

An Inspector Called

Wind shifted through the cracks in the walls of the old house, a cold wind that snaked under the doors and battered against the ill-fitting windows. It came in straight off the Atlantic and over the west coast of Ireland like it was starved, catching the rooftops – tock, tock, tock.

Garda Mooney parked alongside a chipped fence, that contained a small garden with a chair on its side and grass grown over a football. The rusty gate creaked closed behind him, as he walked up the path and knocked on the front door.

“Is anyone going to get that?” A woman’s voice called from inside.

A shadow grew larger behind the glass. The wind picked up speed as the woman opened the front door.

Garda Mooney smiled and took off his cap. The woman’s eyes flitted to the squad car behind him.

“Is this a bad time Mrs Kane?” Garda Mooney asked.

“Not at all, sergeant. Come in. Please.”

Despite her slight stature, it was necessary for Mrs Kane to press her back against the wall to let the policeman pass. He was a heavy built young man who breathed through his mouth, heaving in and out. Not a sergeant as she had said, just a regular beat officer, but he wouldn’t quibble.

“Bad night out there,” she said.

“They call it The Wild West for a reason,” Garda Mooney smiled.

Mrs Kane closed the door and the wind noise stopped. The officer took his turn to press himself against the wall so Mrs Kane could pass.

“Can I get you a cup of tea, sergeant?” she asked without waiting for an answer.

Garda Mooney slipped his cap under his arm. He had small hands for such a big man; hands that were pudgy and new looking, like they were still grasping at life. As he faced the kitchen and watched Mrs Kane fill the kettle from the tap, he slowly lifted his free arm and flattened his hair.

The door to his left opened, and an elderly man poked his head out. He had a gaunt face, brown from a windy sun, that peered at Garda Mooney through thick rimmed glasses.

“Sergeant.”

“Mr Kane,” Garda Mooney replied.

“Has my sister offered you a cup of tea?”

Garda Mooney brought a hand to his mouth and coughed, before taking several steps to face the old man. A fire glowed in the room behind and a television mumbled quietly.

“There you go sergeant.” Mrs Kane held a cup and saucer out to him which he took carefully. “Sugar?” she asked.

“That’s grand Mrs Kane, thank you. I’ll take it as it comes.”

“Go in please,” she said. “Take a seat will you.”

The old man moved to one side and Garda Mooney squeezed into the room, followed by Mrs Kane, tying her hair with an elastic band. He shuffled past an armchair, his fat hands balancing the cup and saucer, towards the fire and stood in front of it. He put the tea down and fetched a note pad from his pocket. Though newly shaven, his pale round face had traces of rusty coloured stubble that he

scratched with his soft fingers. He was aware of the sharp salty air that had come in with him, and the sweat at the back of his neck soaking into his collar.

“How are ya?” he said to a young man sloped on the sofa.

“What’s the craic?” the young man replied.

“You know my Nathan?” Mrs Kane asked, reaching for the gold chain around her neck.

“School.” Garda Mooney took a few breaths. “Those were the days boy?”

Nathan pulled at the ties on his hoodie and smiled. “Ah sure, you know yourself. Good to see you again, man. You made Guard?”

“’Bout two years now,” Garda Mooney said, leafing through his notepad, mouth open. “It’s worth it, like. Job security. Good pension. Training – that you could take anywhere, you know?”

“Of course.” Nathan considered this. “That’s not bad at all.” He smoothed his hands over his long, skinny thighs.

Garda Mooney pinned a thick thumb on the notepad and reached with his free hand to take a sip of tea, chewed on it and swallowed. He moved to the right of the fire. “The old house on the corner, by the Lynch farm?”

He sneezed.

“God bless you,” said Mrs Kane.

“Thank you,” said Garda Mooney, and reached behind his stomach to produce a handkerchief to wipe his nose. “The old house on the corner – “

“I know the one,” the old man interrupted him. “Niall O’Mahony’s. He and I went to school together.”

Garda Mooney opened and closed his mouth a few times and looked down at his notepad. “Mr O’Mahony was found dead yesterday. In the house.”

“Poor man,” Mrs Kane said, a hand flat to her chest. “Did you know that Eugene?”

“I did not,” the old man stated, and shifted back in his chair to get a better look at the officer. “How long was he dead for?”

“Ah-ra, at least two weeks or thereabouts.” Garda Mooney let his jaw fall and stared at a point on the wall.

Nathan gripped his knees and narrowed his eyes at the old man. “You know so much about him but you don’t know he’s dead?”

Mrs Kane could reach Nathan from where she leant against the sofa and clipped him around the head. “You have some cheek, boy. In front of the Guard.” She retracted her hand quickly. “My apologies sergeant.”

“Look-it,” Garda Mooney said, biting the inside of his cheek. “We got information that you were seen thereabouts Nathan. You and another lad.”

Nathan stared wide-eyed. “Me? I was never there.”

Garda Mooney reached deep into his pocket to produce a pen and pressed the top of it with his thumb. “There’s been some thefts. The gate and the door were ruined. Smashed open, like.” He rested the notebook on his stomach. “House had been used for all manner of things. Condoms, syringes and the like. You know yourself.” He glanced at the old man and Mrs Kane. Then to Nathan, “Keep away from there, boy,” like he was older by ten or twenty years not a couple, and that he knew about condoms. He made notes, with great care, onto his pad. “Come here to me. It’s Hallowe’en on Friday. I take it you’ve not got any fireworks?”

Nathan shook his head and stuck out his bottom lip. “No notion of it. Not seen any. Not even in town like.” Nathan pressed the end of his thumb against his teeth.

“You know the story. No licence, no fireworks. Wouldn’t want an accident and you losing your fingers. Or worse.” Garda Mooney smiled and the notepad disappeared into his pocket. “I think that’s all I have. Nothing for me, so?”

Nathan shook his head.

“Does he have anyone?” Mrs Kane asked.

“A brother in America,” the old man cut in, a hand worrying his knee. “And a sister in the U.K. Both dead.”

“He had no one, so.” Mrs Kane put a hand to her cheek.

“He died how?” the old man asked.

Garda Mooney opened his mouth and thought for a few seconds. “To be confirmed. The state pathologist is on her way down tomorrow. If the weather picks up.” He put on his cap. “Well, I best be going. Thank you for the tea Mrs Kane.”

Mrs Kane smacked Nathan around the knees and gestured for him to see the officer out. Nathan jumped up, a long gangly figure, unfolding like an accordion into the hallway, and closed the door behind him.

Garda Mooney reached up and leant against the front door. Nathan put a hand into his hoodie for a packet of cigarettes, offering one to Garda Mooney who refused, so Nathan tucked one, unlit, behind the officer’s ear.

“You have a gun?” Nathan asked.

Garda Mooney smiled and reached into his jacket to fetch a small pistol which he laid on his palm, moving his hand up and down like he was testing the weight. “It’s heavy, like, but handy enough.” Fat fingers clasped the barrel, the handle pointing towards Nathan, who took it and examined it side on. He nodded his head sagely, as if to say, of all the guns he had ever examined this wasn’t a bad one.

Nathan placed his finger on the trigger. “Is it loaded, like?”

“Of course it’s fecking loaded.” Garda Mooney said, sliding his hands into his trouser pockets.

“Ever shot anyone?”

“Nah. Have to be really careful, like. Unfortunately.” He glanced at Nathan and they laughed.

Nathan squinted down the barrel. “CSI Miami.”

“Tell me about it. Wouldn’t mind that now. A stretch out in Florida. Sun and hot bitches.”

Nathan pressed the barrel of the gun to his cheek. “You could apply, like.”

“Sure, don’t I know it.” Garda Mooney pushed his cap back and scratched his forehead with his thumb. “Just a case of filling out the forms.”

“Imagine being a cop there, like.”

“Deadly. Shit hot, like. Women fecking all over you. I’m telling you. It’s all uniform by them.” Garda Mooney stared into the distance, breathing heavy through his mouth.

Nathan yanked up the gun so that it was level with the officer’s chest. “Stick ‘em up.”

Garda Mooney laughed. “We don’t say that, like.”

“Go on. Stick ‘em up.” Nathan’s smile fell. “I mean it.”

Garda Mooney waved the barrel away from his chest. “Feck off. Don’t be an eejit.”

“I think I’m gonna shoot you,” Nathan grinned. “What do you think? Blast a fecking great hole in your chest and the blood spurts out like a fountain, persh, persh, persh, splatter on the walls and over my face. Drip, drip, drip. Mental. All over

the carpet. Or I could do your face. Blast it into little pieces so I could see all the veins and shit inside your skull, you big fat fecking bastard.”

Garda Mooney locked eyes with Nathan and kept completely still. Only his breathing became more laboured as his large chest heaved up and down. A line of sweat circled the side of his cheek and soaked into his collar.

He listened to the wind, the tock, tock, tock of it on the rooftops, the flapping of the garden gate that had come loose. He focused on Nathan’s brown eyes, so dark they were almost black, the line of his mouth thin and mean. He thought of the fireplace in the other room and tried to remember what was on the television.

Nathan pointed the gun at the sergeant’s face and fired.

For such a big man, Garda Mooney didn’t bleed as much as Nathan had predicted a few moments earlier. His soft hands reached out, opening and closing as though trying to grasp at something, before falling to his sides. A thin line of crimson dripped from the black hole that had erupted in his forehead. He slumped back against the door, crumpling at the waist, as though he had been half way to sitting down and missed the chair. A gasp of air puffed from his mouth and he slumped down a little further, his head falling to one side.

Nathan slammed a foot against the officer’s stomach, took the cigarette from behind his ear and lit it.