

# Quillan

Nobody likes me. I see it couched behind their synthetic smiles, their arched eyebrows, their twisted mouths. Such flawed grace, such snide elegance. They say, behind their ill-concealed expression of distaste: *We don't like you*. They detect in me, I presume, the venal streak they are ashamed of in themselves. I am a reminder to them of their true nature, that nature that hides in the shadow of a stone like a lizard. But what do I care if they invite me reluctantly to their boat parties and their barbecues, saying my name, *Quillan*, as if it were a sharp blade in their mouths. I have, a long time since, grown a hard skin over me which protects me from dislike. After all, no one at any time has ever liked me, ever... Not in drab Ireland, where everyone pretends to be so nice, or in this Mediterranean hole, where everyone pretends to be... *so nice*. You too pretend to be nice, young man — I am not fooled — to get what you want from me. Answers to questions... All Ireland is waiting for my answers to your questions. Why did I swindle all those... Poor so-and-sos? Have I no conscience? And what of poor Bunny Lynam? Poor fool! What of him? He let me down... Now, young man, if I entertain you at all it is only for my own amusement and to pass the time here where time passes so slowly... I am like one of those stick insects you see clinging to the walls of the villa, that seem never to move for hours on end. What do they meditate? Have you asked yourself that yet? Do you think they suffer from conscience? Or would like forgiveness? Or are they merely luxuriating in the warm, rich depths of their own ugliness? Like all the other exotic creatures that populate these parts? Tell me - what do you think?

I was born Thomas Alexander — the Great, that is — Quillan. Being Thomas, the name means quite literally *twin*, I was dual, divided, two - sided. Didn't you know that that is the quality of the name Thomas? To have a deep ravine through one's nature, a split, a fracture? And another self across that divide, hidden from the outside world, but facing one like an image in a mirror... a mirror of truth. To name a child Thomas is to offer him uncomfortable self-knowledge, but that is what my parents did. And then later they preferred Alexander and so I

became Alex... Just think of it, parents who choose to give a child one name and then replace it with another one! What confusion! I was irremediably divided between Thomas and his usurper, Alex. They were very different. Alex the Great went forth to conquer while Thomas stayed at home to brood. How was I to understand this reversal? What was I as a child to make of it? Nothing, at first. And then I saw that calling me Alex had suddenly made me palatable to my parents and their friends. They liked the name but did not like the bearer of the name. Alex, the lucky one, collected all the false smiles, the pretended interest. Thomas, the outcast, on the other hand, sat in the corner and pondered his fate gloomily... He was too preoccupied with why he was not liked to feel the pain of not being liked. But there were no answers to it. None... Even now looking back across a great distance of time and a lifetime of experience, I, Thomas Quillan, for it is I who have emerged at last out of the muddle of my existence, have no idea why my parents did not like me. Did I cause my mother some grief in birth? Did I remind my parents, normally chaste — I was an only child — of an instant of sexual abandon they instantly regretted? Or was it, that being a child, and they both adult, I was an alien in their midst, one they could not accommodate, one who disrupted their quiet existence? The young Thomas thought and thought and thought about all of this... Unaware of the many possible answers there were his choice narrowed down to one he favoured. His parents did not like him because there was something in him... something they did not like... something inherent in him. Ah, it was Thomas who was not liked... Thomas who skulked in the background of his alter-ego, Alex... But he was, and I was, Thomas, and no other. A leopard cannot change its spots. A rose by any other name... And I was such as those. And so I grew like a tree split at the roots, with two trunks leaning back from each other, its branches like outstretched arms clutching despairingly at the air. I was a born, if you like, hypocrite...

Don't you think this is relevant? I do! You want a quick, a ready answer to why I swindled all those... Poor so-and-sos. You think your readers will not have patience with this patient exposition of my *modus operandi*... Then tell them that I am just an ordinary crook such as they imagine that to be. They will find excellent models in the newspapers. I have seen murderers explained in not more than two or three words: vile, perverted, psychotic. What does

a mere swindler merit? Cheat, hypocrite, liar? No, no, no... You have not come here to do what you could do in five minutes of frenzied invention at your typewriter in Dublin. No, you want more than that. You want to capture the heart and soul of the swindler in his own words, served in their own juices on a silver platter. Well then, I must warn you, it is a three or four course menu, and you will need your shorthand and a *digestif* afterwards. Then you will know a thing or two worth knowing. Will I continue? Good!

You want to know about my parents? Well, my mother is still alive, you know; though no doubt she is quite stricken by all that has happened. Not least because I had taken charge of her affairs and was thus responsible for all of her finances. Yes, she was also a client of mine, and I treated her as I did each of my clients. Well, after all, it would not have been fair to do otherwise... I was ethically obligated to swindle her. I had no choice. Now, now, now, don't squirm so — it makes me uncomfortable. I have given you a prize headline, have I not? *Quillan cheated Mother. Mother impoverished by swindling son.* That has style you must admit, you should be pleased. With a picture of dear Mama shedding tears, that would do nicely. How she must be regretting the expensive boarding school on the coast, the private tuitions, the college fees, the long, hard years of my apprenticeship... All come to this, a sly stroke, a hand dipped in the till, a heady moment of cunning and duplicity... And then exile. Look around you, look around you at the wealth and beauty of it all, this marvellous villa, the rich furnishings, the discreet maid in her reticent black, the sea, the sunlight, the calm... All this, my education and upbringing has gained for me. Have I not worked hard enough, sweated and lied enough, to merit this? Would not any mother be proud of such a son? Why not mine then? I have made use of my talents. I have not let my nature lie fallow. I have done what I was born to... Where is the wrong in that? Mama should be proud of me!

I was a moderately successful pupil at school. I was bright enough not to cause my teachers concern and not so bright as to merit their favour. I was poor at sport and have no outstanding memory or glittering prize to show you. Looking back, except for the death of my father, my childhood and adolescence were inconsequential. Only the death of my father caused my heart to stutter. It was opportune that I should be home on holidays. He took me fishing with

him to a quiet spot on the river. Over-eager to reel in a fish too big for him he fell from the bank into the water. His high boots filled with water and he sank down. I saw his eyes fill with the blue emptiness of the sky above him before they disappeared beneath the water. Only his arms waved above the surface, his hands outstretched to me, not knowing where to find me. Though near him I could not reach out to take his hand. That would have been unnatural for me. And then I knew that his hand offered only death... I did not want to die. I did not want the same blue emptiness to claim me. I wanted to see my mother's grief. I wanted to be the first to tell her, to see her face crack with disbelief, and the tears spill out... I ran and ran and ran, full of a fevered excitement. The first thing I said to my mother, rushing into the house, her face dismayed to see me running home alone like this, was: *Why don't you like me, Mama? Why do you never touch me or hold me?*

Ah, Alex was always such a nice boy... I was so jealous. I wanted to kill Alex but how could I kill him without killing myself? In my heart I meditated murder. That bastard deserved to die. He had no right to my existence. I watched him constantly and hated him more and more. I knew someday I would have my opportunity and then I would rive him with some tool... Some tool that would leave me untouched, that would leave me whole and undivided. I needed such patience. I waited half a lifetime for the time to be right. But when it was right I did not flinch. Once I had Alex in my grasp I strangled him mercilessly. All the pent-up frustration, the despair, the hatred I felt for him, exhausted itself in his death. And I came into my own. I was never so glad. You see, in reality, I am more than just a swindler, a swindler is not all that interesting really, but I am also a murderer... I murdered my false self, everything I appeared to be, everything the world took me for... I murdered Alex. That is why, no doubt, my mother said — I read it in your newspaper — that I was not the son she knew. *Alex was always such a nice boy...* And that is why it is Thomas who speaks to you now from his bolthole in the Mediterranean, having done his other, his better, half to death. It was the perfect crime, was it not, victim and perpetrator one and the same? Two sides of one coin.

Bunny Lynam was my godsend. He gave me my opportunity. A friend of my father, his

business failing, he saw me as the injection of fresh blood and capital my mother promised. Stocks and shares, pensions, investments, all that... The vain pursuits of the moneyed class, prudent and providential. I found that people trusted me easily with their money. I had the requisite *distance*. I was suitably cold-hearted. I remember one of Bunny's associates saying jokingly that I looked like the type who would swindle his mother... Perhaps that remark gave me the idea. The business picked up with my help and Bunny let himself be guided by me. He deferred to me in everything. He was really a hapless, ineffectual character. Secretly I despised him. I resented the fact that he and his kind were living off me, exploiting me. Especially that Marjorie, the fly in the ointment, who never liked me...

Bunny was very different from me. He had a family, a wife and children, and he was generally liked. I might have had some pity for him if it had not been for Marjorie, his porcine spouse. Ah, I disliked her more than she disliked me; the moment we met there were sudden storm clouds threatening... I would have liked to knock her bloody head off there and then! She was the ugliest woman I had ever seen. She came into the office, a squat, frog-like shape encased in a black, fur-trimmed overcoat. A Cossack-style hat sat solidly on a square, piggish face, small eyes, pinpricks of blue, a flat nose and blubbery lips... All wrapped in a sad, resentful air. Her hand was limp and damp in mine. If I had been alone with her I think I would have thrown her out the window to the street below. And yet Bunny, much older than she by the way, danced attendance on her, as if she were Queen of Something... He was so obsequious. I hated seeing them together. Marjorie accepting it all from him as if it were her due. How does a woman like that get to have a husband and children? How? I'd like to know.

Ah, I'm sorry... You want to know? Married? No, never, I never married. My relations with the opposite sex have never been ideal. They shy away from me. I don't know what it is... But then I never had that fevered interest in women that most men seem to have. Once or twice I made attempts to enter into relationship with this or that one... It was useless. Even the women who come to the port below in search of rich husbands give me a wide berth... though I have more wealth than any other here and it is my villa they see first, high on the hill here,

overlooking the harbour and boats. I have noticed a certain aversion in them... I don't want to harp on about this but maybe I could illustrate with one example? If it does not offend you? Your Irish public might find it interesting, titillating even. I've never told anyone about this. You will be the first to hear it.

I was in London on a business trip. A long time ago this... Having a couple of hours free in the evening I wandered into Soho, following a certain instinct of curiosity, and found myself walking through twisting alleyways where prostitutes plied their trade from shadowed doorways. I was not solicited. No one called to me, though I saw other men summoned and taken into the dark recesses beyond those open doors. Let's say they were not open for me. I was looked on with indifference and yet I had a moneyed air... So be it, I thought. It would not have troubled me to leave that place and return to my hotel. I had no desire for any of those women and I found the seedy atmosphere distasteful. But I wanted to broaden my experience. I wanted to unveil the mystery. I wanted to see what sex was all about. And so I chose one, I picked one out, with long, straight blonde hair that glistened in the darkness, and she led me, with seeming reluctance through long, winding corridors to a cold, bare stone room with just a dressing table and a chair and a bed. She pulled her black tights off her long, pale legs and lay down on the bed, her face turned away. I saw myself in the dressing - table mirror taking my clothes off, stripping myself naked... pulling shadow away from my skin. Before I had finished she caught me by the shirt tails and pulled me down on top of her... I hardly knew what to do, but then nature helps. Her skin was perfumed, her face against mine was soft, I was aroused and probing her... Why did her body seem to shudder away from mine when I entered her? I tried to kiss her, I sought her mouth and eyes, but she twisted away from me. When I pressed against her she gave a deep sigh of displeasure and flicked her blonde hair away from her face with impatience. I said: *Please take me in your arms. Please hold me. Please...* The word *please* seeming to echo eerily around the cold room. She did not respond. I saw that she was rejecting me, that she did not want, did not like me on top of her. I felt so embarrassed. I wanted to withdraw, to retreat, to leave her, but my body clung to her pale body and perfumed skin with a sort of primitive desperation. When it came to an end, our intercourse, she pushed me away and pulled her tights

back on quickly. She sat on the chair to brush her hair while I stayed kneeling on the bed, devastated. *Come on, come on*, she said, *you have to go. - Can't you wait to get rid of me?* I asked her. She gave me a look of utter contempt, her image in the mirror fixing me with dagger-like eyes. *How does one escape from here?* I asked her finally, and she opened the door for me. I went out alone, feeling lost, utterly lost in those labyrinthine corridors, but I found my way, feeling sickly, as if I had just trod in something unpleasant... Feeling something more than that. Feeling a deeply-penetrating self-disgust... Was I that unloveable? That not even a whore could love me? Something inside me felt as if it was dying.

When I first came here I thought that a wife would make a pleasant adornment to my lifestyle. I thought it would be easy, given my wealth, to find some woman compliant enough to marry me. I was not thinking of a sexual partner, oh no, I was not thinking of love... Perish the thought. I was thinking of someone who would enhance my image, who would make life easier for me, someone who would glitter for me at parties and suchlike, like a pair of expensive cufflinks or a tiepin. But as I have already said, even the women who came here in search of a rich husband had no time for me. When they did show interest — sometimes at first they did — it quickly turned to unease and then revulsion. Yes, I use the word advisedly... but that is what I have been saying all along. I belong to a nameless race hated by all... I am a sort of a misfit, I always have been. The world shuns me and turns its back as if it detects some moral handicap in me the equivalent of some atrocious physical deformation. I have long ago accepted this. I am repulsive. *Repulsive!* I must be... I have no other explanation to offer for my life.

I do have Encarna — Encarnación really — to console me. You have seen my rock-faced Spanish maid in her mourning black. I've often wondered what grief it is that has marked her forever. She has such a wounded, blighted air. She was the only person who would come to work for me. She does everything, everything... all the housework, the laundry, the cooking and the gardening. And when occasionally — very seldom I must admit — I have a fit of male fever, I can take her as I will. She is like stone, and her loins smell unpleasantly of onions, garlic and olive oil. She never gives any sign of pleasure or satisfaction, indeed, I am sure she feels none.

And I? I empty myself into her like disposing of rubbish into a dustbin. I am sorry if the image is too bleak, or if it is offensive, but why should I spare your sensibilities with anything other than the truth? There is no reason for me to sugar the pill. When I committed murder, when I killed falsehood in myself, I moved into the light of truth and cannot but see things as they are. If you wish to write something other than *disposing of rubbish into a dustbin* then do so. The Irish have a great tradition of censorship. Of hiding from truths. Your readers will feel happier. Much happier. And they will never know what offence has taken place... The truth is I feel nothing at all when I am with Encarna, there is only the release of a troublesome blockage and then everything is as before. Sometimes, if at all, I find myself looking down at her and thinking how ugly she is... She is ugly. You've seen her. By any standards she's ugly. You must admit. It strikes me that I'm probably the only employer she could find because of her ugliness.

But where was I? Yes then, Bunny and Marjorie. Oh, I feared nothing from Bunny, he was putty in my hands, but I knew Marjorie would be trouble. When she found out, that is... You see I had persuaded Bunny to advertise a new high interest investment plan for retired people. We were an established and trusted firm and I knew from experience what vast sums of money lay fallow in the low interest bank accounts and low risk investment plans of the old and moneyed. We offered low risk but high interest and the money poured in. It surpassed even my expectations... At first I suggested to Bunny that we would simply cream off the interest and reinvest at very profitable rates. The interest on this money we would keep for ourselves. However, when I saw the huge amounts of money flowing in I changed my mind... I saw my chance you see, my chance to kill that nice boy, Alex, the one on whom my parents had doted, and to start life anew as Thomas, the divided one. Yes, I was ready to come into my own... I persuaded Bunny to leave me in charge of the new investment plan and I simply put it all to work for me... Bunny when he saw what I was doing was too afraid to challenge me. I told him there was nothing to worry about, I told him I'd look after him and Marjorie and the kids... if he just let me use all the skill and talent I had amassed in the twenty years I had been his associate. That gained me valuable time. I knew sooner or later that Bunny would say something to Marjorie, and then... I could see Bunny's conscience was troubled, anxious, and I could see him

getting worse day by day. It didn't matter, I made everyday count, or I should say, *pay*, and some of the money, a considerable sum, I sent directly to a bank account outside the country. Ah, why am I shy of figures, you know the amounts concerned... everyday five or ten thousand pounds would arrive in the office. It would just stroll in casually with its hands in its pockets, so trusting, so innocent. With money you can make money; in a few months I had almost a million put aside against that inevitable rainy day, and then Marjorie made her move...

One day Bunny did not come to the office, Marjorie came instead. I knew the moment I saw her that Bunny had told her everything... She had a cousin in the Fraud Squad she warned me. She was ready to report me if I did not do as she wanted. I was not impressed. Bunny was an accomplice, he knew what I was doing... You have to invest that money properly, she insisted. She could see she was getting nowhere with me. I decided to amuse myself with her. *Have you any idea of the amount of money involved?* I asked. I painted a very rosy picture. I inflated the figures for her. She blushed with avarice. *Have you any idea how rich we all could be?* I asked her. *I am only using money to make money, I said. At the end of the year I can, I will, put everything to rights... At the end of the year these poor so-and-sos will have their interest.* She sat rigid in her chair, looked surprised, her slack jowls drooped and her bleary eyes opened wide under the solid Cossack-style hat. *You mean you're not intending to keep it all for yourself?* she asked. *Good God, no, I replied. I have my professional reputation to protect. What would become of me, what become of the business?* She was taken aback, unsure of me. And then I tried my coup de grace... *Unless, I said hesitantly, doubtfully, unless Marjorie...* She waited. *Have you ever thought of how pleasant it would be to live on some quiet, sun-baked Mediterranean island, away from it all?* She sat back in her chair as if I had slapped her. I pressed on. *Are you ever tempted by that thought Marjorie, something you might have dreamed of when you were young perhaps, before there was Bunny and the children?* I could see, Goddammit, I could see — moment of triumph — that she knew what I was getting at; and she was tempted, even though she hated me, and had always hated me; but even so, I knew, and now she knew, that all along she had dreamt of escape, of escape from herself, her own obese ugliness, her own terrible disappointment in life, in love, in family, in Bunny... I could see her slow and uninteresting mind wavering an instant on the edge of flight... And then she nodded

her head as if she was saying *yes*, but she was really only biding her time, because I knew I had a real enemy in Marjorie and that at the back of her mind she wanted only to destroy me; and she must have been thinking of how, just how could she ruin me and could think of nothing, but my proposal was a straw for her to clutch at and so standing up and putting her black gloves on she said, *I'll think about it...* But I saw right through that. She was hopeless, hopeless. I knew where she was going, I knew what she was going to do; I saw the cousin in the Fraud Squad picking up the phone and saying, *right, there's nothing to worry about, first of all we'll have Bunny feign a little nervous breakdown...* Little did she know that I was ready to walk out of Ireland with nothing but the clothes on my back. And I did so the very next morning... Why postpone things any longer, I told myself. I was almost forty. I had lived long enough in the shadow of Alex. It was time for him to die and allow me my place in the sun. That was the best part, killing off Alex, watching him die... And degrading him with my crime... Nice boy, Alex, nice boy... I knew my mother would be sorry.

By the way, is Bunny still in that chic psychiatric clinic he admitted himself too? And what of Marjorie and the bunny rabbits? I'm curious sometimes. I would like news... Tell them to write me. I'd love to hear from them. I must send Marjorie a postcard. There are some lovely ones of the beach and harbour here. You can see this villa high on the hill in the background. I'm sure Marjorie would be insane with envy, and regret perhaps that she hadn't accepted my kind offer... But she can rest assured, I was never going to take her with me, never... Or if I did it would have been only to abandon her here. That bitch! I could have enriched myself beyond even my wildest dreams if it had not been for her. I hope she's happy!

But I know she's not... She never could be.

We must take a little walk later. It's a nice descent to the port and there's always something happening... I could introduce you to Richard and Lucy, to Gordon and Sally, or Max and Betty, or those Italians, Enzo and Patricia... The first friends I met here, not friends really of course, those amiable liars, those svelte crooks, those swindlers all. You will see at a glance how false they are. Maybe that is why they do not like me? I can see right through them, I have let fall the scales from my eyes... My heart is true. Nothing is hidden in me or from me anymore.

I am wise to everything.

Do you have to ask me that? Why do you keep coming back to that question? Have I not already explained? Have I not said enough? Do you think your readers incapable of understanding me? Are they so obtuse? Are they so blind? When I gave you the answer right at the beginning... I told you! *Nobody likes me. Nobody has ever liked me.* If I had had one moment only of kindness from any of you I know I would not be here today explaining my crime... How can you blame me? I was always the stranger in your midst. You never accepted me. You turned away from me every time. And yet you expected my loyalty! You expected that I should work for you — for *you* — and make *you* rich... Why did you think that I would allow you to use me and exploit me like that? I would not! And yet, and yet... if I am honest... I always wanted recognition from you. Secretly I craved for it, a word of appreciation, a glance of kindness, a show of genuine liking would have done it, would have been enough. I was like a child running to you with my arms open wide, hoping that you would lift me up and hold me... I would not have stolen from you if you had once, just once, held me in your arms and smiled on me. The truth is that you brought this on yourself, and I know this will turn you green, but you made me do it, because you made me the barren ground that I am.

I can see, young man, by the cynical stare in your eyes that you think I'm crazy, you think all this is madness... Well then, I'll make a pact with you, and with your readers... I'll make a pact with the world. If any one of you can find it in you to love me... That sounds really strange doesn't it?... But it's exactly what I mean to say — if there is any one of you who will love me, really, truly love me, then I will surrender all my ill-gotten gains; I might even resurrect nice Alex and bury forever sad Thomas... sad, bewildered, unloved Thomas. But I do not think I will have to do that. In fact, I am certain that will not happen, not now, not ever. Not ever.

I know that I will spend the rest of my days here. This is the end of my life you see gathered around me, already in place, like some comforting shroud prepared for the defunct. But

I like it here really. Did I tell you that? Oh yes, I do, in spite of everything... It is a climate, an atmosphere that suits me. I like the dry, scorching heat and the haze that clings to the harbour. I like the coming and going... With my binoculars I can survey all from here. I am a connoisseur of every movement, every to-and-fro. It's like studying a bristling nest of busy insects. All of them hoping to wash their souls clean in busy pretence. I hear the things they say: *Oh Darling I do love the clothes you wear! What subtle shades of yellow you choose! What subtle shades of cowardice! What skilled evasion! What deft and lying manners!* And I am here to preside over it all... I am here to welcome all those who have given themselves to or who have freed themselves from *duplicity*. This world is double. One aspect is visible, but false, and illusory. The second aspect is true but hidden. You must come up here if you want to know the truth. You must come up here if you want to be free at last. My heart is open; we can sit and talk. You will like it here too. Just as I do. I have everything I want here, almost everything I need. Yes, I do like it. You must write that as part of your article. Do not forget it now. *Quillan likes it here.* I hope Encarna will not leave me. She is very useful.

**The End.**