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Opening Extract from...

Elegy for April

Written by Benjamin Black

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Benjamin Black

ELEGY FOR APRIL





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I

1

IT WAS THE WORST of winter weather, and April Latimer was missing.

For days a February fog had been down and showed no sign of lifting. In the muffled silence the city seemed bewildered, like a man whose sight has suddenly failed. People vague as invalids groped their way through the murk, keeping close to the house-fronts and the railings and stopping tentatively at street corners to feel with a wary foot for the pavement's edge. Motor cars with their headlights on loomed like giant insects, trailing milky dribbles of exhaust smoke from their rear ends. The evening paper listed each day's toll of mishaps. There had been a serious collision at the canal end of the Rathgar Road involving three cars and an Army motorcyclist. A small boy was run over by a coal lorry at the Five Lamps, but did not die—his mother swore to the reporter sent to interview her that it was the miraculous medal of the Virgin Mary she made the child wear round his neck that had saved him. In Clanbrassil Street an old moneylender was waylaid and robbed in broad daylight by what he claimed was a gang of housewives; the Guards were following a definite line of inquiry. A shawlie in Moore Street was knocked down by

a van that did not stop, and now the woman was in a coma in St James's. And all day long the fog horns boomed out in the bay.

Phoebe Griffin considered herself April's best friend, but she had heard nothing from her in a week and she was convinced something had happened. She did not know what to do. Of course, April might just have gone off, without telling anyone—that was how April was, unconventional, some would say wild—but Phoebe was sure that was not the case.

The windows of April's first-floor flat on Herbert Place had a blank, withholding aspect, not just because of the fog: windows look like that when the rooms behind them are empty; Phoebe could not say how, but they do. She crossed to the other side of the road and stood at the railings with the canal at her back and looked up at the terrace of tall houses, their louring, dark brick exteriors shining wetly in the shrouded air. She was not sure what she was hoping to see—a curtain twitching, a face at a window?—but there was nothing, and no one. The damp was seeping through her clothes and she drew in her shoulders against the cold. She heard footsteps on the tow-path behind her but when she turned to look she could not see anyone through the impenetrable, hanging greyness. The bare trees with their black limbs upflung appeared almost human. The unseen walker coughed once; it sounded like a fox barking.

She went back and climbed the stone steps to the door again, and again pressed the bell above the little card with April's name on it, though she knew there would be no answer. Grains of mica glittered in the granite of the steps;

strange, these little secret gleamings, under the fog. A ripping whine started up in the sawmill on the other side of the canal and she realised that what she had been smelling without knowing it was the scent of freshly cut timber.

She walked up to Baggot Street and turned right, away from the canal. The heels of her flat shoes made a deadened tapping on the pavement. It was lunchtime on a weekday but it felt more like a Sunday twilight. The city seemed almost deserted, and the few people she met flickered past sinisterly, like phantoms. She was reasoning with herself. The fact that she had not seen or heard from April since the middle of the previous week did not mean April had been gone for that long—it did not mean she was gone at all. And yet not a word in all that length of time, not even a phone call? With someone else a week's silence might not be remarked, but April was the kind of person people worried about, not because she was unable to look after herself but because she was altogether too sure she could.

The lamps were lit on either side of the door of the Shelbourne Hotel, they glowed eerily, like giant dandelion clocks. The caped and frock-coated porter, idling at the door, lifted his grey top hat and saluted her. She would have asked Jimmy Minor to meet her in the hotel but Jimmy disdained such a swank place and would not set foot in it unless he was following up on a story or interviewing some visiting notable. She passed on, crossing Kildare Street, and went down the area steps to the Country Shop. Even through her glove she could feel how cold and greasily wet the stair-rail was. Inside, though, the little café was warm and bright, with a comforting fug of tea and

baked bread and cakes. She took a table by the window. There were a few other customers, all of them women, in hats, with shopping bags and parcels. Phoebe asked for a pot of tea and an egg sandwich. She might have waited to order until Jimmy came but she knew he would be late, as he always was—deliberately, she suspected, for he liked to have it thought that he was so much busier than everyone else. The waitress was a large pink girl with a double chin and a sweet smile. There was a wen wedged in the groove beside her left nostril that Phoebe tried not to stare at. The tea that she brought was almost black, and bitter with tannin. The sandwich, cut in neat triangles, was slightly curled at the corners.

Where was April now, at this moment, and what was she doing? For she must be somewhere, even if not here. Any other possibility was not to be entertained.

A half-hour passed before Jimmy arrived. She saw him through the window skipping down the steps and she was struck as always by how slight he was, a miniature person, more like a wizened schoolboy than a man. He wore a transparent plastic raincoat the colour of watery ink. He had thin red hair and a narrow, freckled face, and was always dishevelled, as if he had been sleeping in his clothes and had just jumped out of bed. He was putting a match to a cigarette as he came through the door. He saw her and crossed to her table and sat down quickly, crushing his raincoat into a ball and stowing it under his chair. Jimmy did everything in a hurry, as if each moment were a deadline he was afraid he was about to miss. 'Well, Pheeb,' he said, 'what's up?' There were sparkles of moisture in his otherwise lifeless hair. The collar of his brown corduroy

jacket bore a light snowfall of dandruff, and when he leaned forward she caught a whiff of his tobacco-staled breath. Yet he had the sweetest smile, it was always a surprise, lighting up that pinched, sharp little face. It was one of his amusements to pretend that he was in love with Phoebe, and he would complain theatrically to anyone prepared to listen of her cruelty and hard-heartedness in refusing to entertain his advances. He was a crime reporter on the *Evening Mail*, though surely there were not enough crimes committed in this sleepy city to keep him as busy as he claimed to be.

She told him about April and how long it was since she had heard from her. 'Only a week?' Jimmy said. 'She's probably gone off with some guy. She is slightly notorious, you know.' Jimmy affected an accent from the movies; it had started as a joke at his own expense—'Jimmy Minor, ace reporter, at your service, lady!'—but it had become a habit and now he seemed not to notice how it grated on those around him who had to put up with it.

'If she was going somewhere,' Phoebe said, 'she would have let me know, I'm sure she would.'

The waitress came and Jimmy ordered a glass of ginger beer and a beef sandwich—'Plenty of horseradish, baby, slather it on, I like it hot.' He pronounced it *hat*. The girl tittered. When she had gone he whistled softly and said, 'That's some wart.'

'Wen,' Phoebe said.

'What?'

'It's a wen, not a wart.'

Jimmy had finished his cigarette and now he lit a new one. No one smoked as much as Jimmy did; he had once

told Phoebe that he often found himself wishing he could have a smoke while he was already smoking, and that indeed on more than one occasion he had caught himself lighting a cigarette even though the one he had going was there in the ash-tray in front of him. He leaned back on the chair and crossed one of his stick-like little legs on the other and blew a bugle-shaped stream of smoke at the ceiling. 'So what do you think?' he said.

Phoebe was stirring a spoon round and round in the cold dregs in her cup. 'I think something has happened to her,' she said quietly.

He gave her a quick, sideways glance. 'Are you really worried? I mean, really?'

She shrugged, not wanting to seem melodramatic, not giving him cause to laugh at her. He was still watching her sidelong, frowning. At a party one night in her flat he had told her he thought her friendship with April Latimer was funny, and added: 'Funny peculiar, that's to say, not funny ha ha.' He had been a little drunk and afterwards they had tacitly agreed to pretend to have forgotten this exchange, but the fact of what he had implied lingered between them uncomfortably. And laugh it off though she might, it had made Phoebe brood, and the memory of it still troubled her, a little.

'You're probably right, of course,' she said now. 'Probably it's just April being April, skipping off and forgetting to tell anyone.'

But no, she did not believe it; she could not. Whatever else April might be she was not thoughtless like that, not where her friends were concerned.

The waitress came with Jimmy's order. He bit a half-moon from his sandwich and, chewing, took a deep draw of his cigarette. 'What about the Prince of Bongo-Bongo-land?' he asked thickly. He swallowed hard, blinking from the effort. '—Have you made enquiries of His Majesty?' He was smiling now but there was a glitter to his smile and the sharp tip of an eye-tooth showed for a second at the side. He was jealous of Patrick Ojukwu; all the men in their circle were jealous of Patrick, nicknamed the Prince. She often wondered, in a troubled and troubling way, about Patrick and April—had they, or had they not? It had all the makings of a juicy scandal, the wild white girl and the polished black man.

'More to the point,' Phoebe said, 'what about Mrs Latimer?'

Jimmy made a show of starting back as if in terror, throwing up a hand. 'Hold up!' he cried. 'The blackamoor is one thing but Morgan Le Fay is another altogether.' April's mother had a fearsome reputation among April's friends.

'I should telephone her, though. She must know where April is.'

Jimmy arched an eyebrow sceptically. 'You think so?'

He was right to doubt it, she knew. April had long ago stopped confiding in her mother; in fact, the two were barely on speaking terms.

'What about her brother, then?' she said.

Jimmy laughed at that. 'The Grand Gynie of Fitzwilliam Square, plumber to the quality, no pipe too small to probe?'

'Don't be disgusting, Jimmy.' She took a drink of her tea but it was cold. 'Although I know April doesn't like him.'

'Doesn't like? Try loathes.'

'Then what should I do?' she asked.

He sipped his ginger beer and grimaced and said plaintively: 'Why you can't meet in a pub like any normal person I don't know.' He seemed already to have lost interest in the topic of April's whereabouts. They spoke desultorily of other things for a while, then he took up his cigarettes and matches and fished his raincoat from under his chair and said he had to go. Phoebe signalled to the waitress to bring the bill—she knew she would have to pay, Jimmy was always broke—and presently they were climbing to the street up the damp, slimed steps. At the top, Jimmy put a hand on her arm. 'Don't worry,' he said. '—About April, I mean. She'll turn up.'

A faint, warmish smell of dung came to them from across the street, where by the railings of the Green there was a line of horse-drawn jaunting-cars that offered tours of the city. In the fog they had a spectral air, the horses standing unnaturally still with heads lowered dejectedly and the caped and top-hatted drivers perched in attitudes of motionless expectancy on their high seats, as if awaiting imminent word to set off for the Borgo Pass or Dr Jekyll's rooms.

'You going back to work?' Jimmy asked. He was glancing about with eyes narrowed; clearly in his mind he was already somewhere else.

'No,' Phoebe said. 'It's my half-day off.' She took a breath and felt the wet air swarm down coldly into her

chest. 'I'm going to see someone. My—my father, actually. I suppose you wouldn't care to come along?'

He did not meet her eye, and busied himself lighting another cigarette, turning aside and crouching over his cupped hands. 'Sorry,' he said, straightening. 'Crimes to expose, stories to concoct, reputations to besmirch—no rest for the busy newshound.' He was a good half-head shorter than she was; his plastic coat gave off a chemical odour. 'See you around, kid.' He set off in the direction of Grafton Street, but stopped and turned and came back again. 'By the way,' he said, 'what's the difference between a wen and a wart?'

When he had gone she stood for a while, irresolute, slowly pulling on her calfskin gloves. She had that heart-sinking feeling she had at this time every Thursday when the weekly visit to her father was in prospect. Today, however, there was an added sense of unease. She could not think why she had asked Jimmy to meet her—what had she imagined he would say or do that would assuage her fears? There had been something odd in his manner, she had felt it the moment she mentioned April's long silence; an evasiveness, a shiftiness, almost. She was well aware of the simmering antipathy between her two so dissimilar friends. In some way Jimmy seemed jealous of April, as he was of Patrick Ojukwu. Or was it more resentment than jealousy? But if so, what was it in April that he found to resent? The Latimers of Dun Laoghaire were gentry, of course, but Jimmy would think she was, too, and he did not seem to hold it against her. She gazed across the street at the coaches and their intently biding jarveys. She was surer than ever that something

bad, something very bad, perhaps the very worst of all, had befallen her friend.

Then a new thought struck her, one that made her more uneasy still. What if Jimmy were to see in April's disappearance the possibility of a story, a 'great yarn', as he would say? What if he had only pretended to be indifferent, and had rushed off now to tell his editor that April Latimer, a junior doctor at the Hospital of the Holy Family, the 'slightly notorious' daughter of the late and much lamented Conor Latimer and niece of the present Minister of Health, had not been heard from in over a week? Oh, Lord, she thought in dismay, what have I done?