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Arimathea

Written by Frank McGuinness

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FRANK McGUINNESS

ARIMATHEA

BRANDON

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CHAPTER ONE

Euni

He came from out foreign and he spoke wild funny. All the older girls thought he was the last word from the day and hour they set eyes on him but they were stupid, and he would no more look at them than if he was the man in the moon. I don't know where that shower got the notion that he was the kind of fellow listened to the likes of them. Was it because of the way some of them sprawled in front of him, were they expecting him to draw them? I doubt if he even noticed they were making a show of themselves. He certainly didn't breathe a word in front of me if his stomach was turning at the sight of those eejits. Maybe he was blathering to himself in his own language, so we would never make out what he thought of them.

It was hard to know what he thought. My mother said, he keeps himself to himself, and will you let the poor stranger alone? He has his work to do, he wants to do it and get home. Like the rest of us, he's missing his own bed. Making all the beds – his as well – that was one of my jobs about the houses, the upper and the lower. We owned two houses down the lane. We weren't swanky, just that one belonged once upon a time to my Granny and Granda. Anyway, I was saying about his bed, it smelt like none of the

rest. It was just always fresh. Mammy changed our sheets once a week and his sheets were washed at the same time, but there was a scent like himself on them, and it was nice, I thought. He must have cleaned himself very thoroughly.

I know he did, for I saw him once. The man is meticulous, my mother told her sisters, my two aunts. In fact, to tell the truth, if I were being honest, I'd say he was pernickety, she whispered. I left them to their whispers but they didn't know I'd seen him soaping himself at the basin in his room. He was browner than anybody I'd ever seen. And even though he didn't know I was watching him and I didn't want him to know, I nearly asked him out loud if all the men were as tanned as he was back where he came from, but I didn't. Here the sun turns everybody beetroot – especially our ones with our red hair to a man and a woman, especially my mother.

He said to me he liked red hair. Not like his own, that I saw on his chest, wet from the water in the white basin, the hairs black as your boot, and fine as the ones on his arms. Yes, he was meticulous in the morning but by evening time he was anything but. Then he was stained with the colour of the paint.

His clothes were stinking to high heaven by the weekend. Mammy fetched them herself down from his room come Friday night, so they could be soaked and the dirt got out of them by Saturday evening, for it is a sin to wash clothes on a Sunday. A venial sin. But to iron on Sunday – well, that is mortal, and if you do and you die, God will brand your bare back with the mark of a red hot iron. Imagine the squeals out of you suffering that. And the smell of your skin burning. So the Sunday was not a day for work, but plenty of times he did. He would lock the door to stop anybody coming in to annoy him. Not that I did so after he lost his temper the first time I juked my head round to see how he was doing. His face turned the most awful shade

and he just roared at me. What did he say scared the living daylights out of you? Mena Kiely asked me. I told her I couldn't tell because I didn't understand one word. Mena said, God forgive him, he must have been cursing in his own language. Well, he was very angry whatever he was saying, he put the heart crosswise in me, Mena, I thought I was going to die, honest to good God, I told her. But you didn't, did you? Mena whispered. And my cheeks burned scarlet. That was because, well, Mena was expected to die at any minute, God rest her. No – no, I mean, God love her. She wasn't exactly my best friend, but you had to mind her all the time at school, or out playing. She was very delicate and she couldn't run fast. If you hit her hard she would lose her breath as if she raced all the mile from Cockhill cemetery to the town. We all took a turn to give her a wallop to hear how she panted. She didn't care the first time you did it because the noise of it was a good laugh, but if you kept hitting her then she'd tell your mother or the nun. Nobody minded her being a tittle-tattle because she was sick, but it meant you couldn't trust her.

You could trust me though. I'd say nothing to anybody about anything. I had eyes in my head and ears that could listen but that doesn't mean I would let the world know my own or my family's business. That's why it was really stupid for him not to let me see his old paintings. God strike me down dead for saying that because it was holy pictures he was doing. That much I knew for sure from the start because it was Fr O'Hagen brought him to us in the first place. I thought Mammy was going into a fit when she opened the door to see a priest standing there with a smile on his face, and he wasn't looking for money.

–Good day to you, Mrs O'Donovan, how are you?

–I'm well, Father O'Hagen, I'm very well.

–Isn't it biting cold for the month that's in it?

–It is. This June is like an October.

–May I come in? I have to ask you a favour.

She let him in. She even offered him tea. And he took it. I was watching her hands shake as she lifted the boiling kettle from the black range to scald the silver teapot. He was still standing as she put in the tea leaves.

–Sit down, Father. Excuse my manners. Sit down. The tea will be soon ready. Do you like it strong? I'll just fetch you a cup to drink it out of.

The good stuff was put on the table. White china with gold at the edges we didn't eat off even on the Christmas. She poured out for him and he sat at our table, Fr O'Hagen, drinking our tea with our milk and our sugar in his mouth. I thought she would offer him a piece of treacle scone with raisins, yet she didn't. I had already staked a claim for it if he left it or any of it lying on his plate, but it was not to be. He had a big face and I was sure he had a long tongue. I thought he looked like a cat, a black and white cat, but then he came to the point. Would we be able to put up a visitor, an artist, a painter that was coming to the town? A painter all the way from Italy, where the Pope lives, he instructed us, as if we didn't know where the Pope lived. I could see the shock on Mammy's face.

–Will he not be wild fussy, Father? All airs and graces – would he not look down his nose at the like of us?

His eyes were scouring the kitchen, catching every speck of dirt as if it were mice droppings. Then he started to lower his voice. He assured her she kept as clean a house as any he'd ever witnessed in this parish, or any other for that matter. She was renowned for her cooking and baking. And the Italians, if they were fussy about anything, it was about their food. He knew that from his own stay amongst them.

–But how will we understand him? Does he speak our language?

There was nothing there to worry about. The painter's father was a distinguished professor of languages. He would surely have taught his son how to master at least the basics of English. Fr O'Hagen himself still could recall a fair smattering of Italian. Between the lot of us we would make a fist of the words to get us all by.

–I still don't understand why you don't ask Anna Boyle, or the Ferguson woman in Ludden. They have houses big enough to take in lodgers. We would be very squeezed–

–If he were to stay here, Mrs O'Donovan, that would be the case. But I was hoping you might let him have the use of your empty house down the road. He could work there as well, uninterrupted. And come here for his grub.

I mentioned to you about my grandfather's house eight doors down from us. We lived next to the forge where my daddy worked. It was bigger than the lower house because there were rooms above the smithy. That's where I was born. In the biggest room in the house. Since he died two years and three months ago Granda's house was empty. That broke my heart. I hated the priest and the painter already because I didn't want strangers traipsing through where he lived. My mother told Fr O'Hagen that house hasn't been lived in since the death.

–Then surely it's perfect.

I'd never heard that word said before. I must have seen it written down, because I knew exactly what it meant, and I was certain as well that Mammy would let this boy from Italy stay. You couldn't refuse a priest. It's bad luck and bad manners. He was asking if her husband, our Daddy, would be agreeable to his request also? Where was he? Out walking the greyhounds. She would tell him when he came in. There was one other thing – she was sorry, but she was obliged to ask.

–Look around you, Father. We are poor people–

–It will not matter–

–I'm thinking of his keep. We couldn't afford–

Fr O'Hagen assured Mammy there would be no question of this family being out of pocket during the lodger's stay. The priest himself would provide a weekly rate to cover bed and board. The visitor would expect nothing fancy. He'd never set eyes on the man before, so he didn't know what size of an individual he would be. As a race, the Italian people, they did tend to be thin and lithe, so he doubted if we would be entertaining a glutton to devour us out of house and home. Mammy was glad to hear that. So, have we a deal? We have.

That's the way he landed in with us. As the priest was leaving, Mammy asked what was it this boy was coming to paint? A new Stations of the Cross, in the chapel. It was time we had one. Wasn't that right?

The lower house was always locked to us after Granda passed away. I didn't mind because without him it smelt like the taste of sour milk. I think Mammy thought the same. That's why she scrubbed the place room by room, me coming after her giving her a hand. She said you're never too young, girl, to learn how to clean a house from top to bottom. That will be your job for life.

–But I'm going into the factory when I leave school–

–You'll leave there when you get married. Every man expects his wife to have his home shining like a new pin.

She was emptying dirty water down the sink. It splashed against her hands. They were rough red, hard as the floors beneath our feet. She was sweating a bit from the work and she used a blue towel to wipe her face. I told her I really didn't want to go into the factory. She stopped and looked at me. Then she took the soaking floor cloth and rinsed it dry. She asked me what would I do instead? I told her

I would love to be a nurse. I was a bit breathless because it was a big secret, so I didn't see her shoot the cloth at me until it stung my face. It was the shock of it made the tears spring into my eyes, because it wasn't that sore. Then she just said, how in the name of Jesus would the likes of us get to be nurses? Tell me how, you stupid bitch? You'll step through that factory door and you'll earn your pay making shirts. That day will be coming soon enough. You're no different from the rest. You have to rough it. Learn that. Get on your knees and help me put a shape on that scullery.

I did as she bid me. I never looked at her. I knew not to when she was in a temper. Eyes boring into her always drove her mad. I still managed though to sneak a look and here's the strange thing – she was doing something she very rarely did. Standing still, looking straight at me, saying nothing.

The painter, he used to do that at times as well. Stand still, looking. Looking at the stupidest things. Leaves, his hand, the table beneath his plate. I asked him what was he looking for? He said one day he'd tell me. I said, go on, tell me now, go on, tell. He said not to be nosy. He didn't say it – he just touched my nose and he laughed. I went all red because I never as much as touched his hand before that. He laughed his head off when he saw me blushing and I couldn't understand why there was what felt like tears in my eyes because I wasn't sad or it wasn't as if he hit me. I got very quiet and he asked me was I all right?

I didn't answer him. I just kept on making his breakfast. Mammy trusted me to do that much. I watched his egg boil in the saucepan. I knew exactly how long to keep it in the water for him to like it. I don't know why this day I didn't take it out when it was ready, but for some reason I let it stay in longer there and didn't lift it out. I put it in the eggcup and carried it to the table. I didn't watch him when he cut the top off, for I was buttering his toast with all my might. I

expected him to give out to me, but he said nothing. When I looked over I saw him putting a giant knob of butter into the yolk and mix it all through. He still barely looked at me as if he didn't notice I gave him a hard boiled egg on purpose, so then, for badness, I said, butter costs money.

He rose up from the table. He took the egg in his hands. He put it on the floor, he put his boot down on it and smashed it into a million pieces. He looked me straight in the face. I pay you money, he said, good money. I get nothing from you, from your family – I get nothing from you for nothing. Do not forget that, because I do not, nor will I let you. Do you remember?

I nodded. I was broke to the bone. And the yellow mess on the floor was like dog skitters when the greyhounds had the runs. I think he believed I was going to cry but I would not give him the satisfaction of that. He might think he was a smart alec from Italy but I wasn't going to let myself or my breed down in front of him by blubbing over what he did to a stupid egg. Let him go hungry. I'm from Donegal. We don't let anybody walk on us, no matter what they are or where they're from. Anyway, wasn't I in the right? Butter does cost money.

Only eejits waste it. During the war in England and across the border in Derry people were panting for a pound of butter. I said that to him. Do you not know the shortage of the stuff there was and there still is, mister? We had a war here, you know, maybe it didn't happen in Italy. Jesus, his face was a panic. I thought he was going to beat me. He took the spoon from stirring his tea. He started to beat it on the table. He said, you know damn all about the war. Do not dare to say you suffered during it. Italy did. Ireland did not. Do not ever talk to me about the war.

He walked off, not touching hardly a bite of his breakfast. I said to

him he'd better put something inside his belly. He would faint maybe if he didn't even have a sup of tea. That's when he started to laugh. I thought it was because the word belly slipped out of my mouth. Then he said, I will die if I don't drink tea, is that so? I said, he might. Nobody could survive without tea. He said I was right. Nobody could. Pour – pour. I did, and he drank the mug down in one go. He said, are you content now? I eat.

I nodded, but I couldn't care less. All I was worried about was he'd tell Mammy and she'd be raging I hadn't done my job and she liked people to carry out what she asked them to do. That comes from being a forewoman in the factory before she had wains. I didn't hear that from her, but the whole town knew she was the youngest woman ever to be made that high up in all the years they made shirts in this place. She wasn't one ever to show off. She hated big heads as much nearly as she did liars – and by God she hated liars – so she never talked a lot about what working there was like, but it was well known she was wild fair to each and every one working under her. All hands were fond of her.

She wasn't of course always that fair to me. It still came as a big shock when I was lying on the bed one summer's day and she must have wanted me out of the house because she shouted at me, asking why nobody my own age bothered with me? I wanted to say, that's just not true, but it was in a way, and I've been wondering why. Here's my answer. It's because I'm friends with Mena. And because she's not well, people must think the same about the two of us. That we're not right in the head. She has something wrong on the outside – everybody can see that – but they notice nothing untoward about myself so they can imagine something's wrong inside of me, that in some way I'm just like her. I suffer because I don't turn my back on her, like the rest of them laughing, calling her gimpy or

pegleg or humpyback, God forgive them.

The painter didn't laugh at her. He was very good to the poor soul. Always asking her questions and listening carefully to what she'd answer. I couldn't believe the way he'd sit talking to her about everything under the sun – school, her Mammy and Daddy, what she wanted to be when she grew up. She said a nun – everybody says a nun – and he told her she would look beautiful. That's when he gave her a lovely drawing of her face. Well, I think it was her face, but you wouldn't know for sure. He said it was of her. I heard him saying that. But she looked more like – she looked more like – I can't say for sure, but Mena, she said, that's not me. Don't say that's me. He said nothing as she hobbled away, leaving the lovely drawing behind. I picked it up and asked him for it, but he said nothing. Just put it all rolled up in his pocket. I said to him that it was a pity he destroyed it like that for even if Mena didn't want it, her mother and father would. A present, a bit of thanks to them for all they put up with her. She has a wild bad temper at times, flying off the handle for no reason. She is a handful, in her own way. He'll learn that, as I did, and I'm her best friend. Her only friend, as I've said before, and I'm paid back for it by nobody else wanting to play with me unless there's not another being in the lane – then I'm made welcome to join in.

That night I had a dream about me and Mena. We were standing at the very edge of the pier. We were holding hands. I could see our parents – her ones and my own – standing a good bit away from us. The next thing I knew we must have fallen in because we were stuck in the water not panicking. Our mammies and daddies though, they were roaring and crying and calling at us to come back to them, to leave the sea. It was as if we weren't listening, for we did nothing to reach them. Then I let go of Mena's hand and I could see tears tripping my mother, so I tried to get back to them on the pier, and my

da's hands, they grew like a giant's, and they caught me miles out in Lough Swilly and carried me back. But Mena, she never looked at us, safe as if she was walking on the earth. She just kept floating, and in the dream I could see why – the painter was waiting for her in a white sailing boat. And the strangest thing of all about this is that Mena couldn't swim. She wouldn't put a foot into the water for all the money in the world.

But he could swim. And he did, first thing in the morning, every day of the time he was staying in the town, no matter what the weather was like. He'd brought a black swimming costume with him. Black with red stripes. I know what it looks like because my mother washed it when she did his clothes along with the minister's and his niece's garments. I never spied him take his dip because it was always so early I'd still be asleep in my bed. And he bathed only in the men's bay where ladies weren't supposed to watch fellows walk half-naked into the sea. And anyway what is it to me seeing him like that? Didn't I give him his breakfast and see him in his singlet, white as an angel next to his brown skin?

I asked him once did he believe in guardian angels? He said he did, and that he'd seen his own. I said that was an awful lie. Nobody was allowed to do that, but he insisted he could when the mood took him. I said I don't believe you – if you did, tell me what the angel looked like. And I bet him he couldn't. What will you give me if I can? I'll give you nothing, I say, because I'm going to share my great secret – I can see them too, I can see them.

That stops him in his tracks. He asks me what do they look like? I say I'm not allowed to tell him. He says he understands. Nobody should reveal things like that. I think to myself that is just jealousy on his part. I'd be dying to know. So I tell him I can reveal only this – girls have a guardian angel dressed in pink, boys have one dressed in

blue. He looks straight past me, as if there's somebody listening to us. He nods and says, I'm sure you're right, yes, you're right, but in that case I have to ask you a question, why is your angel dressed in blue? Only sometimes, I say.

It just slipped out. I nearly run out of the room. How did he know that? This boy might be too smart for his own good. I don't know why it is I am breathing funny, but I am and I can say nothing. He takes advantage of that, knocking the wind out of my sails.

–Why are you sad? It is a most beautiful blue. It is the right colour for your red hair.

–Do all red-haired girls have a blue guardian angel? I asked him.

–No. It is very special.

–Does it happen in Italy or only in Ireland? I wanted to know.

–It does not happen in Italy.

–How often have you seen it?

–Not that often. You are special, he said.

But I'm not. No more than Mena is beautiful. I've wondered since I met this man, what was wrong with him? Now I know he's a liar. And I'm feared of liars, for as I've said, Mammy hates liars. Above all else, she hates liars. I'm not cruel and I'm not stupid, she always declares, but I would hang all liars. It's why we've always told the truth. And it may be why nobody likes me. Somebody asked me once – it was Peggy Jennings who sat beside me in third class – she asked did I like her new brown shoes? Because I said no, she turned against me. I did say as well they would look better on a horse. I said it for a joke, but she turned her face from me. That's you all over, she hissed back. You'd sicken a goat. Is it any wonder nobody can stick you. At least I don't smell.

I told Mammy Peggy Jennings said we smelt. Our house smelt, our clothes. She said our house was like a byre. And Peggy's mother, she

wondered often if the people who let Mammy do their washing and scrubbing knew the state of her own house, they would lock the door on her. I should have known there was going to be bother when she said not one word. Just listened and listened. Letting me blabber on. And I couldn't stop until she asked me, is this the truth? Honest to God, it is. All right, she'd heard enough, she would call round to the Jennings and sort this out. I went green.

Why in God's name had I picked Peggy Jennings? Why had I not spun that smell yarn about another girl, any other girl, for there is one saying in this town that everyone agrees on, it is God spare us from the Jennings. What had I started? What would Mammy do? She asked if I would go with her and confront Peggy. I said I didn't want to and I hope she wouldn't either. Why would that be? Surely I'd want Mammy to stand up for herself. Peggy Jennings had insulted this family. We needed to show that breed we would not take it lying down. Give me my coat, and get your own, I'm not letting them away with that. I didn't move. She said, what's wrong with you? I was holding my stomach because there was a pain in it like a stick down my gullet. Why are you saying nothing, why has the cat got your tongue, wait a minute, we don't have a cat, you must be silent for another reason – what is it? My stomach is wild sore, Mammy, I don't know what's wrong with me. Was it something you ate? Did you have a feed of sour apples? Were you progging fruit in Louis O'Kane's orchard? No – no – I wasn't, I swear. Then why should you have an ache? I told her I didn't know. Maybe I was in need of a dose of syrup of figs, she wondered. Would that clean me out?

I could smell the syrup of figs through the glass of the bottle in the press. I could feel the stickiness of it on my face still after I spat it all out the last time they tried to choke it down my throat. She knew it was the worst thing she could threaten me with. I told her it wasn't