

The
Burning
Boy

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A Famished Heart
The Rosary Garden
The Burning Boy

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NICOLA
WHITE



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for Denise

I burn but I am not consumed.

1

Dublin, 1986

The night is balmy, for once, and a couple stop in the middle of Temple Lane to kiss, not noticing that I'm standing above their heads. I hope they won't be long.

I do love a dare, as Jess well knows. We'd been staying in the warehouse for days before we noticed the locked room. When she said I'd never manage to break into it, I had to prove her wrong. I went out one window, and now I'm waiting on the sill to go in at the other. I look over my shoulder and there's Jess's worried face on the other side of the glass. I want to throw her our bravado line – *I trained in Paris, you know* – but that would give the game away.

After some unattractive slurping and fumbling, the boy and girl move on. There's a short iron bar sticking out of the wall between me and the window I'm aiming for – some kind of underpinning of the rickety warehouse. I grab, swing and reach. The trick is not to think about it. I punch the pane that is only cardboard, and hang on to the metal frame, catch a breath there. Put in my arm and lift the latch.

Jess pops her head out of the other window to check I've made it.

‘I’m in!’

I pull open the window and manoeuvre myself inside. When I turn back to pull my other leg in, I notice a man down in the shadows, looking up. Shit. But it’s only the guy who often hangs out near the gay centre. Baggy denim jacket, hair in a greased quiff, grey moustache. He’s forty if he’s a day. Mr Brylcreem, Jess calls him.

One day we’ll march him in there ourselves. Liberate him from himself. I’ll make sure he pays for the drinks.

The room is a labyrinth of boxes. Video players, televisions, Walkmans. Or should that be *Walkmen*? All very shiny, very sellable. But I’m looking for the fags – that’s what Jess is antsy for, she said there’s bound to be cartons of fags in any dodgy treasure trove. There’s a crate of alarm clocks packed in a satisfying grid of boxes. You wouldn’t think alarm clocks would be so popular. I open one of the little boxes. But there’s no clock in there under the packing, there’s something else.

Then the sound of someone on the other side of the door, handling the padlock, removing it from its hasp. There’s no time to get out of the window, no way down if I did. I close the crate of clocks and hide behind a tower of boxes.

‘Mottie?’

‘Jess! I could bloody kill you!’

‘The key was under one of the tiles all the time. Oooh!’ Her eyes glimmer in the dark at the sight of such plenty.

‘Careful what you touch. These are serious people.’

I’m not going to show her the drugs. It’s best we ignore the drugs. But she’s already opened an old travel chest that

she's found under the window, and the street light pours in on some rolled-up things that look like maps. Everything else is shiny new, but these are old, like junk.

She takes one out and uncurls an edge. There are painted trees on it and the lovely edge of a long-ago lake. My blood sets up a hum.

'We could put one up on our wall. Make it more like home.'

I tell her it would be unwise to take anything. I sound like some kind of schoolteacher and it's not a role I'm attracted to. I'm a bohemian to my toes, fellas, but there are risks I decide to take and risks that are just not worth it.

Jess takes out rolled canvases of various sizes. At the bottom of the trunk there is a small panel wrapped in a piece of curtain. Jess pulls off the wrapping and, although the light is dim, I can see that the painting is exquisite. Colours that remind me of cocktail cigarettes and sugared almonds. I move closer to take it from her hands and glance out the window as I do. Mr Brylcreem is no longer looking at the gay centre. He's looking up at us.

2

‘I didn’t notice him following me. He was very light-footed.’

‘Where did you say this was?’

The pub was filling up. Gina Considine leaned over the little table to hear Fintan better.

‘Down along the quays,’ said Fintan, ‘towards the docks. It was after closing time, and I didn’t want to go on clubbing with the others, so I thought I’d *take the air*. A little detour, a little circulatory perambulation.’

‘There’s nothing down there, no proper lighting even.’

‘Well, quite ... but the moon was full, and so was I. So I was strolling along, feeling very poetic and yearning, when I notice there’s another shadow sliding up beside mine. I looked round with what you might call a *questing* smile – and he had a little knife in his hand.’

Fintan laughed shakily, losing some of his archness.

‘What did he look like? What did he say to you?’

‘Stand down, Detective, I’m not asking you to investigate.’

‘And I’m not buying you another drink until you tell me.’

They had known each other since college, her first Dublin friend. His gentleness had attracted her, and his innocent face, which hid an inner steeliness and ambition.

‘*Give us your money, faggot*, I believe it was. By this

stage I was backed into a doorway. I said it was in my trouser pocket and he could get it himself. You should have seen his face. A picture of beautiful confusion.'

'Jesus, Fintan!'

'I think he almost ran away.' Fintan tipped his glass to his mouth, only a couple of melting ice cubes left in it.

'Did he hurt you?'

'No! I gave him the wallet – course I did. That's why you're buying the drinks.'

'If you give me a description, I'd be happy to see what I can do.'

'He was not unhandsome. A little disarrayed around the teeth, but good cheekbones. Diamond ear-stud – *ugh*. Wiry. I guess you have to be fit to be a mugger. I don't want it reported. I told my bank I thought the wallet had slipped out of my pocket. It's going to be a week before I get a new card, though.'

'Why do you even tell me these things?'

'To spice up your life, my darling. Another vodka and tonic for me.'

'You'll get yourself killed one day.'

'Remember Gerry and Frank – Frank with the bow ties? Did I ever tell you how they met? One night Frank was walking home along Merrion Square and a man started following him. Frank says he never looked behind until he got to his front gate. Thought he was going to be jumped by some thug, but it was just little Gerry standing there, puppy-dog eyes, waiting to be asked in. They've been together five years now. True love can be found in the strangest places. You should know.'

‘Fuck off. Was that what you were looking for down the docks – true love?’

Fintan shrugged, lengthened it to a shudder.

The noise in the pub was rising by the minute. Two incoming girls joined a merry table beside them, and Gina was forced to squeeze up on the bench, moving her coat and bag close to her body. She was still in her office clothes, as was Fintan. This was supposed to be a quick drink after work, but they were already three down.

‘Let’s go round to the Moonlit Gate,’ said Fintan, grabbing her wrist. ‘There’ll be more space, and better talent.’

Considine didn’t want a long night and had no intention of going somewhere like the Moonlit Gate, but she finished her drink and followed him through the crowd and out onto the pavement.

‘Are you absolutely sure you don’t want me to do something about your mugger?’

‘Always the rescuer, aren’t you?’ To dramatise his point, Fintan flung himself across the street into the path of an oncoming car, which was forced to swerve. He careened onto the opposite pavement as the car beeped furiously and wiped his brow with an exaggerated flourish.

Considine cursed and nipped across to join him. Perhaps he’d been drinking before they met.

‘What is it with you?’

He threw a casual arm around her shoulder to propel her towards the pub. ‘I like a little frisson, a little added charge. Preferable to sitting on the monogamy sofa, watching game shows.’

That was a dig at her. Fintan inevitably got spiky as

the blood alcohol rose. They turned the corner and the Moonlit Gate came into view, one of the few Dublin pubs reliably patronised by gay men and, sometimes, a smattering of lesbians. Although he was in the Civil Service, Fintan had no fear of being spotted in a pub like that. Sometimes it seemed that Dublin really was loosening up. Even if the Gardaí weren't.

'Do you have any money at all?' she asked.

'I've got an emergency tenner.'

'That'll do you. I need to slope home.'

'What? Oh, c'mon.'

Considine stood her ground. 'Terry's expecting me.'

'Bollocks to Terry! Don't you get tired of domestic bliss? Don't you want to let rip, like in the old days?'

'You're mistaking me for someone else. The only thing I ever ripped was a crisp packet.'

As they argued, two young men stepped out of the pub. One was tall and dark-haired, broad about the shoulders and conventionally clean-cut, in a bomber jacket and jeans. He stood looking in a friendly way at Considine and Fintan. His companion was slight, eccentric-looking, with long, feathered blond hair and kohl around his eyes. He was wearing some kind of furry jacket and seemed eager to get away, even plucking at the tall guy's sleeve. Considine wished the man would stop staring. She glared at him and, in the moment she met his eyes properly, she realised they had met before.

The boy with the make-up yanked his companion into a stumble. 'Come *on*,' he insisted, linking his furred sleeve with the taller man's arm and pulling him away with

surprising strength. Considine struggled to remember who he was, even as they hurried away down the street.

Fintan stared after them, a hand pressed to his chest in mock longing. 'I would kidnap that too.'

'Don't you get tired of it, all this panto?'

'Well, you're in a shitty little mood tonight. I always say you were a lot more fun before you joined the *filth*. But, you know, I can hardly recall it now – so long ago.'

The bickering made Considine feel more weary than angry. She had fallen for the line that the friends you make in college are the friends you have for life. They had both been more fun in college, perhaps. It was a mistake to hold on to someone for the sake of the past.

Fintan hated that she was with the Gardaí, thought it was in bad taste or low-class. Working in Leinster House, at the centre of government, made him feel above the fray, though all he did was write boring reports about exports, as far as she could tell. It did make him an excellent gossip on a good day. Tonight wasn't a good day.

'You just want me to come in with you as a prop until you find someone you fancy,' she said. 'I've got better things to do.'

'Does watching television with Terry really count as better?'

Considine didn't tell him that she couldn't risk going into the Moonlit Gate any more, not since Superintendent Martin had called her into his office for a 'chat' to talk about unfortunate rumours that he trusted were untrue. She had been so deep in shocked denial that she hadn't been able to adequately assess what evidence – if any – he had on her.

‘You’re a mean drunk, Fintan.’

She took off in the same direction as the two young men had, down towards Dame Street, half waiting for Fintan to call her back or throw another sarcastic grenade. But when she glanced behind her, he’d already gone inside. He was possibly as tired of her as she was of him.

The taller of the young men, the clean-cut one, was loitering at the end of the street. She wondered whether to cross and avoid him, but he looked at her with an expression of such open friendliness that it drew her on.

When she got close, he addressed her by rank.

‘Detective Sergeant,’ he said, and she immediately had a flash of him on some day training course she’d done in Templemore, neat and attentive in his uniform.

He gestured towards the lights of the bar.

‘When I saw you—’

She cut him off. ‘I’d never say anything to anyone about where you were.’

He shook his head. ‘That’s not what I meant.’

A piercing note ripped through the street, a whistle in the dark. Considine squinted. At the mouth of a lane she could make out the glamorous boy. He gestured the young Guard to him, a light beam flickering in his hand.

‘I’ve been asked to go and look at something ... by my friend there. An extraordinary thing, he says, and when I saw you I thought: who better to have along with us?’

God only knows what nonsense he was about to get himself involved in, Considine thought.

‘Is it a body?’

He laughed. ‘I certainly hope not.’

‘Sorry, I only do bodies.’

Another whistle from the alley. The young guy looking highly pissed off.

‘You’re funny. I like that. Thanks for your help anyway.’ He reached out a hand to shake hers.

‘I’ve been no help to you,’ she said, stepping back. There was something altogether too eager about him. ‘And I’d appreciate it if you don’t mention where we met.’

He lifted his rejected hand, regarded it and turned it into a cheerful wave as he went to join his pal, off to some adventure in the warm night. She had no need of anyone else’s secrets.

3

‘You’re sure you want to go ahead?’

The vet’s syringe was loaded with pale-blue liquid. *How could she even be asking that question?* Vincent Swan thought, when he was already holding his old cat steady on the black rubber tabletop, hands cupped around furry shoulders.

‘My wife gave me the impression it was *you* who said it was necessary. That there was no point in him suffering.’

‘I wanted to make it clear that it’s still your choice.’ The vet had cherub curls and a maddeningly young face.

‘Thanks a bunch.’

She startled at his tone. The syringe dribbled. Benny started to purr, a buzz against Swan’s palms. Oh, this was awful. A pulsing pain started up on one side of his skull, the point where most of his headaches began.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said.

‘It’s just that I’ve been dealing with Mrs Swan.’

Yeh, well, Mrs Swan couldn’t hack it, he thought, but he said, ‘I understand, please do ... do proceed.’

The needle slid gently into the shaved patch of leg and Swan felt his cat loosen, slipping from his grip. Benny hadn’t been eating properly for weeks now, mere skin and bone. Swan laid the cat on his side and stroked him as he grew still.

‘That’s him gone now,’ said the vet. Swan ran his hand over Benny one last time. ‘Do you want to take him home with you or leave him with us for disposal?’

‘I’ll leave him with you.’ If it was up to Swan, he would have buried him in the garden, but the garden was all Elizabeth’s territory now, and she didn’t want a little grave in it.

All the chairs in the tiny reception area were occupied when he emerged from the examination room with his empty cat carrier. A woman with a Labrador by her knees gave him a look of great pity. A candle burned on the reception desk, the one with the sign beside it saying: *When the candle is lit, someone is saying goodbye to a dear friend. Please show respect.* He’d scoffed at it in the past. So why were his eyes filling now? *Dear friend, dear friend.*

He paid his bill, though he hadn’t really caught what the amount was, just stuffed a couple of tenners at the receptionist and it seemed to do.

‘Can I use your phone?’

She looked like she wanted to refuse him, but he was in a strong position.

He rang the office and asked to be put through to Detective Considine. The phone rang out at the other end, although the wall clock told him it was past ten o’clock. When the operator came back on, he asked to be put through to Detective Sergeant Barrett instead. The receptionist was starting to look a little impatient. Swan held up a finger to stall her.

The vet stuck her head out of the examination room. ‘Snuggles McGlynn!’ she called, and a young woman with a caged rabbit rose eagerly.

‘Declan Barrett here,’ said a voice from the receiver.

‘Thank God someone’s there. It’s Swan.’

‘I’ve been on early shift for a fortnight. I’m never *not* here.’

‘Well, I’ve been held up. Can you tell Considine I’m on my way?’

He and Gina Considine were due to review some case files together. Swan didn’t want her thinking he’d left her to it, though he did have one more thing to do.

‘She’s not here right now. There’s a bit of excitement over in the park, and I spotted her chasing after the ambulance on her bicycle.’

‘What kind of excitement?’

‘Don’t know, boss. There’s two squad cars and an ambulance attending. I saw them blaze in, but now they’re hidden by the trees. Wellington Monument direction.’

‘Two cars sounds serious, Barrett.’

‘I don’t know anything about it.’

‘A bit of curiosity never hurts in this game.’

‘Thanks for the wisdom.’

Swan hung up.

Barrett was a constant irritant, alternately over-cool and over-ambitious. But there had been a general slump among the whole team of late; it had been a quiet year for the murder squad. Not that Dublin had turned into Eden; there were all too many heroin deaths, suicides, punishment beatings by crime gangs or paramilitaries. But not much had fallen within their particular rubric, and the rumours of cuts – or even the disbandment of the unit – ran wilder than usual in the corridors of Garda HQ. Their

new superintendent would be wanting to make changes too, if only to show he had arrived.

He thanked the vet's receptionist and stepped out into the sunshine, fully intending to return the wicker carrier to his wife right away. He had thought Elizabeth didn't need him for anything any more, and it had satisfied his vanity that she'd wanted him for this sad task. Perhaps he'd be invited in for a cup of tea and he could reassure her that the procedure had gone well, that there had been no suffering.

By the time he got back to where he had parked his car, the nauseous pulse in his head and the relative lightness of the empty cat basket hanging from his hand had drained him. When he opened the driver's door, a nasty heat wafted from the interior.

He swung the carrier into the boot of his car. He decided he'd talk to Elizabeth later, on the phone, not put himself through standing like a travelling salesman on his own doorstep. When they had first lived together she only tolerated the presence of Benny because he was Swan's cat, but she had learned to love him over time. Swan had travelled in the opposite direction in her affections. He'd had to give up his home in the separation, but Benny got to stay on, the dribbling old bugger.

Swan rolled down the car windows and sat behind the wheel without turning the ignition. His throbbing head was looking for something, some spark of interest that would light the way out of this gloom. Otherwise he might well sit until the dark came down.

Then he remembered Considine, racing off on her

bicycle after the sirens. What had she found when she got there? He turned the engine on. Ah, the old curiosity. It wasn't much, but it was enough to get him into work.