



The Morning on Fire

■ BELINDA MCKEON

I learned to tie my shoelaces in St. Mel's Cathedral. I wasn't meant to be learning how to tie my shoelaces, of course. I was meant to be staying quiet in the pew beside my parents. I was meant to be paying attention. It must have been a one o'clock mass; that luxury afforded to Longford Catholics; a lie-in of a Sunday, followed by a good gawk, in opulent surroundings, at practically everyone from the area. If you were a child, it was an hour of what should have been utter boredom, but never actually was. There was so much to see. So much neck-craning to do. The stained-glass windows, their colours so vivid in their dark lacework of lead. The saints, high in their alcoves, seemingly eyeless but staring down at us all the same. The stone angels, peeking out of the spaces between the huge grey columns which soared towards the sky.

My favourite thing to do as a child in St. Mel's was to throw my head back and try to count the sections of the elaborate central nave, or the ceilings in the side aisles, with their coffers like slices of cake. I never managed it; there were too many, and they went too far back. Which I suppose must be why, one day, I learned to tie my laces instead. And then proceeded to show off about this achievement to the boy in the next pew, with his pathetic slip-on shoes.

As you can tell, I was a spiritual six-year-old.

But if I can claim to be at all spiritual now, twenty-five odd years later, it's thanks in large part to those hours spent paying attention to all the wrong things while mass was being said in St. Mel's. To the things that were new and beautiful; the things that went right to the senses. Smells: incense and candlewax, striking on a very different register to those scents brought into the aisles by worshippers: shoe polish and wet wool, Sunday morning shampoo and Saturday night smoke. Sounds: the beauty of the choir, or how the boom of the burnished pipe organ reached right into your blood. And textures: the bone-smooth marble of the baptismal font. The thick tufts of altar rugs. The intricate mosaic of the floor tiles, polished by over a century of footfall and genuflection. Or the crisp dust of burned-out wicks lining



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the trays of the brass candle banks. Nothing was like the real world. Nothing was like the rest of life in Longford, anyway. And the hush. Always, there was a hush.

It was the hush I couldn't get over on Christmas morning 2009, when I stood opposite the gates of St. Mel's, with forty or so other people, and watched the Cathedral burn. It was not yet 9am, and some of those watching had turned up for early mass. My husband and I had been passing through town on our way to my parents' house for Christmas day, and somewhere on the outskirts, we had seen them reaching high: the black plume, the russet flame. Within the town, streets were blocked off; we found parking, and walked towards the scene. I had brought my camera with me, and as we approached I took photographs of a scene that seemed impossible. The building stood tall on its hill over the town,

and it was a bowl of angry fire. The crane of a lone fire engine hovering close to the collapsed roof looked as hopeful of making a difference as might a long-necked bird with a drop of water in its beak. It was a snowy Christmas, and every other part of the county was quiet and beautiful, but here at the end of Dublin Street, it was just quiet and unreal. The freezing weather meant that the fire brigade could not get extra water from the Camlin. It was obvious to everyone who saw it: St. Mel's was lost. Its great ceilings, with all their mouldings and their cornices and their coffers, had collapsed. And there it was again: the hush. Nobody was speaking. Everyone was staring, unable to believe their eyes. Come on, my husband said, touching my arm. Let's go.

I cannot pretend that my feelings on seeing the Cathedral in flames were uncomplicated. They were not. This was less than a month af-

ter the publication of the Murphy Report, with its nightmarish revelations which had left the country reeling. That report was not, of course, about the diocese in which St. Mel's was, and is, located. But it was about the Catholic Church. And it was about the place, and the dominion, that the Catholic Church had for so long assumed at the centre of Irish society, and of what had come of that assumption. It was about the children who had suffered. And here we were, on the morning in the Catholic calendar that is above all else about a helpless child, and here it was, a Catholic Cathedral, a palace of that religion, set catastrophically ablaze from within. And I know that it may cause pain to make the suggestion even now, two years later, but it was hard not to think that something was happening. Something profound.

But running almost in exact parallel with that feeling was a reaction much more straightforward. This was a building for which I had never had anything but affection, and I felt immensely sorry for those who had been on their way to its welcome and who had found it gone. For me, the experience of being in St. Mel's had always brought real comfort, no matter how complicated my relationship to religion might have grown. No matter how complicated life might have become once I learned to tie my shoelaces. I went home that Christmas morning, and I did what anyone of my overly-plugged-in generation would do: I uploaded the photograph I had taken to my Facebook page. And I tried, as you always try when you upload a personal photograph to Facebook, to think of a caption that was somehow pithy, or clever, or striking. Something which would somehow encapsulate what I thought of as the complexity of my feelings as I'd looked on the scene. But all I could think of - and so I wrote it down - was a line that my six-year-old self might have come up with.

I think this is very sad.

BIOGRAPHY: Belinda McKeon is a Longford-born author and journalist. Her debut novel, *Solace*, was published by Picador in 2011 and won her the Best Newcomer award at the Irish Book Awards.

Time Capsule

As part of the repair works to the statues on the front of the Cathedral a very interesting discovery was made. A time capsule was found in the body of the Sacred Heart statue - the highest statue on the roof. The capsule is well corroded and contains paperwork

which is thought to contain the names of the children of the diocese who contributed their pennies towards the purchase of the Sacred Heart statue. This was a very exciting discovery and the capsule has been passed on to the National Museum for analysis.



Pictured here is the corroded Time Capsule which was found in the body of the Sacred Heart statue.



Project Manager Niall Meagher shows Time Capsule to Peter Cox, Carrig Consulting. Also in picture are Fr. Tom Healy and Seamus Butler.



Fr. Tom Healy pictured showing the Time Capsule to pupils from St. Emer's N.S.