RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Cross

Ken Bruen

About the Book

LET US PREY

A boy has been crucified in Galway city.

People are shocked; the Irish Church is scandalized. No further action is taken.

When the sister of the murdered boy is burned alive, **PI Jack Taylor** decides to take matters into his own hands.

Taylor’s investigations take him to some old city haunts where he encounters ghosts – living and dead. But what he eventually finds surpasses even his darkest imaginings…

Contents

CROSS

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For
David Zeltersman … True Noir,
Jim Winter … a Writer of Dark Beauty,
Gerry Hanberry … the Poet of the Western World.

Cross: an ancient instrument of torture.
Cross: in very bad humour.
Cross: a punch thrown across an opponent’s punch.

1

‘A cross is only agony if you are aware of it.’

Irish saying

IT TOOK THEM a time to crucify the kid. Not that he was giving them any trouble; in fact, he'd been almost cooperative. No, the problem was getting the nails into his palms – they kept hitting bone.

Meanwhile, the kid was muttering something.

The younger one said, 'Whimpering for his mother.'

The girl leaned close and said in a tone of surprise, 'He's praying.'

What was she expecting – a song?

The father lifted the hammer, said, 'It's going to be light soon.'

Sure enough, the first rays of dawn cutting across the small hill, throwing a splatter of light across the figure on the cross, looked almost like care.

* * *

'Why aren't you bloody dead?'

How to reply? I wanted to say, 'Tried my level best, really, I wanted to die. Surviving was not my plan, honestly.'

Malachy was my old arch enemy, my nemesis, and, like the best of ancient Irish adversaries, I'd even saved his arse once.

He was the heaviest smoker I'd ever met and God knows I've met me share. He now chain-lit another, growled, 'They shot the wrong fucker.'

Lovely language from a priest, right? But Malachy never followed any clerical rule I'd ever heard of. He meant Cody,

a young kid who I saw as my surrogate son and who had taken the bullets meant for me. Even now, he lay in a coma and his chances of survival varied from real low to plain abysmal.

The shooting hadn't helped my limp, the result of a beating with a hurley. I was thus limping along the canal, seeing the ducks but not appreciating them as I once had. Nature no longer held any merit. Heard my name called and there was Father Malachy, the bane of my life. When I ended up trying to help him, was he grateful? Was he fuck. He had the most addictive personality I'd ever met, be it nicotine, cakes, tea or simply aggression, and addictive personalities are my forte. I've always wanted to say *my forte* – gives a hint of learning, but not showy with it. In truth, my forte was booze. He was looking grumpy, shabby and priestly. That is, furtive.

He had greeted me with that crack about being bloody dead and seemed downright angry. He was dressed in the clerical gear: black suit shiny from wear and the pants misshapen, shoes that looked like they'd given ten years' hard service. Dandruff lined his shoulders like a gentle fall of snow.

I said, 'Nice to see you too.' Let a sprinkle of granite leak over the words and kept my eyes fixed on him. He flicked the butt into the water, startling the ducks.

I added, 'Still concerned for the environment?'

His lip curling in distaste, he snapped, 'Is that sarcasm? Don't you try that stuff on me, boyo.'

The summer was nearly done. Already you could feel that hint of the Galway winter bite; soon the evenings would be getting dark earlier, and if I'd only known, darkness of a whole other hue was coming down the pike. But all I heard were the sounds of the college, just a tutorial away from where we stood. Galway is one of those cities where sound carries along the breeze like the faintest whisper of prayers you never said, muted but present.

I turned my attention afresh to Malachy. We were back to our old antagonism, business as usual.

Before I could reply he said, ‘I gave the boy the last rites, did you know that? Anointed him with the oils. They thought he was a goner.’

I suppose gratitude was expected, but I went, ‘Isn’t that, like, your job, ministering to the sick, comforting the dying, stuff like that?’

He gave me the full appraisal, as if I’d somehow tricked him, said, ‘You look like death warmed up.’

I turned to go, shot, ‘That’s a help.’

Fumbling for another cig, he asked, ‘Did they find the shooter?’

Good question. Ni Iomaire – in English, Ridge, a female Guard, known as a Ban Gardai – had told me they’d ruled out one of the suspects, a stalker I’d leaned on. He was in Dublin on the day of the shooting. That left a woman, Kate Clare, sister of a suspected priest-killer. I didn’t mention her to Ridge. It was complicated: I’d felt responsible for the death of her brother, and if she shot at me, I wasn’t all that sure what the hell I wanted to do. She may also have killed others. I’d figured I’d deal with her when I regained my strength.

I said to Malachy, ‘No, they ruled out the prime suspect.’

He wasn’t satisfied with that. ‘So, the person who shot your friend is still out there?’

I didn’t want to discuss this, especially not with him, said, ‘Not much escapes you.’

Then he abruptly changed tack. ‘You ever visit your mother’s grave?’

There are many crimes in the Irish lexicon, odd actions that in the UK wouldn’t even rate a mention, but here were nigh on unforgivable.

Topping the list are:

Silence or reticence. You've got to be able to chat, preferably incessantly. Making sense isn't even part of the equation.

Not buying a round. You might think no one notices, but they do.

Having notions, ideas above your imagined station.

Neglecting the grave of your family.

There are others, such as having a posh accent, disliking hurling, watching BBC, but they are the second division. There's a way back from them, but the first division, you are fucked.

I tried, 'Believe it or not, when you're visiting a shot boy, shot full of bloody holes, it's harder than you might think to nip out to the cemetery.'

He blew that off, said, ''Tis a thundering disgrace.'

The current national disgrace was the major hospitals admitting they'd been selling the body parts of dead children without the permission of the parents. Even the tax shenanigans of the country's politicians paled in comparison to this. The Government had pledged that *heads would roll* – translate as, scapegoats would be found. I'd had enough of Malachy and made to move away.

He asked, 'What do you make of the crucifixion?'

I was lost. Was this some metaphysical query? I went for the stock reply. 'I take it as an article of faith.'

Lame, right?

We'd been walking, walking and sparring, and had reached a shop at the top of the canal. Moved under the store's canopy as drops of rain began to fall.

A man emerged, stopped, pointed at a No Smoking decal, barked, 'Can't you read?'

Malachy rounded on him, went, 'Can't you mind your own business? Fuck off.'

As I said, not your expected religious reply.

The man hesitated then stomped away.

Malachy glared at me, then said, ‘When the Prods crucified some poor hoor two years ago, I believed it was just one more variation on the punishment stuff that paramilitaries do, but I thought it was confined to the North.’

I tried for deep, said, ‘Nothing is confined to the North.’

He was disgusted, began to walk away and said, ‘You’re drinking again. Why did I think I could talk sensible to you?’

I watched him amble off, scratching his head, a cloud of light dandruff in his wake. It never occurred to me the horror he’d mentioned would have anything to do with me. Boy, was I wrong about that.

The booze, sure, I was *nearly* drinking again. You get shot at, you’re going to have a lot of shots in the aftermath. Course you are. It’s cast-iron justification. More and more, I’d begun to re-walk my city. What is it Bruce Springsteen titled his New York, ‘My City Of Ruins’? At the back of my mind was the seed of escape, get the hell out, so I’d decided to see my town from the ground down. Ground zero.

I moved from the canal to St Joseph’s Church, and a little along that road is what the locals now term Little Africa. A whole area of shops, apartments, businesses run by Nigerians, Ugandans, Zambesians, people from every part of the massive continent. To me, a white Irish Catholic, it was a staggering change, little black kids playing in the streets, drum beats echoing from open windows, and the women were beautiful. I saw dazzling shawls, scarves, dresses of every variety. And friendly … If you smiled at them, they responded with true warmth.

And that, despite the despicable graffiti on the walls:

Non Irish Not Welcome

Irish Nazis … a shame of epic proportion.

An elderly black man was moving along in front of me and I said, ‘How you doing?’

He gave me a look of amazement, then his face lit up and he said, ‘I be doing real good, mon. And you, brother, how you be doing?’

I ventured I was doing OK and fuck, it made me whole day. I moved on, a near smile on me own face. Hitting the top of Dominic Street, I turned left and strolled towards the Small Crane.

Isn’t that a marvellous name? So evocative, and you just have to ask … is there a large crane?

No.

Then you hit the pink triangle. I shit thee not. In Galway. A gay ghetto. Me father would turn in his grave.

Me, I’m delighted.

Keep the city moving, keep it mixed, blended, and just maybe we’ll stop killing our own selves over hundreds of years of so-called religious difference.

But I was getting too deep for me own liking, muttered, ‘Bit late for you to be getting a social/political conscience.’

There’s a lesbian bar on the corner and I would have loved me bigoted mother to know that. She’d have put a match to it and then got a Mass said.

I had quickened my pace, was on Quay Street, the Temple Bar of Galway, smaller but no less riotous, bastion of English hen parties and general mayhem, imported or otherwise. I turned at the flash hotel called Brennan’s Yard, where the literati drank.

I had dreaded returning to my apartment. There’s a Vince Gill song, ‘I Never Knew Lonely’. You live on your own, see a loved one go down, there’s few depressions like entering an empty apartment, the silent echoes mocking you. I wanted to roar, ‘Honey, I’m home.’

I walked slowly up the stairs of my building, dread in my gut, the keys in my hand. There was a key ring attached, given to me by Cody, it had a Sherlock Holmes figurine. I

took a deep breath, turned the key. I'd been to the off-licence, got my back-up.

Bottle of Jameson in my hand, I walked in, found a glass, poured a healthy measure, toasted, 'Welcome home, shithead.'

No matter what the cost – and I've paid as dear a price as there is – those first moments when the booze lights your world, there is nothing … nothing to touch that. Put the cap on the bottle. I was back to the goddamn longing, to trying to keep within a certain level of balance. Shite, I'd been down this road a thousand times, never worked, always ended in disaster. The silence in the room was deafening.

I'd been doing this demented stuff a while now, buying booze, pouring it and then pouring it down the toilet, each time muttering like a befuddled mantra, 'Down the toilet, like my life.'

Before the shooting – What a line that is, a real conversation spinner, beats *Where I took my vacation* hands down – I'd been trying to implement changes, had decided to change the things I could. Got as far as buying a whole new range of music, stuff I'd been reading about for years but never got round to hearing. Picked up a CD by Tom Russell, little realizing the serendipity of one track. The album was titled *Modern Art* and he had a recording of Bukowski's poem 'Crucifix in a Death Hand'.

I noticed I had the volume on full and wondered if me hearing was going. I poured the whiskey down the toilet. Once the drink compulsion eased, I looked round my home. Was there a single item that meant anything? The books were lined against the wall, a thin layer of dust on the spines. Like the shadows on my life, the dust had settled slowly and it didn't seem like anyone was going to eradicate it.

2

‘*Men are so inevitably mad that not to be mad would be to give a mad twist to madness.*’

Pascal, *Pensées*, 412

THE GIRL WAS humming softly, an old Irish melody she no longer knew the name of. It was her mother's song and sometimes, if the girl turned real quick, she thought she could catch a glimpse of her mother, those blue eyes fixed on something in the distance, her slight figure, like a tiny ballerina, shimmering in the half light of the dying day.

She never told anyone of this, hugged it to herself like the softest fabric, like the piece of Irish linen her mother had put so much value on. It had been brought out on special occasions, handled with loving care and then put away, her mother saying in that soft Irish lilt, 'This will be yours some day, Alannah.'

Alannah – my child – the first Irish word that held any real significance for her.

The girl's eyes moved around the room: cheap wallpaper was peeling from the top, a thin strip of carpet barely covered the floor and the windows badly needed to be cleaned. Her mother would never have allowed that, those windows would have been sparkling.

Near the door was the cross, a heavy hand-carved piece, the features of the Christ outlining the torment, the nails clearly visible in the hands and feet. Her mind flashed to that other figure and she lingered on the image for a time. It was burned into her memory like a promise she'd made to her mother, and in her own way she had fulfilled the pledge. There was so much to do yet.

And then she smiled. The mantra her mother had used: 'So much to do.'

She was maybe six, and her mother had decided to give the house a total clean. ‘Top to bottom.’

For some reason that had struck the child as hilarious, and as she laughed her mother had joined in, the two of them, arms round each other, laughing like they’d won the lottery.

When the laughter had subsided, her mother had looked right into her eyes, asked, ‘Do you know how much I love you?’

And she’d said, to her mother’s total delight, ‘Top to bottom.’

The girl felt her eyes begin to fill with tears and she stood up abruptly, began to pace the worn carpet. She focused on what she had to do next, her conviction that not only would it be done but in such a way that it would scream, like the silent Christ on the hand-carved cross.

She resumed her humming as the details began to take shape.

3

‘*You put the heart crossways in me*.’

Irish expression for being given a bad fright.

THERE'S AN OPEN-PLAN café in the Eyre Square shopping centre.

Eyre Square was still in the throes of a major redevelopment and, like everything else, was two years behind completion. En route to the centre, I'd stopped for a moment by the site of Brown's Doorway which, like the statue of Padraig O'Conaire, had been removed. They'd promised they'd restore them and there were maybe three people in the city who actually believed it. There'd once been a monument to Lord Clanricarde in Eyre Square. Like a metaphor for all our history, it had been paid for by his tenants and, need I add, against their will. My father had told me of the wild celebrations in 1922 when it had been taken down, and, nice touch, after they hammered it to smithereens they used the base for the statue of O'Conaire.

You look straight down the Square and there's the Great Southern Hotel, though what was so great about it was anyone's guess. It was expensive, but then, wasn't everything? According to a recent poll, it was cheaper to live in New York. When I was a child, two cannons had stood sentry right where I stood and the whole park had been circled by railings. They were long gone.

As were the fairs.

Fair day in Galway meant fair day in Eyre Square. These affairs began around four a.m. Get at it early.

And they did.

Cattle, sheep, pigs and horses were paraded with varying degrees of pride and cunning. The real winners

were the pubs which sprang up to cater for the crowd. And of course along came a bank – Bank of Ireland, to my back, had now a massive building, begun no doubt in those better times.

Deals were still made on Eyre Square but they involved dope, women, passports and, naturally, booze.

I sighed for a loss too profound for articulation and turned, walked past Faller's the jeweller's and crossed the road into the centre proper. Took the down escalator, in every sense, and went to the café on the lower floor.

You sit, have a snack, watch the tourists. Scarce this year, due to fear of flying, terrorists, rising prices. All the retail outlets had SALE signs in the windows, a sure sign of desperation and an economy on the slide. Our Celtic Tiger had roared and loud for nigh on eight years and man, we wallowed in its trough. Now the downside, we didn't feed that goddamn animal and the whore died.

Got me a latte, a slice of Danish I hadn't touched and the *Irish Independent*. We'd done woesome at the Olympics, maybe the worst ever. Our best and our brightest, Sonia O'Sullivan, had trailed in last. You want to see the difference between the good old USA and us … one of our athletes came eleventh, we were delighted as he'd achieved a *personal best*. The American swimmer currently on his fourth Gold was depressed as he wasn't going to emulate the achievement of Mark Spitz. At the very beginning of the Games, the Irish team had been rocked by a dope scandal. The guilty party said he hoped to work with anti-doping boards when his two-year ban was up. And we applauded him. Fuck, was it just me or was the country getting crazier? Religion, however heavy its hand, had for centuries provided a ballast against despair. Mired in more and more disgrace, the people no longer had much faith in the clergy providing anything other than tabloid fodder. It probably explained why every new-fangled cult had managed to find a congregation in the city. Even the

Scientologists had an office. We were expecting Tom Cruise any day.

It was only a few years since I'd been a regular churchgoer, the priest even called me by my first name, but the Magdalen Laundry's revelations stopped me cold, and a black leather coat I'd brought back from London had been stolen during Mass and I wouldn't swear to it but I saw a priest wearing one very similar.

The newspapers were screaming about a crucifixion, but I skipped that, moved to the more mundane stuff. I sipped my coffee, read about the furore at the Black Box, a venue on the dyke road – a simulated lesbian performance had outraged residents. Further along the way, in Bohermore, a shop selling sex items had to close due to pickets. The proprietor sneered, 'They thought we were having sex in the shop.' He added that the huge publicity had ensured the success of his new premises in the city centre.

I reached for my cigarettes, then realized I didn't smoke any more. And even if I did, you weren't allowed to smoke in the area. The Irish, despite all expectations, had gone along with the new law without a murmur. Had we lost our balls?

You betcha.

I threw the paper aside. A young man with long, dank hair sat opposite me. He'd a can of Red Bull. There was no real physical resemblance to Cody, but he reminded me of him and that was a hurt as harsh as the black coffee I wished I'd ordered.

He reminded me too of Joey Ramone. He slurped from the can and I mean *slurped* – among the most annoying sounds at the best of times, but with a very bad mood almost unbearable. I wanted to reach over, slap his face, roar *Have some fucking finesse*. Reined it in, finished the latte and considered a double espresso. The kid was looking at me. Was it myself or was he smirking?