
Opening Extract from...

Bad Day in Blackrock

Written by Kevin Power

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BAD DAY IN BLACKROCK

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This novel is a work of the imagination. While certain aspects of the narrative have been inspired by news coverage of actual events, all of the characters – their actions and experiences, their histories and destinies – are fictional, and are not intended to represent actual persons, living or dead. The same applies to the educational, medical, social and legal institutions that appear in the text.

This is th'impostume of much wealth and peace,
That inward breaks, and shows no cause without
Why the man dies.

Hamlet, IV:4

PART ONE

Facts and Values

1

They came to the big white house on Inishfall. This much is true, this much we know for sure.

When the last of the trials was over, Richard Culhane's parents packed up and sold their house in Dublin. They went to live for an indefinite period in their windswept house on Inishfall, an island off the coast of Kerry where the Culhanes had holidayed every summer for the first twelve years of Richard's life. I've never been to Inishfall, but I have seen a picture of the house the Culhanes keep there – it was printed in two or three of the newspapers when the story as a whole was winding down. It's a weatherbeaten two-storey manor, painted white, though the paint is turning grey and psoriatic in the rain blown in from the sea. The house looks as though it should be surrounded by the ruins of a vast estate. This is proper, I suppose. It has become the final refuge of a fallen family.

I haven't seen the Culhanes in several months. I was there, outside the Dublin courthouse, when the last of the verdicts came through and the family attempted to leave. For two or three minutes – a frozen moment, it might have been a dozen times that long – the Culhanes were marooned on the steps of the courthouse, their exit barred by the ranks of journalists and television cameras. Peter Culhane stood with his arm around his wife, holding her so tightly he might have been posing for a joke photograph – *See? It's scary how much I love my wife!* – but he didn't smile. Eventually the bailiff shouldered a path through the crowd, and the family, with Richard

in the lead, a sports jacket pulled up over his head, managed to reach their car.

That was the last time I saw the Culhanes. But I often think of them out there in the west, safe in their big white house on Inishfall. How do they spend their days? What do they talk about? What does Richard say to his mother when he runs into her in the kitchen, late at night? Do they talk about injustice? Do they talk about money and power? Do they talk about death?

There is no way of knowing these things. We are, each of us, alone with our guesses. I've never heard anyone talk about this: about what life must be like for the Culhanes on Inishfall. Safer just to leave them be, we tell each other. Best to let them get on with their lives. What this means, of course, is that *we* want to be left alone, *we* want to get on with *our* lives, however ravaged and empty they may be. The Culhanes, and everything that happened to them, have taken up too much of our thoughts already. They have haunted us enough, these usurpers of our time, our love.

I'd like to pay a visit, some time soon, to Inishfall, not to talk to the Culhanes but simply to see the big white house first-hand, to listen to the sea and smell the rotting fish from the crab-traps and rockpools on the nearby beach. I think it might teach me something. I think it might offer me some answers to the questions I've been asking.

Our knowledge of events – even of those events that affect us most intimately – is partial. We content ourselves with guesswork. And that is what I have had to do, in composing this account: content myself with guesswork.

Although I knew most of the other people involved in the incident more or less well, I hardly knew Richard Culhane. We were at university together, but our classes were huge – over four hundred people – and until the events of this story, I knew him mostly by reputation. Richard seldom attended lectures but you could see him often, alone on the playing fields at evening, redfaced and stocky, practising his kicks. He seemed mysterious to me then and he seems mysterious to me now. During the trials he was the only one who kept silent, who sat with his back straight, facing the wall a few feet in front of him, and who never moved, never stood to offer an apology,

never broke down and confessed. I think a visit to the big white house might teach me something about his stoicism, about his calm in the midst of collapse. Then again, I might learn nothing. I've become sanguine about the possibility of genuine knowledge. The world, when I consult it, returns only the hard glass of the mirror that is myself. I wonder if it is the same for Richard and his parents, if they ask the world for meaning only to be scorned, rebuffed; if they find themselves in the dark, as we do, still, now that everything is done.

2

I can't tell this story. Let's be clear about that from the beginning.

I wasn't there. I didn't see it happen. This is by way of an apology. I've had to piece it together, after the fact, from available sources, from newspapers, radio, television, magazines. And people spoke to me, too, usually in whispers, always in private, sometimes with a look of furtive shame, more often with a kind of half-concealed pity or sadness. Teachers and parents, interested parties, witnesses and friends: somehow they were always eager to talk, once I'd brought the subject up, once I'd declared an interest. In the hush of a southside living room, say, as afternoon wanes and turns to evening, at what Stephen O'Brien's popular parents always called the cocktail hour (as they tolerantly mixed the gin and tonics for some visiting college friends), people will often be amenable to sharing their memories of the night it happened, or the moment they heard it had happened, or their thoughts on what life must be like for the various families in the protracted and wearisome aftermath. They pay attention to their hands, as they talk. They seldom look at me.

You encounter resistance, too, of course. Many of my friends and acquaintances told me their parents had forbidden them to talk about the case. Recently I asked a girl I knew if she'd ever met the boy who died. 'We don't talk about that,' she said, looking alarmed.

I didn't press any further.

No, I wasn't there on the night itself. But I might have been. It might have happened to anyone, at any time, on any night. Nights

out in Dublin have a sameness, a predictability. A pattern is followed, every time, without fail. Drinks in someone's house. A pub. A club. Kebabs or chips. A taxi home. But I don't want you to think of the central event of my story as something contingent, as a random occurrence, a freak of chance. You should remember that this event, one way or the other, was inevitable. It would have happened anyway, no matter what factors were different, no matter what people might have done differently.

Or so I've come to believe.

Violence is always an unspoken possibility on these nights out, despite our fondness for the pattern. We do a great deal of concealing, when we're on the town. We conceal our spots and our badly cut fringes, the T-shirt lines of our builder's tans. We conceal our anxieties, our insecurities. We conceal facts, too: facts about who we'd like to sleep with, who we'd like to kiss, who we fear and who we despise. And we conceal more disturbing things: a cigarette burn, self-inflicted; a scar from a razor blade, the same; a problem with food or drugs. But the most secret thing, the thing we go to the greatest lengths to hide, is the possibility of death, the possibility that one of us will go too far and not return, or that we will *all* go too far, that we will go too far because that's what everybody else is doing, because we'd be afraid to say no, afraid to hold back, afraid to ask the simple question – *Why?* Since Conor's death a lot of people have been asking *why* – in reading through those newspapers and magazines I come across it often, the anguished interrogative – but motives are something that happen afterward, they are what we read back into the inevitable. Motives are a way of finding sense where none was meant, where none was even looked for at the time.

Events of a certain magnitude barge their way into our shared future. But some events reach backwards in time, too, and make their contours felt years before they ever get around to actually happening. Conor Harris's death is one of these. We felt it coming, I think. Not that this did us much good. Not that it helped.

There is the fact of Conor's death. And there is the gallery of interpretations explaining why it happened. Facts and interpretations: these are what I have. These are all I have.

In several crucial ways, the case remains opaque. I dearly wish things had unfolded in some other, clearer way. But I am helplessly stuck with the recorded facts. Reality doesn't shape itself to meet the demands of art, and all storytelling is essentially a retrospective gesture. So I will follow the facts to their ends, to see what I find.

I've been afraid to tell this story, possibly because of what it reveals about the cannibalistic nature of my generation, about our hatred for each other, about our hatred for ourselves. I've been afraid to tell it because it seemed too dark, too unanswerable, too messily enigmatic to be told in simple terms. But I think I have to tell it, now. I am too alone in my fascination with it, too solitary in my fixation on the events of a few hours one night three years ago. Now that the trials are over, now that the papers have let the story grow cold, now that I have been left by myself, holding the frayed ends of all these facts, unable to tie them together in any way that satisfies me, I can try to talk about what happened. I no longer seem to have a choice.

This is a story about a single event and its consequences, about what happened before, and about how everything that happened afterward was different.

This is the worst thing that ever happened to us.

This is the only story I will ever be able to tell.

3

This is what happened.

On the last night of summer, 2004, at fifteen minutes past three in the morning, a twenty-year-old student was beaten and kicked to death outside Harry's Niteclub in Blackrock, County Dublin. Three other students were arrested just under a month later and eventually charged with manslaughter. The manslaughter charges didn't stick. Two of the boys were eventually tried in a Dublin court for violent disorder. They were found guilty and served five months in prison. The third boy, also convicted of violent disorder, served eleven months in prison. The state then attempted to bring the third boy to trial for manslaughter, but due to evidentiary difficulties the DPP was forced to enter a *nolle prosequi* and the case collapsed.

The student who died was named Conor Harris. I knew him.

The three students who went to prison for violent disorder were named Stephen O'Brien, Barry Fox and Richard Culhane.

For a brief period Stephen O'Brien and I were at the same private school together. Richard Culhane and Barry Fox went to a different private school. But, in the way of Dublin schools, we all knew each other, in this way or that.

We all went to the same university. That's how I gleaned what first-hand knowledge I have about these people and their lives.

There was also a girl. I'll get to her soon.

The state pathologist (since retired) noted in his report on the incident that it was likely that, as well as suffering numerous blows

to the face and neck, Conor Harris received three kicks to the head that were the probable cause of his death, two hours later, in the emergency room of St Vincent's Hospital.

I'll keep coming back to this pathologist's report.

Three kicks. Bang. Bang. Bang. The bar is closed, the people tumbling out. A fight develops, somewhere on the fringes of the crowd, near the bus stop on the packed main road. Those three kicks, we can be sure, aren't the only blows thrown. But they're the ones that count. According to the pathologist's report – the controversial one, the report on which so much would come to depend – the first and second kicks could have been fatal in themselves. So the third kick has seemed, to some, like a sort of gratuity, what in New Orleans they call a *lagniappe*: an added fillip, an extra bang for your buck. To people less concerned with the facts, however, or to people less inclined towards forgiveness, the third kick has to have been the fatal one.

These were rugby kicks: great semicircular sweeps from the hip, with the foot angled out to lift the ball, the arms extended to keep balance.

Bang. Bang. Bang. One, two, three. A tidy progression from injury to unconsciousness to death. People seem to have found it difficult to conceive of something so irrevocable happening so quickly. They find it difficult to imagine that, with the first kick, Conor Harris was already dead. So many people prefer to imagine that the third kick was the one that did the damage.

This is because the third kick was thrown by Richard Culhane, who up until that point, according to some of the eyewitness reports, had barely been involved in the fight at all.

As Harry's Niteclub emptied and everyone staggered out into the street and began to wave for taxis, Conor Harris found Richard Culhane in the crowd. It was the last night of summer, the return to school and college was imminent, people had come back from their J1 visas (Conor Harris had spent the summer of the previous year in San Diego, Richard Culhane had been in Ocean City), so there must have been an air of tired, expectant festivity in the club and on the street. It was the end of the evening, people had paired off or been disappointed, couples were making out in shop doorways or

clumsily fucking in alleys or laneways. You could hear the boom and shuffle of the ocean at night from beyond the ramparts of the seaside railway station.

And Conor Harris found Richard Culhane in the crowd. Although they had both been in the same small vicinity all evening, they hadn't seen each other until now. Was Conor, at this point, *looking* for Richard Culhane? Was Richard looking for Conor? It's possible. Any number of things are possible.

Richard would have had his arm around a girl. This is the girl I'll get to soon. She was wearing a hoodie, black but spangled with silver stars. Conor would have recognized this hoodie.

Conor would have said something to Richard about the girl. The two boys would have started shouting.

Richard's friends saw what was happening and muscled over. Among them, looming largest, were Barry Fox and Stephen O'Brien. It was the end of the night. Everyone was drunk.

It isn't clear who threw the first punch. Richard always denied it was him. It might even have been Conor. But the punch was thrown and very quickly Conor was on the ground. Only one witness reported seeing him fall. He was surrounded by six to ten people, and they were still hitting him as he fell.

Not all of these people were kicking. Eyewitnesses would later be able to positively identify only three attackers who were kicking as well as punching.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Two hours later Conor Harris was dead. He never regained consciousness. The next day in college someone would tell me that Conor had woken up in the ambulance long enough to say his ex-girlfriend's name. But this can only be a rumour, the sort of romantic legend that surfaces and quickly dies in the aftermath of a terrible event. Whatever Conor was thinking about during those two unconscious hours, I very much doubt it was Laura. They'd been broken up for several months, after all. I don't think people have properly understood that.