

FRANK TUOHY



**THE
ICE
SAINTS**

A NOVEL

THE ICE SAINTS

BY

FRANK TUOHY

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In the spring of 1960 an English girl, Rose Nicholson, arrives in the grey world of People's Poland. Ostensibly on holiday, she comes with important news for her elder sister, Janet Rudowska, who was married during the war to a university teacher, now a party member. The Rudowskis have a fourteen-year-old son, Tadeusz, whose entire future may depend on the results of Rose's visit.

The Ice Saints is the story of what happens to the four of them when the moral and emotional demands of Rose's England come into conflict with the old and new conventions of a people's democracy: these are represented not only by Rose's brother-in-law, but by all the other people, from young students to members of the pre-war aristocracy, with whom Rose becomes involved during her stay.

Frank Tuohy's exact eye for the English abroad and his sombre affection for the people who inhabit the paradox of contemporary Poland have already been noticed in his brilliant collection of stories *The Admiral and the Nuns*. In this, his third novel, he tells a story which is sad, funny and quietly ferocious.

By the same author



THE ANIMAL GAME

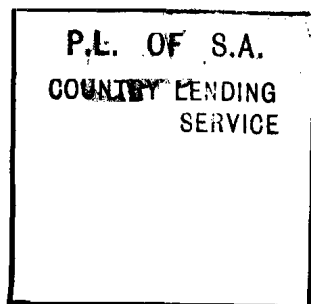
THE WARM NIGHTS OF JANUARY

THE ADMIRAL AND THE NUNS

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To my mother

Author's note

For obvious reasons it is important to state that all the people and incidents in this novel are imaginary.

One

THE drawing-room was entirely English. The Office of Works had provided deep armchairs, a sofa you could have slept on, though of course nobody had ever done so, and a low glass-topped table. The only exotic things lay on this table: a bowl of arctic anemones, and three or four consecutive copies of the *Times* and the *Guardian* for a week in April, 1960. These had recently been torn from their postal wrappers and were still half-unrolled.

Between chintz curtains the windows looked out hopefully, as though on to herbaceous borders planted ready for the spring. But it was like being back-stage, where the scenery comes to an end. There was an iron fence topped with barbed wire, and a wall of yellow, unpointed brickwork, which was beginning to crumble away. The street was paved with stone and opposite stood a ruin, pockmarked by gunfire from long ago. At some distance were large grey buildings and over them a greyer sky.

The sky is enormous in those parts. Its huge arch covers the city and the great river and the flat sandy plain on which pinewoods and heath and infertile fields stretch out as far as the horizon. Patches of exactly the same landscape can be seen at intervals from Aldershot and Camberley, across Belgium and Pomerania and up to the Russian frontier. It is military country, beloved by the organizers of manœuvres and battles. Its dry gullies are as convenient for

firing squads as for lovers; its bracken and heather are more accustomed to mortar fire than to the minor conflagrations caused by picnickers, and its deadly fauna include the adder and the unexploded grenade.

Pine logs from these forests were crackling in the drawing room fireplace and a young woman was standing in front of it, talking.

This young woman stood on the outsides of her feet with her hands clasped behind her, as though she were still obeying a forgotten governess's injunction to straighten her shoulders. She was ungainly, badly dressed and her voice was shrill and discordant, but she had a perfect skin and a rather beautiful face. She could only have been what she was, a confident member of the British ruling class.

'Thank God you've come both of you, I must say. Because I'm here all alone until Mark comes back. He'll be late because of this girl, this friend of his sister's we're looking after. Do please sit down, Miss Er — Mark's gone to the airport to pick her up. Does that sound nasty, Adam? You speak English so much better than we all do. Does that sound nasty when I say Mark's gone to the airport to pick her up?'

'Alexandra, it sounds wonderful when you are saying it.'

'Hum!'

She had asked for the clumsy compliment, yet seemed bored by it.

The man who had spoken was over middle size; he had black curly hair, a square face, with a nose which curved up like a saddle. When he smiled he showed a steel tooth, and sometimes his pale eyes gave the false impression that he wore contact lenses.

'Look, do come nearer the fire, Miss Er —'

'Handisyde.'

‘What are you going to drink?’

‘I’d just love a real Polish Vodka.’

‘Adam will have a dry martini because he always does. Adam, give Miss Handisyde a real Polish Vodka, will you?’ Alexandra returned to her stance in front of the hearth. ‘How have you been getting on, I’m sure Adam has been filling your ears with all sorts of subversion.’

The guest, having got through a smoker’s cough, bowed her short-cut, greying head as though she were beginning to recite: ‘Well, this has really been a most wonderful experience. I don’t think I’ve ever met people who seem so’ — she gestured with rough hands — ‘I can’t express how much’ —

Alexandra looked down at her cheerfully. ‘I know. I’m just like that. But I’m sure you’ll find it’s quite all right the moment you get back home. Look at me. When I’m here I can hardly think of anything to say at all, but the moment we got to London at Christmas the whole thing became absolutely and completely clear to me. I mean, I simply felt I was a one-girl bureau, don’t you know, of Iron Curtain affairs. Of course I do speak the language much better than Mark does, and that does help.’

‘For instance, we spent some time this morning with a really interesting man. I’m afraid I don’t quite remember his name. Adam darling, what was that man’s name again?’

Adam Karpinski was standing between the women, watching them with attention and wonder, as if they had been two fireworks, two set-pieces, which he had managed to set off in conjunction. Neither, he thought as his gaze moved from one to the other, could have fulfilled the exotic roles he had given them with more perfect timing and intonation. Only his glee at this must be always unshared, because

there were few people around who spoke and appreciated English as well as he did.

‘Which man do you mean, Margaret?’

‘The man at that place we went to this morning. With those column things. They weren’t columns really,’ she said to Alexandra.

‘I’m sure they weren’t.’

‘What was that place called, Adam?’

‘Which place, Margaret?’

‘Oh, it doesn’t matter really. But it was fascinating, I was most impressed. I intend in my report to emphasize most, most — You can’t believe it, when you think.’

‘Oh, I can.’

A car drew up in the street outside.

‘That must be Mark. I wonder if he found Rose. Rose is this girl. Please be nice to her, Adam. There was something quite interesting I wanted to tell you about her, only unfortunately there hasn’t been time.’

‘I’ll be very nice to her, Alexandra.’

‘Of course she may be awful.’ Alexandra was silent and a lost, crazy look came over her face as though stumbling, hurrying on, she had reached a part of the forest she had never expected to see. ‘I’ve never met her. Of course, she may be quite awful.’

Mark Tatham came in, a little disarranged, pushing a handkerchief up his sleeve.

‘Washing her hands. Plane was late.’

He immediately went over to Miss Handisyde, and began the effort of engaging her in conversation.

Bringing him a drink, Alexandra interrupted: ‘Does she want to stay the night? Because if so, Simon has been sleeping in the spare bedroom and I’ll have to tell Nanny.’

When Tatham looked up, his long white face was lined

with strain and tiredness. 'No. She's going to Biala Gora on this evening's plane. Apparently they are expecting her.'

'Poor girl, I must say. Why is she going to Biala Gora?'

'Don't speak against that place, Alexandra. I may be deserting you all to go there one day soon.'

'Oh, Adam, no. What will we all do without you?'

Alexandra stood in her old place on the hearthrug but now with her legs crossed and the outsides of her feet laid together. Her colour was high, her eyes bright and fearsome.

'Have I been there, Adam?' Miss Handisyde asked.

'No, Margaret.'

'I seem to have been just about everywhere. As I say it's been the most fascinating—I must say the spirit of the people, that's what I find amazing. I'm going to put all that in my report when I get back. They may have political problems but they've got spirit.' She stared at her empty glass. 'That sounds rather funny, doesn't it?'

Alexandra snatched the glass from her. Karpinski followed across the room.

'My dear, it's simply all the time,' he whispered. 'We buy only the best Wodka Wyborowa, with real pounds and dollars, at the Grand Hotel kiosk every morning. And furthermore she keeps wanting to S-L-E-E-P with me.'

This joke about the spelling out of simple words he had been amused to adopt from Alexandra herself: she had inherited it from a nurseryful of sisters, the daughters of a pre-war Conservative minister.

'Adam, no! How ghastly.'

'What was it you were going to tell me about this girl?'

'It's just that—' she broke off. 'Here she is.'

Two

‘**M**ISS HANDISYDE, this is Rose Nicholson. Mr. Karpinski. This is Elizabeth’s friend. Darling, do give Rose something to drink. Rose, are you quite certain you can’t stay, I mean it’s so simply, really, Simon can have Nanny’s bedroom, Nanny’ll be quite glad to go into the night nursery and we can move Juliet’s cot out into the —’

Alexandra tried to present this girl, who was extremely pretty, as just somebody else that she and Mark were obliged to deal with. The girl, however, seemed unwilling to be managed.

‘No. I have already booked my place on the aeroplane.’

Alexandra’s voice trailed irritably away. There was a small silence while they all watched Rose. The world outside was still with her. How long, they were thinking, would she keep that slightly abstracted look of self-assurance? Miss Handisyde was quite forgotten. Adam Karpinski moved slowly across the room towards Rose.

‘Alexandra tells me that you are travelling to Biala Gora.’

‘Yes. My sister is married to someone at the University there.’

Karpinski looked puzzled. ‘I have heard that there is an Englishman. But I did not think he was a married man.’

‘But he’s a Pole. My brother-in-law, is, I mean.’

Karpinski emitted the three humming notes by which his

countrymen express dubiety and surprise. 'I see. And she has been there a long time?'

'Ten years. No, twelve. Janet is older than me.'

'Obviously, if I may say so. I wonder, is she happy there?'

'Well, perhaps not at first. But everything is much better now, isn't it?'

'Some people try to think so.'

Rose dismissed any attempt to discourage her. 'I'm looking forward to getting to Biala Gora.'

Alexandra came up and said something like 'Biawa'. 'Did I do it right, Adam?'

'Alexandra's dark "l"s are always very nicely formed.'

Alexandra took Rose's arm and led her into the dining-room.

'Rose, how I wish I was you. She's going off to the real world where we've never even been. We just see all the same people at all the parties here. Rose, I wish I was you, I do really.'

Karpinski said: 'And do you imagine that you could see how people in fact live? The moment you go to their flats they would bring out the food they have bought on the Black Market and the Nescafé from the Komis shop and they are wearing the clothes their cousin sends them from America.'

'Adam, you are so depressing. Why does Adam always have to be so depressing?'

During luncheon Rose was so placed that she could not help watching the short-haired elderly Englishwoman opposite her. After a few more incoherences, Miss Handisyde gave up all attempts at conversation; her head bowed, her hand fell dead-heavy on the table, upsetting her empty glass which rolled on to its side.

The newcomer had no idea of the importance of all this to any of the others but soon she noticed signs of a jubilant conspiracy between Adam Karpinski and Alexandra, who was blinking and shaking with almost imperceptible giggles.

She turned to Mark. His sister Elizabeth was one of her best friends but she had not seen him since his marriage; there was an altered stateliness about his bearing, as though one might hope for kindness but not humour from him. Now Mark winked at her gently and after a little he too began to tremble with laughter. The rest of the meal went as a sort of wild burlesque in which every conventional remark bubbled with hysteria. Adam Karpinski kept nudging Rose and mopping his eyes.

Finally Alexandra helped Miss Handisyde out of the room, and after a moment Karpinski followed them.

Still laughing, Mark said: 'I'm awfully sorry about all this, Rose.'

'Who on earth is she?'

'I don't know. A progressive journalist. One of these people who get wished on to one.'

'Is she always like this, I wonder.'

'Perhaps not. Odd things happen to people when they arrive here. Either they hole up in the Grand or the Bristol, complaining of tummy-aches and demanding to see the Embassy doctor — who isn't, of course, allowed to see them. Or they find that vodka is the best way out.'

'But why?'

'Shock.'

'I haven't felt any. Ought I to?'

'Delayed. No, honestly I expect you've got enough to occupy your mind as it is.'

The girl looked relieved that the conversation had at length turned to the only thing she could talk about.

'Yes. I still don't know what I'm going to do. There's one or two things I must be sure of.'

'We'll do our best to help. The Embassy lawyer—' He stopped, seeing that Karpinski had returned to the room.

'Mark, I really do apologize most profoundly. I've seen this crisis approaching but the old girl was simply insisting on coming to luncheon here. Keeping in with the jolly old Embassy, you know. It is too very bad that it should happen in your house. Alexandra has most kindly offered to drive us back to the Grand Hotel.'

He picked up his wine glass and drained it off.

'Still, if she passes right out, it at least means I may have a rest this afternoon. And tomorrow morning, thank God, she is off to Prague.' He turned to Rose. 'I was thinking, is your brother-in-law perhaps called Witold Rudowski?'

'Yes, he is.'

'I see. Then perhaps we shall meet again. I am frequently in Biala Gora.'

'Oh good.' She sounded pleased. She liked him. With his vivid smiles and his air of tightly-packed energy, he was quite unlike the glum exiles one saw in South Kensington.

'That's rather strange, isn't it?' Rose asked Mark when the other had gone.

'Everybody knows everybody else in this country. The trouble starts when they don't know what everybody else is up to. Let's have some coffee.'

While Mark fetched a bottle of brandy and a couple of glasses Rose sat staring unhappily in front of her.

'Cheer up. Have some brandy.'

'Thank you. All the same I do hope I'm not going to get drunk or have tummy-aches.'

‘Well, if you do, you need only come running back here. Alexandra would love to have you.’

There was a moment’s pause between them, sufficiently protracted to throw some doubt on this.

‘Thank you,’ Rose said again. ‘You see the trouble is I’m so frightened of breaking this news to Janet.’

‘How long since you’ve seen her?’

‘Two years. Of course none of this was in the air then. Aunt Louise was still alive, though we’d none of us set eyes on her for ages.’ Rose cautiously sipped at her brandy. ‘Janet came home when my father was dying and we were pretty much taken up with that.’

‘Your sister doesn’t know anything about it, then?’

‘No. She thinks I’m just here for fun. She always spoke about not mentioning important things in letters. This is an important thing, isn’t it? Somehow, now I’m actually here, it doesn’t seem so terribly important after all.’

‘You were quite right not to mention it. *They* would think it terribly important.’

‘Why?’

‘That’s what we must ask the lawyer ultimately. Roughly something like this: legally any property, monies (I wonder why one always says monies) etcetera owned by a national abroad must be realized and transferred into local currency. I don’t know which exchange rate it’d be at, but there wouldn’t be much left.’

‘I’m sure we don’t want to do that.’

‘Then you have to be careful who you talk to. You’re breaking the law. Someone may object.’

‘Who?’

‘What about your sister’s husband?’

He spoke with a hint of distaste. The Poles these English