

Saints
AND
SINNERS

PAUL CUDDIHY

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TO
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Everything I have and everything I am is all because of you.

TO
LOUISE, REBECCA AND ANDREW

You make us proud parents every single day.

I

GUARDIAN ANGEL

It might have been the braying of a restless horse or the snap of a branch, like a chicken's neck being wrung, but when Mick Costello recalled it later, he swore it was a hand that shook his body awake, though when he opened his eyes there was no one there. Whatever it had been, Mick sprung out of bed, alert and on edge. He crept across the room and gently edged the latch up before inching the door open. Clouds of mist silently buffeted each other as they rolled towards the cottage, ready to devour it.

Mick stared hard at the mist – he didn't know why – because there was nothing to see, just a wall of soft, white tufts that moved and shifted shape as they got closer to him. It wasn't even like night-time, when his eyes would adjust to the darkness as he walked across the fields from Doogan's, navigating a precarious path home. He had to admit he'd often owed more to good fortune than good sense, especially when he'd had one too many for the road, and there were times when his mother demanded to know who he'd been scrapping with when she saw the state of him in the morning.

'You'll not tell me you fell this time, Michael Costello,' she'd say, peering closely at his battered face. 'There's an angry fist to blame for that eye and no mistake.'

'I swear to God, mammy,' he'd reply, blessing himself. 'It was an accident.'

She would shake her head as she shuffled away from him towards the steaming stove, Mick's nose sensing breakfast wasn't too far away.

'But you should see the state of the wall that did it.'

'You're an awful boy, Michael Costello. Just like your father and no mistake. He was fond of the drink, too, and that's what done for him, God rest his soul.'

Mick would groan and bury his head under his jacket, though it never drowned out his mother's voice or the clatter of pots and kettles on the stove.

'Now get yourself up out of that bed,' she'd snap. 'Everyone else is already out working and there'll be no breakfast for those that don't pull their weight in this house.'

Now Mick could hear his mother's gentle snoring and he glanced over to where she slept, his youngest sister, Margaret, wrapped across her stomach. The other girls – Bridget and Mary – slept back-to-back in the far corner of the room while Patrick had rolled himself into a ball on the bed where Mick had been lying, his sleeping body suddenly cold with the departure of a warm companion.

Mick sighed, his shoulders relaxing, and he pushed on the door, glancing out one final time before he'd let it close over again. Something caught his eye; a glint of light, just for the briefest of moments before it disappeared in the mist, but it was enough to put him on edge again. His heart was thumping and he checked to make sure it hadn't wakened anyone else in the cottage.

Leaving the door unlocked, Mick scurried back to bed and grabbed his clothes, his head almost diving through the hole in his jumper in its eagerness to help him dress quickly. He waited till he was back at the door before he stepped into his damp boots, like standing in a cold pool, but he knew his feet would soon heat up once he was on the move. Slipping his jacket on, his hand automatically reached into the pocket and retrieved a black, woolly hat his mother had knitted him. It would keep his ears warm, he thought, as he edged his way out of the cottage, closing

the door over as gently as he could from the outside, all the while desperate not to wake the rest of the family.

Once outside, facing the mist like he was standing guard against its inevitable onslaught, Mick wasn't sure what to do next. The noise of a horse made up his mind. He scurried round the side of the cottage and across the sodden turf until the outline of a wall became visible. He leapt over it effortlessly and immediately crouched down behind its solid form, hoping the chickens wouldn't betray him.

His eyes remained focused on the place where he had seen . . . what? Nothing now but the white clouds and Mick began to wonder if his eyes and ears had been playing tricks on him, but he'd had no more to drink the night before than on any other occasion, and his head didn't feel at all fuzzy.

The sound of a horse again.

Mick tensed and lowered himself until his eyes were staring across the top of the wall. Out of the mist they appeared, men and beasts, ghostly apparitions that he still wasn't sure were real or not. He quickly counted them. Twelve, as far as he could see, including two on horse-back, all wearing red jackets – the Queen's men – except for one rider.

When he dismounted, Mick noticed he was all in black, like an undertaker, but he didn't think the man was there with news of a relative's demise, though he suspected he was here to measure someone for the drop. The man took off his hat, wiped the front of it on the sleeve of his long jacket and then slipped it back on, where it perched perfectly on his head. Mick could have blown it off without too much effort if he'd been close enough, but he wasn't for trying it now.

The man in black stood a few paces from the cottage door. He nodded towards the red jackets, four of whom ran forward and disappeared inside the cottage. Mick cursed the fact he'd left the door off the latch. The rest of the soldiers stood alert, rifles pointed at the door. Their comrades quickly re-emerged into the cold.

'He's not there,' one of them reported to the man in black.

‘That’s impossible,’ he said, signalling to the rest of the men. Seven of them disappeared into the cottage while the original four stood awkwardly outside. This time Mick could hear noises coming from inside, raised voices from his family and the soldiers. Then the seven red jackets came out to report the same thing as their four companions.

‘So who is in there?’ asked the man in black.

‘The mother and some children,’ one of the soldiers said. ‘Four of them. Three girls and a boy.’

‘Well, bring them out then.’

Mick gripped the edge of the wall, digging his fingertips into the hard surface until it hurt and turned his knuckles white.

His mother was pushed out first, with Margaret’s thin, bare arms wrapped round her waist. As the older woman stumbled, one of the soldiers instinctively grabbed her arm to steady her. The man in black stepped forward and punched him.

‘This isn’t a mercy mission,’ he said as the soldier staggered back, holding his hand to his face.

Then Patrick and his other sisters appeared beside his mother. The five of them clung to each other for comfort and warmth. The soldiers spread out until they formed a semi-circle round the shivering group. The man in black produced a parchment from his jacket which he unrolled and began reading.

‘By the power invested in me by her gracious majesty, Queen Victoria, Sovereign of the United Kingdom and of the Dominions, in this year of our Lord, eighteen hundred and ninety-one, I hereby serve notice of a warrant for the arrest of Michael Costello, in relation to crimes, specified herein, against said Crown. He is to surrender his person to the authority of the Crown, in this instance being myself as the legitimately appointed magistrate of the county of Galway . . . Where is he?’

There was no reply.

‘I am here for Michael Costello and I will not ask you again. Where is he?’

None of them know where I am, Mick wanted to shout out but he didn’t. He glanced at his fingers, still digging angrily at

the wall as tiny traces of blood began to creep out from under them.

‘Get the woman,’ Mick heard the man in black say and he saw two red jackets grab his mother. He wanted to jump over the wall as the soldiers got involved in a tug-of-war with his brother and sisters over his mother, but it felt like an invisible hand held him back.

The children’s collective strength was no match for the soldiers and his mother stood between the two men while his siblings howled into the cold morning, kept back by the rifle butts of the other men.

‘If you want to defy the Queen’s law, then Ireland will have another few orphans this very morning,’ the man in black said.

‘I don’t know where he is,’ she said, ‘and even if I did I wouldn’t tell you.’

‘So be it.’

The man in black nodded to one of the soldiers, who stepped out to face Mick’s mother, no more than six paces from her. Now was the moment when Mick had to give himself up, but still he couldn’t. His eyes searched the ground around him until they stopped on a rock nestling comfortably in the soggy grass. His bloody fingers started digging at the turf, easily unearthing the rock. It more than covered his hand but he knew he’d be able to throw it as far as he wanted, from here to Doogan’s if necessary.

As he stood up his knees cracked and he paused, though no one would have heard it above the wails of his brother and sisters, which were loud enough even to wake his father, and he’d been dead over five years since. Out the corner of his eye, Mick saw a mound of cow dung and quickly immersed the rock in it before launching it towards his mother. He watched as it sailed effortlessly through the air, piercing the rolling clouds of mist and gliding like an eagle towards its target. He muttered a prayer to Saint Jude, knowing that it would be a miracle if he was successful. And then like a silent bullet, it smacked the soldier pointing a rifle at his mother straight in the face and laid him flat out on the ground.

There was a split second of silence as his comrades tried to comprehend what had happened but before anything else could fill that space, Mick began whooping, giant screams of delight that filled every inch of the air. He was dancing, jumping about like he'd won first prize at the Tuam Fair. Then the first bullet whizzed by his ear and slammed into the chicken coup. He heard a muffled squawk and knew it had found a target. Not waiting to be next, he turned and ran, vaulting over the wall at the other side of the pen and sprinting across the field, stumbling and falling and picking himself up and running again.

He could hear voices and more gunshots trying to hit shadows and still his legs kept moving. The voices weren't getting any further away and he knew he'd have to reach the river to have any chance of escape before the horses caught up with him.

His throat was burning, his chest ready to burst but still he kept going, pushing one heavy leg in front of the other. He'd never been much of a runner but now he felt he could run to the end of Ireland if needs be. His life depended on it, after all. Still the voices pursued him, though they'd obviously decided to save their bullets until they were sure what they were shooting at. That thought gave him a moment of relief but it didn't slow him down.

Then he heard the gurgle of water and felt he was almost safe, though in almost the same instant came a thunderous rumble as hooves closed in on him. He pushed himself even faster, struggling for breath as the dawn cold rushed into his mouth every time he tried gulping for much-needed air. And then he was on his back. He lay flat on the wet turf, dazed. He knew whatever he'd hit hadn't been solid enough to be a wall – he couldn't think of any man-made obstacle in the field anyway – and he'd bounced backwards. A snort told him it was a cow. He'd kill that bloody Edward Ryan when he saw him. He was forever letting his herd have the run of the field at all times of day or night.

Mick pushed himself up on his elbow, aware that the thunder was closer than ever, and came face-to-face with a bull. Shit! He staggered back to his feet, not sure whether to sprint or try to creep apologetically past the beast. He rubbed his head, aware of

a dull pain that would surely produce a great bump before too long, but now was not the time to feel sorry for himself. He stared at the bull, which stared back unblinking. It snorted, rolls of condensed breath escaping from its square nose and mingling with the mist. Mick didn't need a second invitation to start running again.

The bull was right behind him and Mick knew he couldn't run in a straight line. He swerved to the right and then to the left, all the time the beast's heavy breathing following him. Where was the river? He could hear the water, even louder than before, but just as it emerged from the mist he heard a crack, like the angry spit of a log on the fire, and his left shoulder jerked forward, seared by a hot poker. He stumbled on through the reeds and plunged, head first, into the water.

Mick could never decide what hurt more – the ice-cold river as it welcomed his body, or his flesh, burning from the callous brand of a bullet. He flapped and flailed in the water, trying to get back to the surface and at the same time, pushing himself away from the edge. The bull wouldn't pursue him any further but he knew the others would be less reluctant.

'I think I got him,' a voice said above the clatter of hooves on the ground. 'He's in the water.'

Other voices were getting nearer as the soldiers caught up.

'Spread out along the bank and shoot on sight,' one said. 'And someone do something about that bloody bull.'

A single gunshot rang out in the cold morning, followed swiftly by the crash of the dead beast to the ground. Mick swam with even more determination.

The pub was now enthralled, even those who'd heard the story many times before. Mick Costello could tell a good tale, that's what they all said, and he knew it himself. He sat back and folded his arms with a knowing smile.

'It's thirsty work, this story-telling,' he said.

There were a few groans but within minutes another pint and a glass of whiskey appeared in front of him. He took a long gulp of

beer, burping gratefully before sipping the golden liquid and running his tongue across his lips to clear up any stray drops. There were other tales, each one worth a pint or two, and he wasn't slow to produce them on occasion, but this was his favourite. It was also where his story – the reason why he was sitting talking to familiar faces and complete strangers on a cold December Wednesday night in a Glasgow pub – began, so it was well worth the telling, and not just for the drink that wet his whistle and refreshed his memory.

He stood up and stretched, provoking a few groans, and noticed the face of the man who'd supplied the latest drink.

'Don't worry, lads, I just need to make some room for this,' Mick said, lifting up his pint, and the supplier's face relaxed. 'I'll be back in a minute.'

He staggered through the men who'd crowded round the small wooden table and headed towards the back of the pub, the clouds of smoke hovering just below the ceiling reminding him of the mist that morning and a wave of homesickness washed over him. It took him by surprise and he was glad of the fresh air that slapped his face as he stepped outside.

An old man stood at the wall, one hand holding it up while he swayed and sprayed at the same time. Mick stood at the opposite end and stared down at the gutter as he emptied his bladder. A match was struck on the wall behind him and Mick turned his head while trying to make sure he didn't wet himself. Someone lit a cigarette and blew a ball of smoke towards Mick, but the figure stayed hidden in the shadows.

'God save Ireland, said the heroes . . .'

The old man in the corner started to sing. Mick thought he recognised the tune and he was sure the old man heard, in his own mind, the right words, but no one else would know what he was saying.

'God save Ireland, said they all . . .'

A cough from the shadows and another ball of smoke. Mick finished and turned round.

'You're a grand man for the stories,' the smoking man said.

‘Not a word of it a lie and that’s the truth,’ Mick said.

‘No doubt, Mick. No doubt.’

Mick stared at the orange glow in the darkness.

‘Whether on the scaffold high . . .’

‘Who are you then?’

‘Just call me your guardian angel.’

Mick took a step forward.

‘This is not the time for jokes,’ he said. ‘You know my name so I’ll have yours.’

‘Or the battlefield we die . . .’

The smoking man took a deep draw on his cigarette and stepped out of the shadows.

‘You don’t know me,’ he said and it was true. Mick didn’t recognise him at all. The brow of his cap hid his eyes and cast a shadow over half his face every time the cigarette lit up.

‘Oh, what matter when for Erin dear we fall.’

‘Meath?’ Mick said.

‘Close. Westmeath.’

Mick nodded. It was a gift he had and it had won him many a drink and more than a few shillings over time. ‘Two guesses is all I need,’ was always his bet to identify the county of the speaker. If he needed a third go, then the drink was on him and there weren’t many times he had to dip his hand in his pocket.

‘So what do you want with me?’ Mick said.

‘There’s someone been asking after you,’ the man said, taking a final suck on his cigarette before flicking the tiny end in the direction of the old man who was staggering back and forth trying to fix his trousers.

‘Who?’

‘Short fella. Thin. Nose all bent out of shape.’

‘Are you joking me?’

‘Dresses all in black. Do you know him?’

Mick nodded.

‘He’s been offering a tidy sum for any information and it won’t take much to persuade someone. You know what it’s like yourself.’

‘So he’s here then,’ Mick said, more to himself than the smoking man, but he still got a grunt of agreement in reply. The news shouldn’t really have surprised him, yet he shivered like someone had walked over his grave. Part of him was surprised that it had taken so long, yet there was a nagging question at the back of his mind as to how the man in black had found him at all. Even as it pushed its way to the front of his mind, Mick already knew the answer.

It didn’t take too much thought to figure out he was hiding somewhere in Britain. He’d fled without a penny in his pocket so America was out of the question. Then it was just a process of elimination. That it had taken almost two months told Mick the search had begun in England – Liverpool probably, then Manchester, and maybe down to London, before heading up to Glasgow.

‘Just watch your back, Mick,’ the smoking man said. ‘That’s the message I was sent with.’

‘Who sent you?’

The smoking man laughed, a gruff sound that quickly became a heavy cough.

‘Your guardian angel . . . and that’s no joke.’

Mick nodded and slipped back inside the pub, wishing he could make his excuses and leave, but there was a fresh pint and a whiskey waiting for him along with an eager audience which would quickly turn nasty if he didn’t finish what he had started.

He sat back down and clutched his pint, taking a long gulp. His eyes remained on the door at the back of the pub that led out to the toilet but when it opened it was only the old man who staggered in, crashing straight into the back of a heavy, red-haired drinker who spilt the contents of his jug over the floor. He spun round, ready to flatten the culprit, but when he saw who it was he merely shook his head and turned back to his company.

Still the smoking man didn’t appear and Mick realised he’d slipped away as discreetly as he’d appeared. Someone slapped Mick’s shoulder, eager for the rest of the story, and a pain shot down his left arm, reminding him where he’d stopped his tale.