

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.

*Derry 1982*

As the sun settles upon the earth, I inhale the freshness of a new day, and all I want to do is sneeze. I stifle it. No-one around here like loud noises. It makes them jump.

In this little hidden gem, I feel a comforting presence. There is peace and calm. A welcome reprieve from the cacophony of war. The only sound to be heard is the singing from the redshank as they wade upon their sandbanks on the river Foyle. I pause, to absorb the myriad of geraniums. Such beauty in a humble flower. They never fail to greet us with their presence every year. Dad always loved summer. He said that was when gardeners could take a well-earned sabbatical and embrace the beauty of their hard work, from the bending, kneeling and raking during the spring months. He isn't able any more.

The sun peeps out from the cumulous, and kisses me gently upon my cheek. It's a long time since I have been kissed. Nature has sixth sense. It *knows* what I need. I start to relax.

As I walk behind you, I'm conscious that my walking stick *clicks* with every step I take. People don't look at me anymore, they look at my stick. It did have a rubber foot but that soon fell off. Just like my leg.

And here *you* are, the focus of attention. That was always the way. You thought being born ten minutes before me gave you the privilege to be the boss. I knew you were mams favourite. I also knew what she did for you. The secrets, the lies, the cover ups. You think I don't know, but I do. Twins know everything about their other being.

We enter the church where you and I had received our first holy communion. Even then, you were the center of attention. You looked so innocent in your new suit and red dickie bow that mam had bought you from Gallaghers. I was wearing a second-hand dress that cousin Carmel had worn at her first holy communion. It had yellowed whilst being stuck up in the attic for so long. When mam took it out of the black bin bag, she had to shake off the mouse droppings. It smelt musty. 'Don't worry Maeve,' she said, 'I'll give it a spray of my *Tweed*.' I remember our First Holy Communion Day clearly when you elbowed me out of the way so you could receive the host before me. 'Move,' you whispered, quiet enough for me to hear but not mam and dad. You were a brat.

At the back of the church, we pass a group of elderly men. Huddled together and as close to the door as possible so they could make an early exit as soon as communion was over. All afraid to come closer to the crucifix. The obligation of attending Mass drummed into their young minds as soon as they learnt their A's, B's and C's. All nattering to each other. No respect for the sanctuary of silence. The smell of turf embedded within the fibres of their coats. Stale beer lingering on their breath from the night before. Dried silage stuck to the soles of their boots. Familiar smells stay with you forever.

Despite the summer sunshine, this church is cold and damp. With my head held down and my collar pulled up around my neck I follow, obediently.

The procession moves slowly. No rush. Thank God. I'm wearing my navy blue trousers to hide my prosthetic leg. We are led by an altar girl swinging the censor, dispatching clouds of incense through the air, sending our prayers to heaven. If there is such a place. I smell *Lilly of the Valley* perfume. It must be Mrs Costello. She always showered herself in it, just like mam did with her *Tweed*. They loved to hear Mrs Morgan shouting through the letterbox:

‘Avon calling.’ When I went round to Mrs Costellos house to play with Susan, my best friend, I could always smell it.

The same mottled green carpet lines the route from the front door through to the altar. No red carpet for you. Chewing gum nestled solidly within its fibres. You were responsible for one of those stains. You weren’t as good as you made out.

I haven’t been inside this church for many years. You never missed Mass. You would always kneel on the altar steps and pray, intensely. Once a month you would go to confession. Mam knew what you were confessing. I had lost my faith many years ago. I had to attend today. I am the only one left. Mam would have cried today, may she *R.I.P.* She would have been so proud. Before they placed the lid on her coffin I gave her a quick spray of her beloved *Tweed*. She would have thanked me for that. Dad wouldn’t understand what’s going on. I can hear Pat Murphy whispering, ‘Poor Eoghan, away with the fairies, wouldn’t have a clue what’s going on today.’

‘Maybe for the best,’ replied Jim Clifford.

I wonder if God ever got dementia. I think he forgot me.

It wasn’t hard to find an empty seat. Some had an inkling; some didn’t have a clue. Mixed views. The yin to the yang. My bench has been reserved for me, at the front. I would have preferred to sit at the back, unseen and unheard. A Mass sheet had been placed on the bench. I try to genuflect whilst holding onto the corner of the pew, but I wobble, I’m used to that. I look up at the crucifix embellishing the back of the altar. I wanted to know what he or she thought of these proceedings. ‘Come on God, give me a sign.’ I got no response. I hadn’t done for many years. Mam had placed a crucifix on the back of our front door. She had hit her thumb when she was banging in the nail with her Sunday stiletto’s. ‘Fuck,’ she shouted. It wasn’t like mam to swear. We fell about laughing, even dad. I almost wet myself I

laughed so much. 'It'll keep away evil spirits,' she said. In our porch there were two oak picture frames. Inside one was a photograph of Patrick Pearse. Inside the other was the proclamation. You, Ruairi, could recite it off by heart.

Oh, how I hate being in front where they can all see me. I shiver. Nothing has changed since the last time I had set foot in here, many years ago. Rusty radiators that badly needed bleeding. Cold to touch on the top, warm at the bottom. Single glazed windows with rotting cills surrounded by black speckled mould. Glass that desperately needed a good clean. Spiders happy to be homed in a quiet tranquil corner. No-one to disturb them. People no longer wanted to give their free time any more to clean the church, like mam used to. But that was her. A pure good soul that would give all her spare time and her hard-earned cash to anyone that needed it. Even the *boys*. I always wondered where all the money from the weekly collections went to.

The bell rings. I can hear shuffling behind me as everyone stands up. Even the frail and elderly. Respect or fear, I can't make up my mind. The singing starts. Evelyn Reids choir. Oh, God, someone hits a wrong note, probably Eamonn Cahill. He was always out of tune. He genuinely thought he could sing. All this for you Ruari. The altar boys and girls mount the steps of the altar, then the bishop, then, *you*.

Father Martin asked would I like to do one of the readings. I declined. 'Or even a bidding prayer.'

'No sorry Father, I really can't.' He was satisfied. He knew why.

You sit on the chair reserved for you. It's covered in green velvet. Unlike your white vestments. A symbol of purity. The ones that are hiding a multitude of secrets. In front of the altar the bishop clears the ball of phlegm from the back of his throat, then swallows it. He opens his arms wide. His tarred fingertips illuminate the altar. Too many Marlboros. It's no wonder he has a gruff voice. 'In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We welcome all of you here today, friends and family and, we especially welcome Maeve, Ruairis twin sister, on his special day, his ordination.'

You are dressed to kill. Only the best. You don't look like a priest. I look at your face, so handsome, so sexy, even with your red hair that curls over the nape of your neck. Mam said as soon she pushed you out of her belly; she knew you had to be called Ruairi. I didn't inherit her red hair. I just got the freckles. The only trait we share are, our icy blue eyes.

I remember the day you took Janet McAllister to the cinema. It was your first date. I've often wondered what happened to her. She seems to have disappeared. Rumours were rife but she has never been found. You told me you snogged and fumbled in the back row. I really didn't want all the details, but you gave them to me anyway. You had taken her to see *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. You so loved Clint Eastwood. I told you she wouldn't enjoy that film, but it was what you wanted to watch. After the film you dropped her off at her house. Then, you took a shortcut home. Mam had always stressed, 'Do not cut through the Waterside.' You ignored her wishes and crossed the line that day.

When you finally arrived home, you were battered and beaten. That was the start. You stayed out late most evenings. Mam knew where you were, out with the *boys*. Dad was non the wiser. He lived in his own world of make believe. One that was full of fluffy bunnies.

You were in your final year at Queens in Belfast studying electronic engineering, when you came home one weekend and announced, 'I'm going to be a priest.' Mam just nodded. I laughed, and dad, well, he just stared at the dust motes floating in the air.

And here we are. After eight years in St. Patrick's College Maynooth, you are standing on the altar ready to celebrate Mass.

With arms outstretched, I watch as you swallow. I can see your Adams Apple move up and down. *I know* you do that when you are nervous. You did exactly the same when you found out where I was on July 21<sup>st</sup> 1972. I catalogue the breadth of your broad shoulders. You start to speak, 'In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I want to thank you all for joining me today to celebrate my Ordination. Today being the tenth anniversary, let us all remember the nine people that were killed in Oxford Street bus depot and Cavehill Road in Belfast. Let us also remember the one hundred and thirty who were injured.'

'Amen.'

I recall that day, so graphic. And the day after when you came to the hospital with grapes and a magazine, you kissed me on my head. I could smell petrol on your red curls.

I looked at your shoes as you walked out of the ward. Mam had always told you, 'Polish those shoes Ruairi. Soles are the pathway to your soul. They show and tell who you are.' You must have forgotten to clean them that day. Like that day when you forgot I was catching the bus from Derry to Belfast, to meet you at Oxford Street bus depot.

As you walked out of the ward, I watched the cleaners mop up the residue of nitroglycerin  
from the tramp of your footsteps,

You take hold of the censor and proceed to waft the incense for purification.

‘Amen.’