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THERE IS A STINK ABOUT a prison that comes only partly from tangible things. Beyond the stench of shit and piss, boiled cabbage, floor polish and disinfectant, cold iron and sweat, is the stink of fear and cruelty and despair. It is the smell of rotting souls.

Father Minahan doubted he would ever get used to it. They hang people here, he shuddered; snap their necks at the end of a rope and bury them hurriedly in quicklime. He was standing before the iron-studded wooden gates, stamping his feet and blowing on his fingers against the cold, fighting down the urge to cross himself as he waited for the warders to admit him. A thin drizzle was leaking from a sky full of rooks that threatened snow. Above him, the gatehouse towered into the fog, its blackened brickwork enhanced with ornamental white stonework – embrasures, sills and crenellations, all dirtied by smog and time. Time, the priest mused, was one thing those behind the walls were rich in. There were old lags inside who had been buried here for as long as he had lived, and yet still had not served out their sentences.

The dog-faced turnkey at the gate – Belcher by name – gave him a surly nod and beckoned him inside. Minahan scurried through the small door built into the gates, hoping for warmth, but if anything, it was colder inside than out. There was nothing warm or human about this place, with its green and brown paint and iron bars. Sour smells wafted like halitosis. Faint cries and shouted orders echoed along the corridors. Although Belcher must have been close to retirement, Minahan had difficulty keeping up as he swung – Left Right! Left Right! – always the old soldier – down the corridor. A toothless old con was on his knees, sloshing soapy water with a scrubbing brush: one of the trusties who performed the menial tasks to save on Queen Victoria’s wages bills. The man’s face was blank.

Belcher halted at an iron gate and rapped on the bars with an immense bunch of keys. “Father Minnow, Mister!” he barked. “Visitin’ the prisoner on appeal!”

Minahan had given up correcting the warder’s mangling of his name and he half-suspected the man did it on purpose.

Another screw loomed up, his shadow enormous on the walls in the flickering gaslight. This one had a slight Belfast accent under a heavy Geordie overlay and boasted the name JAMES PATRICK MULGREW sewn on the breast of his blue serge uniform. Mulgrew was a scrawny little fellow with a pumpkin head, a pot belly and no arse to speak of; but a brave man by the look of the fruit salad of campaign medals on his breast. He grinned a lop-sided,

snaggle-toothed grin and all but touched his forelock to the priest.

“Thank you, Mister!” Mulgrew snapped, slamming the gate shut behind the priest and fumbling with his keys.

Then, respectfully, his voice many decibels lower, he informed Minahan, “The prisoner will be here shortly, Father. If you like, I can fetch you a nice cup of tea.” With that, he ushered the priest into the visiting room, a coldly impersonal space that contained a scratched old table and a pair of plain wooden chairs. Minahan thanked the screw and sat down heavily after dusting off the chair with his handkerchief. His myopic gaze took in the brickwork, bare apart from a tiny barred window with a hint of snowy sky beyond it. A pair of heavy ringbolts was set into the flagstones: one could never forget that the purpose of the establishment was punishment by incarceration.

Father Minahan had been looking forward to visiting the prisoner, if not the prison. A shy and lonely man, he preferred books and solitude to the company of his fellow men. He worried, too, that he had little in common with many of his priestly colleagues, and in truth he was neither fish nor fowl. He was not quite English, though he had never set foot in Ireland. Educated out of his class, he flopped awkwardly in the rigid British social hierarchy like a fish out of water. When he spoke, it was in the English of an educated man, but there was a touch of Scouse about it – the hybrid dialect which combined Lancashire with Ireland.

Minahan was the eldest son of a Liverpool stevedore whose parents had left Skibbereen in West Cork during the famine years. Although still a young man, he had developed a pronounced stoop and often wandered the winding streets of Durham City with his hands clasped behind his back, lost in thought, his black garments a tempting target for Protestant urchins armed with stones and mud pies. His curly black hair framed a thin face and long nose, on which perched a pair of thick spectacles which magnified his sad brown eyes.

Time passed. Mulgrew reappeared with a mug of scalding tea, apologising for the delay and generally fussing, but Minahan politely made light of it. “You’re very kind, Mr Mulgrew.”

“God’s blessing on you, Father.”

At last, with a great clatter of keys, the door swung back again and Mulgrew stood aside to let the prisoner enter. After shackling the man’s ankles to the ringbolts in the floor, Mulgrew left, informing Minahan that he would be just outside the door if he needed him.

Minahan had come to know the prisoner rather well and to value his company. A young man of medium height and of slight but strong build, the prisoner observed the priest with cornflower-blue eyes from under a fringe of dark brown hair. His expression was serious, but he smiled readily and his grip was firm when he shook hands. He had the typical prison pallor, but it overlaid a complexion that had been toughened by exposure to the elements. When he spoke, it was with the accent of

Donegal – Ireland’s northernmost county – but so fluent was his English that Minahan sometimes forgot that it was the young man’s second language.

“It’s good to see you Father,” the prisoner said. “Thank you for coming.”

“And you too, Michael,” Minahan replied. “I apologise for the chains, but it is the regulations and thus beyond my control.”

Michael shrugged. He knew by now that the prison worked according to clockwork schedules and anally inflexible rules. Once they had hold of you, your body was theirs; all human autonomy was gone. Even the simplest transactions and tasks were regulated. You could never open a door for yourself. Nor could you sit down, eat, sleep, wash or read except when and if it was permitted. Sadly, he realised that he’d come to regard it as almost normal.

The hands that Michael folded on the table hinted that he had earned his living by hard manual labour, but there was something almost scholarly about him, Minahan considered. The black rings under Michael’s eyes indicated that he had been sleeping badly, which, as Minahan realised, was hardly surprising.

Michael, though, was philosophical. “As the Irish proverb goes, ‘There’s nothing so bad that it couldn’t be worse!’” he said, smiling wryly.

“Yes, and nothing that God’s love cannot overcome,” answered the priest.

2

MICHAEL WAS TWENTY-ONE years of age and a shipwright by profession – a highly skilled marine carpenter and joiner. While he was capable of building and repairing wooden boats and ships, he had been employed in the Tyneside shipyards laying the keel blocks of iron ships and fitting out the cabins, crews’ messes, officers’ wardrooms, galleys and so forth of their interiors. His family lived in Gateshead, within sight, sound and smell of the River Tyne. There were many families like them in the town; so many indeed that the quarter where the family lived was sometimes called “Little Ireland”. Like other industrial cities, it had sucked in immigrants from every corner of the British Isles and beyond.

His childhood world had been bounded by the black and silver waters of Loch Feabhail and the hills of Inis Eoghain, a ragged promontory that jutted out into the Atlantic and stretched west to Loch Súili. Baile a’ Chaolais they called his hamlet – “the Village of the Narrows” – which the English military surveyors had interpreted as “Ballycoolish”, which means precisely nothing at all.

Similarly, they had renamed the broad estuary on which it sat “Lough Foyle” and the peninsula as “Inishowen”. The beautiful fjord of Súili became “Lough Swilly”, its waters an occasional haven for British warships.

You can imagine the English nomenclature wallahs clattering importantly into Baile a’ Chaolais on their big horses, all decked out in their red coats. At their head is an officer with mutton-chop whiskers and imperious eye – Captain Carruthers-Bligh or some such double-barrelled moniker.

“I say, my man, what d’ye call this place?” Carruthers-Bligh demands of a passing villager.

“Baile a’ Chaolais, sir,” replies the man.

“Bally *what?* snorts Carruthers-Bligh. Then, barking at a corporal, he snaps “What tommyrot! Write it down as Ballycoolish!”

Earlier, not content with rendering Doire – the town at the head of the lough – as Derry, the English had renamed it Londonderry. As the Ballycoolish savant Seamus MacDubhghaill – or James McDowell – observed, to be sure, they would be outraged were their own towns redubbed as, say, *Dublinlondon*, *Moscowbirmingham* or *Berlinmanchester*, but then Perfidious Albion hadn’t been invaded since 1066. After that, McDowell ranted, they had gone in for invading other people and could inflict any such nomenclatorial atrocities as took their imperial whims and fancies. This extended to the Anglicisation of Irish family and given names. Michael’s family – his father Pádraig, his mother Brighid, his brother Tadgh

and his sister Máire – became Patrick, Bridget, Timothy and Mary respectively. His own Christian name, Mícheál, became Michael. Such were the politico-lexicographical facts of life in John Bull's Other Island, where the English had zealously set about civilising the natives.

For Captain Carruthers-Bligh, Ballycoolish was the godforsaken back of beyond, but it was all Michael knew and all he ever wanted, not that he thought much about it at the time. Ballycoolish simply *was*. Looking back, he realised how beautiful it was, winter mud, ice, poverty and all notwithstanding. They had no way of comparing it with the rest of the world and they mostly took it for granted. Yet for Michael's family, it *was* the world. You could sneer at the villagers as ignorant culchies, he told Father Minahan, but nothing he had seen since leaving it could convince him of the superiority of the world outside. Ballycoolish, he told the priest, was a straggle of whitewashed cabins along an unpaved road; mud when it rained and dust in the infrequent times the summer sun shone strong. But it was also life, love, and community.

The English people, the Grimshaws, lived in the Big House on the hill, an eccentric confection of disparate styles around a seventeenth century core. They owned most of the land. Two steeples stood sharp against the sky; the Church of Ireland's tall and slender one, the Catholic's the short and stubby one, and although the congregation of the latter was by far the largest, their church was the smaller and poorer of the two, which was the normal state of affairs in Ireland. At the centre of the village stood

McDowell's shop and pub, with Doherty's forge and the stone-built National School overlooking the village Diamond – as such village squares are known in Ulster. Up a boreen behind the village were the hill farms dotted with sheep where Michael's grandparents had scratched out a bone-hard living; sharecroppers on what had once been their own land. On the rich, flat lands along the lough were the Protestant farms where fat cattle grazed the grass, their owners the descendants of the English and Lowland Scots who had settled during the 17th century Ulster Plantation.

It being Ireland, it often rained, but Michael's childhood memories, he told Minahan, were mostly of gentle winds blowing clouds the colour of cream across the blue skies of infinity. Michael could never encounter the smell of cut grass without being transported back to the fields of his childhood. They were such a vivid green that you sometimes caught your breath when you looked at them. He loved to walk with his pals in the meadows behind the village, catching butterflies and slashing at the stinging nettles with a stick. If you accidentally stung yourself, you could pick a curly dock leaf on the spot and rub it on the sting to make it better; where you found one plant you could invariably find the other.

One day Michael hiked with his friends Mickey Gallagher and Sean MacDonnell to Newburgh Castle and clambered on the sun-warmed stones. It had been built long ago by the Normans, Mr McDowell had told them. Another time, the boys rambled to Magh Bhile –

Moville to those who didn't speak the Irish – to watch a big ship taking on passengers for America. There were no snakes – everyone knew St Patrick had driven them all out of Ireland – so you could walk safely in the long grass. You could catch tadpoles and minnows in a lochán by a cluster of ruined cabins in the foothills where frogs croaked incessantly, but his mother bade him avoid that place and crossed herself as she spoke. It was a sad place, full of ghosts, she whispered, and he'd understand when he was older.

One summer's evening he stood outside McDowell's and heard an old blind man recite a poem, which began "M'atuirse ghéar, mo phéin, mo bhrón, mo bhruid" – "My great sorrow, my pain, my sadness, my need ..." There was all the sorrow of the world in that keening lament for the victims of the Great Famine. A shadow passed over Michael's child's heart, but it soon faded, for larks soared in the skies, rooks cawed in the woods and doves, linnets and nightingales sang their gentler songs. Rabbits sat among the shamrocks, noses twitching, ready to take flight from the wily fox or villager intent on turning them into dinner. There were salmon in the dark brooks, though Michael and his friends were seldom in luck when they dangled their crude hooks off the parapet of the military bridge.

The seasons turned. Atlantic gales howled down the boreen and churned the lough with waves that crashed over on the County Derry shore. Snow settled like a shroud on the hills. The summer sun sometimes smiled

through the curtains of rain, which were drawn most days, it must be said.

The seasons dictated the rhythms of the villagers' lives; the digging, the planting and sowing, the harvesting. Old Sean Dougherty had a watch that looked older than him, but it only had one hand, and why should he want the other, he asked, pausing to wipe his brow before plunging his slane into the turf. It was as it had always been in Ballycoolish. The people were baptised, confirmed and wed in the Roman church and when they died the priest solemnly intoned the Latin prayers as they were laid in the earth. Generations of Michael's family slept in the churchyard, the Celtic crosses lined up above them like chessmen on the turf; but if life were a game, it had a predictable outcome, as inevitable as the taxes and tithes. Life could be hard, too, unspeakably hard, as Michael's parents reminded him, shuddering at mention of the deserted village in the hills, but there was also a sense of belonging and purpose to it all.

When he was old enough, Michael was prised from his mother's skirt to creep unwillingly to the National School where the lessons were always in the English. "Ach, why must I learn the English?" he demanded of her. "Do the Grimshaws ever speak to us, or the Protestant farmers, save when they are in McDowell's shop!"

By way of an answer, his Mam merely sighed, her sigh redolent of life's sorrows, stupidities and injustices. "Ach Michael, mavourneen," she finally replied in her soft voice. "You'll understand when you're older."