



LOUISE DEAN

# This Human Season

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A C E G I K J H F D B

# This Human Season

ALSO BY LOUISE DEAN

*Becoming Strangers*

*For my own boys Jules and Cassien and  
for my daughter Elsa Rose.*

*'Therein is the whole business of man's life;  
to seek out and save in his soul that which is perishing.'*

—Tolstoy: The Gospel in Brief – Luke 19:9

November and December  
1979





# 1

When the soldiers came the time before, the father went off with them. He had the same name as his son, so he went in his place. After a few days he was released. Their son was far away by then, down south.

This time the son was in prison and they didn't want the father. So what could the father do, except stand in the front room, in his underpants, hands in the sagging pockets of his cardigan, watching the soldiers moving back and forth between the front and back doors of his home.

He was trying to think of something to say. His children and his wife were sat about in their nightclothes; they weren't looking at him.

'You think you know it all,' was what he'd told them up at Castlereagh, the interrogation centre, when they'd come to realize their mistake. The first day they'd had him hands against the wall, legs apart, and when his knees weakened they'd shouted at him or kicked him. He'd not had anything he could tell them. Nor had he defied them. For two days they'd stopped him from sleeping, told him to sweep the hallway and when he'd sat down, they'd emptied out the bucket again and gone kicking the dust, cigarette butts, apple cores, and empty bleach bottles down along the corridor. Then they'd handed him back the broom. They let him go first thing on the third morning.

He'd got off lightly, he knew it, when he stepped outside,

turned his collar up and set off, the sky all of one colour, a licked pale grey. It was a damp morning to come home on, and no one was about. He'd had to wait for the dinnertime session for the telling.

His son, Sean, had been inside Long Kesh for a month now. These men knew that. They were there because of the boy, because of where they lived, because they had another son and because they were Catholic.

There was a stack of rifles on the living room floor. 'Don't you be touching those,' he said to his children in a low voice with a light whistle in it, the air from the open front door catching on his back teeth. 'They leave them there on purpose to see what the kids know.'

From upstairs came the sound of a door being forced, once, twice, and through. His wife shook her head.

'It's true,' said her husband. 'They do.'

The electric light was impotent, the daylight had taken over and so his wife got up to switch it off and pull back the curtains that gave on to their scrap of back garden – some grass, bare patches, a washing line with a pair of pants on it, legs sewn to hold pegs. To the right-hand side of the line, within the creosote armpit of a shed, was a gap that went through to the next street. The last time, she'd had a go at the soldiers when they came in, she'd jumped up to stall them, to make sure her son got away through that gap. She'd kept them then at the front door, offered them her husband herself. 'If it's Sean you're after, well here he is.' And sure enough they looked at the man in his jumper and Y-fronts and agreed he'd do. She, herself, had had him by one of his sleeves, shaking it.

'Who gave you permission to come in my house?' she said now.

'We've got all the permission we need,' said one, loafing by the sideboard, looking at her ornaments.

'You've got the guns is all.'

'We're not the only ones. Show us where you keep yours and we'll be away.'

'Liam, show the man your water pistol.'

Upstairs, they were crow-barring the floorboards, emptying drawers and cupboards. There wasn't a house in Ballymurphy that hadn't been pulled apart by the British Army. The soldier at the sideboard was going through those drawers, taking out chequebooks and bills, newspaper cuttings and photos. He left the drawers open, looked again, then picked up a black rubber bullet that was on the top shelf. It was about three inches long and an inch wide.

'Souvenir?' he asked her.

'Is it one of yours?' she asked. 'One just like that was fired into the face of my neighbour's boy. Fifteen years old. His mother's only son and now he can't even feed himself.' One of the soldier's boots came through the ceiling into the living room and a shower of brown dust came shooting down. 'Jesus, Joseph and Mary! And what if this was your own mother's home?'

'My mother didn't raise a terrorist,' said the soldier by the door to the hallway, leaning back, looking casual. He was tall, his back was straight, his eyes blue. He was in his twenties, smart in his uniform, his beret poised. There was a light white powder in the air. When her husband made to go into the kitchen, the soldier told him to sit down.

Those who'd been upstairs came clattering down the narrow stairway, one after the other until most of them were in the front room, filling it entirely, with two more in the hall. A shorter man stood in the doorway with his hands up above his head holding on to the frame.

'Clear, Sarge,' he said to the soldier at the sideboard.

This man, their sergeant, took a last look around the living room, taking in the vases and knick-knacks on the sideboard and mantelpiece, a small pale blue Madonna, a large conch sea

shell, a few dark-coloured glass vases with gilt lettering, place names, a maple-leaf shaped piece of wood with 'Canada' carved on to it.

'You've got a nice home, Mrs,' he said. 'One of the cleanest I've been in anyway. Any chance of a cup of tea for the lads?'

'Go fuck yourselves,' she said.

Her younger son stood up beside her, the shoulders of his small frame rose and fell; with his mouth open, he was like a baby bird wanting to be fed.

'Starting him off young, are you?' said the sergeant. 'That's what you call infantry, that is.' He threw a look at the handsome soldier.

Kathleen pointed towards the door.

'Out, yous!'

They were in no rush. The sergeant took another look around, clapped his hands together, strolled across to the stairwell and gave the order. His men started to move themselves, gather the guns. The last one out was the handsome soldier, who looked up at the framed poster of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic on his way and tutted. He tipped the barrel of his rifle at the wife, touching her very lightly at her throat, where her dressing gown crossed. 'I bet you were one of them who used to be nice to us, once.'

Her cheeks flushed, Kathleen went to the front door to close it after them. She saw that the porch light had been smashed in. 'Ach for God's sake!' she called out, and started to shove the jarred door with fury and hurt.

'Harassment, that's all it is,' said her husband, coming up behind her, his voice growing as they watched the men going down the path and through the front gate. 'To keep us in our place ...'

'And what are you going to do about it?' she said, turning to him.

He had a moment to look at her, her face backing into the new daylight, her neck stretching, a space between utterances, and he said nothing, paused between difficult things.

And then she was moving. 'Go up and get yourselves dressed,' she yelled at the children. 'Can't any of you do anything without me telling you?'

'Why did they come round here, Mummy?' said Aine, a brown envelope and a pen in her hands; she'd been sitting drawing pictures while the soldiers were there.

'Will you up and get yourself dressed, Aine, please. Don't make me say it again.'

'They'll be back again soon enough anyway.'

Upstairs, her brother, Liam, was taking two empty jam jars out from under his bed. 'You've to go in one, and I'll go in the other,' he told his sister.

'I can fill them both,' said the girl, 'I'm bursting now.'

'Just do the one.'

She went off towards the bathroom. Then she was back. 'What's it for, Liam?'

'For when the Brits come along by the side window, down the alleyway,' he said, pushing the cardboard box back under his bed.

Hearing her daughter fumbling with the bathroom lock the mother called up the stairs. 'For God's sake. No one's coming in to watch you peeing, Aine. We've got a television.'

The father was standing near the kitchen with his hands out, dripping water, shaking them just a little, waiting for his wife to show him the dishcloth.

Kathleen was bent in front of the television, tending to it. In her thin nightdress, her body was long, spare curves. The drone of the TV made a sudden acceleration, jumping from hum to chatter. The picture filled the screen; the outside world sprang.

## 2

As dawn comes on, a man is in his car with his back to the night, hunched over his own warmth, driving towards the daylight. The countryside is unfolding as a series of surprises that are much the same, as it does in Northern Ireland. You can see neither ahead of you nor behind; at each hilltop the car rolls into a rural scene of grazing cows and farmhouses. Everywhere the grass is unbearably green, the brushwood of wintertime is auburn, the wet grey of the road surface is like dark silk. The moon is ahead of the man's car, low and translucent and beneath it the sky is a band of pink with clouds like long bruises.

John Dunn was on 'early unlock' and he needed to report into Her Majesty's Prison, The Maze, just before eight. When he left home in the dark, an hour earlier, he stalled at the traffic lights and a car with three men inside had moved out from behind him. As it passed by, the passenger window was wound down and a man shouted out at him, just some random abuse.

His heart beat hard as he watched the car move off; by the time he had gathered himself the light was red again.

*'The moment you've put that uniform on, you are a target.'* He'd done four weeks' training as a prison officer at the college, Millisle, where they'd impressed upon him the importance of presentation, discipline, punctuality. The instructing officer had come out on to the square when they arrived, seen them standing around with their bags and cases, ready for the four week training course and screamed at them to fall in; one fellow had said, 'Fuck this,' got back into his small brown Austin Marina and gone. The car had made a screeching noise as it took to the coastal road and the rest of them had exchanged looks, laughed.

'You make sure you're smart at all times,' their training officer had said and instructed them to soap the creases of their trousers and to use hot teaspoons on their black boots. A few of them were like him, ex-soldiers, they were used to the taking-the-orders crap. The others were more like the man in the Marina.

At the Maze the week before, for a briefing session, he was told to forget everything he'd learnt at Millisle. 'This place is a cesspit,' the senior officer said.

The site of the prison, Long Kesh, was a desperate place, squat and dreary, a wide, flat area of land, contained by high-wire fencing, punctuated by watch-towers. In the staff car-park he drove across to the furthest corner, careful not to park in what might be someone else's spot.

With his feet churning progress on the gravel and the simple impetus of every step, he felt glad to be starting a new job that was well paid and he was pleased even with the feeling of the rain about to fall, ominous and close, like a wet towel around his neck.

The locker rooms were busy. Tin doors slamming, the growl of abuse and easy laughter. He changed into his uniform and went down through what was something like an abandoned fairground: lights, dogs, soldiers, jerry-built huts, mobile homes, caravans.

He had a long wait in the damp cold outside the tally lodge, queuing with his fellow officers. It was like being back in the army with all the chat, the name-calling, the jostling: the pecking order.

'Tally number 1022. Dunn, John, Sir, on the white sheet,' he said, presenting his pass at the window. The white sheet gave him his next two weeks of supervised duties, before he'd be allowed keys. He waited for his instructions; the British soldier



of twenty-two years standing, and the new prison officer in Northern Ireland. He was evidently the former, with a not-quite-London accent and unfashionably short hair.

The duty officer was turning the pen in his mouth and breathing through his nose as he studied the lists. Dunn could smell that he had a cold, his breath was fruited, rank. He heard the anxiety of a prison officer behind him, saying loud enough, 'Please God I'm not on a fucking grille outside, let it be inside a block.'

After a moment, Dunn said to the man behind him. 'Where were you last week?'

'Ask yer girl,' the man replied, and behind him three or four men fell about laughing.

'That's what they call the prison catch-phrase,' the duty officer said. He was picking up granules of sugar from around three fruit pastilles on his open book, his fingertip wetted, making dirty marks on the page. He pushed back his cap, picked up his biro and rubbed his forehead with the blunt end then slapped his notes.

'There's your wee name now. You're on the get-rich-quick scheme, Mr Dunn.'

'I don't follow, Sir.'

'Working on the protest blocks.'

'Yes, that's right, Sir.'

'Aye. Well, Dunn, have I got the H block for you. Bolton's welfare programme! Nice people. Shame about the shit.'

John Dunn went off, pass in hand, his shoulders stiff, with the duty officer calling out after him, 'I see you've dressed for the occasion!'

He went behind the administration building, and took a long walk around the H block to which he'd been assigned. He had seen pictures of the H blocks on the news the night before; there was an item on the pace of their construction.

Ahead of him was the site for the last two; stacks of materi-