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This book is dedicated to:

USA

Bernadette Kennedy

Ireland

Dr Enda O'Byrne

Ken Bruen was born in Galway, Ireland. After turning down a place at RADA, and completing a doctorate in Metaphysics, he spent twenty-five years as an English teacher in Africa, Japan, South-East Asia and South America. An unscheduled stint in a Brazilian prison where he suffered physical and mental abuse spurred him to write, and after a brief spell teaching in London, he returned to Galway, where he now lives with his daughter.

Ken Bruen is the award-winning author of several novels, including eight featuring private investigator Jack Taylor, and *Blitz*, soon to be released as a film starring Jason Statham.

For more information on Ken Bruen and his books, see his website at www.kenbruen.com

www.rbooks.co.uk

The Jack Taylor novels by Ken Bruen

THE GUARDS
THE KILLING OF THE TINKERS
THE MAGDALEN MARTYRS
THE DRAMATIST
PRIEST
CROSS
SANCTUARY
THE DEVIL

PART ONE
SHOW TIME

I learnt this in prison. Compulsive is when you do something repetitively. Obsessive is when you think about something repetitively.

Course, I learnt some other stuff too. Not as clear-cut. Not as defined.

The day of my release, the governor had me up for a talk.

Bent over his desk, he kept me waiting. His head over papers, a model of industry. He had a bald patch, like Prince Charles. That made me feel good. I concentrated on it. Finally, he looks up, says,

‘Mitchell?’

‘Yes, sir?’

I could play the game. I was but a cigarette away from freedom. I wasn’t going to get reckless. His accent was from up north somewhere. Polished now but still leaking Yorkshire pudding and all that decent shit. Asked,

‘You’ve been with us now for?’

Like he didn’t know. I said,

‘Three years, sir.’

He hmphed as if he didn’t quite believe me. Riffled through my papers, said,

‘You turned down early parole.’

‘I wanted to pay me debt in full, sir.’

The screw standing behind me gave a snort. For the first time, the governor looked directly at me. Locked eyes. Then,

‘Are you familiar with recidivism?’

‘Sir?’

‘Repeat offenders, it’s like they’re obsessed with jail.’

I gave a tiny smile, said,

‘I think you’re confusing obsession with compulsion,’
and then I explained the difference.

He stamped my papers, said,

‘You’ll be back.’

I was going to say,

‘Only in the repeats,’

but felt Arnie in *The Terminator* would be lost on him. At
the gate, the screw said,

‘Not a bright idea to give him lip.’

I held up my right hand, said,

‘What else did I have to offer?’

Missed my ride.

What the Yanks say. I stood outside the prison, waiting
on my lift. I didn’t look back. If that’s superstition, then so
be it. As I stood on the Caledonian Road, I wondered if I
looked like a con, ex-con.

Shifty.

Yeah, and furtive. That too.

I was forty-five years old. Near 5’ 11” in height, weighed
in at 180 pounds. In shape, though. I’d hammered at the
gym and could bench-press my share. Broken through the
barrier to free up those endorphins. Natural high. Shit, do
you ever need that inside. Sweat till you peak and beyond.
My hair was white but still plentiful. I had dark eyes, and
not just on the outside. A badly broken nose near redeemed
by a generous mouth.

Generous!

I love that description. A woman told me so in my
twenties. I’d lost her but hung on to the adjective. Salvage

what you can.

A van pulled up, sounded the horn. The door opened, and Norton got out. We stood for a moment. Is he my friend?

I dunno, but he was there. He showed up, friend enough. I said,

‘Hey.’

He grinned, walked over, gave me a hug. Just two guys hugging outside Her Majesty’s jail. I hoped the governor was watching.

Norton is Irish and unreadable. Aren’t they all? Behind all the talk is a whole other agenda. He had red hair, pasty complexion, the build of a sly greyhound. He said,

‘Jaysus, Mitch, how are you?’

‘Out.’

He took that on board, then slapped my arm, said, ‘Out . . . that’s a good one. I like that . . . Let’s go. Prison makes me nervous.’

We got in the van and he handed me a bottle of Black Bush. It had a green bow. I said,

‘Thanks, Billy.’

He looked almost shy, said, ‘Aw, it’s nuttin’ . . . for your release . . . the big celebration is tonight . . . and here . . .’ He produced a pack of Dunhills. The lush red luxury blend. Said,

‘I thought you’d be gasping for a tailor-made.’

I had the brown paper parcel they give you on release. As Norton started the engine, I said,

‘Hold on a sec.’ And I slung the parcel.

‘What was that?’

‘My past.’ I opened the Bush, took a long, holy swallow. It burned. Wow, did it ever. Offered the bottle to him. He

shook his head.

‘Naw, not when I’m driving.’

Which was rich, him being half in the bag already. He was always this side of special brews. As we headed south he was rabbiting on about the party. I switched off.

Truth is, I was tired of him already.

Norton said, ‘I’ll give you the scenic tour.’

‘Whatever.’

I could feel the whiskey kicking in. It does all sorts of weird shit to me, but mainly it makes me unpredictable. Even I can’t forecast how it will break.

We were turning from Marble Arch and, of course, got caught at the lights. A guy appeared at the wind-shield and began to wipe it with a dirty cloth. Norton yelled,

‘These fuckin’ squeegees, they’re everywhere!’

This guy didn’t even make an effort. Two fast wipes that left skid marks on the glass. Then he appeared at my window, said,

‘Four quid, matey.’

I laughed, rolled the window down, and said,

‘You need another line of work, pal.’

He had long, greasy hair down to his shoulders. His face was thin, and he had the eyes I’d seen a hundred times on the yards. The eyes of the bottom-rung predator. He leant his head back and spat. Norton went,

‘Aw Jaysus.’

I didn’t move, asked,

‘You got a tire iron?’

Norton shook his head,

‘Mitch, Jesus, no.’

I said, ‘OK.’

And got out.

The guy was surprised but didn't back off. I grabbed his arm and broke it over my knee. Got back in the van and the lights changed. Norton revved fast, crying,

'Oh God, Mitch, you crazy bastard. You're out . . . what? Ten minutes . . . and you're at it already. You can't be losing it.'

'I didn't lose it, Billy.'

'What, you smash the guy's arm, that's not losing it?'

'If I'd lost it, I'd have broken his neck.'

Norton gave me an anxious look, said,

'You're kidding . . . right?'

'What do you think?'

Norton said, 'I think you'll be surprised at the place I found for you.'

'As long as it's near Brixton.'

'It's Clapham Common. Since you've been . . . away . . . it's become trendy.'

'Oh shit.'

'Naw, it's OK . . . Anyway, a writer guy got into heavy schtook to some moneylenders, had to do a runner. Left everything: clothes, books . . . you're set.'

'Is Joe still at the Oval?'

'Who?'

'*Big Issue* seller.'

'I don't know him.'

We were coming up to the Oval. I said,

'He's there. Pull over.'

'Mitch . . . you want to buy the *Big Issue* now?'

I got out, walked over. Joe hadn't changed. He was dishevelled, dirty, cheerful.

I said, 'Hi, Joe.'

'Mitchell . . . Good Lord, I heard you was doing a stretch.'

I handed over a fiver, said,

'Give us a copy.'

We didn't mention the change. He asked,

'Did they hurt you in there, Mitch?'

'Not so's you'd notice.'

'Good man. Got a smoke?'

I gave him the pack of Dunhills. He examined them,
said,

‘Flash.’

‘Only the best for you, Joe.’

‘You’ll have missed the World Cup.’

And a whole lot more besides. I asked,

‘How was it?’

‘We didn’t win it.’

‘Oh.’

‘There’s always the cricket.’

‘Yeah, there’s always that.’

Three years in prison, you lose
time
compassion
and the ability to be surprised.

I was nigh amazed when I saw the flat. The whole ground
floor of a two-storey house. And it was beautifully
furnished, all soft pastels and wall-to-wall books. Norton
stood behind to gauge my reaction.

I said, ‘Christ.’

‘Yeah, isn’t it something? Come and see more.’

He led me into the bedroom. Brass double bed. He
threw open the wardrobes, packed full with clothes. Like a
sales clerk, Norton said,

‘You’ve got your

Gucci

Armani

Calvin Klein

and other bastards I can’t pronounce. Get this, the sizes
are medium to large.’

‘I can do medium.’

Back into the living room, Norton opened a drinks cabinet. Full too. Asked,

‘Whatcha fancy?’

‘A beer.’

He opened two bottles, handed me one. I asked,

‘No glass?’

‘No one drinks outta glasses anymore.’

‘Oh.’

‘*Sláinte*, Mitch, and welcome home.’

We drank. The beer tasted great. I indicated the place with my bottle, asked,

‘Just what kind of a hurry was the guy in to leave all this?’

‘A big hurry.’

‘Won’t the loan shark want some of it?’

Norton smiled, said, ‘I’ve already had the choice bits.’

It took me a minute. Blame the beer. I said,

‘You’re the moneylender?’ Big smile. He was proud, been waiting, said,

‘Part of a firm – and we’d like you on board.’

‘I don’t think so, Billy.’

He was expansive.

‘Hey, I didn’t mean right away. Take some time, chill out.’

Chill out.

I let it go, said,

‘I dunno how to thank you, Billy. It’s incredible.’

‘No worries. We’re mates . . . right?’

‘Right.’

‘OK, I gotta go. The party’s in The Greyhound at eight.
Don’t be late.’

‘I’ll be there. Thanks again.’

Briony's a basket case. A true, out-and-out nutter. I've known some seriously disturbed women. Shit, I've dated them, but up against Bri they were models of sanity. Bri's husband died five years ago. Not a huge tragedy, as the guy was an asshole. The tragedy is that she doesn't believe he's gone. She keeps seeing him on the street and, worse, chats to him on the phone. Like the genuine crazies, she has moments of lucidity. Times when she appears

rational

coherent

functional

. . . then wallop. She'll blindside you with an act of breathtaking insanity.

Add to this, she has a beguiling charm, sucks you in. She looks like Judy Davis, and especially how Judy Davis appeared with Liam Neeson in the Woody Allen movie. Her hobby is shoplifting. I dunno why she's never been caught, as she does it with a recklessness beyond belief. Bri is my sister. I rang her. She answered on the first ring, asked,

'Frank?'

I sighed. Frank was her husband. I said,

'It's Mitchell.'

'Mitch . . . oh Mitch . . . you're out.'

'Just today.'

'Oh, I'm so happy. I've so much to tell you. Can I make you dinner? Are you hungry? Did they starve you?'

I wanted to laugh or cry.

'No . . . no, I'm fine . . . listen, maybe we could meet tomorrow.'

Silence.

'Bri . . . are you still there?'

'You don't want to see me on your first night? Do you hate me?'

Against all my better judgment, I told her about the party. She instantly brightened, said,

'I'll bring Frank.'

I wanted to shout, 'Yah crazy bitch, get a grip!' I said, 'OK.'

'Oh Mitch, I'm so excited. I'll bring you a present.'

Oh God.

'Whatever.'

'Mitch . . . can I ask you something?'

'Ahm . . . sure.'

'Did they gang rape you? Did they?'

'Bri, I gotta go, I'll see you later.'

'Bye, baby.'

I put the phone down. Wow, I felt drained.

I had a sort through the wardrobe. When you've worn denim and a striped shirt for three years, it was like Aladdin's Cave.

First off I got a stack of Tommy Hilfiger out. Put that in a bin liner. All that baggy shit, maybe Oxfam could off-load it. There was a Gucci leather jacket, nicely beat up. I'd be having that. Lots of Hennes white T-shirts: the type Brando immortalized in *On the Waterfront*. The guys in prison would kill for muscular American T-shirts.

No jeans.

No problem.

Gap khaki pants, a half dozen. A blazer from French Connection and sweatshirts from Benetton.

I dunno if that guy had taste, but he sure had money. Well, loan-shark money.

There was a Barbour jacket and a raincoat from London Fog. No shit, but I'd be a con for all seasons. Odd thing was, not a shoe in sight. But was I complaining? Was I fuck. I had a pair of shoes.

Took a hot shower and used three towels to dry off. They'd been swiped from the Holiday Inn so were soft and friendly. What I most wanted was another beer, but I knew I'd better cool it. The evening ahead would be liquid and perhaps lethal. I needed to at least arrive soberish. Took a quick scan of the books, one whole wall devoted to crime writers. Spotted

Elmore Leonard

James Sallis

Charles Willeford

John Harvey

Jim Thompson

Andrew Vachss.

And that was only the first sweep. Phew! I might never go out. Just bury myself in crime.

I put on a T-shirt, khaki pants and the leather jacket. Checked it out in the mirror. No doubt I could pass for a Phil Collins roadie. Thought - 'If I'd money, I'd be downright dangerous.'

Walking down Clapham Common, a woman smiled at me. I knew it was the jacket. There's a transport caff in Old Town that used to be the business. It was still there. The type of place if it's not on the table, it's not on the menu.

For an ex-con there can be few greater pleasures than to eat alone. Grabbing a booth I luxuriated in just having it to myself. Knew exactly what I'd order.

The carbohydrate nightmare, neon-lit in medical overload. Like this:

two sausages
mess of bacon
fried tomatoes
eggs
black pudding
toast
pot of stewed tea.

Oh yeah. In the booth next to me was an old codger. Eyeing me. He had the face and manner of a 'character'. His name would be Alfred.

Course, everyone would love him. Alfred would have his own corner in the pub and his own pewter tankard.

He'd be a holy terror to a new barman.

My food arrived, and he said,

'That food, son . . . you know where it comes from?'

Without lifting my head, I said,

'I've a feeling you're going to enlighten me.'

That startled him, but not enough to stop him. He said,

'Big fella like you, you should have a feed of potatoes.'