



Chapter One

New moon

Two drunks came lurching out of the alleyway fighting uselessly, never a punch finding its mark, pawing at the air, cursing the living bloody daylight out of each other. It was a black December night; no moon, just an epileptic neon sign and a half-dozen feeble street lamps dashing shards of pale colour at the greasy cobbles in the market place. A wicked gale blustered in off the coast, a Norse raider looking for victims. It fell upon street litter: cartons, cans and wrappers, whipping them into vagrant squalls which scuttled for cover in doorways and dark corners. Rain had lashed the city earlier in the day and now the clear sky was like a strip-search. Christ but it was cold.

A freezing couple sharing chips out of a crumpled paper wrapper sat hunched on the iron bench beneath the emaciated plane tree which waved ragged branches in its state of winter undress. The girl, all legs and a skimpy little halter-neck, looked up as the shabby, hunched outline of Gaunt, working late and now heading for the pub on a mission to get drunk, flapped passed, fag in mouth, his coat undone and a hand on his hat to keep it there. Something on wheels swished past on its way up from the bridge and it must have just missed Gaunt for his old bones skipped a couple of steps and he nearly ran full into the drunks before disappearing into the depths of the alley.

The editor-in-chief of the *Courier* looked out from the cinemascope window of his overheated eyrie on the third floor with complacency: he had seen this show a thousand times. Sure the cast might change twice every night, but with

an extra matinee performance on Saturdays you got your money's worth: not a line spoken out of turn, never an off-stage whisper from the prompt. That the actors did not know themselves to be on stage was what kept him in his job. And still Queedy, the young man hovering at his side, would not or could not appreciate the artlessness of it all. He might be better off, M. reflected, learning his trade as an apprentice playwright and not as a cub reporter: not here.

The drunks now faced each other, swaying, ranting from a safe distance. The younger one, in his fifties maybe, he could have been the son, stabbed the air with his hand in a bitter gesture that went deeper than the bottom of a glass. The older one, balding, fat, bandy-legged, opened his flies and pissed on the cobbles. The door of the pub on the corner opened and out spilled two pairs of lovers, arms wrapped around waists; either the shock of the cold or the spectacle of the two drunks stopped them in their tracks momentarily before they staggered off down the hill in the direction of the taxi rank.

Queedy stood watching, taking it all in, his face pressed against the window, hands at his back as if he owned the place, not listening to a goddamn word M. was saying. He was wearing a suit, Queedy was, an expensive Italian object which had cost money – not Queedy's money – and time pounding the miles on a treadmill. No one else at the *Courier* could have or would have worn such a thing, or a shirt with cuffs that bloody perfect or a collar that clean. He was a five-clean-shirts-a-week man, was Queedy, not like the rest of them. He would come round to their way of thinking in the end.

It was late, but M. pressed his point anyway.

— See what I mean (he says)?

— About what? (This is Queedy, pretending not to see what he means)

— Learning the trade, Son, learning the trade.

— There's no story out there.

— Sure there is. If not that lot then of what, exactly, do you suppose a story to be composed? Do you think it's wrought from concentrated good and evil? From pure ill-faith or perfect rectitude? Do you think the big stories start big? Does Palestine start with the Bible? Does the French Revolution start with the guillotine? No, Son. All stories start with a courting couple, a time-expired hack and two blokes fighting over nothing. It's the history of the world. You either see or

you don't see.

Queedy laughed in a thin sort of way that said he had heard but was not listening. He carried on staring out of the window with his sleek dark eyes and when M. got a bottle out of the drawer and poured them both a large one he took it and drank it. M. joined him at the window, nursing his glass while Queedy drained his in one, showing off. Queedy's thin body shivered. M. lifted the catch on the window and opened it just enough for a blast of wind and the sounds of the street to invade the office. Queedy shivered again. Now the younger man's eye was caught by another movement and he put a finger to the window, pointing.

— Who might that be?

An immense figure, a giant, his long head of silver-grey hair flowing down over the shoulders of a greatcoat buttoned to the chin, had emerged from black shadows at the top of the street. He traversed the market place in irresistible slow motion, one hand thrust deep in the pocket of his coat, the other holding an ancient leather grip which looked dead heavy. You couldn't see the man's face at that distance and with the light the way it was, but his head was the shape of an outcrop of rock that had defied erosion, earthquake and ice. He was a boulder tumbling fatefully down a mountainside, brushing trees aside. He was a landslide; an avalanche. He was tectonic.

What age was he? Somewhere between fifty and seventy; it was impossible to tell in that blaring dimness. He might have been born before the flood. There was no sign of a stoop in his walk. His pace had the even swing of a pendulum and seemingly made no greater noise. He leant forward slightly as if braced against the wind which tore off the cobbles but it was a straight walk, a guiltless walk, unapologetic. A walk that could not conceal a lie. Was it military? No, it was not: it had purpose, sure, but no strategy; principles, but no objects. Nor did it describe the shortest distance between two points any more than a line on a chart measured by dividers describes the sea. It told the man into being; it spoke his existence, no more and no less. The simple fact of his presence was so overwhelming, so much more massive even than his physical bulk, that the couple on the bench stared at his wake as he passed. Even the two drunks stopped dead in mid-flow: silenced, in awe. He loomed over them, parting the liquid air like a bow-wave. He was mythic. And then he was gone.

— A story there, do you reckon, Son? (M. tosses the words into the air like scraps cut from a Sunday supplement; after all, how can

either of them know?)

— Queedy looked at his empty glass and without asking went over to the desk and filled it again. He examined his watch for signs of time passing.

— No story: a man just walked past, that's all. He caught my eye. I haven't seen him before. I thought you might recognise him. (Sometimes Queedy's voice is reedy like an oboe; now it is all maple syrup)

— For Christ's sake, have you ever seen anything like that? (Why does this boy make M. so damned angry?)

— No, I haven't. But then I am young; what can I know of the world? (Now M. remembers why this boy makes him so damned angry)

— Do you not get a scent of the quarry in your nose? When I was your age I'd have chased him down the street, cornered him, milked a story from him, cajoled and moulded him into a story if I had to. All life is there, Son, and you have to take it with both hands and bleed it like a vein. Where has he come from, Christ Jesus, and where is he going?

M., letting go the iron grip he had on his own fist, went and filled his glass again and collapsed into the grand chair behind the desk. It would have swallowed a smaller man; now it swivelled heavily on its pivot. He so rarely sat there, it came to him almost as a revelation that the room could do with the loving hand of a decorator. One of the racks of shelves, which held periodicals and his library of reference works, was buckling under the strain – although he could throw most of that stuff out if he had a mind to. Where its frame leaned out from the wall a patch of fresh-looking paint showed how bad the rest of the walls were. The faded brown carpet, worn threadbare at the door and almost shiny next to the window, testified to the general shabbiness of the place. A picture of the Queen wearing a pastel twin-set and presenting M. with his gong these many years past, hung slightly askew, enough to annoy but not sufficiently for him to get out of the chair and set her to rights. He wondered vaguely where the medal was; in a drawer somewhere at home, probably. Maybe the wife had taken it, or thrown it off the bridge.

M. noted mechanically that his Lakeland Views calendar had stalled at October. The new one, proclaiming the start of a new decade, lay on the desk in

its buff envelope, unopened. The clock on the wall said it was past midnight. He ought to pack the boy off and go home himself but he'd never been good at going home – even if Queedy drove him to thoughts of the hot bath and iced gin which waited there.

— What do you suppose his story is, then? I confess to being curious. (Queedy has a nice way of talking, at one and the same time trying to pick your mental wallet and show you how bored he is)

— You'll never know, Son. You'll never know. (M. has given up on Queedy for the night)

— Queedy stared at his watch again, ignoring the clock. He was looking for excuses. He went back over to the window and tapped it, as if to mark the place where the epic presence of the man had etched itself on the glass.

— I have an early start in the morning. Gaunt wants me to interview a kiddies' party Santa Claus who used to be a welder in the shipyards, a farmer who's rearing reindeer for meat and a little boy who won't be getting any presents this year because his Mam and Da lost all their Christmas money in a stamp club which went bust. There's no time to chase a real story. Which would be a pity if this turned out to be the Second Coming. (Queedy is beginning to sound like an oboe)

— Don't get bitter, Son. It's a long life to get bitter before you've started. Gaunt isn't a bad sort. He's been around and has an old-fashioned idea that you've to serve an apprenticeship before he lets you off your leash. He doesn't know who your father was and if he did it wouldn't make any difference. You're the new boy. (M. is a provincial newspaper editor, Irish by birth and sensibility. He is nearer sixty than fifty, he has expensive children but no longer a wife, he is fighting a losing war against falling sales, and young men like Queedy piss him off. His hair has gone decisively grey, he has a bad back and his diet is worse than it was before the wife left. He is a good man.)

Sure, Queedy was bitter: young, vain and bitter and that's why he didn't follow so tantalising a scent that night. The world owed him. Chance, or was it fate, would give him another shot. Meantime he would toe the line, sire six quarter-columns a day from the mawkish festive scraps which old Gaunt threw his way and cursing the day he'd been born. He had no choice: he had committed a

nearly unforgivable sin in his youth, and been disinherited.



The man whose brief passing they had witnessed in the market place was seen no more in the city. The *Courier* stumbled on towards its Christmas deadlines. A ‘flu epidemic broke out in the city; hospitals ran short of beds. A trawler, the skipper a father with three sons on board, went down in a terrible blow: widows; orphans. Rumours of an energy crisis: fuel up five per cent, pensioners freezing to death in their own homes. None of these stories came Queedy’s way. It was a week when M. was reduced to sleeping on an inflatable mattress on the floor of his office, wrecking his guts with take-aways and coffee and in terrible pain from his sacroiliac. One of those weeks when you age about ten bloody years.

M. discouraged Queedy from coming into his office so often. Sure the boy needed a father-figure but it could not be M., who knew too much and liked him too little. Besides, in a business whose stock-in-trade was prurience and tattle he would soon become his own story. It couldn’t be allowed to happen. And still M. hoped that Gaunt would knock the boy into shape.

When the place emptied on Christmas Eve, Gaunt kept Queedy on at the night desk. Neither of them wanted to go home and anyway someone had to be there to answer the phones. Gaunt sent Queedy off to make coffee and buy his fags. He took him round to the nick to count drunks in the cells. He dragged him along to car crashes and bridge-jumpers, arson attacks and warehouse break-ins. In between, on long nights when the phone never rang at all, they drank whisky. Gaunt talked and Queedy pretended to listen.

Gaunt had been around. His liver and his lungs were shot, his arteries ran sclerotic as the city roads in rush hour. He possessed two suits: one for interviews with people who mattered and one for all other purposes. Neither had ever seen a dry-cleaner’s. The streets were his home. He knew the tramps and the grubby corners where the hookers and dealers hung out. He drank his lunch in dingy back-street pubs and went home to a shabby flat where a slovenly wife and attention-seeking cat waited, claws sharpened, to give him a hard time. He could count on tip-offs from every desk sergeant, traffic cop and taxi driver for twenty miles around. He had dirt on every councillor and on most of the city magistrates. He

was the city's encyclopaedia of the hum-drum, of corruption and vice, the banal and the bizarre.

For twenty years Gaunt had tramped and tramped the *Courier's* corridors, always on the way somewhere or coming back from somewhere: unnoticed except when a really big story broke. Then he would stick his bottom lip out and run a rolled-up copy of the paper along the walls, flicking at windows and doors as he passed. He loved it when he got the whole front page to himself. In thirty years, the early ones spent working for cut-price press agencies in sleazy corners of the world, he had never won a single award for his writing; and the *Courier* would have folded without him. He was the *Courier*. If only Queedy would listen, well then what an education he might get at that man's hands.

Many a wet-behind-the-ears cub reporter had been schooled by Gaunt. He never socialised with them. He had never liked any of them. Nor had he ever disliked any of them. His small kindnesses were those of the NCOs who had tried and failed to turn him into a soldier in his National Service youth: letting him off spud-bashing the day his brother died, that sort of thing. It was necessary for him to deny such tenderness and for it to remain unacknowledged. On that basis he might put up with stupid young men and they might graduate from his tutelage.

Something of Queedy's fragility must have penetrated Gaunt's misanthropic armour. In January, when Queedy collapsed, M. was away from the office for a few days, nursing his bad back and being fed nourishing bacon, cabbage and mash among the green hills and pastures of his native Ireland. It was Miss Nixon who telephoned his sister Mary in Donegal. M. knew something was up. Miss Nixon, who had been his secretary for fifteen years and would always be plain Miss Nixon, had never called him there, so when Mary passed him the phone he knew it would mean packing his bags. He flew back to a city which lay under a suffocating blanket of murk, and stood waiting in a queue at the airport for twenty minutes before a taxi arrived. He didn't go home but made straight for the Infirmary. Miss Nixon's urgency, so out of character, had him properly scared.

The shock was not so much seeing Queedy in a high-dependency ward, for M. had seen him like that before; it was the visitor which threw him. Gaunt was at Queedy's bedside. For once Queedy was talking and for once it was the old man who did not listen. Gaunt had brought a magazine for the patient and was reading it himself, sitting on a plastic chair at the foot of the bed with his back to the window to cast what daylight there was on the page. He needed reading

glasses but would not admit it. He was eating an apple which he had also brought for the patient. Queedy was propped up on pillows, his perfect hair no longer perfect and the bright dark eyes no longer shining but empty of all lustre; matt, almost. Somehow the head looked too big for the body in those hospital-issue striped pyjamas. A drip attached at the neck fed him drugs and a salt solution. He was wired up to a heart monitor which flashed orange numbers. His voice was the same colour as his face, a translucent grey, like dishwater. He was reciting the history of his heart condition, trying to reassure himself he wasn't going to die young and hoping Gaunt would agree. But Gaunt was nobody's uncle. It wasn't his way. This was one of his little kindnesses, being there but not saying anything.

M. said Hello Gaunt and the old sod looked up and nodded, threw the magazine on the bed and made to leave as if the relief watch had arrived. That shut the boy up because M. already knew about his heart condition and had nothing reassuring to say except had Queedy thought any more about a transplant. Like his old man, Queedy had a great fear of the surgeon's knife. Some said that explained why the old man had disappeared one day in his private plane somewhere over the Rockies; he had been given the thumbs down by his cardiologist. M. had his own ideas on that story.

Still, to give the boy credit he was bloody well determined to make his own way with no help from anyone, or at least anyone apart from M. No, he still didn't want a transplant. There was nothing wrong with him, a stupid fuss over nothing at all, he had just had a bad day and forgotten to take a couple of pills. What he needed was more action, not less. When was he going to be allowed to work on something worth writing about? How long did he have to put up with Gaunt?

As long as Gaunt has to put up with you, M. said, meaning it kindly. The temptation to call him an arrogant little shit was there all right but the boy was on the ropes and so he got away with it that time. Yes, in his way M. was a good man.

M. stuck around long enough to wring a cautious prognosis from the consultant and told Queedy he'd be back with grapes and something to read. Queedy was pathetically grateful, which made a change. When M. left, the boy's ears were plugged into music and his eyes were closed. He looked terrible. He bloody well worries me, that boy, thought M.

Queedy was in hospital for three weeks. They tried this new drug and that new drug on him, watched his heart, tested his blood, shook their heads.

When he left he would have to avoid strenuous exercise and stress, nothing he didn't already know. M. thought about putting that to Gaunt and then thought better of it, because Queedy's life was his own to risk no matter what promises M. had made to himself and neither did he want Gaunt to wear himself out with little kindnesses. Gaunt's heart was in no great shape either.