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A JIMMY FLANNERY MYSTERY

ROBERT CAMPBELL

THE CAT'S MEOW



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A Jimmy Flannery Mystery

Robert Campbell



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THE 
CAT'S MEOW

Novels by Robert Campbell

THINNING THE TURKEY HERD

HIP-DEEP IN ALLIGATORS

HONOR

THE 600-POUND GORILLA

THE JUNKYARD DOG

IN LA-LA LAND WE TRUST

THE TIN COP (writing as F. G. Clinton)

FAT TUESDAY

MALLOY'S SUBWAY

KILLER OF KINGS

WHERE PIGEONS GO TO DIE

CIRCUS COURONNE

THE SPY WHO SAT AND WAITED

To Jane R.

1



You might say it all starts when Father Mulrooney's cat up and dies. Its name was Ignatius. Some people called it Iggie. A few even called it Ig.

My name's James Flannery, but only my sainted mother—God keep her beside Him—ever called me that, except for my wife, Mary, who calls me James more than she calls me anything else.

Mostly people call me Jimmy and my father, Mike, calls me Jim, and there's them what call me Jimbo when they want to get my goat or put me down.

So if I'd known the priest's cat real well I probably would've called him Ignatius, or maybe Iggie or Ig but never Igo. As it turns out, I never had a chance to call him anything very often because we wasn't really friends, only passing acquaintances.

I ain't been around St. Pat's, except now and then, since I moved out of the ward over to the Twenty-seventh.

The St. Pat's I'm talking about ain't the one over on the Southeast Side, which is in South Chicago's oldest parish, having been established in 1857, although the present church and school was built in 1899. And it ain't the St. Pat's on the

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Near West Side, which they started building in 1855 but which was interrupted by a cholera epidemic so it didn't get finished until 1856 but, even so, is generally considered the oldest church in Chicago.

The St. Pat's I'm talking about is in the Fourteenth on the same block as St. Ulric's Seminary for Boys, a preparatory school of good scholastic reputation where Catholic boys are introduced to studies which could lead to the priesthood and, if not, to careers as notable Catholic laymen.

The original church was burned down around 1862 when it was only half finished, and burned down again about ten years later in the great Chicago fire. Nobody tried to rebuild it right away after that. Didn't have the heart or didn't have the money. But building was started again at the beginning of 1929. They had big ideas about gray granite and pink marble, but they got hit in the face with the market crash and the depression that followed, and ended up finishing it in red brick and poured concrete.

St. Ulric's was built about the same time. It's a three-story gray stone building that looks as much like a fort or a prison as it does like a school.

The block they're built on is two regular city blocks long, the streets coming in from the north and south midway making T intersections front and back.

So the church is on one corner and the boys' seminary on the other, with the priest's house, where Father Mulrooney has lived for nearly fifty years—I don't know how many of those cared for by the housekeeper, Mrs. Thimble—in the middle. The old churchyard and cemetery is in back and extends all the way to the next street, running the entire length of the double block except for a patch of backyard that belongs to the priest's house and the school's playground, which intrudes into the cemetery even deeper. There's a wrought-iron fence around the cemetery with two gates in it, one by the church and the other by St. Ulric's.

Father Mulrooney was in on the building of St. Pat's right from the beginning. I don't mean back in 1862—though he looks frail enough to be that old sometimes—but since 1930 when, the stories have it, he slept at night in the shack the workmen used for a privy during the day. He's never left, even when they offered him chances for better churches in richer parishes out in the suburbs. He can tell you what every door and window cost back when it was built and what it would be worth now if the archdiocese ever demolished the church and sold its parts, which he claims they're planning to do the minute he turns his back.

Especially now when everybody, including himself, calls his church St. Pits because, for the last ten or fifteen years, the church building, like the parish it serves, has been going downhill, sliding into ruin.

The word around Church circles really is that they're waiting for St. Pits to fall down from neglect or for Father Mulrooney to die from the ravages of time—whichever comes first—so they can knock the homely pile of junk flat and either expand St. Ulric's or sell off the property where the church stands, like they've already sold off the churchyard. That was a couple of years ago when the bishop decided nobody was burying there anymore, preferring more modern burial grounds scattered here and there throughout Chicago and the suburbs. Rumor has it a gas station is going to be put on the property. So, like Father Mulrooney often tells my father, Mike, when a man keeps hearing bullets whistling past his ear, finds deadly snakes in his bed, and his tea poisons the cat, he ain't being paranoid because he thinks somebody's out to get him.

Mike says it's time that's out to get Father Mulrooney just like it's out to get us all. The old priest is getting a little senile and sometimes, when Mike stops by for a chat or the weekly game of cards he's been having with Father Mulrooney, Rabbi Ziegler, and the Reverend Kilmonis from the First

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Baptist Church every Wednesday for the last twenty years, he thinks it's 1930 again and he's a young man of twenty-nine.

My old man remembers him shortly after that, back when the Fourteenth was all Irish and German with maybe a couple of Italians. Father Mulrooney, whose name is also Patrick, was tall and carried himself like a soldier. He had pale skin, ruddy cheeks, blue eyes, and black hair parted in the middle and slicked back with brilliantine until it shone like patent leather. "And a silver tongue on him," Mike says, "that soothed the men, charmed the ladies, and brought the angels down from heaven to sit among the congregation." Even though he was only a youngster at the time, going to church every Sunday and serving as altar boy as well, he remembers the gossip and the speculating about how a priest as handsome as Father Mulrooney should watch himself or one of the bolder young women—flappers they called them—of the parish might lead him down the garden path into carnal sin.

So maybe that's why—because of old times—although he don't go to church much more than me, Mike makes the effort to do his Easter duties and drags me over to midnight Mass to see the old priest at Christmas Eve.

That's about the only time I ever see Ignatius, the old black cat. If the sacristan's forgot to fill up the big holy-water font on the wall in the vestibule just inside the front door, which is frequent, you could usually find old Ignatius curled up in the cool marble. If you pet him, he'd open one eye and turn his head so you could scratch his neck, the one fang he's got left shining like a piece of old ivory against his lip. He's what you'd call an old reprobate of a cat.

It's my father, Mike, who tells me about how Ignatius is dead. Father Mulrooney breaks the news of his bereavement at the card game a few nights before.

"I'm sorry to hear that about old Ignatius," I says. "Please give Father Mulrooney my condolences next time you play cards."

"I'm sure Father Mulrooney would like to hear your condolences from your own lips," Mike says.

I suppose my old man figures an old priest would care a hell of a lot about his cat, never having had a wife, but for some reason I always had the idea Father Mulrooney kept the cat around because he thought it suited his image of the wise old priest.

But Monday night I go over to see Father Mulrooney to say how sorry I am about his loss.

When I get there, Mrs. Thimble, his housekeeper, who looks like a mop in this house dress which is clean but very baggy, opens the door. She's as frosty as I remember her from when I was a boy when she asks me who I am in a tone of voice not supposed to make me welcome.

The only other person I know can make you feel like you never should have come before you got your foot past the door is Mrs. Banjo, Delvin's housekeeper. You'd think they were sisters except they don't look anything like one another.

"It's Jimmy Flannery, Mrs. Thimble," I says.

"Oh, the choirboy," she says.

"Well, it's been a little while since I sang in the choir."

"That's all right, since we haven't got a choir anymore," she says.

Then a voice as thin and rusty as Mrs. Thimble's says, "And it's been a long time since you've been to church at all, at all."

It's Father Mulrooney, doing his Barry Fitzgerald imitation, who was, in case you're too young to remember, an actor who did a movie called *Going My Way* with Bing Crosby some years ago.

He's standing there in the gloomy hallway, the light from the parlor spilling out all over his white hair so it looks like the shredded pages of some old book. He's not so tall anymore, the years having bent him over and shrunk him somewhat. But his eyes, even in the dim light, are still as blue as they ever

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were and seem to shine with a light that comes from inside his head.

"Come in, Jimmy, and sit you down," he says.

"I just stopped by to say I'm sorry about old Ignatius."

"Now, there's a story," he says, and waves me out of the cold, into the hall, and through the door of the living room.

"Tea, Mrs. Thimble, if you please," he says, staring her down in case she wants to make a complaint.

But she trots off without a murmur of protest.

"She's not herself since the cat passed away," Father Mulrooney says. "She was very fond of the creature. Very fond."

I go over and sit down in one of the big cracked leather chairs in front of the fireplace, which has an electric heater stuck in it, without taking off my overcoat.

"How are things down in the sewers?" Father Mulrooney asks.

"Moving along," I says, which is a little bit of Sanitation humor.

"I hear tell you were walking the lines lately."

"They needed my expertise for a little while there."

"I heard it was a punishment because you wouldn't play ball with the powers that be."

"Which powers is that, the mayor's office?"

"The Democratic party."

"The old one or the new one?"

"The old one. The only one there is as far as I'm concerned."

"They say the old machine's rusted and busted," I says.

"Even so I always considered loyalty and obedience virtues," he says.

"That's why I took it. I figure it's like when you was a kid. Your father or mother's got a grievance they expect you to make up for, you don't argue. You take what's coming to you and get on with it. Besides, me having to walk the sewers again is ancient history."

"I was going to add, I'm not so sure about unquestioning loyalty and blind obedience anymore."

He hesitates as though he's thinking about what he's just said and then he shakes himself. "You cold?" he asks.

"I'm fine, Father," I says.

He's wearing a sweater and wool gloves with the fingers cut out. He's got a scarf around his neck and I can see his breath when he speaks, but he says, "So, why don't you take off your coat and stay awhile?"

He's really not asking, he's telling, so I stand up and take off my coat. I hand it to Father Mulrooney, who tosses it on the couch, which I could have done for myself. I sit down again in my sweater with my scarf still around my neck.

"You'll have a little something?" he asks.

"I don't indulge, Father."

"And very wise, too." He goes to a heavy sideboard made of carved black wood, big enough to be a giant's coffin, and pours himself a couple of fingers which he brings back to his chair with him. He cradles it on his stomach as he slouches down and puts his feet out until they're almost touching the electric grill.

"There's a stereotype, not quite a joke," he says, "of the drunkard priest drowning his loneliness and his withered hunger for women with whiskey. Let me tell you, there's drinkers among us but the reason is more often the fear of abandonment and poverty than frustration and solitude. Would you be amazed to know the Church does not provide?"

"Provide what, Father?" I says.

"A pension. A comfortable and dignified retirement."

"I always thought there was a home for old priests—"

"Filled up. With a waiting list as long as your arm. No, we're expected to provide for ourselves. After taking on the vow of poverty and giving away all the substance that might ever come my way, just how would that happen, will you tell me?"

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I hardly know what to say. "I could ask around and see what I can do," I says. "I never dreamed."

He lets go the glass and waves both hands in the air, balancing the glass on his stomach without spilling a drop. "Don't fret yourself," he says. "I doubt they'll have the gall to throw me out into the gutter. I hope to die right here in St. Pat's just like old Ignatius. But I promise, unlike old Ignatius, I won't come back and prowl the church."

He gives me the old sidelong one-eye like all the best storytellers do, getting you on edge, raising the curtain so to speak. I know I'm about to hear some strange story about his cat.

"Was there something special about the way old Ignatius died?" I asks, priming the pump.

"Well, who's to say much about the way a cat dies?" he says. "Cats are funny creatures who live in a world and according to rules we don't know much about. It's not for nothing they're shown in pictures riding broomsticks with witches. It's not for nothing they write about cats sitting down to sup with imps. It's not for nothing a person will wake up in the night and find his cat sitting on his chest staring at him."

Most people don't know it, but priests, particularly old ones, particularly ones that came from the old country when they was almost grown, often get the old magic and the dogma of the Church all mixed up together in one bag. Saints and devils, prayers and incantations, pagan rites and Catholic ceremonies, the knocking on wood to summon a druid and crossing yourself when speaking the name of Jesus Christ—all spring out of the same old past and sometimes it's hard for them, just like it is for us, to know the difference.

"There's nothing special about the way Ignatius died," Father Mulrooney says, "if you think it's nothing special for a cat, lying by the fire and warming himself, to suddenly jump straight up and run the hell out of the room, down the hall, and out the back porch window, which we kept cracked a couple of inches for any sudden calls of nature."

"Was he a good watch cat?" I asks.

He gives me the old cockeye as if he fears I've gone mad.

"I have a friend, by the name of Willy Dink," I explain, "keeps a menagerie of exotic animals, including a dog what can whistle through its teeth, and a ferret that hunts rats inside the walls of old buildings, who depends on a cat to warn him when strangers are prowling around."

"What about the dog that whistles through his teeth? Doesn't he bark?"

"He lets the cat do it. Or meow or yowl, or whatever it is the cat does to give warning."

"Watch cat?" Father Mulrooney says. "I suppose you could say old Ignatius sensed when strangers were in the vicinity. That is whenever he chose to rouse himself. Whatever his reasons, he was out of here like someone had set fire to his tail, and a few minutes later I hear a scream fit to wake the dead. It raised the hair on the back of my neck, I can tell you. A cat, in dire distress, screams like a woman sorely bereaved or wounded, did you know? I went out looking in the garden. Then heard the scream again. It come from the church."

"You heard the scream right through the stone walls of the church?" I says.

"It was such an amazing scream," Father Mulrooney says, daring me to doubt him.

"He had a hundred ways to get inside the church, I suppose," I says.

"A cat has a hundred ways inside every place but heaven," he says. "I go in through the door to the north porch, through the transept where the statue of St. Patrick stands in his little shrine, and into the crossing. I'm waiting for that hellish scream again, you see, so I'm proceeding with caution. I walk up to the chancel rail and through the gate up to the steps of the presbytery, where I finally see him."

He pauses. He takes the glass off his stomach and has a

swallow of what's in it. He knows how to spin a yarn, how to draw out the suspense.

"There he was," Father Mulrooney goes on. "There he was lying on his back in the middle of the aisle with all four feet in the air."

Mrs. Thimble comes in with the tea. Before she can swing around and close the door with her foot, I catch a glimpse of somebody I think I know standing out in the entrance hall. He ducks back out of my line of sight when he sees me looking at him. I wonder what Phil the Junkman is doing visiting Father Mulrooney this time of night. I didn't even know he was Catholic.

Mrs. Thimble puts the tea tray down on the coffee table, then goes over and whispers in Father Mulrooney's ear. He puts aside his drink, sits up, and gets to his feet with some difficulty.

"Don't grow old, Jimmy," he says.

"What about Ignatius?"

"Hold the thought," he says, and leaves the room.

I sit there drinking tea, smelling the peculiar smell of poverty and neglect in the decaying house that was threatening to fall down around the old priest's ears, feeling my fingertips and toes going numb, for about fifteen or twenty minutes.

When Father Mulrooney comes back he ignores the tea and takes the position he had on the couch with the tumbler of whiskey balanced on his stomach.

"Was that Phil the Junkman I see out in the hall?" I says.

"It was."

"You don't mind my asking what's a thief and a fence doing coming here this time of night? What's he doing coming here at all?"

"Where else would a sinner come when in distress but to the house of God?"

"You telling me Phil the Junkman comes here for you to hear some emergency confession?"

“More like a consultation. Philip’s taking instruction in the faith.”

“If Phil the Junkman converts to being legitimate, let alone Catholic, I’ll put you up for sainthood for performing miracles, Father,” I says.

He laughs and says, “Put me up for a pension, instead. Now, about the cat.”

“He was laying on the floor of the church with all four feet in the air,” I says, finding him his place.

“Dead as a doornail,” he says.

“From what?”

“I didn’t ask, and he couldn’t say.”

“Did you have somebody look him over?”

“A doctor?”

“Well, a vet.”

“What for? I know a dead cat when I see one.”

“So what did you do?”

“I buried him that very night over in the churchyard underneath the big willow.”

“It’s my understanding the old graveyard was sold off to an oil company,” I says.

“You got it right. But I buried Ignatius underneath the tree all the same.” He cocked his head and seemed to wink at me. “Though it seems that old cat won’t rest in peace even in that hallowed ground.”

“How’s that?” I says.

“It’s three nights later that I’m awakened in the middle of the night by Ignatius screaming.”

“You heard a cat complaining?”

“I heard Ignatius. I raised that ancient cat from a kitten and knew his every mew and murmur. It was Ignatius calling me. I got up and put on my robe and slippers. I took a flashlight and went out into the back garden. I walked along the path to the side door of the church and let myself in with the key I