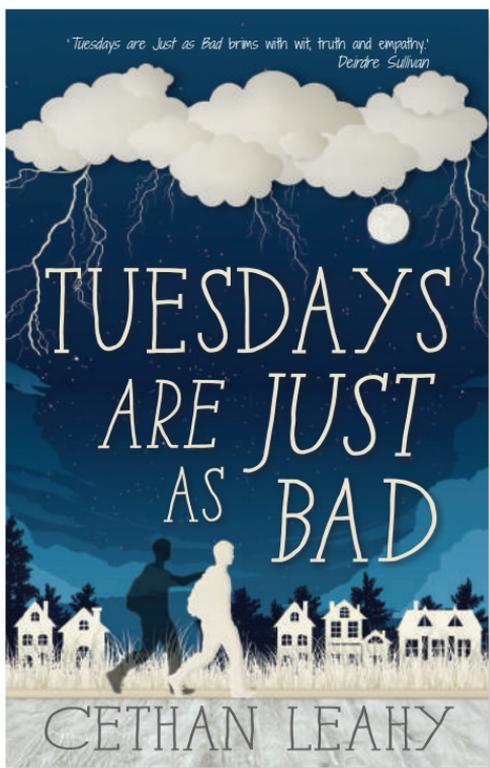


'Tuesdays are Just as Bad brims with wit, truth and empathy.'
Deirdre Sullivan



TUESDAYS
ARE JUST
AS BAD

CETHAN LEAHY



AVAILABLE NOW

IN BOOKSHOPS AND ONLINE AT

WWW.MERCIERPRESS.IE

TUESDAYS
ARE *JUST*
AS *BAD*

CETHAN LEAHY



MERCIER PRESS

FOR MUM

MERCIER PRESS

Cork

www.mercierpress.ie

© Cethan Leahy, 2018

ISBN: 978 1 78117 564 4

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

A CIP record for this title is available from the British Library

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any information or retrieval system, without the prior permission of the publisher in writing.

All characters and events in this book are entirely fictional. Any resemblance to any person, living or dead, which may occur inadvertently, is completely unintentional.

Printed and bound in the EU.

I

THE STRANGER SONG

ONE

Like many things, it seemed a good idea at the time. Everyone agreed he was ready and should return to a regular routine as soon as possible. 'The longer he avoids it, the worse it will be.' So it was decided: Friday. It was as good a day as any other and, sure, if it didn't go well, it was nearly the weekend. That would soften the blow.

After a gentle prod out of the car ('Honey, try to make the best of it. If things get bad, just call me.' 'Deirdre, stop making it a thing. He's just going to school.' 'See you later.'), he walked through the front gates of the long, red-brick building named after some saint. I followed him. It was my first day too, so I was excited, naturally. I told him as much, but he was not interested. He was going through one of his annoyingly regular bouts of not acknowledging my existence, but I was used to it by now, so it was okay.

The building looked quite grand, though not as glamorous as the American ones on TV. Already I could imagine the shelves inside, resplendent with gold trophies and framed awards, the achievements of their most successful pupils.

Adam hesitated at the white doors. His father said going back would be like ripping off a Band-Aid. Unpleasant, sure, but you can't wear it forever. As he lingered, a mob of second years pushed up behind him, launching him through the door.

Inside was a corridor lined with boys in dreary uniforms with matching expressions. As he walked among them, the talk grew quieter and they stared at Adam, at his visible scar, which was not quite on his forehead, but a little to the side, like a marker that had slipped beyond the line in a colouring book. He walked through them and they couldn't resist looking at it. I thought this was a bit rude.

He didn't stop to speak to anyone in particular, instead walking directly to his locker. But there was no refuge even there. His neighbour, a tall guy with no eyebrows, nodded and nudged him in the side.

'Finally back from holiday, eh, Adam?'

'I am, Billy. Thanks,' said Adam. I was unsure if this was a joke at his expense or just politeness.

'Well, it's good to see you back. I've no one but Mousy to copy off and his notes are crap,' he said, slapping Adam again on the back and walking off.

That wasn't so bad. God bless the Billys of the world.

At this point, I was baffled as to why Adam was so scared to return here. However, it became a bit more obvious when a large lunk appeared behind him, waiting for him to turn around. (I would later learn that this lump was christened Philip M. Hurly.) A broad kid with an untucked shirt and a fussy haircut, he stood staring at Adam with a stupid expression on his face. He coughed dramatically and, once he had Adam's attention, stood still for a moment with a dumb smile, then made a gun gesture with his hand and pointed

it at his own temple. 'Boom!' he said and knocked his head back.

A few boys laughed and Adam sank into the floor a foot or two.

'Don't take it so seriously, Adam,' said Philip with a dismissive tone, giving him an insincere ruffle of his hair as he walked away. What a dick.

Anyway, the bell rang and we went to our first class.

It was Double Maths and it was *amazingly* boring, like, completely stupefying. Of course, there was no value in the lesson for me, but I found it incredible how anyone could sit through it at all, taking in numbers and lines and letters with no obvious meaning.

So instead of learning about triangles, I floated around the classroom, popping in and out of desks and bags. I spied on the many whispers, text messages and passed notes. There were jokes, questions and some concerns about Adam, to be fair. I told him about them, that they were talking about him. I could tell that he was interested in their reaction, but he pretended instead to focus on some weirdly named shape.

Since I wasn't able to get his attention, I played a little game: 'Who are Adam's friends?' I really hoped that the guy in the corner with the wooden necklace thing was not one, or the blond kid who spent the whole class drawing penises on his

TUESDAYS ARE JUST AS BAD

neighbour's book. Frankly, they seemed like lost causes. But, as it turned out, he had no friends in that class, or in any class.

The bell for morning break rang and Adam slipped away as quietly as he could to hide in one of the bathroom stalls on the far side of the building. Naturally, I followed – who else was I going to talk to? I remained there as he sat in the stall waiting for the second bell to ring.

'Taking a while there, buddy,' I said. No response. Ten minutes later, break ended and the hermit returned to class, having successfully evaded any human interaction. He did this for the full lunch break too, even picking the same stall. Wherever you feel at home, I guess.

Back in his non-toilet home, his mother cooked pizza. It didn't look especially appealing but I wouldn't know. I don't eat, so I'm judging it entirely on its looks and it looked like a cat vomited its own tail. She stood, leaning forward, watching him take a bite and she resisted a smile when he finally chewed. He had lost weight since the old hammer swing and so this was a minor triumph.

'How was school?' she said, finally sitting down at the table.

'Fine,' he said without inflection.

‘No one said anything, I hope.’

‘Nope. Everyone was okay.’

His mother stood up again, filled with nervous energy. ‘Where is your father?’ she said. ‘Usually when I mention food, he’s right here.’

As if waiting for his cue, Dad promptly entered the kitchen. He dropped into his seat and immediately picked up his fork. ‘Thank you, love! How was school, Adam?’

‘Fine.’

‘Good to hear.’

‘Oh,’ said Mum, sitting down again, ‘Dr Moore’s office called to remind you that your appointment is at 10.30 tomorrow morning.’

Dad glared at Mum with a look that said, ‘Deirdre, I’m pretty sure this is not dinner conversation,’ to which she responded with a glance that said, ‘William, I know but there is no use pretending everything’s normal.’

‘Okay,’ said Adam, who was looking at no one.

To speed this *FASCINATING* dinner along, I can reveal that the night continued in much the same vein. Everyone sat and ate and didn’t say anything. After dinner, dishes were washed, dessert was unwrapped and microwaved. We all sat down to watch a movie, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* – it’s about a superhero dressed as a flag. He didn’t have very exciting powers, just super strength. I was enjoying it but Adam excused himself about halfway through, saying he was tired. His mother followed him up the stairs to see if he was all

right, but Adam assured her he was. I followed too, but I don't have a choice in that.

Without turning on a light, he walked into his room, changed into his pyjamas and lay on the bed. He clearly hoped that this would be the night he would finally fall asleep. He changed his position frequently, shifting his pillows about. However, sleep didn't come. So, instead, he opened his eyes and stared at me, the first time he had looked at me all day.

'Why are you still here?'

I didn't respond. What could I say? I didn't want to be here any more than he did.

TWO

I was born on the same night that Adam died. Born? Is that the right word? I can't say for certain since the logistics of what happened are still unclear to me, but I can say that my first sight was of him lying on the ground with two men leaning over his body. I remember their hands bandaging things and poking others. One said they were losing him, the other agreed and they set about recovering him. They were apparently good at their jobs as they found him again pretty quickly.

I was still here, though, when he came back.

The room was littered with clues to the events that had led up to this moment: a pool of red staining the carpet, a note on the nightstand with some closing remarks and a hammer lying useless on the floor. It was pretty obvious what had happened, even to me who had only existed for three minutes.

Behind me stood a man and a woman. They were well dressed, the man in a fine shirt and the woman in a shiny dress. They stood shaking, not understanding the scene before them (even though, again, it was fairly straightforward). Since they weren't doing anything but staring, I decided that they would be the first people I would communicate with. I waved and the woman burst into tears.

'He's stable,' said one of the men.

They lifted the boy onto a gurney and pushed him into

the ambulance outside. Strangely I was dragged along, as if attached by an invisible rope. So I stood next to him as he faded in and out. The woman in the shiny dress, who had been referred to as the boy's mother, sat next to him and clasped his hand the entire way to the hospital. She was repeating a story over and over; something to do with a cottage and a cow when he was five years old. It sounded like a funny story but her delivery wasn't selling it very well.

They immediately brought him into surgery. I watched as they poked his brain with sharp little knives and sucked spilt blood with noisy devices (I would later learn these were called scalpels and mini Hoovers). Their hands were acting in unison to recover this mess of a boy in front of them.

The operation was successful. He was brought to a bright room. In the hall, I could hear a conversation between his parents and someone asking a lot of questions.

'Lots of blood lost, but with a stroke of luck there'll be no major brain damage.'

'He has been really down, though. Lots of sleeping,' said his mother. 'I thought he was just ... shy.'

'Is there a history of mental illness in the family?'

'Not on my side. His father's great-aunt did once try to walk into the sea on Christmas morning, though.'

'That Aunt Margaret incident is very much up for debate,' his father protested. 'Grandad always maintained she just had too many sherries.'

'Why are you arguing with me about this?'

‘It’s okay. We are just trying to build up a picture.’

At that point a nurse called from the room, ‘He’s waking up.’

I watched the boy when he woke in his bright room, surrounded by his parents, doctors and me. I saw his father’s tears as he was reunited with his only son. I watched his mother give thanks to someone. They cried and embraced him. But he didn’t look at them, instead he looked beyond them, focusing on a spot in the corner of the room, the very spot where I stood.

‘Honey, what are you looking at?’ asked his mother.

He didn’t respond to her question. Instead his eyes widened. He was scared. I moved closer and, with each step, he pushed himself back into his pillows.

‘What’s wrong?’ said Mum.

‘He’s disorientated,’ said a nurse, ‘it may be best for you to come back later.’

A second nurse pushed the parents out of the room, reassuring them that ‘He’ll be fine!’

Soon I was alone with him. I approached the bed and frantically his eyes followed as I got closer and closer.

Finally, he spoke in a whisper. ‘Who are you?’

Now I knew for sure he could see me! I was excited, although he did seem a bit more terrified than I’d have liked.

‘Don’t be frightened,’ I said, hearing my own voice for the first time, giving myself a little surprise.

‘Are you here to take me away?’ he said.

‘Where to?’

TUESDAYS ARE JUST AS BAD

'I don't know. Hell?'

'Why would I do that?'

'I tried to kill myself.'

'Don't know what that has to do with me.'

He lay back on the bed and closed his eyes. Exhaustion had won and I was alone again.

THREE

I suspected that my presence in Adam's life wasn't appreciated at first. There were subtle clues. He rarely spoke to me. He never discussed my existence with his parents or any doctors. Also, one day, he googled on his phone: 'Can you perform an exorcism on yourself?' As it turns out, the Church was vague on the matter, but he did find a website which featured a surprisingly detailed description of the process, including diagrams and a YouTube video. Unfortunately for Adam, the video mostly advised hiring the services of the host of the video, a sweating American with a dead calm in his voice.

Since Adam did not have the money to hire anyone to throw holy water at him, he went the DIY route. In lieu of holy water, he turned on the shower and, waiting till it got warm, shouted, 'The Power of Christ Compels You!' and jumped in. He seemed disappointed when he got out and discovered that I was still there, instead of being cast out of his presence back to the bowels of the underworld from whence he seemed to think I came. He tried it three more times but I didn't even feel a tingle.

It looked like his best hope for an exorcism was finding a local priest or some manner of holy man skilled at the dispelling of demons and the like. But Adam didn't know any priests as far as I was aware, so I was safe for the moment.

Time moved slowly after the ward. They didn't have the

resources to hold people for long so he returned home with some advice and me in tow. His parents were looking for solutions and there was a lot of talk of going 'private', whatever that meant.

Adam didn't speak to me. He didn't really speak to anyone. He just drifted around the house, keeping his parents on edge. His life was the closest thing to not existing.

'I kinda wish they would leave me alone,' said Adam one day in his bedroom, when there was no one else there. This was the first time he said something when it was just me and him in the room that wasn't 'Go away', 'You don't exist' or 'Bleugh.' (I'm still not sure what that last one means.)

I wasn't sure if he was talking to me or to himself, but I took the chance. 'They sure are annoying,' I said, rather desperately.

'Yeah,' he said, a little surprised, 'I need a break, you know.'

I nodded. We said nothing more for the day.

One morning, he asked me, 'Why are you always hanging around?'

'Can't go anywhere else,' I said. (This was true. Being dragged by the ambulance wasn't a one-off. I couldn't go more than a few metres from him without being blocked by some invisible force. It was a bit of a dose.) 'Besides, I'm pretty sure you are the only one who can see me, so ...'

'I don't talk to you, though. Aren't you lonely?'

'Yeah, I am,' I said, 'but there's not much I can do about it.'
'I'm lonely too.'

'Do you want to talk about it?'

'Not really.'

'Do you want to watch a Netflix?' I said, pointing at his laptop.

He laughed. 'Sure.'

And from that moment we fell into a rather particular routine of watching movies and TV shows for endless periods of time. I was delighted with this. Pretty much everything I learned about this world came from the endless stream of video that poured out of his machine. Granted, it was a little confusing at first (it was a month before I realised that the Avengers were not real people constantly protecting the Earth from aliens or killer robots), but it was invaluable for learning how the world works and what things are called and who the attractive people are.

I was particularly interested in the shows about people Adam's age. They lived such compelling lives. They all went to a big building called a 'high school', had conversations with other people called 'friends'; occasionally two of them smushed their faces together (apparently this is called 'kissing') and often other friends became their enemies because of this face-smushing. I used to ask Adam why his life wasn't filled with sexy adventures like that.

'A: it's the summer. School isn't till September. B: we don't have high school here. It's called secondary school and, alas,

no one has sexy adventures,' he said.

'That's a shame, they look fun.'

'They look stressful to me,' he said. 'I couldn't deal with a dance every week.'

'ADAM?' his mother shouted.

'YEAH,' he shouted back, pausing the episode of *iZombie* he was watching. (Zombies, also not real, apparently.)

'Can I come in?'

'Sure.'

The door opened. Evidently, Adam's mother was tired of shouting from beyond. She smiled as usual and I noticed she was carrying some ironed clothes.

'Here's your uniform for tomorrow. How are you feeling about it?'

'About what?'

'Adam, we talked about this. School.'

Adam closed his laptop. 'Tomorrow? School isn't till September.'

'Honey, it is September.'

'I'm not going.' He turned on his bed and faced the wall.

His mother's smile tightened. 'We all agreed it was a good idea. Even you.'

'I'm not ready.'

She sat on his bed. 'You'll probably never feel ready, but you have to go back. You can't avoid school forever.'

SCHOOL! Finally I would see the rich, sexy lives I'd been missing.

THE STRANGER SONG

'You should definitely go,' I said.

'Don't you miss your friends?' asked Mum.

'What friends?' he said weakly.

Well I was thrilled to finally see the first day of school. Of course, it didn't turn out great in the end, but you already know that.

'A highly inventive, moving and skilfully crafted story.'

Ciarán Collins

'A poignant story that deftly touches on themes of suicide and depression, *Tuesdays are Just as Bad* is full of heart, humour and tenderness. A fresh, distinctive voice and a charming cast of characters make this a novel worth reading.'

Catherine Doyle

WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU WERE HAUNTED BY YOURSELF?

When Adam Murphy wakes up in hospital after a failed suicide attempt, he finds he is not alone. In his room is someone only he can see and hear. Tied together by an invisible bond, Adam and his ghostly companion try to find a way to coexist as Adam works to get his life back on track. But life is never simple and as the pressure builds on Adam to appear 'normal', will his constant shadow turn out to be friend or foe?