



belfast noir

EDITED BY **ADRIAN MCKINTY & STUART NEVILLE**

LEE CHILD ♦ ALEX BARCLAY ♦ BRIAN MCGILLOWAY ♦ IAN McDONALD

EOIN McNAMEE ♦ GLENN PATTERSON ♦ LUCY CALDWELL ♦ AND OTHERS

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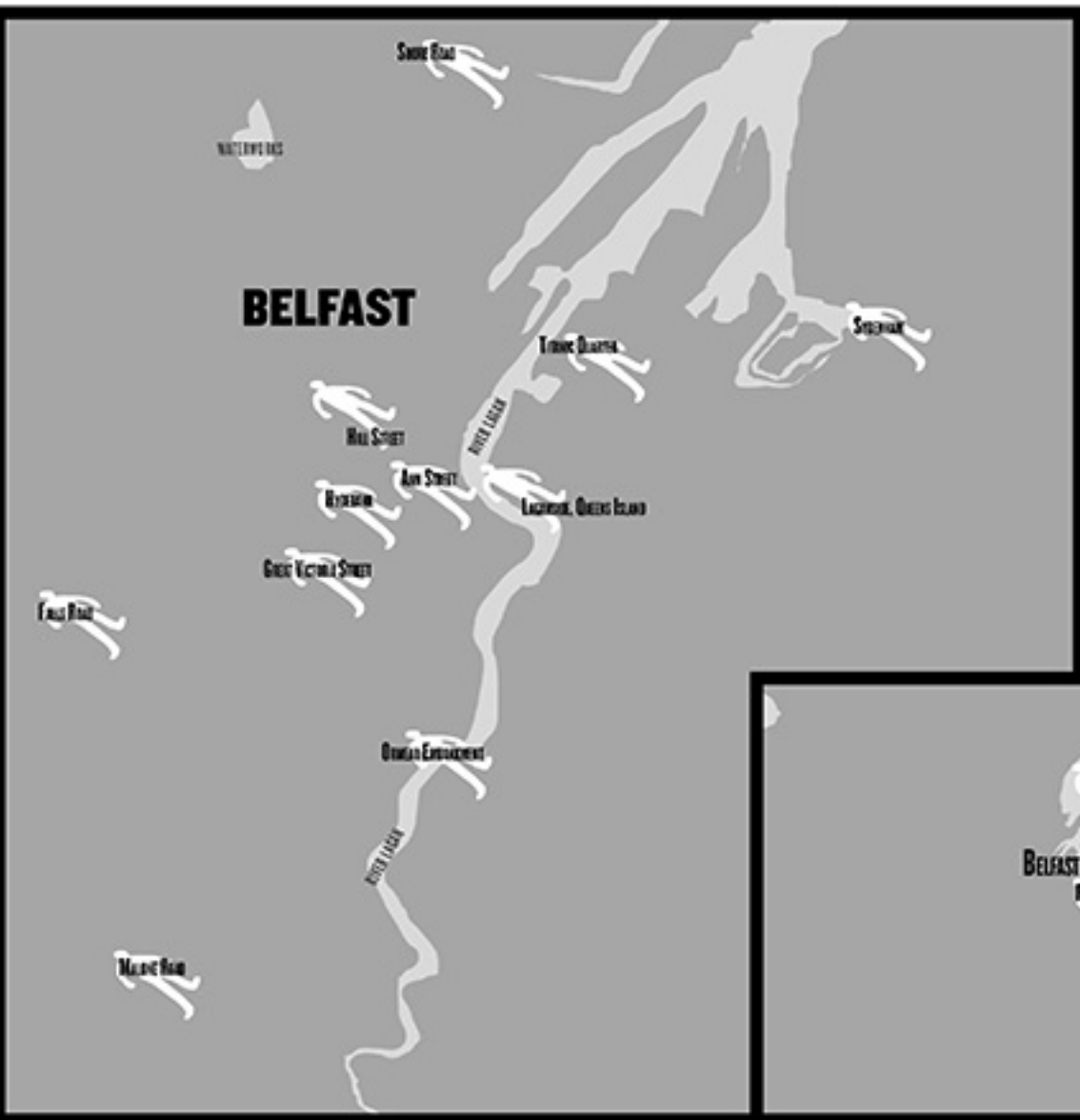
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INTRODUCTION

THE NOIREST CITY ON EARTH

Few European cities have had as disturbed and violent a history as Belfast over the last half-century. For much of that time the Troubles (1968–1998) dominated life in Ireland’s second-biggest population centre, and during the darkest days of the conflict—in the 1970s and 1980s—riots, bombings, and indiscriminate shootings were tragically commonplace. The British army patrolled the streets in armoured vehicles and civilians were searched for guns and explosives before they were allowed entry into the shopping district of the city centre.

A peace process that began in 1998 with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement has brought a measure of calm to Belfast, but during the summer “Marching Season” rioting between Catholic and Protestant working-class districts often flares up to this day.

Belfast is still a city divided. East Belfast is a largely Protestant working-class district. South Belfast is a prosperous middle-class enclave centred around Queens University. West and North Belfast, where Catholic and Protestant working-class districts jut up against one another is the area of greatest conflict and where the fracture lines are at their most raw. So-called “peace walls” have been built to separate adjacent streets of Protestant and Catholic families, with more having been added since the peace agreement of ’98.

The north of Ireland has always been a slightly different place than the south. For centuries Ulstermen and -women have been blessed with a unique accent, a mordant sense of humour, and a taciturnity unshared by most of their countrymen in the rest of the island. Attempts have been made to explain the province of Ulster’s singularity by laying the blame at the door of thousands of Dutch and Scottish planters who began arriving in the northeast of Ireland in the early 1600s. Of course the Ulster plantation changed the religious complexion of the north, but well before then “the land beyond the Mourne” revelled in its exceptionalism. Ulster was the most Gaelic and least English province in Ireland in the early seventeenth century, and further back into the mists of prehistory the story of the Táin Bó Cúailnge was that of Cuchulain, champion of Ulster, battling the forces of Erin.

Belfast was little more than a village for much of this time. The name probably derives from the Irish, *béal feirste*, which means river-mouth, and for centuries it was an uninteresting settlement on the mudflats where the River Lagan joined Belfast Lough.

In the nineteenth century shipbuilding, heavy engineering, and linen manufacture led to Belfast’s exponential growth, and by 1914 a tenth of all the ships and a third of all the linen clothes made in the British Empire were coming from the city. Belfast was Ireland’s boom town and Dublin the metropolitan administrative capital.

But World War I, the 1916 Easter Rising, and the Irish War of Independence (1919–1921) led to the creation of a border that separated the six counties of Northern Ireland from the twenty-six counties of the Irish Free State. Post-partition Northern Ireland suffered from an inferiority complex. Cut off from cultural developments in Dublin and London, Belfast became something of a provincial backwater. Belfast was heavily bombed by the Luftwaffe in World War II and postwar reconstruction was piecemeal at best.

International literary trends tended to pass Ulster by, and Northern Irish fiction itself went through a lean period until well after the end of World War II. A rare cultural highlight was F.L. Green’s *Odd Man Out*, which led to Carol Reed’s extraordinary film noir adaptation starring James Mason.

But the decline of engineering, shipbuilding, and linen manufacture had a devastating impact on Belfast and it was a gloomy, depressed, unfashionable Victorian city that encountered the years of conflict and low-level civil war known euphemistically as the Troubles.

What began as a series of peaceful marches for civil rights for Northern Ireland's Catholic minority in the late '60s quickly morphed into street violence and random sectarian attacks. As the crisis in the north intensified, the British government deployed the army and suspended Northern Ireland's parliament. Direct rule from London did not allay the fears of the Catholic minority and the Provisional Irish Republican Army began to recruit volunteers for their campaign to violently overthrow the British. In reaction to the IRA bombings and shootings, successive British governments panicked: interring IRA suspects without trial, flooding Northern Ireland with yet more soldiers, and strengthening the local police—the Royal Ulster Constabulary. And of course violence spiralled into more violence. The Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) reformed to counter the Provisional IRA, and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) became an umbrella group for various Protestant factions. Of course the majority of those killed were innocent civilians on both sides.

A depressing three decade-long cycle of atrocities and massacres had begun.

By this time much of Northern Ireland's writing talent—intellectuals such as Brian Moore, C. Lewis, and Louis MacNeice—had left the province to ply their trade under brighter lights, and Belfast languished culturally until the early 1970s when in the midst of the Troubles the city became the focus of an extraordinary group of poets who went on to attain world renown: Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, Derek Mahon, Ciaran Carson, Michael Longley, Tom Paulin, among others. Based loosely around Queens University, these young poets produced the greatest body of Irish literary work since the Gaelic revival. As the violence worsened, ironically, Belfast grew in cultural confidence, kicked started by this incendiary poetry, which in turn provided the kerosene for the other arts. By the late 1970s Northern Ireland saw a boom in playwriting, screenwriting, songwriting, and finally in novel writing.

Bernard MacLaverty's *Cal* (1983) was one of the first and best crime novels to address the complexities of life during the Troubles, and the Belfast-set *Lies of Silence* (1990) by Brian Moore established the city as a labyrinth of twisting allegiances and blind alleys. Eoin McNamee's *Resurrection Man* (1994) is a portrait of Belfast as a city of the abyss in which sociopathic Protestant serial killers stalk the streets looking for random Catholic victims. *Resurrection Man* was based on the true story of the Shankill Butchers.

Also in this period, a series of "Troubles Trash" airport thrillers were published by British and American authors seeking to cash in on Belfast's infamy, some becoming best sellers and Hollywood films that were largely derided in Northern Ireland for their didacticism and unsophisticated analysis of the situation.

In the 1990s a native series of Belfast police procedurals appeared, written by the witty Eugene McEldowney, and homegrown satirist Colin Bateman began his long run of novels that mined the rich vein of dark humour that has always been one of the city's defining characteristics.

Finally in 1998 a peace deal was reached between Protestant and Catholic factions and a new legislative assembly set up at Stormont. The uneasy truce established on Good Friday 1998 has held for the most part, for a decade and a half.

Walking through Belfast city centre today, you'll see the same range of chain stores and restaurants that can be found in just about any part of the British Isles. Some might argue that the evidence of Northern Ireland's economic growth—the peace dividend, as it's known—has robbed the centre of Belfast of its character, but few citizens miss the security turnstiles, the bag searches, the

nightly death of the city as it emptied out. Most feel the homogenisation of Belfast is a price worth paying for the luxuries other places take for granted. It might seem a cynical observation, but the truth is, those comforts—the restaurants, the theatres, the cinemas, the shopping malls—are the things that probably guarantee that the peace will hold. Only the most hardened individuals would feel a return to the grey desolation of the '70s and '80s is a sacrifice worth making for whatever political ideal they're too embittered to let go of.

The most visible sign of Belfast's transformation is the Victoria Square shopping centre, a glittering network of walkways, escalators, and staircases that traverse enclosed streets, a temple to modernism that is crass and shallow in the modern world, yet a strangely beautiful image of rebirth. Had anyone tried to build such a place in the Belfast of the '80s or early '90s, it would have been irresistible to the men of violence. If such an architectural bauble had ever been completed, it would have been bombed within days of opening. The people who planted the bomb would have claimed it as an economic target, a blow against capitalism, a crippling of Belfast's business life. Or perhaps it would have just been nihilism: at the time many felt that when the bombers destroyed the Grand Opera House, the ABC Cinema, the Europa Hotel, and other landmarks, it was simply because they couldn't bear the thought of Belfast's citizens having anything good, anything decent, anything shining to brighten the drudgery of their lives.

For all the shimmer and shine of the new Belfast, you can still walk a mile or two in almost any direction and find some of the worst deprivation in Western Europe. Those parts of the city have not moved on. While the middle class has enjoyed the spoils of the peace dividend, working-class areas have seen little improvement. The sectarian and paramilitary murals are still there: crude memorials to the fallen "soldiers" of the conflict, to heroes and martyrs still revered. For a small outlay, you can tour these murals in a black taxi with a knowledgeable guide at the wheel, ready to tell you who died where. You can see Belfast's bloodstains up close and personal. This is the city that gave the world its worst ever maritime disaster, and turned it into a tourist attraction; similarly, we are perversely proud of our thousands of murders, our wounds constantly on display. You want noir? How about a painting the size of a house, a portrait of a man known to have murdered at least a dozen human beings in cold blood? Or a similar house-sized gable painting of a zombie marching across a postapocalyptic wasteland with an AK-47 over the legend *UVF: Prepared for Peace—Ready for War*. As Lee Child has said, Belfast is still "the most noir place on earth."

Despite its relative newness as a city, Belfast has a rich psychogeography: on virtually every street corner and in nearly every pub and shop something terrible happened within living memory. Belfast is a place where the denizens have trained themselves not to see these scars of the past, rather like the citizens of Beszel in China Miéville's novel *The City & the City*.

This volume contains fourteen brand-new stories from some of Belfast's most accomplished crime and literary novelists and from writers further afield who have a strong connection to the city. The stories take place in all of Belfast's four quarters and in a diverse number of styles within the rubric of "noir."

We have divided the book into four sections—City of Ghosts, City of Walls, City of Commerce, and Brave New City—which we think capture the legacy of Belfast's recent past, its continuing challenges, and a guess or two at where the city might go in the future.

We believe that *Belfast Noir* is an important snapshot of the city's crime-writing community and indeed represents some of the finest and most important short fiction ever collected on contemporary Northern Ireland. We hope that this book will serve as a record of a Belfast transitioning to normalcy or perhaps as a warning that underneath the fragile peace darker forces still lurk.

FOREWORD

BY DAVID TORRANS

So, you want to open a specialist crime-fiction bookshop in Belfast? Are you mad?!

This was the general response here in 1997.

Those who cared about my personal and financial well-being were supportive and terrified about equal measures. At that time the vast majority of our stock originated from the other side of the Atlantic—the attraction of the “other” is always present—along with the more obscure British, European, and Asian crime fiction in print at that time. As is the way with change, the more obscure one time can become the mainstream somewhere down the line: Mankell, Rankin, McDermid, et al. were all “new” authors at one point, bringing a fresh and exciting approach to the genre.

Searching for new authors is probably the most satisfying part of our work, and as each year passed by the arena within which to choose increased.

Yet, something was missing . . .

The local scene regarding the crime-fiction genre was somewhat lacking. I would find myself filtering onto the shelves books by fine literary novelists who combine style and narrative with a sense of dark foreboding in much of their work, all important elements in the best of crime fiction. Thankfully, from this point on, things were brewing within the genre in this part of the world, and new names started to appear on the shelves.

That is not to say that all fiction within the genre is Belfast-centric. Much of the best writing from this part of the world combines the urban with the rural; we are, after all, a place filled with contradictions—social, political, and environmental—and this provides the perfect material for the genre to flourish.

Now, almost twenty years on, I can happily say that our focus within the shop veers much more strongly toward the “local.” Procedural, satirical, thriller, and of course noir elements of the genre are all present, and whilst from a gender perspective it is slightly skewed toward the male, this too is starting to change.

That an anthology such as *Belfast Noir* is even possible is a sign of how far both the genre and the city have come. When authors better known for literary or even science fiction are ready to tackle crime stories set in a city once torn apart by sectarian strife, you know both Belfast and Northern Irish noir have come of age.

David Torrans has been a figurehead in the Belfast, Northern Irish, and wider Irish crime-fiction scenes for two decades. His bookstore, No Alibis, has been featured in media around the globe.

PART I

CITY OF GHOSTS

THE UNDERTAKING

BY BRYAN MCGILLOWAY

Roselawn

It's the one thing they'll never stop," Brogan said. "A hearse. Think about it. Not only will they not stop you, they'll probably halt the traffic to let you past."

Healy nodded, unconvinced. The room was sharp with chemicals; the new embalmer, Mark Kearney, was learning the ropes and was still too heavy-handed with the fluid. Not that Healy had had any choice with that particular apprenticeship.

To their left, two women whispered in a hushed sibilance next to the coffin, one with her hair laid proprietarily on the satin-covered edge of the wood. Occasionally, Healy noticed, one finger would extend slightly, just touching the ends of the dead man's hair. It wasn't his wife; she'd been in twice to straighten the flag that was draped over the lower half, drooping in the middle under the weight of sympathy cards being laid there.

"You'd have nothing to do," Brogan said. "Pick it up from an address in Dundalk, bring it to the pub. We've the back room hired for the day for the 'wake.' Bring it in, leave it a few hours, then take the coffin back to your own place. You get to keep the box, and you'll make a few pounds."

"I don't know, Brogan. What's in it anyway?"

Brogan stared at him, his mouth a tight white line. "You know better than to ask."

"I'll be the one driving it," Healy said. "It's my business we're talking about."

He felt Brogan grip his arm, just at the crook of his elbow. "*Your* business? How much has your fucking business earned from all the burials we've brought you? Like fucking state funerals, some of them."

Not to mention all the other burials they'd caused, Healy thought, but said nothing, nodding lightly. "I know," he managed finally. "And I appreciate the trade."

"Your fucking business could burn to the ground some night, if you're not careful."

"I know," Healy said, raising a placatory hand.

"Or, God forbid, that cute blondie you're shifting could fall down the stairs and damage her skull. Not that there'd be much to damage in there, judging by what Mark tells me."

"Leave Laura out of it!"

"I hope to," Brogan said. "That'll be your choice."

Just then, a heavy man lumbered through the doorway, chest wheezing from the exertion of climbing the stairs. When he saw the two men standing, he raised his chin briefly in greeting, then limped his way across to the coffin. He offered a perfunctory blessing, laid his hand, not on the dead man's, but on the flag beneath him, then raised the fingers that had caressed the material to his mouth, kissing them lightly.

Healy could feel the floorboards beneath them bounce as the man approached, extending one stocky hand.

"Bad day, men," he said.

"It is, John," Brogan offered.

"The last of the old guard," John said gravely, glancing toward the coffin as if to reassure himself.

that the man in question was still there.

“Fucking stand-up guy,” Brogan agreed.

“He never turned. Not once. Even was dead against decommissioning, back in the day.”

“They don’t make them like him anymore.”

“Fucking watery sell-outs sitting on the hill now wouldn’t understand the meaning of country.”

Brogan nodded his head. “Country,” he repeated, snorting.

“So, how’s my boy doing?” John asked. “I appreciate you giving him a start.”

“Mark?” Healy asked. A bit too fond of the embalming fluid, personally and professionally, he wanted to say. “Great,” he did say. “A natural.”

“At handling the dead? He’s a chip off the old block!” Brogan said, slapping John lightly on the bicep. John reciprocated with a bark of laughter, causing the two women at the coffin to turn and stare at them, like incensed librarians.

“So, are you in?” John asked, quickly regaining his solemnity, regarding Healy through two narrowed eyes, the pupils pinpoints. *Like piss holes in snow*, his father used to call them. John clasped his hands in front of him, his nostrils flaring.

Healy glanced at Brogan. Brogan might threaten to burn down your business or hurt your girl, but Big John Kearney—well, everyone knew he wouldn’t threaten, he’d just turn up someday with the petrol can and matches and make you do it yourself. And stiff you for half the insurance claim and compensation for the inconvenience you’d caused him in making him come to your house.

“I’ll help out any way I can,” Healy said. “I don’t want anyone getting hurt with whatever it is I’m driving.”

John laughed, the ripples spreading across the shirt taut on his belly. “Hurt? Since when do undertakers become so fucking squeamish?”

Brogan joined in the laugh, though mirthlessly, his grip on Healy’s arm tightening. “He’s only taking the piss. Isn’t that right, Healy? He’s in. Aren’t you? *Aren’t you?*” The repeated question squeezed through gritted teeth.

Healy saw it now. They all had their jobs to do to keep Big John happy. He’d have to collect the coffin and bring it up to Belfast. Brogan’s job had been to convince him to do it.

“I’m in,” Healy said, already feeling his stomach sicken, even as the grip on his arm relaxed and his sense of shame in himself ballooned.

“Good man,” John said, slapping him on the shoulder. “We knew we could count on you. Don’t worry. It’ll be nothing that could hurt you. So, no panicking.”

* * *

Flu season was always busy, but this one was no joke. Three bodies were lying downstairs. Healy had had to ask Laura, his girlfriend, to come in and do makeup on the ones that weren’t too badly damaged. He’d had to promise her a shopping weekend in Dublin as a thank you, despite the fact she had made her first attempt, an eighty-five-year-old woman with heart failure, look like she was on the game.

“That’s the modern style,” Laura had protested when Healy told her to thin down the thick black eyebrows she’d drawn on.

“For whores maybe,” Healy had snapped. “She’s not going out for the fucking night, Lar, she’s being buried. I’m sure God won’t mind if her eyebrows aren’t the most fashionable when she reaches the big gates.”

“She doesn’t *have* any fucking eyebrows!” Laura had screamed. “That’s why I needed to give her some. Imagine your eyebrows falling out. I hope I don’t live to be old aged.”

Healy stopped himself from warning her that old age might be too optimistic a target if she didn’t shut up and get working on the bodies. Mark Kearney, the son of Big John, sat beside a particularly badly mashed-up guy who’d fallen off a roof, trying to shift his Sky satellite dish, a book on cosmetics in one hand, a lump of skin-coloured putty in the other. To his left was an older man, most of his face missing from a self-inflicted shotgun wound.

“This one will be a bastard to make look like he’s still alive,” Mark said. “Can we just put a Halloween mask or something on him? Who would he like to look like?”

“He’s being cremated anyway,” Healy said. “Just get him embalmed and shut up the coffin. There’s no wake.”

“That’s sad,” Laura opined from across the room. “No wake?”

“He must have been a sad bastard,” Mark said. “Shooting himself in the face.”

“He was Jack Hamill, actually. He taught me,” Healy explained. “I started out working for him. He owned the undertakers on the Ormeau Road. He worked some of the worst shit of the Troubles. Reconstructing people who’d had parts of their heads blown off, limbs missing, multiple shootings. He gave it up, couldn’t take it anymore. All the dead bodies.”

“Jesus,” Laura said, whistling softly, sitting back now, regarding the corpse with a little more respect.

“Which is probably why he shot himself in the face. Having to carry all that shit around with him ever since.”

“And he doesn’t want a wake?”

Healy shook his head. “He wanted to be prepped and cremated. That was it. *I want none of that shit*, he said.”

“I understand that,” Mark said. “Once you know the tricks of the trade, it takes away the magic.”

“You don’t know the tricks of the trade yet; you used far too much fluid on the last one,” Healy said. “In five hundred years’ time, if they dig him up, he’ll still look like he did last night.”

“Like Lenin,” Mark offered. “Except without the ear falling off.”

“Did John Lennon’s ear fall off?” Laura asked, pausing mid-lipstick application. “That’s sad to hear, considering he wrote such beautiful songs.”

Healy shook his head as Mark, behind his book again, struggled to hide the shaking of his shoulders as he laughed.

“I don’t think Scarlet Passion was Mrs. Owens’s colour, Lar,” Healy said. “Not since the 1940s anyway.”

* * *

The following morning, just before dawn, Healy was back at the office, getting the hearse ready for the drive south. Laura had made him a packed lunch, as if he was going on a school outing. She filled a Tupperware box with the remains of the previous evening’s lasagne. Healy hadn’t had the heart to point out that, while the hearse contained many things, a microwave oven was not one of them.

The drive down the M1 was uneventful. The road was busy, lorries and buses spraying the ground with water in their wake in iridescent arcs. The address that Mark Kearney had handed him the previous day listed the coffin as being at a house on the outskirts of town. When Healy finally found it, after

being sent to the same field twice by his sat nav, a small man, greying brown hair, glasses, came to the door.

“I’m Healy.”

“Congratulations. What do you want?”

“Big John sent me to collect remains.”

“Did he now?” The man straightened up, pulling himself to his full height. “Leave me the keys. You can go and sit in the living room. We’ll be half an hour.”

Healy handed over the keys as instructed, then turned back to the car. “You wouldn’t have a microwave in there, by any chance, would you?”

* * *

Twenty-five minutes, and one lukewarm lasagne later, he was back on the road. The coffin, polished pine, had already been loaded into the back of the car. A wreath, saying *Granda*, had been laid alongside it, showing through the rear windows. Healy noticed the dirt on the plastic flowers, figuring they’d lifted it off someone’s grave to make their ruse look more realistic.

As he got into the car, something struck him. He sat in silence, afraid to turn on the ignition. Absurdly, he realised, listening for ticking.

“What’s wrong?” the small man asked, blinking furiously behind his glasses.

“It’s not going to explode, is it?” Healy asked. “If my girlfriend phones me? It’s not going to kill me?”

“That’ll not be a problem,” the man said.

“What is in there?” Healy asked conspiratorially.

“You can use your phone,” the man replied. “Except to phone the cops. That call *will* kill you. Eventually.”

The first stretch of the journey, he thought he was going to be sick. He found that, as he drove, his gaze flicked repeatedly to the rearview mirror, to see if he was being followed, either by the cops or by the people who’d loaded the coffin into the hearse. Every pothole in the road seemed to shake the car violently, every sharp bend brought back memories of stories he’d heard in school about mercury tilt switches. He remembered Tommy Hasson stealing thermometers from the school chemistry lab, saying he would sell them for the mercury. Tommy ended up blowing the fingers off his right hand in an accident involving fireworks and a hammer. He was thirteen at the time. Tommy Five Fingers they called him after that. Though never to his face, of course.

Healy was back on the easy bit of the M1 within twenty minutes. This return leg was quieter than the journey down, little traffic heading north in the middle of the morning. As a result, when the marked garda car pulled out from the lay-by and merged into the traffic behind him, Healy noticed almost instantly. He told himself that they’d picked someone up speeding, but they seemed in no hurry to catch up with anyone. He knew it wasn’t him; if anything, he was going too slowly, keeping on the inside lane, overtaking only when absolutely necessary. His concern was twofold: not only did he not want to be stopped for a traffic violation, but he was also still not convinced by the small man’s assertion that whatever cargo he was carrying wasn’t going to blow up.

The garda car maintained its distance behind him. He wasn’t sure if he was being followed or not. He reckoned if they were actually tailing him, they’d have been more surreptitious about it, maybe used an unmarked car. Instead, they had quite literally announced their presence, sitting in the *Garda Only* bay along the side of the road, driving behind him now in a white car with fluorescent yellow

stripes up the side.

~~For a few moments, he toyed with the idea of deliberately speeding, hoping they'd pull him over and search the coffin. Whatever he was carrying wouldn't make it to the streets of Belfast and he'd be able to say it'd not been his fault. But he realised that he didn't even know the name of the people who had given him the coffin, only the name of the supposed remains inside, Martin Logue. Plus, if they asked who'd told him to collect it, he'd have to grass on John Kearney. He'd never survive that. His best bet would be to get clear of the cops and abandon the hearse in a field somewhere. Claim he ran out of petrol. Except, if they were following him, they'd be able to check. He thought he'd been clever, filling up the tank the previous day in preparation for the run; now he cursed his foresight for having deprived him of an excuse to dump whatever it was he was bringing north.~~

He ran through the alternatives in his mind. Explosives, obviously, but the glasses man seemed to have discounted that. Drugs? Big John did sell some to supplement his income. Guns? Again, a possibility. Maybe there actually was a dead person in the coffin. Or a living one? A kidnap victim?

“Hello!” Healy shouted over his shoulder. “Is there anyone in there?”

Silence.

Maybe they were gagged.

“Tap on the wood if you can hear me,” Healy said, then waited, aware that if someone actually did tap on the wood, he'd probably shit himself with fear.

Silence.

The car was still behind him. In fact, it stayed behind him for almost the entire way to the border before finally overtaking all of the traffic and speeding ahead of him, cutting off the motorway at the next junction.

He allowed himself to relax a little, turning on the radio, hesitating briefly as he did so, lest the radio waves detonate whatever was in the coffin. If, of course, whatever was in the coffin was detonable.

He crossed the border just south of Newry, instantly on the lookout for any PSNI vehicles that might have been waiting for him, perhaps alerted by the gardai. In the end, it was not until he was passing the sign for Cloughogue Cemetery that he spotted them.

The car was a silver Vauxhall, unmarked in contrast with the garda car, but unmistakably nonetheless due, mostly, to the dark green tint of the bulletproof glass on the windows of the vehicle. He'd no idea how long they'd been behind him. He'd checked at the border, but hadn't spotted them.

Despite Big John's warning, panic got the better of him as he neared Banbridge. Seeing the turnoff for the Outlet shopping complex, he indicated and pulled in, watching the PSNI car continue on along the Belfast Road. Aware that a parked hearse with a coffin in the back—especially one festooned with a floral arrangement to *Granda*—might attract some attention, he parked up at Burger King and went in for fries and a burger to make it appear that lunch had been his primary reason for stopping, rather than an attempt to lose a police tail.

“Should you leave that out there unattended?” the pimply teen who had taken his order asked, nodding out to where the hearse sat. “With a dead person in it?”

“He's not going anywhere,” Healy managed, blushing at having used the line.

“True that,” the teen offered, then turned to fetch his food.

Despite having already eaten lukewarm lasagne barely an hour earlier, Healy managed the food until he went back out to the hearse and spotted, at the far end of the car park, the same silver Vauxhall, parked, its occupants seemingly having gone to Starbucks for their lunch.

He turned and went back into the fast-food restaurant, heading straight for the toilet. He pulled

out his phone and called Mark.

“This thing of your dad’s? I’ve company following me up the road. Can you check what he wants me to do? Should I still go to the pub with it?”

Kearney grunted and hung up. Healy forced himself to pee, lest someone come into the toilet and wonder what he was doing in there.

He was zipping up when Mark called back.

“He said bring it here. Wait until it calms, then take it to the pub.”

“Take it there?” Healy protested. “My own premises?”

“Aye. We’re flat out here, by the way, so get a move on. And we’ve that cremation at two for the saddo you knew, so someone needs to take him across. Tony said he’d do it. You should be back by then, anyway.”

Healy bit his lip, annoyed at being ordered about by Mark Kearney, a youth with such a startling sense of entitlement that he’d deliberately failed every GCSE he’d been entered for, telling his teachers that he didn’t need GCSEs for what he’d be doing. Healy suspected reconstructing dead people’s faces had not featured on his list of future careers.

He strolled out to the car park again, feigning nonchalance, scanning the parking bays for the silver car, which had vanished once again. He began to wonder if indeed it had been the same one all. Perhaps it had been a different police car. Or just some dick with really heavily tinted glass on his windscreen.

He was fairly certain it was the same one though, when it picked up his tail again just outside Lisburn. This time it held steady, three cars behind him, all the way onto the Westlink and into Belfast.

* * *

He pulled into the parking bay of his premises, shouting for Kearney to close the shutters behind him as quickly as possible and to get the coffin out of the hearse.

He ran to the toilet and brought up both his lunches in four heaving gasps. He was sitting on the ground, his face pressed against the cool ceramic, when he heard someone tapping at the door.

“I’m in here!” he snapped.

“I know,” Laura called back. “That’s why I’m knocking! The cops are here to see you. They’re upstairs.”

A fifth heave, bringing up nothing but yellow spittle.

* * *

There were two officers waiting for him when he went up. Both were in uniform, right down to their peaked caps.

“Officers,” Healy said, his mouth acrid with the taste of bile. “Everything all right?”

“Are you all right?” one, the elder of the two, asked. “You look like death warmed up.”

“I’m fine.”

“Better hope they don’t mistake you for someone should be in one of your own coffins,” the other offered, laughing good-naturedly, like they were old friends.

“So, what can I do for you?”

“You collected a coffin this morning, in Dundalk?”

“Is that a question?”

The officer nodded. "It is."

"I did. That's right. I've only arrived back with it."

"Do you know the person in the coffin?"

Healy shook his head. "No. The order came in over the phone. Someone called Martin Logue."

The officer nodded his head, as if this was as he'd expected all along. "Was he the person who ordered the collection or the person in the box?"

"He was the deceased. Sorry, who are you, exactly?"

"I'm Inspector Hume," the man said. "This is Sergeant Fisher. We've reason to believe that you've been transporting illegal cargo across the border."

"Why?" Healy asked.

"That's what we hoped you'd tell us," Fisher said.

"No, why do you think I was bringing across something illegal?"

"You recently employed Mark Kearney as an apprentice here, is that right?" Hume asked.

"Again, why?"

"We know you did. I'm sure you know who Mark's father is? You were speaking to him the other night at a wake house."

"I know of him," Healy said.

"Is Mark here at the moment?"

Healy swallowed back a sudden rush of sour water that filled his throat and went across to the top of the stairs.

"Mark? Can you come up here?"

A moment later, Kearney appeared at the top of the stairs, wiping his hands on a cloth, as if he were a mechanic completing a job.

"Yes?"

"Officers Hume and Fisher would like a word." Healy widened his eyes meaningfully in a way he hoped Kearney would understand, though the message of which he was himself not entirely sure.

"What?"

"Martin Logue? The deceased remains which just arrived here. It was your father who arranged their transport, is that right?"

Kearney raised his chin defiantly. "What of it?"

Hume smiled. "So that's a yes," he said. "What's your father's interest?"

"Martin was my uncle," Kearney replied. "Whatever the fuck it's got to do with you. Dad wanted him brought home. Offered to handle the wake and burial."

Healy tried not to look at Kearney lest his respect for the alacrity with which the boy was lying was apparent. Instead he nodded, his hands clasped in front of him, head lightly bowed. From below he heard the thud of the metal shutters closing and wondered whether Hume and Fisher had been in distraction upstairs so that a second PSNI team could enter the workroom unseen below and search the coffin without their knowledge.

However, Hume had clearly heard it too, for he looked beyond Healy to the staircase with concern. "Where is Logue at the moment?" he asked.

"Where I left him. Downstairs," Healy said, glancing at Kearney who nodded.

"We'd like to see the coffin." Hume opened the fold up top of the reception desk and stepped behind it to where Healy and Kearney stood.

"You'll need a warrant," Kearney said. "That's my uncle's coffin you're desecrating."

This time Healy couldn't stop himself staring at Kearney, both for his unexpected audacity and

his vocabulary. Thankfully, whether he realised it or not, he was taking responsibility for the coffin. Whatever they found in there, Kearney and his father would have to answer for it, not Healy.

“Lucky we have one, then,” Hume said, handing a copy of the document to Healy, still the man nominally in charge of the place, and passing on out through the doorway that led to the staircase.

Healy followed, handing the sheet to Mark Kearney, assuming he’d have a better working knowledge of what it should contain. He felt sick again, felt the ground lurch to one side as he walked. The stairs seemed to shift under him, so much so that he needed to hold the rail with both hands to keep himself steady.

Hume and Fisher were already standing at the coffin when he reached the ground floor, twisting the locking screws, one by one, to open it. Healy stopped at the foot of the stairs, wondering if he had time to make a run for it once they opened the lid. If he allowed some distance between them, he’d at least have a head start.

They removed the last of the screws and hefted up the lid, raising it in such an angle that the contents were hidden from Healy. He could, however, see the look of revulsion on both their faces as they surveyed the contents. Intrigued, he felt himself moving forward, compelled toward the box against his own better judgement. As he approached, he saw, for the first time clearly, the view that had elicited such a reaction from the two policemen. The man in the coffin, dressed in a suit, had a familiar face. It took him less than a second to recognise the ring he wore on his finger and realise that the corpse was not Martin Logue at all, but his old mentor, Jack Hamill.

Healy took the lid from Fisher. “Happy now?” he asked, quickly checking the nameplate on top. It did say, *Martin Logue*. Kearney, the sneaky little bastard, must have switched the lids of Logue and Hamill’s in anticipation of just this scenario.

Sure enough, the insouciance of Mark’s swagger as he came down the stairs confirmed as much.

“Jesus, I hope it’s a closed wake,” Fisher commented, glancing again at the dead man. “You’ve not done a great job of the reconstruction.”

“We’ve not started yet,” Healy said. “On account of dealing with you.”

“Do you still want to search him?” Kearney asked.

Hume, leaning into the coffin, yet turning his head slightly away from it, patted the corpse quickly, feeling in around the few spaces between the sides of the box and the body.

“I’m sorry for your trouble,” Hume offered when he was done. “We’ll leave you to it, men.”

* * *

Healy had to stop himself from hugging Kearney as they watched the silver Vauxhall drive away from the front street. Dealing with the police had momentarily distracted him from his other concerns.

But only momentarily.

“Right, we’ll give it half an hour to make sure they’re gone and we’ll get Martin Logue across the pub and out of my fucking business,” Healy said. He glanced at Kearney, hoping that something about the young man’s expression would reveal what exactly the contents of the coffin marked *Martin Logue* had been. “And thanks for that.”

Kearney accepted the words with a nod.

Laura appeared in the doorway. “Mrs. Owens is done now. She looks good, if I do say so myself. Better than she did when she was alive, anyway. Being dead suits her.”

Healy nodded. “You’re a star, Lar. Thanks.”

“I know,” she beamed. “Tony was in already too. He said the traffic’s bad so he wanted to sta

on his way to Roselawn for the two o'clock."

"What?" Healy managed, sweat popping on his forehead. He glanced at the clock on the wall. It was two fifteen.

"The two o'clock. He took the old guy who blew his face off. Hamill? Tony took him on over to Roselawn for the cremation."

* * *

Healy sat in his office, staring at the phone. By the time someone in Roselawn had answered his call, the cremation had already begun. There was nothing left to do, no way to prevent it or turn it back. There was also no way he could show up at Kearney's pub with Hamill's corpse. And now Hamill would have to be buried in some way. And Big John Kearney would have to be told. And Roselawn would no doubt be in touch whenever whatever was in that coffin started to burn. He guessed that it wasn't explosives the moment someone answered the phone. The heat, he figured, would already have set them off if that had been what was inside the box.

* * *

Brogan met him outside City Hall. A small group of flag protesters were gathered, holding aloft Union Jacks of their own to compensate for the absence of one fluttering over the council building.

"So, how the fuck did this happen? Just so I can tell Big John."

"His son swapped the lids when the cops arrived. They came down to search the coffin and he opened the one they thought I'd brought up, but it was actually Jack Hamill."

"That was a good move. And I thought that young fella was thick."

Healy nodded. "The cops had him and me upstairs, answering questions. For ages," he said, exaggerating in spite of the fact that Mark Kearney would undoubtedly be asked for his own version of events by his father too. "Tony, my driver, landed and lifted the coffin marked *Jack Hamill*, which actually contained . . ." He looked to Brogan, hoping he'd finished the sentence for him.

"Shit. So Mark kind of caused it?"

"Kind of," Healy said quickly, spotting a get-out. "He thought he was helping."

"He did," Brogan admitted. "At least the cops didn't get the stuff and link it to Big John."

"Look, speaking of the stuff? If it's explosives in there, Roselawn will know. When they explode, it'll be like."

Brogan shook his head. "That's not going to be a problem."

"Or drugs? Every bird in Greater Belfast will be flying around stoned if they're burning a coffin full of dope. They'll find out."

Brogan smiled. "Jesus, calm yourself, Healy. It's guns! Don't worry."

"Guns?" Healy's stomach lurched. "The bullets will be firing everywhere."

Brogan shook his head, laughing. "It's all right. Just pistols."

"*All right?* Crematoriums use fucking magnets to pull out the metal bits of the body that aren't burned," Healy explained. "When the burning finishes, they'll find a load of guns stuck to the magnets. They'll come back to me about it."

Brogan grimaced, laid a hand on Healy's shoulder. "Just say nothing. You know nothing. Someone in Dundalk arranged it; you don't know their names or where they live. That's your story and you stick to it. But you can't name Big John, or me obviously. Or we'll kill you."

"I'll go to jail," Healy said, the weight of the hand seeming to put him off balance.

“Then we’ll do that girl of yours instead.”

“I can’t go to jail,” Healy responded, aware that his eyes were filling.

“You’ll not get long if you say you knew nothing about it. You could be out in less than a year. And we’ll see you right. You’ll be looked after.”

“It’s not fucking fair!” Healy snapped, loud enough for a blonde woman in a Union Jack hat-and-scarf set to look across at them.

“Them’s the breaks, Healy. Remember, you can’t name us. Whatever happens, Big John will see you’re looked after. And you’ll not owe any more favours. We’re all square now. I’ll even get the halfwit of a son of his out of your hair.”

Healy felt his phone vibrate in his pocket, recognised the number as Roselawn. “That’s the one now,” he said, dread running like lead through his veins, settling in the nest of nerves that seemed to be twisting around his stomach.

“Good luck, buddy,” Brogan offered, patting his shoulder and walking off, nodding to the blonde woman. “You’re a stand-up guy too.”

* * *

There was no sign of the police car at Roselawn when Healy arrived. The woman who had called simply said that he was required over an issue regarding the cremation of Jack Hamill. He attempted for a moment, to feign surprise, but didn’t see the point. “I’m on my way,” he’d said, resignedly.

He recognised Lorcan Kirk, one of the staff, when he went in. Kirk was speaking with a young couple about the various services that they could supply for the young woman’s father. Healy stood in the waiting room, unable to sit and flick through the *Ulster Tatler*, refusing the offer of tea from the receptionist, feeling fairly sure that he’d not be able to keep it down.

“Mr. Healy,” Kirk said when he finally entered the room, “thanks for coming in. Mr. Hamill’s cremation is finished and, well, it was a little odd. There was a lot of ash, but no bone. And we found some unusual things on the magnet when we were done.”

Healy nodded. “I know.”

“Was Mr. Hamill the Bionic Man?” Kirk asked, handing Healy a small brown cardboard box.

“What?”

“You expect the odd metal plate. Implants and that. But I don’t think we’ve ever seen quite so many on one body. One of the staff thought we’d cremated RoboCop.” He chuckled softly, as if aware that too raucous a laugh would be inappropriate under the circumstances.

Healy opened the lid of the box. It was three-quarters full of black pieces of metal of various shapes and sizes, including springs and pins. But there was nothing traditionally gun-shaped.

“So, what are they?”

Healy swallowed dryly. “Surgical implants,” he said. “Mr. Hamill was a base jumper in his spare time. A lot of broken bones and joints, apparently.”

“So broken there were none left after the cremation?”

Healy shrugged. “I couldn’t tell you.”

Kirk nodded. “I see. He mustn’t have been very good.”

“What?”

“As a base jumper. His ashes are here, if you want to take those too. Though the urn is only half full.”

Healy peered down at the scraps of metal. He couldn’t understand how the guns had ended up

pieces, the confusion countered by the relief he felt that they could no longer be used for their original purpose.

Kirk came into the room with a small plastic box of ashes that, absurdly, reminded Healy of the Tupperware container Laura had used for his lunch.

“Thanks,” Healy said, heading for the door.

“I didn’t know they did surgical implants,” Kirk said, as he passed.

“Who?” Healy turned, stared at him, desperate to get away.

“Glock. The company that make the plastic pistols.”

“Apparently so,” Healy replied, his mouth dry.

“It’s the strangest cremation we’ve done in some time, I have to tell you,” Kirk said, open and irritated now at Healy’s circumspection.

“I wouldn’t think of it as a cremation so much as a . . . decommissioning . . . And an undertaking remarkably well done at that,” Healy added, then pushed out through the door into the weakening winter sun.

POISON

BY LUCY CALDWELL

Dundonald

I saw him last night. He was with a girl half his age, more than half, a *third* his age. It was in the bar at the Merchant Hotel on Skipper Street. They were together on the crushed-velvet raspberry banquettes. Her arm was flung around his shoulder, and he had an arm around her too, an easy hand on her waist. She was laughing, her face turned right up to his, enthralled, delighted. They kept clinking glasses—practically every time they took a sip of their cocktails they clinked glasses. I was alone, on a stool at the bar, waiting for my friends—friends I hadn't seen in years, but who, even years ago, were always late. I'd ordered a glass of white wine while I waited; I picked it up with shaking hands. It was *him*. There was no doubt about it. His face had got pouchy, and his hair, though still black—dyed, surely—was limp and thinning. When he stood up, he was shorter than I remembered.

But it was him.

I hadn't seen him in years. I scrambled to work out the numbers in my head. Sixteen—seventeen—almost eighteen. All those years later and there he was, entwined with a girl a fraction of his age. He must be nearly sixty now.

I bent my head over the cocktail list as he walked toward me, letting my hair fall partly over my face, but I couldn't take my eyes off him. His eyes slid over the women he passed, thin, fake-tanned, bare backs and sequinned dresses, stripper shoes. He didn't look once at me. I'd lived away too long and I'd forgotten how dressed-up people got on a Saturday night: I was in skinny jeans and a blazer and not enough makeup. I watched him walk along the striped carpet and out toward the toilets, and then I turned to look at his companion. She had her head bowed over her phone and she was jiggling one leg and rapidly texting. She suddenly looked very young indeed. I'd put her in her midtwenties but it was less than that. I felt a strange tightness in my chest. She put her phone away and uncrossed her legs, recrossed them, tugged at the hem of her little black dress. She picked up her empty glass and tilted her head right back and drained the dregs, coughed a little, set the glass back down, and slurred her hair over the other shoulder. She had too much makeup on: huge swipes of blusher, exaggerated cat eyes. She glanced around the bar, then took out her phone again, flicked and tapped at it. She wasn't used to being alone in a bar like this. It was an older crowd and she felt self-conscious, you could tell. The men in the chairs opposite her were in their forties at least, heavy-jowled, sweating their suits, tipping back their whiskey sours. I watched the relief on her face when he appeared again, how she wriggled into him and kissed him on the cheek. As they studied the menu together, giggling, their heads bent confidentially together, I suddenly realised she wasn't his lover.

She was his daughter.

She was Melissa. Seventeen years. She'd be eighteen now. Perhaps they were out tonight celebrating her eighteenth birthday.

With a surge of nausea I realised, then, that what I'd been feeling wasn't outrage that she was too young for him, or contempt, or disgust. It was simpler, and much more complicated than that.

* * *

I don't remember whose idea it was to go to Mr. Knox's house. One minute we were giggling over him, nudging elbows and sugar-breath and damp heads bent together, and the next minute someone was saying they knew where he lived, something about a neighbour and church and his wife, and suddenly, almost without the decision being made at all, it was decided that we were going there.

Was it Tanya?

There were four of us: Donna, Tanya, Lisa, and me. We were fourteen, and bored. It was a Bakewell day, which meant no school, and we had nothing else to do. It was April, and chilly; rain coming in gusty, intermittent bursts. The Easter holidays had only just ended, and none of us had any pocket money left. We'd met in Cairnburn Park just after nine, but at that time on a wet Monday morning the park was deserted. We'd wandered down to the kiddie playground but the swings were soaking and after a half-hearted couple of turns on the roundabout we'd given up. The four of us had trailed down Sydenham Avenue and past our school—it was strange to see the lights on in the main building, and the teachers' cars all lined up as usual. Then, more out of habit than anything else, we crossed the road to the mini-market. We pooled our spare change to buy packets of strawberry bonbons and bags of Midget Gems and Donna nicked a handful of fizzy cola bottles. We ate them as we trudged on down toward Ballyhackamore. The rain was getting heavier and none of us had umbrellas, so we'd ended up in KFC, huddled over the melamine table, slurping a shared Pepsi. We were the only ones in there. The sugar and the rain and the boredom made us restless, and snide. We'd started telling stories, in deliberately too-loud voices, about people we knew who'd ordered plain chicken burgers and complained when they came with mayo. There's no mayo in it, the person behind the counter would say. Oh yes there is. Oh no there isn't. And it would turn out that the mayo was actually a burst sac of pus from a cyst growing on the chicken breast. The girl behind the counter was giving us increasingly dirty looks and we realised that if she chucked us out we really had nowhere to go; so we changed tactics and started slagging each other, boys we'd fancied, boys we'd "seen," or wanted to "see," as the expression went.

And then the conversation, almost inevitably, turned to Mr. Knox.

We all fancied Mr. Knox. No one even bothered to deny it. The whole school fancied him. He was the French and Spanish teacher, and he was part French himself, or so the rumours went. He was part-something, anyway, he had to be: he was so different from the other teachers. He had dark hair that he wore long and floppy over one eye, and permanent morning-after stubble, and he smoked Camel cigarettes. Teachers couldn't smoke anywhere in the school grounds, not even in the staffroom but he smoked anyway, in the staff toilets in the art block or in the caretaker's shed, girls said, and if you had him immediately after break or lunch you smelled it off him. He drove an Alfa Romeo, bright red, and where the other male teachers were rumpled in browns and greys he wore coloured silk shirts and loafers. On "Own Clothes Day" at the end of term he'd wear tapered jeans and polo necks and Chelsea boots and, even in winter, mirrored aviator sunglasses, like an off-duty film star. He had posters on his classroom walls of Emmanuelle Béart and a young Catherine Deneuve and Soledad Miranda, and he lent his sixth-formers videos of Pedro Almodóvar films.

But that wasn't all. A large part of his charge came from the fact that he'd had an affair with a former pupil, Davina Calvert. It had been eight years ago, and they were married now: he'd left his wife for her, and it was a real scandal, he'd almost lost his job over it, except in the end they couldn't dismiss him because he'd done nothing strictly, legally wrong. It had happened long before we joined the school, but we knew all the details. Everyone did. It was almost a rite of passage to cluster as first or second-years in a corner of the library poring over old school magazines in search of her, hunting down grainy black-and-white photographs of year groups, foreign exchange trips, prize days, tracking

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