Begetting, Flesh and Text

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Abstract

This creative writing thesis is a study of the meaning of childlessness in today’s globalised world, as well as an examination of the ways in which, in the First World, science, commerce and individualist ideology have sought to redefine the human desire for one’s own child as a human need.

In a novel, ‘Man of Aran’, I explore the existential nature of this desire for someone whose experience is largely neglected by public discourse on the subject – a man alone. The novel attempts to understand how constructions of heterosexual masculinity isolate the man in his grief, and in his relationship to others.

In an accompanying story, ‘Only a Fairy Tale’, I continue the analysis of reproductive desire, but move beyond the private realm of the novel to explore the ethical implications of redefining a desire – even one so deep and fundamental – as a need. My subject here is the opaque and shape-shifting practices of assisted reproductive technologies, which in their most interventionist forms exploit the unequal power and opportunity of the world’s women, while at the same time creating new categories in our social order: those who can afford to purchase parenthood, and those who cannot.

Bridging the novel and the story is a reflective essay, ‘On Failing Better’, which serves as an account of the relationship between the two works, as well as an elucidation of their creative processes and the contexts from which they arose. In particular, the essay identifies the novel and the story as autobiographical works, informed both by my own childlessness, and by experiences that have led me to a personal reappraisal of human-centred ideas of ‘flesh and blood’. The essay examines both the restrictive and enabling nature of the osmosis between self and imaginative work, and reaches for an understanding of what literary measures of ‘realisation’ and ‘success’ might mean when art is intimately connected to life.
Man of Aran

A novel
There’s something he never talks about, although he’s not exactly the silent type.

He has come to the grey stone island in the Atlantic because it’s his sister’s home, and she needs him. He’s more at ease in cities, but he’s lived in many places and knows how to make the best of things. And he has work to do; he fills his days with work.

Every morning he sits down at the pine table in front of the window in his rented cottage. It’s a stone cottage, painted white. It was once the home of a fisherman and his wife and children, all of them working hard, praying to survive in this harsh, stony place. Now every morning he opens his laptop, looks out at the sea and writes about big business and the lies it tells.

He was a boy, then he was a boy reporter, and now it seems he is a man who chastises the world. He’s tired of it, but that’s another thing he doesn’t talk about; he’s tired of being him and of never being anyone else.

His back hurts. It’s an old injury, and the hours he spends sitting at his desk don’t help. But it’s nearly time to meet his friends, and a walk to the village will do him good. He reads the last few paragraphs and makes some corrections. Below him, moving slowly across the green lowland, is a large white horse. He loves this horse. The animal is there every morning, it’s the first living thing in his day; his heart rises to it when he comes down the stairs and draws back the curtain. And later, when he looks up from his work, he watches the horse’s long white neck bend to the grass and his thoughts relax for a while.

He gets up from the table and carries his mug into the kitchen. The simple fisherman’s shelter is now cottage-chic; white walls, whitewashed floorboards, gleaming white goods. He opens the pantry door. He checks inside the fridge and notes that he’ll need butter, milk and eggs. He squeezes the bananas in the bowl on the bench. He can remember a list of up to ten items
– it’s something he taught himself when he was a boy, his fingers representing the things he mustn’t forget.

In the bathroom he checks his reflection in the mirror. Three-day growth, it’s one of the good things about the way he’s living now. After the years of suits and ties and clean shirts, now it was shave or don’t shave – who gave a rat’s arse?

All through the winter he’d worn a beanie his sister knitted for him, but now that the warm weather is here he notices how much his hair has grown. It’s dark hair, unruly, shot with silver. A scar like a thin white slug bisects one of his eyebrows, but there’s no pirate story to tell. He’d simply walked into a door one night, groping his way to the toilet in a new lover’s apartment, trying not to wake her, trying to be quiet. The gap between his two front teeth makes him look like a rogue, although he’s never been much good at roguishness. The gap between his teeth can make him look as though he’s laughing when he’s not.

He’s tall and lean-hipped, and he walks back through the living room and takes the stairs two at a time. There’s a Johnny Cash song in his head. Country music, he thinks, what is it they say? Three chords and the truth?

In the loft where he sleeps there’s more white, and silence, and the skylight in the ceiling casts a religious light. He picks up his wallet from the table next to the bed, checks for cash, slips it into the back pocket of his jeans. Picks up his phone and checks the battery. There’s a presence beside him. He feels this presence whenever he comes up the stairs and the light is hushed, holding can almost see. A baby lying in the centre of the bed, barricaded by pillows. A tiny baby asleep, dreaming of its recent voyage, or gazing up at the brand new sky.

He goes back down the stairs, singing the Johnny Cash. It’s a song about a man down real low, but he’s not low, he’s forty-three years old today, there’s still time. He walks over to the table in front of the window and looks again at his work. He makes another correction, and puts the computer to sleep.

His sunglasses are new and expensive. When he puts them on, he looks like one of the Chilean miners emerging into the light after three months under the earth. He moves quickly towards the door. You never know what is waiting, you just never know. He is full of hope. And this is what he doesn’t
talk about: he wants to be a father, now, not later. He doesn’t want to waste one more minute of his life.

He pushes the door wide open – he does everything with more force than is ever necessary – and steps out into a day of salt-scented sunshine.
His friends from Galway are waiting for him outside the café in Kilronan. They’re sitting beneath a blue and white umbrella. He bends down as Claire offers him her smooth cheek. She’s wearing a red and white gingham dress, and he’d lay her out on the table if he could, eat bacon and eggs off her.

Claire is from Chicago, but he’s known Patrick since they were boys, and he’s prepared at any moment for his old friend to irritate the shit out of him. On a summer morning, Patrick is wearing black jeans and black boots, a black leather biker’s jacket with a hundred zips. Even his blue eyes look hot, but it’s a version of the tough-guy uniform he’s always worn, the pose of an academic self-conscious about being a schoolboy all his life.

David takes a chair from a nearby table and places it outside their circle of shade. There’s a stranger sitting with Claire and Patrick, a girl he has barely glanced at. ‘David, this is Ettie,’ says Claire. ‘She was just telling us about herself, she’s from Australia too.’

David looks at the girl from behind his dark glasses. She hardly looks old enough to be out in the world. It’s so like Claire to pick up a bird that’s fallen out of the nest.

‘David’s half-Australian, half-Irish,’ says Patrick.

David lifts a hand to draw a slow line down the centre of his body. He doesn’t want to get into it. A sleek-nosed ferry is cutting its way towards them through blue water; he wants to sit back quietly and soak his photovoltaics in sun. He wants to watch the ferry discharge its day trippers, those enthusiasts who have heard the island’s call.

Once the people of the island waited on the waterfront for the return of the red-sailed hookers and small currachs with their catch of cod and ling, but now they wait for the tourists; all along the gentle curve of road leading to the village they’re waiting with their air-conditioned minibuses and pony-traps and bicycles for hire.

‘David doesn’t like talking about himself,’ Claire tells Ettie.
‘It’s just that I don’t think of myself as half and half,’ he says. ‘I’m more Australian with a splash of Irish, you know, like beer with a lime dash.’

‘A Corona with a slice of lemon?’ says Claire.

‘That’s me,’ he says, watching the ferry slot into place alongside the pier. Seagulls fuss overhead and the air smells of brine and fresh horseshit.

‘But where were you born?’ asks Ettie.

‘South Australia.’

‘I don’t really know South Australia,’ she says. ‘I’m from Fremantle, in the west.’

‘I’ve never been west,’ he says. Would he be paying more attention if she were one of the Scandinavian girls making their way down the pier, with their shiny hair and tiny shorts and gelato-coloured T-shirts? Or one of the Italian beauties who are bouncing by in a horse and buggy?

‘Nobody does,’ says Ettie.

‘Sorry?’

‘Nobody goes west.’

He sips his espresso. It’s black and hot but in no other way does it resemble coffee. He’s had coffee, good and bad, with friends before; he’s met Australian girls with whom he is expected to feel an affinity. It frightens him, this boredom stealing into his life, if boredom is what it is. Once he would have judged a lack of curiosity as a moral weakness, as if a taste for life were merely an act of will. He can’t bear to think of the boredom ahead, if a child doesn’t arrive to make the old world terrifyingly new.

‘W. B. Yeats has a new haircut,’ he says, as a copper Clydesdale trots by carrying a smiling Chinese family.

‘We read one of his poems at school!’ says Ettie.

‘It suits him,’ says Claire.

‘He’s beautiful,’ says Ettie. ‘He’s the biggest horse I’ve ever seen.’

‘He used to work St Stephen’s Green, in Dublin,’ says Patrick, ‘but now he’s here for a quieter life.’

‘Like Davey,’ says Claire.

‘Like me,’ he says, though his heart sinks.

‘What sort of work do you do here?’ asks Ettie, bobbing a straw in her Coke Zero.
She is small and sweetly plump, and she’s sitting up very straight on the edge of her chair. Her cotton sundress is patterned with strawberries, and she reminds him of Pebbles Flintstone, her hair pulled into a messy ponytail on top of her head.

‘David fights for justice,’ says Patrick, needling.

‘What does that mean?’ Ettie asks.

‘It’s a bit like being a firefighter,’ says David, ‘but without the fire.’

Ettie gives a small, bewildered smile, and sucks hard on her straw.

‘Ignore them,’ says Claire, narrowing her eyes. ‘What they mean is David is a journalist.’

He’s sorry, immediately chastened; Claire always has that effect on him.

‘Are you just here for the day, Ettie?’ he asks.

‘No, I arrived yesterday,’ she says, ‘and I’m leaving tomorrow.’

‘Well, look, can you come to dinner tonight,’ he says to his friends, and then, because it’s impossible not to, ‘You too, Ettie, let’s say seven?’

It is a point of honour, not to mention his birthday.
Ettie arrives at his door out of breath and when she looks up at him there are tears in her eyes. ‘I think this has been the happiest day of my life,’ she gasps.

David has bad news for her, but it can wait. She pushes a bottle of Australian semillon at him, shy but proud too, as if she’d stomped the grapes herself. He glances at the sky before he closes the door, regretting the turn of events and the night that lies ahead.

‘That hill’s a bit of a killer, isn’t it?’ he says.

‘Yeah,’ she breathes, her eyes still glittering. ‘I’ve been riding all day. I can’t get over this place. People have worked so hard to live here.’

‘Well, the island’s just a giant slab of limestone, there’s no real soil. Everything has been grown in seaweed.’

‘I know!’ she says, peeling off her Burberry sunhat. ‘The Ice Age stripped all the soil away and people had to scratch clay out of the crevices in the rock!’

‘You’ve been reading your guidebook,’ he laughs.

‘Of course!’ she says. ‘My great-grandparents were market gardeners. They came to Fremantle from Italy after the war and there was just so much land waiting for them.’

She has chapped lips and hot pink coins of colour on her cheeks. A crackling energy has come into the room with her, and he tries to figure out from her dark brown, wide-open eyes if she’s a bit crazy, or just an excitable girl a long way from home.

‘Claire and Patrick aren’t coming,’ he says, feeling like he’s stuck a pin into a child’s balloon.

‘How come?’ she asks, and he sees the effort not to show her alarm.

‘Patrick’s mother has had a fall, or it might be a stroke. Claire’s gone with him back to the mainland.’

‘Where does Patrick’s mum live?’

‘In Dublin.’
'Is it bad?'
'I don’t know yet.’ There’s something brave about her questions, the way she’s looking back at him, controlling her nerves by fiddling with the bows on her combat pants.
‘You should put something on that sunburn,’ he says, turning towards the kitchen.
‘Am I burnt? I didn’t think I’d get burnt here, the sun doesn’t feel so strong.’
He takes a jar of cream from the top of the fridge and hands it to her. ‘Here,’ he says, ‘this is good stuff. My sister makes it.’
‘What’s borage?’ she asks, reading the label Orla has written in her best Celtic calligraphy.
‘A herb she grows.’
‘It smells nice.’
He’s suddenly aware of towering over her. He moves books and papers from the table next to the window. ‘Have a seat,’ he says, ‘here, where you can look out.’
‘I love how it stays light so late here,’ she says, turning to gaze across the daisy-flecked grass to the blue sea beyond. Connemara and Galway are no more than smudges in the distance, no more than a dream of land and other lives.
‘It’s what they call a mackerel sky,’ he says, gazing with her.
‘Mackerel served with mashed potato,’ she says, pointing to the fluffy white clouds closer to the horizon.
‘That’s right,’ he laughs.
In the kitchen he opens the wine she’s brought and pours two glasses. The wine is the palest green, the colour at the base of a celery stalk, and it makes him feel better about things. He finds it hard being alone at this time of day, when the meaning of things falls away with the light.
‘It’ll be black as pitch later,’ he says, handing Ettie her glass. ‘Have you got a lamp on your bike?’
‘I don’t think so,’ she says, looking up at him. She has streaks of Orla’s cream on her neck.
‘You’ve missed some,’ he says. ‘Here, and here.’
He takes the plate of fish out of the fridge and picks up the bread that’s been cooling on the bench.

‘Does your sister make other stuff?’ she asks.

He sets the food down on the table. ‘Yeah, she does, creams and lotions for everything.’

‘Where does she live?’

‘Here, on Inishmore.’

‘You don’t sound Irish at all. Not like Patrick.’

‘My mother was Irish but we never lived here, just visited when we were kids. That’s how I know Patrick – he lived next door to my grandmother in Dublin.’

‘So did you grow up in Australia, like me?’

‘Yes, but I left when I was – how old are you?’

‘Seventeen, nearly eighteen.’

‘Well, I left when I was just a few years older than you.’

‘Where did you go?’

‘London.’

‘Like me again!’

‘Snap,’ he says. ‘I came to Ireland first because my sister was here, but it didn’t work out. I wanted to work for a newspaper, but I didn’t have the kind of knowledge you get from growing up in a place, and I couldn’t speak Irish.’

‘What about your sister?’

‘She identified much more with being Irish. She’d always wanted to live here, and then she married an Irishman.’

‘So if you have just a splash of Irishness, she’s a whole pint of Guinness?’

‘I’ll tell her that,’ he says, lifting his glass. ‘Cheers.’

‘Slancha.’

He loves this, can’t help it: here we are, now, this moment will never come again. ‘Let’s eat,’ he says.

Outside, the night has begun its slow thickening. The blues and greens deepen, and the white daisies glow. This is the daisies’ time, their half-hour to twirl their tutus on the stage of all this theatrical beauty.

‘Does your sister have a family?’ asks Ettie, buttering her bread.

‘Three boys,’ he says. ‘Huey, Dewey and Louie.’
‘They’re cute names.’
‘They’re the names of Donald Duck’s nephews,’ he laughs. ‘Their names are really Ned, Van and Kit.’ He used to do a decent Donald Duck impersonation, but there’s been no call for it in a long time.

‘This salmon is good,’ says Ettie, covering her mouth with her small hand. She has a red silk thread around her wrist and a bracelet of small wooden beads.

‘Actually it’s trout, smoked here on the island.’
‘It’s so good, and so are these olives!’
‘Caper berries, all the way from Spain.’
She picks up one of the khaki berries from her plate and scrutinises it.
‘All the way from Spain? All on its lonesome?’
‘No,’ he laughs, ‘with its family.’ He pours more wine into their glasses.

‘Were you born in Fremantle?’
‘No, I was born in Broome.’
‘That’s funny,’ he says, reaching for more lemon. ‘I was born in Mop.’
‘It’s got an E on the end!’
‘So has Mop.’
‘No, that means you were born in Mope!’ She laughs like she’s being chased up the stairs by a boy she fancies.
‘And I hope I never have to go there again.’
‘The caper berries remind me of the little birds that fly all the way from Broome to Siberia every year,’ she says.
‘How far north of Perth is Broome?’ he asks, enjoying the obliqueness of the connection.
‘About three hours by plane.’
‘So the birds fly, what, about ten thousand kilometres?’
‘Or more, depending on where their breeding grounds are.’
‘Do they take a break? For refuelling?’
‘I’m pretty sure they fly non-stop. Broome has big tides that leave lots for them to eat on the beach, so they just have a huge feed before they leave.’ She slips an elastic band off her wrist and pulls her hair into Pebble’s ponytail. Her hair is a nutmeg colour, untouched by chemicals. He thinks he can see the Italian in her, but only in her eyes.
‘Makes all our human efforts seem pretty humble, doesn’t it?’
‘That’s just what I think,’ she says. ‘I thought it was such a big thing for me to come all this way, but I didn’t have to, you know…’ She tucks her hands under her armpits and moves her elbows up and down.

He lights candles when it gets dark. He serves spaghetti with squid ink.

‘Black as devil’s guts!’ Ettie says.

It grows cold and he goes upstairs and gets them both hoodies.

‘I thought you’d have those Aran sweaters,’ she says.

‘Wool makes me itch.’

‘I was looking at some in the shop today. There was an orange one I really liked but it cost too much.’

‘I don’t think the men used to wear orange fishing,’ he laughs. ‘You know it’s the traditional sweater made on the island?’

‘Yes, but it would have been a good colour for fishing, especially when it was dangerous in those little boats.’

‘Currachs.’

‘Currachs,’ she says. ‘The life boat just off the coast is bright orange.’

‘It is.’

‘And the men working on the new jetty all wear orange safety vests.’

‘They do.’

‘Maybe they didn’t have orange dyes back then.’

‘Have you been to see Man of Aran?’

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘I saw it last night.’

‘What did you think of it?’

‘I loved it,’ says Ettie. ‘It was scary and exciting.’

‘The scenes of the men fishing in the storm are incredible, aren’t they?’

‘That’s what I mean about everyone having to work so hard here; how the women had to cart all that seaweed in those huge baskets on their backs.’

‘Imagine how heavy it was.’

‘And the way the men had to break up all the rock by hand,’ she says. ‘It felt sort of wrong, sitting in a little cinema on top of an internet café, eating an ice cream and watching how hard things used to be. Do you know when the film was made?’

‘Around 1934, I think, by an American named Robert Flaherty. He spent a year here on the island. Have you ever heard of Nanook of the North?’

‘No.’
‘That was his first film. It was the first commercially successful documentary ever made, about the Inuit people. I think he favoured heroic tales of man against nature.’
‘And women and children against nature.’
‘Imagine the men in the film wearing orange when they go out to hunt the great basking shark!’ he says.
‘Well, the film was in black and white, so you wouldn’t know,’ says Ettie. ‘No,’ he laughs. ‘But my point is that the man of Aran is supposed to be incredibly rugged and brave.’
‘Are you like that?’
‘God, no! I don’t even know how to cast a fishing line properly.’
‘But you know how to get ink out of a squid.’
‘Yes, I know that.’
‘So you’re more of a man of the world?’ He laughs but it feels bitter in his stomach. ‘I guess you could say that.’
They drink their wine. ‘The men of Aran might not have worn orange for safety,’ he says, ‘but did you notice that the sweaters all have different patterns?’
‘Yes.’
‘The story goes that every family had its own design, so that when a man drowned at sea his people would be able to identify his body from the sweater.’
Ettie pushes her fork around the black-stained bowl. ‘Oh,’ she says.
‘And now the sweaters are sold in lots of bright colours in a tourist store.’
‘It sounds as if you think that’s a bad thing?’ she says.
‘Well, maybe I do.’
‘It’s not as bad as some poor person standing on a beach looking at an awful drowned body and trying to work out the pattern on its sweater.’
‘No, you’re right, it’s not nearly as bad as that.’

He likes her, he’s glad she’s here. He has enjoyed watching her eat his food, and the way her sharp little insights are prising open some of his jammed windows. Fresh air: the surprise of another person. A girl, which he has never been. And young, which he will never be again. He thinks of the fresh air of fatherhood, a lifetime of surprise: moment by moment, a son or daughter revealing themselves to him.
'This is the most delicious thing I've ever eaten in my entire life,' says Ettie. 'What is it?'
'Banoffee,' he says.
They eat in silence, listening to the Atlantic waves smacking the shore. The wine is finished but there's no need to open another.
'How long have you been away from home, Ettie?' he asks, when their plates are empty.
'Seven months and two weeks.'
'Are your parents back in Fremantle?'
'Mum is, but my parents got divorced ages ago. Dad lives in Sydney.'
'Do you see much of him?'
'I used to visit him on holidays when I was little, but not so much as I got older. You know, when I got a life.'
'Did they ever remarry?'
'Dad did, twice, but not Mum.'
'Are you close to your mother?'
'Sort of, but I really had to get away.'
'From her?'
'From everything.'
'In what way?'
Ettie breaks a stalactite of wax from the side of a candle and holds it over the flame. 'I have epilepsy,' she says, 'and I wanted to see what it would be like if I changed some things.'
'Like what?'
'Like stopping my medications.'
'Couldn't you have done that at home?'
'No way! Mum's a nurse. She'd have figured it out – and then she'd have killed me.'
'But why did you want to stop?' he asks.
'I've been on drugs pretty much full-time since I was seven.'
'But it sounds as though you needed to be?'
'Maybe, I don't know. That's the thing, you don't know who you might be without them.'
'I can see that.'
'I'm still lying to Mum about it.'
‘And that’s okay?’

‘It’s fine,’ she says, ‘it’s best for everyone. The worst thing was I felt like I didn’t have any imagination.’

He watches her fingers worrying at the candle wax. He remembers lying with a girl, back when he was young and all his time was spent lying around with girls, comparing his hand to theirs, spinning loose talk. ‘What do you think your imagination is made of?’ the girl had asked.

‘But have you been well without them?’ he says.

‘I’ve only had one seizure. At Christmas. I just got carried away with all the lights.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’d never seen Christmas lights like that before – they’re always pretty pathetic at home. One night I stood for ages just looking in the windows of Harvey Nichols. It was like I was in a trance.’

‘And did you have the seizure then?’

‘A little while later, on a bus, up the top.’

‘Did anyone help?’

‘Yes, lots of people helped. I went to hospital, but just for the night.’

‘Didn’t that make you want to go back on your medication?’

‘No,’ she says, ‘I wasn’t ready to give up yet.’

At the end of the evening he gives Ettie a torch. ‘Are you sure you don’t want me to walk you to your guesthouse?’ he asks one more time.

‘No thanks, I’m fine,’ she says. ‘I really want to ride.’

She is catching the ten o’clock ferry the next morning, the coach to Galway, the train to Dublin, and then the plane back to London because she is running out of money. She has a new job lined up at a macrobiotic lunch bar in Bayswater, and plans for an assault on Paris later in the year. David’s given her a copy of The Turn of the Screw to read on her journey, the jar of Orla’s skin cream, and a slice of banoffee for her breakfast. She’s all packed up and ready to go.

‘It’s still the happiest day of my life,’ she laughs, as they stand outside in the dark.

They shake hands, and then she takes a little jump and pecks him on the cheek. He stands back and folds his arms as she climbs on the bike and wob-
bles over the stones, but she soon finds her balance and in his last glimpse of her she’s standing up in the pedals, riding the hill in the moonlight. He waits until the clatter of the bike fades, and the air no longer appears to contain her.

She is young enough to be his daughter, but he has no daughter. He has no son. When the pain rushes in, sharp like this, the best he can do is tell himself that at least he has no burden, and is no burden to anyone.

He goes inside and closes the door. His back hurts. He collects the plates and glasses from the table and carries them to the kitchen. He puts on Emmylou Harris and turns the music up loud. He runs scalding water into the sink, pulls on pink plastic gloves, and when he submerges the bowls squid ink darkens the water.

All those girls he lay around with, back then, on mattresses and floors, in grassy parks, on sooty rooftops. He can remember some names, and faces, even some of what they told him about themselves. The vast luxury of time and choice when he was young, learning in what ways women were different from him, in what ways they were the same. He had no clue about the nature of time then. He didn’t know that time wouldn’t be elastic forever, that the day would come when he could no longer bend it to his will. That one day, time would suddenly contract; tighten around him.

He had decided that he wanted to be a father on the eve of the new millennium. He hadn’t been planning a thousand-year epiphany – he wasn’t much into epiphanies, he was into good times. But the illumination came anyway, and it had been useful, as a way of measuring the distance, to date the passage of his desire from that night. At first, the thought of becoming a father had brought the quietest kind of happiness, a secret he held close, but as the years went by he began to feel ashamed of wanting something so much, and, humiliated by all the ways in which it had eluded him, it became impossible to speak of.

A decade later, and here he still is, trying to tell the difference between anguish and hope.

He lets the water out of the sink. He pulls off the rubber gloves and thinks of sex, sex, sex. Emmylou Harris is singing about wearing something pretty and white. He’s in love with her. Her diamond-cut song: what he wouldn’t give for a woman’s voice in his life.
In the white bathroom he sees that Ettie has reversed the loo roll and left the cap off his Hugo Boss. He assesses his reflection in the mirror. He’s suddenly tired of the bandit look. He runs hot water into the basin and opens a new cake of soap. Something comes back to him at moments such as this, when he can’t fathom the last ten years, and what’s gone wrong. Often he hadn’t said a lot, lying with those girls on mattresses and rooftops. He was young and uncertain, but more than anything he had preferred to listen. It’s something one of these girls said that comes back to him, although he can’t remember which girl. ‘You know, Davey,’ she said, ‘sometimes I can’t tell if you’re really deep or really shallow.’

He rinses the razor and splashes his face with cold water and then a handful of Orla’s witch-hazel, which stings like hell. He’s reaching for a towel when something on the shelf above the basin catches his eye. It looks like a soap bubble, but when it sticks to his finger he realises it’s a contact lens. He brings the lens closer to the light. He’s never worn contacts, and it interests him: the lens is moist and personal, delicate, almost not there at all. *Ettie has lost her imagination,* he thinks. He meant *she has lost her contact lens,* but having thought it he can’t dispose of the lens, not yet anyway. It will probably get rid of itself anyway, float away like a petal, but for now he puts the lens back where he found it and turns out the light.

He climbs the stairs and undresses. He lies on the bed, easing his back down. It’s ten minutes before midnight. Through the skylight, the slow passage of a cloud unveils a single star.

Ettie and he had exchanged email addresses, of course, but he hopes she understands the beauty of ships in the night. He hopes she understands that writing, or friending him, would be like trailing behind his ship in a noisy little dinghy, when all he wants is to sail free of a brief encounter and leave it far behind.

He wonders if she will find her imagination, whatever that means to her. It would surely have been safer to come off her medication at home and, scientifically speaking, a sounder experiment. But she is making a bid for freedom, he understands that – he can remember his own, there have been many – and you may as well bid everything.
Next morning he dresses in cargo shorts and a T-shirt, and takes the lower road to his sister’s house.

It’s a day of crystalline light, he knows that much, a light that fills him with hope again, but he doesn’t have a clue how to describe anything else that he sees as he walks. The island never stops reminding him just how much he doesn’t understand about the natural world. This hadn’t been a problem when he lived in cities, when society in one form or another was his interest, but he can’t grasp the island of Inishmore; he feels like a flea trying to comprehend the elephant on whose back it lives.

This might not have mattered if he had come to the island as a tourist. Then he would have visited the prehistoric Celtic stone forts and the ruins of monasteries and the burial places of saints; with the other tourists he would’ve wriggled out on his belly to the Western rim of Europe, peered down the three-hundred-foot cliff face and let the heartless Atlantic waves make him feel deliriously insignificant. At the end of his day on the island, resting in the sun with a pint, he might even have felt that it had been good for him, to be cut down to size by all this history and inhumanly scaled nature. But making a home for himself here is a different thing altogether: he feels uncomfortable, subtly undermined.

The first part of his walk takes him through green, flower-filled fields divided into jigsaw pieces by low stone walls. A thousand miles of these walls cover the small island, yet no two are the same. He’s been told that the patterns of the stones are like those found in the Aran sweaters, all signatures belonging to different families, but he doesn’t know if this is really the case. Inishmore is an island of stories: this might be the one and only truth about the place.

Claire comes to the island to photograph the dry stone walls – they serve as inspirations for her landscape designs. Close up, the walls have all the
masculine energy of abstract expressionist paintings, but at a distance, with the light shining through them, they look as fine as lace.

The pain in his back isn’t so bad when he walks. The road is edged with white daisies and star-shaped yellow wort, and a tangle of growth he can’t name. Beyond the fields the sea is dark, and the ferry heading for Rossaveal leaves a long white bridal train. Now and then an islander drives by and lifts a finger from the steering wheel, acknowledging him, and he nods back. People no longer think of him as a tourist, but he’s still not one of them. There are men on the island who are battered and ill and drink too much, but there are other Inishmore natives who speak Irish in their homes and at the pub; men who know the stories of the past but look to the future also. They talk of wind and wave power, raise goats for cheese, harvest seaweed for food and medicine; they understand the material advantages of the island’s history and place in the world. Perhaps he’d like to make a friend of one of these men, but it hasn’t happened yet. No one quite knows if he’s one of the ethnologists, linguists, botanists or poets who have come to save the island, or if he has come, like the New Agers and occultists and burnt-out cases, hoping that the island will save him.

The horse called Bob Marley clops by with a cartload of tourists and he returns their wave. He passes a tumbedown cottage where six long-haired goats stand shackled, their heads lifted, their curved horns like antennae receiving distant music. Ahead of him two more tourists are taking photos of some cows in a field. The girls are laughing in the Japanese way, as if they barely have the right to, but he thinks he knows what it is that they’re feeling.

The island’s red and gold roosters strut for the tourists, and the horses allow themselves to be petted. The goats turn away from people and gaze into a far-off goat realm, but it’s the cattle that stare back at the humans, their forelegs tucked sweetly beneath them, their quiet, philosophical souls rooted in their heavy bodies. The cows return the human gaze in a way that makes people feel that it is they who are the strange ones.

As he draws closer to the Japanese girls, one of them asks if he will take their photo. He takes the camera from her and the two friends pose cheek to cheek. Lovely, he says, and shows them. The girls move on and he turns to the animals. He looks at the cows’ creamy coats, their rich brown splotches.
Once, when he was young and learning his craft on the *Agricultural Times*, he might have been able to name this breed of cattle, but now all he knows is that their skins are thought to look good lying beneath an Eames walnut ottoman and recliner lounge.

He’s not far from Orla’s now. The lake comes in to view, the grey water and the blonde-tipped grass. Swans drift there but he doesn’t know if they are whooper swans or mute swans, he can’t tell the difference. Sometimes he’ll hear his nephews before he rounds the corner and comes in sight of his sister’s house. He hears hollering and laughter, but by the time he reaches the front gate it might be howls of outrage and the bitter sound of boy tears.

But today the house is quiet when he arrives. It looks like Orla lives grandly, but a large part of her eighteenth-century stone mansion is run as a guesthouse. It was a ruin when Orla and her husband Dan bought it, and the restoration had worked them to the bone. There’s no guesthouse sign outside, everything is homely and discreet, just a simple nameplate, *Farraige Fiaine*, on the glossy red door.

Ned runs down the hallway and launches himself at David’s knees, and David bends to kiss the top of his warm head. He finds it hard to keep track of his nephews’ ages – their years do not seem to be the length of his years – but Orla keeps him up to date: Ned is five, Kit is nine and Van is always in the middle.

‘Where are your brothers?’ he asks, shepherding him down the hall.

‘At school!’ says Ned with a note of triumph, of advantage.

He’d forgotten about school. When he arrived on the island Orla was teaching her sons at home, but they’d recently started at the island’s primary.

‘I thought it was quiet,’ he says, entering the big, state-of-the-art kitchen that his sister calls NASA control.

‘Quiet?’ says Orla, looking up from the table.

‘Without the boys.’

‘Yes, it’s awful, isn’t it?’ She’s working on a pile of papers, stabbing her finger at a calculator.

‘You’ll get used to it,’ he laughs. Already she looks better, although he hasn’t told her that because of what it implies about how she looked before. His sister has always been a raving beauty, voluptuous and shining. It was
hard to imagine anything robbing her of that, but the past year has let a lot of air out of her tyres.

After Dan walked out one morning, Orla struggled on with the house and the children for a few months, but then it became clear that she needed help. More than anything, she wanted to buy Dan out of the guesthouse. David and Orla’s parents were both dead: David and Orla were the reduction, they were what the family had boiled down to, its final, concentrated essence. While Orla got back on her feet the island seemed as good a place as any for him to finish his book on corporate mendacity, so he’d sold his home in London and bought his brother-in-law’s share of the business.

David looks around the kitchen. ‘Jesus, what a mess. How many did you have for breakfast?’

‘Ten,’ Orla says. Ned creeps close to his mother and she lifts him onto her knee.

‘Are they all having dinner?’

‘Six are.’

‘Are the aubergines still good?’

She lifts her cheek from Ned’s dark head. Orla’s hair had gone grey at thirty, pure silver. She’d painted it with black stripes and she still wore it that way, long and poker straight. ‘I think so.’

He opens the dishwasher and begins clearing the sink.

‘Have you seen Ned’s tattoo?’ asks Orla.

He looks up and Ned turns out his pale forearm. ‘A skull,’ David says. ‘Very cool. Did Kit do it?’

When Orla was teaching the boys at home, for an hour every afternoon they had to undertake some adventure or study on their own. Kit worked on his fake tattoos or rode the island on his souped-up bike, building speed jumps from rocks, coming home bloodied. Van went upstairs, arranged his soft toys and lay down with them to read his child’s encyclopedia of world myths, while Ned went out collecting. Sometimes in David’s daily movements around the island, he’d come across his nephew and Ned would show him the sticks or stones that he’d found, or David might see him in the distance, the small curve of his back crouching over some interesting thing on the ground.

‘It’s not forever,’ says Ned sagely, rubbing at the skull.
The morning wears on. He tidies the kitchen and makes a parmigiana for the guests. Orla works away at the bills while Ned builds boats out of empty cardboard boxes. They drink tea and the sun shines through all the windows.

Ayrshire, he thinks, dicing tomatoes at the bench, is that the breed of the brown and white cattle? Or is it Guernsey? He is turning his mind to the work that waits for him back at the cottage, when the doorbell rings and Ned runs to answer it.

‘It’s Joe!’ Ned whispers, his eyes wide.

Kit had been in trouble with the garda in the past – some stuff he’d got up to on his bike – and Orla looks up anxiously.

‘My business is with you, David,’ says Joe.

‘What’s the problem?’ asks David.

‘Would you know a young lass named Esther Bradley?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Would this be your book?’ says Joe, pulling The Turn of the Screw from his pocket.

‘Yes, it’s mine – but you obviously know that, my name’s in it. I gave it to someone last night. What’s going on?’

A fisherman had found Esther earlier that morning. She was lying curled on her side on the road, her bicycle tangled in a hedge. Thomas Buckley had fallen to prayer on his knees beside her, but Ettie wasn’t dead. When Thomas dared to look closer, he saw that she wasn’t even especially pale or frightening. She had a small cut on her forehead, on which the blood had already dried, but she looked as if she’d simply slipped to the ground for a rest.

‘Where is she now?’ asks David.

‘In the hospital,’ says Joe. ‘In Galway.’

‘And do you know how she is?’

‘Last I heard she was still unconscious. I’m going there now, and you should probably come with me.’

‘I don’t know what help I can be,’ he says, looking at Orla, beginning to feel guilty.

‘It might help her to see someone she knows,’ says Orla.

‘I suppose so,’ he says.

He takes Joe to Ettie’s guesthouse and they’re given the key to her room. The room is shabby compared to the bright rooms of Farraige Fiaine, and he
knows it will please Orla to hear this. Ettie has tried to make herself at home in the dim little room, she’s a girl who nests. There are glossy buttercups in an empty Diet Coke bottle on the bedside table, and David wonders if it’s the bottle she was drinking from at the cafe the day before. The Yoshitomo Nara notebook he remembers from that meeting is also on the table, and there’s a copy of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, open face down, a third of the way through. He picks up the book and closes it to preserve the spine, but then he realises that he’s lost her place, and suddenly that seems to matter, that she should take up her reading again.

There are clothes spilling from a suitcase, a pair of small gladiator sandals on the floor and her strawberry sundress on a hanger over the wardrobe door. An upturned baseball cap on the windowsill holds three green oranges, and as Joe moves around the room gathering her belongings, David thinks about this. He, too, would place unripe fruit in the light, hoping that sweetness would come, that the fruit might taste like fruit used to taste, like condensed sun.

‘She’s epileptic,’ he says, wondering if that means anything.

‘We’ll tell the doctors,’ says Joe, closing her suitcase.

‘What about this?’ asks David, picking up the little Tweety Bird that’s sitting on the pillow.

‘Do you think it’s hers?’

‘What, you think Tweety comes with the room?’ he says, turning the soft toy in his hands. He’s fond of Tweety Bird too; his big blue eyes, his sweet self-righteousness. *I tort I taw a puddy tat!* He remembers going to Rome for the first time and seeing Tweety bobbing on the balloons of immaculate children in Piazza Navona. Tweety stared out of shop windows and waved at him from the rear of cars. Tweety travelled by on the handbags of Italian women with their gold and their cheekbones.

Rome made him dizzy. The genius and barbarity of the ancients were all around, but Tweety belonged to a newer empire, and it seemed that America’s real power might lie in its takeover of an innermost region of the heart, the tucked-away place where *cute* and *adorable* reside.

He puts Tweety Bird in the pocket of his shorts, and they leave for the airstrip.
He’s never flown between the island and the mainland before. Joe is being hyper-officious, as if they are in the middle of a real emergency, but David’s sure that Ettie will be walking about by the time they reach the hospital. They climb on board the tiny plane and buckle themselves in. The flight will take barely ten minutes, and although he’s pissed off about losing an afternoon’s work, he’s curious about what he’ll see below.

The pilot says something to Joe in Irish, then Joe pulls out Ettie’s phone and starts fussing, asking questions, trying to find her mother’s number.

‘I don’t think she told me her mother’s name,’ says David. Why would she? And isn’t it premature to be calling her anyway?

He misses the moment the plane leaves the ground; the moment he loves, the lift in the belly like lust. He looks out of the window as the plane climbs steeply through cloud.

‘Gina?’ says Joe. ‘There’s a Gina here.’

David turns. Against the bright window, the sun lights Joe’s ears a strange, semi-transparent orange, like the flesh of a persimmon, and this makes David feel more patient towards him. He’s also begun to wonder if his reluctance about contacting Ettie’s mother is his way of being on Ettie’s side. She had been enjoying her independence, and there was the whole business about her drugs. If there wasn’t any real emergency, why upset the apple cart? ‘That might be her aunt,’ he says. ‘I think she mentioned an Aunt Gina. Just try “Mum”.’

Below them the coastal waters are bands of emerald and pale jade. He can see the three Aran Islands, arranged in descending size: Inishmore, Inishmaan, Inisheer. It’s exhilarating to consider them from such a distance – nothing below looks difficult or out of his reach. The plane banks and the islands no longer look like stains upon the water, the cliff faces rear into view. They’re as high as thirty-storey buildings, but there’s no drama or danger about them now. The islands look like nothing more than dark slabs of honeycomb, and as the plane straightens and moves out over the blue sea, it hurts to think that, like honeycomb, the limestone islands are slowly dissolving and that one day there will be nothing but reef to remember them by.

‘I’ve found her,’ says Joe.

David has to breathe against the feeling that has come over him. It’s more than the contemplation of his own death. It’s knowing that, if the future
doesn’t yield, if children never come, there will be not one part of him left clinging to this old earth. He will not have given this to anyone.

It is black and icy, this feeling of extinction. It’s filled with shock and panic. It’s akin to what he’d feel if the door of the plane suddenly flew open; if suddenly he found himself sucked into the cold, uncaring sea.
He doesn’t look at Ettie when he first enters the small cubicle on the hospital’s emergency ward. He pulls a chair close to her bed and stares at the wall in front of him, where a darkened window reflects a strip of fluorescent light. It’s like a Magritte image – very still, offering little information, but unsettling all the same.

He feels embarrassed to be at Ettie’s bedside. He feels unsuitable. To anyone glancing into the cubicle he’d look more like a man slumped at a bus stop than someone visiting a sick girl. He stares at the light reflected in the window and he studies the wheels on the legs of Ettie’s bed. He can flip the wheel’s locking mechanism with the toe of his shoe, and he does that for a while, until he becomes aware of another presence in the room. Ettie is a little lump under a green sheet, with no power of her own, but now he can feel unease coming from her too. He sits up, stops fiddling. He even closes his eyes to test the subtle sensations moving around him.

Finally he turns his chair towards the bed and looks at her. She seems far away and deeply asleep. He doubts his feelings at first, but then he notices a dark blue vein pulsing in her neck. The vein appears again at her temple and it’s alive there too. The vein is pumping out a message, it’s telling him of her distress.

‘Ettie,’ he says. ‘It’s David. David Quinn.’ Her eyelids are almost purple. ‘You were at my house for dinner last night, do you remember?’

He thinks of how Ned pretends to be asleep so that David will tickle him awake. ‘You’re in a hospital in Galway,’ he says, leaning towards her. ‘You fell off your bike.’

Joe enters the room with a doctor. David feels as though he’s been caught doing something he shouldn’t, he pushes his chair back quickly and stands.

‘Her mother’s coming,’ says Joe.

‘Really?’ David says.
The policeman and the doctor look at him in a way that makes it clear he’s still not fully apprehending the situation.

‘We’re taking her for a CT scan,’ says the doctor. David thinks he’s probably Polish, and he looks about twelve years old.

‘I’ll be going back to Inishmore,’ says Joe.

‘I should probably stay here for a bit,’ David says, ‘and see what happens with the tests.’

‘Yes,’ says Joe, handing him Ettie’s phone. ‘You might want to speak with her mother.’

A nurse comes in on silent shoes and goes over to the bed. ‘I don’t know what to do,’ he says to her.

‘You will,’ she replies.

He looks at Ettie as she’s wheeled past, but all he can see now is an awful, pale absence, less than a ghost.

He takes the lift to the coffee shop on the ground floor. He buys an orange juice and a chicken sandwich, and sits at a littered table looking onto the hospital’s foyer. Nine artificial bamboo trees, ten or more feet high, stand there in a stern row. He wonders about the meeting of the hospital’s decorating committee. *Let’s get something tall, really tall. Let’s make it plastic, but one of those old-fashioned plastics – let’s call them vintage – the ones that fade and go furry with time, like the farm animals and soldiers we had when we were small. And let’s get nine! Done? That’s grand. Now, moving on to the next item on the agenda …*

Every time he picks another piece of gristle out of his mouth he remembers something else he knows about the production of chicken. No one comes out of the process well, the chickens or the people who eat them, but he chews on, unable to stop. He studies the patients and visitors coming and going across the dingy foyer, searching for the men on their way to the maternity ward, or leaving it, but nowhere is there a man signalling that he’s a new father. David can’t understand it, why these men are hiding, travelling as commoners, why they’re not wearing crowns on their heads, or emitting a coronation light – how they could fail to know that they are the kings of the world today.

He needs to kill time while they’re taking pictures of Ettie’s brain. He wants to get out of this place of sad dressing gowns, birth lying alongside death. It’s making him feel anxious and oppressed.
University Road is splashed with sun and the sea birds wheel and cry. It’s good to be walking. Above him there’s a gull he doesn’t know the name of, white with a black head, as though it’s been dipped in ink. The squid ink he’d served Ettie. There is something he should do, but what should he do?

He passes the National University, deep shade beneath the trees. Patrick works at the university. David would like to go inside and sit with him in his book-lined room overlooking the calm quadrangle, but he remembers that Patrick isn’t there. He takes out his phone and sends him a text asking about his mother.

The chicken sandwich sits uneasily in his stomach, like a problem his body is yet to solve. On Salmon Weir Bridge he stops to look at the River Corrib, cascading whitely down the weir on its way to Galway Bay. He loves this fast-flowing, soulful river, boiling with oxygen and life force. The fish are running and anglers stand to their waists in the rushing water. Lawyers from the Court House lean over the stone parapet in their flowing black robes, searching for the salmon and sea trout on their way upstream to spawn. They call out when a cloud of fish appears, pointing to the water to show the fishermen where to throw their lines, but David looks down and silently urges the fish on.

He knows that he can’t return to the island, sit down to work and pretend that Ettie’s accident hasn’t happened. He can’t ignore the sense of effort he’d felt in the little cubicle, that blue vein, Ettie trying to communicate. His voice was the last she had heard in this place where she’s a stranger, so his voice might be important, but he can’t see himself sitting beside her bed, carrying on one-sided talk.

But he could read to her – he reads to his nephews. Perhaps he could do that? He considers the choice of books back at the hospital. A reader needed to be fighting fit for *The Turn of the Screw*, and dosed up on irony for *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*; neither of them feels right for Ettie in her present state. He has an anxious thought about running into Erica, a librarian he’d skirmished with a few weeks before, but he’s decided, and he sets out for Saint Augustine Street.

Libraries are not the quiet places they used to be, not since they became information and learning hubs. The library that afternoon is full of the chatter of children; interactive storytelling is taking place in the section where ug-
ly concrete pillars are dressed to look like trees. The library’s carpet is a faded raspberry colour, and the plasterboard ceiling looks uncertain. The grey plastic chairs have fabric seats that are tired and stained. At the front desk there’s a sign. ‘Due to budget cutbacks,’ it reads, ‘we’re sorry that we are no longer able to accept orders for new books.’

A small queue is forming beside another sign: ‘Tragedy and Loss in Four American Novels. Today @ 3pm. Carson McCullers’ The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter.’

There are two thin teenagers in the queue. There are two old ladies, a young mother with a face full of wobbly joy, and a baby in a ducky bib. David had read The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter and McCullers’ The Ballad of the Sad Café over half a lifetime ago. He can remember only an outline of the books’ characters and stories, but the titles summon a feeling in him. It’s a feeling of outsiders’ lives, of faded paint on weathered timber and the black shadows of bare trees, a feeling that life would never be fair, but one could try to observe and withstand.

An old man reaches shakily for a copy of Scientific American from a shelf of magazines. People are bent over newspapers, and one sleeps. A girl with the carriage of a dancer walks past holding a book about Lucia Joyce, who danced too, when she was well. On the walls and pillars and notice boards there are neat, hand-written signs in cheerful colours. The signs offer reading suggestions and inspirational words from the world’s poets and thinkers. This library, too, is a Carson McCullers landscape, full of her sharp melancholy. This place may not be lovely, it seems to say, but it’s needed and we will try.

The problem with melancholy, he thinks, as he makes his way to the fiction section, is that melancholy doesn’t admit anger, or perhaps it’s anger suppressed. The library’s budget cutbacks aren’t accidents of God or nature. Austerity, like James Joyce’s snow, is general all over Ireland. Only this austerity has been caused by human folly, the outcome of ungoverned greed and stupidity, people playing fast and loose with other people’s lives.

There should be a corner of the library for the stupid and the greedy, just as there’s a corner for the children. The librarians could dress up the corner – crepe paper, gold and silver stars – or they might just leave the pillory standing bare. The library might supply the books for people to throw, or, if they liked, people could bring their own. It doesn’t matter really, although hard
covers would be best. The only thing that matters is the outsiders telling the insiders they’ve had enough.

He keeps his eye out for anything Erica-shaped as he makes his way down the fiction aisle. It’s been a month since their lunch date and he doesn’t know what will happen when they see each other again. He would have liked to explain to Erica that at another time he might have pursued her to the ends of the earth, but that was just one of those conversations that are never had.

He has an idea of what he wants to read to Ettie. A story with suspense, but not too much cruelty or violence. Plot balanced by philosophy. And something hopeful, something to wake up for, but nothing untrue or sentimental.

He’s looking for a title that’s unafraid, a title like *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, when he turns the corner and, of course, there is Erica at the end of the aisle. She’s placing books from a trolley onto the shelves. She hasn’t seen him yet and it might still be possible to sneak away, but instead he takes a breath and steps closer.

‘Hi, Erica,’ he says.

She looks up, half smiling, and then it’s painful to see how much she regrets seeing him there. ‘Hello, David,’ she says. She’s wearing a red tartan mini skirt and red fishnets.

‘You’ve had a really major haircut,’ he says.

‘Yes.’ She picks up a handful of books and examines their spines.

‘It looks great.’ He hates the note of ingratiating in his voice.

‘I have it cut like this every summer.’

‘Is that book really called *Carrot Cake Murder*?’ he asks, still ingratiating.

‘*A Hannah Swensen Mystery with Recipes,*’ she reads, but her voice is chilly.

‘By the author who brought you the bestselling *Cherry Cheesecake Murder* and *Blueberry Muffin Murder.*’

‘No,’ he laughs.

‘I’m afraid so,’ she says, a little more warmly.

‘How does she rate with Toni Morrison?’ He couldn’t have said anything more stupid if he’d spent all day thinking about it.
ErEca turns slowly and takes another book from the trolley. She studies
the book; she finds its place on the shelf. ‘I mustn’t keep you from whatever
it is you’re looking for,’ she says.

He’s happy for her. It was a clever thing to say. It had a Bette Davis quality
to it, and she’d delivered it flat and mean, just right. So what makes him
do it? Why doesn’t he leave her with the dignity she’s earned?

‘Yeah, I’m looking for a book for a girl I know,’ he says. He hopes she
thinks he’s just a fucked-up idiot, but he knows he has been cruel. Sometimes
understanding his motivation is like chasing a rat up a drainpipe.

A cry bursts from the storytelling area. The cry is full of commitment and
feeling, as if the children have been enlisted to scare away all the evil from
the earth. He says goodbye to Erica and walks on, feeling desolate and in a
hurry now to be gone.

He grabs a battered copy of Jane Eyre, one of Anne Rice’s vampire novels,
and then, on his way out, he takes from the Recommended Reading stand
Girls Interrupted by someone called Missy Tzu. It’s the author’s first book, a
collection of stories about the lives of young women.

At the nearest café he phones the hospital. A nurse tells him Ettie is back
from her tests and that she is still in a coma. He thanks her and puts the
phone down. Part of him had been playing, he realises. He had thought that,
if he made himself busy, focused on a plan to help her, Ettie would be sure to
wake up and make it all superfluous. But now the word coma has been used,
dropped like a lead weight. Should he have insisted on escorting Ettie back
to her guesthouse? But after all she’d told him about coming off her drugs,
he had wanted to respect her brave, clear spirit. And wasn’t there a fine line
between chivalry and bullying, he’d asked himself.

Or had he simply been too lazy?

He phones Orla. He phones Claire, and Patrick. He decides to phone
Ettie’s mother too, but he’s left Ettie’s phone at the hospital. When there is no
one else he might call, he sits back and waits for his coffee.

The Galway library is never going to be the same, now that he’s ruined
things with Erica. Two months ago they were smiling, shiny-eyed, at each
other, and now they are smudges of bad feeling darkening each other’s land-
scape.
He’d asked her out to lunch. They had first started talking when she asked him a question about one of the books he was returning. She was earnest and pretty, usually not a combination that did much for him, but as their conversations continued and the journey from Inishmore to Saint Augustine Street took on a new excitement, he understood that she was on his mind.

They chose a quiet table under an umbrella, close to the water. Erica ordered salad, he salmon, both being a little over-friendly with the waiter to show what nice people they were, then they placed their elbows on the table and leant in nervously to learn about each other.

She was from Cork and she’d studied in Dublin. She had a four-year-old son. She was on good terms with the boy’s father but he’d just never grown up.

The tension in David’s neck and shoulders bothered him. Her parents were doctors. He sipped mineral water and tried to relax. She was the middle daughter of three, the squashed-in one, she said, narrowing her shoulders. She was wearing a black skirt and a black and white striped T-shirt, a little red scarf tied at her neck. Claire and Patrick had a labrador called Norman who wore a scarf just like it, and it was charming on both of them. There were people who could wear scarves and people who couldn’t; he’d always thought it had something to do with insouciance, although Erica didn’t seem lighthearted in any way but that.

Her life had been a choice between dance and literature, she said. He badly wanted to lie down; he could hardly support the weight of his torso. ‘Do you still take an interest in choreographed movement?’ he asked, before calling for a gin and tonic.

Erica wasn’t drinking; she was going back to work. Seagulls racketed over chips on the pavement nearby. His drink arrived and he watched the bubbles collect around the slice of lemon. Soon politeness would dictate that it was time for him to speak, but he didn’t feel capable of the performance that would require. Perhaps this was why unhappy people stayed married, he thought. For fear of salad and salmon, turning themselves inside out before a stranger, playing casual at a game in which the stakes were so appallingly high. Perhaps he should have asked her out to dinner, got them both drunk. Is this why cultures that forbade alcohol often arranged their marriages?
At that moment he’d have given anything for an arranged marriage, to be a cog in a wheel, a member of family and society and law, not merely a man alone, peddling his shabby wares.

Erica was giving a short tutorial on the novels of Toni Morrison, her favourite writer. ‘Have you read her?’ she asked.

‘Only one.’

‘Which one?’

‘Beloved.’

He wished he’d spoken the word because Erica and he were both very old, they’d been together for a very long time, and this is what he called her. But it was only a book title. He’d been talking to women about books for twenty-five years and he couldn’t do it anymore. He couldn’t stand it when a woman loved a book he loved, as if she’d slapped her hand down on the table and shouted snap, sealed some kind of deal. But it wasn’t any better if she liked a book that he didn’t – he couldn’t help it – it made him think less of her.

They smiled at their food when it arrived, but he knew that, after the first few mouthfuls, it would soon be time for Erica to talk about her favourite films. He couldn’t talk about films either, because something had happened to him, or perhaps to films. A special coating had been peeled away from their surface, the spell of film broken, and he hardly ever believed anything he saw in a film anymore. He wanted another drink. Another drink and he might have said, Erica, I’m sorry, but all of a sudden I find I have no faith to offer you.

The weaker he got, the lovelier Erica became, sitting so neat and eager across from him. An image had entered his head: Erica wearing her red lipstick and little red scarf, slowly turning her head from side to side. And beside her, in a long line, were all the women of the past ten years. They were turning their heads too, like laughing clowns, and there he was slotting ping-pong balls into their open mouths, keeping his hopes up but never winning.

On a clear blue day, with the seagulls screaming, it seemed the impossible had happened: he’d learnt that he was no longer professional enough for romance, god help him; for love.

‘How’s the fish?’ Erica said.
‘Good,’ he said. ‘A bit dry. Do you want to try some?’ If she took just one little mouthful from his fork maybe something would happen, something would arrive to save them.

‘No, thanks,’ she said.

He needs to get back to the hospital. He finishes his coffee and picks up the library books and leaves some coins on the table. He senses that Ettie knows she is alone and she’s frightened. He crosses the road to the pharmacy. He buys ibuprofen and a bottle of water, and sets out with the feeling that everything is his fault.
Ettie is in intensive care now, with tubes in her arms and machines all around. David explains his relationship to Ettie to a nurse, and she says that she’ll try to find a doctor to tell him what the tests have shown. She closes the pale blue curtain around Ettie’s bed as she leaves.

David tells Ettie that he’s returned. He tells her again that she’s in the Galway hospital, it’s a warm summer’s afternoon and she will soon be well once more. In the meantime he’s going to read to her, and he hopes she’ll like what he reads. He feels awkward saying this, but his awkwardness is not the issue. With the tubes and the green hospital gown and her extreme stillness, Ettie looks less like the girl who sat at his table, but he can feel a presence. It’s a focused presence; she’s there.

The first story in Girls Interrupted is called ‘Oh, Baby’. He pulls the chair closer to the bed, and begins. ‘When she was ten years old, Carrie already had the face of an old woman.’

The story is about an adolescent girl who has an inherited disorder called lipoatrophy. He’s heard of lipoatrophy. It causes people to lose fat on their face and bodies, making them look decades older than they really are. It’s also a side effect of some of the drugs used to treat people with AIDS.

‘Oh, Baby’ is a pretty good story, the writer isn’t showing off, she isn’t in love with the grotesque. Her character is just an everyday girl locked in the excruciating prison of her own face.

Carrie goes to a department store. She’s been saving hard, babysitting and doing jobs around the house. She goes to the cosmetics section, to the M.A.C counter. The make-up artist sits Carrie on a chair and then she asks her, in a chatty way, ‘How many children do you have?’

‘I’m fourteen years old,’ says Carrie, who has been taught to be honest with people, to stand up for herself. ‘But I have a medical condition.’

‘Oh, baby,’ says the make-up girl, and Carrie begins to cry.

David will tell his sister about this story. Orla had once worked on the
Estee Lauder counter at Clerys. He hadn’t been in Dublin long, the day he wandered over to O’Connell Street to take her to lunch. His sister was busy with a customer, but a small crowd of women was forming at a nearby counter so he shouldered a place for himself in time to see the demonstration begin.

The make-up artist held tiny pencils and brushes in his large hands. A woman with tissues tucked into the neckline of her blouse sat on a high stool in front of him. Maybe the woman was middle-aged. David was twenty; he didn’t know people’s ages, although it was clear that the woman’s life was making her tired. But he could see why the make-up artist had chosen her – her face had that blessing of the gods, perfect symmetry.

The make-up artist didn’t speak and the gravity of his expression silenced everyone around him. The artist painted the model’s eyelids silver, dabbing and smudging, pausing and dabbing some more. David looked around him, at the tender, rapt expressions of the women watching. The model opened her eyes, blue eyes brought alive, and the artist applied mascara. David saw the mouth of every woman open, ever so slightly, as it would in front of her mirror at home. The artist shaped the model’s eyebrows and her faded presence grew vivid, like a ghost walking towards them from the other side. Her lips were outlined and her cheekbones found, and as David looked around at the entranced faces in the crowd, he felt that he was learning something important about femininity, something he shouldn’t forget. He was learning how ready and quick women were to come to life; how within every woman there was a lake of petrol, just waiting for the flame of a match.

Some part of him still expects Ettie to wake up. As the story grows darker, and Carrie becomes more of a concept than a character, he finds himself glancing up from the page, hoping to see Ettie’s eyelids flutter, or her hand to open on the sheet. It’s an expectation that comes from cinema, and he would like to know, for just one day, what life felt like before film wrote all over it.

The blue curtain opens and Claire is there. He stands and they sway from side to side in an embrace. *Life is weird*, the swaying means, *weird, weird, weird*.

‘How is she?’
‘I don’t know yet.’
Claire leans over the bed. ‘Ettie,’ she says, ‘it’s Claire.’ They barely know each other but it doesn’t look that way.
‘How’s Patrick’s mother?’ he asks.
Claire rolls her eyes. You know Bernadette. She looks tired. She’s doing that Claire thing, arranging the hem of her T-shirt because she thinks she’s fat, not knowing that the whole world talks about her Mongolian cheekbones.
‘Have that chair,’ he says.
‘What are you reading?’
He shows her the book’s cover and gives her a summary of ‘Oh, Baby’.
‘I’d like to hear the rest of it.’
‘Yeah?’
‘Yeah.’
He finds another chair for himself. Claire takes Ettie’s hand and strokes it slowly with her thumb. After a while she places her head on the side of the bed and closes her eyes too.
Now Carrie is going to have a facelift. ‘I will do my best,’ the surgeon says, ‘but you must not expect youth.’
David’s voice feels calm and strong. He floats with Claire and Ettie. Around them, machines breathe for people and count their heartbeats, and they are all instruments of hope.
It doesn’t feel like an emergency.
He arrives at the hospital early on the second day of Ettie’s coma. He’s packed a bag because he’ll be away for the next few nights, staying with Claire and Patrick at their apartment beside the Corrib. Ettie’s mother won’t reach Ireland for two days yet – they’d had a brief, business-like conversation on the phone the night before – and he has told her he will keep an eye on her daughter until then.

He walks by the smokers’ gazebo at the hospital’s entrance, past The Nine Bamboos of Galway, and takes the lift to intensive care. It surprises him, how bustling it is there. The curtains around the beds are open in an optimistic, letting-the-day-in manner, and the staff and visitors stand around chatting. In one corner, beside the bed of a man who might also be a coma patient, a small CD machine is quietly playing Christy Moore.

When David crosses the floor to Ettie’s bed, he thinks for a moment he has the wrong patient. She looks smaller, younger, and so far away. He hadn’t expected unfamiliarity, that she would be a stranger again. When he’d left her the day before, he felt a subtle connection existed between them, as though he was holding the handle of a closed door and he could feel her hand on the other side. That feeling had stayed with him, but now it’s as if he’s pushed open the door and found that the room is empty.

There are tubes in Ettie’s arms that weren’t there the day before. The young Polish doctor has told him that Ettie has a traumatic brain injury, although David shouldn’t focus too much on traumatic because it’s standard medical usage. The doctor can’t be sure of the severity of the injury, the next few days will tell. Neither can it be said one way or another if her epilepsy caused the fall, and decisions about her medication will have to wait until her mother arrives.

‘Hello, Ettie,’ he says, pulling up a chair. ‘It’s me, David, I’m back.’ He feels like an idiot. He feels he’s been deluding himself about the possibility of communicating with someone in her condition. But what is he supposed to
do? He’s not Claire; he can’t sit there holding her hand, even though human heat may be what she needs most.

He takes *Girls Interrupted* from the cabinet beside the bed and turns to the index. ‘I’m going to read to you again,’ he says. ‘Let’s see, all right, this one’s called ‘White Cat’.’

‘White Cat’ is different from ‘Oh, Baby’. It’s a simple story, very quiet. The white cat belongs to a girl called Wendy. He had been found at the rubbish dump when he was a kitten. Wendy’s wacky parents named him White Thing, after the song by The Troggs. Wendy is a fat girl, lonely and bullied at school, and the story could have been a disaster, but it isn’t. It’s a small, affecting story about an animal’s empathy for its human companion, and David’s throat tightens as he reads it.

When he has finished he lowers the book to look at Ettie, and she’s recognisable again. Her nutmeg hair and lilac eyelids, she’s returned. Is this how it will be, then? Will Ettie come and go from him, as any waking person would? Perhaps her unconsciousness is not a static, or even passive, state, although the machines and tests say otherwise.

At that moment it feels as though there’s no trouble, and nothing to fear. As if Ettie has simply made a decision to draw a heavy veil over herself for a while. As if she’s gone to some private and intensely female place within, a convent of her own making, a place where imagination and inner thought matter more than anything.

All around him machines whir and tick in rhythmic cycles, like birdsong. He puts the book down and sits back in his chair. He won’t read to her anymore. If Ettie is resting in a quiet place, he doesn’t want to force-feed her someone else’s dreamings.

He feels soothed, sitting beside her bed. His back hurts, but not too much. He worries about his work, but not excessively. It’s as though her mind is acting on his like a sinker; he remembers her sitting at his table, eating the food he’d cooked, and he thinks of the story she told him then, about the day she left home.

She wasn’t going to look back, Ettie said. She was sitting in the back of the car and she knew if she turned around she’d catch one last glimpse of the blue water, the ships in harbour, the giant red cranes hauling sea containers,
but she wasn’t going to look back. She didn’t know when she’d see the port again, only that when she did she would be different.

‘Lots of layers,’ said her Aunt Gina, sitting in the passenger seat.

‘And gloves and hats,’ her mother said, pulling onto the highway. ‘You lose most of your body heat through your head.’

‘I’m mostly worried about cold feet,’ said Ettie.

‘Well, you’ve got good boots,’ said her mother, ‘and good bed socks.’

‘And leg warmers are coming back,’ said Gina.

‘You’re kidding?’ said her mother.

‘I’m not!’

‘Do you remember?’

‘I do!’

It was hard to imagine that in just over twenty-four hours she would be in London and the long summer would be left behind. She was used to flying to the other side of the country to see her father, when she took off and touched down in the same season. But to just leave a season, put an end to it with a single decision? In their yellow weatherboard house by the beach, she and her mother were bullied by the weather, and it gave her a strange sense of power to be disobeying it.

‘Have you remembered the homeopathic drops?’ asked Gina.

Ettie unzipped the pea-green leather bag that her aunt had bought for her, and felt among its soft compartments.

‘Maybe they’re in your carry-on,’ said her mother. ‘And you should take an extra dose of Topamax while you’re at it.’

‘I already have,’ said Ettie.

‘Really?’ said her mother. ‘Good girl, that’s reassuring.’

Ettie found the bottle of drops – for balance and calm while travelling – unscrewed its lid and tipped in a mouthful. She’d lied to her mother, but it didn’t feel dishonest. They were crossing the bridge over the wide silver river and Ettie’s eyes followed the stretch of water to the scribble of city beyond. The sky was bleached and empty.

‘Have you heard that joke about the peacock?’ asked Gina.

‘No,’ said Ettie and her mother.

‘Well,’ said Gina, ‘one day this punk sat down on a park bench.’
Gina turned in her seat and Ettie looked at the electricity in her aunt’s face and her tanned olive skin, so unlike her own. ‘And the punk had this Mohawk,’ said Gina, ‘standing up like this, high on his head, all blue and green.’

Ettie’s mother leant on the horn and scowled at another driver.

‘After a while the punk noticed that an old man was staring at him,’ Gina continued. ‘What is that old man gawping at? the punk thought. Look at him sitting there in his old man’s cardigan and his old man’s hat.’

Ettie studied her mother’s slender neck, the gold butterflies clutching the posts of her earrings, her smooth brown shoulders tense and high.

‘Finally the punk couldn’t stand it any longer,’ said Gina, ‘and he turned to face the old man. “Old timer,” the punk said, “why are you staring? Weren’t you ever young once? Were you never wild and free like me?”’

They drove past the casino and Ettie silently said goodbye to the beds of red gladioli.

‘The old man looked at the punk,’ said Gina, beginning to smile. ‘“Oh, yes,” said the old man, “you see, when I was young I fucked a peacock – and I’m thinking you might be my son!”’

They all laughed. Gina’s hooting kept things going long after the joke had worn off.

‘Can you switch the air con on, Mum?’ said Ettie.

‘But you shouldn’t have said it was about a peacock,’ said Ettie’s mother.

‘What?’ asked Gina.

‘The joke.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You shouldn’t have said it was a joke about a peacock,’ said her mother, ‘because that’s supposed to be the surprise, the funny part at the end.’

‘Does it matter?’

‘Of course it matters.’

‘Oh, whatever Tania, honestly.’

‘I’m just telling you.’

It was all so familiar, thought Ettie. They drove slowly past BBQ Bazaar, Pool Werx, Spa World, Go Patio. Times had been good, everyone knew that, money was pouring in from the mines, but still it seemed there was just a lot more of the same old. Some of the fibro houses had been replaced by new
apartments that were pale grey, mid grey, dark grey, and just as downcast as those that had gone before. She thought that good times should mean something greener, lawns and parks and gardens, and something opulent maybe, something Taj Mahal-ish, fountains spouting water, but it was the same tired route to the airport that she knew so well, the long thin road and the four squashed, pot-holed lanes of traffic.

Ettie didn’t know why her aunt had told that joke. Sometimes when people told a joke she got the feeling they were really meaning something else. Perhaps her aunt had been saying something to her about being young, reminding her not to forget, as she embarked on her big adventure, that her aunt and her mother had once had lives too.

Or was a joke just a joke?
A nurse comes to bathe Ettie, and David goes down to the ground floor for coffee. He stands in a long line, a girl pushes a button on a machine and flavoured water pours into a paper cup. To make up for this he buys a pastry, thick with icing.

He takes a seat in the corner. Next to him a table of people are wearing surgical scrubs, their masks hanging around their necks while they eat. He starts on the pastry, until a woman carrying a tray stops and asks if she can share his table.

‘Of course,’ he says, pulling a chair out for her.
‘Thank you.’
‘Here, let me move that.’
‘Thank you.’
She has a big cake too, and they both eat in silence for a while.
‘I think I saw you upstairs?’ she says. ‘In intensive care?’
She has red hair in an elegant knot on top of her head. ‘Were you playing Christy Moore for that patient earlier?’ asks David.
‘Yes, my brother.’ The whites of her eyes are very bright.
‘Is he in a coma?’
‘Yes, he is. I think your daughter is in a coma too?’

He’s not sure why he doesn’t correct her, but it doesn’t seem important.
‘Yes, Ettie fell off her bike the day before yesterday.’
‘Oh, I’m sorry for you both,’ she says. ‘My brother was assaulted on the street, outside a pub.’
‘That’s terrible.’
‘He hit his head on the ground. He was a complete stranger, the one who punched him.’
‘When did this happen?’
‘Two nights ago.’
‘And your brother’s a Christy Moore fan?’
‘Oh, he is.’

They both look down at their sweet consolations and take another mouthful. ‘I know you must be very concerned,’ she says, ‘but I’ve been in a coma myself, and that helps me to be a little less worried.’

‘You came through all right?’

‘I felt I was changed – in a positive way – by it.’

‘How?’

‘Oh, it was a very strange experience,’ she says, pushing her plate away. She has a Galway accent, full of peat and brine.

‘Do you mind telling me about it?’

‘It’s a long story, but I could tell you the important parts.’

She had just turned forty, she says, when she became ill with septicemia and she was placed in an induced coma so her body could fight the infection. While she was in the coma she lived with lions that were devoted to her. She tore apart a live antelope with her hands and teeth. She found a stranger’s eyes on the pavement and placed them in her own head. A child again, she played with the children her parents had once been. She heard the roots of plants and trees communicating beneath the earth. She understood all languages. She composed music. She saw death and had no fear of it.

‘You think I’m being fanciful,’ she says. She has a dark line of lipstick around the edges of her mouth. David thinks of the squid ink he served Ettie and feels guilty, as if there were something diabolical about it.

‘Not at all,’ he says. ‘I’m interested.’

‘I’ve never found the words to describe it,’ she says. ‘It was so immense.’

‘Was it like dreaming?’

‘I’d never had dreams that were anything like it, and I haven’t since. And things didn’t happen one after the other, everything sort of took place at the same time, but in different dimensions. It was like another reality, but with all the feelings of real life.’

‘Was it frightening?’

‘Some of it was, but some of it was more wonderful than anything I’ve ever known.’

They sit in silence. The people in surgical scrubs get up from their table.
‘But the important thing,’ she says, ‘is that after I came out of the coma, it was as if I’d really lived those experiences. I felt them inside me, you know?’ She makes a twisting motion with her fist in the area of her solar plexus.

‘The mystery of consciousness,’ he says.

‘A great mystery indeed.’

‘And were you aware of people around you while you were in the coma?’

She seems to think carefully before she answers. ‘The truth is,’ she says, ‘I have to say I wasn’t.’

‘But you’re playing music to your brother now?’

‘Yes, and he played his guitar to me when I was in my coma, and I can remember that now, you know, like you remember a dream?’

‘So you think it’s worthwhile to play Christy Moore for your brother?’

‘Oh, yes, I do, I do,’ she says. ‘And really – how could you not?’

They talk for a while longer and clear their table and then they take the lift together to intensive care. They nod goodbye outside the ladies’ toilet – they haven’t exchanged names – and he goes on to the ward and back to the chair beside Ettie’s bed. A little while later he glances up as the woman passes and they exchange a smile. Is it good, to have lipstick to apply when your world falls away? Does it help, or is it just one more awful effort?

Ettie looks refreshed after her bath. The nurse has put Vaseline on her lips, and she’s brushed Ettie’s hair and tucked it sweetly behind her ears. There’s a smell of soap and apples about her, and her hands look supple and shiny, freshly moisturised.

As the grey light of afternoon falls and the curtains around the beds are drawn, he speaks to Ettie sometimes, a sentence here and there to situate her, to act as compass. He doesn’t read to her again. There’s already so much monitoring of her body, he doesn’t want to add to the load of everything she cannot control. He wants her to know that she’s not alone, but otherwise to let her drift in the quiet.

Sometimes he reads the newspaper, but often he just sits and thinks; there’s a circle of surrender around Ettie’s bed that feels like meditation. He looks at the little peaks in the sheet made by her feet. He looks at her small hands. He thinks of how much he doesn’t know about the human fingernail and the bed of flesh from which it grows, the deep system of roots beneath.
Ettie’s nails are more mauve than pink, and the delicately rounded tips are translucent. He knows he’d learn amazing things if he studied the science of the fingernail, but nothing would tell him more about her at that moment than this curl of her fingers on the blanket, the stillness she holds in her palm.

He remembers the backyard of his childhood home. His father sat on a step, a cigarette burning beside him, his bare legs thick with hair. David loaded the back of his truck with Matchbox cars and pushed it along the concrete path. His father snipped his toenails with the kitchen scissors, and when the job was finished he ground out his cigarette and disappeared inside. First one ant appeared, and then another, and soon a posse of ants scurried around his father’s toenails. The ants organised themselves into smaller groups, and then each group took hold of a toenail and lifted it, as rowers lift a boat. The ants carried the toenails across the concrete and the lawn. They negotiated their loads up a little hill of sand, and then they, too, disappeared inside.

How could they do it? It was hard even for him, who wasn’t an ant, to move his truck across the uneven slabs and the bumpy buffalo grass, without its wheels getting stuck or the cars falling out. He bit off his own fingernails, crouched close to the ground and waited, but the ants didn’t return. His father’s toenails were yellow and hard, but there had to be something special about them that the ants liked, something to do with cigarettes and hairiness and silence, something to do with being a man.

The nurses come and go to Ettie’s bed. They talk to her and tell her what they’re doing. He thinks about Ettie’s mother preparing to board the plane. Tania’s voice on the phone had been steady enough. He has little sense of the woman he’ll meet at the airport in two days’ time, only that she is a person who would correct someone’s telling of a joke.

He goes back to the coffee shop and eats a sandwich. He walks outside and sits down in the smoker’s gazebo between a pregnant teenager and a man with one leg, and cadges a cigarette. Upstairs again, he looks away as a nurse clears an obstruction from one of Ettie’s tubes.

‘Why don’t you read to her again?’ says the nurse.
‘Do you think it’s a good idea?’
‘It’s not a bad one.’
He picks up *Girls Interrupted* and looks for something short. His back hurts, he moves about in his chair. The story he reads to Ettie is about a young suicide bomber. She changes her mind at the last moment, and turns away. She tells those who curse her that in the final few seconds before her fatal act she saw a lemon fall from a tree.

‘If Allah had wished me to continue,’ she says, ‘he would not have shown me that.’
Claire has offered Ettie’s mother a place to stay when she arrives in Galway, and they talk about it over dinner.

‘I think she’d prefer to be on her own,’ says David. ‘She’s asked me to book her a room somewhere close to the hospital.’

‘How’s she coping?’ says Claire.

‘It’s hard to tell – she’s been dealing with the doctors directly.’ David reaches down to stroke Norman the labrador, stretched out beside his chair. ‘But she’s a nurse, so I guess that helps.’

‘Would it?’

‘At least she has some knowledge, she sounds assertive.’

‘We can have her here for meals,’ says Claire, gathering their empty plates.

‘Let’s just see what she needs,’ he says.

‘Life is a long preparation,’ says Patrick, ‘for something that never happens.’

David grits his teeth. Patrick is quoting Yeats again. It’s his lofty way of closing the discussion, floating his boat over what is real. ‘Well, in this case,’ David says, ‘I’d say it’s already very substantially fucking happened.’

He has known Patrick since they were both twelve years old. Patrick’s father was an enterprising accountant and his mother a successful painter of rosy nudes, but Patrick had been raised in squalor.

A low grey haze of cigarette smoke drifted through the rooms of Patrick’s childhood home. The windows were always locked. The carpets squelched with the piss of their sore-encrusted dogs, but on the kitchen floor you slid in their vomit. Food was cooked in pans vivid with mould, and black impasto shit lined the toilet bowl.

Now, when Patrick exasperates him, David tries to remember how the outline of his small head was drawn in filth on his pillow.
Claire goes to the study to finish some work, and Patrick opens a bottle of cognac. ‘Isn’t it good,’ Patrick says, settling back with his glass, ‘after everything we’ve been through, to be at this place in our lives?’

He is always doing this, fixing the co-ordinates of his life with some fat statement, as though he might not exist otherwise. ‘Only a man having regular sex would say something like that,’ David says. He should’ve left the table with Claire, gone to his room to read or catch up on some sleep. But the day at the hospital had been long, his back hurts, and he needs a drink or two.

Patrick begins talking about Maria Maher, a married woman he had an affair with before he met Claire. He would phone David at home in London, late at night, to talk about her. David was dealing with his own heartbreak then, and impatient with Patrick’s self-delusion. Patrick believed Maria was going to leave her husband and it was blindingly obvious that she never would.

He pours more cognac as Patrick begins going over the same old ground. There’s nothing new to discover about Maria Maher, and it takes him back to his time with Anita, one he’d rather not remember.

He had met Anita at a birthday party in Amsterdam. She was laughing, shimmering, always just out of reach, and he had overturned his life for her.

Anita lived in Hong Kong, on the sixty-fifth floor of an apartment building. At night the lights dazzled and the darkness softened the plunge beyond, but during the day he stayed away from the walls of glass and never, ever looked down.

He took a PR job on an eighty-first floor. He hated the work but while Anita and he were putting a life together, the money was good. Now and then he felt that something wasn’t quite right with them, but he had no reason to doubt her. Doubting would be like looking down.

One night he was alone in the apartment and Hitchcock’s 
Vertigo was on the movie channel. He’d seen the film before but he couldn’t remember much about it, although he owned the vinyl of Bernard Herrmann’s score. It was in storage with the rest of his belongings back in London, waiting for the moment when he and Anita gelled or set or crystallised, whatever it was that would finally tell him they were cooking. He recalled the lurid colours on the
album cover as he settled down to watch the film, ready for dated special effects and hammy acting. Ready for anything but revelation.

San Francisco was beautiful, and so was Kim Novak. She had sphinx eyes and a prim grey suit with a lot of body underneath. He could understand Jimmy Stewart’s obsession with her, because Anita was an equally unknowable woman. David had expected to be amused by the film; he hadn’t expected it to plough up his heart. He sat on the edge of the sofa while Herrmann plucked at his nerves with his teeth. The film unfolded, and Stewart discovered that Novak was not the woman he wanted her to be.

David had grown accustomed to the evenings spent with Anita’s friends in which list-making substituted for conversation. The ten sexiest men? Ten sexiest women? Ten most horrible? Top ten films, songs, advertisements, cars, TV shows? They sat over cocktails at the Gecko Lounge or Kyoto Joe, listing their likes and dislikes, displaying their taste, their discernment.

He found Anita’s list, or perhaps he went looking for it, on a page of the diary she kept in a drawer of her desk.

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<td>Health and fitness</td>
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He put the diary back and went out to the living room. Rain poured down the glass and light wobbled on the carpet. In the kitchen he made himself a cup of coffee but let it grow cold. The X factor was unlikely to be sex, because Anita would have said fuckability if that’s what she’d meant. In what way the X factor could be different from chemistry wasn’t clear to him, but then he wasn’t too good on the finer points of distinction between the BMW23 or the Porsche Boxster, either.
He went to the bedroom, changed into track pants and took the lift down sixty-six floors to the gym. He worked out for an hour, caught the lift back up, drank a glass of water and vomited. He stood scalding himself in the shower, then he sat on the sofa with a glass of whisky and watched the rain turn the city to mush.

It was the banality of the list that hurt. He thought about the story of *Bluebeard*, which another girlfriend had told him, at another, distant time. In the story, a young woman marries a nobleman called Bluebeard and goes to live in his castle. She is happy there, until one day, while her husband is away, she opens a door that is forbidden to her, and behind it she finds a bloody chamber of death and the bodies of Bluebeard’s earlier brides.

In the fairy tale the young wife survives, of course, and Bluebeard gets what is coming to him. David’s girlfriend had applied the crude gender politics of the story to the world in general, and their relationship in particular, but that day in Hong Kong he envied the young wife her gory discovery. There was passion in it, huge human feeling, the fear and danger that lie within love. Inside her husband, the young wife had discovered a man of monstrous proportions, but inside Anita, as in a Russian nesting doll, he had simply found a much smaller woman.

‘I heard Maria and her husband had a baby,’ says Patrick.

‘Sorry?’

‘Maria and her husband had a baby.’

‘Did they?’ David says, understanding that Patrick has finally arrived at the point of all his talk.

‘Yes, a daughter, called Esperance.’

Claire and Patrick had just been through another failed cycle of IVF. David knows what this means to Claire, but he and Patrick hadn’t talked about it. ‘I think it means hope,’ David says.

‘What does?’

‘Esperance.’

‘It’s French?’

‘Yes.’

‘Hope?’

‘Yes.’

‘Pretentious, if you ask me.’
‘That husband of hers was always a complete wanker,’ says David, and pours them both more cognac.
He has a hangover when he arrives at the hospital the next day. Ettie’s nurse tells him she wiped away tears from Ettie’s face in the night.

‘Were they actual tears?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’m not sure,’ he says, ‘I guess I’m wondering if they were an expression of something she was feeling, or if it was just – I know this sounds stupid – just a sort of leak?’

The nurse places her hand on his arm. ‘I’m not a plumber,’ she says, ‘but I think we can say they were tears.’

‘Does that mean she was distressed, or in pain?’

‘We can’t rule out either, but it was just a few tears – I wouldn’t worry too much.’

But he does worry. It’s awful to think that Ettie might be suffering and unable to show it, that she might feel locked in, buried alive. He hopes he’ll see the red-haired woman again, the one who told him about her coma, because he will ask her what she thinks about this. The curtain around her brother’s bed is drawn, but all morning as he sits beside Ettie he keeps an eye out for her.

He thinks that he should talk to her now. ‘It’s ten in the morning, Ettie, so that means your mother will be in the air somewhere over India, or at least I think so. Have you ever been to India? I have, once, I had a friend who worked on a paper in Chennai. I don’t know where he is now. He cooked a story and they gave him the sack.’

The nurses help him feel better about his anxious babbling. They move around Ettie’s bed, quiet and impassive, their faces never betraying a hint of amusement or criticism. He hates it when women laugh at him. Perhaps it reminds him of his mother, or it might not be that specific. One of his girlfriends used to say that men were afraid of being laughed at by women, but women were afraid of men killing them. He had thought she was so clever to
see that, to put it so pithily – they were both young – but later he’d discovered it was really something that Margaret Atwood had said.

It is early afternoon when a nurse finally opens the curtain around the bed of the man who likes Christy Moore. David is expecting to see the man’s sister there, but the cubicle is empty, the bed freshly made.

‘Where’s that patient gone?’ he asks a nurse.

‘He passed in the night,’ she says.

Oh, his sister and the clear whites of her eyes. He’d forgotten that everything on this ward is precarious. The hum of the machines and Ettie’s unchanging expression and the nurses’ good-natured coming and goings had made him forget. Ettie’s mother is still a day and a half away – what if something happens to Ettie before then? It’s unthinkable, meeting a stranger at Dublin Airport, and telling her that her daughter is dead.

He takes *Girls Interrupted* from the bedside cabinet and opens it at the first new story he finds. He has to make a raft for Ettie to float on until her mother arrives. He reads the story, and then he reads her the one after that. Perhaps his intensity brings a smile to the faces of the nurses then, but it doesn’t matter. He reads to Ettie all through the afternoon. He finishes Missy Tzu and starts on *Interview with a Vampire*, a story from the good old days, when vampires had real blood in them.

There’s a young girl in it, too, a girl who will never die.

He’s anxious when he leaves the hospital that evening. He has arranged to meet Claire and Patrick at Ard Bia, his favourite restaurant, but he checks that the nurses have his phone number, just in case. He walks quickly, not stopping on any of the bridges as he normally would. He knows he’ll wake in Claire and Patrick’s guestroom in the middle of the night and hear the Corrib continuing, still flowing below.

It is the last night of the weekend and people are out on the streets for their final fun. He walks down Shop Street, past the bank that was once Lynch’s Castle. He thinks of the story that is told about the Lynches, an ancient Norman family and one of the ruling tribes of Galway. The story concerned the young Lynch lad, who went out with his mates one evening, late in the sixteenth century, and killed a man he fought with in a bar.

David weaves his way through the busy Latin Quarter, looking at all the young men standing outside the pubs in packs. Their faces are blurred and
swollen from the weekend’s drinking, full of swagger, but their eyes brim with mute hurt. No one in Galway wanted to be the person to execute the Lynch lad for his crime. The lad was popular, but his father was also the Mayor of Galway at the time, so on the day of punishment, when a large crowd gathered but no executioner could be found, the mayor stepped forward, slipped the noose around his son’s neck, and did the hanging himself.

The young man who had just died in intensive care had been king hit outside a pub. The Lynch story may or may not be true, just as the origin of the term lynching was open to argument. But it seemed forever beyond doubt that young men would go on expressing their pain in dumb, howling, animal violence; that sisters would sit at bedsides, and fathers be forced to make the most terrible of sacrifices.

He stops to look in the window of a bookshop. A girl wearing a long black skirt plays slow violin. A little further on, a man is finishing his sand sculpture of a sleeping dog. David had seen him beginning the work when he walked by earlier that morning. He saw the man wetting the sand, patting it out, and now on the pavement lies a golden retriever so life-like he can feel its humble doggy soul. In an hour or so, the sculptor will destroy his day’s work and walk away with a cap in which he has collected a few coins.

David’s frightened for Ettie, and sad for the woman whose brother has died. His back hurts. His chest feels as thin as eggshell, as though someone could poke a hole in him, there’s no meaning in anything. He walks with his head down until he hears the river, and then, beyond the Spanish Arch, there is Ard Bia’s red door, and Ard Bia’s red bicycle with its basket of red geraniums.

He chooses a table and nods to the waiter for his usual. Outside the window the river spangles in the early twilight. He takes out his phone and rings the hospital. He gets through to intensive care and finally to the nurse he’d talked to earlier.

‘I think she might be wearing contact lenses,’ he says, ‘or maybe only one.’

‘Yes,’ says the nurse.

‘I’m not sure, but I thought her tears might have something to do with that.’
‘Well, contact lenses are certainly something we should know about,’ she says. ‘I’ll tell the doctor.’

His drink arrives and the waiter lights a candle on the table. He sips Campari and waits for his friends. The breeze from the window harasses the candle flame.
Ettie’s mother’s plane has been delayed by thirty minutes. He buys a coffee and reads the newspaper while he waits. *Boland’s Shock Exclusion*. In England or Australia, or in any of the other countries in which he’s lived, this front-page headline would be about a sportsman. But Eavan Boland is a famed poet, and the students who had taken the ‘crazy gamble’ of banking on a question about her work appearing in the Leavers’ English exam, had been left ‘stunned’.

He wonders if Tania Conti has a window seat and if she’s looking down at this moment. The day is clear and he knows how picture-postcard everything will look. He wonders if she’s the type to go in for magical thinking, if her first glimpse of an orderly green Ireland will give her hope.

He had borrowed Claire’s Citroen to drive to Dublin and he went to the hospital before he set out. He wanted to be able to give Ettie’s mother an up-to-the-minute account when she stepped off the plane. No change, Ettie’s doctor had reported, and the nurse said she’d spent an incident-free night.

He’d sat down beside Ettie’s bed and told her that her mother would soon be there. The cut on Ettie’s head had almost healed and her eyebrows were growing back, proof of life amid the stillness, like weeds breaking through concrete. Ettie’s face is now so familiar to him. It’s a face that contains her childhood and intimates her future, yet she has not moved one muscle. Her mood this morning seemed to be a floating, waiting one, not deeply peaceful but content enough, for now.

At Gate 7 he waits for the doors to open. They haven’t talked about how they’ll recognise each other, and it turns out not to matter. The moment he sees the boyishly thin blonde he knows she’s Ettie’s mother because she’s pumping out emotion in just the way that Ettie was the night she arrived at his door. Business people and tourists arrive through the doors too, but all of them are observing the area of restricted space drawn invisibly around her. Some of them glance at her as they pass, curious about her odd power. She’s
wearing cream-coloured jeans tucked into tall black riding boots, and her platinum hair is cut short with a fringe over one eye, like someone in Duran Duran, or an old-fashioned schoolboy.

‘David?’ She says his name in the Australian way, running a hot iron over it. Her breath is stale and her face is lovely, but he wouldn’t be able to describe it. A bright light shines from her that makes him look away, a warning light that says don’t you fucking dare.

‘Have you seen Esther today?’

‘Yes.’

She lets him take her small suitcase and then she folds her arms and hunches her shoulders and they walk, heads down, talking quietly. He’s dimly aware of their easy path, crowds parting around them, like they’re a hot knife in butter. She nods often, asking questions and taking in his answers, and soon they’re in a loop of cool, precise discussion.

She is taller than Ettie, but not by much. Her head reaches his shoulder. While they make their way through the airport he feels clear alternations in her – fear and exhaustion, and some other simmering thing he can’t put his finger on, but all of them held in balance by a crisp intelligence. He tries to stick to the facts and keep his feelings to himself. It’s hard to hold on to the powerful sense of Ettie he has when he’s at her bedside. In the face of Tania’s medical experience his feelings seem sentimental, a product of nothing more than his own imagination.

They walk slowly through the airport doors and outside they walk in silence past a line of grey-faced smokers. A woman is standing with one leg on a large suitcase, as if she’s just killed it, and although he feels a flicker of amusement in Tania, when he glances at her she’s still frowning.

The silence between them isn’t uncomfortable. There’s no pressure to get to know each other, they’re not there for that. He feels as though he’s been the temporary custodian of an important artwork or archeological treasure, which he is now handing back to its owner.

They drive out of the airport. Tania pulls a cardigan out of her bag. Her bones are delicate and all her movements economical.

‘That’s a nasty bite you’ve got on your hand,’ he says. ‘Did a dog do it?’ She looks at the wound as if for the first time. ‘It was a patient.’

‘What sort of patient does that?’
'A dementia patient. I work with old people. Just someone lost and confused.' She turns and looks out the window. Red flowers bloom underwhelmingly along the side of the road, and they drive on again in silence. ‘Why do they always have to be laughing?’ she says suddenly, startling him. It takes a moment to understand that she’s talking about the billboards they’re passing; advertisements for phones, food, travel, finance, and everyone with their mouths wide open, their eyes popping. ‘As if life is just hill-air-ee-us,’ she says. The simmering feeling in her that he hadn’t been able to name? Anger. ‘The only ones not laughing are them,’ he says, pointing to the fashion models staring down at them, grim and cat-eyed, the true face of commerce. The funny thing is, they both laugh. Galway is three hours away. Tania closes her eyes sometimes; she hadn’t been able to sleep on the plane. At one of those times he looks over and sees the fine gold chain caught on the tight tendon of her slender neck, her hands in tense fists. They travel for long periods in silence, but now and then they talk about the world going by outside the windows – the animals, the green, the sky. Giant rolls of yellow hay lie stacked in the fields. They drive into a dirty purple cloud, and when they come out the other side the sun dries the rain on the bonnet. Playing quietly in his head is an old Sam and Dave song, the words slightly altered. ‘Hold on, we’re coming,’ it goes.
It isn’t easy going back to an empty cottage. Nothing there cares that he’s been away. He opens a window and turns on some lights; he takes his bag upstairs.

This is how aloneness is done, procedurally, one moment at a time. His back hurts from the long drive, and while there’s still some light left in the sky he must walk. He pulls on an old jumper, takes a beer from the fridge, leaves the cottage and heads south.

He’s trying to reconnect to the island. The island hasn’t noticed that he’s been away either. He has never before lived in a place so indifferent to hiscomings and goings. The grey, austere stone, the wild wraparound sea: the island demands work of everyone, even if it’s only the work to feel at home there.

It’s a soft sunset, apricot light. The road is a thin ribbon as far as he can see. He’s planning to walk to the shore of Sunda Ghriora, Gregory’s Sound, the stretch of water that separates Inishmore from Inishmaan. Tania is at the hospital now, and there’s nothing more he can do for her daughter. He feels as though he’s been holding Ettie these past days, holding her up, and the time has come to set her down again. He’s exhausted. The nerves around his eyes are jumping and there’s a chemical taste in his mouth. He needs to get back to work. His book will be recalcitrant, but it will take only a few days to find where he’d been before Ettie arrived at his door.

His beer is empty. He wishes he had another. Silence waits in the intervals between the striking of the waves. It’s a thick, slabbed silence that he craves to hear again. He’s sorry now that he’s not walking to the western side of the island, where he could watch the sun slip into the sea. He’d been wrong about how much light he had, but to turn back now would be a failure. He doesn’t let himself fail. At the centre of his life is an emptiness he can’t fill, but around that hollow he’ll allow for nothing but completion, attainment, every task met.
If he set out for Gregory’s Sound, then he must reach it.

The pain in his back isn’t easing but he thinks it will. He moves quickly through the valley the islanders call the Vale of Tears. He’s not far away now. The shore is close and there’s no silence, no let-up in the sounds the ocean makes.

When he reaches Gregory’s Sound, he stops and looks out across the water. The island of Inishmaan is a dark rise against the deep blue sky, its lighthouse the first, stuttering star. The land dribbles away into the water here, there are no photogenic cliff faces, the stone just gives in to the sea. He knows he has only minutes before the world plunges into darkness. He picks his way across a tangle of seaweed that’s as black and tough as tyre rubber, and stands where the water laps the toes of his shoes. Not to reach this point, to fall short of the land’s edge, would be failure too.

He doesn’t know if it’s the haunting of this place, or the days he’s spent in intensive care, but he feels exiled, desolate. The ocean sighs, or it might be the keening of ghosts – in the nineteenth century the emigrant ships sailing from Galway passed through these waters. He looks out at the black sea and tries to imagine the kind of goodbyes that people said in those times, the distances that opened in lives once so close. But the goodbyes were made, and the ships set sail, and on land there might even have been wakes for those whose leaving was as final as death.

He tries to imagine the people of Inishmore, when the word went out that one of the ships was becalmed on Gregory’s Sound. A ship might be stranded for hours, waiting for a wind to sail it to America, it might drift there for days. The islanders left their homes. They came down to the shore through the Vale of Tears, to stand where he’s standing now, to gaze across the water at the spectral boat and the shadowy, unreachable shapes of those they had already begun to mourn.

Inishmaan might be thunder now, massing on the horizon, or it might be a beast erupting from the sea. Night is down. It’s hard to conceive of those farewells in this world, he thinks, people saying goodbye to loved ones, knowing they would never see them again. He turns his back to the water and steps his way across the seaweed, deep breathing iodine. It’s hard to imagine that kind of forever.
He is glad he left a light on in the cottage. He goes into every room and turns on more lights, then he turns on the television and sits and stares at it, squinting in the brilliance, until the bleak demon clutching at his heart loosens its grip and skulks away. He walks slowly around the cottage again, shutting off lights, switching on lamps, lighting a couple of candles.

He feels like a weary butler preparing a residence for his gentleman, living it up somewhere out there in the world of women and wine.

The walk has made his back worse, not better, and now there’s pain in his right leg too. He sits in front of the television again, but there’s nothing to watch. He gets up and pours himself a whisky. He has some prescription painkillers somewhere – it’s time for the heavy artillery. In the bathroom he avoids his reflection as he searches through the cabinet. He moves slowly back through the cottage. He turns off the television and lamps and blows out the candles; clearly his gentleman is not coming home tonight.

Upstairs he drops his clothes on the floor. He swallows two tablets with a slug of whisky and gets into bed, hoping for sleep. He lies on his back and looks up at the circle of night sky. He tries to draw a line around the pain, annex the warring territory. He closes his eyes and feels where the very last nerve is implicated. The pain is on the right side of his body only, which makes it worse, since the feeling of having no pain stretches like paradise alongside it. In the darkness, he draws a line that extends down his spine, divides his anus, outlines his thighbone and returns to finish at a sharp point below his shoulder blade. But then the very moment he finishes the map, the pain moves, as though pain were mercury, the very nature of it evasive.

He waits for the drugs to work. Even if they work slowly, grain by grain, he waits to be shown a sign. Surcease, he sends the word out to the pain. Surcease, surcease, surcease. Beautiful, archaic word: my request is for the surcease of all this iarre.

He turns on his side and then he turns back, limited in the positions he’s able to lie in. Perhaps that’s a definition of growing old: a limitation of the positions one is able to lie in. He thinks of all the ways in which this is true, all its shades of meaning. But he doesn’t want to think, only sleep. He tries to float beyond everything. He tries to become nothing but a man in a bed on an island in the vast Atlantic, but the pain won’t allow him to be insignificant.
He can hear voices below. He and Ettie are at the table talking.

‘I want to come back,’ she says.

‘What’s stopping you?’

‘I’m stuck in something.’

‘What are you stuck in?’

‘It might be mud. Or it might be a honey jar.’

‘Do you want me to help you?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know.’

The alarm wakes him, and the circle of sky above is now blue. He has work to do today, but when he moves to get out of bed it’s only his shoulders that lift from the mattress. He can slide his legs a little, but it’s as though a belt of steel is strapped across his hips, bolting him to the bed. If he tries to shift that part of his body, the pain is a wall. Even if movement is on the other side of that wall, he can’t get through it.

*Jesus Christ!* He lies back on the pillow. He’s never been stuck like this before, but he guesses that in a moment or two, after a few deep breaths, he’ll be fine. But the pain has never been this bad before, either. After every attempt to move, he lies back, sweating. He must subdue the pain somehow, because it’s the pain that’s stopping him. He reaches for the painkillers on the bedside table and swallows two with a mouthful of Jameson, the only liquid he has. Jesus fucking Christ, he says, pulling a pillow over his eyes to block out the light.

The phone jolts him awake. He moves quickly as if to run downstairs, but he’s still strapped to the bed. The ringing stops. He looks up at the ceiling and the circle of sky, and examines the situation. There’s no reason for anyone to come by. Orla knows he’s been spending time at the hospital, so she will think he’s still there. And he had told Tania he’d go to Galway some time over the next few days, but nothing was definite. He isn’t part of anyone’s life; everyone will just presume he is elsewhere.

But he is convinced he’ll be able to move if he can just deaden the pain enough. He is also desperate to take a piss. He swallows two more tablets with another belt of whisky, checks the clock and waits for twenty minutes, then he lifts himself slowly onto his elbows and tries to drag the rest of his body to the side of the bed, like a merman stranded on land, dragging his fucking tail. Except that tipping himself onto the floor really isn’t such a
good idea, because he wouldn’t be able to get any further. He punches the mattress and lies back on the sheets. He looks at the white walls and listens to the sea birds squalling. Every now and then a bird flaps slowly across the skylight, like a flag waved by the world.

Next to the painkillers and whisky on the bedside table, there are pens and keys, a book of David Foster Wallace essays, and George Gissing’s *New Grub Street*. But his glasses are downstairs and he can’t read a word of them. If he stretched out his arm and fingers, he’d probably be able to claw in a shoe that’s lying on the floor, but these few useless objects define his world now.

It is impossible to imagine not being in pain. It’s useless trying to confine the pain by drawing a line around it, and it only hurts more when he tries to describe it to himself. The phone rings again. The tension of wanting to urinate is unbearable. He edges the top half of his body to the side of the bed and reaches for the hiking boot. It’s surprisingly easy to piss into the boot, but he’s not so good at getting the boot back to the floor without any of it spilling.

He takes two mouthfuls of whisky, one to help him swallow more tablets, one for his thirst, and then he jerks off to a quick, reliable concept, one stick and three holes.

If he can’t move, he will have to be unconscious.
He was twenty-one when he arrived in London, hid his grubby shirt under a cheap suit and went out to find a job.

The offices of the *Agricultural Times* were near the Barbican. Editorial and advertising were on the first and second floors, *Fish Industry* and *Construction Monthly* were on the third and fourth, and two new acquisitions, *Cottage Crafts* and *The Quilting Quarterly*, were operating out of what used to be the old tearoom on the ground.

But he wasn’t in the office much, he was out and about. On Monday he might be visiting a poultry farm, Tuesday a cheese factory, Wednesday a pig abattoir. He travelled through the English countryside, from small town to provincial city, reading Thomas Hardy and staring out of train windows.

Back in London again, maybe it was the launch of Pork Pie Month that he covered, with free drinks and samples of the famous cold-fat pie, served with smiles by busty ye-olde-wenches with hay in their hair. And the Hard Rock Café had introduced the British Bun to their burger! A burger bun that was 100 per cent...British! More free drinks! Free buns! Twice a week he was up before dawn for the Smithfield Markets, where humans had once been drawn and quartered, but where the city now traded its meat. Lamb prices were up, beef down. Or was it the other way round? Porters in bloodied aprons shouldering the carcasses of pigs and cows and sheep; lots of noise for all that death, as loud as the stock exchange floor, and no Francis Bacon or Damien Hirst in sight, no one contemplating mortality and flesh.

At the *Agricultural Times* he wrote about barley crops, mastitis in dairy cows, new marketing plans for the purple turnip, and, in the autumn of 1987, he began writing about the Animal Liberation Front.

He met the girl who called herself Raven in a café off Farringdon Road on a grey Thursday. ‘Raven lunatic,’ the deputy editor had said. The Animal Liberation Front had recently claimed responsibility for a spate of attacks on butchers’ shops and vans, and there had been some raids on chicken farms.
too. No one in the food trade knew much about the ALF, although the ALF seemed to know plenty about them. The Animal Liberation Front was an underground movement, leaderless, and as hard to pin down as fog. It had taken him a while, but finally he’d got hold of a phone number and told someone who sounded as though they were speaking through their hanky that he wanted a face to face.

He arrived at the café first and took a seat with a view of the door. He would know his interviewee by her black hair, he’d been told, and she’d be carrying a copy of *Watership Down*. In his fantasies, he’d created Raven in the image of Modesty Blaise: six feet tall without her boots – although she was never without them – and wearing a black, skin-tight costume (vinyl, of course, never leather) with a zip all the way down the front. In his fantasies Raven seized a whip from some cruel animal handler and turned it against the man – *me next, Raven! turn on me next!* – or else she placed a pair of glasses on her beautiful nose and leant her zip towards him to discuss strategy.

His fantasies had been restrained only by what he thought of as her sentimental reading taste. If the ALF had told him she would be carrying a copy of *Moby Dick*, he’d have gone truly bonkers.

The real Raven poked her umbrella through the café door and entered sideways, shaking wetly. She was podgy with skin that was potato grey, and on her head was a nylon wig in the style of an early Beatles mop. She wore a dozen droopy garments, and clutched a battered copy of the bunny book to her chest in such a desperate manner that everyone in the café turned to look at her.

He felt irritated and embarrassed, having himself dressed sharply for the interview, so he shuffled her into a booth in a back corner and ordered a pot of tea.

At first she had prepared answers to his prepared questions, and they moved stiffly back and forth.

‘What does the Animal Liberation Front hope to achieve by its actions?’

‘We want to save animals.’

He was aware of his leather shoes and watchstrap, even the milk he was pouring into his cup. He watched the milk colour the tea, and saw her black, his white. He wondered if he disgusted her. Did she think that, in reporting on the food trade, he was collaborating in its atrocities? It was uncomfortable
at first, to see himself as she might. His mind filled with defensive argument: it was his job to be objective; he was a servant of the ways things are, not the way things should be.

‘And we want to force animal exploiters out of business,’ she added.

He wanted to laugh out loud. He wanted to say but you must know that’s never going to happen? Instead, he checked his tape recorder and asked a question about the ALF’s structure. He studied her properly then, as she talked about decentralisation and covert cells. She looked younger than him, but not by much. She spoke carefully, and quietly, and it wasn’t long before he understood that being there was a kind of agony for her. She was squishy and hapless on the outside, but he could feel her iron core.

The lads in the office had joked about his meeting with Raven; how he might be kidnapped and tortured, how he might have his balls snipped off.

‘About the recent raids on chicken farms,’ he said. ‘What happens to the hens that you capture?’

‘You mean the hens we liberate.’

The editor of the Agricultural Times, Malcolm Keynes, laughed along with the boys, but he had a use for Raven. The Animal Liberation Front’s activities had been an unexpected boost to the paper’s profile and circulation. The paper had established an ALF phone line that was used by both victims and Fronters to report attacks. The attacks were news, and the paper had eagerly established itself as the protector of Britain’s food trade.

Malcolm Keynes didn’t visit the butchers’ shops in the suburbs of Manchester and Leeds. He didn’t know his way around the farms of Cornwall; he couldn’t tell a meat from a milk cow. If asked, he would not have been able to tell you the price of eggs. He knew advertising rates and revenue. He drank lunch with the paper’s sales manager and publisher; he was a company man. And he didn’t give a shit about the readers, much less about their livelihoods. His cynicism was so thick you could stir it with a stick.

When David thought about Keynes he could feel the ground shifting between Raven and himself, between her black and his white. If she thought he was disgusting, that wasn’t so bad. In fact, wasn’t it kind of interesting?

‘The problem with liberating hens is that people don’t always do it right,’ said Raven.

‘No?’
‘Can this go off the record?’ she asked. She had felt the shift too, he thought. ‘Like we’re just having a talk?’

‘Sure.’

‘For example,’ she said, steadying her wig, ‘if you take hens out of their cages and just put lots of them together in a box or sack, there’s a chance they’ll all kill each other before you get home.’

It was a repulsive thought, but he stayed quiet.

‘It’s like anything,’ she continued, ‘there are right and wrong ways to do it. But I’ve learnt. I’ve found the right way now.’

‘And what do you mean by right?’

‘I mean no harm.’

‘To the animals?’

‘To animals and humans.’

She turned her cup slowly in its saucer; she was still wearing her knitted gloves. She touched the china as if it was a living thing, as if not to hurt it.

‘Would you call yourself a criminal or a terrorist?’

‘Neither,’ she said, coolly. ‘You can switch your tape recorder on again.’

‘What would you call yourself then?’

She drank the last of her tea and poured another cup. Her face was scrupulously free of make-up. He thought of Orla saying, ‘It’s not natural not to be artificial.’

‘Maybe a vandal with a cause?’ said Raven.

He laughed, relieved to find she had a sense of humour, but then he thought about the butchers.

Perhaps he’d wanted a sexier job in journalism, but he had regular money, luncheon vouchers and a union card. And once he’d started travelling, learning about the trade and meeting the producers and processors, it had become important to him to do a good job. He liked the people, but most of all he liked the butchers. Potato farmers were not all alike, and neither were cheese makers; one ham manufacturer was not the same as the next. But as he’d moved around the country, he had discovered the same courtesy in every butcher he met, the same strain of kindness.

Organic butchers with green potted plants, or Bruegel-faced butchers with sawdust on the floor, man or woman, master or apprentice, all he ever
encountered was the same easy patience, the same way of making him feel just that bit better about everything.

He hadn’t analysed it. He hadn’t wondered if it had something to do with practising an ancient craft, or if it was a steady diet of animal protein that made butchers this way. He hadn’t even considered whether having over-developed nerve endings, or ethics, might be inconsistent with finding any peace in this world. Butchers’ nerve-endings may have been blunter than those of Raven and her fellow Fronters, but they knew how to spread the love around.

‘But butchers,’ he said. ‘Take them for example. What do you expect butchers to do if they’re forced out of business?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘They could grow things?’

‘Grow things?’

‘Yes, vegetables and things. Or they could open plant nurseries, if they still wanted to have a shop. It would be good for them in the end, good for their souls.’

So now they were in the realm of the soul. Raven, he wanted to say, why don’t you tell me your real name? Why don’t you slip off that wig and show me the hair God gave you? ‘I’ve just finished writing a feature on ritual slaughter,’ he said.

‘I don’t know that much about it, but I suppose I should.’

‘Well, you know that people of Jewish and Islamic faiths have lots of different practices around the preparation of food?’

‘I know Jews don’t eat pork.’

‘That’s one of them.’

‘I think that’s good.’

‘I’m sure you do,’ he said, ‘but that’s not really my point.’

‘Did you know pork has worms in it?’

It was no more the case that pork contained worms than it was possible to lure an intestinal parasite from someone’s body by dangling a steak in front of him. But on such ideas, he thought, fanaticisms are founded. Pigs were sensitive, clever animals that sensed their own deaths and produced stress hormones that affected the quality of their meat – that was what she should have known.
‘Anyway,’ he said, ‘the animals eaten by practising Jews and Muslims have to be killed in ways that conform to religious law.’

‘They shouldn’t be killed at all.’

‘But if you’re going to eat animals, and lots of people do – then isn’t it about having some discipline and compassion in killing them? In kosher slaughter, for example, you’re not allowed to kill an animal and its offspring on the same day.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because it’s not … right.’ He’d been impressed by this when he learnt it, but now he found it hard to say why.

‘But the mother wouldn’t know if she’s dead, and that just leaves more time for the baby to be alone before it’s killed.’

‘But it doesn’t even have to be its biological offspring,’ he said. ‘It could be any animal that follows another one around, like a lamb that might take to a cow – that can’t be killed on the same day either.’

‘I don’t see how that’s more compassionate. It’s only more compassionate from the human point of view – makes them feel better about things.’

‘Them?’

‘Us.’

‘Kosher and halal slaughter men train for years in religious law,’ he persisted, ‘and there are all these rituals that have to be observed before the animal’s throat is cut.’

‘They cut their throats?’

‘In special ways, with special knives.’

‘But what about an anaesthetic?’

‘Well, no, that’s one of the reasons there’s controversy about ritual slaughter,’ he said, wondering just how long she’d been in the animal liberation business. ‘The animals aren’t allowed to be stunned beforehand.’

‘Stunned?’

‘Yes, animals are stunned before killing – either electrical or captive-bolt.’

‘Why don’t they give them an injection?’

‘Because it’s a production line, it’d cost too much money and the chemicals wouldn’t be good for the meat.’ He hadn’t intended for their interview to further her education. He had seen stuff, he knew things, but all of this he could keep at a distance if he never spoke about it. He could do his job and
live in a new city, far away from his parents. He could even continue to see what he saw and learn how to cook it.

‘But how does a religion justify killing like that?’ Raven said, ‘when an animal feels it?’

‘People claim that the training and special laws around the cutting make it less cruel.’

‘I don’t know,’ she said, looking down at her hands. ‘Can we stop for a minute, please?’

He was relieved to take a break. He watched her clip the side of a table as she weaved her way to the Ladies, then he reached under the table to open his briefcase and pull out a quarter of Johnny Walker. He took a couple of big mouthfuls and sat back to think about Rabbi Glick.

He’d interviewed Rabbi Glick when he was writing the article about ritual slaughter. They had met in his grey office, and he’d served instant coffee. Rabbi Glick was wearing a sweater over a white shirt and dark trousers, his belly like a basketball.

Eventually David had got around to the same question that Raven had posed. ‘But what about the animal’s suffering when its throat is cut?’

Rabbi Glick studied him for a moment. ‘I’ll tell you a story,’ he said. ‘You’re not English are you, young man?’

‘No, I’m Australian and Irish.’

‘Is that right? I wouldn’t have thought so, but anyway – do you know what Mrs Thatcher has done?’

David figured he wasn’t required to answer.

‘That’s right,’ Rabbi Glick said, nodding his head, ‘that’s exactly right. She’s let all the hatred rise up again.’ He lifted his arms in wide, sweeping circles, and David felt it, the hatred summoned again. ‘But we knew this time. We had seen it before. We knew how to fight.’

David clicked the end of his pen in and out.

‘It was the spring of 1983,’ Rabbi Glick said. ‘You know spring, young man? Chirp chirp, cheep cheep?’

David laughed.

‘There was a rally in Hyde Park. Enormous, it was. I don’t like crowds, but this was different. Everyone there was tired of Mrs Thatcher, and frightened by what was going on.’ He leant over the plate of chocolate digestives
and smiled at David. ‘There were people like you -- young men who looked like they didn’t have a care in the world but how to bed a girl and fill their stomach.’

Was that what he looked like?

‘But they knew,’ Rabbi Glick said, ‘they knew. And all those gay people were there, they knew too. And people who looked like they’d just got off the bus, you know those people? Those people who are all around us, people we don’t know until something like that happens, until something scares us and we all have to come together to say NO!’

He had never protested against anything in his life, and he felt that Rabbi Glick knew it.

‘And that’s when it happened,’ Rabbi Glick said, slumping back in his chair, relaxed. ‘That’s when they slipped the knife into me.’

‘Who did?’ David sat upright, stopped clicking his pen.

‘Those National Front boys,’ he said. ‘Here, I’ll show you.’ He jumped to his feet, lifted his sweater and shirt, and pushed his belly forward. ‘See!’ he said. ‘See!’

A long, raised scar like a centipede ran from Rabbi Glick’s chest to his navel. ‘Someone stabbed you?’

‘Yes, the little bugger,’ he laughed, tucking his shirt into his trousers. He sat down and reached for his coffee. ‘But I didn’t feel a thing.’

‘No!’

‘I didn’t, not a thing.’

‘But what happened?’

‘We were protesting too, me and my friends, under our Jewish banner. And there was trouble. Those National Front boys surrounded us, in their boots and their braces. But the police came and we thought everything was all right.’

‘And?’

‘And then my friend yelled, “Max, Max, the blood!”’

‘You were bleeding?’

‘Gushing.’

‘Gushing!’

‘They took me to the hospital and stitched me up like a teddy bear.’

‘That’s terrible,’ said David.
‘But you see my point? I’m not telling you a crazy story here, I’m trying to answer your question.’

‘I can’t remember what my question was!’

‘The animals,’ said Rabbi Glick. ‘That’s how I know they don’t suffer. If the knife’s sharp, if it’s quick, no one feels a thing.’

David took another belt of whisky and pushed his briefcase back under the table. Raven returned and when she sat down he saw that she’d taken off her gloves. ‘I sort of stuffed up,’ she said, when she saw him looking at her raw, skinned hands.

‘What happened?’

‘I super-glued myself.’

‘Instead of what?’

‘A lock on a butcher’s shop.’

‘Jesus, you really made a mess of it.’

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘that’s why I’m here really, talking to you. I’m not so good at … the practical stuff.’

‘You mean the damage?’

‘We call them actions.’

He didn’t understand what happened next. Perhaps the whisky had dissolved the boundary between the visible and invisible worlds, or perhaps just a little bit of the real Raven had peeked out from beneath her wig, but at that moment he was sure that someone had frequently raised a hand to this girl.

It was strange, that he could stand up from the table and offer his hand and take her sore one gently, that he could thank her, think her brave, think her foolish, and still be convinced that he knew something about her that was no real knowledge at all.

She left and he paid the bill. She came back for her umbrella and they nodded goodbye again. As he walked to the tube, huddled into his coat, looking back over the meeting and shaping the story in his head, he suddenly understood that Raven hadn’t seen him as disgusting, because she hadn’t seen him at all.

Raven thought that agriculture was an animal holocaust, but he didn’t see it that way. He couldn’t feel it that way. For him, the real deal was people.
After meeting Rabbi Glick, he felt more about animal liberationists’ use of the word ‘holocaust’ than he would about the next hundred chickens he saw die.

He could still be dazed by the smallest of things about people, like the moment when you met a stranger at the entrance of a store, or when you bumped into someone on the street, and it was ‘Oh, I’m sorry’ and ‘No, I’m sorry,’ and then it got all Chip ‘n Dale – ‘After you,’ ‘No, after you, I insist,’ ‘No, I insist’ – and you both laughed, as if together you understood some vast cosmic joke, when really it was just the warm muscle of human civility working between you at that moment.

When he got back to the office the lads came crouching towards him, their legs crossed. ‘Still got your balls, Davey? Still got your balls?’
He wakes to nausea and pain. He’d knocked the alarm clock over when he reached for the boot to piss in, and now he can’t tell what time it is. In the circle above the sky is a dusty mauve. He’s never seen such a lovely colour, or a more melancholy one. It’s the colour of the outside world, and he feels as though he’ll never be part of that world again.

Every part of him is involved in the pain now, and the bed and the house are involved too. He tries not to think, but his mind fills with images of blood and chains, hooks and knives, as though pain is showing him its imagination, or its unconscious.

Now he understands how torture works. It takes a person apart, nerve by nerve. Like a composer builds a piece of music, note by note, only reversed. Music is the opposite of torture; he tries to think about that. If he hadn’t knocked the alarm clock over, he could be listening to the radio now, music might have stopped this unravelling, this coming loose from himself.

He forces himself to speak out loud. ‘It’s August,’ he says, ‘and I am on the island of Inishmore. Concrete language, he thinks, nouns.

‘The walls are white. It is twilight.’

He reaches again for the painkillers, takes two with whisky. The painkillers are white too. White what? White bullets. The whisky is? The whisky is amber.

He would give his life for water. He lies back on the pillows. It’s no surprise to him that he should dream about Raven now, pain dragging the sufferings of flesh through his sleep. But he has other memories of that time in his life, different in tone and significance. If he looks up at the darkening sky and tries to remember, note by note, perhaps he can oppose the pain, in some small way he might be able to stitch himself together again.

It was early in the morning. He was heading for Taunton, Somerset. His assignment: The World’s Fastest Turkey Plucking Championship.
He was always happy to be out of the office, but the day got even better when Stu Reinhardt came loping down the corridor of the train.

‘Mate,’ David said. Stu fell like spaghetti into the seat next to him. They were both tall and skinny. ‘Are you going where I think you’re going?’ David said.

‘I am. Are you going there too?’

‘Sure am.’ He gazed out of the window as the train pulled out of King’s Cross. The graffiti and grime; how he loved it. Against all the odds, a great, ancient city still turning its rusty cogs.

‘Hey, I saw the story in NME,’ David said. ‘Fantastic, man.’

Stu blushed to his peroxided roots. ‘Thanks.’

Stu had come to London from Sydney with the other members of his band, The Final Boyfriend. David had seen them play a few times. Stu was a spearling guitarist and the girl out front gave everything. The writer of the NME article had compared her to Janis Joplin, but that was only because, like most rock journalists, he was a try-hard with no imagination, and what he was really saying was it wouldn’t be her looks that would bring them the great success he was predicting.

Stu also worked for a publication called Poultry Monthly. He was the only one in the band who had a regular job, and though he never said so, David suspected there were drug problems in the band and he was keeping them all afloat. Sometimes David would give him a call. ‘I’ve been given a wheel of Devonshire Cheddar,’ he’d say. ‘It’s yours if you buy me a pint.’ In turn, Stu had put him onto the novels of J.G. Ballard, and kept him regularly supplied with them.

‘I don’t feel like watching a bunch of turkeys being plucked,’ Stu said, as the train moved into the suburbs.

‘Maybe we could get the press release from whatsisname, your PR bloke, then fuck off.’

‘Jeremy, and he already hates me. Very serious about his turkeys, is old Jeremy.’

‘Just how global is this competition anyway?’ asked David. ‘Will there be Russian contestants? Do they do a lot of turkey plucking in Malaysia?’

‘Boris Pluckoffski, I heard he’s coming.’

‘Brilliant! Any others?’
‘The Guinness Book of Records will be there, so I guess it’s legit.’
‘Now, that’d be a job.’
‘The GBR?’
‘Yeah.’
‘Did you know,’ said Stu, ‘that one of the guys who started the Guinness Book of Records got assassinated by the IRA?’
‘Bad luck for him, missed the turkey comp.’
‘He probably deserved it.’
‘Yeah.’
They got up to stretch their legs and drink something brown from the café car. On the way back they stopped in the space between two carriages and jiggled about while they smoked some of Stu’s Moroccan hash. The countryside they travelled through was unrelentingly picturesque. The morning’s cloud had lifted and there was a warm sun.
‘I want to take off my shirt and lie down in some grass,’ said Stu.
‘Jesus, when was the last time I did that?’
They finished the joint and while they were smoking a cigarette he told Stu about his meeting with Raven.
‘She sounds kinda sweet,’ said Stu. They had both taken off their coats and were holding them hooked by a finger over their shoulders, Marcello Mastroianni-style.
‘Sweet?’ David said. ‘Yeah, in a way she was.’
The train conductor passed by and gave them a filthy look.
‘I don’t know if I could do your job,’ Stu said.
‘What do you mean?’
‘Red meat animals, I dunno,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘I can handle the poultry world because, well – chickens are so fucking horrible.’
‘You think so?’
Stu took a drag on his cigarette. ‘They scare me shitless.’
‘Have you told Jeremy about this?’
‘Seriously, you know that guy who made Fitzcarraldo?’
‘Herzog?’
‘Yeah, him. He said that if you want to see evil in this world you just have to look in the eyes of a chook.’
‘I thought he said it was stupidity.’
‘Nah, you can see stupidity everywhere, he wouldn’t have said that.’

David wanted to jump off the train. It wouldn’t matter if they hurt themselves, just as long as they kept rolling and laughing in the non-work world.

‘Do you feel the same way about turkeys?’

‘Don’t get me started on turkeys,’ said Stu. ‘It’s disgusting how they’re bred, like Dolly Parton, all tits and arse.’

‘More meat, more profit.’

‘I feel so sorry for them,’ he said, gazing wistfully at the landscape.

‘I love Dolly Parton.’

‘Fuck, yeah.’ Stu’s grin could split an atom.

‘Islands in the stream …’

The conductor came by again and shook his head but they didn’t care – it just made them sing louder.

Jeckle’s Fine Birds was one of the biggest turkey operations in the country – a sprawling, mega-industrial factory farm set among an idyll of little-lambikins-leaping green hills. Mrs Jeckle’s silver Rolls-Royce met them at Taunton station and they rode through the countryside like kings.

The competition was being held in a handsome iron shed, a discreet distance from the row upon row of dormitories that housed the turkeys. Inside the shed, an amphitheatre had been constructed using bales of hay. Hay bales were also placed at intervals over the ‘performance’ area, at the side of which hung a heavy canvas curtain.

Jeremy was waiting at a reception table with a smiling assistant dressed in a starched skirt and cowboy boots. ‘Stuart!’ Jeremy said. ‘David! So good to see you both. How was your journey? Glorious day! Wonderful weather! We’re so glad you could come. Here are your name tags. Here are your press kits. And over there are some light refreshments. We’re all so very excited. Any questions, anything at all, just ask myself or Carlotta here, or Emma. Where’s Emma? Oh, Emma’s disappeared. Have you said hello to Mr Jeckle? You must say hello to Mr Jeckle. He’s so thrilled you could come. Did you enjoy your transport from the station? Like some sort of wonderful silver yacht, isn’t it? Oh, here’s the lovely Ms Nightingale. Stuart, David, do you know Ms Nightingale?’
David and Stu were besotted with Margo Nightingale, but together they could be strong. They both took a deep breath and turned to face her.

‘That ridiculous old fool,’ she said, tossing her head at a man standing nearby, ‘he just asked if he could.’

‘Could what?’ said Stu.

She pointed to the plastic tag pinned to her chest. Margo Nightingale, it read, Press. ‘He asked if he could press it,’ said Margo.

‘Did he ask nicely?’ said David.

‘May I, my dear?’

They leant together laughing, and Margo’s dark perfume enveloped them.

‘I can’t believe I’m at a fucking turkey-plucking championship,’ said Margo. ‘My life is tragic.’

‘Did you get a ride in the Roller?’

‘No? What do you mean?’

‘Mrs Jeckle’s Rolls, didn’t it pick you up from the station?’

‘No, some twit called Emma picked me up in a Mini!’

‘Oh, Margo, that is so unfair.’

‘Honestly, I told you, my life is just tragic.’

Margo was at least ten years older than them and she worked in the press office at the Ministry of Agriculture. She had a crooked nose and crazy teeth and breasts that were so beautiful they made their palms itch.

‘Hey, look, the hay bales are filling up,’ said Stu.

Margo and David found seats in the back row while Stu went for refreshments. It was a good-sized crowd, lots of smiling and nodding. David took out his notebook and pen, and Margo produced a nail file. Stu loped back with strong coffees and his pockets bulging with biscuits. The stage lit up, latecomers scrambled for seats and music, symphonic and stirring, blasted from the speakers behind them.

Jeremy was the Master of Ceremonies. He had put on his suit jacket and combed his hair. He stood next to a hay bale and welcomed everyone, and they all joined in clapping the representative from the Guinness Book of Records. Jeremy told them what a wonderful year it had been for turkeys. He gave impressive figures, but they knew it would all be in the press pack, so
Margo worked on her nails while David and Stu munched their way through the shortbread.

There was a commotion behind the curtain at the side of the stage. ‘Here come the Rolling Stones,’ said Margo, but really it was the turkeys arriving through a side entrance.

‘Are they going to kill the birds here?’ David asked.

‘Looks like it,’ said Stu.

‘Why?’

‘Something to do with body temperature,’ said Stu, who knew everything. ‘The feathers come out more easily.’

‘Or it’s just a better show,’ said Margo. ‘Oh, phwew!’

You never got used to it, thought David. The stink of bird fear, there was nothing in the world like it. Behind the curtain, turkeys were shitting and screaming and beating their wings; it was probably the most activity they’d known in their lives, the closest they’d ever been to their bird natures, and it was all about to end. The three of them covered their noses.

A few gawky lads joined Jeremy on stage, and two Old MacDonald types wearing checked caps. The contestants were introduced before taking up position on their own hay bale. Assistants flooded the stage. The music grew louder. Freshly dead turkeys came from behind the curtain and were hurried over to the contestants. Expert neck-wringers must have been working back-stage because, for the sake of delicacy, the birds still had their heads. The contestants all had their first bird and the clock was readied. But first Jeremy had a few important words to say about the turkeys’ integrity. Stu explained to Margo that this was not a test of whether the turkey’s former life had been a principled one, but a measure of how much flesh was torn when its feathers were plucked, how much blood was lost.

‘Jesus H. Christ,’ said Margo. This was harder on her. Stu and David were more familiar with the processes by which living creatures became yummy things. Most of the time Margo dealt with bureaucrats and legislation, animal handling laws and food labelling policy, that sort of thing.

The contestants each had their own plucking style. One draped the turkey across his knees like a naughty wench, while another gripped the bird between his thighs. One plucker held the turkey by its feet, and the red wattle at its neck waved like a jaunty kerchief.
'Turkeys are so – genital,' said Margo.

It was a curiously silent affair, the plucking. Squawking and thumping continued from behind the curtain, but the music had taken on a pastoral air and the atmosphere in the shed was heavy with concentration. David had seen some splendid bronze and copper domestic turkeys, but most of the birds were bred to have white feathers, because white pin feathers, developing feathers, were not so clearly seen by consumers. The turkeys that day were white, and their feathers collected like blood-flecked snow in piles at the pluckers’ feet.

The contestants’ arms were a blur. When one bird was finished, the plucker held it aloft and another bird arrived.

‘What’s that acrid smell?’ asked Margo, shrinking into her power-shouldered jacket.

‘My guess is it’s the antibiotics and hormones – all the chemical crap coming out in their blood,’ said Stu.

‘And piss,’ David added.

One of the gawky lads was making a hell of a mess. His hands were clotted with flesh, and he sent his turkeys on their way ripped and skinned and bloody.

‘I pity his poor girlfriend,’ said Margo.

Stu and David had their pens poised over their notebooks. Both of them had shit-hot shorthand. In a recent face-off that the lads from Fish Industry had organised at the pub, Stu had come out 15 wpm ahead of him, but Stu been drinking whisky and David lager, and that was an important difference. Shorthand was a genius of a system for holding down a piece of the fast world, but it was of no real use when you didn’t understand what the hell you were looking at.

‘How long is this going to go on for?’ groaned Margo.

David and Stu just shook their heads.

Ten, twenty, thirty carcasses had been taken away so that the judges could assess their integrity. He wondered what would happen to these turkeys. Would they be seasoned by Mrs Jeckle and served with a cranberry sauce? Or would they be mashed with sawdust and fed to their vegetarian brothers? Along with a commemorative T-shirt, would they find one in the bag of goodies that Carlotta and Emma handed them on their way out?
They all agreed they could see a clear winner. One of the Old MacDonal
dals really had the touch, it seemed he simply had to stroke the bird and its
feathers fell out. If the turkey had been alive, it might even have enjoyed it.
No torn flesh for him, no bruising or burst veins; his turkeys arrived before
the judges as pale and unblemished as Londoners on their first warm day
beside the sea.

‘Thirty seconds gentleman, please!’ cried Jeremy, as if calling for the final
ejaculation at an orgy.

‘Does any of this remind you of waxing, Margo?’ asked Stu.

‘You have no idea,’ said Margo quietly, ‘how close all of this comes to
female experience.’

David and Stu glanced at each other, shocked. They wanted her to ex-
plain, but they didn’t know Margo like that, and it was too difficult, too
close.

The awful thing was that the Old MacDonald with the light, careful
touch wasn’t the winner. David hated seeing his proud, bewildered face
when Jeremy raised the arm of one of the gawky youths. Integrity, it seemed,
had very fucking little to do with it. This lad had spilled blood, but he’d got
there the fastest.

They all took it badly. While the rest of the audience deserted their hay
bales, and the stage was cleared and mopped to make way for the little cele-
bration that was to follow, Stu and Margo and David sat in silence.

‘It must have been rigged,’ said Stu.

‘The whole shitty world is rigged,’ said Margo, and it was hard to disa-
gree with her.

‘Let’s get a drink,’ David said.

‘Yes,’ said Margo, ‘let’s have some warm white wine.’

Down in the party area, Carlotta and Emma offered trays of turkey nug-
ggets and samples of the soon-to-be marketed turkey-and-Camembert bites.
Jeremy came by with more excitement. They shook Mr Jeckle’s hand and
thanked him for everything. David and Stu did a deal with a photographer
they knew for some photos of the winner, and then they circulated and
grabbed a few quotes. Out of the corner of his eye, David could see Margo
talking to the turkey plucker who’d been cheated of his win. He was stand-
ing with a gentle-faced woman who looked to be his wife, and it made David
feel better because he believed a woman by your side made everything all right.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ said Stu, when they all found each other again.

They wound their way over to the refreshments table and when no one was looking, Margo slipped a bottle of wine into her briefcase. Stu and he tucked a couple of beers under their jackets, shot one last look at the crowd and slipped outside.

Margo leant on Stu’s arm and pulled off her shoes, and then she took off in stockinged feet up the steep hill behind the shed. Away from the turkeys the air was insanely fragrant and the world felt clean again. Stu and David were too cool to run fast after anything, even Margo, but they loosened their ties and flipped the tops off their beers and sauntered up the rise. By the time they caught up with her, she’d found a stretch of grass beneath a large beech tree, and she was using her nail file to dig the cork out of the wine bottle.

They might have been a thousand miles from anywhere. The grass was ankle-high and brilliant green, throbbing with chlorophyll. Stu and he took off their shoes and socks and Margo pulled a small packet of tissues from her briefcase and blew her nose loudly. ‘That dreadful smell,’ she said.

They sat down on either side of her. The air was warm and soft on their faces and feet, and insects made complex, communicating sounds.

Margo swigged from the bottle of wine. ‘I don’t want to frighten you boys,’ she said, ‘but I’m not going to miss out on this sun.’ She climbed to her feet, reached beneath her skirt and wriggled out of her pantyhose.

David and Stu did not dare to look at each other.

‘Heaven,’ Margo said, stretching out on her back and lifting her skirt halfway up her thighs.

She had the hairiest legs he’d ever seen on a woman, pale brown glinting ginger in the sun. He wanted to stroke them, he wanted her to purr. Stu and he would talk about her legs later, but for now Stu was sitting cross-legged, rolling a joint on his notebook.

‘Will you have a little bit of hash, Margo?’ asked Stu.

Margo opened one eye and raised her head. ‘I’d love to,’ she said, ‘but tomorrow I’d feel like slashing my wrists.’

‘It doesn’t affect me like that,’ said Stu, licking the edge of a rolling paper. ‘Like what?’ David said.
‘I feel wonderful at the time,’ said Margo, sleepily, ‘but afterwards it makes me terribly depressed.’

David tugged at the grass. He’d never thought of his emotions in that way, as a pattern that might be understood, having cause and effect. Most of the time trying to understand his moods was like watching the television weather without the sound – they were a maze of highs and lows and troughs, cold fronts, fair and sunny.

‘But wouldn’t it be worth it to feel good now?’ he asked. Saying yes to everything was his one philosophy in life.

Margo sat up and looked at him. She reached for the bottle of wine. ‘It’s not like that,’ she said. ‘When you’re feeling good you know it’ll be over soon, but when you’re feeling bad you think it will be that way forever.’

There was a lot more he wanted to know but he didn’t like to pry, he didn’t even know how to form the questions. And he felt he’d already shown how unknowing he was.

‘Now’s the time to get your shirt off, Davo,’ said Stu, struggling out of his jacket, the joint hanging from the side of his mouth.

Margo’s eyes were closed. Stu and he passed the joint back and forth as they stripped down to their trousers. Both of them had long, hairless torsos, the bodies of boys still. Under her white blouse, Margo’s breasts rose and fell with her breath, and tiny pink and yellow flowers pushed through the grass.

They lay close together, like the dead in a family plot. Nothing was said. Margo had drifted off somewhere, keeping her mind safe for tomorrow, but stoned and half-naked in the sun, David and Stu groaned inwardly with bone-deep lust.

A novelist would write this scene differently, David thought. In the novelist’s scene, Margo would slowly lift her skirt. Stu and he would toss aside their shyness with their holey socks, and they would do things to each other they’d remember for the rest of their lives.

But Margo didn’t move. Margo lay quietly between them, like the cake with the girl still inside. David and Stu looked up at the sky and thought about all the books they’d read, wondering why it was that novelists suggested these scenes to them, yet reality remained so indifferent to their desires, so stubborn.

‘We have got to get new jobs,’ said Margo.
Stu spoke about music then, and for the first time David heard him express doubts about The Final Boyfriend, whether the band would survive. Margo told them that every Monday and Thursday evening, after she’d finished work, she took the tube to City University for classes in ancient history. Margo wanted out of the Ministry of Agriculture. She wanted to study history full-time, and then she wanted to do a theology degree. In the future, maybe she even wanted to teach.

The clouds moved majestically across the sky, but they didn’t make David feel that he and his friends were small, or insignificant, or that none of this mattered.

‘What about you, David, why are you in England?’ said Margo.

‘They fuck you up, your mum and dad,’ he said. He’d only recently discovered the Larkin poem, and he quoted this line often. It seemed to be the answer to everything.

‘Sorry?’ said Margo.

‘To get away from my parents,’ he said.

‘Where were you born, Margo?’ asked Stu.

‘In London,’ she said, ‘but I don’t really feel I belong there.’

I see you more as an ancient Egyptian queen,’ said Stu.

‘He’s right!’ said David, wishing he’d thought of it. ‘That’s exactly what you’re like.’

‘Oh, that’s sweet, but it’s probably just because of my fringe.’

‘It’s more than that,’ said Stu, ‘you have a regal bearing.’

‘I can see you with a pet leopard,’ David added.

‘I think I’d prefer to wear a leopard than pet one.’

‘Well, that would suit you too,’ he said.

‘I could fall asleep right here,’ said Margo.

‘Only if you fancy hitchhiking back to Taunton,’ said Stu.

They’d fallen under some spell of enchantment, and now it was broken. They climbed to their feet, recovered their clothes and dressed quickly, stashing the empty bottles in Margo’s briefcase.

They went back down the hill. Like Jack and Jill, David thought. Like Jack and Jill, and Jack’s less imaginative friend, whose name nobody could ever remember.
The light wakes him, or it might be his pain or hunger. It feels like morning. The circle of sky above him is blue. If it’s morning, then he hasn’t eaten for thirty-six hours. Not since the meal he had after he left Tania at the hospital. A dozen Galway oysters to mark the handing over of Ettie, the return to his own life.

But now that life has come down to a few choices: should he bend his leg or keep it straight? Arm across his eyes or out to the side? Pain is the nucleus of everything. It’s a heavier pain now, weighted with drug metals. His head is thick with whisky. He tries not to think about food because when he does he starts to panic. He thinks instead about the night that Stu phoned him with the news about Margo Nightingale.

Summer, 1998. He was at the Daily Mirror by then, and Stu was working for a paper in Sydney, and although they emailed, they rarely spoke on the phone. He hadn’t seen Margo for years. He had run into her now and then, when he was still working for the Agricultural Times. He’d have liked to see her more often. A few times when he called her at the Ministry of Agriculture, for a quote about a new salmonella outbreak or something, he tried to summon the courage to ask her out for a drink. But she was older than him, and he felt it keenly. Without exerting an embarrassing force, he could never slide the professional into the personal, as they had done that day on the grass above the turkey shed.

The last time they’d met was in 1987, not long before he left the Agricultural Times. They were both at a function held by the Meat and Livestock Commission, and after the speeches were over Margo and he sat in a corner of the room and talked.

She looked tired. When a waiter came by with a tray of hors d’œuvres, she closed her eyes and shook her head, as if the sight of the food made her sick. David asked about her studies, but she just shrugged her shoulders. Mad cow disease; that was what she wanted to talk about. Bovine spongi-
form encephalopathy had just been named ‘mad cow’ by one of the newspapers, and Margo was spending all her time trying to manage the panic of Ministry of Agriculture officials. They were worried about what the name would do to the image of British agriculture; they wanted another name for the disease, a more palatable way of presenting it to the public imagination.

‘Have you actually seen one of these poor creatures?’ Margo said.

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘Everyone in this room has. We’ve all seen many.’

‘There’s just no other way to put it. Trembling, shaking, falling-down cow disease?’

‘I’ve seen cows that are stark raving bonkers.’

‘Look at them all,’ said Margo, waving her hand at the other guests in the room, talking and laughing, balancing champagne flutes and vol-au-vents.

‘There’s a lot of fear and denial going on.’

‘I have to tell you, David, that I have hemorrhoids from sitting on this story,’ she said, ‘and I have a very, very bad feeling about it.’

Stu phoned him around midnight. Six months before, David had moved in with Sally Redding, a graphic designer he’d met at a party on a houseboat the previous summer. Sally lay beside him on their new king-sized bed as he and Stu talked.

‘What is it?’ she asked, when he hung up the phone.

‘Someone I know just killed herself.’

‘Who?’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ he said, reaching for a T-shirt. ‘No one you know. Go back to sleep.’

He went downstairs, opened a window, sat on their new sofa and smoked a cigarette. He hadn’t known that Stu and Margo were still in touch. ‘Margo Nightingale has taken her own life,’ Stu had said, and David loved him for saying it like that, and for still being alive himself.

In the half-dark he stared at the Escher prints that Sally had hung on the wall, hating the exactness of their arrangement and the meticulous mind-fuck of their art.

All was still, inside and out.

After a while, Sally appeared in her bathrobe and sat down on the sofa. Everything in him wanted to withdraw, retract, but he willed his muscles to accept her touch.
'Who was she?' Sally asked again.
'I don’t know why that’s important,’ he said. Just let me be dead with her for a while. Don’t make me share her yet.
Sally plucked at his T-shirt, trying to cover his shrivelled dick. ‘Because I love you,’ she said.
’She was someone I worked with back in agriculture,’ he said, knowing that would probably put an end to it. Sally thought his current work was sexy, reporting on crime and the law, but she had little interest in his trade journalism days.
’Oh,’ she said, holding out her hand for a drag of his cigarette, ‘that’s a long time ago.’
’Yes, it is.’
’You’ve had a shock,’ she said. ‘You should get some sleep.’
The hand she held out to him was warm and busy with life. He felt defeated.
The next day he was covering the opening of a murder trial. During breaks between sessions he sat with a pint at a nearby pub, and then back at the office he talked to Stu again.
Margo had died two weeks before, and this was something else that hurt, that they’d been robbed of the chance to think of her when she was newly dead, a shade still hovering the earth.
’Sof the autopsy’s over? And the funeral?’ David asked.
’All done and dusted,’ said Stu.
’Do you know how she did it?’
’No, I don’t.’
’It feels like it matters.’
’I know what you mean.’
’Why, do you think?’ He looked out of the window at the darkening sky.
It was the dangerous hour, when dog might be wolf.
’Maybe because the medium is the message?’ said Stu.
’Sof we didn’t get her final message?’
’No, we didn’t.’
’When was your last contact with her?’
’About three months ago, when Clare Tomkins died.’
He knew about Clare Tomkins, of course. Clare was a pretty, gentle young woman from Kent, whose life had been destroyed by mad cow disease, or the human form of it, variant CJD. She had died horribly, hallucinating, crazed with fear, incontinent and almost blind.

‘That’s why Margo and I were in touch,’ said Stu. ‘I was given the story here because I knew something about the British meat industry, and she was my point of contact for all things mad cow.’

‘How did she sound then?’

‘Exhausted,’ said Stu. ‘I think the Clare Tomkins case was really hard on her.’

Clare’s death had been especially significant. It was thought that CJD was caused by eating infected beef, but unlike many of the others who had died, mostly young people who’d loved hamburgers and meat pies and sausages, Clare had been a strict vegetarian since she was thirteen. Her death had shot to pieces the current thinking about the disease: if Clare Tomkins hadn’t been safe, then who was?

He tried to imagine how Margo’s life had been in the last decade at the Ministry of Agriculture. The mad cow story was a Gothic one, a tale of doom and suffering more fearful than any dreamt of by Edgar Allen Poe. Animals stricken by a prion disease had been slaughtered, fed to fellow animals, and later those animals had been put to death too. They had then been extruded, mashed, pulped, stripped, blasted and boiled into meat-forms for human consumption, and the human form of the disease was hatched. People were falling ill, losing their minds, dying in pain and distress, and the end of the story had yet to be written.

This had been Margo’s life – one expert had said that he could not rule out five million human cases of variant CJD – and all the time David had imagined her reclining in a comfortable armchair, reading Aristotle by lamplight.

‘You know,’ said Stu, ‘the only time I heard her really upset was about a year ago. She called me from home, and she was pretty drunk – she’d just been out to a farm where they were slaughtering cattle.’

‘Three and a half million of them.’

‘So far.’
‘Now we’re just going to kill a few million cattle but we really don’t want you to worry about anything.’
‘That’s right.’
‘Fuck.’
‘She told me about these poor creatures being killed, and then how they’d burned them in enormous bonfires. She was crying. She kept saying “The waste of it, you just can’t imagine the waste.”’
‘What did you do?’
‘What could I do? I talked to her and then I sent some flowers.’
‘Flowers?’
‘Yeah, Interflora. God, it’s only a phone call.’
‘I wouldn’t have thought of it.’
‘You would’ve, Dave, if you’d heard how she was.’
It was nice of him to think that, but David wasn’t so sure he had the imagination.
Sally was pacing and watching the clock when he got home that evening.
‘We’re late,’ she said.
‘For what?’
‘For my mother’s.’
‘Honey, I’m sorry. I haven’t been with it today, I forgot.’
‘Can you please just quickly put on a new shirt?’
‘Sal, I’m sorry, I’m not up to it.’
‘And how am I supposed to explain that? You know we’re supposed to meet her new boyfriend tonight.’
‘I thought we met him last time?’
‘Jesus, David, that was her old boyfriend.’
He wanted to put his fist through the wall. He wanted to pick up the lamp and hurl it, smash everything until there could be no chance of forgiveness, but he just went and changed his shirt.
At dinner he thought more about Margo. He had always hoped that, on some ordinary day, he would turn a street corner and she’d be there, unordinary, smiling. He didn’t believe in fate, but he’d been content to defer to fate the great happiness of seeing her again.
‘David, it’s not like you not to eat up all your dinner,’ said Sally’s mother.
‘He’s had a bit of a shock,’ said Sally, and went on to tell everyone about the suicide.

They fought about it in the car on the way home. ‘Why wouldn’t I mention it?’ said Sally. ‘They’re family.’

‘You won’t even fucking well smoke around your mother, but you’re happy to tell her all about my fucking life?’

‘The way you’re acting, David, I think there was more between you and this woman than you’re letting on.’

‘This woman?’

‘Well, you haven’t even told me her name.’

‘Margo,’ he said, gripping the steering wheel. ‘Her name was Margo Nightingale.’

‘Thank you,’ said Sally. ‘So what really happened between you and this Margo Nightingale?’

He and Sally lasted another six months. They fought and bought things, made up and took expensive holidays, terminated a pregnancy and moved ahead in their jobs. And then one night it was over, it was all so clearly at an end.

Friends were coming for dinner; he’d spent all afternoon in the kitchen. Something was being celebrated, so he and Sally had decided to bring out a bottle of vintage Krug they’d been saving. Their company arrived and Sally fixed cocktails, and then everyone stood around in the kitchen while he put the antipasto together.

‘When did you put the champagne in the fridge?’ he asked Sally.

‘About an hour ago,’ she said, trying on Elizabeth’s new bracelet.

‘I hope it’s cold enough.’

‘It’ll be fine,’ she said, handing back the bracelet. ‘It’s lovely, but I think I’m more of a gold person.’

‘You didn’t take it out of the box?’ he said, opening the fridge.

‘No, why?’

‘Because it’ll take twice as long to get cold inside the box.’

‘No, it won’t.’

‘Yes, it will.’

‘It won’t.’

‘It will.’
'How do you know?'
'It’s obvious, isn’t it? Why didn’t you take it out of the box?'
'It’s obvious, isn’t it? I didn’t think I needed to.'
'At least the bloody box is cold.'
'What about the champagne? It’s cold, isn’t it?'
'Not cold enough.'
'How cold does it have to be?'
'As cold as it can absolutely be.'
'Well, you do it next time.'
'I’ll have to.'
'Since you’re the champagne scientist.'
'It’s not science, it’s good sense.'
'Well, as you keep reminding me, I haven’t got any of that.'

He popped the cork and everyone made all the right noises, but he knew that he had to be better, had to be more than this.

Sally wasn’t happy, but soon after he moved out she met someone and married him. He hoped that some ordinary day he would not round a corner and find her there. There wasn’t a lot of feeling attached to the thought, it was mild, just a preference never to see her again.

He continued to think about Margo. And as time went by he thought, too, about the child who had been given no chance at life. Sometimes he looked behind him for this ghost child. He slowed his pace. He held out his hand for someone who had needed him once, but would need him no more. He waited for a child who was not following.
He doesn’t know how much codeine he’s taken, but it’s a lot. The drug isn’t easing the pain, but together with the whisky it washes him in and out of sleep. He feels the morning warming and bursting, and then the pull of mid-day. He dozes. He dreams about Ettie. The phone rings. He hears Ettie downstairs. She’s trying to get in through the bathroom window, she must be out of the honey pot.

‘Ettie?’ he calls.
‘Uncle Davey?’
‘Ned?’
‘Uncle Davey?’
He lifts himself on an elbow. ‘Is that you, Ned?’
‘Where are you, Uncle Davey?’
‘Upstairs, sweetheart, I’m up here.’
‘What are you doing up here?’ Ned says, appearing at the top of the stairs like a short, scruffy angel.

‘I hurt my back,’ says David. ‘I can’t move.’
Ned stands by the side of the bed, sticking his tummy out.
‘Give us a hug,’ David says.
Ned opens his arms and falls gently on top of him. ‘You smell funny,’ he says.

‘I stink!’ says David.
‘Not stink.’
‘Yeah, stink.’
David holds him tight and drinks his heat and coiled-spring energy, then
Ned sits back on David’s hips.
‘Just move a bit,’ David says, ‘that hurts. No, that’s better.’
‘I knocked on the door.’
‘I didn’t hear you. How did you know I was here?’
‘I could hear you breathing.’
‘Could you? Or was I snoring? Zzzzz zzzzz.’

‘No-o-o,’ he laughs, ‘just breathing.’

‘You must have very good hearing. Have you been out collecting?’ Ned opens his fist and tips a few small shells onto David’s chest. ‘Good haul,’ David says.

‘Uncle Davey,’ he says, gravely. ‘Have you got any chocolates?’

‘Ah-ha!’ David tickles his waist. ‘It was the chocolate you heard breathing!’ Ned collapses beside him, giggling. ‘It was the chocolate, wasn’t it?’

‘No!’
‘Yes, it was!’
‘No! No!’

‘You heard the chocolate calling Neddy! Neddy! Come and eat us all up!’

‘No! I didn’t hear it!’

‘Stop horsing around,’ David says, ‘and go and get me some chocolate. You know where it is.’

Ned scrambles off the bed.

‘And water, bring the water from the fridge,’ he calls, lying back on the pillows, letting relief soak through him.

David props up his head and shoulders on the pillows, puts the shells on the bedside table and sweeps the sand away. He takes the bottle of water from Ned when he returns and empties it in a single gulp.

Ned drops the chocolates onto David’s chest then lies down beside him. His nephew has the more sophisticated palate. He chooses the dark chocolate, while David takes the peanut butter cups, and they eat in silence, gazing up at the ceiling. Every cell in David’s body stands and cheers and claps its tiny hands. When they finish, they choose again. ‘No more after this,’ David says, but they keep eating. They toss the wrappers on the bed and halve the block of fruit and nut. Ned is in little-boy heaven. ‘Kit says the sky isn’t really blue,’ he says. ‘Van says Kit is half-man and half-goat.’

They are down to old Easter eggs and M&Ms, which they divide by colour, and then there’s no chocolate left.

‘That was good,’ sighs Ned, stunned.

‘Now we need some milk,’ David says. ‘Can you go downstairs and get the milk? Don’t run.’
They pass the milk between them, smacking their lips and wiping their mouths with the backs of their hands. David asks Ned to carry the boot full of piss downstairs, and he takes to the task with interest. He brings up David’s phone and charger then he wraps himself like a mummy in the bed sheet while they wait to call Orla.

Orla gets busy when she arrives. She throws open windows and plumps pillows, making a light, soothing comedy of the situation. He craves eggs and while she’s downstairs making an omelette, he calls Tania. There’s a message from her, but it says almost nothing.

Tania tells him that there’s been no change in Ettie’s condition, and this scarcely seems possible, he’s been away from the world for so long. Long enough for even Rip Van Winkle to wake up.

‘How bad is the pain,’ asks Tania, ‘on a scale from one to ten?’

‘Ten being the worst?’

‘Yes.’

‘Maybe eight. I don’t know, nine?’

‘I see,’ she says flatly. She asks him some questions about his range of movement and nerve responses. ‘I think I should come over,’ she says. ‘There are a couple of things I can do that might help.’

He wants the pain to end, and he wants to get up and walk, but does he want help? ‘But what about Ettie?’

‘Esther’s not going anywhere,’ she says, in the same flat way. ‘I know the staff here now, they’ll call if they need to.’

He’ll be fine, he thinks, he will grit it out. What could she do? Why would she do it? ‘I don’t want to put you to any trouble,’ he says.

‘Don’t be a dickhead, David,’ she says, and he can’t read her tone. ‘I’m a geriatric nurse and you – at least temporarily – are a geriatric.’

He tells Tania that she can take the coach and ferry, or coach and plane, and he gives her the details. He puts Orla on the phone and she arranges to meet her when she arrives.

After Orla and Ned leave, he reads for a while. Ned had watched, open-mouthed, as David had brushed his teeth and sponged himself down. He’d put on a clean T-shirt, and he’s not too manky now to receive a visitor.

When the pain makes it hard to concentrate, he sets the laptop on his stomach and catches up on some correspondence. There are Facebook post-
ings. There’s something from his lawyer, and an email from a publisher about another reprint of his mad cow book.

He was angry when he wrote that book. He’d returned to London from his vertical life in Hong Kong, leaving behind public relations, people who made lists in order to know themselves, and Anita’s lies. The mad cow book – and a lot of fucking – was what he had done to recover.

He’d always believed that Margo Nightingale’s work at the Ministry of Agriculture had harmed her. She’d been asked to spin the story of mad cow – spin and spin and spin it, like the jugglers who twirl plates on the end of sticks — but too much had been asked. So he wrote about people’s contempt for the animals they ate, and food producers’ contempt for the people. He discussed bad agricultural practice and lax food standards, and raged at the greed that governed them. It felt good to direct his feelings of injustice and humiliation elsewhere, good to have someone other than himself to blame. It felt even better to get worked up about Margaret Thatcher again. It was sort of fun, nostalgic, like breaking out the old Madness vinyl, or UB40, or The Specials. He held Margo’s old gold Egyptian nobility in his mind, and railed against the British government’s handling of the affair. Arrogance dancing on the back foot, that was how he described it, a dance both clumsy and fatal.

He could never have foreseen the path that his work would take. That the world of public relations would adopt his angry book as a manual of crisis management, a guide to plate-spinning; that the book would become required reading wherever the dark arts of PR were practised or taught.

He could never have foreseen that one day he would be grateful to see the money from such a source trickle in.

There’s an email from Stu that makes him laugh and he sets to work on a reply. He was with Stu when he first hurt his back, an incident that seemed small at the time, and now he rewrites the past days of pain and imprisonment to entertain his friend.

He had seen in the end of the millennium with Stu. By then Stu was press secretary to a minister in the New South Wales parliament, and his wife Alexandra was eight months pregnant with their first child.

He’d spent Christmas Day in the air, business class because he had the points, and it was the best Christmas he ever had. He stayed for a couple of
days with Stu and Alex at their place in the city, and then they drove north to Stu’s parents’ holiday house at Lee’s Beach, where Alex’s sister joined them.

Alex and Miranda were twins, but they might have been an advertisement for the dangers of hard living: Alex before, Miranda after. The night Miranda arrived, after a seafood dinner so lavish he felt wretched about their ocean plunder, he walked with her away from the house.

‘I think we’ve been set up,’ he said.

‘Looks like it.’

Miranda wore a turquoise cheongsam and her blue-black hair was piled high and stuck with shiny pins. She made a racket every time she breathed; her arms full of silver bracelets, her neck hung with silver chains, her fingers a thuggery of silver rings. He liked her but he wasn’t going along with any set-up. He had her down as a soggy bohemian, a marshland of soft ideas surrounded by patched and falling-down defences.

They sat on a warm rock among the slender eucalypts and passed the joint back and forth. The sky glittered with stars and, below them, the iron and timber house sprawled horizontally, its deep verandahs lit by red and gold lanterns. The house had been designed by an architect whose intention, Alex said, was to touch the land lightly. All well and good, he thought, but surely it’s easier to touch the land lightly when you own a shitload of it?

‘I hope that millennium bug thing happens,’ said Miranda. They were talking about the following night, New Year’s Eve. ‘I hope the world falls apart and we have to start all over again.’

‘Jesus, I don’t,’ he said. ‘Why do you think it’d be any different if we did start again? Anyway, it’s not going to happen.’

‘How do you know?’

‘It’s just good old-fashioned millenarianism. I’ve seen it hundreds of times before.’

Miranda took a long hit on the joint, her silver sliding and clanking.

He thought about their plans for New Year’s Eve. They were going to have a barbecue; they’d shop the next day. Alex and Stu would buy the food and he and Miranda would get the alcohol. Of course, only three of them were drinking, and Stu, in solidarity with his wife, would have only a couple of light beers and a glass of champagne at midnight.
At dusk the next evening Miranda gave him a look and they slipped away from the others. He took one of the small tablets from her palm, she popped the other into her mouth, they clinked glasses and swallowed the ecstasy with what was left of their mojitos.

The verandah flickered with tea candles and citronella torches, plunging the bush around them into shadow. Earlier that day all the shoppers had been ill-tempered, as if the last thousand years would amount to nothing if they couldn’t find the right cheese. But the four of them had spent the afternoon at the beach, and now everyone was relaxed. The women had showered and changed into long, bare dresses, and their perfume spiked the air.

Lee’s was the purest beach he’d ever seen. Two blue slabs, the sky pale and the water bright and, below, a brilliant band of white. Like Rothko in its construction; his colours when he wasn’t troubled.

Miranda wore a red bikini. Alex’s black two-piece was more modest, with a bra top to support her bursting, fruiting breasts. When he lay on his back on the sand between them, Alex’s belly rose at the edge of his vision, and when she sat up he saw that her stretch marks were like the pearly corrugations made by the waves at the water’s edge.

Alex was reading Bill and Hillary. Now and then she’d read something out loud – ‘Unbelievable! Why would she put up with him?’ – and if he turned his head to listen, sometimes he would see her stomach rippling with the baby’s movement.

‘I can feel her foot,’ she said, reaching for his hand. ‘Here.’

Her skin was hot and incredibly soft, and he felt the ridge in her flesh that was the edge of a tiny foot. Stu had fallen asleep beneath a Peter Carey novel, and he was reading James Ellroy’s My Dark Places. Lying beside him, Miranda in her red bikini was Alex’s body without the baby, a very fine machine to get about in, but at that moment it seemed to him, as his own body did, lacking.

The coming on of the ecstasy coincided with the going down of the day’s light; thirty minutes of perfect quiet inside him and out. In that mellow half hour he organised the evening’s music. Stu attended to the meat marinade, and Alex and Miranda floated in their gowns between verandah and kitchen, their arms full of fruits and olives and nuts, maidens with offerings for the gods.
He wanted to start with Miles Davis’s *Kind of Blue*, and at midnight play Elizabeth Schwarzkopf, both of which he’d brought with him. For everything between, he had Stu’s parents’ music to choose from, and he chose carefully, calibrating mood and time, the progression of the night, Ella Fitzgerald followed by Frank Sinatra followed by …

All of a sudden Madonna was playing and Miranda was twirling like a ballerina wound up fast on a music box. So, what the hell, he busted out a few moves too, and wasn’t it time for another mojito? Stu and Alex didn’t know that Miranda and David had taken the E, and they didn’t seem to notice there were fireworks going off inside them. He loved them for not noticing, for sitting close together and smiling: look at the kids, aren’t they sweet?

‘Like a virgin, touched for the very first time, like a vir-ir-ir-ir-gin,’ Miranda sang, lifting her arms to the sky. He’d seen other women sing to this anthem of optimism at parties. They’d been fucked, their singing meant. They’d been fucked and disappointed, but they would fuck and hope again. Miranda wore an ironic patio dress, swirls of candy colour held together by big brass rings, and he watched the rings and her long earrings swaying against her neck as they danced, feeling the silky night on his skin, the energy shooting up from the soles of his feet, Miranda’s smile meeting his and the message of all dancers in their eyes: *I’m here, I’m now – watch me burn!*

Alex served oysters with chilli and lime. She couldn’t have any, but she sucked on a lime sprinkled with salt and said that it was the next best thing. He turned the music down while they ate, and there were so many sounds in the night, bird call and the susururs of insects, leaves and sea, that when the CD finished he didn’t put on another.

The food calmed him and Miranda down, and it lifted Stu and Alex, and as they sat at the table a balance was found between them all again. Now and then Miranda started raving – *why did Pamela Anderson get such a raw deal, wasn’t she just a good old-fashioned sex kitten like Bardot and there weren’t enough sex kittens just scrappy cats like Nicole and did we know Pam read books and she looked just as good without make-up and she had actually gone down a couple of bra sizes and she knew the Dalai Lama and protested against Kentucky Fried Chicken – but everyone just sat back and smiled at her. She kept moving her jaw from side to side. David guessed that the drug was making her grind her teeth, but she looked like a drunk who’d been slugged. And that didn’t matter ei-
ther: they were at the dawn of a new age, their stomachs were full, there was a baby coming, they were lucky people.

There was a little bit of ecstasy in everyone.

Around eleven-thirty, as they sat back from dessert, he felt Miranda’s hand reach for his under the table. He thought they’d cleared the air about the chance of anything happening between them, so he was startled and he pulled his hand away.

‘Fuck!’ Miranda said, sticking her head under the table.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Alex.

‘Fuck!’ Miranda pushed back her chair, got down on her hands and knees.

‘Miranda?’

‘Pass me a candle, David,’ she called from below. ‘Quick!’

He reached for a candle and ducked under the table. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘I was trying to hand you another E,’ she whispered. ‘You know, for midnight. Now I’ve lost it.’

The idea of midnight without the E that he hadn’t known he’d be having was suddenly unbearable. ‘Where’s it gone?’

‘I think it’s fallen through the crack between the floorboards.’

‘Are you serious?’ Now he was on his hands and knees too, children hiding from their parents.

‘It must have, I can’t see it anywhere.’ She lifted the candle and searched the floor again.

‘Careful, you’ll set the table alight.’

‘What are you two doing?’ said Stu.

They looked at each other. They backed out from under the table and brushed themselves down. Stu and Alex snorted with laughter when they told them.

‘What’s under the verandah?’ David said.

‘The house is on stumps, it’s just earth down there,’ said Alex.

‘I can’t believe it,’ said Miranda.

Stu stood up from the table. ‘I’ll be back,’ he said, and disappeared down the verandah steps.

‘What’s he doing?’ said Miranda.

‘Who knows?’ said Alex. ‘I thought you two were enjoying yourselves.’
'What’s the time?'
'Eleven forty-three.'
‘Oh, god, it’s so close,’ said Miranda, ‘what’s he doing?’
David collected the empty bowls and carried them into the kitchen. He thought of how good midnight might have been, knowing that he was over the drug’s peak and would soon be in its valley. He washed grapes under the tap and took the cheeses out of the fridge.
‘What’s the time?’ said Miranda, as he set the plate down on the table.
‘Eleven forty-seven.’
‘I can’t believe it,’ she said. ‘I just can’t.’
A light shone from the darkness at the bottom of the stairs and they all turned. The light wobbled, illuminated a few steps, and then it appeared – on top of Stu’s head.
‘You’re going spelunking!’ laughed Alex.
Stu was wearing a helmet mounted by a brilliant light. ‘Dad used to be into caving,’ he said, handing David another helmet and a torch. ‘What’s the time?’
‘Eleven forty-nine.’
Stu led him down the stairs and around the corner. Light from the verandah spilt into the bush all around, but close to the house it was dark.
‘Miranda, stamp your foot on the floor where you were sitting,’ called Stu, crouching.
The house was raised on a steel frame, a few feet from the ground. Stu dropped to his belly and snaked his way under, and David followed. He’d been dumped by a wave when they were at the beach earlier – at the time he had thought it was nothing, but his lower back didn’t feel right now, as if things weren’t quite in line.
They had more height once they were under the house, but not enough to lift their heads properly. The headlamps gave a good metre of light in front of them, and they used their torches to peer into the rest of the darkness.
‘Stamp the floor again,’ shouted Stu, and they wriggled towards the sound.
David had never been caving. He’d never been under a house. He hadn’t even read adventure stories by torchlight under the bloody bedclothes.
‘It’s eleven fifty-one,’ called Miranda, hysterical.
Stu was half a body length ahead of him, patting the ground, sifting dirt through his fingers. The earth felt bone-dry, forgotten. The air smelled of gum leaves and oiled wood. They were both wearing their board shorts still, and sticks and stones dug sharply into his knees and elbows.

‘Wait a sec,’ said Stu.
‘What?’
‘Hang on.’
‘Have you found it?’
‘Shit, it’s a possum turd.’
‘It’s eleven fifty-three.’

This was the Stu he’d always known – his enthusiastic gestures, kindness without self-interest. He thought of the flowers Stu had sent to Margot. Margot, whom he regrets still. Regrets waiting for fate. What had Stu said? You’d have done the same thing, Dave. But David hadn’t been so sure.

A cobweb fell across his face and the ground was alive with skitterings. His torch caught the yellow eyes of some night creature and scared the shit out of both of them. Something was crawling on him! This was a needle-in-a-fucking haystack. This was madness.

He thought of the small foot of Stu’s baby and the life that was coming to him. He didn’t want to go on groping in the dark forever. He didn’t want to be the one always paired with the party girls. He craved something everlasting, ever demanding, some weight to hold him.

‘Eleven fifty-five!’

He wanted to place his hand on a woman’s belly and feel their child stir. He wanted to protect. He wanted to be better, more.

Wasn’t what he wanted the most simple thing in the world?
‘Eleven fifty-six!’
‘Stamp again,’ called Stu.

He turned over handfuls of dirt but his heart wasn’t in it any longer. It was better this way: he would have a different, wiser kind of midnight.

‘I’ve found it!’ shouted Stu.
‘You’re kidding.’
‘You’re not kidding, are you?’ called Miranda.
‘No, I’ve got it,’ said Stu, turning on his huge grin, ‘what’s the time?’
‘Eleven fifty-seven!’
They reversed out from under the house. ‘Look,’ said Stu. ‘I turned this leaf over – and it was stuck to the other side.’

‘What are the chances?’

‘My heroes!’ said Miranda, throwing her arms around them.

It was eleven fifty-eight. The old age was about to end. In another thousand years what would people crawl on the ground for?

He ran inside and put on the Mozart. His back hurt, a lot. A champagne cork popped behind him and when he joined them Stu handed him a glass. Miranda handed him the ecstasy and it was a miracle, wasn’t it, so how could he refuse?

Cheers, slancha, kiss, kiss, happy New Year, new millennium; here’s to us all, here’s to the baby, and the next election, and David’s sparkling new secret, the man he’s going to become – and Miranda, what did Miranda want? Miranda wanted to dance, and pretty soon he wanted to dance again too.
The door opens downstairs.

‘Uncle Davey?’ calls Ned.

‘I’m still here,’ he replies. ‘I haven’t gone anywhere.’

Ned stumps up the stairs, a lighter step behind him. David feels nervous, seeing Tania again in these circumstances, no longer the one in control.

‘Orla had guests arriving on the same ferry,’ says Tania.

‘Ned knows the island better than anyone.’

They have not said hello. They haven’t smiled. To an outsider it would look like hostility, but it isn’t.

Tania looks even smaller than he remembered. She looks small and cold and reduced. The fierce light that was burning in her at the airport has gone out, and her beautiful skin looks thin and inert, like an unlit paper lantern. She’s wearing skinny black jeans and Converse sneakers and a V-necked grey sweater.

‘You look terrible,’ she says matter-of-factly, sliding her bag off her shoulder onto the floor.

‘What’s happening?’ he says.

‘Nothing.’

Neither of them appear to know why she’s there.

‘You look like you haven’t had much sleep,’ he says.

‘I can’t sleep or eat.’

Ned is watching them closely, puzzled by their tentativeness and caution. When David’s phone rings, it’s Orla telling him to send her son home.

‘Don’t forget your collection,’ David says.

Ned walks to the bedside table and looks at the little pile of shells. He chooses one, small as a fingernail, and carries it, grave-faced, to Tania.

‘Is that for me?’

He goes back to the table and chooses another shell and holds it out to David.
‘Thanks, sweetheart,’ David says.

One by one he puts the rest of the shells in his pocket.

‘Thanks for all your help today,’ says David. ‘You saved me.’ Ned puts his arms around David’s neck and kisses him wetly. ‘Don’t run on the stairs,’ David calls after him.

When he looks at Tania her head is lowered and she’s studying the little shell in the centre of her palm. The door slams downstairs. She turns the shell with her fingertips, his eyes rest on her, silence encloses them. They’re inside strangeness and chaos, and both of them are afraid.

Tania bends down, opens a pocket in the side of her bag and slips the shell inside. She puts her phone on the table and sits on the side of the bed.

‘You’ve had a rough time,’ she says.

‘Not compared to what you’re going through.’

‘Let’s not do that.’

‘All right.’

‘I’d like to look at your back,’ she says. ‘Can you roll over at all?’

She has to help him but she’s surprisingly strong. He thinks of the wounded sea lion that washed up on the beach last winter, how sad it seemed, and how he had felt more for that animal than he’d allowed himself to feel for his own miserable flesh.

Now that he’s lying on his stomach, Tania pulls down the sheet. ‘The right side,’ he says.

‘I know.’

How did she know?

‘Here?’

‘Yes.’

‘And here?’

‘Yes.’

‘And what happens when I do this?’

‘Christ.’

Her hands are cold but that’s good because the pain churns its own heat. He doesn’t pretend to himself that his body doesn’t quicken, but her touch is diagnostic, not erotic. She has handled many bodies, her hands say, he mustn’t think that his is any different.
She asks questions about how he first injured himself, the treatments he’s had. ‘Have you got anything against an injection?’ she says.

He turns his head to look at her. ‘Of what?’

‘A steroid that will calm things down -- and maybe a bit of morphine?’

‘Where on earth did you get those kinds of drugs?’

‘From Tomasz, the doctor at the hospital. He wrote me some prescriptions. He remembers you.’

‘You told him the drugs were for me?’

‘Did you think I’d come all this way just to wave a magic hand over you? You needed help, and I told him that.’

He doesn’t answer, doesn’t say anything.

‘Look, there are two types of people,’ she says, placing her hand on his back, undiagnostically. ‘There are people who believe someone else’s suffering, and there are those who don’t – or can’t. There are just as many unbelievers in the medical profession as anywhere else, but Tomasz isn’t one of them.’

‘I have trouble believing it myself,’ he says, ‘let alone expecting anyone else to.’

‘I can see that.’ Her voice is threadbare with tiredness. ‘The injection?’

He tries to imagine the pain ending. In order to get through, he’d had to give up that hope, and now he will have to reel it back in. ‘Yes,’ he says.

She stands and picks up her bag. She unpacks on the bedside table, but he turns his head away. Now that it’s a possibility, he’s desperate for the pain to be over, but he doesn’t want her to see that. If she sees the desperation she might read it as hunger for morphine, and she might turn into one of the disbelievers, pushing his pain out of sight and making the drug the issue instead.

It’s really fucked-up logic but he hadn’t invented it, the world had.

‘Ready?’ she says.

He turns to offer his arm but she shakes her head. ‘It’s intramuscular,’ she says. ‘I’ll need your bum.’ She swabs his skin with something cold and there’s an ache as the needle goes in. ‘Are you too uncomfortable like that? I’ll give your back a bit of a massage.’

‘But you’re tired.’
‘Yes, I’m tired, but that’s got nothing to do with it. I think a massage will help.’

‘All right,’ he says. ‘Thanks.’
She settles into a sitting position beside him on the bed and places both hands on his waist.

‘Is the hotel all right?’ he asks.
‘I haven’t been there much. I went back for a shower this morning.’
‘What are the doctors saying?’
‘I don’t want to talk about it right now.’
‘But there’s been no change?’
‘There’s been no change.’

Her fingers coax the muscles on either side of his spine. Lie down, her fingers seem to say to them, be quiet. He shuts his eyes as a wave of nausea comes over him. He thinks he’s going to throw up, but the feeling subsides. He waits for the morphine to do something honeyed and transcendental, but it doesn’t happen. He grows tired. He has no will to open his eyes. The pain is still there, but very slowly he’s lifting away from it. His being – whatever that is, his consciousness – is parting from the pain. As though morphine has broken open the shell holding the pain and him together, and now they are separating, like the yolk and the white.

The warmth of Tania’s hands reaches deep into his body. ‘I didn’t know,’ he says, ‘that you could feel ashamed about being in pain.’

‘I have patients who feel shame about being old,’ she says.
Another wave of nausea rises and subsides and he drifts on her touch.

‘Oh,’ he says, thinking it over.

‘My father was ashamed,’ she says.
‘Of being old?’
‘He never got to be old.’
‘Tell me about him.’
‘It’s a long story.’
‘I’d like to hear it.’
‘I wouldn’t know where to start.’
‘Start anywhere.’

Her hands stop for a moment. ‘Well, he went to Vietnam,’ she says. ‘But not as a conscript, he was a soldier.’
‘Did he have problems when he came back?’
‘You know what war does.’
‘What was his name?’
‘Geno.’

*Dexy’s Midnight Runners*, he thinks. He hears Tania unclasp her watch and put it on the bedside table.

‘Is this helping?’ she says.
‘So much, but I feel guilty about you being tired.’
‘I’ll stop when I want to.’
‘Okay, but go on?’

‘Mum left him when I was about twelve,’ she says, ‘and my sister Gina went with her.’
‘What did you do?’
‘I couldn’t have left him alone.’

When her father left the army, Tania says, he got a job working on the roads. Sometimes her hands stop, and it feels as though she’s trying to re-member something, but their movement starts again when her story does. She went to school and her father went to work, but he had fears and sickness. There was something wrong with his teeth. They rotted in his mouth and poisoned his blood. He blamed the chemicals he’d handled in the war, the defoliants.

His teeth had to come out. She bought him a new pair of pyjamas for the hospital; he never went shopping. Her mother said it was because he was hopeless, but Tania thought it was because in a strange place, he could never be sure of the quickest way to escape.

She caught the bus to a large shopping centre, Crossway Gardens. It had everything except for fresh air and natural light, and gardens. ‘There were brown and blue pyjamas,’ she says, her thumbs working below his shoulder blades, ‘but I chose the brown ones, because they were more grown-up.’

At that time she was dividing the world into grown-up and not grown-up. Hot pink was grown-up, but pale pink wasn’t. Chinese take-away was grown-up, but not fish and chips. Stirrup pants and tight T-shirts were grown-up, but puffy of absolutely any kind wasn’t – puffy clouds weren’t grown-up, but long, streaky ones were. Films were more grown-up than TV, roses were more grown-up than carnations, kangaroos and dogs were almost
equally grown-up, Ronald Reagan wasn’t as grown-up as Bob Hawke, Princess Caroline of Monaco was much more grown-up than Diana, Princess of Wales, the afternoon was more grown-up than the morning, and night was the most grown-up of all.

‘How could you tell one thing was more grown-up than the other?’ he asks.

‘I just could,’ she says. ‘That’s what being grown-up meant, knowing the difference.’

‘Was staying with your father more grown-up too?’

‘Yes,’ she says, ‘It was.’

But the man who came home from hospital wasn’t her father. Her father was good-looking, but this man’s face had collapsed, his mouth was loose. The man walking from the taxi to the front door was a stranger, but when he came closer Tania saw Geno’s eyes in the stranger’s face, pleading with her to know him.

Her father lay down and slept. She brought him chocolate-flavoured milk and mashed potato. He got out of bed, shaved and dressed, and they sat together in front of the TV, as they did every night. Something on television made them laugh. She turned to smile at him, and there was blood trickling from the sides of his mouth. ‘Dad,’ she said, and ran for a tea towel.

She rode her bike to the dentist. She tied the plastic bag the dentist gave her to the handlebars and rode home with her father’s new teeth. Her father took the bag, went into the bathroom and closed the door. When he came out his face seemed harder, less kind, and she had to struggle again to keep her fear and surprise to herself.

One evening she’d finished her homework and it was dark outside and her father still hadn’t come home. She put her books aside, got up from the bed and turned on the light in her room. Then she walked through the house turning on all the other lights. She went to the room that had once been her parents’, where Geno now slept alone, and then to the room that was empty of Gina. She turned on the porch light and the amber glass in the front door glowed. She walked down the hallway and turned the light on in the back-yard.

She wanted to call one of her friends, but she had to keep the line free in case her father phoned. It was better walking around the house than being in
the kitchen, but she was hungry and it was time for dinner. Dinnertime would bring him home.

She peeled potatoes at the sink. She didn’t turn on the radio, as her mother had done when she cooked, because she needed to listen. She was listening for his car in the driveway and his key in the door, or for anyone who might come to hurt her. She went to the freezer for peas, and she saw the ice-cream. She thought she’d have one spoonful, but the second and third spoonfuls took her mind off things. The ice-cream began to taste too plain then, so she took the Milo down from the cupboard, and soon both the ice-cream and the Milo were gone.

She felt a little better after that. She put the potatoes in one saucepan and the peas in another, arranged the chops under the griller, and stood well back when she put the match to the gas. She went to her bedroom for her cassette player. In the kitchen she put on INXS, and turned the chops and poked the potatoes and danced. Everything was all right while she danced, until some fat spat loudly under the griller and she leapt into the air, frightened like her father, jumping at nothing. She couldn’t go back to dancing again, so she tried hard to concentrate on mashing the potatoes, getting them right.

After she’d eaten dinner she decided to call her mother. Her father’s meal was on a plate on top of the stove, covered in Alfoil. She checked the time to find out exactly how late he was, because her mother would want to know. Three hours, three whole hours.

There were no answering machines, no mobile phones. When her mother didn’t answer, she just had to wait. She cleaned up in the kitchen, but she could feel some meat stuck between her teeth, so she went to the bathroom.

She looked in the bathroom mirror and felt like putting on some lipstick. Her mother had left a few old colours for her, but when she opened the door of the cabinet she saw her father’s teeth on the shelf. They were just sitting there, dry and silent, beside the Rexona. His teeth were in front of her, not in his mouth, and they were telling her that he wouldn’t be coming home that night.

Tania’s story stops, but not her hands. Her hands are warm and soothing, and he can hardly believe she is doing this for him. He would almost be more comfortable if she weren’t, but he doesn’t want her story to be over. He
can see the suburban house, he’s there with her. ‘What did you do?’ he says, ‘Did you have neighbours you could go to?’

‘Maybe,’ she says, working her thumbs into a muscle, ‘but I didn’t think of it.’

The message of the teeth was too hard, too impossible, so after she closed the cabinet and walked to the lounge room and sat down on the couch, she didn’t believe it anymore. She watched something she didn’t understand on television. She noticed that, although everything was normal, she didn’t lie down. She didn’t even slouch. She sat with both feet on the ground and her hands between her knees, like someone on a crowded bus. She felt herself sitting like this and then she watched herself from above.

She got up and went to the kitchen. She didn’t know what she was going to do there, until she opened the fridge and took out the bottle of beer. Everything that she did then was as her father did it – taking the opener from the hook on the wall, flipping the bottle top, clattering it into the sink. She sipped the beer and shivered, but soon it had no taste at all.

She pulled up the kitchen blind so more light would shine on the backyard. Outside, the birdbath was full of slimy water. She’d never noticed before, but the hot-water system clinging to the wall looked like a spy. Her mother had covered the garden beds with white rocks crushed into tiny pieces and in the darkness now it looked like Russia, but in the daytime it didn’t make any sense at all.

It was cold. She was still wearing her school uniform and socks, but her legs were bare. She sat down on the back step. She took mouthfuls of beer and studied the ladder of scabs up her shins, from when she’d tried shaving. Gina was a scab-picker, but Tania preferred to feel their small hardness, like the backs of beetles, and she liked to watch them heal. She sat there until the bottle was empty, then she sent it rolling down the concrete path and went inside to get another.

She walked around the backyard, sometimes spinning the clothesline, sometimes stopping and swaying and squinting up at the stars. When she looked up at the sky it didn’t seem to matter her father was dead, if that was what not coming home meant. The sky was so immense that it sucked up any shock, any sadness, but when she looked down at the backyard with the
every day roses and the normal tap and hose, it was impossible to believe she would never see him again.

Tania’s hands pause on David’s back. ‘It’s raining,’ she says, and they listen to the drumming on the roof.

‘But what happened then?’ he asks, turning his head to look at her.

‘Oh,’ she says, ‘I think I threw up and passed out. In the morning a policeman came to the door, and I hit him hard on his chest.’

‘Had your father been found?’

‘Yes.’

‘Was he dead?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where?’

‘In his car, at the beach.’

David’s pain is distant now; he has to reach out to touch it. ‘That’s a very sad story,’ he says.

‘It was a long time ago.’

But it hadn’t sounded that way. It had been a surprise, turning to see Ettie’s exhausted mother, and not a drunk, forsaken child.

‘You look sleepy,’ she says. ‘The morphine will do that.’

He closes his eyes. ‘Maybe,’ he says. He floats for a moment, a man in a bed on an island in the vast Atlantic.

He floats free.

He guesses he hasn’t been asleep for long because it’s still raining when he wakes. But something is different; he no longer feels harpooned to the bed. He thinks he might be able to roll over, but first he opens his eyes. The light is thin and watery. Tania is standing at the end of the bed with her back to him, pulling up her jeans. He sees a milky curve of buttock, but he doesn’t understand what he’s seeing. Slowly, as if everything inside her hurts, she zips up her jeans and buckles her belt, and when she turns her face is wet with tears. She meets his eye and the hand holding the needle drops to her side.

‘There was a little bit left,’ she says.

He doesn’t have to push against pain or obstruction. His body and he are together once more, and he doesn’t judge. He rolls slowly onto his back and makes room for her in the bed. Tania bends down, unlaces her sneakers, and
lies down next to him. She turns on her side, curls up tight. The skylight bulges with rain, and her back brushes his arm as she breathes. He feels her falling away from him. He feels pain’s markings, like impressions in wax. He closes his eyes and soon he’s asleep too.

It’s dark when he wakes. He lies quietly for a while, until he hears Tania stir.

‘You’ve missed the last ferry,’ he says.
‘But I slept.’
‘There haven’t been any phone calls?’
‘No.’
‘Are you hungry?’
‘I might be.’
‘I can move more, but I don’t think I can get out of bed.’
‘How’s the pain?’
‘Not so bad.’
‘I could get us something to eat.’
‘There’s a light on the table beside you.’

He tells Tania where to find one of his jumpers, and she puts her feet into his Ugg boots and clomps downstairs. She heats the minestrone that’s in the freezer. She brings two bowls upstairs on a tray, and they eat in silence. When they’ve finished he looks at her. There’s light in her face again, and he notices the ring of gold around the pupils of her dark eyes. ‘Do you feel like a glass of wine?’ he says.

They stack the pillows against the headboard and rest side by side.

David asks about Ettie’s father. ‘He’s having a baby with his new partner,’ Tania says. ‘I’m keeping him up to date with what’s going on but he’s ...preoccupied.’

‘New partner?’
‘Not the one he left me for.’
‘Did he leave her too?’
‘Yes, he did.’

They sip their wine as the rain comes down again.

‘For a while after he left,’ she says, ‘I used to fantasise about killing them both.’

‘How would you do it?’
‘I’d stab them to death,’ she says. ‘It’d be really violent.’

‘What they call a frenzied attack.’

She turns to him and smiles. ‘Exactly, a frenzied attack.’

Underneath the sound of the rain, the ocean still murmurs. ‘It wouldn’t have been so bad if it was just me,’ she says. ‘But it was what he did to Esther.’

Esther’s father had left to live on the other side of the country, and soon it was time to put Ettie on a plane for her first visit. She was five years old. She had new shoes and a new haircut. She had a new backpack in the shape of a frog. Tania drove Ettie to the airport, and put her daughter’s small hand into an air hostess’s red-nailed one. In seven days, another air hostess would bring her home again, and this was to be way of things now.

On the way home from the airport, Tania had to swerve into a side street. Jacarandah blossom rained violet down the windscreen as she pounded the steering wheel and wept.

At home the hours dragged. She reminded herself of the time difference between the two coasts – that Justin may not be deliberately making her wait. Tania was in the shower when the phone finally rang. ‘Mama?’ said Esther.

‘Hang on, baby,’ Tania said, turning off the taps and pulling a towel around her. ‘Well, Evening Star – how are you?’

‘Good.’

‘And how was it on the plane?’ Tania could hear music in the background. He listens to music in the morning now.

‘Good.’

Where did you sleep, little one? Were there new sheets on the bed, just out of the packet? Were they stiff, did they smell strange? And Daddy’s girlfriend? Do you love Daddy’s girlfriend yet? ‘So, what did you have for breakfast?’ Tania asked.

‘Toast.’

‘And Promite?’

‘They only have Vegemite.’

‘That’s not as good, is it?’

‘Mum,’ said Esther. There’s some kids.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘That live here.’
‘There are other children there?’
‘Yes.’
‘Whose children are they?’
‘Alison’s.’
Tania sat down on the edge of the bath. She had made so many assumptions about the woman Justin had left them for, the life he’d chosen. She had been too proud to ask, and he’d never told. ‘Can you put Daddy on the phone for a minute?’
‘He said he’s busy.’
‘When did he say that?’
‘Before.’
‘He said to say that if I wanted to speak to him?’
‘Yes.’
She was freezing to death. ‘Could you just walk to where he is now, Esther, and hand the phone to him?’
She heard other sounds of his morning, her house.
‘Justin?’
‘What?’
‘Esther says your girlfriend has children?’
‘That’s right.’
‘Do they live there – with you?’
‘When they’re not at their father’s, yes.’
Oh, the gaudy carousel! Children riding up, down, round and round, turned by the motor of adult discontent.
‘Why didn’t you tell me?’
‘I didn’t think it was any of your business.’
She was shivering. She could feel her toenails dying beneath their polish. He had vanished, her husband, and he was never coming back again.
‘How old are they?’
‘Esther’s fine, they’re good company for her.’
‘How old are they?’
‘Four and six.’
‘Are they boys or girls?’
‘Does it matter?’
‘Of course it matters,’ she said, struggling to keep her voice steady.
‘They’re girls.’

Justin had left his own child to wake up each morning to another woman’s children. He’d taken the baby from her own body, the daughter delivered into his arms, and made a sandwich of her. Esther was nothing but the middle now: she was a slice of pink ham; she was chopped chicken.

‘I wish you were dead,’ Tania said.

David looks at Tania’s hands as she speaks. The bite on her hand is healing. He knows that he’s listening to her as a lover listens – on her side, believing every word she says, unable to imagine a time when he could be cruel to her, or she be cruel to him, or when thoughts of murder might be the only consolation for the withdrawal of the other’s heart.

But he doesn’t know if Tania feels like a woman telling a man about her past, or if talking about Esther is simply a way of holding her daughter, not letting her fall, and there’s nothing in the world but her daughter now. He doesn’t know, and there’s no possible way to find out.

‘I’m tired again,’ she says, putting her glass on the table.

‘That’s good,’ he says. ‘I could sleep too.’

‘I’ll get the first ferry in the morning.’

‘I’ll set the alarm.’

He pulls the blankets over them. He’s able to roll onto his side and it’s a comfort to be in his usual sleeping position again. He feels raw and unsettled about Tania, and it helps to turn away from her and hold the feelings to himself. She turns away too, but there’s warmth where their backs touch.

He enters a dreamless sleep. He wakes once, to rain and an awareness of her. And then he’s swimming out of sleep again, reaching for the alarm, but it’s Tania’s phone that has woken them.

She’s sitting up, listening. ‘Yes,’ she says, ‘yes.’

He looks up at the early morning sky.

‘I’ll be there as soon as I can,’ she says.

He can’t read her voice or expression. This is all his fault. He pulls himself to a sitting position, his heart pounding.

Tania puts the phone down and turns to him. ‘Esther’s showing some response,’ she says.

‘That’s positive, isn’t it?’
'It’s what I was hoping for,’ she says, pushing the blankets aside, getting up from the bed. ‘It’s the first step.’

‘It’s still a while before the ferry,’ he says.

‘I want to get there anyway,’ she says, wriggling her feet into her sneakers.

‘Take my jumper.’

‘I’ll call you.’

‘Thank you, for everything.’

‘No,’ she says, leaning over the bed. She’s going to kiss his cheek, he sees that, a peck like the one that Ettie left him with at the end of that far distant night. She leans towards him and her hair falls across her eye. He reaches out to brush it aside, and that makes all the difference, that tells her. She’s still for a moment, and then her mouth comes to meet his. Nothing more is said and when she runs fast down the stairs there’s barely a sound.
He leaves his bed eight hours later.

He’s taken the anti-inflammatories Tania left for him, and Orla dropped by with lunch. Although the morphine separated him from the pain for a while, that wasn’t the same as ending it. It’s late in the afternoon, while he’s reading, that he finally feels the pain receding, drying up like a puddle in the sun.

He moves like an old man. He edges his body to the side of the bed, places his feet on the floor, and takes the first shaky steps before moving, crab-like, down the stairs.

He looks around him at the white stone walls, the light falling over his books and chairs, the faded blue and gold rug. Everything seems bruised and poised, as if in shock.

He takes it slowly and attends to small things. He feels saturated with toxins, weighed down by lead and shit, so he stands at the kitchen sink and drinks glass after glass of water. He puts the kettle on and makes a pot of green tea. He tides some papers, opens the front door for air.

Tania had called once during the morning. Ettie’s eyes hadn’t popped open like a doll’s, but she was showing signs of struggling towards consciousness. Tania thought she might even have squeezed her hand, and it seemed unlikely that Tania would fool herself about something like this.

He steps outside to a sky without clouds. The white horse moves slowly over the green grass and the air smells of salt. He has returned, and the world didn’t even know he’d been gone. He leans his body against the warm wall and lifts his face to the sun.

He thinks of Tania’s story about her father’s teeth. He remembers dimly lit bars in Los Angeles where everyone’s teeth floated and glowed. You talked to teeth; if you were lucky you went home with teeth, some teeth even married.
He feels uncomfortable about Tania’s story now. He likes the severe quality of Tania’s kindness. He likes that she’s someone who won’t lie to herself; he even likes the sharp edge of her anger. All of this he could go up against, and hopefully match, but he doesn’t know what to do with the drunk twelve-year-old staggering around the backyard in the dark.

He doubts his feelings from the night before. He regrets the kiss. He had been too grateful, too relieved. He blames the morphine for dissolving his defences. And what about the shot she’d given herself? At the time it had been so easy to understand that she just needed sleep, but now he wonders who she really is.

The day lengthens into twilight. He shaves and takes a shower, then he sits down at the table and opens his laptop. He returns to the last chapter he wrote, makes some notes and corrections, but before long his hands are leaving their work. As if they have a will of their own, his hands search for the Wikipedia entry on the port city of Fremantle. He studies maps of the place, satellite images and street views. He looks at the website of the local newspaper. He visits Fremantle real estate sites. He’s astonished by a coincidence: Tania and he both live on western coasts! He compares the geographical coordinates of Fremantle and Inishmore, the various flight paths between them, and the best route if you are sailing by boat. He learns that Fremantle too is built on limestone – more coincidence!

He’s sure there’s a song called West Coast Girls, so he goes in search of it. On YouTube he discovers that it’s the Pet Shop Boys’ West End Girls that’s playing in his head, with a bit of The Beach Boys’ California Girls thrown into the mix. When he looks up from the computer screen there are streaks of pale blue and pink in the sky, rashers of fairyfloss bacon, molecular gastronomy. He thinks of Tania’s dark eyes and Mediterranean skin, and the bleached hair that once would have meant punk princess but is now just suburban hairdressing.

What is she like? he wonders, doodling on a note pad. He recalls a hot summer’s afternoon at Stu’s place in Sydney, drinking grappa in the garden. Is she like that? Like ripe lemons and the sun-silvered leaves of an olive tree?

For Christ’s sake, he thinks, get a grip!

Orla picks him up and they drive to her house for dinner. She has questions about Tania, but he bats them away. When he sees his nephews he
warns them about his back, but still they throw themselves at his legs and climb onto chairs to tackle him, smother him in fierce, heavy-breathing headlocks.

‘They’re excited to see you,’ says Orla.

‘I’m serious!’ he says, and peels them off. His body feels weak and broken, and he’s scared of the pain coming back.

Orla gives him a tight look and turns back to her cooking.

‘What about Muddy Willy and Seedy Pearl?’ he says.

Ned and Van cry yes, but Kit scowls and slinks off to a chair in the corner. David can’t remember when they began The Ballad of Muddy Willy and Seedy Pearl, although it must have been in some fallow hour of winter, because they’d been working on the cartoons for months.

Muddy Willy was a bluesman and his girlfriend, Seedy Pearl, was a torch singer, and they were on the road. David and his nephews shared the drawing of the pictures, and Van printed the words. Kit was mostly disdainful of the activity, but they knew they could always get him involved if they came up with a gruesome enough story. The last time they had the scrapbook out, Ned and Van won their big brother’s attention by having Pearl electrocute Willy on stage. They giggled themselves sick as Kit ran with the idea. Just about everyone was stabbed and burnt and decapitated – the audience and the road crew and the surprise ninjas who fell from the ceiling – but slowly Ned and Van grew tired of Kit’s dominance, the mess he made and his evil cackling.

‘You shouldn’t kill Pearl!’ cried Ned.

‘But she started it!’

‘Don’t do Archie!’

‘Don’t do Teacup!’

Archie and Teacup were Muddy’s dog and Seedy’s bird, and they were not for the killing.

‘A-a-a-argh!’ cried Kit, scrawling all over the page with red pen. ‘Now Teacup’s eating Archie’s guts! All his guts are coming out! Teacup’s stupid! Pull her stupid head off!’

‘You’ve wrecked the whole thing!’

‘I hate you!’
Sometimes David feels like throwing Kit against the wall, but his nephew’s furious brow and the flat-footed way he stomps away from them always tear at his heart. Kit is physical to the bone, to the marrow. He is hot muscle and thumping blood, and he has to hurl himself against everything, just to see how much it hurts.

It’s Kit’s arsehole father who David really wants to punch. ‘Couldn’t you have handled that a bit better?’ Orla always says to her brother after one of these blow-ups. And where was Dan? Dan was living in Madrid with his girlfriend. The Spanish Flu, Orla calls her.

David wants Kit to join them now. He hates seeing his nephew slumped in his chair, picking at his pretend tattoos. It reminds him too much of himself, picking at old hurts. ‘Kit, can you draw a heavy metal guy for us?’ he says.

‘What for?’

‘We’re making Willy get jealous,’ says Ned.

‘Green!’ says Van, holding up the matching pencil.

‘Yeah, like your …’ Kit says, digging a finger into his nostril.

‘Come on,’ says David. ‘We need a guitar hero.’

Kit slouches over to the table like a fifty-year-old on his first day in rehab. ‘With tatts?’ he says.

‘That’s what we want.’

‘All over,’ says Ned.

‘A red dress,’ says Orla. ‘Pearl should have a red dress.’

Orla is preparing her awful boiled bacon. The truth is, Orla’s not that good at the guesthouse business. She’s not much of a cook, and not very organised either. She had always said that she was a people person, but now that those people are sleeping under her roof and shitting in her toilet, she finds that she is perhaps more of a flower person, or an animal person, or a sitting alone in front of the telly with a glass of red wine person.

It had taken David a while to see all of this, long after he’d sunk most of his money into the business. It worries him, and the past few days have made everything seem uncertain. It’s less than a week since he last helped out here, and already things look to be in chaos. There are no guests for dinner that night. Maybe they’d just decided to have a night out at Ti Joe
Watty’s, or maybe they didn’t want to eat Orla’s food again, and that was the kind of word that got out.

‘There’s another film crew on the island,’ says Orla, setting a glass of wine in front of him.

‘I hope it’s not another romantic comedy.’

‘It’s doesn’t matter what it is, if they spend money.’

‘Yes, but I want those two hours of my life back.’

‘I guess that film wasn’t very funny, was it?’

‘No,’ he says, trying to end Van and Kit’s tussle over a pencil.

‘And it wasn’t very romantic either,’ she says, taking a sip of her wine.

‘Teacup’s going to land on your fella’s head ‘n’ pull out all his hair,’ Ned says to Kit, and Kit shoves him hard with his elbow.

‘Cool it,’ David says.

The children fight and the grown-ups fill their glasses. The boys draw their pictures and laugh their wicked laughs. Sometimes, in their small hands, *The Ballad of Muddy Willy and Seedy Pearl* turns out to be the genuine item, that rare thing – a romantic comedy with real injuries, tears and forgiveness, as well as real jokes.

David chews on a piece of bread and watches his sister drain the potatoes over the sink, tilting her head away from the steam. He waits for one of the boys to needle his brother, and then he waits for the point, just before boiling, when he has to intervene.

He thinks about the boredom that he feels in this kitchen. It’s not the only thing he feels, but it’s sometimes there. Orla believes that Dan is living a wonderful life in Spain, but David’s not so sure. It may not have come yet, but it would come – the time when his new life feels like his old life, when boredom, the thin wafer of despair, begins to settle over everything again.

If tedium is inevitable, and David thinks it is, then it’s the lucky ones who have duty, and promises to keep.

After dinner he drives Orla’s car back to the cottage. He seldom drives on the island, and he would stay out touring if there wasn’t something he’d rather do.

He lies down on the floor to ease his back, and calls her. Tania’s at the hospital, speaking to the staff before she leaves for the night, but he waits. They talk as she walks the streets to the hotel, as she climbs the stairs and
opens the door to her room. Her voice goes up and down as she pulls off her shoes, and releases as she stretches out on the bed.

He can’t remember the last time he lay on the floor and looked up at the ceiling and talked to a girl on the phone. He’d done it all the time when he was young, or else the girl was on the floor beside him, listening to music, smoking cigarettes. They’d be naked later, they knew that, but there was all the time in the world then, they didn’t have to sit upright at restaurant tables, or in front of computers, watching the clock, swapping their lists of likes and dislikes, looking for some intersection to tell them that they’d be perfect together – but hurry up, do it quickly.

It’s wonderful lying on his back talking to Tania, because he remembers so much.

He remembers the weight of a girl’s body lying across him, his chest the perfect place for her to lean her arms and lift her head and talk. He remembers what it was like to lie on his back with a girl’s eyes tracing his profile; not to feel judged but to feel taken in, a thing that was good, to be loved. He remembers hair falling on his face, lips holding his eyes closed, and how, if it was a wooden floor they lay on, the vibrations of their laughter could be felt in his spine. He remembers his cock straining at his clothes, but knowing that, sooner or later, they would get to it. His cock would not be forgotten.

And lying beside someone new, not kissing yet, thinking it will come soon, but how will it come, how will it come?

They had talked about Ettie as Tania walked to her hotel, but the moment she lay down on the bed she seemed to fall into the space alongside him. Their conversation is loose and free-associative, they’re not goal-oriented or information-seeking. If they happen to learn something about the other it’s because the thing has been snagged, accidentally, in their wide-cast net.

In Western Australia, Tania tells him, there’s a street in the city of Perth called St George’s Terrace. It’s a street of business, corporations and a whole lot of money. The street is long and narrow, a tunnel for the desert wind to run through, undressing women, tossing dirt into people’s eyes.

He doesn’t know how they’ve arrived at St George’s Terrace, only that there’s a subtext waiting for them when they get there. No matter how young they might feel, lying on their backs and talking, they’ve both had lives and neither of them is innocent anymore, neither of them is tough. A
subject has been dropped into their conversation so that they might turn it over, poke at it.

Something strange began happening on St George’s Terrace, Tania says. Men in business suits were seen entering the high-rise offices with their heads bandaged or arms in plaster, while out on the street men on crutches bravely battled with their briefcases and coffees and phones.

‘What was going on?’ says David.

‘Trust exercises.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The business men were all being sent off to this expensive retreat, where a facilitator was helping them bond and share.’

‘And trust?’

‘Yes! The men had to do this exercise, climbing onto the branch of a tree – don’t ask me why it was a tree, I guess the retreat was in a beautiful bush setting – and the idea was the men had to let themselves fall backwards, putting their trust in their colleagues on the ground to catch them.’

‘No!’

‘Yes!’

‘Surely it’s an urban myth?’

‘I swear! A friend of mine who works in emergency treated some of them.’

They laugh together, and it’s not necessary to say what they both know. No need to speak of what is happening between them, or their very great surprise, or how badly they need, at this time in both their lives, the other to be there should they fall.
He takes the ferry to Galway to see a doctor about his back. If everything goes well with Ettie that day, Tania will have dinner with him at Ard Bia. He has arranged to stay at Claire and Patrick’s, but really he hopes he’ll be spending the night elsewhere.

It is his first visit to Dr O’Connor. He had seen the island’s doctor when he had bronchitis in the winter, but O’Connor had looked after an injury of Dan’s, and Orla urged him to go.

‘And how is Danny?’ Dr O’Connor asks.
‘Well, you know he’s not here anymore?’
‘But where is he?’
‘In Spain. He took off.’
‘Did he then?’ says the doctor, prodding his back. ‘Sore here?’
‘Yes.’
‘But not so much here?’
‘Not so much.’
‘Maybe I shouldn’t have fixed that knee of his then?’
‘Maybe not.’

As he’d expected, O’Connor sends him off for X-rays. It’s a day that earns the name of high summer, although in truth the season will soon be turning. Tourists in Guinness caps and T-shirts saunter by in the sunshine. Sea birds call from the blue and all the girls’ shoulders are bare. He strolls over to Gourmet Tart Co. for an organic ginger beer, then heads to the other side of town.

On Wolfe Tone Bridge he stops and hangs over the side. Oh, the fast, dark river and the lime green weeds waving luminous in its depths! He gives in to the sun and the excitement inside him, and walks on in a dream. He dreams all the way up the carpeted stairs of the X-ray place, but when he has to take off his shirt, hold his breath and turn this way and that for the camera, he’s once more overcome by doubt.
He turns last night’s conversation with Tania over and over in his head, until all that had seemed light and subtle then, everything that had felt exquisite, dissolves into nothing. Tania is half a world away from home, her daughter is in a coma, and he is reading too much into things. In their conversation, she hadn’t really been speaking about the feeling between them, it had simply been the story of some losers who fell out of a tree.

The X-rays will be sent to the doctor. He goes back down to the street and the sky isn’t half so bright. He has to get some control over himself. Just a couple of days ago he’d struggled with pain’s imagination, and now, it seems, he will have to manhandle the imaginings of love.

His phone rings and it’s Tania and she’s hoping they’re still on for dinner.

Isn’t it some form of madness? That he should remain so composed, so smooth, his voice coolly directing her to the restaurant, while all the time blood pounds in his ears and light scintillates before his eyes and even the gulls in the sky aren’t soaring as high as his ragged heart?

Isn’t he seriously unhinged?

At Ard Bia he orders a vodka. He waits at a small table looking out at the river through an open window. The day has devolved to a glimmering twilight and the air feels soft on his skin. All around him candles flicker in the breeze, dripping dark red wax onto dark wood.

He’s wearing a shirt he bought at Brown Thomas’s sale earlier. The shirt is a fine white cotton with two narrow bands of complex white embroidery down the front. In the store he’d fancied it as matadorish, but while he was walking to the restaurant he remembered twelve-year-old Tania’s judgement of puffy as not grown-up, and made sure the sleeves were rolled tight above his elbows.

He looks at the menu, but he’s so nervous he can hardly tell the hummus from the muhammara. Surely this is what an arrow feels like as the archer draws it back in the bow?

He has rehearsed their greeting a hundred times by now, but when Tania arrives it’s nothing like he imagined. He stands when he sees her and she moves towards him without either one of them smiling. They don’t kiss, or
They slowly, carefully, put their arms around each other, like distant relatives at a funeral.

‘I need a glass of wine,’ she says.

They look at the list together and order a New Zealand white.

‘So,’ he says, leaning forwards.

‘So,’ she says. She’s wearing a pale blue dress with a halter neck that ties in a loose bow on her collarbone. A quick tug on the bow and she would not be wearing anything. He can’t see anyone packing such a dress for hospital visits, and he wonders if she’s ducked into the shops too. Her fringe is pinned back with a clip, her roots are dark and her forehead is smooth, and she looks less spiky, less likely to kick his shins.

‘You look good,’ he says. ‘Have you been sleeping better?’

‘A bit,’ she says, ‘How’s your back?’

‘Not too bad.’

‘Did you see the doctor?’

‘Yes, but I don’t know anything yet.’ He breaks off a piece of bread. ‘How was Ettie today?’

‘Oh,’ she says, shrugging her satin shoulders. The wine arrives and the waiter fills their glasses. ‘To the beautiful evening,’ she says, looking out at a sky three shades deeper than her dress.

‘To the evening.’

‘The wine’s delicious, what was it again?’

He turns the bottle so she can read the label. She takes another sip, puts her glass down, then reaches out to touch the pink peonies in the vase on the table. ‘They look like they’re flecked with blood, don’t they?’

‘Yes,’ he says, although he can’t see it himself.

‘This place is lovely,’ she says, looking around her. ‘What was it before?’

‘I think it was a customs house or something.’

‘It’s sort of warm chic?’

‘I’m tired of restaurants that feel like science labs.’

She moves her hand to stroke the flower’s stem and a ring on her index finger flashes in the light. ‘I don’t know how to answer the question about Esther,’ she says. ‘The doctors say everything’s all right, it’s all part of coming out of a coma, but sometimes she seems so distressed.’

‘Are her eyes open? How is she responding?’
‘No, her eyes haven’t opened, but that’s not unusual. And her neurological responses are fine.’

‘Have you ever nursed coma patients?’

‘Yes, but always old people in dementia-related comas before death.’ She lifts a hand to the brass candlestick, dislodges some wax with the nail of her thumb. He remembers Ettie fiddling with the candles at dinner and it seems impossible that in little more than a week they have travelled from there to here.

‘What’s happening about her medication?’ he asks.

‘Nothing, for the moment.’

‘What do you think about that?’

She looks him in the eye for a long, cold moment. ‘Oh, this is terrible,’ she says, and there’s despair in her voice.

He tries to return her gaze steadily, but his heart is pounding. ‘What’s terrible?’

‘Oh, it’s just that – for most of Esther’s life I’ve longed for this,’ she says. ‘Someone to talk things over with at the end of the day.’ She looks down, picks up her knife, and makes cutting movements with it on her napkin.

‘So what’s terrible?’

She looks up again. ‘Wanting to be happy – about you – but at the same time I’m so scared for my daughter.’

His heart squeezes. ‘That’s why I thought I should wait for you to say something,’ he says. ‘Or at least give me a sign.’

‘What?’ she says. ‘Like Stop? Caution?’

‘Give Way.’

‘There’s one on a freeway in Perth that says Wrong Way, Go Back.’

‘That’s so helpful.’

‘Slippery road ahead.’

‘Thanks for the warning.’ He reaches across the table and touches the tips of her fingers. ‘Would it help to know that I’ve been fucked up all day, knowing that I might or might not see you?’

He’s heard her laugh on the telephone, but now he sees the deep spaces of happiness that open at the sides of her mouth. ‘That helps a lot,’ she says.

‘I thought it would be creepy to force anything when you already have so much going on,’ he adds.
She lifts her hand and laces her fingers with his, and a wave of peace, thick as honey, rolls through him. ‘Things between men and women don’t get any easier with age,’ she says.

He shakes his head, pours more wine. ‘They don’t seem to,’ he says. ‘In general, I’ve found middle-age to be a pretty dodgy raft.’

They lift their glasses. ‘Here’s to the white water,’ she says.

At that moment it seems that life is simple, and all he’s ever wanted is someone who makes him laugh. ‘Have you ever done it?’ he asks.

‘What?’

‘White water rafting?’

‘Oh,’ she says, ‘yes. Esther and I went rafting a few years ago. In Ubud, up in the mountains of Bali. We rode elephants too.’

‘I’ve never been on an elephant. What’s it like?’

They’re both calm now. They’ve smoothed a path, and they’ll walk it. Tania tells him about Ubud. They look at the menu and order. When the wine is finished, they don’t order more. The sky is deep blue, then it’s black, and her face falls into the shadows of candlelight.

They leave the restaurant and walk slowly beneath the Spanish Arch. He stops and turns to her and puts his arms around her waist. She moves close, and when they kiss beside the four-hundred-year-old wall, the Madonna of the Quays looks on.

‘Can I take this out?’ he says.

She reaches up and unfastens the clip, and he runs his hands through her hair. Her skull feels fragile but densely alive. She rests her cheek against his collarbone and they hold each other, consoling again. Tania’s need for comfort seems obvious, but it isn’t clear to him why her hand should cup the back of his neck so tenderly, what he’s done to deserve it.

They walk back to the hotel. They wait for the lift. Her room is small, with streetlight striping the walls. Tania turns on a lamp. He puts his bag down and they stand at the foot of the bed, staring at each other. He reaches out and tugs suavely at the bow on her shoulder. *Try again*, she whispers sexily, and he does, but it still won’t come loose.

‘It’s a press stud!’ she laughs, popping the dress apart. The fabric drops to her hips and her breasts are a perfect fit for a martini glass. He stands
gawping at her loveliness, until she pushes him playfully towards the bed and they both fall awkwardly.

‘Shit, my back!’

‘Oh, no,’ she says, scrambling to her knees on the mattress beside him. ‘That was stupid. I’m sorry – here, lie flat.’

He shimmies further up the bed and she looks down at him, frowning but amused.

‘It’s okay,’ he says, ‘it was just a twinge.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Fuck!’ he says, flinging his arms above his head. ‘I’m an old man!’

Tania climbs on top of him. ‘A dirty old man, I hope.’

When his hands reach for her breasts her skin is so soft he’s almost afraid of it. Tania, he says. Tatiana. He’s waited all his life to kiss as slow as this. Her lips move to his eyes, temples, ears, the hollow of his neck, as his fingers comb through her hair. She lifts herself and looks into his eyes. He’s drawn into her gaze, ready for her, when she puts her hand to his cheek and says, ‘You’re beautiful, David Quinn’.

It feels like she’s dug out his heart with a shovel.

‘But you really need a haircut,’ she adds.

He swallows. ‘You reckon?’

‘I do.’ Her dress is blue water at her hips; her hair is atomic. Her dark eyes are laughing at him.

‘You mean now?’

‘Are you up for it?’

‘What? Samson and Delilah?’

‘Trust me.’

He runs his hands over her smooth shoulders. ‘Why not?’ he says.

‘Great,’ she says, leaping off him.

‘On one condition.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Take off your dress.’

She holds his gaze as she snakes out of her dress and tosses it on the bed. She’s wearing plain white knickers.

‘And now those,’ he says.
She pushes the boyish underpants to her knees and steps out of them. ‘Ready now?’ she says, standing naked in the lamplight.

‘Oh, I’m ready.’

Tania walks into the bathroom and turns on the light. He gets up from the bed and unbuttons his shirt. She’s standing in front of the mirror when he comes up behind her. There’s Mega B and evening primrose oil on the vanity. There’s Chanel No 19 and dental floss. He runs his knuckles down the curve of her spine. He puts his arms around her, presses his hands to her belly, holds her close. She gives him all her weight and his hands move down to stroke her slowly with his fingertips. She’s wet and breathing and when she places her hand on his cock it feels like the long plunge towards fucking has begun.

‘Snip, snip,’ she says, clicking a pair of nail scissors she’s holding in her other hand.

He laughs. They untangle. He turns back to the bedroom, lazily rubbing his chest. It’s an interesting version of coitus interruptus, but who is he to complain? He feels strong and whole from head to foot. He feels like a long, cool streak of sex, as though at that moment everything about him makes sense.

He sits down on the edge of the bed and pulls off his shoes. He undoes his belt, loosens his jeans. ‘Are you interested in a night cap?’ he says, squatting in front of the mini bar.

Tania comes out of the bathroom and takes a chair from the small desk in the corner. ‘Will it go with what I’m wearing?’

‘Perfectly.’

‘All right then,’ she says. ‘And I wouldn’t mind a bit of chocolate too.’

He pours a couple of whiskies and breaks up a Toblerone. ‘Have you ever cut anyone’s hair before?’ he asks, handing her a glass.

‘Never.’

He sits with his back to the mirror, sipping his drink and feeding her triangles of chocolate. She snips away at his hair, teasing him about all manner of things. He feels as though his faults have all been hung out to air; he feels forgiven. When she stands between his thighs, he touches her hips and studies her grim caesarean scar, but barely thinks of her daughter.

She tilts her head from side to side to assess her work.
'You’ve got goose bumps,’ he says, drawing her close. ‘Let me warm you up.’

She straddles his lap and puts her arms around his neck.

‘I haven’t finished.’

‘It doesn’t matter, I’m sure you’ve made a difference,’ he says, sliding his hands beneath her buttocks. He tilts his hips as she unzips his jeans and gently lifts out his cock. His fingers play along the crack of her arse, then further, and she holds onto his neck, her cheek pressed hard against his as he reaches deep inside her.

‘I,’ she says, pulling back.

He lowers his head and draws her nipple into his mouth.

‘I can’t,’ she says, lifting her hand away from him.

‘What’s wrong?’

She touches her forehead to his. ‘I’m sorry,’ she says. ‘I feel too guilty.’

‘Ettie.’

‘I can’t relax.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ he says, putting his arms around her. ‘I understand. Let’s just get some sleep.’

He has said these words to women before, a version of them, for one reason or another. He looks over her shoulder at the white towels folded neatly on the shelf, and he waits. He is waiting for a feeling of disappointment, or rejection. For frustration or resentment, and the withdrawal that usually follows; waiting to curl in on himself. But her hand is still there, tender on the back of his neck, and in the bathroom’s quiet and the absolute calm within, he knows that he has meant these words, at last.
Dr O’Connor wants to send him for more tests.

‘I think it’s likely to be a herniated disc,’ says O’Connor, ‘but there might be something else going on too. I’d like to get a fuller picture.’

David wonders why he wasn’t sent for a fuller picture in the first place, but the doctor’s receptionist phones the hospital and gets him an appointment for later that day, and that means that instead of catching the ferry home and sitting down to write about corruption, he’s going to see Tania again.

He phones her to ask if he can stop by intensive care on his way to radiology. She doesn’t seem to think it’s unusual that he’s being sent for more tests. He would like to think it’s routine too, but he hasn’t forgotten his pain or helplessness, and he doubts he’ll ever again have the freedom of taking his body for granted.

He hasn’t seen Ettie since the day Tania arrived, and it feels strange to be entering the hospital again, passing The Nine Bamboos of Galway, taking the same old lift up to intensive care.

He’s not sure why it gives him such a kick to see Tania wearing the cream jeans and short-sleeved denim shirt he watched her dress in earlier, but later, lying on his back inside the CT scanner, he understands he has powerful feelings for even the clothes that she wears.

She’s standing by Ettie’s bed when he arrives, talking to a nurse he knows. He greets them and hands Tania the purple tulips he’s bought, but when she kisses his cheek the look on the nurse’s face makes him feel like he is up to something grubby.

When he turns to look at Ettie he has to hide his shock. She seems so much less than the Ettie he remembers, and it’s horrible to think it, but she seems somehow less human too. There are more machines and bottles and bags around her, and the tube feeding her through her nose looks like a violation. He thinks of when it was just the two of them and Ettie sometimes
appeared as if she were simply off somewhere, having a quiet time on her own.

‘David’s here,’ says Tania, taking Ettie’s hand.

Ettie’s face looks troubled. The trouble isn’t written in any of her features – it’s subtler than that, and thus more malign. It hovers greyly, just beneath her skin. ‘Hiya, Ettie, how’re you doin’?’ he says, like a fucking cowboy sidling up to a bargirl in the local saloon.

Ettie’s hands are curled tensely on the blanket, not open and waiting as he remembers. He tells himself this just means that she’s moving from a passive to an active state, and that’s a good thing – she’s coming loose from the honey jar.

‘Do you want to get some fresh air?’ he asks Tania. ‘Or coffee?’

‘Both,’ she says. She bends down, opens the cupboard beside Ettie’s bed and takes out her bag. ‘Oh, and look,’ she says, ‘these should probably go back to the library.’

He can’t account for the hurt he feels when she hands *Girls Interrupted* and the other books back to him.

In the coffee shop, Tania finds a table while he stands in line and thinks about everything he’s just felt upstairs. He is surprised to have found himself thinking about the time he spent with Ettie in those terms – *just the two of us* – and taken aback by the messiness of his emotions. Tania is the focus of his attention now, and he thought it would be easy to make the switch to thinking of Ettie as Tania’s daughter, at one remove from him. The last thing he expected was this strange, sinewy feeling, this ache.

‘I guess you already know how bad the coffee is,’ he says, setting the cups down on the table, ‘so I bought…’

‘More Toblerone!’

He watches her tear at the chocolate, thinking of her hands on him the night before, the variety of her touch. For a moment, he considers telling her about the woman he met here, the one who had told him about her coma, but then he thinks of the woman’s brother dying, upstairs where Ettie is, and he lets it go.

‘Esther opened her eyes this morning,’ Tania says.

‘Really?’

‘They weren’t open for long, but I’m sure she knew me.’
‘That must have been a huge relief.’

‘It was so good to look into her eyes again,’ she says.

They finish their coffee and go outside into the grey drizzle. He wants to show her the neo-Gothic quadrangle at the university, and they walk the short distance there, neither of them mentioning the wet.

He feels anxious as they step through the broad stone arch. He knows that Tania and he are together in an odd kind of bubble. They’re in a little space capsule called The Extremity, floating free of the earth. He loves that they havenot trawled too much through each other’s lives – he’s given her only the barest outline of his – and they haven’t discussed their likes and dis-likes, because that’s not the most important thing about them. Perhaps this is what it’s like to meet in a time of war, or emergency, when it is the eternal in each other that matters. Not one’s tastes, but one’s character.

*Love comes in at the eyes*, Yeats said, and it’s true. And the mouth and the ears and the nose and the fingertips.

Tania and he are together like this, but he’s not a fool, he knows the time will come when they have to return to earth, when, in fact, earth will be wanted again. He wonders how it will be then, if they’ll be able to walk the earth together. He hadn’t known it when he suggested they walk to the university, but perhaps he was setting a small test for them.

It means something to him that Tania considers the quadrangle. She doesn’t have to feel the same way he does – he loves the severity of its grey stone walls and the flames of ivy, wine-red in winter, in summer electric green – but he hopes that she will take it in.

One day in Barcelona he had taken a sultry Texan he’d just met to see the beautiful, cloistered courtyard of Casa de l’Ardiaca. They left the noise and heat of the city and stepped into the courtyard’s damp darkness. She trailed her hand in the cool water of the stone fountain. She leant against the trunk of the great palm tree and looked up at the fronds scratching the sky. ‘This could be in a movie,’ she said.

As if reality wasn’t enough for her. As if everything coming in at the eyes and the nose and the fingertips wasn’t already some fragment of rapture, some flake of masterpiece, the everlasting reason why people fought for their lives, whatever hard ground they fell upon, because they were still greedy for it, because it hurt too much to let reality go.
They separate when they enter the quadrangle. Tania walks slowly around the green rectangles of lawn. He sits on a bench and looks up at the tall clock tower against the pearl-grey sky. There’s no one else in sight. After a while she comes and nudges his foot with the toe of her sandal and they go back under the arch.

They walk in silence. He doesn’t like holding hands. Tania seems to prefer this too; they don’t even walk especially close. Again it seems that life is simple, and that all he’s ever wanted is someone to walk beside, neither of them minding the quiet.

They cross the road on a green light. The hospital is ahead. They wait at the entrance of the car park for a van to pass, and walk on.

‘The quadrangle made me think of the shirt you were wearing last night,’ Tania says.

‘The white one?’

‘Yes.’

‘In what way?’

‘The ivy reminded me of the embroidery on the shirt,’ she says, as they part around a ticket machine. ‘You like things cool and elegant, don’t you? But with something wild thrown in?’

Coma and CAT scan await.
There are twelve Elvises on the ferry that takes him back to Inishmore.

There are a couple of black leather, ’68 comeback Elvises, some Jailhouse Rock Elvises and a few Elvises in Hawaiian shirts, but only the groom-to-be has the honour of wearing the white rhinestone-studded jumpsuit, with a pillow stuffed down the front.

It’s going to be cold on the open water, but when he sees the Elvises gathering on deck he follows. The moment the ferry pulls away from the dock the lads open cans of beer, they offer David one, and he joins in toasting the island of craic floating ahead of them on the horizon. He walks over to the railing and looks out at the sea. Behind them the ferry churns white water with a seam of liquid jade and the air smells of diesel and salt.

The Elvises can sing. They’re more than parodists, they’re real fans. He’s an Elvis fan too, of the awed and heartbroken kind, unwilling to criticise Elvis’s later years, just grateful he ever existed. He turns away from the water, puts his back to the railing and takes a mouthful of beer as the lads swing into ‘Suspicious Minds’. He had forgotten this: how falling in love feels like a benediction. As if the world is lining up on your side at last; as if life has picked a bunch of Elvises just for you.

He lifts his can in appreciation as one of the lads begins ‘If I Can Dream’. He remembers Elvis singing this song, alone on a dark stage with his name behind him in red neon. He was wearing a white, double-breasted suit, and even though he was as beautiful as a god, his eyes were exhausted from all that he was giving.

He thinks of how he will tell Tania about this. He notes the lads’ oversized sunglasses and stuck-on sideburns, their fingers full of rings, so he can paint her a picture, so she can be there.

When he arrives at Orla’s his nephews are crying in their bedrooms and his sister is in the kitchen, pouring herself a glass of wine.
He feels as though it’s all his fault.

‘I think I’m going to have to send Kit to stay with his father for a while,’ says Orla, flopping into a chair. ‘I can’t handle him – and I can’t stand all this fighting.’

David sits down beside her. ‘Do you think that would be the best thing?’

‘No! But I don’t know what else to do.’ Orla has been crying too. Her eyes are swollen, and when she rubs her forehead with her palm, he notices for the first time that her hands are ageing, that they look like their mother’s hands.

‘I know I haven’t been much help lately,’ he says. ‘I’m just so angry all the time! I feel like I didn’t sign up for this.’

It seems to him that any woman having a child is signing up for the possibility of being a single mother, but he’s not going to say this. ‘It’ll get easier,’ he says, although he’s not sure it will. ‘How many guests have you got at the moment?’

‘It’s a full house. But they’re all working on that film so they’ve got their own catering.’

‘Have you found out what sort of film it is?’

‘Some kind of fantasy, I think. Princesses and dragons.’

He looks around the kitchen. He’s full of energy and goodwill, and the alternative is going back to the cottage and working. ‘The place is a mess,’ he says. ‘But I wouldn’t mind cooking. What if I make a few meals, so at least you don’t have to do that for a while? And you clean up?’

He drives to the Spar to shop. Tania rings as he’s walking the aisles. They talk about the CT scan, and she tells him that Ettie has opened her eyes again. Her voice is so much lighter now. It reminds him of the whipped-up water behind the ferry, the flash of green.

‘What are you going to cook?’ she asks.

‘The boys always love spag bol, especially if I put lots of bacon in it. I’ll make up a pesto sauce, that’s another pasta meal they’ll eat. And I guess some kind of frittata.’

‘What did you cook when you had Esther for dinner?’

‘We had smoked trout,’ he says, taking a can of tomatoes down from the shelf, ‘and spaghetti in squid ink and … I forget. Oh, yeah, I made a banoffee.’
'My God!'
'I thought I was cooking for four, remember.' He's glad to be able to remind her that his dinner with her daughter was more accident than design, although he's not sure why. 'And it was my birthday, so I cooked things I like.'
'I didn’t know it was your birthday then. How old were you?'
He stands in front of the cheeses while they have the conversation all lovers have. 'And how old are you?' he asks.
'Thirty-eight.'
'When’s your birthday?'
'April.'
'April what?’
'April the tenth.'
'A child of spring.'
'Not in the southern hemisphere.'
'No, of course not.'
'You’ve been away too long.'
Perhaps.

When he gets back to Orla’s the boys are watching a DVD, sitting quietly together on the couch like the three monkeys unacquainted with evil.
'Butter wouldn’t melt in their mouths,' he says.
'Oh, they’re grand lads,' says Orla, who is a bit sozzled. 'I’m lucky really – I don’t have anything to complain about.’
He puts his arm around her. ‘On the ferry I met a buck’s party dressed as Elvises,’ he says. ‘They invited me to have a drink with them later, at Ti Joe Watty’s. Why don’t we all go? It’s a beautiful evening – the boys can run around in the garden.’
'I don’t think a buck’s party will want a woman and three children along.’
'They’re not like that, they’re into singing.’
'I don’t know. I’m a mess.’
'Well, go and fix yourself up.'
'Were they singing Elvis songs?’
'Of course.’
Orla goes upstairs to shower and he begins cooking. As he moves around the kitchen he’s jolted by jump-cut images from the night before: Tania’s breasts, eyes, the inside of her thigh. He’d known women who liked to call themselves strong, but often their strength lay in hitting people over the head with feminist platitudes while they were really as gooey as Cadbury Creme Eggs on the inside. Before he met Claire, Patrick used to bang on about how he only liked strong women, proud of himself, as if that made him more of a man. And as if anyone would say they liked weak women? Tania has that tough-girl look going on, but nothing about her seems brittle; her sense of what it is to be a woman hasn’t come from any manifesto.

He thinks she’s a brave person, and that her daughter is brave too.

The film finishes and his nephews start racketing. He warns them in no uncertain terms, and when that doesn’t work he sticks in another DVD. The frittata is in the oven, the bolognese bubbling, and Orla comes downstairs in a slinky black dress and dark cherry lipstick, her hair like Morticia Addams’s.

‘So what happens next with the doctor?’ she asks, shaking a bottle of nail polish.

‘I have to go back to get the results,’ he says, ‘but my back hasn’t been giving me much trouble.’ He doesn’t want to say anything to her about Tania, not yet.

Ned treats them to some breakdancing when he’s told they’re going to the pub, kicking on his back like an upturned beetle. They eat dinner, Orla makes the boys wash their faces and put on clean T-shirts, and they walk out into the twilight.

Tania is in the ocean and the wildflowers lining their path. She’s there in every swish of a horse’s tail. The boys stop in the middle of the road to show off more dance moves – they say they know who Elvis is, but their moves look more like Michael Jackson’s to him.

The Elvises are standing in the garden at the front of Ti Joe Watty’s when they arrive. They’ve already been joined by a bunch of locals, and the night’s regular entertainment has given up, run a long lead outside, and is accompanying them on guitar. David’s nephews fall silent and gather shyly around their mother. He can see Orla enjoying the goggle-eyed looks she’s getting
from some of the Elvisses and he’s pleased. He goes inside to get them all drinks and crisps.

A couple of the Elvisses are computer programmers. He talks to another who runs a seafood restaurant in Kilkenny. There’s a tubby lad with ginger hair and lace-up trousers who looks more like Van than Elvis – like Van Morrison performing ‘Caravan’ in Scorcese’s The Last Waltz: five spine-tingling minutes. Five of David’s favourite minutes on earth. He buys the groom-to-be a top-shelf whiskey, and they stand together under a tree while the others sing ‘Wise men say only fools rush in’. Someone has jokingly moved the pillow from the front of the groom’s jumpsuit to the back, so that he’ll land softly when he passes out.

David hasn’t heard Orla sing in ages and she has a lovely voice. The Elvisses find a couple of songs that his nephews know, and it’s good to see Kit put down his anger, cuddle up to his mother and sing along. Pink streaks the sky and the night comes on.

It’s the most comfortable he’s ever been on Inishmore. Tonight he doesn’t feel fazed by landscape, or intimidated by nature. He’s not shamed by his inability to speak the island’s language, exhausted by its millennia of human toil, oppressed by druids and saints.

He’s never been located on this earth by tradition or faith. He doesn’t know what it’s like to fight for food and shelter, or to work alongside a woman equally bent on survival. He has no affinity with the Man of Aran and his ancient struggles with the land and sea, but he does feel a connection to the man who was Elvis Presley. Like Elvis, he has been confused about what the world wants from him, puzzled by his strengths as much as his weaknesses. He, too, has abused love, misunderstood reality. He’s been gnawed at by hungers, distracted by trinkets, he’s gone missing in his own flesh.

When they’re all ready to leave, they wish the groom-to-be a happy life and he locks Orla in an embrace that goes on for too long. They walk home in the dark. Van hums quietly to himself, and all around them the Atlantic sighs.

With the children in bed, David turns to Orla. ‘Did you have a good time?’ he says. Her smile makes him happy, but he knows he’s been sneaky. He’ll be spending more time away from home now, time with Tania, and to-
night has been a way of easing his guilt, of fortifying his sister for the days when she will be alone with her sons, a belly full of anger and a guesthouse to run.

He walks home slowly, dizzying himself with the stars. The cottage is peaceful now, not empty. He turns on a light and takes his bag upstairs. He turns on a lamp. The bed’s unmade, but it’s not a bed of pain anymore. And it’s not himself that he sees there, trapped in the swirled sheets. Because the baby is back, tinier than it has ever been. The baby is curled close to its mother, newborn, and both the baby and Tania are sleeping.
He waits for Tania outside a Galway pub in the early evening. His chair is damp from the day’s rain, but the sun is out and it’s warm enough to take off his jacket and roll up the sleeves of his shirt.

He’s finished reading the newspaper. He sits back with a beer and watches two overweight men at a nearby table as they greet two women. In his new sunglasses he can get away with looking at anyone. It’s like being a superhero, or a fly, and he wishes he’d had them all his life. The men at the table have hot pink faces. One of the women knows the men, and she introduces her friend as they shake the water from their chairs. Her friend would once have been a serious beauty, but the anxious preservation of her appearance has left her looking strained and tense.

But there’s hope in this woman’s eyes, as she settles into her chair and looks expectantly at the two men. There’s a night ahead. The men go inside and return with drinks, but it doesn’t take long, as the conversation continues, before David sees the woman’s hope turn to politely concealed scorn. She sits back in her chair. She looks around and plays with her bra strap. She’s accepted her disappointment, she should’ve known better.

He feels sympathy for everyone at the table. For the pretty woman with the high standards, for the men still trying, not knowing they’ve already lost her, for the plain friend who learnt long ago that she’d never be the prize. He’s been all of these people; at one time or another, he has taken his place there.

Tania arrives wearing jewelled sandals and a white cotton skirt, and he sees that it’s the disappointed woman who turns to look at her, who takes in her skinny, golden legs.

‘Have you been waiting long?’ she says, slipping into a chair. ‘I sent you a text but you didn’t reply.’

‘My phone’s dead – I forgot to bring my charger.’

‘I wanted to get Esther’s test results before I left.’
'And?
'And everything’s looking all right so far, but it was another exhausting day.'
'But reason enough for a glass of wine?'
'Yes.'

He gets up from the table and crouches by the side of her chair. She turns her head and smiles at him, puts her hand to his cheek. She smells of hospital and sunshine. He knows that there are children hungry at this moment, people being hurt, human endurance stretched unbearably thin. There is every variety of misery, so many gnarled, ingrown complexities, and he doesn’t take it lightly, this simplicity, this happiness that has come to him. ‘Red or white?’ he says.

He passes close to the table of four. The disappointed woman is maintaining a tight smile but the others are laughing easily. ‘I’m telling you,’ says the plain woman, ‘Hugh Hefner would be a lazy bastard in bed. He’d be a please nurse, come and stir my porridge kind of fella.’

Inside the pub he leans on the bar and eyes the soccer as a willowy girl pours his drinks.

‘The rain has stopped?’ she says.
‘Yes, it’s nice now.’
‘I work the whole day. Never go outside.’
‘Where are you from?’ he asks.
‘Marseille.’
‘What are you doing here?’
‘Galway is the most fun in the world.’
‘Lots of young people?’
‘Lots of vodka.’

Tania is talking on the phone when he gets back to the table. He’s familiar by now with the look of hurt related to all things Justin. It’s a look of staring absence, like someone having a brain faze, or petit mal. He sets her wine down and she rolls her eyes at him. ‘It’s impossible to tell,’ she says into the phone.

He hates Ettie’s father, but he keeps it to himself. He sips his beer and sits back, trying not to look ruffled. At the nearby table the laughter has stopped.
The disappointed woman is having her palm read by one of the men. If he gets it right, her eyes say, she’ll give him another chance.

The old feeling rolls through him, slow and cold. It’s a feeling he’s never spoken about, although a long time ago, in an attempt at control, he had named it the pass of the dark shark. It’s a spasm of dread, of hopelessness, and he knows that if it should come one day and not go away, if it should ever lodge within him and harden, then he would have no choice but to put an end to his life.

‘Sorry,’ says Tania, putting down the phone. ‘Job done.’

He tries to latch onto the gold light in her eyes. ‘Job done,’ he says, although it makes no sense to.

‘Cheers,’ says Tania.

‘Yes,’ he says, ‘cheers.’

Tania takes a sip of wine and sets down her glass. ‘It made me so happy last night,’ she says, ‘to hear about the meal you cooked for Esther.’

‘Why?’

‘Oh, just to think that someone had served her lovely food like that. I’ve always felt guilty about it – I’m not the greatest cook. I’m not that interested, I guess. Not when it’s three meals a day, every day.’

‘Did Ettie ever do any of the cooking?’

‘Esther’s pretty lazy. She’s got a lot of get up and go but she likes to relax.’

‘So she’s really just having a big sleep-in at the moment?’

‘She’ll be so relaxed when she wakes up.’

‘And ready for a big meal.’

‘It was wonderful when she left for London. For weeks I ate nothing but cheese and Ryvita and apples. Hardly a dish to wash.’

‘We could have a version of that for dinner.’

‘Yes?’

‘Fresh bread, runny cheese, figs?’

‘In my hotel room.’

‘Tania’s Happy Meal.’

‘Very happy.’

‘But how about a promenade first?’

‘Yes, let’s promenade,’ she says, ‘let’s strut our stuff.’
He laughs because this is so ridiculously at odds with her weariness and worry, his dodgy back. It’s a joke that encloses them, that heals. They swallow the last of their drinks and push back their chairs, and as they are leaving he turns for one last look at the nearby table. Everyone is leaning towards the disappointed woman now, studying her palm, peering into the wishing well. ‘I see a tall, dark, handsome man – but will a fat pink one do?’

He doesn’t fail to note how kindly he feels towards these men and women, in a condescending way, now that he is with Tania, now that he no longer sits at that table.

On Salthill Promenade the seagulls are shitting and the breeze carries the scent of brine. He slips his jacket around Tania’s shoulders, and they might not hold hands but they walk very close. There are pastel houses and the Atlantic is a mild, grey pond.

They walk in the deep, restful silence that goes with them everywhere. He wonders why this shared quiet has always been hard to find with other women, and why it should be so easy now, until suddenly he understands that the silence is the space Tania and he make for her daughter.

In the distance the Aran Islands don’t look like his home. The sun is falling down the sky. He knows where they’ll find the bread and cheese. They’ll have to walk a bit further for the figs, but they can buy wine on the way. When he was a young man, he would not have believed anyone who told him that one day a simple meal would be enough to save him. He wouldn’t have wanted to hear of such a commonplace thing, yet turning his thoughts to food for thin, tired Tania has driven away the dark shark, and there was nothing boring or ordinary about it.

‘The sand looks so grey and cold,’ says Tania. ‘Have you ever thought about living in Australia again?’

A different man would look at her now. A different man would answer: _I’ve thought about being there with you._ But instead David looks out to sea.

‘Sure,’ he says. ‘I’m not opposed to it, but it’s never worked out that way.’

He had considered it seriously, he tells her, about five, six years ago. He’d needed a change. But then he had run into Rosie Booth and life had taken a different course. Had he mentioned Raven, the animal rights activist he’d met when he first worked in London?
‘No,’ says Tania, quietly, ‘you haven’t.’

He has shifted the subject too abruptly. He wishes he could go back, but it’s too late. ‘Well, it’s a long story,’ he says, ‘but Raven the activist turned into Rosemary the politician, and we decided to write the fur book together.’

‘You’ve never mentioned the fur book either.’

‘Haven’t I?’ he says. If only he could stop now, start somewhere else. He’s laying down some of the bones of his story, telling her about himself. These bones will exist as long as they do, he’ll never get a chance to revise them. He will never lie beside her in bed one night and say, you know that story about Raven and Rosie and the fur book, well, can I tell it to you another way, can I show myself in a different light?

‘No, you haven’t,’ says Tania.

‘When I say we wrote it together,’ he says, ‘I don’t mean together. I mean we collaborated – on a book about the fur industry.’

‘What’s the book called?’

‘The Hat is a Cat.’

‘What?’

‘Sorry, I’m kidding. That’s what we used to call it, for a joke. Fur substitution’s a huge racket.’

‘Cats? Really?’

‘Yes, among other animals.’

‘That’s awful.’

‘You wouldn’t believe the freak show of fashion,’ he says. ‘There was this couturier I interviewed in Milan.’ Why is he telling her this? He’s told it before, to other women, it’s old and stale and cheap. ‘He was politely answering my questions, then he told me that the coat he was wearing was made from the fur of three hundred chinchillas. He stood up, dropped the coat to the floor – and he was stark naked underneath. He said “I vood not vare eat any uzzer way.”’

Tania doesn’t laugh. The other women had laughed. Perhaps she thinks he hasn’t told it well, like the joke about the old man and the punk. Perhaps she’s considering ways in which he could better its comic effect. Or perhaps it wasn’t very funny after all, or he had told it with too much charm.

He’d like to start over again. He would like to tell her what needing a change really meant, that he had taken on the fur book because love and
family hadn’t come. He had needed something to wake up for, and there had been lots of travel – fur farms in Europe, Canada, Russia, China, the fashion houses, the back-street boys – and lots of strong, unambiguous feeling to keep him motivated. He’d written the book as a Grand Guignol, because as well as it being the truth about the industry, horror stories sold. He would like to tell her that writing horror had helped him mop up some of the sadness he was drowning in.

‘This baby looks like Winston Churchill,’ whispers Tania. A woman is walking towards them pushing a child in a stroller. The baby frowns at them as it wheels past. ‘You’re right,’ David laughs, ‘he does.’

‘She does,’ says Tania.
‘You’re joking?’
‘I’m not.’
‘How can you tell?’
‘I just can.’

He has turned it over so many times in his head. He’s phrased it this way and that. He has wondered how to ask the question without betraying himself, without hanging out all his hopes like dirty washing. ‘Did you ever want to have more children?’ he says.

‘Of course,’ she says, ‘I always saw myself with more children.’

They walk on in silence. The sky flushes pink. Ahead of them there’s a banner strung between two buildings: a vodka drink is sponsoring the upcoming weekend.

‘It’s going to be a beautiful sunset,’ she says.

Sunset, darkness, happy meal, hotel room. He doesn’t know how he’s survived them, all the nights that were not like this one. And all the days that preceded the nights unlit by sexual promise.

‘Yes,’ he says, ‘yes, it is.’
Tania is lying on her stomach on the bed. She’s wearing pyjama pants patterned with cowgirls, and the girls are twirling their lassoes. He writes on Tania’s naked back with the tip of his finger.

‘Fig,’ she says, ‘that’s easy.’ They hadn’t been able to find figs for their dinner.

‘All right, I’ll make it harder this time.’

‘Apples,’ she says. Instead they’d had pink apples and nougat. ‘Still too easy.’

‘Okay, you won’t get this one.’

‘Honey,’ she says.

‘Yes, darling.’

‘I’m not calling you that,’ she laughs, turning her head on the pillow, ‘that’s the word.’

‘Well, you’re wrong, darling. It’s not.’

‘It’s not honey?’

‘Nope.’

‘Do it again.’

His shirt is draped over the bedside lamp. The little room is as dim as a bordello but their game comes from the nursery. Tania’s skin glows rose-gold. Her spine looks like a work of genius, the world’s most brilliant curve.

‘Honky?’ she says.

‘No,’ he laughs. ‘It’s honour. You’re not as good at this as you think.’

‘Maybe you’ve just got poor handwriting.’

‘Well, let’s see how you go with this one.’

‘O,’ she says, ‘B, E ... obey?’

‘Clever girl.’

‘You want me to honour and obey?’

‘Don’t worry about the honouring, but I want you to do what I ask.’

‘And what do you ask?’
‘Take off your pyjamas.’
‘You don’t like my girls?’
‘I don’t like the looks your girls are giving me.’ He slides his hand under her waistband. Her hip is smooth and cool; he had forgotten that this is the least warm part of a woman’s flesh.
‘Maybe they don’t trust you.’
‘What possible reason could they have not to trust me?’ But her buttock is warm, and warmer still the fantastic crack of her arse.
‘Because you look like a rustler.’
‘A rustler?’
‘A highwayman.’
‘A highwayman?’
‘A robber.’
‘A robber?’
‘A thief.’
‘Yes, a thief!’
Sometimes things just work out. Sometimes the cowgirls cry *yippie ky-yay* and the pyjamas come off with a single tug and she’s the call and he’s the answer and it’s piss off world let’s do this sweet and free thing we were born for, let’s fuck!

Sometimes, but not this time. This time she says, condom? And he says, oh, okay, do you have one?
Dr O’Connor wants to send him for a bone scan.

‘Are you serious?’ David says, ‘I thought the CT would tell you everything?’

‘I just want to be sure,’ O’Connor says, tipping back in his chair. ‘But my back hasn’t been too bad.’

‘You were in agony for two days, unable to move.’

‘Do you think there’s something more sinister going on?’

‘No, I don’t. I just want to be able to say absolutely what happened, before I start you on a course of treatment.’

Five minutes ago, David would have said that his treatment had already begun. He was healing himself, changing his life. He’d almost forgotten what the pain was like. ‘I want you to be straight,’ he says, but he’s thinking don’t take this away from me.

‘There’s nothing I’m not telling you,’ says O’Connor.

‘All right.’

‘Good.’

He’s inclined to believe in people, but also inclined to fear the worst, and he struggles to balance the two as he makes his way across town. It’s another fair day in Galway, and slowly the sun and the fragrance of the roses along University Road drive away the worst of his doubts. Ettie is getting better every day, and perhaps his back problem is just being unnecessarily and expensively over-serviced. Or perhaps the doctor is a brilliant, meticulous diagnostician, and who can tell? Only another medical person could tell, and then they’d send him for a second opinion.

At the university library, he sets up his laptop at a table with a comfortable chair and good light. He looks around him at the students in front of computer screens, bent over books. The young aren’t what they used to be, he thinks. They’re taller and fleshier. They’re better looking. They look better, but they also look more alike. He knows that if he went hunting through
the university for a photo of the 1875 rowing team, or the academic achievers of 1932, he’d find potato noses and cabbage ears and apple cheeks. There would be students with heads like horses, crickets, toads and rats; he’d see magnificent crookedness, disproportion and asymmetry. But it’s rare to find any of these in the young now, even though the mix is more multicultural. He can’t remember the last time he saw a really good set of bug eyes.

He catches up on some news before he gets down to work. He reads about the Irish economy. Ireland will lose its young again, if the news is right. He reads about a spate of employee suicides at an electronics factory in southern China, a factory where Apple products are made. Tens of thousands of young people working long hours for meager pay, living like numbers in a factory city. He scrolls through photos of assembly lines and stacked dormitory accommodation. The photos remind him of things he saw a long time ago, on factory farms and in abattoirs and food processing plants, only now it’s human beings who are organised into productive units. *The leaner the meat; the fatter the profit.* He copies the photos into an email to Stu. Does any of this look familiar to you? he writes.

Tania is waiting on a bench when he arrives at the quadrangle just after six. She’s wearing the pale blue dress with the fake bow – *your famous blue raincoat was torn at the shoulder* -- and her jewelled sandals. They’ve been invited to Claire and Patrick’s for drinks.

‘You look lovely.’

‘Thanks,’ she says. ‘You have a pen mark on your forehead.’

‘Did you have a good day?’

‘Reasonable. You?’

‘Yeah, I had a good day.’

They walk beneath the arch and out onto University Road. He listens as Tania tells him about her conversation with Ettie’s neurologist. She seems subdued, and he wonders if she’s nervous about meeting his friends.

On Canal Road they stop to look at a family of ducks gliding past on the water, and she changes the subject. ‘One of the nurses told me you said you were Esther’s father,’ she says.

‘What?’ He turns to look at her. ‘The nurses all knew exactly what my connection to Ettie was.’
'She said that you told someone you were Esther’s father,’ she says, star-
ing at the ducks, not looking at him.

‘Which someone,’ he says. ‘A nurse?’

‘No. A relative of another patient.’

‘I only ever spoke to one relative.’

‘Of someone who died?’

‘Yes, a woman whose brother died.’

‘Well, she told the nurse you said you were Esther’s father.’

‘That doesn’t make any sense.’

‘The nurse said that after her brother died, this woman asked her to pass
on her best wishes to Esther’s father.’

‘But no nurse ever said anything to me.’

‘That’s because she thought it was weird that you said you were Esther’s
father.’

‘Look,’ he says, ‘I was going to tell you about this woman – when we
were in the coffee shop the other day, I was going to tell you then – but, well,
her brother died, and I thought that might not be the sort of thing you need-
ed to hear.’

‘But hearing that you said you were Esther’s father was?’

‘It wasn’t like that. This woman and I started talking. She’d been in a co-
ma once and it had changed her life – for the better – and she was telling me,
I think, to stop me from worrying. She just assumed I was worrying about
my daughter, and I guess I didn’t correct her.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t know. It just didn’t seem like the most important thing, given the
way the conversation was going.’ And, anyway, where is Ettie’s fucking father?
Making more sandwiches?

When Tania finally looks up the anger in her eyes frightens him, but he
can see that she’s wrestling with it. ‘Can you see how it might have sounded
to me?’

‘Yes, I can,’ he says, trying not to show his own anger.

She looks at the water again, although the ducks have gone. ‘It’s just that
we don’t really know each other,’ she says, ‘and it’s all been so stressful.’

He feels sick to his stomach. Somehow he had thought that, in the ways
that mattered, they knew each other well. He hadn’t seen that what mattered
was different for each of them. ‘We’re going to be late,’ he says, looking at his watch.

They walk on in silence, but it’s not their usual easy quiet. After a while he thinks to humour her with his flimsy observation about the uniformity of young people’s faces, but he ends up sounding like one of those idiots who thinks every generation after his is headed for hell. ‘Esther and her friends aren’t like that,’ says Tania, and her daughter is between them once more.

It’s best to keep his mouth shut. It’s best to listen to the Leonard Cohen song in his head. He was seventeen and drunk the night he discovered that Famous Blue Raincoat took the same time to play as a Benson & Hedges cigarette took to smoke. Exact, right down to the song’s last second, right down to the cigarette butt. He had tested it so many times before he stopped smoking five years ago that now it is one of the few songs to which he knows all the words. It’s a song about forgiveness and generosity in love. Best to turn it up then, keep quiet.

‘It’s four in the morning, the end of December, I’m writing you now just to see if you’re better.’

It tears at his heart to see the trouble Claire and Patrick have gone to; their eager faces when he introduces them to Tania. Sometimes it’s hard to believe that his friends love him as he does them. Sometimes he feels that were he to disappear in a puff of smoke one day, his absence would hardly be noticed. Remember David? Oh, yeah, David, I wonder what ever happened to him?

Claire settles them on the balcony overlooking the Corrib and Patrick fetches the drinks. David sits back and watches Claire and Tania extend their sympathetic female tendrils towards each other, and by the time Patrick gets back with the champagne everyone is smiling.

‘The seagulls make me feel at home,’ Tania says, as a couple of birds flap past, ‘although the river couldn’t be more different.’

‘What’s the river in Perth called?’ asks Patrick.

‘The Swan, after its black swans.’

‘I’ve never seen a black swan,’ says Claire.

‘What colour is the river?’ asks Patrick.

‘Oh, it’s a wide, dazzling blue!’ Tania says.
It is the first time David has caught this moment in Tania’s face, although he’s seen in it other women, many times before: the moment when alcohol hits and inner bindings release and she slips free of tiredness and the everyday. Tania has drunk only half her champagne, and it’s both touching and a giant turn-on to watch it go to her head.

‘And a shark in the river once ate a boy scout,’ she says.

‘Fantastic!’ says Patrick, and everyone laughs.

Claire feeds them tiny goats’ cheese tarts and warm, slow-baked tomatoes, and Patrick opens another bottle of champagne. David had warned Tania that Patrick could be a windbag, but Claire keeps him on the tight rein that brings out the best in him. When it’s time for them to leave, Claire and Tania swap telephone numbers and agree to meet for coffee.

‘I’m too drunk to go back to the hospital,’ Tania says, when they’re standing outside on the street.

He pushes the hair out of her eyes. ‘What if I take you there in a cab?’

She shakes her head. ‘I don’t want any of the nurses to see me like this.’

‘They won’t care, they probably won’t even notice.’

‘Or Esther.’

‘She’s really not going to notice.’

‘I just want to lie down,’ she says, her face crumpling. ‘I need a break from the hospital.’ He puts his arms around her while she cries, and then she lifts her head and reaches into her bag for a tissue. ‘I’ll call them,’ she says, ‘but if Esther’s peaceful, I won’t go.’

They lie side by side in their clothes on the bed in her hotel room.

‘Are you hungry?’ he asks.

‘No, I made a pig of myself at Claire’s. Are you?’

‘No.’

He reaches for her hand. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘I’m feeling worn-out and guilty.’

‘About the hospital?’

‘Yes, but I’m still not going.’

‘I think that’s a good idea.’

‘I’d like to just lie here and watch a film.’

‘Sure, but you have to choose.’
He lies back on the pillows. Tania plays with a handful of remotes, turning on the air conditioning and radio before finding the television, and then she settles back too. He looks at the screen but the film doesn’t interest him. He’s thinking about Tania’s accusation that he’d been posing as Ettie’s father. He turns it over and over. He peeks the bruise, trying to feel exactly where and why the accusation hurts, but it’s like the pain that bound him to his bed, it’s evasive and yet everywhere. In the end, perhaps, it comes down to this: the accusation hurts so much because it’s true. He had been playing at being Ettie’s father.

He doesn’t know how to explain any of this to Tania. It felt right to watch over her daughter, the way it feels right to exercise, to attend to neglected muscle, build up strength. But now it seems that his sense of rightness is somehow her sense of wrongness, and something dreadful has happened: for a time – for how long exactly? hours? how many? – Tania had been suspicious of him; she had thought he was creepy.

He feels all his hope draining away. He wants badly to kiss her, to look closely at her eyes and mouth. He wants to be moving inside her, but the thought of pulling on a condom, or worse still, pulling it off, tying the knot, fills him with despair. Tonight he cannot kill that part of himself.

Tania is so quiet he thinks she’s sleeping. He lifts his head from the pillow but her eyes are open, she’s still staring at the screen. Maybe he had been wrong about films, not believing in them anymore. Maybe films are not about stories or acting or special effects at all, and they might not even be good or bad either. Instead, a film might really be a kind of heart-lung machine, an apparatus to take over the circulation of thought and feeling while the soul rested, while your innermost being underwent repair.

‘Do you feel like a cup of tea?’ he says.

When the film finishes they prepare for sleep. They move in and out of the bathroom. They strip off their clothes, yank the blankets free of their tight corners and switch off the light.

He doesn’t know what time it is when he wakes. The streetlights are all out. He stirs and pulls his arm away from her. ‘You’re awake?’ she asks. They kiss and there’s no other sound. No light but moonlight. He moves into her slowly, without a word, their minds asleep, their bodies dreaming of each other, and she comes to his touch.
‘I’m sorry,’ she says, as they lie together afterwards.
‘What for?’
‘For questioning you about Esther.’
‘It doesn’t matter anymore.’
‘Because really,’ she says, ‘I cherish you.’
‘And I,’ he says, ‘cherish you.’
Tania is worried about money. She’s worried about her job, cat, garden, master’s degree, her elderly neighbour. She’s worried about Ettie’s hospital bills. They talk about all this over coffee and scrambled eggs, sitting in a dark booth far away from the rest of the world. They’re solving practical problems quietly, and neither of them has mentioned it, but their quiet lovemaking in the night has calmed them both.

The doctors have told Tania that Esther will be moved to a regular ward once she’s fully conscious. Her departure from the hospital will depend upon her progress, but it’s likely she won’t be able to fly for a while. Over breakfast they decide that Tania will leave her hotel and move to Inishmore. She can catch the first and last planes of the day, and she will still be able to spend most of her time with Ettie. And then when Ettie gets better, she’ll join them. Think of the good it will do her, fresh sea air, lots of fresh food.

They leave the café and set out for the hospital. It’s raining and Tania is wearing her riding boots. He thinks of the clothing she’ll need as the weather gets colder. He will make some changes to the cottage; there’ll be new meals to cook. The grey stone island doesn’t know it yet, but things are going to be different.

In the lift they arrange a time to meet back at the hotel. David presses Tania into the corner for a long, laughing goodbye, she gets out at intensive care, and he goes on to radiology.

For the bone scan they inject him with radioactive dye, but he has to wait for three hours before he goes under the gamma camera. He returns to the university and sets up in the library again. Stu has replied to his email about the deaths of the young workers at the electronics factory. ‘We worry about where our eggs come from,’ Stu writes, ‘but not our smart phones. We’re too much in love to ask.’

David replies: ‘Free-range phones! Our employees are allowed to roam!’
He writes easily all morning. Four o’clock shimmers on the horizon. They’ve only known each other for two weeks, but nothing has ever felt so right. It was meant to happen, he’s sure of it, fucking without a condom in the dark. Their bodies are wiser than them, and night is wiser than the day, and wisdom wants this to happen – triumph over caution, this roll of the dice.

He thinks about buying a car. He puts his work aside and takes a look at his finances. He can afford it, just. A secondhand Renault Megane, he can see the three of them in a Renault. Perhaps a dark blue or black one.

When he meets Tania at the hotel they pack their bags. Ettie has been up and down all day but the neurologist told Tania not to be too concerned, her daughter was just making her way. And there wasn’t much to report about the bone scan; it had been over in a few minutes. Nuclear medicine, he says. I know, says Tania.

There’s time to shop before the last plane takes them back to Inishmore. They squeeze oranges and pop grapes into each other’s mouths. They buy milk and bread and irises and wild olives, more apples and nougat, and then they gather their bags and walk on to Charlie Byrne’s.

Charlie Byrne’s is a maze of rooms: there are rooms that tumble together, rooms that ramble, rooms you’d swear you’d never seen before. The rooms grow wild as weeds, and in every room books are packed to the ceiling, piled high on the floor, and all priced so enticingly that customers wander dazed and giddy.

David and Tania walk through the rooms together, laughing at the confusion, and then they separate. He’s looking for some new fiction to read, while she wants to replace Simone de Beauvoir’s *Old Age*, which she accidentally left on the plane.

He browses in the art section first, and in the next room he looks at a book about the history of factories. He moves slowly through the rooms of science and philosophy. Time passes and the pile of books under his arm grows. This is contentment, to be lost in his own thoughts, but knowing that Tania is near. He can feel her at the centre of her own circle of solitude, the lines of their circles touching, but it’s getting near the shop’s closing time and they have a plane to catch. He finds his way back to the front counter to pay for his purchases, and then he begins looking for her.
He goes from room to room. He walks up and down the aisles, peering into every corner. When he’s searched every part of the shop and still hasn’t found her, he retraces his steps. One by one, Charlie Byrne’s rooms grow darker. They grow secret, conspiratorial. He returns to the front of the shop, puts down his shopping and luggage, and leans over the counter. The young assistants are tallying the day’s takings. He knows he’s making them nervous but he can’t stop. ‘You’re sure you haven’t seen her? Blonde, riding boots? Australian accent?’

‘No sir. I’m sorry, sir, but we can’t tell the difference between the American and Australian accent.’

There can only be one explanation for her disappearance: she’s left for the hospital. It seems obvious now; she must’ve received an urgent call about Ettie. His phone is dead, and perhaps she hadn’t been able to find him. How many times had he been to Charlie Byrne’s before he’d understood its maze of rooms?

He is chastened by how easily he’d forgotten that the centre of Tania’s life is still a girl in a coma. He’d been dreaming away about their solitudes touching, and all the time she had been rushing to her daughter’s side.

When he arrives at intensive care, the curtains are drawn around Ettie’s bed. He stops, and tries to prepare himself for whatever lies ahead. None of the nurses look at him as he passes, and he interprets this in the worst possible light.

He can’t find the opening to Ettie’s curtain. He wants to peek in, study the scene first. Instead he fumbles the curtain like a vaudeville comic, and when he finally emerges on the other side, he sees that Ettie is lying peacefully, and Tania’s not there.

A new round of questions begins. He goes to the other beds and discreetly draws the nurses aside. ‘Have you seen Esther Bradley’s mother? You know, Tania? Ms Conti?’ Any of these nurses might be the one who talked to Tania about him, and he feels guilty, guarded. But no one has seen her. They hadn’t expected to, they say, and there’s been no emergency.

He can’t make sense of it. Unless, he thinks, making his way back to Ettie’s bed, unless Tania suddenly had a bad feeling about her daughter? This seems plausible; he’s familiar with the strong emotions that Ettie communicates. And perhaps Tania had left Charlie Byrne’s only a short time be-
fore him, perhaps some shifty taxi driver was bringing her to the hospital the long, long way?

He pushes Ettie’s curtain aside, puts down his bags, and sits in the chair beside the bed. All of this is reasonable, in an unreasonable sort of way. All of this means that he just has to wait, and Tania will soon be there.

He reaches into a bag and takes out the novel he’s bought. He crosses his legs and tries to settle his back. Tania had been worried about Ettie’s distress, but there’s no sign of that now. She has fewer tubes and machines, nothing about her seems sad or comatose. She looks like a girl sleeping off a big night out, soon to bounce up for crispy bacon and a debrief. He wants her to wake up and see the changes in the world since she’s been gone. She will like the changes, he’s pretty sure of that. And she will feel different herself, rested, re-imagined, with nothing broken or hurt.

Banoffee, he’ll make one when she gets out of hospital. He will meet her at the ferry in the black Renault, and feed her full of banoffee.

‘What the fuck are you doing here?’ Tania is standing at the foot of the bed, her face drained of colour.

‘I was waiting for you.’

‘But why are you waiting here?’

‘Because that’s where I thought you’d gone.’

‘Gone? I didn’t go anywhere.’

‘But I looked everywhere for you.’

Tania glances at Ettie. She runs her hands through her hair. ‘Oh, my god,’ she says.

He puts his book down and follows her out to the corridor. ‘Why would you do that to me?’ she says, spinning around to face him.

‘Do what, Tania? I didn’t do anything. Where have you been?’

‘At Ard Bia. It was the only place I could think of where you might have gone.’

‘What? You were the one who disappeared. I thought something must’ve happened to Ettie.’

Fluorescent light flickers above them and the linoleum swims greyly beneath their feet. They’re trying to keep their voices down but the effort is twisting their faces, making them ugly. They can’t hear each other, their explanations won’t fit together, nothing makes any sense. Why were you with my
daughter? Tania’s hands run through her hair again. She’s cracking and collapsing, and there’s a scream inside her – he can see it pushing up, rippling her throat.

‘Let’s go outside,’ he says, putting his hand on her arm. ‘Let’s get some air.

She glares at him but he sees her struggle to pull back. ‘All right,’ she says. ‘But I have to check on Esther first.’

‘I’ll meet you there,’ he says.

He presses the button for the lift and tries to control his breathing. The lift arrives and he travels to the ground floor alone, staring into space. It isn’t the argument that has stunned him, but the stopping. He had reached out to touch Tania, to call a halt, because all of a sudden he’d remembered a twelve-year-old staggering alone in the dark, a girl who struck a policeman when she learnt that her father was dead.

Only he hadn’t really remembered – everything was too fast and heated for memory – he had somehow apprehended it. The way you apprehend the answer to a mathematical question, or figure out how to make a piece of electrical equipment work: it’s just there suddenly, a solid thing in front of you, the puzzle and the solution together as one.

The lift doors open and he walks over to the coffee shop. He stands in front of the refrigerator, chooses two flavoured mineral waters, blood orange and pink grapefruit, and waits in line. He knows something irrevocably now, something that, in a sense, he had only been playing at before. He hears and sees Tania. He feels, apprehends her. And that means he loves Tania, so much.

Outside he waits on a wet bench in the weak sun. He watches patients and visitors come and go. He sees sadness and worry but other things too: children jumping into puddles, parents who don’t scold when they’re splashed. Tania believes that someone could walk out on her, and not come back. There’s not a lot of adult logic in it, and little faith, but abandonment is what Tania knows, it’s the wound her blood runs to.

She comes out of the hospital and sits down beside him. She is full of broken glass and thorns, but she takes a drink from him and they talk. Their drinks are deep red and pale peony pink, absurdly beautiful in the ceasefire.
It’s difficult to believe, but eventually they’re forced to, that they had both been in Charlie Byrne’s, and looking for each other at the same time.

‘I didn’t have a clue where I was,’ she says, ‘All the rooms looked the same to me.’

‘I guess it’s possible, if you were going into a room as I was coming out.’

‘And to be honest, maybe I didn’t look for that long. I was just sure you’d gone.’

‘You gave up on me before I gave up on you,’ he says, taking her hand. He feels rinsed clean, ready to start again.

‘I’m so tired,’ she says, and puts a hand across her eyes.

‘It’s like someone was messing with us.’ He says this quietly but really he’s exultant, high on post-crisis chemicals and the feeling that he understands her now, and he can protect them, and there’s so much wordless, condom-free fucking and love to come.

But he has not heard Tania cry in this way before. Sometimes his nephews cry like this, deep into their forsaken souls. He strokes her back slowly. He tries to soothe her but she doesn’t respond, her body doesn’t bend. Her elbows are on her knees, her head is in her hands, and she’s weeping, broken and alone.

‘It’s all right, Tania,’ he says.

She reaches into her bag and pulls out a handful of tissues. ‘I just wish you hadn’t been here with Esther,’ she says.

He tries to keep the aggravation out of his voice. ‘I’m sorry if that disturbs you,’ he says, ‘but I thought I explained it.’

‘I know,’ she says, blowing her nose. She zips up her bag and straightens her shoulders. ‘Can we go up again?’

‘Sure.’

They cross the hospital foyer without speaking. He wants to get out of this awful place. He wants to climb the steps of the plane with her, and leave all this behind. His hand is on the small of her back as they wait for the lift. The aerial view will do them good; it will make human things seem small. They enter the lift and they’re alone.

‘I’m not going back to the island with you,’ she says, as the doors close.

‘Tania?’

‘I’m sorry,’ she says, ‘but I have to focus on my daughter now.’
Rain blackens the island’s limestone. The tourists’ ice-cream colours are vanishing, and it’s less common to hear other languages being spoken in the shops of Kilronan now, in the pubs. Inishmore is returning to its Irish tongue. There are fewer ferries, and on some impossible days there are none, and a look of fear and steel can be seen in the eyes of every islander, a preparation for the inward journey that lies in the winter ahead.

David gets up from the table when Dr O’Connor phones. He has been working all morning. He needs to hear what the doctor has to say because his back has been bad again. Now he understands how pain does its dirty work: first it fools you into thinking it’s gone away forever, then it comes calling again. It dumps its bags, makes itself comfortable and sets about reminding you of all the good times you’ve had.

He walks around the cottage as he listens to O’Connor. He sees Tania’s hand lotion on the kitchen bench, where it would be if she had come to the island, if she were still in his life. He sees her caramel lipstick on a cup.

‘I think we can see,’ says Dr O’Connor, ‘that what happened to your back was a sort of perfect-storm event.’

‘Okay,’ he says, stopping at the window to watch the orange lifeboat moving slowly out to sea.

‘You actually have three herniated discs, some osteoarthritis and nerve compression caused by spinal stenosis.’

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s a narrowing of the spinal canal.’

‘And you’re saying that all these factors contributed?’

‘Yes.’

‘But it’s an old injury. Why did it suddenly get so much worse?’

‘Time, age, the work of the devil.’

‘What are the best and worst case scenarios?’
‘Best is that we control it with a combination of exercise and pain management, worst is surgery.’

‘I don’t want that.’

‘No one wants that,’ the doctor says.

David thanks the doctor and puts the phone down. There’s a helicopter flying above the lifeboat now, it’s the day for practice rescues. He thinks bitterly about the men – or worse, women – out there on the ocean, testing their strength and courage, happy residents of their own bodies.

Later that day he tells his sister about O’Connor’s call, standing in her kitchen, waiting for a saucepan of water to boil.

‘Old age isn’t for sissies,’ says Orla.

‘Who said that?’

‘Bette Davis.’

‘It’s true,’ he says, wondering if Tania knows this quote, wishing he could tell her.

Orla is sewing and they’re both drinking tea. It’s finally time to tell her about Tania.

‘Oh, Davey, Davey, Davey,’ she says. Orla can often be vague and distracted, but she takes to matters of sex and romance like a soldier. She is sitting at the kitchen table in her black and red-striped sloppy jumper, circa new wave 1978, and the moment recalls all the other moments they’ve been together like this, he and his big sister. Without Orla, he wonders how he would have learnt to love anything in this life.

‘I know,’ he says.

‘I feel for Tania,’ Orla says, squinting at a needle, ‘which doesn’t mean I don’t feel for you.’

‘Too much fucking feeling,’

‘Yes, you’ve really kicked a hornet’s nest this time.’

‘What do you mean, “this time”?’

‘Oh, David.’

‘No, really, what do you mean?’

‘I mean you’re a heat-seeking missile for hurt.’

‘I am not.’

‘You are, you always have been, even when you were little.’

‘That’s just not true.’
‘And you’re always rescuing women,’ she says, breaking a piece of thread with her teeth.

‘What women?’
‘Me, for one. Look how you rescued me?’
‘I didn’t rescue you.’
‘Of course you did.’
‘I thought you needed help.’
‘I did, but that’s still rescuing me.’
‘You make it sound like a pathology.’
‘I’m sorry.’
‘You’re sorry, but you don’t take it back?’
‘No.’
‘I hate your guts.’
‘Well, push them aside and start on your vegetables.’
It’s a joke from childhood, and they both snort into their tea.
‘While we’re talking,’ she says, sorting through a pile of buttons.
‘Yes?’
‘How would you feel about selling the guesthouse?’
‘Shit, I’d love to sell the guesthouse,’ he says, stirring the rice.
‘Really?’
‘Of course. But what would you do?’
‘I don’t know. I’d have to find work, but I haven’t really thought that far ahead.’

He searches his mind for the reference. Is it a Rilke poem? About a wild animal that can no longer see the bars of its cage, a captive that has grown to believe the world comes vertically sliced? He hadn’t known until this moment just how trapped he felt.

‘All I know,’ says Orla, ‘is that I can’t last another year as Sybil Fawlty.’
‘Let’s do it then, for Christ’s sake. Let’s get rid of the guesthouse.’
‘Well, that was easy.’
‘Did you think it wouldn’t be?’
‘I don’t know. I wasn’t sure how you’d react. You’re not the easiest person to read.’

‘Do you realise,’ he says, ‘that button’s not going to fit through that button hole?’
‘It’s not, is it? I bloody give up,’ says Orla, throwing the shirt on the table. ‘Isn’t it time for wine?’

He screws the top off a cheap Chilean red and takes down two glasses. ‘I’m ashamed to see you in those slippers,’ he says.

‘You don’t like my puppies?’ She stretches out her legs, waggles her feet.

‘Neddy does.’

‘Ned would,’ he says. ‘Slancha.’

‘Slancha.’

He sits down at the table. ‘When Dan left,’ he says, ‘did you hope for a long time that he’d come home?’

‘You shouldn’t slouch like that with your back.’

‘Jesus.’

‘That’s better.’

‘Did you?’

‘Did I what?’

‘Hope that Dan would come home?’

‘Oh,’ she says, ‘I think I was too angry for that, and too worn out.’

‘But did you want him to?’

‘I thought I wanted things to go back to the way they were – but then the relief set in.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘One night,’ she says, ‘I was lying in bed and I suddenly realised I could stretch out my arms and legs as much as I liked. I could lie in the middle of the mattress.’

‘You didn’t miss Dan’s body?’

‘The truth is I was absolutely sick to death of Dan’s body.’

‘You mean sex?’

‘I mean the whole sexual demand,’ she says. ‘I couldn’t just touch him, you know, walk past him in the kitchen and put my hand on his back, because he’d always try to turn it into something else.’

‘Didn’t you ever want something else?’

‘I would’ve preferred to stack the dishwasher,’ she says.

‘But you must’ve had sex?’

‘Sometimes, for the sake of peace and quiet. It wasn’t much different to what a prostitute does, and much less honest.’
‘That’s a strong thing to say.’
‘Is it? At some time in her life every woman is going to use her body in
some kind of transaction.’
‘Every woman?’
‘Whether she has to, or wants to, yes, every woman.’
He tips the wine back and forth in his glass. He wants to argue this with
her, but he doesn’t know where to start. ‘Poor Dan,’ he says.
‘Poor me! I absolutely hated kissing him – that was by far the worst part.’
‘Was it like that all the time?’
‘Oh, every now and then it’d be okay, but even the sun comes out in win-
ter, doesn’t it?’
‘But you’re still so angry with Dan for leaving?’
‘It’s my prerogative.’
‘I guess so.’
‘You’re not still hoping to hear from Tania, are you?’
‘No, of course not.’

It is possible for him to give this answer because technically it’s true: it’s
not hope that he is nurturing, it’s faith. He thinks about the difference be-
tween the two when the phone rings and it’s not Tania, when he wakes alone
in the night. He has even worked up some corny but serviceable definitions:
hope is a cheap balloon, a bright distraction but a fearful one. Faith is a mus-
cle, pumping with blood.

Before Tania, it was only hope he knew. He can’t bear to think of it now,
all the balloons he has chased, the scraps of colour he’s been left holding in
his hands. But faith is deep in his body. It’s in his testicles and in hot bands
inside his thighs and it burns his gut and flames up into his chest and throat.
Only the tips of his hair and the whites of his toenails feel faithless. Faith was
born the night of the condomless fuck, the night that he and Tania embraced
fate, and it has not gone away.

He has tried to deny it; tried to be reasonable. But there’s no baby lying
helpless upstairs on the bed anymore, his house has filled with another pres-
ence. It’s a small boy who runs through the rooms now, who hides behind
the furniture. He sees the soles of his feet disappearing around corners; he
sees the crumbs of his biscuits, the ducks and boats of his bath.
He has tried to deny this child. He’s tried to convince himself that it’s just the ghost child come back to haunt for a while, but really he knows it’s not. The ghost child is a wan, sad, angry presence, but otherwise unclear. The ghost child is not this swift, laughing boy with Ned’s curls, Geno’s Sicilian eyes, Tania’s delicate bones, not this child with Orla’s talent for tying with her tongue a knot in the stalk of a cherry. He knows that Tania’s phone call will come, because he has faith.
Early one morning, after a night of sobbing winds, a man’s body is found on Inishmore. He is discovered on the rocks, just north of the seal colony, and it seems that he has drowned.

Everywhere David goes that day, the drowning is the news. At the post office and the Spar and the café. Walking home to his cottage, he passes an old man with whom he has no more than a nodding acquaintance, but today the old man looks David in the eye and says, ‘Ah, but that poor fella.’

The man on the rocks hasn’t been identified, and no one knows of any islander who has gone missing. He might have come from across the water, people say, like the drowned woman wearing the clothes of Connemara, whose pregnant body was washed up on the shore near Kilronan and is buried in a field there.

A real dead man, Ned calls him, and it seems as if the whole island turns that day. The way a sleeping giant turns, and mumbles, and sets loose the dreams from its giant, sleeping head.

David learns that Inishmore is an island of drownings, and it hardly seems to matter anymore which are tragedies with actual bodies and which are legends, or stories floated on drink. He sets aside work that day and walks to Ti Joe Watty’s. He orders a pint and sits at the bar so that he can listen to the talk. Behind him, a fire burns in the grate and grey light falls through the windows. ‘God give his soul rest,’ someone says. ‘That is, if rest is good for it.

There’s a chance that this new body is a suicide – people talk about that. They talk about the woman from Connemara again, another stranger the tide had brought in, whose name was never known. People believed that she’d taken her own life, along with the life of her child, and even though it had happened many years before, the land where she had been found was still called An Bhean Bhaite, the drowned woman.
David drinks his pint slowly and lets the fire warm his back. He hears about the Feast of the Blessed Virgin, 1852, when fifteen men were taken by a wave as they fished from the rocks. He learns of others lured to their deaths by fairy ships singing ghostly ocean songs. In every drowning story he listens to that afternoon, fact or fiction, there’s the same plangent note, there’s the same bone-deep knowledge in every islander: sometimes the forces may be too great.

He cooks dinner at his sister’s that night. A teacher at the school had taken some of the children down to the rocks after the body was found. Kit was among them and Orla is furious. ‘She said they went there to leave flowers, but I told her she didn’t have the right.’

‘Was there any real harm in it?’ he says, peeling potatoes at the sink. Now that the guesthouse is on the market, everything that happens at Orla’s might be happening for the last time.

‘Kit’s already off his nut about moving. He doesn’t need any more trouble in his head.’

A few days ago David had arrived at Orla’s to find Kit standing in the vegetable patch bashing tomato plants with his light sabre.

‘What are you doing?’ David had said. ‘Don’t do that.’

Kit turned around and glared at him, his face streaming with tears. ‘What’s wrong?’ asked David. ‘What is it?’

Kit wouldn’t meet his eye. He threw the weapon at David’s feet, as if whatever was troubling him was David’s fault. In the kitchen Ned was on Orla’s lap and he was crying too. Van sat nearby, his hands gripping the edge of the table, his little face grave.

Orla looked at David and pulled down the sides of her mouth. It wasn’t the usual post-tantrum atmosphere, and he tried to grasp it. Somehow he felt that he’d colluded in causing his nephews this upset. ‘What’s going on?’

‘I’ve just told them we’ll be leaving the island,’ said Orla.

‘I didn’t know you were.’

Orla rolled her eyes. ‘Of course you did,’ she said.

‘I didn’t.’

‘We agreed to sell the guesthouse.’

‘I didn’t know it meant you’d be leaving the island.’

‘How did you think I’d be able to support us all here?’
‘I don’t know, I guess I hadn’t thought that far ahead,’ he said. ‘My mind’s been on other things.’

Ned stopped crying. Both boys looked at him. Was he on their side now, was he one of them?

When they all sit down to eat, his nephews can’t stop talking about the drowning, and David begins to understand why Orla had reprimanded Kit’s teacher. ‘He had eels coming out of his eyes and fish had eaten half his face off,’ says Kit.

‘You didn’t even see him,’ says Van.

‘You don’t know anything,’ says Ned.

But Kit does see him, thinks David. He sees him in his head, and he’s frightened by the images, and by the fear itself. Kit has grown taller in the past few months, and thinner. The last of his baby plumpness has fallen from his face, and now his boy bones are showing them who he might become.

‘Kit,’ he says, ‘do you want to come with me when I go to Galway next?’

‘On a school day?’

‘You can miss a day of school,’ says Orla. Kit had scratched his mother during an argument the day before, and she still has two angry crimson lines on her neck.

‘I want to go, too,’ says Van.

‘Not this time,’ says Orla. ‘This time it’s just Kit and Davey.’

‘I’ll have to go to pilates first,’ David says, ‘but then we could see a film or something.’

‘Could we go to Atlantaquaria?’

‘Maybe.’

‘It’s not fair,’ says Ned. ‘Kit always gets more than us.’

David had talked to Dr O’Connor about what he’d have to do to stay away from the surgeon’s knife. He didn’t like the sound of it. He didn’t like the physiotherapy, exercise, discipline, drugs, expense, or vigilance, but it was the only body he had.

‘When you’re Kit’s age you can do the same things too,’ says Orla. ‘How’s pilates going?’

‘It’s full of women who talk and exercise at the same time.’

‘It’s a skill,’ says Orla.
‘And I know I’m probably being paranoid, but I feel like they’re all laughing at me.’

‘No,’ she says, ‘you’re probably right, they probably are laughing at you.’

He has made an apple pie and they eat all of it. The boys have their baths and Ned slips, or is pushed, and bangs his head. David patches him up and bundles him into bed. While Van discovers the Norse gods in his room next door, and Kit reads to his mother, one syllable at a time, downstairs at the kitchen table, David stretches out beside Ned and opens *The Miraculous Adventures of Edward Tulane*.

It’s harder to have faith when he’s away from home. Away from home, it feels like faith is nothing more than a form of self-hypnosis, and the child running from room to room is not his future, but his madness. It feels like Tania is not coming back to him, and he can hardly bear this story that Ned has chosen, about the white china rabbit with the round blue eyes.

*I have been loved*, the rabbit reminds himself when bad times come. It’s one of Ned’s favourites; they’ve read it many times before. His nephew’s head rests against his chest, and David looks down at his dark eyelashes and perfect cheek crusted with dried toothpaste and apple. This, too, will end – reading to Ned beneath the slow-moving mobile of the planets. And then what will he do with the part of himself that he brings to this lamplight? Where else will the world allow him to be so tender?
In the darkness of the night – although no one knows for sure which night –
at the southern end of the island’s immense Atlantic face, a slab of rock
breaks away from the limestone overhang and drops into the sea.

The rock is the size of two jetliners, and yet it falls without causing the
faintest tremor in any islander’s sleep.

Every morning he comes downstairs, pulls back the curtain, acknowledges the white horse. When the coffee has brewed, he sits down to work. He has almost finished his book. All day the winds tear at the land. In the afternoons, the brown sky fills with boiling purple clouds, and when he looks up from the table he sees a painting of the apocalypse.

His back aches. It’s a busy ache, like termites channeling through him, and it keeps him awake at night. He takes painkillers that chafe his gut, drinks whisky before bed. For days the ferry doesn’t run and he can’t exercise. Every few hours he grabs the remote and lies down on the floor in front of the television. He connects with his pelvic floor, cycles his legs in the air, gets in touch with his inner fat housewife.

The slab of limestone falls into the sea and he understands why middle age has turned out to be so precarious. It’s the erosion, the fault lines deepening. It is loss collecting in the places where it’s easiest to wear him down, the places the past has already dug out of him.

One morning he come downstairs and pulls back the curtain, then he reaches for the phone. ‘It’s calm,’ he tells Kit. ‘I can see the ferry at last. Let’s go to Galway.’

He hasn’t been to Galway since the day Tania and he lost each other at Charlie Byrne’s. He will not yet allow himself to believe that they have lost each other for good. His faith flickers on and off. His child plays more quietly in the cottage.
Kit is waiting for him at the pier. His nephew’s eyes are bulging with excitement but he’s working hard not to show it. He’s wearing trainers and a silver chain around his neck, his hair glued into an Astro Boy peak.

‘Can we sit on top?’ Kit asks, as they climb the ferry ramp.

‘We’ll freeze our balls off.’

‘Please?’ His skin is luminous in the pale morning light and he has blue shadows beneath his eyes.

They sit on deck and drink hot chocolate. They’re both unhappy men needing to bust out of their prisons, and they thrill themselves by talking about the fearsome creatures lurking below them at the bottom of the sea.

He buys Kit a graphic novel to help him pass the time while he’s at pilates, but when he leaves his nephew in the waiting area the young receptionist is leaning on the counter, smiling down at him. ‘How old are you?’ she’s asking. ‘Do you have any brothers and sisters? Where did you get that cute hoodie?’

His physiotherapist, Joni, is busy with a woman on the trap table. He smiles at her and checks the weights on the reformer, the contraption that looks like a torture rack but is designed not to pull a body apart, but to put it back together. Core strength is the mantra chanted in this place. Core strength, core strength, core strength.

He works his way through his routine, listening to ease the boredom. Joni is talking to the woman about her pelvic floor. ‘You shouldn’t be forcing anything when you pee,’ Joni says. ‘It should just come naturally.’ ‘But I can’t wait for it to come naturally,’ says the woman. ‘I’ve got so much else I have to do.’

When he gets back to the waiting area Kit and the receptionist are sitting together looking at cars on her computer screen, his reserve completely dissolved. David had expected to hang out with his nephew in manly silence, but now Kit won’t stop talking. ‘What do you like more, Uncle Davey? Lotus or Ferrari? Or Alfa Romeo? Do you like the Alfa Romeo Spider? I like all of them, but my favourite is the Jaguar A-Type. Yeah, that’s what I mean, the E-Type. Do you like those? Can we get something to drink? Can we get something to eat?’

But talk is good. Talk is a distraction from thoughts of Tania, from looking for her here, there, everywhere. They wander over to Gourmet Tart Co.,
then they swagger around town eating raspberry-swirled meringues and drinking sparkling passionfruit juice. Kit is outlining for David the plot of a recent episode of *Merlin* when they turn into Abbeygate Street and David is felled by a memory of walking there. He and Tania had stopped, and he had taken her head in his hands. ‘Look up,’ he said. ‘Now look down.’

‘Maybe it’s an eyelash,’ she said.

‘The cows on the island clean their calves’ eyes with their tongues.’

‘When Esther was a tiny baby I used to bite her fingernails instead of cutting them.’

He found the speck of dirt. He lifted it out of her eye, they continued walking, and he didn’t know the end was so close. Now he feels ashamed of not knowing. As if all his moments before this one, standing outside a tattoo shop in Abbeygate Street, have been foolish ones.

‘Can we go in?’ asks Kit.

‘What?’

‘Can we go in here?’

‘What? Oh, I don’t know.’

‘Please?’

‘What for?’

‘Please?’

‘Hiya,’ says the girl behind the counter, as they step inside.

‘Hello,’ he answers, feeling Kit drop into a deep, overawed muteness beside him.

‘Would you be wanting a tattoo?’

‘No, thanks,’ he says. ‘The lad just wants to have a look around.’

The girl goes back to studying her phone. He sits down in one of the plastic chairs against the wall and tries to ease his back. It’s a relief to be out of the cold.

‘Go on,’ he says, nodding at Kit, ‘no one’s going to bite.’

Kit pulls his hood up. He sticks his hands in his pockets and looks around. The walls are covered in tattoo designs, but David soon knows there is nothing there that interests him. All the designs are alike. Apart from a few regional influences, the Celtic and the Polynesian, everything on the walls reminds him of the art painted on the panel vans that cruised the Adelaide suburbs of his adolescence.
‘Where do they do the tattoos?’ asks Kit.

‘Through there, I guess,’ he says, pointing to the closed door behind the counter.

Kit stares at the door, willing it to open its cave of secrets, but afraid of it too. The girl looks at her phone and drinks from a chipped mug, unconcerned by them.

‘What do you like best,’ says Kit, ‘the tiger or the python?’

He glances up at the wall, feigning interest. ‘The tiger, I think.’

‘Me too. What’s your favourite one of all?’

‘There’s too many to choose from,’ he says. ‘What’s yours?’

Kit moves around the room slowly. A clock ticks. When mail falls through the slot in the front door the girl gets up from her chair and ambles over. She is wearing a short vinyl skirt, and when she bends over he can see she has two words tattooed down the backs of her thighs. The words are in an elaborate Gothic script, so it takes a moment to work out that one leg reads JANE, and the other reads DOE.

He glances at Kit. He doesn’t want him to see this. He doesn’t want to be asked to explain. And how would he explain it? Why would someone choose this name for herself? What reason could she possibly have for identifying with an anonymous body on a mortuary slab? Even the drowned woman from Connemara had not been so lost in death, so unmourned and unclaimed.

The girl bins the mail and returns to her counter, unaware of his attention. He hopes that she has tossed herself aside like this because she’s an ignorant girl, not an unhappy one. That she simply doesn’t know about words yet; hasn’t learnt that words aren’t throwaway things; that words might mess with her fate.

‘This one,’ says Kit.

‘Which one?’

‘This one.’

He looks up at the tattoo that Kit has chosen and his heart lifts. From the four walls crammed with melodrama and bravado, he’s chosen a sea-bird on the wing. ‘That’s definitely the coolest one of all,’ David says. ‘It’s a perfect choice.’

‘Can I have it?’
‘What do you mean? You know you’re not allowed to have a real tattoo – your ma would murder me.’

‘Please?’

‘You’re too young. It’s probably not even legal.’

‘But Uncle Davey?’ He looks like a small, hooded monk, eyes lifted, seeking a kind God.

‘You know you can’t, Kit, so there’s no use asking me.’ David understands the sea-bird belongs to Inishmore. The bird flies over the island that Kit knows he’ll be leaving.

‘What if you have it done?’ Kit says.

‘Me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Because I don’t want a tattoo.’

‘But you like the bird.’

‘I do like the bird, but up on the wall, not on my – where were you thinking I should have it?’

‘You could have it somewhere secret.’

‘What do you mean secret?’

‘Under your clothes.’

‘If I was going to have it anywhere, I’d probably have it here,’ he says, placing his hand on his calf.

‘Will you?’

‘No, Kit, I don’t want a tattoo.’

They wait for the tattoo artist to come back from his morning coffee. Gabriel is tall – taller than David – and he’s wearing black denim and black cowboy boots. His face is bone and shadow, as beautiful as a sharp blade, and Kit falls in love with him at first sight.

They tell Gabriel what they want and he listens. He looks at them; he takes them in. He seems to understand the odd little package of needs they are placing in his hands, and with a few long strides he leads them through the closed door.
Every day after school Kit rides his bike to David’s cottage to see how the tattoo is coming along.

‘It’s bloody itchy,’ says David, pushing his sock down.

‘But don’t scratch it,’ says Kit, ‘you can’t scratch it.’

‘I know.’

‘Gabriel said.’

‘I know, Kit.’

‘And when it happens will you ring me up?’

‘Yeah, yeah.’

‘Like, even if it’s night?’

‘And wake the whole household?’

‘What if I’m at school?’

‘I’ll tell your teacher it’s an emergency.’

‘Will you really?’

‘Well, I promise you’ll be the first to hear.’

He doesn’t want to be a bitter man. He wants other people to have their happiness, every bit of it, but while other men wait for their children to be born, he and his nine-year-old nephew are waiting for his scab to fall off, and it feels like life is mocking him.

He stands in the kitchen mixing a paste for curry. He had grown-up taking it for granted that women were the ones who wanted children, who hungered in their bodies. He’d supposed it was the role of men to act as their porters in life; his role perhaps, one day, to help a woman carry her desire to its fulfillment. Nothing had prepared him for the place in which he now finds himself. No man had taken him aside, given him the tip-off. No one had warned him that fathering was an ancient force that might one day want him for its expression. And that when it wanted him, it would simply take him in its teeth, like a lion takes a kitten.
He switches off the blender. Soon he will have to admit to himself that Tania is not coming back. How he’ll do that he doesn’t know, but enough time has passed. She is not pregnant and she’s not coming back, and even though his wish had been simple – as simple as a spark, as one plus one, as life every day, everywhere, as Stu and Alex, a man and woman walking the street – for him, it seems, becoming a father is as remote and complex as a journey to the stars.

He takes the curry to his sister’s, but the boys clamp their hands over their mouths and carry on and and complain. Orla and he don’t dare to talk about the guesthouse. Throughout Ireland the news is the economy. It’s bad news, and getting worse.

He works listlessly on his book, sick to death of it but dreading the end too. His back hurts, a spike at the centre of consciousness. Core strength, he tells himself, strong core.

The sky is low and bruised. The ocean thunders ceaselessly, bathing the island in foam and mist. Sometimes, after an especially wild night, he goes down to one of the beaches and picks his way across the weeds the waves have torn from the sea. Black, the seaweed is, and purple and lime and rust.

He thinks about the centuries of land-making that has sustained life on the island, all the heavy seaweed the women have hauled, the precious clay clawed from the crevices between rocks, the rock-breaking that has broken men’s backs.

The tourists who come to Inishmore can see this work. They can take photos of the cows and goats in the small green fields, the mile upon mile of heartbreaking fences, the grey stone that everything depends upon. If the tourists are interested, they can even go and see O’Flaherty’s film about the drama and difficulty of life in the past. But the pain in the bodies of the islanders can’t be seen anywhere. Their pain has disappeared along with them, there are no tales told about it, no myths or legends, and pain hasn’t entered the historical record. Unless you worked hard to imagine it, it might seem that the people of the past had different bodies, or else they felt nothing at all.

The sun comes out the morning he sends the finished manuscript to his publisher. He gets up from the desk and walks to Kilronan. He kicks stones with his boot and tries to engage the animals he sees in a game of blinkman-
ship, but they all turn away, haughty. W.B. Yeats clops by, the haughtiest of all, but the driver greets him with a brilliant, gap-toothed smile.

In the village he collects his mail from the post office, and at the Spar he buys a newspaper and a razor that promises an optimum shaving experience. He takes a table at a café, orders a bowl of seafood chowder and talks about the economy with the waiter. On the wall in front of him is a framed photograph of Steven Spielberg, eating the same meal that he’s eating, sitting in the same chair. Someone in the café must be pleased about this photo, but this morning, with his back aching and his heart in tatters, it’s aggravating, playing Goldilocks to the rich and powerful Papa Bear.

He returns to the Spar because he’s forgotten to buy milk, then heads for home. At the centre of the village he stops beside the Celtic cross to look out over the harbour; the ocean is a happy blue today and the ferry is gliding handsomely into port. The cross looms high above him. It’s ten feet tall and carved from a single block of limestone. He has passed this way many times before but never stopped for a close look. When he reaches his hand out to trace the cross’s pattern of entwined snakes he is surprised by the sexual rush he feels. He’s heard the story about the cross, of course. It’s a memorial to Father Michael O’Donoghue, who was once a Catholic priest on the island, famous for a telegram he sent to Dublin Castle in 1886, when there was danger of famine on Inishmore.

His telegram read: ‘Send relief or send coffins.’

David doesn’t know if the priest saved any of the islanders from starvation, even though he’d shown authority a bold face. Michael O’Donoghue’s story would have disappeared in the fog of time, had it not been for the words he’d chosen, as brief as a text message, but, unlike any text, a communication that had lived on. He wonders if there’s not some reason why he’s stopped here today, why he should have chosen this moment to consider the memorial. Has he been wrong to put his trust in silence? Are there words that would bring Tania back to him?

Had Michael O’Donoghue laboured for hours, days even, to compose his telegram, or had the message come in a burst of inspiration he credited to his pithy God? He looks out at the sea as the first of the passengers step off the ferry. He knows that no words in the language will bring Tania back if her
affections have turned, if she has already decided against him. Call me or call an ambulance. Words would only make him grotesque to her.

But what about words in another language? He has seen Van, who is the romantic in the family, wrap his arms around his mother’s neck and kiss her like a butterfly, a courtier, an Eskimo. He’s heard Van’s promise: Beidh me gra duit go deo. Would Tania be charmed or irritated by a text that said this? Would she search out a translation, or press ‘delete’, never knowing that he had pledged to love her forever.

The passengers are straggling along the pier, and he recognises a few of the islanders; the chef from Berlin who has come to Inishmore to clean up his act; the botanist with muscular dystrophy who is there to study a rare alpine flower. The island’s clairvoyant is easy to spot, all dressed in purple, yet he feels nothing at all when he sees the black riding boots of the person walking on the other side of her. His day with Kit in Galway had inoculated him against the disease of seeing Tania everywhere. His heart had leapt at so many Tania colours and shadows and shapes, that his heart can’t leap any more.

There’s no reason, therefore, absolutely no reason at all, for him to pick up his shopping and move slowly towards the pier. He is wearing his fancy, fuck-off sunglasses, so there’s no reason, either, to shield his eyes with his hand as if he’s searching for someone, some special person he’s arranged to meet at the boat.

The seagulls are screaming and it’s blue out there. It could be summer again, except the pier isn’t crowded with tourists, just the islanders, who nod at him as they pass, as he moves, for no reason he knows of, towards the black riding boots and the slender reticence of the body who may or may not be Tania, and he may or may not have lost his mind, he doesn’t know yet, he’s not close enough to tell.
He stops a few feet away from her. ‘It’s not Ettie, is it?’ he says.

‘No,’ she says, stopping too. ‘It’s not Esther.’

The woman walking past with the box of fruit doesn’t look at them, but her daughter does. The girl is struggling with her mother’s bulk purchase of toilet rolls, but she doesn’t fail to notice the two people standing at the centre of the pier, appraising each other, not exactly like boxers before a fight, but with the same tension, the same preparation for something big.

Their embrace is at first consoling, the way they’d held each other at Ard Bia, light years ago, but Tania’s hands soon work their way under his jacket and two T-shirts, and they’re strong and warm on his back. People wobble by on their bikes, and now everyone is noticing them. Beidh me gra duit go deo, he says, as the sky and sea dissolve.

‘What does that mean?’ she laughs, pulling away from him.

‘I’ll tell you later.’

She’s carrying a brown paper bag. ‘Figs,’ she says. They turn and walk back down the pier and up the road to the village, and it’s like it was the day they first met at the airport, people make way for them, smooth their path. As if, together, they’re just a little bit famous.

‘How is Ettie?’ he asks.

‘She’s really so much better,’ says Tania, ‘but can we talk about it later?’

He loves this about her, how she talks when she’s ready, and then when she talks she says something that’s true. How she knows this about herself, and asks that he knows it too.

‘There’s a lot I’d like to talk about,’ she says, as they walk past the memorial to O’Donoghue. Had there ever been a quarter hour like it? He sees the poor, miserable bastard he’d been just minutes ago, and now the air is chattering with the possibilities of what Tania wants to talk about.
She’s had a haircut and her hair is a darker blonde, more wheat, more honey. He likes it so much he can’t say a thing. Her fringe grazes her eyes and her fine lines are fragile and lovely. She’s wearing a jacket he has never seen before, olive tweed with a nipped-in waist and sharp lapels, and underneath it a white shirt buttoned at the throat. ‘That’s an incredible jacket,’ he says.

Tania grins at him. ‘I know,’ she says, ‘it’s my big find. It’s Vivienne Westwood.’

‘Where did you get it?’

‘This little recycled clothing shop in Galway. It only cost eighty euros.’

‘You’re kidding!’

‘I know, I think they made a mistake. I was so happy.’

‘Show me the lining.’

They stop and she unbuttons the jacket and he examines the red silk inside. ‘I didn’t know you had an interest in tailoring,’ she says.

‘My secret’s out.’

‘And, see, the buttons are leather.’

‘You look like a stinking rich heiress ready to murder a fox.’

‘Well, thank you.’

They haven’t mentioned it but they’re heading in the direction they were going before Charlie Byrne’s messed them up; they’re heading home. Along the way there are roadside madonnas. There are stones piled in memory of lost children or men taken at sea, and they slow their step to look at them, make no comment, continue on. He thinks about how light happiness is when it comes, so light it’s almost not there. And how, if you’ve been unhappy for a long time, when you find happiness again you might almost wonder what the fuss was about, why you’d been working so desperately for such a gossamer thing.

They walk in their old silence, comfortable, mutually agreed upon. He thinks about Tania naked, sharp shocks of thought that he’s familiar with, but there’s another feeling too, visceral and uncanny, the feeling that a child is calling out, recognising him from the deep centre of her. All the way there his thoughts are saturated with sex and his blood is tugged until it hurts, but as they draw close to the cottage nervousness creeps over both of them, and by the time they reach the front door they’re as awkward as adolescents.
He’s irritated by the awkwardness. He feels they’re both diminished by it, until he bends to unlock the door. He pushes the door open and she steps inside, and it’s then that he understands they’re crossing a threshold. She may not be wearing white, and there’s no confetti or rice in their hair, but thousands of years of ceremony and superstition and lore exist in that moment, and they’re just two people wanting things to work out, just Tania and Dave seeking the favour of the gods, so why wouldn’t they quiver a little?

They’re sitting at opposite ends of the sofa, their socked feet flirting. They still haven’t kissed. He could lean forwards, take the cup of tea from her hand, only that her hand looks to be trembling, or perhaps the trembling is his vision, his eyes adjusting to her, not quite believing she’s there.

‘I suppose you know I’ve been staying with Claire and Patrick?’ she says.

‘No, I didn’t know. I haven’t spoken to them for a while.’

‘They’ve been very kind.’

‘I’m glad,’ he says, although some small part of him isn’t.

‘Esther’s out of intensive care.’

‘Jesus, that’s wonderful,’ he says, smiling at her. ‘What an incredible relief. How is she?’

‘She’s very weak but she’s really all right. She’s made friends with an anorexic girl on the same ward and it seems to be doing them both good.’

‘It’ll be fantastic to see her awake again.’

‘David,’ says Tania, running her hand through her hair, ‘Esther doesn’t really remember you.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘She remembers meeting Claire and Patrick at the café on the morning of her accident, but not much after that.’

‘She doesn’t remember coming to dinner?’ Or the stories of Missy Tzu?

‘No.’

He puts his cup and saucer down on the table. He feels the pain of rejection, yet he still can’t show this to Tania, it doesn’t feel safe.

‘This is really hard to talk about,’ says Tania, setting her cup down too, ‘but I want to try to explain.’

‘Explain what?’

‘Explain why things went wrong between us.’
'And why did they?'
'I was trying, but the feeling just kept coming back. I guess – well, look, I had some doubts about you and my daughter.'

So, at last, the shadow that’s been stalking them. ‘Could you,’ he says coldly, ‘be more specific about the nature of your doubts?’

‘You need to try to see it from my point of view. It seemed odd to me that some stranger would accept responsibility for a girl he hardly knew.’

‘Some stranger?’
‘Well, that’s what you were to me then, David.’
‘Who else was going to look out for her in that situation?’
‘Some people would have left it to the police, and the hospital.’
‘What, so I’m guilty of not doing that?’
‘No,’ she says, curling her legs closer to her, ‘it’s just that it’s unusual.’

There seems to be no way for him to explain that won’t make it more unusual. She still hasn’t told him exactly what kind of doubts she’s been having, but she’s smart, she’s probably had every doubt possible. ‘But I was the only person she really knew,’ he says, ‘and I was feeling pretty terrible about letting her ride off on her own in the dark like that.’

‘You weren’t to blame. When Esther wants to do something, she does it.’
‘And once I’d seen her in the hospital, I didn’t really know how to leave. I can say this now, but somehow I thought if I left her she might die. I was waiting for you.’

‘I still had to question it,’ she says. ‘How was I to know that something hadn’t happened between the two of you?’

‘You mean something sexual?’

‘Yes, I do. If Esther could make the decision to come off her drugs, she could certainly jump into bed with a strange man on a romantic island.’

‘But I didn’t see her like that,’ he says. ‘Not at all.’

‘Don’t all men see it like that?’

‘She’s young enough to be my daughter!’ It feels like he’s just said it, sliced himself open, pulled out the truth about himself.

‘Since when has that ever stopped anyone?’ she says.

‘But if you felt that way, why did you offer to nurse my back?’

‘Because I was grateful to you,’ she says, ‘and also … I wanted to see you again. When I was with you the doubts went away.’
'And where are those doubts now?'
'Everything seems different now that Esther is conscious. I don’t feel so guilty about my feelings for you.'
'Tatiana,' he says, taking her foot in his hands. What are your feelings for me?
'I was wrong not to trust you,' she says, unbending her knee.
'It always makes me feel guilty when people admit they’re wrong,' he says, massaging her ankle, 'not that I am guilty.'
'I know what you mean.'
'Maybe …'
'What?'
'It doesn’t matter – I was going to say something corny.'
'Tell me.'
'No.'
'Tell me,' she says, lifting her foot as if to kick him.
'I was just going to say that maybe love is clear thinking about mixed feelings.'
'It’s semi-corny.'
'It’s really something that someone once said about art.'
'As in?
'Great art is clear thinking about mixed feelings.'
'Not love is clear thinking about great art?'
'No.'
'Or great art is clear thinking about love?'
'No.'
'Anyway,' she says, rubbing the inside of his thigh with her toes, 'I have mixed feelings about clear thinking.'
He laughs and life feels simple again. Life feels solved.

The sky has filled with cloud and it’s cold as they walk to Kilronan.
'We can have a fire tonight,' he says.
'Do we need to buy more candles?'
They’re planning a dinner. It was Tania’s idea to celebrate the completion of his book. He couldn’t have cared less – he’s finished books before – but he
will celebrate his incredible luck, that she has returned to him. ‘We should use the figs,’ he says.

‘Could we have the same meal you cooked for Esther? That would mean a lot to me.’

He wonders if there’s not something else behind these plans. Tania’s eyes are glittering. She’s full of an energy that reminds him of Ettie arriving at his door saying it had been the happiest day of her life. *The day she no longer remembers.* ‘There’s not much chance of finding any squid,’ he says.

‘Don’t people buy fresh from the fisherman?’

‘We’d have to go to Galway, and even then it might be frozen,’ he says. ‘Only the very wealthy can afford to live like peasants these days.’

‘What about smoked trout then, at least we could have that? Doesn’t that come from here?’

‘That business was forced to close down recently.’

‘God, we can’t have cheese and Ryvita.’

He’s aware that his imaginings resemble an episode from a 1960s American sitcom: the wife plans a special dinner so she can tell her husband they’re having a child. But in the real sitcom, misunderstandings multiply and her husband gets the wrong end of the stick. He sends his secretary out to buy his wife a lavish anniversary present, or else he thinks his wife is trying to butter him up because she’s dinged the car again, and he resolves to show her who’s boss. But it all gets sorted out; the wife piles on the euphemisms until finally the penny drops. *Oh, but shouldn’t you be lying down, the husband says, you should be lying down!* The sitcom ends with the husband stretched out on the sofa, his feet elevated on cushions, an ice pack cooling his poor, stressed head.

David’s well aware of all of this, but even the tiredest clichés feel original when you’re inside them. ‘Let’s see if they’ve got duck,’ he says. ‘I can think of some things I could do with duck.’

The ferry is leaving the pier when they arrive in the village, and they stop and look out at the water. ‘I thought I might be on that,’ Tania says, ‘if you didn’t want me back.’

‘Thank you for not presuming I would,’ he says, putting his arm around her, ‘but having you back is all I wanted.’
At the Spar he takes a wire basket and they start down the first aisle. ‘I think it’s best if I eat this Snickers,’ he says, ‘so I don’t over-shop.’

‘Goat cheese?’ she laughs.

‘Yeah.’

‘Cream?’

‘Not that one.’

‘This one.’

‘Yes.’

There’s no duck and the chicken looks grey and turkey is forever out of the question. They decide on lamb and head down the next aisle. Tania’s walking a couple of steps in front of him and he feels like he’ll die for want of grabbing her buttocks in their tight jeans beneath her rich-bitch jacket.

‘Do you have any shampoo?’ she asks.

‘Yes.’

‘Do you have a comb I can use?’

‘Yes.’

She takes a toothbrush from the shelf and throws it into the basket. She picks up a packet of Advil. ‘I’ve got some,’ he says. *Eye drops? What about tissues?* He follows behind her, thinking about ravishment, about slow-roasted lamb and caper sauce, but then – as if her body is no one’s concern but her own – she casually tosses a box of super-strength tampons into the basket, followed by a tube of Berocca. When she stops to read the label on something, even the cut of her coat seems to dismiss his dreams. He must turn, walk away, be alone.

In the next aisle, standing by the self-saucing puddings, he tries to calm himself. He takes castor sugar off the shelf, thinks about crème caramel. In this place of plastic and postponed decay, in this sad, sickly light, it’s essential that he holds his stupidity and disappointment to himself, tucks his heartbreak away like a shoplifter tucks the tuna.

He had thought that Anita and Hong Kong had cured him of self-delusion forever, but now his capacity for fooling himself seems limitless. There are none so blind, he supposes, as those who think they see clearly.

There are packets of hundreds and thousands on the shelves, tiny silver balls, little bottles of bright food colour, candles shaped like numbers, one to nine. He wonders if ten is the age when children put away childish things,
when they prefer to count their candles instead, like to test themselves, take a deep breath and blow. Candle-makers know this but he doesn’t, and not knowing makes him feel like he’s locked outside of some vital knowledge about life.

He needs brown sugar. Figs with goat cheese, a drizzle of balsamic, a sprinkle of sugar, three minutes under the grill. When he looks up Tania is coming down the aisle towards him. She’s smiling wide, holding up a bottle of champagne, and the world hurts like hell but she’s still his path, she’s still his path.
He pushes her out of the kitchen. ‘Go and make yourself useless,’ he says. Tania goes into the other room to choose something from the bookshelves. She pulls off her boots and lies down on the sofa. He can see her feet from the kitchen, flexing prettily, restless as a retired ballerina’s.

It’s not complicated, what he’s cooking. While he washes potatoes at the sink he thinks about the rest of his books stored away in boxes in London. He imagines unpacking the books in a place where the rooms are filled with other people’s movements, other people breathing when he wakes in the night.

The slow-cooked lamb needs to be accelerated if they’re going to eat before midnight. He turns the oven up and peels garlic as a light rain begins to fall. The raindrops that cling to the window each offer their own reflection of the grey-green world outside. The first batch of caramel crystallises, so he throws it out and starts again. Every now and then he hears Tania shift on the sofa, a page turn, and he’s curious about what she’s reading. The second lot of caramel is perfect. He quickly lifts the saucepan away from the heat and sets it aside while he reaches into a cupboard.

‘That smells delicious,’ says Tania, coming up behind him. ‘Oh, fuck! Oh, fuck! Oh, no!’

‘What have you done?’
‘I stuck my finger in the saucepan!’ says Tania, lunging for the tap.
‘But it’s just come off the heat!’
‘I know that now. Oh, God, it hurts, it hurts.’
‘Let me have a look.’
‘It’s gone hard! It’s still burning me!’
‘Hang on, hang on, I’ll get it. There, now just keep it under the water.’
‘I’m an idiot.’
‘What were you thinking?’
‘I just wanted a taste.’
‘It’s the sort of thing I’d do,’ he laughs.
‘It’s not serious but it really hurts.’
‘Well, there’s already a nasty blister.’
‘I think I’d better lie down again,’ she says, turning off the tap.
‘Want a shot of whisky?’
‘Please.’
‘What are you reading?’ he says, handing her a paper towel.
‘Something disturbing – but very sexy. That’s why I came in. I was going to have my way with you.’
‘But you stuck your finger in a pot of hot toffee instead.’
‘Sorry.’
‘Next time,’ he says, handing her the whisky. ‘What’s the book?’
‘Crash.’
‘J. G. Ballard.’
‘I think so. I haven’t heard of him.’
‘What made you choose it?’
‘The film.’
‘There are two films called Crash.’
‘Not the Academy Award one.’
‘The David Cronenberg?’
‘Is that the director?’
‘Of the film that’s based on the Ballard book, yeah.’
‘I saw it,’ she says, taking a sip of whisky, ‘because I used to have a really, really big thing for James Spader.’
‘Is that right?’ he says, slowly backing her against the fridge, ‘so if I were to whisper the words Sex? Lies? Videotape?’
‘O-oh, I cannot tell you,’ she says, offering her neck to him, ‘how many times I have masturbated to that film.’
‘You can’t tell me?’ he says, his mouth moving slowly up her throat.
‘No.’
‘But perhaps you can show me?’
‘Perhaps.’
‘When your poor little finger’s better?’
‘When my finger’s better,’ she says, and they kiss laughing.
The bright, warm kitchen fills with the smell of lamb. He pours Tania another whisky and sends her back to the couch. Rain glistens on the window and the world outside, the last half hour before dark, is all indigo. Twilight doesn’t weaken him as much as it used to. The island has taught him that the fear isn’t personal; it’s just his body remembering the experience of ancestors whose nights were more dangerous, who had fewer distractions to hold back the dark.

In the future, would the west coast of Australia show him what else he’s learnt at the western edge of Ireland? In the way that only a second mirror can show you what you look like from behind?

He closes the curtains, turns on the lamps. Tania sits up and puts her book on the coffee table. ‘Should I make the fire now?’ she asks.

‘Sure,’ he says, ‘if you want to.’

He drinks a small whisky while he shaves. In the shower he hears music. He looks forward to learning what she’s chosen, but when he steps out of the water there’s no music at all. He dries himself and wraps the towel around his waist. In the living room the fire’s blazing and the candles are lit.

‘Impressive,’ he says, kissing her over the back of the sofa. ‘Do you like the book?’

‘I don’t know if like is the right word, but I can’t stop reading it.’

Upstairs in the bedroom he reaches into the back of his wardrobe. So, here is J. G. Ballard again, making another magnificent appearance in his life. He stands in socks and underpants while he searches a drawer for his onyx cuff-links. He’d always thought that Crash was Ballard’s toughest book. The white shirt slips off its hanger. It’s tough because it puts sex and car accidents together; it eroticises wounds. He buttons up the shirt, fastens the sleeves with the cufflinks, and pulls on his black Gieves & Hawkes suit. But Tania can read Crash, because she’s not afraid of bodies. She nurses old bodies, the scariest bodies of all.

He bends to the mirror to fix his razor-blue tie. He shoots his cuffs and runs both hands through his hair. They’re old clothes, but he’s a brand-new man.

Downstairs Tania is talking to Ettie on the telephone. ‘And what did you have for dinner?’ she says, as he saunters past on the way to the kitchen. For the millionth time in his life, he wishes he were a cooler dude, someone who
could wear a nonchalant face when they were surprising someone, but he’s already started grinning.

The lamb’s coming along and the champagne is cold. ‘So I’ll see you in the morning,’ says Tania. He thinks fleetingly of the champagne argument that ended his life with Sally, and even the ghost child doesn’t haunt too much tonight.

‘You dressed for dinner,’ says Tania, wrapping her arms around him. ‘You look so handsome.’

‘I told you I had an interest in tailoring.’

‘I believe you – but I wish I had something to wear.’

‘You’ve got your new jacket.’

‘I’ve been wearing that all day. I mean something to dress up in.’

‘We could improvise.’

‘Have you got a lace tablecloth or something?’

‘No, but I have a lovely tea towel.’

‘You want me to wear nothing but a loin cloth to dinner?’

‘I was thinking more of a headscarf,’ he says. ‘But why don’t you rummage around in the bedroom? You might be able to put something together.’

‘You wouldn’t mind me looking through your things?’

‘Of course not.’

‘I’m not sure I’d feel that way if the situation were reversed.’

‘I could develop a theory about that based on the difference between the male and female sex organs, but I’ll leave it for later.’

‘You really look so different,’ she laughs, heading upstairs.

He puts on some jazz piano, cool and blue. The moment comes with the music, as it always does, and he craves to smoke. Just one Benson & Hedges. Just five minutes and seven seconds. Instead, he sits down at the table to make some notes about the manuscript he’s just sent, and before long Tania comes down the stairs draped in a white bed sheet.

‘I’m going for the sacrificial virgin look,’ she says, turning for him.

‘Hmm,’ he says, ‘it’s more like a six-year-old at Halloween.’

‘Shit. Really?’

‘Try tying it at the shoulder,’ he says. ‘Come here.’ He unwinds the sheet until she’s naked, all that he’s been aching for, martini breasts and warrior scar, knickers not out to impress.
‘Maybe it needs a belt?’
‘Have you got one? he says, knotting two ends of the sheet together.
‘In my jeans, upstairs.’
‘Don’t bother, he says, slipping the sheet over her head, ‘just a second.’
He comes back from the kitchen with scissors, aluminium foil, and a ball of string. ‘It’s better already,’ she says, folding the fabric around her.
‘It can be improved.’
‘Esther was a bit upset,’ she says, lifting her arms while he wraps the string around her waist.
‘What about?’
‘You know the girl I told you about? The one she’s become close to?
‘The anorexic?’
‘Yes,’ she says, ‘well, they’ve moved her to another room. What are you doing with the Alfoil?’
‘Wait and see. Why would they do that?’
‘To punish her.’
‘Jesus, for what?’
‘For not eating. For not meeting her daily calorific target.’
‘That seems extreme. Can you hold this?’
‘It is extreme, but it’s an extreme illness. She could die.’
‘Talk about sacrificial virgins. Would you prefer a necklace or a laurel wreath?’
‘A laurel wreath, please,’ she says. ‘You’re right about the sacrificial virgins. These anorexic girls have some really deep need to be, I don’t know, very pure and disciplined, devoted.’
‘Nuns in a world of over-consumption.’
‘That’s right.’
‘While you, my darling,’ he says, stepping away, appraising, ‘are a Greek goddess.’
‘Do I look okay?’
‘You look incredible. Turn around.’
‘My donkey doesn’t look big in this?’
‘What?’
‘It’s a joke of Esther’s. You know, how Americans say Does my ass look big in this?’
'Have you told her about us?'
'I didn’t know if there was an us until a few hours ago.'
'No, of course not,’ he says. ‘Are you ready to eat? Are you ready for figs and champagne?'
They have dinner on cushions in front of the fire. His back hurts, but he puts up with it. Tania’s a fire-poker, just as her daughter is a candle-fiddler, both of them entranced by flame. ‘Put the stick down,’ he laughs, ‘and let the fire settle.’
‘When you make love to me, later,’ Tania says, poking his shiny-shoed foot with her naked toes, ‘I want you to keep your suit on. I want you stay like that.’
‘I’ll think about it,’ he says, lying back on the cushions. Who knew that dressing-up could be so much fun? In the firelight, the bed sheet reveals her golden leg and the foil wreath on her head glimmers. He’d thought that only children could fulfil this need to slip free of his moorings, to play.
‘Do you know when Crash was written?’ Tania asks, poking the fire again.
‘Early seventies, I think,’ he says. ‘I first read it when I was in my early twenties, but I went back to it after Princess Di’s death. It seemed to predict an event just like it.’
‘I thought of her too. There are so many things in the book about celebrity culture and, well, just the way things are now.’
‘Ballard knew how to see which way the future was blowing.’
‘So you’re a fan?’ she says, gazing at the fire.
‘When I read him I feel like he’s peeling the cobwebs off my brain.’
‘Has he written a lot?’
‘He died a couple of years ago but, yeah, he wrote a lot, but it wasn’t all like Crash – you know, speculative. Have you heard of Empire of the Sun?’
‘The film with Christian Bale?’
‘Based on another Ballard book, about his childhood in China, during the war,’ he says, gazing at the fire too.
‘He was English?’
‘Yes,’ he says. ‘And he lived his life in a way I think is remarkable.’
‘How?’
‘His wife died young, yet he raised three small children on his own while writing these mind-boggling books.’

‘I’ve found it hard enough with just one child.’

‘When he was writing Crash,’ says David, pouring some of his champagne into her glass, ‘he’d make his children breakfast and wave them off to school, then he’d sit down to write this book about car accidents and death and injury – you know, soft human bodies in a hard, machine world – and he said he always kept his fingers crossed while he was doing it, hoping to god he wasn’t bringing something terrible down on his kids’ heads as they made their way in the world.’

‘I wonder how his children turned out?’

‘They said beautiful things about him when he died. He’d loved them so well and given them such happy, secure childhoods.’

‘I’m trying to put Crash together with that image of him.’

‘That’s why I think he’s remarkable – a man with a deeply subversive imagination managing that kind of nurturing.’

‘He compartmentalised, I guess,’ she says. ‘Men are good at that.’

‘Jesus, I hate all that stuff about men compartmentalising and women multi-tasking. It’s so fucking boring, the way everyone spouts it as some kind of holy truth.’

‘Listen to you!’ she laughs, sneaking her goddess toes under the hem of his trousers. ‘You’re the one who had some notion about pussies and penises and how secretive people are with their stuff!’

‘Your wreath is slipping,’ he says. ‘You look like a fallen angel.’

‘To tell you the truth, I’m starting to feel like a jacket potato.’

‘Here, let me take it off, we don’t want you baked. In fact, why don’t we get you out this silly costume?’

‘Wait,’ she says, her foot stroking his calf, ‘I can feel something. Have you hurt your leg?’

‘No, but I’ll show you later.’

‘Show me now.’

‘But you wanted me dressed, didn’t you?’ he says, grasping her ankle. ‘Me suited, and you stark raving naked?’

‘Oh, yes, please,’ she says, opening her arms to him.
There’s power in his Savile Row suit, and bondage too. She forbids him everything.

‘Can I at least take off my shoes?’
‘No way.’
‘Can’t I loosen my tie?’
‘Certainly not.’
‘My cufflinks will catch in your hair.’
‘Let them.’

By the time they turn on their sides and he scoops her body close to him, the fire has burnt down and it’s cold. ‘Put this over you,’ he says, shrugging out of his jacket.

Two candles go out at the same moment, like a suicide pact.
‘Coal fires are different,’ she says.
‘It’s been a long time since I’ve had a wood fire.’
‘I miss their sound,’ she says, bringing his fingertips to her mouth, ‘the crackle and spit.’
‘But we’ve got the waves.’
‘Yes, we have, we’ve got the waves.’

They listen and drift.
‘Did you ever smoke?’ he says.
‘When I was twelve my friend Megan and I smoked a packet of Sobranie Cocktails, and I was so sick I never tried it again.’
‘They’re the pastel-coloured cigarettes?’
‘With gold filters.’
‘Was that after your father died?’ He closes his eyes but her hair still lights the darkness.
‘Yes,’ she says. ‘Were you thinking everything would be perfect now if you just had a cigarette?’
‘Sorry,’ he laughs, squeezing her.
‘That’s all right, it’s not perfect for me either.’
‘Esther?’
‘I feel guilty.’
‘I’m sorry.’
‘And Justin needs to come through with some money.’
‘Your hair smells of lamb fat.’
‘Your fingers taste of my blood.’
‘My back hurts.’
‘Let’s go up to bed.’
‘Yes, bed.

They move slowly. Tania spends time in the bathroom. In the kitchen he puts the rest of the lamb in the fridge, then he stands at the sink and swallows two ibuprofen. She kisses him with a toothpaste mouth and goes upstairs in the way she does, with barely a sound. In the bathroom she’s left the scent of lemons and the face he meets in the mirror has been strengthened by sex. He walks back through the living room and there’s the white sheet lying by the fire, the black jacket, the champagne cork on the hearth, and it seems that some kind of marriage has taken place here, this night.
He would find it hard to explain to someone his feelings when Tania returns to the cottage at the end of the day, when he hears her footsteps on the path. Perhaps only a man who’d mourned his dead wife, but who had one day heard her key in the door again, would understand the miracle of it: these women coming home to them.

‘I’ve had a shitty fucking day,’ Tania says, dropping her bag to the floor.

Serves him right, he thinks. Serves him right for what? ‘Then let’s go to the pub,’ he says.

He goes upstairs to change his T-shirt. Tania comes out of the bathroom wearing caramel lipstick and wet patches on her neck; she applies perfume like others wield fly spray. Chanel No 19, a scent strictly for grown-ups.

She talks all the way to Ti Joe Watty’s, her hands thrust into the pockets of her raincoat, her sunglasses pushed back on her head, although it’s almost dark. This is when it would be good to have the Renault, he thinks, when rain might come. It’s Justin that Tania talks about. ‘I shouldn’t have to keep asking for the money, you know, as if he’s doing me the favour, when it’s not even about me, it’s about his own daughter, and it’s not like he hasn’t got it, and then today he calls and I think, finally, but it turns out it’s not about the money at all, he’s calling to tell me that his stupid wife’s had the baby, and I said why would I want to know that, and he said, Esther should know, and I said have you got any idea at all what she’s been through?’

‘What did they have?’ asks David. He can hear it so clearly, the catch in his throat, the weakness in his voice. He feels like he’s just telegraphed his anguish, told the whole world about the pain that afflicts him every time he hears of another man becoming a father.

‘What?’ she says.
‘Did they have a boy or girl?’
‘What difference does it make?’
‘I don’t know. Just a question.’
'They had a boy. That’s the only slightly good thing about it, I suppose.’
‘Why?’
‘Because he replaced Esther with girls last time.’
‘Do you really think he replaced her?’
‘Of course he did. How else could you see it?’
‘I don’t know. I was just wondering if that’s how Ettie feels.’
‘Of course that how she feels.’
Better to be quiet. Better to hold his tongue and listen to their boots crunch the loose stones on the road, try and settle the mess of raw feelings inside him. He is disappointed with Tania for not hearing him, not reading his mind, for failing to do what women are supposed to do, for not divining his hurt. It is unreasonable to be disappointed, so he tries to settle that too, although he may as well try to settle the waves pounding the nearby shore. They walk on in silence. The air smells of the ocean, but every now and then Tania’s sophisticated perfume flies him to the city, to streets lined by columns of light, and there his mood improves for a while.
The lobster is on at Ti Joe Watty’s, and they decide to splash out. He orders a pint of Budweiser. ‘I don’t like any of these beers,’ says Tania. ‘I really feel like an Asahi.’
‘Is that what you drink at home?’
‘I don’t like these beers, there’s not enough choice.’
‘I’m sure we’d be able to find Japanese beer for you somewhere in Ireland.’
‘But there’s none here, is there? And they don’t have any in Galway either.’
Better to shut up. Better to take their coats and drape them over a chair, move the table a little closer to the fire. Half a dozen locals are holding up the bar, and the room is dark and warm, shelves glimmering with jewel-coloured liquor.
Tania’s wine empties fast. ‘I needed that,’ she says.
‘I’m expecting big things of this lobster,’ he says, relaxing too.
‘I’m starving.’
‘I’ve got my psychological defences pretty much in place about eating meat,’ he says, ‘but I’m not so sure we should take from the sea.’
‘Why is it different?’
'I don’t know. We’re land animals, the sea isn’t our territory. It’d be nice to think there was some place on earth that wasn’t ours to take every little thing we want.’

‘But you just ordered seafood.’

‘I know,’ he says. ‘I always forget that I feel this way.’

‘I hope it’s not going to take much longer.’

‘Do you want a bag of crisps to keep you going? I’ll get us more drinks.’

‘Why do you call them crisps?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Australians say chips.’

‘Jesus, Tania,’ he says, standing. ‘I didn’t know chips was a criteria for citizenship. I haven’t lived there for over twenty years, you know that.’

He glares down at her. She glares back. There’s absolutely no way of knowing what the next moment will hold, until laughter bursts from the bar and she reaches up with both hands to grab his jumper and pull him close.

‘Then I think it’s time you did,’ she says.

He looks into her eyes, the starbursts of light around the black. ‘Do you want me to?’

‘Yes,’ she says, still clutching, ‘yes, I do.’

He waits at the bar, feeling buffeted. Serves him right. For what? For blowing sickly-sweet bubbles of romance, and forgetting that a miracle might come home as a moody woman.

He nods to a couple of the locals, but there’s one man who doesn’t look at him, or anyone. He stares into his glass. He has seen this man in drinking establishments the world over, alone at the end of the bar, the sick or wounded animal in exile from the herd. This is the man he has always feared he might become, but tonight when he looks at him he doesn’t see himself, he’s not afraid of the times ahead.

The lobster is waiting when he gets back to the table. ‘Look at that,’ he says. They touch their glasses together, but there’s not enough ritual in the world to honour the awesome ceramic creature in front of them, armoured and proud as a medieval knight, but vanquished now, cut in two, drowned in butter sauce.

They eat slowly, saying little, until they’re pushing the last shred of flesh to and fro on the plate. You have it. No, you.
'Esther’s doctor said she might be able to leave hospital in a couple of days,’ says Tania.

‘That soon?’

‘He says she’s ready.’

‘What do you think?’

‘I think they need the bed.’

‘Surely they wouldn’t let her go if they thought there was any risk?’

‘I’m just worried,’ she says, poking a French fry with her fork. ‘I had an awful fight with her today.’

‘Really? What about?’

‘Her medication.’

‘But she must be back on it?’

‘I’m not convinced she’s taking it. She’s so wilful when she wants to be, I wouldn’t put anything past her.’

‘It seemed really important to her, to see what life would be like without her drugs.’

‘And look what it’s like!’ Tania says, and some of the drinkers at the bar turn to look at her. ‘She’s in a strange hospital in a strange country on the other side of the earth!’

‘But no one knows if she fell because she had a seizure or if it was just a bike accident.’

‘It doesn’t make any difference. She needs her meds.’

‘I can understand how you feel, but she told me she felt like the drugs had taken away her imagination.’

‘Imagination? Oh, for Christ’s sake,’ Tania says, screwing up her napkin and throwing it down on her plate.

‘She clearly felt it was something she wasn’t prepared to do without.’

‘I don’t know why you’re on her side all of a sudden – she doesn’t even remember you.’

He fights hard not to show how much this hurts. He folds his own napkin in half and places it on the table. He’s beginning to feel the strain of this, the constant need to calculate the effect upon her of his feelings for her daughter. He is required to care, but not care too much. He is required to measure the caring, even as Ettie’s insights and jokes live inside him, even as he recalls her lack of skill in applying moisturiser, her running-up-the stairs
laugh, the little peaks her feet made in the hospital sheet. ‘I’m not on anyone’s side,’ he says, fighting anger, ‘but what you see as wilful, I see as a kind of courage.’

‘Oh, you haven’t got a fucking clue what you’re talking about, David.’

‘In that case,’ he says, pushing his chair back with a screech, ‘I’ll keep my mouth shut.’

He doesn’t look at her as he stands and grabs his coat, caught up in the surprise of what he’s doing. He strides to the door and steps outside, the cold air snatching at his breath. His hands are shaking as he wraps his scarf tight around his neck, pulls up his collar.

That fucking lobster, he thinks, heading for home, that poor fucking lobster. It had been a stupid indulgence. Why wasn’t he practising austerity, like everyone else? If he’d never gone to the café that morning, he wouldn’t be wasting his money on lobster now. If he hadn’t gone to the café and invited his friends to dinner and Ettie hadn’t arrived at his door, none of this would be happening, his guts being twisted by a woman. Why hadn’t he allowed his birthday to pass quietly, and not gone seeking other people’s warmth and laughter? Why can’t he stop this hopeless thing inside him, this reaching out? There had to be men who had dug this seam of weakness out of themselves, men who could teach him.

He hears her running on the road behind him, an icy sound in the immense night. ‘Please. David. Wait.’ He’s determined to keep walking, but the raggedness of her breathing catches at his heart and he slows his step. Her perfume reaches him before she does and he thinks everything would be better for us on city streets. She comes up behind him, and he feels her hand on his back.

‘I’m getting pretty fucking sick and tired of being punished by you,’ he says, not turning.

‘I know, I know, I know,’ she says, walking beside him. ‘I’m sorry. But I’m really trying.’

‘I don’t want you to try,’ he says, shrugging her hand away, ‘because I’m not trying.’

‘But you are!’ she screams, as if he’s slapped her, not simply refused her touch. ‘You’re trying all the time! You’re trying much too hard!’
They’re squaring off, two people on an empty road in the dark night. There could be a murder and there’d be no witness, no one would ever be the wiser. Ettie’s fall flashes through his mind: same road, same mystery. He sees it flash through Tania too. He sees the fear in her face and thinks: men are afraid. Men are afraid women will laugh at them, but women are afraid that men will kill them. ‘What,’ he says, pushing her lightly, his palms against her shoulders, ‘you think I’m trying?’

‘Yes, you are,’ she says, flattening her hands against his chest and pushing back, enough force to tighten her jaw but barely enough to rock him, barely enough to unbalance one of those toys that tips back and forth with an idiot grin on its face.

‘But I’m not trying at all,’ he says coldly, pushing her with just his fingertips, seeing her sway and knowing that he could snap her neck. ‘And you’re not trying either.’

‘I am trying!’ she yells, digging the roots of her palms into his chest, and it’s just too easy to seize her wrists.

‘Try harder,’ he says.

There’s nothing she can do to prove her strength, prove anything. He could kill her in an instant and she could only kill him with planning, foresight, unreasonable reasoning. They push back and forth on the dark road, knowing they’re both performing tedious parts in a boring play written a long, long time ago, but feeling, too, that this is a one and only original battle for their lives, for happiness.

It’s pathetic, and he knows that somehow he will be made to pay for it. ‘Try harder,’ he says, but already he’s beginning to smile.

‘And you,’ she starts to smiles too, ‘you stop trying so hard.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah.’

He wraps his arms around her waist and lifts her off the ground, and when she laughs and grasps the back of his neck she’s once more the most powerful person in the world.

Hold me close; let’s start again.

They walk home with their arms around each other. The cottage looks whiter. It feels warmer. The kitchen tap pours clean, safe water, and when
they stretch out on the sofa and watch the world on the television news they feel like they’re the lucky ones.

Tania’s sister phones and she takes the call upstairs. She takes talk of Justin upstairs and, yes, thinks David, take the bastard away from me.

He turns off the television and opens his laptop. He looks for updates about the suicides at the Chinese electronics factory. There have been two more deaths and the workers have all been asked to sign an anti-suicide pledge. What, he thinks, I promise to work very hard and not kill myself? Every now and then Tania’s voice grows loud. He can’t hear what she’s saying, but her aggrieved tone is clear. For all his grief about not being a father, he’s at least been spared this fate: yoked until death to someone he has grown to despise. If David can make Tania feel safe, he hopes that her bitterness about Justin will ease over time, Justin will be dissolved. And yet, another part of him knows that Tania’s anger won’t disappear quite so easily. He thinks about the grand illumination he had at Clerys, all those years ago. He felt he saw inside every woman watching the make-up demonstration that day, saw the feminine spirit waiting to catch alight, but he’s not that young man anymore, he knows that when life kicks the shit out of women the fuel inside them may be forever burned up by fury.

Upstairs Tania laughs wickedly. Her sister has said something funny about Justin, he thinks, something defusing. This is what he should do, too, bring his own resentment of Justin out of the closet, shrink him with humour. He can see a day in the future, in a home he has made with Tania. In this home he sees the Mexican sunflowers that Tania grows, he smells the Indian Ocean, and when Justin calls or interrupts their life they have a selection of insulting names to choose from, a hundred hilarious ways to magic him away. Of course they wouldn’t do this if Esther were there. When Ettie was there they’d be monkishly good and quiet, communicating their thoughts with their eyes.

The first drops of rain are so tentative he can count them, but suddenly the clouds open and tip out a load of grief.

He updates himself on the Irish economy. The news is a little worse every day. He worries about their chances of selling the guesthouse, about his investment, and his sister, trying to make a new life at such a time. He fears
there will be more drowned bodies, more people unable to beat the odds. 

*Send relief or send coffins.*

‘Cup of tea?’ says Tania, coming down the stairs.

‘The rain’s heavy now. We got home just in time.’

‘What sort do you want?’

‘Anything but Earl Grey.’

‘Don’t like it?’

‘I hate bergamot.’

‘Why do you have it in the house?’ she asks. She’s changed into her cowgirl pyjamas.

‘Orla likes it,’ he says. ‘Come here, you’re done up wrong.’

Tania kneels beside him and he unbuttons her pyjama top, resists her gorgeous flesh, buttons her up again.

‘I need to do some washing,’ she says.

‘I don’t know how much soap powder there is.’

‘Where will it be?’

‘Should be next to the dryer,’ he says, ‘in the kitchen, third cupboard from the left.’

She walks into the kitchen and he hears her filling the kettle, the ticking of the gas. Her fingers trail through his hair as she walks past him. Now he is looking at Australian interest rates.

‘Do you need anything washed?’ she asks, coming back down the stairs with an armful of clothes.

‘There might be a few things in the basket in the bathroom,’ he says.

Behind him, Tania opens the door of the washing machine. Something clinks as her clothes go in, and then he hears her walk to the bathroom. He’ll have to sell the last of his shares, he thinks. It’s a bad time to do it, but the money will keep him going until the future becomes clearer.

‘What is this?’ Tania says.

He turns his head quickly, because there’s something dreadful in her voice. ‘It’s Tweety!’ he laughs. ‘It belongs to Ettie.’

‘I know that,’ she says. ‘I bought it for Esther at Movie World on the Gold Coast when she was eight years old.’

‘And I,’ he says, mimicking her cold precision, ‘found it on the bed at her guesthouse when the guard and I went there to collect her belongings.’
'So why was it in the pocket of your shorts?'

'Because Joe had already closed her suitcase, and I was going to leave it for her at the hospital, but, obviously, I forgot.' His head is still turned. His neck is uncomfortable but if he doesn’t move, if everything looks casual, he might not have to believe they are having this conversation.

'You forgot?'

'Yes, I forgot.'

Tania is standing very still, framed by the light from the kitchen. Behind her the door of the washing machine is open, waiting. She looks down at the soft toy in her hands. ‘Can you imagine what I might be feeling?’ she says.

'Probably not, but I could take a stab at what you’re thinking.'

'And what’s that?’

He puts his feet to the floor and turns to face her. ‘You’re thinking I’m a dangerous, fucked-up monster who hurt your daughter and took her Tweety bird as some kind of trophy.’

'Don’t laugh at me.’

'I’m not laughing. I’m trying to understand you.’

'I don’t know,’ she says, wringing poor Tweety. ‘I don’t know what to think.’

'I’ve told you what happened.’

'It doesn’t sound plausible somehow.’

'That’s because it’s the truth. If I was lying to you I’d think up something more convincing.’

'I feel really sick.’

He closes his laptop and places it on the coffee table. ‘You’re never going to be able to trust me, are you?’

She doesn’t look at him. She doesn’t answer.

‘Tania?’

'I don’t know.’

'But you have to know, or it’s hopeless.’ He has made the mistake of standing. He’s towering over her, in the place where he once towered over Ettie. Tania takes a step away from him, and he’s horrified.

'If only Esther could remember,’ she says.

'She doesn’t have to remember,’ he says. ‘I’ve told you about that night, it should be enough.’
‘But I’ve tried so hard, David, and it isn’t.’

They are both speaking slowly, quietly, and it feels like someone is opening his chest with a knife. He cannot bear to be the person she sees, flickering good, then bad; a lover, a stranger; one moment a criminal, the next a friend. It has taken him a lifetime to become himself, but now these flickerings are shaking him to pieces.

‘We have to find some way through this,’ he says.

‘But what kind of mother do you think I’d be,’ she says, beginning to cry, ‘if I didn’t doubt.’

He had been preparing himself to plead, to prosecute his case. He’d been ready to bridge the terrible step she had taken away from him, but she’s crying now the way she did the day they lost each other at Charlie Byrne’s. There’s a backlog of grief in her tears, a brokenness that tells him she’s decided; she is crying from an old place where she knows she’ll always be alone.

‘Tania,’ he says, but she turns her face away from him.

Her aloneness is her dignity, he thinks, horrified again, looking at her bare feet and flannel pyjamas, her neck naked and exposed. There’s only one way that he can think of to save them. ‘One of us should probably go,’ he says.

She looks at him, stricken. For a moment he thinks he has said the right thing; he sees the protest in her eyes, the willingness to set aside the quality of her mothering; he sees her need for him. ‘I’ll go,’ she says, taking a step forwards.

‘No,’ he says, reaching for his jacket, ‘you can’t go. I’ll go.’

‘David?’

‘Where’s my phone?’ he says, looking around him. As long as he has his phone, nothing is finished.

‘I’ll be gone by the morning,’ she says.

He’s moving towards the door, pulling on his jacket, biting down on the howl rising up in him.

‘If you want me to,’ she adds.

He turns and walks over to her and takes her in his arms, one jacket sleeve on, one off, and she falls into him weakly. ‘I will always want you,’ he says, ‘but you have a decision to make.’
If he truly thought they’d never see each other again, he wouldn’t be going like this, fumbling his arm into his jacket. And if this were really the end surely she would not be standing so very still and quiet?

‘I can’t bear this mistrust, Tania. I have to go.’

‘I always knew you’d do this,’ she screams, but it’s too late, he’s already out the door.
He had forgotten about the rain but he can’t bumble back inside for an umbrella. Anyway, he doesn’t need an umbrella, he doesn’t want protection, the only thing that’s important is keeping his phone dry. He considers calling Orla to tell her to turn on the electric blanket in whatever guestroom is spare, but he’s not even sure he’ll reach Kilronan before he decides to turn back, or before Tania calls.

He is saving them. He still believes that.

Soon he doesn’t mind the rain falling on his head, and he has tightened his collar to stop the water running down his neck. His eyes have adjusted to the blue-black of the sky and the depthlessness of the road beneath his feet, and it seems that he knows the island better than he thought he did. The solidity of the cottages and stone walls is washed away by the rain, but he senses them in the darkness, he knows where they are. His body is absorbing the night, but now he must reckon with the shock of what has happened to them.

Walking slows his thoughts. His heartbeat eventually slows too, and the rain striking his skin renders him cold hard stony sober. The movement from warmth and happiness has been as wrenching as a car accident or a mugging, and it makes no difference that no mark will be seen on either of them. It had been mostly a quiet argument, and this made it so much worse. It scares him to think that they are somewhere new, a place where the terrible violence of them coming apart might be done calmly, with cold-blooded care, like an execution carried out by the state.

Tania hasn’t called by the time he reaches Kilronan and he’s not ready to turn back. The harbour lights are dull pearls in the rain and everything is closed, everyone has gone home for the night. The windows of the cottages he passes are lit by televisions and bedside lamps, and he wonders who is making love, who is soothing a restless child? He hasn’t done enough of either in his life, and tonight he feels like the lack could kill him. There are men
in some of these cottages too, he knows that, lone wolves like him, doping themselves in the long hours before bed with drink, or pornography, or fantasies of revenge against those who have forsaken them. It is the greatest of all its inequalities, the world’s distribution of love.

His boots are making squelching sounds on the road and he’s not even halfway there. He wonders why people shrink from rain, why they deny themselves this big, baptismal experience. He’s telling himself it’s not so bad, and at the same time hoping her call will come to save him.

He won’t go back without the call; he knows that by now. If only Ettie would remember; if only, just this once, life would not be so cruelly life-like. He pictures himself leaning over her hospital bed, shaking her until a memory of him comes loose, the right memory, one that will absolve him of every little thing he has, and hasn’t, done.

The wind knifes him as the road turns towards the ocean. He curls his hands inside his sleeves and hunches further into his jacket. It was easier when the rain was heavy, he was warmer and there was more to distract him from his thoughts. His mind is approaching something, approaching and swerving away. It’s something that was too hard to grasp before, back at the cottage, but now there’s no mercy in the cold and the wind and the rain. This is the truth, they all seem to say. The Atlantic thunders against the nearby shore and he can taste the salt spray. Each wave takes a little bit more of the island and moves it closer to its extinction. Is there a truth?

He thinks about the woman for whom Justin left his wife and child. What was her name? Alison, was that it? He wonders what Alison thought about her lover leaving his daughter to settle down with her own, or if she had thought about it at all. Children are resilient. Tania thinks this is a lie adults tell themselves, as if it were an irrefutable fact of the universe, like the earth is round, or the grass grows green. We tell it to ourselves so we can continue to believe that what we want is more important than what children most need.

He thinks about the wounded businessmen on St George’s Terrace, jumping out of a stupid tree, learning how hard it was to trust. Not for a moment does he believe the story – it’s too enjoyable – but he remembers lying on the floor of the cottage listening to Tania tell it, and picturing himself perched on the branch of that tree. Only he had been like Alison then, blind to another, not seeing that Ettie was beside him. Tania might have been look-
ing up at him, but she had long ago made the promise to catch Ettie first. Perhaps the promise had even been made the night she staggered drunk and alone in her backyard, spinning the clothesline, gazing up at the sky. The mother that Tania would become might’ve been decided that night, even though, like the final fact of her father’s death, she could not possibly have known it yet.

Tania is the mother that life has made her. *Is that the only truth?*

The moon silvers the outline of a cloud as it slides into view, surprisingly bright. His chest aches with sorrow. Shouldn’t he turn around, go back to her? Everything is quiet on the lake where the swans live, and the water is silver too.

The rain has stopped and the moon shines on the road he takes to his sister’s. All around him the drenched stone is pewter, cold and dark. There’s a light on at Orla’s, and she comes to the door in a fluffy dressing gown and her puppy slippers, a glass of wine in her hand. *Fluffy,* he thinks, *grown-up or not grown-up?*

‘What is it, Davey?’ she says.
‘I’ll tell you later.’
‘I don’t have any spare rooms. The fisheries men are here.’
‘It’s OK. I’ll sleep with Ned.’

Orla is watching *The Tudors* on television. She tells him where to find the brandy and sleeping tablets, and goes back to Catherine Howard’s beheading. ‘She was twenty-one,’ his sister says, ‘can you believe it?’

Not much older than Ettie, he thinks. In the bathroom he pulls his phone from the pocket of his jeans and stares at it. He is trembling with cold; his heavy clothes cling to him. He reaches up to the top shelf of the medicine cabinet, takes a Stilnox with a mouthful of brandy, then in the mirror he stares at his stripped, shaking body.

When he leans into the shower to turn on the taps he thinks of Sally. He sees her stepping into the bath, collecting her heavy breasts, the deep cuts of her bra on her skin. That he should think now, almost tenderly, of someone for whom he cares so little, is proof to him of his need for Tania, how she gentles everything.

He stands for a long time in the shower before the shaking stops. He turns circles under the hot water, thinking about Henry VIII, and the torment
he surely suffered whenever he felt a return of tenderness for the wives he’d dispatched.

He dries himself slowly, arranges his clothes on the wall heater, and picks up his phone. At the door of Kit’s room he stops and listens to his breathing, straining to hear anger, bad dreams, but there’s no hint of them. There’s a lamp on in Van’s room, a boy bundled under the blankets, and Horace the long-eared donkey watching over him.

Ned’s room is dark and the Lego pieces he steps on hurt. He shuts down his phone, and his nephew’s body is warm when he slips into bed beside him. The sleeping pill will wipe him out at any moment – he’ll be there, and then he won’t. It can’t be over. Not like this, he thinks, curling his body around Ned’s, but knowing that this is how grief comes, dressed in the everyday, in blue sheets with red rockets, with the background sound of television, the murmur of history and the taste of brandy in the mouth. He knows this, and he draws Ned close, he holds on tight to him.
He asks Orla to drive him home early the next morning. She has children to get to school and guests who need breakfast, but she takes one look at him coming down the stairs in his rumpled clothes and reaches for her keys.

It had been his first thought upon waking: he can still make everything right.

There’s no way of knowing, as the car draws up to the cottage gate, if Tania is inside. He feels sorry for the little house, humble and inexpressive in the thin early light. ‘Good luck,’ Orla says, although he hasn’t explained the situation to her yet. He closes the car door behind him, unlatches the gate and walks down the path, puzzled by the house’s blankness, that it’s not revealing a thing. It’s not until he pushes the front door open and steps inside that he understands why the cottage has stopped communicating. Tania has gone, and in its mourning the cottage has fallen mute.

This is the truth: we are at the end.

He closes the door quietly and looks at the cold, skimmed milk light. There is no trace of Tania in the living room, nothing to tell him how she passed the night. There’s no cushion out of place, no hollow in the sofa. He walks into the kitchen but that, too, is impersonally neat. Perhaps forensic science could tell him where her body had been, but he would never know what she’d been feeling. His bones ache and there’s shivering in the pit of his stomach. He puts a wheat bag in the microwave and walks to the bathroom with his heart pounding. If Tania wanted to hurt him, or herself, this is where she would do it. He flicks on the light and finds the white room tidy. The clothing basket is closed, the towels are folded and only slightly damp. He thinks of how Ettie reversed the toilet paper the night she was here, sniffed his aftershave and left the cap off, and how, even now, her contact lens might still be somewhere. Now that Tania has gone, he will have to accept that for Ettie he has never existed, and that makes him feel like there really is less of him alive on this earth.
The microwave beeps and he turns off the light and goes back to the kitchen. He wants tea, but he’s too weak to wait for the kettle to boil. Tania had asked him if he wanted a cup of tea, but the tea of the future he must make for himself, the grace that’s gone from his life replaced by effort. He takes the stairs slowly. The neat bed is no surprise, but perhaps she hadn’t slept there. Perhaps she’d chosen to sleep on the sofa, or she might not have slept at all, but whatever her choice, she’d wiped away every clue to her, she hadn’t wanted him to know.

He eases himself down on the side of the bed and drags off one of his damp boots. He has the heel of the other in his hand when he sees, on the bedside table, the paper bag from Charlie Byrne’s. He picks it up, tears at the sticky tape. Inside is a copy of Miracles of Life, an autobiography by J. G. Ballard, published the year before he died. There’s a Post-it note stuck to the book’s cover: I didn’t get a chance to give this to you last night.

He puts the book down, pulls off his boot and crawls into bed. He has never seen Tania’s handwriting before, it’s small and spidery. Everything in him hurts. Where to place the wheat bag for maximum warmth? He thinks of someone he interviewed once, a long time ago, an old man who had spent most of his life in prison, and how the man had told him that in his cell at night, for the dream of flesh, he’d filled a plastic bag with hot water.

I didn’t get a chance.

He’s fully dressed but he can’t stop shivering. Would this book have made a difference last night? Last night, with all the superstition and egoism of love, would he have interpreted Ballard’s book as a kind of message, the man he’d loved for so long speaking to him one last time.

Loved? Yes, loved.

He had thought it miraculous when Tania returned to him, but maybe he is not big enough for miracles. Maybe he hasn’t got the will or the stamina to serve them. But if he had received Ballard’s message last night, would he have tried?

He goes slowly back down the stairs. In the kitchen he returns the wheat bag to the microwave. He swallows some paracetamol and takes water from the fridge, whisky down from the shelf. It’s impossible to imagine ever being warm again. The microwave beeps. He clutches the wheat bag and the bot-
titles to his chest, takes a blanket from the cupboard, another coat from the hook near the door, and climbs up the stairs and back to bed.

Warmth comes slowly. He thinks about the earlier people of Inishmore, the women hauling seaweed in their sodden skirts and shawls, the men fishing the freezing Atlantic in flimsy boats. Everyone shivering by weak fires, poor, undernourished. He feels that he’s part of a community now, although the other members are ghosts, and the people of the past pity him as much as he does them – a soft, modern man on a hard, ancient island, without family or faith to help him make sense of anything.

He reaches an arm out for the bottle of whisky. The first mouthful tastes peculiar, and the second is no better, but it’s not until the third that he finally understands it is not whisky he’s drinking, but cold tea.

He doesn’t need forensics now to tell him how Tania passed the night. It’s not Earl Grey tea, so she hadn’t been malicious. He knows how whisky feels like a dose of divine truth, until the moment it turns into the piss of Satan. And she’d drunk a lot of Satan’s piss. He gets it – totally gets it – but the Ballard book and bottle of shamed, sorrowful tea are what she’s left him, and as he huddles under the slagheap of blankets and coats it seems there’s little to be lived in a life without her.
We were at the beginning and now we are at the end.

He needs to go back. He needs to hunt through their story for the moment when things might’ve gone another way, when it might have been their happiness that was inevitable. He’s looking for his mistake, or Tania’s, or some mistake they collaborated on. It will help, to find this faultline, the crack on which all the other cracks had depended. It will help, as one day follows the next, and he’s well enough to leave his bed, but too wretched to open the front door, to find the pattern in the mess they had made of their hearts.

He stands at the window and watches the white horse. He’s eating Nutella out of the jar with a spoon and remembering Tania on the jetty the day she came back to him. She was wearing her new jacket; she was carrying figs. She had a new hair colour and a different cut, but, even then, had there really been a chance for them?

He rewinds further, back to the day they lost each other at Charlie Byrne’s, but the fracture isn’t there, although if they had been different people there might have been another outcome. So, back further still, to the moment in the hospital’s coffee shop with the woman whose brother was in a coma, and back, back to Tweety sitting on Ettie’s bed. There had been so many mistakes, but where was the fatal one?

He phones Orla. ‘Do you want me to bring you some chicken soup?’ she asks.

‘Your chicken soup comes out of a can.’

‘No, it doesn’t,’ she says, ‘it comes out of a little packet.’

‘Thanks, but you don’t sound too good yourself.’

‘I’m all right. Just a bit down. You know.’

They don’t dare talk about the guesthouse. Across the country, people are walking away from half-built houses and construction has stopped on businesses and civic projects. Orla and he have already lost their investment
in the guesthouse, but in the summer, if the tourists don’t come, would they have to walk away too? When the people of the future came to Inishmore, after they’d visited the ruins of St Enda’s monastery and the old Protestant church, would they climb the hill to look at what’s left of Farraige Fíaine? When they saw the guesthouse’s abandoned kitchen and its crumbling stone bench tops, the corroded Miele, the flaking slate floor and falling ivory walls, would they consult their guidebooks? Would the guidebooks of the future tell these people this is where the bubble burst?

He has gone back, and he’s arrived at the night of his birthday. It had been Patrick’s mother’s fall that left him alone with Ettie, so did she have some part to play in this? It would please him to blame her, the awful nudes she’d painted, the middle-class squalor in which she’d raised her children, those poor scabby dogs. Bernadette had recovered well from her fall and last he’d heard she was leading an old ladies’ tour of Saint Petersburg. He thinks of her bullying her way through the Hermitage, having no idea what she’d given and taken from him.

The phone rings early one morning. His heart hammers as he takes the stairs, but it’s not Tania. It’s midnight in Sydney, and Stu is playing guitar in his shed.

‘Don’t you think it’s a bit fancy calling it a shed?’ David says. ‘When it’s really a state-of-the-art home studio.’
‘But I’m doing secret men’s business.’
‘Hiding out?’
‘Yeah.’
‘You sound pissed.’
‘Probably,’ Stu says, ‘it’s that one drink after work that does it.’
‘How is work?’
‘Davo, you have no idea how bad politics in this place has got. I think we should go to Antarctica.’
‘Do you now?’
‘Yeah, the boat – ship, ice-breaker, I dunno, whatever – leaves from Buenos Aires. We could spend a week there on the way.’
‘You’ve thought about this.’
‘We could hear some Astor Piazzolla.’
‘He’s dead.’
'I know, but his spirit lingers on.'
'I’m looking for work.'
'Finished the book?'
'Near enough.'
'Is not the best time to be looking, especially where you are.'
'Tell me about it.'
'I don’t know, a friend of a friend just got thrown in jail in Thailand. He had a pretty cushy job on some paper there. I could ask.'
'What did he go to jail for?'
'Not sure, but you’d have to think it was drugs or sex.'
'You’d think so.'
'Well, how about a road trip then? Hear Al Green preach at his church in Memphis, make our way down to New Orleans?'
'I have to find work first.'
'Oh, yeah. Work.'

He emails a magazine editor in London. Lucy and he used to sleep together, now and then, a few years ago, and she had always said she would be interested in looking at, so to speak, anything he’d like to show her. In the email he tells her why she needs to send him to China to write about the suicides at the electronics factory. He asks after her little dachshund called Clementine.

One afternoon, when there’s no food left, he walks to Kilronan. Every step reminds him of walking there in the rain, knowing and not knowing they were over. He’s still thinking about the night of his birthday. There must have been something he could’ve done to keep Ettie safe, but if she had been safe then Tania would not have entered his life. If he had perhaps poured Ettie less wine that night, or insisted on escorting her home, all he’d ever have known – and he would soon have forgotten it – was that Ettie’s mother thought jokes should be told properly.

And there it is, he thinks, in a nutshell. In a walnut, in fact, the two halves nestled: Ettie’s lonely fall from her bike; his love and his loss.

He thinks about Claire and Patrick. He wonders if Tania is staying with them. He doesn’t call because she might be, but why haven’t they called
him? And then one morning Patrick sends a text. Claire has been visiting her family in Chicago, he says, but come to dinner next week?
Claire looks radiant.

‘The trip must have done you good,’ David says. He’d been nervous about their meeting but all that has vanished. There’s something buzzy between the two of them that makes him think Patrick missed Claire a lot while she was away. Patrick’s more relaxed than usual, as if missing her had broken him open somehow.

It’s a cold night but the apartment’s double glazing shuts out the moaning winds and they sit in warmth and lamplight. Over drinks they talk about the economy. Claire has fewer commissions for landscaping work, and there have been job cuts at Patrick’s university. David thinks of saying something gratuitous that might lead to a mention of Tania, something like, ‘At least the Australian economy is in better shape,’ but he decides against it. He can’t pretend he hadn’t been hoping that there might be more to tonight. Ettie waiting behind a door, perhaps, ready to spring out and ask for more Missy Tzu?

Norman waddles into the room and lies down at David’s feet.

‘He hasn’t been well,’ says Patrick.

‘What’s wrong with him?’ asks David, leaning down to stroke the dog’s golden head.

‘His arthritis is worse,’ says Claire.

‘And he’s got cataracts,’ says Patrick.

‘He’s getting old,’ says Claire.

‘Poor old fella,’ says David, and the dog rolls over for a scratch.

Patrick fills their glasses and puts on some music.

‘Who’s this?’ asks David, listening to the smooth jazz trumpet.

‘Erik Truffaz. I just discovered him, he’s French.’

Now there’s a little bit of Miles in the night, a little New York skyline. He thinks of all the music Patrick has introduced him to over the years; he wouldn’t be able to count the wealth of it.
‘We’re sorry things didn’t work out with Tania,’ says Claire.

David doesn’t look up. He rubs Norman’s belly harder, communing with him about pain, about growing older. ‘What’s she told you?’ he says.

‘Not much, just that it was over.’

He sits back in his chair and reaches for his wine. ‘Yeah,’ he says, ‘it’s over.’

‘I guess it was just a difficult time for her,’ she says.

‘I guess so.’

‘These things are so often about timing,’ says Patrick.

‘What things?’ says David.

‘You know, people getting together.’ Patrick looks at Claire. ‘We’d never have met if I hadn’t missed that plane.’

‘Do you know how Tania is?’ asks David.

‘She was very stressed when I saw her,’ says Claire. ‘We only had a quick coffee. She had a lot to do, with leaving and everything.’

‘Leaving?’

‘Didn’t you know they’d gone?’

‘No,’ he says, ‘I didn’t.’

‘I thought you knew.’

‘When did they go?’

‘I think they were going yesterday. Or it might even have been this morning – the days are such a blur. She wasn’t exactly sure when Esther was getting out of hospital.’

David reaches into his pocket.

‘You’re smoking? When did you start smoking?’ says Patrick, glancing at Claire, ‘I don’t think you should smoke in here.’

David takes a deep drag on the cigarette and exhales a thin stream of smoke. ‘Okay,’ he says, pressing the orange tip into his palm. ‘I’ll put it out.’

‘Is that one of those e-cigarettes?’ laughs Claire.

‘Yes,’ says David, taking another drag on the metal cylinder.

‘What’s an e-cigarette?’ says Patrick.

‘It’s an electronic cigarette,’ says Claire. ‘Haven’t you seen one?’

‘Obviously not. But what’s the smoke?’

‘It’s just a vapour,’ says David.

‘Is it harmless?’
‘It’s harmless to you.’
‘And what about you?’
‘There’s no tar or tobacco and it’s got a thousand fewer chemicals, but in the long run, who knows?’
‘Is it as good as the real thing?’
‘Of course not, but I’ve given up on the real thing.’

Claire’s cooked boeuf bourguignon, a recipe from her sister in Chicago. David drinks more wine and lets Claire and Patrick do the talking. He’s trying to take in the news about Tania and Ettie, but it hurts more with each passing second. It seems that over is a long, long sequence of moments: you think you’re there but then there’s still more over to go.

He helps Claire clear the table. There’s a rhubarb crumble bubbling in the oven and they sit back to wait.

‘I don’t know what to call this,’ David says, taking out his cigarette again.
‘It’s not exactly lighting up a smoke.’
‘Activating an after-dinner battery?’ says Claire.
‘It feels ridiculous,’ he says, taking a drag.
‘So why do it?’
‘Harm minimisation, I guess.’
‘But why do any harm at all?’

How to tell her that no harm doesn’t feel like an option at the moment. Not putting a rope around his neck is an option, and he’s already chosen that.

‘I know I freaked out when I thought you were smoking,’ says Patrick, looking at Claire, ‘but …’
‘We’ve got some news,’ says Claire.
‘We’re pregnant,’ says Patrick.

He feels winded, like some force has thrown him hard against the brick wall of his own future. ‘Jesus,’ he says, ‘that’s wonderful.’

‘We’d decided it was going to be our last try with IVF,’ says Claire.
‘We were ready to give up,’ adds Patrick.

David stands and walks around the table and leans down to kiss Claire’s sweet-smelling cheek. Patrick is already on his feet and David hugs him tightly. ‘I’m so happy for you,’ David says, and he is.
Claire and Patrick are smiling at him, brimming with talk. ‘Sorry, but I have to take a quick piss,’ he says, not thinking, not planning anything, just making emergency moves.

He walks down the corridor and into the guestroom. He picks up his bag and coat, and as quietly as possible he goes to the front door, unlocks it slowly and slips outside. He takes the stairs two at a time, afraid at any moment that one of them will call out his name, feeling stunned and ashamed, like a hit-run driver, knowing he’ll have to account for it later, to himself, a jury, an almighty judge, but unable to stop. He doesn’t know where he’s going or how he’ll spend the night, but he pulls on his coat and scarf, drags his beanie down over his ears, and hurries out into the dark street.

The Corrib flows fast and dangerous. On Wolfe Tone Bridge, the wind is cutting. He has to keep walking until he can be sure that no one has followed, until his shaking stops.

*We’re pregnant.* Christ, didn’t he know it sounded ridiculous, saying it like that?

He’s running away from something irreparable, something he can never make good. On Dock Road he finally slows his step and wipes his face with the back of his hand. The seagulls couldn’t care less, up in the black sky. He needs somewhere to sleep, but tonight it feels like there’s no place on earth where a man might go to grieve about fatherhood, to mourn the waste of what might have been the very best part of him.

It’s more sheltered nearer Eyre Square. There are people on the streets, cars, electricity. He enters the first pub he sees. It’s dark inside and they’re playing Thin Lizzy. He orders a beer and drinks it slowly, avoiding his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. He should call Claire and Patrick, but he can’t.

Nobody knows him, he thinks, no one knows who he truly is.

‘David, isn’t it?’

He looks around slowly. ‘Gabriel,’ he says. ‘You’ve got a good memory.’

Gabriel props his leg on the stool next to David. He’s wearing a long military coat that must weigh a ton. ‘How’s the tattoo?’

‘It’s good – my nephew thinks you’re a god.’

‘What are you doing in town,’ he says. ‘Aren’t you over on Inishmore?’

‘I missed the last ferry.’
‘Where are you spending the night?’
‘I’ll get myself a hotel room.’
‘You don’t want to do that,’ Gabriel says. ‘Come back to mine. Have a drink with a few friends. I can offer a mattress and blanket.’
‘Where do you live?’
‘Above the shop, you know it.’
He could spend the night under a frilly bedspread, staring at Renoir prints on the walls, or take the chance of forgetting his miserable self for a while in the company of strangers.
‘You’re sure?’
‘You’ll enjoy yourself,’ he says. ‘I just came out for more supplies.’

The tattoo shop lies in darkness. He clumsily follows Gabriel through the rooms and up a set of stairs towards light. There is loud music playing, the vocalist sounds like he’s pulling a tractor – David had imagined two or three tattooed friends sitting around on milk crates, sharing tales conspiratorial and mystic, but now he is beginning to think he might have lacked imagination.

They step into a brilliantly lit loft with a pitched ceiling from which two people are hanging. Gabriel looks at him, assessing his reaction, and for the first time David feels the younger man’s arrogance. ‘Suspensions,’ Gabriel says. ‘Haven’t you heard of them?’

He has heard of them, actually, but he says nothing. He looks around him. The room contains about twenty people. Some of them are standing still in open-mouthed observation of the two young women who are suspended above them, while some are taking photographs. Others wander the room in bare feet, the boys bare-chested, some wearing leggings, the girls all in stretch shorts with bra tops or corsets. The wanderers appear to consist of people who have already performed a suspension that night, and those who are waiting their turn. The waiting ones are moving to the rubbish music, smoking and talking, self-conscious and hyper-alert, but the movements of the others are glacially slow and contained. Their bodies are smeared with blood, but their faces all wear a post-coital expression, empty but replete, a touch smug.
'Are you doing a suspension tonight?' he asks Gabriel, hearing the challenge in his voice.

'No, I don’t do suspensions anymore,' Gabriel says. 'I’m into deeper ritual now – heavier shit.' He wants David to ask but David has no interest. He and Gabriel have slipped into a zone of subtle competition, and perhaps his only advantage lies in knowing it.

David moves his way through the crowd until he’s standing below the two suspended girls. It’s a relatively simple method: two winches, ropes slung over the rafters, the ropes attached to big fish hooks, the hooks sunk into their flesh. Now that he’s closer, he can see that one of the girls is Jane Doe. She has two hooks between her shoulder blades and another two behind her knees, so she’s suspended horizontally. He wonders if she feels like an exotic bird up there, or if she’s soaring in some other spiritual realm, paying penance or healing herself, but the skin around the hooks is so alarming-ly stretched that all he can feel is sorry for her, trying so hard for transcendence yet looking like she’s pegged on a washing line.

It’s time for Jane Doe to come down. The winches rasp, and as she is slowly lowered, her eyes glitter with tears and her impassive face is preparing to smile.

The other girl is alone in the air now. She’s hanging from six hooks embedded across her shoulders and the backs of her outstretched arms. David turns a circle below her, noticing her chipped blue toenail polish, the grubby soles of her feet. This suspension he can almost understand, someone posed as Jesus Christ. He can see how a young woman in this country might seek to defy the church in this manner, speak back to its crimes. How she might want to take charge of her own mortification.

In fact, he’s not having a hard time understanding any of it. The last hook is lifted out of Jane Doe’s flesh. Blood runs down her back and someone is holding her, telling her how well she’s done. He can remember being young like this, longing for experience to be pounded into his body. And being this young but terrified of experience too, feeling helpless to control it, testing experience’s limits.

He supposes he could wait in line tonight. He could pull off his boots and strip down. But when it was his turn, where would he tell them to place
the hooks? What shape would he make with his body, what unsayable thing would he want to express?

Tonight he is a man lost. He sorrows for his mate, his child. He seeks warm shelter. Simple things. Creature instincts. He has witnessed the lives and deaths of many animals, and tonight he understands that he is one of them.

So where would he tell them to place the hooks? How would he suspend himself above this crowd of watching strangers? He recalls the heavy animal carcasses hauled on the shoulders of the porters at London’s Smithfield Markets, the blood of human executions having long ago soaked the ground on which they walked. Make me look like a side of meat, is that what he’d say? Hook me by the balls and throat. Let me hang. Let me bleed. Let me say what I have learnt: the world’s flesh is borderless.

‘How’re you handling it?’ says Gabriel, coming close, offering David his bottle of rum.

Maybe it would be satisfying to dent the young man’s bravado, to reply with something clever, come out on top. It might even feel good, to counter Gabriel’s youth and swagger with his age and wisdom, to scare the bejesus out of him. You don’t know it yet, he might say, but your body will bring you to your knees one day.

Instead he declines the rum with a lift of his hand. ‘Actually, I’m not handling it at all,’ he says, and then, for the second time that night, he’s taking the stairs two at a time – he’s leaving.
When he wakes the next morning a light rain is falling and he’s calm. The hotel room is excessively peach and he needs to get out of there. He wants to hold onto the calm, it’s like the island’s stone. It’s hard, grey, quiet.

He unplugs the electronic cigarette from his laptop and checks his email. There’s a reply from Lucy, the magazine editor in London. Clementine the dachshund is quite the dowager duchess now, she writes, thanks for asking. She likes his suicide factory idea and wants to talk. The message is sent from her iPhone, and, Jesus Christ, he thinks, the irony.

He takes a shower, eats breakfast at a café, and gets to pilates early, hoping to do extra work. ‘I sent you a text,’ says Joni, when he wanders past the unattended reception desk and into the empty studio.

‘My phone’s off,’ he says. ‘What’s going on?’

Joni is on her knees rolling up a padded mat. ‘I’m closing the business,’ she says. ‘I can’t keep it going the way things are.’

‘Has it been that tough?’
‘And I got the offer of a job.’
‘Where?’
‘In New Zealand.’
‘When are you going?’
‘Next week.’

He offers to help her with what she’s doing but is relieved when she declines. A set of spanners lies open on the floor. It looks as though she’s about to take apart the reformers, and he knows he’s no match for a physiotherapist’s practical-mindedness.

‘But you’ve still got your fitness ball,’ Joni says, ‘and you’ll keep doing your exercises on that?’

‘Yeah, I will. And, look, good luck in New Zealand, I’m sure you’ll love it,’ he says, although he’s always hated the place himself.
Joni stands and they look at each other. Are they going to kiss on the cheek? Or will they embrace awkwardly, pat each other like pizza dough?

‘Core strength, David,’ she says.

‘And core strength to you too, Joni,’ he says, smiling back.

Out on the street the clouds have lifted and there’s a rare, warming sun. He reaches into his bag for his sunglasses and turns in the direction of Brown Thomas. He walks by a stringy-haired teenager with crime in her eyes. A toddler with a look of fierce concentration wobbles past, at work on Goldbach’s conjecture. People have no idea that he’s scrutinising them from behind his sunglasses. They don’t know he’s scanning for strife or contentment, trying to penetrate, in some small way, the puzzle of someone other than himself. He thinks about the comics he read when he was a boy. He pored over the back pages of the comics for hours, studying the advertisements for fart cushions and the soap that turns hands black, and, best of all, the X-ray specs. He had a few doubts about the spectacles actually working, but X-ray vision seemed more likely than the idea that someone would set out to trick him. He had wanted a pair so much. There was a coupon he could cut out, he could’ve sent off his money, but for some reason he never did.

He pushes through the doors of Brown Thomas and luxury attacks like a panther. He takes off his sunglasses and adjusts himself to the demands of a department store. In the cosmetics aisle, he chooses a woman and walks up to her counter. ‘I’d like a perfume,’ he says.

‘Yes, sir,’ she replies. ‘What kind of perfume does your partner like?’

Wretched word, he thinks. ‘Um,’ he says, ‘I think she quite likes this one.’

Orla doesn’t like any of this woman’s perfumes; he knows that. Orla only ever wears one perfume, and after he’s spent some time at this counter, he’ll go and buy the Acqua di Parma for her. But for now, he’s hoping that this woman will believe him. He’s hoping that, one after the other, she will spray her fragrances on the inside of her wrist and offer the scents to him. Her lovely wrist won’t come too close – he is, after all, someone else’s partner, and she is a high priestess – but just close enough for him to feel her heat, for her to feel his credit card.

Only it seems that things have changed since he last bought perfume for his sister (every time he’s in Orla’s bathroom, he sees that bottle of Acqua di Parma, turned upside down to wring out the final drop). There’s no longer
any spraying of wrists at the perfume counter, no delicate ceremony. The sales assistant simply squirts the fragrance onto a strip of card and waves it back and forth in front of him, as if semaphoring a message: *You don’t fool me, you sad bastard, you don’t fool me one bit.*

After he’s bought Orla’s present he wanders the aisles looking for a test bottle of the perfume Tania wears, Chanel No 19. At the Chanel counter he stands paralysed by the brand’s gleaming logo of interlocking Cs – the swastika of style, the jackboot of elegance. He looks at the line of perfume bottles. The perfumes are coloured amber, rose, and hangover urine, but the one that will bring Tania back is kryptonite green. He’s no Superman, but still it’s dangerous to him. It’s a threat to his strength, so he leaves.

His back hurts too much for walking, although walking is what he’d like to do. He buys a newspaper, muffin and coffee, and heads for Eyre Square.

He thinks about Orla’s birthday as he walks. His nephews will decide the menu and he’ll help them with the cooking. Something in him knows they won’t be together for her next birthday. He hopes that means his sister and he will be living more certain lives, but he’ll have to reckon with the parting from his nephews.

He hopes that wherever he is in the world, the boys will come to him if they’re in trouble, or confused, or need someone to cheer them on. He likes to imagine his nephews at his deathbed, remembering all the fun they’d had, everything they had learnt from him about being men. He would like them to be sad about his passing, but since he’ll be very old, nothing will seem out of place, and death will be his final gift of wisdom to them.

He has all these hopes, but he knows there’s a chance it won’t be like that. He knows that he and his nephews will likely grow apart. That he’ll try but his attentions might become fitful; that Hewey, Dewey and Louie will lose interest in him; that he’ll grow to be just another beige relative, and then it will be too hard, and they’ll all be too busy, and the boys will grow up like so many others – un-fathered, un-uncled, unsure.

At Eyre Square he chooses an area of grass and eases his back against the trunk of an ash tree. Nearby a few gangly lads are fooling about on skateboards. Kit would be mesmerised by them – he’d like to take one home for him.
Where will he be in four weeks, six months, two years? Shuffle the cards: he’ll take what he’s dealt. He’s lonely, but he will try to remember that the view from loneliness can be a wide one. He’ll try to make the wide view count. And Antarctica, Al Green, New Orleans? Not now, but maybe. He shrugs off his coat and pushes back the sleeves of his jumper. The muffin is full of blueberries. The boys on skateboards are laughing like chimpanzees and it feels good, to sit for a while in the jungle. The next ferry doesn’t leave for a few hours and he’s in no rush to return to Inishmore.

In the white cottage on Inishmore he misses even those who have never existed.

His time on the island is coming to an end; this is something else he knows. And the island will have some final lessons for him before he goes, he’s sure of that. There’ll be more of its hard, grey, stony truths. He hates lessons. He hates being offered learning over love and warm bodies, over laughter and self-forgetting, the surprise of another, belonging to someone, but he knows he’ll bow to the lessons because there is no other choice.

He finishes the muffin and wishes he’d bought two. He drains his coffee and then he unbuckles his bag. Tania’s present, the J.G. Ballard autobiography, is inside the bag and still unopened. *Miracles of Life*. He finds the title a moving one. It might be the name of a Jehovah’s Witness tract, or an anti-abortion pamphlet, but instead it’s the title chosen by a man who knew he was dying, and after a lifetime of writing was setting down his thoughts one final time. An original writer – an original man – who at the end of his life was finished with irony, unafraid of sentiment, happy to declare his gratitude.

David wonders how long it will be before he’s ready to open the book, and who and where he’ll be when he does. J. G. Ballard and Chanel No 19: in the future these will tell him he’s stronger, but of the future it’s all he knows.

He searches the bag for his painkillers. He swallows two without water – he’s getting good at it – and then it’s time for a cigarette. He screws a new atomised cartridge into the battery his laptop has charged for him and puts the cold weight to his lips.

The romance has gone, but perhaps that’s the point. You can’t match a Leonard Cohen song to an electronic cigarette, although maybe he hasn’t tried hard enough. He should call out to the skateboarders, ask them what
they make of it. Something that he finds ridiculous might seem romantic to them – the ritual has changed, but it’s still ritual. He’s frightened of not knowing the next generation; not understanding the ways in which they make sense of the world. If he is not a father, how else would he come to know?

He will have to switch on his phone soon. He’ll have to read Claire’s message – always Claire, doing the heavy-lifting for two – and work out how to answer her. He’ll be reasonable, he has that to depend upon. He’ll suggest coffee and then try to explain. It hurts, he’ll try to say, but how will it sound? After all these years of never saying it, how will it come out? Claire will look at him with her Mongolian cheekbones and warm tendrils and her belly filling with baby. ‘Of course I understand,’ Claire will say, and they’ll kiss and part smiling, and then, having been reasonable, he’ll do the unreasonable, unexplainable thing and draw away from her and his old friend because when he said it hurts, he meant it hurts too much.

He draws on the e-cigarette and this, too, he’s getting good at. He blows flavoured vapour into the air, and no one would know that it wasn’t real smoke. When all’s said and done, has he got what he truly wanted? Glasses that let him look inside others, and a trick cigarette? He feels a surge of tenderness for the little boy who pored over the final pages of his comic books, hoping for miracles, believing in human truthfulness, and the other way round.

It’s irreducible, the passion of a child, he sees that now; he’s the same boy he ever was.

The skateboarders are spilling and joking. He turns to watch them, limbs like sticks, faces lean and scabby. He looks back again, and then ahead of him in the middle distance, neither illusion nor ghosts, there they are.

They’re wheeling their small suitcases and walking in the direction of the train station. A stranger might not notice, but he can see how cautiously they’re proceeding. He can see Tania reining herself in, falling into step beside her slow-moving daughter. They’re not talking, they’re walking with their heads down, they have their minds set on their destination.

They’re going.

Ettie is wearing Tania’s riding boots and a strange dress the colour of red wine, with full sleeves and a high neck, a waist that ties in a bow. It’s a style
he’s seen on other girls, to his eyes prim, churchy. It’s recent, he thinks, it’s something she’s just bought, and it feels new to her, a new version of Esther. She’s wearing secretary glasses, and her hair is longer, loose on her shoulders. She looks thinner, older, her energy drawn inwards, not crackling anymore, but the energy of a chrysalis.

Tania is not changed at all, still carrying with her the great mystery of why no one else in the world has made him feel the same way. She’s wearing jeans and sneakers and her Vivienne Westwood, and Westwood should know about this. Up there in the clouds of high fashion and cultural iconography, she should know that down on earth there’s a woman who cares for old bodies, a woman who could afford her jacket only because someone made a mistake, that the jacket bearing her name helps this woman feel strong, finely cut, when sometimes she’s not.

They look like two people at the end of a long journey, and they still have so far to go. He thought he’d already said goodbye to them, but here they are, still leaving. This is the Vale of Tears, he thinks, gazing across the shadepuddled grass. This is where I see you for the very last time.

They’re walking towards the train station, and he’s trying to hold on. He’s holding on to the red of Ettie’s dress and the gold of Tania’s hair. He is hoping that the stories he read to Ettie won’t always remain unremembered, that she’s a girl not interrupted, but a girl like other girls–built to heal, built to fly. His hopes for Tania are more modest, more like his hopes for himself, although he cannot say, at this moment, what those hopes are.

_They’re sailing for the new land, his wife and daughter._ He allows himself these words. He tastes their unspokenness in his mouth. He’s holding on, glimpsing red and gold, gold and red, and he curses the bus that drives by and hides them from him. The bus moves on and once more he searches for red and gold, for the merest, most distant hint of them, but although the street offers him many colours, red and gold have gone.

Forever feels like this.

He remembers standing on the shores of Gregory’s Sound at dusk, gazing across the water. He was thinking about the islanders who had stood there before him, trying hard to imagine what forever felt like for them. Oh, how busy life is! What a swift, stern, harried teacher – to have answered his
question so quickly, cursorily, so terribly soon. Life shows him forever, the vast future without his loved ones, and then life hurries on to its next task.

Every need he has for a deeper explanation, life waves away.
On Failing Better

An essay
I

On Wednesday the ninth of April 1930, Virginia Woolf made a note in her writing diary. The note concerns the writing of character in her novel *The Waves* – “it should be done boldly, almost as caricature” – and it marks for her a distinctive moment in the creation of a novel, one it is apparent she recognises from past experience. “It is bound to be imperfect,” Woolf writes. “But I think it possible that I may have got my statues against the sky.” (Woolf, 1985: 155)

What does Woolf mean? What are these ‘statues’ she sees, or is vision not the only way she apprehends this moment? Does she somehow feel, in her writing body, a raising or hoisting into vertical life of something? But what is that thing exactly? I can only speculate about what this image might have meant to Virginia Woolf. My interest here lies in the many ways in which this image, despite its grandiosity, has usefully informed my own process of fiction writing.

I will be specific about *my* statues, and my sky. This is not difficult because of the clarity of the image for me. There is even a touch of the comic to this clarity, so definitive is it, so excluding of any other visual possibilities. In no possible way, for example, would this image ‘work’ for me if the statues were bronze, or metal of any kind. My statues are carved from stone, preferably marble. My statues do not serve to commemorate war, exploration or civic achievement in the form of heroic figures, but neither are they abstract. My statues – numbering, variously, four to six – are always neoclassical: neoclassical figures standing tall and dark against a dusk sky, or starkly white in the sunlight.

So much depends
upon
the statues neo
classical
dark against a
dusk sky
or bright against
the blue.
Here, of course, I am borrowing from William Carlos Williams’s imagist poem ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’. I borrow this reference to underline the way in which every formal element of the ‘statues against the sky’ image has meaning for my creative process. Why are the objects in the image always neo-classical, and why statues? Why not the work of a sculptor whose work I admire? Claes Oldenburg, for example, who brings a postmodern wit to the sculpture of everyday objects: monumental forks, pegs and pencils, a fifty-three-foot paintbrush?

Perhaps it is because the simplicity and symmetry of neoclassical form speaks to aspects of my own writing. I am not a postmodern wit (David Foster Wallace or Thomas Pynchon would laugh at my silly statues, and work at toppling them); I choose classical forms for my ideas, building on the past rather than breaking with it – my novel, ‘Man of Aran’ is, in essence, a love story. The neoclassical figure suggests to me qualities of stillness, restraint, and seriousness, and these are qualities I try to bring to my own work. I do not view the neoclassical figure as idealised, as some might, but instead as a character acting within an eternal narrative; a character like those that I write – people striving for knowledge, or a measure of dignity, power over their own fate, but thwarted in their efforts, sometimes undone, by human vulnerability and folly.

Just as ‘glazed’ and ‘beside’ are the words that ‘so much depends upon’ in William Carlos Williams’s poem, ‘against’ is the preposition that, for me, is essential to the working of the image of the statues. My statues stand against a sky that lends them clear definition, although it is not merely the one-dimensional definition of a silhouette, the statues have mass too, they are in relationship to the space around them. ‘Against’ is also a way of conveying the particular point of view of this image – my statues are seen at a distance;

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1 So much depends upon
   a red wheel
   barrow
   glazed with rain
   water
   besides the white
   chickens. (Williams, 1991: 224)
as the viewer I do not stand in front of them and observe detail, I stand back and take in the bigger picture; the view is not intimate, but meditative.

Perhaps it is curious that a still image should mark for me a significant moment in a creative method that is otherwise highly kinetic, one marked by a constant placing and displacing, an interplay of conflict and harmony, activity and quiet, juxtapositions and syntheses. It’s true that at the visual level the image is a fiercely static one – those statues aren’t going anywhere – but no image functions at that level alone. I have speculated that Virginia Woolf might also be bringing to this image her sense of the physicality of novel writing; that the image is accompanied by a felt sensation of the work rising within her, freeing itself of scaffolding and establishing itself independently on the human plane, the vertical. But what do I mean if I say, when writing a novel, that my statues are at last against the sky? I mean that I have reached a lucid moment in the writing process; a moment in which all the elements of the novel that have been unconsciously building and organising, now manifest themselves consciously in the work. The moment brings an understanding of the novel’s state of being, its reason for being, and it is a moment that allows me to move outside the work – for a time I’m able to stand apart from the novel. I can appraise the writing: I am no longer psychically enmeshed in its many uncertain elements; I am both its reader and its author.

In 1951, the American abstract expressionist, Mark Rothko, spoke of the process of creating the vast colour fields that constitute his mature work. “To paint a small picture,” said Rothko, “is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience as a stereopticon view or with a reducing glass. However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn’t something you command.” (Ross, 1990: 172)

Rothko’s description of the difference between painting large and small works is very close to my own experience of writing two novels and a number of short stories. It is not possible when writing a short story to have statues of any kind against skies of whatever hue; a sudden apprehension of the whole is not a moment I’ve ever encountered when writing short fiction. The short story, like the small painting, is a form I stand apart from when writing: I am always aware of its dimensions, the relationship of its parts, its ‘materiality’ (which I think of as the rhythms and textures of its language, along
with the diction and tone that constitute voice). The novel, however, like Rothko’s bigger picture, is something I can never command in this manner.

I experienced a difficult transition when attempting to write my first novel, Careless (2006), after previously writing a collection of short fiction, Proudflsh (1997). The novel demanded that I surrender the control I’d exercised in writing short fiction, and learn to tolerate the uncertainty of the larger form. I had to learn, too, how to understand the freedom of the novel, not to be overwhelmed by it, but neither be profligate. I felt this transition from the short story to the novel in a manner that was intensely physical, as though even my muscles must be coached to relax in order to accommodate the larger form. At that time, I studied the mechanism that allows snakes to ingest prey many times larger than themselves. A snake’s jaw is far more complex than the fixed hinge of the human jaw; it functions as an intricate locking and unlocking of a system of tendons, bones, muscles and highly elastic ligaments. If a novel was my intention, I decided, then I had to learn how to adapt myself to it, just as a long evolutionary process had adapted the snake to its specific prey.

For the painters of large canvases then, and the writers of novels, there is necessarily a moment when a shift must be made in the spatial relationship between the artist and the work, a movement from the inside to the outside. I am thinking here of another abstract expressionist, Jackson Pollock, whose idiosyncratic way of working was to stand or crouch above a large canvas he had placed on the floor. Flinging and dripping his paint, Pollock moved like a dancer, a boxer, a smash-and-grab thief, responding to the deep dictates of his body, his intuition manifested in movements born not of sentimental ideas about primitivism, or naive art, but by years of formal discipline and practice, a bone-deep knowledge of aesthetics, materials and technique.

I liken the turning point in the writing process that I call ‘statues against the sky’ to the moment in Pollock’s painting method when he judged it necessary to lift his large canvas from the floor and place it upright. Pollock’s painting wasn’t finished in this moment, and neither is the novel on which I am working, but it’s now possible to apprehend the work as a whole (and as others will see it). From this moment on there are fewer demands placed on the imagination – Virginia Woolf called this the “making-up” power, and she thought of it as the part of writing that placed the writer under the greatest
strain. (217) Craft or technique, which are drawn from another place in a painter or writer’s body, now come to the fore.

Having one’s statues against the sky is a moment of resolution and consolidation. It carries a hopefulness that the creative work will now be fully realized, and so it remains for me a deep anxiety and nagging bewilderment that in the writing of my novel, ’Man of Aran’, this significant moment never arrived. Two novels, of course, do not make me an experienced novelist, and perhaps the disquiet I feel about the absence of this moment might be put down to unrealistic expectations about writing method, simply failing to fully understand that every book demands its own process. But I think not. I believe Virginia Woolf’s use of the image carried the implication that this moment was one she knew well, from the writing of other novels – *The Waves* was her seventh – and that she had come to expect and depend upon it as a sign of a novel’s growing vitality; of the elimination of the obstacles that exist between the writer and her ideas, and hence the ideas and the reader; the possibility of the novel achieving independent life.

My feelings about ’Man of Aran’ writing process, and the failure of the statues to appear, are uncomfortable and discouraging. They are feelings of irresolution, a sense of something unaccomplished, and, worst of all, something squandered. The misgivings I had while writing ’Man of Aran’ were so persistently troubling I tried to settle them by doing the only thing I knew to do with recalcitrant work: I rewrote.

In my first novel, *Careless*, I wrote ten drafts in the hope of animating the central character, a grieving, eight-year-old girl named Pearl. Unlike some writers, I do not believe that the creation of character is a mystical channeling, or an infusion of God’s breath. Authentic character – character of authority and autonomy, one that inspires belief – is built slowly from the divining of personal experience (and imagination born of that experience) and the discretion exercised in choosing from a limitless number of possibilities regarding human nature. The writing of character involves all the slow manoeuvres that are employed in coming to know someone in real life, the same fleeting insights but also the same ego-bound judgements – the difference being that in order for this to happen the writer must divide herself; she must be herself as well as the other she is attempting to know.
For many drafts of Careless, rather than being an embodied character, Pearl existed as a stiff marionette. But I had learned from Philip Roth the importance of not indulging in doubt; not taking the problems of the work personally, but understanding that creative work is the solving of problems; writing is the act of continuing despite uncertainty. In a 1984 interview, Hermione Lee asked Philip Roth the question of how much of a book was in his mind before he started. Roth replied:

What matters most isn’t there at all. I don’t mean the solutions to problems, I mean the problems themselves. You’re looking, as you begin, for what’s going to resist you. You’re looking for trouble. Sometimes in the beginning uncertainty arises not because the writing is difficult, but because it isn’t difficult enough … being in the dark from sentence to sentence is what convinces me to go on. (Roth, 1975: 140)

Every draft of Careless represented for me a further stripping away of affection and falsity, the tough hide of preconceived ideas about childhood, until finally Pearl emerged in her singularity. No amount of rewriting, however, solved the problems I intuited in ‘Man of Aran’; in draft after draft, my statues remained stubbornly elusive.

In his collection of essays, My Unwritten Books, George Steiner discusses seven books he had hoped to write, but did not, and he seeks to explain why: “A book unwritten is more than a void. It accompanies the work one has done like an active shadow, both ironic and sorrowful. It is one of the lives we could have lived, one of the journeys we did not take.” (Steiner, 2008: Introduction)

An active shadow may also attach itself to a novel that is not fully realised. In a sense, that novel, too, remains unwritten. It is my intention in this essay to examine the nature of the disquiet I feel about ‘Man of Aran’s achievement. I anticipate this will at times be a process akin to reverse engineering, and at other times an inquiry into the art of fiction writing and its relationship to self. I will provide an account of the context from which my novel arose, and attempt to draw together some threads of my life in partial explanation of my influences as a writer. Finally, I will present and discuss a work of short fiction in which I have reimagined the primary theme of ‘Man
of Aran’. As well as offering further illumination of the ideas underpinning this thesis, the work is also a study of creative rewriting and metamorphosis in a writing process.

II

‘Man of Aran’ began life as a novel with the working title of ‘The Silk Sisters’. This novel, too, centred around a character’s longing for a child, but the story concerned women. The following outline of the plot might suggest it was a speculative novel that I was planning, but within the contemporary context of assisted reproductive technologies, the circumstances are entirely plausible: there are three Silk sisters, and they are making a baby together. One of the sisters is unable to conceive, so her two sisters will help her; one sister will donate her eggs, and the other sister will carry the child in her womb.

I had concocted the plot of ‘The Silk Sisters’ so that I might write obliquely about a decade of my life in which I was experiencing every moment as one of lack – I, too, wanted a child, and I was struggling to envision the future I would make for myself if I wasn’t to become a mother. At the same time, I was increasingly troubled by the commercialisation of reproductive technologies, and the ways in which a supply and demand model for the production of children had permitted science to move far beyond society’s capacity to establish supporting ethical structures for its rapid developments.

Assisted reproductive technologies leave many questions unaddressed. What are the rights of children conceived by its methods? Do reproductive technologies mean a new freedom for women, a greater range of choice and possibility in their lives, or are the desires of women simply being manipulated for commercial gain? And, furthermore, what of the circumstances of international surrogacy – how does the desire for a child explain the exploitation of some of the world’s poorest and most powerless women? Then there is the confounding question of biological imperatives. The popular argument in support of reproductive technologies is that the biological urge to have a child is so powerful – a sacred desire, an unassailable human right – that any
means justifies an end when that end is new life: new life is irrefutable. This
argument about the supremacy of biology breaks down, however, when the
methods of reproductive technology are examined. On that account, it seems
biology can easily be overcome by human will (and money). Men do not feel
bound or obligated to the human products of their donated sperm. Women
express little concern in giving to another person a child they have been paid
to gestate in their own bodies. The argument for reproductive technologies
privileges an utmost respect for human attachment and yearning – this
yearning must be satisfied at any cost – yet when it comes to the business
side of things, all human attachment and yearning are readily denied.

I had not planned to make money a factor in the Silk sisters’ babymaking
– although there were profound costs to the bodies of the donating and ges-
tating sisters – but through the prism of familial relationships, I hoped the
narrative’s premise would allow me to explore the moral complexities of re-
productive science while never diminishing the importance of what I also
knew to be true, that for some people the prospect of childlessness is an exis-
tential and spiritual crisis.

I worked for months on ‘The Silk Sisters’, but with increasing frustration. I
found I shared an intimacy with the female characters that was stifling. In
particular, I knew the infertile sister too well because her pain was like mine,
and it troubled and bored me to think that in some ways I was reinforcing
the cultural prescription that fertility, reproduction and parenting are more
‘naturally’ a female realm. Increasingly, it was a minor male character that I
found myself focusing on in ‘The Silk Sisters’ – the man who was the partner
of the infertile sister, and who would be the biological father of the child the
sisters were creating. It was his silence that drew my interest, his lack of
agency; the female-centred narrative I was writing was somehow refusing
me any knowledge of him. I didn’t know how he felt about childlessness, or
fatherhood. I didn’t know if the circumstances of his becoming a parent
seemed bizarre to him, or if he had normalised the circumstances – as repro-
ductive technologies encourage us to do – and he had no wish to dwell on
ethical questions, or consider the possible moral consequences further down
the line.
I tried not to view the difficulty of knowing this male character as my own failure. My inability to exercise negative capability, if you will, or a lack of empathetic imagination. I tried, instead, to think about masculine silence in broader terms; the cultural inscription of silence in men’s lives, the particular prohibitions to expression that isolate men from others, and perhaps even from themselves. In her unpublished notebooks, Gertrude Stein claims that beginning a writing project anew is ‘creative thinking’ (Walker, 1990: 203). “Real thinking,” Stein writes, “is conceptions aiming and aiming again always getting fuller, that is the difference between creative thinking and theorising.” Stein is perhaps being unimaginative about theorists in this statement, but I recognise what she’s saying about the creative process being a mutable one. There is a need for a writer to respect this mutability, and to be willing to set aside previous designs in order to respond to the changing ideas and pressures of the work. I decided I would no longer write about three sisters tackling a problem of infertility with scientific hard-headedness, but instead explore the life of a single man who lived in directionless anguish about not being a father.

I judged it a bolder, riskier, fresher idea to give the problem of childlessness to a male character. I viewed it, too, as an exercise in gender equality, an opportunity to relax some notions about the emotions and behaviours that are appropriate to masculine and feminine spheres – if the reproductive desire of a man could be acknowledged, so might another woman’s desire to remain childless. In my own life, I knew men who wanted children, but were shy to speak of it. I knew others who felt their identity as men had been more fully formed by becoming fathers. But it seemed there was a particular silence in the public discourse about fertility and parenting, as though it was thought emasculating for men to speak of their own experience and join in any conversation of this kind.

It was while I was thinking about the change of direction in my novel, and beginning to imagine its male protagonist, that my research led me to a series of portraits by the contemporary American photographer, Suzanne Opton. (Opton, 2009) The series, titled Soldier, is a study of American men and women recently returned from military service in Iraq and Afghanistan. In these portraits, Opton wanted to apprehend the inner lives of these soldiers, to
capture a moment of their unguarded selves, but she sensed she would not be able to net the fugitive moment she was seeking if her subjects were conventionally posed. Portraiture’s conventional posture is that of the human figure sitting or standing upright, most commonly with the head and torso on view. Opton knew that in this pose her subjects would stiffen before the camera – the conventional pose could only bring out the conventional soldier, a body trained for discipline and fighting, a self trained for subjugation and restraint. In the conventional pose, the soldier would offer a rigid musculature to the lens, and in the performance of being a professional soldier their inner world would be inaccessible.

Opton’s strategy for subverting the ‘public’ image of the soldier, and drawing out the individuality of their private natures and experience, was as simple as subverting the conventional posture of the portrait: Opton asked her subject to sit on a chair, put his or her head down on a table, and face sideways to the camera.

The photographs are all taken in close-up, and they result in an intimate study of the soldier’s head and neck. There is nothing in the image to suggest that the subject belongs to the military, or to any public realm at all – the view of the subject is most akin to the view one might have when gazing at someone lying beside them, both heads rested on pillows. The faces of Opton’s soldiers are all different – there is shock in some of them, numbness, exhaustion, trauma, a sense of loss – but whatever their expression, the sense hovering over the photographs is that these are the young and vulnerable selves the soldiers lie down with when they go to sleep at night.

I had written male characters before ‘Man of Aran’. In my novel, Careless, I had created the character of a young artist, Adam Logan, who achieved celebrity with a sculptural work that exploited the death of a young woman. In that novel, I had tried to examine Adam’s narcissism as a form of perverted innocence, to write him as someone unable to develop himself by the lessons of life’s experience, condemned to a callowness that was a prison for himself and a danger to others.

But Careless was not solely about Adam Logan, he was but one of a small cast of major characters. The metamorphosis of ‘The Silk Sisters’ meant that I would now be placing a man at the centre of my novel, and the point of view
would allow a reader access to the interior life of no one but him. I wanted to write this man – David Quinn – as someone whose silence about his childlessness had weakened him and made him susceptible to the flights of his own mind; a man emotionally exposed and alone.

At this time, I reread several novels I admired by women writers, narratives that examined men in psychological crisis and breakdown: *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* by Henry Handel Richardson (1930), Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* (1920), and *Brokeback Mountain* by Annie Proulx (1997). All of these are studies of men trapped by their own temperaments or by the social and moral dictates of the societies in which they live, but the exceptional nature of their art and the singular delineation of their worlds offered me only the inspiration of their achievements, and could not help me to solve the technical problems posed by the writing of David Quinn. Above all, it was Suzanne Opton’s photographs that continued to be suggestive. Opton had pierced the public armour of her subject and allowed a glimpse of the private self simply by changing the subject’s pose, collapsing the distance between the subject and the viewer simply by moving the camera closer. I wondered how I might learn from her. Were there choices I could make as a writer, analogous to her own, that would help me create a penetrating view of the man at the centre of my narrative, one that would allow a reader greater access to his affective world?

To begin, I decided to place the worldly David Quinn, a journalist, a man engaged by contemporary life – “He was a boy, then he was a boy reporter, and now it seems he is a man who chastises the world.” (4) – in a setting, like Upton’s soldiers, in which he might be psychologically exposed:

It’s a day of crystalline light, he knows that much, a light that fills him with hope again, but he doesn’t have a clue how to describe anything else he sees as he walks. The island never stops reminding him just how much he doesn’t understand about the natural world. This hadn’t been a problem when he lived in cities, when society in one form of another was his interest, but he can’t grasp the island of Inishmore; he feels like a flea trying to comprehend the elephant on whose back it lives … making a home for himself here is a different thing altogether: he feels uncomfortable, subtly undermined. (25)

I had first visited the Irish island of Inishmore in 2000. Inishmore, thirty kilometres square and with a population of less than a thousand, is the larg-
est of the three islands that make up the remote Aran Islands, in the Atlantic Ocean off the west coast of Ireland. Inishmore is uniquely marked by some of Ireland’s oldest archaeological remains; it is an austere stone landscape that everywhere displays evidence of the extraordinary human labour needed to survive in one of the wildest and least hospitable environments on earth. Although the island is an especially beautiful, commanding, and unsettling place, as I worked on 'Man of Aran', it was the sense of Inishmore’s fragility that kept coming back to me, giving me the setting for my protagonist that would allow the access I was seeking to his inner world.

The Aran Islands are composed of karst limestone, and in time the fissuring and dissolution of this ancient stone, its inexorable erosion, will lead to the islands’ extinction: “one day there will be nothing but reef to remember them by.” (34) “Limestone’s solubility,” writes Tim Robinson in Stones of Aran, “makes it a uniquely tender and memorious ground. Every shower sends rivulets wandering across its surface, deepening the ways of their predecessors and gradually engraving their initial caprices as law into the stone.” (Robinson, 1986: xii)

It is erasure, too, of an even more absolute kind, that David Quinn fears if he is unable to change the circumstances of his life:

David has to breathe against the feeling that has come over him. It’s more than the contemplation of his own death. It’s knowing that, if the future doesn’t yield, if children never come, there will be not one part of him left clinging to this old earth. He will not have given this to anyone. It’s black and icy, this feeling of extinction. It’s filled with shock and panic. It’s akin to what he’d feel if the door of the plane suddenly flew open; if suddenly he found himself sucked into the cold, uncaring sea. (34)

However, in placing my main character on the eroding island of Inishmore, I was hoping to do more than simply furnish the narrative with a serviceable metaphor for the wearing away of David Quinn’s body and emotions. I wanted the mood of the novel to be a melancholic one, and in my choice of setting I intended to suggest the interpenetrability of the human and natural worlds: it is unlikely that the natural world can survive in the ways people now recognise, that we will not learn quickly enough about our destructive behaviours to prevent widespread deterioration and loss. On the other hand, a recognition of one’s own deterioration and loss – an acceptance

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of one’s vulnerability, a reappraisal of the myth of human mastery – can lead to a deeper reverence for all things, including nature, and in that reverence may lie some hope.

The harsh, remote nature of Inishmore served my novel in other ways too, that is, in the ways of melodrama. The elements of the narrative – a young woman’s accident and coma, an anguished mother, a hothoused love affair – are conventional ones, chosen to convey a theme which, in the context of contemporary realist fiction, is a relatively unconventional one, the existential crisis of a man whose childlessness leaves him feeling unsituated in the world: “the people of the past would pity him as much as he does them – a soft, modern man on an old, hard island, without family or faith to help him make sense of anything.” (280)

In writing a conventional love story to contain an unconventional theme – how rare the term ‘childless man’, yet how common ‘childless woman’ – I am employing a similar strategy to that of the Polish novelist, Witold Gombrowicz, who once said of his work: “Smuggling the most up-to-the-minute contraband in antiquated charabancs – that’s what I like doing.” (Gombrowicz, 1953: 20)

I had calculated that the narrative of a love affair would allow me to explore the nature of desire and its transformation into obsession, the distortions an obsession places upon reality, and the delusions that grow from the distortions. David Quinn’s loneliness places too much weight upon others; however subtly, he demands that others mould themselves to his dreams. I had hoped to convey the pain of childlessness when one wishes to be a parent, while at the same time suggesting that a wish for oneself, when held too tightly, may also deform a life. Although there is no direct reference to the subject in ‘Man of Aran’, in this respect I was once more thinking about the more extreme measures of reproductive technology; the absolute nature of the conviction about one’s ‘right’ to be a parent that compels some to enter the murky, morally dubious realm of international babymaking; a world in which the power differential between parties is denied by the homogenising language of ‘business arrangements’.

In reflecting upon ‘Man of Aran’, and in attempting to examine my unease about the realisation of my aims, it seems necessary to ask two questions
about the writing of David Quinn’s desire to be a father. The first question concerns characterisation. David Quinn does not change a great deal as a character through the course of the novel, and this now suggests to me a possible weakness in the design of the narrative. David enters the novel with his unspoken desire, and he exits (with)holding the same desire, one still unknown to anyone but himself. He experiences loss in the narrative, and an increased sense of his own vulnerability, but events happen to him, he tends toward stasis, to passivity. Would ‘Man of Aran’ have been a more dynamic novel if David had come to an awareness of wanting to be a father as the novel’s events progressed? At the moment, he arrives at that realisation in the form of an eve-of-the-new-millennium epiphany, and I must question the psychological veracity of this. Real life, in fact, delivers far fewer epiphanies than literary realism would suggest; in life, an ‘epiphany’ is more usually a final, clarifying moment in a long series of moments, the end point of a long process of change. I ask myself if I might have more truthfully represented this by writing David Quinn as a man forced by circumstances into the role of guardian, and who then discovers a part of himself that responds to this responsibility, a change in himself that uncovers his readiness to be a father. Perhaps if I had written David as a man becoming someone who wishes to have a child, I might have achieved a more original pathos for the novel, as well as a more acute analysis of the subject of silence and masculinity.

The second question I must ask is whether the flaws in the narrative stem from its element of autobiography. Iris Murdoch argues that, in good writing, “there is a conception of truth”:

(There is) a lack of illusion, an ability to overcome selfish obsessions, which goes with good art, and the artist has got to have that particular sort of moral stamina. Good art whatever its style, has qualities of hardness, firmness, realism, clarity, detachment, justice, truth. It is the work of a free, unfettered, uncorrupted imagination. Whereas bad art is the soft, messy self-indulgent work of an enslaved fantasy ... I’d want to make a distinction between fantasy and imagination ... a distinction between the expression of immediate selfish feelings and the elimination of yourself in a work of art ... What is important is an ability to have an image of perfection and to expel fantasy and the sort of lesser, egoistic cravings and the kind of imagery and immediate expressions that might go with them, and to be prepared to think and to wait. (Murdoch, 1990: digital text)
‘Write what you know’ might be sound advice for a beginning writer, but writing from a place of unresolved grief is another act altogether, and ill-advised. It seems clear to me now that I was too enmeshed with David’s desire to write ‘Man of Aran’ in the way that I did; David’s longing was too fused with my own. One of the characteristics of grief, at least as I was experiencing it at the time, is a haemorrhaging of meaning, and in the absence of meaning there is fear. In an attempt to staunch the loss of meaning that childlessness was causing me, and in an effort to control my fear, I turned to the creation of meaning and the fortifying discipline that I had always found in writing. I did not understand that, at the time, I lacked the vital clarity and detachment of which Iris Murdoch speaks. To want a child badly is not a selfish obsession, but it is an obsession with the self, and the hardness, firmness, realism that Murdoch identifies as being essential to good art – qualities that I, too, fiercely believe in – are elusive to a writer obsessed. At the time of writing ‘Man of Aran’ I did not have ‘a free, unfettered, uncorrupted imagination.’ If I had possessed such an imagination I might have seen the need for greater change in David’s character. I might have been more honest, too, about another of the novel’s problems: a man’s desire to be a father is, in fact, quite unlike a woman’s desire to be a mother. It is not circumscribed by age and fertility, and my unwillingness to address this difference weakens the novel, clouds it in an untruth. The inequality of the years allowed to men and women’s mating and reproduction is felt by many women as a profound injustice, and in ‘Man of Aran’ s failure to acknowledge this, I feel answerable to Murdoch’s charge of writing an “enslaved fantasy”.

In writing my novel, I waited for the moment of imaginative consolidation, the moment Virginia Woolf had so precisely defined, when my statues would be raised against the sky. This moment would signal the novel’s independent life; it would show me the clear outlines of the artifact I was making. It wasn’t possible to know it at the time, but I gave myself in the wrong way to this novel, and that moment would never arrive. My closeness to the affective world of ‘Man of Aran’, the collapse of a necessary authorial distance, had tethered those statues to the ground.
III

Early in ‘Man of Aran’ I write briefly about some of the animals of Inishmore. It is a foreshadowing of a narrative strand that I will later elaborate, and it also provides a moment of exposition about David Quinn’s past:

The island’s red and gold roosters strut for the tourists, and the horses allow themselves to be petted. The goats turn away from people and gaze into the far-off goat realm, but it’s the cattle that stare back at the humans, their forelegs tucked sweetly beneath them, their quiet, philosophical souls rooted in their heavy bodies. The cows return the human gaze in a way that makes people feel that it is they who are the strange creatures ... Once, when he was young and learning his craft on the Agricultural Times, he might have been able to name this breed of cattle, but now all he knows is that their skins are thought to look good lying beneath an Eames walnut ottoman and recliner lounge. (27)

Our own flesh and blood: this is a common way that we speak about the human family. Knowing he will soon be parted from his sister and her children, David Quinn reads to his young nephew at night:

His nephew’s head rests against his chest, and David looks down at his dark eyelashes and perfect cheek crusted with dried toothpaste and apple. This, too, will end – reading to Ned beneath the slow-moving mobile of the planets. And then what will he do with the part of himself that he brings to this lamp-light? Where else will the world allow him to be so tender? (224)

David desires his own flesh and blood, but in ‘Man of Aran’ another realm of flesh and blood lives alongside the human, consecrated one:

Freshly dead turkeys came from behind the curtain and were hurried over to the contestants. Expert neck-wringers must have been working backstage because, for the sake of delicacy, the birds still had their heads. The contestants all had their first bird and the clock was readied. But first Jeremy had a few important words to say about the turkeys’ integrity ... a measure of how much flesh was torn when its feathers were plucked, how much blood was lost. (101)
The disjunction between the two previous passages represents the profound disjunction that exists between human lives and the lives of the animals whose flesh and blood we simply call meat. The deaths of the animals in the second passage do not even take place in order to produce food, they are in the service of a grotesque ‘entertainment’, part of a marketing event for a new meat ‘product’. There is a denial of the animal here, an exploitation of flesh and blood that demands the forgetting of the animal, that places the animal outside the sphere of moral concern, and contrasts radically with the pathos afforded to the story of human flesh and blood – a story of love and belonging, the reverence of birth and death.

In his essay, ‘The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)’, Jacques Derrida discusses the ‘philosophical problematic of the animal’:

Thus the question will not be to know whether animals ... can speak or reason thanks to that capacity or that attribute implied in the logos, the can-have (pouvoir-avoir) of the logos, the aptitude for the logos (and logocentrism is first of all a thesis regarding the animal, the animal deprived of the logos, deprived of the *can-have-the-logos*: this is the thesis, position, or presupposition maintained from Aristotle to Heidegger, from Descartes to Kant, Levinas and Lacan). The *first* and *decisive* question will rather be to know whether animals *can suffer*. ‘Can they suffer?’ asks Bentham simply yet so profoundly. (Derrida, 2002: 396)

‘Man of Aran’s inclusive view of flesh and blood suggests that the boundaries between man and animal are more porous than we like to think, and that a recognition of the suffering of animals at the hands of man is a necessary part of the project of being a fully actualised human being. There are many suffering animals I might have written about in the novel: the poaching of elephants for their ivory, the killing of gorillas for meat, the destruction of the habitats of migratory birds, or the rhinoceros’s extinction. I wanted, however, to write about animals not famed for their nobility or for the tragedy of their narratives, animals that live very near to us, and play a significant part in our food culture – a culture that is both functional and highly symbolic – but whose lives are rendered invisible. I wanted to write about the flesh and blood of animals that exist within our own realm of responsibility – and, significantly, the lives of these particular animals was something that I knew about.
I had just turned twenty when I left Perth, Western Australia, to settle in the city of London. I had little work experience, and only an undergraduate arts degree with a particular interest in satirical American fiction of the post-war period, and the poetry of Sylvia Plath – an odd qualification for the job I found as a reporter for a trade newspaper.

Established in 1888, the ‘Meat Trades Journal’ represented the British meat industry, and it had a weekly circulation of over one hundred thousand. The meat industry, I was soon to discover, was both an ancient and harshly contemporary one. I often found myself involved, for example, in the highly ritualised activities of the Worshipful Company of Butchers, a livery company awarded the Royal Charter of Incorporation by King James 1 in 1605 (records of a butchers’ organisation in London date back to 975). These activities included the annual parade and delivery, by elaborately costumed liverymen, of a boar’s head on a silver platter, to the Lord Mayor at Mansion House – this act being symbolic of payment for rent on land given to the Company in 1343. There were also regular prayer services for the Company, with a member of the royal family always in attendance, at the church of St Bartholomew-the-Great, London’s oldest surviving church, dated 1123. At the same time that I was witnessing these events, I was also travelling widely throughout the United Kingdom, reporting on a highly-specialised agribusiness that bore little relationship to its arcane past – factory farms and slaughterhouses existed on a vast, industrial scale, and the animals, genetically-engineered and homogenised to maximise profit, scarcely resembled their ancient ancestors.

For a young woman from the colonies, eager to learn about British history and culture, it was often a bizarrely rich and interesting job, but it was a confronting one when it came to encountering the meat industry in the present day: I was a regular witness to the ruthless commodification of animals, and thus, I sometimes felt, a collaborator. I did not strictly object to the eating of meat on ethical grounds, but the methods by which flesh and blood creatures were turned into consumable product were undeniably pitiless and caused animals to suffer. At the same time, while these industrial processes were largely hidden from consumers – an estrangement from the lives of meat animals being a tacit agreement between food producers and consum-
ers – the processes were also not without implications for human health and the environment.

My time at the ‘Meat Trades Journal’ proved to be a profound one for me; the work was an ongoing encounter with death, abjection, human calculation, cruelty, and the complex psychology and culture of food, and it deepened my sensibilities. My working life was marked by a constant movement between abjection and sympathy, as well as the inevitable displacing of horror and responsibility, here, there, and everywhere. To watch living creatures become meat products – the discarding of blood, faeces, feathers, viscera, and the portioning of flesh – is to experience, in the words of Julia Kristeva, that which “cannot be assimilated”:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable … Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself. (Kristeva, 1982: 1)

Then there were the times, no less a challenge to being, when the experience of observing animals was of a different order. One spring day, for example, I visited a pig farm in Somerset. It was the kind of small manufacturing business that was committed to the welfare of its animals, and existed precariously alongside factory farms in which pigs were isolated from their herd, imprisoned, and fed antibiotics and hormones to prevent the torture of their conditions from killing them. The Somerset farm raised their pigs using traditional husbandry methods; the animals were housed in large outdoor shelters that allowed them to live close to their porcine natures. On the day of my visit, I stood at the railing of the animal enclosure and watched with curiosity as a large, rudely healthy pig detached herself from her piglets and waddled her way towards me. When the pig reached the railing she lifted her mighty body on her hind legs, rested her front feet on the railing and looked at me. It was a long, scrutinising look. The animal regarded me with intelligence; she apprehended me, she took me in. I was wearing a pair of high heeled shoes that day (dressed for the fancy lunch that was always part of a farm visit – the fancy pork lunch), and the pig stood tall before me on her pointed trotters. As I contemplated our peculiar sameness a moment of clari-
ty overwhelmed me. I experienced it as a kind of inner, visceral collapse, a dissolving of the boundaries between myself and the animal: the pig and I were one parcel of flesh, nerves, instinct and sensation. Me: female, humanly absurd and vulnerable in my high heels. The pig: no less female, and an inquiring, feeling creature whose life was doomed. I felt everything that we shared and I was sorry for the way of things, and deeply ashamed.

In my reporting work, I also regularly visited the Smithfield Markets in Farringdon, a grand Victorian structure of glass and ironwork where London’s meat is traded. Smithfield had been established as the city’s livestock market in the tenth century, but it was also for centuries the site of bloody public executions of heretics and dissidents. Walking Smithfield’s ancient cobblestones, it was impossible not to imagine a consanguinity in this, and a pity for the flesh and blood of every living creature whose death was thought to be necessary for the smooth workings of society.

For various reasons I did not want to leave my job at the ‘Meat Trades Journal’. Instead, although it was not at first a fully conscious response, I found myself dealing with the ethical dilemmas I faced, the regular assault of the abject, and the demoralising effects of my ineffectual sympathies, by looking more closely at areas of medical history, art and literature, in which the bodies of animals and humans were in close relationship.

In encountering the death and dismemberment of animals, I felt it necessary to learn more about the history of the Western study of human anatomy, and the changes in ideas of embodiment that, over time, had been the outcome of new knowledge. In his compelling account of dissection and the human body in Renaissance culture, Jonathan Sawday argues that anatomisation “takes place so that, in lieu of a formerly complete ‘body’, a new ‘body’ of knowledge and understanding can be created”:

As the physical body is fragmented, so the body of understanding is held to be shaped and formed. In medicine, too, anatomisation takes place in order that the integrity and health of other bodies can be preserved. The anatomist, then, is the person who has reduced one body in order to understand its morphology, and thus to preserve morphology at a later date, in other bodies, elsewhere. (Sawday, 1995: 2)
Imaginatively, in the violence of the dissective culture of the Renaissance, I found a dark counterpart to the animal slaughter I regularly witnessed. In England, for example, the ‘Murder Act’ of 1752 allowed for “penal dissection”, that is, “the codification by statute of a set of rules under which the corpse (of a criminal) could be dismembered after death for the utilitarian investigation of the body’s internal structure.” (54)

Beginning in the Renaissance, and tied also to anatomical practices, it was possible to trace a history of the representation of the animal carcass in European art. The trail of influence began most notably with Rembrandt’s 1655 painting, Slaughtered Ox:

Rembrandt depicted the gibbeted corpse of Elsje Christiaens, hanging from the scaffold, having been executed in May 1664 for murder – the first woman to be executed in Holland for twenty years … this drawing of a dead woman is of a piece with Rembrandt’s other earlier, treatments of dead organisms: the Child with Dead Peacocks, the Self-Portrait with Dead Bittern (1639), a drawing of butchers working on a carcass of a pig, and the extraordinary, horrific Slaughtered Ox … an essay in exhausted violence, or the after-effects of violence. (148)

In the first half of the twentieth century, Rembrandt’s work was referenced by Soutine in his famous series of paintings, Carcass of Beef. Of the origins of this work, Soutine is reported to have said:

Once I saw the village butcher slice the neck of a bird and drain the blood out of it. I wanted to cry out, but his joyful expression caught the sound in my throat … This cry, I always feel it there … When I painted the beef carcass it was still this cry that I wanted to liberate. I have still not succeeded. (Forge, 1965: 202)

In the 1950s, Francis Bacon combined Crucifixion imagery with details from the butcher’s shop in his paintings, and the examination of the animal carcass reached its post-modern apotheosis in Damien Hirst’s 1993 sculptural work, Mother and Child (Divided). “Cutting up cows and sheep,” said Hirst, “is like creating emotions scientifically … the work should attract and repel you at the same time.” (Morgan, 1996: 27)

The animal carcass is a representation of all possibility at an end; flesh and blood stilled, organic life disassembled, death. Although these artists
were all working within particular historical moments possessing their own imperatives, the studies of animal carcasses serve as symbols of violence and persecution (it seems impossible to view Soutine’s raw and tortured carcass paintings without recalling his victimisation as a Jew), and as inquiries into time, mortality, and the materiality of the human body. They are the artists’ struggle to represent the realities of corporeal experience, of the body’s assailability, deterioration and pain: “Physical pain,” writes Elaine Scarry, “has no voice.” (Scarry, 1987: 3)

My work in the meat industry made me a regular witness to death on an industrial scale, and it affected me deeply. Meat production is a meticulously planned and systematised operation of human power, a (dis)assembly line of killing that is aligned to only one principle, that the end (profit) justifies all means. As my reporting led me through Britain’s factory farms, processing plants and slaughterhouses, I became especially interested in the people who worked in these places. The speed and output of each worker was closely monitored, although their tasks varied greatly – workers close to the killing of the animals suffered from its dehumanising effects, while further down the production line, it was more likely to be repetitive strain injuries and soul-crushing tedium that were the workers’ burden. One such task I recall, performed by women, was the evisceration of chickens in a poultry processing plant: the chicken carcasses entered the evisceration room hanging from an overhead system of mechanised rail; de-feathered and clipped of their heads and feet, the carcasses were blue-yellow in colour. The room was tiled in white, and on a platform several feet above the ground stood the row of workers. They were dressed in starched white coveralls, wellington boots and hairnets, but they all wore glamorous make-up; bright lips, flashing eyelids. As the chicken carcasses chugged steadily by on the rail above them, the women extended their arms above their heads, raised themselves on tiptoe, tilted their heads to one side to avoid the oncoming rush of blood, and in one sure movement wrenched the intestines from the carcasses. “There are excellent management/staff relations in this factory,” said the public relations man who was conducting me on the tour of the factory. “The management has installed a first-rate sound system and the workers bring their own mu-
sic.” It was Motown they were playing that day: Diana Ross and the Supremes.

As a means of efficiency, every stage of meat processing is deliberately compartmentalised, from the delivery of live animals to the slaughterhouse, to the plastic packaging of meat portions or products, the workers are confined to one narrow, repetitive task, and although I could not know the private thoughts of these workers, it seemed it was also this compartmentalisation, this quarantining, that made their difficult work possible. Even the killing was divided into separate operations – different people were tasked with stunning, cutting, sticking, bleeding out – with the exact moment of an animal’s death uncertain, responsibility for that death could not be said to belong precisely to anyone.

It is this displacement or deferral of individual responsibility that Marguerite Duras writes about in her essay, ‘The Cutter-off of Water’:

It happened on a summer’s day in a village in eastern France, perhaps three or four years ago, in the afternoon. A man from the water board came to cut off the water in the house of some people who were slightly special, slightly different from most. Backward, you might say. The local authorities let them live in a disused railway station. The high-speed train now ran through that part of the country. (Duras, 1990: 90)

Duras tells us that the family was very poor and couldn’t pay their gas and electricity or water bills:

And one day a man came to cut the water off. He saw the woman, who didn’t say anything. The husband wasn’t there. Just the rather backward wife, the child of four and the baby of eighteen months. The man looked just like other men. I named him the Cutter-off of Water. He realized it was the middle of summer. He knew, because he was experiencing it too, that it was a very hot summer. He saw the eighteen-month-old baby. But he’d been told to cut off the water, so that’s what he did. He did his job and cut the water off. And left the woman without any water to bath the children; without any water to give them to drink. (90)

Later that day “the woman and her husband took the two children and went and lay down on the rails of the high-speed train that ran past the disused station.” Everyone in the family was killed. “The man from the water
board said he went and cut off the water. He didn’t say he’d seen the child, that the child was there with its mother. He said she didn’t argue, didn’t ask him not to cut the water off.” (91)

In this essay, Duras is concerned with the bloodless workings of bureaucracy; an individual’s lack of moral imagination within such a bureaucracy, and the abnegation of responsibility afforded to the individual by bureaucratic operations. The essay is Duras’s response to a sketchy newspaper report, but I see it as being informed by her experience as a member of the French Resistance during the Second World War, and as a comment upon the personal responsibility of individuals whose work had been necessary to the mass-killings of the Third Reich. “Monsters exist,” writes Primo Levi, “but they are too few in number to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are the common men, the functionaries ready to believe and to act without asking questions.” (Levi, 1993: 179)

I am not intending here to draw a parallel between workers on a poultry production line, and the individuals who facilitated the vast systems of administration and engineering that made the Holocaust possible. Neither do I view the planned slaughter of animals as being of the same order as the planned slaughter of human beings, but I acknowledge those who might believe otherwise, and I remain troubled by the forgetting of animals and their suffering that is part of food production today. Instead, I am attempting to explain how, as a young woman, my work in the meat industry led me to contemplate the organisation of mass slaughter – for want of a better term, the ‘business’ of persecution, the protocols and procedures that must be implemented when a group of people decides against the humanity of others, and acts to eradicate them. To put it more simply, I am attempting to illustrate the ways in which my work in this industry broke down previously held ideas about the distinctions between man and animal, and arranged them anew in my mind in a mirroring relationship, vastly complicating and expanding all meanings of ‘flesh and blood’.

Another person might not have tolerated the work I was asked to perform at the ‘Meat Trades Journal’. Someone with a different set of ethics perhaps, or a different prioritisation of values; someone with a lower threshold for visceral horror, but I felt compelled to remain in this work for the two years that I did principally because of my discomfort, because of the many
challenging and contradictory feelings I had about being witness to a world that was largely invisible to others, and because, although I was hardly daring to think it at the time, I was someone who would become a writer, and learning mattered more to me than anything.

In ‘Man of Aran’, I give some of my experiences in Britain’s meat industry to David Quinn, but as a character he does not share my response to these experiences. He is able to remain substantiated in his own body, his physical integrity unthreatened. He is not wholly unsympathetic to the plight of animals, but his sympathy does not overturn the way he perceives the world’s hierarchies:

Raven thought that agriculture was an animal holocaust, but he didn’t see it that way. He couldn’t feel it that way. For him, the real deal was people. After meeting Rabbi Glick, he felt more about animal liberationists’ use of the word ‘holocaust’ than he would about the next hundred chickens he saw die. (92)

It is only decades later, when David is undone by his longing to be a father, that he begins to feel the animal in himself, to acknowledge the biological drive that he shares with other creatures:

Nothing has prepared him for the place in which he finds himself. No man took him aside, gave him the tip-off. No one warned that fathering was an ancient force that might one day want him for its expression. And that when it wanted him, it would simply take him in its teeth, like a lion takes a kitten. (232)

There are many reasons why a man or woman might wish for a child. As an expression of love or faith; a desire to experience creation, an abiding curiosity about an elemental mystery. Or as an act of definition perhaps, of identity, as a way out of solipsism and an over-concern for one’s self; for the expansion of one’s world, for change, for challenge, for learning; to give meaning to existence, shape to the void, to be less alone; to meet expectations, to leave one’s mark, to fit in. For vanity, for acquisition, for the belief in the right to have everything. These are all social, spiritual, and existential reasons for wanting to be a parent. They are powerful reasons, but none of them fully account for the overriding force of the desire to reproduce without a recognition of the biological motor that drives them – the physiological
compulsions of being a human animal. David Quinn is brought to a new appreciation of the vulnerability of his body by the unrelenting nature of his yearning, and by the physical pain that strikes him:

He lies on his back and looks up at the circle of night sky. He tries to draw a line around the pain, annex the warring territory. He closes his eyes and feels where the very last nerve is implicated. The pain is on the right side of his body only, which makes it worse since the feeling of having no pain stretches like paradise alongside it. In the darkness, he draws a line that extends down his spine, divides his anus, outlines his thighbone and returns to finish at a sharp point below his shoulder blade. But the moment he finishes the map, the pain moves, as though pain were mercury, the very nature of it evasive … He tries to float beyond everything. He tries to become nothing but a man in a bed on an island in the vast Atlantic, but the pain won’t allow him to be insignificant. (78)

“English,” writes Virginia Woolf, “which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear has no words for the shiver or the headache … let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry.” (Woolf, 1967: 194)

Why is this so? Why does pain resist language in this way, isolating the sufferer from the understanding of others, and at the same time imprisoning him within wordless experience? David Quinn finds it “impossible to imagine not being in pain. It’s useless trying to confine the pain … and it only hurts more when he tries to describe it.” (80)

In The Body in Pain, Elaine Scarry suggests that pain’s “shattering of language … may be partially apprehended by noticing the exceptional character of pain when compared to all our other interior states”:

Contemporary philosophers have habituated us to the recognition that our interior states of consciousness are regularly accompanied by objects in the external world, that we do not simply “have feelings” but have feelings for somebody or something, that love is love of \( x \), fear is fear of \( y \), ambivalence is ambivalence about \( z \). If one were to move through all the emotional, perceptual, and somatic states that take an object – hatred for, seeing of, being hungry for – the list would become a very long one and, though it would alternate between states we are thankful for and those we dislike, it would be throughout its entirety a consistent affirmation of the human being’s capacity to move
out beyond the boundaries of his or her own body into the external, sharable world. This list and its implicit affirmation would, however, be suddenly interrupted when, moving through the human interior, one at last reached physical pain, for physical pain – unlike any other state of consciousness – has no referential content. It is not of or for anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language. (Scarry, 1985: 5)

Scarry is persuasive in her argument, but in the absence of an external referent the mind of a person in pain must surely reach for something, and it is yet another aspect of pain’s entrapment that the ‘objects’ the mind reaches for, and finds, are those aspects of imagination and memory that echo, recall, or envision related suffering. Unable to move from his bed “every part of (David Quinn) is involved in the pain now … he tries not to think, but his mind fills with images of blood and chains, hooks and knives, as though pain is showing him its imagination, or its unconscious.”(94) During David’s interlude of pain he both dreams about and recollects his time as an agricultural reporter, in particular, his experiences in the meat industry: “It’s no surprise to him that … pain’s power extended to dragging the sufferings of flesh through his sleep.”(94) Pain magnetises his mind, drawing to it thoughts about animals and the reality of their flesh and blood that correspond to his own suffering. The channels of David’s sympathy open during this time of pain, and later, with the recognition of his aging and the need to accept that he will never again be an unselfconscious resident of his own body. He is saddened, too, by the loss of love, the loss of possibility, until he arrives at a moment, late in the novel, when he reappraises the nature of his existence, and the place he had formerly assigned himself in the ‘natural’ order of things:

Tonight he is a man lost. He sorrows for his mate, his child. He seeks warm shelter. Simple things. Creature instincts. He has witnessed the lives and deaths of many animals, and tonight he understands he is one of them. So where would he tell them to place the hooks? How would he suspend himself above this crowd of watching strangers? He recalls the heavy animal carcasses hauled on the shoulders of the porters at London’s Smithfield Markets, the blood of human executions having long ago soaked the ground on which they walked. Make me look like a side of meat, is that what he’d say? Hook me by the
balls and throat. Let me hang. Let me bleed. Let me say what I have learnt: the world’s flesh is borderless. (294)

IV

Literary influence isn’t easy to measure. A writer’s work may imprint itself on the mind of another writer as emphatically as a seal imprints wax, but creativity is a transformative act, and signs of influence may easily dissolve in an individual’s creative method. It is not difficult for me, however, to be clear about the two works of Australian literature whose ideas and accomplishment provided me with important context for writing ‘Man of Aran’, encouraging my attempts to draw man and animal together inside the single jurisdiction of flesh and blood.

The works that contributed a little of their DNA to ‘Man of Aran’ are Les Murray’s poem, ‘The Cows on Killing Day’, written in the 1990s, and the 2003 novel by J.M. Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello. Both these works present provocative and impassioned arguments about seeing animals: the need for people to work their imaginations and emotions so that they might know animals in their own specific animal-ness – the moral responsibility of rescuing animals from their invisibility.

‘The Cows on Killing Day’ is a poem most acutely about flesh and blood: the knowing, feeling intelligence of animals, and humans’ use of them. Murray attempts to cross the species divide in this affecting work; with careful poetic technique he tries to imaginatively sense his way into the being of a creature that is in every way unlike himself.

In the poem, whose content requires no more explanation than its title, the poet attempts to wrest the reader away from an automatic reading of the animal from the human point-of-view by employing the personal pronoun as object – we are shifted to new ground where we are asked to detach from human perception while retaining our human sympathy: “All me have just been milked. Teats all tingling still/from that dry toothless sucking by the chilly mouths/that gasp loudly in in, and never breathe out.” (Murray,
The ‘me’ of the poem is both a cow, “One me is still in the yard, the place skinned of feed/Me, old and sore-boned, little milk in that me now”, and the ‘me’ that is her belonging, the ‘me’ of her herd, “All me are standing on feed.”

The moment of slaughter arrives; the old cow is felled and the herd gather to watch helplessly:

All me come running. It’s the Hot Part of the sky
that’s hard to look at, this that now happens behind wood
in the raw yard. A shining leaf, like off the bitter gum tree
is with the human. It works in the neck of me
and the terrible floods out, swamped and frothy. All me make the Roar,
some leaping stiff-kneed, trying to horn the worst horror.
The wolf-at-the-calves is the bull human. Horn the bull human!
But the dog and the heifer human drive away all of me.

The defamiliarisation in the poem works to create brief moments of dislocation from human reality, moments in which the imagination might reach for an understanding of a different consciousness: “the Hot Part of the sky” is presumably midday, but the cow exists without temporal awareness; “A shining leaf, like off the old bitter gum tree” is the blade that will kill the animal, a sign of the innocence of the old cow’s world, the limits of its awareness and therefore its power; “All me make the Roar” is the helpless cry of the herd’s distress.

This is art, of course, a play of language, and symbolic language is an exclusively human possession. “The animal is without language,” writes Derrida. “Or more precisely it is unable to respond … the animal is without the right and power to ‘respond’ and hence without many other things that would be the property of man.” (378) There is, therefore, an inescapable circularity in Murray’s poetic project, because language marks the boundary of the human consciousness from which animals are excluded. “Not that animals do not care what we feel about them,” says the writer Elizabeth Costello in J.M. Coetzee’s novel. “But when we divert the current of feeling that flows between our self and the animal into words, we abstract it for ever from the animal. Thus the poem is not a gift to its object, as the love poem is. It falls within an entirely human economy in which the animal has no share.” (Coetzee, 2003: 96)
And yet it is Murray’s attempt, and the impossibility of its success, that I find so affecting in his poem. Murray cannot do what he hopes to do, but the poem yearns towards the task – it yearns towards the animal – it feels its way, through language, to the outer limits of the human nervous system.²

J.M. Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello contains none of the plangency of Les Murray’s poem. Rather than sounding a mournful note about animal and human relationships, it summons the reader’s attention and troubles the conscience by the furious sense of urgency it evokes. The state of the human/animal relationship in Elizabeth Costello is that defined by Derrida as a state of crisis:

However one interprets it, whatever practical, technical, scientific, juridical, ethical, or political consequence one draws from it, no one can deny this event anymore, no one can deny the unprecedented proportions of this subjection of the animal … Such a subjection can be called violence in the most morally neutral sense of the term … no one can deny seriously, or for very long, that men do all they can in order to dissimulate this cruelty or to hide it from themselves, in order to organise on a global scale the forgetting or misunderstanding of this violence. (394)

Elizabeth Costello consists of eight chapters in the form of philosophical dialogues called ‘lessons’, followed by a postscript. Elizabeth Costello, the novel’s primary character and presenter of these philosophical arguments, is an Australian writer, born in 1928, who also happens to share – in the teasing Mobius strip that twists through the work – significant details from the curriculum vitae of the novel’s author, Coetzee. Both first achieved literary fame with novels that play intertextually with works of the literary canon: Costello with Ulysses, and Coetzee with Robinson Crusoe. Both now being writers in their ‘maturity’, they have achieved a level of international celebrity that leads regularly to the public stage – lessons 3 and 4, for example, were originally presented by Coetzee as the 1997-98 Tanner Lectures at Princeton University. These lectures adopted the same form found in the novel, employing the fictional character of Elizabeth Costello as the purveyor of ideas, while all

² It is a keen irony that this poem was, in fact, written in an attempt to escape human consciousness: “‘The Cows on Killing Day’ (was written) when I was suffering a bout of depression and decided to get out of my own head and be an animal for a while. It worked for a time.” (Murray, 2010)
the time posing questions about the degree to which these ideas – sometimes inflammatory, contradictory, dogmatic – are shared by Coetzee.

Elizabeth Costello’s ‘lessons’ include arguments about the exhaustion of literary realism, the future of the humanities, the suffering lives of animals, the problem of evil and the responsibility a writer bears in its depiction: Elizabeth Costello makes her arguments, minor characters offer modifying or opposing views, and rhetorically, it might be said, the author covers all his/her bases. And yet, building slowly from all these elements, in Elizabeth Costello there is a sense of mighty struggle – for all its disguises and puppetry and feints, Elizabeth Costello is the least deflective and opaque of Coetzee’s works of fiction; not quite a work of confession, but a work of self-revelation nonetheless.

The struggle that forms the core of Elizabeth Costello is Costello’s/Coetzee’s struggle with the ineffable. After a long, esteemed career, the writer is now confronting ‘her’ own doubts about language, about reason and storytelling. She is struggling with subjects and emotions too vast, too faceted, and too numinous, to be brought to ground by literary strategy and philosophical argument.

In lesson 6, ‘The Problem of Evil’, Elizabeth Costello is asked to speak to the subject of ‘Silence, Complicity and Guilt’ at a conference in Amsterdam, but after she has delivered her paper a question is asked from the audience and Elizabeth realises “she should never have come, never have accepted the invitation, and she knows it now”:

Not because she has nothing to say about evil, the problem of evil, the problem of calling evil a problem, not even because of the luck of West’s presence, but because a limit has been reached, the limit of what can be achieved with a body of balanced, well-informed modern folk in a clean, well-lit lecture venue in a well-ordered, well-run European city in the dawn of the twentieth-first century. (175)

Elizabeth Costello wonders “what hope is there that the problem of evil, if problem is indeed the right word for evil, big enough to contain it, will be solved by more talk?” (157) She asks if certain ways of writing – in this case, a highly detailed and imagined account of the executions of men who had plotted against Hitler – might be better left unwritten. (The book that con-
cerns Elizabeth Costello, *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*, is not an artifact of Coetzee’s imagination, but an actual book. Coetzee is responding to the work of a living author, Paul West.) Elizabeth asks if there is not, in fact, an obscenity in the literary recreation of such evil; isn’t it possible that a writer might be harmed in bringing her imagination to the depiction of evil, and might that depiction not unleash a measure of evil itself? “She felt the brush of (the devil’s) leathery wing, when she read those dark pages.” (178)

It is a challenge to imagine a younger writer – the young Coetzee himself – troubling herself with such concerns, daring to question the orthodoxy of the writer as truth-teller, and questioning whether the permissions granted to a writer’s freedom should always be limitless. But *Elizabeth Costello* is a novel about an aging writer written by an aging writer, and within it is a howl of pain and experience. The world hurts, the novel says, the world’s atrocities accumulate in one’s body as the years go by; the skin is flayed by them, rendering the body unprotected, so exquisitely sensitive to human cruelty that it becomes necessary to think anew about art and argument – the world’s talk – to ask if creative work that seeks to illuminate cruelty might ever be an act of cruelty itself.

Elizabeth Costello struggles again with the inexpressible when she is asked to deliver a lecture at Appleton College. She does not wish to talk about her writing or her profession – she refuses the role of the educated ape “who stands before the members of a learned society telling the story of his life.” (62) Costello is referring here to Kafka’s ‘Report to an Academy’, the story of the captured chimpanzee, Red Peter, who, having learned the ways of human society, is condemned to public recitations of the narrative of his ‘civilisation’.

At Appleton College, refusing to perform herself, Elizabeth instead delivers what many consider to be an ill-judged disquisition on the suffering of animals. Reaching for a way to speak about the treatment of animals in industrial farming and scientific experiment, she draws a parallel with the treatment of the persecuted in the Nazi death camps. The analogy is repugnant – the Jewish poet, Abraham Stern, writes to her: “The Jews died like cattle, therefore cattle die like Jews, you say. That is a trick with words which I will not accept.” (94)
But one feels that Elizabeth Costello already knows this. She knows that the analogy is extreme – clichéd, even, in its offensive extremity. She is not unaware that, in every reasonable way that matters, what she says is obscene. But it is as if her feelings about the lives of animals are pushing her beyond reason and restraint, beyond the fine distinctions and carefully exercised judgement that have been the habits of her writing life. She must surely know, too, that she is dealing in serious contradictions – Paul West’s writing about the Nazis summons evil, she argues, while she is herself trading in shock and offence about the same historical events – but she is, in a sense, beyond caring: the struggle to express her beliefs leaves her beside herself. “When I think of the words,” she tells her son when he questions her new fervency about animals, “they seem so outrageous that they are best spoken into a pillow or into a hole in the ground, like King Midas.” (114)

Elizabeth continues the attempt to explain to her son how her beliefs estrange her from other people, “Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasising it all? I must be mad! … Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can’t you? Why can’t you?” (114)

And then Elizabeth Costello weeps.

V

In 1984 Marguerite Duras published an autobiographical work, The Lover, a novel about her impoverished childhood spent in French-colonial Indochina, and the adolescent love affair she’d once had with an older Chinese man. “Now I see that when I was very young, eighteen, fifteen,” Duras writes there, “I already had a face that foretold the one I acquired through drink in middle age.” (Duras, 1984: 12)

A mirroring study of the exercise of power under colonial rule, and within an erotic relationship, The Lover proved to be one of Duras’s most critically acclaimed and commercially successful books, translated into more than thir-
ty languages and awarded France’s most prestigious literary prize, the Prix Goncourt.

Six years after the book’s publication Duras rewrote The Lover, with the new novel being published as The North China Lover. In revisiting the first novel, Duras was attempting to address what she had long seen as its flaws: “It’s an airport novel,” Duras told Jean-Jacques Annaud, who would go on to direct a film of the book, “I wrote it when I was drunk.” (2015: digital text) One can only speculate about Duras’s idea of the ‘airport’ novel, but the statement implies that the book’s immense popularity with readers suggested an accessibility with which Duras was uncomfortable. A standard-bearer for the French literary movement, the Nouveau Roman, with its belief in de-personalisation and the quelling of sentiment by means of the subordination of character and plot, Duras seemed unable to accommodate the abundant evidence that The Lover, in its transparency and crystalline honesty, had achieved a covenant with readers that was at odds with her literary manifesto: “It’s there,” writes Duras, in one of the novel’s typically clear-eyed moments, “in that last house, the one on the Loire, when she finally gives up her ceaseless to-ing and fro-ing, that I see the madness clearly for the first time. I see my mother is clearly mad.” (45)

The North China Lover adopts a form that is both a deliberate formal disruption of The Lover’s accessibility, and a sly response to an associated provocation. Initially, Duras had worked with Jean-Jacques Annaud in the adaptation of The Lover to film; she had partly written its screenplay before aesthetic disagreements between them led her to abandon the collaboration. The North China Lover, at times, takes the form of a film script – Duras makes the film she wants to make – with camera angles, soundtrack directions, and lists of suggested images. At one level, the revised novel is a ferocious act of reclamation and repair, and yet its deepest mood is elegiac – Duras’s primary reason for rewriting the book was the death of the Chinese man who had once been her lover.

The North China Lover is a novel of mourning; a tender memorialisation of the affair that led the author out of an anguished childhood into the life of a creative, autonomous adult. “I wrote the story of the North China lover,” Duras writes, “it wasn’t quite there in The Lover, I hadn’t given them enough
time. Writing this book made me deliriously happy … I became a novelist all over again.” (Duras, 1991: 1)

I think I understand what Duras means when she says she “became a novelist all over again”. Duras is not implying she had forgotten how to write a novel, but that, in writing The Lover, novelistic truth had eluded her; she had squandered the autobiographical material that life had given her; the work had failed to become. For a writer who has drawn upon her own experience in a work, this means far more than a job poorly done. It is for her a physical sense of incompleteness and exposure, she feels bloodily raw and ashamed. Duras’s throwaway remark about The Lover – “I wrote it when I was drunk” – must surely be read as a tough-guy defence of what was for her an acutely vulnerable state.

The case of Marguerite Duras’s The Lover and its rewriting is a vivid illustration of Iris Murdoch’s thought quoted earlier in this essay: “What is important is an ability to have an image of perfection and to expel fantasy and the sort of lesser, egoistic cravings and the kind of imagery and immediate expressions that might go with them, and to be prepared to think and to wait.” Duras committed herself to thinking and waiting, and then she re-entered the place of her perceived failure. She undertook the imaginative work required to reconceptualise a book that had, for six years, lived independently of her; she rose to the technical challenge of finding a new form for the writing that might more truthfully embody her content; she excavated yet more autobiographical material with its attendant emotional and ethical demands – and all this made Duras deliriously happy!

In writing about Marguerite Duras and The Lover, I am, of course, also writing about my own unease regarding ‘Man of Aran’, and my keen sense of its limitations. I view ‘Man of Aran’ as a novel trapped within the personal concerns of its author, and feeling creatively disabled by this, in the spirit of Duras, I too have revisited my work.

The work of short fiction that follows is my reply to ‘Man of Aran’. Unlike The North China Lover, this story does not revisit ‘Man of Aran’s characters, setting or plot, but it is primarily a reworking of the novel’s central theme. The story, too, is a narrative driven by the main protagonist’s desire
for a child, but in writing it I have made many decisions that are intended to untangle the work from my own hopes, regrets and illusions. These decisions were made with Iris Murdoch’s previously mentioned distinction between fantasy and imagination in mind: “a distinction between the expression of immediate selfish feelings and the elimination of yourself in a work of art.”

The most important of these decisions was to eschew the realism I’d employed in ‘Man of Aran’. In writing the novel, I found that the craft of mimesis, the accumulative, quotidian procedures of realism, exerted a magnetic force that undermined the work – as I attempted, word-by-word, to create a monological, palpable world that might net realism’s authoritative ‘truth’, the ‘real’ world that I was building was also inexorably drawing to itself the grief and bewilderment I was feeling about my own childlessness.

In my reply to ‘Man of Aran’, I wanted to move away from this pathos and toward a more active engagement with ideas. I was keen to revisit questions about assisted reproductive technologies, a line of exploration I had abandoned along with my earlier work-in-progress, ‘The Silk Sisters’. How could realism portray the increasingly unreal world of reproductive science and the global business it had become? Was realism a supple enough form for exploring a situation in which the desires of the world’s mobile and affluent were being met by utilising the bodies of powerless and impoverished women? The international surrogacy industry is a commodification of flesh and blood, and one that I find profoundly disturbing in its resemblance to the world of factory farming and agribusiness with which I was once so familiar. I wanted to write about the extremity of a desire that would seek its satisfaction by methods such as these, but what mode of story would allow me to best depict extremity? I wanted to avoid the dead weight of ‘social commentary’ and reach for a more suggestive, creative account of the unconscious forces that drive human desire. I looked for a way in which I might show the motivations of people who turn to international surrogacy as being all too understandably human, while at the same time illustrating the blind spots and the denials involved in their actions; the inhumanity in this blindness, the ‘monstrousness’?

I felt that nothing new could be achieved in any revision of ‘Man of Aran’ if realism was allowed to continue what I had come to think of as its banal
tyranny – to reimagine ‘Man of Aran’, to rethink the subject of childlessness and all its implications, I needed a literary form or mode of ‘unreality’. “Literature of the fantastic,” writes Todorov, “is concerned to describe desire in its excessive forms as well as in various transformations or perversions.” (Todorov, 1973: 89)

Ultimately, I found it was the venerable form of the fairy tale that offered the malleability, suggestiveness and imaginative disruption that I was seeking. It was a fairy tale that helped me to “describe desire in its excessive forms”.

That story, ‘Only a Fairy Tale’, follows.
Only a Fairy Tale

A story
There was a woman named Anastasia who wanted a child very badly. She had no husband or lover and homosexual friends, it seemed, now kept their seed for their own families. She didn’t have any money. She had nothing behind her and not much in front of her either, but Anastasia’s ancestors had survived wars on faith and grass soup and she wasn’t about to let their line fizzle out in inner-city Melbourne where grey skies were tender and passing, and no soul ever lacked for good coffee and cake.

Anastasia was in her kitchen. It was late summer but the rain had come at last and outside the window her garden was breathing. She washed the day’s dishes slowly, gazing out at the plum and loquat and apricot trees. The patched-up shed with the rusty roof; the old fence sagging under grapevines heavy with inedible fruit. She loved it, all of it, although none of it belonged to her. The house and garden belonged to George, who put his paws all over her when he came to collect the rent each month.

She had never met a man she’d been afraid of, and outrage wasn’t her thing. Now and then she thought about hitting George on the head with a shovel, dragging him down the backyard on a bin liner and burying him deep beneath the sprawling fig, but it was a fantasy of having a home to live in forever – a home for her child – rather than any punishment of a lonely old man for taking a few liberties.

After all, she was hardly beyond taking a liberty or two herself.

Anastasia was a woman who had always met her own needs, but now that she was thirty-nine years old, close to forty, her need was of a kind she could not meet alone. Two or three evenings a week – it should have been more – she painted on two wings of black eyeliner and dark cherry lipstick, and went out looking for sex.

All she wanted was something quick in an alleyway or the back seat of a car, but the men she met in the city’s bars, or the pubs of Carlton and Fitzroy,
were sometimes too shy to take up her offer – she was five foot eleven with long hair, dark and jungly, its single grey streak dyed navy blue – or else they were too fainthearted, affronted, rude, cocky, romantic or sooky, and sometimes, she thought, just too damn lazy.

The men she did have sex with were usually younger than her. She found men of her own age a bit … congealed … in spirit and flesh, and seducing them could be melancholy work. Not that any of it gave her much pleasure. Most of the time she observed herself in the act from a million miles away, feeling next to nothing, although afterwards she always made a point of saying a few nice words to the helpful fellow before she unlocked her bicycle, took a long drink of water, and pedalled home in the dark.

Outside the kitchen window the magpie appeared suddenly, as most birds do. It flapped its glamorous wings and came to rest on the ledge outside. Anastasia had been feeding the bird for a week or two, chopped egg and bits of hard cheese, but the creature had never spoken to her before.

She slid open the window. ‘What was that?’ she asked.

‘There’s something you must do,’ the magpie said.

Anastasia leaned close and listened, staring into the creature’s toffee-coloured eye. ‘Is that all?’ she said.

‘That’s all,’ said the magpie.

‘But it sounds so easy.’

‘Must things always be hard?’

‘And there’s nothing else?’

‘There is nothing else,’ said the bird, opening its wings. ‘Now do what you’ve always done.’

Anastasia watched the magpie fly away before closing the window and pouring herself a glass of water. She looked slowly around her humble kitchen. Red and cream linoleum. Cream cupboards, red bench. Tea leaves in a puddle. Two yellow pears turning brown. She had experienced this before, although rarely. Only two or three times in her life had she known the same stillness; poised and quiet.

It was the quiet of an untied knot, and it arrived – out of the big wide blue – when something cruelly complicated suddenly became simple.
Once a week, Evelyn drove her black BMW across six streets to Anastasia’s house.

‘I’m not walking with you if you wear that thing,’ said Anastasia.

‘But it monitors my heart rate,’ said Evelyn.

‘I don’t care, you always race ahead of me.’

‘It’s for fitness.’

‘But shouldn’t our walk be for the journey?’

‘Oh, fuck off,’ said Evelyn. ‘I am currently on so many different journeys I barely have the strength to open my eyes in the morning.’

Anastasia stood on the porch and assessed Evelyn’s new turquoise spectacles – too witty for her taste – then she took in Evelyn’s eyes, black with tiredness and decades of crusted kohl. It was the end of a long day for Anastasia too, teaching seven tutorials back-to-back, but she wasn’t weary. Her new-found optimism was making all the difference: since the magpie’s visit her strike rate with men had nearly doubled.

‘So did I tell you?’ said Evelyn, ‘Maybe I haven’t seen you since then. But maybe on the phone? Or did I email? Text? About what Jim did on the weekend?’

‘No,’ said Anastasia. Jim was Evelyn’s husband, although they’d been separated for the past year.

‘Well,’ said Evelyn. ‘He finally got his act together to see his one and only child.’

‘That’s good.’

‘Until of course he meets some other poor woman he can’t live without and gets his vasectomy reversed.’

‘That’s likely.’

‘So Jim finally has Edward for the weekend,’ said Evelyn. ‘But then when his father drops him off Edward comes through the door wearing only one shoe and carrying this plastic bag – and you know what’s inside the bag?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Anastasia. ‘Jim’s washing?’

‘The other fucking shoe! With dog shit all over it! Edward had stepped in some dog shit and his father had put it in a plastic bag for him to take home!’

‘Oh, Evie.’

‘It’s not funny, Tash! He put it in a bag to take home to me!’
‘I know, I know,’ said Anastasia, ushering her down the steps and out the front gate.
‘You’re so lucky you don’t have to worry about this kind of crap.’
‘Meaning husband and child crap?’
‘Ex-husband, please!’
Anastasia broke a stick of lavender off a neighbour’s hedge and crushed it between her fingers. She had never spoken to Evie of what she wanted, much less of what she got up to at night. She’d always kept things to herself, and now she was superstitious about squandering her luck in loose talk. Still, she wondered about Evelyn’s lack of imagination sometimes. Her lack of looking at Anastasia’s life; showing no curiosity at all about what might sustain Anastasia’s spirit.

Or perhaps Evelyn had looked at Anastasia’s life and saw only what she longed for herself. Evie would probably call it freedom, although waste would be Anastasia’s word for it, if ever she was asked.

Not that any of this mattered anymore. She was above bitterness and self-pity now. She was following the magpie’s instructions: every night before she left the house she filled a bowl with water, then she carried the bowl outside and set it down on the back step. When she got home she went outside again, picked up the bowl and carried it into the bathroom. The magpie hadn’t actually called it a bowl of moonwater, but there had been no need to because she had understood: if she washed with moonwater after she’d had sex, she would soon find herself with child.

‘You reckon we could pick up the pace a bit?’ said Evie, as they cut through a playground of dry grass and artistic stones.

Anastasia felt the moment was right. ‘You know how you lent me those books last week?’ she said.
‘Did I?’ said Evelyn.
‘The Atwood and that Thai cookbook?’
‘Oh, yeah.’
Anastasia snuck a sideways glance at Evelyn before she spoke. ‘Well, I found a receipt in one of them.’

‘I must’ve been using it as a bookmark,’ said Evelyn. ‘You can throw it out.’

‘But it was a very interesting receipt.’
‘What?’
‘Cami and knickers?’
‘Don’t remember.’
‘From some chi chi place in Hawthorn?’
‘Maybe ... it had to be a while ago.’
‘Two months? You must remember.’
‘Vaguely.’
‘You don’t recall,’ said Anastasia slowly, ‘paying three hundred dollars for a pair of undies? And six hundred and fifty for a fancy singlet?’

Evelyn’s face turned a gratifying shade of congested crimson. Already Anastasia had calculated how many straws of semen she might have bought with this money. Or half-straws, if they had such things. ‘Oh, those,’ said Evelyn. ‘I was having a bad day.’

‘But I guess the real question is – did you have a good night?’
‘As if I wouldn’t have told you if it had been something like that!’ said Evelyn, who never kept things to herself. ‘No, I bought them just for me.’

‘And I suppose they’re nice to wear to work?’ Anastasia was enjoying herself now.

Evelyn scowled. She was the CEO of a high-profile charity that fed the city’s homeless.

‘Have you got them on now?’ said Anastasia, plucking at Evie’s waistband. ‘Give us a look.’

Evelyn slapped at her hands. ‘Go away, Tash! Get off me! Get off!’

‘But I just want to see them,’ she pleaded, lifting the hem of Evie’s hoodie.

‘I haven’t got them on! Keep your grubby hands to yourself!’

They tussled, laughing loudly, then they righted themselves and continued down the street, past the newly-renovated weatherboards painted barley and paperbark and highland mist.

‘At least tell me what colour they are,’ said Anastasia.

‘They’re coffee, with a bit of ivory lace.’

‘Real ivory?’

‘Fuck off!’

‘But a cami?’ said Anastasia. ‘For six hundred and fifty dollars it couldn’t be called a camisole?’
'At least it wasn’t called a teddy.’
‘What exactly is a teddy anyway?’
‘I have no idea.’
‘It sounds disgusting.’
‘It sure does.’

Their pace slowed. They shared fish recipes. They talked about Sophia Loren, eighty years old today, and how had that happened? They admired, as they always did, the silver princesses growing in the front gardens they passed; the trees slender and weeping, their fingery branches painted in the ghostly sunscreen that reminded them of other things.

‘Remember? The fake snow we sprayed on Christmas trees?’
‘And that creamy stuff – vernix. All over a brand-new baby.’

Slowly the weeks turned into a month. The water in Anastasia’s bowl became a little colder each night and then another month went by. Finally one night she leaned over the bowl, washed the grit from her eyes, reached for a towel and sighed. She was a fool, that’s what she was. She had been much too quick to interpret the magpie’s meaning. The water wasn’t moony, or any stupid magic at all. No, the water was only what she must do to bear it. To continue her quest, night after squalid night, she needed the water to come home to. The water to rinse her clean.

When the magpie appeared a second time, Anastasia was working in the garden. She lowered the brim of her hat to conceal her face before she spoke. ‘This time I must know I’ll get what I want,’ she said.

‘But at this precise time,’ replied the magpie, in a voice like a rusty hinge, ‘do you have any other option for getting what you want?’

Anastasia’s blood froze. How did this creature know?

She had always feared the early arrival of menopause. She had inherited her body from ancestors who’d been starved near to death, and she’d prayed hard for protection from starvation’s long effects. Please, she had prayed, not like my mother. Not yet.

Flush. The word was so puny. The word was so fucking inadequate for conveying what that first hot flush had felt like, all that it had meant to her, when it arrived at ten twenty-five in the morning, two days before.
Like a public burning, that’s how it felt. All the vivid children of her imagination. *Elouise and Lydia and Alexis and Stefan.* It meant death.

So the magpie was right about one thing; she had nothing and no-one to help her now. She tossed a handful of weeds aside. But *how* would she stop imagining herself as a mother? How did one ever give up hope? Would she go to bed one night like a woman beginning a diet, promising herself that tomorrow she would not want what she’d always wanted?

Would she stick a note on the fridge? Remember to give up.

It was no longer true that babies were made by one man and one woman alone. Some babies were one plus one plus one plus fees and expenses. Somebabies were precision-engineered. These days, did anyone care how a child came about?

Anastasia turned to the magpie. The creature’s prehistoric talons made her flesh crawl, but if forced to she could see that its graphic black and white markings had an unambiguous vigour – a forward drive – that was the way of things now.

‘Tell me what I have to do,’ she said.

Anastasia took a photo of herself and posted it online. She wrote about herself as well. The words came easily and none of them were untrue. She had never had the faintest idea how to make a man fall in love with her, but a woman’s heart seemed like an easier catch.

She didn’t go out at night anymore. Instead, at the end of each day she poured herself a sherry and sat down at the computer. The magpie had said she need look for only two things, youth and a certain kind of vulnerability, so there was no need to be picky. Nevertheless, as one long evening followed another, Anastasia was forced to accept that no-one matching her requirements was replying to her, and they certainly weren’t making the first move either. Young women weren’t responding to her at all, and she didn’t know why because younger men pretty much always did.

One night after she had drunk all the sherry and then the four-dollar white she kept for cooking, Anastasia turned away from the computer screen and took to doodling sums on a sheet of paper, setting them down as she had been taught to do at school. *Write down thirty-nine (my age) and below it write*
twenty (roughly the age of the woman who hasn’t contacted me yet), draw a line under
neath and then zero from nine is nine, write down nine, two from three is …

It hurt, but she had probably known it obscurely for a while: it was young women who had stopped looking at her first. And young women no longer opened their eyes to her authority or experience or beauty because – fair enough – it was their turn now.

Thirty-nine plus fifteen, thirty-nine plus twenty, thirty-nine plus twenty-five. She had done the calculations before, at least she thought she had – all the ages she’d be as her son or daughter grew. Her age had never seemed like a problem before; she planned to grow old well, take care of herself, keep up. But the morning after the night of drinking, when she looked through a pulsating headache at the piece of paper and the little calculations she’d done, she saw the sums as she thought the young women on the dating site would see them: as incomprehensible scratchings from an unimaginably distant era. Only there was no beauty or meaning in her scratchings. They weren’t like ancient hieroglyphics; they were no more than evidence that she belonged to a time much dumber and slower than this one.

If she remained childless, how would she ever know any generation but her own? And wouldn’t that be like living locked in a cellar, or bricked-up in a tomb – stored forever in one of those containers for leftovers with the press-to-seal lid and no possible way of any air getting in?

The next time the magpie appeared, Anastasia was in the backyard again, distressing a garden urn. Her ebay business wasn’t exactly booming, but money trickled in, especially since she had added shabby chic to her range of garden pots and decorative garden fittings.

‘You’re doing it all wrong,’ said the magpie, strutting around her.

‘It’s not finished yet,’ said Anastasia.

‘The young woman?’

‘The pot?’

Anastasia and the magpie stared at each other, locked in a perfect misunderstanding.

Once a week, Anastasia travelled to leafier parts of the city to weed the kind of gardens that, before the economic downturn, she had once designed.
On one of these days her bike had a puncture, so she pulled on her khaki shorts and work boots, put an organic banana in her backpack, and caught a tram. She took a seat by the window, facing forward. Given the choice, she couldn’t understand why anyone would want to face the other way, but it probably said something about her, to prefer a sense of arriving rather than leaving.

She pulled a book out of her bag and didn’t look up again until someone sat down in the seat opposite. ‘People are always telling me I should read her,’ said the young woman, nodding at Anastasia’s book. The features of the girl’s face were close together and huddled. She might’ve been plain, but for the broad sweep of her forehead, sweetly freckled and bristling with inquisitiveness and life-force.

‘Here, it’s yours,’ said Anastasia.

‘But you’ve still got some to go,’ the girl said.

‘No, honestly, I’ve finished it.’ In fact, the book had been boring her to tears.

‘Thank you.’

‘You’re welcome,’ said Anastasia. It was a relief that the girl had allowed something genuine, however fleeting, to pass between them. The girl opened the book and sat back in her seat. Did she look like a leaver rather than an arriver?

Perhaps.

Anastasia turned her head and looked out the window. Could facing forward have something to do with being a bit on the greedy side? Needy side, even? To sit facing forward was to gobble up life as it went by, like a fish moving open-mouthed through the water. Was there something more detached in facing the other way, more relaxed? Could it be that the people who sat with their backs to their destination had an easier arrangement with life, a confidence that there would always be enough, they would always be fed (more than grass soup), an acceptance – thank you – of everything that came to them, and no undue appetite for what didn’t?

The girl turned a page of the book. She was wearing a short, daisy-sprigged sundress and kitten heels worn to a nub. Her skin was blueish-white, the colour of skimmed milk, and free of any tattoo. It seemed brave of her to be out in the world so bare and undecorated, with nothing to defend
or declare. When the girl crossed her legs, Anastasia thought about Daniel Day Lewis. *His fingers slowly unbuttoning Michelle Pfeiffer’s glove. Her naked wrist. His mouth.* Low voltage electricity was most certainly flowing between the girl’s ankle and hers, but was it being generated by their bodies or was it just Anastasia’s private screening of an erotic moment in a film she loved?

She didn’t know. And anyway her stop was next. She reached up to pull the chord and when she had settled back in her seat again the young woman was looking at her. ‘Maybe I could text you?’ the girl said. ‘When I’ve finished the book? You know, to tell you what I thought of it?’

Anastasia made herself smile. She made herself give her name and number.

‘And I’m Billie,’ the girl said.

Anastasia’s heart raced as she waited for the tram doors to open, *quick* *quick* *quick*.

Calm down, she told herself.

*But what am I doing? What am I doing?*

The most natural thing in the world, she scolded, and stepped down onto the street.

Anastasia looked everywhere for the magpie.

‘I’ve never known anyone like you,’ said Billie. The bird wasn’t at the kitchen window.

‘I love you,’ said Billie. ‘You’ve changed my life.’ The bird wasn’t in the garden either.

Anastasia had always assumed that the magpie had told her to seduce a younger woman – although, as it turned out, it had really been the other way round – because her ageing body would be renewed by the intimacy. As though Billie were a girl-sized oestrogen patch! An oestrogen patch – *God help her!* – who wrapped her legs around Anastasia as they slept at night, and woke her by trailing a finger down her spine.

Making love to Billie wasn’t proving too difficult *technically*, but pretending a desire for her was excruciating. She felt like her soul was being shredded by a cheese grater. And it was all so much worse because Billie didn’t even seem to notice, which could only mean that she had never been loved
properly, and this made Anastasia feel hopelessly sad, hopelessly responsible, for setting the bar so low for Billie, so early in her life.

Anastasia needed the magpie to explain to her what she was doing. Sometimes in the mornings after Billie had cycled off to jewellery class, or to visit her brother on the psychiatric ward, Anastasia would stand at the sink washing the breakfast dishes and pray for the magpie to appear. Only this time, she told herself, she would not allow the bird to be evasive or vague in any way. She rehearsed their conversation. She practised the upper hand.

Late one morning, Anastasia sat on the backstep in a puddle of sun, staring into her mug of tea. Last night Billie had screened for her – with the aid of a barbeque fork for pointing at things – old videos of the childhood she had spent in some seaside town called Dubbleduk.

Could a place really be called Dubbleduk? Oh, this was the horror! This was the thing that was destroying her, and must surely be destroying Billie too: Anastasia wasn’t listening to Billie, or rather, she couldn’t hear a thing that Billie said. If she loved Billie, or even if she just had a raging lust for her, then she would remember for the rest of her life the name of the town where Billie had sunned her fourteen-year-old body and frolicked drunk and naked in the surf at night; the place where she’d rolled her father’s car on a dirt road and still had the scars to show for it. And the scars, she would never forget those scars either!

If Anastasia loved her, then the town’s name would remain forever a crystallised form of Billie, but last night she hadn’t even asked Billie to repeat the improbable name of the place that was so important to her. She hadn’t asked her to spell it or show her where it was on the map. She had been content for the town to remain unmythic.

It was terrible! It was a particular form of atrocity, to be so uninterested in the person who shared her bed. But if the magpie told her to keep going, she knew she would. She longed for a baby. A child of her own. And wasn’t that a primary human need? Her birthright even? Yet on the other hand, concerning rights and needs, what was the fit relationship between ends and means? She planned to ask the magpie all these questions, but when the bird at last arrived from nowhere and settled beside her on the backstep, her first words to it weren’t at all philosophical. ‘I don’t know how much longer I can keep doing this,’ she said.
‘Then don’t,’ said the magpie, eyeing some skittering thing on the ground.

‘What?’

‘Don’t do if you don’t want to. What’s the point?’

‘The point? What do you mean what’s the point? Aren’t you supposed to be telling me that? Oh, Jesus! Help me! What’s the point?’

After it was all over, Anastasia enjoyed the emptiness of her bed, along with the silence that returned to her mornings. She liked the quiet nights she spent at home. But during the day she was forced to carry her mind as though it were a bowl brimful of water, knowing that soon – although she was not quite there yet – she would have to begin the work of accepting that she’d never be a mother.

It would take discipline and sobriety, this acceptance. Sobriety in the sense of being careful with alcohol, of course, but she would need to be careful with sentiment, too, and self-reflection, and in using her imagination without it using her, and in not comparing herself to others, and in always thinking of five things to be thankful for at the end of each day. If she couldn’t have what she wanted, then she’d do her best to want what she had. If only she didn’t feel that she’d made a crucial mistake somewhere. Why did the life she had made for herself – like the grass soup of her ancestors – contain so little nourishment? Were her ancestors afraid she’d forget them if she had more?

Or was it all her own fault?

She was in absolutely no mood for the magpie when it appeared in the backyard a few weeks later.

‘You did very well,’ said the magpie. Anastasia said nothing, and pegged another towel on the washing line. ‘You did well with the young woman,’ said the magpie. ‘You passed the test.’

‘And what test was that?’ Oh, she could hear it in her voice! The swollen curiosity! The grotesque desire!

‘I had to know,’ said the magpie, ‘if you’d break another’s heart to get what you want.’ Anastasia grabbed the empty washing basket and hurled it at the creature. ‘Nothing for you to do now,’ called the bird from the air.
Anastasia had made biscuits for the children who would come trick or treating at the end of the day. She had already hung a smiling pumpkin on the front fence to tell the neighbourhood she would welcome them. The biscuits were full of butter, vanilla and coconut. She might … would would would … never be a mother herself, but she believed in spoiling children. She had shaped the biscuits to look like witches’ fingers, crooked and knotty. She’d left almonds to soak in a bowl of warm water, then she had dried them and slowly peeled away their skins and separated one half from the other and pressed each half-almond into the tapered end of the biscuit dough. They’d taken next to no time in the oven. The almonds had baked into long, convincing, yellow-brown fingernails, and she had been rewarded by a shiver as she placed the amputated fingers carefully, one by one, on the cooling rack.

‘Eew, sinister bikkies!’ said Evelyn, plonking a bottle of pinot gris on the bench. ‘I saw a couple of extremely short zombies as I was parking.’

Anastasia laughed. ‘It’s like a military operation. They’re assembling at the park at six to coordinate the attack.’

‘I guess it’s safer that way.’
‘What’s the time now?’
‘Five past.’

It was a warm twilight. A light breeze silvered the olives trees. Anastasia and Evelyn stripped off their cardigans and set themselves up on Anastasia’s porch.

‘Oh, my god – smell the jasmine,’ said Evelyn.
‘I know.’
‘Sometimes I wonder if I’ll ever have sex again.’
‘Cheers,’ said Anastasia.
‘Yes,’ said Evelyn. ‘Cheers.’

The sound of voices came first, light and excited, then the unlatching of the gate. The children came one by one because the path was narrow and the huge, hoary old cactuses on either side were medievally cruel and spiky.

‘And what have we here?’ said Evelyn, leaning towards the first bloodied child as he tentatively climbed the steps towards them. ‘Are you a zombie? Or a vampire?’
‘No! He’s a victim of crime!’ said a bigger girl, leaping boldly onto the porch.

‘And you,’ said Evelyn, with a twist of lemon, ‘aren’t you glamorous?’

‘Have a witch’s finger,’ said Anastasia, as the monstrous and ghostly piled onto the porch.

‘What are they?’ asked a vague creature of the night.

‘They’re sweet biscuits. They’re delicious.’

‘Is that a nut?’ said the glamour girl through blue-black lips. ‘I can’t have nuts.’

‘Yes, it’s a nut,’ said Evelyn

‘Have you got anything else?’

‘Afraid not,’ replied Evelyn, with a note of triumph.

Anastasia waved at the two women who had appeared on the path. They looked a lot younger than her, but she tried not to have a feeling about it. Instead, she noted that mother or non-mother, young or not-so, all four women clutched glasses of white wine as if their lives depended upon it.

‘What do you say?’ said the women, as the children returned to the path.

‘Thanks,’ the children called perfunctorily, already on their way.

‘Thank you,’ said the women.

Anastasia held her smile until she heard the gate close. ‘Well, they weren’t easy to impress,’ she said, refilling her glass.

‘You weren’t expecting that, were you?’

‘I guess I’d have liked someone to be, I don’t know … pleased?’

‘Delighted?’ said Evelyn. ‘Inspired by your creativity? Appreciative of your time and effort?’

She was in no mood for one of Evelyn’s rants about the trials of motherhood. ‘Don’t,’ she said.

‘Never mind,’ laughed Evelyn, ‘they might remember you yet. Anastasia, the Queen of Anaphylaxis.’

‘Oh shit, don’t say that! I just never thought about it. Do you think I should take the nails off the rest before any more come?’

‘And ruin the effect?’

‘Yes, but –’

‘It’s not your responsibility. Don’t worry about it.’
The gate opened again and a quartet of boys filed down the path. Their clothes were torn and their eyes blackened. The flesh of their arms and torsos was slashed and bloody, thickly clotted with pus and gunk.

‘Oh, you look fantastic!’ said Anastasia.

Even the undead were not beyond a little manly pride. ‘Thank you,’ they said, smiling shyly and shuffling onto the porch.

‘How did you make those wounds?’ asked Anastasia.

‘Well, see –’

‘You get some porridge –’

‘Oatmeal.’

‘Yeah, oatmeal, and then you put a bit of water in –’

‘And mash it all up.’

‘And then you get this … what’s it called?’

‘Gauze.’

‘Yeah, gauze, then you …’

Anastasia beckoned for the boys to come closer. Their tongues were radioactively green and their breath chemically sweet, but otherwise they were just old-fashioned boys who smelled yeasty and doggy.

‘Wow!’ said one of the boys. ‘What are those?

‘Witch’s fingers,’ said Anastasia.

‘Cool!’

‘Are they biscuits?’

‘They look really real.’

‘How did you get them like that?’

The boys listened with rapt attention to her animated explanation. She felt Evelyn scrutinising her but she didn’t care. She was a little drunk and doing something that gave her joy.

The boys went back down the path, chewing on the fingers as if they’d slain the witches themselves. Soon they were replaced by an evil fairy and a few rudimentary vampires, and then a chubby boy wearing a black tuxedo, a black bow tie, and a white dinner shirt so thoroughly drenched in blood that they both sat back in genuine horror.

‘Massacre at the Oscars!’ cried Evelyn.

‘Can I please take another finger for my Dad?’ asked the boy.
Occasionally a shadow passed over the afternoon. Anastasia tried to push the thoughts away, but every time she smiled at a group of children and leaned toward them with her plate of treats, how could she not think of Hansel and Gretel? It was only an old fairy tale, and everyone knew that fairy tales were sexist and ageist and everything, so why on earth did it hurt so much? At other times, too, she thought she caught a look in the eye of a waiting mother. A look not quite of distrust, but a wary look nonetheless. A look of why-would-you-be-doing-this?

They had to snap the few remaining fingers in half when another group of trick or treaters swarmed down the path. There were three older children, a couple of degenerate disco-queens and a sulky pirate, and in their charge, straggling behind them like ducklings, were four little ones.

‘Oh, they’re gorgeous,’ said Evelyn. ‘Just look at them.’

The three little girls wore tutus and animal ears and brightly coloured tights, a smear of glitter here and there, a dab of lipstick. They couldn’t have been more than four or five years old, yet they seemed to understand the day’s pageant and they were in full command of its complex ironies and etiquette. But the little boy accompanying them didn’t have a clue what was going on. He had pale, silky hair cut in a Prince Valiant bob, and around his wrists and neck he still carried the last traces of his baby fat. Someone had drawn whiskers on his cheeks and a spot on the end of his nose, and at his neck a black tea towel had been fastened with a safety pin to look like a cape. While the rest of the children crowded around the plate of biscuits the little boy loitered behind, content to be there but faraway too, as if wondering to himself – might life on Mars be easier to grasp?

‘Here you are, sweetheart,’ said Evelyn, crouching in front of him, ‘I saved the last bit for you.’

The child looked at the stump of finger.

‘It’s a biscuit,’ she said. ‘It’s yummy.’

He took the biscuit elegantly between his thumb and forefinger.

‘Be careful,’ said Evelyn, as she watched him dawdle past the cactuses.

‘They’re sharp.’

They waited until they heard the gate swing shut.

‘My old bones,’ said Evelyn.

‘They’ve cleaned us out.’
‘And the wine’s all gone.’

The evening had turned chilly so Anastasia found a shawl for Evelyn, who sat on a stool and talked to Edward on her phone while Anastasia searched the kitchen cupboards.

‘So there’s a huge jar of anchovies and heaps of pasta,’ she said, hands on hips, after Evelyn had finished.

‘Garlic?’
‘And stacks of chillies and parsley in the garden.’
‘We’re good then, aren’t we?’
‘Let me check,’ said Anastasia, opening the fridge, ‘if I still have a lemon.’
‘I think someone’s at the door.’
‘What?’
‘The front door,’ said Evelyn. ‘I think someone’s knocking.’

One of the disco-queens back again. She had danced her last Hustle. All her cocaine and amyl were done, she’d stubbed out her last Black Russian, and now she was a ten or twelve-year-old girl once more, wearing a gold lurex headband across her frowning forehead.

‘Have you seen the little boy?’ she said, looking up at Anastasia. ‘The one who was with us when you gave us those fingers?’

‘With the whiskers?’
‘Yes,’ she said. ‘He’s called Leo. We can’t find him.’

Anastasia looked past the girl. The sky was now a deep indigo and the first few stars were out. Somewhere nearby she could hear a magpie hanging its crystal on the cold, clear night.

‘But it’s only, what – fifteen minutes since you left here? How long have you been looking for him?’

‘I don’t know, it got dark quick.’
‘Where does he live?’
‘Next door to us.’
‘And where do you live?’
‘In the street behind. Just over there,’ she said, pointing.
‘In Arthur Street? Or Greville?’
‘Greville.’
‘That’s not very far – maybe he’s gone home. Have you looked for him there?’

‘My dad is.’

‘Well, hopefully your dad will find Leo safe at home with his parents.’

‘But his mum won’t be home yet, she works at the hospital.’

‘Harriet?’ called a woman’s voice from the street.

‘That’s my mum.’

‘We’d better go to her then,’ said Anastasia, ushering her gently down the path.

‘I’m Anastasia,’ she announced to the blonde woman standing on the footpath. The woman was wearing a corporate trouser suit and shiny blouse.

‘Carol,’ replied the woman. ‘Sorry about all this. Hop in the car, Harriet.’

‘Don’t be sorry, I just hope you find Leo. Is there anything I can do?’

‘We’ve got it pretty much covered. Personally, I think it’s likely to be some kind of domestic mix-up. The dad – sit in the back, Harriet, I’ve got all my work stuff there – Leo’s dad sort of comes and goes.’

Anastasia heard the gate open behind her. ‘What’s going on?’ said Evelyn.

‘They can’t find that little boy with the blond hair, you know, the one who was trick or treating at the end?’

‘Oh, dear,’ said Evelyn. ‘But look, try not to panic. Little boys – remember when Edward wandered away from home that time? How he told the person who found him he was going to buy some milk?’

‘Carol isn’t Leo’s mother,’ said Anastasia. ‘Carol is Harriet’s mum.’ Harriet was staring at them through the car window, her earrings sparkling inappropriately. Anastasia had begun to feel very odd. It had started as a melting warmth deep in her belly, and now the narcotic deliciousness was spreading slowly through her. She waited as Carol got in her car. She watched Carol flick her fringe in the rearview mirror, buckle her seat belt, then she returned Harriet’s wave as the car pulled away from them.

Anastasia slipped her arm around Evelyn’s waist and they turned to go inside, but when they paused at the gate to look up at the sky, the night’s immensity explained to her the strangeness she was feeling. She was feeling no fear. She wasn’t frightened for Leo, or herself, and the childless years didn’t loom horribly either. Even the future of the planet no longer seemed
imperilled. Nothing was urgent. Nothing had to be done about anything. It was extraordinary to feel so free in this way, free and empty, although it hardly felt human at all. Maybe it was how a god might feel; a god gazing down on the small concerns of the lives below.

Evelyn went into the backyard with the scissors while Anastasia lit the gas under a saucepan of water. She chopped a couple of garlic cloves, then she opened the jar of anchovies.

I wonder why I can’t stop?

Instead of taking the few fillets she needed for the pasta, screwing the top back on and returning the jar to the cupboard, Anastasia was eating the anchovies. She had started slowly, savouring one before putting another in her mouth – relishing their flavour and texture, but experiencing, too, the faint, familiar revulsion – but now she was shovelling anchovies in by the forkful, dripping yellow oil all over herself and making a hell of a mess on the bench.

I wonder why?

Wonder?

I?

She had arrived somewhere consciousness didn’t know about. She had to have the anchovies, that was all she knew. In her mouth, inside her body – the anchovies were necessary. The soft meat. The soft bones. The salt.

She ate all of them, every last one. Out in the vegetable garden, Evelyn was complaining about her back again. Anastasia wiped her face with a tea towel, poured the remainder of the oil down the sink, rinsed the jar under the hot water tap, and quickly stashed it at the back of the cupboard.

‘I picked a lettuce too,’ said Evelyn.

Anastasia tried to sound calm. ‘Bad news,’ she said. ‘The anchovies were off.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Evelyn.

‘They weren’t okay,’ said Anastasia, turning to pour herself a glass of water. Oh, she felt so incredible! So zinging! So alive! As though she had been suffering from an anchovy deficiency all her life, and now every single one of her cells was applauding. Her cells were all jumping up and down and clapping their tiny hands.

‘Let me have a look,’ said Evelyn. ‘Where are they?’
‘I chucked them out – flushed them down the toilet.’

‘What? Why? I don’t think it’s even possible for anchovies to go off! Why the hell didn’t you give me a whiff?’

‘I read something about old jars of stuff coming from Chernobyl,’ Anastasia said.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake, Tash! That was last century!’ Evelyn shook her head. ‘You’re too weird sometimes, you know that?’

The police were there for nearly an hour. They sat on the edge of the chairs in Anastasia’s living room and asked the women questions about the twilight they had spent on the porch.

‘The ceiling light would be preferable,’ said Constable Burgess, after Anastasia had switched on a floor lamp. The women’s bowls of half-eaten pasta grew cold on the coffee table as the interview wore on.

‘So whose shoes are they then?’ asked Constable Burgess, after Anastasia had told her she lived alone.

Anastasia looked behind her. ‘The Blundstones?’ she said. ‘They’re my work boots.’

Constable Burgess was petite, blonde, and chipped from a block of ice. ‘Yours?’ she said.

‘Yes,’ replied Anastasia, flexing her foot in evidence. She was familiar with this psychic tussle between big and small women. At another time she might have enjoyed tussling back, but it was now more than two hours since anyone had seen Leo and nothing else mattered. To the best of anyone’s knowledge, Anastasia and Evelyn had been the last two adults to see the little boy. Evelyn told the police she had warned him about the cactuses.

‘What about them?’ asked Constable Tomac, who was tall and bendy with a face so sweet his choice of vocation seemed either a courageous or a foolish one.

‘Just that they’re sharp,’ said Evelyn.

And what could Anastasia tell them about those last moments before Leo disappeared down the path? That he’d been wearing Crocs on his feet, and maybe they were red ones? How her arms had ached to see him go?

‘Some of the mothers have mentioned the biscuits,’ said Tomac.
‘But they were meant to look like witches’ fingers,’ said Evelyn. ‘They were supposed to be fun.’

‘Did you make them?’

‘Me? Hell, no. Tash is the creative one.’

‘The biscuits were your idea?’ asked Burgess.

‘Yes.’

‘Are there any left?’

‘No, they’ve all gone.’

‘And you yourselves,’ said Tomac, ‘what would you yourselves have been having?’

‘I’m sorry?’ said Evelyn.

‘We were having a glass of wine,’ said Anastasia.

‘Is that really important?’ Evelyn said.

‘I’m sure it has to be asked,’ said Anastasia.

‘Was it wine from a bottle?’

‘Is there any other kind?’

‘You know there is, Evelyn,’ said Anastasia.

‘Not that I would ever drink,’ said Evelyn.

‘Is there any wine left in the bottle?’

‘No,’ said Anastasia, ‘that’s all gone too.’

After Constables Tomac and Burgess left, Anastasia put on the kettle. While she waited for the water to boil she looked around the messy kitchen and wondered if she might be experiencing some sort of shock. She thought she was apprehending the seriousness of the situation – the police had told them a search centre was being set up in the hall of the local primary school – but at the same time, the very same time, she was still feeling sensuous and floaty, sublimely omniscient. She was feeling above it all – yes, above it, and wasn’t that awful? What on earth could be wrong with her?

‘I won’t have tea,’ said Evelyn, putting their bowls down on the bench. ‘I want to get going.’

‘I thought you were coming to the school with me?’

‘I’ve decided to pick up Edward,’ said Evelyn, pulling her keys from her bag. ‘I want him at home tonight.’

‘I think I’ll still go and help with the search.’
‘You’ll keep me posted?’ said Evelyn, as they kissed goodbye on the porch.

Anastasia watched Evelyn walk down the path. She waited until she heard the gate close, then she turned off the porch light and closed the front door behind her. She stood in the hallway with her arms folded, listening to the silence inside her home. Silence would meet her in all the rooms too, but she could hear the fear in the streets outside, along with the faint but nerve-shredding screech of people trying very hard to be hopeful.

In the lounge room she turned off the ceiling light to restore the shadows that had vexed the police, then she went into her bedroom and slowly pulled the curtains closed. She didn’t want tea anymore, and she wouldn’t be going to the school either. She stripped off her clothes and ran her hands lightly over her body. Her skin felt softer than usual, as though her hands belonged to a man who adored her. In her underwear drawer she rummaged for her nicest pair of knickers and least-oldest bra, then she opened the wardrobe door in search of a particular dress. She needed to wear this dress in the very same way it had been necessary, just a few hours ago, to stuff herself with anchovies. The dress was long, black, and so severe it required all her wit and strength to wear it. A dress so without adornment and pleading that it could mean only one thing: I am above it all.

In the bathroom she cleaned her teeth and messed-up her hair with her fingers. She hooked silver hoops through her ears. She drew on eyeliner. She applied dark cherry lipstick and two squirts of Shalimar, then she stepped back from the mirror.

How did she look?

She looked like a woman just a little bit out of her mind.

* 

There was a woman named Anastasia who had wanted a child very badly. Sometimes, when her baby was small, it wasn’t always easy to remember this. There were days when she looked at her tiny son through her tears, and begged him as feverishly for some rest as she had once begged the fates for him.

On other days, her happiness was so light, gossamer, it almost wasn’t there.
She never thought about the magpie’s visits. Or rather, she chose to think about them in the same way she thought about dreams she’d once had: they had happened but they weren’t real. Sometimes when she woke in the middle of the night she might hear a magpie warbling somewhere, but it had nothing to do with her, it was just a bird going about a bird’s business, just as she was a woman stumbling towards her child’s bedroom with her breasts streaming, going about hers.

Her baby had been ten days overdue and when he came into the world he was dark red and dry, a strip of beef jerky. She had named him Rafael. His hair was dark and his eyelashes excessive. She thought his skin was like hers. She had preserved a sense memory of his father’s flesh – the smooth, dense meat of his flanks – but she had forgotten his face almost entirely. He had been tall like her, and dark like her too, and when they had left the bar where she found him it felt good to walk down the street together, their matching steps and every little thing about the way their bodies moved through the night.

‘Maybe now you can forgive your wife?’ she said to him later, as she was preparing to leave his hotel room.

‘You seem to want me to,’ he said.

‘She sounds like she’s worth it.’

‘I think you’d probably be worth it too.’

‘You have no idea what you’re talking about,’ she laughed.

‘See,’ he said. ‘You already know me so well.’

The killer of little Leo Bailey had been sentenced to life. No parole, it wasn’t his first crime. Anastasia saw the man on television and she saw the afflicted face of Leo’s mother. She knew she owed a debt to Wendy Bailey, but while the nature of the debt remained obscure and the amount as yet unspecified, she tried never to dwell on it.

She was drinking more. Twilight was the hardest. The hours when someone might come home to them, but no one did.

Halloween arrived again, but this time there was no trick or treating in the street. Anastasia planned to mark the date of Rafael’s conception privately, with wine and smoked almonds, after he had gone to sleep. She hadn’t forgotten that Wendy Bailey would be remembering the day too, so it could
not have been called a celebration. She simply wanted to curl up with a cushion at the end of the sofa and quietly consider, as she drank her way through a reasonable bottle of cabernet, the events of last Halloween.

She thought she was ready to reflect upon voyages: the souls that had arrived this night one year ago, and the souls that had left. She felt she was, at last, ready to make some sense of things, but she was not even halfway through the second glass of red when she became so jittery and weepy she lunged for the TV remote.

Anastasia was in the garden. She was planting Black Russians again, a tomato she’d never had much luck with in the past. Last year there had been a bounty of fat Beefsteaks; she’d piled the tomatoes three-high on the kitchen windowsill and stacked them up on the bench and still everyday there had been another bucketful. Rafael had been tiny then and she too tired to cook, and she had eaten the tomatoes like apples, standing alone at three a.m. in the dark kitchen, dripping olive oil and salt on the floor.

This would be the final harvest and then they would be leaving this place. George had taken a tumble at the beginning of winter, and his son had wasted no time installing him in a nursing home and taking care of things. Four new townhouses, that’s what his son saw for the house and garden in which he had been raised.

And at a pinch, six.

Anastasia looked up to check on Rafael. He was happily monstering his stuffed donkey, Horace, on a blanket beneath the apricot tree. She didn’t know where they would go when they left, what she could afford, if there would ever be another garden for them like this one. She stood and stretched her back. Rafael sat upright like a frog and began shredding the Aldi catalogue. Don’t worry baby, she sang to him. Don’t worry bay-ay-bee.

He looked at her for a moment with a scholarly expression, then slowly, clunkily, he rose to his feet.

‘Good boy,’ she said, reaching out her hands to him. ‘Come to mama.’

Rafael frowned and took one wobbly step, then another.

‘Keep going,’ she said. ‘Come to me.’ He seemed to be soberly and methodically organising something deep within himself, then suddenly his
frown lifted and he stepped shakily out of the shade into the sunlight, his face lit with pride.

There wasn’t even a sound to warn them. The magpie swooped and dipped its beak at Rafael’s head. Anastasia screamed and rushed forward, waving her arms wildly, but the creature dismissed her calmly with its orange eye, lifted lazily into the air, and slowly flapped away.

Anastasia scooped up her baby and held him tight. ‘It’s all right,’ she said, smoothing his heaving back. ‘Everything’s all right.’ He had been just a few hours old when she first heard him cry like this – cry with outrage and forsakenness and bitter, furious need – and it had made her wonder about the pain of people who lived with this cry still inside them. The pain of people whose childhood cries had never been met, whose nerve endings were still wide open and waving; waving for someone to see them, hear them, rock them quiet.

*Sssh now, baby. I’m here.*

Rafael’s tears were nearly done. He had discovered a fascinating button on his mother’s dress, and while he was busy trying to get the button into his mouth, Anastasia took the chance to sift through his curls and feel along the top of his head. She couldn’t find any blood. There was only a little swelling, and what was either a small lilac bruise or a shadow, so it was the shock and insult that had hurt him the most.

‘All good,’ she said, wiping Rafael’s nose with the hem of her dress.

Only now it was time to take care of her own feelings. There was nothing too unusual about a magpie swooping, was there? It was nesting season, after all. She had seen birds swoop before. Hadn’t she even been attacked herself once, while riding her bike, a long time ago? So perhaps it was only the manner of the magpie’s attack that felt so disturbing. It hadn’t exactly been ferocious. And it hadn’t seemed territorial, either. The attack had appeared casual, almost recreational. The creature had dipped its beak into her baby’s head like … like … like a corn chip dips guacamole!

Rafael squirmed restlessly in her arms. His face was blotched and snotty and his eyelashes had clumped together in formidable spikes. *Corn chip?*

*Guacamole?* It was time she pulled herself together. Pulled them both together. It was time to go inside, clean themselves up, have something to eat – and push all these ridiculous fears away.
She hoisted Raffy higher on her hip and returned to the apricot tree to retrieve Horace. *Ohwah*, said Rafael, mashing the soft grey donkey to his chest. It wasn’t quite a word, but words would come. Words and sentences and then conversation; her son telling her about himself.

There was so much to look forward to.

She walked slowly with Rafael towards the house. The vines on the old fence were fruiting again. The dark red grapes that she had never picked. Too sour to eat, each year they shrivelled and died like rubies with their light extracted. She’d always felt bad about the waste, but this, too, she would soon be leaving behind.

Rafael was singing quietly, dribbling on poor Horace, who should really go in the wash. Her baby seemed quite recovered now and it was nearly five, not long before her first drink. She thought of the lamb chops defrosting for her dinner and bent down to break a sprig of rosemary off the bush by the back steps. ‘Rosemary will only grow in the house of a wise woman,’ she told her son, tickling his nose with it.

*The corn chip can do whatever it likes with the guacamole.*

A spasm of fear rooted her to the spot. Surely she knew this by now – the magpie always came with a message. And wasn’t this the message the magpie had delivered? That the relationship between the corn chip and the guacamole is one of entitlement?

*Did the bird feel entitled to her son? Did the diabolical creature think it had rights?*

Rafael’s gaze was fixed upon the sprig of rosemary his mother was holding. He wanted the rosemary, but something about it troubled him too. Was it the way the rosemary trembled? The way his mother’s hand was shaking and how her head had turned away from him and her heart was beating in her neck?

*What rights did the creature have? The rights of a monstrous father? A sly benefactor? Please, god! Not the right to fly away with him?*

Rafael remembered the first time his mother crushed some rosemary for him. The scent had made him screw up his nose, but she had laughed and dabbed her sticky finger on the end of it. Oh, his mother’s laugh! His mother’s laugh could unspill milk! He wanted the rosemary, but more than anything in the world he wanted his mother to come back to him. He held on
tight to Horace. He bent his donkey’s ears. Grey one way, the other way pink. Why weren’t they going inside, where they were always happy? It must have something to do with him, because didn’t everything? It was *his* fault his mother had forgotten him!

Anastasia knew that the magpie would be back. Only next time it wouldn’t come to deliver just another cryptic message. No, the bird’s next visit would be unambiguous. It would be faithful to its black and white nature. Next time the creature would come righteously, unforgivingly, to call in its debt.

Rafael chewed on Horace’s nose, though it was really no nose to speak of. He felt the violent trembling overtaking his mother’s body. What if she dropped him? And even if she didn’t, what if this happened again? She might drop him then, she might not pick him up, she might fail him. Or worse – worst of all – she might stay forever as she was now, not looking or smiling, concealing her heart from him.

How he hated her! He hated her! He hated her!

He recalled the few shaky steps he’d taken before the bird pecked his head. Soon there would be more steps, and all being well, in a while he’d be able to walk by himself. After that, it would simply be a matter of practice, until, in the not-too-distant future, whenever his mother caused him difficult feelings again – any difficult feeling at all – he would just trust his own mighty legs.

And run far away from her.
VI

In order to reimagine the content of ‘Man of Aran’, I chose the fairy tale form for several specific reasons. Childlessness, for one, is a theme often found in fairy tales. The Grimm tale, ‘The Juniper Tree’, is a fine example:

Two thousand years ago, or a very long time anyway, there lived a rich man and his good and beautiful wife. They loved each other dearly. There was only one thing needed to complete their happiness, and that was children, but as much as they longed for a child, and as much as the woman prayed both day and night, no child came, and no child came. (Pullman, 2012: 187)

A fairy tale about childlessness comes heavily freighted with meaning. The meaning has been built slowly over time, and it is composed of layer upon layer of other stories – fairy stories and folk tales and myths – so that, to read one fairy tale about childlessness is, in a sense, to read all of them. Childlessness in the world of the fairy tale may mean an imbalance in the natural order, a discontent, a quest, a blight, a curse, or a loss of life-altering proportions. Childlessness in the real world means some or all of these things too, but in writing ‘Only a Fairy Tale’, I rejoiced in the supersaturation of the fairy tale form – its compacted, preexisting meanings freed me from the need to labour the psychology of my childless protagonist, Anastasia, and it was also no longer necessary to strain to convey, as I had in ‘Man of Aran’, the poignancy of the quest to be a parent.

In ‘Only a Fairy Tale’, in the form of the enigmatic and riddling magpie, I also deployed another common fairy tale element, and I did so for several reasons. For one, I had wanted an animal to live with agency in this story in opposition to all the animals that die helplessly in “Man of Aran’. I hoped this opposition would help to open a dialogue between the novel and the story that the different modes of realism and fantasy might otherwise mute. Unlike the plucked and bloody turkeys in ‘Man of Aran’, I did not approach the magpie in ‘Only a Fairy Tale’ with humane concern; the creature cannot sensibly be said to inhabit the realm of ‘flesh and blood’ which draws man and animal together in my novel. Rather, the magpie in the story might best be seen as an element in a still-life painting is seen, that is, in aesthetic and the-
matic relationship to other elements. If, for example, a still life contains the image of a dead pheasant, then a seam of the colour orange appearing amongst its feathers might be repeated elsewhere in the painting in the form of a ripe persimmon. The birds in my novel and story exist as do the pheasant and the persimmon – for structural balance and integrity, for patterning, and for the meanings that arise from their juxtaposition.

The magpie in my story is a supernatural creature that plays with human fate. Animals have long played significant roles in storytelling; in fairy tales, fables, allegory and myth, animals have existed to represent aspects of the human, or else they have existed as themselves, but principally in order to challenge or enable human life. The ambiguity of the relationship between Anastasia and the magpie is one that is often found in fairy tales in which animals act as agents of change, but in ‘Only a Fairy Tale’ the anxiety arising from these ambiguities is intended to suggest an anxiety about the contemporary practices of reproductive science and commercial surrogacy. Like these, the magpie operates on promise and stealth. Will the magpie (the baby-making industry) uncomplicatedly grant Anastasia’s wish, or does malevolency lurk in desire’s fulfilment? What is the real nature of the transaction between woman and bird? What are its debts, self-delusions, responsibilities?

In the story, I break with the pattern of the traditional fairy tale by refusing to answer any of these questions. I allow uncertainty to linger. These uncertainties speak to all that is unknown or concealed in the world of assisted reproductive technology: the opaque nature of its business models; the unexamined ethics, exploitations and contingencies, as well as the human stories that remain hidden behind the dazzling prestidigitations of commerce and science.

‘Only a Fairy Tale’ is, of course, a highly ironic title, suggesting as it does that human desire can never be resolved with the satisfaction and completeness of a fairytale, that a fairy tale’s order and justice are unobtainable in the real world. The terms of Anastasia’s motherhood will long remain obscure and unsettling. At the end of the story, she may hold a baby in her arms but nothing is secure, nothing is unchanging. Anastasia’s desire, which thus far has directed the narrative, is replaced by the desire of her son. “One does not

As I reflect upon ‘Man of Aran’ and ‘Only a Fairy Tale’, it seems that my realist novel is, arguably, the truer work of fantasy, and that my fairy tale comes closer to representing the impenetrable, ungovernable nature of reality and lived experience. The fantasy to be found in the novel is the idealised fantasy that lies at the heart of all desire. David Quinn’s desire for a child, my own desire, and, I would suggest, the desire of those people who are drawn to the hope offered by reproductive technology – this desire is, understandably, built around the fantasy of having for one’s own a child who is whole and well and capable of claiming an enriching life for themselves. It is also a fantasy of a lasting child and parent bond, a reciprocal affection; it is the fantasy that posits family as the solution to the anxiety of existence.

Despite its fairytale elements, ‘Only a Fairy Tale’ is a work no longer in thrall to this ideal. On a personal level, it is a story that represents for me the ways in which I have come to a more philosophical accommodation of my state of childlessness, and as a crafted work of the imagination, I hope it no longer reads, to borrow from Iris Murdoch again, as “a soft, messy self-indulgent work of enslaved fantasy.”

The reimagining of my novel’s subject did not, however, deliver to me any quasi-experience of Virginia Woolf’s ‘statues in the sky’. Instead, the writing of a compromised novel, the long process of reflecting upon this and the complex work of reimagining, has been a confronting yet transformative experience, and one that has exhausted my belief in the very concept of ‘statues’.

I doubt now the idea of there being any one ‘moment’ of realisation in a creative work; the image no longer has any significance for me when thinking about the process of writing. Writing begets writing: for me, this is presently the more engaged and encouraging way of thinking. ‘Statues in the sky’ seems too romantic an idea; it represents an approach to creative work and the self that I find too absolute and commanding, and thus, perhaps, too unforgiving.

I make no criticism of Virginia Woolf. Woolf was, after all, simply recording, after a long period of sustained work on a novel, a private note in her
journal about a small, hopeful insight she had had that day. “It is bound to be imperfect,” she also wrote, referring to her work-in-progress. (155) Rather, it is my own vision of neo-classical statues posed lyrically against a perfect sky that now represents to me another kind of enslaved fantasy; the idea that a writing process, too, might conform to a shapely narrative, and one that tends toward the triumphant and heroic. I now believe in nothing so exalted about writing.

Lacking this belief, it is no longer clear to me what I consider to be important about the writing of fiction. I have burned down my house, and now I am sifting through the ashes for those objects that have withstood the flames, for fragments of the things that were once precious to me. (I may be making a claim here for the dismantling of a romantic approach to writing, but clearly I’m not yet beyond a hyperbolic and fragranced analogy.) The ways in which my imagination will order the chaos of writing my next novel is also unclear to me. I’m unable to predict my writing process now that the nature of my self-talk and relationship to my work has changed; every writer needs to mark stations along the way, but I no longer have a sense of what those stations will look like. For now, I exist, not unhappily, in an interregnum.

In her 1996 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, ‘The Poet and the World’, the late Polish writer Wislawa Syzmborska refused to educate her audience with grand, unifying theories about creativity. She offered no consoling and redemptive claims for literature. She was there to be consistent, to maintain integrity with a self who had renounced all systems and ideologies that seek to impose regulations on thinking. She was there to be the poet who had written ‘Discovery’:

I believe in the refusal to take part.
I believe in the ruined career.
I believe in the wasted years of work.
I believe in the secret taken to the grave.
These words soar for me beyond all rules without seeking support from actual examples.
My faith is strong, blind, and without foundation. (Szymborska, 2000: 124)
In her Nobel Prize speech, Szymborska did, however, speak about what was valuable to her. Szymborska said: “I value that little phrase, ‘I don’t know.’”

I can imagine no more capacious a thought. I don’t know. I can think of no better place to start.
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