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**ELEGY
FOR
APRIL**

A NOVEL

1

IT WAS THE WORST OF WINTER WEATHER, AND APRIL LATIMER WAS missing.

For days a February fog had been down and showed no sign of lifting. In the muffled silence the city seemed bewildered, like a man whose sight has suddenly failed. People vague as invalids groped their way through the murk, keeping close to the housefronts and the railings and stopping tentatively at street corners to feel with a wary foot for the pavement's edge. Motorcars with their headlights on loomed like giant insects, trailing milky dribbles of exhaust smoke from their rear ends. The evening paper listed each day's toll of mishaps. There had been a serious collision at the canal end of the Rathgar Road involving three cars and an army motorcyclist. A small boy was run over by a coal lorry at the Five Lamps, but did not die—his mother swore to the reporter sent to interview her that it was the miraculous medal of the Virgin Mary she made the child wear round his neck that had saved him. In Clanbrassil Street an old moneylender was waylaid and robbed in broad daylight by what he claimed was a gang of housewives; the Guards were following a definite line of inquiry. A shawlie in Moore Street was knocked

down by a van that did not stop, and now the woman was in a coma in St. James's. And all day long the foghorns boomed out in the bay.

Phoebe Griffin considered herself April's best friend, but she had heard nothing from her in a week and she was convinced something had happened. She did not know what to do. Of course, April might just have gone off, without telling anyone—that was how April was, unconventional, some would say wild—but Phoebe was sure that was not the case.

The windows of April's first-floor flat on Herbert Place had a blank, withholding aspect, not just because of the fog: windows look like that when the rooms behind them are empty; Phoebe could not say how, but they do. She crossed to the other side of the road and stood at the railings with the canal at her back and looked up at the terrace of tall houses, their lowering, dark brick exteriors shining wetly in the shrouded air. She was not sure what she was hoping to see—a curtain twitching, a face at a window?—but there was nothing, and no one. The damp was seeping through her clothes, and she drew in her shoulders against the cold. She heard footsteps on the towpath behind her, but when she turned to look she could not see anyone through the impenetrable, hanging grayness. The bare trees with their black limbs upflung appeared almost human. The unseen walker coughed once; it sounded like a fox barking.

She went back and climbed the stone steps to the door again, and again pressed the bell above the little card with April's name on it, though she knew there would be no answer. Grains of mica glittered in the granite of the steps; strange, these little secret gleamings, under the fog. A ripping whine started up in the saw-mill on the other side of the canal and she realized that what she had been smelling without knowing it was the scent of freshly cut timber.

She walked up to Baggot Street and turned right, away from

the canal. The heels of her flat shoes made a deadened tapping on the pavement. It was lunchtime on a weekday but it felt more like a Sunday twilight. The city seemed almost deserted, and the few people she met flickered past sinisterly, like phantoms. She was reasoning with herself. The fact that she had not seen or heard from April since the middle of the previous week did not mean April had been gone for that long—it did not mean she was gone at all. And yet not a word in all that length of time, not even a phone call? With someone else a week's silence might not be remarked, but April was the kind of person people worried about, not because she was unable to look after herself but because she was altogether too sure she could.

The lamps were lit on either side of the door of the Shelbourne Hotel, they glowed eerily, like giant dandelion clocks. The caped and frock-coated porter, idling at the door, lifted his gray top hat and saluted her. She would have asked Jimmy Minor to meet her in the hotel, but Jimmy disdained such a swank place and would not set foot in it unless he was following up on a story or interviewing some visiting notable. She passed on, crossing Kildare Street, and went down the area steps to the Country Shop. Even through her glove she could feel how cold and greasily wet the stair rail was. Inside, though, the little café was warm and bright, with a comforting fug of tea and baked bread and cakes. She took a table by the window. There were a few other customers, all of them women, in hats, with shopping bags and parcels. Phoebe asked for a pot of tea and an egg sandwich. She might have waited to order until Jimmy came, but she knew he would be late, as he always was—deliberately, she suspected, for he liked to have it thought that he was so much busier than everyone else. The waitress was a large pink girl with a double chin and a sweet smile. There was a wen wedged in the groove beside her left nostril that Phoebe tried not to stare at. The tea that she brought was almost black, and

bitter with tannin. The sandwich, cut in neat triangles, was slightly curled at the corners.

Where was April now, at this moment, and what was she doing? For she must be somewhere, even if not here. Any other possibility was not to be entertained.

A half hour passed before Jimmy arrived. She saw him through the window skipping down the steps, and she was struck as always by how slight he was, a miniature person, more like a wizened schoolboy than a man. He wore a transparent plastic raincoat the color of watery ink. He had thin red hair and a narrow, freckled face, and was always disheveled, as if he had been sleeping in his clothes and had just jumped out of bed. He was putting a match to a cigarette as he came through the door. He saw her and crossed to her table and sat down quickly, crushing his raincoat into a ball and stowing it under his chair. Jimmy did everything in a hurry, as if each moment were a deadline he was afraid he was about to miss. "Well, Pheeb," he said, "what's up?" There were sparkles of moisture in his otherwise lifeless hair. The collar of his brown corduroy jacket bore a light snowfall of dandruff, and when he leaned forward she caught a whiff of his tobacco-staled breath. Yet he had the sweetest smile, it was always a surprise, lighting up that pinched, sharp little face. It was one of his amusements to pretend that he was in love with Phoebe, and he would complain theatrically to anyone prepared to listen of her cruelty and hard-heartedness in refusing to entertain his advances. He was a crime reporter on the *Evening Mail*, though surely there were not enough crimes committed in this sleepy city to keep him as busy as he claimed to be.

She told him about April and how long it was since she had heard from her. "Only a week?" Jimmy said. "She's probably gone off with some guy. She is slightly notorious, you know." Jimmy affected an accent from the movies; it had started as a joke at his own expense—"Jimmy Minor, ace reporter, at your service,

lady!”—but it had become a habit and now he seemed not to notice how it grated on those around him who had to put up with it.

“If she was going somewhere,” Phoebe said, “she would have let me know, I’m sure she would.”

The waitress came, and Jimmy ordered a glass of ginger beer and a beef sandwich—“Plenty of horseradish, baby, slather it on, I like it hot.” He pronounced it *hat*. The girl tittered. When she had gone he whistled softly and said, “That’s some wart.”

“Wen,” Phoebe said.

“What?”

“It’s a wen, not a wart.”

Jimmy had finished his cigarette, and now he lit a new one. No one smoked as much as Jimmy did; he had once told Phoebe that he often found himself wishing he could have a smoke while he was already smoking, and that indeed on more than one occasion he had caught himself lighting a cigarette even though the one he had going was there in the ashtray in front of him. He leaned back on the chair and crossed one of his stick-like little legs on the other and blew a bugle-shaped stream of smoke at the ceiling. “So what do you think?” he said.

Phoebe was stirring a spoon round and round in the cold dregs in her cup. “I think something has happened to her,” she said quietly.

He gave her a quick, sideways glance. “Are you really worried? I mean, really?”

She shrugged, not wanting to seem melodramatic, not giving him cause to laugh at her. He was still watching her sidelong, frowning. At a party one night in her flat he had told her he thought her friendship with April Latimer was funny, and added, “Funny peculiar, that’s to say, not funny ha ha.” He had been a little drunk and afterwards they had tacitly agreed to pretend to have forgotten this exchange, but the fact of what he had implied

lingered between them uncomfortably. And laugh it off though she might, it had made Phoebe brood, and the memory of it still troubled her, a little.

“You’re probably right, of course,” she said now. “Probably it’s just April being April, skipping off and forgetting to tell anyone.”

But no, she did not believe it; she could not. Whatever else April might be she was not thoughtless like that, not where her friends were concerned.

The waitress came with Jimmy’s order. He bit a half-moon from his sandwich and, chewing, took a deep draw of his cigarette. “What about the Prince of Bongo-Bongoland?” he asked thickly. He swallowed hard, blinking from the effort. “Have you made inquiries of His Majesty?” He was smiling now but there was a glitter to his smile and the sharp tip of an eyetooth showed for a second at the side. He was jealous of Patrick Ojukwu; all the men in their circle were jealous of Patrick, nicknamed the Prince. She often wondered, in a troubled and troubling way, about Patrick and April—had they, or had they not? It had all the makings of a juicy scandal, the wild white girl and the polished black man.

“More to the point,” Phoebe said, “what about Mrs. Latimer?”

Jimmy made a show of starting back as if in terror, throwing up a hand. “Hold up!” he cried. “The blackamoor is one thing, but Morgan le Fay is another altogether.” April’s mother had a fearsome reputation among April’s friends.

“I should telephone her, though. She must know where April is.”

Jimmy arched an eyebrow skeptically. “You think so?”

He was right to doubt it, she knew; April had long ago stopped confiding in her mother; in fact, the two were barely on speaking terms.

“What about her brother, then?” she said.

Jimmy laughed at that. “The Grand Gynie of Fitzwilliam Square, plumber to the quality, no pipe too small to probe?”

“Don’t be disgusting, Jimmy.” She took a drink of her tea, but it was cold. “Although I know April doesn’t like him.”

“Doesn’t like? Try loathes.”

“Then what should I do?” she asked.

He sipped his ginger beer and grimaced and said plaintively: “Why you can’t meet in a pub like any normal person, I don’t know.” He seemed already to have lost interest in the topic of April’s whereabouts. They spoke desultorily of other things for a while, then he took up his cigarettes and matches and fished his raincoat from under his chair and said he had to go. Phoebe signaled to the waitress to bring the bill—she knew she would have to pay, Jimmy was always broke—and presently they were climbing to the street up the damp, slimed steps. At the top, Jimmy put a hand on her arm. “Don’t worry,” he said. “About April, I mean. She’ll turn up.”

A faint, warmish smell of dung came to them from across the street, where by the railings of the Green there was a line of horse-drawn jaunting cars that offered tours of the city. In the fog they had a spectral air, the horses standing unnaturally still with heads lowered dejectedly and the caped and top-hatted drivers perched in attitudes of motionless expectancy on their high seats, as if awaiting imminent word to set off for the Borgo Pass or Dr. Jekyll’s rooms.

“You going back to work?” Jimmy asked. He was glancing about with eyes narrowed; clearly in his mind he was already somewhere else.

“No,” Phoebe said. “It’s my half-day off.” She took a breath and felt the wet air swarm down coldly into her chest. “I’m going to see someone. My—my father, actually. I suppose you wouldn’t care to come along?”

He did not meet her eye and busied himself lighting another cigarette, turning aside and crouching over his cupped hands. “Sorry,” he said, straightening. “Crimes to expose, stories to

concoct, reputations to besmirch—no rest for the busy news-hound.” He was a good half head shorter than she was; his plastic coat gave off a chemical odor. “See you around, kid.” He set off in the direction of Grafton Street but stopped and turned and came back again. “By the way,” he said, “what’s the difference between a wen and a wart?”

When he had gone she stood for a while irresolute, slowly pulling on her calfskin gloves. She had that heart-sinking feeling she had at this time every Thursday when the weekly visit to her father was in prospect. Today, however, there was an added sense of unease. She could not think why she had asked Jimmy to meet her—what had she imagined he would say or do that would assuage her fears? There had been something odd in his manner, she had felt it the moment she mentioned April’s long silence: an evasiveness, a shiftiness, almost. She was well aware of the simmering antipathy between her two so dissimilar friends. In some way Jimmy seemed jealous of April, as he was of Patrick Ojukwu. Or was it more resentment than jealousy? But if so, what was it in April that he found to resent? The Latimers of Dun Laoghaire were gentry, of course, but Jimmy would think she was, too, and he did not seem to hold it against her. She gazed across the street at the coaches and their intently bidding jarveys. She was surer than ever that something bad, something very bad, perhaps the very worst of all, had befallen her friend.

Then a new thought struck her, one that made her more uneasy still. What if Jimmy were to see in April’s disappearance the possibility of a story, a “great yarn,” as he would say? What if he had only pretended to be indifferent, and had rushed off now to tell his Editor that April Latimer, a junior doctor at the Hospital of the Holy Family, the “slightly notorious” daughter of the late and much lamented Conor Latimer and niece of the present Minister of Health, had not been heard from in over a week? Oh, Lord, she thought in dismay, what have I done?

2

QUIRKE HAD NEVER KNOWN LIFE SO LACKING IN SAVOR. IN HIS first days at St. John's he had been in too much confusion and distress to notice how everything here seemed leached of color and texture; gradually, however, the deadness pervading the place began to fascinate him. Nothing at St. John's could be grasped or held. It was as if the fog that had been so frequent since the autumn had settled permanently here, outdoors and in, a thing present everywhere and yet without substance, and always at a fixed distance from the eye however quickly one moved. Not that anyone moved quickly in this place, not among the inmates, anyway. *Inmates* was a frowned-upon word, but what else could they be called, these uncertain, hushed figures, of which he was one, padding dully along the corridors and about the grounds like shell-shock victims? He wondered if the atmosphere were somehow deliberately contrived, an emotional counterpart to the bromides that prison authorities were said to smuggle into convicts' food to calm their passions. When he put the question to Brother Anselm that good man only laughed. "No, no," he said, "it's all your own work." He meant the collective work of all the inmates; he sounded almost proud of their achievement.

Brother Anselm was Director of the House of St. John of the Cross, refuge for addicts of all kinds, for shattered souls and petrifying livers. Quirke liked him, liked his unjudgmental diffidence, his wry, melancholy humor. The two men occasionally took walks together in the grounds, pacing the gravel pathways among the box hedges talking of books, of history, of ancient politics—safe subjects on which they exchanged opinions as chilly and contentless as the wintry air through which they moved. Quirke had checked into St. John's on Christmas Eve, persuaded by his brother-in-law to seek the cure after a six-month drinking binge few details of which Quirke could recall with any clearness. "Do it for Phoebe if no one else," Malachy Griffin had said.

Stopping drinking had been easy; what was difficult was the daily unblurred confrontation with a self he heartily wished to avoid. Dr. Whitty, the house psychiatrist, explained it to him. "With some, such as yourself, it's not so much the drink that's addictive but the escape it offers. Stands to reason, doesn't it? Escape from yourself, that is." Dr. Whitty was a big bluff fellow with baby-blue eyes and fists the size of turnips. He and Quirke had already known each other a little, professionally, in the outside world, but in here the convention was they should behave as cordial strangers. Quirke felt awkward, though; he had assumed that somehow St. John's would afford anonymity, that it would be the least anyone consigning himself to the care of the place could expect, and he was grateful for Whitty's studiously remote cheerfulness and the scrupulous discretion of his pale gaze. He submitted meekly to the daily sessions on the couch—in fact, not a couch but a straight chair half turned towards the window, with the psychiatrist a largely unspeaking and heavily breathing presence behind it—and tried to say the things he thought would be expected of him. He knew what his troubles were, knew more or less the identity of the demons tormenting

him, but at St. John's everyone was called upon to clear the decks, wipe the slate clean, make a fresh start—cliché was another staple of the institutional life—and he was no exception. “It’s a long road, the road back,” Brother Anselm said. “The less baggage you take with you, the better.” As if, Quirke thought but did not say, I could unpack myself and walk away empty.

The inmates were urged to pair off, like shy dancers at a grotesque ball. The theory was that sustained daily contact with a designated fellow sufferer, entailing shared confidences and candid self-exposure, would restore a sense of what was called in here *mutuality* and inevitably speed the process of rehabilitation. Thus Quirke found himself spending a great deal more time than he would have cared to with Harkness—last-name terms was the form at St. John's—a hard-faced, grizzled man with the indignantly rephending aspect of an eagle. Harkness had a keen sense of the bleak comedy of what he insisted on calling their captivity, and when he heard what Quirke's profession was he produced a brief, loud laugh that was like the sound of something thick and resistant being ripped in half. “A pathologist!” he snarled in rancorous delight. “Welcome to the morgue.”

Harkness—it seemed not so much a name as a condition—was as reluctant as Quirke in the matter of personal confidences and at first would say little about himself or his past. Quirke, however, had spent his orphaned childhood in institutions run by the religious, and guessed at once that he was—what did they say?—a man of the cloth. “That’s right,” Harkness said, “Christian Brother. You must have heard the swish of the surplice.” Or of the leather strap, more like, Quirke thought. Side by side in dogged silence, heads down and fists clasped at their backs, they tramped the same paths that Quirke and Brother Anselm walked, under the freezing trees, as if performing a penance, which in a way they were. As the weeks went on, Harkness began to release resistant little hard nuggets of information,

as if he were spitting out the seeds of a sour fruit. A thirst for drink, it seemed, had been a defense against other urges. “Let me put it this way,” he said, “if I hadn’t gone into the Order it’s unlikely I’d ever have married.” He chuckled darkly. Quirke was shocked; he had never before heard anyone, least of all a Christian Brother, come right out like this and admit to being queer. Harkness had lost his vocation, too—“if I ever had one”—and was coming to the conclusion that on balance there is no God.

After such stark revelations Quirke felt called upon to reciprocate in kind, but found it acutely difficult, not out of embarrassment or shame—though he must be embarrassed, he must be ashamed, considering the many misdeeds he had on his conscience—but because of the sudden weight of tedium that pressed down on him. The trouble with sins and sorrows, he had discovered, is that in time they become boring, even to the sorrowing sinner. Had he the heart to recount it all again, the shambles that was his life—the calamitous losses of nerve, the moral laziness, the failures, the betrayals? He tried. He told how when his wife died in childbirth he gave away his infant daughter to his sister-in-law and kept it secret from the child, Phoebe, now a young woman, for nearly twenty years. He listened to himself as if it were someone else’s tale he was telling.

“But she comes to visit you,” Harkness said, in frowning perplexity, interrupting him. “Your daughter—she comes to visit.”

“Yes, she does.” Quirke had ceased to find this fact surprising, but now found it so anew.

Harkness said nothing more, only nodded once, with an expression of bitter wonderment, and turned his face away. Harkness had no visitors.

That Thursday when Phoebe came, Quirke, thinking of the lonely Christian Brother, made an extra effort to be alert to her and appreciative of the solace she thought she was bringing him.

They sat in the visitors' room, a bleak, glassed-in corner of the vast entrance hall—in Victorian times the building had been the forbiddingly grand headquarters of some branch of the British administration in the city—where there were plastic-topped tables and metal chairs and, at one end, a counter on which stood a mighty tea urn that rumbled and hissed all day long. Quirke thought his daughter was paler than usual, and there were smudged shadows like bruises under her eyes. She seemed distracted, too. She had in general a somber, etiolated quality that grew steadily more marked as she progressed into her twenties; yet she was becoming a beautiful woman, he realized, with some surprise and an inexplicable but sharp twinge of unease. Her pallor was accentuated by the black outfit she wore, black skirt and jumper, slightly shabby black coat. These were her work clothes—she had a job in a hat shop—but he thought they gave her too much the look of a nun.

They sat opposite each other, their hands extended before them across the table, their fingertips almost but not quite touching.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I’m fine.”

“You look—I don’t know—strained?”

He saw her deciding to decline his sympathy. She glanced up at the high window beside them where the fog was crowding against the panes like compressed gas. Their gray mugs of tea stood stolid on the tabletop before them, untouched. Phoebe’s hat was on the table too, a minuscule confection of lace and black velvet stuck with an incongruously dramatic scarlet feather. Quirke nodded in the direction of the hat. “How is Mrs. What’s-her-name?”

“Who?”

“The one who owns the hat shop.”

“Mrs. Cuffe-Wilkes.”

“Surely that’s a made-up name.”

“There was a Mr. Wilkes. He died, and she began to call herself Cuffe-Wilkes.”

“Is there a Mr. Cuffe?”

“No. That was her maiden name.”

“Ah.”

He brought out his cigarette case, clicked it open, and offered it to her flat on his palm. She shook her head. “I’ve stopped.”

He selected a cigarette for himself and lit it. “You used to smoke . . . what were they called, those oval-shaped ones?”

“Passing Clouds.”

“That’s it. Why did you give up?”

She smiled, wryly. “Why did you?”

“Why did I give up drink, you mean? Oh, well.”

They both looked away, Phoebe to the window again and Quirke sideways, at the floor. There were half a dozen couples in the place, all sitting at tables as far separated from the others as possible. The floor was covered with large, black-and-white rubber tiles, and with the people in it placed just so, the room seemed set up for a silent, life-size game of chess. The air reeked of cigarette smoke and stewed tea, and there was a faint trace too of something medicinal and vaguely punitive. “This awful place,” Phoebe said, then glanced at her father guiltily. “Sorry.”

“For what? You’re right, it is awful.” He paused. “I’m going to check myself out.”

He was as startled as she was. He had not been aware of having taken the decision until he announced it. But now, the announcement delivered, he realized that he had made up his mind that moment when, in the grounds that day, under the stark trees, speaking of Quirke’s daughter, Harkness had turned aside with that bitter, stricken look in his aquiline eye. Yes, it was then, Quirke understood now, that he had set out mentally on the journey back to something like feeling, to something like—

what to call it?—like life. Brother Anselm was right; he had a long trek ahead of him.

Phoebe was saying something. “What?” he said, with a flash of irritation, trying not to scowl. “Sorry, I wasn’t listening.”

She regarded him with that deprecating look, head tilted, chin down, one eyebrow arched, that she used to give him when she was little and still thought he was her sort-of uncle; his attention was a fluctuating quantity then, too. “April Latimer,” she said. Still he frowned, unenlightened. “I was saying,” she said, “she seems to be—gone away, or something.”

“Latimer,” he said, cautiously.

“Oh, Quirke!” Phoebe cried—it was what she called him, never Dad, Daddy, Father—“my friend April Latimer. She works at your hospital. She’s a junior doctor.”

“Can’t place her.”

“Conor Latimer was her father, and her uncle is the Minister of Health.”

“Ah. One of those Latimers. She’s missing, you say?”

She stared at him, startled; she had not used the word *missing*, so why had he? What had he heard in her voice that had alerted him to what it was she feared? “No,” she said firmly, shaking her head, “not missing, but—she seems to be—she seems to have—left, without telling anyone. I haven’t heard a word from her in over a week.”

“A week?” he said, deliberately dismissive. “That’s not long.”

“Usually she phones every day, or every second day, at the least.” She made herself shrug, and sit back; she had the frightening conviction that the more plainly she allowed her concern to show the more likely it would be that something calamitous had happened to her friend. It made no sense, and yet she could not rid herself of the notion. She felt Quirke’s eye, it was like a doctor’s hand on her, searching for the infirm place, the diseased place, the place that pained.

“What about the hospital?” he said.

“I telephoned. She sent in a note, to say she wouldn’t be in.”

“Until when?”

“What?” She gazed at him, baffled for a moment.

“How long did she say she’d be out?”

“Oh. I didn’t ask.”

“Did she give a reason not to turn up?” She shook her head; she did not know. She bit her lower lip until it turned white. “Maybe she has the flu,” he said. “Maybe she decided to go off on a holiday—they make those junior doctors work like blacks, you know.”

“She would have told me,” she muttered. Saying this, with that stubborn set to her mouth, she was again for a second the child that he remembered.

“I’ll phone the people there,” he said, “in her department. I’ll find out what’s going on. Don’t worry.”

She smiled, but so tentatively, with such effort, still biting her lip, that he saw clearly how distressed she was. What was he to do, what was he to say to her?

He walked with her down to the front gate. The brief day was drawing in and the gloom of twilight was drifting into the fog and thickening it, like soot. He had no overcoat and he was cold, but he insisted on going all the way to the gate. Their partings were always awkward; she had kissed him, just once, years before, when she did not know he was her father, and at such moments as this the memory of that kiss still flashed out between them with a magnesium glare. He touched her elbow lightly with a fingertip and stepped back. “Don’t worry,” he said again, and again she smiled, and nodded, and turned away. He watched her go through the gate, that absurd scarlet feather on her hat dipping and swaying, then he called out to her, “I forgot to say—I’m going to buy a car.”

She turned back, staring. "What? You can't even drive."

"I know. You can teach me."

"I can't drive either!"

"Well, learn, and then I'll learn from you."

"You're mad," she said, shaking her head and laughing.