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The Twelve

Stuart Neville

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STUART NEVILLE

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'The place that lacks its ghosts is a barren place.'

John Hewitt

I

Maybe if he had one more drink they'd leave him alone. Gerry Fegan told himself that lie before every swallow. He chased the whiskey's burn with a cool black mouthful of Guinness and placed the glass back on the table. *Look up and they'll be gone*, he thought.

No. They were still there, still staring. Twelve of them if he counted the baby in its mother's arms.

He was good and drunk now. When his stomach couldn't hold any more he would let Tom the barman show him to the door, and the twelve would follow Fegan through the streets of Belfast, into his house, up his stairs, and into his bedroom. If he was lucky, and drunk enough, he might pass out before their screaming got too loud to bear. That was the only time they made a sound, when he was alone and on the edge of sleep. When the baby started crying, that was the worst of it.

Fegan raised the empty glass to get Tom's attention.

'Haven't you had enough, Gerry?' Tom asked. 'Is it not home time yet? Everyone's gone.'

'One more,' Fegan said, trying not to slur. He knew

Tom would not refuse. Fegan was still a respected man in West Belfast, despite the drink.

Sure enough, Tom sighed and raised a glass to the optic. He brought the whiskey over and counted change from the stained tabletop. The gummy film of old beer and grime sucked at his shoes as he walked away.

Fegan held the glass up and made a toast to his twelve companions. One of the five soldiers among them smiled and nodded in return. The rest just stared.

'Fuck you,' Fegan said. 'Fuck the lot of you.'

None of the twelve reacted, but Tom looked back over his shoulder. He shook his head and continued walking to the bar.

Fegan looked at each of his companions in turn. Of the five soldiers three were Brits and two were Ulster Defence Regiment. Another of the followers was a cop, his Royal Ulster Constabulary uniform neat and stiff, and two more were Loyalists, both Ulster Freedom Fighters. The remaining four were civilians who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He remembered doing all of them, but it was the civilians whose memories screamed the loudest.

There was the butcher with his round face and bloody apron. Fegan had dropped the package in his shop and held the door for the woman and her baby as she wheeled the pram in. They'd smiled at each other. He'd felt the heat of the blast as he jumped into the already moving car, the

blast that should have come five minutes after they'd cleared the place.

The other was the boy. Fegan still remembered the look in his eyes when he saw the pistol. Now the boy sat across the table, those same eyes boring into him.

Fegan couldn't hold his gaze, so he turned his eyes downward. Tears pooled on the tabletop. He brought his fingers to the hollows of his face and realised he'd been weeping.

'Jesus,' he said.

He wiped the table with his sleeve and sniffed back the tears. The pub's stale air clung to the back of his throat, as thick as the dun-coloured paint on the walls. He scolded himself. He neither needed nor deserved pity, least of all his own. Weaker men than him could live with what they'd done. He could do the same.

A hand on his shoulder startled him.

'Time you were going, Gerry,' Michael McKenna said.

Tom slipped into the storeroom behind the bar. McKenna paid him to be discreet, to see and hear nothing.

Fegan knew the politician would come looking for him. He was smartly dressed in a jacket and trousers, and his fine-framed designer glasses gave him the appearance of an educated man. A far cry from the teenager Fegan had run the streets with thirty years ago. Wealth looked good on him.

'I'm just finishing,' Fegan said.

'Well, drink up and I'll run you home.' McKenna smiled down at him, his teeth white and even. He'd had them fixed so he could look presentable for the cameras. The party leadership had insisted on it before they gave him the nomination for his seat in the Assembly. At one time, not so long past, it had been against party policy to take a seat at Stormont. But times change, even if people don't.

'I'll walk,' Fegan said. 'It's only a couple of minutes.'

'It's no trouble,' McKenna said. 'Besides, I wanted a word.'

Fegan nodded and took another mouthful of stout. He held it on his tongue when he noticed the boy had risen from his place on the other side of the table. It took a moment to find him, shirtless and skinny as the day he died, creeping up behind McKenna.

The boy pointed at the politician's head. He mimed firing, his hand thrown upwards by the recoil. His mouth made a plosive movement, but no sound came.

Fegan swallowed the Guinness and stared at the boy. Something stirred in his mind, one memory trying to find another. The chill at his centre pulsed with his heartbeat.

'Do you remember that kid?' he asked.

'Don't, Gerry.' McKenna's voice carried a warning.

'I met his mother today. I was in the graveyard and she came up to me.'

'I know you did,' McKenna said, taking the glass from Fegan's fingers.

'She said she knew who I was. What I'd done. She said—'

'Gerry, I don't want to know what she said. I'm more curious about what you said to her. That's what we need to talk about. But not here.' McKenna squeezed Fegan's shoulder. 'Come on, now.'

'He hadn't done anything. Not really. He didn't tell the cops anything they didn't know already. He didn't deserve that. Jesus, he was seventeen. We didn't have to—'

One hard hand gripped Fegan's face, the other his thinning hair, and the animal inside McKenna showed itself. 'Shut your fucking mouth,' he hissed. 'Remember who you're talking to.'

Fegan remembered only too well. As he looked into those fierce blue eyes he remembered every detail. This was the face he knew, not the one on television, but the face that burned with white-hot pleasure as McKenna set about the boy with a claw hammer, the face that was dotted with red when he handed Fegan the .22 pistol to finish it.

Fegan gripped McKenna's wrists and prised his hands away. He stamped on his own anger, quashed it.

The smile returned to McKenna's lips as he pulled his hands away from Fegan's, but went no further. 'Come on,' he said. 'My car's outside. I'll run you home.'

The twelve followed them out to the street, the boy sticking close to McKenna. McKenna had climbed high in the party hierarchy, but not so high he needed an escort to

guard him. Even so, Fegan knew the Mercedes gleaming in the orange street lights was armoured, both bullet- and bomb-proof. McKenna probably felt safe as he lowered himself into the driver's seat.

'Big day today,' McKenna said as he pulled the car away from the kerb, leaving the followers staring after them. 'Sorting the offices up at Stormont, my own desk and everything. Who'd have thought it, eh? The likes of us up on the hill. I wangled a secretary's job for the wife. The Brits are throwing so much money at this I almost feel bad taking it off them. Almost.'

McKenna flashed Fegan a smile. He didn't return it.

Fegan tried to avoid seeing or reading the news as much as he could, but the last two months had been a hurricane of change. Just five months ago, as one year turned to the next, they'd said it was hopeless; the political process was beyond repair. Then mountains moved, deals were struck, another election came and went, while the shadows gathered closer to Fegan. And more often than before, those shadows turned to faces and bodies and arms and legs. Now they were a constant, and he couldn't remember when he last slept without first drowning them in whiskey.

They'd been with him since his last weeks in the Maze prison, a little over seven years ago. He'd just been given his release date, printed on a sheet of paper in a sealed envelope, and his mouth was dry when he opened it. The politicians on the outside had bartered for his freedom,

along with hundreds more men and women. They called people like him political prisoners. Not murderers or thieves, not extortionists or blackmailers. Not criminals of any kind, just victims of circumstance. The followers were there when Fegan looked up from the letter, watching.

He told one of the prison psychologists about it. Dr Brady said it was guilt. A manifestation, he called it. Fegan wondered why people seldom called things by their real names.

McKenna pulled the Mercedes into the kerb outside Fegan's small terraced house on Calcutta Street. It stood shoulder to shoulder with two dozen identical red-brick boxes, drab and neat. The followers waited on the pavement.

'Can I come in for a second?' McKenna's smile sparkled in the car's interior lighting, and kind lines arced out from around his eyes. 'Better to talk inside, eh?'

Fegan shrugged and climbed out.

The twelve parted to let him approach his door. He unlocked it and went inside, McKenna following, the twelve slipping in between. Fegan headed straight for the sideboard where a bottle of Jameson's and a jug of water awaited him. He showed McKenna the bottle.

'No, thanks,' McKenna said. 'Maybe you shouldn't, either.'

Fegan ignored him, pouring two fingers of whiskey into a glass and the same of water. He took a deep swallow and extended his hand towards a chair.

'No, I'm all right,' McKenna said. His hair was well barbered, his skin tanned and smooth, a scar beneath his left eye the only remainder of his old self.

The twelve milled around the sparsely furnished room, merging with and diverging from the shadows, studying each man intently. The boy lingered by McKenna's side as the politician went to the unstrung guitar propped in the corner. He picked it up and turned it in the light.

'Since when did you play guitar?' McKenna asked.

'I don't,' Fegan said. 'Put it down.'

McKenna read the label inside the sound hole. 'Martin. Looks old. What's it doing here?'

'It belonged to a friend of mine. I'm restoring it,' Fegan said. 'Put it down.'

'What friend?'

'Just someone I knew inside. Please. Put it down.'

McKenna set it back in the corner. 'It's good to have friends, Gerry. You should value them. Listen to them.'

'What'd you want to talk about?' Fegan lowered himself into a chair.

McKenna nodded at the drink in Fegan's hand. 'About that, for one thing. It's got to stop, Gerry.'

Fegan held the politician's eyes as he drained the glass.

'People round here look up to you. You're a Republican hero. The young fellas need a role model, someone they can respect.'

'Respect? What are you talking about?' Fegan put the

glass on the coffee table. The chill of condensation clung to his palm and he let his hands slide together, working the moisture over his knuckles and between his fingers. 'There's no respecting what I've done.'

McKenna's face flushed with anger. 'You did your time. You were a political prisoner for twelve years. A dozen years of your life given up for the cause. Any Republican should respect that.' His expression softened. 'But you're pissing it away, Gerry. People are starting to notice. Every night you're at the bar, drunk off your face, talking to yourself.'

'I'm not talking to myself.' Fegan went to point at the followers, but thought better of it.

'Then who *are* you talking to?' McKenna's voice wavered with an exasperated laugh.

'The people I killed. The people *we* killed.'

'Watch your mouth, Gerry. I never killed anybody.'

Fegan met McKenna's blue eyes. 'No, the likes of you and McGinty were always too smart to do it yourselves. You used mugs like me instead.'

McKenna folded his arms across his barrel chest. 'Nobody's hands are clean.'

'What else?' Fegan asked. 'You said "for one thing". What else do you want?'

McKenna circled the room, the boy following, and Fegan had to twist in his chair to keep him in sight. 'I need to know what you told that woman,' McKenna said.

'Nothing,' Fegan said. 'I'm not much of a talker. You know that.'

'No, you're not. But a reliable source tells me the cops are going to start digging up the bogs near Dungannon in the next few days. Round about where we buried that boy. His mother told them where to look.' McKenna moved to the centre of the room and loomed over Fegan. 'Now, how did she know that, Gerry?'

'Does it matter?' Fegan asked. 'Jesus, there'll be nothing left of him. It's been more than twenty years.'

'It matters,' McKenna said. 'If you open your mouth, you're a tout. And you know what happens to touts.'

Fegan tightened his fingers on the chair's armrests.

McKenna leaned down, his hands on his thighs. 'Why, Gerry? Why'd you tell her? What good did you think it'd do?'

Fegan searched for a lie, anything, but found nothing. 'I thought maybe he'd leave me alone,' he said.

'What?' McKenna straightened.

'I thought he'd go,' Fegan said. He looked at the boy aiming his fingers at McKenna's head. 'I thought he'd leave me alone. Give me some peace.'

McKenna took a step back. 'Who? The boy?'

'But that wasn't what he wanted.'

'Christ, Gerry.' McKenna shook his head. 'What's happened to you? Maybe you should see a doctor, you know, get straight. Go away for a while.'

Fegan looked down at his hands. 'Maybe.'

'Listen.' McKenna put a hand on Fegan's shoulder. 'My source talks only to me, nobody else. You've been a good friend to me over the years, and that's the only reason I haven't gone to McGinty with this. If he knew you opened your mouth to that auld doll, it's your body the cops would be looking for.'

Fegan wanted to jerk his shoulder away from McKenna's hand. He sat still.

'Of course, I might need you to return the favour. There's work I could put your way. I've a few deals going on, stuff McGinty isn't in on. If you can stay off the drink, get yourself right, you could be a big help to me. And McGinty doesn't need to know what you said to that boy's mother.'

Fegan watched the boy's face contort as the other shadows gathered around him.

'Do you understand what I'm saying to you, Gerry?'

'Yes,' Fegan said.

'Good man.' McKenna smiled.

Fegan stood. 'I need a piss.'

McKenna stepped back and said, 'Don't be long.'

Fegan made his way up the stairs and into the bathroom. He closed and bolted the door but, as always, the followers found their way in. Except the boy. Fegan paid it little mind, instead concentrating on keeping upright while he emptied his bladder. He had long since gotten used to the twelve witnessing his most undignified moments.

He flushed, rinsed his hands under the tap, and opened the door. The boy was there, on the landing, waiting for him. He stared into the darkness of Fegan's bedroom.

Fegan stood for a moment, confused, as his temples buzzed and the chill pulsed at his centre.

The boy pointed into the room.

'What?' Fegan asked.

The boy bared his teeth, and his skinny arm jerked towards the door.

'All right,' Fegan said. He walked to his bedroom, glancing back over his shoulder.

The boy followed him into the darkness and kneeled at the foot of the bed. He pointed underneath.

Fegan got to his hands and knees and peered under the bedstead. Thin light leaking in from the landing showed the old shoebox hidden there.

He raised his head, questioning. The boy nodded.

Fegan could just reach it if he stretched. He pulled it towards himself. Something heavy shifted inside as it moved, and Fegan's heart quickened. He removed the lid and was met by the greasy smell of money. Rolls of banknotes were bundled in here, twenties, fifties, hundreds. Fegan didn't know how much. He'd never counted it.

But there was something else, something cold and black lying half-concealed in the paper. Something Fegan didn't want in his hand. In the semi-darkness his eyes found the boy's.