

## Son Of So Many Tears

By Hilary Davidson

“Go in the peace of Christ,” intoned the elderly priest as Maire Kennelly made her escape. Her heels clattered on the stone steps as she distanced herself from the few penitents whose addiction to early morning mass was as keen as her own. She was glad to be out of the church, a fact that surely meant another dark mark on her soul. It had been seven years since Maire’s last confession, and when she thought of her soul now, she pictured a Victorian silhouette with edges sharp and refined but coal-black to the core. As she turned onto the sidewalk, she wondered what effect words of absolution could have on it now. *Saint Rita, hear my prayer*, she began to recite silently, when a flame-haired woman in a black trenchcoat stepped in front of her.

“Pardon me,” Maire said, stepping to one side. The woman moved to block her path.

“Maire Kennelly? Janey Saxon, we’ve met before.” She smiled and put her hand on Maire’s arm. “Last week was the seventh anniversary of your son’s trial and I wanted to ask how you felt about...”

“You’re a *reporter*.” Maire hissed the last word and jerked her arm back. “I have nothing to say to you.”

“Well, plenty of people are interested in what Brendan’s doing now. So many viewers called us about the show we ran last week. If you would...”

“Let me alone.” Maire took a step back.

“We’ve been trying to locate Brendan but we can’t find him,” said Janey, flashing a toothy smile. “Nobody knows where he’s gone. I was hoping you could help...”

Maire stepped onto the damp grass and when Janey Saxon blocked her path again, she hit the reporter’s shoulder with her big black purse. The dyed-redhead swiveled and Maire followed her glance. There was a black van on the street with a man standing behind it, holding a camera.

“How dare you,” said Maire, her voice rising. “You’re nothing but a... a *vulture*.” She rushed down the sidewalk as quickly as her heels would allow her.

“Did he leave the country?” Janey called after her. “Is he hiding out from his victims?”

Maire kept on, her heart racing. *Saint Rita, don’t let me fall*, she prayed. A year before, when she was turning sixty-five, a reporter had so flustered her that she’d tripped in front of her own house and fractured her forearm. Maire slowed her pace now to look over her shoulder for the reporter and the van but saw neither. As she approached her house she scanned the street. When Brendan was first arrested, there were local news reporters and then national ones camped out in front of her house. Maire had installed an iron fence along the property line and planted a privacy hedge behind it. Even though she only occasionally heard from reporters now – the anniversary of the trial always brought them out – she liked the privacy it afforded her, the way it shielded her little house from prying eyes. The downside, which she hadn’t realized until everything was in place, was that the fence and hedge made her house immediately identifiable in a modest Queens neighborhood of green lawns and painted gnomes and year-round icicle lights.

She snapped open her handbag and extracted her keys, wondering if she needed to bring out that big lock she used to keep on the iron gate. *It's a lot of bother for arthritic hands*, she thought as she walked up the flagstone path to the house. She unlocked the front door and stepped inside. As she shut it behind her, something struck the back of her head. Her keys clattered to the floor as everything went dark.

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Maire heard the sound of something smashing as she came to. Her vision was blurry and her head throbbed, but she realized it was her own kitchen spinning around her. She closed her eyes and took a shaky breath. She wanted to touch her face – the left side felt like it was burning – but she couldn't move her arms. Her raincoat had been pulled off and tossed in the corner. She was sitting in a wooden kitchen chair, her hands tied behind her back.

"You're awake," said a man's voice. She opened her eyes and glared at him, fury trumping fear.

"What are you doing?" she said, her voice hoarse. She heard another crash.

"Knock it off," the man called out. He was in his early twenties, with blond hair and a goatee. His face was turned away from her while one hand tapped an impatient beat on the Formica countertop. There was another crash and second man bounded into the room.

"This place is like a museum!" he said, grinning. He was also young, but muscular and dark-haired. "Doilies and shit everywhere. Hey, grandma," he said, turning to look at her. Face-on, his face was haggard and his eyes blank and glazed.

"What are you doing in my house?" said Maire, staring at him as his face came into focus.

"Whoa, she's an old hag, like you said, bro," said the dark-haired man.

Maire wanted to snap back at him, but her insides were quivering. She gritted her teeth to keep herself from sobbing.

"Where's your cash, grandma?" said the dark-haired man.

"There's money in my purse," said Maire. "That's all you'll find in the house."

Her good black handbag was lying sideways on the table, its mouth wide open and its guts spilled over the table. Her lipstick and compact and tissues were lying in the midst of coins and stamps and lined bits of notepaper. A prayer card to St. Rita lay on top of her checkbook. There were no bills on the table. They must have pocketed those already.

"All this nice shit," the dark-haired man said, bouncing on his heels and cracking his knuckles. "I know you got something stashed away for a rainy day."

"Enough, Ray," said the blond man, sounding exasperated. The words were met by an affronted look. "Fine, look for her money. Just don't make so much noise. We don't want anyone coming over."

"Whatever, man," said Ray, disappearing through the doorway.

The blond man's eyes swept past Maire and drifted to the kitchen window. He was watching something in her backyard with a concentrated expression on his face. Maire twisted her wrists apart slightly, but the bonds were tight. *Trussed up like a turkey*

*in my own kitchen*, she thought. Indignation gave strength to her voice. “You should be ashamed of yourself, beating an old woman and tying her up.”

The man’s head snapped around. “Ashamed? That’s funny, coming from you.” There was cold fury in his voice, and his eyes narrowed as he stared at Maire. “Where is he?” he finally said.

“Who?” Maire asked, thin lips quivering slightly.

“You lie to me and I’ll cut your eyes out of your head.” His gaze went to the window again, but his eyes seemed barely focused.

“You’re at the wrong house,” said Maire, her heart pounding out of her chest.

“You’re Maire Kennelly.” The man looked down at her and stepped closer. In his right hand she saw a flash of a knife blade opening up. “You don’t remember me, do you?”

She looked into his eyes. They were blue with flecks of green and gold mixed in. Handsome eyes, but fatigued-looking, like someone who hadn’t slept in days. They were memorable and yet not at all familiar to Maire. “I don’t.”

“Your son used to bring me over.”

“Patrick?”

“No. The other one.”

Maire stared into his eyes, but she barely saw the man in front of her. One of Brendan’s little friends. All grown up now, and with a knife in his hand.

“I didn’t come here to steal, though I can’t say the same for my buddy.” He moved a little closer to her. “I want to know where Brendan is. You’re going to tell me.”

“Seven years,” said Maire. Her eyes were tearing up a little, and her voice was quavering.

“What?” The man put the blade of the knife against the edge of her jaw. She felt the sting of the tip of the knife. It was like the sting of a hornet, hot and sharp.

“It’s seven years since...” She was staring into the man’s eyes and speaking with careful deliberation.

“Where is he?”

“I don’t know.” Her gaze dropped to the hem of her black skirt.

The words were barely past her lips when she felt a searing pain on her jawbone. The blond man had slid the knife down an inch. She looked at him and saw his eyes, almost as shocked as she was. She saw blood on the knife in his hand and a wet patch on her skirt, darker than the black fabric.

“I told you not to lie to me,” he hissed. “You were there with him in court every day, every single fucking day. Always by his side. You knew what he did and you didn’t care.” The scent of his breath was vile, like something had died in him but hadn’t had a burial. His soul, Maire thought. Brendan had done away with that, and this was the husk that remained. She closed her eyes in anguish and guilt and began to pray to Saint Rita before she passed out again.

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When she came to, Maire could hear the young man’s labored breaths. He had moved a few feet away from her. When she opened her eyes, she kept her head bowed.

“I remember you praying in court,” he said softly.

Maire nodded slightly and glanced up at him. He was flipping the knife closed and swinging it open, a movement that was jittery but hypnotic. Maire's eyes followed the blade, now wiped clean. The phone rang shrilly behind her. The man blinked in surprise.

"Who's calling you? It's not even nine."

"It could be my daughter."

"She live around here?"

"No. Philadelphia." Maire swallowed, the dryness of her mouth making her throat ache. The phone continued to ring.

"You don't have an answering machine?"

Maire shook her head. The blond man picked up the receiver and slammed it down. Less than a minute later the phone started ringing again. The man looked at it and cocked his head.

"Maybe it's your son calling." He grabbed the receiver and held it against his stomach. "Say hello and nothing else." He held the receiver against Maire's ear and bent down to listen.

She mumbled a soft, "Hello," and tried not to gag at the smell of his breath.

"Maire Kennelly? Janey Saxon again. Don't hang up! I just want to ask you a couple questions about Brendan. I won't quote you if you don't want..."

"Who the hell is that?" hissed the blond man, moving his head back slightly.

"Reporter," whispered Maire.

"Oh." He looked at the receiver – Janey Saxon's high-pitched voice was still chirping out of it – and pulled the cord out of the wall.

"Reporters always come around this time of year," said Maire.

"Guess I'm not the only one looking for Brendan." He was interrupted by the dark-haired man, Ray, who stalked into the kitchen holding a china figurine in one hand, its head obscured in his fist. "Man, this shit is all over the house. You think it's worth something?"

The blond man shrugged. Ray smashed the figurine against the wall and watched the pieces fall to the ground. "I thought maybe there's like, diamonds hidden in them. They're all over the house. But nothing." He looked annoyed. Then, staring at Maire, he brightened. "Fucking A, Paul, you cut her face good. You look even more like a gargoyle now, Grandma."

"Cut it out, Ray."

"What's the matter with you? You were all excited about doing this, now you look like you come to a funeral. You're depressing me, man."

"I need more time."

"Grandma holding out on you?" Ray turned his full attention to Maire. His black eyes held hers, making her think of a nocturnal animal whose eyes were all pupil and no iris. "Where's your boy hiding, bitch?" He slapped her across the face once and then again, when Maire turned her face forward and glared at him. She tasted blood, and fury extinguished her fear.

"You are nothing," she spat out, blood trickling onto her lips.

Ray kicked her hard, hitting her leg and sending the chair toppling to one side. Her head narrowly missed the floor, but something snapped in her wrist and she cried out in agony.

“Stop it!” The blond man yelled, shoving Ray to one side and hitting him into the countertop. The knife flashed open again but she felt her bonds go slack and realized he was cutting her free.

“What did you do that for, man? I was going to get it out of her.”

“Get out, Ray.”

“That’s what you say to me, the only one ever tried to help you?”

Maire curled her knees to her chest and pulled her right arm close to her with her left. The bone had to have fractured, the pain was so intense. The blond man, Paul, was on his knees in front of her, looking at her arm.

“You wouldn’t be nothing without me, you little fuck, you hear me?” Ray slammed his fist onto the Formica countertop. Paul stood up and grabbed Ray’s arm. For a second, Maire thought Ray was going to hit him, but the big man seemed to deflate before her eyes. “You don’t want my help, fine,” he muttered. He turned his dark eyes on Maire. “You didn’t get nothing you didn’t deserve, bitch.” He headed out of the kitchen and a moment later the front door slammed emphatically shut.

Paul crouched next to her. “Can you stand up?”

“I think so,” whispered Maire. “But my wrist...”

He put his arm around her back. His head was so close to hers that she breathed in his awful breath and her head swam again. But he helped her to her feet. “You want to lie down?” She nodded and he helped her through the doorway and down the dark hall and into the front room. It was a disaster, she realized as he eased her onto the sofa. The room looked like it had been hit by a cyclone. There was broken glass and crystal all over the bare wood floor, and pictures had been torn down from the wall and smashed. Even the framed family photographs had been swept off the end tables and crushed underfoot. Maire automatically reached down with her left arm, picked up a silver frame, and set it on the table.

“Who’s that?” Paul asked.

“Vincent. My grandson,” Maire said, fussing with the frame.

Paul stared at it for a moment. He knelt down and picked up the photos, propping them up on the table again. “That’s your daughter Caitlin. And Patrick. I remember him. He died just after Brendan was acquitted.”

Maire nodded sharply, her eyes filling with tears. Paul moved to the other side of the sofa, where Maire couldn’t reach, and picked up more pictures. “You don’t have one of Brendan.” He said it flatly, but a question lurked within.

“How could I?” said Maire softly. “After what he did.”

“So you admit it now.”

Maire shrugged with her left shoulder and shook her head.

“I thought you’d defend him till your dying day.” Paul sat on a chair and looked at her appraisingly. “You and your rosaries, always beside him. I wanted to strangle you back then. Dreamt about doing it with a rosary. I never understood how you could stand by him.”

“If you had a child, you’d know.”

“He raped kids. How could you overlook that?”

“I believed he was innocent.”

“All those boys testifying against him? You thought we were all liars?”

“I thought... I hoped that it was a mistake.”

“A mistake?”

Maire looked at him and wondered how she could ever explain. She had spent years praying to Saint Monica, because she felt that there was a bond between them that bypassed time and geography. Like Monica, Maire had had three children and a violent-tempered husband and a mother-in-law who made her life a hell on earth. And like Monica, she had recognized that one of her children was a bad seed. But that was the very thing that gave Maire hope. “A priest once told Saint Monica that it was not possible that the son of so many tears should perish,” Maire said softly. “He was right. The son she despaired of, the one who made her life agony, he became one of the fathers of the church.” Paul looked at her blankly. “Saint Augustine, Monica’s son. It gave me hope.”

“You thought Brendan was a saint?” There was acid in his voice.

A saint. What a laugh. Maire had named him for an Irish saint, Brendan the Navigator, and where had that led? “Of course not,” she said. “But I hoped he’d get... better.”

“So he was sick?”

“I’m not excusing him...” Her voice got louder when she saw Paul’s pale cheeks flush bright red. “But anyone would have to have been ill, very ill, to do what he did.”

“You thought he was innocent. What changed?”

It wasn’t a question anyone had ever put to Maire before, because she never talked about Brendan, not to anyone. But she had thought about this very thing, long and hard. When had she lost her faith? She could trace it to a day, to an hour, to a half-choked confession over the phone. “I don’t know,” she said sharply.

“You’re lying again. You’ve got the worst tell I’ve ever seen.”

“Tell?”

“Like in poker, a tic that gives you away. When you lie, you look at your lap, like there’s a rosary waiting there.”

Maire looked at the front window and almost jumped out of her skin. “Water,” she said.

“What?”

“A glass of water. I’m sitting here with my arm broken. You could at least get me a glass of water.” Her voice quavered.

Paul gave her a long look. “Don’t move,” he said, getting up and retreating to the kitchen. Maire looked back at the window, the face of the red-haired reporter she’d seen at the church swimming in front of her eyes. *Are you alright?* The woman mouthed with her bright pink lips. Maire shook her head and thought she’d lose consciousness again, it throbbed so painfully. Janey nodded and skittered away from the window. Paul came back, a glass of tepid tap water in a glass ringed with a shamrock pattern. He handed it to her with a shaky hand and watched her drink. “You had these glasses years ago,” he said.

She closed her eyes for a moment. “You said Brendan brought you here.” Help was on the way now, she thought, all she had to do was keep him occupied a little longer. Talking about Brendan made her insides frigid and her heart stone, but she could manage it for a few moments, if she had to.

“He said if I came over I’d get a treat. Said his mother was the best cook in the world. Stupid kid I was, I fell for that.” Maire’s eyes followed him as he paced. “Treat for him first, of course. Then, after he was done, he gave me pie and ice cream.” Paul

stood still for a moment. “Rhubarb. Cherry. Blueberry. Made me wish I had a mother who cooked for me.”

“You came here more than once?”

Paul sat down again, but he was jittery, kicking one heel against the chair. “He brought me over here a few times. One of the reasons he got away with it, you know. His prick lawyer kept hammering that home. *If Mr. Kennelly was hurting these boys, why on earth would they go back to his house to have it happen again and again?*” He kicked the chair really hard, then looked at his leg as if it were an entity separate from his body.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“When I’m up for days my muscles get jumpy.”

“Up for days?”

He gave her a look that was halfway between pity and frustration. “I’m tweaking.” Her blank look made him snort. “Meth. I’ve been up five days. Ray’s pushing three weeks.”

“That’s a terrible sin, desecrating your body.”

Her words made him smile and look away. “My body was *desecrated* a long time ago.” He stood up again and paced in a circle around the chair. “You can’t know how happy I was to find something that kept me from sleeping.”

Maire watched him, so filled with sadness that she couldn’t catch her breath.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly.

He gave her a bewildered look. “That’s the first time you’ve apologized...” He stared at her, realization dawning on his face. “It’s true that your other son died of an overdose, isn’t it? Right after the trial.”

Maire nodded and dropped her head to her chest. When she tried to speak, a huge sob shook her body. She held her breath for a moment and watched fat tears drop onto her black skirt, close to where the blood from her jaw had dripped down. She felt Paul’s hand on her chin, lifting up her face. “Brendan molested him too, didn’t he?”

She cried softly for a little while, finally wiping her eyes and nose on her sleeve. “I didn’t know,” said Maire. “I never even suspected. Brendan was fourteen when his father died, Patrick was ten. Caitlin was already eighteen and out of the house. I had to go back to work to support us. couldn’t afford a babysitter, so I left Brendan in charge of his brother.”

“And he abused him.”

“I didn’t know until the end of the trial,” she said. “I called Patrick to tell him the good news, that Brendan was free, and he cried as if someone had died. He was living out in California then, as far from the rest of us as he could get. I told him he should be on his hands and knees praying. It was only then that he told me...what Brendan had done.” She shook her head. “He hung up on me and I tried to call him back. I tried and tried and finally that night I got his landlord on the phone. He went up to Patrick’s apartment and found his body. An overdose, like you said.”

“He killed himself?”

“Accident or not, who could say?” Maire stared down at her skirt.

“That’s why you changed your mind about Brendan. But by then, it didn’t matter.” His hands were drumming against his thighs. “So where is he now?”

Maire shook her head.

“I can’t believe you’re still protecting him. He’s responsible for the death of your other son, you know that?” His voice was getting louder. “You know how many other deaths he’s caused? How many drunks, how many addicts?” He towered over her. “You’re going to tell me if it’s the last thing you do.”

Maire laughed suddenly, a short, mirthless sound that was almost a bark. “That would be a threat if my life meant anything to me.” Paul’s blue-green eyes stared at her. “Do you think I want to go on living like this, knowing I gave life to a monster? This is hell on earth. I wish I were dead.”

Paul shook his head disbelievingly. “When the trial was on, somebody asked you how you were getting through it. You said it was faith. What happened to that?”

“I put my faith in the wrong things,” she answered quietly. “I have committed a mortal sin and I...” Her voice trailed off. “I can’t even take communion now. I’d have to go to confession first. I’d have to tell a priest my sins, and there are too many to tell.”

“Hiding your son from me is a sin.” Paul sat down on the couch next to her. “You know he’s guilty.”

“And you want revenge,” Maire said, staring straight ahead.

“It’s not just that.” He put two fingertips on her bloody jaw and gently turned her face to his. “I think about what he’s doing now. I think about him hurting other kids.”

Maire stared into his eyes for several heartbeats and took a deep breath. “He can’t hurt anyone.”

“I need more than just you telling me that,” said Paul.

“If I tell you where he is, you have to promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“You’ll put an end to my suffering. I don’t mind how you do it, so long as you do.”

“Put an end...” Paul stared at her in disbelief.

“I can’t kill myself. A Catholic can’t do that,” Maire explained. “But it would be a mercy if...”

At that moment there was a crashing sound and shouting, and men with guns yelling, “Don’t move!” and a camera crew behind them getting everything on tape. Paul was shoved onto the ground, a patrolman’s knee shoved into the small of his back as he was cuffed. “No!” shouted Maire. “You can’t take him away! Let him alone!” No one listened to her. Another cop frisked Paul and pulled out a small baggie from the pocket of his jeans.

“This is Janey Saxon, reporting live from the home of Maire Kennelly, mother of accused sex offender Brendan Kennelly. Mrs. Kennelly’s quiet home was brutally invaded this morning by a pair of drug addicts...”

Maire closed her eyes and sank back against the couch, offering no resistance to the medics who swarmed around her. There would be no release and no absolution for her.

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Maire refused to press charges, but Paul was arrested for drug possession, denied bail, and shipped to Rikers Island awaiting trial. Janey Saxon had spotted his partner leaving Maire’s house, but the police hadn’t found Ray. For all Paul knew, he was

headed back to San Diego. One morning Paul was told he had a visitor, and he was stunned at the sight of Maire on the other side of the glass. Her silvery hair was freshly permed and she was wearing a black suit and red lipstick. One side of her face was healing from dark bruising, but the cut on her jaw looked as if it had healed without a stitch.

“You look better. Healthier,” she said when she picked up the telephone to speak to him.

“Maybe orange is my color,” he said, and gave her a slight smile.

“I’ve thought a great deal about what we talked about, the last time I saw you,” she said carefully. “I told you about Saint Monica. Now I want to tell you about Saint Rita.”

Paul stared at her, wondering if it was the blow in her front hall or the fall in the kitchen that had jumbled her brain.

“I started praying to Rita after the trial, when I finally knew what my son really was. Do you know anything about Saint Rita? Her life was a hell on earth. Her husband abused her and her sons were terrible creatures. She prayed for them, for all of them, but the only relief she got was when they died.”

Paul took a sharp breath.

“The last thing my son Patrick said to me was: *Take care of Vincent. Don’t let Brendan get him too.*” Maire blinked back tears. “It hit me then, my grandson was in danger. Brendan wasn’t going to stop. *I had to stop him.*” She took a deep breath. “Brendan could read me like a book, just like you did, and I thought he would realize that something in my heart had changed. But with Patrick’s death, it was easy to explain why I was... different. After Patrick’s funeral, when Caitlin had left with her husband and boy, I made dinner for Brendan. It was never hard to get him to come over for that. He always said I was the best cook in the world.”

Paul swallowed hard.

“Do you think anyone’s listening to this?” Maire said idly. “Be an interesting test, won’t it? So when Brendan came over, I served him dinner. And that was the end of that.”

“You mean you...” Paul’s hand shook and he gripped the receiver.

“It had to stop. It was the only thing I could do.”

“But how did you... get... rid... of...?”

“There’s a rather large freezer in my basement,” said Maire. “The next time you come over, I’ll show you.” She sat straight in her seat. “You’ve a fine way of listening to an old woman prattle on. Almost as good as a priest.” She started to get up. “Keep in mind you made me a promise,” she said, leaning close to the glass. “I intend to hold you to it.”

*This is Hilary Davidson’s second story in Thuglit. Her first, “Anniversary,” is included in the anthology A Prisoner of Memory and 24 of the Year’s Finest Crime and Mystery Stories (Pegasus, May 2008). Visit her online at [www.hilarydavidson.com](http://www.hilarydavidson.com).*