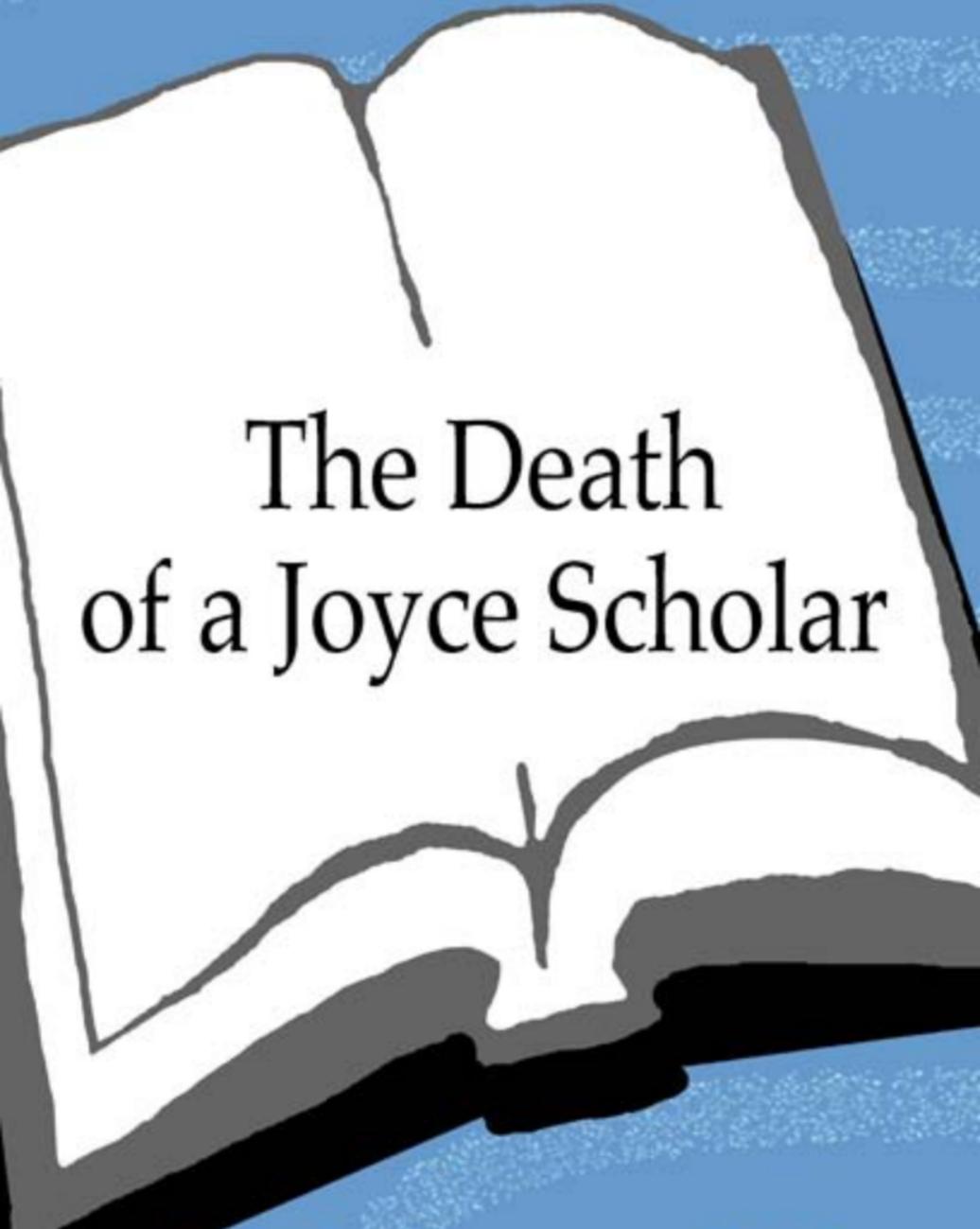




HarperCollins e-books



The Death
of a Joyce Scholar

Bartholomew Gill

BARTHOLOMEW GILL

**THE
DEATH
OF A
JOYCE SCHOLAR**

A PETER McGARR MYSTERY



HarperCollins e-books

For
HUGH GILL MCGARRITY
publican • beloved brother • *Mensch*

“We Irishmen think otherwise.”

—BISHOP BERKELEY

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PART I

ONE

IT BEGAN DURING an unprecedented period of June heat. After a cold, wild spring that saw force-eleven winds fell ancient beeches and hail showers shatter double-glazed windows, the clouds parted suddenly and bathed an unbelieving Dublin in a strong hot sun.

For the first few days people rejoiced and celebrated. Newspapers reported traffic jams on roads leading to Howth and other nearby beaches, and farmers, ever quick to exploit good weather, worked late into the night making hay with dried grasses. But for those who remained in the city to work, the reaction was different.

By the fourth day they were stunned. Looking up from a telephone or a desk at a sparkling pristine sky, they asked themselves why they had thought late July or early August, when they had arranged to take their holidays, had ever offered better weather. They mused and wandered—hands in pockets, voices vague—until the sixth or seventh day, when the collective mood changed from a tentative acceptance of

what life might be like in another clime to downright anger that they had chosen badly.

It was then that Peter McGarr, the senior-most civil servant in his section, decided that—schedule be damned—he would defer to the elements and to a prerogative of his rank. Just half-century now, he asked himself how many more weeks of sunshine he might be able to enjoy in the tranquility of his back garden. He could remember whole summers of cool breezes and forbidding skies, and with so many of his neighbors and their bands of bawling brats—God bless them—having taken to the coasts, he would have virtually all of Rathmines or at least Belgrave Square, where he lived, to himself.

At home he took the phone off the hook.

Once he'd made the mistake of leaving his phone number while on holiday in Portugal. He didn't get a moment's peace until he instructed the hotel management to say he'd moved on. In the minds of many of his colleagues and much of the press, McGarr had become so equated with his operation that, though much of substance could and often did occur during his several yearly absences, little of the reality of those occurrences could be acknowledged without his presence.

It was a dynamic that cut both ways, and from time to time McGarr regretted being perhaps too much the chief operative and too little the chief administrator of his agency. Yes, he had become a kind of institution, and was therefore more secure. But when, as was now the case, the work load increased dramatically with little hope of relief, it was he himself who bore the brunt of public scrutiny, not the bureau.

At his kitchen sink McGarr now filled the kettle and looked out through tall Georgian windows on the green

wonder of his garden, burgeoning in the near tropical heat. It was almost as if he could actually see the plants growing; he easily convinced himself—listening to the flame drum on the bottom of the copper pot—that the wide, rubbery cabbage leaves that were glistening in the morning sun had actually gained inches since he had last seen them through the same window only a few hours earlier.

McGarr's house sat on a corner lot in Belgrave Square, a cluster of mainly Georgian row houses that looked out over a small, planted green area which was bounded on two sides by major through streets. Since McGarr's arrival some six years earlier, the neighborhood had declined from shabby genteel to tatty to near-slum before being rescued by several rent moguls who divided the gracious, eighteenth-century spaces into as many as ten tiny studio apartments.

But at least they had repainted crumbling exterior brick and replaced sagging windows and doors. In such a way, Belgrave Square—unlike some Dublin squares of the same vintage that had been gentrified beyond approachability with new, ornate fanlights and brass nameplates and door knockers—had remained familiar, accessible and democratic, which was how McGarr preferred things. And if prices declined again, he might plunge in himself and restore at least the dwellings immediately surrounding his own. His wife's picture gallery in Dawson Street had been doing nicely in recent years, and McGarr did not plan on being a wage slave all his life.

In the basement, the garden rooms of which he had converted to a kind of hothouse, McGarr changed into his work clothes, a pair of patched, twill trousers, an open-neck, short-sleeve shirt, and an old pair of boots heavy enough to punch down the top of a spade. A man a few inches shy of medium height, McGarr was sturdily constructed with firm, once-quick legs and strong arms and shoulders that he kept

fit by means of what he called Chinese exercise. By that he meant daily bouts of vigorous, manual labor, usually, as now, in or around his house.

Bald on top, McGarr kept long the light red hair that remained, sweeping it back on the sides of his head so that it curled at the nape of his neck. He now fitted on a worn panama hat. He had a freckled face and a long nose, which had been broken often and was now bent to one side. His eyes were pale gray, and in all, dressed as he was with dried mud on his boots, he looked like a Dublin navy from the building trades whose specialty was poured concrete.

The meringue on McGarr's boots consisted, however, of aged chicken manure and compost. Combined in the proportion two to one, it was the secret to his garden and such a fillip to growth that his neighbors and the few friends whom he had made privy to his hobby admired his handiwork in terms that he always found distressing. Having dismissed all the standard explanations for digging in the earth from reestablishing touch with his ecology to taking direct part in the cycle of birth, growth, harvest and rebirth, McGarr believed, and insisted, that he gardened for simple pleasure. Everything from journeying the forty miles down to Kildare for the magic chicken droppings, which clung like glue to his boots and made his eyes water and his nose sting, to enjoying the snappy crunch of fresh vegetables and herbs in all seasons, regaled him in a way that was beyond words. He did it because he did it, he once told his wife, for whom all urges required some explanation, and he couldn't think of anything else that would provide him with such...pleasure. There was no other word for it.

Thus McGarr worked nearly to noon on the first day of his unplanned, midsummer retreat from things tiresome and worldly, turning over and wetting down his several compost

heaps and weeding and tickling his raised beds that differed from traditional Irish “lazy” beds in their width of six feet and their depth of four. The sun, contained by the tall garden walls, became torrid, and in looking up from his hoeing to move the sprinkler from his rows of lettuce, chicory, endives, watercress, and spinach to the beds of nearly ripe asparagus, McGarr noticed a richly bearded face at the top of the wall that he shared with his only truly contiguous neighbor.

It was that of Rabbi Viner, who had lived next door for nearly a decade now and become a particular friend of McGarr’s. He too was a Dubliner by birth and sensibility, and their minds often met with a felicity that McGarr considered soothing.

“Grand day, but a bit hot, wouldn’t you say? Particularly in your predicament.”

“Which is?” McGarr asked.

“Locked in guilt expiation, I have it. Is this the noonday sun?” Having positioned himself in the full, patterned shade of McGarr’s ginkgo tree, he pretended not to be able to locate the source of heat. “We’ll have to add Irish civil servants to the lyric, specifically those who phone in ill to pot around in their back gardens. We could then relate it all to the country’s unplanned-for and unsolved mortalities.”

“Something like the Lizzie Borden jingle,” McGarr suggested.

“The very thing,” said Viner. “On the charts in no time. Haven’t we all a touch of mayhem in our hearts?”

Disregarding his clothes, which were now nearly wet, McGarr moved the sprinkler without turning it off; the fine spray of cold water felt so refreshing that he thought for a moment that he might raise the ring over his head. “But, isn’t all mortality unplanned for, or are you intimating that persons known to you—your supplicants, perhaps—plan

otherwise? I could send somebody 'round. Preventive mortality, we could call it."

"Something like preventive medicine," Viner chimed in, warming to the crack, as lively conversation or any good time was called throughout Ireland. "It's the coming thing, I'm told. All prohibition and exhortation. Rules. *Dictats*. No smoking, no drinking. Did you hear me, Chief Super or Super Chief, whichever it is they call you down there in the *drum*."

"Castle," McGarr corrected. "I couldn't imagine myself in a mere fort." McGarr was Chief Superintendent of the Murder Squad of the Garda Siochana, the Irish Police. His office was in Dublin Castle.

"Water. *Mineral* water. And jogging—who, might I ask, ever thought of that abuse of the human body?" Viner was a powerfully constructed man who, much to his family's dismay, had taken on a great deal of weight in recent years, such that he was perhaps the largest man, if not the tallest, that McGarr knew. "Some bloody American, no doubt."

"Wrong there," said McGarr. "He was Greek. Carrying the bad news, he was."

"And suitably dispatched, as I remember the myth. Instant mortality right on the spot and bad cess to all his kind."

There was a pause in which McGarr removed an already damp handkerchief from a back pocket and swabbed his brow. Exactly fifty now, he was beginning to feel both the weight of his years and the injuries that he had sustained along the way. Having begun with the Garda at nineteen, he had chafed under a system that had seemed to reward bureaucratic competence and political pull more than active police work. He had resigned and spent an even score of years on the Continent, first with Criminal Justice and later with Interpol, before returning home to his present post.

But he now had a knee on which both he and a Marseilles

thug, who had jumped him from behind, had fallen. It would only take limited lateral movement. His hip—same side—gave off a definite click with each step. The socket had been rearranged in a bomb blast in a Galway disco. And then his back and one arm were riddled with scars that imperfectly concealed damage of which he was reminded whenever he bent too far or reached too quickly. Or whenever he performed any vigorous activity too long.

“Don’t you just hate Americans and vegetables?” Viner went on. As with most Dubliners, conversation between them did not always proceed linearly.

McGarr wondered if there were a correlation or a choice. He himself hated neither, and he nearly remarked that he had several good friends who were Americans, but he knew where that would lead. And since much of his garden produce regularly found its way to Viner’s table, he imagined Viner himself rather fancied vegetables. He hadn’t become that immense on bread alone. “Now what could you possibly have against vegetables? Not to mention Americans, of whom there were on last report a mere two-hundred-and-forty million.”

“Oh, nothing. Certainly nothing against *your* vegetables. All organic. No pesticides. No herbicides. Kosher in the strictest sense and delicious certainly. But vegetables are best et as an accompaniment, a side dish, garnish even, to something more toothsome.”

McGarr now understood the drift of their conversation and suggested, “Like beefsteak,” which was what Viner wanted to hear. After a series of tests some six or seven months earlier, Viner’s cardiologist had recommended a diet rich in whole grains, fresh vegetables, and defatted, salt-free potions like consommés and weak chicken soup. Viner had lost scads of weight and had admitted to feeling much better. “I don’t nod off anymore at three or four in the afternoon. I

don't get *angry* at little things, goddamn it!" But he couldn't speak to McGarr, who he knew treasured a solid meal, or look upon his garden, without conjuring up the entrées with which those comestibles might be served. They had gone through this before.

"Smuddered in sautéed mushrooms and lovely green onions, with a side of bleedin' broccoli hollandaise. No, *no*—*salmon* hollandaise. Forget *vegetables*, dirt-dwelling, lower-life forms that they are, though I wouldn't ignore fresh asparagus"—Viner's dark eyes turned toward the rainbow that the full sun was creating in the mist of McGarr's sprayer—"lightly steamed and dripping with drawn—"

"Sol!" a voice came over the wall. "Solly! Dinner!" It was Viner's wife.

"*Bu'ther!*"

McGarr tried to keep from laughing. He half turned his back. "What is it today?" he asked innocently.

"Twigs and bloody bark, if you must know. What else?"

"Ach—things could be worse. Consider my situation. I don't have dinner at all."

"And you with a fridge brimming with death." Viner lifted a hand. "Oh, no—dissimulate not. I've seen it: sides of rashers, tubs of butter. Cheeses! Gruyeres, Camemberts, lovely soft, moist Bries that just melt on the tongue," he cataloged as he descended the wall and escaped McGarr's sight. "Pickled herring in cream sauce. The leavings of some highly caloric repast like chicken Française or a pot of Beef Bourguignonne..."

"Sol!" his wife called out the open window. "What are you going on about out there? Come in here now while your dinner's hot."

"...pâté de foie gras on buttered toast points" were the last words of protest McGarr heard for perhaps an hour, until a dog began barking, and, though lame from injuries sus-