

A Perfection

Thomas Docherty

Part One

The Blemish

Chapter 1

September, 1992

Anne Elliott was going home.

She stepped out of the hotel lobby in Westminster, and heard the seven chimes of Big Ben. As she went to step into the taxi, she caught a brief sight of something small and black scuttling under the cab. She shivered when she saw that it was a rat. ‘Another rat, love?’ said the cab-driver. ‘You’re never more than twenty yards away from one in London. Mind you, I suppose the average comes down a bit round here.

Westminster; MPs’. The cab’s radio blared out Kylie Minogue singing how she should be so lucky, lucky lucky lucky: ‘In my imagination there is no complication I’m dreaming of you all the time’ she sang, cheerily. Rats; *rats, they’re good luck somewhere. I think*. London was awake; rats, and luck, moving around, busily ghosting the city. ‘Where to, love?’

‘Heathrow. The airport,’ she said.

‘Heathrow? You’ll be lucky, love. Security threat there this morning. Traffic’s a nightmare. What time’s your flight?’

‘11.15. What’s the problem? What happened?’

‘Bomb threat, innit, love,’ replied the driver. ‘At 6 this morning. They closed it all down. IRA.’

Anne’s face set. *Whatever you say, say nothing.*

‘Yeah, IRA. Turned out to be a brief-case somebody left in the café. Nothing in it. But knock-on effects right back through the M4. But I’ll get you there, love. 11.15’s fine. No worries. Where you going? Somewhere interesting?’

But Anne was searching in her own hand-bag, head down, avoiding talking. The taxi was already moving. The driver turned the radio up, and closed the window separating his cab from her seat.

Anne got out of the cab at Heathrow airport two hours later, paid the driver, and turned into the melee that was a routine Monday morning. The noise of Concorde taking off was deafening; it forced everyone around to bow heads, as if in reverential awe before its power. Anne felt it as a cosmic insult, and she rushed into the terminal building to escape the assault on her senses. Inside, the crowds streamed past and round her; *rat-race*. The echoing of a tannoy voice announced the imminent departure of one flight after another. Everyone was leaving. Anne was going home.

She picked up a copy of the *Irish Times*. Her concert had been a great success. London and the Proms had given her composition an outstanding reception. Alone in a hotel room, one quiet evening just a week before, she had turned thirty-one, and felt, at last, that she was arriving somewhere with her music, with her life. Her hotel room had a balcony; and she stood out on it, in the twilight air, looking over the city, sipping a celebratory champagne that she had taken from the mini-bar.

The invitation back in January to offer a new piece for the Proms season was part of a new initiative: several ‘young’ nations had been invited to send a work from one of

their most promising young composers – young meaning under forty for the composers, under ninety for the nations. When the letter came from the Arts and Culture department, she first thought it was a friend joking – she had eminent colleagues in the music department in University College Dublin who had contacts in Aosdana. But then, almost immediately, she thought beyond the cliché, and a warm smile rose to her lips, a smile born of her emerging self-assurance. It was more than luck, yet also less.

The piece – she had called it *Black Rain Falling* - was resolutely melodic, and its tune, edged with melancholy, captured her audience, an audience tired of modern cacophony, of ‘squeaky-door music’, as Sean Gallagher, her conservative Head of Music, called it.

Now, as she entered the executive departures lounge, a burly man in a pin-striped suit rushed past her, making her step aside and crush herself small against the doorframe. He was muttering some curse back at the flight attendant who was staffing the desk. ‘Bloody computers. Christ almighty. What’s the use if you need your boarding card in your hand first?’ The attendant looked at Anne, paused briefly, took a breath, and smiled. ‘*Maidin mhaith*; Good morning,’ she said. Anne looked around at the placid multiple shades of green on the walls and over the soft furniture. Green is the colour that calms. ‘Good morning,’ she replied, handing over her boarding card. ‘The 11.15 to Dublin. Is it on schedule this morning?’ The attendant punched some numbers into her computer, stared at it for a moment, and said ‘It’s currently showing on time, so you should be able to get away.’ ‘What a brute,’ said Anne, nodding back towards the doorway. The attendant smiled again, this time raising the hint of one eyebrow to

signal her silent agreement. 'You'll find coffee and breakfast on the table over by the fax machines,' she said. 'Please let me know if I can offer you any assistance at any time. *Go dté tú slán.*'

In the lounge itself, men in business suits paraded back and forth, barking like hunting-dogs, loudly and disjointedly, into their mobile phones, their new executive toys. Like a herd roaming; but, also, like a herd, with leaders of the pack, ostentatious pin-stripes standing out against jackets and trousers whose bottle-fly sheen indicated that they had been dry-cleaned too often, old and worn. The volume was a barometer of their self-consciousness about using the phone in such a public place: the more familiar they were with the technology, the louder they became, brash and arrogant. A cacophony of voice: 'At least twenty thousand in Mexican pesos'; 'Have you chased Alex for the order?'; 'Just tell him we can't fucking do it at that price'; 'See you in Paris, Bill; send us a fax Saturday'.

The performance, with its swearing and posturing, the half-transatlantic accents in which all businessmen were learning to speak, their phony-sounding American-English, were less offensive to Anne than the irritations of the celtic muzak piping in the air. *It's like a cross between Luciano Berio and Jefferson Airplane in here. Better than airy Enya on the speakers.* She stood with her back to the lounge and its amateur Americans, poured herself some over-brewed coffee from the machine and faxed a scribbled note of thanks to Tillie, her agent. Now she sat hiding her face behind her copy of the *Irish Times*, its broadsheet pages held up as a defence and a quest for some privacy, some intimacy with herself. She twisted the Tara ring that she always wore as a charm on her wedding-finger so that its crown faced outwards, and

studied it, her fingers held out. She brought it to her lips and kissed it, a private moment, self-communing. She hesitated before moving her hand away again, and thought of her feeling as a satisfaction. It had been a victory of sorts: she was making a name, even a self, returning home with the spoils, with the laurels.

On a black leather sofa opposite, Nick White, portly and edging towards middle-age plump, looked up and saw Anne, her back to him – tall, leggy, with auburn hair falling half-way down her patterned jacket, short pleated skirt swirling - as she poured her coffee. Automatically, unconsciously, he pulled his stomach muscles in, though to no great effect. He fingered his speckled bow-tie, checking its knot. *Tight; good.* His tired eyes lingered on Anne, suavely following her movement for a brief moment: a diversion from which he persuaded himself, disentangling his imagination from the curls of Anne's hair, the sway of her hips as she walked away, returning to her seat. *Pretty.*

Nick had flown in overnight from Seattle, hop-skipping to Chicago and then to London. The landing at Heathrow had been delayed, and then they sat on the tarmac for an hour before being allowed to come off the plane. As he made his way towards the Aer Lingus lounge for his Dublin connection, he overheard a flight attendant muttering about security issues. He was too tired to be irritated.

Trying to regain some alertness, to focus his mind on something, he opened his briefcase on his lap and pulled out a sheet of sales figures. Motion Computers, Inc.; the summer quarter figures were down again. *My fault. Nothing to smile about in there.* He stuffed the sheet back into the briefcase. He ought not to have brought them. This

trip wasn't business; but not holiday either. It might be more important than that. Nick caught a glimpse of the woman again as she sat down; but her smile, her face, was hidden behind the pages of her newspaper. *The Irish Times*. Her hands: long fingers; one ring. She seemed to kiss it. *Pretty*, he thought again. *Focus on something*.

The Irish Times: the *Times*, but its Irish version? *Like the Times of India I read that time in Delhi. Colonies, Ireland; but more than seventy years ago. Hasn't it earned its own title? Isn't the country entitled yet? Shit. What do I know anyway? About any of this. Nothing. Nothing. 'American Irish': me; but what the hell is that, exactly? The luck of the Irish: 'I should be so lucky'; isn't that Jewish? Oy-vey. Trouble; the troubles; trouble.*

Anne turned the pages, and held them back up in front of her again. Nick caught the glint of a necklace in the light.

So what about *my* Irish times, Nick thought, picking up his own copy from the table in front of him. He looked around at the other passengers, imagining Dublin, Dubliners, and this city that he had apparently visited once, as a child, but of which he now recalled nothing. *Home*, his parents had called it once; but Seattle is home. They left; they regretted nothing; over time, they became American. And that was how Nick thought of himself, proud American, saluting the flag every morning in school. *And yet, now, this Irish thing.*

Whenever Nick went on a sales trip to a place that he would be seeing for the first time, he took a glance at the city's newspapers. Most of the time, they were in

languages that he didn't understand; but the pictures let him know what was on the minds of the local people. Then he could use some allusion to that as a way of ingratiating himself – 'integrating himself', he preferred to call it. *That is the prelude to a sale. Sales is just selling yourself: if you can sell yourself, get people to buy into you as a person, take a share in you, then you can sell your product, no matter what it is: gadgets, cars, nuclear weapons, computers.* The thing is, though, the salesman has no self. *Prostitution: no kissing, coz that puts too much of the self in your mouth.* In sales, though, you speak their language, their tongue; they buy what you offer.

For too long now, Nick hadn't been selling anything. He had no language. Motion Computers Inc. was watching him, listening – hard, listening harder, more and more eagerly - to his disappearing voice, his emerging silence.

This trip was different, not business. Maybe the prelude to a permanent move away from home in Seattle: a chance, maybe a second chance. He knew it; but he hadn't yet managed to bring himself to think it, consciously. Avoiding trouble. He stared at the news pages, trying to familiarise himself with the names of politicians, wondering how you would pronounce 'Taoiseach', settling on something like 'Toy-sash' in his mind. The front-page story was about Tai-chi, Toys-ach, whatever, Albert Reynolds, visiting John Major, the British leader, in London for talks about a peace process. He had heard of Major, something about calling his own party bastards; obviously in trouble politically, attacking the people who should be his friends. *Civil war; at war with yourself, myself. But peace; wish I had some. I'm selling nothing; fucking silent on the sales pages.*

There was a page written almost entirely in Gaelic. He stared at it, dyslexic suddenly. *All vowels; no grit.* Around him, still, the braying of the successful, finding their prey, applauding themselves, loudly: 'For Christ's sake, Pat, just tell Jim to get off his fat arse and do it'; 'Twenty thousand? I've just done that into Mexican pesos, and now you're telling me it should be in yen after all? Listen: there are no second chances, got that? No second chances,' the speaker looking round him, like a prophet expecting applause for his proverb. Unearned authority, worn smugly, unaware of the fall that awaited them like the fulfilment of a prophecy.

Sheltering again from the noise of success, of commerce that was working, Nick's eye was caught by the photograph on the Arts pages. It was a half-page portrait of a composer whose music had been a huge success, not in Dublin but here in London. Beside it, running down an anorexically thin column at the left-hand side, was an interview with Frank Zappa, at the end of which Zappa talked reservedly about his impending death from prostate cancer. *It has spread to my bones.* 'Is it terminal?' the interviewer asked. *Everything is terminal,* said Zappa.

Everything is terminal; it just depends on where and when the terminus is at, thought Nick. He turned back to the photograph, and, as he stared at it, he thought it curiously familiar, troubling like an unwanted memory. He squashed the paper onto his knees and took out his wallet, checking to acquaint himself with the small amount of Irish currency that he had bought; and there she was again, this composer, the image drawn on the back of the five-pound note, sitting as a schoolgirl, hardened properly into the lined figure that revealed the firmness of her child's face, the money here as the hard consonant to the soft-focus blurrings of the *Times* picture. The portrait in the paper

could have been modelled on this little girl who sat at her school-desk, her book spread open before her, left hand holding it down, the long right index finger tracing the lines of script, with two other girls, friends perhaps, sitting daydreaming behind her. The girl's eyes were focused on the page she was reading, so that you couldn't see them (*and she can't see us either*, thought Nick; *Ireland's looking inwards*); but you could catch a glimpse of the edge of her smile. Nick went back to his paper, the five-pound note folded in his hand still. 'This', said the paper in the caption beneath the photograph, 'is the future of serious Irish music: Anne Elliott, the thirty-year-old composer from south Dublin, whose violin concerto, *Black Rain Falling*, was the success of the Proms in London this season'.

White looked around the lounge, as he got up to pour himself a drink. *Too early*, the voice in his head; *Shit, no; I've been on the road for fifteen hours; it's night-time here, inside*. He did his best to make himself a Bloody Mary: vodka and tomato juice, but no lemon juice, no shaker. He stirred slowly, watching the red deepen through the vodka. Burning like fire, like shame. Behind the little girl on the note, he had seen Lily, his daughter. *It would all have been different*, he thought. *Everything. I'm sorry, Lily. There are no second chances; and I took your first one from you*. He sat back down with his drink, telling himself he would let it settle. He would let everything settle. *Everything is terminal*.

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There was a commotion. A whisper turned into the susurrations of a name being passed from one to another. The barking softened and stilled, changing into something

like a chorus as the name was repeated. The rock star and his model wife walked across to the far corner, preceded by two bodyguards, bursting from suits whose formal beauty could not quite contain the brutishly exaggerated masculinity of the bodies. Like magic, like a miracle, there was a pathway driven between the groups of bemused people on two sides, as they walked to their seats. 'It's the Red Sea,' said the star. When they sat down, the guards stood before them, facing back out to the crowd. They looked bored.

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Anne never usually read the reviews of her work; there weren't many anyway. But the concert had been such a success, this all so new, that she felt thrilled still. They had called her to the stage to take the applause. It was Tillie, her agent, who made her go out. 'Go on,' she said, 'Take Sir Michael's hand. He'll show you what to do.' The conductor, all satisfied smiles, led her out to the stage before letting go of her hand and stepping back, setting her alone as if offering her up before the audience, who were now all on their feet, applauding and stamping. Her habit was to prefer privacy.

On the stage, her head bowed, seen by the audience but somehow not seeing them, she caught a memory of her teacher. Mr Briggs had always stressed the importance of a cold detached impersonality, had insisted that she efface herself: 'You're just the vehicle that the music uses to get itself brought from the skies of inspiration to the earthly human ear; you're the instrument, like a harp across whose strings the spirits of music, in the air itself, can be allowed to breathe and so to sing. You're the tympanum, struck by the Muses, so that they can be heard by lesser mortals. Always

remember that: you must never get in the way of the music.’ Hiding while revealing; hiding yourself while letting someone else sing through you.

Whatever you say, say nothing. Especially here, especially now, an Irish woman in London. At this time.

Now her hand moved to her neck, where she played with a chain on which hung a second ring, a wedding ring, not her own. In the first interviews after the concert, two of the journalists had interrupted the questions about her music, insistent, hostile, asking about the release last year of the Birmingham Six and the acquittal of the Maguire Seven. *Don't you think the Six should have remained in jail until the IRA tells us who did plant the bombs? Have you anything to say to the widow of Ian Gow, the democratically elected MP killed by Irish bombers?* She had not responded, not knowing how to speak to these. She could only answer the musical questions, about her much-celebrated ‘return to melody’, ‘revival of classical and romantic harmony’, ‘is your music bearing the tradition of Gaelic minstrelsy, Irish song?’ and she looked to Tillie for guidance when the Irish question turned to politics and the Troubles. Tillie put her finger to her lips; and she bowed her head, not responding.

As her finger slipped in and out of the ring, now, her mind wandered away from the present, from the discord of noise, and she was by the lake at Glendalough, first hiding among the shrubbery, then skimming stones at the water's edge, smiling at her father as he swam towards the middle of the water where it was deep and dark. He looked happy, she remembered. They had watched the waterfall in the distance, and he had dared her to swim right across the lake to it. He, too, had taken her by the hand

and then let go, to stand herself alone. 'Swim to the waterfall.' She knew it was a joke; but when he got into the water himself, she knew it was for real. He was for real. She loved him then. He loved her mother. Those days are gone, except in the memory that sings out the melody that went unheard at the time itself, an echoing memory that makes the best days of the past more real than they ever could have been, unremembered. She tucked the ring on her neck-chain back under the collar of her shirt.

She turned the page quickly, feeling suddenly embarrassed, narcissistic, sensing the presence of another traveller. As he sat beside her, his body weight sinking into the sofa, the cushion under her lifted her up. She re-settled herself, momentarily putting the newspaper aside to sip again from her coffee, making her movement seem intended, natural. It was the man who had almost knocked her over as she had entered. He had come back in, and was now putting his boarding card into his inside pocket and fumbling with his outsize briefcase, one of those that doubles as a suitcase. He mumbled, acknowledging her presence, not making eye contact, instead staring at her hand on her neck, and her breasts, before turning back to his briefcase and pulling out some papers, flattening down his tie, loud red silk, against his distended stomach, the stripes on his shirt like uneven waves. He rested a pair of spectacles on his stomach, where they sat, perched like a sea-bird on a rock, watching, watching without eyes.

Anne laid the paper down and sipped at her coffee, staring straight ahead, but unseeing; and the phrase that she had composed as the central leitmotif of *Black Rain Falling*, a phrase that she associated with her mother, came into her head. It was a

simple melody, that she had modified from a similar phrase in Gluck's *Orfeo ed Eurydice*, and in it Anne heard a voice saying something like 'I can't go back, I must move on, I can only go forwards, onwards, even if the place I'll come to is an echo of what went before, its repetition, it can't be exactly the same, nothing can ever be the same, and I'll be damned so if I look back'.

Melody: even her detractors – 'Elliott is resolutely anti-modern', an affronted *Guardian* said, 'either that or just gloriously, defiantly naïve'; 'she writes as if she has never understood what went before', said James Atkins in *The Times* – even these would-be detractors acknowledged how sweetly memorable her gift for lyric melody was, 'a certain joy emerging from melancholy, as if sadness is but a veil for the most intimate of pleasures; and maybe that's love, maybe what we see in this music is the expression of love,' said Libby Tompkins in *Gramophone*.

This *is* modern, Anne told herself: I'm *not* looking back. *Behind me is what I need to escape, no matter how hard it draws me: Julia, Julia. How seductive you are; but the past only ever looks like a perfection, and never actually is. There is always a blemish, somewhere: oh, Julia.*

Nick sat back in his seat, shuffling his fiver back into his wallet, staring now at the map of Dublin centre printed on the back of the ten-pound note. As long as you have a tenner, you can't get lost in Dublin. If you're sober, you read the map; if not, it'll buy a drink for someone who'll see you home all right. They were calling the flight.

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Anne followed Nick aboard the plane, where she found herself in a double seat, paired with the large businessman who had sat beside her in the lounge and whose elbows now invaded her space, large arms falling over even these broad seats, big legs in too-tight suit-trousers seeming to swallow up any room that Anne might have felt before her. She put on her headphones and switched on her cassette. She listened attentively to the song sung by the rock star who was sitting a few rows ahead.

On the other side of the aisle sat Nick, no one beside him, staring out of the window and seeing reflected there not his own face but the faces of his family in Seattle. Lily. He repeated to himself, as he always did now, that the accident had not been his fault. *I'm not responsible for it.* That was what he had taken from his analysis sessions with Dr Mostyn. 'Arguments happen in families. They have a force and energy that drive onwards until things get out of control. If you're not in control, not in control of the car, then what happens is not your fault. If you forgot to put the seatbelt on when you put Lily into her seat, well, that was because of the anger you felt at Joan. You were not in control; so it was not your fault. Joan should not have goaded you. But it was not her fault either. She wasn't even there in the accident; how could it be her fault? And Lily was the victim, innocent, too young; not her fault.' Mostyn was good: expensive, but good. He made it possible for Nick to go on. Lily would go on, too, but not as before, never again as before; but it was not his fault.

And this? Was he now miming the leaving of them? Joan had threatened to leave before, and to take Lily with her; but the accident had changed things. And the terrible

argument a few days before he left; nearly a repetition of the night with Lily, menacing Joan by taking Dan out in the car, in anger, at midnight. Was Nick now miming something that had not yet been done, but that would be? Making a moment that he would later identify, saying 'there it was' or 'it was then that I made the decision'? Making a memory of something before he had experienced it?

The plane moved on the runway, and Nick felt the pressure in his back as the engines thrust forward. He gripped the arms of his seat, tight.

He tried to concentrate on other things. Joan. Joan is my wife. She is beautiful. Things aren't always perfect. But. She and I have two lovely children. Lily first: unbearable to think about, but lovely. Dan: Dan is more troublesome. Dr Aschenbach says that he suffers from hyper-active attention deficit disorder. *What's that?* we asked; and Aschebnach tried to alleviate the thing with a joke: It's the only disease that you can have and not ever know you have it, for the name of the disease is so long that the patient can never pay attention long enough to what the doctor says when he gives you the diagnosis. *Not very funny; not funny at all.* That's why they started calling it 'add'; that sounds less harmful, apart from anything else. Add is what you do at school – only if you've got add, you don't. Dan certainly doesn't. He subtracts; he takes away; he takes things, steals things. Have I done right? Is it me to blame after all? Genes? I've maybe not been a good father, or even a good husband for that matter. But Joan and me? Together? Still? Joan is my wife. *She is beautiful. Things aren't always perfect. But.*

‘Christ!’ the big man across the aisle wheezed, half under his breath, shuffling the papers on his knees into a messy pile, bringing Nick back to himself. The man smiled across at him.

‘That’s it,’ stuffing the papers into his bag. ‘Everything up in the air. Can’t work now. No point.’

‘Sure thing,’ replied Nick. He hated it when people spoke to him on planes. Usually, if he could get an upgrade to First Class, he took it. In there, everybody was always alone. In First, the rule was that you didn’t speak to anyone. That’s why you travel First. But there was no First Class on this short-haul – hardly even Club.

‘Here on business?’ the fat man asked, having detected the real thing of an American accent on Nick’s tongue.

‘Yeah, but private business.’

‘Oh yeah?’ inviting the conversation.

Shit. After the briefest of pauses, too brief to be registered, ‘Yep. Turns out I’ve inherited something of Ireland.’

‘Yeah?’ turning awkwardly to face Nick across the aisle, ‘an inheritance, huh? Irish American?’

‘Yeah, I guess so. An uncle of mine farmed there, someplace called Rathnew, Wicklow Mountains somewhere. D’you know it?’

A shrug.

‘Well, anyways, he died about two months back. Turns out I’m the only surviving relative. So it looks like I might have a new business: farming. I need to go and see about inheriting a farm.’ He laughed at the madness of it all, and looked away again, back through the window. Below, he saw the Thames as the plane banked to make its

turn in the direction of Ireland. He recognised it from all the circling he had done when they landed this morning.

‘Christ!’ said the fat man again. ‘You’ve landed lucky, then.’

‘Well...’

‘Christ! Sorry! Your uncle. I didn’t mean. It’s just that...well... Christ!’

Nick laughed. ‘No worries. I hardly knew him. It seems nobody did. Nick White,’ he said, reaching across the aisle to shake hands.

‘Bill Jackson. Computing.’

‘Computing? No. Me, too.’

‘Christ! Really?’

‘Yeah. Sales. Not a good time right now.’

‘When is it ever? You gonna sell the farm?’ said Jackson, slipping into the casualness of an American intonation.

‘I don’t know. Yeah, I guess so. Unless I quit it all and become a farmer.’ He smiled laconically, as if testing the phrase in his mouth: ‘unless I become a tiller of the soils, guardian of the earth.’

‘Yeah,’ replied Jackson, laughing too. ‘Christ, that’d be a good idea – for me, I mean. Christ, just think what you could do.’ His voice lower, ‘Get away from this fucking crap. Selling computers. Christ! Caused me a hassle when I was trying to get checked in. And here’s me, trying to sell the fucking things.’

Christ was invoked like inverted commas at the start or end of every sentence from Bill Jackson. Nick relaxed into his jet-lag as they talked over the new developments in software. Windows; brilliant. We should just make it the industry standard. World-wide. Save all the hassle. Get rid of the fucking competition. Nick was surprised at

hearing so much profanity, first in the lounge and now on the plane. I thought these people were all staunch Catholics, not given to swearing. But Bill's English. I wonder if it's hard for him in Ireland? The plane juddered suddenly, and the seat-belt light came on again.

'Christ almighty!' said Bill. 'I hate travel. Always in transit. Christ all-bloody-mighty!'

Anne hadn't noticed the seat-belt light coming on. The flight attendant, passing to check everyone, reached towards her, indicating the belt. Anne looked up, and took her headphones off. 'Sorry, didn't hear the announcement,' she said, and belted herself in.

Nick looked past Bill, and his eyes lingered again on that woman from the lounge, playing with the ring on her necklace. He was amused by Bill's casual profanities. Christ in transit. How long did it take for Christ to die? How would you die just from getting nails in your hands and feet? Nick remembered asking this when he was a child, when he was still a believer, and it being explained to him by the Jesuit teacher in his class that the nails went into the wrists first of all, not the palms of the hands, and that the feet would be supported, so that the body would not just fall off the cross, dragged down by its own weight, the nails just ripping through the flesh as the body fell. It had to hang, as if in air, the body in suspension between living and dying for as long as possible; and gradually, with the arms held up, and the body weight pulling down, it would become harder and harder for the lungs to expand properly, so that the person crucified would gradually be less and less able to hold themselves up, to hoist

their chest enough to get a proper breath, and so would gradually, very slowly, suffocate. It was a slow hanging, held in air, aloft and above the ground, above the ground that he could now see outside the window, falling further and further away.

He looked back out at the Thames below. He could see its sinuous, woven lines, drifting across the fields like a thread lost from a patterned coat somewhere, unnoticed when you dropped it from the coat, but visible now on the floor, worn, wearing away, and irritating you with the thought that you would never be able to stitch it back in to its proper position, that somehow the coat was damaged, ever so slightly, not the perfect item that you thought you had bought. *Vague memory of something: I made my song a coat. Some poet or other. Take off your coat.*

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‘Take off your coat’, said Joan, as Emily came into the kitchen. It was warm. Walking out of doors in Seattle was like trying to keep moving while you had a warm wet sponge permanently masking your face. The sleep-depriving humidity was literally maddening. Emily had been to the market, and had picked up Joan’s groceries too. She often helped out when Joan had to collect Dan from school, while also taking care of Lily.

‘Coat?’ she said. ‘What’re you saying? I ain’t in my coat, honey? It’s thirty-five out there today?’ Emily spoke in questions.

Joan laughed. ‘A moment of inattention,’ she said, turning back to the shallots she was preparing. ‘My mind’s elsewhere. I was just thinking about Nick.’

‘How’s that all going, Joan? After the funeral and all that stuff? I’m sorry...’

‘Nick didn’t go to the funeral,’ said Joan. ‘He didn’t even really know his Uncle Patrick. But he’s there now, dealing with the will and all that.’

‘Yeah. That farm stuff? Inheritance?’

‘Yep; on his way to being a farmer.’ She looked up, ‘Looks like it, sure enough, now,’ said Joan, trying out her cod-Irish accent. It was unconvincing; and Joan was unconvinced. Emily didn’t realise it was a joke, didn’t know the accent.

‘So what are you going to do, Joannie?’ said Emily, picking out some fresh salad from her bag and immediately tearing some of it into her mouth. ‘Mmm-muh. Radicchio. Try this?’

Joan wiped her hands and dabbed at her eyes, watering from the shallots. ‘I’ve no idea. Anyway, it’s more a question of what Nick’s going to do.’

‘Meaning? Mm, spicy, peppery.’

‘Meaning that... Nothing... Meaning that he’ll make his own decisions I guess.’

‘Decisions? About what?’

‘Well, about the future. About Ireland.’

‘Well, he’s surely not giving everything here up and going to live in *Ireland*, is he?’ said Emily, incredulous. Ireland was as foreign as Pluto to her. ‘He’ll sell it? Yeah? Make you all rich so that you can buy something big here. Get some money so you can buy in some help for Lil?’ She tore another leaf, passing it to Joan.

‘Yeah, I guess that’s what would make sense. But I don’t know. Nick’s been funny about it. Starting to look into his Irish heritage, tracing lines and all that.’ She laid the torn leaf on the table. ‘You know. Discovering family, history: “who I really am”,’ and her fingers wrote the invisible quotation marks in the air.

‘Natch, honey. I would, too, I guess? I mean, if I suddenly found out I was Lithuanian or something, I suppose I’d want to know about it. But just for interest? Nothing more

serious. I mean, going to Lithuania? Who in their right mind? No, I'm staying here. Seattle. The US of A. Not that I am Lithuanian anyway? American.' She was picking out a radish.

'Nick's talking about giving things up, Em.'

'Giving things up? What's that about? Hey, Joannie, just try this salad? It's delish. Nothing better. That grocer down in the Port District; hhhmm, hhhh-uh. Y'know? The young guy in *Lettuce Play*. He's pretty delicious too. Gets the juices flowing. Giving up what?'

'This. Here. To go to Ireland. Live there.'

'What? *Ireland?* *Living* in Ireland? No way? Ain't that where all those troubles are? Terrorists and stuff?'

Joan laughed. 'It's more complicated than that. That's the north. The farm's well away from all that. In the south. The republic. It's a separate country. And anyway, things are getting settled. The troubles there might be over. There's a peace process starting. So Nick told me anyway.' She paused. 'Nick's thinking about starting over again. Finding his roots. All of that stuff. "A new start", he's calling it. For him.'

'But Joannie. I mean, Jeez. Give up this? What the hell would *you* do in Ireland? And Lily? Dan?'

'Emily.' A pause. 'Emily. We're not having it so good right now.' She paused again and sat down at the table, pushing the salad away and resting her elbows. 'It's *Nick* who's talking about this, not *us*. Just him. Emily,' and she looked up before covering her eyes with her hands, 'Oh, Em. I'm worried that he might not come back.'

'Oh, honey. Of course he will. Why d'you say that? He's just sorting out paperwork? From the lawyers? It's just like his usual business-trips.'

'We had a bit of an argument last week.'

‘Well, hell, honey. Jim and I have arguments all the time. Marriage ain’t marriage without a bit of friction. If you’re lucky, it’s under the sheets; but sometimes it ain’t. Keeps the wheels going, though, Joannie. And making up again is always... uh-huh, uh-huh... you know? Jim likes to *please* me when we’ve made up after a row, know what I’m saying?’

Joan stared at the table, then at her hands, trying to let Emily know it was serious, not run-of-the-mill trivia. She looked steadily at Emily to get her mindful attention, and then she said, ‘This wasn’t an argument like any of the others. We both said things we probably shouldn’t have. And you know, it’s like the genie: once those things are said, they can’t be unsaid. You can’t get them back into the bottle, can’t make them unheard again. It’s one of those irritating songs that plays again and again in your head. “I should be so lucky”. Something real stupid. Over and over. It sticks.’

Emily looked into the lounge, where Dan was watching TV. Lily was in her wheelchair in the corner, her head propped up by its cushion, her hands laid out flat on the table that was attached to the chair. Emily went over to the TV, turned it up a little, and went over to Lily’s side. She stopped and took the towel that was beside the chair, and wiped away the liquids that were dribbling from Lily’s open mouth. Lily looked at her, uncomprehending. Emily went back into the kitchen and closed the door over.

‘Leave it open,’ said Joan, instinctively.

‘They’re OK, Joannie. I’ve settled them both. They’re fine.’ She had stopped asking questions. She went to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of white wine. It had already

been opened and was three-quarters full. 'We're having some of this,' she said. She inspected the bottle: 'Some *more* of this.' She smiled at Joan. 'It's Californian. Delish. Nothing better. And you're going to tell me what you said, and what he said.'

They drank a glass and Emily took Joan's hand while she talked.

* * * *

In transit. Who would have thought that there could be so much green field, so many trees, around London? The water seemed to have burst over the banks at points, inundating some of the green, blurring its edges, reasserting the power of the water to take over at any time, as if telling Nick of his own fragility here in the air. Too much work, too many papers to be read and filed, too many contacts to be maintained, too much to do. His time was as cramped as his space. Suffocating. But Bill Jackson was right: can't work here. Time's in suspense. In transit: in-between things. The jam in the sandwich; but the jam's the best bit, what makes it worth eating. In transit is in reality. This is what's real; this here, this now. Nothing else.

Big Bill over here. Nice guy. Fat bastard. I'll bet he does whatever the fuck he wants to do. He might be fat, but I'll bet he knows what he likes, and that he gets it, too. Eats the jam. I don't see him running after too many people, watching out for them, *caring*. I care too much. I'm lost; don't know who I am, what I want any more.

I care too much about what Joan said. It was just the heat of the argument. She can't have meant it. Joan; with him; no, no. Something else. Not betrayal, not back then. Let me think about something else.

Where do we go from here? What do I *want* to do? What do *I* want to do? Forty, out-of-shape, out of kilter; my great future behind me. Look at me, holding my gut in; and Fat Bill, couldn't give a shit. But he's probably selling. And me? Fucked. *I don't think I can go back.* That voice in his head again. *Your heart's not in the game any more. At least Bill cares. "Christ!" No, you can't do this; but where do you go from here?*

I know nothing about how to do a farm. I can't do that. Or can I? Can't be that much to it. You just buy a few cows and sheep, stick them in a field, watch them get big, and then sell them; buy some more. God, I don't even know if Patrick did that kind of farming, or whether it was crops. He went over again in his head the letter he had from the lawyers. No, that didn't make it clear either.

Poor Patrick. No one was at the funeral. No one at all. Nick knew he should have gone, but he hadn't gone. And *that* was the start of it, the start of his asserting himself, asserting that he had a self, was a self. That; not the argument with Joan. When he had decided against going to bury Patrick, he was saying for the first time that he wasn't beholden to anyone else. Had he gone, he would have been going just for form's sake, or for Patrick: a name, a name of a man whom he couldn't even remember. But, with the sudden cruelty of realising that for once, he, Nick, could be someone, could say *I* and feel that he inhabited the word, he decided No. And it had been liberating. *As*

liberating as lifting the gun and pulling the trigger. As liberating as driving off at high speed, Lily in the front. As liberating as anger.

* * * *

Across from him, squashed into her place, Anne declined everything that the flight attendant offered except mineral water. After that first interview, Tillie made sure that the rest would skirt around the fraught questions, limiting themselves to asking about other contemporary Irish composers or possible influences on Anne's work from the history of Irish music. Tillie had insisted that there be no political questions raised. Just as well, since Anne would not have had any answers. She had learned how to live the political situation without describing it. If the description was in her music, then so be it; but she hadn't put it there. Except that she had been moved to vote a year or so back, adding to the many voices of women who had supported Mary Robinson and made her the first ever woman President of Ireland. She still shivered with pleasure when she recalled the President's first address, informal and impromptu, to *Mná nà Eireann* – the women of Ireland. If *Black Rain Falling* had any political import, it was related to that; for in writing it, Anne had thought constantly of her mother.

She had silently dedicated the concerto 'to the memory of my mother'. It was a kind of secret dedication. Anyone seeing it would immediately assume that Anne's mother was dead; but not even Anne knew that for sure. In Anne's memory was the picture of a beautiful woman, whose small and delicate facial features – hauntingly deep brown eyes, slight but high cheek bones, smooth skin and full lips, a tiny freckling over the

bridge of the nose, like a juvenile bird – belied the sheer sensual strength of the person. Julia Elliott had slipped from Anne’s view when Anne was a child, and still unable to process the determining event that is the fact of life or of death.

Julia frequently disappeared for a few days; and so, this time, at first, Anne just thought that she had gone off for a bit longer than usual - ‘to visit an aunt’, she was told; but then, as days became weeks and weeks months, she became accustomed to the vacancy at home and started to forget to ask about when her Mum would be back. During those days, she had started to live with her grandmother, Mairead – Mammy – and there, she started to realise that it was not the done thing anymore to ask about when her Mum would return. Gradually, she realised that she wouldn’t. And when, after a year or so, her father also died, she and her sister, Caroline, just adapted to their new parents, Mammy and Grandpa.

But now, Mammy’s memory was dying too. Soon, Mammy wouldn’t be able to tell Anne anything about Julia, even if she herself really knew what had become of her. Mairead now lived in a nursing home in Burwash, in the Sussex countryside. Two days after the concert, Anne went to visit her.

‘Hello, Mammy,’ she said.

‘.....’

‘How are you today? It’s me, Anne. I’ve been in London. They played a piece.’

‘....’

‘Can I get you some tea?’

‘Tea, yes. No milk.’

Mairead stared at Anne. Anne hoped she was concentrating and trying to stir the embers of the faded coal that was a memory. A flicker, then nothing again. The nurse, who hadn't left the room, busied herself at the table in the corner, pouring milk into two cups, all the while keeping a watchful eye on Mairead.

'Has Caroline been to see you this week?'

'No. No-one comes.'

'Now that's not so, Mairead,' interrupted the nurse, bringing tea to Anne and putting a beaker with its lid on carefully on the table that was slung over Mairead's bed.

'Caroline was here just three days ago. She brought you that lovely chocolate cake.'

'....'

Anne sipped her tea, and made to put the beaker between her grandmother's lips.

'Too hot,' Mairead said, her voice rising suddenly, hands jerking into life. 'You're trying to scald me.'

'Sorry, Mammy,' said Anne. *Oh, Mammy, come back; come back to me*, she thought.

But Mairead was going, following her memory into an eternity of silent solitude, frightening. She started to talk, rambling wildly, occasionally dropping to a whisper, or pointing a finger; but Anne didn't know to whom this was all being addressed. A voice going out, from the dark and back into the dark, with only the merest hint of lucidity in between. A flicker, surrounded by growing shadow.

'It was there, over there, against that wall thing; not a wall, a railing. They were looking out to sea. Andrew was there. That's when it started. I've a daughter. She left me. There were two nasty children with her. They ate the chocolate. Stole it from me.'

A pause, and Anne tried to offer the tea again. Then Mairead went on. 'No tea. I don't want tea. It's got milk in it. I don't drink milk. Those children. Bastards. They're bastards, you know.' She looked at Anne.

Caroline, Anne's sister, lived near to the nursing home. Mairead had stayed with Caroline and her partner, Jack, for a number of years before it all became too much for them to cope with. Jack was increasingly frustrated at her presence; and Caroline had started to feel that her own children, Sean and Aíne, needed her full attention. That was how it came about that they found the home for Mairead. They had never married, so when Mairead called Sean and Aíne bastards, Anne hoped that she was just being literal. Mairead's voice was getting quieter, whispering now. 'Bastards,' she repeated, 'they stole the chocolate. Little bastards. At the coast, with Andrew.'

Mairead lay back on her pillow and closed her eyes. She hadn't recognised Anne at all. Anne sat beside the bed, holding her grandmother's hand. As she tried to interlace fingers, she had a sense of a broken bridge between the two women, a fissure into which Julia had fallen. She tried to imagine the presence of Julia, as if cupped protectively in the space between her own palm and the now fragile near translucent skin of Mammy. Then, after a little while, she got up, thanked the nurse, and left. 'I'm going now, Mammy. I'm going home; but I'll come back and see you again, soon.' She kissed her grandmother's forehead, then her hand; and she laid it back down, gently, over the sheet. Mairead was asleep. *Julia. For your memory; for my memory of you. A black rain is falling, darker than a black sun, and in the rain as it falls is love.*

Anne sipped at her water. She was aware again of the weight of the man beside her, he too now straining to look out of the window. She leant her head back, to let him see. He acknowledged her kindness and looked out, only briefly, before saying to her, 'Ms Elliott, isn't it? I was at the Prom last week. A splendid piece. Thank you for it.' Anne felt confused and embarrassed. 'That's most kind of you to say.' 'One of the best pieces I've ever heard premiered at the Proms,' he went on, smiling, himself a little embarrassed at what he now felt to be his forwardness, an invasion of Anne's privacy. 'Christ knows it's not often that you get a chance to thank an artist in person – so I thought I would.' Anne smiled, and felt warmer towards the man. Who was she to go judging people just by sight, by first impressions? Who was she to think so judgementally of this man, whom she had considered a monster just an hour before, now seeing that he had an aesthetic sense, a love for beauty, a tenderness no doubt, and a gentle modesty in his addressing himself to her?

And her mother, too; Anne had been judgemental towards her. *Behind me is what I need to escape. Julia.* Always judging her, at least in her mind if not also in her heart. Don't. People can surprise you; always remember, she thought to herself. *There is a humility and a humanity to be remembered at all times; to be human is to be related to the earth itself, to be earth-bound, to share the land, the terrain, the very soil that yields itself to us.* And, as the plane came in to land, she turned her head away from the window, just in time to catch the look of apprehension on the face of Nick White sitting opposite, staring ahead.

Chapter 2

September 1992, six days later, Dublin

The note was badly written, but she was shaken by it. 'We'll make you leave the Holy Ground of Ireland you need to no that theres a death threat on your Head. the more you conspire with the Hereticks over, the quicker it wil be. Go. Go, or face you future here. there is no future here. For you. Heathen. Music is for the glorey of God, not for your fame. Fear us. We no where you are.' It had been thrust through the letterbox sometime during the night. It wasn't the first such note she had received, but the fact that it had been hand-delivered was new; and it frightened her. It meant they knew where she lived, and were prepared to come to her door. The house felt polluted suddenly.

She was not fooled either by the spelling errors, designed to help anonymise the thing. Opus Dei, clear as day. Until today, they had been mostly a harmless irritant. Anne saw a crowd of troubled individuals, perverted by a religious fanaticism parading as pious fervour. She imagined them as people who were terrified of the liberating power of pleasure, especially bodily pleasure. *The illness caused by repression, of sexual repression, of their bodies. I love my body.* She repeated it as if it were a mantra to ward off death itself. *I love my body, and its secret.* The authors of her note also adored the body, but only if the body was in pain: they would celebrate suffering, venerating the afflicted almost idolatrously. Theirs was a pathological interest in wounds, suffering or disabilities: their pious attention to all this being a terrible

deviation of desire. She knew that their founder was famed for self-flagellation: *bad sex*.

And they were the vocal but subtle minority who could terrorise the reflective with their myths and superstitions. Their ostentatious piety gave them *carte blanche* to bend the will of others to their perverted desire. ‘And death-threats, now,’ said Anne, aloud but to herself, staring still at the note.

For several years, before she started to receive the commissions that were now coming in, she supplemented her income by regular teaching. She took some classes in University College Dublin from time to time, and gave private lessons and master-classes to some extremely gifted youngsters. While in UCD, she was asked by a radical student group to take part in a debate about the arts in Ireland. It seemed like one of the harmless student debates that happen all the time; but it was important enough a topic for her to agree to do it. And these were accursed times – what the Chinese called ‘interesting’ – a moment when people were sensing the free air of change, a spirit of revolt flying, sprite-like, through the air, taking form in debates, pamphlets, the eruption of new voices. She knew why she had been asked. It wasn’t just because she was a musician. Her views on abortion – that women had the right to control their own bodies – were well known, even if she didn’t make a big thing of it. The students would be counting on her to take a radical stance of some kind. All she knew was that she would be standing up for the arts as the bringer of sensuous freedom.

Her views – what her Department called her dangerous radicalism - had become public knowledge because of another event, related directly to her music. She had been invited to write the incidental music for a theatre piece, *Bless me, Father*, that had been put on in The Dublin Pavilion, one of the smaller theatrical venues in the city, known for its daring programming. Its name was intended as an irony, because the pavilion was actually nothing more than a small room, above a sleazy pub in the unfashionable north side of the river. The audience was a bizarre mixture of intellectuals and drunks, who appreciated the late opening hours more than the plays.

‘Daring’, at the Pavilion, usually meant ‘foreign’ plays, occasionally containing hints of the liberalities of nudity, and thus attracting the interest – for moral reasons only - of the Gardaí and the conservative factions among the critics. One such critic was Con O’Briain, a professor of Art History in UCD who took it upon himself to act as the guardian of public taste. His newspaper column – its catch-phrase, ‘they call it modern, but they mean immoral’ - was notorious. The Pavilion was happy to feed his habit.

The play that Anne had scored was written by Gerry Flaherty, an unusually quiet north-sider, his hinterland marked by poverty. He was fashionably skinny, his face lean but distinguished by eyes that were of an extraordinary light blue, so lacking-in-pigment blue he had to wear dark glasses much of the time. His play detailed a story of sexual abuse by a Catholic priest, carried out systematically over a period of years, terrorising a small rural community. Anne was drawn to the obvious drama – but more importantly, she was occasionally sleeping with Gerry.

The UCD debate took place in the largest Arts auditorium on campus. Five hundred there. On her side was the eminent left-leaning newspaper columnist, Ristead Lawrence; but, as she stepped onto the stage, she saw O'Briain opposite her, being introduced by the student chair as 'the scourge of anything new'. Next to him sat Fr Seamus Twomey, a priest who had been arrested recently while taking part in an anti-abortion rally in Cork. The allegation against him was that he had smashed the windows of a doctor's private home. He didn't deny it, saying that a smashed window could be repaired, but an aborted foetus was irrevocable and unforgivable. Twomey waved cheerfully at the audience as they jeered when his name was mentioned.

This wasn't really about the arts in Ireland at all: it was a skirmish in the struggle being fought by some who feared that romantic Ireland was dead and gone and with O'Leary in the grave. Twomey and O'Briain were die-hard traditionalists, determined to resist any form of cultural modernity, seeing it as a threat to embedded power, especially their own. Twomey had preached a well-publicised sermon against Gerry, one that led to demonstrations outside the Pavilion against *Bless me, Father*, people saying decades of the rosary and praying for the soul of the author and all who were associated with the play.

This evening, they both concentrated their attack on Anne, personally. As a woman, she had no place in the arts, for her body was made for the bearing of children. *And who are we to go against God's divine intentions, his great plan and design?* This was O'Briain's theme. What could she know about music; could she name one decent female composer in the history of the musical canon? Modern composition is all dissonance and discord; and the reason for that is that the natural order of things

socially was being disrupted. O’Briain misquoted Ulysses from *Troilus and Cressida*, saying that a woman assuming the role of cultural leader was an affront to social order, to what he called the natural degree of things: “‘O, when degree is shaken, Which is the ladder of all high designs, the enterprise is sick. Take but degree away, *Untune that string...*’ and he paused, staring right at Anne, “‘...then hark what discord follows”. I give you the music of Miss Elliott. *Untuned*. She and her kind are leading us away from the true and proper paths of our fulfilment. We are a special people, chosen to lead, by the arts if need be, to lead others into the path of right understanding of human truths...’

‘...yes, Con; paths of righteousness...’ the whispering-aloud voice of Twomey agreeing.

‘And as for that disgrace of a theatre piece that she contributed to. Honestly. They call it modern,’ and the audience duly obliged, laughing as they chanted ‘but they mean immoral!’. O’Briain went on, ignoring the irony, ‘Is there no-one left in this country – in this lecture-hall or this University – who will defend normal sexuality, normal sexual behaviour any more?’ Another delighted roar went up from the students. It was panto, but O’Briain was serious, angry and almost beside himself, stomping now across the stage and coming right towards Anne. Ristead saw his chance, and intervened with a point of order, saving Anne, had he known it, from the revelation that she saw coming, about her sleeping with Gerry.

‘Normal sex?’ he asked. ‘What would that be, exactly, Professor O’Briain? Could you show us, maybe?’ A loud harrumph from Twomey. ‘Or maybe, now, *you* could show

us, Father Twomey, given what we know happens, given what Gerry Flaherty has revealed for us.’ Twomey stood up, red in the face; more whoops from the audience. Ristead waved him back to his seat, and went on, turning to the auditorium, ‘I’d have thought that sex was probably the one moment when we have the privilege – and *it is a privilege* - of abandoning normality totally. What’s “normal” about sex at all? All I know is that if my sexual behaviour was “normal”, my lover would be the first to complain. Normal? Boring, more like; inattentive to the body of your lover; inattentive to your basic humanity.’ A cheer echoed round the hall, and the Lesbian and Gay Society thrust their flag high in the air near the back. Ristead was finishing triumphantly, quoting the marriage vow, ‘With my *body* I thee worship,’ he said, ‘Read the Psalms; read the Song of Songs. Better still, read *Bless me, father*; and listen to the music of Anne Elliott. Anyone who calls it “untuned” can’t have been listening to it. It’s pure melody, the essence of pure tune itself.’ And he sat down to cheers and applause.

Later, when Anne saw Twomey’s menacing grin and wagging finger pointing at her at the end of the debate – which she and Ristead won hands down - she knew that she had been targeted. And the notes and threats started soon after that. At first, it was a student walking out of a lecture and sending a note of complaint to the Dean, anonymously. An anonymous letter, taken from the pages of the *Irish Times*, cut out and sent to her office, proclaiming that it would be legally and medically entirely legitimate to have a complete ban on abortion without posing any threat to the mother and, scribbled below it, the word ‘murderer’. Then, a letter that circulated in multiple copies around the staff, complaining, with falsifications, about the quality of her teaching. Anne was the only colleague who didn’t receive a copy; so when she

eventually saw it, she was put in a position where she felt that her colleagues must have been talking about her behind her back.

Then, she was alone. Gerry was no longer around. His daily phone calls to his mother, 'just to check she's all OK', turned into daily visits; and then he moved back in with her. Anne had been amazed, but began to re-think her own relations with men: were they all as infantile, at root, as Gerry? *Apron strings. Maybe the sex had been too normal*; Ristead's words had stayed with her. *Interesting man*; she should keep in contact with him. In any event, now she had no one at hand with whom she could share her frustrations. Isolation was part of the Opus Dei tactics, she knew; and she couldn't help feeling betrayed by Gerry as well.

One evening, a month after the debate, she went out alone to the city centre to see a film. On her way back to her car, she noticed that its bonnet had been lifted, exposing the engine. She had no idea whether the engine had been tampered with, or if something dangerous had been done. She left the car untouched, took the bus home, and rang a garage the following morning. The mechanic handed her the note that had been tucked under the windscreen. 'You're a disgrace. Go to England. Go back where you belong. The mark on your body is the mark of Cain. You are tainted.' Nothing else. *Who else knows about my blemish? The mark on my body; my secret? Who, other than Gerry? But he's not in with these people, surely. Surely?*

Then a series of similar notes, always anonymous, always left for her in UCD. Once, the day before she was to conduct a concert, she was woken at about 1 a.m. by the ringing of the phone. Gradually realising that it was actually ringing, not a part of her

dream, she rubbed her eyes and got up. When she picked up the phone from its cradle in the hallway, the line went dead. No one was there. She went back to bed. At about 1.45, the same thing; then again at 3. This time, she waited up, watching, her lights off. Despite herself, she dozed in the chair by the window, woken again at 4.30, this time with muted voices when she lifted the receiver. At 5, it rang again, but this time only twice, just enough to waken her again. Finally, she got some sleep; but the damage had been done. The concert was fine after all; but her confidence was shaken.

After this, there had been a welcome period of silence from her tormentors, until this morning. She stared again at the note, wondering if she should report it. *But who to?*

She started at the sudden ringing of her doorbell. 'Who is it?' she shouted.

'It's me,' came the voice back to her, the mouth at the letterbox.

'Who?'

'It's me. Sean.'

'Sean?'

What was Sean Gallagher doing, coming to see her, at home like this?

'Just a moment,' she shouted. She wrought her face into the forcing of hospitality, and opened the door. 'Sean. Hi,' she said, 'I didn't know you know where I live,' she said.

'Can I come in?'

'Yes, sure, of course. Please,' and she closed the door behind him.

'I got the address from the Central Administration. I needed to see you. Face to face.'

'Uh- huh?'

'Yes.' A pause. 'God, this is awkward.'

Anne felt embarrassed at Sean's embarrassment. She decided that it was going to be bad news, and braced herself, while saying 'let me get you some coffee?'

'Sure. That'd be good. Black, please; no sugar.'

'Grab a seat. Here,' and she drew an easy chair over to the bay window. This actually was a bay window, for it overlooked Dalkey Bay itself. Sean sat down, and stared out.

'What a view,' he said. 'This is a terrific place you have here,' looking round the room and back out to the choppy waters in the bay.

'Yes, I know,' shouted Anne from the kitchen. *And you're wondering how I afford it, on the lousy salary I get from UCD, aren't you?* 'I've got a bit of barm-brack here,' she called out, 'from Cork. I'll bring a slice through.'

When she came back, Sean was holding a small painting that had been propped against some bookcases on the floor. 'What's this? Who's it by? It's lovely,' he said.

'It's by me,' she said. 'But you haven't come round to my place just to look at my etchings, now, have you, Sean? So what can I do for you? It's awkward? So I'm guessing you're not here to praise my painting.'

'I didn't know you painted as well, Anne,' and he placed the canvas back against the books. 'Seriously, it's lovely.'

He sat back down in the bay window, and Anne sat opposite. They both looked out, and Sean held the coffee in his hand. She had made an espresso. It was small. It said you won't be staying long.

'Anne. You've had a great success. I always knew you'd be one of our great composers. *Black Rain* is a great piece.'

'It's *Black Rain Falling*, actually. Have you heard it?' knowing, as she did, that the concert had not been recorded.

‘Well, not actually heard it. No. But I’ve read the reviews.’

‘Which were a bit mixed in some of the papers, actually.’

‘Well, the *Irish Times* called you the future of music.’

‘Oh, Sean. Come on. Drink your coffee and tell me what brings you here.’

‘Well,’ and Anne saw him steeling himself. *He really is weak*, she thought. *This is distasteful because he’s so hopeless. Will I help him? He’s going to tell me I’m sacked, I know. But why should I help him out? Let him speak it himself.*

‘Well. As you know, the College is facing difficult times. Financially, I mean.’ *Yes, here it comes.* ‘And some Departments are having to cut things.’

‘Things?’ asked Anne. ‘What “things”?’

‘You know. Resources. Facilities.’

‘Uh-huh?’

‘Yes. And, well, staff.’

‘Really?’ *I’m damned if I’m going to say it for him. He knows I’m one of his best teachers.*

‘Yes. Really. It’s shocking. And I’ve fought it all the way, Anne. All the way,’ he said, putting his coffee down on the floor and punching his left palm with his fist. Anne lifted the coffee cup off the floor and placed it on a coaster on the table. He flinched, and Anne realised with a start that he imagined she was going to hit him. Instead, she laid the coffee cup gently down.

‘It’ll stain the wooden floor,’ she said.

‘...’

‘So. Who?’ she asked.

‘Anne,’ he said, almost desperate now. ‘This isn’t easy.’

‘I know.’

He looked up, then stared out the window as he said, 'Well. You.'

Anne waited a moment. 'You said you would tell me face to face. But you look out the window instead. Do me the small honour of facing me.'

He reddened, and then, summoning himself together, he turned to her and said, 'I'm sorry, Anne; but you have to go. I really don't want it, but there it is. I've said it.'

'Thanks, Sean,' said Anne. As he relaxed back into his chair, his face going paler now, she said, 'Who told you it had to be me?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well: is it just me, or are there others who are also having to go?'

'Well, it looks as if the budget breaks even if we lose you.'

'Thanks; but "lose" me? You make it sound like some kind of accident.'

'Well, you know what I mean. You will be a loss. I'm really sorry.'

'OK; but who told you it had to be me? Me alone, out of all of our potential lost souls?'

'What do you mean?'

'Just what I say. Who decided it was me? I only ask because you know – everyone knows – that I'm a good teacher, better than some of the deadwood in the

Department. So who's in charge? Who makes the decisions? Who made this one?'

Sean sat silent, his hand reaching out and searching for his coffee cup. Anne waited.

And waited. She knew the power of silence.

'Who is the new Dean of Faculty? Remind me again?'

Sean looked at her. 'You know who it is.'

Yes; but I'd like you to say the name. I'd like you to tell me, face to face, who it is that is sacking me here.'

'Well, you know the Dean is Con O'Briain.'

‘Thanks. Now, your coffee is finished. You can go. Goodbye,’ and she led the way towards the door, Sean following, meek as a newly house-trained puppy. As he turned to offer his hand at the door, it was already closing on him.

Sean knew the address, and had clearly been sent. That means that O’Brian also knew the address. He had sent Sean here to frighten her, to let her know not that she had been sacked, but that they were watching her. How much did they know about her, though? *What more do they have on me? About me?*

The morning’s note, followed so soon by Sean’s visit, had somehow firmed her soul, hardened her. ‘Thank God. It’s done,’ she thought to herself now. She realised that she was still holding the note in her hand. She had crumpled it during the conversation with Sean, and it now sat in her fist, the dead weight of a moribund culture.

* * *

Afternoon. Anne stood at the window and stared out over the bay. She could see across to Dalkey Island from here, the island no more than a large rock outcrop, with the remains of its old ruined church, its rough and ragged stones standing in hopeless piles still clearly visible. Under the sky, its clouds dark but thin, so that the light came through as if the air itself was being washed, reflective, the edges of the island were sharp, detailed. Everything was reduced to its bold and determined outline, the clarity of flat against the sea, translucent against the sky, so that the colour was shallowed out into near black-and-white, the monochrome chiaroscuro that subdues the wilder

imaginings of the eye to reveal the intrinsically foreign shape of the world, glamorous in its simplicity, outside of our thought.

Cormorants stood on the rocks and stones around Dalkey, their wings held out, proud and big, generous like charity, drying black, almost blue-black, against the uneven lighter greyness of the church stones behind them. Across the strait between the shore and the island, there was an outsize rowing boat, its garish red diminished only slightly by its distance from her, its four oarsmen pulling together in exaggerated movements, the cox himself bending back and forth with the oarsmen, rhythmic and steady as a metronome, bending forwards so that he nearly doubled himself, then straight back almost horizontal, unfolding himself, his arms always held firmly behind his back.

As she watched, seduced by the rhythms, Anne tried to catch the instant when the movement changed, from forwards to back, but could not isolate it from the steady sureness of the motion, so that it was almost as if the movement backwards would take nothing, no momentum, no moment at all, from the propelling forwards that had happened the merest microsecond before, the men's bodies a wave inside the boat itself so that they were charming the water to carry them on with it, exceeding it from within itself, pouring themselves forth and onwards. Time was flowing so steadily as to be imperceptible, the men inside its current, part of the time itself. She could hear, faintly, as if the voices were originating somewhere behind her, from an invisible place, the men calling to each other, the sounds, bits of words, half-phrases, carried on the wind, crazily amplified and then silenced as the turbulent air tantalised her, bringing the men at once close to her, their voices audible, before snatching them

away, making her feel that they were not really there at all. Like ghosts. It was like the sound of laughter, rolling and waving, but episodic, rare and haunting.

Anne left the window and walked back through the house. She stopped in her bedroom to stare with pleasure at the Elisabeth Frink print that she had bought last year. It was a scene from the Frink series in which she illustrated Homer; and this one showed Odysseus and Penelope making love. Its quiet eroticism stilled her soul; and she always recalled the Homeric text itself when she looked at this image. *Penelope's surrender melted Odysseus' heart, and he wept as he held his dear wife in his arms, so loyal and so true. Sweet moment too for her, sweet as the sight of land to sailors struggling in the sea.* In this room, she had removed all the other prints from the wall, casting the print into sharp relief against the bare white. The only other thing in the room was her large double bed, white-sheeted, white-covered. White on white.

The walls in the other rooms were covered with prints and original paintings. She had started with a few framed prints that she had filched from the doors and windows of Paris cafes, brightly coloured copies of images that were used to advertise exhibitions: Klee, Kandinsky always real favourites, always stalling her progress through the house; but others as well, some of them with artists she didn't know at all, but always with something arresting, enlivening and, she thought, edifying in their life-affirming brightness.

These prints spoke to her of Paris, of foreign worlds, of smoky jazz-clubs opening round midnight, of walking home by the banks of the Seine that time, her three-month stint studying contemporary music at IRCAM. It was then that she had decided to

return to Dublin rather than anywhere else. One day, sitting in the Café Dauphin near Opéra, she realised that what she was learning as contemporary music was, for her, too alien and alienating. As she sat studying a Boulez score, she realised that what interested her more was romantic melody. Looking up from the score, she saw in the door of the café a series of posters. *There* was what she wanted: the yellows of Kandinsky; and then the deep blue of Chagall, the madness of the whitened bride floating high above the head of her husband, the blue bird perched at the corner of the canvas, watching, waiting, alert. She decided then that she needed a music in which she could feel that she had space to roam, to see colours.

On her way home that day, elated at the realisation that she knew now what she wanted, she had an attack of claustrophobia in the métro. It was hot and sticky and, for a brief minute, the train stopped between stations and the lights went out. In the dark, she felt threatened suddenly. Crowded in, standing in the aisle, she felt a man's hand at her back. She couldn't breathe suddenly. Then, when the power returned and they moved again, she turned her head to see a small boy behind her, waist-high, reaching out to catch his mother's hand but rubbing against her back as he did so. 'Excuse me,' he said, the accent Irish. She took it as some kind of sign. *I'm going home*, and she pinched the little boy, playful and conspiratorial. 'Shhh,' she said, 'our secret.' His eyes lit up, his mother exchanging looks with Anne, not quite suspicious but not entirely easeful.

She walked back out of her bedroom and into her lounge again, where she sat back at her piano, and casually ran some melodic chords, arpeggiating them together. She reached her left hand inside the piano as she played with her right, stilling the strings

occasionally with her fingers, taking their vibration into herself, as if lifting the music through her palm, and stilling it there, in her body. She felt again the echo of the little boy's touch; and, in the echo of that clarity, she began to see as if the world itself were doubled. There was the world of the island outside, the ruins testimony to a life or lives that had already been closed, having run its course, like the life of her parents; and there was her own life here, in this music. She was happy.

Outside, the rowing boat slowed and stopped. The men gathered together, then reached down out of the boat, and pulled in the cold, naked body from the now stilling waters. They turned the boat back around, slowly, heading northwards again, back towards the tiny harbour at Coliemore.

* * *

Inside, the phone rang, and Anne went to the hall to answer, her reverie interrupted. She caught herself in the mirror, and took her spectacles off before answering.

'Hello?'

'Anne?'

'Yes. Is that you, Philip?'

'Yes. How are you? Are you just back?'

'Yes. Yesterday.'

'I thought you were due back a couple of days ago. I've been trying to get you. How did it go?'

‘Oh, quite well, I think. I had to stay on for a bit after the concert. Doing a few interviews and things.’ Philip hadn’t read the papers, she thought. Probably doesn’t read the Irish Times.

‘And how have things been since you got back? Fame hitting you yet?’

‘You could say that,’ said Anne, wryly, thinking back to her conversation with Sean, him punching his fist into his palm, and how he had flinched at her own movement when she set the coffee cup down, as if he feared she would hit him. ‘The hitting bit isn’t always so good, though.’

‘“Fame frightens those who fear it most”,’ said Philip.

‘Is that some wise saying or proverb or something? Who said it?’

‘It’s a proverb. I just made it up.’ There was a pause, Philip giggling but Anne recalling the note sent by Opus Dei.

‘Anne? You OK? Are we still OK for our meeting this evening? Dinner? The Shelbourne?’

‘Yes,’ said Anne. ‘Sure. 7 o’clock, is it? Whose name have you booked in, yours or mine?’

‘Mine, of course. I’ll be paying. Yes, 7. That’s English time, by the way,’ his grin almost audible, ‘so don’t be showing up at half-eight. I’ll have snaffled all the nosh by then, and will be crying into a Guinness somewhere.’

‘Shall we meet in the foyer of the hotel?’ asked Anne.

‘No, at the bar. I’ll be there before 7, standing at the end nearest the door as you come in. You just remember to make sure you’re carrying the copy of *Tables of Stone* prominently; and I’ll know it’s you.’

‘OK. See you then. Bye.’ She didn’t say that she thought she would probably recognise him anyway. An Englishman in a Dublin bar.

Anne wondered, with a slight irritation, if she ought not to carry the copy of the Irish Times with her photo on it instead. She went to pick out the copy of *Tables of Stone*, the novel written by her grandmother in 1973, while she, Anne, was just about to begin at the Menuhin School. It was the first of Mammy's novels that she was really aware of, though she would not read it until many years later, when she finally understood Mairead's importance as a novelist.

Philip Winter had re-written *Tables* as a film script, finding it, as he had said in his first letter to her, one of Mairead Elliott's most exciting, most visual, works and (this was for Anne more threatening, invasive) that he suspected it was largely autobiographical. She took the book from its place in the book-case in the hall. This was the book-case that held all of Mairead's novels and their various translations, some in multiple copy. Anne had inherited it and the collection of books when she took the house; for, when she did return to Dublin, it was to the house once owned and inhabited by Mairead. She put the book by the door so that she would remember to take it with her that evening.

Philip was a diversion from Anne's more serious work, but one that she felt as oddly seductive. They had not yet met, but had exchanged a number of letters and phone-calls. The first she heard from him was the fan-letter that he had sent, oddly not to Mairead or her publishers, but directly to Anne herself, c/o UCD. I've been blown away by *Tables of Stone*. It's a narrative marvel, and would make a great film. Can we meet? I'm Phil Winter – you won't have heard of me – I do some freelance

writing. I've done a bit of journalism and I've also tried my hand at a bit of writing for films before. Maybe a film of *Tables*? Would you do the music for it?

She liked the tone and pitch of his voice when he phoned, hearing it also in his letters to her, so that when she read, she visualised a face. Beguiling; *but will the real match the image?* Like a parlour-game.

The novel told the story of Jack Hillary, a communist actor in the 1930s, who had had an affair with a female civil servant, Mary Aspell. From Jack's point of view, the affair became a part of his job, for he was recruited to spying activities; but for Mary it had been something else entirely. When their child was born, clandestinely because Jack had refused to marry Mary and had refused even to acknowledge the child as his, Jack found himself in an awkward position. He had got too involved, his minder told him; and now he had a choice to make: continue as an agent, which would require the disappearance of the child and of Mary; or continue as a lover, which would require that he be eliminated himself.

The pity was that Mairead now knew little of the fact that she had written at all. Anne felt that her own coming celebrity was somehow tied firmly to that of Mairead, so that what she was enjoying was somehow not her own fame and availability, but rather the belated success of her grandmother. It was as if Mairead was somehow *responsible*, in fact, for Anne's musical success, as if it was really Mairead that was inside this music, straining to make herself heard. The thought troubled Anne, for she now had Mairead associated firmly in her mind with her new piece, *Mnà nà Eireann*; and she feared that she was blocked in her composition. She wanted to find a voice, but wasn't sure

now whether it would be the voice of herself or that of her grandmother that would reach out from the music that she was trying to make.

And in the middle of this, in the space between Anne and Mairead, was the silence, the vacancy that was Julia, a voice that, try as she might, Anne could not remember, could not make materialise. It was as if she had become insubstantial with the fading memory of the timbre of speech. *Where is Julia? Why did she go away?* Anne usually suppressed these questions; but insistently they were returning, haunting and shadowing her. What did those journalists mean in London when they referred to Julia so obliquely in their questions? As if they knew more than she herself, insistently trying to tease Julia's name out of her. But she refused to give it. Three women inhabit this music: Mairead, Anne, and between them, the silent woman, Julia. Was this what the phrase meant, this *Mná nà Éireann*, these women of Ireland: was it the fact of their speaking together, as if in one voice, a chorus to some kind of ancient tragedy?

She rose again from the piano and looked back out of the window. No sign of the little rowing boat and its men all pulling together. *Fir nà Éireann*, thought Anne to herself; what of the men of Ireland? Who might they be? Philip Winter wasn't one of them, that was for sure. English. Would he be as cold as his name? Remember the man on the plane. Don't judge. Winter was a writer of some growing distinction, his short stories getting some acclaim, he had told her, in the London literary circles. She was looking forward to meeting him.

Outside, the light had started to fade again. Clouds, lowering like bulls, were moving in across Howth Head to the north, presaging more rain to come.

* * *

In his hotel room opposite University College Dublin on what the airport information desk had called the ‘fashionably posh’ south side of the city, Nick White opened the mini-bar and pulled out a whiskey and some peanuts. The packet was tiny, the wrapping garish. *Fashionable*. He pulled at its edge, and the contents fell out onto the bed. Irritated, he swept them with his hand onto the carpet. The room was at the front of the hotel, and from his window he could see the main road that led from the centre of Dublin out to these southern suburbs and beyond. On the opposite side of the carriageway, across a bridge, there was the entrance to a University campus. He read the sign, *Ollscoil Baile atha Cliath*. Ollscoil must mean university, he thought; he had already worked out that Baile atha Cliath meant ‘Dublin’. *No wonder they changed it; oh, yeah, ollscoil, all school: so, university. I get it.*

There was a sure and steady stream of traffic, and its noise battled with the low hum of the air-conditioning for supremacy. He needed company. He needed to eat. He needed to clear his head and make a few decisions. He undid his bow-tie, and opened the neck of his shirt, carefully folding the tie back into his travel-bag. He downed the whiskey in one, its soft peaty notes lingering on his tongue, feeling it turn to heat in his throat. He looked at the tiny bottle, opened the mini-bar and took out a second. This time, he drank more slowly, appreciating the smell, the golden colour in the glass, a gilded reflection of himself, as if in a convex mirror. He eased himself back

onto the bed; and, lying back, he felt the few remaining crumbs from the peanuts under his hand. He sat up, swept them away again, and smoothed back his hair, catching sight of himself in the mirror on the back of the room-door. He coughed, and felt the phlegm rising to his mouth. Not enough to spit. He swallowed with the whiskey.

He was here to make a few sales. He was here to start a new life. He was here to find out if he wanted a new life. He was here to save his marriage. He was here to see if he wanted to end his marriage. He was here to find his roots. To leave them, definitively. He was here to take over a farm. He was here to sell it. All these reasons; and none of them answering to his anguish, to the need that he felt right now for company, for someone to share the tiredness of it all. None of them explaining anything. He drank the whiskey, stared again at the glass, no shadowy reflection of himself left in it now, and phoned reception to order a cab. People; he needed to be close to some people; he'd go into downtown Dublin, find a place to eat, feel as if he was in company, another Saturday night.

He got into the cab and checked his wallet. That little girl again. He'd need to get more cash; can't buy everything on cards. 'How much will it be to go downtown,' he asked. 'About five,' replied the driver, 'ten if you want a good story or two while we're going.'

'No stories; but I need a place I can eat. Lively. Where I'll get a table. People.'

'A bit of a buzz,' said the driver. 'Sure. On your own?'

'Sure. That a problem?'

'Only if you start talking out loud while you're eating.'

‘You from here? From Dublin city?’

‘That’s right. A true Dub. Dublin born, bred and buttered. Declan. So what kind of food d’you like?’

Nick half-listened to a series of suggestions, but most of them seemed to be bars, and most of them belonged to people with whom Declan seemed to be on first-name terms. ‘Sure, you could go down to Paddy Manaán’s, it’s a grand Guinness there, takes a good five minutes to stand so that you can get the chewin’ of it. Or if you want to be more central, like, try Jimmy’s pub along Baggot Street. I can drop you right there if you like, and if you mention my name Jimmy’ll see you all right for a glass or two. The craic’s good there. Best place for pub-grub is Johnny Murphy’s, near Beggar’s Bush. There’s RTE there, the telly people, on your right. I had Gay Byrne in here the other week.’

Crack? Must be something else. Must have mis-heard. Maybe I’ve got the wrong idea of the place. Who is Gay Byrne? All those folk on the plane, Bill Jackson, swearing and blaspheming. Crack as well now.

And so it went on, a rolling map-making of Dublin, Declan going along a route in his mind that followed friendships as a way of organising space. Space was becoming place; and Declan’s place was with his friends. Outside, the city scrolled past, a confused mixing of neo-Georgian grandeur and sixties brutal concrete. *So different from Seattle, so flat here.* ‘If it’s the hills you’re after, head south, to the Wicklows. Great walking, get the auld boots on; but not at this time of night, this time of the year.’

Nick thanked him, tipped him too generously – still bemused at the idea that Declan (Nick was already a friend, on first-name terms) had told him where he could get crack - and stepped out at St Stephen's Green, near the top end of Grafton Street. 'Stephen's Green,' Declan had called it, dropping the holy title; it was as if he was on first-name terms with the saints themselves. There were crowds already rolling back and forth, streaming this way and that, but all with a sense of purpose, all going somewhere. Bustling. Nick stood for a moment, taking in the evening lights, and turned away from the main drag down Grafton Street, walking instead along the edge of the Green. He heard a low rumble of noise, punctuated by laughter and occasional shouted remarks, and looked up, the noise fading as he did so. The doors of a large hotel were pushed open again, and three people came out, tumbling down the steps, oblivious of him, caught up in their own Saturday evening, the first relaxation of the day easing them into this, their bodies falling, ready to give way but not quite in control. Nick stood aside to let them pass, then looked in through the doorway, and entered.

The bar was the longest he had ever seen, and it was lined with people, two or three deep. Many of them were only half-listening to the talk of their companions, their hands instead stretching out across the bar, waving money, trying to order. The racket was exhilaratingly loud. Nick joined them, feeling less alone right away. In overhearing bits of conversations, Nick felt himself to be a part of them, imagining the lives being led by the people, relaxing as he became more and more submerged, going with this flow, included simply by being there. 'So I says to him, like, I says, you'll be losing your fiver on *that* donkey,' ... 'another pint there? Ahh, go on, it'll do yez good sure, we've only been here for the hour or three, plenty o' time for goin'

home, it won't have fallen down by the time yez get there,' ... 'a glass of the Murphy's for the fine lady here,' ... 'I only caught up with the papers today. I've been busy, you see, so I didn't get to see the photo until just before I came out tonight; it must've been a huge success, then, don't be modest' 'who's goin' to support those Fianna Faillers now, by God?' ... 'Fianna Fuckers, more like,' ... 'OK fellas, it's time to get on to Paddy's bar now.' Nick felt this all as conversations that called out to him, and so he became a part of it, involved, seduced, charmed into this confused speaking, these random scenes from lives being led, being fulfilled, being disappointed, just being there. The fact of it.

The fact of it for Nick was that he needed to make a break of some kind. I'll go and see this farm, see what it's like. Ask the lawyers if it's a going concern. See what it feels like to be down there. He pulled his wallet out and looked for his cash, trying to catch a barman's eye at the same time. That irritating cough came back to him again now, just as he was trying to shout out his order, and the man next to him asked if he was OK.

'Sure,' he spluttered, reaching for his handkerchief as he felt the phlegm rising in his throat. 'Sure, I'm fine. Just so thirsty for a drink that I couldn't even spit out the order.'

'A pint of Guinness for the man here,' said Philip, patting Nick on the back before turning back to his conversation with Anne.

* * *

‘What will you have?’ Philip asked Anne, opening the menu. ‘By the way, I should mention: I’ve got an ulcer, so I need to go easy.’

‘Really? That’s a pity. Lots of the stuff in here is pretty rich.’ Anne then went through a whole range of suggestions, working her way right through the menu, with Philip saying ‘No, can’t do that,’ more and more theatrically each time. ‘Sorry, no; too spicy... no, too much sugar in those ... pity about the butter that they need to use cooking that...’ until eventually, Anne put the menu down, bemused. ‘Well, that’s about wrapped, then. There’s nothing you can eat.’

A pause; a grin; and then Philip said, ‘Well, you know what they say round here. “Ulcer says No!”’ He laughed at his own Ian-Paisley brogue, looking up at last, seeing if his joke worked. ‘I’ll start with the oysters, of course,’ a mischievous grin spreading on his face, opening him up to Anne’s scrutiny. She laughed with him, even if she felt slightly uneasy sitting here with this Englishman who was making jokes about Ireland, about the troubles that, Mammy once told her, had forced them away when Anne was young, about the uncompleted business, as she thought it, of the increasingly rancid statelet in the north. But it was funny, the way he said it.

‘D’you know what I did this afternoon? After speaking to you on the phone and finally catching up with the paper that had your photo in it? Well, I went out bought a couple of CDs that had your work on it and listened to them. Those first three string quartets, for instance, with the Krueger Quartet playing them. And d’you know what I thought?’

‘I’m sure you’re going to tell me, even if it’s not good,’ said Anne, reddening slightly in anticipation, her fingers playing with the ring on her necklace.

‘But of course I thought they were good. But more than that, it persuaded me that you really need to be doing the music for this film?’ It was one of those questions that was actually a statement. ‘It’d be a brilliant coup, and you’d do a music that was, well, somehow, what’s the word I need, “intimate”, yes, that’s it, intimate with your grandmother’s work. What do you think? We should think about it. We should do it.’

They were interrupted by the waiter taking their order; and when he had gone, Philip changed the subject, leaving the idea that Anne would do this music as something that might be discussed but that, for him, was already beyond discussion. He had decided. Anne couldn’t politely change the subject back; but she thought it was all spur of the moment thinking by Philip, that it was part of his effort at making her feel relaxed, part of the effort that he was making to ensure that it was he who was entertaining her; and in the generosity of her hospitality, she decided to leave it go at that, to let him take a charge of the situation, just to relax. She needed it, she thought to herself, suddenly realising that the last fortnight had exhausted her, the rehearsals, the concert itself, the mad follow-up in London, the parties, the false, public face that she had needed to adopt. Then that madness with Sean and the Opus Dei threats.

‘What made you want to do this? This re-writing of Mammy’s novel as a screenplay, I mean?’

‘Mammy?’

‘Yes; Mairead. She helped bring me up. We used to call her Mammy instead of Granny. Just an affectionate little family thing.’

‘Yeah. Well. It’s like I said in the letter I sent off to you at first. I think the novel is a really strong story, and really visual. Setting its main action – all those bits when the

decision has to be made by Jack about what he's going to do; will he move here and risk his life for a love with Mary, will he let her be 'disappeared', and what about the child, is that too to be sacrificed – setting all that bit of the story in some kind of retreat in the west of Ireland makes it really easy and obvious for cinema,' said Philip, pausing to sip the champagne that came with the oysters. 'Only problem is that the finance doesn't work for that. Irish Film Board has found us a place – some cheap dump - in the Wicklows instead. Never mind.'

'Well, yes, never mind,' and Anne looked up as the waiter hovered with the wine, readying to pour.

Philip did the whole cinema thing, staring at the wine, swirling it in the glass, slurping it across his palate to get the air across it, and nodded to the waiter. He was totally unselfconscious about it, and carried straight on talking, not noticing the smile that passed between Anne and the waiter. 'Sure; but you know, if it could be shot there, in the west, it would bring back all that early Irish cinema work, Flaherty's *Man of Aran*, for instance, and would carry all the echoes of that. It's also just a glorious place to film, out there. The light. The clarity of things. I can still remember it from my childhood.'

'Your childhood? But you're English,' interrupted Anne, looking up at him, and raising the glass to her lips.

'Yes, I am, sort of. I've lived in London for as long as I can remember – just about. But it's not a British passport that I carry. It's an Irish one.'

And he reached inside his jacket to pull it out, passing it to Anne so that she could see. She took it and stared at the front; and then she opened it, finding Philip's photograph inside. The passport was nearly ten years old, and the photograph showed a man younger than the one facing her, sporting a moustache that had since been shaved off, and crowned by longish, brown, slightly curly hair. Philip, opposite, realised what she was thinking and reached his hand across to take the passport back. 'I know, I know. I've gone grey; but it's very prematurely grey, and at least it's natural. And the moustache came off when I went to San Francisco.' A pause as she looked up at him again from the photo. 'Sent all the wrong signals.'

Their fingers touched slightly as the passport went between them, and Anne recalled again that mild eroticism that had been there – or had it – when the photographer's make-up assistant had worked on her the other day. That was what made the thing erotic, she realised: not knowing if it was intended to be erotic or not, and so introducing a kind of uncertainty, and with it a release of imagination, of fantasy, of fancy; what if, what if? What if she were to say yes to doing this music?

Philip was talking. '... and so, as a boy, until I was about seven, we used to come back to the old farm, my mother watching it going downhill all the time, she said, year on year, falling into decay. On those holidays, my father and I used to go out on the bikes, cycling all around the Burren, watching it change colour in the light and in the rain.' He stopped his reverie for a moment, adding 'if we could catch some of that light, the blue of the limestone after rain, it would get itself precisely the tone I need for the film. And if we added your music to it, well, that really would be something.' 'So when did you leave Ireland, then?'

‘Oh, I was just a baby when they left. So you couldn’t really say that I’ve ever left at all: it wasn’t my choice, the matter wasn’t in my hands. To leave a place you need to have been aware that you were there in the first place. For me, I’ve never left; but then I’ve never really been here either. I’ve always been in London, coming back for vacations, yes, but never feeling that I belong properly, even though this is the place I was born in. I don’t belong over, either,’ he went on. ‘I’m kind of in-between.’ A pause. ‘Like the silence between the movements of a symphony.’

Anne felt a sympathy for Philip at this. She felt she was facing an unwanted man, a man in need of a history, a place and a time to be at home in. Her thoughts returned again to *Mná nà Eireann*, and she thought again how it stirred up thoughts of the men of Ireland, not the women. The men are the lost souls, she thought to herself; and here she was, having dinner now with one of them. Who was he, exactly? She found him attractive. Though seemingly fully at ease, there was something of shyness and reserve, a holding back within himself, that made her want to think more. Just to think, to think what it might be to be him. His eyes were deep blue, his chin fashionably unshaven. Instead of a tie, he wore an apricot scarf, hanging loosely around his neck, the unbuttoned shirt revealing his flesh slightly, as if he himself was unaware of his body, its seductive possibilities. His lips were curved upwards in the slightest hint of youthful energy and readiness for laughter; his teeth small, but perfectly white.

Anne suddenly thought to herself that she was going to sleep with this man, maybe not this evening, but she felt it as a kind of inevitability, like the completion of a

major chord after the utter predictability of its sequence. It was like a formal demand, a requirement of history. Necessity.

Philip was talking. ‘*Ananke*,’ he said. ‘I want the film to be like some ancient tragedy, recalling the great classical themes: fate, destiny, catastrophe.’

‘It doesn’t sound too cheerful.’

Philip laughed. ‘I know, I know. I get too intense. There will be some comedy, too, you know? “Ulcer says No!” Maybe you’ll help me get the laughter back in? Tell me about you. Tell me some funny stories.’

Over dinner, they discussed Philip’s ideas for the film. *Tables of Stone*, Anne knew, was an unusual kind of novel for Mairead to have written. Jack, its main character, was an actor; as Anne’s father had been. He was a communist; and Mairead had certainly dallied with communism at some point in her early days, maybe even having been a member. Love or duty? That was the question of the novel. Jack’s way out of the dilemma - would he be eliminated himself, or would he kill his wife and son – was to simulate his own death. The novel left it unclear, though, whether he had actually killed himself or not. Anne had asked Mairead about it, but Mairead remained as evasive as her novel. ‘What makes it interesting is that you don’t know,’ she said; ‘if you knew, one way or the other, it would take all the pleasure out of it. Think of it as one of your great unresolved chords.’

Philip excused himself to go to the loo. Anne stared around at the people in the dining-room, then looked down at the table, making a show of examining her glass of wine. Fingering the ring on her necklace absent-mindedly, she watched Philip

disappear into the gents. *He takes that little French man-bag with him. Continental. Confident.*

Philip looked around the toilet before going in to one of the cubicles. He reached up to the window at the back of the seat, and opened it as widely as he could. He could see the piles of rubbish, the detritus of unfinished meals, the waste from the hotel bedrooms, all awaiting collection. He took out his mobile phone from his bag and checked that he could get a signal, then he dialled. Immediately, the call was answered.

‘Rick? I’ve got her here,’ he said, ‘but the operation will take a little time if we’re to do it right... Yes, I think so... She won’t do that, I’m sure, but I’ll do what I can... Yes... Look, don’t worry, just give me until the end of the month, right? I’ll get the photo of her and anything else we need, right? I’ve got her, I tell you... Sure. Bye.’

He closed the window back over, then heard a cough from outside. Someone had come in while he was on the phone. Had he heard? Philip pulled off some loo paper and crumpled it, loudly, and then flushed the toilet. He came out of the cubicle, and went to wash his hands at the sink. At the sink along from him, staring into the mirror, stood the man who had had the coughing fit at the bar. They grunted an acknowledgement of each other’s presence, before Philip went back out. He wondered if Mr Throat had heard him on the phone. Shit. As he went through the door of the loo back into the restaurant, the smile came back to his face. He asked Anne if she wanted coffee here or whether they ought to go somewhere more lively for it, ‘to finish the evening with a bit of a swing,’ he said.

He paid the bill and, on the way out, he took a good look along the bar. White still sat there, looking slightly flushed. Philip took a good note of him, and glanced at the barman to say goodbye.

Anne and Philip did not sleep together that night. Philip offered to drive her home, 'but I didn't bring my car,' he laughed. 'We could always take a cab.' 'I'll be fine,' Anne replied; 'you take one cab, I'll take another; we're going in different directions tonight.' In her cab, she wondered if Philip had noticed her final word. Why had she said that they were going in different ways *tonight*, as if tomorrow or some other day they would not. She had given herself away too much; but she thought that Philip too knew what would happen between them. It was all just a matter of timing, and placing. Where and when?

* * *

Back in his hotel, Nick got undressed for bed. He went again to the mini-bar, which seemed to have been re-stocked in his absence. Another whiskey. Night-cap. In his head, he carried the image of the woman, long-legged, an odd necklace that had a ring instead of an amulet, her fingers playing with it at her neck. He felt the temptation of sex, then checked himself with the thought of Lily. Inhaling the peaty perfume of his Jameson's, he saw Lily's face, not as it was now, caught in a rictus that shamed him, but instead as it had been before the accident. Eyes that had sparkled with mischief, a smile that stole into his soul whenever he came home from work, exhausted and then revived again by the simplicity of her spirit.

And Joan. As he drank the whiskey, he saw, at once, that their relation was over. For, as the liquid slipped down his throat, slightly tingling as it went, the woman with the necklace supplanted Joan in his mind's eye. He felt no sexual arousal with the image of Joan; rather, it was Anne's face that came, dizzily, before him as he lay himself back down on the bed. *What if?*

Crazy.

But what if?

He emptied the pockets of his trousers before folding them over the trouser-press, and noticed then the blood on his handkerchief. 'Christ almighty,' he thought, 'that's all I need now.'

Chapter 3

November 1992

Anne picked up her bag, stuffing the trailing edge of the pure white sheets into it hurriedly – all her bedding was pure white; like her bedroom itself. *Malevich*, the name crossing her mind as she zipped the bag over roughly, and went to the door.

Philip was there, the car engine running still behind him on the road. There was a frost that painted the roads hesitantly, grainily, white, its purity crossed only by the brush-stroke tracks of Philip's tyres.

'Come on. The car's warm,' he called, clapping his hands together for warmth, a faint vaporous breath round his mouth, as he returned to the car. It didn't look warm: small, a red two-seater with its canvas top fastened down, taut. He was wearing a heavy leather flying jacket with a fur collar, that apricot scarf again round his neck. *He looks like a cross between Mr Toad and a First World War pilot.*

Anne opened the boot and crammed her bag in, before coming round to the front and getting in beside him. As she smoothed down her skirt and eased her coat off to put it in the tiny space behind the seats, he inclined his head a fraction towards her face and kissed her lightly on the cheek. There was a spot of paint on her skirt, he noticed.

Yellow.

'It'll take us a couple of hours.'

‘Fine. Can we go the coastal road? The light is brilliant over Killiney at this time of year. At this time of morning. Before the cloud covers us in again for the winter.’

‘Sure,’ said Philip. ‘I’m starving. No breakfast. We can stop for coffee at Glendalough. There’s a little house there, just at the entrance. They make terrible coffee, but great scones and tea. You’ve got a spot of paint on your skirt. Do you want to take your gloves off?’

‘I’ll keep them on, at least until I warm up,’ touching the paint spot, as if inquisitively wondering how it got there.

As they set off, Anne told Philip about the body that had been found in the bay by the oarsmen. ‘It was on the news this morning. They found the body two months ago, but they’ve only just identified him, they said.’

‘Yes, it’s in the newspaper, there,’ said Philip, reaching behind his seat and passing the paper to her. It was the body of a young man who had been declared missing by his family three days previously, though he hadn’t actually been seen by his family for about three months. When the oarsmen found him, the skin had shrivelled back to the bone, and bore the traces of an oily translucence so that it looked greenish-blue. The bare life of the skeleton was visible, as if the body had become transparent. A primitive decadence.

The report troubled her. *Death was close by; in the bay beyond my window. Very close by; in full view, had I but looked.* She was sure that the oarsmen were the ones she had seen that Saturday afternoon, the day of her visit from Sean Gallagher, the day of the note. Their rhythmic back-and-forth motion now took on another association in her mind: that they were wailing, moving in sympathy with the dead,

like medieval oarsmen ferrying the lost souls in some illustration of Dante's *Purgatorio*, intoning prayer by their movement, or invoking some god or other against their mourning, against tragedy. Philip was less moved.

'Somebody in despair about something,' he said, 'about life. You're right. This light's lovely. Look over the bay there.' In the distance, coming into the harbour, the night ferry from England.

'Yes,' replied Anne, feeling her mood pulled, drifting, into banality. 'But I don't think you're getting what I'm saying, Philip. It came close. Death came close. It makes me feel anxious.'

'Superstition. Not rational.'

'I know.'

'.....'

'.....'

'Did he drown? Was it a heart-attack in the cold of the water?'

'They don't know yet. Post-mortem and all that to be done. But that's not the point. The point is how he got into the water.'

'There's a suggestion he was pushed?'

'No. I don't mean how, I mean why. How did he get to the state where he wanted to die like that. I'm assuming it was suicide. That's what the Gardaí have said it looks like. No other suspicious circumstances. They found his clothes in a neat pile on the rocks near Dun Laoghaire front.'

'...'

'It's just made me anxious, that's all I'm saying. It was outside my window. Death was outside my window.'

Philip said nothing; but he was pensive, visiting a private thought: *Coincidence. That's all. Twenty years later, the same thing, a body in the water. Then, twenty years ago, it was guilt. Their guilt at what they did. And this body now: nothing to do with what happened, but it's like a sign to me, a signal. Or just coincidence? No, not coincidence and not a signal either. It's the past inhabiting the present. History. Remembering, not forgetting; not forgiving. Above all, not forgiving.*

They drove on, the thin shafting sunlight sharpening the coastline against the edge of the water, green against blue. The housing estates on the edges of the suburbs, drab pebble-dashed bungalows, gave way to woodland along the coastal road; and suddenly they were as if travelling under a broken or incomplete arch: conifers towering to the right, leaning seawards, and open water filling the space to their left. There was the silence of a near intimacy; and Anne felt her mood lightening, gradually opening to take in the sensuality of the approaching winter. She felt as if protected, as if charmed against the menace of a hard-hearted world, a world where a young man could die unnoticed, unmourned or just forgotten.

Philip was driving slowly, aware of the hoar frost of the morning and of the possibility of ice. There was no traffic, except for the occasional old jalopy edging along near the edge of the roads, jolting along without shock absorbers, crawling at pony speed. As they neared Enniskerry, he started to pull inland. Anne saw the coastline receding behind her in the wing-mirror; and, as they moved towards the forested interior, the sky above them darkened gradually. Then they were in the hills, exposed again to the opening clouds, the bronze-yellowing gorse tracing its lines like

parentheses along the roadside, keeping them straight, bracketed off from the encroachments of autumn's mellowing mists. Philip picked up speed now. Nothing was moving, no breeze, the countryside still, pacific.

Wouldn't it be great if it could be like this all the time, Anne thought. She closed her eyes, trying to imagine the scene as a painting on her easel at home. She would get the yellow of the gorse. What kind of brush would Chagall have used for that? He wouldn't paint anything so simple: the gorse would be blue and there would be a white horse flying above it – probably upside down, and a bride somewhere; why would that be so good? Her skirt: she should have changed it, but hadn't noticed the drip from her brush as she had added the vertical stroke, the one that she thought finished the picture, first thing this morning. Then, falling deeper, as if into blue gorse, the hum of the engine and the warmth of the car conspiring in a soporific haze.

In this moving space, eyes closed and drowsy, she could hear. Not the sounds that nature makes, for that's always too loud, a cacophony of birdsong, wind bustling against leaves, the disjointed rhythm of creaking branch disturbed by the haunting wails of distant traffic; rather, Anne heard the quality of the pure note in her head, a pure sound that she wanted to let others hear. This is composition; and it is always a failure. The uttering of the sound, its very making a betrayal of purity, the violent rupturing of the silence that contains all musical possibility. *I'm the vehicle; the tympanum only; don't get in the way.* If at first you do not fail, then try again; fail again. Roll the stone up the hill; find, when you raise your shoulder from the stone at the crest, that you're at the bottom of a hill; and roll again. In her head, the steadiness

of the movement, colour draining from her imagination, the blue lightening and fading, fading from her dream.

She came to, suddenly, as the car screeched and skidded, Philip muttering ‘Shit!’ There was a thump, and Philip pulled into the side. What is it, she asked; but he had already stopped the car and had got out, leaving his door open. The cold air flowed in, and Anne sat upright and fumbled with her seat-belt to get out. Philip was standing beside the animal. It was a cat; and, with the dark blood, black like oil, that seeped and started to flow from its mouth, Anne could see that it was fatally injured, though still moving, still achingly breathing. Philip looked down at it as Anne came round the front of the car to help. There’s nothing we can do, said Philip. But it’s suffering, said Anne. The poor thing. She looked around to see if there was a house nearby; but they were in the middle of a wood, surrounded by trees that formed a canopy above their heads. There was nothing on the cat’s neck to identify it, or to identify its owners.

‘It’s wild,’ said Philip. ‘It just ran out and couldn’t get away from under the wheels in time. I didn’t have a chance.’

‘What do we do?’ asked Anne. ‘We can’t just leave it. It’ll die. It’s in pain.’

‘We do all we can do. We’ll need to finish it off.’

Anne paled. With an awkward timid cough, she hummed quietly to herself; she needed to turn this off, get back again to the grey note she was hearing emerging in the car.

‘Can’t we take it?’

‘Take it where? It won’t survive.’

She needed noise. As Philip stood up, looking down uncertainly at the animal, she hummed quietly again, a meandering tune.

‘Can you maybe stop singing, humming, for a minute? I need to think clearly,’ his tone frustrated, verging on the edge of an anger. Anne looked at him, not having realised that she was singing. Then he went on, ‘You stay here and hold it firmly. I’ll do it.’ ‘You’ll do what?’ ‘I’m going to crush it under the wheels,’ said Philip, moving back to the car, ‘finish it off’. Anne quietened, feeling that Philip was taking command of a situation that was beyond her own grasp, her own power. She had no other route open to her. She bent down to stroke the cat. She was still wearing the gloves, though her hands were warm now. The animal looked up at her, and made to nuzzle its head pathetically against her hand. It wasn’t going to move anywhere, thought Anne, as Philip approached in the car. I don’t need to hold it still anyway. As Philip came close, she stood up and looked away.

‘You can’t do that, Anne; you need to guide me, guide the wheels. I need to kill it quickly. There’s no point in doing this if I just end up injuring it some more. I need to do it in one. Hold it steady, and guide me towards it. Make sure the wheels are lined up for its head.’

Anne bent back down, and held the cat steadily. She could sense its life through the skin of her gloved hand, the merest hint of a vibration, a fractured rhythm. It tried to paw at her. ‘Left, slightly. Left. Now,’ and then she moved back with the car only a metre away. Philip revved the engine, moved the car forward and held it steady as he felt it move on to the cat. Then he reversed, and repeated the move again.

They drove on, the quiet in the car now taking on a different intimacy, the colouring of shame or guilt, Anne staring ahead, her hands, ungloved at last, folded together on her lap; and Philip reaching over with his left hand to pat her on the arm, trying to reassure but failing entirely to settle. His stomach rumbled, an indignant comical noise piercing the solemnity. He felt the urge to smile, felt it would be wrong.

‘There’s a bit of fruit in my bag in the back there, behind my seat,’ he said to Anne.

‘Could you pass it to me, please? I’m starving. Have a bite yourself if you like.’

When they got to Glendalough, the little tea-room was closed. It was an ancient stone-built block, darkly muted grey, drab and cheerless. A window-box, its wood rotting, sat on the window-sill, empty of flowers but with weedy tufts of grass starting to take it over. The curtains were half-drawn, and Philip could see inside, where what had once been someone’s front room was now furnished with five small tables, each surrounded by three or four primitive-looking wooden chairs. Anne came up behind him, looking over his shoulder. She couldn’t see inside properly, the glass reflecting her image in the weak morning light. As she moved back, her eye caught a glimpse of movement inside; and Philip turned round. ‘Looks more than just closed for the day; looks abandoned. I can see mice inside; maybe rats, it was big. I don’t understand it. It was busy, thriving last time I was here.’ ‘When was that?’ ‘Can’t remember. Not too long ago.’ ‘It’s got a faint odour of ghosts,’ said Anne. ‘What?’ said Philip. ‘Ghosts,’ she repeated.

Anne was sitting at the table, trying to butter a scone, her young hands struggling with the knife to stop everything from crumbling into a mess on her plate. Caroline was kicking her under the table, trying to make her giggle. Mum and Dad held hands,

seemingly oblivious of the girls. The conversation was hushed. Everyone in the place spoke in whispers or quiet mumbling. An American couple looked idly at the prints on the walls, horses and hounds, 'look at this, honey,' the only discernible phrase among the English tourists. 'Lovely cup of tea,' one of the women ventured. 'I'll bet it's Barry's, from Cork. I wonder why there's a famous tea-making factory in Cork?' 'Colonialism,' came the assured reply, the man nodding his head sagely to himself, 'from when Ireland was still part of Britain. Empire.'

The little lady serving the tea came and went, her apron floury, her hands leaving the greasy slippery trace of melting butter on the handle of the teapot. Her husband, a once tall and proud man now bowed with heavy age but hanging on to his dignity by wearing a smart jacket and tie, occasionally peered out from the kitchen, pulling apart the incongruous multi-coloured Mediterranean blinds just a fraction, just enough to reveal his eyes, a glimpse only of the rest of his face. 'They're spies,' whispered Caroline, kicking Anne again. Anne stuffed the scone into her mouth to stop the giggles. 'Shush,' Mum and Dad said to her. They looked as if they were in love, Anne thought. That must be what love is. Holding hands like that, fingers intertwined, like a kind of perfect arch for a church, sheltering people, small people, like Caro and me.

Spies. Julia and Dad there.

They walked round the little house, now, Philip knocking loudly on the door, on the windows. Pointless. No response. 'And you say *I* act irrationally?' Anne, turning back again from the window, saw the note pinned to the gate. It was hand-written and in a transparent plastic wallet. The hand was like that of a child, and the ink had run with

the dampness and condensation inside the wallet. Through the smudge, Anne could read the two simple words: gone away.

‘Let’s walk to the lake,’ said Anne.

Philip grumbled about his hunger, his need for coffee, but followed Anne through the stone arch into the grounds of the ruined church just at the entrance to the Glendalough hills. As he caught up with her, she reached back and took his hand, without comment and without looking back at him. She felt, nonetheless, the rightness of what she had done; the trace of Philip’s ambiguous kiss from the morning still there, on her cheek. Philip’s hand held hers, with only the slightest pressure to acknowledge that she had reached for him, initiated something. Anne felt her own body, and his, relaxing and easing into their joint movement across the stony floor of the woods.

The path narrowed, and they separated to walk through the undergrowth of the trees in single file, Anne moving ahead of Philip. The branches were bare, and Anne could see the sky through them as she looked up and ahead. They were coming to the bend in the path that, as she remembered it, would open out again, round the corner, to the lakeside. ‘*Spies*,’ Caro had said; and now Anne remembered why they were giggling. It wasn’t the little woman and her husband who were the spies. But all that was back then; and she had left that, had escaped it, wasn’t looking back any more. Julia and Dad: ‘*Shush*.’

As she surfaced from the tunnel of trees, she waited for Philip to catch up; and took his hand again. Something was definite between them now, sealed. The repetition made it explicit, sensual. That is why rites are meaningful: the meaning comes from the very repetition that, in time, will evacuate any sense from the action, injecting the sense instead into the meaningful relation among the people who share the action. It can be as complex as a sacrifice, and as simple as a kiss or a touching of hands. Rite becomes routine, like a rite of spring. That's why Anne's music made the return to melody, to the repetition of tune, an invitation to commune. This time, Philip held her hand and stopped her briefly so that he could look her in the eyes. The briefest of smiles, a moment of recognition; and they moved on. They were together.

As they approached the lake, Anne felt again, as she always did here, the presence of her father.

'So,' she began, 'You think *Tables of Stone* is like a covert biography.'

'Yes,' said Philip, 'that's right,' picking up a stone to skim across the still water of the lake. 'Maybe.'

'So what do you know about my family?' Anne handed him a smooth pebble.

'Well, not too much... yet. Four. I can do better. Watch this.' Anne's pebble was thrown, skipped five times, stuttered and sank. 'See?'

'What about my mother and father?'

'Nothing much. I know your mother disappeared when you were a child, and that Mairead' – he looked at Anne, as if seeking approval or permission – 'Mairead, *Mammy* - brought you up. Are you going to enlighten me? Prove me right? Tell me I'm wrong? Maybe you'll tell me more? Some secrets that I couldn't find out unless I ask you? Every family has secrets.'

‘No.’ Anne skimmed her stone. ‘Seven.’

‘Never. You can’t count the last dribbling bit before it sinks.’

‘My father used to bring me here when I was very young. We swam. It wasn’t dribbling; a clear bounce.’

‘You swam? In this? It’s bloody freezing. Impossible. You’d have died.’

‘Well, we swam. He used to challenge me to get as far as the waterfall.’

‘Crazy. Mad.’

Anne laughed, but she saw again the body of a desperate young man being lifted into the boat, and shivered. She saw the dead animal under her hand. Bare life; pure dying.

‘It’s freezing, Anne. Even in summer, it’s freezing here. You’ve got to be joking.’

‘Well, I’m telling you. We swam here. Often.’

‘Add that to the biographical details: father mad, daughter mad.’

Anne turned away, not amused. ‘Sorry,’ said Philip. ‘Sorry. Only joking. Going too far. Sorry. Didn’t mean to be saying anything serious. Sorry.’ Philip moved over to her and stood beside her, not yet sure that he should embrace her. Just for the warmth of it. *Important to keep her on side.*

He lifted her face to his, his hand under her chin. He felt the necklet and pulled it out.

‘What’s this?’ he asked, fingering the ring, its yellow gold reflected against her chin.

‘It’s a wedding ring,’ she said.

‘A wedding ring? There’s somebody already?’

‘No.’

‘Divorced, then?’

‘Philip? This is Ireland. There’s no divorce here.’ He was confused, visibly, now.

‘You’re not . . . well . . . widowed?’

She smiled at him, removing his hand from her neck-chain. ‘No, I’m not widowed.

But it’s a wedding-ring. That’s all.’ He would need to know her better if he was to find out more. ‘Anyway, it’s lovely,’ he said, turning back to look again towards the waterfall.

‘He was an actor.’

‘Who?’

‘My father.’

‘Really?’ Philip stood back again. ‘Now, that I did not know.’

‘You haven’t found out much, then, have you?’ In the distance, the sound of two voices, coming closer, not properly distinct from the muffled birdsong. ‘He did some theatre, but never became very famous. Lots of the time, he seemed to be out of work. Lots of the time, he was away, travelling, either performing somewhere on tour or looking to get a part. Often it was in London, I think. Once, New York. But he was away so much, I never really felt I knew him. That was why the times here, just him and me, were special; why I remember them.’

‘Just him and you?’

‘Yes. Good moments, alone together.’

‘And your mother?’

‘She didn’t usually come here. Only sometimes. Special occasions. Birthdays and the like.’

‘So what did she do? While you and your father were here, I mean.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Anne. ‘I don’t really know. She always went her own way. She was also away from home a lot. Visiting relatives. I never really knew where she went.’

‘An independent woman, then?’

‘Yes, ahead of her time.’

There was a pause, and Anne stared into the distance, across the dark and troubled, stirring, waters. Then Philip said, ‘but always there for you?’

‘Hmm?’

‘Always there for you?’

‘Dad? Yes.’

‘No. I meant Julia.’

Another pause.

‘How do you know her name?’

‘Hm? Her name? Julia?’

‘Yes, Julia.’

‘I think. I don’t know. Maybe Mammy’s publishers told me.’ He looked towards the waterfall. ‘When I was initially asking about the script, you know?’

‘I don’t know anyone else who knows her name. Outside of my family, I mean.’

‘’

‘Maybe you’re ahead of me in your research for this novel, then.’

‘Yeah. Maybe. Who knows?’

Anne lifted another stone, turning it and weighing it in her hand, looking for its smoothest side. She looked over the water, crouched and threw, spinning on her foot. She stared after at the stone, not counting. She bent, and picked up another, smaller

stone, rejected it, and turned back to face Philip. He handed her another, and she looked at it appreciatively.

‘Then, one day, one time when she went away, she just didn’t come back. Ever,’ she went on, finally. She didn’t throw the stone, but reached inside her coat, to her skirt, and pocketed it instead.

‘But you must know where she went?’

‘No. We never really asked. Mammy just said it was to visit an auntie or something. We were young. We just got used to it with Mammy there, and she made us feel that it was all normal, all OK.’

‘And?’

‘And, well. Nothing much else, really. Then Daddy died, and we were just with Mammy all the time.’

‘Give me your hand and let’s get back to the car. I need to find a coffee somewhere. I get headaches if I go too long without.’

Around the bend, a couple, by this time their voices clear, arguing with each other. They dropped their voices as they saw Anne and Philip, and looked away, shy of their own argument, shy of themselves, of revealing this intimate desperation. Philip grinned at Anne behind his hand. ‘We’ve just saved their marriage.’ But as the couple walked back away from the edge of the lake, round towards the side, they heard the voices rise again. ‘Or maybe not.’

Anne stared towards the waterfall. For a thrilling instant, she felt that she needed to make this a moment of definition. 'If I challenge you to swim to the waterfall, would you do it?'

'No way.'

Anne took his hand and looked at him. 'No way? None at all?'

He hesitated, sensing that there was a right answer, and stared back at her, trying to intuit what it might be.

'No way,' he repeated, after a moment. Anne's disappointment was palpable, and he felt it in the slight loosening of her hold on his hand. So he added, 'Not yet. Not now; maybe another time.' It made no immediate difference to Anne. She shrugged and turned away, then walked towards the edge of the water, knelt and felt it with her hand. It was icy, but she cupped her hand to scoop some up, and poured it back out in a gentle splash. Philip watched.

'Turn away for a minute,' she said. Philip stared at her, uncomprehending. 'No: away. Look away for a moment.' He turned his back.

She slipped off her coat and laid it down neatly folded on the pebbles. Then, she slipped out of her shoes and reached up under her skirt to take off her tights. That yellow stain again, like a daffodil. She was aware of Philip, aware that he was sensing her do something, aware of her strength of purpose because he knew not what it was – but aware, above all, of her father, the memory of his voice echoing deep inside her, bringing her child's excited body back to her. Barefoot, she stepped into the water, holding her skirt high above it. Philip heard the mild turbulence as she splashed in, and turned around.

'You're off your head,' he said.

‘No, I’m not. This is biography. This is me, writing a life, writing out where I’m from for you. I’m from here, from these waters, from my father and mother. Julia. If you’re going to find out about me, you need to find out about them. You need to feel them here. Not ghosts. Real.’ She stared right at him, still holding her skirt high and revealing her thighs as the water lapped around her shins. ‘You should come in.’

Philip took off his shoes and socks, half-grinning half-irritated, *don’t know why I’m doing this*, rolled his jeans above his knees, and stepped into the water. It took his breath away momentarily. ‘Purgatorial,’ he said, his voice quivering slightly. She reached her hand out to him again.

‘No. Not so cold after all. Stand a moment. Still, still. Not so cold after all,’ she said.

‘Now,’ and she looked away, ‘*now* would you swim to the waterfall?’

Instead of a reply, he kissed her, and held her to him, saying nothing. She responded, and let her skirt fall from her hand, its edges trailing into the water. She felt the stone in her skirt-pocket, delicious in its weight against her skin. She felt the wedding-ring under her shirt, close.

When they got back to the car, something had been sealed between them. A name.

Whatever you say, say nothing. For Anne, the hint of an anxiety on hearing that name uttered. Ghosts are here. *Whatever you say.*

* * *

September 1992

In the morning, Nick found himself in Temple Bar, a dull ache where his head should be. Too much Jameson's; 'one too many of the old Jimmies', the waiter in the hotel said at breakfast, smiling. 'Ah, stick around and ye'll get used to it. Yer head adapts, like.' Temple Bar was a building site; but a bourgeois building site, the receptionist said when he asked her for directions and a map. 'It's to be our Canary Wharf.' Nick looked puzzled. 'Like London. Where the arts become business. Lots of galleries. Japanese sushi bars. Little alternative theatres where they do incomprehensible plays. French restaurants. Smart people. Bono.' Why hadn't the taxi driver last night taken him here, asked Nick. 'Ah, but none of it's built yet. It's a work in progress. Like old Jimmy's *Wake*.' Nick pressed his fingers against his head, his eyes, massaging his scalp, uncomprehending. 'Jimmy? Jameson?' 'Joyce. *Finnegans Wake*. He called it *Work in Progress* when he was writing it. Work-in-Progress. That's the Ireland *duh noh djoors*', this last in exaggerated inverted commas. 'Would you like some aspirin, sir?'

Downtown. There was an impressive sign, telling him he was now entering The Temple Bar Renovation Project. The picture on the sign - one of those architect's impressions that give you a sense that even the busiest places in the world have only half a dozen well-dressed executives walking around - gave an image of the Temple Bar to come. Glass, steel, sunshine; trees punctuating the civic space with efflorescences of nature. Above all, space. It would be more like a Saenredam cathedral than a temple. But the present looked nothing at all like the future. Scaffolding lustrous half-way between a drizzle and a snow flurry. In September. The

lawyers who had told Nick of his inheritance had offices here, but instead of glamour and wealth, the place reeked of dereliction: broken glass, drifting newspaper, paper bags, discarded cigarette butts, used tissues lying soggy in the gutters.

Nick looked at his map and walked through to the riverside where he saw the Ha'penny Bridge. I should walk across it, just for the sake of it. Famous, apparently; even if Seattle hasn't heard of it. *It used to cost a halfpenny to cross it. The cost of communication from one side to another. It's never free: free speech always costs money, just as soon as you want a response to it.* It's free if you just give out, or rant, not caring if anybody hears, not bothering to wait for a response. But if two sides are to form a bridge, to touch each other, it costs money. Communication's all like that too: it's verbal foreplay, just a way of using your tongue to get somebody to come closer so you can touch them, hold them, span the endless flow of time beneath you both, breathe each others' breath, catch a soul. *And that's what Grabowski goes on about back in Seattle all the time: talking with each other via computer. Though nothing about souls. He hasn't got one.* Bigger bridges, that's all; or more likely, more damned ranting. Nut-jobs shouting into the void. Racket. But as it costs money, the more racket the more profit. So why the fuck are my sales figures so low? I don't make enough noise.

On the north side of the bridge, he found a second-hand book-shop that doubled as a café. The customers picked books off the shelves and sat down with them, having ordered their coffee. It didn't look as if you had to buy them. It's like a civilised kind of library; even the coffee is good, he thought, sipping the surprise that was his cappuccino. The Ireland *de nos jours* turns out to be Italian. He reached up, closed his

eyes, and picked a book at random. He stared at the cover: a Gaelic dictionary; and so he found out how to pronounce Taoiseach properly. It's a bit like tea-shop, but with a catch in the throat, the gurgling of a drowning man instead of a p, he smiled to himself. Taoiseach in the teashop, cchheuh. I'll remember that.

He put the book back, finished his coffee, using it to help him swallow another aspirin, and re-crossed the Ha'penny Bridge, pausing briefly in the middle as a barge slipped past, heading downriver, out towards the Irish Sea. A man stood near the rear of it, looking back up towards the bridge. Nick nodded towards him, but the man turned away, intent on his work, indifferent to Nick, to the settling drizzle, to the dully oppressive ache of the louring sky. Crossed twice, there and back: a full pennyworth, but two halves making a fractured whole.

The lawyers had a surprisingly grand office. In the middle of the scaffolding, the planks of wood laid irregularly across the road, the high wire security fencing that dominated the space, higgledy-piggledy, there stood an immaculate white neo-Georgian building. Inside, it was all cool baroque plasterwork, beautiful cornicing, high ceilings giving a great sense of open space and light, Regency furniture dotting this winter interior. It was like the irony of a stable and settled history, the unchangingness of tradition, in the midst of turmoil and modernisation. In the discussions with the lawyers, more surprises as a few things became clear to him. Patrick had not just been a farmer. No-one just farmed anymore in Ireland.

'In the documents you sent out to me in the States, there were a number of things that I didn't understand.'

‘Yes?’ said O’Driscoll.

‘Yes. Like all these arrangements that Patrick had in place with the County Council, for instance. What’s all that about?’

‘He did work for them.’

‘But how would he have done that? It seems to be contracts about roadbuilding and the like.’

‘Yes?’ O’Driscoll was experienced at making clients feel themselves to be somehow inadequate to the subtleties of his extraordinarily refined sensibility. It didn’t matter if the clients were paying him substantial amounts of money; if anything, they were then made to feel even smaller, inconsequential. O’Driscoll’s mind was so refined, so caressed by nuance, that any attempt to express his thought would be vulgar. Nick tried to ward off his feelings of stupidity, rubbing his head. The Jameson hangover was lifting, gradually. He was an American salesman, in computing. He preferred a bit of vulgar directness.

‘Well, Mr O’Driscoll. Forgive my obvious stupidity, but I don’t see what that has to do with the farm; and I don’t know how Patrick managed to farm and be a construction worker at the same time. I’m trying to understand a situation that is unfamiliar to me; and, since I’m paying you a great deal of money to sort out this inheritance for me, I’d appreciate it if you could help, and thereby earn your money.’

‘Very well, Mr White.’

‘Else you’ll be dealing direct with my own lawyers, in Seattle. Who’ll make sure that it’s done at your expense. They’re very good.’

‘Very well, Mr White. I understand.’

‘So?’

‘Perhaps we need to step back a little.’ O’Driscoll settled himself in the black leather chair in the office, swivelled to the desk-phone, and called to his secretary to make some coffee (‘Black, I assume? No sugar?’), and his secretary’s voice came back through the phone, ‘in welcome’) and, as he reclined in the chair, he put his hands together, fingers just touching, before his face. He kissed gently his index fingers before inhaling deeply, and talking. Nick suppressed his anger. I’m tired, he thought; these guys are all the same. Taoiseach rhymes with teashop; lawyer rhymes with prick. O’Driscoll rhymes with asshole. I’m a poet. Let it be.

‘Farming in Ireland is not now what it was a few decades ago,’ O’Driscoll began. ‘Then, farmers were farmers. They ploughed the land, tilled the soil, maintained their stock, took care of their large family, provided good and safe food for the nation, and worried about how their first-born would carry on the farm after they had gone. It was a twenty-four hours a day job. Then – and if you ask me, due to the infelicities associated with this country’s accession to the Common Market in 1972, the day when our rural poor were bought off with promises that couldn’t be kept – a new word entered the vocabulary of every peasant farmer from Galway to Dublin, from Sligo to Dingle: diversification.’ He almost spat the word out.

The secretary arrived with the coffee balanced delicately on a tray, and poured a cup for Nick, who smiled a thanks to her. No response other than the repeated phrase ‘in welcome’ quietly spoken: the bland face of one who knows how to be invisible before the boss: a functionary, not a human being. Her skirt swayed, emphasising the swell of her hips as she sashayed her way back out of the office. Pity, thought Nick, his eye following her. ‘Thanks,’ he said aloud, and turned back to O’Driscoll.

‘Diversification is the word that we use to cover the fact that Europe is failing its agricultural roots.’ A sip of coffee, and a stare into the middle distance, as if in a caffeine trance. ‘Which is why there is now no livestock on the farm.’

‘None? So is it all arable?’

‘Not much of that either. Your uncle rented out some fields to neighbouring farmers until last year. They used them for their few scraggy animals, as grazing land; and in some cases, for growing vegetables, potatoes. That stopped and dried up entirely in the last couple of years, it seems. The economy simply no longer works for the farming fraternity. Subsidies have ravished the land and its workers.’ He stared at his coffee, slowly dissolving a sugar cube into it and stirring methodically, once clockwise twice anticlockwise, once clockwise again. ‘They need to get new jobs, additional jobs. They have large houses, with many bedrooms that used to be used to house their own family, their own children working the land until one of them inherited the farm and re-populated the house with his own family in turn.

Contraception has put an end to that, of course. Not to mention abortion.’ *Not again*, thought Nick. *Why is the place so obsessed with this stuff? The letters pages in the paper; references in them to the Catholic catechism. Must be like this in Iran.* ‘As a result,’ O’Driscoll went on, ‘the houses are empty. To make money, the farmer’s wife opens a bed and breakfast establishment, in which we entertain with our renowned Celtic hospitality our foreign guests, from Britain, from Europe from the United States.’

Nick nodded. He decided he would take the incidental lessons, on the politics of Europe, on women's rights, on the decline in morality in the modern world, without comment.

'New kinds of work, huh.'

'Yes. New work. New ways.'

'A work-in-progress then. Like the new Ireland.' Nick decided to venture the phrase, seeing if he could change the mood, insinuate himself into O'Driscoll's mind. The guy seemed oblivious, though. Maybe the work-in-progress deal wasn't common currency; just the receptionist's literary in-joke with herself. *Probably a literature student from the Ollscoil* – he savoured the feel of the word, its music, *Ollscoil - UCD, across the road from the hotel; working part-time.*

'Then there is the fact that the farmer has tractors and other forms of heavy machinery,' O'Driscoll went on. His voice was becoming a drone. He sipped some coffee, delicately replacing the cup on the saucer. Nick noticed the brown stain slipping down the side of the cup where some of the coffee had escaped between O'Driscoll's lips and the side of the cup. *Les larmes du vin*. Wine-tasting: that was where he had heard that gurgle before, the Gaelic Taoiseach. You can make the sound you need by drawing in air across your tongue, as if you're tasting wine. He looked at the plump lips on O'Driscoll's well-fed face: too big for a man, someone kisses them, someone lets that tongue slide along her body. Inside her mouth. Horrible. O'Driscoll took a napkin from the table and wiped his mouth with it, wiped the edge of the cup.

'Instead of allowing his JCB digger to lie idle, the wise farmer now goes into the employment of the local council and, with his digger, takes up contracts to deal with

the council's road-building programme.' Nick stared beyond O'Driscoll's head, out the high window. In the distance, he could see the tall cranes, a thin yellow line against the grey, lifting loads over the Liffey. They shifted slowly, turning gently, sometimes so slowly that their motion was difficult to discern. The noise of distant hammering came into the room, into his head. That way must be the Irish Sea, where the bargeman was headed, he thought, the receptionist's crude child-like map coming back before his mind's eye; so the other way is inland. *A tenner would tell me.*

He turned his head to stare towards the interior, and could see across to the bookshop where he had sat earlier. Despite the soft rain, people seemed to be sitting at the tables by the door. O'Driscoll's voice was still going on. Obviously a spiel he has given many times before, thought Nick. It's not rude to be looking past him out the window. He's not looking at me while he speaks either. He's off somewhere else. The golf-course. The bank. With his mistress. The ridiculousness of the thought made Nick smile. 'You laugh,' said O'Driscoll, turning to face him again, 'but it's true. The council derives money from Brussels to build a road, hoards most of it, but allows a little of it to drip out to the community by bringing the farmer along with the JCB. It is what they call a "good deal" on all sides: the corrupt council makes some extra money; the farmer does the work, but providing his own tools so to do; the peasantry get better roads so that they can now drive German or French cars at high speeds, ensuring that their noise disturbs the few remaining animals.'

'And the farm?'

'As you will see as you drive around this countryside, many of the farms stop farming. They fall into disuse; and some of them are sold.'

'To?'

‘To wealthy individuals; sometimes wealthy or state institutions. We suffered many decades ago on this island from the system of tenant farmers. There were people – usually British – who owned the land, and allowed the indigenous population, through their good grace, to work the land for the profit of the farmer. Now, after Land Reform, after near-independence – I will not mention the North – we have joined a new community called Europe; and we seem to be heading straight back to having foreigners of various kind owning the land again.’

He looked hard at Nick, the foreigner imperialist, defying a response.

Nick had had enough. ‘OK, OK. I get the movie.’

‘Which brings me, appropriately, to this other contractual agreement that your Uncle had entered.’

‘Which is?’

O’Driscoll opened the filing cabinet, burrowed briefly in it, and produced a further file of letters.

‘In here,’ he said, ‘you will find that your Uncle had entered into an agreement with a film production company.’

Nick laughed out loud. The idea of Patrick in a movie. Crazy.

O’Driscoll continued, as if not noticing Nick’s laughter, the grin that had settled now on his face. ‘He has agreed to allow the farm to be used as a location for the making of a film.’ Looking up, he said, nodding sarcastic enthusiasm, ‘Oh, yes. The Irish Film Council is in the ascendant.’ He went back to look at the files. ‘As I believe I already indicated, farm houses have lots of rooms; and several of the actors and film crew are

to be housed there for the duration of their “shoot”, as I believe they call it. Additionally, farms have lots of land, and I believe that the land around the farm offers some desirable lighting and scenery opportunities for the film. They start “shooting” at the turn of the year.’ He paused and rifled through the file. ‘Ah yes, here it is: January until March next year. However, Patrick has also offered the use of the house to some of the production crew as of now. I believe that the director or producer and scriptwriter or some such people plan to be in the house from time to time. “Scoping,” I think it’s called. They will need to convert one of the rooms as a set. They may make other modifications to décor, but nothing structural. The agreement does not specify that the owner – formerly your Uncle, now you – needs to vacate the premises. In other words, when you go down there, you may have company. I am afraid that this is one agreement where, if you withdraw now, you will stand to lose a lot of money. They will contest the case, but I am afraid that your Uncle had taken bad legal advice. I have looked at the contract as drawn up, and I believe that you would lose.’

‘What advice had Patrick taken?’

‘I believe he availed of the opportunity of free legal advice. From a firm in Gorey; or more likely from one of the juniors in the office there. I am afraid that free legal advice is usually worth precisely what you have paid for it.’

‘How long is the shoot to last?’

‘Three months have been booked.’

‘Can I live there while it’s going on, as well as during this pre-production deal you’ve mentioned?’

‘There is provision for that in the agreement, yes.’

* * *

November 1992

Back in the car after their gentle embrace in the waters of Glendalough, Anne and Philip set off again, heading now through the Valley of the Dargle. Anne's skirt was still damp at the edges, so she lifted it and held it against the warm air from the heater. The water had made the yellow daffodil-stain smudge, a widening but fading circle, an indeterminacy. The winter light was bright still, and the bare-branched trees along the route were like skeletal hands, veins running upwards to the tips of the branches before emptying out, black but thin, into the light cloudy blue, almost drained to white, of the open sky.

Anne was unsure of what the music for this film could be. As Philip had tried to explain his idea of the story, she sought the mood. *Anguish*; but maybe that was him, not the film. *No; that's not what I'm after*, he said; rather, he was going for the sense of paranoid suspicion. The characters in the movie, like the characters in *Tables*, feel that they know each other; but it turns out that they are all deceiving each other, all the time, even in their most intimate moments and scenes. 'It's the logic of spying, of a surveillance culture. Everybody becomes important in it,' he said.

'Everybody? How? The spies – or the government – aren't interested in everybody, just in the big fry.'

'But that's not how it works. When you become aware that you're living in a society or a place that feels anxious for some reason, you yourself start to feel that anxiety.'

'Yes; but you said we're not talking about anxiety or anguish here.'

‘That’s right. But look at it closer. Why is the society anxious, and how does it show that and deal with it?’

‘. You’ll tell me?’

‘Well. Take the Cold War, for the obvious big example. In that war that wasn’t a war...’

‘Thankfully,’ interrupted Anne.

‘... sure. Thankfully. In that war, the Americans try to shore up their identity as American. And to do that, they need an enemy, somebody that the people can look at and say “I’m not one of them, I’m not like them”.’

‘Sure; Daddy once told me. They – the Russians and the poor people behind the Iron Curtain – they’ve only got black-and-white television, and it always rains, and the buildings are grey, and it’s always winter. Whereas here, in America, everything is in colour, we all live in California, we all live on the sunny coastlines, and we’re as free as the birds – look at us flying over the waves on our surf-boards. Sure, sure. All that’s easy.’

‘But don’t you see what I’m getting at? The surfer is anxious, basically.’

‘No, I don’t see that. They look happy.’

‘That’s because of the next bit.’ Philip paused. The car was at a cross-roads. ‘Where do we go next? Can you look again at the map?’

Anne let her skirt fall, patting it – *it’s dry now anyway* - unfolded the map on her knee, looked up at the signposts, turned the map upside down in her hands. ‘Left,’ she said; and Philip started to turn. ‘No, wait a minute. Not left yet. That’s the next cross-roads. Here, straight on. Sorry.’ Philip slowed and re-adjusted the turn to come back and go ahead. He had to pause, as the lorry that had been trailing them for ages now pulled ahead of them. ‘Dammit,’ said Philip. ‘Never mind,’ said Anne, ‘there’s no

major rush yet. We've got ages. We can look more at the countryside. The light's super: you get a hint of the sun even through the cloud, and it's sharpening the edges of things. It's brilliant light. I wish I was a photographer.'

Philip sighed. 'Where was I?' he asked.

'Turning left,' said Anne. 'But then deciding to carry on dead straight.' He caught her eye, caught her girlish half-smile trying to change the mood and keep them in their momentary commitment, the sealing of some relation that had taken place in the water. 'Americans are unhappy,' she said, returning to the serious tone he wanted.

'Yes. They are. And why is it that you have to turn the map upside down? When you do that, your right is your left.'

'I can look both ways at once,' she said, and put her face in front of his, eyes crossed.

'So?'

'So. American people – this is the Cold War, right? – American people are shown the image of what they're not so that they can identify with what they supposedly are: free, flying, bright colours, all that. But in reality, they know that they don't all live in California. In Nebraska, there are loads of poor sods who sit under wind and rain for lots of the time, ploughing away on the land. So somebody must be to blame for that.'

'The reds.'

'Yes, the reds. So that's why they start believing that there are reds under their beds.

The way it goes is that the redneck farmer starts to think it's only him that's not able to become the full American – free, bright colours, surfing – and so he starts to feel that he's been somehow singled out. He starts to feel – to reassert – his own importance...'

‘Left. Left, now. Here, quick. Left,’ said Anne, turning the map back up the right way. Philip started to turn, abruptly. ‘No, sorry. Right.’ The engine stalled on the junction. There was a pause.

‘Sorry,’ said Anne. Philip took the car off the junction, and turned off the ignition. ‘So, to assert his own self, the farmer reasserts his own importance, his own individuality. If he is not quite making it as a full American, there must be something of the enemy in him. He starts to keep himself under surveillance. He looks under his own bed; he looks into his own circle of friends and family, looks into his own community, looks into his own soul. He has a red in his head. The State has triumphed. No need, anymore, to employ people to keep an eye on the American population: they do it themselves. Our farmer will do everything he can to make sure there is no trace of red communism anywhere near him, much less in him. Even his red neck isn’t red any more. Instead, he’s got a blue collar. Surveillance is hard-wired, as our computer pals will tell us, into the psyche.’

‘That’s the logic of paranoia,’ said Anne.

‘Sure,’ agreed Philip, re-starting the car. ‘Sure. The paranoid schizophrenic believes himself to be both the least important person in the world because he is hated by everybody, but at the same time the most important person in the world because the world has picked him out for this special attention, this special hatred.’

‘And that’s the logic of *Tables*?’

‘Sort of, yes.’

‘I’ll need to re-read it again, I suppose,’ said Anne.

Anne's mind was partly elsewhere. She was still trying to find a way to black out the vision of the dying animal they had left by the side of the road, its head crushed to an unrecognisable pulp. Philip had made to lift it, as if he was going to carry it to some burial place, but she pushed him back when he bent down to it. *Don't touch. Don't use your bare hands.* And she used her foot to edge it to the side of the road. Let's go. Let's get away.

Philip was pushing on with his vision for the film. 'That's the logic of the novel. Except that here, of course, we're not talking Cold War. The espionage thing in *Tables* seems to me to have more to do with that culture where our Nebraskan farmer is looking into his own soul.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning that what's going on here is that *religion* is doing the work of the State. The table of stone, as you'll remember, is the altar. Well, actually, it's a dolmen where Jack and Mary meet, where they make love; but it works like an altar in the book. We'll film it near one of the big standing stones.'

'That'll be good. Visually strong. Them making love near the phallic stone. Very modern; very *now*.'

He went on, ignoring her irony, 'Catholicism here – I mean in the book – is what generates the culture of surveillance. Once the priest has so fully managed to get you to internalise the examination of your own conscience stuff, once guilt has become structurally a bit of yourself, then he can go and rest, sit at home, drink. Because the people will keep themselves under surveillance for him. They monitor themselves; they act as if the whole community is monitoring them. There's no private life any

more. They will act as if all of their actions are exposed before the priest. And that hampers what they can do.'

'No more sex.'

'No more sex, no more illicit pleasures. Except, of course, that there *is* more sex, as we know. The sex is just tainted. Guilty. Like Jack and Mary. Good at the time, but not to be acknowledged openly as a good thing; rather, to be hidden away. "Bless me, Father. It wasn't sex, Father – it's a virgin birth".'

'And the result, then?' Anne shifted in her seat and, as she moved, she felt the stone again in her pocket. She took it out and looked at it in her hand, its striations yielding nothing of its archaeology. It was beautiful in its smooth anonymity.

'Well, the result is a culture where people don't trust each other to be telling the truth, at the same time as needing to believe in each other. That's what happens between the two big characters in the film, in the story: Mary Aspell and Jack Hillary need to believe in each other, but they're *both* hiding things from each other, both fundamentally mistrusting each other. It should be here, soon. We're just leaving the village, so it must be set back from the road somewhere along here.'

As they carried on out of the edge of the village of Rathnew, the already few houses became rarer and rarer. Hedges trailed uncertainly along the edge of the road, scattered unevenly, sometimes trimmed, mostly ragged. The road had narrowed, and every now and then there was a squeal as some large twig, nearly a branch, scratched along the side of the car. Philip winced every time it happened. Anne looked around, trying to see above the line of the hedges, for some sign of the house, but it was now so dark that they could see nothing, just the eerie shapes of trees, camouflage for the life of the night. Eventually, they came to a gate that had been left open, but only

because it had fallen off its hinges, lying slantways into the hedge. Beyond the gate was a short drive that went round a bend, with sycamore and rhododendron built up on both sides. A willow hung its low branches down to the track. They drove slowly up the drive, and as it curved, they saw the house. Philip stopped the car, and got out.

Anne stayed behind for a moment. The conversation had unsettled her. If there's a religious motif, then maybe some hymn music? Religion as politics? Not again. *The problem is that we lack a politics on this island. Everything focused on that border. A proper socialism knows no borders. Religion depends on them. He's wrong.* She still had no real idea what to do for the music.

She was also starting to think she knew so little about Philip, and needed to know more. Who was he? And how had he got Julia's name? Behind that, though, was the real disturbance for her. Who was she herself? Sealing something with Philip at Glendalough had returned her father solidly to her: she had felt him there, beside her. But wasn't she also Julia's daughter? Then, who was Julia? She felt closer to Mairead, Mammy; and she could bring forth an image of her father more easily than she could that of Julia. Yet Julia was at her core, and she sensed something dark there, something that frightened her. *Spies. Shush.*

'Trouble. Troubles,' she muttered to herself as she opened the car door and joined Philip in the black-dark porch.

* * *

November 1992, England

In her converted barn in Burwash, Caroline had just put the children to bed. Sean and Aíne had been unnaturally loud this evening, and she was exhausted from playing with them. Ludo, *I play. Ludamus*, we're playing? No, it's *ludere*, second conjugation: *ludebamur*, then, we were playing. It's an irregular perfect tense, isn't it? *Lusi* or something. She couldn't recall. Sister Josephine, it was, taught them Latin. It was awkward, for the girls hated Latin, but many of them, Caroline included, had a schoolgirl crush on Sister Josephine. So they took the class. Caroline fantasised about sitting with Nuala – that was her given name, she once told her, the name she had before going into the convent – she fantasised about sitting with Nuala on a warm summer day by the river that ran across the field behind the school. They would be having a picnic together, just the two of them, clandestinely stealing a moment away from the rest. Nuala removed her wimple, too hot, I wish we could just swim; and Caroline would be overcome with a simple and asexual desire. *I want to spend time with you. You're lovely. You let me see what love is. Beauty.* We're just playing, said Nuala, *ludemus*. When Caroline was asked, years later, about Sister Josephine's behaviour with the girls, she simply replied, we were playing, *laudeamus* – but that means we were praising – sorry, *ludebamur*.

She came back downstairs and into the lounge via the kitchen, where she picked up a bottle of Chablis that had been chilling in the fridge. The fridge was one of those ridiculously huge American affairs, coal-black with double doors like a wardrobe, and a machine at the front that dispensed ice-cubes, noisily. The children loved it; Caroline spent much of her time picking up the cubes that had been crunched out. Too

many conveniences, she muttered under her breath. Too Americanised. Keep it simple instead.

As she walked into the lounge, carrying the bottle in one hand and two glasses gently clinking together in the other, Jack looked up from his pile of exercise books.

‘Marking. The bane of every teacher’s life,’ he said. She put her fingers to her lips and nodded upstairs, as if to indicate that the children might not yet be asleep. ‘But this helps,’ he whispered, looking at her, at the wine. Caroline sat beside him, uncorking the bottle. He took it from her before she poured, and made a show of looking at the label. He held the bottle in one hand, a school exercise book in the other, as if judging between them. ‘Cheeky little number,’ he said. ‘Grand Cru, 83, chardonnay grapes sweetening almost into a Sauternes. Lots of body, and a long aftertaste. Berries. Big berries and vanilla.’ He looked up. ‘Like you,’ he added. ‘Funny how marking’s like sex, really.’ She smiled. He knew nothing about wine, but always liked to pretend that he was a connoisseur.

‘And that,’ he went on, looking harshly at the exercise book before dismissively throwing it to the floor, ‘that, by contrast, is a load of bloated garbage. Porridge. No taste, no flavour, empty of delight, without surprise. Some marking’s like bad sex. What am I saying, sex? I mean wine. Some marking’s like having a bad wine. Wine, not sex.’ He started to pour. ‘It’s as if they’re industrially processed these days, these kids. Bloody exam boards. Bloody targets.’ Caroline touched glasses with him, ‘Cheers. But there are some good pupils still,’ she said. ‘That’s the point,’ he replied. ‘We’re betraying them. A whole generation being denied knowledge. Political pawns.

It's my job to teach, not to get the results required to give good league-table results that will secure the re-election of a bloody Tory government.'

Caroline kissed him gently on the cheek. 'I mean, as a socialist, it's my bounden duty to make sure these kids fail – make sure Major and his corrupt Tories don't get back in. God, this wine's terrific.' 'Mm, yes. Kinnock, then?' 'Oh, God. The victory speech will outlast the first sitting of Parliament. *I'm the first Kinnock in a generation, a thousand generations, a million generations, that worked down the mines and came up, singing, dancing, playing football and rugby, and was this a generation that was lacking in ability, in talent, I warn you don't be young don't be old*, well that covers the available options, blah-di-bloody-blah-di-da.'

They drank and savoured the Chablis, its cool lemony scent returning them to France, to their vacation by the beach in Brittany, to reality. But it wasn't a bottle that they had bought there and brought back with them; rather, it was one of the three more expensive wines that Anne had given them when she visited after her Proms success last week. So it gave them not just France, but the delicious evanescence of a success: a lapidary moment punctuating the unrelenting flat drabness of the insanity that constituted their daily working lives.

Jack's pretence that he knew about wine wasn't entirely false. He knew enough to know he liked certain grapes, even certain vintages. But his self-image as a connoisseur got him into trouble once, at a School Fete. He reminded Caroline about it now, delighting in teasing her.

‘So. You agree that we should do something for the Fete. The children join in; but nobody comes up with any ideas. Except me: tombola; penalty-taking with me in goal; in a brief moment of total bloody madness, wine-tasting. On reflection, I plump for the penalties, seeing the flaws in all the other suggestions – *especially*, above all, the wine-tasting. But no, wine-tasting’s a great idea, you all say, no-one else will be doing that, it’ll be great fun, guess the country the wine comes from and you get the glass free, get it wrong and it costs you a pound. Great idea... *You say.*’ He smiled and sampled the Chablis, swilling it round his mouth, drawing his breath across it.

‘And then I’m stood standing there, while you and the kids disappear all day. I’m standing at the stall, holding the fort my-bloody-self, and they’ve given me the stand right plump between the official bar on one side and the bloody barbecue on the other. The smoke is killing me. Worse, all the parents are headed for their beers at the bar to go with their E-coli flavoured rubber chicken and cholesterol burgers. And they’re all staring at me as if I’m some sort of lunatic. They don’t know whether to go blind and ignore me completely or to make some witty gibe. They’re positively embarrassed by me: come to think of it, *I’m* bloody embarrassed by me. The thorny question of social class raises its lovely head.’

‘Like the head on a pint of lager,’ interrupted Caroline, teasing him back. ‘Oh, God; not the class stuff again,’ she said, but she could hardly suppress her giggles.

‘Ah yes, class. Beer is good; wine is for nobs’n’snobs. We should have had them educated privately, you know. As a teacher in the state system, I can categorically say that that would have been better. It would have been an education at least.’ He paused.

‘And I wouldn’t have been making an arse of myself in front of all the parents. And seeing it reverberate later on the kids, with teachers taking it out on them for being so upper-middle-class-aspirational-whatever. That’s what’s worse.’

‘But it was fine in the end, wasn’t it?’

‘Only because, to make any money for the Fete at all, I had to drink the whole bleeding supply of wine myself. Four crates, if I remember correctly.’ They laughed, then tried to stifle as they heard the creaking of a bed upstairs, a child moving around, settling. ‘But this,’ and he lifted the bottle again, refilling their glasses, ‘this is delicious. Your sister is a gem. Almost as stunning as you.’ He reached across the table and took Caroline’s hand. ‘Upstairs,’ he said, ‘now. I need you. I want you.’

‘They’re not asleep yet,’ said Caroline. ‘We’ll waken them.’

‘Only if you make sweet moan, Fanny Brawne.’

‘Or as soon as you start your panting upon the midnight hour, Jack Keats,’ she replied. ‘Unheard melodies are sweeter. We’ll be quiet,’ he said. ‘Here, then; not upstairs,’ she said. She had put her glass back on the table, and was now pulling Jack towards her. They slid off their chairs and on to the carpet. Caroline reached up to the sofa and pulled some cushions down. ‘Otherwise it’ll hurt my back,’ she said. She was slipping out of her dress, unzipping it with one hand while arranging the cushions with the other.

‘Better move this,’ said Jack, picking up the exercise book he had thrown down earlier. ‘Don’t want to stain my reputation – or anything else, for that matter - even more.’ He had undressed at great speed, and was now busily unhooking Caroline’s bra as she edged herself alongside him, feeling their warm nakedness. Together.

‘Reputation? A fig; a sweet ... tasteful ... classy ... fig,’ said Caroline, between kisses, pulling him breathily towards her, kissing him earnestly, her tongue seeking out the soul in his mouth, mingling their breath together.

The phone rang.

‘Fuck.’

Caroline leapt up, trying to grab the phone off the hook before it roused the kids.

‘Yes, hello?’ In the pause that followed, Jack, taking a large draught of his wine, saw her face fall, her eyes close as she concentrated on what she was hearing. She grabbed at her dress on the floor, and sat down, covering herself as best she could with it over her knees. He started to pull his own clothes back towards him. ‘Yes? When? How long?’ she was asking. ‘We’ll get there as soon as we can.’ She put the phone back on the hook.

‘It’s Mammy,’ she said.

* * *

November 1992

Philip fumbled in his pockets for the keys, but as he was doing so, unable to distinguish them in the dark, Anne reached past him to feel the door-knocker. It was an enormous hand, bronze, shaped as a fist. As she raised it and let go, it set off a loud and echoing clatter; and the door opened. The lock was not working, and the house was lying open. Philip looked up, shrugged and put the clutch of keys back in his pocket.

‘Open sesame,’ he said.

They went in and Anne reached for a light-switch. As the faint uncovered bulb dispelled some of the gloom, they could see that the house was barely occupied. None of the other lights seemed to work. Curtains, their old floral patterns looking like uneven muddy stains, hung off their rails and hooks on all the windows, some of them ragged, all of them mottled. There was a large hearth in the hall where they had entered, but it looked as if there had been no fire in the grate for many a year. Instead, yellowed newspapers and dozens of green beer-bottles were piled in a disorganised mess all round it.

‘Forgot the recycling,’ said Philip, lifting a newspaper. ‘20th March 1987,’ he said and dropped it back to the ground.

‘Forgot just about everything,’ replied Anne, ‘like warmth, for instance. Is there any heating in the place?’ She held her coat tight to her body, and looked down as she felt her feet kicking something away in the dimness. It was an open cardboard box, with an old brief-case inside, battered, bruised. She caught a glimpse of the blood from the cat still on her shoe, and looked up again.

‘What a dump,’ she said.

‘We-e-ell,’ replied Philip, ‘but it depends how you look at it.’ Anne looked at him, eyes wide. ‘Yes, I mean ... if you look at it, kind of from a distance ... with your eyes shut ... and looking the other way, sort of ... it has a certain kind of ... an unusual type of ...’ Anne turned her back to him, closing her eyes. ‘... charm ...’ she said. ‘Yes, charm,’ said Philip.

They walked round the house together. Anne didn’t like to say it, but she was afraid of going ahead alone. The events of the day were haunting her: that body in the water,

the cat killed on the road. She had a bad feeling about the place; but she knew Philip would dismiss such superstitious nonsense, so she kept quiet.

Philip walked into the kitchen. There were dishes laid at the sink, but they were covered in verdigris. 'Yeuch,' he said. He turned the tap. Nothing. 'We'll need to find the water mains. Wherever that might be.' Anne looked around at the yellowed walls; and then saw a brown box, high up above what looked like the boiler. 'Is this anything?' she asked, opening the box. She flicked a switch and more lights came on. 'I wish I'd left them off,' she said, 'the place is so gloomy it's probably better in the dark.'

'And the water will be outside,' said Philip, trying to make the most of the dismal surroundings. 'I'll go and find it,' he said. 'You wait here. Keep warm.' As Anne sat down in the kitchen, she heard a faint scratching noise, and a mouse ran across the floor, heading for the door into the hallway. She clutched her coat to her. Not what she had had in mind. She hummed a line from *Black Rain*.

Philip came back in and turned the tap. There was a horrible gurgling noise, and brown brackish water spat into the sink. 'It'll flow clear if we leave it,' he said. 'Time always clarifies things.'

'Another of your proverbs?'

He shrugged. 'It'll have to do.'

'We've got mice,' said Anne.

'Maybe they found the place more hospitable than it looks to us.'

'We should keep away from the walls. Always sit facing an open door.'

‘Is that one of *your* proverbs?’

No. Wyatt Earp.’

As they busied themselves trying to find a corner of the house that they could make habitable, Anne asked ‘So who, actually, is the owner of this place?’

‘Some American guy.’

‘American? Is that why it feels so uninhabited?’ A pause, ‘uninhabitable. There’s nobody ever living here?’

‘No. He’s only just become the owner, literally a couple of months ago. The place used to belong to an Irish farmer. But he died. The American is his nephew. The film company did all the negotiations with the farmer, the Irishman; and the deal was all set in place when he died. So the American inherited the house, and inherited the deal.’

‘When did he die? Can’t have been recently.’

‘No idea. 1987?’ he said, picking up the old paper from the grate again. ‘Anyway, the American gets the deal.’

‘The deal being, exactly?’

‘As I said to you: the fields around the house are going to be used for some of the location shooting; some of the interior may be used for the interior shots. They’ll need to do it all up for that, obviously. I thought that would have been done by now. Never mind,’ picking his way through some of the debris on the floor. ‘But the main thing is that the house will be a base for a couple of the actors, maybe the director or producer. It’s just a kind of security net, a place that’s not like the usual caravans that you get on a film set. More ... more ...’ and he looked up...

‘...comfortable?’ suggested Anne.

‘Yeah. Comfortable. Homely.’

‘But the American hasn’t made it homely for us? There’s no way this place can accommodate anybody. Much less fancy Hollywood actors.’

‘I told you. The actors aren’t big names. Niall O’Dwyer; Niamh Dunne. *Frontiers of Security*, remember them in that? No Hollywood money. This is the Irish Film Board funding us here. No big deal. We’ll be slumming it.’

‘We?’ *Frontiers* was the film Anne had seen the night her car was tampered with in Dublin. She had forgotten all about it.

‘Well, yes. We. If you stay on board. As you’ve promised.’

They were now upstairs, walking in and out of the bedrooms. There were six rooms, most of them large, all dominated by dark heavy mahogany furniture. Anne heard more scratching in one of the rooms. ‘You’re imagining it now,’ said Philip, cocking his own ear theatrically and saying he could hear nothing at all. ‘You’re hearing things.’

‘That’s my job,’ said Anne, in a cursory manner. Yet she wanted to like the place, wanted to like the evening, the adventure.

‘So when is the American going to be here?’

‘Well. The story is he got here, found the place in a state, got the utilities all reconnected. But he’s gone back to the States. Sort out his affairs there. There’s something about him maybe even leaving the States to come here. For good. Become a farmer himself.’

‘Really? So he farms in the States?’

‘No. Typical bloody American arrogance, if you ask me. The lawyers who gave me these keys – though I don’t know what for,’ and he threw them on the dresser in the largest bedroom of them all where they lay reflected in a three-piece mirror, endlessly doubling themselves in two directions, ‘the lawyers told me that he’s never farmed before, that he’s in computing or something; but that he has fallen in love, suddenly, with his Irish heritage – or his Irish inheritance. The place must be worth millions. All that land out there. He’ll probably sell it all to developers when he realises that sheep don’t do what they’re told, and that cows need milking. Make a small fortune.’

‘Sounds like you know him already. A friend of yours, is he?’ asked Anne, lightly, lifting the keys and looking at her hair in the mirror.

‘Just a little moment of letting off the old steam, that’s all,’ said Philip, his face appearing behind her head in the mirror, his arms now embracing her. She turned to face him. And kissed him.

He eased her away from the dresser and edged her towards the bed. ‘At least we’ll be warm. Together. Under the covers,’ he said. He reached for the buttons on her coat and started fumbling, trying to open them.

‘Wait,’ she said. She stood up from the bed and pulled the sheets back. They were filthy. ‘I brought sheets with me. They’re in the bag in the car. If you go and get them, we can get under them together. Tucked in. Away from the mice.’

Philip went downstairs and out into the drive. He opened the boot of the car, and its interior light came on. He took out his mobile and dialled the number. It was answered right away. He exchanged the code-word and then asked ‘Rick? How are

you? What have you got for me? I can't talk for long.' The voice at the other end replied, 'Where are you phoning from? The line's dreadful.'

'I'm in the middle of nowhere. Wicklow somewhere, I don't know. I've got her here, though, so I can't talk much. What have you got on the mother? Anything yet?'

'Yes. She's not using her name. That was the problem earlier. But we've tracked her and we can get to her. Do you want us to do that? Take a message?'

'Not yet. I'll get back to you as soon as.' He closed the phone.

His monologue in the car - bending the plot of the novel to a story that he felt as closer to home - hadn't teased very much out of her. She hadn't responded as he had expected to his bait: priests, suspicion, questions of guilt and responsibility. He couldn't quite read her response: too bland. *But she must know. Julia was her mother, after all. All families have secrets; but they don't keep that kind of thing – thing? let me use the word: murder – they don't keep murder a secret from each other. Do they? Do they? And now this, here, and the thing by the lake. Her move. Do I sleep with her? Well? Well, why not?*

He turned back to look inside the boot and, as he picked out the bag, he turned to look back at the doorway of the house. He noticed now the small name-plate fastened to the wooden frame of the porch. 'Brookside House'. He left the boot open and walked over to the door, staring at the plate. 'Brookside House'. It was definitely 'Brookside House'. They were in the wrong house.

'Fuck,' he said quietly to himself. 'Fucking hell. Her bloody navigation. Turning the map upside down. We're in the wrong place.'

As he closed the boot, he was undecided about whether to tell Anne that they had made a mistake. That was why the keys didn't work. This wasn't the farm at all. It was an abandoned house. At least, he hoped it was abandoned. He could turn back, now. It was a moment when he could reassert his control of things. Not sleep with her; turn it back to where he had imagined.

He went back indoors and strode upstairs. Anne was sitting on the bed still, with her coat wrapped tightly round herself. But he noticed that there was a neat pile of her clothes on the chair next to the bed. She undid the buttons, from the bottom, partly revealing the length of her leg. He would not tell her. They could 'find out' together tomorrow morning. He'd pretend he hadn't seen the sign.

Smiling, he undid the bag and pulled out the sheets. Anne had already stripped the bed of the old things that had been on it, and he started to lay out her fresh sheets neatly.

'No need for all that. No need to fuss,' she said. She grabbed a sheet, pulled her coat off, quickly recovering her nakedness with the sheet, and lay on the bed. He noticed the birthmark on her body, just below her left breast; a fleeting glimpse of a scar on the otherwise smooth skin, a blemish.

'Come on in,' she said. 'The water's lovely. Cold at first, but then good, like Glendalough. Will you swim with me? In me?'

* * *

Father Seamus Twomey waited in Bewley's café for Con to arrive. He sat close to the fireplace, its open flame a warming radiance against the chill day outside. All round, Dubliners sat in a faded splendour that recalled a fin-de-siècle Vienna coffee-house: stained glass windows on the baronial-looking staircase, red plush velvet on the sofas that lines the walls. The bustle and noise of the women serving the coffees from their modern machines dispelled any possible sense of gloom. He budged along the seat, closer to the fire, as Con sat down beside him, newspaper and coffee in hand.

Con had sketched out the wording of a note. Seamus looked at it, inspecting it like a secret document, hand covering it like a child afraid of having his homework copied at school. Looking up and pocketing it, he said, 'fine. It's good.'

'We need someone to deliver it,' said Con.

'No problem. I've got lots of people in the Society who'll do it.'

'The St Vincent de Paul?'

'No, not them. Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child. SPUC.'

'Ah, sure. Good; that's appropriate, Seamus. Very appropriate. You'll get it re-written, of course; by hand.'

'Yes, and delivered by hand as well. No worries, Con.'

Drinking their coffee, they looked just like two ordinary citizens, the only significance being that one of them wore the dog-collar. The other people in the café gave them a wide enough berth, either thinking that there must be a confidential conversation

going on between a man and his confessor, or that they wanted to get nowhere near the clutches of the priest. The dog-collar was like a leper's bell for the young people in the café, like a veil for the elders. Some of these nodded respectfully as they passed, teas and doughnuts perched precariously on their trays; but Seamus's response was so minimally a smile that they felt rebuffed, as if they didn't really exist for him. And, as people, they did not. They were either with or against him, and his assumption was now that the population was against him, unless he saw them in his church.

Or unless they were like Con. Here, at least, he thought, watching Con sip at his drink, was one that could be trusted, one who had used his talent to the proper ends, who could be trusted by Seamus to do the academic research necessary and, if need be, to find the counter-facts or to twist the data so that it could be presented as grist to the mill. Yes, he could make use of Con.

Yet there was one thing at least that Seamus could not trust him with, could not trust anyone with. *PJ Gallagher. I don't know whether to be insulted that she didn't take my name when PJ was born. She could have done so. No-one would have put it together and come up with me. And the bishop. Can he not let me alone, that one? I hardly ever see PJ anyway; and, when I do, I'm no great influence. For good or bad. But I can't tell anyone about this. Not yet. The trouble's always there.*

They finished their coffee, shook hands, and parted, going their separate ways, but united in their grim determinations, walking embittered, sad, through Grafton Street and its crowd of free-singing buskers.

Chapter 4

October 1992

Joan kissed Lily and tucked her fragile and stiff body under the bed-covers. She had learned to expect no response and, as always, Lily remained totally impassive. Joan then stopped hesitantly at Dan's door and listened for the sound of a steady breathing. A gentle snoring let her know that, for once, Dan was resting, asleep. She felt a kind of relief for him. Joan was exhausted by trying to care for him; but it was Nick who had pointed out that the condition must be exhausting for Dan as well. Think of it, he had once said, just after the diagnosis: *it's like your mind can't control your body, so when you wanna rest, when you need to rest, insteads you got some mad machine inside you pulsing on and on, forcing you to be on the move. All the time; alla' the time.* They used to call it possession; it's like being possessed – being *occupied* - by some crazed, manic devil, *your body ain't your own.* The thought of the poor kid's helpless exhaustion exhausted Nick even more than their hopeless attempts to keep him sociable or to try to maintain some kind of damned normality. Normality, huh.

Joan hesitated, wondering if she would dare to cross to Dan's bed and kiss him lightly on the head. Frightened that it would waken him and bestir the devil, she tiptoed away. She left the doors to both bedrooms slightly ajar, and dimmed the hallway light. Her eyes accustomed themselves to the fading gloom; and she looked down the hallway to the contrastingly bright light coming up the staircase from the lounge below. She hesitated, indecisive, as if perhaps preferring to keep in the twilight with the children.

Three days earlier. Same routine. Nick was in the kitchen of the house. He was opening the bottle of Jameson's whisky that he had brought back from his trip. He raised an eyebrow in Joan's direction: share a glass with me? Joan misread it and thought he was asking about her and the children. They're down, asleep, she mouthed silently. Nick nodded, and filled two glasses generously, handing one to Joan, who sat down with him on the sofa.

'I guess you drank lots of this in Dublin?' she said, quietly, holding the glass at arm's length, suspiciously. 'Pocheen? Is that what it's called?'

'It's not poteen. That's the illegal stuff. This is official. And I sure did drink the occasional glass or more,' said Nick. 'It's delicious. You'll see. Sniff it first, so that you get the scent from it. It's like a wine: you've gotta admire the colour first, then assess the bouquet.' His voice was returning to normal volume. 'Drinking it is the least of your worries. There's a whole palaver before you get to that point.'

'Palaver,' repeated Joan, mimicking an Irish accent as she did so. She swirled the liquid in the glass and stared into it.

'Look at it. The gold that's the colour of the barley sheaves; the light straining through the watery sun; the unevenness of the liquid as it falls back steady, like the mountains of the auld counthry,' said Nick, his self-ironising a defence against any more sarcasm from Joan.

But the banter, though light, was awkward, and they both knew it was forced. Joan was fearful that Nick's inheritance was something that was breaking her life apart. She wished he hadn't got the farm at all. She wished he had had an elder brother somewhere, instead of being an only child, and that the big brother had got the farm.

Why couldn't he just sell it? Leave it alone? What had precipitated this sudden interest in his roots? He'd never as much as mentioned Ireland before. Even when his parents were alive. God, they hadn't even mentioned it themselves.

Nick was on a kind of auto-pilot, going through the motions. Against his routine, his habitual relations with Joan, he felt now the gravitational weight of necessity at his back. He had no idea where the feeling had come from. Maybe it was realizing that he was near the end of a line, the Irish line, and realizing that he had screwed up with his own kids. How could the line continue now? Lily won't marry; Dan probably won't either. This is it, then. Yet he knew this wasn't the whole story either. Maybe he was just fed up with Motion, with Joan, with the endless deadly routine of it all, the mindless palaver. Maybe it was just that this was a chance, that he sensed he was being given a second chance in his life, and that he needed to take it. One thing was sure, though, and he knew it: *I'm sick of always serving, of seeing things from Joan's point of view, or Dan's or Lily's or fucking Grabowski's. What about me?* He wanted, like some mid-life adolescent, to find out who he was. If it meant leaving Joan, then it meant leaving Joan. Yet he was still going through with the idea of trying to persuade her to share the fresh start with him. It was an idea he knew she couldn't entertain.

'Drink it slowly,' he said.

Joan drank, and gasped as it caught at her throat. She spluttered and coughed, the remains of the whisky tumbling from the glass down her shirt. Empty. While Nick went to fetch her some water, she calmed herself, and decided to open the subject that they had been skirting since Nick's return from seeing the farm. It would be fraught.

She knew they would argue. And the memory of their bitter words the night of Lily's accident frightened Joan. How could they ever have got to where they were that night? Then the argument that she had told Emily about, the terrible one just a week or so before Nick went to Ireland. The fear she felt then, thinking that Nick would damage Dan this time, as he had done Lily before. *I don't know how much I can say, how much I can dredge into the light for us to be blinded by.* That argument, she felt – and she had said this to Emily, sobbing as Emily pretended to normalize things, with her wine, her salad, her incomprehension – that argument had been definitive of something. It had shaped Nick's mood as he prepared to make his visit to the farm, to see what life could lie there. She had gifted him to Ireland with what she had said.

The dinner-party, three days before Nick would fly out, seemed to be going as well as she could have hoped. As well as she could have hoped was, well, just this side of disaster. Nick had been on edge about it all day, all week even. The stress was showing, as clearly focused and painful as toothache. Michael Grabowski, Nick's boss, large, loud and brash, was there with Margie, his diminutive wife. Food was important to them, *we met in a restaurant, me eating, Margie serving. Beautiful; as it should be.* Grabowski was fourth-generation, he reminded people whenever he could. 'I was here *before* the pogroms, all that bullshit. I'm so fourth-generation I'm part of the fabric of Seattle culture. The fact that Seattle *has* no culture isn't a problem; Seattle's only third-generation,' and he'd laugh at his joke. Every time. 'I'm so fourth-generation domesticated I'm fucking *Italian American!*' Every time the same.

Margie was mostly silent, her inexpressive face marked by the tiniest of benevolent smiles, as if she was a beaten animal who felt now totally at home in her

subservience. She was accommodating, to Grabowski, to Joan, to everyone. That was why Joan had sat her next to Harvey Wesson, Joan's own father. Harvey was retired, long-since widowed, aging and starting physically to show it with his silvery hair and slight stoop, but still a very influential voice in the State. As one of Seattle's most celebrated architects, he had helped build much of the new financial district. Everyone knew how much he had contributed to the growth of the region's economy; everyone also knew how much he had contributed to the Republican Party. They knew it because he was a great talker, even if mostly about himself. He'd keep Margie occupied all night. She would be the perfect sounding board for him. They'd both enjoy it. *Or at least no harm will come of it*, thought Joan.

Joan's own studies, in architectural design, had come to something of an end when she met Nick. They had met at college and – as Harvey loved to tell the tale - Nick, young, inexperienced in the ways of the world, too embarrassed to buy condoms, had 'got my daughter pregnant'. And Harvey would laugh, usually very loudly, expecting – almost requiring – his listeners, whoever they were, to laugh with him, a laughter that was edged with mockery, just skirting savagery and hatred. It was their second year of study when it happened.

Joan never knew whether Harvey was being deliberately provocative, trying to stir a fight with Nick, or whether he was actually quite pleased. He'd usually slap Nick on the back as he shouted out to everyone about Nick's embarrassment threshold, 'Condoms. I mean, condoms. You can get them at the barber's. You can get them at the penny-and-dime. Go to the next village where no-one knows you. Best of all, stand in Bart's Pharmacy in the centre of Seattle and shout out that you want to buy

some condoms – extra large size, for Chrissake. Everybody’ll look away! Or if they look, they’ll at least be impressed!’ and he’d roar, pleased with himself, laughing at his own jokes; but there was always an edge, cold and sharp as a steel blade, under the warm guffawing. Nick would smile, self-mocking, indulgent, whenever the story was being told. He turned the possibility of barbed criticism to familial lore and joke by nodding his head, smiling inanely and making a goofy face, shrugging his shoulders, *yeah, that was me all right*. But Joan knew that Nick didn’t really like him.

Deep down, Joan had started to feel a bit of dislike for Harvey herself. But, for these many years since her mother had died, she had felt his all-absorbing need for support, even his expectation that she would support him. She was to be his daughter before she was Nick’s wife, or the mother of Lily and Dan. No, she didn’t like Harvey very much herself, his insensitivity, his selfishness. After all, there was more to the pregnancy that he so joked about: another story entirely. It had ended in miscarriage; and Harvey knew it, of course; though he didn’t know the entire truth – no one except Joan knew that. Joan and Nick married before the loss of the child; and Joan felt a question-mark over the marriage: would they have wed if she hadn’t been pregnant? Harvey sometimes asked her, but she always avoided replying.

She had invited Emily and Jim, her own friends from the neighbourhood, to the meet-the-boss party. Joan and Emily met one day at the local gym, both desperate to lose weight though neither was really out of shape; and, having passed a few words with each other over the cross-ski, they struck up a friendship. Now, they went to the gym together. They didn’t take much exercise, but used the time to catch up with each other. They would pedal lazily side-by-side on the bikes, monopolizing them until

other customers – ‘the mince-cake’, Emily called them, ‘not big enough to be serious beefcake, and just mincing their sweet little asses around the machines’ – until these more serious users made it clear that the bikes were needed, and that they needed to move on to some other machine. Then they’d walk the treadmills for a bit, before finally going off to shower and have coffee. ‘And bagels,’ Emily insisted. ‘We’ve earned it.’ Nick thought Emily was a complete air-head; but, for Joan’s sake, he did his best to bite his tongue and to try always to be polite to her. Joan had placed them together. She wanted Nick to like Emily; she wanted Emily to be a bit more serious, to listen to Nick and so find out more about Joan herself, through her husband.

It was a hopeless mix, she realized. Why Nick had asked Grabowski was something she could not work out. OK, he was the boss, and it’s important to do the stuff for the boss. But dinner? Here? At home? On top of all the usual hassle about trying to keep Dan and Lily in the usual routine? Nick could have taken Grabowski to a restaurant or something, *Le Renoir*, with its fancy menu and fancier prices. Harvey, meanwhile, was talking politics. Shouting it, rather. ‘The GOP needs new leadership. We need another Ronald Reagan. Winner of the Cold War. Driver of the most successful economy in the world. And a great actor as well. No point in beating about the George Bush. Ha-ha-ha.’ No-one else could get a word in, thanks to the volume. Joan nudged his elbow, ‘Too loud, Pappy,’ she said. ‘What? Whassup?’ asked Harvey.

Grabowski seized the moment to launch into his own analysis of the malaise affecting America: ‘we haven’t embraced technology enough. Every home a computer. There’s a new thing coming, people, the ‘Internet’. Listen up, listen. It’ll link everybody’s computers worldwide. Right across the States. California to NY. Somebody’s even

speaking of something called the World Wide Web. The military have it already; CERN in Europe. It's gonna revolutionise communications, commerce. In our lifetime. America is the only true revolutionary country in the world; but it needs to take on the challenge of technology. Computing. Miniaturisation. Nanotechnology. You watch. Within a decade, we'll have computers so small they'll be smaller than your cell-phone. You'll do everything on it. The new ways are good. The old need to get out of the way,' and he looked steadily at Harvey as he said it.

You'll be old too one day,' said Emily, reaching for the bottle of wine and pouring herself another glass, pointedly not sharing it with him.

'Yeah, technology. Yeah. The technology of these new automobiles is awesome,' said Jim, smoothing the tenor, lowering the temperature. 'It's getting more and more like Star Trek. Amazing. Wondrous; a whole nother world.'

'Did you see *Troubled House* last night, Joannie?' asked Emily. She had emptied her glass in one, turning her back now to Grabowski and pouring herself another glass, ostentatiously, with challenge in her eyes.

'What's he saying about computers?' from Harvey. 'And what's this Irish farm business? Hey, Nick? Ireland: what's that?'

'Who'd like some more pavlova?'

'Isn't that a Polish dish?' Margie's only words all evening.

'Jim's the real dish here. Delish. Best in the whole of Seattle. Ain't he terrific?' and Emily grabbed Jim's hand on the table, turning to face him. The look on his face told Joan where Emily's other hand had gone.

'Coffee, anybody?' from Nick.

It went downhill from there on in. By the end of the evening, Nick felt sick, sickened at the world he found himself in, at the terrible earthquake of an event that he had helped make. Harvey having a go at him; Grabowski being Grabowski – ‘if *that*’s American then I’m a fucking banana from Guadeloupe’; Margie sitting taking all the shit, and obviously resigned to a life of it with Grabowski; me having to be nice to everybody, I’m fit to scream; airhead Emily talking about television shows, and handsome Jim – ‘he’s delish. Nothing better’, mimicking Emily’s voice – Jim going on about his Porsche. He stood at the sink, having loaded the dishwasher to full, and towelled dry the last few glasses. He towelled one so hard that it broke.

Sickened to the heart, he told Joan that he would settle Dan and Lily. They had spent the evening in Dan’s room, TV on, with Joan going up to see them every quarter-hour or so. Even that had irritated him all night, her constant bobbing up and down to them. Now, he thought it might calm him to help settle them. But when he went up, it was too late: on her last trip upstairs from the dinner party, Joan had already got them into their beds. He turned the hall light off and came back downstairs.

‘What a night. What. A. Fucking. Disaster.’

‘Let’s forget it,’ said Joan.

‘Forget it? How can I forget it? I’ve got Grabowski on Monday again. In the office. He’ll make use of this. Maybe I should head out a day sooner, avoid seeing him before Ireland. He’ll remember fucking brain-dead-grope-your-husband Emily, and will think that she’s the kind of woman I hang out with. He’ll remember – oh God how he’ll remember – Harvey and...’

‘What about him? Pappy was good tonight. Best behaviour. And it was you invited Grabowski.’

‘What? Best? Is that the best he can do? He *knows* Grabowski was snubbed by the local Republicans when he tried to stand for office here. He was rubbing it in. Same as all that shit about condoms. Which isn’t even true anyway.’ By now Nick’s voice was raised, and Joan feared he’d waken Dan.

‘Come on, Nick. Forget it. Let’s go to bed. We’ll clear up tomorrow.’

‘And as for you...’

Joan’s heart fell into what was close to becoming its habitual sickness. At this stage in their serious arguments, she knew what would be coming next. She was the final target. Nick would accuse her of making it clear that she had sacrificed her career for him, that she knew she could have been a very successful architect, that she gave it up actually to make him feel miserable, make him feel perpetually indebted to her. It was all a complicated power play, shaped, he’d triumphantly and sarcastically add, by “gender”, the word in mock scare-quotes.

But she was wrong. What he did say was worse. ‘As for you...’

‘Well? What, as for me?’

‘You can’t be serious about being friends with Emily. I know that. She’s much too vacuous. Vacuous, yes, you’ve got friends that are vacuous; but Emily’s had the brain sucked out of her so much she’s become like a fucking black hole. She is *so boring*.

No matter what the topic, she’ll drain it of any significance.’

‘Thank you for that kind comment on my friend.’

‘She bores more than the fucking Texan oil-fields. Only it’s shit she brings up, not oil.’

‘Thanks. I enjoy her company.’

‘No, you don’t. You can’t. You’re not brain-dead enough.’ There was a pause and he grabbed another wine-glass to dry, before, ‘So what about Jim, then?’

‘What about him?’

‘Ah, Joan. You know what I mean. You. Techno-handsome Jim. If his wife is a fucking black hole, then he’s the space invader. Captain Fucking Kirk. How come he’s round here so much? How come he spent the evening talking only to you? Is that what it all is? Emily’s the excuse? It’s Jim you’re interested in, huh?’

‘Oh, Nick. Don’t be ridiculous,’ her voice now also rising in irritation.

‘What’s so ridiculous? I’m out at work all day, away lots of the time. He works “from home”, fiddling with cars. Home’s just round the corner from here. Emily’s also out all day at work. Jim here, talking away to his earnest audience: you. Going on about design all the time. Plenty of time for you and him to be together. Talking about design. Doing whatever.’

Joan didn’t know what to say to this. Partly because, if she had the choice of spending time with Emily or Jim, it was in fact true that she would have chosen Jim. Nick knew something of the truth, had spotted it in her eyes or attitude, the way her body leaned towards him during the dinner; even if it was ridiculous to suggest that she was having some kind of affair with him. ‘How much have you drunk tonight?’ she said, casually implying he must be drunk, trying to divert attention from the suspicion of an infidelity. He swung his hand at her, just catching the side of her face as she swerved away. ‘Nick. Hey. God. Nick,’ she said. Now, though, he was beside himself with frustration and irritation. He made to go for her again.

‘Nick. For Christ’s sake. Calm down. For God’s sake.’

‘Just tell me. Just say it.’

‘There’s nothing to say. Nothing,’ Joan started sobbing. But something in her cracked. They had had arguments before, serious arguments, the night of Lily, but nothing like this. This was charged with a seismic force, a hatred or venom that was eating both of them now from inside. Things pent up were threatening to darken everything. There was a shift of plates, a fundamental and underlying movement that might reveal things. It’s not the truth that gets revealed, though; only the truth of the frustrations, the desires that have been thwarted by one plate’s pressure upon another. But it would move the earth, shift the ground from under their feet.

Although Joan never actually did charge Nick with the loss of her career, it was true that she felt it. She had felt pressured into their marriage; she felt pressured to achieve less than he did when they were married; she felt pressured to put him and his important sales career first. She was the wife putting her husband on a pedestal of male self-importance in a man’s world. And Emily wasn’t an air-head: she had urged Joan to stand up for herself, as a woman. And, now today, Joan had felt pressured to have that brute – that shit, that wife-ignoring, spouse-insulting prick - Grabowski in her house. When Nick lunged at her and tried to strike her, something changed. In that moment, she hated him. It was maybe only for that moment; but the hatred, the total fed-up-to-here-ness, the choke in her throat, was real.

‘OK. I’ll tell you. All you need to know,’ her voice was firm. Nick sat down.

‘Come on, then. Tell me. I probably know already anyway.’

‘No. You don’t.’

‘Surprise me, then,’ said Nick.

She did. She told him that her first pregnancy, the one that ended as a miscarriage and led to their wedding, was not what he thought. She had slept with another man. When she was with Nick, she had used a diaphragm. 'I thought you'd feel it, that you'd know it was there,' she said, 'but I was your first, so you didn't know what it should feel like. The gel I used made me wet. You thought that was you, too; but it was my contraceptives. Then, that week, half-term, when you went home to your parents, I stayed in college. Remember? There was a party. I slept with another student. Pete Armstrong. Three times that week. No diaphragm. No gel; no need. Don't ask me why or why not. Just how it was; how it happened. As Harvey would say, no condoms either. The baby – the dead baby - was his, Pete's. But I didn't love him. At the time, I wanted you.'

Her voice had quietened again. 'Maybe that was a mistake... Wanting you then.' Nick looked up, and saw Dan standing at the bottom of the stairs. 'I need to go to the bathroom,' said Dan. When he came out, Nick finally placed his now dried wine-glass on the work surface, and told Dan that he had a surprise for him. They were going to go for a midnight drive.

Just like before. Just like with Lily.

* * *

November 1992, Ireland

‘Who are you, Philip Winter?’ asked Anne, her knees folded under her, tucked up in the chair beside the bed, her coat wrapped round her for warmth. They had slept easily, but when Anne woke in the morning, she was cold again. A feeble light came struggling through the high bedroom windows, and she looked at Philip, still sleeping beside her. She got up, put her spectacles on, and sat in the chair, waiting for Philip to waken. When he stirred, she asked what she had been thinking, ‘Who are you, Philip Winter?’

‘What do you mean?’ he asked, yawning. “‘Who are you?’” First topic of the day. Can’t you stretch to something a bit less philosophical, like “Good morning? Fancy some coffee? I’ve got some brewing”, something like that?’ and he reached up to her, pulling her back towards the bed. She resisted and stayed where she was. Philip half sat up, ‘and you could call me “lover-boy” or something.’

‘Good morning, *a cuisle*’ said Anne.

‘Mmm, nice,’ said Philip, stretching his arms behind his head, the sheet wrapped round his legs still.

‘But who are you? Do you ever think things like “Where is my *self*?” No? I remember, when I was a child, a few times, on my own, just thinking the word “I”, and somehow feeling myself locked into that word. No, “locked into” is wrong. The word was like a fountain of possibility.’

Philip adjusted the sheets, half-covering his chest with them. ‘Go on,’ he yawned, only half-listening.

‘And then, I composed sentences with the word “she” in them, wondering about other people talking about me. And although that felt great – it gave me a sense that I existed for other people – I was less happy than I was when I was thinking “I”. But you had to wait for the feeling of the “I” to come. You couldn’t will it. It was as if you were being visited by your self. Kind of.’ Anne felt Philip looking at her, felt his gaze suddenly. It gave her the wrong kind of self-consciousness, the very opposite of what she had been talking about. She felt foolish, exposed for having said so much. ‘So, I was just thinking. Who are *you*? Who is the I or the he that is you: Philip?’

He was fully awake now. ‘What’s with the heavy stuff,’ he said. ‘Too many pronouns; feels like a Latin lesson, I, you, he, she, it. Amo, amas, amat. Too early in the morning for me. We’ll talk about it more later today. I’ll tell you a bit about myself on the way back up to Dublin. Coffee. Now.’ *Whatever I say, I need to keep her on side; better to say nothing for now.* How was he going to explain that they were in the wrong house? He didn’t know yet; but he knew that it meant that he had wasted the evening. Not entirely, of course. The love-making had been good. He had to admit it: Anne – whatever about this “I am she” business – was beautiful. No, beautiful wasn’t the word. Sensuous. Aware of her body. At home in it. Sexy. But it wasn’t supposed to have gone this way. They were supposed to have spent the night in the other house, the proper one, the real one. He would need to get the photograph and the recording done some other time; make an excuse to come back again. He needed to photograph her in the right house. The recording was less of a problem in terms of location. But he needed the photograph. He shrugged, thinking to himself, ‘so what? We’re behind schedule a little. That’s all.’ They’d come back. Make love

like that again. Do what he had still to do. *The sex is like an added extra. Like dessert, before the main course.*

‘Why do you shrug?’ asked Anne. ‘Don’t you know who you are; where your self lies?’ Now it was her turn to reach towards him. She pulled the sheet back off him. ‘Are you here?’ and she prodded his heart; ‘or here?’ his head; ‘or here?’ and she touched his eyes; ‘here?’ his mouth; ‘or here?’ and her hand dropped down his body, quickly, towards where he felt himself quickening into life again. As he grabbed her to him, and kissed her, they fell together off the bed and onto the floor. Anne’s coat fell open; and her spectacles fell off and under them. There was a horrible crunching noise as Philip rolled over onto his back, trying to steady himself, pulling Anne onto him.

‘My glasses,’ said Anne. ‘I need my glasses.’

‘Sure. In a minute. Don’t want to stop,’ said Philip. He went to carry on kissing her.’

No, stop,’ she said. ‘Stop.’

‘Fuck. Come on, Anne. Not now. They’ll be fine. You must have a spare pair.’

‘I’m useless without them. I need them for work. I see nothing without them.’

They were broken: the lenses were in place, but one of them was cracked, a line running top to bottom. The legs were askew. She tried to put them on. ‘This is hopeless. I won’t be able to do anything properly today.’ She held them, trying to meld them back into some semblance of their proper shape. ‘Ah, shit.’

Philip comforted her. ‘We’ll go straight back to Dublin. Get them fixed. Get you set up with a new pair. Let’s go. Let’s get on the move.’ He jumped up and started to

dress. Anne did the same; but he had to help her find her shoes. 'Downstairs. At the door,' he said.

They picked the shoes up on their way out. Philip made a show of surprise, pointing to the name-plate. 'Look at this! Would you believe it? That's incredible!'

'What is it?'

'Look at this.'

'What is it?' asked Anne, screwing up her eyes to see.

'Brookside House.'

'Yes? So?'

'We've just spent the night in the wrong house! The wrong place!'

'...?'

'Look at it. Here. On the map. We turned off the road too soon.' But Anne was less interested, and couldn't make out the place-names on the map without her glasses.

'Let's get back to Dublin,' she said. 'I need to go home. To my own place. The right house.'

When they got back, Philip dropped Anne at her door. He waited to see if she would invite him in. After fumbling with her bag in the boot, she did. 'Come in and have a coffee. You've spent the whole last two days without.' She tried to appear bright.

'And I make excellent espresso.' 'I'll bet mine is better,' said Philip. 'Well. Come in and show me,' said Anne.

Inside, while Philip was making the coffee, Anne found an old pair of spectacles. She caught sight of herself in the mirror: they made her look like a child. A child in the

1980s, she thought. As she went to open the shutters in the front room, the room that overlooked the bay, she saw the light on her answer-machine flashing. Two new messages. She opened the shutters and stared across at Dalkey Island. Philip came in behind her with the coffee. 'That's a terrific painting you're doing there. On the easel. The gorse. I had no idea you painted as well as composed. "You're a girl of many accomplishments, Miss Elliott."' Anne turned. 'Very nice,' said Philip, miming the new spectacles. 'Very Mary Robinson.'

Anne pressed the button on the answer-machine. The tape played the first message. The person calling had started their message before the beep, so it started mid-phrase: '...and we're watching you. We're watching your every move. You're away somewhere. With a man in a bright red sports car. Very flash. You'll have been followed. Be sure of that.' Then the voice darkened: 'Stay away. I've told you. We're watching you. We know where you are.'

'Who the hell is that?' asked Philip.

'Oh, I don't know. I think it's Opus Dei. They've been harassing me for a while. I try to ignore it.' But the coffee cup was shaking a little in her hands. Philip took the cup from her and held her hand.

'Never mind,' she said, business-like. 'There's another message.'

She pressed the button again. This time, it was Caroline. She heard only the words, 'Anne, Caroline here. Listen. Can you come over? Quick. It's Mammy. Phone us as soon as you get this message.'

* * *

November 1992

“The auld country”. “A palaver”. “Poteen”. So this is your past coming back at you. To haunt you,’ she felt she needed the clear air of an argument, despite herself. ‘Back. Like the repressed.’

‘I’m going back, Joan. I’ve made a decision. I’m not selling. I want to sell here instead. If you want, you and the children come with me and we sell up here, and start afresh. I hope that’s what you’ll agree. But if you can’t, or don’t, then we’ll need to come to some sort of agreement. I’m going back there. I’m going to stay.’ And he poured himself another whisky, making a show of studying it, afraid to look directly at Joan. He had said it.

Joan was too shocked or upset to say anything; and for three days now the subject had not been raised again. Now, though, as they went through the nightcap routine, Nick came over, holding a glass of water out to her, and she took it from him and sipped at it. Nick took her whisky, and made to pour the rest of it into the water; but she held the glass back. She didn’t want any more.

Nick spoke. ‘I talked with Motion today. I gave them two months’ notice, but told them I’d be taking the annual leave that’s still due to me. So the bastards told me to go and clear my desk. They gave me two hours. “We only want people here who are totally committed to the company”,’ mimicking a central European accent. ‘I’ll be around in the house tomorrow,’ he said.

‘Who said that? Who did that?’ asked Joan, speaking from behind her shock and dismay.

‘Who do you think? The bastard Grabowski, of course. I asked to go above his head, see Mason, Grabowski’s boss; but they wouldn’t let me see him. Instead, Grabowski himself went and reported the thing to Mason and came back with the news that Mason told me that my great future in computing was now behind me, that I’d never work in Seattle or in any other blue-chip company like Motion again. He’d see to it.’ Nick laughed, and looked up from his glass. ‘Looks like I’ve burnt my boats.’

‘Looks like you’ve fucked up, Nick. Fucked up big style,’ said Joan. ‘What the hell am I to do now? With Lily? With Dan? We need money. We need your damn salary. Nick,’ and she put her glass down and took him by the shoulders, staring into his eyes, ‘Nick. You. Have. Fucked. Up. You have fucked me over; you’re in danger of fucking over your kids. Can we just cut this Irish nonsense? This, this... this I’m-an-Irishman shit? Please?’

‘Joan. Sshh,’ said Nick, pointing towards the hallway. ‘Don’t waken them.’

‘Don’t fucking waken them? What do you mean “Don’t waken them”? You want them to sleepwalk through the next bit of their lives, without a father, without the money we need? For Dan’s treatment? For Lily’s care? What the hell d’you mean, “Don’t waken them”? I’ll more than waken them, Nick. I’ll tell them what you’re doing to us. I’ll tell everybody. I’ll tell the lawyers. I’ll tell the courts. You’ve got responsibilities, Nick. Don’t you get it? Don’t you understand it? When you committed to me, to us, you committed to certain *responsibilities*. To us. We need you, here. Home. With us.’

There was a pause. 'I'm sorry, Nick. I'm sorry. Oh, God,' and Joan held her head in her hands. Nick moved to embrace her; but, although she accepted the embrace, her body was frozen. Nick could feel that she was somewhere else.

'I don't usually swear,' and she laughed, but it was laughter forced and strained through tears, the laughter of a desperation when you know before the fight that you've lost. She reached across the table and picked up her handbag, took a tissue from it, and dabbed her eyes. 'But I've been swearing a lot these last few weeks.' Nick risked the joke: 'Just like Dan.'

Joan looked at the table. 'Yes, just like Dan.' She looked up at Nick. 'Just like Dan,' she repeated. 'Dan and I are in this together. So are Lily and me. So are Dan and Lily. You should have seen them together while you were away. Dan's started to notice her. I mean, to really pay attention to her. He's started to try to do things for her. Last week, they were in front of the TV together. I had left them there for a few moments. When I came back in, he was dabbing at her mouth. I swear she was smiling. And he was talking to her, gentle, sweet noises. I held back at the door, and he bent his head and kissed her. He's never done that to me,' said Joan, and she stifled a sob. 'And now, you give us an ultimatum like this, Nick. What the hell am I supposed to do in Ireland? What are Dan and Lily to do? There's a better plan, Nick. Sell the farm and use the money to tide us over while you find something better here. If it's a fresh start you want, we can have it. But here. Here, where they're settled. Here. Nick: come back to us. Please. Come back.'

Nick was shaking his head through all the pleading. But he couldn't say anything. He knew that if he spoke, his resolve would crumble, he'd stay, he'd give up. But what he

had decided the morning after he slept at the farm was certain. He felt it like a necessity. For perhaps the first time, he was going to put himself first. It made him feel terrible, like a spoilt child making a fuss at a party because his cake is smaller than everybody else's; and that was how he knew he'd crumble if he entertained the thought of changing his mind. So he couldn't. Necessity was calling out to him. He had to go. But he had also decided to try to have it all, which was why he asked Joan to come to Ireland with him. He knew she wouldn't, of course; but, having accepted the responsibility and guilt of putting himself first once, he couldn't accept the further responsibility of making the decision to leave her. So he tried to put it in her hands. And here she was now, saying No. No. It gave him the opportunity he needed. She was leaving him, not he her. She was taking Dan and Lily.

Although they slept in the same bed that evening, they slept apart. It disturbed Joan that Nick could sleep at all; and she lay there for an hour or more, listening to his breathing, aware of the low steadiness of the rhythm of his movements. How can he sleep at all? Doesn't all this trouble him? He's being selfish. What about us? And him? He just sleeps. She felt like waking him, just for the sake of telling him that he ought to be sleepless. When his arm reached out, involuntarily, towards her, she stiffened and moved even closer to the edge of the bed. She could not bear him touching her any more. The idea repelled her.

When Joan woke the following morning, it was later than usual. The bed beside her was empty, and the alarm had been switched off. She jumped out of the bed, feeling slightly light-headed, dizzy, at the sudden rush. Dan. Lily. I need to get them started for the day. She grabbed a dressing gown and raced to their rooms. Their beds, too,

were empty. In a panic, she ran downstairs, grabbing the phone as she went, as if she could make a quick call and get things sorted out.

On the kitchen table, a note, of course. *I've taken Lily and Dan out for a walk this morning. We won't be long. I hope you've had a good rest, Love, Nick.* Joan sat down at the table. He was even taking this from her: this, caring for the children – he was even robbing her of this.

Nick pushed Lily's chair around the pond at the park. Dan was running here and there, like a puppy, picking up sticks or stones, running back to Nick to show them, throwing them away himself and then running away again after them. They came to a bench at the edge of the pond, and Nick sat down, talking all the while to Lily. 'Hey, Lil; take a look at those ducks there. Can you see them? They're called mallards. Not all ducks are the same. People see them and they just think 'duck'; but actually, there's loads of different kinds of duck, lots of different species. They're like humans.' Dan flew past, racing towards the hedges behind the bench.

'Did you bring my skate-board, Dad? Hey, magic. Cool dude, Dad,' as he pulled the board from the rack beneath Lily's chair. He raced off, shouting, doing a running commentary on his moves.

'Where was I? Yes, ducks. Different kinds. They're like people. Do you know they match up in pairs? They're very faithful, ducks. Well, now, we're talking about ducks and drakes. Ducks are the female ones, drakes the male; ducks are the mothers, drakes the fathers. And here's where it gets interesting, and how they're different from

people. Because, it's the drake that looks real fancy, not the duck. It's the drake that's got all the fancy-coloured feathers and that looks real beautiful. The ducks looks pretty plain, really. That's where they're different from us. With us, it's the fathers who are plain, and the mothers who are beautiful, fancy, all colours with their make-up and stuff.'

He stared at Lily. How much did she comprehend? Did she see that Nick was trying to communicate something to her? Her face was locked in the pained ghost of a smile that has been held too long, waiting for the camera-shutter to go; but so locked that Nick had no idea now if she was smiling or grimacing. Did she remember what had happened? Did she blame Nick? Could she even compare what she was now with what she might have been? Nick couldn't tell.

'You girls are the ones who are beautiful. Make-up; smooth skin; fine lines around your eyes; ruby lips. Men – fathers – we're the plain ones: we're the ducks and you're the drakes.'

He halted the babble for a moment, restraining himself from saying what he wanted to say, but thinking it no less. I wanted to be able to tell you about girls and boys; I wanted to be able to advise you; I wanted you to see that I wanted you to be happy, with a boy. That won't happen. Except with Dan; and that's not the happiness I meant. Shit. Shit. Your father is a bastard, Lily; your father is a bastard. Shit.

'Shit!' he said, aloud. Dan was back, skate-board under one arm, terrified duck under the other.

‘Caught him!’ he laughed. As he held the duck aloft, like a trophy, Nick heard its neck snap under Dan’s unknowing hand.

* * *

November 1992

Philip placed Anne’s coffee on the table, and she went to sit down. She lifted the cup and moved it. ‘Don’t leave it on my manuscript, my music,’ she said. ‘Sorry,’ said Philip. ‘What’ll we do? Are you going to go?’ ‘Of course. I need to. It’s Mammy. I need to go. Can you phone a travel agent for me, please? Get whatever I need for a ticket?’ ‘Sure. Here, sit here. Just for a moment.’ Anne sat down, and Philip took her hand; but it felt lifeless. She was staring away, towards the big bay window. Philip said, ‘Can I come with you? Would it help? Or would I be in the way?’ Her hand quickened to life in his, the barest flicker of movement. ‘Yes, please. Come with me.’

He got the tickets arranged for a flight to London that evening, paying by credit card and brushing aside Anne’s wallet as he read out his own credit-card number. They had a few hours to kill before they would leave for the airport. Anne finally found the courage to phone Caroline to hear exactly what stage Mammy was at. It was Jack who answered. Caroline’s at the care home. She’ll last the night for sure. Maybe longer. You know how she is. Maybe much longer. She’s a real fighter. When will you get here? Yes, of course, bring your friend with you. Plenty of room. Take care; didn’t expect to be seeing you again quite so soon. You’ve got my mobile in case there’s a

delay. You need to get a mobile yourself; we'd have got the message to you sooner if you had. – Then, in that hopeless effort to normalize things with humour: you can get all sorts of ring-tones. Mozart, Debussy, the Stones. Anne Elliott.

There was nothing to do until they would leave for the airport. Philip walked to the window, while Anne went to her bedroom to pack a bag. As he looked out, he wondered again about the body in the water. *Strange coincidence. After all these years. Another body fished from the water here. Let me think: what have I got? A lead to track down Julia. Rick's good. But how do I get her here? Anne: she's the key. But shit, I wasn't supposed to like her. Last night. We weren't supposed to sleep together; but what do you do? I must've been giving the wrong signs. Revealed too much when Julia's name slipped out. Shit. That's what led to her making the move on me. As if we already knew each other. But it's not her I'm after. Keep that in mind. Sexy, though. But it's just a fuck. A means to an end. Don't fall for her. For Christ's sake, don't fall for her. Don't forget; don't forgive.*

When Anne came back into the room, Philip was sitting on the floor, idly looking through the manuscript that Anne had been so careful with. 'I didn't know you could read music,' she said. She sat on the sofa behind him, knees tucked under her, stroking his hair. 'I can't,' he said. 'I just look at the shapes. What's this title? *Mná nà eireann*? What is it you're writing?' 'Well, you know what it means. *Mná nà eireann*, "women of Ireland". You've got some basic Gaelic surely?' 'Sure. I know what it means literally,' said Philip, shifting a little under her hand, reaching up and moving her hand gently down to his neck and back again, repeating the motion. 'I meant what are you getting at with it?' 'I don't know. Something about men and women. I don't

know. The impossibility of love. Betrayal. I don't know.' She took up the movement that Philip had invited, and now placed both hands on his head, massaging gently.

'Well... betrayal.' He reached up and held her hand. 'Keep on doing that. It's like an Indian head massage I once had. Really relaxing.'

'Indian? In Dublin?'

'And you. Where is your self?' said Philip, ignoring the question. 'You said you'd tell me.'

Chapter 5

November, 1992

Philip Winter was not Philip Winter, or not the Philip Winter that Anne was seeking to know. He had borrowed the name from a twenty-year old copy of the *Writers' Annual and Directory*. Anne's words, asking him 'who are you, Philip?' had disconcerted him, making him wonder if she had suspicions. Her body – flesh and blood, perfections and blemish - had disconcerted him even more. He meant it when he told her that he had been moved by her music as well. *I'm not a brute, after all; even if this thing, this ... this project ... with Julia ... might need a violence, a violation of some kind. Deception, to get to justice.*

That sensuality: it played through the vibrations of her body, as in her music. When they made love – and he hadn't initially meant for that to happen, it wasn't in any script, serious or bogus, that he had written – when they embraced, he could hear and feel her heart-beat as he lay with her. Something about its rhythm, its intensity, its sheer physical force was like the hammering out of a life itself: primal, Nordic. Thor. He was starting to wish that maybe he was this Philip Winter. But he wasn't. He had to keep his mind clearer, remind himself of what he was actually after – what they were expecting him to find. Julia.

* * *

They sat round the bed. Caroline was holding Mammy's hand, Anne stroking her brow. In the corner, the Filipino nurse who was always there when they visited but whose name they had never found out was arranging some medical instruments –

syringes, bottles – on a table, quietly. Jack, tired, unshaven, leant over to Caroline, and said that he would take the children out for a bit. Sean and Aíne had been sitting quietly, at both a spatial and a mental remove from the bedside. They were shifting uncomfortably in their seats, like children on their best behaviour, outside the head teacher's door awaiting a punishment for their unlikely naughtiness. Fine, said Caroline. This isn't a great place for them to be. But it's important that they're here, said Jack. We won't be long. Caroline dropped Mammy's hand and reached back to hug Jack and the children.

Outside, Philip stood waiting, one hand at his ear with his mobile, the other cupped over his mouth. He had insisted that he should not come into the room. Too private, he said. Death's a private thing. He cut off the call he had been making on his phone and put it back in his pocket. 'Sad times,' he said to Jack. 'Yes,' Jack replied. There was a silence. 'Nothing to say, really. Words are useless in the face of death.'

'Terrible.'

'Yes. And even that sounds banal. You can't find words adequate; and then you say you can't find the words, as if it's more profound to be silent; but it's not.'

'Words are hopeless in the face of any reality,' said Philip. 'I should know. I write.'

'Yes. And I teach. English. All that poetry. Elegies.'

Sean and Aíne had walked briskly away, glad to be out of the stillness of Mammy's room, glad to be away from the too heavy air. They felt the ponderous atmosphere as a mask, making them want to hold their own breath, as if even to breathe here would be an insult to the grown-ups, solemn, confronting this death. Now, outside and back in the living world, they were running round the trees in the gardens of the nursing

home, all seriousness fast going and being replaced with childish thoughtlessness, a freedom from all care. 'They're probably still too young to understand that if she dies today, then that's it,' said Jack, feeling he had to excuse them somehow. 'They probably think dying is just something that happens, but that doesn't have any real consequences.'

'Well, in one way, it doesn't,' said Philip.' At least for the person dying, it doesn't. Maybe the children understand it better than we do.' They had started to walk along the graveled path that led down to the wrought-iron gates at the entrance to the grounds. 'Though I suppose it depends on the circumstances of a death. Old and from natural causes is different from young. From the death of a child, a younger brother, say,' Philip went on, staring after Sean and Aíne. Jack rubbed his hand across his stubbled chin. He hated its roughness, wanted to shave clean.

'Wordsworth,' he said.

'Hm?'

'Wordsworth, 'The Immortality Ode'. It suggests that what we think of as life is just a little interruption in the otherwise on-going flow of something more real. Children, having just been born or having just entered this interruption that we call life, are closer to the essential. Then the whole of life is a preparation for death, for the return to that primary state. A preparation for leaving life again.'

'Plato. All philosophy is a preparation for dying.'

'*Touché*,' said Jack. 'But nothing really prepares you for it.'

'No, nothing. And if it comes too soon...'

'....'

'....'

The morning air was crisp. Looking out beyond the grounds, the hills sloping away to the west, they could see great stretches of Sussex laid out before them: fields, their clear lines punctuated with irregular dots as the sheep and cattle stood still and steady, oblivious of time passing, of the shortened winter day, living in the pure here and now. And, closer to them, Bateman's – *that's Kipling's former house*, said Jack, pointing - its formal gardens visible, the ancient Rolls that Kipling liked to travel in, parked beside the front door.

'Kipling. Funny how he used the colonies, India, to give Englishness to the English,' said Jack. 'I've never got on with him, myself; married to an Irish girl, you know?'

'Yes, I know. But maybe politics should be kept out of art?'

'I've sometimes thought that what politics is actually about – or should be about – is to help us all to prepare for death, to help a community deal with the fact that we're all transient, insignificant.'

'But we're not insignificant, though, are we? I mean, Caroline must be the most important thing for you; and you both likewise for the children. . .' Philip nodded his appreciation of the beauty of the Rolls. They had stopped and were staring over the Downs. *Class*, he muttered, in an aside shared with Jack, a moment of normality snatched from the scene.

'Sure. In one way, sure. But what I mean is that it's the primary job of government to deal with sustaining the life of its citizens. Yet, biologically, that just can't be done. People die. Humans die. It's what we're here for.'

'And that's what makes us important, no?'

'Anyway, we're not *even* citizens in this bloody country. We're subjects, *subjected*.'

'I don't know if it's any better in a republic. Look at Ireland.'

'*Touché*. For the second time. A hit, a palpable hit.'

Side by side, heads bowed now, hands behind backs, they went kicking through the dense lushness of the fallen leaves. It was cold, but neither of them wore a coat. It had not occurred to them. Their conversation was enough of a defence against the weather, against what they both knew would come as the deepening darkness of the day.

‘Were you close to her?’

‘Mammy? Yes. She lived with us for a while. So, yes. Pretty close. It became too close; claustrophobic. I couldn’t stand it, eventually. In the end, I thought her constant presence, living with us, was driving a wedge between Caroline and me. It was my idea to put her in the care home. Shameful, I guess.’

‘Well . . . we have to find our own ways of dealing with these things. I’m sure Caroline . . .’ but Jack interrupted, feeling the need to explain himself, as if to confess. ‘It was driving us apart. The longer she was with us, the more I thought Caroline was not really with me, that she was with Mammy. She had gone to live in the past. I felt as if I was losing her, almost, as if she were being unfaithful or as if I was being abandoned. That’s why it was selfish.’

‘But that’s normal, Jack.’

‘And the more she spent time with her, the more Mammy started to lose it herself, the more Caroline stopped being Caroline; the more childish – no, childlike – she started to become. It was as if she was trying to recreate or rediscover what they had shared when Caroline was a child. You know, speaking even sometimes as if she were speaking as a child, and becoming child-like again herself. I hated that. I wanted her back.’

‘ . . . ’

Philip pulled at the broken branch of a tree by the side of the path. It gave way, but was entangled with other branches. He stopped and took both hands to it, tugging hard. Jack stopped and reached up higher, to where the branch was caught, and separated it from the higher bough. As it fell, Sean and Aíne came rushing by, and Sean snatched it, then started whipping the trunk of the tree with it.

‘So, anyway. In the end, I put my foot down,’ walking on. ‘Stupid phrase. Doesn’t even describe what I did properly. I didn’t put anything down; I just suggested, and then suggested again, and again, and pointed to how Mammy was losing it more and more. But, in the end, it was me being selfish.’

‘Not at all,’ replied Philip. ‘Normal, I’d say. It’s hard to be in mid-life: kids demanding support from below, but parents also needing support. You’re caught between. The jam in a sandwich that everyone wants to suck dry.’

Jack smiled. ‘Crushed fruit. Grapes that need fermenting before they can become good quality wine. A process we all need to go through, I guess. Still maturing, still crazy... after all these years,’ and he half-sung it.

‘And, with your parents – your whole family - there’s the sense of indebtedness as well. They gave you everything. And as for mothers, well, they give life itself.

“Giving birth” to us. That’s why Mammy’s so important to you all.’

‘But, of course, she isn’t really Mammy, you know. She’s their grandmother. They just call her Mammy...’

‘Yes, I know. Anne told me.’

‘How long have you two been... you know... together?’

‘Well, I guess we’ve not been formally “together” too long,’ said Philip, ‘but we’ve been like working along with each other for a few months now, ever since I first got the idea for making this film.’

‘You don’t mind me asking. Sorry. It’s just. Well.’

‘Sure.’ Philip reached up to the bare branch of the sycamore and pulled it earthwards, before letting it spring back into place. ‘She’s terrific.’

‘Yes. I know. They both are.’

Jack went to turn back towards the house. Philip suggested that they walk on, further, letting the kids run free for a bit more. So they did, and Philip asked about Mammy, her writing career, when she had started to show signs of dementia. And then he turned the conversation to Julia.

* * *

January 1993

Nick was back in Dunmore Farm. He had come alone. The argument with Joan stood like finality between them. While out walking that day with Dan and Lily, with the ducks, he had decided to push things to their ends. He was going home.

Home. That first night, his first visit back in September, driving down after the interview with O’Driscoll, had been magical for him. When he was discussing the legal position with the lawyer in Temple Bar, looking out across the flow of the Liffey, he still had no real idea what he was going to do with the place. ‘Go down there,’ O’Driscoll said. ‘Spend a few days in the house. See if you feel you can inhabit the place.’ He gave Nick the map, the keys, and a diagram showing where all

the utilities could be switched on, and then gave him the phone number of a car hire firm.

‘O’Driscoll’s cars?’ asked Nick, looking up from the business card.

‘The very one. Personal treatment. Not like your multinationals. Irish.’

‘He wouldn’t be a relative, this O’Driscoll?’ asked Nick.

‘The law proceeds at its best when its practitioners are well networked,’ replied O’Driscoll enigmatically.

‘Yes, sure. But this guy here, “Brian O’Driscoll”: it wouldn’t be a cousin or something?’

‘Not quite. But the family names in Ireland are few. We’re a big family, really. Everyone is related – at least in the tribal past – to everybody else.’

Nick looked at the card. He reached into his wallet and pulled out the lawyer’s card, attached to the official documents that had been sent to him in the States. ‘Brian J. O’Driscoll.’ He looked up at the smiling lawyer. ‘A close relative, even?’

The car was splendid, Nick admitted to himself as he sat behind the wheel.

O’Driscoll’s son handed him the keys. ‘Thanks, Brian,’ said Nick. ‘No. Dad’s the one called Brian. People here call me Simpson.’ ‘Simpson?’ ‘Yes, Simpson. It started out as what’s the difference between me and my Dad? He’s got a middle name that he doesn’t use, but the initial is J. I’ve not got one; so he’s Brian J. O’Driscoll, I’m Brian No-J. O’Driscoll. Brian-no-jay; Brian-o-jay. Then we saw that great car-chase on telly, with OJ Simpson, so No-J becomes OJ becomes Simpson.’ ‘Neat, like Bart and Homer,’ said Nick. ‘Huh?’ ‘Never mind. Nice car. Only problem is that the wheel’s on the wrong side. At least it’s automatic.’ He had hired cars in Europe before, where

at least the wheel was on the left where it should be; but those cars had gear-levers, and he could not master them.

He had found the house without any problems. As he turned the key in the door and made to enter, he felt an urge to bless himself. It was not so much a feeling as a pure instinctual movement: he had done it before he realized. *What's that about? I haven't prayed in years. It was like somebody else's hand doing it for me. I guess no harm; but weird.* He walked through the hall, looking in the doors along its passage. They were all much the same: an armchair or two, a sideboard or dresser, small china ornaments everywhere: sailors, smoking their pipes, muscular arms bared, marching athletically on to somewhere, who knows where; fishermen, steady, deep brown, the detail showing their lined faces, and carrying their nets, tiny strings woven in the space between their arms and their bodies; a woman and child, the child kneeling while the mother stroked his head in an image of maternal passivity, heads bowed in towards each other. *Kitsch to the tenth degree. They're going to the dump. First thing.*

And he walked into one of the rooms and started to lift the ornaments, putting them on the armchair, ready to throw them out. The short late autumn afternoon was darkening. He found his diagram in his jacket, and switched the electricity on, found the mains water supply and turned it. There was no gas, but there were two huge gas bottles near the kitchen window that he had noticed when he arrived. He went out and turned them on, then went back indoors and found the gas key to open the supply inside. I wonder if Patrick left any coffee when he... Nick didn't quite know what to say. 'When he died.' He spoke it aloud. It sounded too trivial: 'Did you leave some coffee when you died, Patrick?' And suddenly he realized that what he was doing,

while judging the ornaments as kitsch, while assessing the furniture in its dark cheerless mahogany, was examining a life. How had Patrick lived? Nick hadn't given him much thought: all his attention was focused on the farm, on his own life and what he'd do. 'Poor Patrick,' he said, aloud to himself, letting the name fall steady into the air; but it seemed empty. 'I'm taking possession of your house. Vacant possession.' The phrase was in the legal documents, as if Patrick had just vacated the property, removed himself from its space. Possession: nine-tenths of the law; your body inhabited by someone else, the one that makes the sign of the cross across your face.

There was no coffee, but Nick found tea bags, hundreds of them. He brewed up a cup of tea, found some sugar that had crystallized into marble-sized chunks, and sat down with the mug. The taste was vile. He looked again at the tea-bags, and saw that most of them had long exceeded their 'best before' date, by two or three years. Eventually, he found a box that had a few days to go, and tried again. Not much better, but drinkable. He decided to go to bed.

Above the bed there was another kitsch image that Nick recognized as the Sacred Heart. It showed Jesus, his breast wide open, with his fingers pointing at his revealed heart. Ridiculously, the heart was conventionally shaped, like in a greetings card or a playing card, and it had a crown and a series of rays, like sunrays, emanating from it. No other visible organs. Christ looked sad, his hands held outwards, pure white but for the tiny bleeding hole where the nails had supposedly gone in. How would the cynical and ultra-rational O'Driscoll – the corrupt O'Driscoll - deal with that? How does he reconcile his obvious slavishly conservative Catholicism with his hard-nosed and world-weary cynical lawyerly prick-self?

Nick took the picture down. *I can't have that hanging over my head. Not guilty. Not responsible. At least, not personally. So why did I bless myself coming in here?* He laid it on the floor by the window, realized that there were no curtains in this room, no shutters. But he was in the middle of the country. Nobody would be looking in. He switched the light off, nonetheless, before undressing and getting into the bed, a massive thing that he had to climb into. There was even a little step beside it to allow him to get in. Beside it, an ancient chamber-pot, stained a dull yellowy shade, and striated with cracks. The springs groaned and creaked as he turned; but he was asleep. During the night, he coughed, never enough to waken himself up, but enough to deposit some drops of blood on the pillow.

He had woken with the rising of the weak sun, hazy but intrusive through the uncurtained window. He looked at his watch. 9am. Hell's bells and Jesus ringing them. It had snowed very lightly overnight. Nick rubbed the condensation away from the pane, and looked out of the window of the bedroom in this freezing house, and gazed at the pure white garden. The sky was heavy with clouds, threatening yet more snow, the air between earth and sky that darkish blue whose menace is daunting even for the birds, who vacate the space and leave it to be itself, pure and bare winter. He looked out across the garden, then looked again, closer to the door. Unmistakable. There were footprints. It looked like two sets, a man and a woman: one large, flat shoes, the other with lighter indentations, and the clear marks of a stiletto heel.

The actors? Were they here? Maybe in the house somewhere? But they weren't supposed to arrive just yet? Had they come late and just come in without him hearing?

As he stepped back from the window, he saw the remains, in the condensation on one of the panes low down, of a face that had been drawn. Ages ago, probably, by a child-like finger: two dots for eyes, a letter L for a nose, a big open smile, and two jug ears. Three little lines stood upright to signify a head of hair. Tousled schoolboy. Nick thought again of Patrick, leaving behind this ghostly trace of himself, of his boredom one day when he steamed the window with his breath and left the traces, the stains, of a selfhood on that breath, fixed in this cruelly open glass.

He dressed quickly and searched the house. No-one there. He went out and looked again at the prints. They were fading, for the light snow was already covering them over, flattening the smooth white surface. He traced them lightly round the house. It looked as if somebody – a couple – had come round the house, maybe looking in for something. There was a little bit of a mess near the door, where they had obviously stopped and maybe stamped their feet against the cold. Had they tried to get in?

Maybe just a couple looking for a bed and breakfast; something innocent.

When Nick went back to the bedroom, he saw his pillow-case, the small flecks of blood as if sprayed lightly across it. He turned away and looked again at Patrick's stained-glass image on the window-pane. The image was fading, the condensation turning to slowly dripping water down the pane. *I can look inwards to me, to myself, or I can look out, past the image of my old self, see the new. I'll think about the prints; follow them out again, walk in the direction they were heading and see where I end up.* The moment is new, original.

* * *

November 1992

Mairead floated back to the shadow of an alertness. She felt the pressure of Anne's hand on hers, and responded. *Here, now; be here, now.* She looked into Anne's face, and Anne could see, in her straining but now widely opening eyes, the faintest shade, the haunting shape of her struggle to remember. Mairead didn't know her as Anne, but she knew her; somehow and somewhere the face bore a narrative that Mairead could feature herself in. There was someone else in her world. For a brief moment, Mairead felt her world expand again. After all the years of shrinking back into her self, the domain of her own shrinking body, the touch of Anne's hand made her sense that there was a world outside her mind, outside herself. It was good. She tried to squeeze Anne's hand. *I'm here.*

Who is it?

'It's me, Mammy. Anne,' said Anne. She could see Mairead struggling, and would help her.

A nod of the head. Then, 'Ah, you. Anne.'

'That's right. And Caroline's here too,' said Anne motioning to Caroline to take Mammy's other hand again. Caroline did; but Mammy kept her eyes on Anne.

'Anne.'

'Yes, Mammy. Anne. I told you I'd come back and see you again, didn't I? When I was here the other time. After the concert, after the big concert in London.'

This was too much for Mairead, who was trying to focus on what was happening. She would try to speak, to say it. Now, in this moment, she felt a kind of understanding again. It was because there was this woman there. Anne. That was somebody else. You talk to other people. They say things you hadn't expected them to say. They surprise you. Then you say new things, things you hadn't imagined before. Thinking. Things that are new to you, you can think them because of this other person.

'Anne?' It was a question.

'Yes, Mammy? What is it?' Anne gently caressed Mairead's hand. It gave Mairead a kind of pleasure, but it was distracting her. She summoned up an effort and squeezed Anne's hand to get her to stop. It worked. Anne held still.

'Anne? Am I dying?'

' . . .' Anne looked at Caroline, who was shielding her eyes from this, head bowed. Anne could not deny Mammy the truth. She would say it. 'Yes, Mammy. We think so.'

' Ah . . . Well.'

' . . well, Mammy. Well.'

'Am I disgusting? Do I smell?'

'No, Mammy. You're beautiful. Just as you always were.'

'There's a metal taste in my mouth. I think I stink. I think my breath is rotten.'

'Can I get you something to take that away?'

'No. Never mind. I'm dying. That's all I needed to know.' Her voice was firm for once as she said it. Anne, though, was almost breathless with pain. Her breast, her heart, were as if crushing her, from the inside. Not since a year ago had she had such a conversation with Mairead, a conversation where they seemed to both speak to the

same point. She remembered her thoughts on the occasion of her last visit, after the concert. *Come back, Mammy, come back to us.* And now here she was, back; but, cruellest irony, back to die. She was going to be here again, here now; and that would bring her presently to her own death. That's what death is: being perfectly in the moment. She'd be totally in this moment.

'Anne?'

'Yes, Mammy. Yes.'

Andrew was in Mairead's head, but she had no name for him. He was with a woman. Mairead knew the woman, even knew her name, but couldn't say it. Yet. She was silent. The nurse in the corner looked up, came over and sat beside Caroline. Caroline edged aside while the nurse took Mairead's wrist and felt for her pulse. After some twenty seconds or so, in the silence, she laid the hand back down on the bed and walked back over to the corner, where she made a note. She shuffled with the syringes again, preparing something to give Mairead. Caroline sat back down, but didn't take Mairead's hand this time. She just sat. Waiting.

Who is that? wondered Mairead, her head turning back and looking at this young woman, Caroline, head bowed, beside her. *I prefer this one, the one who talks to me, who tells me I'm dying. This one – Anne, I remember - she smiles and doesn't cry,* turning back to Anne and looking her in the eye. Anne smiled; and the name was coaxed into Mairead's lips.

'Julia,' said Mairead.

‘Yes, Mammy? Julia?’ said Anne. She kept her voice steady, as if hearing the name was the most natural thing in the world.

‘Julia was a bad daughter to me. She went away. There was a man. He stood over there. Against the wall. No, not a wall; at the shore, at the pier. It was raining. Black. He stood there, with her; and took her away. That place in London. Birds it is, canaries.’

Anne remembered the rambling from last week. The rambling about bastards and children, Sean and Aíne. It was getting mixed in with the news. *Mammy must have seen the TV news from a few days ago, the IRA’s bomb in Canary Wharf.*

‘Andrew? Andrew, was it?’

‘A man. He stood over there. He took Julia away. He was a bad man. Julia was a bad girl.’

‘. . .’ Anne didn’t know what to say. Eventually, ‘why do you say that, Mammy?’

‘Because she did bad things.’

‘We all do bad things sometimes, Mammy,’ said Anne.

‘But she did bad things. And then she ran away. With that man. Yes, Andrew. He showed her other bad things. It went from bad to worse.’ Mairead paused. She was struggling now. Her breath was not enough to power her voice properly; so it was becoming a whisper. Anne leant in to hear.

‘She had bastards. I had to take care of them. She went away. To kill people. That man showed her. He showed her how. And she went away. Left me.’ The nurse was beside them again. She lifted Mairead’s arm, but Mairead ignored her as she injected the liquid from the syringe. Then the nurse returned once more to her corner table.

The door opened. Jack, Sean, Aíne came in. Philip stood a little behind, the door ajar. The nurse motioned him in, and he entered and closed the door, holding it gently so as to make no sound. Anne looked up and saw him, and half-smiled again towards him, in recognition. Come in, she mouthed. It's almost over.

But Philip shook his head, silently mouthing *A family thing; close family*; and he stepped out. In the corridor, he opened his mobile again, and re-dialled. A voice at the other end told him that things might be delayed. *I might need to divert my energies, the voice said. Just for a while. Just until the Canary Wharf bomb stuff quietens down. The police need my help there. But we should meet. Soon; as soon as we can.*

In the room, Mairead lay back on the pillow. The skin on her face was stretched tight, so that you could see the skeleton. It looked almost blue, thought Anne. As Mairead struggled for breath, her throat made gurgling noises. Sean looked at Aíne; but both knew at once that this was not funny, not a thing to laugh at. They instinctively reached out and took each other's hand. Then Aíne reached out for Caroline's hand. Caroline, aware that they were there behind her, sensing them without seeing them, reached back without looking and took Aíne's hand in hers. Aíne's attention was taken by Anne's large, dangling circular earrings. She couldn't wait to have her ears pierced so that she would be able to look so nice.

'Anne?' said Mairead, hardly able to get the word out.

'Yes, Mammy? What is it?'

'Remember what I say. Julia was bad, a bad person. I'm sorry.'

'No need to be sorry, Mammy. No need, no need.'

‘Anne?’ her eyes opening, looking for Anne through the descending veil that was covering her face, her voice, her self.

‘Yes, Mammy? What is it?’

‘Goodbye.’

‘ ’

Too late for Mammy to hear, Anne said ‘Goodbye, Mammy. Goodbye.’

The nurse looked at her watch, and wrote down the time.

* * *

January 1993, Ireland

And so, Nick White found himself on the set of a movie. Niall O’Dwyer and Niamh Dunne had arrived. The film company had done out all the rooms in the house sometime in December, so that when Nick returned to it after leaving Seattle – ‘definitively leaving, coming home’, as he put it – he didn’t recognize the place.

He arrived in early January, having had a strained New Year celebration – it felt more like a funeral, so morbid was it – with Joan. Emily and Jim had come round, and they shared a few bottles of champagne in an effort to make merry, to believe in a shared future. Joan made sure to keep a good distance from Jim, hardly daring to respond whenever he spoke to her, always making sure her reply was to the whole party and not to Jim alone. She told them that Nick would be going back to Ireland in the New Year, ‘just for a while, to sort things out’; but Nick, made just the wrong side of

irascible by the alcohol, had interrupted, 'No, not just for a while. For good. I've asked Joan to come, but she says she won't.' 'Let's give it time, let the New Year's vibe sort things out for us all,' said Emily, 'let's see what shakes out.' Jim sensed Nick's mounting and barely restrained anger: *vibe, vibes* - that's what's wrong with this place. It's all just crap words - *shaking things out, hangin' loose, feeling the vibes* - crap words covering the emptiness of soul in you, Emily, you're rootless, you've got nothing that's really home, you're as much a migrant as Grabowski. Jim saw all this in Nick's thought without its being said. *I wish he could be just a bit more pleasant. Like Joanie. She's lovely, gorgeous even; but Nick, well, he's a harder nut to crack.* 'Let's toast 1993,' he said, re-filling everyone's glass. 'Cheers, everybody. Cheers, Joannie!' raising his glass and blowing a kiss, 'Here's to my new Lamborghini!'

When Nick arrived at the house in early January, ready to take possession, the door was open and Niamh was sitting at the kitchen table, her feet up on it and her script in her hand. There was a coffee cup on the table, and a plate surrounded by a mess of toast-crumbs. He saw her first from behind: short, boy-cropped blonde hair, streaked with pink-tinged highlights, a massively baggy outsize jumper, striped in multi-colours, small and delicate hands with nails polished bright red. He could see she was wearing a short blue skirt, showing a glimpse of her thighs, but with thick wool dancers' leggings that, impossibly, matched the peach-pink-blonde of her hair. The leggings came up above her knee, and went all the way down to cover her feet half-way. As he stepped in, he could see over her shoulder that she was highlighting passages in her script. In bright pink.

‘Niall? How can I say these things? Total bad. Sometimes, this writer just has no idea of how the actor *knows* the character,’ turning her head. ‘Oh; oh, hi’. She got up right away, quickly brushing any stray dirt or crumbs off the edge of the table, wiping her lips. Hi, you must be Mr Greene, she said. White, said Nick. *Reservoir Dogs*, said Niamh. I should have said Blonde. No; you’re Blonde; I like the pink highlights, said Nick as they shook hands and Niamh put her script on the table. He undid his bow-tie, casually laid it on the table, and pulled off his suit-jacket.

Niall walked in, towelling his hair, bare-chested and with another towel tight round his waist, calling out to Niamh, hey, Niamh, coming for a walk? Here’s Mr Blue, said Niamh. Huh? said Niall. Blue; blue with the cold. Hi, I’m Nick, pulling in his waist, only half-consciously, Nick White. *Never mind the table*, he said, as Niamh carried on wiping away imaginary dust, the crumbs now all over the floor at her feet, *it isn’t mine*. I think you’ll find it is: all the new stuff that the company has put into the house stays here after the shoot. Oh yeah? Yeah, said Niall. Hope you like it. Reaching out a hand for Nick to shake. *Soft accent. Is that Cork? Not a Dubliner.*

All the dark mahogany furnishings were gone; all the kitsch ornaments. The house had been repainted, bright everywhere; and all the rooms had been emptied of anything extraneous to their basic functions as bedrooms. *Very Zen*, said Niamh, showing Nick round. All except for the front room. When Nick walked in there, he was walking on to the set. It looked like a 1930s drawing-room: crammed with furniture, the grate piled with logs, two sofas, chintzy, one on either side of the fireplace, behind each of them a table with silverware and ornaments that announced their good taste, glass and ivory, seats in the window areas, and a box-seat under the

large bay window. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, its glass reflecting light like the spraying of water to bless the space. I like it, said Nick. So do we, said Niall. But it's yours for keeps; it's only ours for the shoot. Come out walking? Nice day.

So the three of them went out walking. Who is it that Niall reminds me of? 'Nice day'? Yeah, Mostyn, Mostyn and his greeting, always 'nice day, huh?' no matter the weather. *Is Niall gay? Looks it. I've never seen a nipple pierced before. Must have been painful. Hope I didn't stare at it too long when he came in to the kitchen, near-naked, flexing that body. Yes, sure; he must be. Hands too soft as well when we shook.* In the fading afternoon light, as Nick listened to them speaking of various roles they had played, or wanted to play, he thought of his last session with Mostyn. This will be my last time, he had said as he entered the rooms. Mostyn's therapy room was in a high-rise building, on the forty-seventh floor. 'One step to heaven', Mostyn had said the first time they met, years back, at the time of Lily's accident. 'One step to heaven; out the window, up or down, it don't matter,' and he'd laugh at his own joke. Often, when the fog came in from the bay, you could look out of the windows *down* onto the clouds below. Up here on forty-seven, though, the air didn't look much clearer. Maybe Mostyn thought it was symbolic somehow, getting high up above the troubles that obfuscate things, that obscure your view of reality. Maybe he thought that this, this up here above the clouds, above all human troubles, was reality.

In one early session, after they had finished and as Nick was leaving, Mostyn reached forward and placed his left hand, curled into a fist, on Nick's forehead, and then placed his right hand, palm flat down against his left, and pushed gently, exerting the hint of a pressure. What's this? Asked Nick. *It's an old Gnostic blessing*, said Mostyn,

from the Kabbalah. Gnostic? What's that? I thought you were Jewish. And I'm not – Jewish or Gnostic or whatever, said Nick, pulling back and sliding away from the blessing. Nor am I, said Mostyn. Oh yeah? I thought all shrinks on the west coast were Jewish? No, that's east coast; New Yoik, dropping his hands by his side and closing his eyes. So? So, if you're not Jewish or Gnostic, Nick, - and that includes agnostic – then what are you? I dunno. Atheist, I guess. Sure, everybody's an atheist, said Mostyn; but what kind of atheist are you? Catholic atheist? Presbyterian atheist? Muslim, Hindu, Jewish? You're not a believer? I'm not a believer either.

Nick looked out behind Mostyn. With what he later thought of as stupidity, intellectual vacuity, the Monkees came into his head, Micky Dolenz the child-actor drumming and singing, 'I'm a believer, I couldn't leave her, if I tried.' But that was why he was here now, today, this last visit. He was leaving her.

Mostyn's methods had changed over the years since he helped Nick deal with the aftermath of Lily. Then, he had been a typical Freudian-style analyst, saying little, encouraging Nick to free-associate, content to let him do the talking: the talking cure. But then he started on a new kind of therapy. The new therapy involved confrontation. Hence the Gnostic blessing, the direct and hostile questioning.

The cloud level was high today: they were for once below it. When Mostyn came into the room, he did the Gnostic blessing thing again. *Remember this?* Sure. But it doesn't wash. I'm an atheist, remember? pulling Mostyn's hands away from his forehead. *Look down there, said Mostyn, 'the beauty of the world, the real world. All this can be yours. Reality, Nick; reality can be yours.'* Nick interrupted, 'OK, Satan.

Tempt me. Tempt me to stay. I'm listening.' *You can get what you want. You just need to get off your ass – your frankly fattening ass - and do it. Just do it. It's easy.*

'But I don't want all that shit below, down there: cars, fucking job, shopping.' *So what do you want? What exactly do you want, Nick? You know, it'd help us both if you'd say it.*

'What do I want? How am I supposed to know? You're supposed to be the one that helps me find out. That's what I'm paying you for.' *But you do know, Nick; you know. You're just finding it hard to say because you don't want to hurt people. Maybe you should, though, if that's what you need to do to get to you, to your wants.*

'I want me; I want Lily back.' *But that's just stupid, Nick. You can't have that: Lily's not there for you any more. Which leaves you with?*

'Wanting me.' *That's what the blessing's about: darach. That's Hebrew. It means to mark with blood in order to render holy, whole.*

'No blood.' *That's right. But there has to be. You need to give blood for the ghosts that haunt you still. Your past isn't real enough for you yet. You need to find it, to make it real, give it blood. Violence, if need be. Then you can be whole, holy.*

'Bit of a coincidence, Dr Mostyn, huh? So you know about my inheritance, and now you've got a cheap solution for me. "Find my self. Find my roots"?' *OK, yes, sure. I'm a practical man; either that or a hypocritical shyster. Just one thing before you go, darach also means 'to curse'.*

'Send me your bill. This is my last session.' *And where do I send it?*

'To Ireland.'

He had realized that it was all an act, a series of impostures. These two actors beside him were as good as Mostyn. You want sanity? You just act it. That's all a sane mind is: it's a mind that's playing the script, that gets its lines right. Doesn't matter what the lines are.

‘We’re nothing, really, are we?’ said Niamh. ‘I mean, to you, Mr Orange. Mr Green?’

Nick was staring ahead. ‘Aha, hello again. You’re back with us. Mr White: the peace between the orange and the green. Where have you been? We’ve been having a nice little walk here.’

‘Sorry, drifted off. Jet-lag. What were you saying?’

‘She was saying, Nick, that all actors are prostitutes.’

‘Huh?’

‘That’s right, isn’t it, *a cuisle*?’, said Niall. ‘We’re just prostitutes.’ He grasped Niamh round the waist and she turned to him, wrapping her arms round herself, not returning Niall’s embrace.

‘And how do we get to that?’ asked Nick; ‘and what does *a cuisle* mean?’

‘It’s a little endearment, like ‘darling’ in English. Total Gaelic,’ said Niamh. They separated again, Niall and Niamh smiling, their bodies still touching occasionally as they walked.

‘We’re all prostitutes because we serve you with whatever you want, for money.’

‘We give you our body. We give you our soul. We give you ourselves. All of it.’

Coquettish.

‘Well, there’s giving and giving,’ said Nick. ‘But then, I wouldn’t know. I’ve never actually been with a prostitute.’ *A lie; but that was then. This is a second life.*

‘Until now,’ said Niamh, grabbing him by the arm, a lively sprite, turning him back briskly towards the house.

Nick’s boots were cramping his feet. When they went out, Niamh and Niall had each grabbed a pair of wellingtons by the door. There was a bit of circus as they looked inside, swapped them round, failed to get matching pairs. ‘Waiting for Godot,’ said

Niall. 'Here, just grab a pair,' and he threw another pair to Nick. The boots had all been provided, with the furniture and all the other fittings, by the film company. They had initialled them for the actors. But Nick didn't have any. He looked inside the pair that Niall threw to him: AE. They were too small, but, exhilarated by Niamh's exuberance, he put them on anyway.

Once indoors, he pulled the boots off. 'Too damned tight,' he said. He stepped into a side-room with his bag, and changed into jeans and tee-shirt. The tee-shirt was tucked firmly inside the jeans; and he was aware of his stomach, just slightly edging into overweight. He'd soon need to decide where to tie his belt: above or below the navel: below revealed and emphasized the paunch, but at least it allowed him to breathe easy.

That cough came back again, as he did up the belt. This time, a pain in his lower back as well. He had quickly got into the habit of catching whatever came up in his cough in a handkerchief, then immediately inspecting it. Last thing he had done in Seattle before leaving was to get a check-up. 'We'll just take some blood,' said his doctor, having done the usual routines in his office. 'If it's anything serious, we'll get back to you within a week or so.' 'Serious?' asked Nick; 'what's serious?' 'Could be all sorts of things; probably nothing; maybe a blister on the lungs, a polyp in your throat; but we need to check against worst-case scenarios.' 'Which are?' 'Well, cancer.' The word hung in the air, an invisible dagger before his eyes from time to time. It was still there, now, while he was awaiting the results. *It's just a word; like a curse, just a word.* 'Send me your bill,' he told the doctor, 'Ireland.'

He looked across the kitchen table, now, at the other two, lithe, unworn. Their clothes revealed their bodies, and with them an ease of heart. Niamh had pulled her leggings back down, covering her heels; and the sleeves of her jumper, covering her wrists and hands. *Sloppy; but alive. At least that: alive.* ‘Have you started filming yet?’ Nick asked. ‘No. We’re just here to get a sense of the place, a sense of the set. We won’t actually film for weeks yet,’ said Niamh. ‘And it turns out that it’ll be just for two days,’ said Niall. ‘Two days; and they’ve done all this work in the place. It’s mad.’ ‘But we should enjoy it,’ said Niamh. ‘Tell me,’ said Nick, ‘is this the first time you’ve been down here? At the house?’

‘Well,’ said Niamh, ‘not quite. Back at the end of last year – can’t remember the time, maybe September – when we were told that there’d be some shooting here. . .’

‘The twenty-eighth,’ said Nick.

‘Huh?’

‘The twenty-eighth of September. You were wearing heels, and Niall was with you.’

Niamh laughed. ‘How the hell do you know the date?’ she asked, fiddling with her leggings, ‘never mind what I was wearing!’ Nick opened his bag and pulled out a bottle of whisky. Want some? he asked. *Is the Pope a Catholic* said Niamh and Niall, in perfect stereo together. They laughed, also in stereo, collapsing in juvenile giggling as Nick opened the bottle. Niamh pulled some glasses down from the kitchen cupboard.

‘I followed you. Or, at least, I followed your prints. I was here.’

‘You can’t have been. The place was in total darkness. Maybe it was the twenty-eighth, let me think. But on one bit at least, you’re wrong, Inspector Clouseau.’

‘Oh yes?’ said Nick. ‘Nice whisky, huh?’

‘I wasn’t with Niall.’ Niall grinned, lifting the whisky bottle, saying, ‘No; it wasn’t me; not guilty. Hey, this isn’t just whisky, this is a Midleton. I’ve never had this before. It’s miraculous. As you’d expect from East Cork, of course. Eighty quid a bottle. They only make about fifty bottles a year; and you’ve got one of them. And we’re drinking it! Yeah!’ And he lifted his glass. ‘*Sláinte!* No, I’ve not been here before at all.’

‘Total,’ said Niamh.

‘But you weren’t alone,’ said Nick.

‘No, you’re right about that. I was with my partner – my ex-partner - Gerry. He’s a playwright. We were a bit pissed, actually, and I was excited about the role here, and Gerry said let’s just drive down there. But it was miserable; started snowing and everything. And by the time we got here we were sobering up fast. Realising how stupid the thing was. But hey, we were in love. It’s what you do.’

‘Were?’

‘Yes, were. A week later, Gerry went back to stay with his Mummy, the asshole. I mean Gerry was the asshole, not his mother.’

Nick looked at Niall, who laughed and said ‘And no, it’s not what you’re thinking. I’m not with Niamh either.’ *As if. I hadn’t actually thought that. I don’t think I know anyone gay, though.* ‘We’re just playing the part of lovers for this film. We’re not really lovers. *Sláinte.* A Midleton. Yeah!’

‘How can you tell the difference?’ asked Nick. He had removed his socks and was rubbing at his feet. ‘I think I’ve got a blister.’

‘Between a Midleton and the rest? Well...’

‘No; between love and acting being-in-love,’ and he rubbed his foot.

‘Let me see it,’ said Niamh, lifting Nick’s feet onto her lap and massaging them softly. ‘You need some of my foot oil. Tea-tree. I’ll leave you some tomorrow.’

‘And you,’ said Nick, holding Niamh’s gaze, ‘you were wearing high heels.’

‘Maybe I was. Prostitutes do.’

‘Quit that talk,’ said Nick. ‘Especially when you’re rubbing my feet like that. They’re not too sweaty? Not too horrible?’

‘Ah, no. You’re grand; they’re fine. Massage is just one of the many talents I have. I do heads and backs as well. Indian. With patchouli oils. It’s meant to relax you as well as do you good.’

Niall was laying out a cigarette paper on the table. He pulled a packet of Winston from his jacket pocket, and took a little pouch from his bag on the floor. He strung out a little bit of the tobacco, and then mixed it with the contents of the pouch, before wrapping and sealing it. He lit it and took a pull before passing it on to Niamh. All the while, he was a picture of studied inwardness. *Looking in on himself. Ireland; introspection. Where did I think that before?* Niamh held the joint at an angle away from her face, and inhaled strongly, her eyes closing slightly against the irritation of the smoke. Then she passed it to Nick. *I don’t smoke*, he thought; *or at least, I didn’t used to*. He took the joint, held it delicately between his fingers, and imitated Niamh’s movements as he drew. *Is this how it’s done?* He passed it back to Niall. *A second life; like acting. Doubling yourself in the role. A new thing in the mirror; original, beginning yourself anew.*

Then they sat up all evening, drinking and telling stories, making them up, acting. Just before they went to their separate rooms, they said Goodnight to each other. Niamh

kissed Niall casually on the cheek; Niall gave a high-five to Nick, clasping his hand, briefly, at the height of the touch; and Niamh, entirely unselfconsciously, hugged Nick and kissed him; but as he went to hug her back, she had gone and slipped away from his body.

* * *

The next morning, Nick was in the kitchen making coffee. The jet-lag was going, helped by the dope and the whisky. No hangover this time. He heard the outside door opening again, a key sliding the lock. 'I guess that'll be the staff, somebody else associated with the film,' he thought. Philip and Anne walked in, and Anne looked around, immediately taking off her coat. 'Well, this is an improvement on Brookside House, that's all I can say,' she said. 'Hi,' said Nick. 'Nick White. You must be here for the film? Are you the staff?' 'You could say that,' said Philip, shaking Nick's hand. 'Phil. Philip Winter. I wrote the movie; and this is Anne Elliott. She's doing the music. Are Niamh and Niall around?' *Jesus Christ. Mr Throat. Has he recognized me? What the fuck is he doing here? Months ago; he can't have recognized me. Two seconds at a bar, a passing face in the gents. Still. Coincidence? I don't know. I need to be careful.*

Anne was playing with her necklace, her finger sliding in and out of its ring. Nick recognized her from the movement she made as she played with her ring. His mind went back to September, to his first glimpse of her, in the newspaper and in the flesh, her legs, her hair, as she was making herself a coffee in Heathrow. 'D'you fancy a coffee? I'm just making some,' he said. *Bill Jackson. I wonder what happened to him. 'Christ!' and he couldn't suppress a grin. The jam; computing; and here's me, a*

farmer. Christ! He noticed the Tara ring on her wedding finger as they went to shake hands. ‘Coffee’d be good,’ said Anne. ‘You’re welcome. You’re both very welcome. To my home. To my family home,’ he said. ‘Welcome.’

Anne saw the man for what he was, a man like the men of Ireland who had been dispossessed, who had lost a history, now struggling to find one. She reached out to his hand, and held it for longer than she should have done, her fingers lingering in his. And she heard, again, the elegiac music that she recognized now as the phrase that came to her, forever associated with the dead man brought ashore at Coliemore, outside her window in Dalkey. ‘Anne,’ she said, ‘I’m Anne Elliott.’

Philip interrupted, as Niall and Niamh appeared. ‘Hi,’ he said. ‘I’m Philip Winter.’
But he is not.

* * *

November 1992

Anne turned to the nurse, still holding Mairead’s hand. ‘Is that it?’ she asked. The nurse came over, took Mairead’s other wrist, paused briefly and nodded. ‘Yes.’ Anne lifted Mairead’s hand to her lips, held it there, and then rested it back on Mairead’s stilled breast. The nurse placed the other hand over it. Anne stood up as the nurse turned away, this time not resuming her place in the corner, but going out of the room, leaving them alone with Mairead.

After a few minutes, the nurse returned; and the family, not quite knowing what to do, started to get up to leave. Caroline was weeping, being consoled by Jack. Sean and Aíne were immediately behind them, stilled into grown-upness at their mother's grief. All they could do was follow, awkward, unsure of how to behave, knowing they were sad but lacking any vocabulary or body-language to say it.

Back at the house, they started to prepare food; but Philip said that he wouldn't wait. He said to Anne in the hallway as they arrived back, 'This is too private. I'm not a part of this, and I'll just be in the way of your privacy as a family. You don't need me around to be witnessing your grief. I know somebody who lives not far from here, up near the Kent border. I'll go there, stay over maybe. I'll get back in touch as soon as. Can I take the hire-car? Jack and Caroline will get you back to Heathrow when you need to get home?' 'Yes, sure, of course,' but Anne was torn. On one hand, she wanted him to stay – still feeling the warmth of their sudden intimacies; but knowing also that he was right, that this was not for him, that he wasn't a part of the closeness here. 'OK,' she agreed. 'I'll call you when I get back to Dublin, maybe before.'

He got into the car, checked the map, and drove off, heading west. After an hour, he passed through the town of Crowborough, on the edge of Ashdown Forest. At the entrance to the town was the sign saying that it was twinned with Montargis, France, and also that you were now entering a town that was the 'home of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle'. Philip hadn't known that Sherlock Holmes had been born here. In his mind, the town was associated with someone much more sinister, Kim Philby. Rick had told him that Philby lived here once. The reason was simple: Crowborough is the town that is higher than anywhere else on the south coast, so you could get clear radio

signals, perfect for spies, perfect for communicating with your enemies. 'And the air is like Scotland, like Switzerland. It's clean here.'

Philip went right through the town, and picked up the sign for Ashdown Forest. This is where Rick had told him to come. He opened the phone and made the call to say he was coming. Rick gave him precise directions, but told him he'd need to leave the car about half a mile from the house. 'I'm at the end of a dirt-track. The only thing that can get down here is my quad-bike.' Philip parked the car in a lay-by in the forest and set off on foot down a narrow track. The house was surrounded by trees, one tall skinny aerial pushing up in their midst.

Rick Webb was good, Philip knew. He found him through one of his media contacts in London, who told him that Rick had once been the best apprentice investigative reporter in Fleet Street; but what made him so good was that he was too much his own man, too unpredictable. None of the papers would touch somebody they felt they couldn't control, somebody who'd take too many risks in their investigations, stir up too many nests, even the nests that some of the editors wanted to protect. Philip felt he would be perfect for the job in hand. His call today convinced him he was right, if the police are also using him for under-cover stuff on the Canary Wharf bomb.

When he started researching the Elliott background, trying to find out what he could to pin down the feeling that *Tables of Stone* was biographical, he had just been doing a simple piece of work. As he progressed in the research, though, spending dismal hours in the National Library in Dublin, the story behind the novel started to touch on his own history. What began as a simple bit of research became, quickly and

shockingly, a re-awakening of a pain that Philip felt he had dealt with, years ago. The story was marked by death, and it stirred a long-suppressed desire in him, a desire that he had frustrated for years, a desire for revenge.

In the Library one day, he came across an interview with Mairead that she had given to a long-forgotten women's weekly magazine, called *Heart and Hearth*. It focused on her home-life, and was full of trivia, through which Philip skim-read. Then there was an arresting moment, as the interviewer asked whether Mairead felt annoyed in any way by the line that her daughter took on non-domestic affairs. Mairead's answer was evasive, but the interviewer carried on, asking 'what do you say to those who are spreading rumours about Julia's involvement in the politics of the North? The rumours about violence, for example?' Mairead refused to reply to the question.

Philip was intrigued. Maybe here was something of interest: a daughter, named Julia, possibly involved in some politically sensitive events. He was intrigued, but he also felt a sense of revulsion. This was an area he did not really want to explore. The effect, though, was like a narcotic: on the one hand, he knew that pursuing this would re-awaken the terrors of a past that he had successfully negotiated and dealt with, and that it would only bring him harm; but, on the other hand and at the same time, he was drawn like a moth to a flame, like an iron filing to a magnet.

He tracked down the journalist who had done the interview. Sinead Barber was now retired, and living alone, except for her three dogs, in a small apartment in Ballsbridge, south Dublin. The apartment was the upstairs half of a neo-Georgian house, with a small front garden, and steps leading down to the basement half. The garden was beautifully tended, even at this time of the year. The small bouquet of

flowers that he held in his hand paled into insignificance beside the display here. As he pushed open the gate, he heard the barking of the dogs. He knocked on the door, and she welcomed him in, restraining as best she could a beige Labrador who looked as if he might possibly lick an intruder to death, and accepting his flowers, smelling them and saying how gorgeous, how she loved their colour.

Over tea, yes she remembered the interview. How could she forget, since it nearly cost her her job. *Heart and Hearth* was supposed to be light-hearted, concerned with domesticity. Sinead had over-stepped the mark, said the editor, had gone well outside her brief. Mairead was most displeased, might not ever give an interview again to the magazine. Didn't Sinead understand the basic rules? She laughed now, thinking back on it; and Philip joined her. By now, he was the one pouring the tea, while Sinead stroked her dogs, two of them at her feet, while the smallest nestled in her lap.

Philip probed a little further, easily, gently. Sinead was flattered by his attention to her, and, though she easily recalled the information he was seeking, she played it as if she was struggling, to retain as long as possible the company of this delightful man. She could not recall when she had last had a guest in her house, could not recall the last time she enjoyed the simple pleasure of another voice in this house.

'A rumour? Yes, it was a rumour, of course; but what do you call a rumour when the story it tells is true? Julia, Mairead's daughter, disappeared. What I was trying to get at in the story was the feelings that Mairead might have had about that. Why did she disappear? Well, the rumour,' and she paused, then gave a nod of her head, 'the "rumour"' - this time in scare quotes - 'the rumour was that Julia had been involved in

gun-running, that she had even been active politically, maybe even violently, in an incident just over the border, near Drogheda. She was apparently unmasked at the time, and so she had to disappear in case she was identified.'

'Near Drogheda?'

'Yes. But the incident itself was over the border.'

'When was that, exactly? Can you remember?'

'Um, let me see now,' she said. 'Let me think,' and she reached across the table to offer Philip a slice of the cake that lay there. *Patience*, he thought to himself, *let her speak in her own time*. He lifted the cake, commented on how lovely it was. She went on, 'I think it was sometime in 1972. It involved a family in Drogheda. That's how I got to know about the thing. I've got relatives up there. They told me about it.'

Philip looked at her, expectantly. He felt the hair on his neck bristle. The labrador had made its way to his feet under the table, and he bent down to stroke its head. 'What did they tell you?'

'Well, they didn't give me the details. In those days, you know, up there, it was dangerous to talk at all. So they didn't say too much.'

'But what do you know about it? What else? It's very important.' The cake was crumbling in his hands, and the dog beneath the table was looking up, waiting for the next crumbs to fall. Sinead could see the agitation barely hidden. This was what he was after, she realized. She was at once suspicious. A lifetime's training in avoiding talking about these troubles gave her her resolve. She would say no more. It was a pity, she thought; she had been so liking his company.

But this gave Philip what he needed. He had contacted Rick. Now, he could see that he could use Anne Elliott to get to Julia. *A night in Drogheda in 1972, at home, some*

people entering the house; Rick Webb would find out, for sure. He cast his mind back: were any of the people who entered the house that night women? Unmasked? He could not remember now. Over the years, the trauma of the evening had made him turn it into stories in his head, a film whose actual shots he couldn't properly remember. But he felt sure he would recognize Julia if she had been there. He had to get her.

Rick would track her down. The plan, though, would be complicated. Rick told him that the best way to try to get her to return would be to use the coming peace process that everyone was speaking about. 'We'll tell her that the IRA have instructed her to return. That there's an amnesty, provided she is prepared to give certain information. She'll need to meet a contact to get a briefing on what she'll be allowed to say. You'll be that contact. We'll also make use of her daughter, this musician you've pinned down. Anne needs to see her, something like that – but I'm not too sure yet of that element in the story. How to play it.'

Now, as Philip walked down the dirt-track to Rick's house in Ashdown Forest, coming from the death-bed vigil at Mairead's side, he knew how he could use Anne. We can say that there is something in Mairead's will, that Anne can benefit in some way, but the condition is that Julia has to return and sign something. Some such story. Mairead's death will help, though, somehow.

'The information we have is that she is willing to return,' said Rick. 'She has fallen for the instruction to return story that we fed her. But it's the sentimental thing – Anne – that will swing it. She'll need evidence that Anne wants to see her. She needs to

know that it's Anne that's behind this. That's why we'll need the photograph. And the recording of a voice, if we can get that.'

'I've got the photograph, but not the recording.'

'I don't know if that will do. There's a lot riding on this for her.'

'The photograph will do the trick. Anne has a distinguishing mark, a blemish, an imperfection on her skin. There'll be no need for a recording to prove it's her. But are you sure she'll come?'

'She knows this might be a trap. But she says she needs to clarify things. She wants a reconciliation with her family, her homeland. Some such crap, I don't know anything about it.'

'Good; but I know what she's on about. And I need to clarify a few things too. With her. Where has she been living all this time?'

'Remote; even more remote than this. She's been living in the north of Scotland. Anyway, I'm not interested in any of that. I'm just doing you the service of making communication possible. I don't need to know anything else. I just need payment now. And to get back to this Canary Wharf stuff. It's all shit, you know. Tarnishes me. The payment?'

'That's sorted. You'll get the money. Just as soon as I know it's her. Julia Elliott.'

'I don't know anybody called Julia Elliott. That's not the name of the woman we've tracked for you. At least, it isn't her name now. She's called Chris, Chris Andrews.'

'Fine. I don't care what she's calling herself. I just need to know it's her. Then you get paid.'

'And fine by me. I know you'll pay us. After all, I know that you know that I can track you down. Just to make sure.'

‘Sure. You’ll get paid. And Julia – Chris Andrews – will also get what’s coming to her.’

‘I don’t care.’

‘But I do.’

PART 2

Memorial

Chapter 6

September 1972

It was 8.20 on Saturday evening, the last Saturday of the month, and it was raining hard. Father Seamus Twomey sat in the dark of the confessional in St Brigid's church in Blackrock, south Dublin, listening to the rain spattering the walls outside. Above and behind his head was a tiny slit-window, opaque, impossible to see in or out of, but there, there just enough to let a shard of light cut through, had there been any light outside, but the edge of any light had been dulled. This was the dead hour.

If the people of his congregation were going to come to confession on a Saturday evening, they usually came early, to get it done before spending the evening back home before the television. It used to be just a Dublin phenomenon, but now the traditions of the country were being ruined by it. *We're losing our grip on the people, losing them, their souls.* All over Ireland, the dead hour was getting longer.

All over Ireland, all except for the running sore that scars the island. Whole means holy; and we won't be holy until we are whole, the island made a perfect island again.

As Seamus sat in the dimness, listening, he tried to pray. The words would not come easily. He was worried that the bishop would see the falling attendances over the last three years, and his mind was on that. When Seamus came here at first, twenty years ago in 1952, he was a young, fresh-faced but stern priest, basking in the harsh austerity of his calling, loving it and the black authority that it dressed him in; and St

Brigid's was the biggest church in south Dublin, and attracting a congregation both from the rich southern suburbs and from the countryside a little further to the south and west still. The mixture brought together lawyers and farmers, housewives and civil servants. He watched, approvingly, as the women civil servants gave up their jobs, as they had to do, upon marriage; and then they took their places with the children, rearing the future generations, with luck some priests, or nuns who had the calling. The congregation didn't take to him at all at first, seeing him as too hard, with no give; but, ashamed to think these things, they excused him and preferred to think him just impossibly sophisticated, clever – the bishop said so - clever beyond their reach. He had had to work hard to get under their skin, to work his way into their midst, to reassure him that he was one of them, of the community.

Now, it was less than ever clear what constituted his community, or who shared his values, once so certainly clung to by a people who subscribed to them as unquestioned dogma. He felt his civilisation jeopardised. *To protect their souls, we need to preserve the proper ways of living. Pius tells us so, and Pius is right.* He maintained his allegiance to Pope Pius long after Pius died, replaced by the worryingly liberal John. John blurs the boundaries; *Pius knows where the borders are. Borders between good and evil; borders that keep us pure, unsullied.*

He had been there only three or four years when it happened. The woman started to come for out-of-hours confessions. Once, she told him she was unwell, and would he come and hear her confession at her home. And, when he sat on the side of the bed, holding her hand with eyes closed, he let it happen. She drew him to her. The affair had been going on for two years when she told him that she was pregnant. The bishop

arranged everything after that. *The child will be taken care of.* But no truth could be told about his son. The bishop had a stock of stories that could be recycled for events like this. And Seamus carried on, if anything more austere and severe than ever before. Occasionally, he thought about her, about his son, about being given this second chance. Luck; it had been bad luck, her getting pregnant.

He felt now for the rosary beads, more like worry beads, in the pocket of his soutane. Just then, the door on the other side of the confessional closed, as someone came in and knelt down. There was a brief shuffling as the person seemed to get themselves into position. Seamus could just barely see their shape, silhouetted, faceless, through the densely woven mesh netting separating him from them. ‘Yes?’ he said, ‘God bless you.’

‘In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost’ came back the voice of a man, gruff, a voice on whose timbre the reverential words seemed to sit uneasily, like the top-hat on a bridegroom more used to wearing a cloth cap, uncertainly poised, but the wearer determined to carry it off.

‘Amen,’ they said together.

‘Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It is two weeks since my last confession. I accuse myself of . . .’ and there was a brief pause as this ritual incantation came to its end, signalling the opening of the parenthesis in which would be the revelation of the man’s life, his acts of commission or omission, his sins in deed and in thought and in word.

The voice behind the mesh was starting, ungrammatically.

‘I accuse myself of I have been ungrateful. I have been hard to my wife, who deserves better. I have been unclean in mind and in spirit, and once in body: I have lusted after another woman, with improper thoughts. I have been angry with my children, and have struck them – I spanked one of them too hard. For these and for all my other sins, I ask forgiveness.’

Seamus recognised the voice of Tom O’Connor. Tom was a good man, a local builder, and a man who wished no evil or harm to others. He was reliable. A good Catholic. Seamus rearranged his hands on his lap. Instead of turning his face to the mesh, he remained sitting side-on to it as he sought the familiar dogmatic words. ‘You need to make sure that you discipline a child; but if you do it in the spirit of love, and in the knowledge that you are keeping them good and pure for God, as I know you can and will, then God will reassure you that you’re doing the right thing. We can bring them to perfection even if we’re not perfect ourselves. Say one Our Father and five Hail Marys for your penance. Now join me in an act of contrition before I absolve you of your sins.’

While saying the contrition together, words that seemed to come to him as if from somewhere else, Seamus was thinking how it comes to pass that you could ever come to strike your child, the one person for whom you would certainly and without a moment’s hesitation lay down your own life. *That’s the struggle; what the struggle’s about. Abraham and Isaac; God sacrificing even his own son. For the greater good. A blood sacrifice, like Pearse reminded us in this earthly domain. This chosen people might have to pay with blood for the truth; and he was prepared to spill it.*

‘Thank you, Father.’

‘And remember me in your prayers.’

Seamus sat back again, then looked at his watch, and decided to call it a day. *I forgot Tom’s infidelity. His impure thoughts; probably the reason why he came to confess. Ah, well. God’s will; and luck.* Opening the door of the confessional, he peered out to make sure no one else was waiting. There was a woman, kneeling, as he had expected, in the front pew of the church. She turned her head when the door creaked open, and made as if to stand; but then shook her head when she saw Seamus. There was a brief nod of recognition – he would later think of it as complicity – between them. She prefers Christopher to me, he thought: he gives gentler penances. Or maybe she just feels him easier to talk to.

* * *

1972, Crossmaglen, near the border

In the barn, they held Joseph face down. He could smell the cow-shit, could see it mixed glutinous in the straw. He tried to bite as they re-did and re-tightened the gag over his mouth. There were two of them holding him. Their clothes were determinedly nondescript: worn-out shapeless jeans, Doc Marten boots, black leather jackets. Their very black blandness was itself a uniform, giving them an affiliation, an identity but not yet a name. One of them - the older one, thought Joseph, for he was

slightly more sclerotic in his movements, limping – wore a grubby white sweat-shirt, with ‘Penn State University’ written on it in light blue, the words surrounding the University logo. He didn’t look as if he had been there, or in any other school: his hands were as rough, as dry and hard, as a field left stubbled in the hay-harvest after a parched summer. The younger man had a checked shirt, fraying round the collar, open-necked, the top two buttons missing. His leather jacket was the kind that was fashionable at Joseph’s school, blouson-style, a bum-freezer they called it. Joseph had one himself that he usually wore with a red scarf. Both the men wore balaclavas, but they were ragged, torn at the edges, revealing more flesh than they were meant to. Joseph saw that the younger man had the shadow of an emerging beard under his chin, the light thin hairs just visible, sparse, ghosting the outline of his chin and neck where the frayed edge of his balaclava stopped. He looked as if he had not been shaving for too long, like Joseph himself.

While the older man held Joseph down, sitting heavy on his back, the young one went to the corner of the barn and picked up a length of rope. He knelt down and started to tie Joseph’s hands together behind his back. Joseph felt his warm breath as he struggled to pull the rope tight. ‘Not too tight for the knot,’ said the older man. ‘Just make sure it’s tight round the wrists. The knot will hold if he struggles. He’ll tighten it himself if he moves too much.’ They rolled him over so that he was lying face-up to them. His face had been bruised when they had wrestled him down in the van, and one eye was now swollen, starting to close. He watched through his strained eyes as they pulled the length of rope round under his buttocks, using it to tie his ankles together. They pulled the rope tight enough that he would not be able to straighten up fully.

‘Now,’ said the youngster, looking down at Joseph. Joseph looked straight back at him. The young kidnapper, as if forgetting that his face was covered by the balaclava, grabbed Joseph by the head and turned his face away, holding his face now hard against the barn-floor. Joseph felt the rough ground grazing the side of his face, but he couldn’t move, couldn’t resist.

‘That’s him. Done,’ said the older man. ‘He won’t be going anywhere now. Get that old chair from over where the rope was,’ he said. ‘Tie him to it.’ When they had done, all three were sweating. The older man took his jacket off, and started patting the pockets, looking for his cigarettes. He took two out, passing one to the young accomplice. Then he laid his jacket down on the floor, and sat on its lining, smoking. The youngster went to the barn door, and opened it a fraction. The hesitant, shy sounds of the night came in, the quietness of a breeze blowing gently, bleakly, oblivious of the world inside the barn. He opened the door a fraction more, just enough to let a body enter. Then closed it again. A different quiet now, one not strained by the trees outside, but rather a stilling of the body contained in a held breath, as if awaiting a melody.

She came into the space. ‘Take the gag off,’ she said. ‘He knows better than to make any noise.’ Joseph’s saliva had soaked the gag. He felt as if he was dribbling at the mouth like a baby, as if he might vomit. He felt his facial muscles tighten even more as the men approached him. He tried to turn his head to watch the older man, who was now standing behind him. The youngster slapped him hard, turning his face back to the front. Shocked, he stared right ahead, then felt the man undoing the knot behind

his head, the gag loosening. He gave his head a shake, and the youngster went to hit him again. 'Don't do that,' said the woman. The men both stood back immediately. She was in charge of the situation. He needed to concentrate on her.

Joseph was fourteen. He had no idea why he had been taken. One minute, he was at home watching a lousy football match on the television, the next he was being bundled into the back of a van. The rest of the family were silent, with guns pointing at their heads.

His mother had opened the door, and then reeled as she was grabbed, her mouth covered as she was bundled back into the hallway. 'Who is it?' shouted the father as he emerged from the kitchen into the hall, and then 'What the hell...' as he, too, was grabbed. Upstairs, on the landing, Joseph's ten-year old brother, having been sent to bed early because of his school exams next day, watched, crouched and gripping the banisters, keeping his head as low as he could, terrified into silence. There were five of them in all. He mentally recited his maths tables, trying to hang on to some certainty, cowering and trying to make himself invisible. All he could think was that, for the nine times, you watched the tens going up as the digits went down: 19, 28, 37, 46, 55, no, this is wrong. 55 is elevens; or fives, like these intruders. He searched his mind for the right start.

Joseph was taken into the van by two of the men. The phone was snapped from the wall, and then his parents were taken into the kitchen. Ten minutes later, the remaining three men came out of the kitchen, and calmly left the house. There was the sound of an engine revving as they left.

18, 27, 36, 45, 54... that's it, said the child as he made his way, still scared, downstairs; 65, no 63, 72, 81. He saw the numbers suddenly as a pattern: 18 mirrored 81, 27 mirrored 72, 36 went with 63. Upside down; he would pass. In the kitchen, his parents were tied to two kitchen chairs and both of them were crudely gagged with torn tea-towels. He noticed, with a momentary sadness, that the towels were the shamrock ones, his favourites. They'd be ruined. He started untying them, but the knots were too tight, so he had to get the scissors and cut the gags away from their mouths. He was scared he'd cut their faces. All he could see were their eyes, his father's widening in encouragement, his mother's shimmering with tears. He noticed how blue they were. Like his own. Nine fours are thirty-six, nine fives are forty-five. Mum's age.

And now Joseph was in a farmhouse, he didn't know where, deep in the night, deep in trouble. The woman approached him and held his face in her hands, holding it up to the one ceiling light, its bare bulb shining directly on to him. 'Joseph,' she said, 'ah, Joseph.' *Who is she? How does she know my name? What does she want?* 'What is it,' he asked; 'what have I done? Why am I here?'

'You know why you're here, Joseph. You know why.'

'No, I don't.'

'In the movement, we need total trust. You know that.'

'What movement? I'm not in any movement.'

'You mean you're not supporting the cause? Joseph,' she paused, 'that's not so good.'

And I had you down as a supporter of the cause.'

Joseph realised what was going on. *Watch what you say.* He looked at the two men who had kidnapped him. He thought that, under their balaclavas, there would be a face that he would recognise. His friends, supposedly. But he didn't know what they were after.

'I don't know what you're after,' he said. 'All I know is I keep myself clean and out of trouble.'

'And maybe that's the problem,' she said. She was standing right in front of him now. Unlike the others, she did not wear a face-covering; and he told himself that he must somehow try to make sure he could remember what she looked like. Deep brown eyes, short hair, cut almost like a man's. Her skin looked soft, and he noticed that there were freckles over the bridge of her nose.

Nobody can keep themselves out of trouble here,' she said. 'We've all got responsibilities. The ones who stay at home watching the television are part of the problem. Were you watching television when we came to collect you?'

'Aye,' said Joseph.

'What was on?'

'Football.'

'And who was playing?'

'Liverpool.'

'Liverpool? An English team?'

'Aye.'

'Do you support them?'

'Aye.'

‘And what does that support mean, Joseph? Do you go to their matches? Do you go to England to see them?’

‘No. I can’t do that. It’s too far. Too dear.’

‘But you’d go if you could.’

‘Aye, I suppose so.’

‘Because you know the place. You lived there for ... oh, how long is it now? Four years? Five?’

‘We were there for five, aye.’

‘Before coming back; coming home.’

‘Aye.’

‘So this is home, then.’

‘Aye.’ He didn’t know what to say. That they had gone to England to get away from this kind of thing, these troubles? But she’d call that shirking responsibilities. That, while in England, they had come up against an anti-Irish feeling that made them feel they had to go back, come back?

‘Who’s your favourite player?’

‘I like Steve Heighway.’ A pause. ‘He’s Irish,’ said Joseph, looking at the woman for reassurance that he had given the right answer.

‘You know, Joseph? I’m not really that interested in football. But I’m interested in commitment, support for a cause, a team of people. You know how it is. A team needs to work as a team. When a player kicks the ball, he expects his team-mate to run on to it and get it. If the team-mate fails to do that, there is disappointment all round. Not only that. The opponents get the ball sometimes, and then they score.’

Joseph looked at her, not knowing what to say.

‘And in this team, we don’t want the opponents getting the ball. Scoring.’

Still, Joseph looked. He wasn't following what she was saying. The young thug was standing back from them both, amusing himself by carving a heart into the wooden wall of the barn. Suddenly, Joseph thought of Marie at school. He loved her, but he knew she wasn't interested in him. *I wish she was here.*

'And our opponents are the Brits. The security services. And they've scored.

Somebody gave them the ball. We think it was you.'

Joseph turned back to her. 'Fuck it,' said the young kidnapper, licking his bleeding finger and turning back to watch. 'Can we get on with it?'

'Me?'

'Yes, Joseph. You.'

'But I don't know what you're talking about. What did I do? What have I done?'

'You've shown yourself to be a fair-weather supporter. Not really a supporter at all.

You don't go to the match; you're not there when you're needed. You give the ball away.'

Joseph knew this was a mistake. They were wrong. It would be all right. He almost laughed with relief. It would be all right. They had the wrong boy. *It wasn't me. I'm OK.* They were saying he had betrayed them in some way. He knew he hadn't. Like he said, he kept himself out of trouble, out of bother. *Marie, Marie.* He just needed to get them to see they had the wrong boy.

'You're a bit of an athlete, aren't you, Joseph?' said the woman, standing back away from him again.

'Ye- Yes,' he replied.

'Four hundred metres? Mile?'

'Mile,' he said.

‘How fast?’

‘Four minutes three.’

‘Now, if we let you go now, then, at that rate, you’d get back home in – let me see – about ten to twelve miles an hour, allowing for you to be slowing down - about two hours.’

He started trying to work out where he was. Twenty miles or so from home, but in what direction? She laughed. ‘I can see what you’re thinking,’ she said. ‘You’re wondering what direction you’ll be going in. You’re wondering if you’ve got the stamina to get all the way back to Drogheda. But that might be the least of your worries, Joseph. Unless you talk to us, you might not be going anywhere much. And you’d maybe have to get across the border. Without us there to help, that might be awkward. Anyway, we’d need to be letting you go first. Would you run as fast for us? If we gave you a message to take somewhere? Would you be a good member of the team?’

‘Aye. I’ll do whatever you want me to do. What is it you want?’

‘Supposing we wanted you to take a parcel somewhere for us? Just leave it at the door of somebody we know; maybe just behind the wheel of his car. In his driveway. Somebody on the other team. Would you do that for us?’

Joseph paused. He looked away, down towards his tied ankles. His eye hurt. He thought of his father, how he had overheard him crying, once, just once, the night before they left England to come back again. He was crying and saying to Mum that he had thought they could make a new start in England, that it would be good for the boys, but that he hadn’t expected such anti-Irish feeling. *Like the fifties again*, he was saying, *No Irish, no blacks, no dogs*. He had heard all this, eavesdropping at their

bedroom door, feeling guilty afterwards about hearing it, about hearing his father weep. Oh, Da.

‘And there we have it,’ said the woman. ‘You see, Joseph. If you have to ask yourself “would I do that?” then you’ve already shown me that I can’t trust you. What if you went away but then changed your mind half-way, ran to your Da, maybe, and spoke to the security people again – the Brits? We’d be in trouble. Just like Paddy O’Donnell, or Brian Doyle.’

Joseph remembered the news bulletin from last week. O’Donnell and Doyle had been set up, ambushed. They were shot in what the news called a ‘confused gun-battle’. The British Army denied any involvement. The news stuck with Joseph because, when the item came on, his father had said, ‘Brian Doyle? Brian Doyle? Turn the volume up, Joseph; turn it up. Look at the picture. I knew him. I worked beside him a while back. He tried to recruit me for “the struggle” – *we need men like you*, he said, *men that are steady, like*. It was a load of garbage, and I gave him short shrift. But to think he’s dead. God, what a waste of a life.’

‘Ah, well, now; I see you recognise at last what I’m talking about, Joseph. Now, as I was saying, you’re a runner, aren’t you?’ She nodded to the younger of the two kidnappers. He came forward to Joseph, bent low before his feet, flicked open the jagged blade of his knife, and started to cut away at Joseph’s jeans. Joseph felt the knife scratch his leg as the man stabbed at the material, trying to get the rip started. He tore the trousers roughly, exposing Joseph’s legs to just above the knees. As he

was cutting, the woman was saying that those who couldn't be trusted needed to be taught a lesson. Wings needed clipping.

Holy God, No, thought Joseph. He was sweating, and he felt his stomach turn, his bowels easing involuntarily. *Please, God, not this*. He started to cry.

'You're crying, Joseph,' said the woman. 'What for?'

'I'm scared.'

'Scared? What of?'

'Of you. Of what you're maybe going to do to me,' he sobbed.

She grabbed his chin and yanked his head up. 'And what am I going to do to you, Joseph?' she asked.

Joseph sat shaking. Sweat ran into his eyes, making them sting. 'I don't know,' he said. 'But ask anybody who knows me. I'm not the boy who did it.'

'Did what?'

'Betrayed you to the security. To the Brits.'

'Betrayal? Who said anything about betrayal, Joseph? I don't believe I used that word at all, did I?' and she looked at the two men as if for an answer. 'Naw,' said the elder man; 'you did not.'

'So, Joseph, unless you *have* betrayed us, you couldn't have known that was what we're interested in. Could you?'

'Well,' said Joseph. 'I know. But all that stuff about the team and all that. Steve Heighway.' He stopped. 'Brian Doyle.' A wave of fear came over him, almost stopping his breath; and then it broke over him, and he was breathing again, but fast, too fast.

‘Yes, Joseph. Think hard. Brian Doyle. Can you see his face?’ He was silent. She went on, ‘And, when our men are betrayed, do you think they also cry?’ she asked.

‘Or are they braver? Ready to die for the cause?’

He could not reply.

‘You betrayed our men, Joseph. You told the Brits where to find us. We don’t like that.’

‘No. No, I didn’t. I swear. You’ve got the wrong person,’ said Joseph, and, for a brief moment, he felt relieved again at seeing their mistake. He’d be free again in a minute. He just had to get them to see it wasn’t him. *I wish Marie was here.* Where did that come from, that thought, Marie? ‘I don’t know anything about your men,’ he said. ‘I don’t know where they are.’

‘That’s because they’re dead, Joseph. The Brits shot them.’

‘Yes, but it wasn’t me. I couldn’t have told anybody anything. I didn’t know. I don’t know.’

‘It’s a shame about your being an athlete. I don’t usually like doing this to the young men of Ireland who have shown their strength and potential,’ and she pulled a gun from inside her jacket. Then she took her jacket off and laid it carelessly behind her. She was wearing a denim shirt. Around her neck, she wore a gold chain. As she took off her jacket, the chain fell forward out of the neck of her shirt. Joseph noticed that it didn’t have a pendant on it, or a cross. Instead, there was a ring on it. She tucked it back under her shirt, and came close to Joseph. The gun was pointing at the floor; but her finger was on the trigger.

Oh Holy God, No. It wasn’t me. I’m not your man. He could only think it, too terrified to say anything.

‘Get him back onto the floor,’ she said. As he lay there, he was aware of her releasing the safety catch on the gun. He felt the cold metal against his right knee. The silencer meant that the shot was not so loud. For a brief moment, he felt nothing at all. *It’s all right; she has just been threatening; what do they want to know; I’ll tell them whatever they want to know.*

But the shot, though quiet, had been heard. Outside, on the hill behind the farmhouse, a patrol van stood, still and quiet, its engine off. The three soldiers in it had stopped and were outside, staring up at the night sky. ‘Amazing how you can see the night properly here, in the dark,’ said one, whispering, almost reverential beneath the stars. He was drawing heavily on his cigarette. ‘Better than anything back home. Fucking Aldershot. I was born for this,’ said another. ‘This’d be a great place to be, to live, if only the crazy fuckers could see sense here.’ Lying at an angle backwards, their backs pressed against the side of their van, they were stealing a magical moment away from their daily fears, determined to try to normalise things for once by stopping in a country lane for a quiet smoke. They heard the shot, stared at each other, stubbed the cigarettes out, nodded to each other, knowing what to do, as if automatically. They cocked their rifles and started to move towards the farmhouse. One of them stepped back inside the van, pulled out the radio, and radioed a message back to base.

Penn State didn’t like to watch the knee-capping when it was done. *I’ll be on lookout,* he said. He looked out from behind the closed curtain. He saw the light flashing on the radio of the patrol car. ‘Shit,’ he said, ‘we’re fucking banjaxed. Soldier patrol.’

Joseph lay on the floor, his knee bleeding and the pain growing through him, moving in percussive circles up through his thigh and into the pit of his stomach. He felt his leg getting warmer and warmer, and then an icy coldness.

‘What’ll we do about the boy?’ said Penn State, peering back out into the night. For a brief moment, the woman paused. Her cruelty seemed to have abandoned her. ‘We can’t leave him like this,’ she said. ‘Well, we’re not fucking taking him with us,’ said the younger man. Joseph, through the mist of his pain, saw the voice, now. It was the voice that sat behind Marie in class. It came to him as a picture of his classmate, PJ Gallagher. PJ was known as the class idiot, a bit dull, awkward. Fatherless, son of a single mother; the rumour was that he was a bastard child. It gave him an identity; but, above all, he was known to be a liar, untrustworthy.

Joseph realised, all of a sudden, that it was he himself who had been betrayed. PJ was the one who had given the whereabouts of the Provos to the Brits; and it was PJ who had accused Joseph of doing it, to cover his own back.

‘We need to get out of here,’ said PJ.

‘This is unfinished business,’ said the woman.

‘Well, finish it then,’ said PJ.

Joseph looked up into the woman’s face as she moved towards him, the gun readied again. There was a pause.

‘For God’s sake, Julia. Finish him,’ said PJ. ‘We need to get the fuck out of here.’

Joseph sensed the boy’s fear; but he was also aware of the woman’s calm still. It was a gentleness in her face, those eyes, that settled him as it humanised her. Julia turned Joseph’s face towards her, so that she would be looking at him and he at her. She reached behind him, felt his tied and sweating hand, held it tightly. Then she put the pistol against the front of his forehead. They were looking deep into each other in a moment of terrible communion.

‘Fuck sake, Julia. Do it,’ PJ was panicking. He abandoned his place by the door and grabbed at Julia’s hand, the one holding the pistol.

After, she grabbed her jacket, but upside down. Her keys fell from the pocket. As she stuffed them back in, readying her pistol with the other hand, she didn’t notice what else had fallen out. She looked again at Joseph, then turned and ran.

When the soldiers reached the buildings, Joseph was dead. Julia and her two accomplices were gone. A man’s leather jacket lay on the floor; not far from it lay the well-thumbed note that had fallen from her jacket. Although the jacket belonged to Pat Maher, the note said that it was Julia who had been there, and that Christopher loved her.

* * *

Dublin, 1972

Tom O'Connor and his adulterous act. What was it? Betraying his wife, his love. Seamus told himself to forget it. Tom had told God of the sin, not Seamus; Seamus was just an ear, a memory-hole, he tried to remind himself. Who is the other woman? How can you avoid asking that? Seamus stood as if waiting for a sign of some kind from the woman at the front railing of the church; but she had already turned her head back towards the altar. He turned to go, and moved slowly, as if reluctantly, towards the door of the church.

Seamus recalled a confession from four years ago, in which a man told him he had committed a murder. As was the case with Tom this cold and wet evening, he had recognised the man's voice. He also knew that for years afterwards the man was still walking around free, that he had never served time in prison for his act. Seamus had done what he knew he had to do: as a priest, he had to absolve, for he was sure at the time that the man was genuinely sorry; but as a citizen, he also had to tell the man that he should go and confess to the police. Clearly, that had not happened; and Seamus now felt himself to be complicit in an act that was evil, and he could do nothing about it. *And that brought the struggle home to me. That's its reality.* Whenever the man came back to confession over the years, Seamus had always prompted him, with a 'Now, is there anything else you need to confess? Think hard.' The man always said that there was nothing. Then, last year, he had died, himself the victim of an unexplained gunshot. Seamus wondered about his fate before God; and wondered if he, Seamus, would share in it, whatever it was. *Probably more important than my fate before the bishop.*

Father Christopher Andrews, Seamus's younger colleague, was stepping out of the confessional on the opposite side of the church. They'd need to work out a better rota. It was a waste of time having them both on for the full three hours on Saturday evening. Father Christopher made his way to the front of the church, and knelt in the pew opposite the woman, saying his own prayers. Seamus went straight out through the door at the back of the church, lifted the umbrella that he had left there at 6pm when he started the shift, and stepped out to look at the rain and at the damage it was doing to the building.

The roof would not hold secure for much longer against this. He could see where the slates were loose and where the lead flashing was coming away near one of the ridge tiles. His soutane was getting wet at his ankles, so he turned to go back into the church. As he did so, with his umbrella blocking his view, he barged into the figure of the woman who was now coming out, trying to raise her own umbrella against the wet.

'Sorry, Father. Excuse me,' she said; and rushed out past him before he had a chance to speak, to apologise for his blindness and roughness in the rain. She didn't look back, though he looked, half expectantly, after her. He shook the umbrella out vigorously in the porch, just as Christopher was coming out to look for himself at the rain. Christopher got soaked, just as if a stray dog had come out of the sea and stood shaking itself back and forth in front of him. He smiled, and Seamus apologised, the apology somehow more to the woman he had barged into than to Christopher who heard it.

Back in the priests' house, Seamus suggested a cup of tea. And they sat together, quietly, as so often, before the peat fire, smelling the fields of Ireland burning, mixed with the bergamot-scented odours of India. A whole world between them, in what they had heard over the past three hours, and could not discuss, ever. In that silence, the space between them grew, containing the multitudes that they felt they embraced in their holiness, their wholeness. Christopher shifted in his chair, poked the fire to rouse its embers, and smiled at Seamus. It was an invitation to talk.

Seamus, too, would have liked to talk, maybe even to confess. The thing with Tom had got his mind back on to his own *indiscretion*. He thought about his son, PJ. He was following what his son was up to, but at a necessary distance. The church had its spies who kept him informed. Helen, PJ's mother and Seamus's 'indiscretion', had given PJ her own name, Gallagher, and had managed to re-start her life. The story that the bishop gave them was that Helen's husband had died in a tragic accident – and even for PJ the details were vague – somewhere overseas; and that Helen had returned to Ireland with her son, going to Drogheda because she could not bear the memories associated with Dublin and her late husband. *Dead, the dead father. Not content, they have to kill me off* thought Seamus to himself. *But I'm worried about him. Like a father should. Like a still living father does.*

* * *

1972, Drogheda

In the kitchen, Joseph's mother was weeping uncontrollably. 'Oh my God, oh God, where have they taken Joseph? What's going on, what do they want with him?' The father, calmer, but white-faced, waited while his gag was cut by the ten-year old boy, his hands trembling as he held the scissors, cutting the shamrocks right down the middle of their pattern. As the gag came away, the father turned to the mother, saying 'Calm yourself. There's been some mistake.' 'We should never have come back. We should have stayed over. Where we were. Where we could get some peace,' said the mother. 'Ah, wheesht, now. Calm yourself,' repeated the man, 'you know we were getting even less peace over there. Still yourself, here, come here to me and I'll calm you'; and, as he felt his hands coming free from the knotted rope, he turned to his other son, saying 'Thanks, Philip. There's a lad. Thanks, son. Are you OK? Did you see anything? Try to remember.'

Chapter 7

January 1993

Anne lay in bed. She was not alone, nor was she sleeping. The ghosts were with her.

First of all, the shadow of a memory conjured by a fading sound: she called up Mairead to lay beside her, the force of her dying words betrayed by the softness of her voice, and then the remembered image, a silhouette that gradually coloured into grey-blue solidity as the gentleness of her face, her dying demeanour. Anne could still feel Mairead's skin, the once soft hands that had bathed her as a child now parchment-dry as she had tried to massage a life, a bloodflow, back through the lethargic veins. She slid her hand over the cotton sheets, still fresh, crisp where they were exposed to the morning cool. 'Goodbye,' she said, aloud now; and she realized, with the shock of an immediacy, that the softness of Mairead's voice, the tone and timbre of it, was actually already the voice fading away, its disappearance from her own hearing. *This is dying: the loss of the echo of a voice and its vibration, its impact on the world.*

But she could still recall some of the content of Mairead's speaking. Who was Andrew? Andrew who had led Julia astray, who had made her become a bad woman. It was probably nothing more than the momentarily ossifying of a rambling memory that came to rest somewhere; but why rest on the name Andrew?

She wished Philip had stayed with her at the bedside. Sometimes he felt just like a shadow, a darkness suggesting time passing, the shortening of days and of daylight. *Winter. Hardly an Irish name.* He was more and more of a mystery to her, a slowly darkening shade around which she was starting to feel uneasy. *Is that not what love*

is? The realization that you never really know your lover, that he always escapes your grasp? On the one hand, she was taken by his charm. Or maybe it's just the realization that you can never trust anybody, even or especially the man that you embrace with your body, your heart. Once inside you, you're no longer yourself, no longer virgin, somehow always incomplete for ever after. But it ends in betrayal.

When they kissed, she felt his tongue like the insistence of a truth that must be spoken, like a confession. Yet something in him was not right, or was not right for her. *So maybe the growing mystery, this sense that I'm excluded from something at the core of him, is the passing away of love, the end of things, the exhaustion of an affection.*

Yesterday, as they lay together after making love in the late afternoon, she fell into the languid *farniente* of a delicious near-sleep. She felt sure that he had taken a photograph of her, naked as she was, on the bed. From the corner of her consciousness, she saw and felt him pull the sheet back, exposing her breast, exposing the birthmark that he had never once mentioned though he had explored it with his fingers, his tongue, this large strawberry mark under her left breast, and taking the photograph. Or had he? Maybe she had imagined it in her half-sleeping state. Then he had come back to bed with her, and lay beside her as if asleep himself all this time. Why did men do that? Why did men want to have the image of their lover with them, like a trophy? Wasn't the image in the memory enough?

But memories fade, like Mairead's. They dissolve the past, corrupt it. Or maybe remembering like that, fragmented, demented, is the very imperfection that proves the wholeness of the experience in the first place.

She looked out of the window. The sky was cloudy again, with a greyness in the scudding clouds that made her feel peaceful, despite the clouds' ever-changing and irregular, fretful movement. The grey is not uniform ever. What was that French phrase that Mairead used to use when she asked for tea? Tea, with *un nuage de lait*, that was it: a clouding of milk. She could see it swirling in the liquid, lightening it, giving it shape and body, taste. The sun is too clarifying, making you believe what you see, making you think things are clear, that you can always remember clearly what you have once seen. She had not remembered ever meeting Nick before; and yet, when he reminded her – told her, rather – she felt a vague sense of intimacy with him, as if they had already shared something of note. But what?

And so, now, Nick White, in whose room she was lying. Nick had disarmed her by telling her that they had met before. She was embarrassed, of course, at her failure to recognize him. He was an American businessman, now a farmer, here, in this godforsaken square of land, 'a hundred hectares of nothing, of void,' he had called it, 'but it'll be filled with something new, a future, something,' he said, and she tried to remember the timbre of a voice. While concentrating on the voice, Anne had followed his gaze, vaguely looking around the farm: there was nothing much to it. The house stood at the bottom of a hill, which was covered in rocky outcrops. The land was barren, bare; not even good enough for grazing. What was he going to do here? He had said he didn't know, that he had a lot to learn, that he was belatedly discovering who he was, why he was here, on the earth. He just felt right to be here, he said, and the word he used was odd, she recalled, *It just felt appropriate, somehow*.

'Appropriate,' and something in his American intonation of the word made her think

of propriety, property: this house was his, but he did not yet have its history. He might own it, but, so far, as yet, the house didn't yet own or even acknowledge him.

But that appropriateness was what had done it for her, made her feel an awareness of home, of homeliness. The *Heimlich*, as Jack had once described to her; something about Freud and uncanny feelings, like *déjà vu*. It was a moment like that: appropriateness. He was an interesting man. *Who else was it that I said that about recently? That he was an interesting man? Ristead. That's it: Ristead. The unusualness of sex, how it makes you not normal.* She shivered at the thought of the night with Twomey, the debate; but Nick had somehow brought back Ristead as well. Both interesting men, men wondering about the appropriateness of behaviour, or of home. *Heimat*.

And a spectral voice, from somewhere in her past: *Frisch weht der Wind, der Heimat zu. Mein Irisch Kind, wo weilest du?*

Then Nick had said the airport; and she could recall, amidst the hubbub, with the rock star and his vulgar wife, the face of a man sitting quietly opposite, looking very American, with his spotted bow-tie and, despite the sharp suit, sitting uncomfortably and uneasily in his place. That man had been troubled, out of shape, out of kilter with the world, whereas this one, here in his own home, was carefree. She smiled as she recalled his constant, almost unconscious, tucking in of his tummy whenever he spoke to her or she to him. Vanity. No need for it. *But then, I should be flattered*, she thought.

And then, finally, Julia. She brought her hands back under the cover, back to where they felt the warmth of her own body, the residue of her deep sleep. This time, though, Julia was accompanied by a man called Andrew, a man who had no face, no image, no voice whose echo she could yet hear. She searched in her memory for talk of anyone called Andrew, anyone who had had anything to do with Julia. This Andrew led her astray, and after him, she was a bad woman. What did Mammy mean? Anne would not believe that Julia was a bad woman, but she had no evidence to make that easy for her. Julia was there and not there always; she was there by not being there; she was as dead, but, like the dead everywhere an insistent presence shaping Anne's possibilities, her inmost self. Ghosts.

There was a knock at the door. 'Come in,' she said, sitting up and drawing the sheets up around her. Niamh came in, carrying coffee, bread, butter, marmalade. 'Total breakfast,' she said. 'Total assault on the senses,' replied Anne. 'The bread smells fresh, warm as a morning in Tuscany. And good coffee... mm.' Sitting up, and with the sheets falling back to the bed, uncovering her, she was aware of Niamh's eye drawn to her breast. Her stare was a fraction of a second longer than it should be. 'Birthmark,' said Anne. 'It doesn't bother me.' Niamh simply said, 'It's lovely: the exact shape and colour of strawberry.' 'Yes, I know; just ten times bigger,' and Anne half-heartedly pulled the sheet back up. 'Pass me that night-dress, would you' she said to Niamh. Niamh left the tray on the bed and pulled the nightdress from the back of the door. Anne pulled it over her head, but moved too abruptly in the bed, and the coffee spilled. 'Damn,' she said. 'No worries, Anne,' said Niamh, resettling the tray, dabbing at the stained sheet with a napkin. 'Somehow, the sheets get changed every

day. Don't know who by. It's as if somebody's waiting for us to look away or go out, then they pop in and tidy everything up. It's magic.'

Over breakfast together, Niamh asked Anne about Philip. How long have you been together? *Oh hardly any time at all; we're hardly together, as in together; we don't share the same house, for instance. Come to think of it, we just share some time together.* And a bed? *Yes, sure, from time to time.* And? *And?* Yes; 'and'? *And, well, it's good, I suppose. . . .? . . .? It's work, really; working on this film thing. We'll probably split up right after.* D'you mind if I smoke? *No, but it'd be a shame to cloud the room. Let's go outside. Give me a minute to pull some jeans on.*

Out in the hallway, making their way to the front door, Anne explained that Philip had gone back up to Dublin late last night, and so he had not stayed over in the house. He had left at about seven, before dinner. 'Seven?' asked Niamh, 'seven? Are you sure?' Niamh said she had seen him, in his car, at around nine o'clock, not far from the house, on the road and going south, away from Dublin, further down the coast. 'You know,' she said to Anne. 'You know?' a question, this time; and she paused. Then, taking her by the arm, 'I hope you don't mind me butting in, Anne, but, well...'

'Yes?' said Anne, 'Yes?'

'Well, he can be a bit of an odd one.' She paused. 'You don't mind me saying, do you? It's just that, well, I'm a bit unsure of him.'

Anne said nothing, for Niamh was voicing what she herself had started to think. 'For a start,' Niamh went on, sensing Anne's agreement, 'For a start, I've never known a scriptwriter to be so cavalier about his writing. He never seems to bother when we suggest that the script needs changes. It's crazy. Total mad. I mean, I once worked

with Sam Collier – you know his stuff? Brilliant Liverpool writer – anyway, Sam would go Beckett-crazy if you as much as changed a semi-colon for a colon. But Philip just says “sure, whatever you think goes” when Niall and I make our suggestions. And some of them are huge. Changing whole speeches. Niall wants to be credited as co-writer, he says.’

‘The problem,’ said Anne, ‘is that I think he’s maybe more attached to me than I am to him.’

‘You mean he’s in love with you?’

‘...’

‘And you’re not in love with him.’

‘Love? That’s maybe too strong. Who ever knows about love? Your lover is the one that always escapes your grasp, isn’t he? No, we’re just going maybe in separate directions. Different trains; different rhythms. I felt attracted to him – in fact, I think it was me that made the first move,’ remembering Glendalough, the touch of hands, the arching of palms and intertwining of fingers as in a broken church. ‘And then, he didn’t seem too fussed; but, as time has gone on, I haven’t got any closer to him, but he seems to be getting more attached to me.’

‘Do you know somebody called Pat Maher?’

‘Pat Maher? No, why?’

‘Because Philip asked me to find out if you knew the name. From way back. I’ve no idea why. That’s another weirdo thing about Philip. I was supposed to find out surreptitiously. But how the hell can you do that? Stupid idea. Anyway, I’ll let him know you don’t know this old Pat, whoever he is. Was. Might be.’

‘No, I’ve no idea who Pat Maher is. Or was,’ said Anne, though she would wonder about the name, about whether to mention it to Philip. ‘Don’t tell him, though. Don’t let on.’ *Why is he trying to find this out behind my back? Can’t he just ask me?*

What’s the big deal?

‘Limpets. They’re all bloody limpets. The barnacle men,’ said Niamh, ‘stuck on our backs and hanging on for dear life. And when they start to irritate and eat at you from the insides, you can’t scrape them off. He was heading in the direction of Dunmore East. I’m sure it was him. You can’t mistake that car.’

* * *

In a small cottage on the outskirts of a tiny village in north-west Scotland, so small it barely figures on any map, a woman lies asleep. Her sleep is, for once, peaceful: she is so very tired that her troubles cannot rouse her. In her sleep there is someone beside her, in the dark. They have only the light of a tiny candle, its wax running, running too eagerly down, as the wick burns time away. And as the years are burned away, so too is fear and torment. The man beside her touches her, skin to skin. His skin is smooth, bearing no evidence of the years of toil, no trace of labour, all instead as perfect as the bones beneath the skin, white and delicate. She touches and feels him, and her feeling is the touch of a pure desire, not a desire that wants but rather a desire that gives, that yields itself into the soul of the beloved. For once, just for once, this night, she is happy. But she is asleep.

When the door is knocked, the candle of the dream burns out completely, and she is again back in the dark. The knocking comes again, not loud but insistent. She gathers a dressing-gown from a hook on the back of the door and makes her unsteady way

downstairs. She is a little afraid. 'Who is it?' she asks. There is no reply. Again, 'who is it? What do you want? Who are you looking for?' She steps back suddenly, realizing that the letter-box is being pushed open. A small parcel drops through it and on to the floor. 'Open it,' says a voice, a man's voice from outside.

Through the brown paper, she feels a malleable shape. Light, pliable. Still unsure, she peels back the paper. Inside, there is a book. It is called *Tables of Stone*, and it was written by her mother. Now, she opens the door, and the man walks in, saying a polite 'Thank you. It is cold this night.'

Seated at the table in her tiny kitchen, the man tells her a story. Mairead, he tells her, is dead. Then he speaks of Caroline and of Anne; and he tells her enough to make her believe that he really knows her daughters. She, by contrast, has no knowledge of her daughters and of what has ever become of them. When she left, she hoped only that they would have a good life. And, according to the man, they have. Did she know that she was a grandmother? Caroline's children, two of them.

Then she asked what had brought him here this night to tell her of these things? And then, he explained that Anne was in mortal danger, and that, if Anne were to survive, then Julia would have to return to Ireland.

* * *

They stood on the waterfront at Dunmore East, looking up at the cast-iron statue, its bronzed folds suggesting mobility, mutability. Billy the Kid held his rifle against his leg, and he stared meanly out to sea. 'Billy the Kid,' said Nick, 'in Dunmore East.'

Anne shrugged. It might be preposterous; but she was used to that. *Just think of Temple Bar.*

‘And I thought he was born in the Bronx before heading out west,’ Nick said, his hand caressing the rifle butt.

‘Ah, but you’re too much of a literalist,’ said Niamh, ‘whereas this is the land of imagination, of free thinking.’ The three of them – Anne, Nick, Niamh - had come down to the coast for the ceremony of the unveiling of the statue. The only crazy thing about it all, Niall had said to them as they were leaving him behind (‘I hate cowboys. I hate westerns. The west; it’s deathly’), is that people here don’t think there’s anything crazy about it. Billy the Kid, an Irishman.

‘Well, there *is* a dispute about his origins,’ said Niamh. Nick waited for the explanation, not knowing if Niamh was joking or serious. They turned their back to the statue, eased their way past the small crowd of people who had gathered, and looked out over the coastline. The wind was blowing fresh; but the day was dull, low grey sky bringing the horizon close. The space was near suffocating, despite the insistent breeze, Anne felt; and she urged them to come down onto the beach. She needed to feel the water, get her breath.

‘What kind of dispute? He was American,’ said Nick, baffled at the very idea of the statue.

‘We can call it the Jack Charlton effect,’ Niamh laughed.

‘Who’s Jack Charlton? Another Irish cowboy?’ asked Nick.

‘He’s the manager of the Ireland football team. *Soccer*.’ Nick nodded, ‘I know, I know.’ And Niamh went on, ‘They’re one of our great success stories. They used to be disastrous. Ireland, being a bit of a small country, doesn’t breed too big a pool of footballing talent, especially as we’re still all forced to play Gaelic games.’

‘But there’s no money in Gaelic football,’ said Anne. They were walking along the promenade, heading for the steps down to the sand, to the beach.

‘That’s right. Not much TV coverage, so not much advertising, so not much money.’

‘Whereas the World Cup is big business.’

‘Yeah. Even I’ve heard of that one. Ain’t we supposed to be holding the next one? Seattle?’ He had nearly said *back home, Seattle*, but he was schooling himself in his new abode, his new domain. It was a matter of language.

‘So, we hire Jack, Big Jack, as the manager. And he goes out and starts selecting the best players in England. The ones that are really pretty good, but not good enough to get into the English team. Their B-team, kind of.’

‘But don’t you need to be Irish to play for Ireland?’

‘Well, there’s the trick, you see. No, you don’t. Jack asks them if they’ve got an Irish grandparent, even great-grandparent. If they have, then, legally, they’re in.’

‘And if they haven’t?’

‘Well, there’s the genius of the moment, the freedom of thought that is our imagination, the freedom that Big Jack saw and that we all love him for. If your dead granny won’t do the trick, then you just keep asking about aunts, uncles, cousins, dogs that were bred here that you now own.’

‘You see, Nick,’ said Anne, and here she took his hand, leading him down onto the sand and motioning that he should slip his shoes off, ‘you see, Ireland now, these

days, is really a matter of invention, of imagination. Anyone can be Irish; you just need to wish it.'

'And the corollary – I like that word, 'corollary' - what follows from that is that Ireland doesn't exist any more,' added Niamh. She had taken her boots and socks off, and was starting to run towards the water. 'Time was when you could say what Ireland was, where it was.'

'But all that's past. It's history.'

Nick walked briskly. He couldn't yet risk running; he'd look old and fat and unfit, so he pretended to be taking in the view back up to the seafront behind him.

'Mandelbrot,' he said, his voice carrying away on the breeze like a seagull searching for a thermal, looking to keep aloft without effort, supported by an airy nothing, a void, the energy of heat.

'Huh?' shouted Niamh over the noise of the wind, the waves. 'What did you say? Hey, Anne, this water's freezing. Come back here. Keep warm.' And Anne came back onto the sand. The three of them walked, and as they did so, they fell into a pattern. Nick was in the middle, and, at the same moment, both women took him by the arm, enveloping him between them, Niamh to his right, Anne on his left, water-side. They were all carrying their shoes. It was nothing sexual, just a keeping warm, an innocence like children aware of the pure sensuality of the body but without any sexual stirring. Except for Nick. *Ages since I've felt so wanted, so welcome. At home, here. Crazy. But what if?* And he caught a glimpse of Anne's bared feet, damp and half-covered in light sand. He wanted to touch, to hold.

‘Mandelbrot,’ he repeated. ‘He was a mathematician; and he asked, how long is the coastline of the USA? Or maybe it wasn’t the USA specifically. Any country; any country that has a coast,’ nodding his head towards the sea-front.

‘And?’ asked Niamh, ‘how long is it?’

‘Well, that’s the point. There has to be an answer to that question. It’s a certain number of miles; and it must be exactly that number.’

‘But the waves of the sea keep disturbing it? Is that it?’ asked Anne.

‘No – though that as well. No, the problem is how you measure it. If you do it to scale, then the answer you get depends on the scale that you use.’

‘How come?’

‘Because if the scale is very big, it irons out many of the small inlets; and if you scale it down, you get a different result because it takes account of those inlets – but it also reveals the possibility of there being more.’ He paused, thoughtful, ‘or maybe the scale’s the other way round. You know what I mean.’

‘So, really, the only way you can measure it is by getting down on your hands and knees and crawling the whole way round, measuring every last stone and pebble.’

Niamh bent down and picked one up, turning it round in her hand, as if trying to imagine how you would measure the curve of its size, but really just liking the feel of it in her palm.

‘But there must be an answer.’

‘Yeah. That’s right. There must be an answer, but nobody knows what it can be.’

‘It’s like the number of grains of sand in the world. There must be a right answer to that.’

‘Or like measuring your shadow,’ said Anne, ‘on a day like today when there aren’t any.’

‘So if the shadow changes, you change as well. Total.’

‘Same as here,’ said Anne half under her breath.

‘What’s that?’

‘Same as here. Ireland. Everybody’s got a shadow, everybody’s got a reflection of themselves in history, and everybody’s got an answer to the question of who they are, how Irish they are; but they just don’t know what the question is, what the answer’s a shadow of. They’ve got the right answer – Unionists, Republicans – but they’ve got the wrong question.’

‘Yes, like Dev and the rural poor.’

‘Dev?’

‘De Valera. He gave us an image of Ireland; but he was asking the wrong question.’

‘And what’s the right one?’

‘How come Billy the Kid is Irish?’

They paused. ‘The right question is, what is it that makes you Irish? Or,’ turning to Nick, ‘or American?’

‘But I’m not American,’ said Nick. ‘At least, I don’t want to be anymore.’

‘Did you know that Phil is Irish?’ asked Anne.

‘Never. He’s as English as... as English as... Jack Charlton,’ said Niamh, laughing.

‘He isn’t, you know. It’s an Irish passport he carries.’

‘Well, he must have two, then,’ said Niamh. ‘He’s an odd one.’

‘So, Billy. Howdy,’ said Niamh, as they turned to make their way back towards the statue. They could see the very small crowd slipping away, drifting quickly, leaving Billy defiantly staring out over their heads, out to sea. ‘So, as I was saying. There’s a dispute about his origins. The story is that his mother, Catherine McCarty, was a

victim of the Famine. She left Ireland, starving, and headed west, first to Cobh, where she took the boat to America, New York. Starving, but also pregnant. Now, where it is that Henry - the son that was to become William Bonney and then Billy the Kid – where it is that he was actually born is the subject of the dispute. Some say America; others say that he was already born when Catherine left and that she took him with her; still others that he was born on the boat.’

‘I like that one the best.’

‘Born at sea. All at sea.’

‘Anyway, the thing is that, here in Dunmore East, there’s a family of McCarthy’s; and they claim themselves to be relatives of Catherine McCarty. They decided that the town was lacking in cultural significance, so they began a big petition to get the statue done.’

‘And they succeeded.’

‘They sure did. There’s Billy, standing tall and proud. It’s just a shame that he was such a villain.’

‘Ah, but an Irish villain.’

‘Or an American one.’

‘It makes no difference. That’s the point. It makes no difference.’

They were standing right in front of the statue, all three of them looking out, Billy up and behind them, as if supervising, monitoring.

‘Are you married, Nick? Have you a family?’

‘No.’

‘No? No family?’

‘No, I mean no wife.’ It made no difference, he said to himself. Joan had left him, not he her. ‘I’ve got family, though. Or rather, I *had* family. Patrick.’

‘Patrick?’

‘My uncle. My dead uncle. The man whose farm I’m now on. In. At. Whatever.’

Anne asked him about whether he had family in the States. He said No, that he had always been alone there, that his mother had taken him to Ireland once, as a child, but that he couldn’t remember it. That his mother had died many years ago, as had his father.

‘What did they die of?’

‘My father of TB.’ When he said it, he stopped walking, and suddenly pushed Niam’s arm away from his. ‘Nick? What’s up?’ asked Niamh, as he turned away. But he was shocked. He had not thought of this as a possibility. TB. His family roots were here, for sure; and maybe they were drawing him back down, back to the earth. *Is it congenital? I don’t know. The handkerchief in the pub last September; the sheets here in the farm; those little drops I keep seeing, in the sink or when I cough. What are the tests they’re doing? Why haven’t I got the results yet? Hypochondria; or maybe worse, maybe for real. Fuck.*

‘Nothing,’ he said.

‘But you’re as white as a ghost,’ said Niamh. ‘We need to get you to sit down.’

‘Take him home,’ said Anne. ‘Take him home.’ While they had been walking, Anne had been aware of Nick holding her arm pressed tightly against his chest. When she moved it to release herself from his grasp and to help settle him down on the beach, their hands brushed, and then they held hands briefly. Very briefly, for Anne knew that the holding of hands is too intimate. But as their fingers intertwined so briefly,

she had felt the indentation on his finger where a ring had been worn, maybe for many years. It was his wedding finger.

Now, though, she was wondering more about what Niamh had said about Phil, about two passports. *Does it matter if he's not Irish? Does it matter if he's not who he says he is? If he's lying? Like Nick, lying about being married.* Niamh said that he's an odd one; and so he is.

* * *

The boat left the Welsh coast, near Mumbles, and sailed out into the waves. It was a quiet afternoon, and the forecast was good. The sea would be steady, rhythmic. On board was a crew of four, and, under the cover of the cabin, a middle-aged woman. Julia sat alone, covered in a blanket against the cold. She would try to rest and sleep. The crew looked back towards Mumbles lighthouse. They didn't need it: they knew these waters well. They headed southwards first, out of Swansea Bay, before turning west.

Two hours out, they cut the engine, shut down the lights on board, and waited. They waited out at sea until the sun started to go down and the crepuscular light started to give them their only shadow, themselves. One of the crew looked in on Julia. He saw a woman whose deep brown eyes, now closed, had all but seduced him when they met, when she had been handed over to him by her minders. They were not supposed to have any contact or talk with her; but he could not resist. Those eyes. He noticed that she was freckled across the bridge of her nose; and this gave her face a still

youthful air, despite the lines around her eyes, her mouth. Her body looked more fragile. She shifted slightly in her sleep under his gaze, and he moved to draw the blanket more warmly around her. As he had half-hoped it would, the movement roused her. She came to with a start; but he put his hand on her arm, gently, so gently; and she smiled at him out of her sleep, opening her eyes wide. 'We've got a bit to go yet,' was all he said. She made no reply. She didn't need to. He had got all he needed.

When the man went back up on deck, they re-started the engine and set out further into the Irish Sea, heading west. Julia heard them, as if in a dream, as they picked up radio contact with the other boat and, after about an hour's further sailing, they came into visual contact with it. An exchange of signals took place: three flashed lights, followed by two, followed by three again. Code words were exchanged over the radio contact, and the boats drew closer together. Julia, brought out of her doze by the lights and the sound of the activity as the crew readied themselves, got up, still drawing her blanket about herself, and looked out from the cabin towards the deck. The man she had exchanged smiles with earlier nodded, and she stepped cautiously out onto the deck. She had a small hold-all with her, and she brought this out from the cabin.

The two boats were now almost side-by-side. Their engines purred softly, the old tyres along their sides bumping gently against each other. Everyone was silent, as if waiting. Julia moved towards the edge of the boat, the crewmen handing her onwards, balancing her. The man who had looked in on her was the last in the line, and, as she was passed to him, the boats bumped together. She lost her balance and fell into him; but he steadied her. 'Easy,' he said, 'easy does it. You're fine. All right?' She could smell the damp wool of his sweater, its slightly bitter tang of weeks-old staleness,

tobacco and sweat, and she could feel the strength in his arm as he steadied her. His beard was rough, short and stubbled, and she felt it against her cheek as she righted herself against his body. 'I'm fine,' she said, her voice barely audible, barely more than a whisper. She had been silent for so long that she couldn't moderate the volume; and the whisper gave the moment an intensity that she hadn't intended. She coughed, to get her voice recalibrated, and repeated, 'I'm fine. Fine, thank you.'

She would have to balance carefully on the edge of the boat, and then make the small jump across to the other one. Suddenly, she didn't want to do it. She wanted to stay with the warmth of the man's sweat, his worn self, his big body. She felt a security beside him when she stumbled; and that was what she was now craving, above everything else: security. *Peace, quiet. God, I'm tired, tired. I want quiet, a safe haven. He would maybe give it to me.* But she had to move. The man was staring at her, now at arm's length, his arm barely holding her, just touching her. She was on her own. On the other boat, a much younger man was standing, holding his hand out to reach her, to take her. Before she went, she needed to know the man's name. She turned back to face him, and he looked expectantly at her, nodding as if to encourage her to go on, to go to the other boat. 'What's your name?' she asked. 'Christopher.' *Ah, Christopher.* She turned again, steadier now. With a determination that she no longer thought she possessed, she moved forwards. She waved away the hands of the younger man on the other boat, stepping on board and moving immediately beyond him.

Christopher. She turned, but the boats had separated again right away after she had boarded, and Christopher was making his way back towards the east. He didn't look

back, but she stared after him for some time, until the shape of the boat was lost in the dark.

In this new boat, again with a crew of four, Julia sat fully awake in this heart of night-time. Stars dotted the sky, and she could make out the vague shape of constellations that she barely remembered from her childhood. Orion's belt was clear, but instead of it being just three bright stars, she could now see all the smaller stars in between. *Like lace. Like filigree, a whole network of interlaced constellations and shapes. You can make of them what you will, but they themselves don't care. The stars are not there for us. The world's indifferent to us, our pains, sorrows, memories, actions, responsibilities.*

The engine was stopped again, and she felt as if they were drifting. But she was in their hands now. She was apprehensive. What if the plan to get her back to Ireland this way, without attracting all the usual border security, didn't work? It was too easy. Somebody would have been watching. But she had spent the whole day yesterday in the hold of the yacht, long before the crew arrived. Anybody watching would have been able to count four men out, and four returning. Unless they had been watching for twenty-four hours or more, solidly. Then they would have seen her, taken out to the yacht on a rowing boat late at night, and then the rowing boat returning without her. She had waited, cowering in the cabin, shaken by cold and by fear. For the first time, fear; and she felt that fear returning to her again, now, as she waited again, here, in the midst of the Irish Sea. *Christopher. As if to haunt me. And here, maybe, is where he died. Does it all matter? Ah, Christopher. Will I ever be able to make my*

peace? And Anne; oh God, it doesn't bear thinking about? That, at least – that matters.

As she lay there, alone in the quiet of the cabin, she saw the sunrise starting away in the east, the dawn light eerily cold. And Pat Maher: he had taken the rap for the murder of that young kid, Joseph. His jacket was there, in the barn, beside the body. Like a child, he'd had his name scrawled inside it. The soldiers who found it said it was still warm to the touch when they found it. Would Pat have stayed quiet inside? Would he have told anybody the truth of what happened that night? What would he have revealed; and who else would see the dark play of that night emerging into light, into the revelation of things that are maybe better left unsaid? *Silence; or a confessing? What is it that will help Anne?*

The engines were started, and she felt heat returning to the cabin; but the boat had not yet started to pull. They were just heating the space for her. They were due to make landfall at Dunmore East, where she would be picked up by Philip Winter. She had only spoken to him on the phone, and had no idea what he would look like. Maybe he's just a plant? He sounded English. Maybe she was being set up. But she had to see Anne. This was now the most important thing to her. *After all this time. I need to see her again, to see Caroline as well if I can; but it's Anne most of all, Anne on her own.* Her regret was that she would not see her mother, that she would be arriving too late for a reconciliation there. Before the man left her cottage, that night, he dropped onto the table a newspaper cutting with Mairead's obituary. Beside it, he placed a photograph of Anne, as she looked now. *Beautiful*, he said.

But how many years had it been? Twenty? No, more, nearly a quarter century: a whole lifetime and world away. That was when she had made this same journey, but in the opposite direction. After the death of that young man, Joseph, she had had to go. She was spirited out of the country, by night, in a boat. On the other side, near Mumbles, she lost her name. She could think of no other name to take than the name of the man she was in danger of loving, and so she became Chris Andrews. She could think of nowhere to go but to Christopher's homeland; and so she made her way to Scotland, to live in quiet obscurity, knowing that she was condemned to be forever on the run. Until now. She wondered what Mairead had ever said about Julia's disappearance? Did Anne know all there was to know?

In the mid morning, they started the engines and headed towards the coast at Dunmore East. About a half-mile from shore, she got into a rowing boat, and was taken steadily, slowly, ashore. The yacht, meanwhile, pulled away and headed for Dun Laoghaire harbour, where, much later that morning, it pulled up near Coliemore, from where it had set off the day before.

* * *

Another day, another discovery. Philip was away from the house again, back in Dublin, sorting out a problem in his apartment. 'A plumbing thing. The shower's leaking. The people in the floor below are getting water coming in. I'll be away for a couple of days. I'll phone when I can get back.' 'But you're forgetting. I don't have a mobile.' 'Well, yeah, right. Maybe you can phone me, then? Each day?' And he drove off. Anne watched from the end of the drive as the car headed away to the north. She

stood there for a further half-hour, watching to see if it turned back again, to head south, remembering her breakfast coffee one morning with Niamh.

There was nothing to do. Niall and Niamh had exhausted their possible variations on their scenes. Anne and Nick watched them as they did a run-through of what they saw as their best version. It involved one of those scuffled half-arguments, where innuendo in conversation turns to more bitter statement, then to half-hearted maybe still playful slapping at each other. Then Niall, as Jack, strikes Mary, determinedly, harshly. Niamh sold the punch so well that Anne cried out. Niall and Niamh ignored her, and went on. They ended up scrimmaging around together on one of the sofas by the fire. As they did so, their bodies became entangled and they held each other, defending themselves by trying to restrict all movement. Then, pausing for breath, Jack kissed Mary, hard, full on the mouth; and Mary's arms relaxed into receiving the embrace. As Jack also relaxed, his movement with her now a passionate embrace, seeking her mouth again and again, Mary fell off the sofa. She lay on the floor, immobile. Jack stared down at her. She didn't move. He calmly got up, walked over to the window, took out a cigarette and lit it.

Anne didn't know if he was still Jack, still acting. She didn't know whether Niamh was actually hurt or whether that, too, was in the script. She was aware of Nick's breathing beside her as they watched. Neither seemed sure of whether the scene was over or not. Nick was sitting in close to her. She was aware of his presence, increasingly close over the last few days. He had detected her vague interest in him, not a sexual interest but a human interest; and he was responding to that by coming always into closer proximity to her, physically and psychologically. Here, in this

scene that blurred the space between reality and acting, she suddenly felt the need of some psychological reassurance; and so she resisted the temptation to slide away from him, staying still, close enough to sense his breath as he sat, visibly moved yet entranced by Jack and Mary before him.

Then Mary got up, and Niamh returned. 'Total blackout, huh?' The tension broken, they applauded. 'I didn't know if it was for real,' said Nick. 'I could have been watching something from life, from my life.' 'I told you,' said Niamh. 'Prostitutes. That's all we are. What's your fantasy? We'll deliver it.'

Niall had started to pull off his tie. 'Come on, let's get out of here. Let's get out for the day. I need a bit of air. A change of scene.'

'Dublin?' asked Niamh.

'Hell, no. Anywhere but there,' he said. 'Hey, Nick? Have you ever seen our great standing stones? Our history? Newgrange burial chamber?'

'No. I know nothing,' said Nick.

'That's that, then. Settled. Newgrange. Yeah, everyone? I'll get the car round.'

And they set off, picnic packed in the boot, on the road north. They passed Dublin, heading further north on the Drogheda road, then turned inland, west, towards Navan. Newgrange was signposted.

When they reached Newgrange itself, there were signposts directing them to queue for tickets to go and see the burial mound. It was a half-mile walk from the ticket

office; and the crowds were already forming a ragged line, straggling for about another half-mile. It was a disappointment. Too many tourists.

‘We’ll get off the track,’ said Niall. ‘Get back into the car. There’s another one of these, much smaller but just as interesting – and without the crowds – just down the road at Fourknocks. ‘But let’s picnic first.’ It was too cold to sit out, so they sat in the warmth of the car, the engine on and running to keep the heat up. ‘It’s the Famous Five,’ said Anne. ‘Good math,’ said Nick, ‘there’s only four of us.’ ‘Ah, sure, but you’re forgetting, Nick. This is Ireland: we’ve got ghosts as well.’ ‘And anyway, what about Phil?’ said Niall. ‘He’s here in spirit too, I suppose,’ looking at Anne. ‘In spirit, maybe. In body, not. And anyway,’ said Anne, ‘that doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter.’

And, in the way she said it, Nick saw, in that instant, that Anne had dismissed Philip from her life. He felt something like the well-spring of a hope opening. *Don’t be crazy. But what if? What if?* He got out of the car, ‘stretch my legs. The cars in Europe are too small,’ and, when he got back, his place in the front was taken by Niamh. ‘If I pull the seat forward, it makes more room for you behind me,’ she said to him when he pulled the door open. He got into the back, beside Anne. As he got comfortable, he felt his knees resting against Anne’s leg. He didn’t move, and nor did she.

Niall was right. At Fourknocks, there was no one at all. They saw the mound, and, to their delighted amazement, it was covered in a thin puffy layer of light snow. ‘Makes it look like an igloo,’ said Niamh. ‘I told you it’d be brilliant,’ said Niall. All round it the snow had melted away, but here it lay covering the mound, not evenly but in small

puff-balls. A small sign near the mound said that the key was available from Mr White's house nearby. 'Mr White?' said Nick. 'Sure thing. Total brilliant,' said Niamh. 'Maybe you own more than Dunmore Farm,' said Anne, pinching Nick playfully on the arm as they got out of the car. Niall came back two minutes later with a massive key in his hand. 'Mr White is a pure delight,' he said, 'as we have come to expect from the Whites of Ireland and Seattle.' Nick bowed his head, in mock humility. 'We're to make sure to bring the key back before six. He told me about why it's called Fourknocks.' He was walking towards the entrance to the mound, putting the huge key into the lock on the door. The door looked as if it would not withstand too much pressure, despite the size of the key. 'Where'll I put this?' he asked, pushing the door open and holding the key aloft. 'Who's got the biggest pockets here? It won't fit mine, that's for sure.' He was wearing skin-tight jeans. 'Yes, we've noticed,' said Niamh, raising her eyes to heaven. 'Here, I'll take it,' said Nick, 'given that it is one of White's keys.'

'So, why Fourknocks?' asked Anne. She was standing back a little. The entrance looked narrow to her, a little claustal.

'Well, as usual, there are rival versions.'

'As usual. Of course,' said Niamh, bowing her head and peering into the darkness in the entrance tunnel. 'I don't suppose anybody thought to bring a torch?'

'It's either a reference to the four hills, *cnocs*, that surround us here,' said Niall, looking round. 'Yes, see, four other small burial mounds, all built on natural hillocks,' pointing round. 'I'll bet there's an astrological significance to that,' he added, 'East, south east, south-south-east, south,' measuring the distances with his fingers held out like a mathematical compass.

‘Or?’

‘Or it is a different word, *fuair*, not four. So – who’s got any Gaelic here?’

‘Me,’ said Nick. ‘I can say *Fir, Mnà, Bruscar...*’ they were laughing, and he played up to it, ‘and, wait for it, *Taoiseach!* – rhymes with teashop!’

‘So, Gents, Ladies, Litter and Prime Minister. Very good. But what’s *fuair*? Don’t know? Niamh?’

‘It’s cold,’ she said, shivering.

‘Right. Cold.’

‘Huh?’

‘You’re right. *Fuair* means *cold*.’

‘No, I was saying that it’s cold here. *I’m cold*,’ she said.

‘Well, whatever. So *Fuair cnocs* is *cold hills*.’

Anne remained detached, at the tiniest and barely perceptible remove from the other three. She had an uneasy feeling. The cold was right. The place felt cold. She watched as Nick struggled to get the key into his trouser pocket, eventually giving up and leaving it hanging half-out. Niamh and Niall had disappeared into the interior.

‘What’s that song you keep humming?’ asked Nick, his hand playing with the dangling key. ‘Hm?’ she asked, distractedly.

‘That song. You’ve been singing it for days now. You were humming it on the beach in Dunmore East; and I heard you at breakfast the other day as well. Whatever it is, it’s beautiful.’

‘Oh, it’s not a song. It’s just a few melodies that I’m toying with. For my next piece.

Mnà nà eireann.’

‘Women of Ireland,’ said Nick. ‘It’s lovely. It should be melancholic, given the melody that I’m hearing; but it’s not. You make it joyful at the same time.’

‘Thanks. Yes, it should be so.’

‘I’d like to hear more of your music. Can you sing some to me?’

‘Well, not really. It’s not really meant for singing. It’s orchestral. Difficult to do *a capella*.’

‘But you’re singing the women of Ireland, and I can hear *that* all right. Can you hum the melody of the piece you did for the Proms for me? That you told us about the other day on the beach? What is it - *Black rain falling*?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said, hesitantly.

‘Please? It’s important for me. To me.’

And she started to sing. She was singing still eyes closed, when Niamh and Niall came back out. They fell to a hush, and Anne’s voice echoed high across the country, a singing that became a wail, a wail that became a chant, a chant that became a melody and that revealed the unsung melody behind and of the wail, behind and of the chant. Pure song, note perfect, perfectly pitched.

After it, they stood in silence. Then Niamh applauded, softly. Anne opened her eyes. Niamh hugged her; and then Niall also moved towards her, and held out his arms in embrace. They said nothing, and moved beyond her then, back to the car that was waiting on the road at the bend where they had left it. As he went, Niall turned to Nick and handed him a box of matches. ‘You’ll need this. It’s dark in there.’ Then they were gone, and Nick and Anne were alone before the cold hill.

Nick looked at Anne, then at the entrance to the mound. 'Coming in?' his eyes asked. He went first, and Anne followed into the dark. Nick struck a match and, as he did so, they saw the clear image of a face carved into the stone near the entrance to the mound's centre.

'It's like a womb,' said Nick, quietly; but his whisper echoed in the dark empty void, 'oomb, oomb.'

Anne was entranced by the space, but also terrified by it. It brought to mind a bad dream that sometimes recurred. She was in a cave, and she had to get through a tiny space to see the centre of the cave. For some reason, it was important that she reach the centre. When she got there, it was pitch black, but, once there, she heard what she thought of as the most perfectly pitched scale, being sung. The face of the singer was indistinguishable in the dark, but the voice was that of Julia. When awake, she could never hear it, but in this dream, it was there, sounding perfectly in the space. It sang the phrase from *Orfeo*, the melody of *Che faro senza Euridice*, Gluck's wonderful phrase that she was now trying to incorporate in her new piece. *How can I live without thee?* But then, in the dream, things turned to panic always. She knew she had to get back out of the space so that she could write the music down, but to do so, she had to get back through that tiny aperture; and it was sinking to the floor, so that she had to bend lower and lower to get to it, and, as it sank, it also narrowed. She was being buried alive.

She fought to keep the dream at bay as she looked at the face on the stone. But then, she realized she was alone. Nick had moved on while she was lost to her aural memories, and the match had gone out, leaving the space black, empty. *Which way?* Nick had the key. He couldn't be locking her in, could he? *Don't panic. Just move on,*

feeling your way round the walls. You'll get back to the entrance. She moved along one side, 'Nick, Nick?' she said, trying to hold the urgency out of her voice. She was feeling stupid, but she was also afraid. There was no reply. She felt the wall turning away from her, and realized that she was now walking into one of the side-chambers at the centre of the tomb. *Keep going. Just keep going. How many of these are there? Three? Or is it four? Four knocks, must be four.* She thought that Nick must have gone round and back out; and she had that moment of panic again as she imagined him locking the door. As she came to what she thought was the second side-chamber, feeling her way tight against the wall, she stopped, frozen. He was here. In this space. Waiting for her.

When she came out of the mound, she was visibly shaken. Nick came out a moment later.

'Hey, what's with you guys?' asked Niamh. 'We thought you were never coming back out. Total crazy in there, yeah? What did you think?'

But Anne was walking past her, hurrying to the car.

'Hiya,' shouted Niall, standing at the open car-door. 'Hey, what's happened? You look as if you've been terrified out of your wits. What happened?'

Nick came running back. 'She had a panic in the mound,' he said. 'She must be claustrophobic. We were walking round and, as she panicked, she knocked the matches out of my hand. It went pitch black. She told me she needed to get out and started getting hysterical.' He paused briefly, then said, 'I think she'll be fine. We should take this key back.'

‘You both look as if you’ve been dragged through a hedge backwards. Nick, your face is scratched.’

‘Let’s get home,’ said Anne. ‘Niall, can you drop me back in Dublin on the way? I’ll make my way to my own home. I don’t want to go back to Dunmore today. I’d like to be dropped off at home, please.’

‘Sure thing, Anne. Hey, relax. Take it easy.’

‘Can I get into the front, please? I want to look at the scenery on the way back,’ she said.

And then, ‘something touched me in the mound. Someone touched me.’

* * *

Part 3

The Imperfect

Chapter 8

Dublin, 1972

‘You know, Seamus,’ began Christopher, uncertain, hesitant, staring at the flames as if Seamus was to be found there as a flickering but assuring presence, and not in the body beside him at the fireside. He got no further. The two priests sat in their usual chairs, Seamus closer to the hearth than Christopher. Seamus looked up; but no more words came, and Christopher continued to stare into the flames, then shook his head, dismissing what it was he was going to say. Eventually, Seamus yawned theatrically and said, ‘I’m on the early Mass tomorrow; so I’m going to turn in early. Good night,’ and, getting up from the chair, now definitively putting a stop to any conversation that Christopher might have started after all, ‘God bless.’

Christopher stood up and looked out of the window. It was dark outside, shining black with the rain as it fell insistently on the sepulchral streets, the buildings made of grey quarried stone stained into blackness by age and by the weather. The sodium light of the streetlamps showed the raindrops like pinpoint polka dots dancing in the circle of dirty yellow light against the black surround of the night sky. He turned and went to his own room to fetch his overcoat and an umbrella. *But what’s the point? It doesn’t matter.* Then, quietly, so as not to be heard by Seamus, he slipped out, turning the key in the lock as he went rather than just pulling the door to, so that Seamus would not even hear the sound of the door closing. As invisible as he was inaudible: gone, *like a perfection of spirit*, he thought to himself.

He turned quickly and walked out into the street, his umbrella at once torn inside out by the wind as he turned the corner past the church and on to the main road. Here, where the road forked, he had a choice; but he had already made up his mind before coming out – days before coming out. He turned right, away from the road that would have taken him to Sandymount Strand, and instead walked towards Idrone Terrace, a little detour with its row of Georgian houses before skirting the coast road. From here, he could see across to Howth Head up to the north, and then the night ferry in the dock at Dun Laoghaire away to his right, its lights punctuating the dark and miserable skyline.

The choice of this road had been made for him not just days before, but months before. *Genesis; the start of it all. Let there be light. But as soon as there is, so is there also dark. Things were determined then, in that difference, in that clash of light and dark.* Christopher looked up at the houses on the terrace, most of them in darkness, curtains drawn, shutters closed. The windows were high, so high that if someone stood at them you could see their whole body. He knew which window to look for; and there, in one of the lighted windows, a woman stood looking out and over his head. Her hands were at her face, as if she were weeping. Another, younger woman appeared at her side, embraced her; and they moved back into the room and the light went out. *Opposites: light and dark, sun and moon, hatred and love, war and peace, men and women. Making sense; but how can you make sense of sadness, of regrets. That woman up there, weeping. And light there was. It all started then; this night started then.*

Christopher turned away, and went to walk on; but after a mere ten paces or so, he felt himself pulled back to look again towards the woman; but the window remained in darkness. No one was looking out; no one was there. He could be anyone, walking out here, indistinguishable, and with no one to watch over him. Nonetheless, he reached up to his neck and pulled the dog-collar off, stuffing it into the inside pocket of his coat.

He walked steadily on, keeping as close to the coastline as the roads would allow him, in the direction of the harbour at Dun Laoghaire, a moth drawn inexplicably and dangerously towards the light. The haloed beams on the ferry were clearer now, but looking still like yellowed raindrops that have been freshly painted, not quite settled into place, their colour still likely to change, to deepen ever so slightly as their light brings the surrounding darkness into visibility, into form, shape and focus. He could hear the noise of cars and lorries slowly loading, engines being started and crawling forwards, idling then crawling, the shouts of the harbour crews carrying occasionally towards him on the wind that was still stiff, still gusting, as if restraining him, trying to turn him back.

Crowding near the foot-passenger entrance to the ferry, he saw a group of excited schoolchildren, whose whoops and calls echoed, high and alert, into the night.

Nicknames and catch-phrases were passed around them, like so many balls being thrown, bouncing back and forth, not meaning much, simply playful, but holding them together, together and apart from the grown-up world round about them, the world in which people were travelling in the search for work somewhere, or travelling to England to find a place where they could abort the life that they felt stirring inside

them, unsure, bordering on a young consciousness, asking her to be more grown up, as grown up as her body, itself never yet readied for this, and was this love, and how would she know, and would she know, would she ever know?

Christopher found himself at the beginning of the long harbour wall that edged its way around the ancient port at Dun Laoghaire. He decided, or rather, he felt it decided for him, that he would take this detour along the length of the wall that, while it led out to sea, was still protective. He would walk the broad and enveloping harbour walls, arms reaching out to sea but actually restraining you, holding you back here, home, walls that had, from ancient times, said don't go, don't leave me now; but that were also open enough at the end to welcome the stranger here, or to bring back into our embrace the prodigal child who has gone away but failed to find a freedom and who needs the re-enchantment found in the wind whistling through the harbour entrance, enticing, welcoming, saying never mind, it's all all right, I'm still here, still waiting for you, you're still mine, we're still, we are still, we are, we, we.

If you had been on the ferry that night, looking not back towards the land that you were leaving, but rather looking the other way, forwards, out towards the open sea, you would have seen the small figure of Father Christopher Andrews, his coat still buttoned against the chill wind, his head bowed but determined, splashing his way across puddles, giving up entirely on his umbrella as it blew inside out for the final time, placing it, stuffing it rather, folded back up in a horribly contorted shape, into one of the wastepaper baskets that line the wall. He was a barely perceptible black stain, moving against the blackness of the wall, the night, the wet, and only occasionally distinguished against the harbour wall whenever the regular and

repetitive flash of the lighthouse picked him out. At those moments, the wall looked grey, lighter, and you could see Christopher more clearly outlined against it. But no one was watching.

Esse est percipi, he said to himself, his mind briefly fixing on the woman he had seen at the window. At each flash of the light on him, Christopher had moved a fraction further, so that he looked like a very slow flickering black-and-white silent film, a saddened Buster Keaton, only thinner, less substantive, not quite so insistently there, losing himself in and against the dark, wet walls. *Esse est percipi; so when the light goes out, I am no more*. His progress was slow, because there would be nowhere for him to go; when he reached the end of the harbour wall, he would simply have to turn back, re-trace himself, reflect back on himself as he returned towards the noise of the children who had not yet moved forward, still waiting, their noise still echoing wildly into the night air, replacing the insistent and shrill shrieks of the gulls who would be there during all the lighter hours of the day, flying.

Christopher, his hands lost deep in the fold of his coat pockets, felt there, in his left-hand pocket, the little receptacle that he had put there before leaving the church earlier that evening, while Seamus was outside in the rain. He felt its reassuring coldness, like the brightness of steel, hard, strong, unyielding though tempered, bending only slightly to his will, giving himself support, giving himself back to himself as in a mirror that would reveal his soul and not just his inverted face, left for right, right for left. It was his own confessional, and he held it in his hand, his thumb and index finger edging towards the clasp, as if to open it; but not yet, not yet. He had some small time left, and some way to go still.

* * *

She had been beautiful. There was no denying it, and no point in denying it. Sacrilegiously beautiful. Her skin so soft, so smooth against his own, so yielding against his clumsiness so that his clumsiness itself became elegance, the movement of a dancer. She translated his gaucheness into adroitness, his left into his right, turning him inside out, upside down, reconfiguring him in an image that she gave him of himself, making him not in God's image but in hers. Her eyes, round, large, brown like an invitation into a mystery, an initiation, the light freckling over the bridge of her nose.

The first time they had met, having coffee in the parish-room after Mass one Sunday, introduced to each other by Father Twomey, he shook her hand and looked into her eyes; but then it was the full arch of her brows that he noticed. At the time, he had been shocked at catching himself thinking at once of her body, its most intimate secrecy - as if her eyes summoned her sex before him, brazenly, in her returned stare. He felt her looking into his soul, felt the stirring of life in his very core, felt as if this was his calling, as if she were calling out to him. Nothing had happened, of course. They shook hands, said their hellos, and then he had gone on to talk with the other visitors to the parish, while she stayed chatting some more with the two other women, now forgotten, who had been there to witness their meeting. And it felt like that, like a meeting that was so solemn it had to be witnessed. He felt the sensuality of her hand

again, under his own wet fingers as he stood, now still, holding on to the railing that lined the walkway bordering the coastline.

Once, right here, their hands had touched like this, as they both stood looking out to sea, resting their hands side by side on the wet railing, their skin slipping closer and closer until the edge of his left hand touched, gently, the back of her right. In the water, a seal looked out and up at them, somehow ignoring them in its look, making it all feel *usual*, normal. Had they clasped hands? He could not remember now. The precision of the moment was lost, buried under the weight of his other memories of her. Of her? No, of himself.

He had gone to the bishop. ‘I don’t know what to do, Father,’ Christopher said.

‘Well,’ said the bishop, ‘When I was training, in Rome, there was one cardinal rule. “Keep away from the women; you can caress the bottle as much as you like, but keep away from the women.” The bottle is shaped the same, curvy like; and it has the same intoxicating and inebriating effect. But even if it harms you, you won’t harm the Church by indulging in it. And it won’t talk, and won’t talk back; you can throw it away when you’re done with it. Women, on the other hand ... well, there mustn’t be an other hand, and they mustn’t be on it.’

‘I know. I know. But it’s too late.’ A pause, then: ‘I’m not sure of my calling any more. I want her more than I want the Church’.

‘That, my son, is not to be; and you know it. It will not be. *That will not be: non fiat*’

The bishop’s tone was suddenly sombre. ‘It will not be,’ he repeated. ‘You’re a good priest. You’re married already, to God, to the Church. Think of it like that. Now, go and pray to God for guidance and deliverance; and do not let me hear you questioning your calling again.’

He was alone; or he would have been, but for her. She alone knew what was going on in his mind: she was the source of his problem, and its cure all at once. He was addicted to her. He felt as if paralysed: unable to move on, unable to disengage.

The week after they met at the coffee morning, she was dallying by the door of the church after he had said Mass, and she was still there after all the other parishioners had left. They shook hands again, and this time her hand lingered in his, not quite letting him go, and he not wanting her to let him go. They talked briefly, quietly but to the point; she assured, he tentative but caught up in her certainty. Wednesday next they would meet. He would take the bus out to Greystones, and she would be waiting there, near the bus stop, in her car, ZS323. They would then go for a car ride together. He’d get back by 6pm, and could explain to Father Twomey and anyone else looking for him that he’d gone for a long walk, the kind he used to do before he was ordained and so busy. She had all the free time in the world.

As Christopher started to walk again, along the promenade, his body felt warm despite the night’s chill air for he was as if back on that Wednesday afternoon. It had been easy. No one was there, at the bus-terminus in Greystones, so he was not even noticed getting into her car. She drove him up into the hills back in the direction of

Dublin, then turned off the main road. She knew where she was heading. He went along with it, went along with the whole thing, telling himself that it was beyond his control, she was the driving force, he was being swept along, it must have been preordained to be like this. *Fiat.*

After half an hour or so, by now on almost entirely deserted country roads, she pulled the car over to the side, and tucked it in off the edge of the road, between two bends and on the crest of a hill, the road sloping away to the west before them. 'Here. We get out here,' she said. When Christopher got out, she locked the car, and took his hand. They were holding hands, like lovers. He felt the shock of it running through him, the rightness of it, the sheer normality of it. His mouth was dry. She would still have to do all the running, all the leading; for he was out of his depth, in way over his head. But she knew it. She led him over the field and through the wooded ground until they came to the edge of the river. It was the Dargle, she said. *This is the Glen of the Dargle. Come on.*

They almost ran along the edge of the water, Christopher holding her hand all the while. Suddenly, she stepped away from the river's edge, going between two large pines that were like columns entrancing them into the thickly wooded forest that ran alongside the river, not much more than a stream at this point. Even though it was shaded slightly, it was still warm from the heat of the noonday sun; and they were warm from their walk, their near run. She seemed to know the way. Christopher felt the prick of the furze on his legs as he followed her on the narrowing path, the wood getting thicker as they entered under the canopy of the trees, the yellow light of the sun still there, but intermittent, interrupted by the branches that hung down, as if

inviting them to climb: the broad sessile oak, the turning leaves and dropped branches of beech, then the bright greenery of pine.

About forty yards into the thicket, there was the tiniest of clearings. She stopped and turned to him. He bent his head towards her, closed his eyes, and kissed her. There was a lump in his throat, so that he could not talk. He felt her hand slipping under his shirt, loosening it, touching him as if searching for something on his tensed skin.

What if someone came? He didn't care. He didn't dare open his eyes yet, because he knew that if he did see anyone he would stop this; and he didn't want it to stop. He felt for the buttons of her blouse, and started, inexpertly, to undo them. She helped him, pulling it off over her head. Her hands left his body for an instant, as she stepped out of her skirt. They knelt down, and he opened his eyes. There were tears in her eyes, as in his own; but they could not stop. They fell to the ground together, and made love, she still guiding the way, showing him what to do, showing him what made them both feel good.

Now, in the middle of the forest, he felt and knew no shame. He felt renewed, strengthened. A memory of being wrongly punished for something at school: '*You're not worth it,*' the headmaster had said. *That's a lie, a lie.* She shivered slightly beneath him, and he folded her in his arms. The bright yellow of the afternoon was starting to shade slowly into the gentlest hint of red as the earth carried on its diurnal round, oblivious of them, telling them that this was of little importance, that it just was, but that it *was*, as sure as the fact that the sun would rise again tomorrow, it had happened, it was neither right nor wrong, it just was, *it was. Esse est.*

Christopher reached over and handed her her clothes back again and, slowly, still stopping every now and then to kiss or embrace once more, they got dressed.

‘Next Wednesday?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ he replied.

* * *

Christopher felt the sodden folds of his trousers flapping against his ankles as he walked on now through the dark night. The wet had seeped into the insides of his shoes, and his feet were becoming numb. He was coming close to Sandycove beach, hardly a beach at all, just a tiny triangle of shingle and muddy sand in the tiny harbour near the Martello Tower where Joyce had once lived. The beach, or harbour, was in what the maps called ‘Scotsman’s Bay’, though no one here ever called it that. When Christopher had come to Dublin at first, he had felt the attraction of the place, expecting some kind of epiphanic moment the first time he walked to it. There was nothing Scottish about it, as far as he could see; and when he went there, feeling his own Scottishness rise in his breast, memories of West Street in Glasgow, he felt homesick. He had not stopped walking here; but he had stopped thinking of it as Scotsman’s Bay.

Just next to the Martello Tower was the famous ‘Forty-Foot’, a haven for swimmers and divers, where, within a circle of about twenty metres diameter, the waters seemed to have the edge of the chill taken from them, and where, even though always choppy, they were still safe. On this side of the beach lay a small, low-lying building against

which the council had built a bench. People came along here and swam in these waters in Sandycove, mysteriously always colder than the Forty-Foot just round behind. Christopher had reached the wall, and sat down, oblivious now of the wet, his clothes already soaking. He stared over the beach. There was a tiny rowing-boat there, upturned, but also tied for safety to a post at the edge of the road behind the beach. The water stopped about ten feet short of the hull.

* * *

That next Wednesday, they had gone to a different spot, still in the Glen of the Dargle. *It's called Lovers Leap*, she said, laughing, provoking; and he felt embraced even by the laugh. They had made love again, this time more comfortably, for she had brought a rug that they could lie on, and she had prepared a small picnic for them. As they ate afterwards, sitting on the ground, they began to talk. Christopher realised that they had hardly said anything to each other, they knew so little of each other, yet they had made love twice. This was the absoluteness of grace, he thought; it was a giving without question, without expectation, a giving of the body and the self without there being any discrepancy between the body and the self.

Talk was what would establish the distance between self and body, and he felt the need to resist it. The silence could not persist, though. She asked him about when he had come to Ireland, and if he had ever been in the North. No. Why? Had she? Yes. She had been there at the end of January, in Derry. Bloody Sunday. He stiffened slightly, and wanted not to talk of this, the world making itself felt again on his skin. At the same time, he felt a rush of sympathy for her. Had she been involved? Did she

know any of the thirteen who had been killed by the British that Sunday? He didn't ask these questions of her, but he asked them of himself. She turned the conversation away. They said they would meet again. She said two weeks; he agreed, though he wanted it sooner.

Two weeks later, the mood was slightly different. After they made love, this time back in the first spot under the canopy of trees, she sat quietly for a moment, then asked Christopher 'Can I trust you?' 'Of course. I won't say a word to anyone about all this. How could I?' But she had not meant that. It was now late afternoon, and the sun was starting to set. The birdsong had stopped, and the only sound was that of their own breathing, or that of the occasional insects and nocturnal animals hesitating as they edged their way into the emerging darkness around them. She sat with her back against the trunk of a tree, and started to dig at the ground with a knife that she took from the picnic basket. Christopher, thinking she was just aimlessly distracted, went to kiss her, but she held him at arm's length and went on digging. After a moment, she produced a small box, wrapped in damp newspaper. Using the newspaper to hold it, she manipulated it open with her fingers. Christopher saw the gun, a small revolver, sitting now in the palm of her hand. 'This. Can I trust you with this?' she asked.

* * *

He stared at the upturned boat on the sand, but it was that gun he saw again, now. He held it in his hand, cold metal, lethal. They had made love lying on top of it. The image shook him, now as then, and he stood up and walked around towards the Forty

Foot. There was no one there, as he had foreseen. Who on earth would be out to swim on such a night as this? At this time? He walked along the wall that led to the small area where you could change. At once, it was as if he was returning back into himself from a pleasant reverie, back to the matter in hand. He took off his coat and jacket, and folded them neatly on the bench. The wood of the bench had been broken just here, probably some lads up to high jinks some time. His coat lay over the break. Then, he pulled off his shirt and vest. He felt inside the pocket of his trousers for the little silver container he had there, and placed it gently on the bench. Then he started to unzip his trousers, but realised that he had not unlaced his shoes, so he had to pull his trousers back up a bit to get his now sodden shoes off before he could get his trousers and pants off properly. Bad habit. A smile creased his lips, with the thought of himself as some ridiculous clown in a circus or farce, trousers down about his legs, umbrella long since abandoned as useless. But he brought his mind back to the moment, to the present in all its cold immediacy, its urgency. Everything he folded into a neat pile. Habit. His habit. Naked, he opened the tiny silver box and took out the consecrated wafer that was in it. He mouthed to himself a prayer, quickly, for he was already shivering, asked for forgiveness for all he had done and all he had failed to do, and raised the wafer to the sky before taking it into his mouth. It had gone a little soggy, wetted slightly by the rain as he had held it up. His saliva further softened it, and he swallowed.

He looked around, and then started on the descent down the steps into the water. On the way, he felt the rain on his back and the edge of the spray splashing up against him. It was odd. Not how he had imagined it would be. He had thought it would feel like standing in the shower, washing; but it didn't. The drops were less regular, less

rhythmic, and, for the first time he became aware of himself shivering, teeth chattering. It was cold.

Christopher stepped down and into the water. It was pitch black, sticky tar black, on this side of the rocks, shielded from the lights of the strand and of the harbour at Dun Laoghaire in the distance. As he edged his foot in, his whole body shook in a fretful shivering. Then, all at once, he took a deep breath and plunged. The sharpness of the cold water right through his body was oddly comforting. It brought him back to his whole self, he felt. Some few strokes were what he needed to get himself warmed up; and he swam briskly back and forth at the foot of the steps while his body adjusted to the temperature of the water, bending into its internal rhythm as the water chopped around and over him, his heartbeat going steadily up, pumping the warmth of his blood back around his body, tempering him to the water's own fluidity, allowing him to inhabit the element properly. He lay on his back, and let himself be carried by the waves a little; but they were too choppy and kept splashing up his nostrils. He turned back over and started to swim out from the rocks, crawl for a bit, then breast-stroke. Nice and easy, but steady, sure. It was still raining, and the wind was still high; but here, at the surface of the water, it felt like having a drink perpetually thrown into your face. He went back to crawl, his head under water for five, six strokes before resurfacing for some air. He stopped to tread water, and looked back; he was about a hundred metres or so from the rocks, and the pull of the current beneath him was palpable. He could see the lights along the strand, all the way back towards Idrone Terrace, re-emerging in the lengthened perspective that he now had. He looked towards them, and a feeling of deep longing came over him; then, with some resolution, he turned away and started swimming again, out further. He was starting to

feel the cold again, but he went on. He could just see the lights flashing on the twin electricity pylons over at the north end of the bay; and he thought again of the long walks he had done, when he first came out here, from Howth Head right down to Dalkey, miles and miles. As he swam further out, he felt his legs starting to tire slightly, so he rolled over onto his back again and lay there, floating, naked, staring upwards from the surface of the water, without a single star in the sky, the water lapping into his ears and now and then over his face.

For one brief moment, the thought came to him that there would still be people after this, that they might remember him, miss him even; but he pushed the thought back out of his consciousness, determinedly. He was going to do this thing. The water on his face, had you been swimming alongside him, might have looked to you like tears; but it might just have been that his eyes were stinging with the salt spray that splashed into them. There is salt in tears anyway, so he would not have known as he licked the water when it fell from his eyes whether the salt in it was from himself or from the seawater. But he was beyond caring about that: he was becoming the water anyway, the water becoming him, overtaking him, accommodating him to its elemental substance. He turned over and swam on again, this time keeping going even when he tired, never looking back again, on and on, feeling weaker and weaker with each stroke but trying still to swim, irregular now, losing his rhythm, his head submerged every now and then, blowing the water back out of his mouth, he would not encourage this thing any further, it had to come in its own time, *fiat*, he'd try to keep going, and he swam on and on, he must have been a thousand metres out by now, maybe more, he couldn't say, it didn't matter, he could not quite remember how long he had been going, but he would not look back, he would resist, keep going on,

Scotland was over the other side of this water, that was his direction, was it homewards, who knows, he'd just keep going for as long as he could, he'd need to rest his arms a little, but no, the idea was just to swim, he had to swim, that's what he had decided to do, and he swam on through the feeling of pins and needles, through the numbness in his limbs, so that he was not sure anymore if he was still kicking, still pushing, but he was trying to, that was the important thing, to keep trying, for he had to forget, he needed to forget, he could not live on remembering this, he had to forget, he had to keep going, he could not go on, where had he heard that before, he'd keep going though, he was going on going on going on going

* * * *

Seamus was called to identify the body when it was found washed up along Killiney Bay two days later. That evening, alone in the priest's house at St Brigid's, he wept quietly. *What a mess. Did Julia realise he would do such a thing? If I had thought it, I wouldn't have encouraged her.* What was it that Christopher had wanted to say to him last Saturday evening? *If only I had got the words out of him, who knows if this would have happened? I let him down.*

* * *

January, 1993

The events of that evening, consigned as they were to the days of his indiscretion, as he called it, rarely returned to Seamus. But now, this evening, they did; and not only

the events. When the phone rang, he was expecting it to be Con. They had a meeting scheduled for next week, to discuss how they might deal with the proposed legislation for divorce. They were thinking of organising a prayer meeting in the grounds of the Dáil as a form of demonstration. The press would need to be brought on side. But, when he answered the ringing, it was not Con. He heard the pips as money was being put in. *A public phone box. It's not Con, unless his phone's on the blink again, or unless he doesn't want the wife to hear what he's saying.*

'Hello? Is that St Brigid's Church, Blackrock?'

'Yes, it is.'

'Is there a Father Seamus Twomey there, please? He was the parish priest some time ago.'

'Yes. That's me. I'm still here for the past forty years.'

'Seamus? Is it you?'

'Yes, this is Father Twomey. Who is this, please? I'm expecting a very important call.'

'Seamus.' There was a long pause, during which Seamus grew increasingly irritated. Thinking of hanging up – these damned hoax calls – he said instead, 'well? What is it? Who am I talking to?'

'Seamus. . . . It's Julia.'

'Julia? Julia who? Do I know you?'

'Seamus, yes. It's Julia Elliott. From back then.' She left the pause; and then, 'I'm calling from a phone box. If I give you the number, can you ring me back? I need to talk.'

‘Talk? What is there to talk about? Is this a hoax? I don’t believe I know any Julia Elliott.’

‘Please, Seamus. I’m coming back. It’s important.’

‘ Give me the number,’ gruffly.

He thought about not calling; but he knew it was pointless. She would only keep calling him back. He’d need to talk to her. *But what does she want? Now? I had thought all that was over. Her and Christopher; the gun. We’re all covered.* But in the back of his mind, and rapidly coming to the front, unable to suppress it, he also realised *Apart from the bishop, she’s the only one left that knows about PJ. She has me over a barrel with that. Not enough that PJ’s mother died ages back. Julia knew; Julia knows.* He rang the number, and it was answered immediately.

‘Julia?’

But it was a man’s voice that answered.

Chapter 9

Round midnight. Julia walked from the beach towards the town. She was looking for the ridiculously improbable landmark that Rick had given to her. She thought it was some sort of code. 'No, no code. Straight. Billy the Kid. It's close to the town centre, but on the front, near the beach. Wait there. You'll be contacted.' She walked along the coastline, taking the signs for the town centre. Back out at sea, there was no movement that she could discern.

She feared for Anne, a dull and aching insistence in her blood, as of nerve ends that had been severed once but now rejoined, bringing the body back to pain, to the very point and purpose of living. Her visitor that night had said that, once she had agreed to return, there would be no immediate danger to Anne's life. It was Julia that they were after, not Anne. Anne was just the vehicle. Julia had been shocked by the persistence of memory when she unwrapped *Tables of Stone*. She knew about the novel: it was Mairead's farewell message to her. In the suddenness of her departure, though, she had rejected its message. In leaving home that time, leaving Ireland, she had felt that she was definitively severing any blood-ties to persons as well as to places; and she felt she had had to do this in order to survive, just to live on. In leaving, she was abandoning everything; *for Christopher, even though he was no more*, she said now to herself. To leave Mairead was natural, she knew: every generation makes its own way by cutting the cord. And Tony, well, that had been over for some time, like a *mariage blanc*. But she had also abandoned Anne and Caroline, and that was harder. Tony had always found the intimacy with the girls easier than she had done: it wasn't Tony who had nearly died giving birth to them. He found it easier to play with them, especially

with Anne. She had hardened her heart against memory; but now it softened as the warm pulse of her blood returned, returned at the thought of a danger to Anne.

And here, now, was her return; not as she had ever envisaged it, if she ever had actually done so. What a way to return home, she thought, the banality of the phrase occluding her pain, allowing her to think. *Home*. And the word tasted of ash in her mouth: dry, dead, a matter for tombs and burial mounds. Skulking around in the dark; but not as dramatic as it might be, thanks to the folly of a statue. *Billy the Kid; I'm Billy the Kid, and I'm Irish: I'm Spartacus. The place is as mad, as maddening, as it always was.* There was no one around.

She stared idly into the shop windows, trying to focus attention on anything so as to avoid reflecting on herself alone. The windows looked exactly as she recalled the shops from her childhood, an age away, like the day that Mairead took her out to shop for her First Communion dress; and here, now, the displays looked as if they had been unchanged since that day, was it in the fifties? Frocks in pastel shades were draped on headless mannequins whose arms were held at what had once been a jaunty angle, now just desperately tired and dropping after all these years, handbags slung carelessly, incongruously, onto them, the hands chopped off at the wrists. It looked as though a passer-by had hung the bags there, on these figures that were more like ghouls than like women. *How do the women of Ireland – Anne is one of them - see themselves: surely not like this?* Next to these were the male mannequins, dressed in tweeds, these models with heads intact, but with wigs that looked as if they were about to fall off at any moment. The proud smile on the faces of the dummies looked entirely at odds with the reality of their plight: stuck hopelessly in the remote past of

someone's imagination of what fashionable society – always, somehow, a society in an exotic elsewhere - would look like.

As she approached the corner, she paused to see if there was anyone following her. All was quiet; still no one. A cat appeared, its back arching as it emerged from the doorway of a newsagent store. The window of the store displayed advertisements for sweets and cigarettes; but these were hard to make out, for an orange plastic blind had been drawn down over the whole window, barely half-transparent, giving a ghostly evening sunset feel to the display, but dull, like the setting of a black and dead sun. As Julia looked down at the cat, it rubbed its back against her legs, and she felt a great urge to lift the thing and just hold it, to hold the first mangy living thing, cat or cur, that she came across, here: to hold a life. That would give her a warmth that she could not presently feel, she thought. She bent down, but the cat was gone, skipping lightly and playfully away, as if trying to seduce her to follow it.

Julia looked up again, searching along the street before her for a sign that would lead her to Billy the Kid. *I don't belong here anymore; maybe I never really did belong here; maybe I don't even know what it means to inhabit a place, to have it in your blood and bones, like a cat marking its territory, staking its claim on places, on people. I've been away too long.* She walked on, alone in the dark, thinking, I used to think I knew, years ago, when I felt the place – this place, this Ireland, whatever that is now in its strange familiarity here in the dark – years ago, when I felt the place inside me, felt that its beating heart was being stilled and stifled because of its incompleteness, its fractured unwholeness. Holy, unholy, Ireland. Then, I felt that I was occupied or possessed by someone else. Now, though, I know I don't belong, so, for

me, this can only be an ending. I'll live on, for sure; but whatever time I have left to me now – years, probably, maybe decades still - is marked as an ending, no matter how long it may last.

At sea somewhere, a foghorn blared, its sound muffled in the mist, deadened, a narcissus-howl devoid of echo or resonance. The wind stirred her hair, and she pulled it back from her face, again looking round to see if she was being watched. She changed her bag from her left hand to her right, and examined the indented mark its weight had left on her palm.

Afterwards, you'll have no cover. That was the deal. They'd get me here, the usual channels they said, not that they're usual to me anymore; but then, after that, I'm on my own. As if it mattered. As if *I* mattered. I'm no longer a threat to anybody, even if I ever really was. Not even the police – the Gardaí, I'm so unused to calling them that, now – not even the Guards would be interested any more. Maybe Pat Maher's family; but only if they know the full story. How many years is it since Christopher, since the gun? And I've been inactive for decades now. The thing is over. Over; done. I stopped – it all stopped - after the thing with Joseph. I wanted that to remain unfinished. I remember saying it was unfinished business; but then that stupid PJ finishing it. How stupid. We could have left Joseph alone; he'd have been saved. We should have taken him with us. PJ and Pat were masked. It was only me that risked being identified again. Pat should have taken his jacket.

But the note, that love-letter from Christopher. *Oh, Christopher: if ever I was going to be truly faithless, it would have been with you. Truly faithless; isn't that a*

contradiction in terms? I mean wholly, perfectly faithless: abandoning everything, family friends country – I would have done it for you. With you, and, in the end, without you. She mouthed the words, not aloud but felt in her tongue, cloying there, like the thin paste of unleavened bread.

A man cycled past, bag slung over his shoulder, pedalling casually. He nodded vaguely in her direction, half-lifting one hand from the handlebars in a tentative wave, acknowledging that she was here but also that she was not known here, then returning to his ride. She turned her head to look after him as he disappeared round the bend at the end of the quiet and untroubled road. He couldn't be the contact, for there's no sign of Billy the Kid. No, the man was going home after his sweet evening in his lover's arms.

A lover: clandestine, sweet. Ah, Christopher. Christopher. I even stole your name. But it wasn't how it should be. In the beginning, I was just – *we* were just – making use of you. It was cruel at the start: you were just a means to an end. Seamus introduced us – some coffee morning or other, if I remember - so that I could make use of you to hide the gun. And Seamus needed that. He knew it was PJ's gun. Maybe he had even got it for PJ. Maybe. No, let me say it: definitely. I knew, that afternoon in the Dargle, that I couldn't trust you with it: you had fallen deep for me – and that wasn't supposed to happen. What's worse, I had fallen for you, too. There was something in you so delicate, so broken by rejection or something. What started off as business became affection, love even. *I needed to get away.* And then she formed the words, properly and fully, acknowledging the fact for the first time after so many years: *I wasn't*

running from the police: I was running from you, running from my love, my desire, for you.

And you, too; you also needed to get away. But to get away as you did? Was I responsible for that? In the water, you must have been cold. *So cold, so cold, the waters between these islands are so cold. Did you think of me then?*

She looked back from where she had come, down the street that led back to the sea. In the thin strip of water that was darkly visible between the buildings where the road gave out, she could see that all was still, unnaturally so: a calm that was black and coma-deep. The foghorn sounded again, as if yet more distant. She decided that she had been heading the wrong way, and returned towards the shore. There, along the shoreline, in the distance, she could just make out the vaguely emerging shape of the bronze: a man, holding a rifle by his side, and staring over the water.

She walked briskly now. It would be ridiculous to miss the rendezvous just because she was late, dreaming of Christopher and the might-have-beens, finding homeliness in the purring of a stray cat. As she got closer to Billy, she could make out the facial features on the head: stubborn, dull. It was a horrible statue, she thought, stressing all that was mean about the man, about the place where he stood. She reached up to feel the bronze where the Kid's hand was shaped into its metallic form, and again she was holding the handle of a gun. It had retained the moisture of the evening dew, and, as she felt the inertly cold hand, she felt again also, as an unwanted memory written on her skin, the damp clamminess of PJ's hand, scented again the sweat under his leather jacket, felt his breath on her face as he squeezed her fingers round the trigger. She sat

down on the bench before Billy the Kid, so that he was now grandiosely towering over her, looking down at her. She waited.

Some minutes later, Philip appeared, stepping out from the midnight shadows as if maybe he had been there, watching her, for some time.

‘Julia?’

‘Philip?’

Like lovers in some tryst, they approached each other warily but irresistibly, as if unsure of whether to consummate this great thing that lay between them, an unfinished act that they might bring to a conclusion, though neither of them knew what it might be. Julia was half-expecting Philip to pull out a warrant card – or worse, a gun - or for more men to appear, surrounding her. She looked around, uncertainly, seeking out shapes in the shadows, seeing nothing; nothing but the ghost of Christopher, swimming, fading, drowning, and above her the memorial to a villain claimed as a hero by a people desperate for recognition, for a name.

There were no others to be seen. Philip led her to his car; and they drove, in the silence of a mutual uncertainty and suspicion, up the coast and then inland towards Dunmore Farm. But before they got there, Philip took the turning for Brookside, the wrong house, the house where he had begun his affair with Anne, the house where, for some previous inhabitants, all hope had been abandoned, where history had stopped in 1987, with a newspaper lying discarded by the fire, unread, but unburnt.

* * *

After they took Anne back from Fourknocks, dropping her at her house in Dalkey, Nick started talking, animatedly and as if suffering inside from his concern for her. ‘What happened was. Well. What happened was. How it went was that. It was, you see, it was. . . . It was as if she got an attack of claustrophobia or something. First of all, she just froze, against the wall, and then she’s grabbing at my arm. She kind of grabbed at my arm. The match went out and she knocked the matches box from my hand. Then, it was as if she was in a panic. In the dark. Pitch black; you couldn’t see anything. I was fumbling for the box. At first, she started quiet at first. She started, quiet at first, just whispering “get me out, get me out”. When I took her by the hand and I’m leading her, trying to lead her back towards the door, she starts pawing at me. That’s how my face got scratched, I think; though she also pushed me against the wall at one point, so that I might have got scratched there. I don’t know. She was like a woman drowning, clawing at the very person who’s trying to save her. Anyway, that doesn’t matter. She was losing it, I thought, just losing it. As I tried to lead her out, she started saying “There’s somebody else in here. There’s somebody touching me!” and it was as if she could actually see somebody.’

‘She believes in ghosts,’ said Niamh; but this time, Niamh was not joking. There was a darkness here, visible and sensible to the three of them.

Nick could see the very shape of Niall’s solid, weightily silent response. Niall knew that the somebody else, the ghost, had been him, Nick. *What’s he thinking? He’s thinking, There was no ghost. He’s thinking that I tried to grab her, in the dark. He’s got his own understanding of the whole thing, his understanding, a clear picture of all*

that happened in there between the brash, crude American and the innocent local girl. If he'd say something, I could clear it up. And he's got it wrong. I didn't touch her; but he wouldn't believe that. But it's true. It's true that I didn't touch her. But it's also true that I wish I could. Her eyes; more – the fact of that music in her. I'm hearing things - beauty - that I had never imagined before. I'm renewed whenever I hear her speak, even. But I didn't touch her there. If only. Would she ever respond? If I did make a move? Crazy, but if only. He could say nothing more now unless and until Niall spoke first. He was disarmed by Niall's continued silence. Where Niamh imagined the possibility of Anne's spectral haunting, Nick saw power, a power gained by a refusal to speak or to reveal a self. Niall's silence was more than reticence: it was a refusal to cooperate with Nick's version of events, with Nick's version of history.

It would need to remain unspoken. *I should have stayed quiet. I should have said nothing*, said Nick to himself. Nick knew he was now vulnerable, that Niall had an advantage over him, and that the advantage lay in Niall's silence, a silence that could be broken any time, any place. And the break would be devastating, if it came. *What if? What will I say? The brash American and the ravished local girl. Imperialism; they'll believe his story. But it's only a story. It's not the truth. I know. I was the one in there with her. Yet.* Nick needed to arm himself, to prepare himself. *At last, I get a sense of what it is that I want. Not running after everyone else's desires anymore, no more serving them and negating myself. My desire. Me. What I want. And what I want is for Anne to want me. Yes. I think that's what I want, yes.*

When they reached Dunmore, there were two letters in the mailbox at the end of the drive. The first was Mostyn's bill. Nick read the cover letter with disdainful contempt.

He looked instead at the separate sheet with the bill for services rendered; but the money meant nothing to him anymore. The second bore the postmark of the laboratory to which his doctor had sent the blood samples. He wasn't yet ready to open this one.

* * *

They got out of the car. Philip stared at her for a long time as she stood by the car-door, and she eventually bowed her head. All she could feel was the shame, the shame of returning like this, a criminal thief in the night; and she felt, for reasons that she couldn't explain, that she deserved the shame, that what was happening had a rightness to it. Then, at the corner of her line of vision, she saw an outstretched hand. Philip was reaching out his hand, as if to shake. Tentatively, she looked up. His face was impassive, his hand steady. She took it; and they shook. There were no smiles. Julia's fingers felt cold against the warmth of Philip's palm.

Nothing was said between them; and it was unclear to Julia what the handshake meant, though it felt to her like the sealing of a pact, as if these two were now in agreement about something, accomplices – but in what, Julia could not think. All she knew was that this man was bringing her back to her daughter, that he was bringing Anne to her; and that there, in that meeting, there would be a kind of peace, if it meant safety for Anne. She hoped, but couldn't expect, that he was going to help her secure an amnesty, so that she could stay here, home again; but the condition of that would

probably be to reveal PJ as the murderer of Joseph, with the attendant risk that she would not be believed and that she would face trial. She might just be one bit of the sacrifice that was needed in whatever political chess was being played out, well above her head, and in which she was just a pawn, just a usable counter in a game. She rebelled internally against the idea that she was just a functionary. She was human; she had a right to be here, and a right to be heard. Living elsewhere, she had realized that her enemies felt the same; and, over the years, that realization had changed her.

Still holding Julia's hand, Philip reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out an envelope. Finally letting go, he passed the envelope to Julia.

'Here. Take it,' he said. 'Proof.' Julia opened the envelope. Inside was the photograph that he had taken of Anne that night in the house, a copy of the one that her visitor had left with her, stapled to Mairead's obituary. 'Proof positive,' he said. 'It's her. You see the blemish.' Julia looked at the photograph for a long time. For long, she had imagined how Anne would look as a woman. She felt at once both entirely comforted by the image and yet also disturbed by it. She felt as if, looking at the image in the presence of this man, the man who had taken the photograph, she had intruded now on Anne's intimacies, her very nakedness or her soul, in a way that was improper. She recalled the blemish from the moment of Anne's birth, how the nurse had covered it up immediately as if it were a mark of shame, and how Julia had felt such a rush of protective warmth when she held her daughter for the first time, determinedly opening the shawl and revealing the marked skin. It had been a hard birth; she had thought she was dying; and, to come out of that pain with not only her own life but also the warmth of this other life, a life that had nearly cost her everything, was

overwhelming. The blemish was clearly visible again, now, in this photograph. A phrase came to her as she looked: *In my blemish lies my beauty, my wholeness, my self entire*. It sounded religious, she thought, but she could not think where she might have heard it. Maybe it was the nurse. Maybe the priest when Anne was to be baptised. Yes, she could imagine a priest saying it. She looked at her daughter's face in the photograph, at Anne's closed eyes. *She's beautiful*.

'Can I?' she asked, motioning to put the photograph in her own pocket. When Philip didn't reply, she handed it back to him, saying only 'When can I see her? I'm ready to do whatever I need to do, whatever you – you and the organization – want me to do. I'm old and tired. I want peace. I want it all to be over.'

'And so do I,' replied Philip, taking the photograph and slipping it back into the envelope, then into his inside jacket pocket. But before he could feel peace, he needed to exact a revenge. Only then would it be over, for him. He had, in front of him now and powerless, the woman who had taken Joseph; and she was unaware of who he was, unaware that he knew her history, knew what she had done to his brother. He savoured the power that his silence gave him: as long as she didn't have the full picture, he had an edge over her; and it frightened her, he could see. He liked that, liked the taste on his resting tongue.

For Julia, with her heart in her mouth, a feeling of choking, drowning pressed through the awkwardness of the silence. It lay heavy, like a pillow settling over her face, stifling. Eventually, she said, in a voice striving for normality, 'Is this the place? Is Anne here?'

‘No, not here,’ said Philip. ‘But we’re going in here, first. You’ll see her. First, we need to talk. Just you and me.’

Julia was at his mercy. ‘Will she come here, then?’ No reply. ‘What do we need to talk about? You and me?’ Again, no reply. She was not in control of any of this, now. Philip led the way to the door of the house, and pushed at it. As before, it was unlocked. He stepped to one side, and ushered her in through the door.

Then, with his hand on her back, he pushed her into the darkness of the house. She heard him close the door behind and, as her eyes started to accustom themselves to the dimness of the house, she became aware of its damp odour, the stink of old clothes, musty, drying the back of her throat. She could make out the vague shape of their bodies reflected in a dust-covered mirror at the end of the hallway; and, seeing Philip standing there, behind her, she felt fear for the first time. *I was right. It’s a trap, just a trap. They’re not bringing me to Anne at all*, she thought, and an immense feeling of resignation swamped her. Philip, holding her now by the arm, led her forward and pulled at the light-switch. The faint light struggled against the gloom.

‘It’s abandoned,’ he said. ‘This is where I first slept with Anne, your daughter. It’s where I slept with her. Filthy, isn’t it?’ He was provoking, seeking a way to begin his revenge with words. But Julia, recovering from her sense of fear and trepidation, yet resigned now to whatever was about to happen, seemed unmoved. She shrugged her shoulders. Nothing to say. It was the logic of the tribe; the logic that she had once lived by. Vengeance, followed by revenge, stoking more violence. And, in her shame,

she knew that she had just to accept it. This – this shame and maybe worse – would be her lot, from now.

Cold, he thought, she's cold; but I suppose you need to be cold if you murder. That's why it's called cold-blooded. The question is, can I be cold enough? Can I be as cold, as detached, as she is? That coldness; it's liberating. It's as liberating as lifting the gun and pulling the trigger.

Inside, in what used to be a drawing-room, Philip motioned to Julia to sit. The house was as before, miserable and shaped by a chill that made Julia want to curl in on herself. Philip sensed the damp more than he had the night he slept here with Anne. Its decrepit condition was getting worse. 'Welcome,' he said, looking round at the wallpaper that was peeling from the walls, dripping from the cornices. The welcome was to nobody; he was speaking as if it was the house itself speaking, welcoming them both to their necessary closeness, their forced intimacy.

Julia sat down in the large dusty armchair by the fireplace. It smelt of ancient stale urine. She shivered. 'Can I go and get my coat?' she asked. 'It's in my hold-all, in the boot of your car.' Philip grinned inwardly, remembering the evening with Anne, going out to the car to get the fresh sheets. 'No,' he said. 'You can't. We need to talk about some things here. First. Now.'

'But Anne?' and Julia struggled to keep the imploring tone out of her voice, struggled to hold on to a sense of normality in the midst of what was obvious madness. She wanted to get out of this chair. He shrugged, and dismissed her question with a wave of his hand and a turning of his head away from her, as if he couldn't bear to look at

her. Then he turned back, saying, 'You'll see Anne soon enough. Here,' and he took the photograph out of his pocket again, 'here, look at her.' Julia took the photo again, holding it close to her face. 'Now you can see her. Look at her,' said Philip. He thrust it closer to her face. 'Look at her. What do you think? Beautiful, huh?'

'Yes, she is,' said Julia.

'A normal mother would say things like how proud she was of her daughter. All that fame.'

Julia was silent. She did not know what he meant by fame. She looked inquiringly at him. He laughed, realizing. 'You mean you don't know how famous she is? Maybe she's not so famous after all.'

'You forget. I've been living in a very remote community. We keep ourselves to ourselves. I don't have a television or radio. I don't know much of what happens outside of Kinlochbervie.'

'Kinlochbervie? Nice name. Where is it? Where did they track you down?'

'It's on the west coast. North of Ullapool. It's a small place. But it's the biggest place near to where I live now.'

'Picturesque?'

'No. Not really. Basic.' *Keep it normal*, she thought, *it's your only chance*.

'But isolated. Deserted.'

'More or less. There are some tourists from time to time.'

'Like here, then.'

'Here?'

'Yes, this house. Isolated. Deserted. But at least this house has played host to both your daughter and you.'

Julia nodded. She wanted to see Anne. She felt that Philip could – would – be nasty. The tone in his voice convinced her that this was not a good situation for her. The best way to fend off any violence, she thought, was to keep him talking.

‘Yes. You’ve hosted us both. You’re bringing us together again. That’s good.’ She ventured a smile. ‘And what is the fame?’

‘Hmm?’ He was distracted. Though he didn’t yet know it, his resolve was ebbing, as if the high-water mark had been simply meeting this woman. He needed to steel himself. His evocation of the spirit of Anne in this place disturbed him, though he had intended it to disturb Julia. ‘Hmm?’ he said again.

‘The fame. You said Anne had fame.’

‘Ah. Yes. Music. She’s a musician.’

Julia remembered taking her for lessons, and Anne telling her that Mr Briggs told her about voices coming through you, how you were like vibrating strings in the wind, how playing music is like hearing spirits in the wind and letting them have voice through you. ‘Ah, music. She was a gifted child. I’m not surprised to hear that she has found fame. I’d like to hear her music.’

‘Well. You might.’ He paused. Then, ‘the time I brought Anne here was a mistake.’

‘Yes? What went wrong?’

‘No, nothing went wrong. But the house was a mistake.’

‘Yes?’

‘Yes. We were looking for another house.’

‘What made you stop here, then?’

‘Your daughter. She led us here. She led *me* here. Then she seduced me.’

Julia didn’t react. She knew she was being provoked. *Keep him talking; keep it normal.*

‘In this filthy house,’ he went on. ‘She took her clothes off in front of me, in this filth and squalor. She took me to bed.’ Still no response. ‘Like a whore,’ his voice rising.

Julia saw his mood turning. Before she could speak again to calm things and turn things round, he stood before her and thrust the photograph of Anne back in Julia’s face. She flinched; and he said, his voice now barely restraining its anger, ‘Take a good look at your whore-daughter. Here she is. Now, before you tear it up, I want you to spit on it. On her.’

‘What?’ and Julia looked up, uncomprehending.

‘Spit on it. I want you to spit on her.’

‘Why?’

‘Because. Just do it.’ She paused. He grabbed her suddenly by the hair, yanking her head forwards onto the photograph. ‘Just do it,’ he said, struggling for calm in his voice, sensing the stupidity of his own melodrama. *Cool. Stay cool. Make her wait. Take it back down.*

He was torn: on one hand, his rising anger at Julia, and at the same time, his confused feeling for Anne. Partly, he wanted to defile the photograph himself, but he was unsure why. He had not planned to feel any affection for her, but she had trapped him, with sex, maybe with love. He felt wronged, felt that he had lost control of his plans, because of the sex, the love. He thought he could hurt Julia now by making her hurt the image of something that he hoped was as dear to her as it was to him. He really didn’t know too much, now, what he was doing. *Fuck it.* And this woman, this Julia, whom he had wanted to have at his mercy, crying for release from his torture, look at her. A small, middle-aged, frail-looking person. A person. And now, here he had

another image of Anne before him: Julia was so clearly Anne's mother, the near-perfect resemblance shocking to him. *Fuck it. Hold steady.* He wanted to hurt Julia; he wanted to hurt this thing that was the image of Anne; he wanted Julia to hurt her own image. 'Just do it,' he repeated.

'No,' she said, indignantly. 'No. What is this? What do you want from me? Who are you? No.'

'Just do as I say,' he repeated; and again he yanked her head forward so that her face was touching the photograph. He grabbed it and pushed it full into her face. Julia, now afraid as well as shamed, released the tiniest thread of saliva and let it drip onto the photograph. She immediately went to rub it off. 'No, not enough,' said Philip. 'More. Harder.'

'But why?' asked Julia. 'Why do you want me to defile it so? To defile her like this?'

In reply, he gave a name, barely audibly, as if it gave him pain to say it, and releasing her from his grip as he did so: 'Joseph.' They froze, staring each other in the eye, soul to soul in the deepest encounter available to humanity, when two separate people come together and identify with each other, in a name, a vocation. It is for this moment, this encounter, that the narratives of two separate lives have existed. An act of nomination that is as intimate as love, as calling to your lover, pleading for her to see the pain that is etched in your face, your human being.

So this is it. Julia listened, stilled into near paralysis, her jaw tightened against the possibility of tears, as Philip told her that he was Joseph's brother, that he had been there that night in Drogheda, watching from the staircase as Joseph was taken away.

‘Now,’ he said at the end, ‘defiling a picture of your Anne seems a small thing to ask. Of my brother’s murderer. She’s already stained anyway, with that blemish on her body. It’s like a mark of Cain. The mark of the first murderer carried on. Through you. To her. If you want to see her again, you’ll do as I tell you. Yes?’

‘Yes.’ *Will he listen to me if I tell him the truth? Will he believe me?*

She had no choice any more. It was a trap, though not the kind she had been expecting. The soiled photograph of Anne still in her hand, she started to tell her story. She was there, back in those dreadful times, *black days*, she said, *black days with rain falling all the time, it seemed*, she was back with Joseph in the barn just over the border; but she was not the one who killed him.

‘Don’t tell me it was Pat Maher,’ said Philip, interrupting. ‘We know well it wasn’t him. He was just a water-carrier, stupid enough to leave his name behind’. No, it wasn’t Pat Maher, she agreed. ‘So, whose hand was it on the trigger? Not Pat Maher’s hand. Your hand,’ and he grabbed her hand, twisting her wrist. ‘Was it this one? Is this the finger?’ and he pulled her index finger backwards, forcing it, close to breaking point, round as far as he could. The water came to her eyes and started to fall down her cheek as she bent double under the pain. ‘Or was it the other hand?’ But this time, she held his hand as he went to crush her fingers. ‘And don’t give me the tears,’ he said; but he was close to weeping himself, as the rage inside him shook the core of his self. ‘No tears,’ he repeated, aware of his own voice threatening to break under the strain. He held her hand tightly; but she was suddenly aware that he was not

crushing her, and she saw her opportunity to talk, to confess and reveal what had remained unspoken.

So, then she said what she had to say, trying to resist the force of his hand on hers. It was her hand on the trigger, but she had not been responsible. She had been holding Joseph's hand, looking into his eyes, wanting to find a way of taking him with her; but the other one there grabbed her hand, squeezed her hand on the trigger.

'The other one?'

'Yes, it was PJ. PJ Gallagher.'

'PJ Gallagher? Who's he?'

'He's the illegitimate son of a priest: Father Seamus Twomey. He *was* the son: he's dead, killed by his own bomb years back.'

'And you expect me to believe this?'

'No, I suppose I don't. But it's the truth. It's what happened. I'm not denying I was there. An accomplice. But I wasn't the one to pull the trigger. It wasn't me. I'm not responsible for his death, for the death of your brother.'

'He's got a name.'

'I know.'

'Why not use it?'

'Because you'll think I'm degrading him. Just hearing his name, in my voice, will be a bad thing for you. I know. Trust me, I know.'

'What do you know?'

'I know how important a person's name is.'

'Is that so, Chris Andrews?'

She said nothing. *I stole even your name.*

‘Well?’

‘Well, nothing. I’ll call him by his name if you like. Joseph. I was there when Joseph was killed. The gun was in my hand. But I was not responsible for his death. I didn’t kill him.’ She tried to catch his eye, to look him in the eye as proof of her truth; but he was staring at the ground. She was right: Joseph’s name in her mouth was like a lightning bolt across his brow. Steadying himself, he turned to her again.

‘That will go down well in a court of law, I’m sure,’ he said.

‘ . . . ’

‘Responsibility is a big word. But it’s a little thing. It’s the squeezing of a finger on a small piece of steel. Do you want to see?’

‘ . . . ’

He pulled out the gun from his jacket. *Oh no. Not this. Please, God, no; anything but this.* ‘Here,’ he said. ‘Here’s a small piece of steel. You can squeeze it; it’s like a caress; and when you do, it isn’t love that comes out. Death comes out. Death. And you’re then responsible for the death that follows. I can show you.’ And he suddenly put the gun against her temple. She flinched back and he grabbed her hard. ‘But I forget. No need to show you. You know. You know how it works.’ He took the gun away from her head. *Cold, he reminded himself, stay cold. Cold as steel.*

‘What do you want from me?’ said Julia. ‘What is it you want?’

‘I want the truth. I want you to tell me how you did it. I want to hear, from your mouth, the confession that you killed my brother. Joseph. Joseph.’ Every time he thought the name, he felt a tremor of rage, and fought to still it, to calm it. He couldn’t bring Joseph back. Except in the words of this woman, his killer.

'I'm telling you the truth,' said Julia. 'I know you don't believe me; won't believe me. I know you think it's an excuse. I know you're probably thinking how convenient it is that someone else was there, that someone else did it. But it is true. My hand was on the trigger, I admit it; but it was PJ who did it. And he did it against my will. He panicked.'

'Go back to the beginning. Why did you pick up Joseph?'

'We had been told he had informed.'

'Who by?'

'In the organization, at that time, we kept the channels of communication about that kind of thing anonymous. To protect each other. I got the information. That's all I can say.'

'A rumour, then; nothing more substantial than that?'

'I don't know. All I know for sure is that I got the information.'

'But it could have come from anybody? From this Gallagher even?'

'I don't know. . . . Maybe I don't know for sure. We were told to get him, that's all I know.'

'And?'

'And we were told to teach him a lesson.'

'A punishment beating, then?'

'Yes. That's what the press called those things.' She felt a distaste for the phrase in her mouth even as she said it.

'Those things.'

'Yes. I've changed now. I don't support the violence. I want peace. I realize it was a mistake.'

‘A mistake? You’re calling a murder a mistake? Like it was some sort of spelling game? A problem in algebra? X marks the spot? Make X the subject of the equation; X has to be removed from the equation. And let X equal Joseph, my brother.’

‘No, no,’ she shouted. Then, more quietly, again, ‘No,’ calmer. *Keep calm; slow it down; keep him talking, but calmly.*

‘No, that’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying that I made a mistake. That’s a big thing to say. The mistake was to believe that things – wrongs, and I still call them wrongs - could be healed through violence. I admit it. I was a part of the violence. But, and I don’t know how else to say this, although I was there that night, I wasn’t the one responsible for Joseph’s death. I’m sorry.’ There was a pause, a quiet. ‘I’m sorry,’ she repeated. ‘I’m sorry that Joseph is dead. Your brother; somebody’s son. I didn’t want that. I looked Joseph in the eyes. Doing that, looking into his eyes, I could not have killed him. I’m sorry.’

Philip’s head was bowed, resting on one hand. The other held the gun, but now carelessly, loosely. He had let go her hand when she said that she was sorry. Her use of Joseph’s name, her recalling of his eyes, his hearing Joseph being spoken of by someone else, was what he needed after all. When she said it, Joseph re-appeared in his mind as what he was: *someone else*, someone other than Philip. Julia’s voice was like an elegiac song that stirs the dead, quickening Joseph once again, now, calling him back here before Philip. For years, Philip had carried Joseph – the body of Joseph, a corpse - inside him; it had felt at times as if he actually was Joseph, that what he saw was what Joseph would have seen. Now, hearing the name in someone else’s voice, he saw that Joseph was someone else, not a part of Philip, someone other

than Philip; and in seeing Joseph as other than himself, Joseph came back, back from the dead. It was the voicing of his name; and, behind that voicing, what he heard was Joseph speaking, saying *I, Joseph*, so that the voice of the dead boy himself came back. It was shocking to Philip for, as the years had passed, he had forgotten the tone and timbre of Joseph's young breaking voice. *Try to remember*, his father had said, that night. But he had forgotten, until now, the reality that was Joseph. And now, through this woman, he heard it once again, just as if Joseph was there, quick. He recognized it, the audible equivalent of a ghost. Julia had given him Joseph back.

Julia, in the quiet, had reached over to him and was now touching his arm, holding it. As she half-consciously stroked his arm, that ancient human touch of skin on skin connoting a shared pain, she became aware that she was holding the hand that held the gun. She said again, softly *I'm sorry that Joseph is dead*.

'Enough. Enough apologies. Who is PJ Gallagher? Tell me again,' said Philip. He wanted to recapture his firmness of purpose again, to recall himself to the task that he had set himself, years ago. The task was changing, though, as he tried to enact it. He sat down in the chair opposite Julia. They looked like a couple, at home, having a chat by the fire at the end of a long but routine day. But there was no fire. They were cold. Julia asked again if she could go and fetch a coat. This time, he said Yes. He knew that by letting her go to fetch it, he was taking the risk that she would run; but somehow he knew that she wouldn't. And, anyway, he had got what he wanted, he was now realizing. He had held Joseph again, thanks to her simple act of using his name, of naming him and opening his eyes again. In that everyday act – calling

someone by his name – Julia had reawakened Joseph for Philip. She had made him real again, had realized him. The flesh wasn't important. The self was.

But now he needed someone else. He wasn't yet ready to give up fully on revenge. He had nursed it so long, and would be bereft without it. He was shocked to find himself starting to believe Julia; but, although his feeling about Julia was changing, he still felt the demand for vengeance. What he had nursed was now festering through time and neglect. 'You're going to phone this Twomey. You're going to bring him here.' 'I don't know if he's still around.'

'You'll either bring him here, or you'll be joining his dead body. And, if need be, I'll put Anne's finger on the trigger and make her squeeze it. We're going to phone, from the phone-box outside, in the village. And we can go to the right house, now: the one where you can see Anne.'

And so, Julia phoned Seamus, and told him he had to come to Dunmore East, where he'd be met beside a statue of Billy the Kid.

* * *

From his mobile, Philip made another call.

'I can only come if Nick's not going to be there,' said Anne.

'Nick? He's gone back to the States,' said Philip. 'Niamh and Niall are also gone now. It'll be just the two of us. I've got some good news for you. I've found out much more about your family history. Come on down.'

It'll be a chance to tell him it's over thought Anne. 'OK,' she said.

* * *

After the phone calls, Philip drove to Dunmore Farm with Julia beside him. He was struggling for clarity, and didn't know what to do. Brief moments of lucidity punctured his confusion, like random stars in a black sky. *What the hell am I doing with a gun in my pocket? And if I use it?* He realized that he really had no plan; he had not got further than thinking of the confrontation with Julia, as if that would be enough. *And so it is, in a way. What do I want now? What did I ever really want from this? Insanity, this is insanity.*

He knew that if Twomey had any sense – and as a priest he probably had some semblance of nous – he would have contacted the security people. He had been prepared to sacrifice another priest to save himself and his illegitimate son, this PJ Gallagher, if Julia's story was to be believed. The authenticity of Julia's voice in telling her story had been persuasive. So he'd certainly be prepared now to sacrifice Julia. He'd have called the police, and would be preparing the story to incriminate Julia and save himself again. When he came to this place, he would not be coming alone. And the police would find him, Philip, with a gun, holding Julia hostage. *What a fool I am, what a fucking idiot.* He thought, I'm bringing the house down on my own head, instead of on hers, and he looked sideways on to Julia. The resemblance to Anne disturbed him. He felt as if he was sitting beside the future Anne, as if he was travelling not in space but in time, as if he were living in two times at once.

‘What do you want, Philip?’ asked Julia. ‘What is it that will ease you, make you feel you’ve done what you need to do?’

‘Don’t you know? Can’t you guess?’

‘Actually, no, I can’t’

‘You’ve got no imagination, then.’

‘Maybe I haven’t.’ She should change the subject. Her fear was that he would use the gun on Twomey; and she had had enough of violence. She wanted to avert any more. She wanted Anne. ‘I never really knew this part of the country,’ she said, staring out at the stars in the night sky. ‘If I had known it, I would have tried to paint it.’

‘Paint it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you an artist then? Like your daughter?’

‘Well, she’s a musician, you tell me. I’m a painter.’

‘So is she.’

‘She paints as well? It seems I gave birth to a great talent.’

Philip let the words hang in the air. Then he said, ‘Is that how you survived in your place, Kinlochbervie? You painted?’

‘More or less, yes. Like I said, there were occasional tourists, and they would pay decent money for a bit of Scottish kitsch. But I also did other stuff. More serious stuff.’

‘Like what?’

‘The occasional portrait. Some rich people seem to like to give portraits as gifts. I’ve done the portraits on some well-known Scottish people, lairds, titled baronets, MPs even.’

‘Wasn’t that a bit risky?’

‘Why?’

‘Well, you were supposed to be in hiding, no?’

‘From what? The event we’re talking about wasn’t an unsolved crime. Pat Maher paid the price for it. I’m not proud to say it, for he was innocent. Well,’ as Philip looked menacingly at her, ‘not innocent, but innocent of pulling the trigger that night. But the point is, no-one was looking for me.’

‘It begs the question, then, doesn’t it?’

‘What question?’

‘Why you left. Why you went away.’

‘I was running from something else,’ said Julia, ‘from someone else.’

‘What? Who? Anne?’

‘Christopher Andrews.’

‘Who’s he? I thought *you* were Chris Andrews.’

‘I am. I took someone’s name, changed Christopher to Chris, became the person I was running from.’

‘So? Who was he?’

‘Just somebody I knew. Somebody I loved.’

‘So why run away?’

‘Because he died.’

‘I don’t get it. Why run away?’

‘Because I think that this *was* a death that I was responsible for. I could have saved him, I think.’

They were at Dunmore Farm. Philip told Julia that he would be taking her with him to the rendezvous with Twomey. He was starting to feel familiar with Billy the Kid.

Meanwhile, they had to wait. In the Farm, at least he could make something to drink. As he made some tea, he found himself wondering that if it did turn out that Julia was lying, he would be making tea and having a cosy conversation with his brother's killer. He knew that she was telling the truth, though. He knew. So it turns out he had been wanting vengeance, but on the wrong person.

Philip spoke about Mairead. The obituary had not mentioned the care home, had not mentioned Julia even. It was as if, amid the inaccuracies of the obituary, her own very absence had been conjured and realised. Julia had known so little about Mairead after all - had cared so little, as she now realized - after leaving. She realized that she had left Mairead bereft and that her disappearance was so great a burden for Mairead that she had had to be completely obliterated and written entirely out of Mairead's life. That's how she was cut even from the obituaries: Mairead had contrived to conjure her fully out of history. Julia's love for Christopher had made her selfish, so selfishly unaware of the love that others - her mother, God, even her daughters - might have felt for her. The disaster that was Tony, her actor husband, acting being in love, had dulled her feelings for all others; that, and her commitment to an abstract political identity.

As Philip spoke, describing Mairead's frailty at the end, she could catch a fleeting and momentary shade of a memory of her mother. And now, Philip saw some of Julia's weakness. Until now, she had seemed resolute, strong, even when he had threatened her life. Now, though, he could see the shock of her human feeling; and, for a moment, he felt chastened by it.

‘Mairead is dead as well. I should have been back, even if only for that. My mother,’ and she broke off, staring at the floor. ‘Oh Mairead, Mammy.’

They said little more. The vacancy left by the dead occupied the space between them, holding them apart yet touched by each other: twinned and sundered all at once. Then it was time to go. When they arrived at the statue, Twomey was already there. He sat low in the driver’s seat of his car, a trilby balanced ridiculously just above his eye-line, as if he were some sort of spy in the movies. Philip nearly laughed. He flashed his headlights, but didn’t get out, and as Twomey sat up, taking the hat off, he asked Julia, ‘Is that him?’ Julia replied, ‘Yes, it is. He’s older; but he still looks as smug as ever. I’d recognize him no matter how low he slinks. Here or anywhere.’ She let her distaste for him show on her face, and then looked away, back at Philip. ‘Yes, that’s him.’

They drove back in convoy, Philip looking in the rear-view mirror to see that Twomey was alone in the car, and also looking for any other cars following behind. At the Farm, Twomey got out, and looked over the outside of the house, as if he was sizing it up for purchase. ‘Nice place,’ he muttered. Then, ‘Hello,’ to Julia, ‘long time.’

‘Indoors,’ said Philip.

‘OK, big fella. OK. Easy; easy,’ said Twomey; and they all three went inside.

* * *

Later in the morning, when she arrived at the Farm, Anne was surprised to see another car parked alongside Philip's. She walked past it, thinking it looked vaguely familiar, then went straight into the house. The door was unlocked, as she had expected. But inside was something that she had not expected at all. Father Seamus Twomey was there, and a woman that Anne feared to recognize.

'Hello? What's this? What's going on?' Turning to Philip, 'I thought you said it was just us two. Why is he here? And who is this?' But she knew.

'I'm Julia.'

Anne did not know what to do. Awkwardly, she reached out her hand, as if to shake. Julia opened her arms, offering herself in total vulnerability for an embrace that she knew she did not deserve. Anne moved to her, and it felt as if she was being held by a ghost, by one who had returned from the dead and who could tell her all she ever needed or wanted to know. Yet, this was no ghost, not one of the dead. As she reached out both hands to hold her mother to her, Anne felt the warmth of blood. As they stepped apart to look at each other in that examination that says *I love you*, they were interrupted by Philip's voice beside them.

'Julia here tells me that she knows you, Twomey.'

'That's true. From a long time ago.' He forced a smile in the direction of Julia. 'And it's Father Twomey, if you please.'

‘She tells me she knows a good deal about you,’ said Philip, ignoring the parade of injured pride in the demand for a title, for entitlement. *This man is entitled to nothing from me.*

‘Yes, that’s as may be.’

Anne was staring straight ahead. As in other moments of uncertainty, she started to hum a melody. She knew not that she was doing it. Julia heard it under the barrage of noise from Philip, and looked over at her; but Anne, this time, did not return her gaze. Julia didn’t know how to feel for Anne any more. It had been so long. The melody was barely audible; it was as if Anne was whispering something. In that quiet susurration, Julia began to see the world she had left behind, with Anne, a world where beauty could be found, could be heard, lying there latent and awaiting human contact, awaiting the contact from a human consciousness that would allow it to live, to come to reality.

She reached out and took Anne by the hand. Anne turned and smiled. Julia reached to her, and lifted the ring on the necklet that she wore. *Can I?* her eyes asked. Anne, for the first time in thirty years, lifted the necklet over her head and handed it to Julia. Julia opened its clasp, and let the ring slide into her hand. She looked at it, took Anne’s left hand in hers, and placed the ring onto Anne’s wedding finger.

They both looked on, holding hands, Anne feeling the oddity of the ring on her finger, as Philip interrogated Twomey.

Chapter 10

The letter from the medical centre told him he should return for more tests.

Immediately. For one brief moment, he invested hope in the mis-spelling of his name: Nicholas Whyte, it said: maybe his records had been mixed with someone else's – but he knew in his heart that they hadn't, and that the letter, and the diagnosis, was for him. That moment removed his immediate fear, though he knew that he probably ought to be concerned, at the very least. The spots of blood on the pillow each morning couldn't any longer be ignored; and nor could the cough, which was becoming insistent, and now painful. He was also sure that he had felt a hardening of the muscle in his neck when he was shaving, a tenderness that could be a lump. *But I've always been a hypochondriac. Zappa: everything is terminal, remember; nothing special going on here.*

Returning to Seattle would give him some respite. It would interrupt the embarrassment of his abortive relation to Anne. *Crazy. I always said it. Crazy; yeah, but what if?* And it was this 'what if' that he could not rid himself of, now. He was putting his bag in the overhead rack on the plane to London for the first leg of his trip when he became aware of a burly man with a battered briefcase barging past. 'Christ,' he heard, as the man muttered. He turned and caught the man's eye, with its glimmer of a recognition. 'Bill?' he asked. 'Bill Jackson? Still in computing, huh? It's me, Nick White. Remember?' 'Yeah, sure. Nick. Hi. I'm seated at the back. Smoking. I've started again, Christ's sake. If I had seen you in executive I'd have arranged to sit with you. You going home?' 'Uh. No,' 'No? London, then? Sales business?' 'I'm not in the business any more,' and now, for the first time, he heard himself say it, 'I'm a farmer.' 'Christ!' said Bill, 'Jesus Christ! You've done it, then?' 'I've done it,' said

Nick, 'See you in London, maybe?' The crush of people carried Bill past and on down the aisle as Nick took his seat.

But Nick didn't really know what he had done. He didn't really know where he was going, either. Would Joan allow him to stay with her? He had determinedly not kept in touch, and Joan probably didn't even know about the blood, about the medical tests. He would call her. He felt the empty ridge on his wedding finger, the trace of the ring that he had wrapped in a handkerchief in his bag, the mark on his skin that spoke of a lifetime together, of two children. Now, the mark was an absence; and he felt the word in its full force. He was an absence: empty, like a ghost, transparent, seen through, insubstantial, haunting and haunted, not here, not present.

Like at school. Not present. Like Dan and Lily at school: absent, but for different reasons.

Two days later, he was in Seattle, at the medical centre, being given a diagnosis. We think it may be serious, but we need to confirm with some more tests. Can we start today with more X-rays, and some blood? He duly rolled up his sleeve and watched as the syringes filled: five in all. Maybe this is serious. He asked if he could go home, and they said that he could; but that he might be called back in within the week. Leave your cell-phone number with us. It all depends on the results. Try not to worry: I know it's easier said, but, well, try.

He had taken a room in a hotel. It was standard: bland furnishings, nondescript pictures on the wall – a poor imitation of a Georgia O'Keeffe lily, a still life of some

drying flowers, and above the bed four well-dressed people dancing on a deserted beach, the woman in a stark red evening dress. When the porter showed him the room, the first thing he did after dropping Nick's bag was to switch the TV on. Nick had turned it off again right away, and hadn't looked at it again since.

He was used to hotel rooms from his days on the road for Motion Inc. They were almost a home-from-home for him; but not now. Sitting here, eating alone in his room - pizza, calzone, pizza again - staring at the city beyond his balcony, he was haunted by the image of Anne, by the timbre of her voice as she sang at Fourknocks. He thought about Bill Jackson, remembering how he had thought that here was an ordinary guy, one who got and took what he wanted, not caring, light of heart even if big in the girth. He couldn't do that, he couldn't be a Bill Jackson. Somewhere inside Jackson, beneath the fat, beneath the cajolery, there was a sense of a life passing by, unremarked, unremarkable. They had spoken again, briefly, while waiting for their bags at the carousel in London airport. Bill was edgy, wanting to get out quickly for a smoke; and Nick realized that Bill had little more to say, now, than had already been said when they met some months back, going the other way. Nick realized that he had been mistaken when he thought of Bill as a free spirit, a man who did as he pleased and knew his own wants and desires. What did someone like Bill do? He went to school, took college classes, dated a few girls, found one who'd settle with him, got a job, had two kids, and then? Then it was all more of the same, like a record on loop. You could see it in his body: he was bored, he lacked self-respect, had given up and was resigned. The constant invocation of Christ meant nothing but that: submission.

And compare me, said Nick to his image, now, in the bathroom mirror of a bland Seattle hotel room. *By contrast, here, in me, you have a full life, lived to the limit in all its glorious uncertainty and unpredictability. Pah!* He filled the basin with water, reached into his toilet bag, and took out his razor. He stared at himself, *and me? I could finish it now, I guess. Here, now, this night. Before I get the diagnosis confirmed.* He lifted the razor and took out the blade, letting it rest on his arm and turning its edge slowly towards his skin. It was one of those new three-blade affairs and, as he slid it gently across a millimeter on his arm, so three thin stripes of blood started to show. He knew he'd go no further than this, this dallying with death, tarrying a while and wondering if he would ever foreclose his own time. Putting the razor back down, and looking at the parallel lines on his arm, he now felt nothing but contempt for himself. He knew he was one of life's patients, one who would await and be done to; but he could not change.

And Anne. What if? What if? Is it so crazy? He knew, somewhere in his blood, that, yes, it was, it was crazy; but he did not want to feel it so. There was a hint of a red stain, turning dark pink, in the water as the blood from his stripes ran gently down his arm, across the palm of his hand, dripping from his fingers. He pressed hard on his arm, right over the cut, to start to stanch the flow. The blood brought him back to himself. He had had the briefest sensation of a life running out of him, running away from him. The whole thing had begun when he had decided to watch the life of somebody else ebb away: Patrick, whose funeral he had refused to attend. And it was that that made him decide he needed to do something for himself. Become a Bill; except that now, having met him again, he realized the fantasy of it all, realized that everything was disappointment.

As the blood started to dry on his self-inflicted wounding, he decided that he would go and see Joan. No more fantasy; back to the real. He needed to steel himself for it, though. He hadn't announced his return to Seattle, so she didn't even know he was in town. And what would she be thinking of him? Maybe she would have decided to have nothing to do with him, throw the door closed in his face. Who knows?

He dressed again, without finishing his shave. He was oblivious of his half-cleaned cheeks, not noticing the roughness of the remaining stubble on the top of his lip, the left side of his face. There was a small red stain on the sleeve of his white shirt, where the cut had dribbled its last coagulating drops. He went to put on a tie, then decided against, and undid his collar. He went out, took a cab to the market, and found a Starbucks. At the counter, he was faced with the modern version of existentialist angst and a barista whose grin was sickeningly cheerful, as plastic as cartoon. Too much choice, too many different kinds of coffee, different kinds of bean, different grinds. He was crippled by the choice and, feeling stupid suddenly, he walked away again, the barista's *have a nice one sir* following him out of the shop, *see you next time sir*. Outside, in the mid-winter sunshine, young couples sat, lovers holding hands, arms interlinked, coats and hats on, but enjoying being outside. Their breath misted the air, lightened it with their easy laughter. *This*, looking back over his shoulder, *this is no place for an old man like me. I'm becoming old*. This was not for him.

He decided he would walk all the way to the house. It would take up some time, would allow him to think, to clear his head, let him find a form of words he could use with Joan. Back to the real, whatever that would be. But, within what felt like a mere

ten minutes or so, he was at the end of his street; and he had thought nothing. All he had in his mind was an occasional snatch of music, of Anne's voice.

The neighbourhood was quiet. He looked along the rows of houses, their drives. A yellow Lamborghini sat outside the house where Emily and Jim lived. As he approached the house, he saw Joan's car in the drive. She was at home. That was good. It was eleven-thirty. The children would be out: Dan at school, Lily in her day-care home. Monday morning, and all as normal, all things well. The normality of it brought him back to his life here, his past and his memories, a reality that was as sharp as a stone, as dangerous as flint. Happiness, that is what it was, a happiness despite himself, as when you skim a stone on water and see it skip beyond you, beyond your horizon. In a moment of lightness of heart, smiling, almost laughing, he decided against knocking at the door. Instead, he'd use his key, come into the house like the old days, and shout out his usual cry of 'Hi, honey, I'm home.' He opened the door and walked in, but in silence so as to give Joan an even bigger surprise.

As he walked through the hall, he heard the murmur of her voice and thought she was on the phone in the bedroom. He slipped off his shoes and walked into the lounge, then on and into the kitchen, where everything was recognizable. There was even the bottle of Jameson's whiskey lying on the work-surface, where he had left it. Had he really drunk that much with Joan that night? He lifted the bottle and looked at it: half-empty. Then he put it back down carefully, exactly where it had been, and looked around the kitchen some more. Coffee cups lying unwashed by the sink, two plates with the remains of croissants on them. Yet, it was as if he had never left.

The dull mumbling continued from the bedroom. And then he realized.

Before he could get his shoes back on and leave again, he heard the other voice. Then the bedroom door opened. Jim stood there, wrapping Nick's old dressing-gown around himself. Behind him, Nick could see Joan sitting up, smiling and laughing, in the bed. But as she saw him, she gasped a sudden, piercing, 'No!', then again, but quieter, 'No. Oh God, no.'

'It's fine. I'm just leaving,' said Nick. 'No need for any more noise. I'm gone.'

'What the hell...' said Jim.

'Yeah. Well. What the hell is right,' said Nick. Joan was getting up out of the bed and feeling for her own dressing-gown. 'I guess I should ask,' continued Nick. 'How long?'

'Not what you think,' replied Jim.

'Oh, really?'

'Yeah. Really. Not what you think.'

'So what is it, then? Therapy? Massage? Relaxation techniques? Relationship counselling?'

Joan came between them. 'Nick,' she started. 'Yeah?' asked Nick, turning abruptly to her. 'Yeah? What can I do for you? Eh? What can I do? No doubt not as much as Jim here.'

'Nick,' Joan started again, 'Nick, it's not what you're thinking.'

'Echo. So what *am* I thinking? What *should* I be thinking? And hey, Jim, you realize that a naked man is immediately a bit more defenceless than those of us with our clothes still on, don't you?' Jim wrapped the gown more tightly around himself. 'Hey,

listen, buddy,' he began. 'Nick,' said Joan, talking at the same time, 'Come on. Sit down. Here, over here. At the table. Let me fix a drink or something.'

'Jamesons?'

There was a pause as the three of them stood their ground. None of them knew what to do next. 'Yes, Jamesons,' said Joan, finally. She went to get some glasses and the bottle. They all three sat awkwardly round the small kitchen table. Nick stared at the wood, ancient pine that was cracked. 'It's a bit early for this,' said Jim. 'Never too early for a Jimmy, Jim,' said Nick. 'Here,' and he poured a generous measure and placed it before Jim, then a second that he put beside Joan. 'So,' he said, as he poured his own. 'So; how long?'

'There's nothing going on,' said Jim, but Nick interrupted at once, saying 'well, the evidence kind of flies in the face of that particular hypothesis. What with you and my wife both naked, coming out of the bedroom together. By the way, that dressing-gown is too small for you.' 'Sure,' replied Jim, smiling awkwardly, 'maybe I should get my clothes back on. But Nick grabbed his arm. 'Never rush a Jimmy,' he said, putting the glass back into Jim's hand. 'You've got a lot to drink there still. Drink up.' Turning to Joan, 'and you, too. Go on. Drink up.' The three of them raised their glasses to their lips. 'Hold it,' said Nick, 'should we not have a toast?'

'To what?'

'You tell me.'

'There's nothing to toast, Nick,' said Joan. 'Nick. . . . Nick. Tell me how you've been,' as if he had just gone away for a day or so.

'Not so good, Joan. Not so good. Maybe not as good as you. As him.'

‘...’

‘So what’s new here? I mean, apart from, you know, this?’

Joan and Jim looked at each other. Then Joan said, ‘Nick, first of all “this” isn’t anything...’ but Nick interrupted, ‘Yeah, yeah, I know. What else, then?’

Well,’ said Jim, ‘you’ll have seen the news about the latest at Motion, I guess.’

‘I’ve no interest in Motion.’

‘But you know about Grabowski?’ asked Joan. ‘It’s been all over the TV news.’

‘I haven’t watched TV. What is it? Who has he shafted now?’

Joan paused, and then said, ‘He hasn’t shafted anybody. He’s dead, Nick.’

‘Dead? Grabowski? Dead?’

‘Yes. His wife has been arrested.’

‘Say what?’ said Nick, disbelieving.

‘Turns out she had had enough,’ said Jim. Absurdly, he was trying to behave as if it was normal for him to be sitting there, in Nick’s dressing gown, trying to act as if nothing mattered, nothing was serious. ‘I’m surprised. The way he treated her that night. Here; when I met them. She couldn’t get a word in. Every time she went to speak, he dismissed her; told everybody she was talking rubbish, that she didn’t understand anything. As if she was some sort of moron.’ He was talking too much. He stared at his glass.

‘Looks like she shot him,’ Joan went on. ‘He came home as usual one night, Monday I think,’ – Jim nodded – ‘but something had cracked for her during the day. She had picked up some ammunition for his gun – it seems he didn’t let her have one, but he had one, kept locked – and she unlocked the shelf where he kept it. She was waiting for him when he came home. She shot him in the head, and he dropped dead, right there, at the door of the house. Didn’t even make it over the threshold.’

‘I guess she knew that if she waited, waited until he got in properly, she wouldn’t do it,’ said Jim.

‘When the police arrived – it was she herself who called them – she reportedly said something about it being such a fine feeling, squeezing the trigger. The police say she looked happy.’

‘So, then,’ said Nick, finally, ‘at least one worm turned. Shows what can happen when you just barge into your own home. Unexpectedly.’

For a moment, he stared past their heads and out of the window of the kitchen. He could see the garden beyond, a pale aspen tree struggling upwards, frail, against the boundary fence. Joan had planted it years back, he recalled; ‘it’s a Quaking Aspen,’ she had said, ‘better suited to the Rockies, but we’ll try it.’ It had struggled, but was still there.

‘You want to know something?’ he said, finally, turning his attention back to the table.

‘Yeah, sure,’ said Joan.

‘This morning, I went out for a walk, and passed by Starbucks. Downtown, at the market there. You know the one. Good deli, close to a little grocery store, *Lettuce Play*, good name. I noticed that. Witty; clever. Anyway, there were some folk there that I’ve seen before. Young folk. Students, maybe. They were sitting out in the cold. But they were having a good time.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah. A good time. And, you know, as I walked away from them, that old cliché came into my head. You know what my head is like: pretty empty, never a really new or original thought. Isn’t that what Harvey always says? That I’m a walking

dictionary of clichés and received ideas?’ Joan was shaking her head, but he went on, ignoring her, ‘So I thought about that phrase – was it a song, or a poem or something, maybe a play – about “love in a cold climate”. Jim? You’re a man of culture; you’ll know where the phrase comes from. No?’ Jim stared into his glass. He realised it was empty. Nick lowered his head and bent beneath Jim’s so as to force him to catch his eye, and then went on, ‘No? You don’t know either? Well, then; I thought better of you. Now, not having read enough, I myself don’t really know what it might mean. In context, you know? But it made me think about how I felt, you know, coming back here and all that.’

‘When did you get back?’ asked Joan, trying to find a way of recovering the conversation to a normality, though she knew it was ridiculous, with Jim and her sitting at the table, naked but for their hastily grabbed gowns. ‘When?’

‘Oh, about a week ago. Something like that.’

‘You mean you’ve been back in Seattle for a week and haven’t told her?’ said Jim.

‘Hey. Listen up, buddy. Don’t try to take the high moral ground here. I don’t really think you’re in a position to do that, you know?’ and Nick lifted the edge of Jim’s dressing gown, exposing his thigh. Jim flinched instinctively, covered his crotch with one hand and with the other grabbed Nick’s hand and thrust it violently away. His knuckles crashed against the wood of the table, a sharp pain stinging his wrists. Nick laughed; but he felt an onrush of anger starting to rise from the bedrock of his shock.

‘Do that again, Jim,’ he said, his voice suddenly cold and rock-steady, hard, ‘Do that one more time, and you won’t be *able* to put your own clothes on. Ever.’ He stared fixedly at him. ‘You do not have the high moral ground here.’ He paused, then, ‘Now, as I was saying.’ He motioned to the two to drink again, and went to pour more whisky into Joan’s glass. She placed her hand over the glass, but Nick gently removed

it and placed it on the table. 'Don't refuse my hospitality,' he said, and poured more for both Joan and Jim. Jim, though frightened by the hardness of Nick's tone, tried to look disdainful, tried to make it look as if he was contemptuous. The whisky was already making his head unsteady, unfocused.

'Now, as I was saying. I saw these youngsters, and thought about love in a cold climate. And I thought about what it was that had made me come back. It won't be of too much interest to you, but I've been having some tests done at the medical centre. Possibly for cancer. With any luck, though, it's just a small blister of sorts on my lung. Anyway,' he went on. The mention of cancer had stilled them into total silence, complete attentiveness. 'Anyway, I've got these tests done. And I was wondering, while I was in my hotel room, about whether it was worth it at all. Worth going on. Whether I should just slash my wrists. Disappear, you know? Like a Mrs Grabowski moment, maybe. Like disappear totally. Total magic,' and he smiled at himself with the image of Niamh and her 'total' this and 'totally' that. *I've picked up the lingo; nearly Irish. Grabowski; good riddance.* 'But then I saw these young things. And I thought about how they've got everything before them. And I thought how unfair the world is. About how, for many of them, though they don't know it, their great future is already behind them; while, for others, for the lucky ones, they've got everything at their feet. Luck; and how unfair it makes everything. You know, chance and fate, the luck of the draw; one man draws a fraction quicker than another. Like in a duel,' and he stared at Jim, who looked away, down at his whiskey in the glass. 'Bad luck. And then I thought about Lily, and Dan. And you, Joan.' He paused, making sure he had her eyes. 'And you, Joan. And me. Me, Nick. And whatever it was that drew us together, let us draw at the same time, back then, back when things were good. Then I

shivered in the cold out there; and I thought, what is love if it can't stand a cold climate? And I thought – and don't ask me where this came from. It wasn't my own voice, but it felt like a voice speaking through me from somewhere else, like it had possessed me – I thought, Joan, I love you. You're beautiful.'

He took a drink.

'And that's why I'm here. Now.'

'.....'

'When I walked out, you know, and went to Ireland, I imagined I was probably walking out completely. I can admit that. I *do* admit that. More than that. I've met someone. And before you both start to lose your guilt, thinking that your sleeping together – and you *will* tell me, you know, oh yes you will, how long that's been going on – before you start to think that it's tit-for-tat, you need to know that I haven't touched this woman, haven't as much as lifted my finger to her. Anyway, I met her. And I've imagined a life with her. Is that unfaithful? Just imagining things? Anyway, I realized at one point, while I was away, that that was what I wanted. I wanted a life with her. I had her voice, the sound of her voice, in my head all the time. Have you ever felt how seductive a voice can be? Not what it's saying, just the tone of it; like a magic charm, like music, I suppose. Like enchantment,' and he stopped for a moment.

The aspen outside fluttered in the breeze, its big leaves shimmering in the winter-light. 'I had decided to leave you, Joan. But, as I sat in my hotel room these last few days, I started to think some more. About you. About me. About why I thought I wanted her. She's called Anne, incidentally. Nice name. Simple. I wanted something

simple, something clear. I wanted – like some kind of belated adolescent, I know – I wanted to find out what my own desires were. All my life, I’ve suppressed them. I’ve gone along with things to suit other people. I’ve never got beyond adolescence. Ask Harvey. I’m like a kid that has never left home, living his life through the eyes of his parents. Only I’ve lived it through you, Joan. Maybe even through Harvey. These last couple of months, through my Irish family, whoever they might have been, I don’t even know, but they’re there, pressuring me to do things that I don’t even know if I want to do.’ He sipped his drink. ‘But you know what I realized? Sitting in that hotel room? I realized that that’s what makes me happy. I’m like those wild animals you see that have spent their life in cages. You take them out to the wild, and they run and explore it a bit, thinking it’s freedom; but then they come crawling back to their cage again at night. They no longer know what they want. They never knew; they have no wants, no desires at all. And, you know? I’ve come to see that that’s good. That’s a good thing. Well, anyway, this now is my night. I’m crawling back. That’s what I’m thinking as I put the key in the door this afternoon. I’m crawling back, but it’s OK; I’m not humiliated, I’m happy. But, and this is the real joke that’s been played on me, when I get back into the cage, someone else is there. Somebody else. The hairy ape with the hairy thighs. The guy next door. You, Jim.’ And Nick grabbed Jim’s hand, turning his wrist. ‘So. Jim, Joan. How long? How fucking long?’

‘Joan spoke first, urgently, ‘This was the first time, Nick. And we stopped. We stopped before we, you know.’

‘Yeah; it’s not what you think, what you imagine. It’s complicated,’ said Jim. Nock ignored him, turning instead to Joan.

‘Oh, really? First time?’ he said, ‘all in my imagination, then. How convenient. And why did you stop, then? Isn’t he any good in bed? Can’t he get it up properly?’ Jim flinched as Nick twisted his arm more.

‘No,’ said Joan; and Nick interrupted, ‘oh, so he *can*, can he. He *did* get it up. So why did you stop, huh, this “first time”? Why stop?’ He turned to Jim. ‘Was it because of your airhead wife? Because of Emily? Afraid she’d notice something? Afraid she’d sense another woman’s odour on you?’

And now Jim replied, and resisted Nick’s pressure on his arm by seizing Nick’s fist.

‘No, not because of that. If you want to know, I didn’t want to stop. It was Joan who stopped it.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah. And she stopped it because of you,’ looking straight into Nick’s eyes, through the curtain of tears that threatened to fall. Nick let go of Jim’s wrist. ‘Because of you, Nick. She stopped it because of her feelings for you.’ Joan’s head was bowed on the table; but he heard the words from her, ‘I love you still, Nick. Come back. Oh, please come back to us.’

In reply, Nick said, ‘I need some air. I need some distance,’ and he took a final gulp from his glass, placed it on the table, looked at it for a moment, as if surprised at its new emptiness, got up and walked to the door.

‘Will you come back?’ asked Joan, timidly.

‘I’d better go,’ said Jim.

‘Yes, maybe you had better,’ said Nick, turning before he left; and to Joan, ‘I don’t know. I don’t know.’

* * *

Anne and Julia stood by the large bay window in the house in Dalkey, looking out over the water. Anne turned the ring on her finger. ‘So, what is the story behind this?’ she asked, holding her wedding finger up to show off the ring. Julia took her by the hand, saying ‘No story, really. It was the ring that Tony, your father, gave me when we got married. When I left, I was leaving him behind as well. I was no longer to be Julia Elliott, but rather Chris Andrews. So I had to shed the identity fully. But I was sentimental about the ring. I didn’t want just to ditch it, or to give it back to Tony. Cowardice, I suppose; selfishness. Instead, I left it behind, in a box of things that I addressed to Mairead. And I gave instructions that she should give it to you.’

‘Why me? Why not Caroline? Why not tell Mammy to keep it herself? In case you ever returned – as you have done?’

‘Well, it had to be you. You were Tony’s favourite. It’s a terrible thing to say, but sometimes parents have favourites among their children. King Lear and Cordelia; Shylock and Jessica. Tony wanted to call you Cordelia at one time, you know. He had been playing Lear somewhere, New York, I think, and when he came back – you were no more than a baby at the time – when he came back, he held you in his arms, and wailed for happiness at you. But by then you were already Anne. You were what held us together.’

‘But not well enough to keep you together, obviously.’

‘No. That’s true,’ said Julia. She turned away from the window and looked at Anne’s unfinished painting on the easel. ‘What’s this?’ she asked.

‘Just something I’m trying to do,’ replied Anne. ‘It’s a scene from the window here.’

Julia looked at it, then looked back outside, across the bay. The ruined church lay still, half-hidden by the mists and light drizzle. She measured the real ruins against the church in the painting, and nodded, as if with approval. ‘And what’s it about?’

‘About?’

‘Yes; you know. What are you doing with it?’

‘Anne hesitated. ‘Nothing, I think. At least, nothing very profound. I’m just trying to paint what I see.’

‘And the boat?’

‘Yes; what about it? It’s not very good, is it?’

‘No, it’s fine. Maybe a little too clearly drawn, but fine. You could smudge the edges a little, make it more impressionistic, less clear lines. But it’s fine. Is it a real boat?’

‘Of course it’s real. What do you mean, “real”?’

‘I just meant, is it one you actually saw one day, or just one you imagined seeing?’

‘No, no, it’s one I saw.’

She left the pause. Julia looked again, more concentrated. ‘What’s that in it? This detail here. Beside the men rowing?’

‘It’s a body.’

‘A body?’

‘Yes. They have picked it up. From the water.’ Julia looked down, but held Anne’s hand again, tightly. Anne was staring fixedly at the canvas. ‘Anne. Did you know? About Christopher?’

‘No. No, I didn’t. But one day, I looked out here, saw this little boat going out. When it returned, the men had picked up a body that was floating in the Irish Sea. A young man. I didn’t actually see them coming back with the body. Just going out. But I read about it in the papers. This is the boat. So you were right, actually. This boat, this one

here returning to harbour, is one I imagined, not one I saw. The one I saw was going out to sea, unfreighted, unburdened. Alive, quick and rhythmical.'

Mother and daughter stared back out to the island. Eventually, Julia said, quietly, 'It's a beautiful painting. It holds love in its frame. You hold love in your hands.'

The doorbell rang, puncturing the near reverential silence between them. 'That will be Risteard,' said Anne. 'Will you join us for dinner, after all? We're going downtown, into Dublin.' She opened the door, and Risteard stood there, holding two bouquets of flowers. 'One for you,' he said, holding the carnations out to Anne, 'your favourites, pink and white carnations', their fingers touching as he handed them over; 'and one for you,' to Julia, freesia and white lilies.

* * *

'OK, it's OK,' said Philip. 'You've got the scene perfect. Keep it like that, I'd say. But then, I'm just the writer, not a director. Who know what will happen to it once the cameras roll?'

Niall and Niamh relaxed, coming quickly back out of character. 'That's about it, I guess; that's all we can do. Over to you. Both of you,' said Philip, 'and break a leg, or whatever it is you say.'

'Break a leg'll do,' said Niall.

'Total good luck. To you,' said Niamh.

'I don't get him,' said Niall to Niamh, as Philip left the house.

‘Nor me,’ said Niamh. They shook their heads, and turned back into the house. They would have it to themselves now, until they decided to return to Dublin. Free time.

‘Niall?’

‘Yes?’

Niamh turned his body to face hers.

‘Niall?’

‘Hmm? Smiling.

She took his hand. ‘Will you come to bed with me?’

* * *

Philip opened the door of his apartment. Rick stood there, his hand outstretched. ‘Mr Winter,’ he began. ‘I believe we have some unfinished business between us still. Involving money. Payment for services rendered.’ ‘Come in,’ said Philip. ‘Come on in.’ ‘I will,’ said Rick. ‘You know, I’ve always fancied a weekend in Dublin. The cost of the flight, though: phew, phew-ee, man, prohibitive. But then, I’ve added it to your bill,’ he said.

‘You’ll get paid, Rick,’ said Philip.

‘I know.’

‘I just need to make a few calls.’

‘Uh, uh,’ shaking his head. ‘We’ll do this in a civilized fashion. Dinner? What about we go for dinner? My shout.’

‘OK. OK.’

And so they found themselves standing at the bar of the Shelbourne hotel, having a Guinness before dinner, amid the noise and bustle of a Saturday night. ‘Are you going to tell me?’ asked Rick.

‘Tell you what?’

‘What happened? To Chris Andrews?’

‘Nothing happened to her. She changed her name, though.’

‘To Julia Elliott, I’m guessing.’

‘Yes. To Julia Elliott.’

‘And?’

‘It was the wrong person.’

Rick put his glass down on the bar. ‘What do you mean, “wrong person”?’ We got the woman you wanted. It was the right person. No mistake. We do not make mistakes. Especially in cases like this one. If you think you can get out of paying by pulling a fast one like that, forget it, friend.’

‘No. I don’t mean that. You got me the right person; but I was chasing the wrong one. The one I was after is dead already.’

And Philip told the tale. That day, in Dunmore Farm, he had Twomey, the father of Joseph’s murderer, before him, at his mercy. He had the gun. He had the motive. He had the anger, the thirst for revenge, the need to cleanse things, to get rid of the murderer. Then the girl had spoken. She said that getting rid of the murderer by killing him wasn’t getting rid of the murderer at all. It was just adding to things. Adding another death, pointlessly. The arithmetic of trouble, she called it. And he was thankful, not angry at her intervention. He had needed somebody to stop him in the terrible logic of the scene. That logic in all its simple geometrical beauty said a death for a death; but he knew he didn’t want to do it, to kill Twomey. He needed somebody

to give him a reason to step out of logic and into reason, to escape from the terrible anger in all its purity of form and to open the door to grace. A death for a death is the economics of justice, like twenty pounds for a coat; but revenge is excessive, breaking any bounds of economy. You can never have enough of it. You want the killer dead, but you also need him alive, to keep him suffering; and you need the pain to be more and more, but it never answers your need. Because, as long as he's alive, you're also still suffering, more and more; and so you need to kill him, but you also need to add to his suffering. Again, again. And, when Anne spoke that night, he saw, suddenly, that revenge was just like love in its demand for excess. Like desire: unanswerable, not to be satisfied. But the word she used was one that could also have been used by Twomey: grace. Only, in his mouth, if he had said it, it would have been too much for Philip: he would then have pulled the trigger after all. But it was Anne's voice that said it; and that was what saved him, and saved Philip also from himself, from the spiral into endless repetitions of revenge.

At the mention of grace, Rick interrupted with a groan, 'ah, shit, man. You had him there. All you had to do was lift the barrel and squeeze the metal.'

'Yes, I know. I said to myself that it would be liberating, that it would free me. From the torments of the years; from my anger. But then I saw what it was I held in my hand.'

'Yes, a cool point-four-five: one shot and it's all over.'

'No. I held a life in my hand. Like a birth.' Philip paused. 'So I couldn't do it.'

'And?'

'And I told him to go.'

‘Fuck sake, man. Listen. Listen. Do you need us to do it for you? You owe us already, but we’ve also got a price for this kind of job as well. If you’re interested,’ and Rick pulled his drink back again, gulping the rest down.

‘No. That’s not what I want.’

Rick shrugged. ‘I don’t get it,’ he said.

‘Yeah; but you don’t know the girl who interrupted me; stopped me. You don’t know Anne.’

In the far corner of the restaurant, at a private table away from the rest of the diners, unseen by the men at the bar, sat Ristard with Anne and Julia. They were three people, having a simple and quiet meal together, sharing time, sharing a forgotten past. Ristard had been surprised, the evening when Anne called; it was unexpected, but no less welcome. ‘Anne?’ ‘Yes, Anne Elliott. Remember? We spoke together a few months back. In UCD at a student debate. We exchanged numbers.’

‘Yes, yes, of course I remember.’

‘Well. Here I am. Phoning you up. Making use of the number.’

‘Sure,’ and Ristard knew he would help her along, through the conversation. She would be asking him out, for dinner; and he’d help her to get there.

‘Something you said that night,’ she said, ‘something that struck me; and has stuck with me.’

‘Oh yeah? What was that?’

‘You don’t remember?’

Though he wanted to help her out, he couldn’t recall what he had said. ‘No. I’ve got a vague memory that we trounced them. That’s all.’

‘Well. You said something that got a laugh from the audience. It won the debate for us.’

Ristead wracked his brains. ‘No, sorry. You’re going to tell me?’

‘Yes, I’ll tell you. But I can’t tell you just over the phone like this.’

‘That important, huh?’

‘Yes, important.’

‘...’

‘...’

‘Well? When can you tell me? Where?’

Thank God. ‘How about we meet for a drink? Dinner? Friday next?’

‘Sure. There’s a good place near Doheny and Nesbit’s pub. Let’s meet at the pub, then go on. You promise you’ll tell me?’ seductive, leading her on now.

‘All ye know on earth and all ye need to know,’ she said.

‘Ah, the beauty that is truth.’

So they had met, and she had reminded him about how he had won the audience with his talk of how sex was what could free you from the tedium of normality, the endless security of being your masked self; but she did not remind him by telling him, or by saying anything. And, in the embrace of her arms, after the pub, after dinner, after all, in her house overlooking Dalkey Bay, he remembered.

‘Will you tell me what you’ve done all these years?’

‘It’s a long time. On the one hand there would be too much to tell; but, at the same time, it has been unremarkable. I’ve lived quietly.’

‘As Chris Andrews?’

‘Yes, as Chris Andrews. Artist, portrait painter, manufacturer of kitsch.’

‘Yes; but if you know kitsch is kitsch, then it stops being it,’ said Ristead, pouring another glass of wine for Julia, passing the bread basket around the three places at table. The Shelbourne restaurant was busy, and he could hear the on-going murmuring, but it was just a drone in the background. Their table was secluded, away from everyone else.

‘Thanks,’ she said, ‘enough. Yes, but if you know that it stops being kitsch because you know that it’s kitsch, then it starts being kitsch again, über-kitsch.’

‘Seriously, Julia,’ said Anne, ‘it would be good to know. You’re a big part of my life, obviously; but you’re the single biggest mystery in it.’

‘It’s better that way. Better that it stays that way,’ replied Julia.

‘All this business. With Twomey. What was all that?’ asked Ristead. He knew that if he wanted to get to the truth of what had happened, he would have to go round the houses, approach at a tangent. Yet there was a part of him that didn’t want to know. It was enough for him that he had found Anne, these days and weeks. He didn’t need to know anything more about what had made her, where she had come from. In one way, Julia was an irrelevance for him, because, with Anne, he wasn’t a journalist, nor a socialist, nor a historian. He was discovering what it was to be himself, to be an audience at the words of someone else.

‘Well. It was a long time ago. In one way, I had nothing to do with Twomey at all, except that we were both vaguely involved in the romanticism of political action. Childish.’

‘Childish?’ asked Anne, a disbelieving look on her face.

‘Yes. Childish.’

‘But...’

‘Yes, I know. Another child was hurt. A boy, Joseph was killed. He was Philip’s brother. But me? I was just a child there; and, for Twomey, it was like a game, I think’

‘But Joseph was killed, Julia. You were there. That’s not a game, not child’s play.’

‘The record says something about his being knee-capped first. I guess PJ had to work himself up to doing the killing, and started with the punishment?’ said Ristead.

‘Another glass? The wine’s terrific.’

‘Yes; maybe. It was a time ago. The details sometimes get fuzzy,’ said Julia; ‘but, yes, I know. It wasn’t child’s play, not a game. You’re right. Yes; another glass, please.’

Silence. ‘Can we talk about something else? The future? You two?’

Anne said, ‘Will you go and see Caroline? Before you go back?’

‘Yes, I will. Before I go back.’ It was the first time anyone had mentioned that Julia would be leaving again. ‘Before I go home,’ she said.

Only Julia knew that she had lied to Philip back in Dunmore Farm. She had been there. Her hand had been on the trigger. It was she who had injured Joseph first, created the crisis that PJ had been trying to resolve by perfecting the act. Whose finger had exerted the real pressure? When the trigger was pulled, whose hand was liberated? Only Julia knew the answer to this.

* * *

When Nick got back to the avenue, Jim was gone. The Lamborghini had disappeared from the drive. He turned the key in the lock and, this time, with some resignation that

he was trying to expel from his voice, he called out, 'Honey? I'm home.' Joan appeared from the kitchen. She had obviously showered and done her hair, and she was wearing the black dress that she knew Nick had once so liked her in. It was also the dress that she had worn that same morning, when Jim had come round, 'for a coffee, Jim? Just to pass an hour or so? Only if you're free.' The idea of going to bed with Jim had only become a reality when she thought again about her dreadful argument with Nick, the night of that dinner-party. It was Nick who had put the idea into her head. Sure, Jim had some attractions, physically; but when Nick had said that he thought they were having an affair, it made her think that maybe she, too, could be attractive. To someone, anyone; to Jim. So, that morning, she had arranged a seduction scene. Jim hadn't been too surprised, and he responded quickly, even energetically. But Joan had realized, as they lay in bed together, naked but somewhere else in her mind, that she wasn't happy with this. So she stopped it.

Here she was now, though, ready for some kind of comic replay; but this time with Nick, her husband, her love still. Nick moved towards her. Both felt shy, like teenagers on a first date: they knew what was supposed to happen, but no longer knew the moves that were required for the dance to make sure it came to its proper ending, the one where you don't change partners.

As he held her, he said, 'It still fits, I see.'

'But I'm holding my breath.'

'After years of not wearing it at all.'

'I didn't think I'd get it up over my hips.'

'But you did. No need to keep holding your breath. Relax. It'll make no difference.'

‘Oh, Nick,’ and she held him tightly to her.

‘I’m back, Joan. Will you have me back? Can I stay?’

* * *

Ristead answered the phone. ‘Hello? No, I’ll just get her. Who’s calling? Fine. Hold the line for a moment, please; I’ll just call her.’ And he called out to Anne who was just getting out of the shower, ‘for you, Anne. I’ll make some coffee. Here,’ giving her the phone. Anne kissed him, wrapped the towel round her more tightly, and took the phone from his hand. It was Tilly, from London. She wanted to know if Anne’s new piece was ready yet. There was a follow-up to the Proms, an international thing this time. Jack Romeo, the promoter who carried some of the most successful programmes in the States, wanted to know if she’d be ready. ‘For June. It doesn’t need to be for a full evening,’ said Tilly.

‘Thank goodness. I’ve only got about forty minutes of new work. What’s the occasion? Which orchestra?’

‘It’s the Washington State Symphony, with Eduardo Morientes conducting.’

‘Morientes? Excellent.’

‘Yes; the whole world seems to be talking about him, and wanting him as a resident conductor. But at twenty-four, he says he wants to take his time. He’ll end up in Berlin, I’m sure. That’s what the smart money says.’

‘He’ll be great. It’s a bit daunting. With Morientes conducting, it’ll get heavily reviewed. Lots of coverage.’

‘Yes, he’ll be great. But no reason to feel daunted. The programme is meant to celebrate the links between the States and what some are calling “the new Europe”.

Ireland fits the bill, it seems. Just an excuse for a concert. Ireland's been in Europe for donkey's years.'

'If forty minutes or so is OK... forty minutes to represent donkey's years.'

'Sure. I'll tell Romeo. But it should fit. What's it to be called?'

'Can we give it the Gaelic title?'

'It's your piece, Anne. I guess you can call it what you want. But if it's Gaelic, you'll probably have to spell it for me.'

'It's called *Mnà nà Eireann*', and she spelled it out.

'What does it mean?'

'It's an address, to the women of Ireland.'

'Sounds fine. A perfect counterpart to the rest of the programme that Morientes and the orchestra are planning to do that evening.'

'Oh yes? What's that?'

'It's by Aaron Copland. They're doing his *Fanfare for the Common Man*, and then his ballet, *Billy the Kid*.'

As Ristard came back in, coffee in hand, Anne told him that she had found a dedication for her new piece. 'Oh yeah?' he said, tugging at her towel as he replaced the phone on its cradle. 'Yes. It's for Catherine McCarty.' 'And who is that?' 'If you love me, you'll find that out,' she said.

* * *

A fortnight later, Joan is wearing the same dress again. Nick has asked her to put it on for him. They hold hands as he is wheeled to the operating theatre. The surgeons are

there, waiting. Joan sits beside him, the dress now covered in a surgical green gown, and holds his hand, kissing his forehead as they administer the anaesthetic. And as he drifts into unconsciousness, eyes closing, he sees the dress in his mind, and, as the torpor overcomes him, he sees the body inside it, and smiles, suspended as he is between earth and heaven. In this end, though, it is not Joan's body, but Anne's that he imagines; and her voice, singing at the edge of Fourknocks burial mound, is the last thing he has in his mind as he loses consciousness.