

## The Hermit

By Shaun O Ceallaigh

Fr. Matt Tobin left the parish house carrying the bag of provisions. As he stood beside the small Nissan Micra parked in front of what used to be a garage, a barbed wind whipped his overcoat. The building stood dark and empty, with one of its windows broken. He'd have to get that sorted before it spread. As he pulled the car door open, he groaned at a burning in his shoulder. The season's turn swelled his joints. On the cusp of winter, the weekly visits would soon become a challenge.

He tossed the bag onto the back seat, then sat in, keys at the ready. Above a nearby housing development, coloured sparks rained from exploding fireworks. Not a night to be on the streets, but his last duty remained—there was no getting out of it. He relaxed against the head rest, stared at the weathered garage door, then closed his eyes.

When he first arrived in the parish, he'd converted the garage to an office. He hung inspirational posters, arranged pamphlets, set up a chair and desk. One by one, parishioners started to call, asking him to pray for the sick, call on the dying, perform baptisms, blessings, and weddings. Not anymore. These days, he used the place as a storage shed. A rarity to receive callers—the last of his flock buried and their



offspring suspicious.

His last duty came to him in that garage. Or, at least, Maura Comskey did. He opened his eyes and turned the ignition, the hybrid engine sending a shudder through the vehicle. Maura Comskey. Whatever happened to her? He reversed the car out of the driveway.

“I can’t stand it, Father,” she’d said, sat in front of his desk. “How am I expected to put up with it?”

He leaned forward, arching his hands. “I’m sorry, I don’t really understand. What is it your husband is doing?”

“The man has the house wrecked, Father, but he won’t listen. He won’t speak to me, just blanks me. Oh God, Father, that icy stare. It scares me.”

She twisted the grey woollen hat held on her lap. It was her first time coming to him. Before this, she was a nameless face in the Sunday congregation. Probably in her late thirties. As with most women, marriage had knocked the shine off her appearance. She looked around the small office, her face creased. “If you could just talk to him, Father. He might listen to you. You might be able to get through to him.”

He sat back in his chair, feeling the desperation coming off her. The poor woman. “I’m happy to, Maura. If you think I can help, I’m happy to do all I can.”

“Oh, thank you, Father.” She got up, pulling on the hat, wiping the dampness from her eyes. “He’s a good Catholic. He’ll listen to you. You’ll make him see sense.”

He smiled at her, rising from his own seat. “I promise I’ll do everything I can.”

The next day, parked on the Comskey’s street, he climbed from the Toyota Corolla, rested his palm on the roof, and looked at the row of red-brick buildings. Children played on the road in the broiling afternoon sun. Two girls spun a rope and another skipped over it, all three chanting a rhyme, the ground radiating heat around them.

As he passed, the children stopped their game

and called to him: “Hello, Father Tobin.”

He waved and smiled, hurrying along to the Comskey’s house. When the door opened, Maura peered from inside, shielding herself.

“Oh, Father.” She opened the door wide. “Thank God you’ve come. It’s worse he’s getting. Soon it will be too late.”

“Well,” he said, smiling, “lead the way. We’ll see if we can get this business sorted.”

She returned a muted smile. Inside, he noted her grey pallor.

“He’s out back. In the kitchen.”

As he entered, he got his first glimpse of Larry Comskey, his rear end cocked in the air as he bent, struggling with something. Smears of cement caked the linoleum, and dust hovered in the air, covering the kitchen counter, the cupboards, and the dinner table. Maura stood across the room from them, at the worktop.

“Larry, we have a visitor.”

Larry glanced at his wife, then turned without straightening.

“Hello, Larry,” Matt said, saluting the man. “I just called to . . . to see how the work is going.” Larry turned back to whatever he was struggling with. “It looks like you’ve been mighty busy.”

“Eh, I’m sorry to ask, Father, but would you give me a hand with this?”

Matt removed his jacket and joined Larry where he stood over a large steel contraption—some sort of box. “Right, where are we going with it?” he asked, rubbing his palms together.

“If you’d just help me slide it over to the door.

I need it on the threshold.”

Together, they manoeuvred the box. Larry Comskey was older than Matt expected, a skull cap of baldness atop his head, his light wool jumper, bunched at the elbows, covered in mortar. He'd a few years on his wife. Probably in his fifties.

With the box in place between the kitchen and the front room, Matt found himself facing through the doorway. The room looked all wrong. Its window, with flowery curtains pulled back on each side, was bricked up, with the cement between the red stone solidified in drips down the sides. One corner was occupied by a small army camp bed, a portable television perched on a milk crate, and a threadbare easy chair. The opposite corner contained a bathroom sink and toilet, crudely installed.

Larry Comskey straightened, rubbing his neck. “Thanks, Father. Couldn't manage the thing on my own.”

Matt coughed into his fist, clearing his throat. He met the rheumy eyes of the man, noticing the sweat beading his forehead. “What exactly is it, Larry?”

“It's a sliding drawer,” he answered, crouching down. He pulled a handle on the box and the drawer slid into the room. When pushed back in, the drawer popped out on Matt's side. “I saw one in a Post Office in Cork. Got a friend to make it for me.”

“Oh, I see. But what is it for?”

Larry stood up without responding. He

grabbed a trowel and a bucket of wet cement. Matt hadn't noticed the pillar of bricks inside the door.

“If you don't mind, Father, I have to get a move on.” He began laying bricks across the threshold.

Matt looked over his shoulder at Maura. She faced away from them, gripping the kitchen sink. “What is it you're up to, Larry?”

“Tell him!” Maura screeched. “Tell him what you're doing.”

Larry glanced up from where he'd slopped cement on the bare floor. “Calm down, woman. It's none of his concern.”

“It's the stuff of horror stories,” she said, spinning around, her face strange with rage. “If you're not ashamed of what you're doing, then tell him. Say it aloud.”

As he set a brick in place, he glanced at Matt. “I think he sees for himself.”

“You're a monster,” she screamed. “A monster!” She bolted towards the hallway, sobbing, slamming the door behind her.

“Don't mind her, Father. She's always been prone to hysterics.”

Matt pulled a hanky from his pocket and wiped his brow. “Tell me this isn't what it looks like? Because, frankly, it doesn't look good.”

“Don't worry yourself. I'll be out of everyone's way soon enough. Out of sight, out of mind, eh, Father?”

“This is crazy,” Matt said, turning away. “They'll lock you up for this. Is that what you

**Larry looked at him, a trail of sweat glistening down his left cheek. “Did you ever consider that maybe I’m the only sane man left? That it’s the rest of you who have gone crazy?”**

want? To end up in the madhouse?”

“If my wife hadn’t gone blabbing, no one would have known about it.”

“Well, now I know. And I’m going to have to tell someone. I can’t let this go on.”

“Why, Father?” He started laying the second row of bricks, building them up around the sliding drawer. “What harm will it do to anyone?”

“You, Larry. It’ll harm you. You can’t be in a right state of mind if you’re doing this.”

Larry looked at him, a trail of sweat glistening down his left cheek. “Did you ever consider that maybe I’m the only sane man left? That it’s the rest of you who have gone crazy?”

The pager on Matt’s belt beeped. He pulled out the small device and read the scrolling message. The Guards—there’d been an accident. “Look, Larry, I’ve to go, for now. I’ll be back this evening. Don’t do anything until then. Okay?”

“I’ll only be able to go so high with the wall before the cement will need to set.” He slopped on more mortar. “I won’t be finished until late in the night.”

“Good. I’ll be back in a few hours.” He grabbed his jacket and hurried for the door.

“I’m not going anywhere, Father. That’s the whole idea.”

That was over twenty years ago. The fireworks bursting over the city continued as he drove his

hybrid through the streets. After a number of quiet years, Halloween had again become a night of revelry and mayhem. Swirls and eddies of screaming teenagers sprinted past boarded shopfronts. The pubs overflowed, sending drunks spilling into the road. Seconds separated the explosions rattling the night. He passed a number of small fires—rubbish bins set alight. An egg splattered against the car window.

He would have preferred to stay indoors, to forget his obligation, to curl up and let the night burn out. But here he was, driving through a warzone with the bag of groceries. Whatever new horrors came, his last duty remained.

He’d had years to think about his final encounter with the Comskeys. He played it over—what he would have done differently. Maybe he could have gotten through to them. As he watched the city crumble, he started to believe that if he had reached Larry Comskey, identified the wound inside him—if he’d found a way to ease the pain—maybe . . .

In the end, he saw the futility of these thoughts and resigned himself to his fate, while the world went to ruin. Time was a great educator—it taught him new ways of thinking about the life of Larry Comskey.

On that night twenty years ago, he’d arrived back at the Comskeys’ house. The car crash took

longer than anticipated. A nasty accident, with those involved not having an easy death. As he hurried up the moonlit road, bugs swarmed around the streetlamps. When Maura opened the door, she looked tired, dull-eyed with fatigue. She said nothing, just turned and walked towards the kitchen.

Closing the front door, he noticed two suitcases at the bottom of the stairs, a brown coat draped across them. Maura returned from the kitchen.

“Here,” she said, handing him a bulky envelope. “Everything is there: instructions, bank details, the deeds of the house. He made sure you’d have everything you need.”

He looked down at the package, then at her. “Where will you go?”

“I’ll stay with my sister, for now. After that, I don’t know.”

“It’s not too late, Maura. We can change his mind. Get him help.”

She smiled, lifting her coat from the suitcase—an air of calm acceptance about her. “No, Father. This is what he wants. No one forced his hand; it’s his own choice.”

“You know I can’t go along with this. I’ll have to get the authorities involved.”

She picked up her suitcases and carried them to the door. “You do what you think is right.”

He followed her onto the street, then watched her look back at the house, her home.

“Goodbye, Father,” she said, with a down-sloped smile. She walked away, her heels clicking

in the darkness.

He returned inside and closed the door. In the kitchen, he was struck by Larry’s progress. Bricks filled the doorway, from ground to lintel, with only a narrow space remaining in the top corner. Room enough for a single brick. He stood before the construction and called to Larry.

“Hello, Father,” he said from inside. “I wasn’t sure you’d be back.”

“I told you I would.”

“I know, but I still worried. Is Maura gone?”

“Yes,” he said, facing the gap. “She just left.”

“It’s for the best. I never made her happy. She still has time to start over.”

Matt placed the envelope on the table. “Could you not do that, Larry? Start over?”

“No. Too late for that. And the world only has pain in store for people like me. I’m better off out of it.”

Matt sat at the table, still facing the wall. “You realise how crazy this is, don’t you?”

“It’ll make sense in time. You’ll see I’m right.”

“And you just expect me to go along with it? I’ll have to tell someone. I can’t let you do this.”

Larry coughed inside the room. “You do what you think is right, Father. I wouldn’t ask more of any man.”

Matt leaned forward, staring at the linoleum. He searched his mind, raking through anything he could say to stop what was happening, then closed his eyes, rubbing his forehead with his fingertips.

“Here, Father,” Larry said.

**The front door was long since kicked to splinters, its windows empty holes. He stepped into the darkness, entering what was once the hallway, spider threads brushing his face. The air stank of urine, and he did his best not to trip over debris.**

When he looked up, at the gap in the top corner, a small paper rectangle poked through. He got to his feet and approached. “What’s this?” he asked, accepting the envelope.

“Just a message for the future. You’ll know when the time is right to open it.”

As he turned the sealed envelope over, he could find nothing to say.

“I’m going to put the last brick in now, Father.”

“Is there nothing I can say to change your mind?”

“No. So long, Father.”

As if in slow motion, the brick slid into place, cushioned by a smear of cement around the sides. The silence in the house seemed to expand—a suffocating vacuum. Matt stood before the long, red rectangle, his hand against the cold bricks.

When he left the house that night, he fully intended to contact the council, the Guards—someone. But then he let the first day pass. Then a second and third. Why he kept the secret, he wasn’t sure. And as time passed, Larry’s choice seemed to make more and more sense. A part of Matt envied that level of courage.

As his hybrid stopped outside the house, fireworks exploded above him. He climbed out

of the car and retrieved the groceries from the back seat. The front door was long since kicked to splinters, its windows empty holes. He stepped into the darkness, entering what was once the hallway, spider threads brushing his face. The air stank of urine, and he did his best not to trip over debris.

Muffled grunts stopped him dead.

“Shush, someone’s there.”

“Naw, babe, it’s your imagination.”

“No, no! Someone is there, look.”

Matt waited at the stairs while two figures shuffled about up the hallway. In the dim light cast from the window, a man struggled with his trousers, then straightened, pulling something from his pocket. Light from a phone lit up the space.

“Get out of this house,” Matt said.

The man came closer, his wiry body a shadow behind the light. “Hey, babe, it’s a fucking priest.”

“What!”

“Yeah, a genuine kiddie-fiddling holy man.”

A short figure came out of the dark and brushed past Matt, continuing onto the street.

“Get out of this house before I call the Guards.”

The man chortled, stepping closer. “What is

it, Priest? Have you come to have a go on her? I thought little boys were your lot's thing?"

"Get out, now!"

"Tony, come on," the girl shouted from out front. "Let's go."

Tony stepped up to Matt, stinking of cheap cider, the veins in his neck visible beneath taut, translucent skin. "If you give me fifty quid, I'll let you fuck the arse off her."

Matt couldn't miss the mark on the man's forehead—a crucifix with two curved horns on the top limb—burned into the skin.

"What do you say, Priest? A fifteen-year-old arsehole. Close your eyes, you can pretend she's a boy."

"Come on, Tony."

Matt shook inside. "Get out!"

"Fine," Tony said, shoving him aside, "don't say I didn't offer."

When they'd gone, Matt took time to steady his breathing, a rushing sound in his ears like waves lapping a seashore. As he exhaled, his

limbs lost their tension and trembled, his gut tight as a fist. Once he was sure they'd gone, he approached the bricked-up doorway. He crouched, dragged the drawer open, and piled the groceries inside, then sat on the floor, his back to the scabbed wall.

He removed a hipflask from his pocket and popped the cap, then took a swig, resting his head against the wall as he waited. It didn't take long before the sound came. The steel drawer shuffled, followed by stuttering scratches of metal on metal. He reached into his pocket again and pulled out Larry's envelope, staring at it as the drawer closed.

The frigid air bit his face when he stepped onto the street. As he climbed into the hybrid, he returned the letter to his pocket. He looked out the windscreen at the row of derelict houses, at the fireworks exploding across the city, then he started the car, his last duty done for another week.