

I Hear the Sirens in the Street

Adrian McKinty



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1: A TOWN CALLED MALICE

The abandoned factory was a movie trailer from an entropic future when all the world would look like this. From a time without the means to repair corrugation or combustion engines or vacuum tubes. From a planet of rust and candle power. Guano coated the walls. Mildewed garbage lay in heaps. Strange machinery littered a floor which, with its layer of leaves, oil and broken glass was reminiscent of the dark understory of a rainforest. The melody in my head was a descending ten-on-one ostinato, a pastiche of the second of Chopin's études; I couldn't place it but I knew that it was famous and that once the shooting stopped it would come to me in an instant.

The shotgun blast had sent the birds into a frenzy and as we ran for cover behind a half disassembled steam turbine we watched the rock doves careen off the ceiling, sending a fine shower of white asbestos particles down towards us like the snow of a nuclear winter.

The shotgun reported again and a window smashed twenty feet to our left. The security guard's aim was no better than his common sense.

We made it to safety behind the turbine's thick stainless steel fans and watched the pigeons loop in decreasing circles above our heads. A superstitious man would have divined ill-omened auguries in their melancholy flight but fortunately my partner, Detective Constable McCrabban, was made of sterner stuff.

“Would you stop shooting, you bloody eejit! We are the police!” he yelled before I even had the chance to catch my breath.

There was an impressive dissonance as the last of the shotgun’s echo died away, and then an even more impressive silence.

Asbestos was coating my leather jacket and I pulled my black polo neck sweater over my mouth.

The pigeons began to settle.

Wind made the girders creek.

A distant bell was ringing.

It was like being in a symphony by Arvo Pärt. But he wasn’t the composer of the melody still playing between my ears. Who was that now? Somebody French.

Another shotgun blast.

The security guard had taken the time to reload and was determined to have more fun.

“Stop shooting!” McCrabban demanded again.

“Get out of here!” a voice replied. “I’ve had enough of you hoodlums!”

It was a venerable voice, from another Ireland, from the ’30s or even earlier, but age gave it no weight or assurance – only a frail, impatient, dangerous doubt.

This, every copper knew, was how it would end, not fighting the good fight but in a random bombing or a police chase gone wrong or shot by a half senile security guard in a derelict factory in north Belfast. It was April 1st. Not a good day to die.

“We’re the police!” McCrabban insisted.

“The what?”

“The police!”

“I’ll call the police!”

“We *are* the police!”

“You are?”

I lit a cigarette, sat down and leaned against the outer shell of the big turbine.

This room in fact was one enormous turbine hall. A huge space built for the generation of electricity because the engineers who'd constructed the textile factory had decided that autarchy was the best policy when dealing with Northern Ireland's inadequate and dodgy power supplies. I would like to have to seen this place in its heyday, when light was pouring in through the clear windows and the cathedral of turbines was humming at maximum rev. This whole factory must have been some scene with its cooling towers and its chemical presses and its white-coated alchemist employees who knew the secret of turning petroleum into clothes.

But not any more. No textiles, no workers, no product. And it would never come back. Heavy manufacturing in Ireland had always been tentative at best and had fled the island just as rapidly as it had arrived.

"If you're the police how come you're not in uniform?" the security guard demanded.

"We're detectives! Plain-clothes detectives. And listen, mate, you're in a lot of trouble. You better put down that bloody gun," I yelled.

"Who's going to make me?" the security guard asked.

"We are!" McCrabban shouted.

"Oh, aye?" he yelled back. "You and whose army?"

"The bloody British Army!" McCrabban and I yelled together.

A minute of parley and the security guard agreed that perhaps he had been a bit hasty. Crabbie, who'd recently become a father of twin boys, was seething and I could tell he was for throwing the book at him but the guard was an old geezer with watery eyes in a blue polyester uniform that perhaps presaged our own post-peeler careers. "Let's cut him a break," I said. "It will only mean paperwork."

"If you say so," Crabbie reluctantly agreed.

The security guard introduced himself as Martin Barry and we told him that we had come here to investigate a blood trail

that had been discovered by the night watchman.

“Oh, that? I saw that on my walk around. I didn’t think too much about it,” Mr Barry said. He looked as if he hadn’t thought too much about anything over the last thirty years.

“Where is it?” McCrabban asked him.

“It’s out near the bins, I wonder Malcolm didn’t leave a wee note for me that he had already called that in,” Mr Barry said.

“If it was blood, why didn’t *you* call it in?” Crabbie asked.

“Some rascal breaks in here and cuts himself and I’m supposed to call the peelers about it? I thought you gentlemen had better things to do with your days.”

That did not bode well for it being something worth our trouble.

“Can you show us what you’re talking about?” I asked.

“Well, it’s outside,” Mr Barry said reluctantly.

He was still waving his antique twelve-gauge around and Crabbie took the shotgun out of his hands, broke it open, removed the shells and gave it back again.

“How did you get in here, anyway?” Mr Barry asked.

“The gate was open,” Crabbie said.

“Aye, the hoodlums broke the lock, they’re always coming in here to nick stuff.”

“What stuff?” McCrabban asked, looking at the mess all around us.

“They’re going to ship the rest of that turbine to Korea some day. It’s very valuable,” Mr Barry explained.

I finished my cigarette and threw the stub into a puddle. “Shall we go see this alleged blood trail?” I asked.

“All right then, aye.”

We went outside.

It was snowing now.

Real snow, not an asbestos simulacrum.

There was a quarter of an inch of the stuff on the ground which meant that the trains would grind to a halt, the motorway

would be closed and the rush-hour commute would become chaotic. Crabbie looked at the sky and sniffed. “The old woman is certainly plucking the goose today,” he said stentorously.

“You should put those in a book,” I said, grinning at him.

“There’s only one book I need,” Crabbie replied dourly, tapping the Bible in his breast pocket.

“Aye, me too,” Mr Barry agreed and the two obvious Presbyterians gave each other a knowing glance.

This kind of talk drove me mental. “What about the phone book? What if you need to look up somebody’s phone number. You won’t find that in your King James,” I muttered.

“You’d be surprised,” Mr Barry said, but before he could explain further his method of divining unknown telephone numbers using the kabbala I raised a finger and walked to a dozen large, rusting skips filled with rubbish.

“Is this where you’re talking about?”

“Aye, over there’s where the wee bastards climb over,” he said, pointing to a spot where the fence had been pulled down so that it was only a few feet high.

“Not very secure, is it?” McCrabban said, turning up the collar on his raincoat.

“That’s why I have this!” Mr Barry exclaimed, patting his shotgun like a favoured reptile.

“Just show us the blood, please,” I said.

“Over here, if it is blood. If it is *human* blood,” Mr Barry said, with such an ominous twinge in his voice that it almost cracked me up.

He showed us a dried, thin reddish brown trail that led from the fence to the bins.

“What do you make of that?” I asked Crabbie.

“I’ll tell you what I make of it! The kids were rummaging in the skip, one of them wee beggars cuts hisself, heaven be praised, and then they run to the fence, jump over and go home crying to their mamas,” Mr Barry said.

Crabbie and I shook our heads. Neither of us could agree with that interpretation.

“I’ll explain what happened to Mr Barry while you start looking in the skip,” I said.

“I’ll explain it while *you* start looking in the skip,” Crabbie countered.

“Explain what?” Mr Barry asked.

“The blood trail gets thinner and narrower the further away from the fence you get.”

“Which means?” Mr Barry asked.

“Which means that unless we have a Jackson Pollock fan among our local vandal population then something or someone has been dragged to one of those dumpsters and tossed in.”

I looked at McCrabban. “Go on then, get in there, mate,” I said.

He shook his head.

I pointed at the imaginary pips on my shoulder which would have signified the rank of inspector if I hadn’t been in plain clothes.

It cut no ice with him. “I’m not going in there. No way. These trousers are nearly new. The missus would skin me alive.”

“I’ll flip you for it. Heads or tails?”

“You pick. It’s a little too much like gambling for my taste.”

“Heads then.”

I flipped.

Of course we all knew what the outcome would be.

I climbed into the skip nearest to where the blood trail appeared to end but naturally that would have been too easy for our criminal masterminds and I found nothing.

I waded through assorted factory debris: wet cardboard, wet cork, slate, broken glass and lead pipes while Mr Barry and Crabbie waxed philosophic: “Jobs for the boys, isn’t it? It’s all thieves and coppers these days, isn’t it?”

“Somebody has to give out the unemployment cheques too,

mate,” Crabbie replied, which was very true. Thief, copper, prison officer, dole officer: such were the jobs on offer in Northern Ireland – the worst kakistocracy in Europe.

I climbed back out of the skip.

“Well?” Crabbie asked.

“Nothing organic, save for some new lifeforms unknown to science that will probably mutate into a species-annihilating virus,” I said.

“I think I saw that film,” Crabbie replied.

I took out the fifty-pence piece. “All right, couple more bins to go, do you want to flip again?” I asked.

“Not necessary, Sean, that first coin toss was the toss for all the skips,” Crabbie replied.

“You’re telling me that I have to sort through all of them?” I said.

“That’s why they pay you the big bucks, boss,” he said, making his beady, expressionless eyes even more beady and expressionless.

“I lost fair and square but I’ll remember this when you’re looking for help on your bloody sergeant’s exam,” I said.

This had its desired effect. He shook his head and sniffed. “All right. We split them up. I’ll take these two. You the other two. And we should probably get a move on before we all freeze to death,” he muttered.

McCrabban found the suitcase in the third bin along from the fence.

Blood was oozing through the red plastic.

“Over here!” he yelled.

We put on latex gloves and I helped him carry it out.

It was heavy.

“You best stand back,” I said to Mr Barry.

It had a simple brass zip. We unzipped it and flipped it open.

Inside was a man’s headless naked torso cut off at the knees and shoulders. Crabbie and I had some initial observations

while behind us Mr Barry began with the dry heaves.

“His genitals are still there,” Crabbie said.

“And no sign of bruising,” I added. “Which probably rules out a paramilitary hit.”

If he was an informer or a double agent or a kidnapped member of the other side they’d certainly have tortured him first.

“No obvious tattoos.”

“So he hasn’t done prison time.”

I pinched his skin. It was ice cold. Rigid. He was dead at least a day.

He was tanned and he’d kept himself in shape. It was hard to tell his age, but he looked about fifty or maybe even sixty. He had grey and white chest hairs and perhaps, just perhaps, some blonde ones that had been bleached white by the sun.

“His natural skin colour is quite pale, isn’t it?” Crabbie said, looking at the area where his shorts had been.

“It is,” I agreed. “That is certainly some tan on him. Where would he get a tan like that around these parts, do you think?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll bet he’s a swimmer and that’s the tan line for a pair of Speedos. That’s probably how he kept himself in shape too. Swimming in an outdoor pool.”

Northern Ireland of course had few swimming baths and no outdoor pools, and not much sunshine, which led, of course, to Crabbie’s next question:

“You’re thinking he’s not local, aren’t you?” Crabbie said.

“I am,” I agreed.

“That won’t be good, will it?” Crabbie muttered.

“No, my friend, it will not.”

I stamped my feet and rubbed my hands together. The snow was coming down harder now and the grim north Belfast suburbs were turning the colour of old lace. A cold wind was blowing up from the lough and that music in my head was still play-

ing on an endless loop. I closed my eyes and tripped on it for a few bars: a violin, a viola, a cello, two pianos, a flute and a glass harmonica. The flute played the melody on top of glissando-like runs from the pianos – the first piano playing that Chopinesque descending ten-on-one ostinato while the second played a more sedate six-on-one.

“Maybe we’ll get lucky. Let’s see if we can find any papers in the case,” Crabbie said, interrupting my reverie.

We looked but found nothing and then went back to the Land Rover to call it in. Matty, our forensics officer, and a couple of Reservists showed up in boiler suits and began photographing the crime scene and taking fingerprints and blood samples.

Army helicopters flew low over the lough, sirens wailed in County Down, a distant thump-thump was the sound of mortars or explosions. The city was under a shroud of chimney smoke and the cinematographer, as always, was shooting it in 8mm black and white. This was Belfast in the fourteenth year of the low-level civil war euphemistically known as The Troubles.

The day wore on. The grey snow clouds turned perse and black. The yellow clay-like sea waited torpidly, dreaming of wreck and carnage. “Can I go?” Crabbie asked. “If I miss the start of *Dallas* I’ll never get caught up. The missus gets the Ewings and Barneses confused.”

“Go, then.”

I watched the forensic boys work and stood around smoking until an ambulance came to take the John Doe to the morgue at Carrickfergus Hospital.

I drove back to Carrick police station and reported my findings to my boss, Chief Inspector Brennan: a large, shambolic man with a Willy Lomanesque tendency to shout his lines.

“What are your initial thoughts, Duffy?” he asked.

“It was freezing out there, sir. Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow, we had to eat the horses, we’re lucky to be alive.”

“Your thoughts about the victim?”

“I have a feeling it’s a foreigner. Possibly a tourist.”

“That’s bad news.”

“Yeah, I don’t think he’ll be giving the old place an ‘A’ rating in those customer satisfaction surveys they pass out at the airport.”

“Cause of death?”

“We can probably rule out suicide,” I said.

“How did he die?”

“I don’t know yet – I suppose having your head chopped off doesn’t help much though, does it? Rest assured that our crack team is on it, sir.”

“Where is DC McCrabban?” Brennan asked.

“*Dallas*, sir.”

“And he told me he was afraid to fly, the lying bastard.”

Chief Inspector Brennan sighed and tapped the desk with his forefinger, unconsciously (or perhaps consciously) spelling out “ass” in Morse.

“If it is a foreigner, you appreciate that this is going to be a whole thing, don’t you?” he muttered.

“Aye.”

“I foresee paperwork and more paperwork and a powwow from the Big Chiefs and you possibly getting superseded by some goon from Belfast.”

“Not for some dead tourist, surely, sir?”

“We’ll see. You’ll not throw a fit if you do get passed over will you? You’ve grown up now, haven’t you, Sean?”

Neither of us could quickly forget the fool I’d made of myself the last time a murder case had been taken away from me . . .

“I’m a changed man, sir. Team player. Kenny Dalglish not Kevin Keegan. If the case gets pushed upstairs I will give them every assistance and obey every order. I’ll stick with you right to the bunker, sir.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“Amen, sir.”

He leaned back in the chair and picked up his newspaper.