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The Blood Miracles

Written by Lisa McInerney

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The Blood Miracles

Lisa McInerney

For Love Reading Only

JOHN MURRAY

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1

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For Review Only

For Caroline

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I

This, like so many of Ryan Cusack's fuck-ups, begins with ecstasy.

It begins in Rotterdam, like so much ecstasy does, where Daniel Kane, frustrated from months feeling like his supplier's afterthought, strikes up an acquaintance with a couple of lads from Naples. Dan bonds with them, in so far as these kinds of boys can bond, over Dutch draw and contempt for the Rotterdammer dignitaries.

It escalates when Ryan returns from a summer's week in Naples with a throwaway observation about how their yokes are so much better, based on two nights out and zero hangovers. It's a thought that germinates in Dan's head until it becomes a strategy. By autumn he is making preliminary, private enquiries. By winter he is arranging a visit.

Finding ecstasy is no easy task. The market offers so many MDMA knock-offs: PMA, NBOMe, MDE, alphabet broths of second-rate stimulants developed in Chinese laboratories. The black market is not a free market. Consumers take what they can get. They cannot always get methylenedioxymethamphetamine. Access to the proper stuff depends on the capacities or whims of the dealers and the dealers cannot truly be trusted; they're in it for the money; the satisfaction of the end user matters only in the context of how much the end user is willing to pay.

But Dan Kane believes that because he will never be the man importing the most pills, he has to be the man sourcing the

For Love Reading Only

finest. The profit margins aren't as magnificent as they are for alphabet broth rubbish, but good yokes move fast, so Dan's developed a reputation for artisanal pharmaceuticals. It makes sense for him to switch from one producer to another if there are better yokes available. His enterprise is small enough that he can manage the shift. His ambitions are broad enough that he will cope with the upheaval. And Naples, well. It turns out there are better yokes in Naples. *Is that not serendipitous*? he asks.

Because, of course, there's the matter of Ryan's blood.

At the start of December, about three months before Ryan is to turn twenty-one, about five and a half years into his relationship with his girlfriend Karine, about seven years after he first met Dan, he and Dan stand in a corridor on the third floor of a Cork City hotel. Dan, fidgety on the way over, has dedicated himself to cold lucidity; only once in this corridor does Ryan see him waver, and that's in exhalation, a deliberate expelling of breath as you might see in a long-distance runner.

Dan tilts his head and in response Ryan bows his own. 'Get every nuance,' Dan says, and Ryan nods faintly, so diminished is the space between them. 'This is not,' Dan goes on, 'a deal to be done in simple English.'

Ryan knows it's too late to say it but he says it anyway.

'You know if you're opening routes there, you're dealing with the Camorra. You know that, right?'

'What difference does it make?' Dan asks. What separates gang from clan from syndicate? It's all business. Dan's dealt with English top boys, Dutch producers, Russian smugglers, 'and if I can manage Russians, Ryan, I can manage Italians.'

Ryan knows you don't manage the Camorra. He cannot say how he learned this or when he accepted it; he just knows it, maybe from his mother's muttered oaths or maybe because he is sane, underneath it all.

Dan tilts his head the other way. 'Tell me you're all right.'

'I'm all right,' Ryan lies.

For Love Reading Only

In a corner room Ryan sits with a lone Neapolitan and they converse as the city below them darkens. The MDMA will be manufactured in Estonia, pressed in Naples and shipped to Cork while Dan's money goes the other way. Accountants will whir about in the background, making what's illegal legal; they will obscure details and arrange bribes, put thick skin on the bones of it. Dan directs Ryan's questions. The rest of the inner circle – Shakespeare, Pender, Cooney and Feehily – sprawl on armchairs or lean on walls. The Neapolitan doesn't flinch.

Ecstasy, a taster batch of fifty thousand for fifty thousand, just to test the route, all grade upfront, a fifty-thousand-euro risk for a brand-new channel, and Ryan's misgivings are months too late.

I'm all right, he tells himself, though he is not all right. He is nervous and he is rusty. He has been out of action since the October bank holiday weekend.

The Neapolitan asks him to clarify a statement. It's Ryan's pronunciation or an ending sliced off a word or he slips into Napulitano. The Neapolitan's eyes widen. The smell of blood: his nostrils flare. His mouth stretches. He identifies Ryan as one of his own.

I'm all right, Ryan tells himself. *This is all right*.

Dan carefully structures the fortnight following this meeting. He sends Shakespeare – Shane O'Sullivan, enforcer, adviser, right-hand man – to go over complexities with his customs guy. He evaluates an old rental on Watercourse Road as a potential base for storing the batch, checking it for damp and draughts, sizing up the neighbours. He goes through two dummy runs with Cooney and Feehily and fabricates solid reasons for them to be at the Port of Cork in Ringaskiddy for the days leading up to the delivery. The pills are due on the last container in from Salerno before Christmas: the 23rd of December.

He looks beyond the best case scenario: the delivery is a success, the pills are immediately sold, and the Neapolitans

For Love Reading Only

agree on a price per pill appropriate for a long-term partnership. Half of Ireland will want in on it. The Shades and the shams, all looking for a cut. Handling such interest will take strong nerves. He will need to be totally confident in his abilities, his men's loyalties, and his belonging to his city. The one he is most worried about is the robber baron Jimmy Phelan – often referred to by initials only, abbreviation sprung from jitters and dismay – the man who thinks everything in Cork is his by default. When Jimmy Phelan finds out about the route, he will almost certainly make a move towards seizing it. Dan knows it is imperative that the route is established before this happens. The longer he can keep Phelan from finding out, the easier it will be to manage his megalomania. If it means selling outside of the city for the time being, so be it.

He explains such thoughts to Ryan over and over again in Ryan's sitting room in the early afternoons of the first half of December. Dan is excited, Dan is nervous, Dan is determined, optimistic and desperate.

He seems surprised that Ryan's appointment as translator didn't lead to instant relief from his depression, as if he'd expected Ryan to emerge from the meeting with the Neapolitan his old self.

At the end of that preparatory fortnight he says, 'You'd want to get your arse in gear,' not altogether unkindly.

It is only in terms of Ryan's new melancholy Dan has any real right to be frustrated. Ryan has kept earning. During his weeks indoors his brother Cian brought him chips and bad news in exchange for directions – to clients, pick-up points, debtors, underlings. The dealers whom Ryan supplies have not run low; Dan has heard no complaints. But then Dan needs more from Ryan than a line of income, more, even, than an Italian tongue and Neapolitan blood. Dan Kane, a disciplined eater who lifts weights and reads and plucks what he likes best from Buddhism and believes in balance and fucks around and is proud of the

For Love Reading Only

quality of his cocaine, needs an apostle. He needs walking, talking reassurance that he is up to snuff.

Daniel Kane has put a lot of work into Ryan Cusack being all right.

Mere days before the pills are due, Dan has need of Ryan's words again.

It is late on a Saturday afternoon, and Ryan is at home with Karine, who has come over, as she does when she can spare the time away from studying, to remind him of the various things he needs to do to be alive. *You should eat, you should talk, you should go for a walk, you should have sex with me*. Today she's told him to have a shower. Ryan's natural attributes are such that he is easily inclined towards vanity – *septic* is the old Corkonian term he hears from his dad – but since the bank holiday he's been forgetting himself and, in so doing, remembering himself again with mild surprise. His beard grows pretty quickly, it turns out.

Dan texts:

I need you to talk to someone for me.
So get moving, little man.

This message comes through while Ryan is in the bathroom, and Karine intercepts it. When he comes back in she's on his bed, boots off and legs curled beneath her, holding his phone and staring into space.

She says, 'Dan's looking for you.'

She lets him take the phone. He reads the message. It has come through at a very bad time, for Karine doesn't know that Ryan's been talking to Neapolitan exporters and so is not prepared for Dan demanding his company now. He knows he should sit, gather his thoughts and call Dan to ask for an hour's grace; he needs to explain his return from exile to a girl who

For Love Reading Only

believes exile fits him. He leaves his phone on his desk and picks out dark jeans, a slim-fit T-shirt, boots. Going-out clothes.

This is a creaky sort of enterprise. He's slow in dressing and she watches him as if assessing a rehabilitation. She runs her hands over him; she rearranges the short waves of his hair, she pulls her fingertips along his jaw, she opens a palm over each lung.

'D'you not know you're a mess?' she says.

A mess in blood and in deed. The oldest son of Tony Cusack and Maria Cattaneo is Cork City born and bred and in its sing-song accent speaks fluent Italian, shaky Neapolitan and rough and rapid Hiberno. His eyes are the colour of black treacle and his olive skin is paled by adjacency to the Atlantic; his nonna, with varying degrees of sincerity, blames everything from draughts to the *malocchio* for his pallor. He takes up just under six feet and a good bit less across the chest than he should, exile being the kind of thing that makes a man skinny. His is the business of fledgling savages the world over: he facilitates the movement of illegal inebriants from his foolhardy class into the hands and mouths and nostrils of those who should know better. He feigns a swagger to hide the fact that he doesn't breathe easy and doesn't sleep well. He has notions about his future; he feels violently inadequate sometimes; he hasn't had enough practice to be a good shot.

In front of him now is his girlfriend of nearly six years, as blonde and bright as he's dark and bloodless. She withdraws her hands and purses her lips and takes a breath.

'You're a mess,' she repeats, 'and if you go out there after Dan now you'll fall to pieces.'

'I have to go back to work, girl.'

'Why do you have to go back to work? You've done nothing for the past six weeks, Ryan. And guess what, he managed without you.'

For Love Reading Only

Ryan cannot correct her. For the past six weeks he has been still and quiet and he's mostly stayed indoors but it goes to show, he thinks, how innocent his girlfriend is that she doesn't suspect he was up to no good at the same time. Only in outline is Karine aware of what her boyfriend does when he's not with her. She knows Dan because Ryan has been with Dan even longer than he's been with her. She knows Ryan sells enough to make decent grade. Lately this has bothered her. She could consent to his carry-on when he would otherwise have gone hungry. Now he's flush and enjoys a sort of reputation and that doesn't sit right with her at all.

Ryan says, 'Staying in is doing me more damage than going out.'

'And how do you make that out?'

She looks tired, he thinks, but then, she's doing exams. A trying life each, at odds and opposites.

He says, 'I feel better, like. The last few weeks . . . It's over, I got my head together.'

'You got your head together? Ryan, you tried to kill yourself.'

'I didn't.'

'You say you're out of the pit and you still haven't faced up to what put you there.' She stands back. 'Oh God,' she breathes, and blinks at the ceiling.

'I know what it looked like.' Ryan reaches for her hand and she holds both up and pouts. 'But that's not what it was. I have a hard enough time going without you for a couple of days, Karine. Why would I want to stretch that?'

'Guilt? You weren't exactly thinking straight.'

Ryan rubs his eyes. 'I'll make it up to you,' he says.

'Right. I had to drag you out of an early grave, but that's just something you can pay me back for. Like it's part and parcel of being with you. Oh yeah, my boyfriend's deep. So deep he was nearly six feet down.'

For Love Reading Only

Her hostility is justified. He proved incapable of containing what should have been a common-or-garden October bank holiday binge, falling instead to overindulgence: a few drinks too many for a constitution weakened by secrets, apostasy and self-medication. The anxiety was there to begin with. Everyone tells Ryan he's the bulb off Tony, the living spit, his father's son, as if after nearly twenty-one years it could be news to him. It was always going to happen. Tony burst out of him, not just the dark hair and the dark eyes and the slow smile but the wrath, the tears, the knuckles. Ryan was fighting with his girlfriend; she turned him inside out and he raised his fist to her. He didn't hit her but he came close. He pinned her to the wall and aimed at the plaster.

'What's gotten into you?' she wept, and some short hours afterwards emergency department doctors had an answer. Cocaine, they said. Alcohol. Paracetamol.

This was the makings of his six weeks of stupor: Ryan was dissociated by half-memories and stunned by having made so dire a mistake. He is reasonably sure that he never meant to overdose. He knows how long paracetamol takes to kill, so it makes no sense to him that he'd choose it.

He assumes that he was drunk and melancholy after another fight with the ould doll, but he never blamed her, not even in the darkest moments; Karine had no hand in his blotting out the beautiful lore of him and her and the million things she always does right. He's torn her apart; she hovers, tearful and tender, and her complicity makes her angry, and her anger makes her ashamed. There have been doctors echoing sinister words like 'episode' and referrals to a psychiatrist or a psychologist or whatever, and Karine has to take it seriously because she's almost a nurse. She stood with him at the pharmacy, waiting for a paper bag of the kind of drugs they don't want him to take recreationally, drugs he hasn't taken and won't take. She bought him a notebook and pleads with him to write

For Love Reading Only

down those agonies he cannot otherwise express. *Write down what you're feeling*, she directs. *I dunno, write about songs that make you feel things. If you won't talk to me, write to me; write to someone, anyone*. She tries to put him back together.

I am a mess, he wants to tell her, I am a mess and I want you to put me back together, I want to change direction, I want to leave the country, I want to take back what I did to you, I want to bury it on Vesuvio.

But instead he moves towards her and in his actions tries to simulate health and normality; he kisses her insistently and secures her cooperation; he wraps her arms around his neck.

Heat, skin, sweat. She chides him even as their bodies start to slip. She tells him she can't fix him if he doesn't get the legwork done. She reminds him that she's graduating next year. Their paths threaten to diverge; doesn't he know that? Celestial in the pale glow of the floor lamp beside his bed, she tells him she loves him. Past her shoulders glint the bits of herself she's left on his chest of drawers. A hairbrush, a can of deodorant, make-up remover, cotton balls. Two pots of pastel nail varnish. There's more tucked away in one of the drawers – fluffy socks and T-shirts and tampons and a hair-dryer. The most obvious stuff here belongs to Ryan – decks, a digital piano, black, blocky, blokey hardware – but the room is as much her space as his.

Between deeper and slower breaths he says he loves her too, he loves her more.

'If you love me, you'll stop. Like, straight away.'

'Stop what?'

'Stop dealing.'

He pushes his mouth against her neck and tastes salt.

His phone rings when he's catching his breath against her shoulder as she draws circles on the back of his neck. Outside someone bellows *OK love!* and a car door slams and a van

For Love Reading Only

rumbles past and the hum starts at the back of the house as the central heating kicks in. Ryan rolls away. Karine clings to his side.

'Don't answer,' she says. 'Just leave it.'

But he must answer, because normality demands that of him.

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