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JOHN
McGAHERN

The Barracks



THE BARRACKS

by the same author

THE DARK
GETTING THROUGH
THE LEAVETAKING
NIGHTLINES
THE PORNOGRAPHER

THE BARRACKS

by

JOHN McGAHERN



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To
JAMES SWIFT

1

Mrs Reegan darned an old woollen sock as the February night came on, her head bent, catching the threads on the needle by the light of the fire, the daylight gone without her noticing. A boy of twelve and two dark-haired girls were close about her at the fire. They'd grown uneasy, in the way children can indoors in the failing light. The bright golds and scarlets of the religious pictures on the walls had faded, their glass glittered now in the sudden flashes of firelight, and as it deepened the dusk turned reddish from the Sacred Heart lamp that burned before the small wickerwork crib of Bethlehem on the mantelpiece. Only the cups and saucers laid ready on the table for their father's tea were white and brilliant. The wind and rain rattling at the window-panes seemed to grow part of the spell of silence and increasing darkness, the spell of the long darning-needle flashing in the woman's hand, and it was with a visible strain that the boy managed at last to break their fear of the coming night.

"Is it time to light the lamp yet, Elizabeth?" he asked.

He was overgrown for his age, with a pale face that had bright blue eyes and a fall of chestnut hair on the forehead. His tensed voice startled her.

"O Willie! You gave me a fright," she cried. She'd been sitting absorbed for too long. Her eyes were tired from darning in the poor light. She let the needle and sock fall into her lap and drew her hand wearily across her forehead, as if she would draw the pain that had started to throb there.

"I never felt the night come," she said and asked, "Can you read what time it is, Willie?"

He couldn't see the hands distinctly from the fire-place.

So he went quickly towards the green clock on the sideboard and lifted it to his face. It was ten past six.

The pair of girls came to themselves and suddenly the house was busy and full with life. The head was unscrewed off the lamp, the charred wicks trimmed, the tin of paraffin and the wide funnel got from the scullery, Elizabeth shone the smoked globe with twisted brown paper, Willie ran with a blazing roll of newspaper from the fire to touch the turned-up wicks into flame.

"Watch! Watch! Outa me way," he cried, his features lit up with love of this nightly lighting. Hardly had Elizabeth pressed down the globe inside the steel prongs of the lamp when the girls were racing for the windows.

"My blind was down the first!" they shouted.

"No! My blind was down the first!"

"Wasn't my blind down the first, Elizabeth?" they began to appeal. She had adjusted the wicks down to a steady yellow flame and fixed the lamp in its place—one side of the delf on the small tablecloth. She had never felt pain in her breasts but the pulse in the side of her head beat like a rocking clock. She knew that the aspirin box in the black medicine press with its drawn curtains was empty. She couldn't send to the shop for more. And the girls' shouts tore at her patience.

"What does it matter what blind was down or not down?—only give me a little peace for once," was on her lips when her name, her Christian name—Elizabeth—struck at her out of the child's appeal. She was nothing to these children. She had hoped when she first came into the house that they would look up to her as a second mother, but they had not. Then in her late thirties, she had believed that she could yet have a child of her own, and that, too, had come to nothing. At least, she thought, these children were not afraid of her, they did not hate her. So she gripped herself together and spoke pleasantly to them: they were soon quiet, laughing together on the shiny leatherette of the sofa, struggling for the torn rug that lay there.

Una was eleven, two years older than Sheila, almost

beautiful, with black hair and great dark eyes. Sheila was like her only in their dark hair. She was far frailer, her features narrow and sensitive, changeable, capable of looking wretched when she suffered.

They were still playing with the rug when Elizabeth took clothes out of a press that stood on top of a flour bin in the corner and draped them across the back of a plain wooden chair she turned to the fire. They stopped their struggling to watch her from the sofa, listening at the same time to find there was no easing in the squalls of rain that beat on the slates and blinded windows.

"Daddy'll be late tonight?" Sheila asked with the child's insatiable and obvious curiosity.

"What do you think I'm airin' the clothes for, Sheila? Do you hear what it's like outside?"

"He might shelter and come home when it fairs?"

"It has no sound of fairin' to me—only getting heavier and heavier. . . ."

They listened to the rain beat and wind rattle, and shivered at how lucky they were to be inside and not outside. It was wonderful to feel the warm rug on the sofa with their hands, the lamplight so soft and yellow on the things of the kitchen, the ash branches crackling and blazing up through the turf on the fire; and the lulls of silence were full of the hissing of the sap that frothed white on their sawed ends.

Elizabeth lowered the roughly made clothes-horse, a ladder with only a single rung at each end, hanging high over the fire, between the long black mantelpiece and the ceiling.

"Will you hold the rope for me?" she asked the boy and he held the rope that raised and lowered the horse while she lifted off a collarless shirt and felt it for dampness. She spread it on the back of a separate chair, the sleeves trailing on the hearth. He pulled up the horse again, hand over hand, and fastened the loop of the rope on its iron hook in the wall.

"Do you think will he be late tonight?" he asked.

"He's late already. You can never tell what hold-up he

might have. Or he might have just taken shelter in some house. I don't know why he should have to go out at all on a night like this. It makes no sense at all! O never join the guards when you grow up, Willie!"

"I'll not," he answered with such decision that she laughed.

"And what'll you be?"

"I'll not join the guards!"

They looked at each other. She knew he never trusted her, he'd never even confide his smallest dream in her. She seemed old to him, with her hair gone grey and the skin dried to her face. Not like the rich chestnut hair of his mother who had died, and the lovely face and hands that freckled in summer.

"It's time you all started your homework," Elizabeth ordered. "If your father sees a last rush at night there'll be trouble."

They got their schoolbags and stood up the card-table close to the lamp on the laid table. There was the usual squabbling and sharpening of pencils before they gave themselves to the hated homework, envious of their stepmother's apparent freedom, aware of all the noises of the barracks. They heard Casey, the barrack orderly, open the dayroom and porch doors, and the rattle of his bucket as he rushed out for another bucket of turf: the draughts banging doors all over the house as he came in and the flapping of his rain-coat as he shook it dry like a dog in the hallway, then his tongs or poker thudding at the fire after the door had closed.

"Will I be goin' up to sleep with Mrs Casey tonight?" Una lifted her head to ask.

"I don't know—your nightdress is ready in the press if you are," she was answered.

"Guard Casey said this evenin' that I would," the child pursued.

"You'll likely have to go up so. You'll not know for certain till your father comes home," she was abruptly told. Elizabeth was tired to death, she could not bear more questions.

Casey's wife was childless and when barrack orderly fell to his turn and he had to sleep nights in the dayroom, on the official iron bed between the phone and the wall of the lock-up, Una would often have to go to sleep with her, for she couldn't be got to stay alone in the house on these nights. Una would get sweets or pennies, the slice of fruit cake and the glass of orange if she went and she didn't care whether Sheila had to sleep alone in their cold room or not, even when the smaller girl began to sob.

"What's wrong, Sheila?" Elizabeth was quick to notice.

"I'm afraid. I don't want to sleep on me own."

"Oh, you're a small girl no longer, Sheila. Una mightn't be going yet at all. And even if she is we can leave the lamp lit! Shure you'll not be afraid then, Sheila?"

Elizabeth coaxed and she was quietened. They turned to work again at their exercises, Elizabeth kneading dough in a tin basin on the table beside them, her arms bare to the elbows and a white dusting of flour on the back of her hands and wrists.

It was their father's tyres they first heard going past on the loose gravel and, "Daddy's home", they said to Elizabeth. He'd leave his high policeman's bicycle in the shed at the back and come in through the scullery.

His black cycling cape and pull-ups were shiny with wet when he came, his face chafed red with wind and rain. The narrow chinstrap held the cap firmly on his head, the medalion between the peak and the crown with its S twined through the Celtic G shining more vividly tonight against the darkened cloth. He carried his carbide bicycle lamp in his hand, big and silver, its blue jet of gas still burning, he left it to Willie to quench, quickly discarding his cycling clothes. The rain had penetrated the cape and pull-ups. There were dark patches of wet on the trousers, and on the tunic with its array of silver buttons, the three stripes of his rank on the sleeve.

"Wet to the bloody skin," he complained. "A terrible night to have to cycle about like a fool."

The children were very still. He had an intense pity for

himself and would fly into a passion of reproaches if he got any provocation. They watched him take off his tunic and boots. His socks left wet prints on the cement when he stood up.

"All the clothes are aired," Elizabeth said as she gave them to him off the back of the chair. "You'd better change quick."

He changed in the dark hall that led down to the day-room door at the bottom of the stairs and was soon back at the fire in his dry shirt and trousers. He towelled his face, then the back of his neck, then his feet. He pulled on socks and a pair of boots he didn't bother to lace.

"A terrible night," he muttered at the fire. "Not fit for a dog to be out in."

"In what direction were you?" Elizabeth asked.

"Round be Derrada," he answered.

He disliked talking about his police work in the house. He only answered Elizabeth because he needed to talk.

"And you'd never guess who I met?" he went reluctantly on.

"Who?"

"The bastard Quirke."

"The Superintendent!" Her exclamation seemed a faint protest against the coarseness. "What had him out, do you think?"

"He was lukin' for a chance he didn't get, you can be sure!"

He began to recount the clash, speaking with a slow, gloating passion and constant mimicry.

"He stopped in front of me and pulled down the window and asked, 'Is that you, Reegan?'"

"'That's me, sir,' says I."

"'And is there some trouble?'"

"'No, sir,' says I."

"'And what has you out on a night like this?'"

"'I'm out on patrol, sir,' says I."

"'But are you mad, Reegan? Are you stone mad? No man in his senses would be out cycling on a night like this"

without grave reason. Good God, Reegan, don't you realize that all rules and regulations yield at a certain point to human discretion? Do you want to get your death, man, cycling about on a night like this?

" 'Aye, aye, sir,' says I. 'But I'll not get the sack, sir.' "

No word was lost on the children who pretended to be busy with their exercises. It was an old feud between their father and Superintendent Quirke. They loved this savage mimicry and it frightened them. They heard him laugh fiendishly, "That shuk him! That's what tuk the wind outa his sails! That's what shut him up, believe me!"

Then he repeated Quirke in a high, squeaky voice, the accent so outrageously exaggerated that it no longer resembled anything human.

" 'Even regulations, Reegan, must yield at a certain point to human discretion—even the law!—even the law, Reegan!—must yield at a certain point to Human Discretion.' "

"But you're only causing annoyance and trouble for yourself," Elizabeth interrupted. "You'll be only bringing him the more down on you. For the sake of a few words couldn't you let it go with him? What does it all matter?"

"You mean it'll be all the same in the end?" he asked shrewdly. "We'll be all nice and quiet when we're dead and gone—and nothin'll matter then? Is that it?"

She did not answer. She felt she could care no longer. She knew he'd go his own way, he'd heed no one, opposition would make him only more determined.

"You never give a thought for anybody," spun angrily over in her mind but she did not speak it. She feared she still loved him, and he seemed to care hardly at all, as if he had married a housekeeper. She watched him pull the jumper she had knitted for him over his head and draw on his old tunic, leaving the collar unclasped at the throat, the silver buckle of the belt swinging loosely on its black catches. It was more than four years now since she'd first met him, when she was home on convalescence from the London Hospital, worn out after nursing through the Blitz. She had come to the barracks to get some of her papers put in order.

He happened to be on his own in the dayroom when she came. It was twelve, for the Angelus had rung as she left her bicycle against the barrack wall.

"It must have been a terror there in London durin' the bombin'?" he had asked, a conventional thing to ask any one who had been there at the time and she smiled back the equally conventional, "You get used to it after a time. You go on almost as if nothing was happening after the first few scares."

"It's like a fella hangin', I suppose," he laughed. "He hasn't much of a choice. But what amazes me, though, is that one of those rich Americans didn't run off with a girl like you on us."

She blushed hot at the flattery. He seemed so handsome to her in his blue uniform. He came to the door to see her out. She saw him watch from the barrack window as she cycled out the short avenue and turned left up the village.

The desire for such a day could drag one out of a sickness, it was so true to the middle of the summer. She felt so full of longing and happiness that she crossed from the shop to the chapel when she'd got the groceries for the house. The eternal medals and rosary beads were waiting on the spikes of the gate for whoever had lost them; the evergreens did not even sway in their sleep in the churchyard, where bees droned between the graves from dandelion to white clover; and the laurelled path between the brown flagstones looked so worn smooth that she felt she was walking on them again with her bare feet of school confession evenings through the summer holidays.

The midday glare was dimmed within, the church as cool as the stone touch of its holy water font, but she could get herself to say no formal prayer, all her habits and acceptances lost in an impassioned tumult of remembering.

A cart was rocking past on the road when she came out, its driver sunk deep in the hay on top of the load, a straw hat pulled down over his face. The way his body rolled to every rock and sway of the cart he could have been asleep in the sunshine. The reins hung slack. A cloud of flies

swarmed about the mare's head and her black coat was stained with sweat all along the lines of the harness, but they rolled on as if they had eternity for their journey.

Whether he was ashamed or not to pass the shops so sleepily in the broad middle of the day, he started awake at the chapel gate and noticed Elizabeth.

"Powerful weather we're havin'," he shouted down, and it came to her as a prayer of praise, she never had such longing to live for ever.

She was helping her mother and brother on their small farm then, and they had opposed her marriage to Reegan from the beginning.

"There's three childer and his wife is barely cauld in the grave, remember. That's no aisy house to be walkin' into! An' what'll the neighbours say about it? Himself can be no angel neither, not if quarter of the accounts be true," her brother had said one autumn night in the kitchen while their mother stirred the coals on the hearth and supported him by her half-silence.

"Take heed to what he says! Marryin' isn't something, believe me, that can be jumped into today and outa tomorrow. It's wan bed you have to sleep on whether it's hard or soft, wance you make it. An' remember, as he tauld you, it's no aisy house to be walkin' into, but I'm sayin' nothin'. It's for your God above to direct you!"

Elizabeth knew it would suit them if she stayed, stayed to nurse her mother as she crippled, the mother who had seemed so old when she died three months ago that not even her children had wept at the funeral, she meant as little as a flower that has withered in a vase behind curtains through the winter when it's discovered and lifted out on a day in spring.

And it would have suited her brother who'd never marry if she had to stop and keep house for him, but she did not stop. She married Reegan. She was determined to grasp at a life of her own desiring, no longer content to drag through with her repetitive days, neither happy nor unhappy, merely passing them in the wearying spirit of service; and the more

the calls of duty tried to tie her down to this life the more intolerably burdensome it became.

She'd not stay on this small farm among the hills, shut away from living by its pigsties and byres and the rutted lane that twisted out to the road between stone walls. She would marry Reegan, or she'd go back to London if she could ever forget the evening she came away from the operating theatre with Sister Murphy.

"I lit three candles today in St. Anne's before the Blessed Virgin," the frail Sister had said.

"Are you praying for something special? Or is there something worrying you, Brigid?" Elizabeth asked out of politeness.

"If I tell you, you'll not mention it to anybody, will you?"

"No. Why should I want to? But, maybe then it might be better not to tell me at all. . . ."

"But you'll not mention it to anybody?"

"No! No!"

"I am praying to Her to send me a man—some nice, decent person."

Elizabeth stared at her in astonishment, but this frail woman of more than fifty had never been more serious in her life. She had blurted it out with such sudden, confiding joy. It seemed obscene for a minute; yet, when Elizabeth thought, the desire itself was not ludicrous, no more than a young girl's, but only the ferocious ruthlessness of life had made it in time seem so. Hardly fifteen years separated the two women. Elizabeth had blanched before this vision of herself growing old and blind with the pain of ludicrous longing. She had few hesitations about marrying and she believed she loved Reegan. The children weren't hostile, even if they'd remained somewhat reserved. And for a time she was happy, extremely happy at first.

When Reegan had his clothes changed he felt new and clean before the fire, drowsily tired after miles of pedalling through the rain. He was in high good humour as he pulled his chair up to his meal on the table, but he wasn't easy until he had asserted himself against Elizabeth's, "Couldn't you