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A SHOOTING IN RATHREEDANE

SERGEANT JACKIE Noonan was squaring away paperwork when the call came in, just her and the gosling, Pronsius Swift, in Ballina Garda Station. The third officer on duty, Sergeant Dennis Crean, had run out to oversee the extraction of a Renault Megane some young lad – sober, apparently, just a nervous non-local negotiating the cat’s cradle of back roads around Currabaggan – had nosed into a ditch a half mile out from the national school. The car was a write-off but the lad had got away without a scratch, according to Crean, and he was a lucky lad because Noonan knew the roads out that way and they were wicked; high ditched, hilly and altogether too narrow, scantily signposted and laced with half-hidden, acutely right-angled turns it took only a second’s inattention to be ambushed by.

Noonan was at her desk drinking coffee black as a vinyl record from a battered silver cafetière and transferring a weekend’s worth of write-ups from her notebook into the central computer system. The weekend had been unremarkable but busy: there had been a dozen or so minor traffic infractions, a fist-fight between stocious teenage

cousins outside a main-street chipper late last night and a call-out this morning prompted by what turned out to be a man's empty duffel coat snagged in the weir gates of the Moy river, which was enthusiastically mistaken for a body by a band of visiting American summer students and their professor taking an early constitutional along the quays.

The notes, executed in Noonan's irredeemable *ciotóg* scrawl, were the usual hassle to decipher, their transcription to the computer an activity of an order of tedium Noonan nonetheless found strangely assuaging. So absorbed was she in this task that she started in surprise when the phone on the main desk first rang out.

'Pronsius,' she commanded, without looking away from the screen. The phone continued ringing.

'Pronsius!'

Noonan glanced up. Pronsius wasn't at his desk. He wasn't in the room.

Noonan made her way over to the main desk. She snatched the handset from its cradle.

'Ballina Garda Station, Sergeant Noonan speaking.'

'There's been a shooting,' a voice, a man's, declared.

'A shooting?' Noonan repeated just as Pronsius appeared with a mug in his hand. Pronsius Swift was twenty-four, out of Templemore less than three years, and an aura of adolescent gawkiness clung to him yet; he was tall but disposed to stooping, with an emphatic aquiline bump in his conk, jumpy eyes, and a guileless shine coming off his forehead. Even the chevrons of premature grey in his crew cut served only to emphasise his prevailing boyishness. When he heard Noonan say 'a shooting', he froze in place and stared at her with his mouth open.

‘When you say “a shooting” – a shooting as in someone’s been shot with a gun?’ Noonan asked the man.

‘What other kind of shooting is there?’ the man said.

‘Hang on, now,’ Noonan said. Keeping the cordless handset to her ear, she returned to her own desk, sat back down, and retrieved her pen and notebook.

‘How many people have been shot?’ she asked.

‘Just the one.’

‘The person shot. A man or a woman?’

‘A man.’

‘Is he dead?’

The man on the end of the line sighed.

‘He is not. He’s out there now in the back field. He’s in a bit of a bad way.’

‘How badly injured is he, in your estimation?’ Noonan said, raising a finger to fix Pronsius’s attention then pointing at the phone on his desk, meaning *call the emergency at Castlebar General*.

‘He took a serious enough hit. But what it was, was a warning shot. I want it on record I was in fear of my life and my son’s life. I was not aiming at him at all. He broke on to my property. I was in fear of my life and was only trying to warn him off.’

The man was outside, on a mobile, his voice dipping in and out amid the ambient scratch and crumple of the elements.

‘I need your name,’ Noonan said, and when the man did not immediately answer she added, ‘It’s important you answer my questions now, please.’

‘Bertie. Bertie Creedon,’ the man said.

‘Where’s your property located, Mr Creedon?’

‘Rathreedane. I’m on the far side of Rathreedane.’

‘You’re going to have to narrow that down for me.’

‘Take the Bonniconlon road as far as Mills Turn. Do you know Mills Turn?’

‘I do,’ Noonan said, dashing down *Mills Trn* in her notebook. ‘Where am I heading from there?’

‘Take the third road on the left after Mills Turn. Keep along *that* road a mile and a half until you come to a farm with a yellow bungalow and a ’92 Fiat motorhome up on bricks out the front.’

‘Yellow bungalow, ’92 Fiat motorhome, up on bricks,’ Noonan recited as she wrote. ‘OK – I have you, your young fella, and the fella’s been shot – is there anyone else to account for on the property?’

‘That’s it.’

‘And the injury. How many times was the fella shot?’

‘Just the once. By accident. Like I said.’

‘Where on his body did he take the hit, can you tell?’

‘In his – in his middle. His midriff.’

‘What kind a gun was he shot with?’

‘A shotgun.’

‘Double-barrel?’

‘Double-barrel.’

‘And that’s your gun, is it?’

The growl of a throat-clear, almost gratified-sounding, came down the line. ‘It’s legally registered and I’m lucky I have it.’

‘As far as you can determine, is the man bleeding badly? I don’t want you to go prodding at him but it’s important to stop the bleeding if you can.’

‘The son’s after going inside and emptying the press of

every last towel. We have the wounds stanching as best we can.'

'That's good, Mr Creedon. Keep the pressure on the bleeding. We are coming right out. The ambulance is on the way too. What I would ask is that you render your gun safe if you haven't already done so—'

'What happened to this fella is on him,' Creedon interjected with renewed conviction. 'He was on my property, he was in the act of committing a crime and I was in fear for my life and my son's life. I want that clear.'

'O.K. We will be there in fifteen minutes, Mr Creedon. Just heed what I said about the gun. Let's just take the gun out of the equation altogether—' Noonan said, but the quenched noise of the disconnected line was already in her ear.

Noonan dropped the handset on her desk.

'Did you catch all that?' she asked Swift.

'Ambulance is dispatched,' Swift said.

'Let's beat them to the draw,' Noonan said.

Noonan and Swift were on the road when they got Crean on the squad-car radio.

'Shots fired, man down, firearm still in play,' Crean summarised after Noonan had given him a rundown of the situation.

'That's the size of it,' Noonan said.

'I'm wondering if we shouldn't just put a shout in now to the Special Response Unit,' Crean suggested.

'Fella's done the shooting rang us of his own volition. I asked him questions, he answered them. He's not lost his reason.'

'You can't rely on reason with a firearm in play.'

‘Just let us put our feet on the ground out there, get the lay of the land. No cause to escalate yet.’

‘I’m the other side of Ballina and I’ll be out to you as soon as I can. But, Noonan, ye get out there and there’s a hint of *anything* off I need ye to withdraw and hold tight.’

‘I hear you.’

‘Good luck,’ Crean said and signed off.

They were a couple of miles out from Mills Turn when they ranged into the wake of a tractor towing a trailer full of sheep. Noonan got right up the trailer’s arse, siren *wapwapping*, but the stretch of road they were on was not wide enough for the tractor to let them pass.

‘Come on to fuck,’ Noonan said as the trailer weaved from side to side ahead of them. Sheep were packed thick into the trailer’s confines, stamps of red dye smudged on their coats like bloody handprints, their snouts nudging in anxious query between the gaps in the bars. Once the road opened out, Noonan gunned the engine and streaked by the tractor.

As instructed, they took the third left after Mills Turn and found themselves on the Rathreedane road. Rathreedane was nothing but flat acres of farmland, well-spaced houses set off the road at the ends of long lanes, and cows sitting like shelves of rock in the middle of the fields, absorbing the last of the day’s declining rays. Where the ditches dropped low those same rays, crazed with motes and still piercingly bright, blazed across Noonan’s sight-line. She flipped down the visor. She considered the gosling. Swift had gone quieter than usual, his gaze trained out the window and one knee frantically joggling.

‘That is some incarnation of sun,’ Noonan said, talking

just to talk, to draw Swift out of his introversion and back into the here and now. 'Haven't seen a sun like that since Guadalajara. You know where Guadalajara is, Pronsius?'

'Is it the far side of Belmullet?'

Noonan smiled.

'Technically it is. Visited there a few years back. Unreal how beautiful it was. The light just lands different.'

'The world is different everywhere, I suppose.'

'We went there for an anniversary. It was Trevor's idea. Trevor's the traveller,' Noonan continued. Trevor was her husband. 'Enjoying the place you get to is one thing. But Trevor has this thing for the travel itself; the luggage and the security lines, the time zones, the little trays of food with the foil lids you peel back they give you onboard, and these days having to drag a pair of mewling teenage boys everywhere with us. Trevor gets giddy at all of it, somehow. Me, I could live a long happy life never going through a metal detector again. You ever been anywhere exotic, Pronsius?'

'I been the far side of Belmullet.'

'Good man.'

'Ah,' Swift sighed, 'I've no interest, really. Wherever I am, that's where I like.'

'A man after my own heart.'

Presently they found the residence, a low bungalow off a gravel lane, the red galvanised roofs of farm buildings visible at the rear of the property. An enormous, rickety white motorhome was stranded in the grass out front.

'Now we'll see what's what,' Noonan said.

She cut the siren and turned through the concrete posts

of the gateless gate. The squad car bounced and lurched as it passed over the rattling bars of a cattle grid. Next to the motorhome there were pieces of outdoor furniture and what looked like a little fire pit dug out of the ground, empty wine bottles planted in the moat of ash ringing the pit. Scattered elsewhere in the grass were bags of feed, a stripped-down, rusted-out engine block, scraps of tarp, scraps of lumber, metal piping, plastic piping, bits and bits and bits.

‘Look at all this shit,’ Noonan said.

‘Steady on,’ Swift said with a nod.

A man had come around the side of the house. He was holding something to his head and his other arm was raised, palm forward.

Noonan killed the engine and got out of the squad car, keeping her body behind the door. Swift followed her lead on the other side.

‘This the Creedon residence?’ Noonan asked.

‘It is, surely,’ the man said.

He was pressing a stained tea towel of blue and white check to his temple. The stains looked like blood.

‘I’m Sergeant Noonan out of Ballina Garda Station. This is Garda Swift. You Bertie Creedon?’

‘Christ, no.’

‘You’d be the son, then?’

‘That’s more like it.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘I’ve no say in it but every cunt that knows me does call me Bubbles.’ **Copyrighted Material**

Bubbles looked to be in his early thirties. He was stocky, his head shaved close. He was in a faded grey T-shirt with

QUEENS OF THE STONE AGE, ERA VULGARIS printed on it in a disintegrating white script. There were dark wet daubs of blood flecking his forearms like tracks left by a bird.

‘We hear there’s been a spot of bother,’ Noonan said.

‘There has.’

‘That knock to the head part of the bother?’

‘A little bit, all right,’ Bubbles said and lifted the towel away from his temple to let them see. There was an open gash above his eyebrow.

Noonan whistled.

‘I wager that needs stitching. I understand there’s another man in a bad way here too, is that right?’

‘There is, yeah.’

‘That his blood on you?’

‘Some of it, yeah.’

‘Can you take us to him?’

‘I can.’

‘Get the emergency kit,’ Noonan said to Swift. Swift popped the boot, took out a bulky, multi-pocketed bag and handed it over to Noonan.

‘Lead the way,’ she said, sliding the kit’s strap over her shoulder.

Bubbles cleared his throat.

‘This situation here. You have to understand, my father was in fear for our lives.’

‘We’ll be sure to take that into account.’

Bubbles led Noonan and Swift down a short dirt track into the yard at the back of the property. The yard was covered in matted, trampled-down straw. Noonan watched

Bubbles step indifferently into a cowpat the size of a dinner plate, his boot heel leaving an oozing bite-mark in the pat's crust. The air was thick with the heavy, grainy-sweet redolence of fodder and shit. Through a window cut out of the galvanised facade of a shed cows blinked their stark, red-rimmed eyes as if roused from sleep.

'That's where we caught him, brazen as you like,' Bubbles said, gesturing at the large, cylindrical oil tank mounted on a bed of brick next to the cowshed.

'He was thieving oil?' Noonan asked.

'Such a stupid thing to be at,' Bubbles said. 'There's nothing left from the winter gone and it won't be filled again for months. Who's going to have a full tank of oil in the middle of summer?'

They passed a final row of sheds and came out into an open field. Fifty feet ahead of them a short man was standing over a second man lying on his back on the ground. On the horizon Noonan could make out the low, blunted serrations of the Ox Mountains.

'Bertie Creedon?' Noonan called out to the standing man.

'Aye,' Creedon said, not taking his eyes off the man on the ground, his shotgun tucked at an idle diagonal under his arm.

Noonan kept walking toward Creedon at an even clip, not hurrying, taking care not to break stride. When she was a handful of paces from him he finally looked at her. Creedon had watery blue eyes, cheeks latticed with broken blood vessels, a head of windblown, thinning yellow hair, and a set of small, corroded teeth. He did not react as Noonan gripped the barrel of the shotgun, brought her second hand to the butt and transferred the weapon into her embrace as firmly

and gently as if she were taking possession of a newborn. She checked the safety, broke the gun, slipped the ammunition from the chamber and pocketed the cartridges.

‘All right,’ Noonan said.

She handed the gun off to Swift, took a second look at Creedon to make sure he wasn’t considering anything, then addressed her attention to the man lying in the grass. The man was young, lanky enough by the sprawl of him, his dark hair sticking to his pale forehead in strings, and for a moment Noonan did not recognise him, his features crushed into anonymity with distress. It was only when his eyes, screwed shut, burst fearfully open – they were blue, but a deeper, more charged blue than the farmer’s, phosphorescent almost – that his face turned into one Noonan knew.

‘God above in Heaven is that you, Dylan Judge?’

Dylan Judge groaned in assent.

Dylan Judge was from Ballina town. He was what you would call ‘known to the police’. In his early twenties, he had already run up a decent tally of minor convictions. Breaking and entering, drunk and disorderly, possession; Judge was one of those prolific, inveterately small-time crooks who possessed real criminal instincts but no real criminal talent. He was opportunistic, impulsive and undisciplined, requiring little in the way of convincing – and not even much in the way of incentive – to be roped into an underhanded scheme, so long as the scheme did not require much effort or forethought. Noonan knelt down in the grass next to Judge and slid the emergency kitbag from her shoulder. She tore open a pack of nitrile gloves, worked the gloves over her hands.

‘Do you remember me at all, Dylan?’

Judge looked blankly up at her.

‘It’s Noonan, Sergeant Jackie Noonan out of Ballina. And that there is Garda Pronsius Swift.’

‘Pronsiusssss,’ Judge repeated with a sneer.

‘It’s a name that draws attention to itself, all right,’ Noonan said as she began scanning Judge’s wounds. There was a mess of hand towels plastered over his groin and tucked in under his backside. The towels, along with his jeans, were plum dark with blood. From the amount of blood, Noonan could tell he was in a very bad way. She unpacked the gauze, the trauma shears.

‘You remember the last time we met?’ Noonan asked. ‘We were chasing a consignment of cigarettes and wound up at your house.’

‘Ye stormed into the gaff at all hours,’ Judge said with genuine recollection.

‘We thought we had you, Dylan.’

‘And ye were out of luck.’

‘That time, we were.’

It must have been a little over a year ago. They’d received a tip considered credible that Judge was sitting on a significant quantity of cigarettes smuggled down from the North, so they got a warrant and raided his place, in the Glen Gardens estate. Technically not even his place, because there was only the girlfriend’s name on the lease, if Noonan remembered correctly. They raided the house at dawn and made Judge, his girlfriend and their little daughter stand outside in their pyjamas in the chill grey light while the Guards turned the place upside down. Noonan remembered the girlfriend; five foot nothing,

stick thin and incensed, unceasingly effing and blinding while a saucer-eyed and gravely silent little girl, no more than three or four years old, sat up in her arms watching the Guards troop in and out of the house. Not a peep out of this fella that Noonan could remember, Judge just skulking meekly behind his raging *beoir*, eyes on the ground. And though his entire demeanour had read guilty as sin, the raid somehow turned out to be a waste of time. All they found was a half dozen cartons of cigarettes under a tarp in the back of the property's suspiciously empty shed, nowhere near enough to hang an intent-to-sell charge on.

'Are you still with that young one, Dylan? That one with the mouth on her?' Noonan asked. She wanted to keep him awake and talking.

'Amy, yeah. Same bird.'

'Such language out of her, this slip of a thing stood there in her fluffy slippers calling us every name under the sun, and the little beaut good as gold up in her arms. What age is your girl?'

'That's Amy's kid.'

Gingerly, Noonan removed the towels covering Judge's groin. Judge gasped.

'That's OK, that's OK,' Noonan said. 'It doesn't matter a whit whether she's yours or not, so long as you treat her well.'

'I treat her like a queen,' he slurred.

'I bet you do. Bear with me now, Dylan,' Noonan said. She slipped off Judge's runner, lifted the cuff of his trouser leg and with the trauma shears drew a clean slit from his ankle up to his hip and peeled back the panel of the jeans. She could make out several raw black punctures where the