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Opening Extract from...

Seventy Times Seven

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Seventy Times Seven

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Chapter 1

Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Maundy Thursday 1992,
McHales Bar, lunchtime

'You figure it's him?'

'Yeah,' replied Vincent.

'Did you get a good look?'

'It's kinda dark back there, but it's him all right.'

'You seen a photograph?'

Vincent looked confused. 'There ain't no photograph.'

'So how you so sure it's him?' said Cola sharply. 'You don't want to turn round and check?'

'Don't have to. It's him,' said Vincent without raising his eyes from his beer. 'He's sitting there just like it was described.'

Cola Conrado drew smoke deep into his lungs and blew out a long thin jet of grey between his dry, cracked lips: the end of the exhalation punctuated by a perfect, rising smoke-ring.

His dark slicked-back hair was showing the first signs of grey around the temples and his voice clattered like a death rattle in his desiccated throat.

Sitting across the cityscape of empty beer bottles was Vincent Lee Croll; the perspiration on his dark-skinned forehead throwing off a sheen that accentuated his large, full lips – and unfortunate lopsided features. His friends at school used to wisecrack that his mom was a Nigerian princess and his dad was a potato.

The barmaid was at the table.

'You want me to clear some of this for you?'

Cola stared at her from behind his black-glassed Aviators and made no attempt to disguise the fact that he was checking out her

ass. He gave a small nod – like what he was looking at met with his approval – before adding dismissively, 'Yeah, and bring us two more beers.

'You see McCormack's drugstore across the street there?' rasped Cola, turning his attention back to Vincent.

'You'd better point, man, cause I can't read nothing cept my name,' replied Vincent idly.

Cola gave Vincent a sideways glance, then raised his finger and pointed across the street at a large green cross flashing outside a shop, with the words 'McCormack's Drugstore' written below in red neon.

'Can't write nothing but my name either,' continued Vincent.

Cola sucked air in through a gap in his crooked yellowed teeth and made a clicking noise with his tongue. 'You want to hear what I have to say, or you gonna pass some more gas bout how dumb you are?'

Vincent shrugged and gazed vacantly across the street to where Cola was pointing.

'You may not be able to read, but you know what a flashing-fuckin-green cross looks like,' continued Cola. 'First time I ever shot someone dead was right over there, can you believe that? Kinda weird that we ended up here, eh? Don't you think? You figure that's significant?'

'What?'

'I haven't been back in Tuscaloosa in nearly fifteen years and we're about to do some business right across the street from where it all started for me. You don't think there's something freaky about that, or d'you think it's just a coincidence?'

'What, like an omen or something?' asked Vincent.

'Yeah! That's what I'm asking.'

Vincent considered it for a few moments then shrugged. 'Beats me.'

'Wasn't a drugstore then, was a convenience store. Wasn't too

convenient for the Asian, caught the bullet with his forehead. The first thing everyone learns in a foreign language is how to swear, but to me that's fucked up. First thing you got to learn to say is "Don't shoot."'

Cola stopped talking and stared out of the window.

Vincent wasn't sure if he'd finished or not so he nodded a few times before adding, 'That's a good story.'

*

It was as hot inside as it was out: well into the nineties. Cola shifted uncomfortably in his seat. The overhead fan was having little impact and the long-barrelled Magnum he had tucked into his belt was digging into his thigh, making his teeth set against each other whenever he leant forward to pick up his beer.

'Where d'you leave the Fleetwood?' he asked.

'There's a lot the other side of the street,' replied Vincent.

'Next time we jack a car we got to make sure it has a few extras. That ride is a piece of shit, man,' said Cola as he drew down another lungful of smoke. 'When we're done here we ought to find the guy that owns it and run the son-of-a-bitch over. It's a goddamn disgrace.'

'You show up in a town like Tuscaloosa driving a car that's got all four doors, you in danger of getting pulled over by the cops,' replied Vincent.

'You show up *anywhere* in a Fleetwood you gonna have the whole neighbourhood watching anyway: few cops won't make any difference,' continued Cola. 'You couldn't have stolen something that had – at least – one window that wound down? Every goddamn one of them is jammed shut. I've had so much hot air blowing on my ass, my trousers don't fit me no more.'

The waitress arrived and placed two fresh glasses and a couple of bottles of beer on the table.

'That'll be four dollars.'

'For that kind of money you'd expect to have some air-con thrown in for free. I didn't leave for work this morning expecting to die of heatstroke in a goddamn bar.'

'You got to die of something,' replied the waitress, masking her irritation with a convincing smile.

Cola's face changed like a switch had been flipped.

'Too fucking right you got to die of something,' he growled. 'You want to bring me some ice and a towel, or you want to hang around here giving us lip then see how easy it is to "die of something"?'

The waitress avoided Cola's hard stare and answered quietly, 'I'll go get you some ice.'

Vincent stared straight ahead. He knew for sure Cola was about to start in on him now. The guy was on a permanent short fuse. The least little thing would set him off. *Motherfucker should be in a secure wing*, Vincent was thinking, just as Cola poked him in the face with his finger.

'You cool?'

Vincent didn't respond.

'You listening to me nigga boy? . . . You know what I'm asking. You ready to go? . . . You cool?'

Vincent considered giving some of it back, but for now he just muttered under his breath, 'Jack Frost, brother.'

Cola crushed the lit end of the cigarette between his fingers and flicked the butt across the floor. 'Okay, here's the play. You go get the Fleetwood and park up at the end of the alley, runs up behind here. You see anyone come out the fire exit except me, you let him know you ain't pleased to see him . . . What'd you bring?'

Vincent pulled his jacket to one side and showed Cola.

'Glock-Compact.'

Cola shook his head. 'What the fuck you thinking? You want something that's gonna make a big "bam" noise. Like if you was to

write it down, like in the comic books, it would have a big yellow flash with "Bam" in the middle – make a noise that's going to discourage the other patrons from going for a bravery medal, you know what I'm saying. Let the target know you ain't fucking around.'

'This ain't my first time,' replied Vincent with a little edge creeping into his voice.

'Then why'd you bring a fucking pop-gun to the party, asshole?' Cola lit another cigarette. 'Pick me up in exactly three minutes. You think you can manage to count that high? If I ain't out in three then it's all fucked up an you's heading home on your own. C'mon, get off your skinny ass and let's get busy.'

Vincent lifted his awkward frame out of the chair and lumbered over to the large mottled-glass door at the entrance, his arms hanging limply at his side. He turned back briefly to Cola before leaving.

'See you in three.'

*

Cola tipped his chair back and tapped a drumbeat on the side of his beer bottle with his fingers. A table of noisy office workers nearby suddenly erupted in a burst of raucous laughter. Cola placed his beer slowly back on the table and turned to stare, willing one of them to catch his eye.

He checked his watch.

Time to go.

In one slick, easy movement he was on his feet with the Magnum in his hand and his finger squeezing the trigger.

'*Got a message from the boys back home, motherfucker!*' he shouted across the room.

The air exploded with a series of loud bangs.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

Just like in the comic books.

Chapter 2

Newry, Northern Ireland, three days earlier

Danny McGuire had received the call just a few hours earlier. The thin, guttural voice on the other end of the phone sounded older than he remembered, but was easily recognisable: Lep McFarlane, one-time best friend of his elder brother Sean.

Danny's instinct on hearing the thick Newry brogue was to hang up, but Lep was the last person to have seen his brother alive.

'Wub? Weird I know, but . . . just listen.'

The phone call had taken Danny by surprise. He'd thought McFarlane was dead.

'Are you there, Wub?'

Danny didn't reply: he didn't know what to say. If the rumours were to be believed, it was because of Lep McFarlane that his brother had been killed.

'Wub, can you hear me?'

Lep sounded scared: speaking hurriedly, in barely audible whispers, struggling to compete with the din from the pub in the background.

'Wub, I've got hardly any coins left, c'mon, are you there?'

No one had called Danny 'Wub' in years: not since Sean's death. It was a nickname his brother used to taunt him with. Danny had no idea where it came from, but Sean and Lep would laugh every time they used it. They were the only two people who'd ever called him by it. Hearing it now after all this time reminded Danny how much it used to piss him off: still did.

Danny pushed the thick black-rimmed National Health glasses

he was wearing further up on his nose and spoke. 'They putting telephones in coffins these days?'

'Jesus, I was just about to hang up.'

'What d'you want?'

'I need to see you. We have to meet. Don't believe anything The Farmer and his mob say about me Wub, it's a fucking stitch-up. If he tells you my name is on that list they stole he's talking out of his arse.'

'I don't know what you're talking about, Lep. What d'you want?' cut in Danny.

'Have it your way, Wub. Word travels fast – even to the dead. I know what you do for a living these days, so let's cut the coy crap.'

He wanted McFarlane off the phone before he said something that could land Danny in trouble. 'I can barely hear you. Why don't you try ringing back later,' he said.

'Give me two minutes Wub, you'll want to hear this. Something fishier than a trawler-man's dick about that break-in, don't you think? How was The Farmer able to stroll into Special Branch's offices in the middle of the night, and leave ten minutes later clutching a file that even the Prime Minister doesn't have the security clearance to read, tell me that? A file that's going to destroy the Brits' intelligence operation and get all those informers murdered – how does he even know where to look? I'm telling you: dark politics at work. And you have to ask what the hell the Brits are up to. Finn O'Hanlon knows what I'm talking about. He's yer man: he knows the score.'

'Knows the score about the break-in?' asked Danny.

'Knows the score about me: about what happened.'

Danny heard Lep pause to take another slug of whatever it was he was drinking. 'The Farmer' was the codename for E. I. O'Leary: the commander in chief of the Irish Republican Army. He was also sometimes referred to as 'Old McDonald', but only by those who had known him from his days as a political prisoner in Long Kesh.

He owned a farm next to the border in South Armagh. Always came across on the news as a hard-done-by worker trying to eke out a living in what he called 'difficult times': just an ordinary farmer – doing an ordinary job – subjected to constant victimisation and witch-hunts by the Crown authorities.

But whenever his name was mentioned, the words murder, torture and death were usually tagged on to the end of the sentence.

'You ever heard of Finn O'Hanlon?' continued Lep.

'No,' replied Danny flatly. 'Don't call here again, Lep.'

'Wait, wait, wait, we need to get together. This is why I'm calling. I have to see you.'

Danny had stopped listening.

Lep was drunk: not making any sense. It was time to get off the phone. 'I have to go, Lep. If you're passing this way . . . keep going.'

'Wait!'

Lep's voice was raised in desperation. 'O'Hanlon says he knows who murdered Sean.'

Danny felt a kick in his stomach like peppered ice.

'Did you hear what I said?' asked Lep.

Suddenly Danny couldn't think straight.

Eventually in a low, quiet voice he managed to say, 'Where are you?'

'Purgatory,' replied Lep, 'but the Devil's got me by the ankles, you know what I'm saying? They're out to get me. That big fucker Owen O'Brien's been sniffing around Dundalk. He's here for me, I know it.'

'Meet me in Saint Pat's tomorrow morning after Mass,' said Danny.

'Hang on . . .'

Danny placed the receiver back in its cradle and leant his back against the wall.

He stretched his right hand out in front of him and tried to stop it from shaking.

*

Danny stood in front of the bathroom mirror – naked from the waist up – and ran his cold, bony fingers over the small sharp bristles that had started to grow like coarse velvet on his chin.

If he closed his eyes he heard his brother's screams, so he stared at his reflection without blinking.

Danny had experience of death from a very early age: his dad, his brother, Sean, friends at school caught up in the Troubles. Switch on the news any day of the week and some poor bastard had either been blown to bits or shot, or beaten to death. He had grown almost immune to it.

After his brother's murder Danny had been expected to join the IRA. He'd been approached several times to do so, but although he sympathised with their cause he didn't approve of their methods and on each occasion refused to become a member. Terrorism was too crude a method for conducting a war.

Instead he'd waged his own war: quietly taking revenge on those he held responsible for his brother's death.

He was selective. Any member of the security forces was a legitimate target: any member of the IRA who turned informer was a priority. Each killing was planned with precision and executed with an attention to detail that had – so far – kept him out of the clutches of the authorities.

Death was what Danny did for a living. He didn't like what he did, but he was good at it.

His glasses lay next to the soap on top of the sink; without them his face looked strangely naked.

His dark eyebrows and black, piercing eyes contrasted sharply with his pale, milky skin and gave the impression of a hawk hunting its prey as he tipped his head to one side and scanned his taut, scrawny features.

In the early days – before his brother was murdered – people

would often stop him in the street, mistaking him for Sean. Danny could never figure out why. They were nowhere near the same build. Danny was three inches smaller and not as broad. Even from behind, Sean's hair was markedly lighter than the thick black mop of Danny's youth (he kept it short these days). Both had the same cheekbones and well-defined nose, the same easy smile, but Sean was considered the better looking of the two. In company people were instinctively drawn to him, leaving Danny to go largely unnoticed. It was a trait that Danny now saw as a strength.

Anonymity had become his credo, but it was a battle-cry to be whispered.

Danny flexed the lean, wiry muscles on his arms and shoulders and frowned.

'Jesus, you better start eating or you're going to fade away to nothing,' he said, tipping his head towards the mirror.

He slipped a fresh razor blade inside the metal holder and screwed it shut before lifting the small bone-handled shaver to his face and scraping it over his dry skin in slow deliberate movements. When the blade reached his hairline Danny didn't stop. He continued until all the hair on his head was lying in soft tufts – and short, matted clumps – at his feet.

After filling the sink with warm water he submerged his head and repeated the process until his face and scalp were completely smooth and free of hair.

Danny knew that each tiny follicle had the potential to turn informer were it to be collected as evidence at the scene of a crime.

The phone started ringing.

Danny stood in the doorway of the messy bathroom and listened.

After four rings the caller rang off, then the phone started ringing again. This time Danny made his way along the narrow hallway and picked up the receiver.

'Órlaith?'

'What about ye, Danny, everything all right?'

'Fine.'

'Sorry to call so late, yer ma's just been on the phone. There's something wrong with the lights in her kitchen. She wants to get an electrician in tomorrow.'

'Did you try the fuse box?' asked Danny.

Órlaith laughed. 'I wouldn't know what a fuse looked like if it crawled up my leg and bit me on the arse, never mind finding the box they're kept in.'

'Did you tell her I'd fix it?'

'No point! I'm taking her shopping for a few hours tomorrow afternoon. Why don't you nip round while she's out? If we finish early I'll ring the house and you can do a runner.'

'Aye, fine.'

'If you've no other plans why don't you head over here afterwards and I'll cook you your tea.'

'What's on the menu?' asked Danny.

'Whatever you're given,' replied Órlaith. 'You bring the alcohol, and your pyjamas if you're going to stay.'

'Aye, grand,' replied Danny.

'Are you all right? You sound a bit flat,' asked Órlaith.

'I just had Lep McFarlane on the phone.'

'Lep McFarlane! Jesus Christ, you are joking! I was convinced the little fucker must be dead,' said Órlaith. 'What the hell did the wee shite want?'

'He wants to meet.'

'Why?'

'Did Sean ever mention anyone called Finn O'Hanlon to you?' asked Danny.

Órlaith thought for a moment before answering. 'No, never heard of him.'

'Lep reckons this guy knows who killed our Sean.'

Órlaith was silent for a long time before she spoke again. 'You be careful now, you hear.'