

Unless He Is Born Again

by David Butler

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Hoisted onto the wall he hesitates. Night has turned the river to marble. Will the plunge even break the puckered surface? *Mustn't. Mustn't think.* Eyes shut, hands fast in pockets, he levers himself into free-fall. Then...

...tumbled head over heels by the current the body struggles. Arms thrust sideways into the opaque turmoil. Legs pedal out and down, to where instinct cries is down. Eyeball can no more penetrate the murk than eardrum the muted, turbulent din. *Mustn't. Mustn't.* Momentarily, he quells the body's mutiny. He holds still. He feels his limbs drift through the freezing and violent waters. Coldness grips vicelike, and vicelike tightens. It clutches until mouth screams to discharge its burden of air. *Mustn't.* When knee and elbow buffet along the bottom silt, he allows the mouth to open. He holds the meniscus as long as lung can bear it. Then he screams a great bubble into the icy murk. He is imagining the plate he saw in Mahood's book: a soul escaping its corpse.

But the instant the first glut of clayey water hits his lungs, great spasms seize his body. Now the struggle is with terror. In blind terror, hands tug at the coat that is drowning them. In terror, legs kick out. In terror head rolls and butts until for one brief instant his face breaks the surface and mouth can bite off a dark gobbet of air. Throat gags, splutters, but gullet holds down the wet air against its coughing. The river, a vast beast, drags him under once again. Now his struggle is with the river. Suddenly united, body and soul find their orientation in the submarine dark: which way is up; which down. The gobbet of oxygen is too fast exhausted, but as he plunges it a third time into his rebellious lungs his hands cease tugging at the coat. His fingers grow instantly subtle. They tunnel down into the pockets, to where the flatirons are weighing downwards. These irons they delve out and, releasing them, he kicks out at the soft mud already buffeting beneath his legs.

Slowly, painfully, he rises through the waters.

This is not the first time his body has betrayed him. Not by a long shot.

April. A figure is loitering in the vicinity of the bus station of a provincial town. He's not the only stranger in the bus yard. There are

strangers with almost every arrival and departure. There's nothing about this man to suggest he's a foreigner. But all the same, something in his aspect attracts suspicious looks. Perhaps it's the slightly dishevelled coat, missing the third button. Perhaps the eyes, raw with insomnia. Perhaps the disreputable bag in which he totes...what? Clothes? A few books? The residue of a life.

Opposite the bus yard is a sign: *JJ Mullin, Building Contractor*. He will call himself JJ.

There's a suggestion of rain. But although the yard is open to the elements, JJ is in no hurry to move on. An hour passes. The woman with the horn-rimmed spectacles behind the sweets and newspaper counter has been aware of this man for the longest time. She singles him out with a nod to anyone who dawdles about her stand. Who is he? Why doesn't he move on? He doesn't look like he's waiting for anyone, much less a connecting bus. What can he want here?

Him. That man.

JJ is aware of her, and of her less than kind attentions. He does nothing either to attract them or to assuage them. But he's in no hurry to move on. It's JJ's fourth provincial town in as many years.

‘Go on Father. Ask him what he wants.’

Mahood smiles to himself. *Father*. Sure he’s never been a priest! But the rumour has persisted in the town since first he retired here. There are those like Bridget Dowling who cling to it like a superstition.

He follows her scowl towards the man on the bench. Mahood has nothing to fear from a down-and-out! In his middle years, he worked the toughest doss houses of inner city Dublin, did she not know that? Drunks! Hopeless cases! By God, he can remember the smell as if it was yesterday. Poverty has a smell, Bridget. The scleroses. The musty clothes. The ruined bladders.

He’ll be living here seven years this September, and still they call him Father. He that was far from being a priest! But Mahood knows, too, that the Lord protects his own. And if he thought about it deeply enough, it’s the Lord’s work he’s about. ‘All right,’ he smiles, grimly. ‘All right, Bridget. Leave it to me.’

The woman in the horn-rimmed spectacles returns his smile to his face. But it puckers up like a prune the minute he’s turned his back to her. What if the scene was to turn ugly? What if that other ... *so-and-so* was to turn nasty? And to a priest! Would she have done better not to say it

to him? Would she have done better to wait until one of the bus drivers was knocking around the place? Because you never can tell...

JJ watches the old, desiccated man in the black coat approach him. He is tall. He is gaunt. His eyes are pale and severe. JJ moves his centre of gravity forwards on the bench. His hand moves to the bag.

Because you never can tell...

JJ has met charitable men before. Women, too, though he's always found women wary of him. As though they got a scent off him that put them ill at ease. Or else the opposite, and then of course they're too nosy. There's nothing in between, with women. But he's never met a man like Mahood before. Within two days Mahood has arranged digs for him with a Mrs Flynn, and what's more, covered the cost of it. Within a week, a position behind the till in a charity shop. Normally there would be no question of a salary. But on top of the board and lodging, Mahood allows him forty euro a week. Forty euro, until such time as he has sorted out his dole money.

Mahood had winked when he heard the accent. 'You're a Dub then?' But beyond that he has asked him nothing, not even his full name. Or

his real name. Has he realised how impossible it will be for JJ to sign on the dole? Maybe. A nuance in his pale eyes suggested it.

No, he's never met a character like Mahood before. Who knows? He might even get to trust the man.

It's Mahood who makes the first move.

One day, apropos of nothing, while they're alone and sorting through a late delivery of clothes and books and odds and ends, the old man begins to talk freely.

'I suppose you've heard them call me Father?'

JJ shrugs.

'Father!' he laughs. 'Of course I was never married, that must be what's behind it!'

JJ merely grunts, busy with the task to hand. He is moving a number of flatirons into the storeroom. What are they used for?

'When I was young,' Mahood goes on when JJ returns, his pale eyes candid, 'd'you know, I took a most violent dislike to the clergy. And in all these years I've never warmed to them. I was a CBS boy.'

He stops until the other looks at him, then shakes his head. It's as much as to say, and we both know what that means!

‘One of their famous Industrial Schools. A place whose name to be honest with you I don’t care to remember. I was convinced it was a purgatory on earth, and every Christian Brother, a devil sent to torment us. Ach, I’m sure it was probably no worse than anywhere else. By all accounts, there was all sorts of violence and carry-on in those days.’

He pauses. He’s leafing through one of the hardbacks he has pulled from a sack, a book of religious iconography. One image shows the soul escaping, like a speech bubble, the mouth of a dying man. He turns it towards JJ and ...does he wink? Or is it a trick of the light? Either way, he tosses the volume nonchalantly onto the growing heap of books.

‘But there was one character there who particularly got my goat. A Br Coyle. Carrots, we used to call him, on account of the hair, though to tell you nothing but the God’s truth, it was already more grey than orange in my day. And I’ve yet to see a grey carrot! Now this Br Coyle was what you’d call one walking bastard. For years I’ve thought about this, and there’s no other word for his carry-on. I don’t say he was...*that way*. But the man was a born sadist, and one walking bastard!’

JJ scarcely looks at the other. But there’s something in his movements that indicates the intensity with which he’s listening.

‘Now, the mistake this Br Coyle made is, one fine day, and this when I was a lad of no more than fourteen mind, he took the leather strap to me for something that I never done. A fellow called Roche, a right little Cabra gurrier, had tried to set fire to a pile of wood shavings behind the lathe and Carrots, on account of I’d been caught smoking the previous week and on account of he had it in for me anyways, took it into his head to give me an unmerciful beating. And this before the entire woodwork class. I was an inch or two taller than him, but with what they fed you on, I was like a pull-through for a rifle. And besides, everyone was so scared stiff of Carrots that there’d never once been a case of anyone standing up to him, least ways not in all the years I was there.’

There is a pause. JJ realises he has stopped moving. At once he throws himself into the task in hand with renewed vigour. There are only a couple of irons remaining to be moved.

‘So that was all very well. It wasn’t me, Brother, says I. Sure I might as well have been talking to that pile of books there! He pulls at one of my hands, and draws back the leather over the shoulder with his beady eyes glittering like the cat that’s caught hold of a mouse. Oh by Christ something broke in me at that moment. I couldn’t tell you what it was,

JJ, but something snapped. First I stopped his hand with the leather and then, when I saw his face grow white with the anger, before ever he had a chance to bawl into my face, a hand of mine had found an old chisel that was lying on the worktop beside us, and I drove it with all the force I could muster right there into his thigh. Right there, do you see?’

Now JJ looks at him. It’s not what he was expecting to hear. Not from this priestly man.

‘Now to cut a long story short, the next thing of course, it got infected! Blood poisoning, if you don’t mind! It still wasn’t right by the time yours truly was standing before the magistrate for sentencing. So the long and the short of it is, I spent the balance of my teenage years up above inside Patrick’s on the North Circular Road.’

There’s a silence. Is he waiting for JJ to ask him something? But how can JJ think anything beyond an infected wound, there on the thigh?

‘To tell you nothing but the God’s own truth, it was the makings of me. I came out of juvie with two things. A lifelong hatred of the clergy, and a mission in life to prove to them bastards that I was worth every bit as much as they were.’

JJ looks at him, this desiccated figure in greys and blacks. For the first time, he allows himself to smile. ‘And they call *you* Father!’

‘And they call *me* Father.’

But the eyes are too candid. JJ looks away. ‘And so?’

‘At nineteen I was out on the street, and more on my own than I’d ever been. If you think it was hard in those times getting a start when you’ve no relations, try it when you’ve a criminal record! So I signed up, I joined the army. I mean of course the British Army, sure ours is only boy scouts. It was the only place that would have me! I’d no more interest in guns nor fighting than that broom over there. But I’ll say this for them, it was the nearest thing to a family I ever had. It was a place you belonged, d’you know what I’m saying to you? And it was the same British Army that give me the chance to do what I done up in the tenements of Dublin, once I’d served out my years with them. The early pension, you see.’

JJ looks at him for a long time without speaking. Their work is finished. They make sure all the electrics are off, then move to the door. It is JJ who’s been entrusted by this stranger with the keys. As they make to go their separate ways, JJ declares ‘I was a maths teacher, would you believe that now?’ Then he snorts, and walks into the night.

This is how they go on.

Mahood never asks more than JJ is willing to impart. He never asks why he left the teaching. He never asks what caused the two scars, scored by a Stanley knife, to the left side of his throat. He never asks why a smell like sweetened grass often disguises the whiskey on his breath. Still, by degrees, he finds out that JJ was married. That he is separated. That there's a child, unlikely to be his. He hasn't seen her since she was a toddler.

What he doesn't find out, though it might be guessed, is that it's in the mess of a disintegrating marriage that things began to go radically wrong for JJ. He doesn't find out how her first infidelity led, indirectly, inexorably, to the night when the façade of his world finally caved in. He doesn't find out about the disgrace.

One would have to go back five years for that. One would have to go back to a windscreen drenched with blue, flickering lights. One would have to go back to the gloved hand tapping on the window, and the alcohol heavy on his breath. The maths teacher's breath. One would have to go back to the schoolgirl drunk in the passenger seat beside him, sixteen years of age. And then to a man, sitting alone on Dun Laoghaire pier in the drowning rain. He no longer has a driver's licence. He no longer has a job. He no longer has a marriage.

JJ has been in the town for five months before he all but succumbs. It is not the first attack. Not the first temptation. But by now, he's begun to feel secure enough in his routines here that loneliness has stirred and begun to gnaw.

There's nothing so voracious as loneliness. Nothing so tyrannical. More than once, it has driven him to the edge of madness.

His pace slows as he nears the cries in the park. It's a pleasant area, raised some yards above a bend in the river. The convent girls cross over the footbridge, here. At three, the mothers chat on benches and release their children into the play area. Their screams of delight and alarm fill the air like the screams of the swallows scything the river. He is at the other side of the wall. He is filled with giddiness. He is filled with self-loathing.

He looks about him, a drowning man. How can anyone understand what's driving the pounding of his heart? Or understand what flightiness is coursing frantically through his veins? How, if they haven't teetered on the brink? It's a form of vertigo. It's the giddy urge to feel oneself trip over the edge. He senses the intoxicating moment of weakness, just a half second before the downward plunge. All restraint,

so painstakingly built up, all willpower, all self-respect is just on the point of collapse. Then it will happen. JJ knows he will realise, with a gorgeous panic, that the moment is already passed when all could have been saved.

But not today!

He is running. His head tilts forwards and he races along the street as if the cries of the children are demons pursuing him. He runs until he has made the door of Mrs Flynn's and only then, though before opening it, only then does he dare to look behind him. The street is empty.

Once he is safe in his room he pulls his case from beneath the bed and starts to throw his possessions from the wardrobe into a frantic pile beside it. But it's no good. He needs to expend energy. He's desperate to punish his body. He longs for the nerve to hurl himself headfirst against the walls. Instead, he sits on the edge of the bed and stares at the pile of clothes and books, unseeing, hearing nothing but the hammering of his heart.

Loneliness can drive a man to despair. It sits on brood over his emptiness, and who knows what might hatch. Loneliness can drive a man to extremes: to self-abuse; to suicide; or violence; or even, most awful of all, to degradation.

But today, it will drive him in a different direction.

‘You see these?’ he says, his fingers touching the twin scars at the base of his neck. ‘That was the first time. Ha ha! Sure I’d no idea what I was doing man. On that occasion, it was a failure of the will, pure and simple. I poked, and I prodded, and I shut my eyes. But the hand just wouldn’t pull the damn thing beyond where you can see. It wasn’t even the pain of it! It was, how can I explain it to you?’

Mahood’s eyes are by far the most youthful of his features. They mock the wrinkles that surround them. ‘I think you put it very well. A failure of the will. Sure I saw it any number of times in the army.’

‘All I know is, when I knew I couldn’t go through with it, I hurled the knife into the sea as if it had just bit me. Tell me honestly, would you not call that cowardice?’

Mahood considers this. The strange individual standing before him has given him no earthly reason for his flirtations with suicide, nothing beyond the bald refrain: ‘I’m a fucking monster!’ He calls to mind the face of a Derry recruit, McCrery?, McKinley?, who blew his brains out in Malaysia when homesickness and bullying got too much for him. ‘I

wouldn't call it cowardice. Have you considered JJ, maybe the cowardly thing would have been to have gone through with it?'

JJ looks away. This sounds to his ears a platitude, pure and simple. A plaster, to cover up the septic wound. A minute goes by, two. But he doesn't want to let this chance escape.

'The second time, I tried it with pills. I knew well I'd never have the nerve to do myself harm directly. I mean slashing the wrists, or throwing the body from a roof. But this time it was my stomach let me down. Call it a failure of the guts, ha ha! I woke up in a pool of vomit, and a headache that lasted for three days. For three days man!' He looks up at the other and screws his eyes. 'Do you know what it is? I think, no matter what the mind might decide, I think the body clings to life like it was a wild animal.' This thought is met with silence. 'Three days I had that headache.'

'And when was that?'

'When? Oh, a year ago now. Fifteen months.'

'And you've been ok since then?'

He lies awake, staring at the ceiling. His eyes are filling once more with the grit of insomnia. He's like a gambler who has played his last card,

the card he had held back all this time for fear of playing it. Of course, it was no sooner played than lost. ‘And you’ve been ok since then!’ If he’d been able to ask that, Mahood hadn’t understood a single word! I can’t go on like this, he mutters for the thousandth time. It’s a statement that, over the months, over the years, has lost every contour of meaning.

But at what stage was the game lost? At what stage did the progression, the descent, become inevitable? Where was the lost trick that cost the game? Other people seem to get on with life. But he’s replayed the sequence so often in his head that it’s a track worn smooth. There are no longer any features for his imagination to grip onto, no alternatives to be played out. In the early days, he would imagine all sorts of scenarios. They crowded his head; every ‘what-if’ a nail driven into the past so vividly, so mercilessly, that in the end they paralysed him. But now, (now!), he can scarcely tell anymore what had actually been said, and what done. If he tries to conjure the past, it’s only because the future frightens him. It is barren, bereft of possibilities.

He shuts his eyes and makes a vow out loud. Tomorrow night I’ll take those blasted irons from the storeroom. I’ll make an end of it!

The headlights of a passing car glide over the head and muddied shoulders struggling through a great bank of reeds. Instinctively, it freezes. Instinctively, though the man has no strong desire to hide, the body shrinks down in the reeds until tyres have hissed past and the red lights have diminished around the corner in the direction of the distant town. The driver has noticed nothing, and the hum of the engine recedes into the darkness.

It is quiet. Not so much as a dog bark. Only the sibilance of the river, and the wind in the trees.

His body struggles rapidly through the reeds. Once they found he was in his depth, the legs hastened him forwards, and now hands clutch at everything that grows from the banks. It's a mad scramble to get out of the river.

He levers his body, the coat heavy with water, onto the bank.

He lies on his back and faces the stars. A shiver runs through him. He is cold, but it's delicious to be alive. He can feel his heart thumping so hard that through the coat it must be visible. He turns his head and retches a gob of river water into the grass. He wipes his mouth and stares again at the constellations. Thin screeds of cloud blowing across the sky give them the appearance that they are moving. And he knows

by their apparent motion that he is alive. The clay, damp and uneven beneath him, presses the message into his back. Even the wind, which has such an edge it could skin him, tells him he is alive.

After five minutes, when the cold begins to rack him and the shudders become painful, he sits up. He looks about. Then slowly, aching, he gets to his feet.

‘All right,’ he says, ‘all right.’

And he sets off towards the lights of the distant town.

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David Butler's third novel, *City of Dis (New Island)*, was shortlisted for the Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year, 2015. His second short story collection, *Fugitive*, is forthcoming from Arlen House.