

Twins, born in Dublin and separated at birth, are adopted into different worlds, one into wealth on a Montana ranch, the other into poverty in a Belfast ghetto - to become an IRA Assassin. After assassinating a British Official, the Irish twin goes to the US, His twin arrives in Ireland for the first time. Mistaken for his Irish brother, he's arrested, brutally interrogated, and sentenced to life in prison during the IRA hunger strike of 1981 when ten men died.

### **Irish Twins: A Novel of the Troubles**

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# Irish Twins

A Novel of the Troubles

Bob Huerter

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author. The exception being those actual public figures mentioned by the author, Margaret Thatcher, Bik McFarland, Bobby Sands and all the rest of men who died on hunger strike in Northern Ireland in 1981.

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## *Prologue*

May 5, 1981

Creighton University

Omaha, Nebraska

**F**rank McGrath's head pounded, it was so bad that even in his dreams his head ached. Then there was the rattle of the keys and he felt the excitement coming that he didn't need but couldn't avoid.

Eddie McMahon said, "Frank! Frank! Wake up, damn it! Are you awake?"

Frank McGrath rolled over in his dorm room bed and said, "Eddie, what the hell do you want?"

"Look at this!"

"Holy shit, its seven a.m. Eddie, we didn't get in until two."

"I know, I know, I feel like shit too. But my dad called, Frank. Look at this."

Eddie opened the morning edition of the Omaha World Herald to the World News section and Frank squinted through the dirty, yellow light of their early morning dorm room and read, "BOBBY SANDS DEAD AFTER 66 DAYS." Frank sat up and felt real grief for only the second time in his life. His granddad had been killed four years before in a car accident in which Frank had been driving. The awful sick feeling he had when he woke in the ICU to the news of his granddad's demise, he thought it might never go away. He felt the same way now and without ever having met Sands, he felt as if he had just lost a close friend.

Frank and Eddie had been following the hunger strike of the Irish Republican prisoners in Long Kesh prison southwest of Belfast, since the prisoners had announced their plans in February.

They knew about the five demands of the prisoners and their request for political status versus criminal status and they had debated with other students throughout the early parts of the strike.

Frank said, "Do you think Thatcher is going to allow more prisoners to die?"

"Frank, my dad says the mistake the Republican prisoners are making is that they're assuming the Brits will place as much significance on a hunger strike as the Irish do."

"What do you mean?"

“He told me that in ancient Ireland under Brehon law. . .”

“Brehon law?”

“Yeah, ancient Irish law. Anyway, under Brehon law a hunger strike was a legal method of protest used by the poor.”

“Like?”

“Let’s say that a wealthy merchant cheats a poor guy out of some money.”

“Yeah.”

“The poor guy could go to the wealthy merchant’s home or place of business and begin a hunger strike. If the wealthy merchant let the poor guy die, by Brehon law, the wealthy merchant had to take care of the poor guy’s wife and kids. Most times the hunger strike was settled before anyone died. The Brits don’t look at it like the Irish do and dad thinks this could get really ugly.”

Frank lit a cigarette and said, “Eddie, your dad was right, they don’t understand the Irish. Those fuckers let him die.”

“And there are more behind him, Frank.”

Frank put his head down and tears welled in his eyes and dropped to the tile of his dorm room floor. He missed his granddad more now than he had in the last four years since he died.

Frank was a senior in high school at the time of his granddad’s death, and after a nasty confrontation with his father, Frank was forced to drive his eighty-three-year-old granddad, Liam O’Conlan, to his childhood home in eastern Iowa. Liam, wanting to put some demons down from a bit of a sordid past, needed a ride. It was eight hours there and eight hours back and Frank was a captive audience to a particularly talented Irish story teller who captured his mind and heart, someone who, in the old country, they would call a Seanachie.

As the journey was ending they were crossing the Missouri River Bridge that connected Iowa and Nebraska. The bridge became slick with ice and their car careened out of control and collided with a semi truck, killing Liam and sending Frank to the ICU.

Frank found himself going back to that period in his life often because of an odd occurrence that happened to him a month or so after he was released from the hospital. He still debated with himself as to whether it had been a dream or had actually happened.

One evening, after Frank had fallen asleep, he awoke suddenly from a nightmare, and there on his bed sat his granddad. The question was always the same. Had he still been dreaming or had his granddad come back from the grave as a ghost? It was so real. What was crazier than the ghost was the fact that Frank found himself witnessing his family’s immigration from



Ireland to American during the potato blight of 1846. So was it a journey or a great dream? Once again it was so real, and after some research, he found he knew more than he should've known, that no one ever taught him. He knew historical facts that no one in his family or in this world had ever told him before that night, that dream, that experience or whatever it was. The debate raged within him and he couldn't tell anyone, they would think he was crazy. Sometimes he thought of telling Eddie, but the time was never right.

As the spring of 1981 moved into the summer, one hunger striker after another was allowed to die until ten Irish Republican prisoners had been buried; all of them denied their lives and their political status. Frank felt a sense of despair and helplessness as the British Government, under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, once again turned a blind eye to the plight of the Irish nation.

Eddie McMahon was studying for a pre-med degree and had just found out he had been accepted into Creighton's medical school. He had grown up in Butte, Montana and came from a long line of copper miners. They were Irish Republican supporters and Clan na Gael members, the Irish-American clan supporting the brotherhood in the fight for freedom in Ireland.

Eddie's father, Barry McMahon, had broken the family chain of miners by sneaking away to Creighton University and graduating with a business degree in 1958. Barry ran the Montana branch of the clan for many years until an Irish national upstart named Paddy Quinlan, who had immigrated to America and made it big in the ranching business, took over for him.

Eddie had every intention of graduating from medical school and heading back to Butte to practice his profession. But, in the meantime, he stayed close to his dad and the American clan's support of the fight in Northern Ireland.

In the summer of 1981, Eddie and Frank had rented a small apartment while bartending and waiting tables at Barrett's Barleycorn Irish Pub, the hunger strike and the political climate in Ireland being a key topic of conversation there. One evening Eddie walked in out of breath and said, "Where's Frank?"

Ruthie Barrett, the owner, said, "He's stocking the back bar, like you should be. Eddie McMahon, you're late as usual. Get clocked in we've got work to do. Its going to be busy tonight, damn it."

Eddie, ignoring his boss, walked back to Frank and said, "You're not going to believe this."

Frank looked up from the case of beer he had been stocking and said, "Believe what?"

"You and I are going to have company."

“Who?”

“Irish Twins.”

Frank, used to puzzling together conversations with his best friend said, “Eddie, what’re you talking about?”

Ruthie Barrett screamed, “Eddie, where are you?”

Eddie said, “Coming, Mrs. Barrett. Frank, you know how these hunger strikers have been dying in Long Kesh prison?”

“Yeah.”

“Eddie McMahon, do you like working here?”

“Yes, Mrs. Barrett, I love working here. Anyway, I don’t know all the details but one of these guys busted the other out of Long Kesh and they’re now on the lamb.”

Frank laughed and said, “On the lamb?”

“Yeah, fugitives, hiding from the law and they’re heading to Omaha.”

Frank, suddenly serious, said, “No shit?”

Eddie said, “No shit and dad wants me to put them up at our place and then drive them to Montana.”

“Not without me you’re not.”

“You’re going to have to take a semester off.”

“And where’s the problem?”

“Edward McMahon if you’re not clocked-in in exactly three seconds you’re fired!”

Eddie smiled, winked at Frank, and walked away.

## Chapter 1 The Right Foot

1925 Upperchurch

County Tipperary, The Republic of Ireland

The cool night air blew in through the farmhouse window, it was empty except for a screaming woman in labor and the midwife helping her. The cool air felt good as the sweat ran down the woman's face.

In between contractions she said, "Oh my God I'm heartily sorry for having offended thee. .

." Contraction, "Hail Mary full of Grace the Lord is with thee. . ." Contraction, "I Believe in God the Father thee Almighty Creator of heaven and earth. . ."

Time passed stubbornly and the pain swept through her body as if purging her of past iniquities. The midwife continually wiped her brow and whispered words of encouragement; she came from a long line of Druids, the earth her religion, nature her god and she never understood these foolish prayers.

Under her breath she said, "And they call what I do magik?"

The stubborn child in her womb, comfortable and content there, moved to the birth canal with the utmost reluctance. It fought like a Celtic warrior from ages past and wreaked carnage inch by inch until it acquiesced, like a prisoner of war brought into a cold hard world it did not recognize.

The midwife said, "You're ready darling, next time push."

She screamed, "St. Michael the Archangel defend us in battle, be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil!" And pushed like she was at war; the head began to crown a thick tuft of jet-black hair.

"It's on its way. That's it, there's a good girl."

The struggle was underway once more, but the woman lying in pain would not be turned away. The purple and bloody head witnessed the world for the first time. She pushed. "May God rebuke him we humbly pray!" The shoulders and arms slid forth. She pushed. "And do though oh Prince of the Heavenly hosts by the Divine power of God!" The belly slipped by. She pushed.

"Cast in to hell Satan and all the evil spirits who roam throughout the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen!" The baby found itself in the arms of the midwife as she walked away shaking her head.

The mother said, "What's wrong?"

The midwife just shook her head again and cut the umbilical cord. She then held the child up and spanked it on his bum. The baby boy let out a scream that only a mother could love and she wanted to smile but the aftermath of the delivery was too painful.

The woman looked up from the bed, tears streaming down her face and said, "I asked what was wrong? How is he?"

The midwife said, "I'm so sorry darling. He's a club foot. He'll be nothing but a burden to you. Best to be rid of it now."

She set the baby in the dustbin and went to clean up the mother.

The baby cried out.

The woman looked at the midwife with stiletto eyes that would have slashed and wounded if she had her way and said, "What did you do? How dare you! Get away! Get away from me, now!"

The midwife was not to be pushed away so easily and said, "You're delirious, darling. Now you listen to me. I've delivered many a child and it's hard enough for the healthiest of them. It's for the best."

The woman pulled her nightdress down to cover herself, pushed the midwife aside, and said, "I don't care how many you've delivered, get out now!"

"Have it your way, lass. You'll regret it."

"You'll be the one to regret it. You'll rue the day you tossed away a Quinlan like so much garbage, now leave!"

The midwife shrugged as if she had just tossed scraps to the pigs and left the room.

The mother cried out again as overwhelming pain shot through her like stab wounds from the slightest movement. But she had to get to him. Pain be damned she scrambled from her bed, crawled to the dustbin, reached in and pulled the precious child from its heap and held it close. Instinct led the wee one to her breast, she reached up to the bed and grabbed a blanket to cover him and he was content once more.

She sat on the floor and rocked the child back and forth crying as he fed. She said, "As strong an appetite as you've got, of course you'll be a burden, but no more than any of the rest of them. She's a foolish old hag, I'll run her out of this village, I will."

Suddenly the pain seemed to vanish, like a wisp of steam over an early morning pond. She stared at the miracle she held and said, "It's not a club foot darling, it's the right foot. I think we'll call you Padraig. Yes, after our patron saint. People of little faith tried to kill him too. Padraig Vincent Quinlan, you'll do great things one day, lad. I'll see to that."

## Chapter 2 The Walking Nun

1950 Ballycraig

County Kilkenny, The Republic of Ireland

Clare Eva White stopped for a moment. She had the gift. The intuition that the women of rural Ireland used just like they used sight, sound and smell. Since she was a little girl her mom told her to be aware of and nurture that intuition and she had. And it never failed her.

The October wind blew clean and cold around her but something wasn't right. She could feel it in her bones as sure as she could see the red and purple leaves that fluttered to the ground in front of her, as sure as she knew that pigs could see the wind. She remembered the village women working together to churn butter or sew patchwork quilts while the wee ones played nearby and listened. It was all too often that they would warn one another to keep an eye on the pigs; they could see the wind and any malevolence it brought with it. If they started to the barn for no reason, beware. Clare looked for the pigs and there were none to be seen. She whimpered and prayed, begging the Blessed Virgin to allow her to see the wind just this once. But she hesitated, if only for a moment, knowing certain if her prayer was answered what she would see there.

The feeling formed a black pit in her stomach and the evil seemed inexorable, like a single black crow on a gust, unable to stop itself. Clare moved once again, only her pace quickened and, with no little resolve, forced herself to stay calm. She wondered if the October temperature had just dropped ten degrees or if it was the chill of her inner senses, warning of an ill wind blowing in and harboring some unknown malice. All Clare had wanted was to get away from home, her endless chores and her mom's doting on her to frolic with her best friend, Cassie Kenny. Saturdays only came once a week, she thought, and she was out to make the best of it. But now the doubt was as real and menacing as a banshee screaming in the middle of the night. The chill forced her to fold her arms tighter in her sweater.

Rosemary Kenny came to the door and looked suspiciously at Clare as she did with all children.

Clare shrugged and said, "Hello, Mrs. Kenny, is Cassie about?"

With a note of frustration in her voice she said, “She disappeared an hour ago and I haven’t seen her since. She’s not finished her chores. When you see her, tell her I’m after finding her.”

“Aye, ma’am, I will.”

The two girls liked to play in the woods near the back road in Ballycraig, the road that the tinkers used. The Irish gypsies would travel it in their covered wagons peddling their trinkets, sharpening knives and mending pots or pans for cheap. The girls were fascinated and terrified by the traveling nomads. So they hid in the trees to watch as they passed.

Clare ran to the spot that they usually gathered in the woods when she heard a scream that sounded like Cassie. She then heard a man’s voice, loud and booming. It hit her hard and her breath was taken from her as if someone had doused her with ice water. The voice spoke in Shelta, the language of the Irish travelers, and she wanted to vomit. Her intuition proved itself once again, and there would never again be even a shadow of a doubt about it.

Willing herself beyond her own fear she ran and by the time she reached the road, it was deserted except for the familiar jacket, which Cassie always wore, lying in the ditch. She looked around for a few seconds and was disoriented. She wanted to scream for help but knew no one would hear. Besides, she thought, there’s no time. She looked down at the dusty road and saw the tracks of the tinker’s covered wagon and she began to run. She ran for twenty minutes or so and just when she was ready to give up, thinking maybe she went the wrong way, she saw the small chimney on the tinker’s wagon disappear around the bend in the road a half a mile ahead.

Clare ran harder now than she had ever run in her life. She knew in her heart that she could run forever if she had to. When she finally got close, she moved with stealth in the woods nearby.

The sun finally began to set in the west and the gypsy, traveling alone, made camp. She watched as he built a small fire, made some dinner and pulled on a jug of what she guessed was poteen, potato whisky. She began to wonder where Cassie was when he stood precariously and ambled to the back of the wagon. He stepped up and in and pulled Cassie out by the hair, bound and gagged. He dragged her near the fire, pulled her skirt up and began to pull her underwear off.

Clare’s heart raced in her chest, trying to find the courage. Cassie, now half naked, defenseless and terrified, lay in the dirt by the fire. The man stood and began to unbuckle his trousers. Clare, feeling every bit as naked, walked slowly and quietly from the shadows and when Cassie looked over at her, with tears streaming down her face, Clare put her fingers to her lips to motion Cassie to lay quiet. Clare moved closer, the tinker’s back to her, talking to himself and more intent on his prey than watching for intruders.

He dropped his pants and when they came to rest around his ankles Clare charged. Before he knew it ninety pounds of fury hit him sending him sprawling face first into his campfire. She landed on top of him and looked up at the iron skillet that had been resting on a grate above the fire, which now clanked near by spilling its contents. She grabbed for it. The tinker came up to his knees roaring with frustration and pain, trying to put out the fire in his hair and beard. He then grabbed Clare around the waste, howling a blood-curdling curse she couldn't understand, as the smell of burnt hair, flesh and whiskey sickened her. She wielded the skillet now firmly in her grip, the adrenaline keeping her from dropping it as her skin broiled and blister under the heat of the iron handle. She hit the man squarely across the face, knocking him back to the ground. She then turned it sideways as if to use it like a hatchet and before he could come to his senses she crashed it down once more upon his head, splitting it wide and sending his blood up her arm and on to her face.

She looked down at Cassie, who was now hysterical, and said, "Hush now, let's get you out of here."

She grabbed a sharp knife from the man's cooking gear, and as she cut loose the ties that bound Cassie, which became the ties that bind, which bound them forever and they ran away into the night.

\* \* \*

Sister Maria St. John walked slowly through the tenebrous Irish countryside, carpet bag in hand, her pipe hanging from her lips, sending the sweet smell of pipe weed into the night air. She hummed ditties in between decades of her rosary as she went about her missionary work. She walked about her country visiting prisons, hospitals, homes as well as the marginalized tinkers who shared the road with her. Since she was a wee lass she had watched those travelers. She had watched as they wandered the highways and byways of Ireland, reading a palm or two, telling a fortune or just swindling whoever they might and occasionally showing up for Mass on Sunday.

As with most youngsters in rural Ireland she would watch them pass on their eternal road, but unlike her young friends who feared them she was infatuated with the Tinkers. She would spend hours assimilating their ways, even beginning to understand their secret language. She witnessed them as they set up along the road selling snake oils and health potions taking advantage of the naïve when it was to their advantage and then move on down that gypsy road of the outsider, unwelcome to stay too long.

Sister Maria St. John was an anomaly working among the often double-dealing nomads, but found their trust and respect as she spoke their language. She had been moved to work with them at the beginning of her vocation quite by accident. She simply went about making her calls on those left behind and ran into them as she walked about the country.

She walked along the road and heard the two frantic voices off in the distance. She walked, calmly waiting for them to come upon her, not wishing to startle them further if they were in trouble.

They walked arm in arm to support one another and when they saw the dark figure standing in the shadows up ahead they stopped. The nun looked at the girls, seeing them plainly in the light from the harvest moon.

Clare said, "And who are you?"

"Sister Maria St. John, I'm a Mercy nun."

Clare said, "What's a nun doing on the road at night?"

"I work with the travelers and this is where they roam."

Clare said, "Then go away and leave us be, we want nothing to do with them."

"With who?"

"Never mind, just leave us be."

The girls began to make their way to the woods and the nun, seeing the blood covering Clare, said, "No, wait. I can help. Please, give me a chance, you're hurt."

They stopped for a moment and gave the nun a chance to approach.

She said, "My God, lass, what has happened here?"

Cassie, now hysterical, ran into the nun's arms and said, "Oh, Sister."

Sister Maria hugged her tight and said, "What has happened?"

Clare said, "A tinker took Cassie and tied her up. I followed and after he had his supper and drank too much, he pulled her out of his wagon, hiked up her skirts and was ready to have his way."

She stopped briefly, sucking her breath through her teeth, and with an intense clarity the moment hit her, she dropped to her knees in anguish and said, "And I killed him. I killed a man, Sweet Lord Jaysus. He's dead and I killed him."

The nun gathered the two girls in her arms and gave what comfort she could then said, "He was by himself, then?"

Clare said, "Aye."

The nun said, "He's an odd one, 'tis rare they travel alone, but this one, I think I know who we're talking about here. Will you girls be okay, if I go up ahead and have a look?"

Cassie said, "No! Don't leave us, Sister."

Clare said, "Can we walk with you? We'll wait back, but we don't want to be alone."



The nun smiled gently and said, "That would be fine."

The fire sparked and cracked and sent daunting shadows dancing among the trees in the nearby wood. Cassie shivered as she sat close to the fire. Clare sat in her underwear with a blanket around her, her dress on a line tied to two trees over the fire to dry. When Sister Maria had made a fire, she took Clare to a nearby running brook to wash the blood from her arms, face and clothing.

Clare shivered and said, "Sister, our parents are going to worry and then they'll be furious."

The nun said, "Hush, drink your tea and don't worry about your parents. In a few hours your dress'll be dry and we can take you home. I'll explain everything and no one need be the wiser."

## **Two weeks later**

McMahon's Pub  
Ballycraig

Will White and Sean Kenny sat sharing a pint and small talk at the end of a long day in the peat fields.

Sean said, "Have you given much thought to where those two wild ones were off to that night?"

Will said, "My Clare can be as wild as a March hare, I don't think there's any stopping her."

"You know who that nun is?"

"Aye, she's the crazy one who works with the tinkers."

"Do you believe her story?"

"Are you serious? You think those two just fell asleep out there and she just happened upon them?"

"You heard about the dead tinker, then, on the back road?"

"I have."

"That was the same night."

"Aye."

"Do you think those two had anything to do with it?"

"I do."

"How?"

"The wife found a blood stain on Clare's undershirt."

"Is that so?"

"'Tis. But it, as well as the dress, was burned."

"Why?"

"Even with a tinker, the peelers are sure to start nosing around. The lass can be mean as a hornet when provoked, Sean."

"I wonder what he was up to?"

Will thought back to the night a few days back when Clare had broken down and told her parents what had happened and what she had done when her mother questioned her about the bloodstain.

Kate White said, "Will, she needs to see a priest and a confessional. Killing's a mortal sin."

Will said, "There'll be no confessing anything. The man got exactly what he deserved, Clare saved Cassie's life. This matter is closed."

Will White looked carefully at his best friend and decided to leave it at that.

## Chapter 3

### The Hurling Midfielder

Nine Years later

Ballycraig, County Kilkenny, The Republic of Ireland

The spring of 1959 in southern Ireland was exceptional. It had been a long, cold, wet winter and spring fever was running high. It was no different in Ballycraig, a small village in county Kilkenny, The Republic of Ireland.

Clare Eva White had blossomed into a beautiful twenty-one year old woman. Her plans to follow Cassie Kenny, who had been gone for nearly three years now, had been foiled, as something always came up that kept her home.

Clare's mother doted on her. She had nearly died giving birth to her daughter and was left barren afterward. Clare was the rare only child and her mother was disinclined to let her go anywhere.

At dinner one night, Will White said, "We've a young new priest coming in a week."

His wife Katie said, "Now where did you hear that?"

"McMahon's pub Thursday last. Fr. O'Keefe, Ruari O'Keefe, fresh from the seminary in Maynooth."

Clare said, "Well, I'm sure Widow Buggy will be relieved. Old Father Egan quit showing up when she called for last rites. Now she'll have someone to give her the sacrament three times a week again."

Will looked at his daughter and said, "If I looked like Widow Buggy I'd be calling three times a week myself."

Kate White said, "You two should be ashamed of yourselves, standing in judgment over a poor lonely old soul like Genevieve Buggy."

Will said, "Lonely? What about Colm?"

Clare said, "That son of hers is worthless as a fiddle without strings. He should've taken the pledge years ago; instead he's a pickled old goat at fifty."

Will winked at them both and said, "I could think of worse things."

Clare was tired and out of sorts that Sunday morning. Life had become dull. The village held no excitement for her anymore. She had become fed up. Dublin was just over sixty kilometers away and she dreamed of it every night. Known as the alien port in Ireland, people from all walks of life and

from all over the world lived there. Artists, poets, actors, musicians, writers, playwrights, the pubs, the theater, that was the life she wanted..

She was half-asleep during High Mass and paid little or no attention to the service or the new young priest saying Mass. She was daydreaming of a life far away and she was languid in her movement to the communion railing to receive the Holy Eucharist, as if some unknown power was holding her back, uninterested in any type of guilt and shame-ridden redemption.

“The Body of Christ.”

“Amen.”

“The Body of Christ.”

“Amen.”

The monotonous drone made her crazy. When at last she had made her way to the communion rail, she knelt down and pulled the communion clothe that stretched the length of the railing to below her chin, the church’s way of ensuring that the host did not fall. The second line of defense was the altar boy who held the gold paten below the hand of the priest that held the Body of Christ.

The young priest looked at her and said, “The Body of Christ.”

His eyes, the color of gunmetal, held her gaze. They were penetrating and knowing, as if they saw things mere mortals did not.

She said, “Amen.” And thought, isn’t that how it always works? The best-looking man in the village is a Catholic Priest.

In the church vestibule after Mass, young Father Ruari O’Keefe stood shaking hands with all the parishioners.

“Welcome Father, nice sermon.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re a breath of fresh air, you are, Father.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t worry about falling on your way to the altar, Father, first day on the job nerves. Welcome.”

“Thank you.”

When it was Will White’s turn he said, “Hello Father. The name’s William White, but you can call me Will.”

“Nice to meet you, Will.”

“Likewise Father, and this is me wife Kate.”

“Pleased to meet you, Father. Would you join us for supper on this beautiful Sunday?”

Startled at the sudden invitation he said, “That would be grand.”

Will then said, “And this is me daughter, Clare Eva.”

Clare's short blond hair blew in the wind and she smiled as she reached for Ruari's hand and said, "Welcome to Ballycraig, Father. I'm sure you're overjoyed to be here."

Kate said, "Clare Eva White, what kind of smart thing is that to say to our new Father?"

Father Ruari O'Keefe laughed and said, "Don't worry Mrs. White, I've been in far worse places than Ballycraig and I'm finding that the view here is quite remarkable at times."

Clare was about to ask what he meant by that when his statement registered in her mind. She stared at him a bit bemused; convinced she saw a glint in his eye, however slight.

"Thank you for the invitation to dinner. What time should you expect me?"

Kate said, "4:00 should do it, Father."

Ruari O'Keefe was finally back in the sacristy giving the altar boys last minute instruction on how he wanted things cleaned up after Mass. He removed his garments and hung them up. He stood in front of the mirror, which hung above the washbowl. He rinsed his hands and face and towed them off.

The late morning light began to shift and his shadow grew longer. He looked into the mirror, only this time he saw the old demon rising again. In his youth he knew the minute he stepped into the sacristy as an altar boy that he wanted to be a priest. The smells of burning bee's wax, incense, altar wine and the great quiet calm that the church held were all a source of comfort to him. He knew.

As he grew into a young man his athletic prowess became increasingly more apparent, hurling, Gaelic football and rugby. He loved the competition, the physical contact, and he was good.

Hurling became his true love. He started playing on the local clubs in and around Derry, in the Bogside neighborhood where he grew up. Word spread about this kid who was one hell of a midfielder. Scouts came around and pretty soon Ruari found himself playing for the Irish National Hurling Team with lads from Kilkenny and Tipperary, where the sport was huge. He became known as old number nine and the press loved him.

Ruari's thoughts of the ascetic life the church had to offer began to fade as the adulation of the women in the pubs increased, more and more finding himself hung over and in a strange woman's bed. A further distraction was his seeming inability to stop. As his reputation grew so did the demand for his time and attention. The word "no" had never registered with Ruari so it was night after night in the pubs and morning after morning of growing despair and regret.

“Father?”

Coming out of his thoughts Ruari turned around and one of the altar boys was standing in front of him.

He said, “Sorry to interrupt, but I forgot me cap and me mum will be after me if I show up without it.”

Ruari smiled with relief and said, “That’s a good lad.”

As the young altar boy walked out of the sacristy Ruari winced remembering back on the night his life had changed. He had been spinning out of control for a while and he figured he had had it coming. The punch came out of nowhere, but it was only the pebble that started the avalanche. When Ruari pulled himself off the floor, he flew into a rage that hurling circles would talk about for years. He had been pursuing the favors of a married woman when her jealous husband had had enough and hit him.

He woke up on the floor of a crowded jail cell with handcuffs holding him behind his back. When he looked up he saw a familiar, if not somewhat welcome, sight. The prison chaplain, Father Byrne, a priest Ruari knew in his youth, had come to bail him out.

He said, “Well, if you aren’t a sight.”

Ruari winced as he tried to smile. He looked at the priest through swollen and black eyes said, “Aye, had a bit of a row last night.”

“A bit of? You made the papers.”

“I’ve what?”

“Aye, when a celebrity makes trouble it makes the papers.”

“Celebrity my arse.”

“So they’ve given you the boot, eh?”

“Who has?”

“The National Hurling Team.”

“What? For a little row?”

“You don’t remember do you? It was hardly a little row.”

“What do you mean? The guy hit me first.”

“That may be, but according to eyewitness reports in the paper you flew into a maniacal rage.”

“So what? I’ve seen other players get mad.”

“Well, then maybe it was because you put three men in the hospital, or maybe when you broke the Peeler’s jaw.”

“I broke a peeler’s jaw? Jaysus.”

“Or maybe when you ripped the dress off the lady and pulled her bloomers down around her ankles. Or could it have been when you jumped up and decided to relieve yourself on the bar.”

“No,” He groaned. “No I didn’t.”

“Or, according to the paper, you single-handedly broke every table and chair in the pub as the local law enforcement closed in to take you away. And you pulled this whopper off in your birthday suit.”

“Nude?”

“Nude.”

“Bullshit.”

“Why do you think you’re the only one in this cell on the floor and handcuffed?”

“Where’d the clothes come from, then?”

“When they brought you in, kicking and screaming, mind you, they called me in. Once you passed out we took off the cuffs and dressed you. I told them they didn’t need to re-apply the cuffs, but the bleeding and bruised officers of the law disagreed.”

Ruari sat up with his back to the chaplain and said, “Lord have mercy.”

At dinner that afternoon, Ruari found himself mounting with distraction and discomfort. He couldn’t keep his eyes off Clare. Unable to put a firm finger on it, he surmised that she was taunting him. Whether intentional or not, he couldn’t tell, but she seemed to sense his difficulty and was enjoying it.

The months following his explosion in the pub and his expulsion from the Irish National Hurling Team were dark and lonely times. The calls ceased and it seemed to him that he had been left behind, that his fifteen minutes of fame were up.

For the first time in his life he was directionless. He never fathomed that the competition would stop and when it did so abruptly it left a gaping black hole in his life, a void that he could not fill. Next to a bottle, fear, anxiety and despair were his only mates, which led to more drinking to ease the pain and the spiral downward began.

He became reclusive, rarely leaving his flat, except for the fifth of Paddy’s, cigarettes or a few groceries, living on a dwindling pension from his playing days.

A knock came on the door. It startled Ruari. He took a pull from his bottle and said, “You’ve got the wrong door, go away.”

The reply from the hall came, “I’ll knock it down before I go away.”

Ruari said, “Well fucksake.” He stood and went to the door more out of curiosity than anything. Standing there in the hall was Fr. Byrne.

He said, “Lord have mercy, Ruari. You look worse than the night I found you on the floor of the pokey.”

Ruari said, “Jaysus Father, it’s good to see you too.”

Father Byrne said, "Well, would you like to come out into the hall to have this conversation or would it be better to invite me in?"

Ruari said, "Och Father, can't you see I want to be left alone?"

"Sure enough, lad. But left to your own devices I suppose you'll be dead in a month."

"And a right better world it would be."

"Quit feeling sorry for yourself and let me in."

They walked into the filth of a man who had lost hope or the prospect of ever finding any.

"Do you have a clean jar? I'd like to share a sip of your whiskey."

"Aye."

The priest glanced around at the misery that had wrapped its insidious cold and lifeless arms around this place, this life.

He said, "I've come to see you at the request of others and not a minute too soon, I might add."

"I'm doing just fine."

"Yes, like a fox in a trapper's snare, you are. What'll you do for an encore? Chew your own leg off?"

"Father, what do you want from me? I'm in no mood for a lecture."

"I've got a job opportunity for you."

"Oh, I see. The great Catholic priest comes to save a poor fucking soul. I'm not interested."

"Knock it off. I baptized you, watched you grow up and watched as you enjoyed grand success. You're a talented man with a lot to offer the world and the first time adversity plays a part you run like a coward. Are you a coward?"

"You know better."

"Do I? You seem to be fooling a lot of people. And I, for one, won't stand by and watch you throw it all away."

The priest shot the whiskey in the jar down with one gulp and said, "The mercy nuns have an opening for a janitor."

"Jaysus father, are you serious?"

"Yes. They'll feed you, give you a room and pay you a fair wage. A lad could do worse."

"He could?"

Ruari smiled at the memory. At the time he was forced to comply, he was like a mule forcing his hooves into the dirt as they drug him into the place. After eighteen months, though, the calming effect of the serene bastion of nuns took hold of him. He somehow exorcised the demons that haunted his past and after two years, cloistered in the convent, he applied for the seminary in Maynooth and, with a letter of recommendation from Fr. Byrne, was accepted.



As years passed in the seminary, Ruari knew that he had made the right decision. He loved it at Maynooth and looked forward to his ordination and his first parish assignment. However, like all men of flesh and blood, he had his physical struggles. Celibacy and sobriety were not his least bane and yet somehow, so far, he had managed to overcome his temptations. That was before he met Clare White.

Twins, born in Dublin and separated at birth, are adopted into different worlds, one into wealth on a Montana ranch, the other into poverty in a Belfast ghetto - to become an IRA Assassin. After assassinating a British Official, the Irish twin goes to the US, His twin arrives in Ireland for the first time. Mistaken for his Irish brother, he's arrested, brutally interrogated, and sentenced to life in prison during the IRA hunger strike of 1981 when ten men died.

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