

THE SHEPHERD

Brian Dolan

THE TWELVE CYLINDER engine purred quietly along the narrow road, slowly passing the tall Alder branches blocking access to a blue front door, never locked, never opened, since the last resident took a one way trip after a sudden fall.

The morning light scraped over the mountain, and steam threaded from the twin strips of black tar marking out the road ahead, registering a recent rainfall, surprising only in the fact that it had stopped already.

The car slowed to a halt; long, shiny, no trace of splattered cow dung along the sculptured sides. Warm parchment leather yielded smoothly to the bulk of the driver as he hit the button to stop the engine, leaving only the tick of the cooling exhaust to count out the silent seconds.

A darkly tinted window slid smoothly to allow the tailored elbow a resting point, and the subtle soundtrack of the empty countryside began to rise in perceived volume, the man's hearing adjusting to a new nothing.

His cell phone was ringing, vibrating anxiously across an IKEA bedside table towards a Dunne's stores duvet in the B&B that he had found on an obscure seventh page Internet listing. He hadn't forgotten the phone. He had never meant to bring it. Never meant to give himself the option of backing out of necessary work. Not now. Not when he had given so much already to get to this point.

He couldn't hear the silence either. Not since the birdsong had become so loud, and the cows, for now hidden behind the willow stands, alternated between noisy tracking and intermittent mooing, both of which brought his finger to the button that would raise the tinted double glazed window and seal him off from the familiar and the forgotten.

The field opposite the car door was black, twelve inches of soil chewed by the

saddleback hogs, and he watched the bonamhs dancing through the top two.

A steady finger raised the window, then moved towards the start button. The start button that would launch that long bonnet down the narrow road, silent suspension insulating the bumps, wide tyres carving the bends with precision, gold cufflinks setting the climate control to perfect.

He paused, withdrew his hand, leaned back, and closing his eyes, waited.

The knock on the passenger window was late, according to his Cartier wristwatch, but he didn't mind. Not now. The man slid into the passenger seat, bringing an aroma of the earth, of the cows now staring steadily towards the road over metronomic jaws.

"You look different, your Lordship" the man said.

"Do you have it?"

A flat book, leather bound and worn, pocket size, was passed to the driver. The never quite meeting eyes, darting, watched manicured nails carefully select an inspection point among the delicate pages of the old Pepys Diary.

"It is yours, isn't it?"

"Have you read it?"

The hesitation was tiny, almost lost in the detail of the lie that followed.

"The money is in the boot" and both stepped out into the suddenly bright morning. The dew clung impossibly to the long grass at the roadside, waiting for the inevitable death of direct sunlight.

The birds stirred with the casual cough of the silenced Glock pistol, and the cows kept chewing their cud, more witnesses than could ever fit in a court, none that ever would.

The blue nitrile gloves removed the farm rough clothes, and a BIC lighter and zippo fluid sent shimmering columns skyward. It took longer than expected, but there was

never any doubt that he would stay until the ashes could be lifted to let the light breeze disperse them towards the waiting pigs.

The blue rope was released from one cooling ankle, then the other, and the bonamhs were the first to dance over the sparse grey chest hair of the body. The driver, back on the drying road, hunkered over his wet shoes, watching, waiting, while the hogs drifted purposefully towards their offspring.

The new Cardinal finally straightened, and poured the remaining lighter fluid over the open book, followed by a spark. The first invisible flame, trammelled vertically by the cold air, was succeeded by smoke as the pages curled, crisped, and finally, burst into orange tinted blue flame.

As before, the ashes of the diary were scattered across the low ditch, not quite reaching the body already merging with the soft earth. The body looked strange to him now, startlingly remote from the still living body he remembered, whose form he knew so well, had trusted for so long.

He retrieved his cell phone from the Dunne's landing pattern in the B&B and pressed the button to redial.

"Done!"

"No problems?"

"None, Don't feed them while there's anything left".

"I didn't know what else to do"

"There was nothing else to do. I'll be in touch when I get back from Rome"

"If...If you get back from Rome".

"You'll be needing a passport too, then".

They both laughed at the impossibility of both statements.

The silence stretched comfortably between them, closer than the miles would suggest, closer than the cloth permitted.

"Did it matter that it was your brother?"

The soft click signalled disconnection.