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NEIL JORDAN

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PART ONE

NOW

He had this habit that always irritated her when she was alive. Of whistling backwards, with indrawn breath, an inhaled tune, always one of those ancient ones, 'Be my Baby', 'Baby Love', 'Bad Romance', 'Back in the USA'. And that was just the Bs. He was a librarian, after all. And it made him wonder what had happened to the USA when it became the USAI. Where had it gone? Like snow, it just became a memory. Or a false memory. So many of the memories he had to file involved this background doo-wop of harmonised voices, the heartbreaking twang of guitars and harmonicas, the vroom of an exhaust-pipe from a Harley Davidson. Could it all have vanished so completely? Or had it ever existed? Maybe it was a subset of a subset of apparent memories, constructed just to sell you stuff. And incidentally, what had happened to babies. Maybe they were imaginary too, since they hadn't been much in evidence either lately.

So, he was whistling when he was cycling from the rundown cottage by the small stony inlet, through the montbretia and hyacinth roads to the large glittering structure that seemed to grow like a titanium prosthesis out of the old Huxley mansion. One of those tunes she

loved. 'Sleigh Ride'. And he hadn't got a Harley, he hadn't got a sleigh, there was no snow, if there ever had been. He was on a bicycle and there was wind in his face. Because he cycled to work most days. Wore his high-viz jacket, of course, with the backpack that Isolde had bought him, emblazoned with a luminous yellow Z on its back pocket. Like the white stripe on the back of a fox. Although he hadn't seen a fox for a long time, either. Better not to ask why. Because he wasn't like the fox that knew many things, more like the tortoise, who knew one big thing and that big thing was to keep his mouth shut, no matter what reservations haunted him.

The Huxley mansion had been built in the days when people made things, things made of copper and metal alloy. It had been enabled by a fortune, long since vanished, or dispersed amongst the home counties of the next, larger island. There were abandoned mines on the peninsula's edge, with a seemingly pristine beach laid with the sand that came from the copper smelting plant of long ago. He had heard somewhere that arsenic was a by-product of copper smelting but did his best to keep that thought deep in the dreamscape, where reality, if it intruded, only made a transitory ripple. Yes, there were many things to keep below the fringes of consciousness, which he didn't dare to call thinking. There were many troublesome things going on in the Institute, but he was simply engaged in the filing of them, like the proverbial tortoise, moving carefully through the duties assigned him. Analysis was for others. Beyond his pay grade. But one question always troubled him, on the long, rather windblown bike-rides like today's, and that question was: why here?

There was parkland, it was true. There were the remains of a previous structure, true as well, like the carcase of a savaged deer in which other organisms could create their dwellings. There were grants as well, government grants to keep these rural hinterlands in some semblance of life. But still, the question persisted, why on earth here? Why not anywhere else on this planet, which, he had no doubt, the Huxley Institute's commercial reach spanned like no other. But perhaps, and the question would become one more that he had to suppress into that troubled dreamscape below his consciousness, maybe the planet was like this peninsula. An experiment of the Institute.

MEMBRANE

It began with a skin graft. One that could be self-applied, almost like a plastic membrane pulled over the offending wrinkles, that merged with them, smoothed them, lived within them and in the end outlasted them. The accounts of wrinkled, desiccated bodies that were buried with immaculate, almost virginal faces, stunned the medical community, led to floods of venture capital cash, multiple amendments to legislation in Dublin, and in turn to further medical developments. There were pliable, prosthetic belly buttons to enable single port surgery; artificial kidneys; penis, vulva and liver enhancements; and a heart valve that would continue pumping long after the blood had gone cold.

The medical developments were in some way enabled by the gradual collapse of farming. Piggeries up and down the peninsula were put into service as the old stinking barnyards were replaced by the glass and formaldehyde surgical experimentation stations. All in secret, initially, as the animal rights movement could prove ruinous to genuine research. But the guardrails of algorithmic entry codes, cryptographic passwords, and the tactic of decoy barnyards, where genuine animal husbandry was flamboyantly and publicly performed

led to habits of diversion and feint becoming ingrained in the Institute's practice. The right hand, Christian came to realise, didn't need to know what the left was doing. But by then the Institute had grown so many multi-dimensional arms that right and left became questionable concepts.

ALCHEMY

But there was another beginning, centuries before. To do with alchemy, not algorithms.

Sir Walter Raleigh, granted whole swathes of Munster by Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen, was walking the beach of Na hAilichí (the Allihies) and noticed a peculiar green tincture to the sand beneath his feet. His alchemist's eye recognised the process of oxidisation and the possible presence of a precious metal, somewhere in the hills beyond. There was a series of rivulets tumbling down from the dark rock, and carried by them, tiny pebbles of something that, if it was not yet gold, could surely become gold. He collected them in a small purse and hid his discoveries from his host, Donal Cam O'Sullivan of Berehaven, and continued the alchemical obsession that would lead him to search out the Lost Golden City of El Dorado, on another peninsula entirely.

It was copper of course, Cu, atomic number 29, not gold, Au, atomic number 79, but that may not have prevented the rumour from spreading. To Bohemia, where it reached the ears of another Elizabethan favourite, John Dee, who shared it with another alchemist, Edward Kelley, who himself had lost his own ears to the blade of an Elizabethan executioner.

Kelley also communicated with angels and grew fluent in the Enochian language, through which he communicated the angelic instruction that they share everything, including their alchemical results, their clairvoyant 'scryer' mirrors and their wives. One or other mirror might have foreseen the result of this tripartite union. A son, the unfortunate Theodorus Trebonianus Dee. Two mirrors, two fathers, two futures. But was he the son of Kelley or of Dee? If the son of Kelley, he died in Prague before his father's death in Most, Bohemia with one scryer mirror in his hands. If the son of Dee, he followed his father back to England, into the service of William Cecil, another servant of the queen, through the ruins of Canterbury to the wild Atlantic wastes of the Allihies with the other obsidian scryer mirror in his hand. And quite another set of elements in his satchel. Potassium nitrate, charcoal and sulphur – gunpowder, with which he blew away his own life and the first hole into the copper mines of Allihies.

The blast would have been barely noticed in the carnage that was engulfing the whole peninsula. The forces of the Virgin Queen under Sir George Carew laid waste to Donal Cam's castle at Dunboy, massacred what remained of his followers on Dursey Island and thus ended the alchemical promise of the Allihies beach.

But the copper was still there, just waiting.

TIME

Time played tricks on that peninsula, as Christian would discover when he delved into the history of his ancestor, the Huxley mansion's original architect.

It whispered lies, tall tales, false memories, and maybe its inventions were necessities, given the brutal roar of the history itself. And it had lately seemed exhausted, like the Hag of Beara, whose many lives exhausted her own self. Every acorn has to drop, they said she said, and she became a craggy stone, perched over the Atlantic.

But for the moment, time was just time, and Christian had plenty of it, as he pushed his bicycle against the prevailing wind towards the harbour, the town and the Institute, dimly visible through the scudding clouds. What is it about wind? he wondered. Is there a logic to it, to the fact that when you are cycling there, it is always against you and when you are cycling home it is against you again? But maybe that was the wrong question. Maybe there was no logic to the wind. It came from the Atlantic, buffeted your face as you pushed your way towards it and buffeted your face as you pushed away again.

He made his way into the town, past the ferry that trawled its way to the nearby island, past the rows of shuttered pubs

and the garages and the petrol pumps and the haberdashers that sold sou'westers and the Catholic church to his right, rising serene, gaunt and grey over its granite steps, the small, delicate and decaying Church of Ireland church to his left, and thought he might stop for a coffee.

Serendipity, the sign on the mottled glass door read, which once perhaps reflected the hopes of Martin, its proprietor, his balding pate stippled and scarred with whatever hair implants he was currently testing. Courtesy of the Institute? Christian wondered. Self-administered, he realised. The doctor would have done a better job.

Martin, he acknowledged, and didn't even need to order. Martin knew how he liked it – hot frothed milk, without sugar or chocolate.

Christian, Martin replied, and that would have to suffice for conversation, as the silver pot did its gurgling thing.

Everyone in that town was testing something, and faces and indeed figures changed so much that it was sometimes difficult to remember who was who. But Martin's jowly countenance was unmistakable under the sprouting harvest above it.

And okay, Christian realised. He wasn't himself immune to experiments. But his were secret, as yet. Or so he assumed.

He paid with a card that beeped, walked back out to where his bicycle waited, and sat for a while on the wall that abutted the Church of Ireland graveyard. The wind had abated. There were blinding passages of sunlight over the mossy gravestones and he saw the light settle, as if of its own volition, on one of them.

Montagu Cartwright, 1841–1886

Etched into the grey stone, almost obscured by moss and lichen, a triangular shape which he recognised as a compass. An inscription on the licheny stone, in undecipherable Latin.

AMPHITHEATRUM SAPIENTIAE AETERNAE

Christian, who knew no Latin, could at least decode the compass.

Montagu Cartwright, architect of far more than the Huxley mansion, was buried here. Of course he would be. He had been born on the Kerry side of the peninsula, on the Lansdowne Estate, a willing servant of the empire. He had designed parliaments in Ceylon, palaces for maharajas in Rajasthan, none of which he felt the need to visit, and even, Christian dimly remembered as he sipped his scalding coffee, churches for the worldwide Anglican Communion, of which the shuttered edifice beyond the graves could have been one. It had been repurposed as a tourist office, closed now for the winter, and perhaps forever. The congregation, such as it was, had dwindled and died. Christian remembered the story he had heard, or the tall tale, of two churches designed by the same Montagu Cartwright from his Lambeth studio for overseas parishes, one in Carlsbad, Bohemia, one in Castletown, Ireland. A mix-up at the Anglican administration in Dean's Yard, Westminster, had led to the Irish designs being sent to the Hapsburg town, the Bohemian ones to Ireland. Which could explain the vaguely Gothic curlicues and turrets of this Montagu Cartwright church. And somewhere in Bohemia was a piece of Celtic revivalism, with harp-shaped windows and a round tower.

His librarian's mind could imagine the mix-up. Both filed under C. Carlsbad, Castletown.

Two churches, each echoing the other, both in the wrong place.

Was it all, like most things in this dismal burgh, a half-remembered legend, distorted, like everything else, by the Chinese whispers of time?

Christian stepped back to get a better view.

It was cut from the same grey stone as the Catholic edifice down the street, had nothing but a vague hint of Prague, and everything about it spoke of a gentle, barely remembered Protestant past.

He finished his coffee and cycled on, past the shuttered Silver Dollar Bar.

THEN

Two hundred years earlier, almost to the day, Montagu Cartwright stood in the Castletown graveyard. There were no plinths, no shrouded urns, no epitaphs, just a set of random, rotting crosses to remember the famine dead.

Rumours of the architectural mishap had been alarming enough to set him on whatever packet he could find to Cork, on the endless, windswept journey by horse and trap from Cork to Bandon, Clonakilty, Glengarriff, into the wild peninsula he barely remembered from his childhood. And there, sure enough, beyond the permanently muddy town square, he saw the last slates being erected on the roof of the church he had designed for Carlsbad. There was a master-builder, Muck Corrigan, standing amongst the worm-eaten wooden crosses, supervising the completion. It had been a workhouse graveyard before a church was even thought of, he explained to the bemused Cartwright. But what amazed Montagu Cartwright, even more than the sight of these Gothic structures soaring over the harbour beyond, was the finish of the roof, the towers, the walls. The cornerstones cut so beautifully they could slice the hand, the perfection of those angled arches, the soaring bell-tower with the bulbous, onion-like dome housing the bell. And the roof

tiles, laid in serried rows, like scales on a perfect mackerel. Here was a true craftsman, a master of balance and weight, for whom the church, as he explained to the architect, was just a secondary endeavour. His main business was the copper mine, and he would soon begin blasting its ingresses and tunnels into the hills above the Allihies beach. The mine and the mansion planned by their owner, Copper John.

Was Muck a diminutive? A corruption of Michael? Or did it refer to the browned, cracked substance that covered the hand that shook the hand of Montagu Cartwright?

Montagu Cartwright couldn't have known then that the peninsula had a moniker habit.

That he would acquire one too.

That Michael Muck Corrigan would drag the body of Montagu Compass Cartwright through a grouse moor, under the instruction of Copper John Huxley. That he would be shot by two blasts from a Purdey and tumble from the half-built staircase of his own design. That his only thought would be, as he hit the flagstones below, who would finish it now?