Derry 2084: A Burial


Published in:
Channel

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal

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Don Ó Donnacháin

Derry 2084: A Burial

Jean thought she’d seen his face in the crowd. It wasn’t him. She cursed under her breath.

All over the Old City, people were out enjoying the last of the sun or buying what they needed before the weather turned. There was a growing urgency about the place. Jean turned a corner, continuing the fine-tooth motions of combing the city for her son.

She hated anxiety in the sunshine.

It was still fine in Derry but heavy rains out across Donegal in past days had made for another Code Orange. When the Flash Flood Text Alert came in that morning, Jean sighed with annoyance. She turned to Ivor, who was crouched over his jar of tadpoles, and told him he couldn't wander today. He’d have to stay near.

No answer.

“Did you hear me, love?”

“Uh-huh.”

His eyes were so close to the jar opening that Jean could only see his back and shoulders—a curious decapitation framed by the window of northern springtime light.

The nurses had said Ivor’s growing detachment was a classic sign of early puberty. Up until not very long ago—perhaps just a few months back—Jean could barely shake him off.

For much of his infancy, Ivor followed her around, even in the house, ensuring there was some form of contact between them at most times. If contact was refused or not possible when he needed it, he could get nervous and upset. Sometimes, his
distress would escalate into hysteric—inconsolable, tearful howls followed by rounds of airless convulsions, or more violent outbursts when he cursed his mother and looked about for things of hers to fling or break.

When this happened, Jean would have to get hold of him somehow and envelope him with her body, restraining his wriggles and kicks, and exaggerate her breathing so that his own would gradually slow down and synchronise with hers. Once, during this de-escalating process, blood from a cut she’d gotten on her forehead, from broken glass he’d thrown at her, trickled into her eye. A sharp sting hit. She shut her eyes tightly. The blood collecting on her scrunched-up eyelid began to drip onto Ivor’s cheek below and a thought briefly passed through Jean that if she held him long enough, or a little tighter, the breathing might slow so much that it would stop altogether and that might be best for everyone.

What followed such episodes was a most unique kind of peace—love found again in the aftermath of violence. These were the most tender moments of Jean’s life.

By the time Ivor started school—he didn't go till he was six—there were dramatics every morning at the school gates where he clung tightly to her legs, screaming, and bit or spat if she tried to pry him away. It was as if he had split her in half, directing all his love and need to her legs and all his hate and fear to her arms and face.

Jean ended up having to sit in with him for the first half hour or so of every school day, until he got engrossed by patterns in the sand box or a structure he was trying to make out of the wooden blocks. She would then steal away. With time, Ivor learned to make the daily switch of his attachment from Jean to Mrs. Moon, his P1 teacher. Each year brought a new
teacher and a new attachment. As he grew, the cast of trusted attachées expanded, so that, by the time he was ten, Derry intra-muros was like a playground for him. He’d wander off, run up to people he knew well. He could spend hours walking the Walls on his own, studying, as he moved, the changing lines and angles of the Old City below.

And yet, whenever they’d venture outside the City Walls—to visit friends up in Irish Town or do the weekly shop at the Waterside Complex—his hand would soon find its way into his mother’s and clasp it tightly, his step would fall in with hers and before long, he’d be walking so close to her that, on a few occasions, he caused her to stumble.

But that fear too would come to subside.

The last flash flood—a sudden Code Red a few weeks ago—arrived on a Tuesday and the sluices came down while Ivor was still at school. But during the one before that, back in late January, he was down by the Marsh when the sluices were closed. Then, as today, Jean was out looking for him around the Old City. She ended up walking along the top of the Walls, umbrella over her, studying the streets below to see sign of him in his red raincoat. As the rain grew heavier, it got harder to see. Her heart jumped when she thought she spotted him below, only to realise, a moment later, that what she had seen was only a post box, morphed and melted to her eyes by the thick rain.

Her phone buzzed and Jean struggled, with wet, nervous hands, to fish it out of her raincoat pocket before it rang out.

“He’s with us up here,” Angela O’Neill said on the other end of the line. The O’Neills were old neighbours of Jean’s from her Irish Town days and well-loved by Ivor. The rain was hitting the umbrella hard and although Jean could hear Angela perfectly, she used the noise as a pretext to let the anxiety flow
out of her.

“Sorry, Angela, you said he’s safe and sound? He’s fine? Is he fine?”

A positive response came across the line. Jean scraped her nail on the umbrella pole.

“Are you sure?”

The floodwaters had come in so fast that Ivor was cut off from his usual way home. He'd had to leave the Marsh in the opposite direction, by making his way up the hill towards Irish Town, across the way from the Old City.

Now, a dangerous channel of roaring water separated him from his mother. With all the sluice gates down and the Old City surrounded, Ivor would spend two days with the O’Neills before the currents weakened enough for the Flood Time Ferry Service to be started up.

During those two nights apart, Jean had visions of Ivor with his jar down by the Marsh, looking for fresh frogspawn. What was it in the search for spawn that had made him oblivious to the Code Orange, deaf to the sluice sirens coming from the Old City above?

In the darkness of her bedroom, with the faint sound of her other son, Joe’s, video games coming through the wall, she imagined Ivor in his wellies and bright red raincoat, crouched over the fecund pools of the Marsh as the waters moved in silently around him.

In some visions, she trapped him with no way out, perched on a tuft of harder soil as the waters lapped ever closer, licking out at him as he trembled on his ledge—a newborn calf, alarmed yet ignorant of any response other than total submission to the great force of Nature bearing in around him.

Other scraps of visions lingered: Ivor knocked from his ledge
and carried in the great currents of the flood. The futility of
his efforts to tread water, the sound of his pathetic bleats, the
certain death all made the brief images impossible—even for
her—to sustain.

Last month, after three years spent in Year Seven, Ivor’s
form teacher told Jean that her son was now ready to make the
move to secondary school. He would no longer be able to
manage in mainstream education. In September, he’d be going
to the Special School up on the Buncrana Road.

Jean could imagine a scared, forlorn Ivor standing in the
yard on his first day in the new school, surrounded by other
Special Kids—some in the same way as him but far worse; others
epileptics, cerebral palsy kids, teenagers with Down’s. The only
remedy to the distress this image brought was to harbour
irrational fantasies: that Ivor’s growth would mysteriously halt,
that he would stay in Year Seven for ever.

But already he stands high above his classmates, most of
whom are a good three years his junior. The growth spurt came
suddenly last year and brought with it the beginnings of a
striking beauty in Ivor—a nuance of manhood that was the first
manifestation Jean had seen of Ivor’s father since he left a
decade ago. This distinct beauty shot through to secret depths
in her.

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The bells of St. Augustine’s ring out four times as Jean walks.
Dusk won’t be long. And then darkness.

Before the last peal fully dissipates, the Old City’s Flood
Sirens crank up into their slow wail. This particular tone signals
that the sluice gates will come down in one hour. Jean swears
under her breath. She’s reached a part of the Wall beloved by Ivor, its tallest stretch in the whole city.

Last week he stood here, the unknowing subject of amorous glances from a group of teenage girls on a school trip to the Wall from St. Bridget’s. Jean saw how his cool oblivion put sparkles in their eyes. His own eyes, though, remained in deep congress with a piece of moss growing on a snag some eight feet up the Wall.

Of late, this spot had become a site of pilgrimage for him, a place where he would study the Wall’s many textures, running his hands along their regularity. Did that expanse of crisscrossed cement lines and recurring patterns of brick hold secret meanings for the palms of his hands? What were the Walls telling him?

Ivor’s affinity with patterns and regularity had found a new expression in a deepening fascination with Nature and the processes of life that Nature lays bare. He’d pay special attention to how things intersected and cooperated in the natural world, how everything was ultimately interdependent. He could stand, enthralled, looking at the way a specific branch of a tree joined and fused with the trunk.

After the late-winter thaw, Ivor’s Year Seven teacher took the class to the Marsh to study the “first signs of spring” in the water pools and on the earth tufts there. Ivor returned home in high excitement with a jam jar of frogspawn. He was so intrigued by it that he would sleep with the jar beside his bed and then, in the morning, he’d place it at his bedroom window so the spawn could catch as much light as possible while he was at school.

On getting home, he’d race directly to his room, drop his bag on his bed and go straight to the windowsill, hunkering
down to gaze at the hundreds of little black eyes staring back at him from the spawn—all potentially on the brink of an as-yet-invisible metamorphosis.

When the black dots eventually did begin to lengthen, Ivor’s joy, his unselfconscious whooping and jumping around his room, was so raw that it struck a fear in Jean. Soon, the black dots would stop elongating. No tadpoles would ever hatch. The spawn would die and turn rancid, she knew, and it would have to be disposed of.

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They made a ceremony of it. They walked hand-in-hand up Society Street with the jar under Ivor’s free arm. They turned silently onto Bishop Street Within, crossed the Diamond and stopped at the Wall at Shopquay Gate, the one that’s permanently sealed up. They took the narrow stone stairs up onto the top of the Wall. Ivor peered over its edge down to the rapid waters of the Foyle sweeping along its outer side. He gasped weakly and jerked back with fright.

“Ah, son,” said Jean. She pulled him close and took the jar from under his arm. She placed it on the Wall.

“Now,” she nudged him. “Off with it.”

Ivor unscrewed the jar lid. They said a quiet prayer together and then he poured the dead spawn into the raging waters below.

Later, with the jar washed and dried, Jean took Ivor, as promised, back to the Marsh to find more frogspawn so he could try, once again, to provide the love needed for those black dots on his windowsill to transform into the tadpoles and frogs that Nature had designed them to become.
At the Bishop’s Gate exit, which leads to the Marsh, Ivor turned to Jean.

“Let me go on my own,” he said. “I want to go on my own.”

Leaning against the stone arch of the Gate, Jean watched as her son picked his way down the steep Bog Lane—jar under one arm, his glowing, energetic figure standing out against the muddy mid-March colours of the landscape beyond.

The Marsh had been made a Nature Preserve since the mass clearances of the '40s and '50s. As a girl, Jean used to play there in streets that no longer exist, used to attend birthday parties in back kitchens of houses long since razed. To the right of her field of vision, the Marsh gave way to the beginnings of the Bogside Channel, which wrapped out of view, around to the furious thrust of the Foyle on the other side of the Old City. Down under the Bogside Channel, somewhere, was her childhood home on Tyrconnel Street.

The Flood of ’35 happened before Jean was even born but it had been a wake up call for all of Derry. Initially, a high watermark was set—a thick copper band, implanted into the slopes surrounding the city as a kind of monument. Sometimes, on summer evenings of her childhood, it used to catch rays from the setting sun and cast sharp glints of light down on Jean as she played in the streets of the Bogside. At the time, she’d fancy that the band of copper, throbbing as it was with fiery light, was a part of the hill’s insides that had been exposed by some unexpected, violent gash and that those pulses of late-summer evening light were a private code of pain that the hill was communicating only to her. She was 11 when her family moved up to Irish Town, the new settlement up on the hill.

The demolition of the Bogside took years. During an initial period, when the area was cordoned off, it seemed like nothing
was changing. The houses and streets stood just as they had been before, only now devoid of life. Former Bogsiders took to going to the Walls of the Old City for a view of their former homes, but this practice began to stop once the houses showed signs of dilapidation and decay. It came as a relief the day the demolition works finally made it to Tyrconnel Street. The seasonal floods had made the old houses sad and discoloured and, once they were razed, people could start the work of resurrecting them in their minds.

Then, one year, the seasonal floods never receded. The Bogside Channel was born.

In those early days—she was still living with her parents, before her marriage, before Joe, before Ivor—Jean would also go across to the Old City to gaze down at the Bogside Channel from the Walls. Back then, she could easily re-impose the old streets, specific houses, monuments and recollections onto the canvas of water below.

Now, when Jean looks down at the waters of the Channel, she struggles to see past the pleasure seekers and power walkers to discern the former Bogside topography beneath. All that come back easily are random, disconnected details: the garish yellow and orange wallpaper with the large, embossed flowers along the stairs; the missing key in the door of the bathroom; that one pane in the girls’ bedroom window, broken by a rock and covered up with taut plastic. It all faded, so slowly that she barely noticed, like the sound of the voice of a deceased loved one: the fondness for them remains but the specifics of who they were—the timbre of their voice, their particular smell, their unique way of moving—fade into obscurity.

Ivor had reached the Marsh and was navigating his way through the waterlogged earth, jumping from one clump of
hard earth to the next. Now he was hunkering down by a boggy pool, inspecting a part of it intently. He moved about on the spot a little bit before settling into an immobile, hunched-over posture.

Jean set out down the Bog Lane to get him. At one point on the descent, she stopped and looked beyond his still figure, up at the intersecting slopes around Derry. At certain spots, she could just about make out traces of the dirty track of the Copper Band, that once-gleaming high watermark of her childhood. It was the limit below which no house would ever be built in the future, city officials had said. Now it was barely visible, tarnished and muck-strewn after many floods, long forgotten and superseded by newer watermarks.

When she got close to Ivor, she could see his back shaking with giddiness.

“Son?”

“Mam.” He turned to her, beaming. “They’re alive! Look!”

She knelt beside him and looked into the pool. In it, among the clumps of spawn, were dozens of tadpoles darting about frenetically, some of them feeding on the unhatched spawn. In the jar of water sitting beside him on the pool’s edge were a dozen tadpoles Ivor had scooped out.

The same routine of care developed as before. The jar of twelve tadpoles stayed by his bed at night. In the morning, he placed them by the window. After school, he rushed to the window to check on their progress.

There were signs of growth initially, but over the past three days a suspicion has come: that the growth is halting. Now, Jean can’t shake the idea.

She's reached their home and opens the apartment door. No sign of Ivor.
“Ivor? Ivor, are you there?”
Silence. She waits.
She puts on the kettle. She looks for her phone. She puts away a plate that has been left out.
She hears the front door go. Runs to it.
“Ivor?”
It's Joe.
He starts talking about the café being shut early. The Code Orange. About getting paid for the full shift nonetheless. Jean’s barely listening.
Poor Joe; it’s not his fault. He has always known which one of them is her favourite... if disaster were to strike and she had to choose... before he was born, before he was conceived even, it was always Ivor.
Joe drones on as she walks into Ivor’s room. On the window ledge, the jar. On the water’s surface, twelve dead tadpoles.

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Jean is panting by the time she reaches Bishop’s Gate. The city workers are already making preparations for the lowering of the sluice. She walks out through the portal onto the top of the Bog Lane.
Down below is Ivor in his red raincoat, lying on the ground, his head bent down looking into a pool. Around him, the other pools of the marsh have grown from their usual sizes and are beginning to merge.
“Ivor,” Jean calls out with blood in her voice. “Ivor.”
Beyond his own rain-shattered reflection on the pool’s surface swim baby frogs and some remaining tadpoles who have grown the beginnings of legs. They have already shed their
blackness for a murky shade of green.

Ivor extends his fingers and touches the surface of the water. He pushes his open-spread hand down into the darkness of the pond and feels, with exhilaration, a current through his fingers. The currents have always been there. The coming flood has just pushed them to the point where he can feel them: a secret revealed. Born as they are of the scary, angry river, these currents are what bring life to the Marsh. They carry that pulse which ushers the spawn onto its awesome transformation. Everything is connected. Out here, there can be no fear. This is where love is.

Ivor is so close to the water’s surface now that with a slight dip of his head, his face is submerged. Now, he can see the frogs and late-stage tadpoles in their own world, and beyond them, the further depths of the pool as it extends into darkness.

When Ivor’s face pushes down into the water, Jean’s back is turned. The last siren has started and she’s looking at the Sluice Gate workers, wondering if she has enough time to run down the Bog Lane and get Ivor back up before the gates are fully shut.

In this moment of panicked calculation comes a familiar anxiety. It reminds her of Ivor’s birth, fourteen years ago. The labour was long and ended in an emergency caesarean. High on oxygen, under strong local anaesthetic and curtained off from what the doctors were doing, Jean felt—at the moment of incision—a sudden release of pressure in her abdomen, a deluge out of her.

Turning away from the Sluice Gate workers, Jean makes to run down the Bog Lane but stops when she sees that Ivor has ducked his head into the water.

Down below, he can feel frogs’ feet brush his cheeks and
tadpoles swim in and through his hair. He could be swimming with them, she thinks. Discovering that silent world with his frogs. She sees him move gracefully with them through the weeds and silt, moving deeper and deeper until they reach a place he only knows intuitively, through her. 34 Tyrconnel Street. He swims through the front door and past the garish orange and yellow wallpaper on the stairs. He stops for a moment and takes one of the large, embossed, yellow flowers out from the wallpaper, continuing to float on up the stairs, past the key-less bathroom door and into Jean’s bedroom where she is sitting on her bed, weeping. The wardrobes are empty. A suitcase lies next to her feet. Ivor sits beside her, wipes the tears from her cheeks and hands her the flower. Taking her hand, he swims up off the bed, leading her to the small window frame covered in plastic. Together they peel it off and, as it bobs and pirouettes to the floor, the boy and girl swim out through the window and far away.

The last wail of the siren dies out. Jean is running down the Bog Lane when Ivor’s head crashes back up from the water. He gasps for air and turns, looking up at her. His face is fresh, flushed from the cold. His cheeks shimmer from the water flowing down over them.

They hold their positions, looking at each other. The old love seeps back in, found again. With it, a new estrangement begins to assert its force.

Research for this story and an initial draft of the text were undertaken in the context of a workshop called “Ecotopian Derry-Londonderry,” run by Queen’s University Belfast in Derry city in August 2018.