PURBLIND - SAMPLE

Purblind adj. Lacking in vision, insight or understanding.
O purblind race of miserable men,
How many among us at this very hour
Do forge a life-long trouble for ourselves,
By taking true for false, or false for true.

- Alfred, Lord Tennyson

1962

PROLOGUE
10.30pm, June 10

The hands which are about to commit murder are faultless, save for a little weathering of the skin.

The nails are pink almonds, with a milky half moon at the cuticles. On one finger there is a ring which may be gold but might not be. Nothing is pure any more.

The child is asleep, as he is most of the time these days. His thin legs are limp and the blond hair, grown deliberately long, cannot disguise the fact that the facial features are not as they should be.

His eyes, were they open, would be vacant, lighting up only for the brightest of colours or the most frenzied activity within his field of vision. The mouth, held now in the faintest imitation of a smile, is incapable of accommodating food except with the greatest patience on the part of the person by whom it is offered.

Once, long ago, he was the essence of hope. His father imagined him as the person who would achieve all that he had not. His mother, holding him in her arms at birth, touched a cheek against his wet hair and felt the future.

His grandmother … well, grandmothers are grandmothers and the baby gave her a stake in a world that had seemed to be slipping out of her control.

The riverbank is far from solid, and the killer's feet slide from time to time in the treacherous wet earth. With each step, it offers up odours of decay and renewal.

There is the smell of freshly cut grass and the river clutters past, consuming everything in its path. Soil becomes silt and tree roots come to depend on water rather than earth for nourishment.

It is difficult to find a place. Some, where the stream is flowing fast, are too shallow. Others, while deep, are too still. Eventually there appears a basin, created by a current which combines violent movement with a flow that feeds into the main river.

And here the hands of the killer lay the child in the water. For a brief moment he is unaware of what is happening, but then instinct takes over and his normally quiet limbs begin to thrash. His face, beneath the surface, ripples like a memory. Bubbles stream from his nose and mouth. The hands hold him under until everything is peaceful, and then they allow him to drift away like a beach ball on a deceptive wave.

His red T-shirt balloons with trapped air and for a time the body can be seen like a marker, tracing the eddies of the current until the shirt deflates and gradually disappears from view.

The killer watches it until it fades in the distance and in the half-light, as if expecting something to have changed as a result of this dreadful, desperate act. On the opposite bank, the blue flower heads of the flax crop nod in conspiracy with the breeze and there are animal noises in the air. A heron screeches as it takes flight.

The killer runs to escape the terrors of the approaching night, crashing through fields of knee-high grasses, wondering if anyone has seen, racing breathlessly for home, praying for the world to stand still for these next ten minutes, panicking until at last the house appears, magnificent in its whitewashed simplicity, keeps running, hardly taking time to open the door, and finally lies on the bed, melting into its calico softness, knowing that this is not the end of anything, but simply a beginning.

1963

CHAPTER ONE

The American, his linen suit the colour of butter, arrives in the town on a warm summer day with a breeze of rumour circulating in his wake. The sun feels like compensation. Less than two weeks ago, on June 11, Ireland had its wettest day since records began.

In years to come, it will be asked how he chose here; and how, with his combination of guile and charm, he managed to fashion such a terrible story from the quiet passing of ordinary lives. Some will say it was nothing more than luck or chance. Others will believe that something more sinister was at work. And, in the way of country towns, it will be this latter understanding which ultimately becomes the accepted version of events. Few will recall that the fault lay within the town itself.

Even in many years from now, his name – Crawford Earley – will be spoken quickly or not at all, in case some lasting curse should be at work.

In the beginning, of course, he is just a visitor, if a little more exotic than most. He says hello in the street to people he has never met, particularly women, and soon he hands out tips where none is expected. He remarks on the sweet smell of burning turf in the air and, because the temperatures are lower than he is used to, takes to the wearing of autumn clothing, his tanned face hinting of beaches and orange groves in Florida or California.

On this first day, he is amused by his room in the town's only hotel. It has a fireplace - imagine! - and a bed whose mattress is supported by something resembling chainmail stretched onto a metal frame. The enamel of the bath is furred and stained brown for want of a plumber. And yet, Crawford Earley feels strangely at home. He places his typewriter – a modern Imperial – on the kidney-shaped dressing table and lays a sheaf of paper beside it. Between the leaves – not by necessity, merely from force of habit - are layers of jet-black carbon paper. Here he will craft the stories that will contribute to tearing the town apart.

For the time being he does not know this. He is here to do nothing more than recount the visit to Ireland of President John F Kennedy, a visit which already resembles that of a movie star or singer. The President will be welcomed by excited crowds, in much the same way as the Beatles have recently been feted at airports in Germany and the USA. But there will be little crying or fainting. Kennedy, whose status also resembles that of a religious icon, is too important for such frippery, such uncontrolled emotion.

The weeping will wait until November 22nd this same year, when Lee Harvey Oswald's bullet will shatter the President's skull. Ireland will mourn as it has not mourned before. Photographs of Jack Kennedy will remain on top of china cabinets and on walls for years to come. Tucked into the corner of the gilt frames will be small cards with religious relics attached: a tiny square of material from a garment worn by Padre Pio; a strand of hair from Blessed Oliver Plunkett, whose severed head, blackened with age, is preserved in a church in Drogheda; or something connected with Saint Martin de Porres or Saint Anthony or one of the many legions who share their title.

For now, though, Ireland is joyful. There is a feeling of electricity in the air. Sleepy towns like this one are suddenly charged with the knowledge that they are to become part of history. The anticipation is almost sexual in its intensity.

It is this that Crawford Earley has come to document. Jack Dunne, his News Editor back in Boston, has told him he wants every last drop of colour from Kennedy's visit to be visible in his words. He has chosen Earley because his prose and his eye for detail show great promise. Dunne believes that he could, in fact, be a future Pulitzer Prize winner. Given the right encouragement, of course. And he has plenty of time. He is only 25 years old. This is his first foreign assignment.

The town is laid out like a cross of Saint Brigid. At the centre there is a square, and from each corner there radiates a road, each one of the four at right angles to the next. On the square are Mahon's pub and grocery, O'Dwyer's pub, a butcher's shop, a small electrical repair shop, a newsagent and tobacconist, Doyle's Hotel and a bakery. The river runs along one side, so that the baker's apprentices can watch the wildlife shake itself awake as the sun rises each morning. They pound the dough on a marble slab while looking through the window at the rear of the building. From the window there is a sheer drop to the water and the lower outside wall is coated with a slick, dark green alga.

Across the river, drawing water from it, is the chemical plant which, six years ago, became the town's biggest employer.

Crawford Earley leaves the hotel and walks the short distance to O'Dwyer's pub. It is five o'clock and the air bears the aroma of beef, onions and potatoes cooking slowly in battered aluminium pots. There are few people around. The bar is almost empty.

As he enters, a handful of grizzled faces turn to look at him. On the mahogany bar top is the amber glow of whiskey and the dark shadow of half consumed pints of stout and porter, the foam melting in slabs down the walls of the glasses.

“Good evening, Sir,” Earley says to the barman.

“A fine one, certainly,“ the barman answers at speed and in an almost impenetrable accent.

The reporter takes a second or two to translate what the man has said, smiles an all-purpose smile, orders a lager and seats himself on a stool. He looks jarringly out of place with his fine clothes and carefully cut hair. The other customers – all of advancing years – are wearing dark suits which were once their Sunday best but are now work apparel. Their shirts – again, once Sunday best – are white and without collars. Everyone is suddenly silent, waiting for the barman to perform his civic duty and prompt this strange intruder to give them something of his history.

Earley smiles. “Quiet, isn’t it?” he asks, but his small joke is lost.

“Just arrived, are you?” the barman wonders.

“Yes,” says Earley, “just arrived. Via Dublin. And before that New York. And before that, Boston. Neighbourhood of south Dorchester.”

He pauses.

“My name is Crawford Earley,” he says. “Until recently, night city reporter with the Boston Times-Inquirer. Recently, temporary foreign correspondent. Posted to Tullough, County Wexford, pending the arrival of John F Kennedy esquire, thirty-fifth President of the United States.”

“You’re very welcome, Mr Earley,” the barman says. “Staying in Doyle’s, are you?”

“Yes.”

“The finest. That hotel and this bar were once owned by the same family. But you know how things happen among kin. They had a falling out over something or other. One of the brothers, Ciaran, kept the pub. Patricia, the sister, ran the hotel. The two of them never spoke again, even though they were running businesses not a hundred yards from each other.”

“Family hatred,” says one of the old men at the bar. “The purest kind.”

“Patrick O’Dwyer, Ciaran’s great grandson, owns the pub now. If you’re looking for a story to put in your newspaper, he has one for you. He has a cask of whiskey that was produced in Tullamore in 1938. Twenty-five years ago. President Kennedy, if he does us the honour of stopping on the way back from Wexford, will be the first man to taste it. Twenty-five years old. What do you think of that?”

“Produced in the year of my birth. It’s certainly a good line,” says Earley. “I’ll use it.”

He decides to quote O’Dwyer in his first despatch, even if he does not get the chance to talk to him directly. A little artistic licence.

“And what about the people of the town? Are they all looking forward to the great man’s visit?”

“The flags will be out,” the barman says.

There is a television high on the wall in one corner of the pub, and now it broadcasts the Telifis Eireann news. The tiny square screen is almost lost at the centre of the huge cabinet. The Bakelite tuning knobs and the fabric-covered speakers take up more space than it does. There are flecks of gold thread in the beige cloth. The picture is normal for the time, but would look to someone even twenty years later like something broadcast from the moon, with its lack of contrast and snowstorm texture.

“President John F Kennedy will leave Washington tomorrow for an official visit to Berlin … the scene of one of the bitterest confrontations of recent years between America and the USSR,” the newsreader says. He is a man of middle age, with thick-rimmed spectacles and hair Brylcreemed back.

“The President hopes to resolve the dispute regarding access to the various sectors of the city, which was divided under the Potsdam Treaty. America has consistently registered its strong disapproval of the building of the Berlin Wall.”

Crawford Earley smiles briefly. The rumour mill in Washington and Boston tells a different version of events. Some believe that it suits Jack Kennedy very well to have a wall through Berlin, simply because here is a place in which – barring something unforeseen - he will never have to use nuclear weapons.

“So. This is the biggest event to affect the town in some years, I’d be right in saying?” Crawford Earley says to no one in particular.

“The biggest,” the barman answers, but Earley is sure he has seen a glance pass between him and one of his customers, a man who, like the others, has the experience of years etched upon his face and hands. But who, unlike those around him, has not, until now, paid much attention to the reporter.

“The biggest,” the man echoes. “Tell me, do you fellows never get tired of asking questions?”

“Asking questions becomes a way of life,” Crawford Earley says. “Besides, if I didn’t ask questions, I wouldn’t be much use to the folks who read the

paper. Reporters would be like the Press in Moscow, printing exactly what Mr Khruschev wanted us to print."

"A fine speech, Mr Earley," the barman says. "But what you really want is a story, and I'm only after giving you one. Write about a cask of whiskey fit for a President."

Earley is not sure if this advice is born of naivete or mistrust, but he responds anyway.

"It'll take a little more than that to excite the readers back in Boston," he says. "Now, gentlemen, I'll take my leave of you. Thank you for your hospitality."

He stands up and turns to depart, leaving a red ten-shilling note on the counter.

"A drink for everybody," he says.

The regulars are too shocked even to say thank you. No one can remember the last time a stranger left ten shillings on any bar between here and Waterford.

Earley looks at his watch. The gold hands show two minutes to six. As he turns right, in the opposite direction to his hotel, the Angelus bell begins to toll. In houses nearby, families kneel before cream-tiled fireplaces reciting the Hail Mary before sitting down to tea. He is now the only soul in the street, and he decides, for want of something better to do, to explore the town in a little more detail.

He walks to the hump-backed bridge beside the bakery and stands at its highest point, looking downstream. The river is in its lower course here, cutting a wide, crooked groove through the deep green countryside. In places the brown water is as still as a pond. In others it swirls and dances around rocks that it still cannot bring itself to accommodate, even after all these centuries.

Rivers fascinate him; have always fascinated him. Beauty and treachery bound up in the same package. Even from here he can see the huge swathes of bright green lichen extending from the bank across the flat surface of the water. Lichen that looks as solid as grass. Only if you are raised beside a river do you understand its secrets and dangers. He knows this.

Earley remembers a kid named Luke Allen who stepped on a sheet of lichen just like this. He was eight years old and was trying to retrieve a ball. Luke Allen, who was from the city and did not understand rivers, disappeared below the surface and was not found for two days. As he sank, his legs tangling in the weeds, the lichen closed over his head as if he had never existed.

When his body turned up the school Principal announced the death in a sombre morning assembly. Crawford Earley wondered at the time how Luke Allen could

have disappeared so quickly and absolutely. One day he was the toughest kid in the class, able to win a fight against boys twice his weight; the next, vanished, airbrushed out of the picture that childhood leaves imprinted upon the mind. He struggles to remember his face, but apart from a dusting of blond hair he cannot see Luke Allen. He is simply the boy who was swallowed by water and weed, as if the purpose of his entire existence was to send a shiver down Crawford Earley's spine each time he stood beside a river.

He crosses the bridge and walks towards the chemical factory. It rears out of the surrounding countryside like something forced to the surface by pressures within the earth. A high wire fence surrounds its various angular buildings. Within, everything is coated with a white dust. He guesses it to be lime – a constituent of several agricultural fertilisers. As he approaches the main entrance he is startled by the ferocity of a German shepherd dog on the other side of the wire. It hurls itself at the fence, snarling and barking, barely taking time to draw breath. It does not stop even when Crawford Earley backs away.

"They starve it to make it more vicious," a voice says. "It'll have your hand off if you go too close. There should be a law against it."

"There probably already is," Earley says.

The woman, he guesses, is in her early thirties. She has a breathtaking beauty. As he looks at her, he foolishly conjures up the cliché of dark-haired Irish Colleens, perfect complexions, rose cheeks, modesty.

But while she lives up to every element of the stereotype, she is somehow different. Earley thinks for a moment that she does not belong here. But for the accident of birth, she might have spent each harvest morning twisting plums from trees in southern Italy or collecting olives in Palestine.

At a time when few women in rural Ireland wear make-up, her eyes radiate a blue mascara light. The irises are blue also. Her nose is an American comic book nose, the nostrils the shape of perfect tears.

"My name is Crawford Earley," he says.

"Aisling Gunn," she says. And smiles. "I won't ask you what you're doing here. I'm sure some people in town have asked enough questions for all of us."

"You're right there," says Earley. "A stranger doesn't exactly go unnoticed."

"Pay them no heed," she says. "They have no lives of their own, so they have to live in everyone else's." She picks a twig from the hawthorn hedge and breaks the barbs from it, slowly and singly, dropping them to the ground.

“And you?” Crawford Earley asks. “What do you do?”

“This and that,” she says. “I don’t work, if that’s what you mean. My days are my own. So I come down here and watch the river, and I wonder when this factory will close its gates forever. But that’s one wish I’ll be denied.”

“Why would you want it to close?”

“A long story, Mr Earley, and I won’t bore you with it now. Anyway, look at that poor dog. Is that not reason enough?”

“If it’s never known anything else, perhaps it’s not suffering.”

“Just because you suffer every day of your life, it doesn’t make it any easier to bear,” she says. “That’s where most people are mistaken.”

She sees a look of puzzlement cross his face and knows he does not have the courage to question further.

“Are you married?” His awkward enquiry surprises her. It is not the kind of question anyone expects from an American newly arrived in town and who has only just learned your name.

“Does it matter?”

“Yes ma’am,” he says. “It matters.”

“Why?”

“Because, ma’am, it’s my job in this situation to be everyone’s friend. I don’t want anyone to make an enemy of me because I’ve been seen making small talk with his wife.”

“In that case, Mr Earley, you will be interested to know that I am, indeed, married. I should, in fact, be at home cooking my husband’s tea at this moment. But my being here will surprise no-one in this town. I get something of a fool’s pardon, so if occasionally I don’t cook my husband’s tea, nobody says anything. Least of all my husband. People smile. They make conversation about the weather. They ask how I feel. I tell them I’m fine. And so the days go on, Mr Earley. If Mrs Gunn is at the river, it’s just a fact of life. Like the rain on the ground, or the sun in the sky, or the horses in the field.”

“I see,” says Crawford Earley. Even though he does not see at all.

“I take it your presence here has something to do with President Kennedy,” she says.

“You take it correctly,” he says.

“My God,” she says. “You’re not one of those Secret Service men, are you?”

“Nothing so exciting,” says Crawford Earley. “I’m a reporter. My job is to tell the folks how the President is spending their tax dollars. How the people of Ireland are awaiting his presence. And how one of the two most powerful men in the world returned to the family homestead.”

“Dunganstown,” she says. “It’s not much to write home about.” She realises she has made a joke, without meaning to. Earley smiles, and the smile turns to a laugh.

“Not much to write home about,” he repeats. “I might use that.”

“Be my guest,” she says.

Under the bridge a small boat appears. Its occupant, a man dressed in fishing apparel, kills the outboard engine and lets the vessel drift into the reeds. He casts, and Earley hears a fast whirr echo from the fields into the quiet evening.

The fisherman reels in his empty line. He looks up to the bridge. Earley knows from his manner that he does this every day at the same time. He gauges, too, that the man also knows whom he will see there. He raises a hand in greeting and Aisling Gunn returns his wave. He watches for perhaps a second longer than he might on any other evening, his eyes registering the American. But Aisling Gunn is right. Her being at the river at this time is simply a fact of life.

“If you’re here every day at the same time,” he says, “I might have the pleasure of seeing you again tomorrow.”

He hopes he has not gone too far.

“I didn’t say I was here at exactly the same time, but if I am I shall see you then.”

She turns, her blue print dress caught for an instant in the breeze, and smoothes the cotton fabric against her thighs in a well-practised movement. She walks, without looking back, up the road to where she lives. Earley entertains for a moment the idea of following her to see where she goes. But only for a moment. That would be madness. Instead, he retraces his steps to the town square.

When he reaches the hotel, he washes, changes his shirt, and repairs to the dining room for dinner. Although it is only seven thirty he is the last of the guests to dine. He gets the feeling that people are put out by his timing. Several of the tables are already laid for breakfast, and he has the impression from the activity of the staff that food is being reheated just for him.

The evidence is on the plate when it arrives. The potatoes, instead of the firm buttery ovals the other guests received, are broken. The gravy has lost its sheen.

The skin of the peas is puckered. He will have to be earlier in future. It is his first lesson in fitting in with the town's rules. This is a place where nothing gives. The system does not change to suit outsiders. The outsiders must change to suit the system.

Having eaten little, he thanks the waitress and ascends to his room.

He sits in front of his typewriter and writes. There are no telex machines here, so he must dictate his copy by telephone. It is a laborious process, involving a call from the reception desk of the hotel to the local exchange and thence to Dublin, before finally being connected to Boston. The hotel's telephone number has only one digit.

As he speaks, he is aware that the entire population of the lobby is listening. When he finishes, a red-faced man slaps him on the shoulder and tells him he has made the town world famous. The man's breath smells of tobacco and beer, sweetened by the recent addition of a whiskey chaser.

"Thank you," Earley mutters, not sure what else to say. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

Later, he lies on his bed and stares at the smoke stained ceiling. On another day and in another place he would be thinking about the next day's angle on the story. But today he is not. He is thinking of Aisling Gunn.