

BRONAGH'S CONFESSIONAL (Part one)

The view from my window hasn't changed. It's the same snarl of half-empty tourist coaches and sales girls from the sports outfitter's across the way sneaking outside for a ciggie, no matter how shit the weather. My colleagues haven't stopped whispering, but they always did that. I still get a half hour for my lunch, even if it takes Maggie at the café nearly that long to make a fair sandwich. I no longer get a thrill out of putting on the uniform, but I act as if I do. The *GARDA* lettering on my jacket makes me cringe in shame. The fabric feels like steel wool when it chafes against my wrists. I hate it now.

Because nothing is the same as it was.

Not inside me, about me, nor any place else I can see with my own eyes. Darling Jim Quick has left memories all over town more tangible than the grave in which he lies. And if this is my confession, I doubt you can grant me absolution. How absurd for a cop to ask forgiveness, but there it is. I have nobody else who will listen. This is a resignation, nothing more. It will be sent to Garda HQ as soon as I'm done unburdening myself. So perhaps what I really want is to hear myself talk. Close your ears if you mind.

I have always been too methodical, hesitating to act where Fiona and Róisín Walsh would have plunged headlong into disaster without considering the risks. Especially Róisín. I suppose you might call it sound judgment on my part, if you're being kind. But call it by its proper name. Cowardice. It was this creeping sensation, this feeling that makes your ears burn while you cast your eyes down, that handed the village of Castletownbere to Jim like a gift someone had already unwrapped for him to enjoy.

People died. Not gently and painlessly, either, but killed by someone who took pride in his work. Whether they were all as innocent as the gossips claim I'll leave up to

you. Because the desire they felt for the man in the cheap leather jacket is what made them take leave of their senses. I know I did, and he never so much as looked at me once.

It's well documented, the papers have hashed and rehashed all the murders, and I won't tire you with every detail. But what nobody can know is my part in it. I'm a law dog, you see, at least that's what Róisín always called me, and dogs aren't supposed to be disloyal. I had information about Jim Quick, right there in my hands, and I could have pressed harder. Filed a formal enquiry, disregarded Sergeant Murphy's bullying, and driven that damn case file all the way to Dublin my own self. A file jammed with stray leads and half-provable insinuations, any one of which would have humiliated me in public had I marched it straight to the top.

But Jim Quick *was* a murderer without question, they all say now, a proper menace in a handsome package, who should have been put down long ago like that bastard wolf he turned out to be. I say brilliant, fabulous, couldn't agree more. Sergeant Bronagh Daltry (that would be yours truly, who was but a wee newly minted Garda when it all began) should have, could have buttoned that bastard before he had the chance to tear up our town. But all those lynch mob voices were as silent as mine when he rolled into town. Back then, they sighed and felt a warm thrill inside more intimate parts than their little hearts, I'll tell you that for nothing. They examined the papier mache mask, peered behind it, and saw the whiskers and incisors. And they came back for more. They would still be coming if Fiona, Aoife and Róisín hadn't pulled out those handsome teeth.

But I know why I stall in coming clean about my role in this fiasco. Bear with me a little, even if you don't have real pity, but just a morbid interest in what a disgraced cop might present for your afternoon titillation.

I don't fear God, my mother, or even Father Malloy. And at this late point, no sanction my lords and masters in HQ can administer will make me feel any worse. No, I am afraid of admitting how much I truly hated the three Walsh sisters, even as I tried to love each of them to pieces. That's the truth of it. And that's why I haven't sent this shagging letter of resignation along quite yet. For when I write down the words, I will have to post it. Duty, you see.

I adored Fiona, I really did. She was the oldest of all of us, a schoolmarm with a firm hand and a warm heart. She tried to include me as the fourth sister, even if everyone else snickered behind my back that I was like the ugly Beatle who didn't play any instrument worth a damn. She yelled at Róisín whenever she got me into trouble, and was the only one who encouraged me to talk to boys more freely. Like *that* would ever happen. David and Garth, whom I both liked, only stared at Fiona's arse. That is, whenever they weren't too busy gawping at Róisín's cleavage.

Róisín. Child of darkness, and Castletownbere's resident goth experiment. A better friend to me than I ever was to her, and that's a fact. But even as I tried to imitate her swagger, her easy smile and that effortless cocking of her black-clad hips, I only looked fatter and more desperate. A laughable clone. I can remember wishing her dead one night when she was helping me get ready for a date. I saw her quite clearly on a slab, that perfectly messed-up black hair thinned out by death.

And I got my wish, as everyone around here already knows.

I want to tell you more, I really do. And maybe I will, later. But I can't take any more today. I feel like one of those rubber trees where the sap drips from them like white blood. I have a notion this confessional might take a while. I hope you'll keep listening.

BRONAGH'S CONFESSIONAL (Part two)

If this is to be a proper confessional, let's have it all out. My indecision, which acted like a spanner to some unlucky girl's head, is the least of it. I'll dump all my sins on the desk for you to pick over and judge, before I staple them all together and send it up to Garda HQ in Phoenix Park. How would that be? All right with you? Fine, so here's the next bit:

I'm a stalker, too.

For the longest time, I've convinced the righteous part of myself that still resides inside the uniform that I was just looking out for my best childhood friends. See them home safe, throw Róisín's bike in the back whenever she was too pissed to ride it up the hill. The respect I never got when I wore a dress stiffened my spine whenever I put on the polyester blues. The change made me feel like Castletownbere's own Jane Law, squinting at all criminals and good townsfolk in the manner of that parched Marshal on *Gunsmoke*.

The stalking, right, sorry. I was about to tell you about the first time I laid eyes on Darling Jim Quick. Because it just happened to be the same evening that I followed Fiona to the town square like some beggar hoping for beer change. The sun was setting, transforming our town into the kind of coral-pink postcard that Finbar's estate agency sold as physical reality to foreign dullards with cash for brains. His Mercedes looked like someone had turned an oyster shell inside out and coated the metal plates with the residue. It was glorious.

But it was Finbar I'd come for on that late afternoon. I'd come for a memory.

Finbar was handsome in a way most girls never noticed. Long before he started buying neckties made by Italians whose names he could never pronounce, his patient silence made him sexy to me. He listened to truths, lies, and to the kind of vague prayers

that seep out whenever anyone has had one too many to count. Fiona called him her lie detector. I didn't call him anything.

For I had kissed him first, you see.

Not much of a kiss, if you must know, but it meant something to me that went beyond bragging rights in a town the size of a telephone booth. Running dead last with a crew that included the Walsh sisters meant always getting picked last, and, usually, not getting noticed at all. But Finbar did notice me, as it turned out. And before I even took the Garda exam and shined my first badge, we went to dinner up in Cork. *Rabenga's*. Italian, I think, but I never touched the food. He listened to my doubts about joining the Guards, and his gaze held me steady. He squeezed my hand and fumbled as he kissed me goodbye at the door afterward. I was happy as the German car silently rolled away. When I went to bed, I dared to imagine me and him together somewhere else. In New York, maybe. Or even just Dublin. I dreamt of things I won't even tell you. You'll just laugh at me for trusting you with it.

And then Finbar noticed Fiona, didn't he? I suppose it was inevitable.

Sure. They'd been together for over a year. And on that particular evening, as I sat behind the wheel of my patrol car two houses away pretending to talk on the radio, I saw them holding hands in the café. I zipped up my jacket and hated him more than her, to be honest. And no, I wasn't moping in that "Why not me?" chorus you might expect from a girl wearing a size ten while hoping for something slimmer. I hated my own poor timing. I left as they came out the door, arm in arm. As they parted, Finbar smiled like Fiona had just said something he was still thinking about and didn't like as much as he let on. Jaysus, did I miss Marshal Dillon's six-shooter at that moment, pistol belt, big hat and all.

My radio saved me. Or so I thought.

“Good craic down at the bar round ten,” came Jonno’s voice. A wise man whose false teeth belied his truer heart. He had given me boy advice when I was younger, not that it had ever helped anyone get into or out of my knickers, sad to say. “We have a *seanchaí* coming by, if you want to hear a story,” he continued as I saw Fiona pedaling past on her bike. I resisted the impulse to open my car door to make her swerve. A *seanchaí*. A teller of tales. Usually manky old men in tattered sweaters and felt hats that were meant to give them credibility as sages, instead of identifying them as unemployed farts. But I told Jonno I’d go. I owed him that much. As I glimpsed Finbar’s Mercedes gliding in the opposite direction, I could taste the phantom spaghetti sauce from that night at *Rabenga’s* on a long ago kiss I was probably the only one of us who still remembered.

So when I saw the young man in his leather jacket up on Jonno’s shabby little podium, my face flushed with something more than surprise.

Jim Quick, that’s what he called himself.

He spoke a little too low for everyone to hear, which made even Róisín shut it. Jim had put his pulse on everyone in Jonno’s bar. Men, women, dogs and the rest of it. Don’t ask me where I got the nerve, but as he began to tell his tale about ancient castles and two cursed brothers, I interrupted him with a question. I felt like an *eejit* right away.

“Did the castle have a name?” I heard myself wanting to know. That was a lie. I wanted him to tell me something about himself. Anything at all would have made me happy that night. He winked, deflected my enquiry and continued. And, as it usually happened at McSorley’s Bar, his gaze inexorably landed on the Walsh sisters’ carelessly beautiful features as the story took shape like smoke from a campfire.

It was then that I resolved to be nobody's fourth sister. I felt nothing but hate.

| BRONAGH'S CONFSSIONAL (Part three)

I suppose there's no longer any way of avoiding the truth about my own part in the death of Sarah McDonnell, then, is there? Because she might not have been the first to get the terminal Darling Jim treatment, I know that well enough now, but she was the first one *I* knew. Truth is I couldn't stand her, alive or otherwise. But that doesn't mean I don't still feel just gutted at the thought that I didn't stop Jim's little helper when I had the chance.

I was after listening to Jim when I noticed the unsmiling Asian fella by the bar. I'd seen his little pantomime earlier, what with advertising their next show just up the road, but now I really paid attention to his eyes. They had no hatred in them that I could see, merely calculation. When Jim sauntered out of the place with an arm around Fiona, I lost sight of him for a moment. You really must excuse this jealous little marshal without a gun, but all my desires left the room with the both of them. Jim never even looked back at me or anyone else. He was in the zone he preferred the most – the moment before the kill, be it figurative in a sexual way, or literal in the Sarah McDonnell fashion.

But back to Tomo, sorry.

So, anyway, there was Jim's trusty assistant still standing at the bar, handling the money everyone had crammed into his felt hat. Except he didn't count it, that's what set my alarm bells chiming before anything else. What kind of itinerant *seanchaí* roadie cares nothing about the cash? He crumpled the notes in both fists and jammed the paper balls into his hunting coat like wads of newspaper. Then our eyes met, and he nodded politely. Part of me, the spurned and hurt percentile, had half a mind to arrest him on some pretext that would force Jim to disengage from his romantic adventure with my

friend, and instead come down to my cop shop and bail out his surly pal. But I just nodded back.

My jealousy was nothing compared with the flaming red cheeks belonging to Sarah McDonnell, the town totty. There she was at the end of the bar, more bangles and earrings on her than a statue of Shiva, hands clenched and eyes on the door, as if she could will Jim back into the room. I instantly felt better about the world and had another sip of my pint. You see, Sarah worked down the road behind the Formica counter at Allied Irish Bank, waving her dyed hair and batting those blues at anyone who cared. Whenever any of us, meaning anybody who wasn't a male prospect, came in to make a deposit or whatever, we barely merited a look from Her Highness. Any fella who knew how to shave without cutting himself and had a reasonable amount of hair left on his head got the whole treatment, didn't he? With foreign tourists, it was even worse to witness. Sign here, please, sir. What a nice jacket, sir. Are you in town by yourself, then?

That must be why Sarah finally left McSorley's Bar and decided to follow the object of her desire. If Fiona was taking Jim to her place, then Sarah's stalking would only take her four streets up from the bar, and I had no desire to hear any of that nonsense for myself through thinly paned glass no matter who won, thanks all the same.

But Jim's silent creature had a mind to join in the fun somehow, for he shadowed Sarah out of the bar, hands still screwed into his pockets as if something resided in those folds of waxed cotton that couldn't stand the light of day.

Stop me. Because that moment, as Tomo brushed past at the door is when I could have reached out, invoked the law, and acted as my intuition bade me. He wasn't going back to the van for a kip, was he? His eyes still revealed no hostility, merely more of that

same concentration that you'll see on pilots when they walk onto the jetway with all their kit right before taking off. That kind of focused, unhurried anticipation. I stepped aside and let him past, and I regret it every single day.

I spent the next few hours feeling sorry for myself back at my place. My flat is on the edge of town, just past Fiona's and those other Walsh princesses' burned-out childhood home; the windows still have the soot from the gas explosion around them like messy mascara on someone who just cried. I crawled into bed, uniform and all, and watched some crap TV. Then I got back up to make tea, and told myself things maybe weren't so bad. I still had a decent job, my husband and I were in mediation again to save what might still be left of our marriage, and my daughter just rang from her father's to leave a message and tell me she missed her mammy. I drank the tea and wept with relief. The balmy summer sky kept the dead of night from getting as dark as Jim's tales.

I must have dozed off, and awoke myself with a start just before dawn.

I still can't remember if I dreamt anything, but the feeling that gripped me as I looked around the tiny room at my daughter's scattered toys was a dread so physical it felt as if someone was in the room with me. I leaped up, crumpled uniform and all, and waved my stick about like a lunatic to dispel the notion. Outside, I caught a glimpse of a vehicle lumbering silently down the road, engine idling softly in the turn. It could have been Martin from the bakery, or Cathy getting ready to open up the SuperValu. I wish I could tell you honestly that I saw its color. I want it to have been white. For at least then I know that I could have told Sergeant Murphy of my suspicions about Tomo and Jim's van, rather than blame Sarah's death on some unnamed druggie, provenance unknown.

I got up and walked briskly in the direction from which I'd seen the van emerging. There were fresh footprints in the dewy grass leading up the the old Glebe Graveyard. I held my breath and tried to dispel the dreamless sense of dread I'd felt in my sleep as I made my way past the headstones.

Sarah McDonnell lay on her back, one shoe off, and her face worked over by someone who wanted to make sure she was quite done winking at anyone ever again. I rang Sergeant Murphy right before I threw up on some unlucky fella's last best granite wishes. I know who did this, I thought. I looked him in the eyes. And I can never prove a thing.

Now, wouldn't *you* feel like shite at least for the rest of the day?

BRONAGH'S CONFESSIONAL (Part four)

The shadows are already too long outside for me to be shiting on like this. The sports outfitter's is closing, and I can see Deirdre lighting up a ciggie down on the footpath after a job well done. It would have been nice to have old Sergeant Murphy to confide in, even if he hated my guts while he was here. But now I'm the one resting my elbows on his ratty old desk, jotting down memories of old friends whose faces won't let me go home yet. I hate being Sergeant. And I still remember when it was all I wanted in the world.

Róisín would have laughed at my fate. A friendly chuckle, though, not a curse. Even if I deserve one now.

"The *guards*?" It was ten years ago and Róisín's voice echoed across the street from the café. We were a couple of snot-nosed girlies with Sacred Heart uniform blazers letting our legs dangle from the edge of the pier. We had just nicked sweets from across the street and stuffed them up our jumpers, making us look like strange pregnant pixies with sugary eyes.

"Why not the guards?" I remember replying with a firm edge to my voice, chewing my way around a gummi bear that tasted medicinal rather than fruity. She'd hurt my feelings. Again. Rosie didn't mean to, it was just something hiding behind her voice that whispered to me that no matter how hard I tried or how ambitious I was, I'd never be half as desirable or naturally charismatic as her. I sometimes watched her and Aoife, her twin, from across the classroom during Miss Carlow's Irish class. They smacked their chewing gum the same way, true enough. But where Aoife was content to let her natural beauty be discovered in its own good time, Róisín tarted hers up with white makeup and mascara before the age of twelve, much to the consternation of the good nuns. She didn't

trust in other people's ability to see the goodness she kept hidden behind that kabuki veil of hers. So she kept pushing. And that afternoon by the town square, she wasn't easing up on me, either.

"Right, so," she said, choosing a green candy shaped like a pear and sawing it in half with her teeth, leaving me the translucent one that always tasted bland. "Want to be top cop, then, is that it? Sit in that little red guardhouse with those other farts, and give out parking tickets to Dutch tourists? Glamorous, that's what you are, Bronagh. Really daring."

"I want to solve crimes," I persisted, grabbing at a gummi candy shaped like a cherry, a half-second too late. Rosie threw it into the air and caught it on the way down, like a trained seal. The hatred I would feel later began bubbling up into my prepubescent limbs even then, like hot sour milk. Who was she to laugh at my dreams? One day at school, the nuns had handed out those *What will I do when I grow up?* questionnaires that were supposed to sharpen young minds for the adult drudgery ahead.

Aoife had answered "Joe Maxi," meaning she wanted to drive her own cab one day, which pleased the nuns not one bit. Fiona, older by all of us by that precious two years, said her wish was to become a big game hunter in Africa and own a summer home on the Nile. That didn't find much favor, either. The nuns would have been pleased to know that she never got to see the pyramids. My own pious wish to join the force drew some stares, but even the headmistress could imagine little Miss Bronagh Daltry in uniform, as long as she deferred to the menfolk, I'm sure. I wonder what she might have thought of me as Sergeant on the top floor, pouring my heart out to strangers like

yourself. Don't take that personally. It's just that confession was never in my job description. It's rather the other way around, if you get my meaning.

TOWN DRUNK Rosie had answered on her own page, and in capital letters, too. When she came back from the headmistress' office on the second floor, I could tell from her flushed cheeks and ruffled skirt that she'd been caned, and good. But she smiled. She kept her promise, besides. Even the gobshites down at the pub who fancied themselves drinkers of some repute had nothing on my Rosie when she started in on the dark pints.

Did I just call her "my Rosie?" That was the Walsh sisters' quality, you understand. No matter how furious Fiona or the twins would often make you, their irrepressible appetite for messing about made you follow them through Hell on a hot day.

"Solve crimes?" Rosie repeated with no malice in her all too grownup voice as she let me fight for the last sweet that had any color left in it. Raspberry. I swallowed it too fast, lest my phantom sister beat me to it, as usual.

"That's right," I said, feeling the invisible uniform already cover my pale knees and threadbare jumper. It made me feel invincible, even if it was only an afternoon daydream. "Any crime will do. And I'll getcha some day too, you desperado, you." I gave her a nudge.

"Oh, willya now?" Róisín said, cracking the kind of smile that was about to make her a town legend. "Chase me down the street for a bag of sweets? Then you best remember that we're co-conspirators." She winked. An invitation to that invisible fourth sister membership card that was always just slightly out of reach.

"I'll be the one carrying the badge and the gun," I answered, nudging her back harder.

Rosie grew silent and serious for a moment, as if she could peer across the bay and into both our futures.

“Then you’d better protect me, hadn’t you, Sergeant Daltry?”

And I wanted to. I did, you must believe me. I was simply too afraid.

But there’s still one left for me to save. And I won’t go back on my word.

BRONAGH'S CONFESSIONAL (Part five)

Whenever my mother used to send me down the street for smokes, I took longer than I should have. And that wasn't because main street in Castletownbere was ever anything that would give you any kind of thrill. Still isn't. No, I lingered because I knew that I'd probably end up right in the middle of Aoife's circle of friends.

If it was over the weekend, I might not come home until after supper. For where Róisín alternated between attracting people before shoving them away, her twin quietly gathered the town rejects, the geeks, and the just plain disoriented children in need of some guidance. You could always find them slap bang in the town square, stealing puffs on ciggies far more illicit than the ones my mother smoked, or sneaking pints of Bulmer's cider that Jonno from McSorley's pretended not to know about when customers took their orders outside. It was one of the only places in town I knew I'd feel welcome, and with no reservations. None of the other eejits made cracks about six-shooters or police women in need of real crimes to chase after. So far as I could tell, Aoife never actively did anything to create this sense of safety other than sit down on the bench, put up her pink combat boots, and jam her fists into her pockets. It was like a ritual. Kids flocked to her like pigeons to breadcrumbs. I felt more like a crumb myself than any kind of graceful creature in those days, to be straight with you.

With Aoife's and her sisters' parents dead, it was their aunt Moira who filled those sensible shoes. She would usually appear late in the afternoon, choosing not to see the blue smoke enveloping her niece and her friends like a shroud. "Time for your dinner," she would say, and without haste or judgment. I liked Moira Hegarty then, and I'm not ashamed to admit it, even if everyone in town now agrees that they always knew

she was nuts. A killer, people say aloud near the SuperValu; they don't even bother lowering their voices now that there's no risk any longer of being overheard by someone who might do something about it. A sick, demented old buzzard. Sure. But she was glorious once. I was there, I saw it. Beautiful, even.

“Eat up, my darlings,” she chirped before our Friday dinners up at her house – the one she later turned into a bed-and-breakfast. That was all before she began to populate her house with statues of the Saints, and started to burn the food. Before Jim. Before any of it. There was always a spare seat at the table for me, just in case my own mother's dinner didn't quite measure up, which was often. It was on these occasions, with orangeade on tap and breaded chicken cutlets within reach that I felt like a proper sister to Aoife, Róisín and Fiona. There's nothing like the quiet agreement of silently chewing children to cement a pact of almost-sisterhood.

That's the word to pay attention to, though, isn't it? Almost.

Because just as surely as the mighty crowns of trees don't grow into heaven, those dinners began to fizzle out as the Walsh sisters began to notice boys. Or, should I say, when those gobshites began paying real attention to *their* collective female loveliness. Dirty pints of stout replaced the orangeade. Yours truly was never that pretty or that noticeable, so in the end it was just me and the girls' aunt Moira around the dinner table, with only Aoife skirting by to grab a piece of cake on the way out the door. Aunt Moira – yes, I called her that, too, because she let me – was a gem. She told me not to worry about any of that lark, to follow my bliss and apply for the entrance exam into the guards as soon as I was old enough. I often answered by crying my tears into the bosom of her starched white shirts when I was certain nobody else could hear or see.

A murderer? Sure, I know she is. I read the papers, too. I buried my friends and even spoke in front of their caskets. I've paid my dues. But put yourself in my well-worn shoes for just a little bit longer than it takes to agree with the obvious, and you'll see that the passion that swept across our town and into the hollow heart of Moira Hegarty was not of the ordinary kind. What Darling Jim Quick breathed into Castletownbere was no mere trick of the hand, or some romance story meant for dullards with no imagination.

He made Moira feel more than special once more; he convinced her that she was deserving of love. And not just any love, mind you, but his very own. Yes, yes. I know that Moira is the extreme example of what Jim wrought on us all, but was the effect really so unusual? Wasn't Moira merely the one person who needed to be loved just a smidgen more than the rest of us? I think she was. But there are limits to my understanding. She did kill two of my best friends in the whole world. I was speaking clinically. So far as I know anything about that, anyway.

I told you before that I hesitated because I was afraid, and it's true. When Jim's stories took him around our county, I got copies of the Garda reports, too. Sexual assaults. Outright murders. Shadows in the night, and the growl of a motorcycle. I knew sure as shite that Jim had done it when I read the case file of the widow Julie Ann Holland, over near Drimoleague. Then I saw him one day, sauntering into McSorley's just as bold as you please. "Have one with me?" he asked, and I found myself in front of a pint at one in the afternoon, in full uniform and everything. I wasn't drunk on his charm, or the beer. I just couldn't believe it. My Sergeant played cards with him, too, for Jaysus' sake! What would you have done? "Erm, Sergeant Murphy, sir, I think I know who the serial killer is. It's that handsome fella who makes sure to lose to you at poker so

you'll remain his friend." Can't you just see it? Goodbye, uniform, and hello SuperValu cashier's desk.

So here we are, then. The moment of truth. I've told you of my sins but in a way, I've only just begun to rattle them off, haven't I? I apologize, but as I've talked to you, I've shredded that report I intended to send to Garda HQ, begging them to punish me. They'd never believe me, is what.

Besides: There is one person still alive whom I will do everything to save, even if it means laying down what I have left of this life.

My name is Sergeant Bronagh Daltry, and I hope your judgment on my actions won't be as harsh as the one I have reserved for myself.