

James Joyce
DUBLINERS

Introduced by
COLM TÓIBÍN



• THE CANONS •

INTRODUCTION

by Colm Tóibín

In the autumn of 1974 I moved into a damp room at the back of the basement of one of two gaunt Victorian houses which stood on Upper Hatch Street in the centre of Dublin. They were the only houses on the street and were demolished in the early 1980s. My room was called the garden flat by the genteel landlady who lived upstairs and who often entertained her friends for drinks. There was a sink in the corridor in the basement and a toilet outside, but there was no bathroom. At night as I walked home from a pub or from the National Library, the street which led from Stephen's Green to Hatch Street was empty and desolate. These were the years before the National Concert Hall was constructed inside the shell of the old university building and when the Conrad Hotel had yet to be built. The university itself had moved to the suburbs and the Harcourt Street train line, which had once run at the back of the house in Hatch Street, was also closed. It was not difficult to imagine that the city which James Joyce wrote about in *Dubliners* was still in place, perhaps even more paralysed than he had ever imagined. The spirit of scrupulous meanness that he used in his prose was a spirit which a lone walker on those nights could sense as palpable and present.

The basement room in front of mine was inhabited by a man who went to work each morning and came in each night. The few times when I saw him on the street he appeared like a perfectly normal man in a suit. He looked as though he worked in an office,

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and did not seem in any way odd. But he was not normal – his electricity had been cut off and he lived by candlelight; he never once passed my door to go to the toilet in the backyard. I don't know what he did instead. Also, he never had rubbish to throw out. It is possible that he spent much of the weekend in his room in bed, but during the week he went out before nine and came back soon after midnight when the pubs shut. I sensed from his fumbling movements at night that he spent the evening drinking somewhere in the city.

That idea of shabby, solitary and secretive lives – men moving alone, their lives half fuelled by alcohol, men trapped in their work, living in a mean boarding house, or in bare rooms, men with some education but scant hope – makes its way into the core of the stories at the centre of *Dubliners* – 'Two Gallants', 'The Boarding House', 'A Little Cloud', 'Counterparts', 'A Painful Case' and 'Grace'.

What is strange is that most of the pubs where these characters in *Dubliners* drank are in place to this day – O'Neill's in Suffolk Street, Davy Byrne's in Duke Street, the Oval in Abbey Street, Mulligan's in Poolbeg Street. In the 1970s, even the Scotch House was still there. And it is clear, or reasonably clear, that the pub whose stairs Mr Kernan fell down was Kehoe's in South Anne Street, where the men's lavatory in the basement is still down a set of steep steps.

As he drew these men, offered them little comfort and tiny moments of possibility, Joyce was concerned not with some dark vision he had of mankind and our fate in the world but rather with the individual self he named and made in all its particularity and privacy. The self's deep preoccupations, the isolation of the individual consciousness, which keeps so much concealed, were what he wished to dramatise. The self ready to feel fear or remorse, contempt or disloyalty, bravery or timidity; the self in a cage of solitude or in the grip of grim lust; the self ready to notice everything except that there was no escape from the self, or indeed from the dilapidated city; these were his subjects.

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