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Opening Extract from...

The Dead House

Written by Billy O'Callaghan

Published by Brandon

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The Dead House

... the past holds constant sway ...

BRANDON

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To Nellie and Peggy,
my grandmothers,

for the stories they gave me and give me still.
Sometimes, when the wind lifts
the dead still sing.

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Walking

I walk ahead
– Just out of reach
Of the ocean's polished claw – a body
Observing the West Cork sun
Through rusted eye
– Hooked,
Hauled in,
And smashed,
And smashed again against the side.

A white and shivering skin
Assembles on the clawed floor.

I am afraid to turn and find
Only myself,
The sea,
And the wind.

Andrew Godsell (1971-2003)

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Prologue

Tonight, I have a story to tell, one that for years I've kept buried, one that I'd hoped could have remained so forever. But the circumstances of the past several hours have brought everything once again to the surface, and I can no longer deny the things I've seen.

This is the truth as I know it to be, this is what I remember. At the very least, I want this to stand as a kind of confession. No, not only want. Need. Even now, I find myself clinging to the idea that some vital and previously overlooked detail will reveal itself, some glint sparking away in the dark distance with a final offer of salvation, something I have long misread or overlooked. God, hope, something. Clinging to logic in the face of every contradiction. Because time, as we all know, can blur things. But maybe it can also, in its way, bring clarity. I only hope that, with so much at stake, I have not waited too long to speak of this.

And if it should prove that I am deluding myself, that talking changes nothing, then tell me, please, if you can, what choice do I have? Hoping for the best, even in the face of certain worst, is how we all live our lives. Isn't it the reason why so many of us pray?

I suppose, in the final analysis, this story will hang on a single burning question:

Do you believe in ghosts?

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Because that's really where it begins, with belief. We glimpse or experience something that defies explanation and we either accept the stretch in our reality or we choose to turn our heads away. It's a question that torments even philosophers: *Do you believe?* Our minds build our worlds for us, setting a line between what is acceptable as truth and what is not. We are conditioned to doubt the reality of the supernatural, and encouraged to assume that our world holds nothing more than the details of its surface. There is little about life as we have come to know it that can't be explained away on some basic scientific level. Yet when the wind howls, and we find ourselves alone with only the yellow pool of a guttering candle to hold back the darkness, our instinct, perhaps our innate need for something above and beyond, still screams otherwise.

That is, as I say, where it begins. With belief. I've seen, and the truth is that even now, with all that has happened and all that seems to be happening again, a part of me remains uncertain. The stains of scepticism are just as hard to scrub away as those of faith. What I do know is that, for me at least, the past simply will not remain the past. The dead refuse to rest, or even to lie still. And I am not asking you to believe. I ask only that you give yourself time and space to consider the question, and that you listen, with an open mind. Because this is something I need to tell.

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Part 1

My name is Michael Simmons. I am married to Alison, and the father of one child, a daughter, Hannah, who is almost seven now, and our reason for bliss. Home for us is Southwell, a small village on the Cornish coast. Our house, a mile and a half out, is a modest but ample stone-build that sits on its own wood-backed acre overlooking the sea. It is a place that holds the illusion of loneliness, yet lies within easy calling distance of the church bell. An ideal compromise. And we could not have chosen a more beautiful place to live than Southwell, positioned as it is among the folds of land and distinguished by steep streets and alleyways and lots of outlying greenery, the sort of place perfect for children. Even on the sodden days of winter, it retains a peculiar beauty. The air is clean, we can walk the cliffs, swim during the summer months or search for amber on the beaches. Cars drive slowly along its narrow roads, and everyone knows everyone else by name.

I am retired now, benched prematurely following a minor health scare, the mildest of heart attacks, and as a family we are comfortable without actually challenging the threshold of serious wealth. Fine Art has, for me, been a relatively lucrative business. I put in the hours, of course, the better part of twenty years' worth, initially with an agency and then, once I'd established my name and collected the requisite tally of

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contacts, in a freelance capacity. I represented a small but not inconsiderable stable of talent, painters mostly, but a few sculptors too, and even a practically famous Lithuanian conceptual artist. Still, I don't miss a thing about the paper chase, and the idle life seems most of the time crafted with me in mind, though I can, on occasion, be coaxed back to the table, when the money is right or a duty feels owed, to serve as a middleman of sorts, mainly providing a letter or phone call of introduction for one or another of my former clients directly to an artist who might still be within my reach.

Between our savings, pension and this occasional side income, we get by.

Alison and I met relatively late. I was nearing forty and had some three years on her, and we were at that point in our lives where the loneliness into which we'd settled had brought its own kind of unambitious contentment. I'd accepted, as a great many single people do once they hit middle age, that love, or anything even approaching the notion of love, had passed me by. Ali had been married once before, unsuccessfully. But that happens. And our coming together surprised us both. We could be happier, I suppose, but not much happier.

She's Irish, which adds a nice colour to our existence.

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She was born in a small Wicklow village about twenty miles outside Dublin. It has since been absorbed by the city and is unrecognisable now from the place she'd known growing up, but twenty miles seemed to measure itself differently in those days, and her accent retains quaint elements of country, a lag or elongation that coats certain words. Sometimes she misses home, the nature of the place, the country as a whole, its pace, its softness, but there is comfort for her in knowing that we are always only a short flight away and we manage to get across two or three times a year, to take a cottage in Connemara or Clare, to sit in the pubs, explore the Burren, the islands. Alison wants Hannah to know her roots, and to feel at home there. Which is only right.

Though she and I first met in a romantic sense some nine years ago, we'd known one another a little longer than that. Existing on the outskirts of a shared business, we often had occasion to speak on the phone and kept up a relatively regular dialogue through email. We'd even been in the same room together, without actually colliding, on at least a couple of occasions, at some party or exhibition, and so we'd glimpsed one another from afar. What I'd seen then was a willowy, flowing woman looking half a decade younger than the facts, her raven hair tied up

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in a way that seemed to heighten her delicacy. Slight and pale-skinned, ethereal in certain falls of light. The sight of her made it hurt to breathe. She owned a small gallery in Dublin's Temple Bar, two floors of whitewashed space that exhibited more than its share of heavyweights and drew some decent footfall, and over the previous few years she'd hung and sold paintings by a number of my artists. I liked dealing with her because she was always straight when it came to money, a rare enough trait among art dealers, and because she showed a genuine appreciation, even passion, for the work she chose to display. More than that, though, I simply enjoyed chatting with her. We were always easy with one another, and with the benefit of hindsight the scent of something more between us seems apparent. But any blame for hesitation rests with me; I was the one who preserved the distance. I'd been through a couple of relationships, not serious exactly but of the kind that left marks, and I suppose I was afraid of making a fool of myself, and of ruining something potentially beautiful.

★

When you've made business your life, you get into a mindset where the world is concerned, and it can be difficult

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to let go. There is something safe and assuring about the ache to be at your desk, near a phone, a computer, to be able at a minute's notice to send out photographs of work, to negotiate, haggle, cajole from the chair you know and that knows you, all the while gazing out on the black-and-white-lit waters of the Thames and at the passers-by either half-clad in the sun or else wrapped and hunched against the rain. You are in control there, you know the environment, the cafés and restaurants, you have a routine set in granite and you know which boundaries to press and the point at which they'll snap.

Who has time for house-warming weekends?

'Come on, *Consiglieri*,' Maggie said, her voice filling the office from the speaker phone, full of mock threat. 'Make time.'

She was one of my artists and, more than that, one of my few truly close friends. Maggie Turner. I'd discovered her some years earlier, by the purest of accidents, and took all the credit I could from that, though she'd have been picked up sooner rather than later anyway because there is just no possible way in the art world that you can get by for any significant length of time being that good without somebody finally sitting up and taking notice. But I was the first, and that seemed to count for something.

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I'd come to Manchester at the invitation of someone I had met at a party and didn't even remember but who'd happened to corner me at precisely the right moment of insobriety. Maggie's genius announced itself, admittedly as a suggestion yet, through a single, vicious watercolour being used as filler to bulk out an exhibition of graduate work from the local college of art and design. I'd been to a thousand of these events, but did my duty, moving around the room, trying to give every piece its chance, wishing with every step that I was somewhere else, anywhere else. Nodding when nodding seemed appropriate, pausing to consider technique, use of space, the authority of a brushstroke, perspective, shadow, and all the while conscious of the covert stares, the almost frenzied angst of twenty kids feeling themselves mere feet and then inches away from an actual future and already seeing the twinkle of the stars. I can't say precisely what I was hunting. A trace of the indefinable, I suppose. A suggestion of more. Something. You get a sense of it, if it's there. None of the work was particularly bad; these kids would all go on to make decent enough livings teaching GSCE Art or following the potentially lucrative graphic-design road into advertising, and maybe, on the side, just to fulfil a need or to nourish their enduring delusions, peddling a painting or two a year

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to clubs or societies or libraries, or to people who think it possible to buy their way into whatever currently passes for good taste. But all had the aura of sameness. Except hers.

She was still a year from finishing, and not even in attendance. They'd hung her painting, along with a few other junior pieces, ostensibly to demonstrate the consistent excellence of the college, but I knew from having seen this trick turned before that the true intent of the gesture was to emphasise and magnify the quality of the more polished work. Which I suppose says something about the subjective nature of art, and something else again about the judgement of those who are supposed to know better.

To the untrained eye, her watercolour was not flamboyant. An expressionist seascape on paper, small and only competently mounted, and seemingly unfinished. Jutting reefs in cadmium and jet, a ribbon of ochre beach with something like a horse and rider chasing the distance, and everything else ribs of water and sky. I loved the muddy confluence of colours, the wrong shades that somehow made up the sea, the ichorous waves, and I loved the simple, unaffected way in which she signed her name, Maggie, in rose madder, as if the letters themselves, like a jut of off-colour crabgrass or the remaining spindles of some mangled picket fence, not only belonged there but

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had something more than the obvious to contribute.

'Are you sure?' she asked, her voice flimsy as dust, her eyes hard and wide, after I'd twisted an address from a grudging instructor and without call or warning arrived by taxi at her door. Afraid to believe me. Not ready to, I knew. Sometimes the prospect of a future can be daunting. She stood there, wrapped in a child's dressing gown, cerise pink, and denims with the knees worn or torn out, leaning a hip against the counter while I sat perched on the edge of the apartment's only armchair and breathed the pungent stench of underlying linseed even through the pot of Irish stew fermenting behind her on the stove.

'You painted the light,' I told her, knowing what I meant but not quite getting there with words. But it really was that simple. 'You realised what mattered most in what you saw. That's an instinct. A rare one.'

I didn't encourage her to drop out of college. That was her choice. I did say that I believed there was little more the college could teach her. Colleges and universities have their place, and their worth, and when it comes to something as indefinable as art they can knock the edges off mediocrity and help make it presentable. But when the edges are what actually matter, such instruction can be fatal. She kept her head down while I talked, and her lack

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of reaction made me afraid of silence, so I kept on and on, praising her style, her composition, but mentioning the flaws, too, in a feeble effort to preserve some balance, and finally just saying anything I could think of, simply to keep a sound going in the room. How much Manchester had changed since I'd last been up here but how some things never change, like the rain. A full minute after I ran out of air, she seemed to regain consciousness. She glanced around, as if registering her living space for the first time. The one-roomed flat was shabby, but not a mess. A cursory attempt had been made at dressing the narrow cot bed, a few cups and plates lay cluttering the sink, left over from breakfast and, likely, the night before. Ancient paperbacks lined the single shelf in the alcove above the small television set, mostly westerns and Golden Age science-fiction novels, a combination that seemed odd only until I came to know her, and in the corner beyond the window a small chest of drawers stood littered with trinkets, little porcelain ornaments of cats, dogs and horses, and a narrow fluted glass vase that held a single probably stolen and already wilting daffodil. Her parents were dead and she had a sister in Canada, Rosemary, married to a dentist. When I got up to leave, she embraced me, and when she stepped back I saw that her cheeks were streaked in tears. She was young

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then – twenty, twenty-one – a brittle, almost elfin creature with a shining teak cap of hair, a long, deceptively pretty mouth and the largest eyes I'd ever seen, the deep pond green of carnival glass that was sometimes almost yellow and sometimes veered to darker shades.

That first month I sold three of her paintings, and I moved maybe six to eight each year after that for the better part of a decade, at decent prices too as her name became more and more established. She never cared about money, never queried a sale. Along the way, there were fallow periods when her work would change direction and we'd have to endure six or nine months of drought before she could again bring herself to produce anything saleable, and during those times I'd call on the phone or pay her frequent visits, not to try and press her into production but simply to chat, to touch base, take her out for coffee or lunch and, without discussion, to help her out with rent arrears, float her enough to get by. Her naivety kept her alive, I think, and I came to love her like a little sister.

The most recent dry period was different. A year, maybe a little longer. The span of time bothered me less than the nature of it. Inevitably, there'd been a man involved. Pete, a handsome city type, all briefcase and umbrella, something in an area of finance that to everyone but the law sounds

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like a monumental con. They'd met through friends, at a party, I think, and for a while she was all in, smitten by his appetites and ambitions, even going so far as to start whispering words of marriage. I worried about her. Over the years, there'd been men, one or two decent enough, the rest not, but somehow she'd managed to remain an innocent, if a scarred one. And an avowed romantic, the kind who shatters when dropped. I wanted more than anything for her to be happy and didn't give a damn, really, if she never touched a brush again. But I knew from early on that she'd made another wrong turn. It was clear to me, even without having to see the bruises. When she spoke on the phone the marks were in her voice, not a tremor exactly but a shadow of something – pain, fear, whatever. An underlying understanding of the dark. I'd met Pete only once. He was tall and thin, not muscular but with a kind of threatening hardness, and nurtured these long, still silences that made you swallow and want to look away. Maggie would laugh whenever I asked if she was all right, or at my offer, no questions asked, of a bed for the night or for as long as she needed, should she ever feel like bailing. Laugh as if I'd just landed the punchline to the month's hottest gag, and say no, thanks but no, she was fine, that it was nothing, just an argument, the usual, that she'd been working too hard or

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that he had. And then, some months on, I got a call from Canada, from Rosemary, asking if I knew that Maggie had been hospitalised. I didn't, which hurt more deeply than I could have said. What I found waiting for me was carnage: severe bruising to her throat, mouth and eyes, two cracked ribs, a broken right wrist – mercifully not her painting hand. The nurses had had to shave the hair on one side of her head so that they could put a horseshoe of twenty-two stitches into the scalp above her left ear. From where she'd caught her head on the edge of the door, she explained, unable to look at me, her voice birdlike with shame. When I saw her in the bed, smashed into so many tiny pieces, I wanted to cry, and within seconds began to wonder how I'd go about getting hold of a gun. It never went further than that, but there was a very real moment when I believe I could actually have been capable of committing murder.

She had to get out, and she did. The law's interest in what had occurred was sympathetic but fleeting, because domestic-abuse cases are always complicated. A young officer, a woman in clothes so plain she might as well have carried a sign around her neck, came and sat at the bedside. You could tell by the set of her mouth and by her eyes, which shifted in slow drags back and forth between Maggie in the bed and where I stood leaning against the

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window sill, that she'd been doing this twice a week for years and knew all the likely computations by heart. In a voice trained to the gentle, she told us that they'd investigate the matter to its fullest extent, and would try to make life as difficult as possible for the bastard. They'd show up at his workplace, make a big deal of requesting to search his desk, his car, confiscate his clothes so that they could scrutinise for traces of blood, hair and skin fibres. They'd even drop a few insinuations to his colleagues, particularly his female colleagues, so he'd know that everyone knew. But, she added, lowering her stare to the floor, it would be best not to expect too much, because the likelihood of pinning anything solid on him would be next to impossible. Despite a very real and explicit medical report, which was unequivocal in stating that the injuries Maggie sustained were one hundred percent consistent with a prolonged and particularly brutal assault, the evidence against the accused was circumstantial at best, and too heavily reliant on hearsay. He'd been careful, which suggested that he'd done this before, and the odds on achieving a conviction were thin to the point of anorexic. In fact, the case was unlikely even to make it as far as trial. Nevertheless, the officer was as good as her word, and Pete was harassed with three separate unannounced visits to his place of work, once even

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timed to coincide with his lunchtime absence from the office. Finally, when every avenue of inquiry had been exhausted, he was brought in for questioning and, as a way of inflicting as much discomfort as possible, held for the maximum allowable number of hours in a small, cold, windowless cell. Inevitably, on the advice of his solicitor and because he was intelligent and maybe experienced enough to understand the rules of play, he denied everything, and then a young woman came forward who was willing to swear under oath that he'd been with her on the night in question. The entire night. Her lie was obvious from half a mile away but the police were left with no option but to issue a release and grudgingly drop all charges.

Three weeks later, Maggie checked herself out of the hospital and into my care. At that time, I was leasing a two-bedroomed apartment in Kensington, a comfortable, spacious second-floor pad in Connaught Village, and I set her up in the spare room, with lots of good springtime light and a south-facing view over Hyde Park. She spent most of those first days and weeks of recuperation stretched out on the sofa, swaddled in heavy sweaters or an old flannel nightgown, watching endless recycles of bargain hunting, property renovation and cookery programmes, and trying not to think about the world beyond

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my walls, trying to forget the person she'd so recently been. Sometimes, if I kept on enough and because my kitchen skills were barely a step evolved from abject, I was able to coax her into dressing and we'd eat out at one of the local restaurants. Such evenings were, for the most part, quite pleasant, but I could recognise the effort they required of her and the toll they took, and so mostly we fell for the recklessly unhealthy but far more convenient option and dined in on Chinese or Indian takeaways, food that could be ordered by number and eaten in a sprawl.

And then, one night, while watching the round-up of the day's football fixtures on the late news, she leaned across and kissed the corner of my mouth. 'I'm almost ready to leave,' she said, 'if that's okay with you. But I just wanted to say thanks.'

She looked better, though not yet quite right, and all I could think about was the warmth of her lips, what it had meant and what it might yet mean. I nodded, and pulled on a state of calm I didn't truly feel.

'What's the plan?'

'Ireland.'

She'd been there once before, she said, years ago, when she was just a girl, and I saw by the smile that, in her mind, she had already returned.

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