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Opening Extract from...

On Canaan's Side

Written by Sebastian Barry

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On Canaan's Side

A novel



by SEBASTIAN BARRY

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For Dermot and Bernie

Livin' on Canaan's side, Egypt behind
Crossed over Jordan wide, gladness to find.

AMERICAN HYMN

PART ONE



First Day without Bill

Bill is gone.

What is the sound of an eighty-nine-year-old heart breaking? It might not be much more than silence, and certainly a small slight sound.

When I was four I owned a porcelain doll given me by a strange agency. My mother's sister, who lived down in Wicklow, had kept it from her own childhood and that of her sister, and gave it to me as a sort of keepsake of my mother. At four such a doll may be precious for other reasons, not least her beauty. I can still see the painted face, calm and oriental, and the blue silk dress she wore. My father much to my puzzlement was worried by such a gift. It troubled him in a way I had no means to understand. He said it was too much for a little girl, even though the same little girl he himself loved with a complete worship.

One Sunday about a year after I was first given it, I insisted on bringing it to mass with me, despite the long and detailed protestations of my father, who was religious in the sense he hoped there was an afterlife. He bet all his heart on that. Somehow a doll was not a fitting mass-goer in his estimation.

As I carried her in stubbornly to the pro-cathedral in Marlborough Street, by some accident, possibly the great atmosphere there of seriousness, she started to fall from my arms. To this day I am not certain, not entirely, that I didn't let her go on some peculiar impulse. But if I did, I

immediately regretted it. The ground of the cathedral was flagged and hard. Her beautiful dress could not save her, and her perfect face hit the stone and smashed worse than an egg. My heart broke for her in the same instance, so that the sound of her destruction became in my childish memory the sound of my heart breaking. And even though it was a babyish fancy, I do wonder now if it might not be a sound like that an eighty-nine-year-old heart makes, coming asunder from grief – a small, slight sound.

But the feeling of it is like a landscape engulfed in floodwater in the pitch darkness, and everything, hearth and byre, animal and human, terrified and threatened. It is as if someone, some great agency, some CIA of the heavens, knew well the little mechanism that I am, and how it is wrapped and fixed, and has the booklet or manual to undo me, and cog by cog and wire by wire is doing so, with no intention ever to put me back together again, and indifferent to the fact that all my pieces are being thrown down and lost. I am so terrified by grief that there is solace in nothing. I carry in my skull a sort of molten sphere instead of a brain, and I am burning there, with horror, and misery.

God forgive me. God help me. I must settle myself. I must. Please, God, help me. Do You see me? I am sitting here at my kitchen table, with its red Formica. The kitchen is gleaming. I have made tea. I scalded the pot, even in my distraction. One spoon for me and one for the pot. I let it brew, as always, waited, as always, the yellow light in the window facing the sea as solid-looking as an old bronze shield. In my grey dress of heavy linen, that I regretted buying the moment I paid out the money for it in Main Street

years ago, and still regret, though it is warm in this struggling weather. I will drink the tea. I will drink the tea.

Bill is gone.

The legend of my mother was that she died in giving birth to me. I broke free, my father said, like a pheasant from cover, noisily. His own father had been steward of Humewood estate in Wicklow, so he knew what a pheasant looked like, breaking from cover. My mother died just as the need for candlelight failed, at the first instance of the dawn. It was in Dalkey village, not far from the sea.

For many years that was just a story to me. But when I was pregnant with my own child, it suddenly became vivid, and as if it was present time. I sensed her in that little room in Cleveland as I strained to get him out. I never had any true thought of my mother till then, and yet in those moments I do not think any human being was ever closer to another. When the baby was laid on my breast at last, me panting like an animal, and that matchless happiness surged through me, I cried for her, and the worth and weight of those tears was more to me than a kingdom.

When I was shown the Catholic catechism at four, in the little infants' school attached to the Castle, and the very first question was posed, *Who made the World?*, I knew in my heart that the teacher Mrs O'Toole erred in providing the answer *God*. She stood before us and read out the question and answer in her wren-sized voice. And I might have been inclined to believe her, because she was impressive to me at four in her skirt as grey as a seal in Dublin Zoo, and she had been very kind to me as I came in, and had given

me an apple. But the world, as I thought she ought to have known, was made by my father, James Patrick Dunne, not quite at that time, but later to be, chief superintendent of the Dublin Metropolitan Police.

The legend of my father was that he had led the charge against Larkin's men in Sackville Street. When Larkin came over O'Connell Bridge in a fake beard and moustache, and walked up through the marble corridors of the Imperial Hotel, and out onto a balcony, and began to give a speech to the hundreds of workers gathered below, which had been forbidden by edict, my father and the other officers ordered the waiting constables forward, with batons drawn.

When I first was told this story as a child, on the very evening it happened, I misunderstood, and thought my father had done something heroic. I added in my imagination a white horse, upon which he rode with ceremonial sword drawn. I saw him rush forward like in a proper cavalry charge. I gasped at his chivalry and courage.

It was only years later I understood that he had advanced on foot, and that three of the working men had been killed.

Old matters. And not much to do with the grief of the present except it gives me my bearings. Now I'll draw breath and start properly.

When I came back in from the funeral my friend Mr Dillinger had come into the hallway while I was out and left flowers but not waited for me. They were very costly flowers, and he had put a little note against them, and written,

'To my dear friend Mrs Bere, in the time of her great loss.' It touched me, truly. I am sure if Mr Nolan was still alive he also would have crept in. But it would not have been welcome. Maybe if I didn't know what I know now, maybe if Mr Nolan's death had not occurred when it did, I might have gone on imagining him my closest friend in life. It is so strange that his death and the death of my grandson Bill have happened so close together in time. All things come in threes, no doubt this is true. The third death will be my own. I am eighty-nine years old and will end my life very shortly. How can I live without Bill?

I cannot do such a terrible thing without explanation. But who do I explain to? Mr Dillinger? Mrs Wolohan? Myself? I cannot depart without some effort to account for this despair. I am not generally despairing, and I hope I have exhibited little enough of it as a living, breathing woman. It has not been my style at all. So I will not entertain it for long now. I feel it, so deeply I fear it troubles my very pancreas, that strange blue organ that has killed Mr Nolan, but I do not intend to feel it much longer. As long as it takes to speak into the shadows of the past, into the blue ether of the future, so long will it be, I hope and pray. Then I will find some quiet method to dispatch myself.

I have not been immune to all the lovely sights of this world that I have been granted, whether some corner of Dublin as a child, some little unprized courtyard in the castle that seemed to me like a dusty paradise, or in these later times those long-limbed creaturely fogs that walk in against the Hamptons like armies, whether attacking or defeated, whether going out or returning home is hard to say.

I hope and pray Mr Nolan wends the long downward

road to hell, with the fields beginning to burn about him, and the sunlight to take on a worrying, ragged hue, the vistas to alter and seem strange to him – not the wide tobacco fields and blithe, wooded hills of home after all, for he was born and raised in Tennessee, despite his Irish name, and, like every dying son of a place, he may have imagined himself wending homeward naturally in death. And though in essence I loved him while he was alive, and for many many years we were friends, it will only be just and right now that the devil takes his hand and leads him in among the smoking meadows.

The devil, I am beginning to suspect, and great grief it is causing me, has a greater sense of justice than the other man.

'Only the unfaithful can be truly faithful, only the losers can truly win' – this was said to me once by my grandson Bill, with his usual sparkle, before he went to the desert war. He had already been divorced, aged nineteen, and already believed himself to have lost in life. Or Life, with a capital L, as he called it. The war took the last sparkle out of him. He returned from the burning desert like a man that had seen one of the devil's miracles. Some mere weeks later he was out with his friends, maybe doing a little of that drinking he liked. Next day he was found by a cleaner lady in the toilets of his old high school, of all places. He had climbed in there on some impulse known only to himself. He had killed himself on a Saturday night, for the reason I am sure that only the janitor would discover him on Sunday, and not the great tide of children on Monday. He had hanged himself on his tie from the door hook.

Why am I alive when he is dead? Why did Death take him?

Nothing else on earth would have set me to writing. I hate writing, I hate pens and paper and all that fussiness. I have done well enough without it too, I think. Oh, I am lying to myself. I have *feared* writing, being scarcely able to write my name until I was eight. The nuns in North Great George's Street were not kind about that. But books have saved me sometimes, that is the truth – my Samaritans. Cookery books when I was learning my trade, oh, years ago, though in these later years I sometimes still find myself dipping back into my tattered *White House Cook Book*, right enough, to remind myself of some elusive detail. There is no good cook that has not found errors even in their favourite cookbook, and marked them in the margins, like an old book maybe in the lost library of Alexandria. I will read the paper on Sunday sometimes, in a certain mood, from stem to stern. Burn through it like a growing flame. I quite like the Bible in a rarer mood. The Bible is like a particular music, you cannot always catch the tune of it. My grandson Bill also liked the Bible, he specialised in unpicking the book of Revelation. He said that was what it was like, the desert, Kuwait, burning burning, like the lake of fire. *He who is not written in the book of life will be cast into the lake of fire.*

I like stories that other people will tell you, straight from the mouth – or the *gob* as we used to say in Ireland. Easy-going tales, off the cuff, humorous. Not the heavy-hearted tales of history.

And I have had enough history for a lifetime from my

own life itself, not to mention the life of my employer, Mrs Wolohan.

That is an Irish name of course, but as there is no W in the Irish language I must suppose the letter was added in America, many years ago, in another generation. Because one thing I have noticed about words in America, they don't stay still. Like the people themselves. Only the birds of America seem to stick, birds whose natures and colours so intrigued and confused me when first I came. Hereabouts, these days, the seaside sparrow, the clapper rail, the grackle, and the piping plover, and the thirteen species of warbler that grace these shores. I myself have been about a bit, all told. The first town I hit was New Haven, a thousand thousand moons ago, as one might say. With my husband Tadg. Oh, that was a wild story enough. But I will try and write about it tomorrow. I am cold, even though the heat of early summer is adequate. I am cold because I cannot find my heart.

Second Day without Bill

Not content with leaving the flowers yesterday, Mr Dillinger brought himself back today. The actual flowers I had put not very beautifully in an old milk-jug, but for all that they shone brightly on the kitchen table. He touched the blue petals absent-mindedly, as if he only half-remembered they were something to do with him.

Mr Dillinger has discretion, I am sure he knows when he is not wanted. But the difficulty with him will always be it is hard not to be glad to see him. He is one of those perhaps rare men that bear the face of an emperor, rather craggy, and what I imagine as noble, not being entirely sure what that might be. He has the looks to go with his reputation, which is as a wonderful writer. He is one of the very closest of Mrs Wolohan's friends.

Even in his late sixties, his manner gives no hint of age. He is very long and lean, so he didn't so much sit in one of my parlour chairs, designed for lesser mortals, as lean himself against it somewhat, like a ladder someone had propped there. Such is the nature of his mind that his head is always in clouds of a sort, and he speaks what is uppermost there, what is most important and urgent to him at that moment, and has not much small talk, something he shares with Mrs Wolohan. But she never had much need of it, with me. We went on like clockwork, in the days of my actual employment. I cooked the same round of things for her, and Wednesday lunch was the same thing more or less every

Wednesday, except when the pressure of the seasons was on me, and some items might be scarce. My days in Cleveland had been well spent, and my dear friend there Cassie Blake, who showed me the first oyster I ever saw, and many other mysteries, left her mark on me for ever, so that I just cannot say I was a bad cook. Which is just as well. Mrs Wolohan may have put great store on my being Irish when she first engaged me, or inherited me from her mother, but it would never have been enough for an employment.

Mr Dillinger has no small talk, but he does have talk. 'I think I should bring you with me next time I am going to North Dakota,' he said, as if the tail-end of a vast train of thought, as long and mysterious as the great freight trains that wind down through America. 'When I was very sad myself, when my wife passed, I found great solace there, among the Sioux.'

Of course I did not for a moment think he meant it, about bringing me with him. But there was its own kind of solace in his odd playfulness.

He began to talk about other things. Like an old-fashioned Irishman of my father's generation, he did not want to get at the main topic directly, but to creep up on it. Now he was telling me a story about his family during the Hitler years. Mr Dillinger's father had been quite wealthy, he said, and far from fleeing Germany with a cardboard suitcase, had made the journey hopping from five-star hotel to five-star hotel, all the way down through Europe, as far as Gibraltar, where he managed to book a first-class passage for his family to America. But his wife, Mr Dillinger's mother, at the last moment refused to go, and later died in Dachau, with two of her daughters. Mr Dillinger visited Dachau years

later, when it was a sort of museum. Mr Dillinger did not look at everything with the eyes of a tourist, he said with a beautiful solemnity, but with eyes made of the same stuff as his mother and sisters. There had been a huge photograph, he said, he remembered that, in an exhibition hall, of a woman running, staring back in terror, her arms flying, her breasts cut off. I jumped in my chair when he said that. I felt it in my own breasts, somehow. Terrible, very terrible.

'It is not always possible to know exactly what you are looking at,' said Mr Dillinger, his body visibly shaking.

Then he said nothing.

'I apologise,' he said. 'Please forgive me.'

'For what?' I said. 'I am very sorry what happened to your mother and sisters.'

'I came to try and say some words about Bill,' he said, his head down.

'There's no need,' I said.

Because of course there are no words of consolation, not really.

Then he seemed to shake his head at the next thing he thought to say, and the next, and so continued to say nothing.

I sat very quietly. I didn't want to cry in front of him for one thing. Tears have a better character cried alone. Pity can sometimes be more wolf than dog. I wonder if I were to have an X-ray at the little hospital, would the machine see my grief? Is it like a rust, a rheum about the heart?

At last he bestirred himself, and his face broke out into a warm smile. His blue eyes lifted their lids, those very eyes he had mentioned.

'Mrs Bere, perhaps I have taken up too much of your time?'

He rose nimbly from the chair, eliciting from it a half-musical squeak, and stared down at me. He seemed to be waiting for an answer, but my throat was stuffed with silence. Then he nodded his head, bent down towards me, and patted my arm very briefly. Then he went silently into the hall and away out into the dusty brightness of the day. The light of the Hamptons, with the lustre of a pearl.

Discretion.

When he was gone I took down the book he had given me years before. I had never read it, as indeed he had predicted the day he gave it to me. He had been coming up my lane, he had said, after a long walk by the sea, the beach in a great shroud of fog, just the way he liked it. He had seen a little wren going in and out of a hole in the old roadway wall. Stretching away from it, he said, was the vast potato field. Stretching the other way, the great series of dunes and salt-water canals. Above this tiny bird was the colossal, clearing sky of the Hamptons, the fog being dispersed by the huge engines of the sunlight. This, he had thought, was a bird that didn't know how small it was, that existed in an epic landscape, and believed itself to have the dimensions of a hero. This was a bird, he thought, that only read epics. And for some reason, best known to himself, whether he associated me with that bird, I don't know, or because I merely lived next to it, that very same afternoon he had decided to bring me a gift, a red-leather-bound volume of Pope's Homer.

'You may read it, or not read it, that is not part of our contract.'

The contract he referred to, I believe, was the contract of friendship.