A Famished Heart

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VIPER

First published in Great Britain in 2020 by
VIPER, part of Serpent's Tail
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London EC1A 7JQ
www.serpentstail.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Sabon by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 408 5
eISBN 978 1 78283 643 8

1

Dublin, 1982

Father Timoney rang the doorbell a third time. Listened to the soft *bing-bong* resonate somewhere deep in the house. A figurine of the Child of Prague in his big frock stood in the narrow window beside the door, dead flies scattered at his feet. The nylon curtain hanging at the statue's back shut off any view of the inside.

Most likely the sisters had gone away and not told anyone. He had noticed they hadn't been at mass lately; his congregation was so sparse, of course he'd noticed. If he'd thought about it, he might have assumed they'd followed the rest of his migratory parishioners over to Holy Trinity, where the heating functioned and the brass chandeliers shone bright in the dark mornings. Or they could have gone off to visit a relative, a sick relative. Often women did that.

But their niece, a small punky-looking one, had arrived at his door, saying she hadn't been able to reach her aunts for a month, and no one would answer the door. It was nine o'clock last night when she'd shown up, distraught and melodramatic. 'You are their shepherd,' she'd said, clutching at his hand. A sharp waft of alcohol came off her breath. He told her to go home, to leave it with him.

He had asked his housekeeper, Mrs Noonan, for her advice – she knew so much more about the people around here. He hadn't even known the keys to their house were among the hoard in the hall cupboard, until she told him.

He took the keys out of his coat pocket now, the brown label written in Father Deasy's fussy hand. *The Misses MacNamara*.

Still he hesitated. There would be a simple explanation. And yet he realised he was rehearsing the sequence of events that led him to this moment, as if noting it to tell someone later.

He took a breath and slid the key into the lock. When he turned it, the door opened easily, but juddered to a stop as a little gilt chain tightened across the gap, a chain someone inside must have slotted in place. He looked over his shoulder, along the cul-de-sac spattered with yellow leaves. Nobody about. He should have asked young Jimmy to come with him, but it would be spineless to go back to the parish house and get him now.

He put his face to the gap, about to call *Hello there*, but inhaled a waft of heat so thick it stopped his voice; a swampy warmth bearing a bouquet of chemical flowers and there, like a wire running through it, a very specific smell.

Despite the many bodies he'd prayed over and delivered to their rest, he had met this smell only once before, ages past, down by the railroad near Sandymount. Hunkering in the long grass on a hot day, hiding from the older boys, the thread of a strange odour – redolent of mutton and sweat – had led him to the body of an Alsatian dog wreathed in

broken bricks, the rising flies unveiling a pale-pink crater behind its plush ear.

One hand against the door now, his heart began thumping. Why did it have to be him? Why did the Lord – or was it the world – try him so? Another priest would have had the wit to call the police. To not be the lone one standing here, knowing he had to press on, because every action on this earth is witnessed.

Father Timoney took a step back, then threw his bulk at the neat white door, bruising his shoulder against the wood. The chain held.

He flung himself again and heard a metallic 'ping' as the chain gave way. But he couldn't halt the momentum of his body and fell through the opening gap, landing on his knees on a spill of unopened post, sliding forward on layers of glossy paper and envelopes. He braced his hands against the grimy carpet to stop his face meeting it. When he raised his head, he was in the doorway of the living room, and there in an armchair she sat, facing him. One of the sisters. Her head was bowed, she was swaddled in shawls, but the hands braced on the chair arms were not like hands at all, but the dry claws of a bird.

2

Francesca nodded her way past the doorman guarding the revolving door of the Gramercy Hotel. 'Hi there, how are you?'

He acknowledged her passing with only a slow bat of his eyelids. He used to be chatty with her. She ducked straight into the bar area and took the first stool at the long bar, shielded from the foyer by a room divider paned with coloured glass. It was wonderfully old-fashioned here, unchanged since her first days in New York – what – fifteen years ago? No, can't be.

She pushed up her sunglasses and shucked off her rabbit-fur jacket, let it fall over the back of the seat. She loved these bar stools. They were like the bastard love-child of an armchair and a high stool. They swivelled. They had buttoned upholstery. If there was a pub in heaven, it would have bar stools like these.

It was the kind of thing she loved about the States. They had no fear of luxury. In Dublin it was seen as a bit soft to be sitting at all while you drank. Sitting was for geriatrics.

She placed a newspaper on the shining counter to mark her domain, then sauntered over to where the guest breakfast was laid out. Yesterday's bagels, cream cheese, a jug of thin orange juice, big metal urns of coffee. If she had paid

the fifty dollars a night to stay here, she might well have complained about this sparse, unmanned buffet.

The other breakfasters were a mix of business people and tourists, planning out their days over diaries or guidebooks. Two stocky women in casual clothes bent over a map of Manhattan. The Russian girl who occasionally cleared the tables appeared, and Francesca moved away, bearing her two bagels and coffee back to her corner.

The newspaper was yesterday's, just a ploy to look occupied. It was turning into a very lean week. An unforeseen taxi fare the previous evening had almost cleared her out – some men were badly brought up, in that respect. At least he had paid for the dinner. There were two days to go before payday, and since the entire company had accepted shares of the box office rather than a wage, she was worried it wouldn't add up to much. During every performance she looked into the auditorium and counted the empty seats. *A matter of faith*, she told herself. The play could take off yet, it wasn't *so* bad. Or her agent might call with news. That second series of *Honeybun* might be commissioned. There was no end to the good things that could happen.

Which reminded her. She reached for her jacket pocket and pulled out an envelope. She didn't particularly want to read Rosaleen's holy nonsense, but it *had* been her birthday recently and there was a chance her sister had fallen into the old habit of sending her a bit of money.

She'd picked up the letter from the mail office on the way to breakfast. The bastards were holding it for the 82 cents owing on the postage. Rosaleen had scrawled 'airmail' on the envelope, but neglected to stick on the right stamps.

Francesca had been tempted to abandon it rather than pay the extra, and asked the official if she could hold it – more than one sheet of paper, possibly a bit of folding money – before handing over her dimes.

Rosaleen's handwriting on the envelope just about broke her heart. It was still the well-behaved hand of a convent girl, but seemed to have gained a trembling quality. Like the writing of a feeble old lady, not her bright-smiled big sister. How could Rosaleen grow old when she herself felt so unchanged?

A line from a play came floating out from that part of her mind where years of memorised lines lay in a jumble. *I was not in safety, neither had I rest … then the trouble came*. What was it from? No. Gone, so much gone.

'Excuse me?'

She mustered her dignity and turned, expecting the sharp-featured waitress, but it was one of the lady tourists.

'Sorry to bother you, but my girlfriend and I thought we recognised you.'

Francesca gave a modest shrug.

'Where would we have seen you?'

Jesus! The guessing game. The woman's 'girlfriend' gave a little wave from the table.

'Do you go to the theatre?'

'Don't get the chance much. We're from Virginia. You *are* an actress, though, right?'

'I am that,' said Francesca. 'It might have been a film. Perhaps *Dark Flows the Bann*?'

'Hmm,' said the woman, puckering her lips. 'Can't say it rings a bell. How about TV?'

'Well, I've just been in a series called *Honeybun* – about a girl who runs a bakery.'

The woman twisted to shout across the room, '*Honeybun*?'

'That's the one!' said the woman at the table. Everyone in the room was watching now. 'You're that old downstairs neighbour – Mrs O'Leary.'

'She's not old, she's—'

'This is so exciting,' said the woman at her side. 'Dianne thought she saw Lionel Ritchie yesterday, but it was just some black guy with a mullet.'

With an eager smile, Dianne padded up to join them. 'I didn't mean *you're* old. It's the make-up they do, ain't it? You are just *gorgeous*.'

'That hair!' said the first woman and reached out to take a strand and show it to her friend. 'Is it natural red?'

No such thing as a free breakfast, after all. But Francesca smiled and gave them a printed flyer for her play, said she'd love to see them there. They couldn't visit New York and not go to the theatre – it was unthinkable. If they showed, it would boost her wages, by … oh, a dollar at least.

The women headed off for the top of the World Trade Center, and Francesca took her sister's letter from under the newspaper, where she had automatically tucked it.

There was no money inside, just three battered pages of pale-blue writing paper, one of them torn nearly across, as if the letter had survived various ordeals before even reaching the envelope. She couldn't face reading it over breakfast. The agitated script, the wrong stamp – little signs of Rosaleen not quite managing. She hoped Berenice was

taking care of Rosaleen, was being kind to her. She'd tried to phone them a while back, to catch up, but the number kept ringing out. She could do without the worry right now.

Francesca took a last bitter swig of coffee and a chew of bagel before gathering her things. She pulled her sunglasses down to hide her eyes. As she reached the revolving door, someone called from the reception desk, 'Ms MacNamara!' and she turned automatically.

It was one of the junior managers, looking like a young undertaker in his dark suit. He curled a finger.

'My car is waiting,' she said.

'It won't take a moment.'

She sighed and approached the desk.

'Breakfast for non-residents is six dollars.'

'I did not partake of breakfast,' said Francesca. 'I was obliging two of your guests, who wanted information about my play. Those ladies from Virginia?'

'Don't know 'em.'

'It's very disappointing. This petty harassment. The Gramercy always had such a reputation for supporting artists. International actors …'

She gestured towards the bronze wall plaque to Siobhán McKenna, another flame-haired Irish woman, whom a previous management had obviously treasured during her great Broadway triumphs.

'Very disappointing,' she repeated and headed for the door.

'Well, you ain't no *Shee-bawn* McKenna,' said the man.

Francesca kept walking away, delicately raising her middle finger in an over-the-shoulder farewell.

3

Vincent Swan took the call from Deerfield Garda station, wrote down the relevant address and scanned the office for someone to bring with him. Young Colin Rooney was eating a sandwich with his mouth open and reading the sports pages, a tempting target.

'I've got a car signed out.'

He swivelled towards her voice. Detective Garda Gina Considine was already getting up from her desk. One week in the unit, and keen as a razor.

'Okay, so.'

She swung her jacket off the back of her chair and jangled a set of car keys at him.

'You can drive,' said Swan.

'Taking your life in your hands there,' commented Ownie Hannigan from his den in the corner, half hidden by a buttress of filing cabinets and a fug of smoke. Swan ignored him, but some of the other men obliged with rote chuckles.

They headed out from Garda Headquarters onto the North Circular. The radio was playing some dreadful chirpy pop, so he twisted the knob and hit RTÉ1. A woman with a drawling voice was discussing food. The third time she said *luscious*, he hit the button again.

Gina Considine side-eyed him. 'Can I ask what we're going to?'

'An old woman, dead in her home. Found by her priest.'

He looked out of the side window. They were waiting at lights near Phibsborough Cross, entering his home turf, and his eyes automatically sought out his father's old shop. The sign on the gable wall was still visible – just – the white letters faint on the red bricks now:

HARRY SWAN
FINE FURNISHINGS

Considine was following his line of sight. 'He's got the same name as you. A relative?'

'I can see why you were promoted to the detective unit.'

She looked uncertain how to respond.

'Sorry,' he said. 'I didn't mean to sound sarcastic.'

The lights changed and she drove on, obeying his directions wordlessly. It was the thought of his father that made him irritable. Harry had been a spectacularly bad businessman – filled his shop with gilt frou-frou when the style was sleek and modern, then changed to sleek and modern when the middle classes were all for stripped dressers and Victoriana. His father never listened to anyone's advice, least of all that of Swan's mother. And now he was two years dead, and his mother still heartbroken for the old bastard.

They passed by the end of his street and pulled onto the busy road towards Glasnevin. When he spotted the ugly church of St Alphonsus coming up on the far side, he pointed to a slip road and Considine turned off.

'It should be around here.'

They drove past a fenced lot where the remains of a garage canopy stood like an outsize dolmen, then an expansive car park around a modern pub with an attached run of three motley shops. There was a metal pedestrian bridge linking the shops to the church across the road. He couldn't see any houses nearby.

'Two Rowan Grove,' recited Considine, as if that might make it appear.

Swan glimpsed a small terrace veiled by a line of trees on a rise behind the pub.

'Up there.'

As they got closer, he could see they were fairly new houses – narrow, boxy things squeezed onto a strip of land in front of an old stone wall. A patrol car parked by the kerb confirmed it was the right place.

There were no fences or gates dividing the strip of grass that ran in front of the five houses. Simple slab paths ran up to each door. Every house had a large plate-glass window to the right of a small porch, but the overall proportions were mean. Outside number two stood a tall Garda sergeant and a moustachioed younger man in a brown bomber jacket.

'Ready?'

Considine flashed a quick grin. 'I am.'

Swan recognised the sergeant and managed to pluck his name from some hinterland of his brain as they approached.

'Flaherty, isn't it?'

'Yes, sir, and this is Detective Sergeant Clancy.'

Swan shook the younger man's hand.

‘Darren,’ said Considine crisply.

‘You should get some tape up,’ Swan said. ‘Tie it to the lamp posts, if you need to.’

‘We didn’t want to go over the top, you know,’ said Clancy.

‘What’s worse,’ said Swan, ‘looking stupid or messing up an evidence chain?’

‘We’re thinking it’s probably natural causes.’

‘I’ll keep that in mind.’

He noticed Considine studying the ground, a wry twist to her lips.

‘I’ll call the station,’ said Sergeant Flaherty. ‘They’ll send some up.’

‘What else do I need to know before we go in? Where’s this priest?’

Sergeant Flaherty jerked his thumb towards the church across the road. ‘Back in the presbytery. He was apparently alerted by the women’s niece that she couldn’t contact them, and came to investigate. There should be two women, y’see – sisters – but there’s only one. One of our Guards is with him.’

‘Make sure he stays there until we get a chance to see him.’

Sergeant Flaherty reached for his walkie-talkie. Swan squinted over at the church. It looked like it had been built in the 1960s, with a steep green roof that rose asymmetrically to a single pinnacle. The adjacent bell tower was like a concrete lift shaft topped by a slab on four thin legs, a metal cross with a drunken tilt stuck on top of that. Plain and unlovely.

'How long did the pathologist say he'd be?' asked Swan.

'Eh, he didn't say,' said Clancy.

He had the impression that Clancy hadn't asked, that urgency was not a factor. The young detective was not the one who had called in the murder squad, Swan reckoned. Flaherty, more cautious and more experienced, would have been the one who asked for a second opinion.

Now it was down to Swan to make a decision as quickly as possible. The right decision. If Swan called it in as suspicious, the forensics team and enough back-up to scour the neighbourhood would be there within the hour. Call it wrong, and Superintendent Kavanagh would take a flamethrower to him for unnecessary expenditure. Back at the Depot, the talk was more of budgets than of crime these days.

'Right. Let's take a look.'

'Sir …' Clancy was practically squirming. 'The priest. He opened the back door and windows to let in some air. We left them like that.'

'You come with us, so. Show Detective Considine exactly what he moved or touched. Flaherty, will you try and check in with the pathologist?'

Swan led the way across the threshold, noticing the splintered frame where a small guard chain had been forced. A holy-water font hung beside the door, pearlised pink plastic bearing an oval picture of the dove of the Holy Ghost. The little square of sponge lying inside the bowl was shrunken and convex, dry as bone. Straight ahead, through the kitchen, he could see the open back door, but the house still breathed a foul warmth. Letters and leaflets

were scattered down the hall, a few stamped over with grey footprints. Swan hopped over them neatly, then watched that Clancy and Considine did the same.

He nodded them towards the kitchen. 'See if you can get it back to how everything was, without leaving prints.' Considine glanced into the living room as she passed and he saw her falter, then keep going.

Swan stood in the living-room doorway and made himself look methodically from left to right, to take it all in, ignoring what screamed for his attention in the armchair.

The room was low and long, running from the front of the house to the back, where sliding patio doors framed a view of a modest garden. The room was untidy, yet staid, the furniture of an older style than the house. There were two green damask armchairs and a few dark mahogany pieces; nesting tables, a big standard lamp with a fringed shade, a Victorian sideboard that was much too large for the room. In contrast, the fireplace surround was modern, made of a kind of pale marble, and the flame-effect fire had been pulled out so that it was tilted to face the armchair with the body in it. The carpet was scattered with serious-looking magazines and books with plain black or dark-red covers. A grey plastic bucket sat in one corner.

Finally he turned his focus to the figure in the chair, hunched and ancient-looking, an Incan mummy dressed in grandmother's clothes. The wrists sticking out from thick jumper sleeves were thin as broomsticks, the hands skeletal, skin the colour of leather. Her upper body was wrapped around with a knitted shawl or blanket. She wore a tweed skirt, and the legs visible below the skirt were as

emaciated as her arms, shinbones sharp inside wrinkled nylons. Knobbed ankles disappeared into fluffy pink slippers, incongruously bright.

They had described her as an old woman, but the hair on her head, though lank and matted, was brown, with only a few strands of grey twisting through it. It hung forward so that it hid most of her face. Perhaps she wasn't so very old; it was the clothes and thinness that had made them think so. His own mother was far greyer than this woman at – what? – sixty-five or -six, she must be now. The thought of his mother tugged momentarily at his attention, a guilty, sinking feeling wrapped up in it.

He stepped over a pile of books and balanced a hand very lightly on the chair arm, squatted down to get a better look at the woman's face.

It was still a face, just. Skin stretched over a skull. The lips shrank back from the long teeth, the eye hollows retreated deep into shadow. Her skin looked terribly dry, the surface minutely wrinkled, like gauze.

Desiccated. That was the word. He looked down at the pamphlets and papers spread around the woman's feet. A stapled journal called *The Bugle of the Revenant*, with a hovering angel on the cover, caught his eye.

Considine leaned in the door, Detective Clancy at her shoulder.

Swan stood up, wiping the palms of his hands together to rid them of the feel of the chair.

'The lads here unplugged that fire after they checked her,' said Considine, 'and the priest moved some bin bags in the kitchen to get at the door.'

Her voice was steady, and her eyes darted about the room as she spoke. They fixed on something behind him and he turned to follow her gaze. Above the mantelpiece, a photograph of Pope John Paul II saying mass at the Phoenix Park hung in a cheap gilt frame. There was an empty picture hook two inches above it, suggesting that the pontiff had recently ousted a larger picture to gain his place. Below the mass scene, a heavy wooden clock overhung the narrow ledge of the mantel. To its left stood a black crucifix with an abstracted figure of Christ attached, swaying from his nails in a sickle of pain. On the right was a framed photograph, five children sitting on a low country wall, an unremarkable hill swelling in the background.

He turned back to Considine. 'You've got the names of who touched what?'

She nodded. 'Is it a goer?'

'Probably not. No obvious signs of interference. But I want to see what the pathologist says. Any word on that, Detective?'

'I'll get on to it,' Clancy hurried out the front door.

'I could have a look upstairs,' said Considine, waiting for Swan's nod before she moved.

He bent to examine the family photograph. It looked like it had been blown up from an older, smaller snapshot – everything was slightly blurred. Four teenage girls and a younger boy. The girls' identical buttoned-up coats and heavy boots were reminiscent of the 1940s or 50s. The back end of an old dark car butted into the frame on the left. Three of the girls had their hair in plaits, with big bows on the end. The fourth and smallest girl, maybe eleven or

twelve years old, wore her thick hair loose, curls lifted and blurred in the wind. She faced the lens with a confidence that set her apart from her sisters – bright eyes and a bold smile. The boy, sitting a little apart, sulked in a short-trousered suit. A pale rosette on his lapel indicated that this was his first communion. A family jaunt, in honour of the sacrament. Swan looked at the figure in the armchair, then back at the photograph.

She could be one of those girls. Perhaps even the lively one. It could have been a simple heart attack or stroke. A thing that happened unnoticed. But why unnoticed? They'd need to track down the sister. But the woman's thinness was disturbing, he'd never seen such a thing. Could she have starved? But what was there to stop her walking out the door, if she was in need?

He looked again at the stuff scattered around the chair – a few crumpled tissues, but no teacup or glass, no sign of any sustenance taken. He was vaguely aware of Considine's feet moving around above him. A handwritten page poked out from a prayer book and he bent to coax it out delicately by a corner:

> … you say God burdens no branch with fruit too heavy. But I cannot stand the pain Bernie. I want to be in heaven but this way is too long and too awful. How soon will he come for us?

She knew she was dying; someone else knew it too. Swan's pulse quickened.

He was heading for the door when he heard Considine

stumble above him, and a weird exclamation. Before he could call to her, she was racing back down the stairs. She stopped cold at the sight of him, her voice breathless when it came.

'I found the other one.'