

The death and afterlife of Billy Isaac

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Early in the afternoon of 30 September 2013, a white Jaguar estate pulled into the forecourt of a petrol station on the N71 in West Cork, about a mile south of Bantry. The driver did not get out of the car, but the station owner, Sean Barry, recognized it as belonging to a very large Englishman called Billy Isaac, who had made a dramatic – sometimes violent – impression on the area in the short time he'd been living there. Isaac sat behind the car's darkened windows for close to two hours, according to Barry, who guessed Isaac was on the phone, making use of a patch of decent mobile reception before driving on home to Durrus. Instead, shortly before 3 p.m., a taxi pulled up and Isaac got into it, leaving the Jaguar behind.

It was clear to the taxi driver, Carmel McCarthy, that her passenger had been drinking, which probably helps explain how he came to leave his phone wedged in the seat of the taxi. Perhaps it is also why he'd abandoned the Jaguar. Isaac was on bail at the time, having recently been convicted of assault, and he may have been especially sensitive to the prospect of a drink-driving charge. But the following day, Sean Barry formed another theory, when he discovered that Isaac's car battery was flat, after finding the car key on the driver's-side floor. He also found another set of keys in the car, which turned out to be the keys to Isaac's house.

Billy Isaac's place was on a secluded road about a mile from the village of Durrus. It was fortified with electric gates. We can assume that it was not long after Carmel McCarthy dropped him off that he discovered he had no house keys and no phone. Isaac was an enormous man – 6'4" tall, with a vast

barrel chest and hulking shoulders. He had been a debt collector, a line of work in which being big and strong was a useful asset. As he once put it to a jury in his native Manchester: ‘You wouldn’t ask a little camp guy teaching dance lessons to go and do it, would you?’ Now – as we know from the CCTV cameras Isaac had installed around the property – he applied his mountainous body to the task of breaking into his own home. The footage shows him walking around the back of the house and launching a flurry of kicks against the back door. Then he backed up and hurled his massive frame against it. After a few unsuccessful runs at the door, Isaac noticed that the upper panel of the ground-floor bathroom window was open. That must have been when he thought of the wheelie bin.

Isaac hauled one of his bins around the gravel drive and positioned it underneath the window. The lid would have bent under Isaac’s weight, but he kept his footing long enough to get the window fully open and launch himself up, squeezing his head and shoulders in through the gap. At that point Isaac became stuck. Then, quite suddenly, he toppled forward into the bathroom. He hit the floor head first, and his shoulders were jammed between the toilet and a dog cage he had stored in the bathroom.

It was shortly before noon the next day when a local friend found Isaac’s body in that position, and at 3.30 it was transported to Cork University Hospital for a post-mortem. Cause of death was positional asphyxia associated with neck compression. The coroner, Frank O’Connell, told me that the death would not have been quick. ‘You wouldn’t wish it on anyone,’ he said. There would have to be a full coronial inquest, but the police were able to rule out foul play as soon as they saw the CCTV images.

It's 10 p.m. on a Thursday night in January 2015 and a storm has knocked out both the TV and the internet at the Sheeps Head Inn in Durrus. I'm the only guest staying in the rooms upstairs and the only customer in the bar too, until a man named Jimmy appears and makes small talk with the bartender about a darts game in progress across the way at the Long Boat Bar and about the questionable economics of pub sporting events.

This morning I was in Dublin, sitting in on a hearing in the case taken by Ian Bailey against the state. Bailey, an Englishman who relocated to West Cork, was for many years the prime suspect in the still-unsolved 1996 murder of a French woman, Sophie Toscan du Plantier, in Schull, about fifteen kilometres south of Durrus. All week the court gallery has been overflowing with law students, barristers between sessions and retirees with packed lunches – all fascinated by Bailey's public fight to restore his reputation. Hoping to find something new in this story, I've been reading up about other notable West Cork blow-ins, trying to understand what attracted people to the area in the first place. When proceedings were adjourned after it was established that one of the jurors had a cold, I wanted to make use of the day, and made the rash decision to head for the place that had briefly been the home of Billy Isaac.

'Lots of youths,' Jimmy says, of the scene at the Long Boat. 'Tell you one thing, you can't make money on darts.' Soon another man comes in and begins speaking in hushed tones to Pat down at the end of the bar, and Jimmy slopes off. Keen to check out the youth action, I decide to head out too. The Long Boat is just across the road. Everything in Durrus is just across the road, more or less. The village spans a few hundred metres where two roads join on a gentle downward slope before forking off again towards either the Sheep's Head peninsula or the Mizen peninsula. There are four pubs, a post office, a charity shop, and the Gateway – a restaurant with a

newsagent attached. There's still a sign out for a fishing tackle and hardware shop called Wiseman's, though it's closed down now. As of the 2011 census, Durrus had 334 residents, and the total population of the Sheep's Head peninsula was approximately 2,000. Strictly on the numbers, the village should barely support a single pub, let alone the four that are open year round. Many locals visit more than one of an evening, having a drink at Ó Súilleabháin's then ambling down to the Sheeps Head or Ross's at the junction.

I choose the wrong door to the Long Boat and nearly get a dart in the face from a stern-faced, brown-haired woman. She impatiently ushers me along and another player, with his arm in a cast, stops me in the corridor. 'Whose side are you on?' he says. I'm struggling to come up with an answer that might satisfy this dangerous-looking man, but just as I am considering bolting for the door his scowl gives way to a grin. 'Only messing,' he says, introducing himself as Christy. He explains that the darts team from Bantry are visiting and it's a tight game. 'You get that throwing darts?' I ask, lamely, pointing to the plastered wrist. A guy next to Christy asks if he uses his left or right hand these days. 'Just use the Hoover,' says Christy.

Youth being a relative value, the average age in here is probably forty. The man from the Sheeps Head comes through the door as I approach the bar and gives a nod of recognition. He calls me over and asks what I'm doing in Durrus. I tell him, and he announces it to the bar: 'Oh, he's here to do the follow-up about Billy Isaac!' Then to me he says, 'I've got stories I could tell you about Billy Isaac.' But he doesn't. When I ask for his name, he says 'Bob' and smiles in a way that suggests his name is in fact not Bob. He introduces the bartender as 'Chris' and both men laugh. If I am to get anywhere, it is clear, I will have to dispense with jotting down names.

In early September 2013, a few weeks before he died, Isaac stood trial in Bantry district court with his fiancée, Siobhan Ginty, charged with a brutal assault on a waitress in the Gateway. The story had made the national papers along with some of the tabloids back in England, where Isaac was well

known in the Manchester boxing community and had a bit of a rap sheet. But none of the stories carried comment from Durrus residents, and I'm curious as to what the locals made of him, and of the assault – which happened right next door to this pub. Bob's face darkens. 'He was a big bully' is all he will say.

Later in my room, with the internet back up, I rewatch a YouTube video of Isaac in a boxing ring in Manchester. The clip shows Isaac calling out a fighter who has failed to show up for a bout. Isaac is wearing a pinstripe suit so large that it looks roomy even on him. He's also sporting a large cross on a chain around his neck and, though it's obviously nighttime, sunglasses which are for the moment perched on his shaved head. There's an etched-in quality to his scowl, with a single frown-line that forms a pronounced trench between his eyebrows. Under his left eye there is a tattoo of three tears. He looks cartoonishly pugnacious. Isaac circles the ring, mic in hand, berating the 'muppet', the 'mug', the 'batty boy' who has failed to show up for this match, and he threatens to come out of retirement to teach the guy a lesson himself. When he's finished he hands the microphone to a man and plants a kiss on his cheek; this nearly knocks the man off balance. From a guy like Isaac, even an embrace looks like assault.

I read through court reports. When he was a teenager, Isaac was convicted several times of assault; much later, he was sentenced to three years in prison after police found bullets rolled up in a sock in his Jaguar, though Isaac maintained he had planned to have the rounds made into jewellery. One article detailed another case in which Isaac was reportedly working as an enforcer for the notorious North London crime gang known variously as the Adams Family, the Clerkenwell Crime Syndicate and the A-Team. Beyond the court reports I find faint traces of Isaac online, mainly on sites related to his interests – greyhounds, boxing, prestige-car and vanity-plate collections. He had a number of nicknames, including Big Billy, Wild Bill and The Guv'nor.

The five-button suits, the socks full of bullets, the wideboy talk – it all

seems so foreign to life in this peaceful Irish village. What had Isaac been looking for in West Cork? Among the comments on an online forum discussing Isaac's death, one in particular, from a user named 'Jim Comic', stands out: 'The west cork omerta will ensure the real story never comes to light.'

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Towards the end of August I go back to West Cork in search of answers. Struggling to locate the cottage where I've rented a room via Airbnb, I phone the owner, Hayley. She gives me some simple directions and apologizes for not picking me up from the village, explaining, 'I don't have a car, I have a horse and cart.'

Like a striking proportion of people who live around here, Hayley has an English accent. Originally from the Isle of Wight, she came to West Cork eighteen years ago, initially mucking in on Coole Mountain, a New Age expat commune. The Atlantic is just a short hike from her little farm, where she keeps pigs, horses and two terriers. For money she runs a small pony-trekking concern and offers massage therapy and astrology reading services at the cottage – but she rarely ventures into town. 'I don't do concrete very much,' she says.

After showing me my room, she sends me off with a few euro to buy bread for the morning. I drive on to Skibbereen, where I have arranged to meet a friend-of-a-friend named Eoin at Baby Hannah's pub. Eoin is a chef and a gardener, born and raised in West Cork. His children are grown up now, and he has a wiry little dog, Blackie, that adopted him ('She just turned up'). Eoin spends as much of the summer as possible sailing off the peninsulas, sometimes dropping anchor to fish in one of the inlets. He is finalizing the sale of his house and plans to celebrate with a trip around Scandinavia, indulging his love for pickled herring.

I tell Eoin about a sign I saw near Hayley's place for CrimeStoppers, warning of drug traffickers. Eoin recounts the story from a few years ago of a smuggling operation that came to grief because the traffickers, who were British, filled their outboard motor with diesel rather than unleaded. One man swam ashore, leaving the other bobbing desperately in Dunlough Bay along with dozens of sealed bales of cocaine before finally being rescued by the coast guard. In 2007, the *Guardian* dubbed this 'Ireland's Cocaine Coast', reporting that West Cork's peninsulas were nearly impossible to patrol and had become a landing point for drug shipments from as far away as Panama and Pakistan.

It's not a new problem. In 1822, Richard Griffith, then engineer of public works for Cork, had hoped that laying new roads would provide a fix. 'Smuggling, though much lessened through the exertions of the preventative service, is still carried on to a certain degree, owing to the impossibility of a rapid communication by land between the numerous creeks and inlets on the coast,' he wrote. The British struggled for centuries to regulate activity on these waters. In 1877 Alexander Sullivan, the Durrus-born proprietor of *The Nation* in Dublin, romanticized 'the wild beauty and savage grandeur' of this coastline with its 'brave and hardy race' of subsistence fishermen. 'This class ... their hard lot, their humble life, offered little temptation to envy or cupidity. The ocean was their principal "farm" and on this no landlord could raise a rent.'

The remoteness that has attracted smugglers also appeals to people seeking to live a different kind of life or flee the discontents of civilization. They are generally known as blow-ins, but Eoin sees them as runaways.

'It's the farthest place you can go and not get your feet wet,' he says. 'If the coast was another fifty miles west, they'd all keep going.'

Billy Isaac didn't so much blow in as advance, military style, on Durrus, with a fleet of cars that included the white Jaguar, a Rolls-Royce and a souped-up, claret-red Bentley with chrome rims and the number plate 'BIG GUV'. At the height of his short boxing career, back in the early 1990s, Isaac had told a reporter, 'My idea of a night out in Manchester was to drink 12 pints of lager, have a fight, wreck a curry house and then pick up an old bird. That's what people live for up there.' He had done stints in prison. Now he was ready for a change. Isaac was also thinking of his girlfriend, the twenty-three-year-old Siobhan Ginty. She had roots in Ireland, Isaac later told a Bantry district court judge, and he had wanted to take her away from 'the madness in Manchester'.

Isaac didn't pick West Cork at random. His father, Peter Isaac, had retired to Durrus in the late 1990s with his second wife. The couple bought a large, newly built house a mile or so from the village. The Isaacs kept to themselves, rarely venturing into Durrus pubs. Sean Barry, who told me he once sold Peter a car, described Billy Isaac's father as 'a gentleman ... He was like any Englishman that retired over here and was following a dream.' In 2012, not long after Peter died, Billy moved into his house in Durrus.

Newcomers in small towns often do their best to assimilate, or else keep to themselves, but Billy Isaac was different. He stuck out from the start. Apart from his exceptional physical bulk, he had gold teeth and wore a gold chain. He was often seen in the pubs, where his standard drink was three vodkas in a pint glass, topped up with a can of Red Bull; sometimes he would order three of these cocktails at a time, lining them up in front of him along the bar. He paid in cash and tipped big. He told stories about his boxing days, involving former champions like Gary Mason, who acted as Isaac's manager during his short professional career, and Ricky Hatton, who once provided Isaac with a character witness in a criminal case, describing him as 'a credit to the sport'.

Sinead Levis, a bartender at the Sheeps Head Inn who was travelling overseas during Isaac's brief Durrus sojourn, told me that her sister once pointed him out to her during a visit home. 'He just stopped his car in the middle of the road. That's what he did. People had to work around him,' she said. I was told that he once tried to leave his gold chain as collateral for an unpaid bill. A man I spoke to said that Isaac seemed to be a classic bully. 'You couldn't win. Look at him and he says, "What you looking at?" Look away and he says, "Why can't you look at me?"'

Up at the house, Isaac began making some changes, reworking the stone-clad exterior along a macabre rodent theme. He commissioned local contractors to produce a wrought-iron weathervane adorned with rat sculptures and install it on the rooftop. He nailed signs to the stone wall bordering the road – 'DOGS ON PATROL 24/7' and 'CCTV cameras in operation'. The latter featured an illustration of a rat crouched on top of a closed-circuit camera. There was a custom-made post box with a gold rat perched on its hind legs. Stone pillars on the driveway featured twin adornments of larger-than-life rats. The motif continued on the electric gates, which were decorated with rodents and diving crows. Emblazoned across the gates in uppercase, gold-coloured script, and arranged so that the two syllables parted as the gates were activated, was the property's new name: RATSVILLE.

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Today, those grounds bear no trace of Isaac's grand vision. There is a new postbox, this one decorated with the emblem of a rose. The gates, now rat free, are open and there is a car in the driveway. For a moment I consider walking up and knocking on the door, but decide it would be an unwelcome intrusion for the new owners.

There's no way to dawdle unobtrusively, so I drive to Bantry to try my

luck at the Garda station. I tell the desk sergeant I'm looking to clear up some facts about Isaac's time in Durrus. The desk sergeant mutters something I don't quite catch about the 'material' that has 'leaked already'. Declining to elaborate, he directs me to the central press office in Dublin. From there I am bounced to the southern regional headquarters in Cork, and finally end up on the phone to Bandon Chief Superintendent Tom Hayes, within whose regional command Durrus falls. Hayes is friendly but similarly unforthcoming. Was it an unusual case, the assault in the Gateway restaurant? Not entirely, says Hayes: 'It wouldn't be the crime capital of the world, but we have our issues, you know.'

On 30 March 2013, shortly after 3 p.m., Billy Isaac and Siobhan Ginty arrived at the Gateway looking for lunch. A waitress, Lucie Kopecka, informed Isaac that lunch was finished – it was café service only until the chef returned for dinner at 6 p.m. Isaac and Ginty stormed out of the restaurant.

'I felt disrespected and said that a number of times to Siobhan,' Isaac later told the judge. 'I went home in that frame of mind.'

Later that afternoon, Ginty began making threatening calls to the Gateway. At that point the chef, Christophe Zilliox, was back and prepping dinner. 'Tell Lucie I'm coming to have a word with her,' Ginty told Zilliox. Around 9 p.m., Isaac and Ginty returned to the restaurant. Ginty grabbed Kopecka and pushed her into the outdoor smoking area. Isaac blocked the door behind them.

'Show her,' he said. Ginty landed several punches to the waitress's face and head, knocking her earring out, then wrestled her to the ground and began kicking her.

Isaac who was still barring the door, told Ginty, 'Finish her off, and do it properly this time.' Ginty continued to punch and kick the waitress. By the time the gardaí arrived, Isaac and Ginty had crossed the road to the Sheeps Head Inn, where Isaac took offence at another local – who had objected either to the way Ginty was speaking, or to the way Isaac was speaking to

Ginty – and challenged the man to a fight in the street. A few blows from Isaac knocked the man to the ground. More squad cars arrived. Isaac put up his hands for the cuffs, but Ginty fought, and it took several officers to subdue her. They were both charged with assault and threatening behaviour. The gardaí placed Isaac under a curfew and banned him from pubs in Durrus. Local people told me that the guards enforced the curfew by sending an armed-response unit to Ratsville each night.

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Sunday. A thin mist hangs over the seaside town of Schull. The annual regatta is on, and this is perhaps the biggest business weekend of the year, so everyone is trying like mad to downplay the weather. Small groups of spectators in windcheaters and baseball caps are hustling down to the harbour while families packed in cars cruise the streets in search of parking. Cheerful commentary from a race announcer is bouncing off the hills around the village: ‘We’re after clearing away some of the rain and don’t forget there’s the bouncy castle and there’s the children’s tug of war ...’

A Sunday market operates in Schull during the summer in a car park down by the harbour, offering organic produce and local arts and crafts. I understand that someone who once crossed paths with Billy Isaac is working at this market, but I fail to track her down this morning. Instead I get speaking to Paul Phillips, an Englishman who traded in a career in commercial law to come out here in 2012 and now runs the West Cork Pie Company. Phillips says he served Isaac at his stall one Sunday in 2013, when Isaac was catering for some visiting friends.

‘He said he usually made roast dinner for his boys when they came over,’ says Phillips. ‘But he was running late, so he got eight or nine products from the stand. He was a big, intimidating guy. With his dogs. Of course he had to

have pit bulls ...’

Phillips says Isaac seemed like a caricature of a gangster: ‘If a film director was looking for a baddie for Ray Winstone to ham it up with, he was perfect.’

Manning a stall a few metres down is Ian Bailey, who handily outranks Isaac as the region’s most talked-about blow-in. Bailey maintains the stall with his partner Jules Thomas, selling paintings and home-baked goods. He finally lost his marathon case against the police and the state and, having appeared impeccably coiffed and suited at the Four Courts on each of the sixty-four days of his trial, he is today wearing a gilet and sensible sneakers. It’s a bit uncanny to see Bailey in such a relaxed setting, hawking pizza slices and his partner’s watercolours. I’m reminded of what a strange picture Isaac must have made propping up the bar at the Long Boat.

Bailey tells me he knew his fellow Englishman by reputation only, but had noticed some striking similarities. Both men grew up in Stockport, in greater Manchester, and had come to West Cork for a new start. And like Isaac, Bailey is physically imposing, with the sort of broad and lofty frame that could be difficult to find clothes for in this part of the world. It was this connection in particular that occurred to Bailey when Isaac died. With characteristic black humour, he tells me he optimistically poked his head in at the Durrus charity shop a few times hoping Isaac might have left something behind in his size.

At the Ouvane Falls Inn in Ballylickey, about ten miles north of Durrus, one or two people are at the bar having a late lunch. I ask to speak to the chef, and then take a seat in the reception area which doubles as a cocktail lounge. A well-built, stubbled Frenchman in a black chef’s jacket appears in the doorway and I introduce myself, asking if I can talk to him about Billy Isaac. I receive an eye roll, a wave and a heavily accented ‘Bye!’ But after taking a few steps back to the kitchen, the chef reconsiders. ‘Come back in an hour,’ he says.

Christophe Zilliox knew very little about Isaac before the assault at the

Gateway, he tells me, once he has closed up in the kitchen. ‘I mean, I knew he wasn’t a priest ...’

On the evening of the assault on Lucie Kopecka, Zilliox was in the kitchen prepping for dinner. He came out of the kitchen just in time to see Siobhan Ginty laying a final slap on the waitress.

‘I said something like “Get the fuck out of here” as she was walking past, and Isaac heard. He said I disrespected his wife,’ Zilliox says. (Isaac and Ginty were reportedly engaged, not married, at the time.) ‘Billy came back in, took off his jacket and all of a sudden his fist is coming toward my face.’

Zilliox says he saw what happened next replayed days later on the restaurant CCTV. At the time it was a blur, but somehow he managed to out-manoeuvre the boxer. Zilliox demonstrates, swivelling in his seat and guiding an imaginary arm away with both hands. He says that when the police watched the footage they asked if he’d taken self-defence training – he hadn’t. (A bruise later appeared on Zilliox’s shoulder, suggesting he hadn’t totally avoided the punch.) There followed what Zilliox says felt like an hour of Isaac chasing him around the restaurant and into the adjoining newsagent. ‘I’m not ashamed to say I hid in the toilet at one point,’ Zilliox says.

Soon after the first lot of police arrived, Zilliox seized his chance and left: he had plans to go to Cork anyway. By the time he returned to work on Monday, it seemed as though everything was back to normal. But the following Sunday, as he was coming in to the restaurant, Billy Isaac caught him getting out of his car.

‘He came to me and said, “If I see your name, or anyone’s name, in a quote in the paper or anything, I will kill you.” Just like that. Literally, “I’ll kill you.”’ A speaker on the windowsill next to our table has been piping out mellow jazz. Zilliox switches it off.

‘Yes. If my girl ends up in jail and I see your name on a court paper ...’ he says, trailing off. ‘So what I did was I went to the Guards and withdrew my statement and I told the boss I have to take off for one week.’ Zilliox drove

straight for Cork and checked in to an anonymous hotel in the city: 'Just to be away from him and to think.'

He began sleeping with a knife under his pillow. He also took to wedging a broom under the handle on his bedroom door, but still found he hardly slept at all. Instead he spent his nights plotting an escape.

Zilliox accepted a job at a café in Donegal, gave notice on his flat in Bantry and his job at the Gateway – and was gone.

Isaac meanwhile went after everyone who might help the prosecution's case against him. At the start of the May bank holiday he drove his Rolls-Royce down to the alley beside the Sheeps Head and left it pointing directly at the Gateway, with the engine running. Eddie Ryan, the Gateway's owner, said he supposed it was meant to be intimidating. At the very least it was a nuisance, blocking traffic. The Rolls stayed there all bank holiday weekend until eventually the police called Isaac and told him to move it or it would be towed.

A Durrus resident and witness to the Gateway assault, who would talk to me about it only on condition of anonymity, says Isaac caught up with him one day before the trial.

'I never told the police this, but he stopped in front of me one day in his car and got out and he drew his finger across his neck and said, "If you say anything, I'll kill you," he told me. I was told Isaac also visited the man he punched outside the Sheeps Head, driving up to his family home on a hill a mile or so from Durrus village. (I went to visit this man myself – he wouldn't say what happened, or even confirm that he had been assaulted by Isaac that night at the pub, saying only, 'Don't believe everything you hear in the town.' There was no charge against Isaac for the Sheeps Head assault and Bantry police did not respond to questions about whether any threats made by Isaac were reported.)

The stories were strikingly similar to a disturbing claim about Isaac that had been reported in English papers. In 2010, Isaac stood trial for blackmail.

A Middlesbrough businessman, who wasn't named in court proceedings, claimed initially that Isaac showed up at his house with some associates and demanded he pay £1.4 million within a week, or else he would kill him along with his wife and children. Isaac claimed to be working legally as a debt collector and denied threatening the man. In the end the businessman failed to turn up to testify, claiming he was too ill to come to court.

The assault charge in Durrus wasn't Isaac's only legal problem that summer. In July he was called to London on a charge of sending abusive and threatening texts to the former lover of a girlfriend (not Ginty) who had apparently attempted suicide. One of the texts read: 'Do you want a razor or a rope you muggy cunt?' Isaac was found guilty and travelled to the UK to serve his time, spending less than two months in prison. He returned to Durrus just in time to stand trial in the Gateway assault case.

Isaac may have succeeded in intimidating Durrus witnesses, but he couldn't do anything about the CCTV from the Gateway. National media were present at Bantry district court as Judge James McNulty was shown more than five minutes of footage. Isaac got five months for the assault on Kopecka and Zilliox and for engaging in threatening and abusive behaviour. Ginty was sentenced to four months. The couple's lawyer lodged an appeal, and both Isaac and Ginty made bail and walked free the same day.

A local photographer, Niall Duffy, captured Isaac and Ginty leaving court. Isaac is wearing a check shirt that makes his torso appear pneumatic; the teardrop tattoos look sarcastic. The convict is stuffing €50 notes into the pocket of his jeans and scowling at the lens with hot fury.

The old burial ground above Durrus is overgrown with pampas grass, and the undergrowth is landmined with moss-covered grave markings. Visiting on a

wet day, I lose my footing more than once. But the sure-footed Patrick Crowley, who has agreed to show me around, is in his element, crouching to examine a decrepit plot, rolodexing through connections between the family names marked on crypts as he goes. Since illness forced him to early retirement from legal practice in Dublin seven years ago, Crowley has been putting together a historical resource on his home town, rooting through library collections of uncatalogued historical scraps.

As we walk, Crowley talks me through centuries of local history – a blur of dates, crop trends, and land forfeitures. In 1261, a band of families – McCarthy, O'Donovan, O'Mahony, O'Driscoll – reclaimed much of West Cork from the Anglo-Norman invaders. Crowley's own family came down from Roscommon in the 1300s to work as mercenaries. Regardless of who was in charge, Crowley says, the peasant class 'had an awful time of it, dragooned to fight whatever war was going on, or having their cattle seized'.

One night in November 1882, a landlord named Morris arrived in Durrus looking to evict non-rent-paying tenants. A bullet was fired into his lodgings at the old Durrus rectory. Crowley says there were a number of suspects but the entire district kept quiet. A proclamation was issued but no culprit was identified.

In 1920, Durrus made the *New York Times*. 'HUNDRED SINN FEINERS BLOW UP BARRACKS: Two Policemen Are Wounded at Durrus in Sharp Combat', read the headline. Volunteer fighters descended on Durrus, digging trenches and felling trees across the road as they went, delaying any reinforcement efforts by the Royal Irish Constabulary. They marched down Durrus main street and straight into Mrs K. Daly's bedroom. As she later told a reporter from the *Cork County Eagle*: 'We were all in bed, my two daughters and myself, when we were terrified on seeing three tall men and three medium sized fellows.' From Daly's house they laid siege to the barracks next door with bullets and petrol bombs. The newspaper accounts describe the assailants as out-of-towners in motorcars who 'terrified villagers'. Durrus was

framed as the hapless victim, a 'thriving little village, picturesquely situated at the mouth of Dunmanus bay'. Crowley, though, tells me that logistical support for the raid was provided from within the village.

So Durrus had form for casting out intruders. I ask Crowley about Billy Isaac. Did he get the Boycott treatment? But Crowley was in Dublin at the time. He says he gathered all he knew from the newspapers and didn't pay the story much attention.

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After the trial, local internet message boards lit up in outrage over the perceived leniency of the verdict. 'Didn't we invent the boycott in Ireland? I'm sure it works just as well today as it did then,' wrote one person. Another observed: 'West Cork have a long and noble tradition of dealing with Brit gangsters.' I'm told one Durrus pub manager took matters into his own hands: when he spotted Isaac in Bantry, he told him he wasn't ever welcome back in the pub. I'm told Isaac consented without rancour. It must have shocked Isaac, leaving Manchester a feared hard man only to come to rural Ireland and have a village publican stand up to him.

Weeks later, news of Isaac's death would reach an online forum on poulespublicofcork.com before it hit the newspapers. 'He's dead ... fell out window and broke his neck allegedly ... cops all over the place!!!' read the post, from a user named 'Cavitation'. When I spoke to 'Cavitation', he told me he'd been posting updates to the forum as he spoke via Skype to a family member who was in Durrus. He also told me his family reacted with relief to Isaac's death: 'They were fearful of violence from his presence in the area. We feared he may have been in hiding and that a "hit" might ensue.'

Another man I spoke to said he was in the Long Boat Bar on the night Isaac's body was found. There was a card game and at one point someone

stopped to raise a glass: 'A minute's silence for Billy Isaac.' People around Durrus don't speak ill of the dead, he said. Still, he added, you could sense a change when Isaac was gone. 'A weight lifted off the town. I've never seen a town physically change like that.'

A few days after the police were finished at Ratsville, Siobhan Ginty returned with some others to Durrus to handle estate arrangements, and soon the cars were gone. Isaac's body was taken to England and a funeral was held in November. That winter the house was burgled. The thieves made off with some of Isaac's additions to the house, including the rat-festooned iron weathervane.

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Billy Isaac's stepmother, Helen, answers the door with one leg blocking the exit to prevent her black pug, Sam, from escaping. She tells me she first met Peter Isaac while working as a dog handler for greyhound races; later, they moved to Durrus together. Before he died in 2011, Peter was sick for several years, and Helen, who had retired, was forced to go back to work at a local hotel. She tells me that throughout Peter's illness, Billy would come over from Manchester to help care for his father, sometimes for months at a time.

After his father's death, Billy returned, this time to stay. Helen left Durrus, spending a year or so in England, returning only after Billy's death. I say it seems like he just came in and turfed her out. Helen doesn't want to talk about it.

'Why would you want to write about this?' she asks, finally, and in the moment, I can't think of any answer at all.

I am hoping to spend a final evening in Durrus, but the spare room at Hayley's has been booked by someone else tonight, and with two weddings on it seems as though everywhere within a fifty-mile radius is booked out. Finally I find a bed-and-breakfast, a mile or so out of town, that has a back room I can have as long as I don't mind going without a shower.

A live band is playing to a packed bar at Ó Súilleabháin's. A young couple are dancing near the doorway as the two musicians deliver a rousing version of 'The Patriot Game', a rebel song. 'How's your story going?' asks Michael, a man I met at the Long Boat last night. 'Great!' I say, doubtfully. Totting up some of the rumours I have heard about Isaac over the past few days I wonder what, if any of it, is true? That his girlfriend Siobhan Ginty was a trained mixed-martial-arts fighter. That he tried to offer his Rolls-Royce as an apology to Eddie Ryan for tearing up the Gateway. That he once fought off a gang of angry Travellers, threw them into a van and set it rolling down a hill.

I think of something Ryan told me one afternoon while taking a break after lunch service. He traced a line with his hand from the top of the street at Ó Súilleabháin's down to the fork at the end of town. 'A rumour born in Durrus, by the time it gets to the end of the street, it can grow legs and walk out of here,' he said.

As I walk back to the B&B on foot, I come to the edge of the village, where the street lights come to an end and the road narrows. I try to imagine Isaac's big cars bowling along this tiny lane and the others like it around here. If any car passed now I'd be forced to leap over the wall to escape. But no headlights appear and there is only the sound of the rain and my footsteps to disturb the silence. Patrick Crowley told me about a Durrus parish priest back in the late eighteenth century who would send his four sons to spend nights outside in the town cemetery hoping to toughen them up. As I hold up my phone in front of me, using the light to help pick out a path, it occurs

to me that I might have benefited from a similar sort of formative hazing.

Finally I spot the turnoff, which is marked by an estate agent's sign advertising Isaac's house for sale. Rounding the corner I can make out the foyer light of my B&B, which my hosts have left on for straggling guests. I try not to make a racket as I walk up the gravel driveway, but ruin it all by noisily fumbling with the front-door key. Finally getting the hang of it, I gently turn the handle and head inside.