

TRESPASSES



'A compulsively
readable love story'

EMMA DONOGHUE

'True and honest,
heartbreaking
and tender'

RONAN BENNETT

LOUISE
KENNEDY

BLOOMSBURY

TRESPASSES

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The End of the World is a Cul de Sac

for Stephen, Tom and Anna

TRESPASSES

Louise Kennedy

B L O O M S B U R Y C I R C U S
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CONTENTS

2015

THE IRISH FOR NO

1

2

3

4

5

6

DÚIL

7

8

9

10

11

12

CHIAROSCURO

13

14

15

16

17

18

IN CALVARY'S FLOW

19
20
21
22
23
24

WHEN I MOVE TO THE SKY

25
26
27
28
29
30

2015

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

There is a melancholy blast of diesel, a puff of smoke which might be
black or white.

So the harbour slips away to perilous seas as things remain unsolved; we
listen

To the *ex cathedra* of the fog-horn, and *drink and leave the world unseen* –
Ciaran Carson, 'The Irish for No'

Ah! That first affair, how well one remembers it!

Stanley Kubrick, *Barry Lyndon*

2015

They follow the guide, a thin, pale girl. She's wearing a linen sheath dress in moss green, and there's a fine spiky tattoo wound around her right arm that looks like barbed wire. Cushla moves to the edge of the crowd, away from the French and Italian tourists in expensive raingear; her own age – which still surprises her. Away from the man on her left, pushing fifty, with steel-grey hair that's greased back, small glasses and a soft wool jacket.

The guide stands slightly to the side of the next exhibit, a couple of feet from Cushla. This close, she can see the barbed pattern on the girl's skin. It's gorse, spiky tendrils of stems and golden flowers. Cushla likes her for it, for choosing the shrub that chokes the hills here, not roses or butterflies or stars.

It's a piece of sculpture, made of resin, fabric, glass fibre. A white figure on a plinth, chalky, sarcophagal, a shrouded look about the face, features indistinct. The body is oddly sexless, though it is male; there is breadth in the torso, bulk at the chest. From the waist up he looks peaceful, sleeping head resting near the bend of an arm. There is something not right about the pose, though; his limbs are splayed awkwardly, have not been arranged.

The girl begins to speak. This work is from the seventies, she says. The artist was moved to make it when her friend was murdered. While the almost classical composition is a familiar representation of death, the disordered configuration is shocking, hinting at the violence of the moment of the subject's murder and the chaos of the hours that followed. She gives us her friend as Everyman, yet his rather untidy bearing makes him human.

The others move towards the next piece, a structure like a Tardis fashioned out of six doors taken from Armagh Prison. Cushla hangs back and steps towards the sculpture. The girl with the gorse tattoo was wrong. The artist hasn't shown Everyman. The detail is intimate, accurate even,

almost as if the cast had been moulded over his body. The neat ball of fat at his middle. The slight raise of his right shoulder. A doughiness about the jaw. She looks at his face, afraid she will see fear or pain, but he looks just as he did when he was sleeping.

Someone touches her arm. It's the man with the small glasses.

Miss Lavery, he says. Do you remember me?

THE IRISH FOR NO

Cushla wrapped her handbag in her coat and pushed it into the gap between the beer fridge and the till. Her brother Eamonn was bent over the counter with a stock list. He looked up at her and his eyes narrowed. He inclined his head at the mirror that ran the length of the bar. Cushla leaned in to check her reflection. Father Slattery had marked her with a thick cross an inch wide and two inches long. The rub of her finger raised the piney, resinous scent of whatever blessed unguent the ashes were mixed with and blurred the cruciate shape to a sooty smudge.

Eamonn slapped a wet serviette into her hand. Hurry up, he hissed.

Most of the men who drank in the pub did not get ashes on Ash Wednesday or do the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday or go to Mass on Sunday. It was one thing to drink in a Catholic-owned bar; quite another to have your pint pulled by a woman smeared in papish warpaint. Cushla buffed until the skin on her forehead was pink, the serviette blackened, flittered. She tossed it in the bin.

Eamonn muttered something under his breath. The only word she could make out was *eejit*.

The regulars were lined along the counter. Jimmy O’Kane, the single egg he bought for his tea bulging in his breast pocket. Minty, the school caretaker, who got through so much Carlsberg Special Brew the pub won an award for having the highest sales in Northern Ireland, even though he was the only customer who drank the stuff. Fidel, in his khaki cap and tinted glasses. By day he measured mint imperials and clove rock in his mother’s sweet shop; by night he was brigadier of the local branch of the Ulster Defence Association. A fitter from the shipyard called Leslie who didn’t speak until he was drunk and one night told Cushla he’d love to bath her. Another man. Middle-aged, with a whiskey in front of him. Dark-eyed, faintly jowly. He was wearing a black suit and a stiff white shirt from which the collar had been detached, clothes that were conspicuous among the overalls and drip-dry fabric. His hair was flat to the ears then

wavy at the nape of his neck, as if it had been sweating under a hat. Or a wig.

Cushla climbed on to a stool to turn up the volume on the television. When she climbed down, the man with the whiskey was flicking at the filter of his cigarette with his thumb, as if he had just looked away.

The news started the way it always did, with a montage of short scenes. A riot. A boy of six or seven climbing up the side of a Saracen personnel carrier to poke a stone into one of the slits from which the soldiers pointed their guns. A march on Stormont, thousands moving up the long avenue to the parliament building. They had added a new one. A single parked car on an empty street. It looked like a photograph until the car bulged and exploded into a great ball of smoke and fire and its doors somersaulted away from it, glass from the surrounding buildings falling like hail on to the tarmac. The segment finished where it always did, on an image of Mary Peters holding up her Olympic medal.

She won that three years ago, Eamonn said.

It's the last thing that happened here we can be proud of, said the man. His voice was deep, almost rough, despite his refined accent.

Right enough, Michael, said Eamonn.

How did Eamonn know his name?

Fidel inclined his head at the newsreader. Barry's had the beard trimmed, he said, looping his own brush around his thumb and teasing it into a long, tapered point.

The news. A country road; a police Land Rover parked sideways across its white lines, a pair of legs draped in cloth protruding from a bald whitethorn hedge. Men in balaclavas behind a Formica table, woolly faces pressed to a row of microphones, lit sporadically by camera flashes. A pub with no windows, damp smoke wheezing from a crater in the roof.

The last item on the news was a human interest story. Everyone liked this part because it was usually something non-partisan they could comment on. A reporter had been sent into the city centre to ask people what they thought of streaking. It's ridiculous, said a woman in a knitted hat, sure it's far too cold. There were sniggers around the bar. A tiny man slick with Brylcreem said he'd do it if somebody paid him enough. The next man barked 'it's obscene' and walked off. Then they stopped a girl with long dark hair and big eyes. She was wearing an Afghan coat, the collar fluffed up around her face. I think it's fantastic, she said, something different. She seemed stoned.

She has the look of you about her, Cushla, said Minty. Would you be up for a bit of streaking yourself?

Leave my sister alone, you pervert, said Eamonn, smirking. Normally she would have had a reply that would shut them all up, but she was aware of the man with the neat whiskey and tidy nails.

Eamonn told Cushla to do a sweep for empties. She went on to the floor. Three men with crew cuts were at a corner table cluttered with soapy-looking tankards. As she reached for the last, one of them placed it on the carpet. You forgot one, he said, his Adam's apple bobbing in his neck. She bent to pick it up and he laid his hands on her hips, just above her arse. She eased herself free of him and went back to the bar to the sound of their laughter.

Did you see what that soldier did? Cushla asked Eamonn as she dumped their glasses in the sink.

No. He said it without looking at her and she knew he had.

He frigging groped me.

What do you want me to do about it? he said, only it wasn't a question. He couldn't do anything.

They lived in a garrison town, although it had not felt like one until 1969, when the troops were sent in; not that the soldiers ever patrolled the streets there. The Laverys met them across the bar, when they were out of uniform. The first few regiments were all right. Then the Paras arrived. They liked to leave reminders. Cigarettes ground out on the carpet, tiles they had peeled from the wall lying broken on the floor of the gents. The day after Bloody Sunday, a group of them came into the bar. Even Fidel and the boys were uneasy in their company and soon there was just Gina and Cushla and the soldiers; her father was too sick to work. Gina sat on the stool, pushing her glass under the optics, watching them. She managed to ignore them until one took a bite from his beer glass, the others egging him on, and spat splinters and blood into the ashtray. Cushla had watched as if it was a horror film as her mother strode across the floor. What English jail vomited you lot up? Gina said, before phoning the barracks; she had rung to complain so often she knew the commanding officer by name. She told him in her telephone voice to remove his men, that they weren't welcome any more. The military police took them away, but the sight of squaddies in the pub still made Cushla uneasy. Gina had shown her hand.

When she could bear to raise her head the man gave her a smile. His eyes were kind. He had heard everything and she was ashamed, more for Eamonn than herself, and set about tidying the shelves of bottled beer.

Nice view, an English voice said. She glanced in the mirror. The groper was standing at the counter, a banknote in his hand. Behind her, the beer

tap gasped, as Eamonn pulled pints for him.

She's pretending she can't hear me, the groper said.

Perhaps because you are humiliating her, said Michael. Cushla felt herself turn. He had swivelled on his stool and was facing the soldier, the whiskey resting on his left palm.

Come on, mate. I'm having a laugh, the soldier said, so shrilly he sounded like a whining child.

Humour is most effective when it's mutual, Michael said.

The groper leaned forward, paused, then drew his neck back in, as if he'd thought better of it. He picked up the three glasses awkwardly and went back to the table, beer dribbling across the floor. Eamonn was staring implacably at the television, but she knew by the set of his chin he felt emasculated. Fidel and the others too looked as if nothing had happened. Who was this man?

She busied herself, wiping, tidying, trying not to look at him. The door banged. The soldiers' table was empty, a couple of inches of lager left in the bottom of each glass.

The regulars began to slope home. You should get out of here for an hour, Cushla told Eamonn. See the kids before they go to bed.

I don't want to leave you on your own.

I'll be fine now.

OK then. Give me a ring if you've a problem, he said, and then he was gone.

Michael lit a cigarette and blew the smoke down his nose. Throw another in there please, he said, sliding his glass at her.

She glanced in the mirror as she was pouring his drink. He was watching her. She was emboldened by having her back to him and didn't look away.

She put the whiskey on the counter. Cushla, isn't it? I'm Michael. Would you like one yourself? he said, closing his fingers around the tumbler. The room looked better with him in it. Behind him, the shabby lanterns that were fixed to the walls were casting circles of warm light on the teak tables, and there was a squalid opulence about the jade-green tweed that upholstered the banquettes and stools.

I'm teaching in the morning. Thanks, but, she said.

Where do you teach? he said. It was one of those questions that people asked when they wanted to know what foot you kicked with. What's your name? What's your surname? Where did you go to school? Where do you live?

I teach P3s in St Dallan's.

So the children are seven or eight? That's a nice age.

It is, she said. I had P1s for the first two years. Spent most of my time bringing them in and out to the toilet.

You brought the children to get ashes this morning, he said.

He must have seen her removing them. Eamonn's irritation with her. Yeah, she said.

I lived in Dublin in my youth, he told her. It's wall-to-wall Catholics down there, you know. It was said lightly, but he was looking at her so keenly it was a relief when he took his eyes from hers and drank.

I got ashes this morning myself, said Jimmy O'Kane in a loud whisper.

You made a better job of getting rid of them than I did, said Cushla.

A wee taste of Lifebuoy on a dishcloth, said the old man.

Cushla glanced at Michael. His eyes were creased in amusement.

She made a cup of tea and pulled the stool around to face the television. A drama had come on. Helen Mirren was lying on a settee stroking a white cat, while her husband was confronting Malcolm McDowell about sleeping with her. Cushla didn't know why she would go next or near McDowell, who was skinny and cruel-looking and wearing a prissy blue jumper, when she was married to Alan Bates, who was thickset and brooding. Helen Mirren got up and walked around the room. She was wearing a white shirtwaister. She looked classy. Cushla had on a pink cheesecloth shirt and jeans with a patch that said 'Push My Panic Button' sewn on one of the back pockets.

Jimmy finished his pint, bottom lip working at the rim to catch every drop, and, patting his breast pocket gently, shuffled out the door.

Michael ordered another drink. He told her the drama was *Play of the Year* in 1960. He thought Mirren was put to poor use and that McDowell had been pigeonholed by doing *A Clockwork Orange*. Cushla told him she couldn't finish the book, never mind watch the film. Oh but the film was beautiful, he said, even its violence is exquisite. He said he knew the man from Armagh who played the cripple. He wrote a bit himself. A couple of documentaries, short plays. Barristers are frustrated actors, he said. He talked as though he was used to being listened to.

When Eamonn came back he pinched Cushla's cheeks as if she was a toddler. Thanks for babysitting, he said to Michael.

I'm twenty-four, Cushla said. Eamonn regarded her with his usual blend of disdain and indulgence; Michael with an expression she couldn't read.

He left when she did, holding the door to let her walk out ahead of him. Her arm brushed his as she passed. He felt solid, substantial.

The pub was down a slip road at the end of the main street, overlooked

from behind by the clock tower that stood in the grounds of the ruined priory and, from the front, a low-rise block of council flats. She crossed the dim car park to where she'd left her little red Renault, near the underpass that ran beneath the new dual carriageway to the lough shore. There were voices bouncing in the concrete tunnel, cigarettes sparking in the dark. An acrid smell from the water, the hum that came before the tide rose, oily and muddy.

Goodnight, Cushla, called Michael. He was beside a big brown car near the entrance to the pub.

Cheerio, she said. When she turned on her headlights he was still standing there, a heaviness about his shoulders that made him look older than when he was sitting at the counter.

The police had made a Control Zone of High Street and it was desolate. As she approached the bank, three men spilled on to the pavement from another bar. The soldiers from earlier. The groper stumbled in front of her car and Cushla had to press the brake to the floor to avoid hitting him. He clapped his hands on her bonnet and peered through the windscreen. When he saw it was her, he flicked his tongue out and wiggled it, an obscene gesture made ludicrous by the youth of him. Headlights lit up her car from behind and she checked her rear-view mirror. It was Michael. He raised a couple of fingers at her and waited, engine idling, until the boy's friends pulled him away. Cushla set off slowly, leaving them laughing on the kerbside. Michael trailed her home and, flashing his lamps once, continued out the road towards the hills.

The bay window on the ground floor of the Laverys' house was indecently bright among the dark facades of the other houses. Inside, Cushla drew the gold velvet curtains in the front room. The embers had sunk low in the grate, a fur of white ash that collapsed to dust when she emptied the tall brass ashtray that was standing by her mother's armchair.

She put the fireguard in place, switched off the lights and climbed the stairs.

Is that you? said her mother.

Who else would it be? said Cushla, pushing open her door. Gina Lavery was reclined against three pillows, a pair of knickers over her rollers. The radio was on low. She always left it on all night, said it was company. Some mornings she told Cushla things she had dreamt, about George Best and round-the-world yacht races and the US space programme, only to find out they were true when the newspaper was delivered. All that subliminal information she was taking in.

You left the curtains open again, said Cushla.

Who'd waste a bullet on me? said Gina. She was trying to sound imperious, but there was a cloy in her voice from the sleeping tablet. Were youse busy?

The usual. And three soldiers as well.

Scum.

I let Eamonn go home for a wee while.

I don't like you standing behind that bar by yourself.

It was OK. A man called Michael kept me company. About forty-five. Dark. Awfully-awfully. Said he's a barrister.

Michael Agnew. And he's fifty-odd, said Gina.

He looks younger, said Cushla.

Is he still gorgeous? said Gina. He was a ladykiller in his day. God, I haven't seen him for donkey's years. He got on great with your daddy.

Eamonn was thirty-two, and had worked in the bar since he was fifteen. He must have remembered Michael from then. Where does he live? Cushla asked.

In a big house out the hill road. Has a flat in town as well. The wife wouldn't be great, said Gina. Then she did that thing that all the women in her family did when they felt sorry for someone: crumpled one cheek and mouthed the word 'help' out of the side of her face. It was short for 'God help her'.

What's wrong with his wife?

Gina tilted her hand to her mouth as if she was throwing a drink into it. She's from Dublin, she said, as if that explained it.

Oh? Is she a Catholic?

No, she's from some posh Protestant family.

Do they have kids?

A son. He must be seventeen or eighteen now.

Cushla leaned over her mother and kissed her cheek, taking in her sad scents. Je Reviens and cigarettes. Setting lotion and gin. Michael Agnew's wife was not the only woman who was fond of the drink.

In her room, Cushla laid out clothes to wear to work in the morning. A-line plaid skirt, navy lambswool jumper, grey blouse. Like a school uniform. She had never given much thought to how she looked behind the bar, throwing on clothes she didn't mind spattering with bleach, tying her hair up to keep it from her eyes. Not until now.

2

Her mother's cough woke her, a treacly hack that made Cushla feel sick. She got out of bed and opened the curtains an inch. Morning was struggling through a seam of low, grey cloud. A figure came out of the house across the road and dropped to the ground as if he was about to do press-ups. It was Alistair Patterson, a prison officer who claimed to be a civil servant, checking under his car for a bomb. His wife was watching from the doorstep in a turquoise nightgown, holding their dog.

The storage heater under the window hadn't taken the chill from the room and Cushla dressed quickly. Her breath fogged the bathroom mirror as she washed and applied a cursory amount of make-up. Downstairs, she put the kettle on and slotted a slice of bread in the toaster. She went to the back door and opened it, fanning it back and forward to expel the stale smoke and cooking smells. Rain began to fall, slow, heavy drops that clattered on the lid of the bin. Soon it was coming so fast it splashed on the black and white tiles. She closed the door again and made breakfast for her mother, carrying it upstairs on a tray.

Gina was as Cushla had left her the night before, with the addition of a lit cigarette. The knickers had slid down her forehead.

Some day I'll come home and find you burned to a crisp, said Cushla, confiscating the cigarette and stabbing it into the cut-glass ashtray on the bedside locker.

Gina lugged herself upright and took the tray from Cushla. She picked up a piece of toast and bit the centre, her mouth contorting in disgust as she chewed. It could do with more butter, she said.

Butter's bad for you, said Cushla.

It's so dry I'm more likely to choke to death than have a stroke, she said, tossing the slice back on to the plate. And you needn't think of giving me margarine. She pronounced it with a hard 'g', as if she had been about to say Margaret but changed her mind at the last minute. Gina would not have baked beans or corned beef or beetroot in the house. She had an

aversion to relishes because she had worked in a piccalilli factory during the war and had to wear gloves to dances so the GIs couldn't see the yellow staining on her fingers. Cushla's father had tolerated her snobberies. Gina grew up hungry, he said, so it makes her feel good to be picky.

Cushla went downstairs, grabbing her basket from the hall table, and set off for school. The Laverys lived in a row of red-brick Edwardian houses. Opposite were homes from the same period clad in white stucco. The dwellings got smaller and more modest as the road neared town, and the final stretch was lined by plain terraces that had been built in the fifties. In summer, Union Jacks flapped from their windows and without them the houses looked boxy and spartan. A small figure was rounding the corner towards the narrow street that led to the school. It was Davy McGeown, a child in her class. He had no coat on. She tried to avoid the puddle that formed outside the chippy on rainy days, but another car was coming towards her. The water made a whooshing sound as Cushla's tyres displaced it. She glanced back to see Davy, arms out, looking along the drenched length of himself.

She drove through the gates at the rear of the school, parking quickly. Inside, she walked against the arriving children along the corridor that led to the main entrance. Davy came dripping through the doors, his skin ruddy with cold.

I soaked you, she said.

He shook his head like a puppy, showering her with drops of rain. I'm all right, he said, through chattering teeth. She brought him to the staff toilet and went at his face and hair with a series of paper towels. He winced at their roughness.

The bell rang. That'll have to do, she said.

Mr Bradley, the headmaster, was in the corridor when they came out. He loomed over Davy and said, Where's your coat?

I forgot, sir.

Right, he said, as if he was trying to think of an appropriate punishment. Davy's name sometimes came up at staff meetings. His father was a roofer who rarely seemed to have work, his mother a Protestant and, though the children were being brought up Catholic, she had not turned. For Bradley, they might as well have been members of the Manson Family.

It was just a mistake, said Cushla, placing her hands on Davy's shoulders and steering him away.

Some of the other teachers expected the children to stand when they entered, but Cushla liked to slip in and hear the chatter. Davy went to his