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The New Policeman

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PART ONE



1

JJ Liddy and his best friend Jimmy Dowling often had arguments. JJ never took them seriously. He even considered them a sign of the strength of the friendship, because they always made up again straight away, unlike some of the girls in school, who got into major possessive battles with each other. But on that day in early September, during the first week that they were back in school, they had an argument like none before.

JJ couldn't even remember now what it had been about. But at the end of it, at the point where they usually came round to forgiving each other and patching it up, Jimmy had dropped a bombshell.

'I should have had more sense than to hang around with you anyway, after what my granny told me about the Liddys.'

His words were followed by a dreadful silence, full of JJ's bewilderment and Jimmy's embarrassment. He knew he had gone too far.

'What about the Liddys?' said JJ.

'Nothing.' Jimmy turned to go back into school.

JJ stood in front of him. 'Go on. What did she tell you?'

Jimmy might have been able to wriggle his way out of it and pretend it was a bluff, but he had been overheard. He and JJ were no longer alone. Two other lads, Aidan Currie and Mike Ford, had overheard and had come to join in.

'Go on, Jimmy,' said Aidan. 'You may as well tell him.'

'Yeah,' said Mike. 'If he doesn't know he must be the only person in the county who doesn't.'

The bell rang for the end of the morning break. They all ignored it.

'Know what?' said JJ. He felt cold, terrified, not of something that might happen but of something that he might find inside himself; in his blood.

'It was a long time ago,' said Jimmy, still trying to retract.

'What was?'

'One of the Liddys . . .' Jimmy said something else but he mumbled it beneath his breath and JJ couldn't hear. It sounded like 'burgled the beast'.

The teacher on yard duty was calling them in. Jimmy began to walk towards the school. The others fell in.

'He did what?' said JJ.

'Forget it,' said Jimmy.

It was Aidan Currie who said it, loud enough for

JJ or anyone else to hear. 'Sure everyone knows about it. Your great-granddad. JJ Liddy, same as yourself. He murdered the priest.'

JJ stopped in his tracks. 'No way!'

'He did, so,' said Mike. 'And all for the sake of an old wooden flute.'

'You're a shower of liars!' said JJ.

The boys, except for Jimmy, laughed.

'Always mad for the music, the same Liddys,' said Mike.

He began to hop and skip towards the school in a goofy parody of Irish dancing. Aidan trotted beside him, singing an out-of-tune version of 'The Irish Washerwoman'. Jimmy glanced back at JJ and, his head down, followed them as they went back in.

JJ stood alone in the yard. It couldn't be true. But he knew, now that he thought about it, that there had always been something behind the way some of the local people regarded him and his family. A lot of people in the community came to the céilís and the set-dancing classes that were held at his house on Saturdays. They had always come, and their parents and grandparents had come before them. In recent years the numbers had increased dramatically with the influx of new people into the area. Some of them came from thirty miles away and more. But there was, and always had been, a large number of local people who would have nothing to do with the

Liddys or their music. They didn't exactly cross the street to avoid JJ and his family, but they didn't talk to them either. JJ, if he'd thought about it at all, had assumed it was because his parents were one of the only couples in the district who weren't married, but what if that wasn't the reason? What if it had really happened? Could JJ be descended from a murderer?

'Liddy!'

The teacher was standing at the door, waiting for him.

JJ hesitated. For a moment it seemed to him that there was no way he could set foot inside that school again. Then the solution came to him.

The teacher closed the door behind him. 'What do you think you were doing, standing out there like a lemon?'

'Sorry,' said JJ. 'I didn't realize you were talking to me.'

'Who else would I be talking to?'

'My name's Byrne,' said JJ. 'My mother's name is Liddy all right, but my father's name is Byrne. I'm JJ Byrne.'

The Legacy

Trad





2

The new policeman stood on the street outside Green's pub. On the other side of the bolted doors a gathering of musicians was at full throttle, the rich blend of their instruments cutting through the bee-hive buzz of a dozen conversations. Across the road the rising tide slopped against the walls of the tiny harbour. Beneath invisible clouds the water was pewter-grey with muddy bronze glints where it caught the street lights. Its surface was ragged. The breeze was getting up. There would be rain before long.

Inside the pub there was a momentary hiccup in the music as one tune ended and another began. For a couple of bars a solitary flute carried the new tune until the other musicians recognized it and pounced on it, and lifted it to the rafters of the old pub. Out in the street, Garda O'Dwyer recognized the tune. Inside his regulation black brogues his cramped toes twitched to the beat. At the kerbside behind him his partner, Garda Treacy, leaned across the empty passenger seat of the squad car and tapped on the window.

Larry O'Dwyer sighed and took a step towards the narrow double doors. He'd had a good reason for becoming a policeman but sometimes it was difficult to remember what it was. It wasn't this; he was sure of that much. He hadn't become a policeman to curtail the enjoyment of musicians and their audiences. A few miles away, in Galway city, violent crime was escalating dramatically. Street gangs were engaged in all kinds of thuggery and muggery. He would be of far more use to society there. But that, as far as he could remember, was not why he had become a policeman either. There were times, like now, when he suspected that the reason, whatever it was, might not have been a particularly good one.

The tune changed again. The light inside the squad car came on as Garda Treacy opened his door. Larry stilled his tapping foot and rapped with his knuckles on Mary Green's door.

Inside the pub throats closed, conversations collapsed, the drone of voices faltered and died. One by one the musicians dropped out of the tune, leaving, for a while, an oblivious fiddler tearing away enthusiastically on her own. Someone got through to her finally, and the music stopped mid-bar. The only sound that followed was Mary Green's light footsteps crossing the concrete floor.

One of the narrow doors opened a crack. Mary's anxious face appeared. Behind her, Larry could see

Anne Korff perched on a bar stool. She was one of the few people in the village that he had already met. He hoped he would not be required to take her name.

'I'm sorry, now,' he said to Mary Green. 'It's a quarter to one.'

'They're just finishing up,' said Mary earnestly. 'They'll be gone in five minutes.'

'I hope so,' said Larry. 'That would be the best thing for everyone.'

As he returned to the car, the first drops of rain were beginning to fall on to the surface of the sea.

The New Policeman

Trad





3

They were falling, as well, on JJ Liddy – or JJ Byrne, as he now called himself. They were falling on his father Ciaran, and on the last few bales of hay that they were loading on to the flat-bed trailer in the Ring Field; the highest meadow on their land.

'How's that for timing?' said Ciaran.

JJ didn't answer. He was too tired to answer. Inside his gloves his fingers were red raw from the hundreds of bale strings that had been through his hands that evening. He threw up the last bale. Ciaran stacked it neatly and dropped down into the tractor seat. JJ helped Bosco up into the cab beside him. The dog was too old and stiff now to jump up on his own, but he wasn't too old to want to be part of everything that was happening on the farm. Wherever there was work being done, there was Bosco.

Ciaran let in the clutch and the old tractor began to rumble and clunk across the new-mown meadow. JJ climbed up on top of the bales. The rain was falling more heavily now. Drops slanted across the headlight beam as they skirted the ring fort and emerged on to the rutted track which led down to the farmyard.

Ciaran was right. It was good timing. The hay they had just saved was a late crop; almost an afterthought. The summer had been wet, and their previous attempts at hay-making had been disastrous. In the end they had brought in contractors to wrap what was left of their crop in round black bales. It had been too wet to be hay but not fresh enough to be silage. They called the resulting hybrid haylage, but it was optimistic. Even if the stock were hungry enough to eat it they wouldn't get a great deal of nutrition from it. This crop was good, and it would make up some of the fodder shortfall, but by no means all of it. Farming was a tough station.

The trailer lurched. In the cab ahead of him, JJ could see Bosco's tail waving about as he was thrown from side to side. To their right, on the other side of the electric fence, was Molly's Place; the field behind the house which the Liddys had called after some long-forgotten donkey. A stream of mottled shapes was moving across it now, like a school of fish gliding through the black depths of the sea. The goats – white Saanens and brown-and-white Toggenburgs – were heading for their shelter at the edge of the yard.

Goats hated rain. So did JJ. Now that he had stopped working, his body temperature had plummeted. Drops were rolling out of his hair and stinging his eyes. He longed for his bed.

Ciaran swung the tractor round in the yard. 'We'll unload in the morning.'

JJ nodded, hopped down from the bales and semaphored to Ciaran as he reversed the trailer into the empty bay of the hay shed. His mother, Helen, emerged from the back door and came over.

'Brilliant timing,' she said. 'Tea's just made.'

But JJ walked straight past the pot, which steamed on the range in the kitchen, and the plates of fresh scones on the table. Upstairs in his room his school bag lay open on his bed, leaking overdue homework. He glanced at the clock. If he got up half an hour early the next morning he could get a bit of it done.

He spilled the bag and its contents on to the floor, and as he set the alarm he wondered, as he wondered every day, where on earth all the time went.