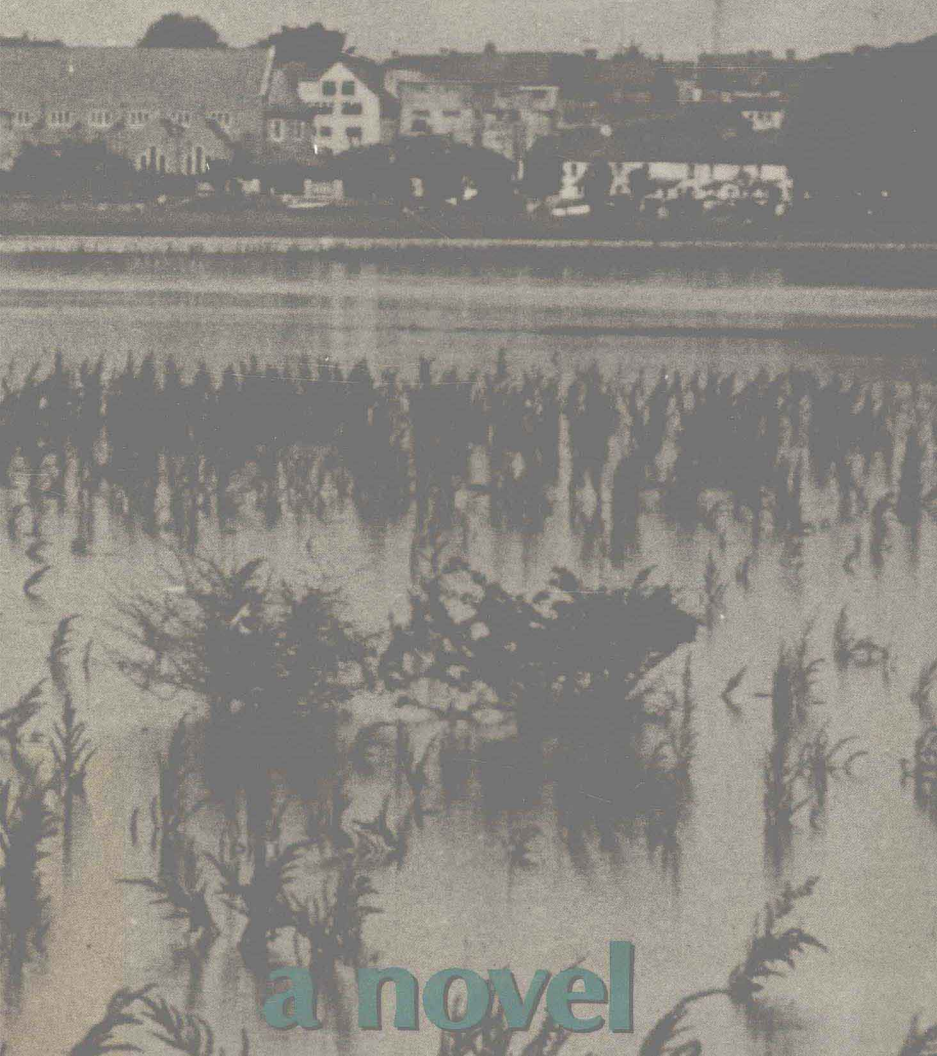


John Broderick

THE FLOOD



a novel

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JOHN BRODERICK

THE FLOOD



A NOVEL

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Part One

NOVEMBER 1933

Most of the seven o'clock women woke with the first ting of the alarm beside the bed, and smothered it with a moist hand before sitting up and dragging their feet out of the deep tunnel of the blankets, but there were others who rose slowly out of the buried night and lingered for a while in the warm and murmuring depths.

Not a stir is that the wind outside and the dog barking no dog something else god in heaven could there be a stranger creeping over the hill someone saw a line of men on the top of the corrigeen but no glint not a glimmer they were only our own back from another townland maybe the one beyond here but where is the dog and the pig and the few coppers I hid under the stone and give us this day our daily bread.

Ellen O'Farrell always dressed quickly and tidily by the light of one candle in a little enamel holder on the dressing table. She prepared now only a little less quickly than usual, her five months pregnancy not yet a real burden. But she had never been delayed by these stray thoughts which came and went in her half-conscious mind. Like the other women, most of whom had experienced the same waking terrors, she was up and dressing by twenty to seven.

Ben, her husband, was never unaware of her stealing across the bottom of the big bed and dropping silently like a ripe plum to the floor, but he no longer grunted and complained and blew through his out-turned lips.

'Take care, Nellie, don't trip,' he murmured to himself as Ellen opened the drawer of the tallboy in which she kept her most precious possessions: fine wool vests, silk slips and stockings, two pairs of satin knickers for an occasion that had never arisen, her best pig-skin gloves and pure silk blouses. Above all, in their own secret place at the back of the drawer,

her collection of satin, velour and heavy silk garters. They lay, gleaming even in the feeble candlelight with their splendid winking bows in rich and varied liturgical colours. White and red and green and violet and black: there was not a feast day in the calendar of the ecclesiastical year that she could not match with an apt, snapping garter.

But in time Ellen developed scruples over this, and now she wore whatever colour her mood dictated, so that no one, not even her husband, could accuse her of irreverence. Not that he ever would. The idea of his wife wearing a garter to suit the season had delighted him. For a while after their marriage he teased her about it: 'red for martyrs, green for hope, violet for Lent and Ember days, black for the holy souls, and white for everything, even me, what?' After a few weeks of this Ellen no longer allowed herself to match her garters with the saints and the seasons. Ben regretted this and often watched her sleepy-eyed, as she dressed.

Today she wore red, a bright crimson garter with rhinestones sewn into its flouncy bows. Then she tiptoed over to the marble-topped table on which the ewer and basin of water had been laid out overnight, covered with a towel. This helped to keep out the dust that, in that old house, was forever settling on everything, like flour in a bakery. Ellen was sure that if she stood in the middle of any of the rooms long enough, she would be turned into something like a statue.

Her face washed, a comb through the thick hair faintly streaked with grey, a little silent shake as she picked out her bulky tweed coat, hat, gloves, scarf, prayer-book, and the tiny rosary beads she always carried in a pouch hung round her neck when going out: one must always be prepared. This accomplished, she looked at her husband who seemed peacefully asleep again.

'Now,' she said to herself looking at the heavy, dark red curtains that hung in frozen folds over the front and back windows. She knew and everybody knew and Benedict knew, and everybody knew that he knew that the curtains were never drawn until mid-afternoon, when Ben had been already several hours in the bar. No one in that town was going to know when he rose. Some said eleven, others, the majority, twelve; others later still. It was nothing new. In some houses bedroom curtains were never drawn back at all, except for a wake.

Ellen opened the door silently and stepped down into the big parlour that stretched the full length of the shop below, the O'Farrell's bedroom being over an arched passage to the yard behind. She made her way as surely as an acrobat on a high wire between the huge lumps of furniture that made the room almost impassable to those who did not know it. A further hazard were the ornamental sprinklings from visits to Galway, Dublin, Tramore, New York, and Belfast which lay on the various tables like wreaths on war memorials.

When she reached the thick lace curtains she grasped them firmly, and drew them back as silently and carefully as she had done everything that morning: the curtain rings had to be greased occasionally. Then she let up the Holland blinds, patched like elderly hands with dark spots.

For a moment she waited at the end window. A second later the sound came, *tap-tock-tap-tock* down the street on the other side. Miss Hosannah Braiden was on her way to mass, as she had every morning in the twelve years since Ellen McCarthy had come to O'Farrell's as a young bride. The time of the drawing of the curtains, the letting up of the Holland blinds had not altered by more than a few seconds in all these years, except that recently Hosannah had broken the heel of one of her shoes, and the *tap-tappity-tap* of former years had become the *tap-tock* of the past few months.

'Bloody hell, why doesn't she get it fixed?' Ben grunted when told this significant piece of news. It altered the whole rhythm of the street.

'She hasn't the money,' Ellen shook her head and smiled sadly.

'Doesn't she make wedding cakes? Doesn't she do a bit of dress-making? Doesn't she get a handout from her American cousins an odd time? Doesn't she? Oh yes, she does.' He had paused as was his usual manner when he wanted to make a special effect. Ellen always awaited these with her eyes wide open and interested. It was a small price to pay for the only boring mannerism that Ben had, and even then he often came out with something interesting or amusing.

'If the old faggot didn't spend all her money lighting bloody candles in the church, she'd be able to buy herself a new pair of shoes.'

'Oh Ben, it's another cross, she's lame now as well as

everything else, caught in the chest, and bent down with a growth.'

'Growth, me arsel!' He gave his wife a sharp look. Ellen was gazing at him with wide, innocent eyes. 'I don't know what it is that regular mass-going does to women, but it turns them into a bunch of unholy bitches.'

Ellen thought of that remark now as she turned from the window and made her way towards the door. The gaslight flickering through the window spread over the half-shaped mass of chairs and tables like a covering of decayed yellow lace. She went carefully downstairs and along the passage to the hall door. From the entrance to the shop at the bottom of the stairs the rich smell of beer, spices and oranges made the hallway a place of generous anticipation and cosy warmth. Ellen remembered the first time she had ever been there, and always at this time of the morning, that memorable day came back to her as she pulled the bolt on the hall door, usually in a hurry.

There was no need for hurry today. Since her pregnancy she had risen a few minutes earlier, although Ben had for some time now been trying to persuade her to lie in. But her condition was an unusual one, hardly to be hoped for a year ago, and she felt the need to continue the seven mass to thank God for His goodness to her.

Outside, the shop fronts opposite were clear or dim or glimmering 'accordingly as the lamps caught them. The wooden shutters were still up, giving the windows a blind, bandaged air. Yellow circles were drawn around the bottom of the lamp posts; the street, after rain yesterday, was muddy and still smelled thickly of horse manure and damp straw.

There was no need to wait for any more footsteps.

Miss McLurry, who kept the sweet shop seven doors down from Ellen, always waited until Hosannah passed before setting out in her leisurely fashion twenty or thirty paces between Ellen and Miss Braiden. Ellen had often wished that Miss McLurry would get a move on, for her ambling progress led to Ellen's having to walk slower than was natural for her, even in her present condition, and was a serious matter on wet mornings. But the procession, with its minute timings, had been instituted long before her time, and she respected it. None of the Connaught Street women ever walked to mass together.

The last of the seven o'clock women was Mrs 'Pig'

Prendergast, the big Kerry woman who sold pigs' feet — crubeens — in her dark and cavernous shop, and had been married to the biggest pig dealer in town. Having small use for local protocol, she dropped into the church in her own time and stayed on sometimes after it was over, fast asleep in the back row, wrapped in her late husband's thick frieze overcoat.

It was a good twenty minutes walk to the Friary from Connaught Street, and one had to face the bridge, a fearsome place on a wet and windy morning. But as Ellen walked across the market square between the military barracks and King John's castle on the other side at the end of the bridge, she was relieved to see that this morning promised a fair crossing, middle of November though it was. The gas lights flared on the parapets, and threw down little islands of light, which made pedestrians and pilgrims feel that they were hopping from one small stone foothold to another, as in the days when the Shannon at that place was a famous, dangerous and warlike ford. It was the border between two provinces, between east and west. The Connaught women, following their seven o'clock routine, separated by so many exact minutes as they crossed into Leinster under the hissing lamps, were aware in their hearts of immemorial things.

It's a fearful place child dear but tis the only place to cross the river and it's full of demons and dead men's bones and they forever killing for the ford the bed of that river is white as death don't look down when the lights is out and hurry on home our side is safest.

There were two ways of getting to the Friary after crossing the swollen river that was as 'wide as half the world.' One was straight ahead through Church Street, named after the Protestant church that stood in the middle of it, and down you went like a sack of potatoes if you slipped on the steep incline of the Friary Lane. Hosannah and Miss McLurry always went this way, with Hosannah always first to huddle in her corner of the doorway, until the holy place was opened by sardonic Brother Ulick, who always looked at the famished woman with a forbidden glance, and murmured 'glory be' with no little sarcasm.

'Amen, Brudder,' Hosannah quavered, getting her oar into the holy tide.

The other women took the low road that forked down a few yards beyond the bridge, and led through a maze of small lanes

and houses by the side of the river and the opening onto the docks. A line of tall eighteenth century houses stood at the top of the lanes.

It was while passing one of the narrow lanes which led directly to the embankment, partially lighted by a lamp at the corner, that Ellen saw something out of the corner of her eye. She would have passed on, quickening her step, but for some reason she paused that morning, although it was the last thing she should have done in her condition. The man was lying on his back outside the end house, with his legs sprawling across the path. She could have avoided him by stepping a little to the right. But she bent down, saw the blood on his forehead and heard his rasping breath. She did not wait, but hurried as fast as she was able to the Friary door and rang the bell long and hard. It was answered by Brother Ulick who looked anything but pleased. Life was difficult enough, what with getting old Father Pacificus dressed and vested for mass, opening the door to the two humbugs, Hosannah and Miss McLurry, whose woe-begone faces made him want to puke. And now a hysterical ring at the convent door.

'Well, what is it?' he demanded in his sharpest tones, but when the woman answered, he knew the call was genuine. Nice Mrs O'Farrell was one of his favourite mass-goers; pretty, quiet, thoughtful, and now apparently—and almost miraculously, pregnant.

'I'm terribly sorry to disturb you, Brother, but there's a man lying on the path at the corner of Barnett Street and he has a gash on his forehead and —'

'Oh, Mrs O'Farrell, I didn't know it was you. It's one of the men out of that god-forsaken county club, I suppose?'

'God help him, I'm afraid so. Isn't it awful?' Ellen felt a genuine alarm, touched by fear at the mention of the drinking, card-playing, billiard and dice club, known locally as the 'dogs' home', where fathers of families often disappeared for days on end, while the women who were not allowed to cross its threshold, fretted and prayed and muttered and were helpless.

'And more than awful,' said Brother Ulick grimly. 'Aren't you the good woman to stop and look?' He gave her a glance which did not include her body, but she knew from the unusual tenderness of his voice, which he kept for the sick and the pregnant, that he was aware of her state. 'Several others passed

that way this morning too, and in the night you may be sure. They throw them out of that place when the money runs out, you know.' Ellen remained silent and stared down at his bare toes in their heavy sandals. She was always embarrassed when anyone referred to her condition, even silently by a look.

'Now, you don't bother your head, Mrs O'Farrell, I'll see to it.'

'Oh you are good, Brother —'

'Nonsense. Would you want him to stumble into the river, if he got to his knees and crawled that way? You know there are at least two or three drownings in the Shannon from that same club every year, unfortunates that don't know where they're going. And to think that most of the club committee are in the Third Order!'

'I'll be late for mass, Brother,' said Ellen nervously. Ben had spent a few days in the club in his time.

'No, you won't. Father Pax is just about ready to move now, having been wound up, we had a terrible time with him this morning. Cross as a chained dog, he was.'

The great beauty of seven mass was that it had never been known to start before ten minutes past: plenty of time on frosty winter mornings. But Ellen had never got used to the way priests talked about one another.

'I'll have him down in the hospital in two shakes of a ram's tail'. He held up his huge workman's hands and laughed lightly.

Ellen smiled and hurried across to the church door. Brother Ulick watched her go, then took down his cloak from a peg in the hall, threw it over his big shoulders, and went off to carry the drunk back into the Friary, if necessary. As he went out of the gate and made for the river, he could see the height of it, already lapping angrily against the quay wall. Some houses facing the docks were keeping a lamp lit all night, something they could ill afford, in case the baleful river, the great arbiter of the district, rose up in the small hours and invaded their kitchen floors.

'God grant I don't get my death from wet feet,' said Brother Ulick to himself, thinking of the 'questing' he had to do before Christmas, those long tramps through the hospitable countryside, begging for alms from those who had little to give and gave of it freely. He thought of his bare feet and the thick brown tea

and the turf fires and the fowls he was loaded with by the people, as he made his wintry way to the man lying in his own bright blood on the road.

Father Pacificus shuffled towards the altar, closely supported by two altar-servers who had been trained with great patience by Brother Ulick to wedge their shoulders under the old man's elbows, and to hold him up by the arms when he ascended the steps to the altar.

At first the old man reacted violently to this aid and boxed the boys' ears for daring to touch him, but necessity had reconciled him to the idea of having some support, however unwelcome, against falling. It had not reconciled him to the congregation, on whom he cast a baleful glance as he made his way out from the sacristy. Later, when reading the announcements, he would get his own back on them by mumbling through the notices, having first slipped his false teeth into a big check handkerchief in order to do so the more inaudibly.

This had led to some restlessness on the part of mass-goers, and once, some years ago, they had expressed their disapproval by coughing, sighing and moving their feet while the old man croaked on. He had looked at them venomously over his spectacles, put back his teeth, and in a clear voice told them to keep quiet in the house of God.

'Pack of heathens, I don't know why St Patrick bothered with the likes of you. Stop that noise at once, you're not at a pagan, drunken wake now. And as for the announcements, d'ye think I don't know that you already know who's dead, or dying, or about to die, far better than I do? And the anniversaries too.' Then he took out his teeth again and went on reading to himself.

But the congregation was now long used to Father Pax, who was, they all agreed, a saint, and too good for this life.

This morning however, even though the old man seemed more unaware of his surroundings than ever, the very length of his mass brought with it a thrilling experience which the congregation did not often enjoy at this time of the morning.

Just before the *ita missa est*, when Father Pax had given his last dirty look at the people, Brother Ulick came hurrying out from the sacristy with a little note which he handed to the old