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TRACE FARRELL

THE RUINS

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In 1997, the jurors selected Trace Farrell's novel, *The Ruins*, and Nancy Shoenberger's collection of poems, *Long Like a River*.

THE RUINS



TRACE FARRELL



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This book is fictional. Names, characters, places, and incidents are invented or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people, places, or events is purely coincidental.

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A heavy debt is owed, as well, to Marianne Faithful for her hysterical schtick on the demise of Harry Nilsson (on which La Stupenda's account of "the gay dog Doug" is based).

Goethe's the wag behind the first verse of the lullaby on p. 146; the insights on green apples and uncounted heads belong to Machiavelli.

In the end, of course, I have to hand it to Tom-Tom.

CHAPTER ONE

*In Which Our Hero's Knees—Dicey, a
Hazard in the Best of Times—Have
Never Been Worse . . .*

1—

Tom grunts like a girl as he hurdles a black-spotted sow barreling straight for him down the narrow cobbled lane . . . swerves violently round two roaring guttersnipes, hung like hams from the big red fists of a leering police matron . . . vaults a row of battered metal folding chairs laid out with bundles of colored wire, used computer geegaws and papers of rusted needles—lands hard on both tender heels and whistles to cover the small involuntary cry that escapes him. He pulls up wincing, mincing like a crab. On either side two wharf hands bellow:

“Porca madonna!”

“Guarda! Aiee—”

Huh? Tom looks up and a thirty-pound watermelon, monstrous in the flickering gaslit drizzle of rain, sails elegantly not an inch before his own dripping nose. He rears back—*ungh!*—then grabs to save it. Slick fingers goose

the glamorous green butt. Too late! A hollow thunk; a sharp wet crack. Like magic, children swarm from under empty produce crates and overturned dollies to cast themselves, spitting and snarling like monkeys, upon the bright red, black-eyed fruit: “*Crackerjack!*” No small booty in a neighborhood of weeping mutton and green potatoes.

Tom pauses, impressed by their bravado. Himself high-browed, gaunt-cheeked, small-chinned; with rheumy spaniel eyes set close above the bridge of a long, deferential nose, and a calamitous thatch of ruddy curls, flared as a fruit bowl, crowning his tapering, pear-shaped torso (tragic legs; broad, delicate feet). Tom’s pluckless exterior belies a keen admiration for the defiant self-servers of the world. He clucks, is tapped from behind—spins—then backs away, appalled, before two abruptly looming, yellow-slickered dock bulls.

“Whoah!” He tugs a penitent red forelock. *An accident!* “I didn’t, that is, I’m really—” No use. He fakes left, cuts right; a pretty cheat, bum knees and all. The yellowbacks spit, cursing the tactical squeak of rubber sneakers on wet cement, the flagrant white flash of fugitive heels, rising and falling, away and further away, down the long dark tunnel of night. Close call!

The crooked lane is tight as a hen’s ass, snot-slick with rain and perilously lit. Tom hugs his ribs and hightails it anyway; the impact of each striking heel drives jagged bolts of blue lightning clear to his plump, pumping hips. *Rickets*, is why. Wrung like rags in the tenderness of their

growing years, our hero's legs came through conspicuously calcified in their misfortune: sockets taut, exquisitely bowed, he warps with the weather like a sensitive guitar.

"Alas," Tom would be the first to agree, born to a caste of humble shoeshines obliged for generations to make ends meet by the dogged, day-long tuck of their typically inadequate knees. And yet, adds he (the sort of green apple that favors a comforting lie, as they say, to the uncomfortable truth): "It could be worse!"

Tom knew, for instance, a certain butcher, born with no eyelids, who depended on a spray bottle of boiled water to spare his eyeballs' drying out. The fellow's wife covered his face with a damp rag at night as she could not bear to wake and see her husband's eyes—"like two boiled onions!"—staring at the ceiling while he snored.

And then there was Rosie. A real heartbreaker, Tom's ravishing baby sister; only innocent as an egg. Talk about luck! She'd been hours each day lighting candles at the parish church, her hair an apricot cloud bound clumsily with dirty blue string, and despite her devotions—or *because?*—brought home a virgin belly miraculously abloom with child. Oh la! (a coral blush stained her perfect cheeks). And what was Tom to think? Tubercular Father Ratskin, from whose blunt, nicotine-stained fingers the meek parishioners weekly received God's inescapable dispensations, didn't blink an eye.

"Mysterium tremendum!" he drew hard on the stale weed of a smoldering Pall Mall. "Penetrated by a heav-

only incubus while telling her beads.” The priest’s voice rattled with furtive yellow phlegm. “Happens all the time!” He dropped one proprietary hand to Rosie’s slender neck and squeezed, his gaze trailing a haggard ash gone to rest upon the child’s precocious, blue-marbled bosom. Tom shuffled his feet; Father Ratskin glared—“*Scram!*”—turned, and with a convulsive hitch of his long black skirt, shepherded the waddling and obedient Rose up the aisle. And that was that. Tom watched them disappear inside the priest’s dim and airless sacristy; eyeballed, uncertainly, the zipped lips of the plaster saints; and finally left, only knocking wood for the less inscrutable liabilities of punk knees.

• • •

At the end of the lane Tom’s side stitches, forcing him to walk. *Was* it weather made things worse? Honestly, he can’t remember a less promising spring. Five minutes ago it rained; the backed-up sewers ebb and flow, awash with iridescent oil slicks, unsinkable filter tips, and the floundering headlights of stalled automobiles, mopeds, and careening bicycles. In five minutes more it will rain again. People push past Tom in ancient oilskins, or makeshift tarps of torn and dirty plastic, sick and tired of being wet—no surprise!—their ruby-lobed cabbage ears shoved deep into yawning collarbones, their dripping hoods and hunched shoulders reflecting the interminable red, green, and amber of the corner traffic lights. Rude carts insinuate themselves amongst the in-

different crowd; ragamuffins prowl the gutters in packs, slapping parked cars with freezing hands to set off a chorus of wailing security alarms; broken-tailed cats slip sourly along the damp walls, pausing now and then to stare with wide, accusing eyes at the mess of humanity surging by.

Tom draws bead on a rusty vinyl awning bellied low with rain; steals sideways between the wearily kissing chrome of checked traffic and ducks in, shuddering the water from his back like a finicky sparrow.

Are all chips vendors junkies? *Any port in a storm*, Tom reckons. This one's surprised holding a mustard dispenser to his whorled gray ear with evident wonder, his mouth opening and closing in astonishment. Well? Tom taps at the window and the old man jumps. His red-rimmed, caramel eyes roll in their sockets like loose marbles; his face is a wad of blue-black wrinkles, white stubble and brilliant gold teeth as he points at Tom, slaps his skinny thigh and hoots, his bald head wobbly as an egg on end. Tom nods, accepts a cracked cup of pale pink tea, and to pamper his knees squats gingerly upon a splintered orange crate; the slats give uneasily. He twirls his tea bag counter-clockwise, lifts it up and observes the drops that fall from it back into the cup, sinks the bag once more into the steaming pink water. Across the sidewalk thin filaments of rain attach themselves to a bucket of Chinese chrysanthemums and a child's rubber galoshes, as if to catch the colors up and dangle them over the gleaming pavement, the yellows a bit higher than the reds. Tom

squints and the blue-white headlamps of cars swim like platinum fish.

“But, oh!” (and oh! here we go again). “Why here? Why on earth *Q*—?”

This is Tom’s cross to bear, his bone to chew, the hard yellow pea that won’t let him rest. He’s had his head turned, is the problem, by tales overheard while plying his trade. Bent over the caulked boots of sailors, the cracked leather thongs of itinerant saints, the gaudy two-tones of fast-talking traveling salesmen—our hero listens, and marvels at what he hears.

. . . three skinny boys, yellow as snakes, with glittering smiles they dangle like bracelets before the faltering guardians of your desire . . .

. . . tomahawks, uranium, absinthe, you bet! Snake oil for amethysts, marigolds for tin!

. . . beyond a frozen, pitiless bivouac of pitched bones and blood-daubed caribou hide—and in all directions, for miles—the silent drifts like God’s dream of angels, or death . . .

. . . a naked girl with tattooed breasts, wrestling a puma!

. . . what isn’t light is stone, what isn’t stone is sea, and an army of blue mountains standing at your back . . .

. . . ruby slippers, glass coffins, poisoned pancakes—and the geese!

. . . across the water is Africa . . .

Tom's head spins, and no wonder. In *Q*—, a tired, bristling city of crumbling brickyards, contaminated needles, coal barges and abject fog, the days come and go in a flat, lurid tide, noon and midnight like sullen twins, so indifferently does light distinguish itself from darkness. Encrustations of oil and soot eclipse the shattered street lamps, hissing neon, and storefront windows; grease the puddled streets, the bald, glabrous tires of carts and lorries. A dank, funereal smoke hangs in the air everywhere—down among the slimy docks beetling out over the viscous yellow river; choking the crowded market stalls where half-dressed chickens flap by their heels from loops of rusting wire; and in the open ulcerated squares, pearled, like vast laboring brows, with gobbets of blood-marbled sputum and the brought-up bile of bellies dizzy with cheap yellow ale. The damp fetor clings to people's hair and skin, and to the filthy matted hides of the cart horses dragging their haphazard loads of pig iron, draff, recyclable glass and busted furniture. Crows, pigeons, and starlings slouch along the gutters, their feathers a bootless debauch of grease and grit, their black eyes bulging with ill will.

Phew! One day spent in this town is too much—one hour! Tom hugs his tea and nods with understanding at the botched, beset faces of the people slogging by—the stooping, soot-masked furnace tenders; doomed insurance adjusters clutching taut black umbrellas; restless crews of saffron-robed Hare Krishnas, their shaved heads stubbly under backwards baseball caps; teen moms push-

ing preemies in strollers with torn tops; apocalyptic fags in patent leather drag; tiny Asians in tall rubber boots; old people with no homes who slept on the smothering ash heaps beside the river for warmth and woke with cinders in their eyes to stare at the muddy dawn of another un-charitable day. Our hero shivers, his curved spine rattling like a child's stick against the aluminum chips wagon, and lets his eyes close as the gaslights sputter overhead like dying stars and *still* it rains, vertical ladders of water rising up out of the streets, leaning on nothing at all, going nowhere.

"Yet only read the papers!" Tom rouses himself, set in his ways for one so young, "*—it could be worse!*" Worse indeed. Rogue viruses, religious terrorism, cross-tribal atomic sniping, the stratosphere in smithereens.

Grandma's Favorite Devoured by Deceiving Wolf!
Stepmother's Slave Rescued after Lifetime of Forced Labor!
 Oh la!

"On the other hand," Tom allows, nodding drowsily, "it wouldn't take much to brighten things up a bit." For just a moment, eyes fluttering like little birds beneath sweetly lowered lids, Tom yields, cradled and consoled, to a small private rapture (wholly invented) of *Better Days*. Warm breezes tumbling about like flossy, sun-licked kittens, and a cloud of hummingbirds beating the air to stiff, luminous peaks. There would be hands, bodiless and soft as butter, to tease the rough kinks from one's sullen curls; and a bower of round-cheeked yellow

roses, shaking their skirts at the leering sky; and the soporific drone of wasps, swinging dizzily among ripe, unreachable apples. A white rabbit's pink, quivering nose . . . and something nice, *nice* to eat . . . and thickets of tall grass to nap in, and oh!—ecstasy of the golden carrot!

When Tom's eyes open it's raining buckets and the junkie's out in it, aghast: seven pigeons press toward him along the gutter, shoving with tender urgency like old people for a bus. The frightened vendor backs away, one arm thrown up across his stunned, streaming face. Tom shakes his head, tucks several pennies beneath a tin of pallid lard, and steps out from beneath the dripping tarpaulin. The crowds, anyway, have thinned.

• • •

At the next intersection it's the letter of the law for Tom—a dauntless stickler, *natch*—who bides his time at the deserted crossing shifting his weight from one peevish knee to the other while the traffic signal deliberates. Meanwhile his idle belly, nettled by the indeterminate pink tea, is arranging a conniption.

Not surprisingly, Tom's never managed to eat properly. Sure he's mouse-poor, motherless, and (beyond the niceties of boiling water) never risen much to the occasion of *cuisine*; all more or less to be expected. But it's not strictly a lack of resources that frustrates him; the fact is, Tom's saddled with a nervous stomach. What *he'll* say, presented with a not unappetizing crust of gravy, the flaccid skin from a kind man's pudding: "Mmm? Oh! *ha*

ha—no really . . . I’m, I couldn’t—I’ve *eaten*, yes! You go ahead though, go on! I’ll just . . .” and he backs away from the innocent morsel, hands palming the air as though you’d pulled a knife on him. Modesty, is it? Or pride? Bad breeding? (There is more to any hero than meets the eye, and Tom, for all his youth and inexperience, is no exception.) Still, you wonder how he manages; these so-called growing years. . . . Furthermore, and what’s worse, people are insulted. *We’re all rats on the same sinking ship*, goes their thinking. *Who’s he to powder his nose?*

Needless to say, his belly’s none too happy about it either. Tom has a special—indeed, an *inspired*—relationship with his hunger, which he perceives as very like a glowering, one-eyed dachshund one used to see dragged through the market in a fancy cart by an otherwise destitute bum. Heaven knows, that shabby old man was *born* dreadful to look at—his tiny eyes peered warily from the face of a bloated and blistering seal—and could scarcely provide for his own material needs, much less those of an ill-tempered bitch named “Kevin.” Nevertheless he doted on his snarling, darling mascot, his horrid little cyclops, his *Kerver*; and would swaddle it in his own stinking rags, kiss the tip of its torn ear, beg for its ungrateful sake first, and promise it brighter skies, silver linings, pots of gold, a plump and steaming phoenix rising from old, cold ashes. *Just around the corner, little princess, over the next rainbow and we’re there* . . . Now and then the nasty little princess would narrow her one gummy eye, lift her

lip and snap traitorously at the earnest, uneasy bum, who invariably believed (poor wretch! heartless Kevver!) that he had it coming.

Our Tom assumed the same tender, futile guardianship toward his own perpetually dissatisfied belly. He fed it hope in humble crumbs; he made excuses for its bad manners; he flattered and indulged it; he did what he could. When it showed its teeth he clucked and promised it anything—fish fingers, malted milk balls, hot cross buns, chicken à la king.

Now Tom's stomach, unappeased since this morning's hasty and wholly insufficient gruel, rattles the cage of his ribs in high dudgeon while the rain streams down the collar of his hoodless mack, and the crossing light is predictably on the fritz. Overhead a wrought iron sign complains of rusty hinges; Tom looks up: The Groaning Board. Turning around, he admires the big, blowzy edifice, five stories high, its beam-built frame haphazardly stuffed with stucco, mortar, lath, and straw. Neon silhouettes of implausibly endowed barmaids animate the steamy, street level windows; the entire structure lists right. Oblivious, now, to the abruptly green and insistently flashing *Walk!* signal behind him, Tom whistles to distract his belly and fingers the pennies at scant liberty inside his pocket. *Mm-hmm, mm-hmm . . .*

When the double-wide doors of the public house burst open, discharging a great friendly belch of laughter and curses and the mingled odors of scorched grease, mildew, and corrosive perfume, our hero surrenders.

Tom darts in, automatically shaking the water from his unruly red crest, before the heavy doors swing shut behind him with a great whack like a clap of thunder and a godawful *whoosh* of air.

2—

Gracious! Transfixed by the abrupt fluorescence of furious orange bulbs—hundreds of them, bare and hissing from long black wires that criss-cross the high exposed beams of the hall—Tom hesitates, then creeps forward, his feet testing the unfamiliar threshold of damp clay and rushes, his hands cagey as spiders along splayed walls festooned with spit and vomit. The place is vast and, though unheated, the stale air nevertheless steams with the congregate squalor of wet dogs and woolen underclothes, the morbid reek of indoor plumbing, and the rank collective gorge of countless indefatigable gobs—bared, carious teeth closing on plump sausages and meaty white shoulders; withered lungs sucking greedily at fat cigars and windy gossip; ambitious tongues lashing away at pert earlobes and promising assholes and the overlooked bottoms of unattended gravy boats. The commotion is *de luxe*.

“Pretty kettle of fish!” thinks Tom, looking round a little wildly. Here a fairy’s strapped to a table, blowing air like a laboring porpoise while a tattooed hoyden sets steel rings through his pierced and bleeding nipples. There by the bar a turtlenecked highbrow in a wheelchair with

bent spokes puts a cigarette out in the palm of his own hand, glaring at a skinny girl who looks away, flicking her lips with the fat black whisk of a greasy braid. Not far from them an immense tub of a woman in a tired blue hat has her elbows out around a platter of meat sandwiches; her tiny eyes gaze wearily around the crowded room. Oh, a lively spot, all right! Lane dogs, ulcerated pigs and rickety kids with ticks in their seams, run hell-bent and shrieking, snapping and squealing, up and down the narrow aisles. Walleyed pigeons sidle along the overhead beams, indifferent to the sizzle and pop of shattering orange bulbs. In one corner a little goat bleats mildly, head in a sack, twat impaled on the red hot poker of an amorous schoolboy. Frowzy chickens browse among the dirty straw pallets of deadbeats and pilgrims, penny-a-flop, snoring round an unlit stove. Rats run like eels beneath the long communal tables, while fat cats sneer over filched sprats; and it's nobody's business if here and there a wink's met with a nod, a likely pocket's picked, a ripe crotch experimentally squeezed.

A small gray mouse, confused, runs halfway up Tom's sopping leg. "Sweet!" he thinks (*a little velvet sack with claws*), then kicks it off and edges closer to the dining hall. Waitresses in shapeless paper caps struggle past him with platters of bashed neeps, mangle-mangle, and red flannel hash. Barmaids' arms terminate in tankards of beer and ale, like enormous glass knuckles, or tall flagons of boiled wine, fumey with gentian and juniper. Fresh loaves grow limp under fat, perspiring arms; from bag-

ging apron pockets comes the covert, beguiling clink of ash trays and bottles of sauce. Not bad, not bad at all! Tom's belly lifts its pointed muzzle, dances on its hind feet and moans. *Well*, our boy reasons, *he that allows A cannot deny B*—and so on. In other words, one thing leads to another. Tom therefore fills his lungs, tucks his chin, and plunges into the teeming hall.

"Sorry, s'cuse me . . . oh pardon! Ugh! I mean—"

Tom's dogged as a dowser's stick, nosing his way among patrons no more mindful of him than the nits in their ale. He finally squeezes in between a huddle of Chinese cooks sipping cognac from thimble-sized tea cups, and two wan girls in flaking black lipstick who turn their backs at Tom's friendly nod. Well! A pig-tailed chef offers him the bottle; flattered, self-conscious, our fledgling hero demurs with a flurry of mute, inscrutable gestures. The cook shrugs and Tom reaches for the menu, a single sheet of greasy foolscap folded and stuck between a red glass candle globe netted in white plastic and an empty napkin dispenser.

And now, the moment he's been waiting for!

Naturally he's short on dough and doomed, as a consequence, to a saucer of dry groats, a shy measure of cider (if he's lucky). Nevertheless Tom has grave instincts for the *ceremony* of dining and will give all possibles an extravagant going-over before placing his final order. He shrugs off his mack and unfolds the soiled paper.

*Has Your Bed of Roses Gone to Seed?
Is Your Ivory Tower Besieged?
Has the Spice in Your Life Lost Its Zing?*

Never Fear, Fret, or Bemoan Your Fate!

The Ruins

Will Gladly Engage All Those in Sincere Pursuit
of

Prosperity, Prestige, and a Promising Future . . .

Does This Mean You?

No Experience Necessary!

Imagine . . .

Gainful Employment!

A Glamorous Environment . . .

Your Big Chance!

Don't Pass Up This Rare Opportunity!

Join Us and Leave Your Troubles Behind!

The paper itself, once thick and creamy, is now dog-eared and spotted with sauce, limp and nearly torn across the middle from repeated folding. Ah, but the bold, gold, elegantly bossed script! Back-slanting languidly, glinting come-hitherly! Mmm-mmm-*mmm*! Our hero's fingers brush the face of it. Tantalized, provoked, he lays one hand upon his abruptly galloping heart.

In the meantime a waitress has arrived and, noting Tom's preoccupation, takes this opportunity to sort furiously among a fistful of loose yellow receipts—amending one with the licked tip of a ravaged red pencil; crushing another to a grimy yellow nugget—her darkly muttering

lips parting to reveal two rows of childish, milk-white teeth.

“Unh huh, that—that was . . . uh oh! Oh!—what?”

Slope-shouldered and ostensibly boneless, with tiny hands and a transparently anxious brow, she put Tom in mind of the little gray mouse, and seemed frail for the job. Her pointed chin shone like the petal of a flower; her wide mouth—an artless, unrouged pink—blurred at its edges. Her nose, on the other hand, was the sharpest he’d ever seen (a little chapped around the nostrils, as though recovering from a cold). She had bright black, slightly protruding eyes, unabashed as buttons, with vigorously arched brows in marked contrast to the cloud of feckless, fuzzy hair drawn back from her face into a dubious knot at the back of her head. Her bosom, as revealed by the flagrant plunge of her uniform neckline, stared one in the face, frankly flat as the bottom of a pan, chaste as whey. On the other hand, there was a delicate commotion at the base of her throat—a flicker, a serene churn—as though it were *there* her heart lodged, just below the skin, and not hidden behind the hard, bony confines of the ribs.

Tom gazes politely somewhere to the left of the girl’s sternum, intending, when she has concluded her paperwork, to inquire as to the strange and remarkable hand-bill he’d discovered in place of a menu. As it happens, the girl sinks slowly—still biting her big soft lips, totting up numbers and exclaiming under her breath—down upon the bench beside him. Tom bends over to collect several

dingy receipts she's let slip to the floor; but even as he delivers these before the waitress's distracted eye, his own gaze steals back to the luminous golden letters of the broadsheet lying open on the table.

The Ruins . . .

Some kind of joke?

Prosperity! Prestige!

"No," Tom reasons, "that's no joke!"

All right then, was it a club of some kind? An agency? The thing read like a solicitation, but expressed a disregard for experience or credentials. A training program? An apprenticeship? Ah, the future! Indeed, that certainly rang a bell! It was no picnic, after all, to have been born a two-penny shoeshine with lousy knees; Tom had often asked himself if there weren't, perhaps, *another way*. In any case, there was only so much can-do a fellow could muster; as things stood it was all he could manage just to pacify his churlish belly and keep a thatch over his head. The here-and-now consumed him, no blame there; and it was only in "the future" that he was able to discern, however remote, the faint glimmer of a different, *better* life. Something, for example, up off his knees.

Well then? Heart in his throat and decidedly half-cocked, our hero slaps his hand flat against the table top, sending a litter of yellow receipts fluttering to the floor; the waitress looks up. For a brief moment both their mouths are open to exclaim; then each indicates with a

polite nod for the other to go ahead. Then it's "no, pardon *me*," and "no, no, you were saying?"; then a volley of "please, I insist"—"no *you*"—"no no"—"well"—"*well . . .*" They break off. Tom's hands meet precisely in his lap; the girl's mouth nips to one side of her face, a wince of impatience to the other.

"*Well I was just going to—*"

"*I guess you'd like to—*"

Oh for the love of—! Again they break off, eyes narrowing with suspicion. When Tom frowns the waitress surrenders, throwing up her hands with a contrite yelp.

"Oh I *am* sorry—jeez! And now you're mad? Well look, it's nothing, I won't say another word. Cross my heart! You just go ahead!"

Tom softens. "Oh, as for that—mad! No, not at all. Fellow like me? The fact is, well, no, I am a little tired, to be sure, and of course I might order a bite to eat—oh, nothing elaborate, mind you, a little snack, and only when it's convenient for you, naturally . . ." The waitress nods briskly and pulls a yellow receipt book from her apron pocket. "*No!*" Tom nearly snatches the girl's pencil from her hand; then sits back, surprised and embarrassed by his own lathered nerves. He manages a neutral *s'cuse me*, then fixes his eyes down the table where a seedy pigeon pecks casually at a plate of battered cod.

"The thing is, really, I'm a little—well, *very* curious, I must say, about this, this little circular, or whatever, that was left on the table. 'Spect you've seen it! Some kind of