THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# JOSEPH O'CONNOR

# MY FATHER'S HOUSE

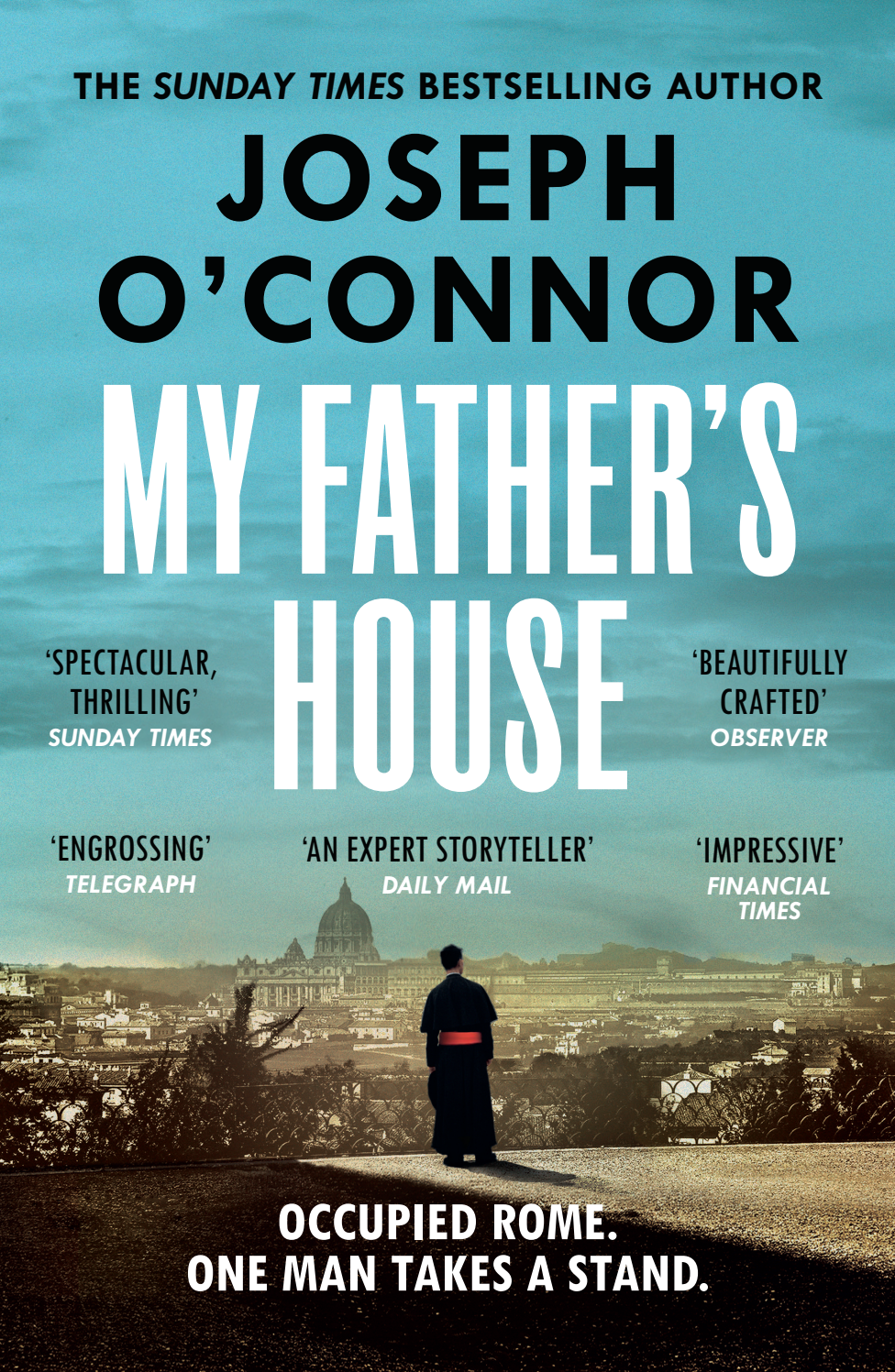
'SPECTACULAR, THRILLING'
*SUNDAY TIMES*

'BEAUTIFULLY CRAFTED'
*OBSERVER*

'ENGROSSING'
*TELEGRAPH*

'AN EXPERT STORYTELLER'
*DAILY MAIL*

'IMPRESSIVE'
*FINANCIAL TIMES*



**OCCUPIED ROME.**
**ONE MAN TAKES A STAND.**

'*My Father's House* manages to be at once a ripping yarn and a profound exploration of moral choices in the worst of times . . . With lyrical evocation of time and place, scabrous humour and heart-stopping tension, it combines the pleasures of the ideal holiday read with those of a literary masterpiece'
Fintan O'Toole, *Irish Times*

'A literary thriller of the highest order. The incarnation of O'Flaherty, the Irish Oskar Schindler, is sublime. What often elevates a writer is compassion, and O'Connor has it in spades . . . Beautifully crafted, his razor-sharp dialogue is to be savoured, and he employs dark humour to great effect. The plot twists keep on coming'
*Observer*

'A spectacular, thrilling novel . . . suspense crackles . . . celebrates triumphant against-the-odds camaraderie'
*Sunday Times*

'O'Connor is on stellar form with this ensemble thriller . . . while the story's inbuilt tension urges you on, it's the sheer vigour of O'Connor's beautifully turned phrases that really makes the book sing . . . an expert storyteller'
*Daily Mail*

'Breathtakingly good writing – O'Connor puts you right there, centre stage in the story and never lets you go'
Peter James

'The novel's evocative scene-setting, its propulsive narration and its powerful depiction of bravery and unity *in extremis*, all make for an engrossing read'
*Telegraph*

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‘Thrilling . . . Based on true events, this tense, gripping narrative is rendered in beautifully evocative prose’
*Mail on Sunday*

‘Impressive and pleasurable . . . the diverse ventriloquism of O’Connor’s novel evokes a city in peril with wonderful vitality’
*Financial Times*

‘A tale worth retelling, adorned as it is by the brilliance of O’Connor’s impressionistic writing’
*The Times*

‘A powerful portrait of extraordinary courage’
*Irish Independent*

‘Precisely choreographed . . . We eagerly follow the characters through uncertainty and disappointment as well as high-stakes jeopardy. O’Connor is playing with the possibilities of multiple narrators, and thinking also about plurality, reliability and the historical record’
*Guardian*, Book of the Day

‘Gripping . . . a hugely satisfying book, from its explosive opening to its bittersweet end’
*Washington Post*

‘So beautifully written, a masterclass in “voices” and an extremely tense thriller. It’s magnificent’
Marian Keyes

‘A masterwork . . . so urgent, so incredibly alive . . . A searing and beautiful example of storytelling’s infinite importance’
Donal Ryan

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‘For all its thrills . . . primarily – and triumphantly – an intimate drama that illuminates both the fragility and the wonder of unlikely human connections forged in adversity and, in some cases, enduring for a lifetime’
*Wall Street Journal*

‘O’Connor’s work is hugely impressive and utterly haunting’
*Sunday Mirror*

‘O’Connor’s writing is always intensely atmospheric . . . O’Connor succeeds in integrating into the suspenseful plot numerous narrative voices that intersect class, gender, nationality and religion’
*Literary Review*

‘Gripping, compelling and utterly brilliant. O’Connor’s gift for exquisite language shines through’
Liz Nugent

‘Joseph O’Connor’s new novel, *My Father’s House*, is two things: a twisty thriller whose outcome is hard to guess; and an exquisitely rendered piece of literature from a masterful writer . . . Bravo’
*Jewish Chronicle*

‘A thriller of engrossing urgency’
*Irish Independent*

‘A fine novelist, capable of remarkable feats of literary ventriloquism’
*Spectator*

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## JOSEPH O'CONNOR

Joseph O'Connor was born in Dublin. His books include *Cowboys and Indians*, *Inishowen*, *Star of the Sea* (American Library Association Award, Irish Post Award for Fiction, France's Prix Millepages, Italy's Premio Acerbi, Prix Madeleine Zepter for European novel of the year), *Redemption Falls*, *Ghost Light* (Dublin One City One Book Novel 2011) and *Shadowplay* (Irish Book Awards Novel of the Year, Costa Novel of the Year shortlist). His fiction has been translated into forty languages. He received the 2012 Irish PEN Award for Outstanding Contribution to Literature and in 2014 he was appointed Frank McCourt Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Limerick.

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JOSEPH O'CONNOR

# My Father's House

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For Emma, Laurence and Cormac, *un abbraccio*.

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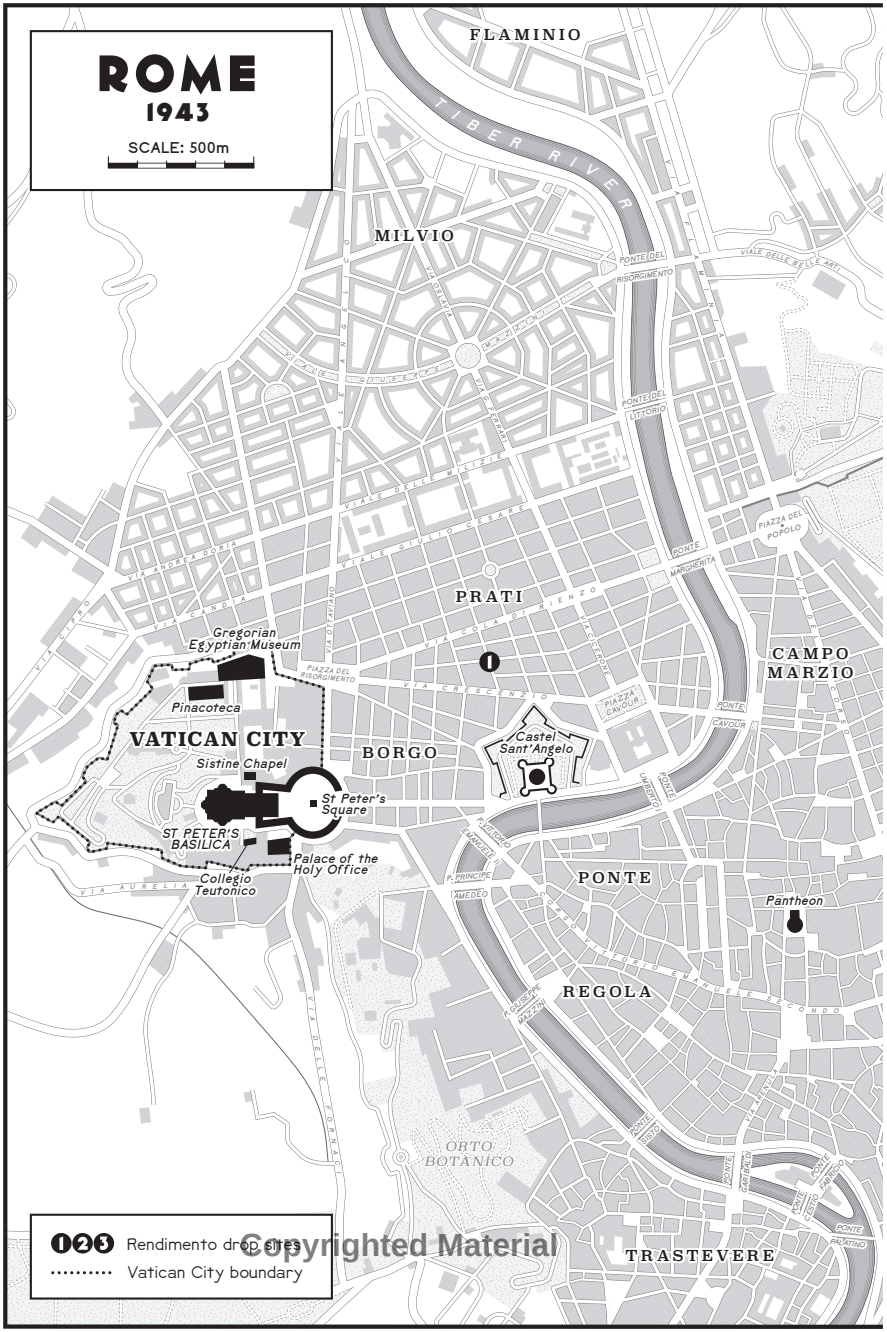

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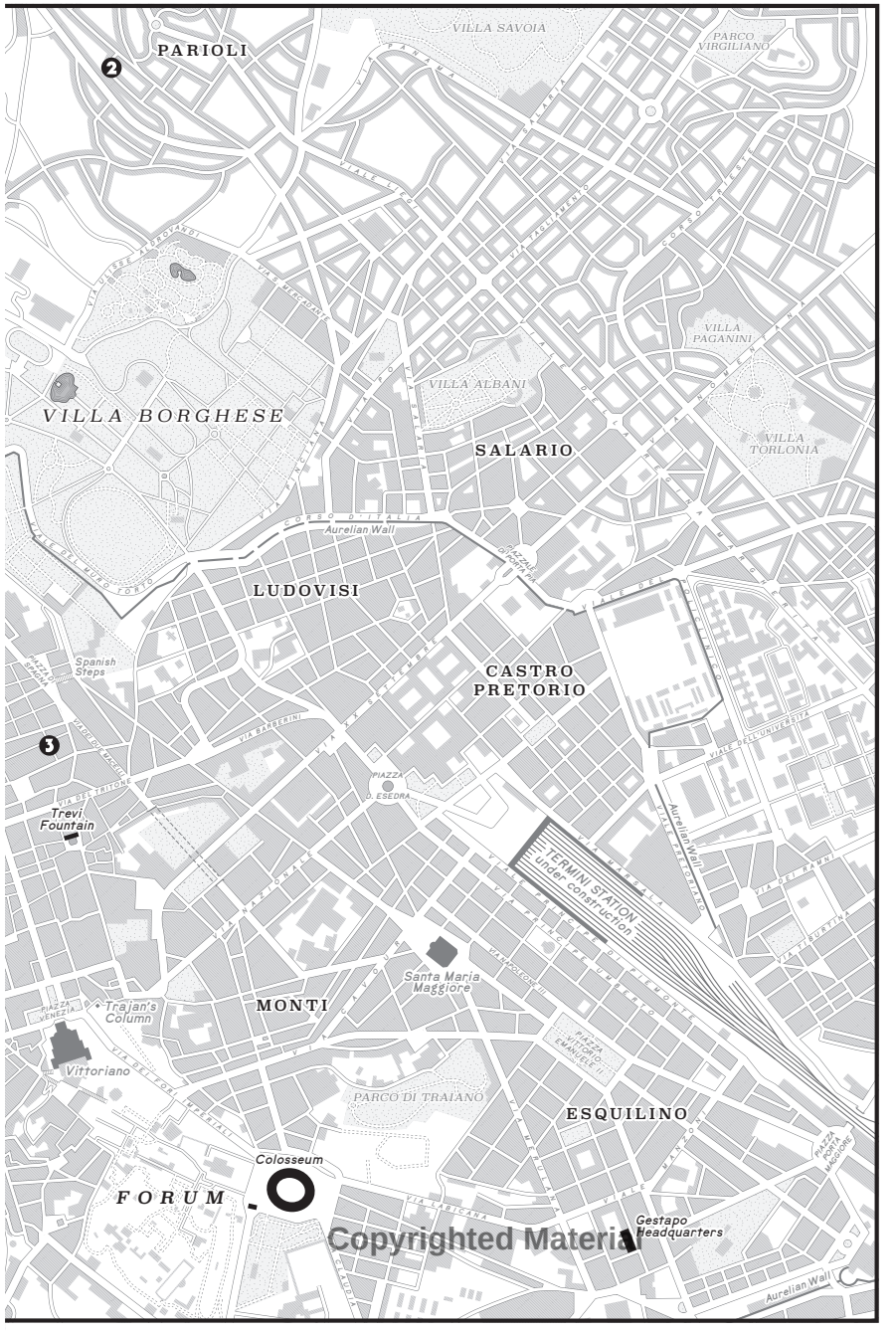


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Dear Mother, Father and Family. This is the last letter I will be able to write as I get shot today. Dear family, I have laid down my life for my country and everything that was dear to me. I hope this war will be over soon so that you will all have peace for ever. Goodbye. Your ever loving soldier, son and brother, Willie.

*Letter written by a Scottish prisoner of war in Italy*

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# ACT I

# The Choir

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*Sopranos*: Delia Kiernan, Marianna de Vries

*Alto*: The Contessa Giovanna Landini

*Tenors*: Sir D'Arcy Osborne, Enzo Angelucci, Major Sam Derry

*Bass*: John May

*Conductor*: Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty

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September 1943: German forces occupy Rome.

Gestapo boss Obersturmbannführer Paul Hauptmann rules with terror.

Hunger is widespread. Rumours fester. The war's outcome is far from certain.

Diplomats, refugees and escaped Allied prisoners risk their lives fleeing for protection into Vatican City, at one fifth of a square mile the world's smallest state, a neutral, independent country within Rome.

A small band of unlikely friends led by a courageous priest is drawn into deadly danger.

By Christmastime, it's too late to turn back.

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# 1

Sunday 19th December 1943
10.49 p.m.
*119 hours and 11 minutes before the mission*

Grunting, sullen, in spumes of leaden smoke, the black Daimler with diplomatic number plate noses onto Via Diciannove, beads of sleet fizzling on its hood. A single opal streetlight glints at its own reflection in an ebbing, scummy puddle where a drain has overflowed. Pulsing in the irregular blink of a café's broken neon sign, the words '*MORTE AL FASCISMO*' daubed across a shutter.

Scarlet.

Emerald.

White.

Delia Kiernan is forty, a diplomat's wife. Doctors have ordered her not to smoke. She is smoking.

A week before Christmas, she's a thousand miles from home. Sweat sticks her skirt to the backs of her stockings as she pushes the stubborn gear stick into first.

The man on the rear seat groans in stifled pain, tearing at the swastikas on his epaulettes.

The heavy engine grumbles. Blood throbs in her temples. On

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the dashboard, a scribbled map of how to get to the hospital using only the quieter streets is ready to be screwed up and tossed if she encounters an SS patrol but the darkness is making the pencil marks difficult to read and whatever hand wrote them was unsteady. She flicks on her cigarette lighter; a whiff of fuel inflames his moans.

Swerving into Via Ventuno, the Daimler clips a dustbin, upending it. What spills out gives a scuttle and makes for the gutter but is ravaged by a tornado of cadaverous dogs bolting as one from gloomed doorways.

Squawking brakes, jouncing over ramps, undercarriage racketing into potholes, fishtailing, oversteering, boards thudding, jinking over machine-gunned cobbles, into a street where wet leaves have made a rink of the paving stones.

Whimpers from the man. Pleadings to hurry.

Down a side street. Alongside the university purged and burned by the invaders. Its soccer pitch netless, strangled with weeds, the pit meant for a swimming pool yawning up at the moon and five hundred shattered windows. She remembers the bonfire of blackboards, seeing its photograph in the newspaper the morning of her daughter's eighteenth birthday. Past the many-eyed, murderous hulk of the Colosseum like the skeleton of a washed-ashore kraken.

Across the piazza, gargoyles leer from a church's gloomy facade. She flashes her headlights twice.

The bell tolls eleven. She feels it in her teeth. Wind harangues the chained-up tables and chairs outside a café, wheezing through the arrow-tipped railings.

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A black-clad man hurries across from the porch, damp raincoat clinging, abandoning his turned-inside-out umbrella to the gust as he scrambles into the passenger seat of the ponderous, boat-like car, trilby dripping.

As she pulls away, he takes out a notebook, commences scribbling with a pencil.

'What do you think you're doing?'

'Thinking,' he says.

Pulling a naggin of brandy from his pocket, he offers it to the groaning passenger who has tugged off one of his leather gloves and jammed it into his own mouth.

The man shakes his head, scared eyes rolling.

'For pity's sake, let him alone,' she says. 'Give it here.'

'You're driving.'

'Give it here this minute. Or you're walking.'

An eternity at the junction of Via Quattordici and Piazza Settanta as a battle-scarred Panzer rattles past, turret in slow-revolve as though bored.

'What does it mean for the mission?' she asks. 'If he's gravely ill?

'We'd have to find someone else. Maybe Angelucci?'

'Enzo couldn't be trained up. Not in the time.'

Hail surges hard on the windscreen as they pass Regina Coeli prison. She lights another cigarette, veins of ash falling on the collar of her raincoat. He has his eyes closed but she's certain he's not praying.

'For the love of God, Delia, can't this rust-bucket go any faster?'

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Steaming blue streetlights, alleyways snaking up hills, ranked silhouettes of martyrs on the rooftops of churches. It comes back to her, her second morning in Rome, when she climbed the staircase to the roof of St Peter's, every feature of every statue worn away by time and storm. Soot-stained, weather-beaten stalagmites.

Now, a farm gate blocking a driveway. He steps out into the furies of rain and tries to haul the gate open, trilby falling off with the fervour of his shakes. In the glim of the headlights, he wrenches at the bars.

'Tied closed,' he shouts. 'Would there be a toolbox in the boot?'

'Stand out of the road.'

'Delia—'

Revving, foot down hard, she *bolts* the massive car through the splintering, wheezing smash as the gate implodes and he clambers back in, shaking his heavy, wet head as a man wondering how his life can have come to this pass.

Through the long, flat grounds, where soaked sheep bawl, then the road climbs again and the hospital buildings loom, three blocks of brutal concrete bristling with empty flagpoles and monsters that must be water tanks.

A fluorescent yellow road sign commands in black:

'*Rallentare!*'

Up a short winding drive where the gravel is wearing thin, past a trio of diseased sycamores and the concrete hive of a machine-gun turret, to the floodlit portico by which a khaki-and-red-cross-painted ambulance is parked, engine on, three

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orderlies in the back playing cards. Inexplicably, on seeing the Daimler approach they pull the doors closed on themselves. A moment later, the floodlight is extinguished.

She exits the car but leaves the engine muttering.

The hospital doors are locked, the lobby beyond them in darkness. She tugs the bellpull three times, hears its distant, desolate jangle from somewhere in the heart of the darkened wards.

Stepping back, she looks up at the shuttered windows, as though looking could produce a watcher, the hope of all religious people, but no one is coming and as she approaches the shut ambulance for help a wolf-whistle sounds from behind her.

An orderly in his twenties has appeared from some door she hasn't noticed. Sulky, kiss-curled, cigarette in mouth, he looks as though he was asleep two minutes ago. The smell of a musty room has followed him out. The flashlight in his left hand gives a couple of meagre flickers, diminishing whatever light there is. In his right hand is an object it takes her a moment to recognise as a switchblade. He looks like he'd know what to do with it.

'I've a patient who needs urgent assistance,' she says. 'There. Back seat.'

'Your name?' he sighs, peering into the Daimler's chugging rear.

'I am not in a position to identify myself. I am attached to a neutral Legation in the city. This man is seriously ill, I had our official physician attend him not an hour ago. He says it's peritonitis or a burst appendix.'

'Why should I care? I am a Roman. What are *you*?'

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'Matter a damn what I am, send in for a stretcher.'

'You come here with your orders expecting me to help a son-of-a-whore Nazi?'

'You've a duty to help anyone.'

He spits on the ground.

'There's my duty,' he says.

The man in black steps out of the car, heavy hand on the roof, gives a grim stare at the sky as though resenting the clouds, slowly rounds to where the youth is standing.

'You kiss your mother with that mouth?'

'Who's asking?'

'Name's O'Flaherty.' Opening his raincoat, revealing his soutane and collar.

'Father. Excuse me, Father.' He crosses himself. 'I did not know.'

'The German uniform that man in the car is wearing is a disguise. He was running a surveillance mission and became seriously ill.'

'Father—'

'Tough Guy, here's a question. Is there a dentist in that hospital behind you?'

'Why?'

'Because you'll need one in a minute when I punch your teeth through your skull. You ignorant lout, to comport yourself before any woman in that fashion. Go to confession tomorrow morning and *apologise this minute*.'

'I beg forgiveness, *Signora*.' Bowing his florid face. 'I haven't eaten or slept in three nights.'

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'Granted,' she says. 'Can we move things along?'

'Our passenger is escaped British prisoner Major Sam Derry of the Royal Regiment of Artillery,' O'Flaherty says. 'The lives of many thousands depend on this man. If you love Italy get him into an operating theatre. This minute.'

The youth regards him.

O'Flaherty hurries to the ambulance, hauls open its doors.

'*Andiamo, ragazzi*,' he says, beckoning towards the Daimler. 'Off your backsides. Good men. We need muscle.'

Derry lurches from the car, blurting mouthfuls of blood, clutching at his abdomen and the night.

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## — 2 —

### THE VOICE OF DELIA KIERNAN

7th January 1963

*From transcript of BBC research interview, questions inaudible, conducted White City, London*

I probably drink too much. Which is the main thing to say. They'll have told you, no doubt. You needn't sham.

We were after setting up a mission – a 'Rendimento' was the code, the Italian word for 'a performance' – for that Christmas Eve, starting at eleven o'clock that night. But on the Sunday five evenings beforehand, Derry, our mission-runner, got sick while out on reconnaissance, and Angelucci was sent for, to stand in.

But you're wondering what led to it. As well you might.

Old age has made a bit of a hames of the memory, I'm afraid. Not that I forget things, but sometimes I remember them the wrong way around. So I'm not entirely certain when I first met the Monsignor. It was in Rome during the war. Don't ask me to work it out more than that or I'd need a long lie-down.

No, I didn't keep a diary, love. Never had the patience.

You wouldn't happen to have a cigarette? If we're going to get into it.

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Thanks. No, I'm grand. I've matches.

As the wife of the senior Irish diplomat to the Vatican, you did a lot of standing about at official receptions being talked at by Archbishops and pretending to listen. But I suppose you felt it a sort of duty to do what little you could for the young Irish of the city, most of whom were in religious life.

Oh, I'd say a total of five hundred or so, priests and nuns. Many seminarians. What with rationing, you didn't have much of a good time in Rome during the war – you wouldn't see a head of cabbage or a bit of chicken in a month's travel. Scabby bits of turnip. Hard-tack biscuit tasting of sawdust and ashes. Sausages with that little meat in them, you could eat them on a Good Friday.

And so many of the youngsters I'm talking about were barely out of their teens. These days we'd call them teenagers. That word didn't exist back then. So they seemed – how to put it? – a bit lost. And exhausted. A religiously minded kid will often be good at lying awake all night because you need an imagination if you're going to believe.

One or two were scarcely into long trousers and they staring down the barrel of priesthood. Some of them, you wondered had it maybe been more Mammy's idea than their own. And, often enough, though some won't like me saying it, a nun was the youngest daughter of a poor family, with no other prospects. Or she's impressionable in adolescence, like most of us were. Some ould gull of a Mother Superior goes prowling for vocations into a little school in Hutchesontown, Glasgow. Annie raises her hand and she barely gone thirteen. Annie loves Our

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Lady and the flowers on the altar. And that's Annie despatched to the convent, for the rest of her life. Not in every case, obviously, but you wondered. You wondered.

Anyhow, there was all of that, just fellow feeling for these youngsters. You'd see an awful lot of fear and plain hunger in Rome at the time. It was also a hellishly hot summer, scalding, sapping heat. The gardens of our beautiful Legation villa had a swimming pool, and I let it be known at every function I attended that all Irish youngsters in the city could use it, and the numbers of the trams that would take them there from Piazza del Risorgimento, which is right next door to the Vatican. My poor Tom nearly lost his mind with me and insisted, at the very least, that the sexes must attend on different days. 'You're no fun,' I told him. 'But sure that's why I married you.'

To be serious, of course I was happy to agree to his compromise. Seeing their poor, scrawny bodies leapfrogging and splashing would have brought tears to a glass eye.

So, I started putting on a weekly evening for them, an Open House, if you like, at the Residence of a Thursday night.

I'd have tureens of delicious minestrone and that lovely long Italian bread, you know, a bit of fruit if I could get it on the black market – the Legation maids used to help me in that respect – a few bob will get you most things in Italy. Great cauldrons of pasta; a quid's worth of spaghetti will do you to feed a whole battalion. If you'd olives or a cheese or two, that was nice for them as well. A dirty big beast of a lasagne, piping hot. Also, sausages and rashers from Limerick the odd time, if I could get them brought in in the Diplomatic Bag. A table of ices or

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poached peaches with zabaglione, maybe a lemon tart. Yes, wine, too. Why not? I wanted them to feel welcome in my home. If they felt like *un bicchiere di vino rosso* or a bottle of stout, which most of them didn't, I wanted them to enjoy it, and to share anything we had ourselves. That's the way I was brought up.

I'm a Catholic, I love the faith as best I can, but I wouldn't be a great one for kissing the altar rails. Not at all. Wouldn't be a Holy Mary. There's good people of every persuasion, and there's 24-carat bastards. Life schools you the way no catechism will.

There was a modest enough budget provided for entertaining guests at the Legation. I drove my misfortunate liege demented by exceeding it every week. And then, Dublin could get a bit snippy, too, as I recall. There'd be these urgent cablegrams from the Department of Foreign Affairs demanding a receipt in triplicate for that bottle of Prosecco: viz, heretofore, moreover, block capitals. Oh, I didn't give a fig, dear. We'll be a long time dead. Here's a girl wouldn't be too renowned for doing what she's told. Some little jack-in-office of a penpusher thinks he'll lord it over yours truly? Take the back of my arse and boil it.

This particular evening, I'd plenty on my mind. I was after spending the morning in the recording studio at Radio Roma because I was making a record of two songs to be released back in Ireland. Yes. I was a professional singer before I was married. I didn't want to give it up fully.

That day? Oh, I can't remember now, love, I think 'Danny Boy' and 'Boolavogue'. Maybe 'The Spinning Wheel'. I'd have to check.

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I'd a grand little career going back at home and I got such fulfilment and excitement from that. To be honest, I missed it dreadfully, the concerts, the travelling around. But by '41 I'd had to take a break from it, between one thing and another, the war getting worse, Tom's posting to Rome. I was singing in Belfast the night the Luftwaffe firebombed the theatre. That's what you call a mixed review.

Wasn't a town I didn't perform in the breadth and length of Ireland. In the summers, the Isle of Man, Liverpool, Manchester, often Dundee or Ayrshire, maybe a couple of nights in Cricklewood at the dance halls. I've sung in Durham, Kilmarnock, Northampton, all over. A woman can lose her confidence in the house all day. And I always think, if singing's in you, you have to sing.

Anyhow, in comes this polite sort of fellow to my get-together that evening and introduces himself as Monsignor O'Flaherty of the Holy Office. Chilly words.

'Monsignor' is a title conferred by the Church on a diocesan priest who's been an administrator five years. So, it conveys a bit of importance. As for 'Holy Office', that's the department of the Vatican where they keep a weather eye on what's called 'adherence to doctrine' and ensure everyone's toeing the line. It's what used to be called 'the Inquisition'. So that carried a bit of weight, too. There's few of us want an Inquisitor at our party.

Normally at my evenings I didn't like too many high-and-mighty sorts, because the youngsters weren't able to relax and enjoy themselves if the quare ould hawks were along. Once, for

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example, a certain Cardinal who shall be nameless pitched up; a long drink of cross-eyed, buck-toothed misery if ever there was, he'd bore the snots off a wet horse, and the effect was like turning a fire hose on a kindergarten. He'd a way of smiling would freeze up the heart in your chest. As for smug? If he was a banana, he'd peel himself.

But this Monsignor fellow was different, down to earth. Affable. You get that with Kerry people, a sort of courtesy. Too many priests at the time saw themselves not as a sign of mercy but as grim little thin-lipped suburban magistrates. Hugh wasn't too mad on authority.

Another different thing, his means of transport over to us that night was his motorcycle. Here he's ambling up the steps to the residence and he grey with the dust from boots to helmet, huge leather gloves on him like a flying ace, and he blessing himself at the Lourdes water font on the hallstand. As though a priest dressed like that was the most everyday sight you ever saw. And the bang of motor oil off him. Unusual.

He spoke in beautiful Italian to my servants. I didn't know it yet, but I would never meet a brainier piece of work: Hugh had three doctorates and was fluent in seven languages, his mind was like a lawnmower blade; he'd shear through any knot and see a solution, if there was one.

Around the party he sallies, anyhow, tumbler of *limonata* in hand, a word of chat here, a joke or two there. Two Liverpool students were playing chess; he watched them for a while, and, when they finished, asked the winner to explain what the strategy had been. He didn't touch a drop but not a bother on him

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about anyone else having a glass of beer. Fire away. Whatever you're having yourself.

There was a young woman from Carrigafoyle, a Carmelite novice, they'd a great old natter; didn't it turn out he'd known a late uncle of hers through golf back at home. Hugh was brought up on a golf course as you probably know. His father, a one-time policeman, was the club professional in Killarney. Then Hugh and the young Carmelite – I can see them clear as you like, still, from that night in my living room – the pair of them demonstrating to the company how to putt with a walking stick. There was a bundle of talk about happy subjects and none of the war.

Oh, I forgot to say, when, later, we started having code names, his name was 'Golf'. He was obsessed with the notion the Germans were listening. Escaped prisoners were known as 'Books', their hiding places 'Shelves'. We never used the real names of the Roman streets but gave them names of our own, based on numbers, like the streets in Manhattan. Or we named them after the great Italian composers. And we had to keep mixing the codes to stay ahead of the Gestapo. But more of that, anon.

Tom was out that evening, visiting a trio of Dubliners who were after unwisely giving lip to the Fascisti and getting themselves chucked into Regina Coeli, the jail in Rome, after a hiding; and, anyway, he rarely attended my get-togethers. He enjoyed pretending to disapprove of them more than he actually did.

A point came in the evening when the youngsters started asking would I sing. Some of them had my 78s back at home in

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Ireland, or, likelier, their parents had. There was a recording of mine was after being played all that summer on Raidió Éireann, 'The Voice of Delia Kiernan', even on the Third Service and American Forces Network. The great Richard Tauber himself had said in an interview he liked it, so that was a feather in my cap. The Monsignor encouraged me to oblige them. 'Go on, Mrs Kiernan, before they start breaking up the furniture.' I answered that I had no accompanist and would feel nervous without that safety net. In truth, I'd a couple of whiskeys on me.

He answered that he was no Paderewski but would vamp along as best he could if I would tell him the key. What I had in mind was written in A-flat, which isn't easy for an improvisor, but I told him I could hack it in A. So, over with the pair of us to the piano, a lovely old Bösendorfer, and off we went. It was an old love song, an arietta by Bellini I've long had a place in my heart for – a lovely loose melody like a soft-rolling folk song. It always brings my father back to me, Lord have mercy on him, it was a great favourite of his. As a girl I learned it off a 78 he had in the house, John McCormack's version – and some of the younglings joined along.

*Vaga luna, che inargenti*
*Queste rive e questi fiori*
*Ed inspiri agli elementi*
*Il linguaggio dell'amor*

It wasn't false modesty from Hugh, I must say, about the level of his musicianship. Dear knows I've heard bad pianists in

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my time but he was cat altogether, God love him. He'd grand big hands on him like a pair of shovels but he was clumsy. All the same, it was a lovely experience. You'd remember it. In recollection, Rome comes to me always as everyday music: the clunk of a shutter on a sweltering afternoon, the gasps of wonder when you're inside the Pantheon and rain starts to fall. The hot pigeons warbling, the way the drinking fountains chuckle. But there was never music sweeter than hearing the room sing that night.

Something happens in a room when people are singing. It changes the air, like rainfall, or dusk. You've those say it's escapism but, to me, life seems realer, then.

Forgive me. Makes me emotional to think of.

Well, that's how we met, and we were soon good pals. He'd come along to my evenings the odd time, bring a chum or two with him. Priests, yes – a Japanese Franciscan came once – or pilgrims from the homeland or his beloved United States, and always a bottle of excellent Chianti, the dear knows how he laid hands on it, though he didn't drink himself, as I say. Often, he'd bring a naggin of brandy.

A well-placed Papal Count was after gifting the Irish Legation an expensive subscription to a box at the Opera House, to which we'd often invite other diplomats and their families. You've to remember that independent Ireland was still a very young country, having only won her freedom in 1921. The solidarity of others was needed and valued. Hosting was something a diplomat's wife was expected to do. Verdi sometimes proved an ally, you could say.

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This one particular occasion the plan was for a party of seven, but the Portuguese Ambassador was under the weather with the awful heat, the filth of which brought headaches that would cripple you and made it hard to breathe, so I invited along the Monsignor to join the group, for I knew he loved Puccini, and *Tosca* is set in Rome as you know. We were the Swedish Ambassador and his wife, the Swiss Cultural Attaché – there's a part-time job if ever there was – and a lady friend, then the Monsignor and yours truly and my husband. 'A riot of neutrality,' Hugh joked, shaking hands. 'We lot couldn't shoot our way out of a mousetrap.'

Which the Swedish Ambassador laughed at. But not the Swiss Cultural Attaché, as I recall, who seemed understandably put off by the fact that Hugh had a little notebook in which he kept scribbling, all the way through the performance. It was an oddity of Hugh's: if a thing wasn't written down, it hadn't happened. Even his Bible, he'd be scrawling all over the margins. Anyhow. Another story. Where were we?

Yes.

Late in '42 it must have been, a kind of darkness I hadn't seen before came over him. For a while he'd been visiting the Axis prisoner-of-war camps in Italy as an official Vatican observer. But something happened to him that autumn. He wasn't the same. He stopped attending my evenings, went to ground a while. Someone told me he'd been sick, was after being in hospital with cancer or was considering going to Massachusetts to do parish work. My Tom heard on the Vatican grapevine he might be leaving the priesthood. But when at last he agreed to

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see me, he said that wasn't so; he'd been preoccupied with what he called a private matter.

It was after raining for days as we spoke, and the river was rising, one of those nights when the Tiber was tipping the tree-roots. Was he in trouble? I remember asking him. Was he in need of a friend?

Because, I'll be honest, sometimes you heard of a priest where a woman had come into the picture. Human nature is what it is. We won't change it this late in the day. There's many a good man discovered the celibate life wasn't for him, but they'd be shunned by the Church when they left. The routine was you'd be told to go to a particular room in some shabby back-street hotel, on the bed there'd be a suit from a pawnshop and three pound-notes. You took off your priestly clothes, folded them on the bed, got into the dead man's suit, left the hotel by the back door. It was understood no one from your old life would ever contact you again. They made it hard for you to leave. So, too many stayed.

I can say now, after all this time, I had a particular lady in mind, a young Contessa recently widowed who'd been seen in Hugh's company at art galleries and the like, around Rome, each of the pair for different reasons clad in black. A beauty she was, with something of what the French call '*gamine*', slightly boyish film-star looks, like those of Leslie Caron. She and I became great friends; indeed, I was speaking with her on the telephone not two hours ago. The Vatican, like all kremlins, is a hive of whispers and envies. I know for a fact that her friendship with Hugh didn't merit the way it was sometimes talked about. 'No

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smoke without fire' is the way gossips put it. I always say, maybe it's not smoke, maybe your spectacles need a wiping.

Anyhow, he gave a laugh when I mentioned her name. The private matter he was after mentioning was nothing at all of that nature, he assured me. 'But thank you, Delia, for the compliment.'

When I persisted, he showed me a scrap of a letter that had been smuggled to him from a poor Scottish boy, a soldier in a prisoner-of-war camp, about to be executed. The lad wanted it sent to his mother. The words of it, the fact of it – forgive me a moment – had been coming between Hugh and his sleep.

I wept when I read it. Handed it back and wept. There's never a single day of my life I don't pray for that mother.

We'd go through American bombing attacks the following summer. Those I'll never forget. Because unless you've lived through an air raid, I don't think I can convey the terror. There's no film could capture it. The screaming. The smell. The nerves would be at you weeks afterward.

A B-25 Mitchell bomber is the size of a London bus. You look up and there's forty of them raining 500-pound bombs. So, a street isn't damaged, it's obliterated. Gone. A rubble of stinking smoke and pulverised bricks. The planes would come the night before, drop eighty thousand leaflets saying what would happen the next day. So you'd plenty of time for the dread to build up. One night an air raid came during one of my evenings. I'll never forget the young people's fear; they were weeping, terrified.

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By now, Hugh had become aware that certain individuals in Rome – a person here, someone else over there – were helping escaped Allied prisoners and Jews get out of the country, into Switzerland, and he'd been giving them the odd bit of assistance on the QT. Things like buying train tickets in false names, getting clothes, nothing much more. It was ad hoc, you know, not organised. Hugh had a lot of friends in the city between one thing and another; he wasn't one of those priests that eat and sleep and die in the chapel. He was half-thinking of putting together a proper group that might raise a few bob for the escapees, the odd handout, at a distance, on the quiet.

Discreet. Nothing formal. All very hush-hush. Perhaps best not to mention it to Tom or anyone else at the embassy. There wouldn't be any danger, it would only be in the background, like a charity fund.

I didn't know what it would lead to or I'd have run for the hills.

He was after thinking of a cover for it.

The Choir.

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# — 3 —

Monday 20th December 1943
6.47 a.m.
*112 hours and 13 minutes before the Rendimento*

In the hours after the dash to the hospital, a head cold assails him. Racking sneezes, hacks, shivers, hot eyes. The fear looms that this is the onset of the dreaded Roman flu, which killed a dozen of his African First Years and nine of his Chicagoans last winter.

Minutes before dawn, exhausted, he forces himself to sleep. The Daimler roaring through his nightmares.

Somehow it becomes the Mercedes of Hauptmann, the Gestapo commander. They're driving long spirals of impossibly narrow streets in a city that is and is not Rome. Oak trees. Lightning. Bloodstains on sand. Rain patterning a window. Vast towers. A well as deep as the moon is high. Faces turning to stone as a Chopin nocturne plays, the settled, broken blankness of those without hope. Now Hauptmann is at his bedside, a presence, a virus. You'd be afraid to breathe in case you inhale him. *Tell me who you met. Tell me why you met them.* The Nazi's grey eyes. Grey infantry braid on his cuffs. Grey smoke of his grey cigarettes. The wolf feeding Romulus and Remus in a fresco comes to life and slobbers at her starving babies before devouring them.

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At ten o'clock, he leaves his room, walks uneasily to the School of Divinity, starts into the three-hour lecture he must give on Aquinas, in Latin, to a class of ninety seminarians. Last night's sleet still beating in his head as he clutches the lectern for steadiness, the bleached-out yellow windows of the lecture hall throbbing. This term's Third Years are bright. Their questions swarm like wasps. The glass of hot water and lemon he has brought with him to the dais tastes of mud and pencil shavings.

Afterwards, wrapped in a blanket, he begins grading their end-of-term disquisitions but makes it through only thirty papers before retreating to his sickbed. The remaining sixty scripts he marks between bouts of flicker-lit half-sleep and fits of angry coughing. His wheezes cast a seething dog into the corners of the room. His ribcage is made of fire.

No word from Sam Derry.

Bombers overhead.

Perhaps news will come tomorrow.

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## *Transcript of memorandum recording made on Allgemeine Elektricitäts-Gesellschaft AG Magnetophon*

This is Obersturmbannführer Paul Hauptmann speaking. For the attention of Dollman, confidential. Twentieth of December, forty-three, Gestapo headquarters, Rome.

Himmler telephoned again. Ranting, threatening. Furious

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