

HOME STRETCH

Also by Graham Norton

NON-FICTION

So Me

The Life and Loves of a He Devil

FICTION

Holding

A Keeper

HOME STRETCH

Graham Norton



CORONET

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1

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For Paula and Terry

1987

I.

It was Bill Lawlor who found them first.

No rain had fallen for four days but he knew it couldn't last. He decided to take no chances and was working late at the garden centre. A pallet of peat moss sacks that had been delivered in the afternoon needed to be moved into the long store. By rights, young Dunphy should have been doing it, but he had looked so desperate when he came running into the shop asking if he could go early. His hair freshly flattened with water from the tap in the yard, his shirt tucked into his jeans.

'Get away out of it. I'll see you in the morning.'

The young lad beamed and in his haste to leave he tripped over his own feet.

'Thanks! Thanks, Mr Lawlor.'

Bill wondered if there was a girl waiting. Was young Dunphy going to walk his lady friend along the river to the weir and then lure her under the railway bridge for a kiss or maybe more? He chuckled as he made his way down the yard. Hadn't he done it himself?

The plastic sacks safely stored under cover, Bill threw the padlock around the gate and got into his car ready for the short drive home. Afterwards he tried to remember how he knew

GRAHAM NORTON

something was wrong. Had he heard the crash? He didn't think so. All he could recall was that everything seemed unnaturally still as he approached Barry's roundabout. There were no other cars and the early evening light gave everything a flat, washed-out air. Without deciding to, he found that he had slowed down. On the far side of the roundabout by the turn-off to the coast road, he saw two men, more like boys really. One was kneeling on the overgrown verge, his black and purple rugby shirt like a bruise against the green of the grass. The other was tall and thin, standing over him, gesturing with his long pale arms. Had they had a fight? Then he saw the thin threads of smoke rising up into the marmalade sky of dusk, and to the right of them the broken bank of shrubbery.

Everything suddenly accelerated. Bill was out of his car, running towards the boys.

'Is everything all right? Is anyone . . .' But before he could form the question, the answer became obvious.

A navy estate car was lodged in the drainage ditch that ran along the bottom of the bank below the roundabout. Judging from the battered roof, it had rolled at least once, maybe more. From the back window protruded an arm, porcelain white, with a crack of red creeping from the armpit towards the wrist. The limb was still. Through the broken windscreen he could see long brown hair fanned out across the dashboard and from beneath it, a dark viscous pool was spreading towards the steering wheel on the other side of the car.

HOME STRETCH

'Is help coming? How many are there?'

The two figures just stared at Bill as if he had interrupted a private conversation.

'Has someone called an ambulance?' Bill asked with a growing sense of panic and dread.

The boy in the rugby shirt looked up.

'Four. There are four of them.' His face, covered with a summer crop of freckles, looked almost childlike.

'Six.' The other young man spoke, his voice more certain, almost calm. 'Six altogether. The two of us and four in the car. You're the first. Nobody has called an ambulance.'

'Right. Don't move!' Bill shouted as he began to run back towards the petrol station. His legs felt heavy and there was something about the thin slapping of his feet against the road that sounded hopeless.

Maureen Bradley had just been put under the dryer so she didn't hear the sirens.

She licked her fingers to turn the pages of the *Family Circle* little Yvonne had given her to pass the time. She wasn't really reading the magazine, just relishing the solitude. There was no peace to be had at home with everyone pestering her with questions. She hated having other people in her kitchen, especially her mother-in-law, but at least after tomorrow it would all be over. Her daughter Bernie would be a married woman and the house would probably be so quiet that

GRAHAM NORTON

Maureen would wish they could have the wedding all over again.

Yvonne would come up to the house in the morning to do Bernie and the bridesmaids, but she'd asked if she could get a literal head start on Maureen tonight. She was the only one who needed her roots done so it was easier in the salon with all the brushes, foil strips, bottles and toners needed.

Everyone politely referred to Yvonne's as 'the salon', when it was clearly nothing more than a converted garage on the side of the house. In fairness, she had done a lovely job. Fully tiled throughout and it was only on the worst days of winter that you might need one of the travel rugs she had on hand to offer her clients.

With her ample frame wedged into the chair, and her magazine resting on the soft shelf of her bosom, Maureen didn't see the young woman running up the hill. And the noise of the dryer meant she didn't hear the door to the salon being thrown open. It was only when a grim-faced Yvonne tapped her on the shoulder that she looked up to see her younger daughter, Connie, standing in front of her, all flushed in the face, tears streaming down her cheeks. She was saying something but Maureen couldn't hear her. She wriggled free of the dryer with the help of an apologetic Yvonne.

Connie's voice was a mixture of sobs and swallowed words that made no sense.

Maureen struggled to her feet.

HOME STRETCH

‘What is it? What’s wrong?’

Just managing to control her heaving gasps, Connie said, ‘Daddy says you’re to come home. Oh Mammy, the guards were at the house.’ She tried to say more but her mouth was overtaken by threads of snot and spit. She collapsed into her mother’s arms, her tears soaking into the pale pink towel that was still draped across Maureen’s shoulders.

Less than a mile away, over the bridge and in a small terraced cottage down the entry beside the hotel, Dee Hegarty laid five buttonholes in a line on the kitchen table.

Each was a single red rosebud framed by a white shock of baby’s breath. Dee was carefully wrapping them in damp tissue paper before they were to be stored in the salad drawer of the fridge overnight. As she worked she couldn’t stop smiling at the sight of her own hands. They looked like they belonged to a stranger. Her nails pink and shiny like the inside of a shell. She couldn’t remember the last time she had worn nail varnish, but it was a special occasion and she didn’t want David to think she wasn’t excited about his big day. The buttonholes were placed head to tail like floral sardines in a shallow cardboard box. Dee had to admit that they had turned out very well. Red and white were the Cork colours. It was about the only detail of the wedding plans that David had been involved in. He insisted on everything being in his team’s colours. Bernie and her mother had finally agreed, since he had allowed them to decide on everything else.

GRAHAM NORTON

Dee was trying not to worry, but despite herself she stole a glance at the clock above the cooker. Gone half seven. She hoped he hadn't been dragged to the pub. With all the excitement and the lovely evening, it was no surprise if that was where he had ended up. The last thing he needed tomorrow was a hangover. He might be a clever lad, a kind one, but even his own mother had to admit he seemed to lack any common sense. Not for the first time, Dee questioned the wisdom of her son walking down the aisle. He was just twenty-three, still a boy. What was the rush? Himself and Bernie swore blind that no shotgun was involved and her family seemed thrilled, but why wouldn't they? In a few years he'd be a fully qualified dentist. Dee liked Bernie and the Bradleys well enough but a doubt about this marriage still nagged at her. Could David do better? As a girlfriend, Bernie was fine, but was she really a fitting wife and mother? She was just so loud. If she hadn't been her son's girlfriend, Dee might have described her as coarse. She hated herself for having these disloyal thoughts, especially after Maureen and Frank Bradley had been so generous. Of course, it was tradition for the bride's family to pay but people didn't really hold with that any more. Nowadays everyone chipped in but, without ever embarrassing her, they had made it clear that she wouldn't be expected to contribute. After David's father died things hadn't been easy, but she had managed. Dr Coulter took her on as a receptionist and the little cottage she had bought after she sold the big house, the family home, out on the New Road, suited her and

HOME STRETCH

David fine. Her son had waved away her objections. 'They can well afford it and look what they're getting – me!' He flashed that big grin of his and flexed his muscles. Dee couldn't help but laugh as she chased him out of the room with her tea towel. Her big, silly, baby boy.

The evening glow had begun to fade and Dee had just stood up to put on the kitchen light when a loud firm knock came at the front door.

Washing and drying his hands for the final time of the day was Michael Coulter's favourite ritual.

Job done. He stared at his face while he did it. The nose hairs needed a bit of a trim and there were a few reddish veins on his cheeks, but other than that he couldn't really complain about what he saw. Yes, there was grey creeping around the sides of his head, and the wrinkles on his forehead remained now no matter how hard he tried to smooth his brow, but he was, and he didn't consider it vain to think this, a handsome man. It was just a simple fact. He hadn't allowed himself to go to fat like so many of the boys from his year at school. Never trust a fat doctor, was a mantra Professor Lyons had drummed into his students and Dr Michael Coulter had never forgotten it.

He folded the hand towel and placed it carefully on the rail beside the sink in the corner of his office. The desk lamp was switched off, the door to the street double locked and then he made his way down the hall towards the house. He could smell

GRAHAM NORTON

fish frying. Despite the surgery being attached to the family home, Michael was very firm about keeping them separate. The worst scoldings his son ever received when young were when he and his friends had dared to bring their games or high-pitched chases into the corridor that ran from his office down to the door of the house. At night he made a point of locking the door.

He was just turning the key when he heard the surgery phone begin to ring. He sighed. These out of hours calls were invariably time-wasters or hypochondriacs, but he could never forgive himself if it turned out to be a genuine emergency. He reopened the dark wood door and almost ran back to the tall narrow desk in the reception area.

‘Hello, Dr Coulter speaking.’

‘Doctor, it’s Sergeant Doyle. Sorry to ring so late.’

‘That’s all right. What can I do for you?’ He never liked getting a call from the police.

‘There’s been an accident down at Barry’s roundabout. One ambulance is there and another is on its way but I’d say they could do with any help.’

‘Of course. I’ll come now. Very bad is it?’

‘Oh, a fierce mess. A clatter of young ones in an estate car rolled over into the dyke. At least a couple dead anyway. Thank God there were no other cars involved.’

Dr Coulter’s mouth was suddenly very dry.

‘Was it . . . was it a Cortina?’

HOME STRETCH

'It was.'

'Blue.' The two men spoke in unison.

Caroline O'Connell hadn't wanted to go to Cork the day before the wedding.

The point was that she didn't have a choice. Why Declan couldn't comprehend this simple fact was beyond her. The face on him. The huffing and puffing as he went out to the car.

'You've nothing else you could wear?' he asked incredulously.

'No.' This was not a discussion she was willing to have. There was no way she could wear the dress with the large red and white flowers if those were going to be the colours at the reception. She didn't want people thinking that she considered herself a part of the top table or the wedding party just because one of her daughters was a bridesmaid.

This wedding had been nothing but aggravation and Caroline normally enjoyed weddings. Her niece was getting married next spring and she was looking forward to that, especially now she knew she could wear the red and white flowers. Declan seemed very unimpressed by this particular silver lining as they sat at the lights by Wilton shopping centre. He peered over the steering wheel looking even shorter than he was, his breathing suggesting he might be about to have one of his rare outbursts. Damn Bernie Bradley and her red and white wedding reception. Why Carmel couldn't have mentioned the colour scheme before this morning, she didn't know; well, except she did . . .

GRAHAM NORTON

All mentions of the wedding had been more or less forbidden since Bernie had decided to ask Carmel to be a bridesmaid but not Caroline's other daughter Linda. She couldn't understand it. The three of them had always been inseparable. If you were having three bridesmaids, would four be so difficult? She didn't want to get involved but Caroline could see why Linda was so put out.

She had been happy to hear that morning that the three of them were spending the day at Trabinn, by the seaside. It was the first time in weeks that she had heard her daughters laughing together. Good. Nobody wanted bad blood on the big day.

At the back of Dunnes, Caroline finally found an acceptable dress in pale blue that came with a matching coat that had a pretty shoelace tie at the neck. Pleased with her purchase she felt a sudden surge of affection and sympathy for Declan, who sat slumped on a chair by the changing rooms reading an *Evening Echo*.

'What do you say we head into town and treat ourselves to a mixed grill in Moores Hotel?'

Declan's head jerked up. 'If that's what you fancy yourself,' he said, willing her not to change her mind.

'It is. It's just what I fancy and it'll save cooking when we get home.'

She slipped her hand into his and the odd couple, statuesque woman with diminutive man, walked out towards the car park.

* * *

HOME STRETCH

No one was at home to answer the knock at the door when it came. The house stood in darkness, waiting. Later that night when Caroline and Declan returned, bags in hand, flushed and easily amused after the couple of drinks they had had with their meal, it was Declan who nearly stepped on the postcard that was resting lightly on the hall mat asking them to call the Garda barracks at their earliest convenience.

Ellen Hayes paused on the brow of the hill to savour the moment.

That feeling of finishing work for the week – but before she returned home to her mother’s nagging and her brother’s sly digs. She took a deep breath. From this vantage point, Mullinmore looked its best. The whole town had a sepia glow as dusk faded to night and the amber street lights spluttered into life. Through the centre of the town her eyes followed the smudge of green where trees traced the route of the river. On the hill opposite, the chapel with its empty sloping car park marked the western edge of the town, while the red brick of the convent school dominated the eastern side. Even after two months Ellen still found it hard to believe that she would never have to go back to that building.

At the bottom of the hill the narrow street opened out into the main market square where her family had their pub. She noticed that the large Guinness sign above the door wasn’t illuminated. Odd. Maybe the bulb had gone.

Walking as slowly as she dared without dawdling so much that

people would notice and think there was something wrong with her, she reluctantly made her way down into the town. One of their regulars, old Mr Hurley, was standing outside the pub leaning on his stick. She gave him a half-smile and a nod before pushing the door. It was locked and behind the frosted glass was darkness. Mr Hurley gave a cough and said, 'You'd better get inside.' Ellen just stared at him. She didn't like this. Her imagination immediately homed in on the worst possibilities. She remembered her mother had complained about having a headache. What if it was a brain tumour? Had she gone blind? She rooted through her bag to find the rarely used key to the street door that led straight up the stairs. Taking two steps at a time she ran up calling, 'It's me! What's wrong? What's after happening?'

Her mother was sitting on the sofa. She looked up when Ellen came into the room. Her face was streaked with tears. Ellen's father was standing at the other end of the room by the door into the kitchen.

'Ellen, sit down love.' His voice was soft and gentle. It didn't sound like him. Ellen could feel her bottom lip beginning to quiver and a pressure building behind her nose.

'Oh Daddy,' she whispered as she sat beside her mother, who reached across and took her hand.

'Connor was out with Martin Coulter and a few others.'

That made no sense. Connor wasn't friends with Martin.

Her father continued, 'There was a crash and at least three of them are . . .' His voice faltered. 'They were killed.'

HOME STRETCH

Ellen raised her hand to stifle a scream. 'Oh no. Oh Connor!' Her mother squeezed her hand. 'Your brother is fine, love. He isn't hurt.'

Ellen looked at her parents, confused. Her father bit his lip and looked away. 'Connor was the driver of the car.'