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hood

A NOVEL

EMMA
DONOGHUE

"Ms. Donoghue displays her confidence by avoiding the grandiose and showy, and dipping into the ordinary with control and the occasional sustaining descriptive flashes of a born writer."

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INSIGHTS,
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Hood

A NOVEL

EMMA DONOGHUE

HARPER  PERENNIAL

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • NEW DELHI • AUCKLAND

Epigraph

I kept
to the road, kept
the hood secret, kept what it sheathed more
secret still. I opened
it only at night, and with other women
who might be walking the same road to their own
grandma's house, each with her basket of gifts

Olga Broumas, 'Little Red Riding Hood'

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Hood was written in Frances's hammock in Dublin, on Denis's couch and by Anne's fan in New York, under Helen's pines in Washington, beside Amy's river and Linda's pool in Vermont, but mostly in my rocking-chair in Cambridge among my second family. Warm thanks to all, as well as to my editors Kate Jones and Terry Karten, and to the best of agents, Caroline Davidson.

*'S a chara mo chléibh
tá na sléibhte eadar mé 's tú*

SUNDAY

Mayday in 1980, heat sealing my fingers together. Why is it the most ordinary images that fall out when I shuffle the memories? Two girls in a secondhand bookshop, hands sticky with sample perfumes from an afternoon's Dublin.

Up these four storeys of shelves, time moves more slowly than outside on the quays of the dirt river. One window cuts a slab of sunlight; dust motes twitch through it. I shut my eyes and breathe in. 'Which did I put on my thumb, Cara, do you remember?'

No answer. I stretch my hand towards her over the Irish poetry shelf, as if hitching a lift. 'All I can smell is old books; you have a go. Was it sandalwood?'

Cara emerges from a cartoon, and dips to my hand. She wrinkles her nose, which has always reminded me of an 'is less than' sign in algebra.

'Not nice?' I ask.

'Dunno, Pen. Something liquorishy.' Her eyes drift back to the page.

'I hate liquorice.' All I can make out now is vile strawberry on the wrist. I offer my thumb for Cara to smell again, but she has edged down a shelf to Theology. My arm moves in her wake and topples a pyramid of *Surprising Summer Salads*.

I'm sure to have torn one. I have only ninety-two pence in my drawstring purse, and my belly cramping. It occurs to me to simply shift my weight on to the ball of my foot and take off like a crazed rhinoceros through the door. Then, being a responsible citizen, even at seventeen, I put my mother's spare handbag down beside the sprawl of books, and kneel. The princess who sorted seeds from sand at least had eloquent ants to help her. All I get are Cara's eyes rolling from the safe distance of the Marxism shelf, and a snigger from some art students over by the window. Luckily the black-lipsticked Goth at the till is engrossed in finding a paper bag for an old atlas; in any other bookshop a sales-woman would be pursing her lips and planting her stiletto heel six inches from my fingers. The tomb of *Surprising Summer Salads* I build is better ventilated than the original, almost Japanese. They have been neat, no one can make me buy a copy. If it were *Astonishing Autumn Appetizers*, now, I might consider it.

I'm blithering, amn't I?

Cara is over by Aviation pretending not to know me, so I set off downstairs, trying to soften the slap of my feet on the wood. Ragged posters for gigs and therapies paper the winding stairwell; the sellotape fingers flap in my breeze. Between the third and second floors the blood wells and I think they may be going to topple. Familiar clogs hit the steps behind me.

'Cup of coffee?'

Cara doesn't seem to hear, as her shoulders poke past, but when we have come out of the bookshop on to the dazzling quay she says, 'I'm off caffeine, Pen, I thought I told you.'

'Since when?' I shout into a surge of traffic.

'This morning.'

I let out my sigh as a yawn. 'A glass of water and a doughnut?'

'As you wish.'

I pause for a second halfway along the Ha'penny Bridge, to feel it bounce under the weight of feet. I refuse the first and second cafés we pass, as rip-offs. Cara wipes a dark red strand off her eyebrow.

'Pen, you know I've got plenty.'

'I'd choke on a bun that cost thirty-five pee.' It sounds like a point of principle, but is based on the ninety-two pence remaining in my purse.

We thread our way through the crowd on College Green in what I hope is a companionable silence. Town is full of twelve-year-olds in limp minis and pedal-pushers; their shoulders are peanut-re scored with strapmarks. I have often wondered if the Irish consider it ungrateful to use sun block. As we head up Grafton Street the light is like a splash of lemon juice in my face. I turn my stiff neck to find Cara, but she is ahead of me. Five yards ahead, in fact, sprinting. How odd. I scan the mass of shoppers for a familiar face, but then I realize that she is not running up to anyone, just running. Her head is down. Her fringed purse is smacking from rib to rib. I stand still and lose her.

When I catch sight of her narrow body hurtling past the flower barrows, a great weariness comes over me. It occurs to me, by no means for the first time, to let Cara go. But while that thought is worming its way down the nerves, through the labyrinths of flesh, to reach my feet, they are already flailing a path up the street. When I get past the cluster of tourists around the mandolin player, I grab my handbag under my elbow and gather speed. Cara is nowhere in sight, but I trust that even lank footballers run out of energy when they've eaten nothing all day and their clogs are heavy.

Exercise is good for cramps, I tell myself, ho ho. It is not so much the pain that worries me as the possibility that I may take a leap too far and leave my reproductive system, steaming gently, on the pavement outside Bewleys Café. What was the name of that woman in labour, who, forced to race against a horse for the men of Ulster, gave birth at the winning post and cursed them to suffer the same pains every year?

At the top of Grafton Street I begin to doubt my lung capacity. Motivation falters too; Cara could be halfway to Belfast now for all I care. Then I catch sight of a moving dot halfway along Stephen's Green. I heave a sticky breath and launch myself forward again, swerving round a lamp-post.

My little gold boat is swinging on its chain, its points pricking my throat. Slow down, Cara! 'Caaaahra! Cha-cha-cha!' as the girls at school bawl when we play rounders out the back field. You've made your point, my beloved. I am following, the puppet is still attached to its string. If you slowed a walk we could process with more dignity, a hundred yards apart, blinking in the sun. Slow down, damn you.

When Cara reaches the church she pulls up. Touched by one of their pink billboards, perhaps 'Repent' or 'Come to Me'. She slopes on to a bollard, her hands in her lap. I pound down the last stretch of pavement, feeling like a right eejit. Should I slow to a walk, or fall in a gory heap by her feet, or (this might surprise her) canter right by? I could catch that revving doubledecker before it leaves the bus stop.

Twenty feet before her I come to a halt. I had thought she might be crying, or at least sweating. Instead she is watching the traffic, her gaze neutral. The colour of thin typing paper, as ever. Her ribs are not heaving like a deck in a storm. Only a string of burgundy hair, dangling from her widow's peak, shows she's been running.

I don't expect her to look at me. She doesn't. 'You can't be very comfortable there,' I wheeze.

Cara gets up from her bollard and falls into line. I loosen the thin gold chain from where it is stuck to my collarbone. We plod along two sides of the Green. It occurs to me to suggest cutting through the park but what with sparrows and roses and all, it might seem inappropriately romantic. They are gutting some Georgian tenement; the bulldozers cover our silence. I stare up at the yellow crane, seeing myself fluttering from it like a snagged kite.

'Mind.'

Her long arm has tugged me out of the way of a truck. 'Sorry,' I say, absurdly grateful.

The cramps begin again now, throbbing in my thighs. To distract myself from self-pity, I marshal

my pity for Cara. ‘Are you all right, love? Did you suddenly feel sick? Is it the exams? I know you mightn’t feel like talking about it, but I need to know so as I can help.’

Not a word.

I finger my sailboat, my thumb fitting into the slight concavity in its back. ‘Was it something said?’

Her mouth twists, a smile or disgust, I can’t tell from this angle.

‘Please, pet, tell me.’

In the shop on the corner I buy us choc-ices for something to do with our mouths on the long way home.

A hint from Mr. Wall’s elbow, and I shut down on the memory of that peculiar afternoon and slipped to my knees. If it wasn’t for him I knew I’d daze right through the consecration, and I couldn’t blame it on the exceptional circumstances because I always daydreamed in mass. There was something hypnotic about the pattern of antiphons and coughs and acclamations. Six o’clock mass in particular the day having rubbed out the lines of thought until I could slip into a memory at the drop of a hymn book.

Right up to the responsorial psalm tonight I had focused on the appropriate pieties, especially about the funeral, which was likely, I decided, scanning the vast beige walls, to be grim, as grim as gets. So I aimed my gaze at the tabernacle and asked to be uplifted. If not all the way up then at least a couple of inches. For the first minutes of mass I had concentrated fairly holily, then, even muttered along with ‘let your face shine on us and we shall be saved’, but of course didn’t that start me off on Cara’s white, unshining face charging through the crowds on Grafton Street. Not a good choice, memories went, not at all uplifting. Not even educational, since I had never worked out what the hell had got into her that day.

Gotten, Kate would say; Americans said gotten, that much I knew. And sidewalk for footpath, of course, and jello for jelly and jelly for jam. None of which we had in the house since Mr. Wall preferred marmalade, and personally I could kill for chocolate almond spread, right now in fact, on toast. How I wished the Pope would do away with the hour’s fast before communion; not even the saints could have concentrated through fantasies of chocolate almond spread. And there might be scraping of Cara’s leatherwood honey left but she probably used that up before going on holiday. First out what Kate eats, I wrote at the top of a mental list, and buy it tomorrow morning after Immac. Also catfood for Grace; he’s resisting those rabbit chunks.

My eyes dawdled across the missalette. I had never noticed before that the official title of the ‘Lord have mercy’ prayer was the gracious phrase ‘Invitation to Sorrow’. Hey there, Sorrow, how’ve you been keeping? Come on in. If your bike doesn’t have lights you can always crash on our sofa tonight. Oh, so you’ll be staying a while, Sorrow? Planning to get to know me better? Grand, so. There’s tea in the pot.

All at once I was very glad, staring at Mr. Wall’s worn corduroys on the kneeler, that he had decided against a traditional funeral with cold ham and aunts trying to make the best of things. ‘No flowers’, I had put in the newspaper notice when I was drafting it at the kitchen table this afternoon only a matter of hours ago – and ‘donations to Women’s Aid’. I had picked that charity almost at random, but now I seemed to remember Cara saying that everybody should have somewhere to run to. (Or was it just the kind of thing she would say? Was I her ghost writer now, putting words in her mouth?) I had to explain what Women’s Aid was to Mr. Wall, who seemed rather shocked that such things were needed.

‘Take this all of you and drink it’, Canon O’Flaherty was suggesting through the microphone, ‘this is the cup of my blood.’ Kate would be delayed at Logan Airport, I decided, adding it to my list.

Winona too, of course, but I couldn't visualize her. Kate I could see, at least in outline, with her Wa kneecaps set against the back of the seat in front. I could imagine the apologetic drone over the speakers: ladies and gentle captain speaking unfavourable weather traffic controllers considerable period on behalf cabin crew opportunity to complimentary beverage. She'd be sparing a thought for her sleek leather luggage, moving her watch five hours to Irish time (impatient, wasn't she? wouldn't she be?), and deciding not to bother with the in-flight film, a heartwarming saga of this that th'other. Movie, she'd say, not film. I would have to refrain from sniggering when she came out with an Americanism. I couldn't expect a Dublin grin from someone who went over to the other side the year she turned sixteen.

The Canon was speeding up, probably aiming to be home for the repeat of *Glenroe* at seven. Or maybe he just knew the words so well that they slid together like raindrops on a window. 'Welcome into your kingdom our departed brothers and sisters and all who have left this world in your friendship,' he said conversationally. It had the ring of a holiday brochure: Fly Aer Lingus to Kingdom Come – passengers in Eternal Rest Class get a free pair of travel slippers.

I'm rabbiting, I thought. It's the shock. Must calm down, wise up, and so forth. Margarine, or some kind of low-fat dairy spread, that would be best; Americans were known to be paranoid about cholesterol.

Was Kate a smoker? Maybe the minute the captain switched off the no-smoking lights she'd be reaching into her holdall for one of those brands that are aimed at executive men and smoked by women who don't like being patronized. No boiled sweet for the take-off, thank you. She would have accepted a paper and pursued the economic scandals by now; perhaps she would already have launched into the crossword, her carved lips twisting at the worst of the puns. Black rain might ro over the wings, but she wouldn't be looking out her porthole. What was I talking about, she wouldn't even be in the plane yet; she'd probably still be packing, back at the smart apartment.

'Let us offer each other the sign of peace', and Mr. Wall's cool hand was taking mine before I woke from my daze. No need to meet his eyes. Receiving my clammy fingers back into my lap, I returned to wondering about his elder daughter. Tense, Kate would undoubtedly be, but which tension would lie topmost, out of all she had to choose from? If she hadn't been home in what, '92 take away '78, just over fourteen years, then chances were she despised this dog-shaped island and all of its foolish enough to cling to its wet ridges. Perhaps she was one of those people who couldn't stand the rain, though I never remembered her complaining on drizzly days at Immac. But then there was so much I couldn't remember, or never knew in the first place; I had only shared a classroom with her for nine months. It was just that I could imagine her as someone whom the rain would irk wildly. She would crack three black umbrellas into it every winter and shove them in bins with the lids blown off.

The good thing about all this frantic thinking was that I would sleep tonight. It might take a hot bath and cocoa and a cry but I would definitely be too tired to stay awake listening out for the phone, rehearsing the words of the call that would tell me it was all some Monty Pythonesque mistake and everything was grand, see you soon pet.

Stop. Stop it this minute, Pen, don't get sentimental on me now. The ushers will have to carry you out on a pile of collection plates, you great blubbering Cleopatra. Mr. Wall was straightening his blue silk tie as he stood up and bent towards me. Come on now, I barked at myself, get into the queue.

It had all been most businesslike on the phone at lunchtime. I tried Winona in Texas first, but I couldn't bring myself to leave such a message about her daughter on an answer-phone. Whereas Kate picked her phone up on the second ring; her bed had to be right beside it. The line was crackly, with a barely noticeable time lag. I said who I was and why I was ringing – calling, they said, never ringing – remember – and that the funeral would be delayed until Wednesday to give her and her mother time to get here. For a minute I thought we'd been cut off. I was shivering in the hall with my head against the

mirror, a draught slipping under the front door. I bellowed 'Hello? Hello?'

Then Kate's voice came back, and said she'd be there.

'Do let us know your flight number and I'll pick you up from the airport,' I told her, erring on the formal side rather than the maudlin, because that was Cara's favourite insult for me any time I showed sentiment she wasn't in the mood for. When I challenged her on what it meant, all she could come up with was the qualities she associated with the name Maud.

Anyway, the sister said that she'd see about a few days off, and would ring from the airport on arrival in the morning. (Ring, she said, not call, which threw me a little.) 'Which morning?' I asked, adding that I could never quite remember which way the hours went.

'Monday morning,' Kate told me, and clicked off.

This communion queue wasn't moving. What were they doing up there, baking the host from scratch? My mind kept lurching between memories. The last time Cara and I had exchanged more than two lines about Kate, that I could remember, was during the big snow. We were in Cara's bedroom overlooking the back garden; it must have been after I moved into the big house. Schools were shut, Mr. Wall happened to be staying with his aunt in Cork, Cara's eco-socialist-feminist-whatsit newsletter was skipping an issue, and the buses were off. We made a snowlady down behind the pear tree and reddened her nipples with wine, then went to bed for a three-day breakfast. If I closed my eyes now – only for a moment, as the sluggish queue of communicants came to a halt – there, framed in the small window, was the garden muted with snow, the pear tree dozing under its load, and Cara's hot flank against mine.

'I had the weirdest dream last night,' I tell her, making my voice sleepy. The end of the quilt has a seizure; Grace is worming his way in.

'Mmm?'

'I'm out in the Wicklow Hills, right, walking up a steep bit, I think it's the heathery patch above Lough Dan, and there's a few stragglers coming down, Germans with rucksacks and such.'

'Nothing weird about that,' yawns Cara.

'Well but, just as I've turned sideways against a granite boulder to let the last walker go by, I glance up and it's your sister.'

'Kate?'

'Have you another sister I don't know about?'

'Not that I remember.' Cara reaches down for the cat and lifts his clenched orange limbs on to her knees. 'Though I suppose they could have smuggled one or two away before I was born.'

I lean up on one elbow and keep my voice airy. 'In the dream her hair's blowing across her eyes and when she pulls it back the face is all dark, like those leathery bodies they found in the bog.'

'Uuurgh.' Cara sits up in bed and puts her crumpet down. Grace springs on to my thighs, clawing at the quilt.

'No, in the dream it isn't frightening,' I tell her. 'Or only a bit. Otherwise she's normal. She's got this black leather jacket and a cigarette in her hand.'

'Kate doesn't smoke.'

'She might by now.' I am concentrating on the cat, scratching the triangle of skull till his eyes narrow with pleasure.

'Nah, she's a control freak, she'd hate to need it.'

'It's just the dark brown face that's so strange.'

'You wouldn't recognize her if you did meet her, you know.' Cara tweaks the tip of Grace's tail. 'Big sis is probably in a twinset and pearls by now.'

'I would so. I was in her class.'

‘That was decades ago.’ The crumpet pauses, halfway to her mouth. ‘Listen to me. I used to say that when I just meant a while. But now it’s true. I’ve been on this planet for practically three decades.’

I laugh and take a bite out of her crumpet.

Cara pulls it away, getting butter on my cheek; her face is thoughtful as she bends to lick it off. ‘Honestly, you wouldn’t recognize Kate now, even I mightn’t.’

‘When did you see her last?’

‘Must have been that awful weekend we all spent in the cockroach motel in Cape Cod, in ’80. After that we stopped pretending we were a family.’

‘You must miss her, though,’ I say.

‘Really? Why must I?’ Cara sounds as haughty as her sister used to.

‘Well, you know, blood being thicker than water and all that.’

‘Bullshit’s thicker than either.’

I recoil. ‘I was only saying...’

‘Everybody’s always been only saying,’ she snarls. ‘Pitying me for my “broken home”, assuming all my problems can be attributed to my being a motherless waif.’ Slowing down, she adds, ‘One guy at college asked could that be why I turned out, ahem, the way I did.’

I groaned. ‘He didn’t! Freud lives.’

Cara rests her nose in the dip of my collar-bone. ‘Didn’t mean to bite your head off, by the way.’

‘Craven apology accepted.’

She puts her buttery tongue in my ear for a moment, as if taking a reading. ‘I do remember missing Kate for a while, actually.’

‘What about your mother?’

‘Missed her a lot more. Kept waiting for her to come back. The visits just upset me. But at that age you change so much in a year. You get used to anything. You forget your life was ever different.’

I nodded, not believing her.

‘In the long run I did fine with Dad. It was him I always used to run to if anything went wrong anyway. He didn’t think I was feeble the way Mum did.’

‘Surely –’

‘And the year after they left I got you, didn’t I?’ she interrupted, leaning to rub her nose along my wider one. ‘Kate and Mum are more like distant relatives now.’

‘That’s a bit sad,’ I told her.

‘It’s pretty normal. How often do you see your brother, who lives in the same city?’

‘Fair enough.’ I go back to stroking the cat, who is writhing in the valley of duvet between us. ‘His face would still be the same, you know.’

‘Kate’s?’

‘I bet she still looks just like her photo.’

‘Which?’

‘The one of her on rollerskates, in the dungarees.’

‘I don’t know any photos of her on rollerskates,’ says Cara puzzledly.

‘Don’t you?’

‘You mean those blue dungarees she never let me try on?’

Almost too late, I remember which photo I mean. The one I stole, all those years ago, on my first visit to the big house. I was a sweaty teenager in a red uniform, irked to be stuck watching television with the little sister when what I wanted was a walk in the woods with the big one. ‘Must be confusing it with some other picture,’ I tell Cara, and swipe the end of her crumpet.

My stomach was rumbling as I came back to the present, and to the top of the queue. A gleaming nu deposited the white circle on my tongue. It had taken me years to learn how to dissolve the swe papery wafer off the ridges of my mouth. Processing down from communion now, head dipped in wh my employer Sister Dominic still called the modesty of the eyes, I tried to realize that this was Go sliding down my throat. It was good practice, believing improbable things.

Believing was easier than bowing to his will, anyway. Once I began questioning his motives, I g so angry I wanted to hawk him up again. Why did you do it, you bastard? You couldn't have neede Cara more than I did. If times are all one in eternity, why couldn't you have waited a while longer f her?

Like me, Mr. Wall must have dreaded the after-mass jollity of neighbours who hadn't heard th news yet. Better to have them come across it in tomorrow's paper. So instead of sitting down for th final prayers we slipped out the heavy door into the dripping twilight. We got to my dark green Mi just as the rain turned heavier. While we fastened our seat-belts in unison it spattered on th windscreen. 'Kate's due in tomorrow morning,' I told him.

'Who's that?'

Was he losing his mind on me now? 'Kate,' I told him warily. 'And Mrs Wall.'

'Oh, forgive me, I still think of her as Cáit, must get out of the habit. Is her mother still callin herself that, Mrs Wall? Sounds a bit old hat.'

'I believe so. It goes well with Winona.'

'Yes, Win always had a weakness for alliteration.' He blew his nose into a large cotto handkerchief.

'So I'll pick them up at the airport, will I?'

'Would you mind, dear, that would be wonderful.'

As I drove through the deserted suburb Mr. Wall looked out the window, head bobbing like a chil on a trip. He glanced over once to say, 'About Wednesday.'

'I have that all in hand, don't worry your head. I left the ad on the newspaper's answerphone, an the Monsignor's booked.'

'You're very good.'

'And as far as I know all the friends are in the address book so I'll do some ringing rou tomorrow.'

'Ah, yes. Won't they see it in the paper?'

'They're not all *Irish Times* readers,' I explained, sliding the car on to the kerb outside the b house.

'Of course not,' said Mr. Wall guiltily.

The honeysuckle hung around the front door, gemmed with rain. I held my breath so as not smell it. The breeze caught the wind chime made of forks that Cara sent back from her Californian tr a couple of years ago. Such a honeyed tinkle they made; I stilled them with my hand.

We stood in the kitchen with nothing to do. The cat-flap crashed; Grace was off on his evenin rambles. I had put my handbag on the sideboard and now my arms hung down, fingers tingling. Th kitchen was full of that fuzzy grey light which builds up when a house is left empty round teatime. was afraid to move and disturb a cloud of it.

'Have you eaten, Pen?' asked Mr. Wall. 'I suppose one ought to.'

I bent to click on the electric fire; its bottom coil bloomed from rust to orange. 'I had some chee before mass, but you know me. I could fancy one of your soufflé omelettes.'

'Yes, you're partial to them.' I could hear his face brighten. 'Very good, give me ten minutes. And he set off like a dog loosed from its chain, snapping on the light and rummaging in the larder.

I checked Grace's water. I heard the sound of an egg smashing on the parquet, but pretended not t

notice as Mr. Wall mopped it up. I leaned my bulk against the mahogany sideboard, soothed by the sound of fork whipping egg-white. My eyes began to shut.

‘I wonder, dear, could you do me a favour and run me in later on?’

‘Run you in?’

‘Pay my respects.’

My head was still fogged up. ‘Oh of course. I just, yeah, sure, whenever.’

I cleared my throat in a roar and strode off. Though the living-room was dark, the sky was still blue gauze in the windows. The first thing I did was to draw the velvet curtains and shut it out. Then I snapped on the reading light by the fireplace. There was a torn envelope sticking out of the shelf between *Encyclopaedia of World Knowledge* and *Asterix the Gaul*. ‘Cara’, it said in an unfamiliar scrawl. A birthday card from last June? It was empty. I found a dusty biro on the hearth and began to make a list on the back of the envelope.

‘To Do’, it began confidently. ‘Notify Registrar of Births and Deaths’; the nurse on the phone had assured me it was urgent. I wondered had I spelled the word Registrar right; I kept visualizing him as God’s recording angel. ‘Funeral home will arrange chapel of rest and do med. certs’, I scribbled to reassure myself. ‘Ring relatives’, that was unless Mr. Wall showed any signs of initiative. And while he was at the phone, ‘Ring friends’. Cara’s Snoopy address book was down the back of the leather armchair, I remembered spotting it the other day. I walked over now and dug in for it; my back ached. I riffled its three-by-three pages; whose were all these first names, I wondered, all these Sues and Mels and Jays, and how many of them had she slept with? Moving on, moving on, best not to get bogged down in details. ‘Send back ID cards and passport’, I added to my list; I had read in some novel that you had to do that.

It exhausted me even to think of doing all these things. I folded up the envelope and put it in the pocket of my trousers. To kill time, I read the spines of all the books in the fireside case, left to right, top shelf to bottom. Nineteenth-century titles were the most comforting. When I had watched the last five minutes of Biddy and Miley’s thoughts on the weather in *Glenroe*, Mr. Wall carried in the air-omelette on a tray, and we switched over to a documentary on otters.

I was calm, I was doing fine. He passed me the unopened Bourbon Creams. It was only at the bottom of my second cup of tea that I realized I had eaten halfway down the packet without a pause. I tucked the cellophane over the top and put it back on the tray.

Mr. Wall had left his biscuit on the saucer. ‘Perhaps a quick round?’ At a time like this, the man wanted to play Scrabble.

He cleared his throat. I could see his lips tightening over his teeth.

‘Good idea,’ I told him.

The odd thing was, he played better than ever. He seemed gripped by the need not to think, not to daydream, not to let a word slip by. He put ‘seize’ on a double word square and countered my ‘zebra’ with a nest of the kind of two-letter words that are used only in Scrabble. I watched his face light up with achievement.

At eight exactly Mr. Wall stared at the hands of his watch. ‘Perhaps we should be thinking about making a move.’

‘Yes indeed,’ I said, too hearty.

I stood on the doorstep, waiting for him to get his raincoat. I would drive him there, I decided, but I would not make myself go in. Not that I was particularly squeamish, or would have been repelled by a battered face; Cara’s face had often looked battered from the inside. I just felt no need to see it, the thing they would call the remains. I knew it was more true to say that she was still wandering round the Aegean, buying postcards but no stamps. Not getting around to coming home, but not to be thought of as any less real than she ever was.

Mr. Wall was double-locking the front door. The honeysuckle dangled near my face, but I breathed through my mouth.

Minnie's ignition moaned into life as soon as I turned the key; no excuse there. The damp streets were deserted, the last courting couple having dawdled home with a steaming bag of chips between them. I always got this fantasy, driving through Dublin on a Sunday evening, that they had dropped that bomb which leaves buildings untouched but turns people to dust. I alone, through some whim of fate, had survived, full-fleshed, and was crossing town in a dirty green Mini. Where would I be heading, if I was literally alone in the world? I could raid the gourmet delicatessen, I supposed; shame to let it all spoil. Or perhaps a library, to hide under a table in the children's section. The bomb couldn't kill Cinderella.

'Next left we turn at, isn't it?'

'Oh yes,' I said, glad of his tactful reminder. Then I admitted, 'I was heading on in to Immac, on auto-pilot.'

'I never quite understood,' replied Mr. Wall, 'why you girls called it that.'

'What, Immac?'

'Of course I can understand that abbreviations are irreverent and therefore amusing, but why the change in stress? I would have expected not *Immac* but Immac, for Immaculate Conception Convent.'

'Oh, but did nobody tell you in all these years?' I stared at him. 'Immac's a brand-name for what's the word, a depilatory cream. You must have heard of it.'

'My wife preferred an electric razor.' Then, embarrassed by this confidence, he murmured, 'At least, as long as I knew her. I believe the police often set up a speed trap at this corner, perhaps...'

I went down to forty.

After a minute Mr. Wall began again. 'Immac, I get it now. The link must be the taming of adolescent females.'

'I don't remember the original reason, it just seemed funny at the time. When I was a pupil I thought they were trying to tame us, but since I've been teaching there, I realize what an impossible task that would be.'

For the rest of the journey through the increasingly seedy streets of the old city we talked about our jobs: my zealous nuns, his vague cataloguing assistants, my pre-pubertal brats, his precious books.

Sitting at the traffic lights, I watched the other drivers. They looked sober and careful but you never could tell. We were all potential killers nowadays.

I had never been to that hospital before, and never to a morgue. Or no, mortuary, that was the polite word. When my father died I was eighteen. I spent the day before the funeral cleaning the house so as not to disgrace us in front of the neighbours. My mother was hit much harder than I was. He had been a nice man, but not a very memorable one. I felt very low, of course, but not so low that I wanted to go to the mortuary and kiss his glassy forehead.

And since my father there had been no occasion. Remarkable, really, that death hadn't laid a bone-finger on me or mine for more than a decade. If it had, I would be practised in such matters, would know what to think when, would have some experience of the opening and shutting of the gates. As it was, I felt such an amateur. About to embark on the biggest loss I could imagine, with no practice in mourning a mother or even a pop star, and never having so much as stepped inside a hospital mortuary.

I wheeled in the gate and parked near the entrance for a speedy getaway. I mouthed a quick 'Eternal rest grant unto them and may perpetual light shine upon them.' The vision conjured up was of a neon-lit meat safe.

'You go on in,' I told Mr. Wall as he picked at his seat-belt.

His face was grey, with a bar of orange streetlight across it. 'Ah. You're not -'

‘I’ll stay in the car.’

‘Right so.’

It didn’t seem to have rained in this part of town. I watched him straighten his tie as he walked across to the light spilling from the main door, an unaccustomed slowness to his pace. I wondered whether he was getting a touch of arthritis, then realized that he was trying to be reverent.

The radio kept me going for five minutes of a play about Queen Medhb and Cúchulainn, but then snapped it off and the silence closed in. Not that a car was ever entirely silent, especially not an old banger like this. As the engine cooled a series of gentle clicks filled the air. ‘Hey, Minnie Mouse,’ whispered, ‘what say you ’n’ me go take a ride in the hills, see ourselves some stars and cut ourselves some turf for a bonfire by the light of the silvery moooooon.’ But no, we were waiting for the good gentleman in whose house (and garage, respectively) we lived rent-free, owing to our illicit amorous connection with the aforementioned’s younger daughter, the late Cara Máire Fionnuala Wall.

At that the silly voices slid away and my face shut down. The cheeks sank heavy as leather; the bones around the eyes fused into a helmet of pain. It was the word ‘late’ that did it. Such a stupid word to use of the dead, implying that they would be with us today if they hadn’t happened to be delayed in traffic somewhere and phoned ahead to say ‘Might be late, don’t wait up, pet’.

My fingers were locked around the steering-wheel. I made them tap out ‘Knocking on Heaven’s Door’, which by some perverse association was the first tune that came into my head. After the second verse I had myself in hand again. I could let the fresh memory through the valve, inch by inch.

It was just gone midnight last night; I remembered it because I had been glancing at the kitchen clock, just beginning to let myself worry that Cara’s plane had been delayed in Athens. It was a short call but a good one. Between echoing yawns she said that her tote hadn’t turned up on the conveyor belt yet, so she had told the others from the Attic to go ahead on the last bus to town. She said she would come home in a taxi as soon as the bag emerged from whatever cavern they hid them in. Little bourgeois, I called her, joking about the taxi fare. I hoped she knew I was joking, all the times I was. Actually I was glad to think of her laying her head back in the comfort of a taxi and speeding through the night to our hot pillows. When I had put down the phone I climbed upstairs, pulled the duvet over my head and slept like a trusting spaniel. In my dream a bare-breasted Amazon sat on a motorbike under my window, playing the bagpipes.

When I woke, even before the bagpipes turned themselves into the sound of the phone ringing, I knew it was later than it should have been. The flowery curtain was filling up with light.

The nurse had to ring twice. When she told me first, I thought, what poor taste, they say the best thing to do with hoaxers is to put the phone down on them straight away. But when she rang back I believed her, because she sounded so embarrassed. I apologized over and over for having slammed down the phone, and she kept telling me it was understandable. But there was nothing understandable about any of it.

Even as I sat here in the darkening car park of the hospital, I could make no sense of the story. I remembered the order of events, but that was all. My forehead pressed on the wrinkled leather of the steering-wheel.

Once the nurse had got it through to me that there was no point dashing in to the hospital, I started asking for details. I supposed I was afraid to stop talking, cut the umbilicus of the phone-line. I made her tell me all she knew, which wasn’t much. ‘Some kind of crash on the dual carriageway; sorry I don’t know any more’, she kept repeating. I got her to admit that the crash had happened round one o’clock the morning, and the surgeons were finished by three. She said I wasn’t rung till six because I’d needed all the sleep I could get. I expected to be angry with her, but I found myself touched at her concern for such a small thing as sleep.

After I had put down the phone, I stood there, telling myself ‘Be brave’, over and over. Then I g

dressed, pausing for quite a long time to decide between a blue and a grey cardigan. I went about my immediate duties, including telling Mr. Wall, though now I came to think of it I could not for the life of me remember what ghastly words I had chosen, and I would never dream of asking him. All I could remember was standing in his doorway, the hall light spilling in as far as the bump his knee made in the blanket. Not a sound came from his face, lifted off the pillow. I could tell he'd heard me.

Then, I remembered, I'd looked at the kitchen clock and it was still only a quarter past six. The best thing, the nurse had insisted, would be to visit the mortuary in the evening. So there was the whole of Sunday to fill. I was sitting at the kitchen table, considering whether or not to have breakfast. I was hungry, but under the circumstances it seemed vulgar to do anything about it.

And then it hit. It was as if I was crushed in a giant hand, like the tiny people in the fairytales illustrations. I was dangling by my hair one minute, my ribs popping between the giant's thumb and finger the next. A scream too wide to let out bulged behind my teeth.

I ran out the front door, as far as the gate. It was such a pretty morning. Hacking drily, I ran up the hill towards the woods; I must have had some notion of finding a space big enough for such a scream. I stumbled, jogged faster. Past the hair salon, pet shop and bridal boutique with all their metal shutters down. Past the inaccurate wrought-iron house names: Three Wishes, Four Willows, Seven Oaks, Avalon. As always when I passed the wall with its ancient white graffiti that said 'the cure', I wondered what would be cured, and when, and how. My lungs failed; my steps slowed and faltered. I was no longer running to get anywhere, just running.

When I got to the woods there was no more room than in the big house, and I had no breath left. I opened my mouth and the wind pushed in and sealed it up.

A woman and her golden labrador emerged from the cluster of horse chestnut trees. I waited till they were gone; I didn't want to frighten her, or have to give embarrassing explanations. When she was out of sight I opened my jaw again but only managed to produce a little gasp, a sort of yawn of pain. I realized that I was such a tame conditioned creature that I couldn't scream, even under circumstances that should have allowed for anything.

And it seemed that even here, hours later, soundproofed in my own vehicle in a deserted car park, I couldn't let out a sound. Mr. Wall was taking a long time in there. Glancing at the old-fashioned digital set into Minnie's dashboard I saw that only ten minutes had passed. Was every hour from here on in going to be played in slow motion? Was each of these new days going to feel like a week?

I wondered why Mr. Wall wanted to see his daughter's body. It was not something he and I would ever bring ourselves to talk about. We would each be far more afraid of upsetting the other.

He really was taking ages in there. Maybe I should go in and see if he was all right. Maybe I should stop being such a chicken and go and get it over with, this being the last chance to see what was left of Cara. They said it made it real, seeing the body. Not that I particularly wanted to make it real, I was much more comfortable with unreality, thank you very much. But if it was likely to become real on its own behalf one of these days – in a traffic jam, say, or while lifting a dish out of the oven – then I supposed I would prefer it to be now, with her in the flesh, or rather, the flesh but not her in it.

I got out, stretching my stiff knees. I'd parked beside an electricity generator; it was humming like some alien space-craft. 'Dang', said the notice, above half a lightning zigzag; the rest of the message had been ripped away. As I was locking Minnie's door, a horrible thought occurred to me: they might have made Cara up. She had always been intimidated by women who wore makeup, because they looked dramatic, and equally intimidated by those who wore none, because they scored higher on politics and self-confidence, so she compromised by putting on eyeliner, then wiping it off till you couldn't be sure she was wearing any. If they had got some mortician beautician type to do a full job on her, she might look grotesque.

Get on with you, PenDulous, stop procrastinating.

A knot of people emerged from the mortuary entrance. The only face turned up was that of a small girl sucking on the end of her plait, her eyes raised to the bulging moon. Couldn't be more than eight and she was coping. I slammed the car door, goading myself into action. As I strode past the family, the child gave me a thoughtful stare, with – bless her – no pity in it.

The corridor was white. The last of their group, an emaciated grandmother, was coming out of a door which she held open for me. I headed blindly through. No sign of Mr. Wall; he must have gone out another way. The coffin was on a sort of marble plinth, with a sheet up to the chin. Otherwise the room was empty. I was glad not to be observed.

Leave the face till last. Begin on the creamy cotton of the sheet. How small a body was, laid out this way; how little even Cara's long limbs came to in a standard box. The hands were waxy, knotted together in the clasp of prayer; I had expected that. Come on now, I hissed at myself, one look at the face and you can go back to the car. Get on with you. I turned my head and looked.

My first wild thought was that death had drained Cara's blood-red hair to a muddy blonde. The face below me was that of a young girl, twelve or so, and I ran, lungeing through the swing-door and out into the cool air. Seat-belt on, door locked, radio filling the car with seventies rock, I coughed and sobbed and coughed again. My cheeks stayed dry as paper. The tears were dammed up in my head, scorching me from the inside. They were not for Cara. They were for the girl on the wrong slab, with shiny knuckles and a nose pointed at the ceiling. It occurred to me that she must have been sister to the child I saw at the door, the one who had seemed more interested in the moon.

I could, of course, have gone in again and found the right slab this time, but I came to the swift conclusion that no slab would be the right one. By the time Mr. Wall tapped on the window I was calling again, and before I let him in I remembered to turn off the radio, which was playing something unsuitable about holiday, drive away, babe-ayyy.

Crossing the city, the only sound was the rain returning to spit at the windscreen. Mr. Wall sat upright, his hands clasped in his lap. I offered him not a single opening to tell me how it was, how she looked, what the small mercies were. Instead, I planned how to fill in each half-hour: *The Living Planet*, cocoa, *Cagney and Lacey*, a game of chess if Mr. Wall and I got desperate, and half a sleeping tablet just in case.

I was so worn out I fell asleep before I even took the tablet.

I dreamed of the big house, of chasing someone who was Cara but also a nun. We danced through the rooms, falling on soft carpets, sporting on the stairs. It was dark but we knew our way around. Halfway through we got the munchies and she, this nun who was Cara but also not Cara, went out to get twenty packets of crisps. I lay in a doze of content, the dusty fibres of the carpet under my cheek. At one point I heard the chimes tinkling madly outside, but I thought it was the wind. Surely if it was Cara she would use her own key or ring the doorbell? I did think of throwing the front door open, but I was afraid all of a sudden in case it was an intruder. I curled up on the carpet and fell back asleep.

But when at last I seemed to wake, still in the dream, it was morning, and I was cold. Then I found Cara's key, forgotten beside the teapot, and I knew she was lost out there. I ran on to the road then and hurtled down to the traffic lights. There was an unexpected opening in the tall hedge. I heard laughter, light and metallic. When I climbed through the glossy branches, I found a garden. There were hedges in the shape of letters I couldn't read from that angle, and fruit trees pruned into elegant poses. There was a summer-house painted white, with lanterns that trailed ribbons. I glimpsed Cara disappearing round a corner in knickerbockers and a frock-coat, her hair powdered high, her cheeks whitened above a beauty spot and a startlingly red cupid's bow. When she reappeared from a nearby corner of the maze, she laughed and glanced back over her shoulder at her pursuer. I could hear the swish of skirts along the hedge, louder than the wind in the trees. I turned away in terror of seeing the face of the one who was taking her away from me.

I woke up for real then, and found myself shivering under the heavy duvet. I was flat on my back stretched out like washing on a line. The minutes passed, one by one. No more sleep for me tonight. Cara had this irritating habit of asking life's biggest questions in the dark just before falling asleep herself, leaving me flat on my back in existential turmoil. Or sometimes we'd lie together in a post-coital erotic daze, and just as I'd be slipping away from consciousness, she would turn with a great heave pull the quilt and announce 'I'm wide awake, are you?' Other nights she was convinced she heard burglars and even if I knew it was the wind against the larder's broken window, I had to pull on my dressing gown and go see. I was not sure what I was meant to say to any burglars I might meet: 'My girlfriend's upstairs and she's taller than I am, though thinner'?

At least we did sleep compatibly together once we managed to stop talking. One couple I knew from college just couldn't do it. He got snoozy after sex, she got wired; he liked heavy blankets, she threw them off; he fancied sleeping all squashed together like tiger cubs, whereas she needed to turn him on his back and get him out of her head. They tried single beds, then they broke up.

The only other person I'd ever slept beside was my mother. Not at night – Dr Spock's child-rearing manual would never have allowed that – but sometimes on Sunday mornings when I was small she'd let me into her bed and we'd snooze till we had to leap up and go to mass. It was like being in a bird's nest; all sharp bones and warm curves. Her skin was infinitely softer than mine, starred with tiny creases, and it hung slightly loose on her bones so it moved when you squeezed her. Skin like that was what I still looked forward to about getting old. As we lay there, we'd play a game where Mamma would name the parts of my body, her firm palm descending in turn on Timothy Toe, Edgar Ear, Nellie Knee.

I wondered did she sleep well these nights, my mother. I remembered her saying once that you couldn't expect to sleep as long or as deeply when you were getting older, so it was best to keep a book by the bed. I didn't like to think of her propped up on her narrow headboard, reading Stephen King late into the night; how could someone so gentle relish such horror, and how on earth did she get to sleep afterwards?

Over on my back. I reached for my headphones, and turned on the *Goldberg Variations*. I was a right for the first few minutes, letting the trustworthy rhythm row me along, but then came a series of minor chords that pulled at my heart. I fumbled for the stop switch. At first the unemotive silence was a relief, then it began to sound just as loud as the music.

I turned on my side. Then on the other side. This was ridiculous. I couldn't be expected to get through the days if I didn't sleep through the nights. I fumbled for the two halves of the sleeping tablet on the dressing-table, and swallowed them down. The edge of the pillow wrapped round my eyes, I reached for an image of something warm and real, to clear the shreds of that costume-drama nightmare out of my head. A memory of our beginning, maybe, to ward off our end.

Sun and skin were the things that brought us together in the first place. Not a Greek island but our own island of concrete and iron, floating above Dublin. This was a film so old and re-run I couldn't tell fact from fiction. It was a memory I saved for when I really needed it, in case I wore it out.

Light spills across my desk, bleaching inky scrawls off the page. I know I won't mess the exams up again, because this year I have a friend. Cara thinks she will. She is taut and baking whiter in the hottest June in years. She grabs the elbow patch of my jumper when the bell rings for lunch. 'Come with me, little girl.'

'There's something I want to look up...'

'Shut your face and come with me.' She stands imperious, balancing pencils and rubbers on her sketchpad.

I leave my jumper sprawled on the back of my chair and follow her upstairs past the assembly hall

past the sixth-year common room, upstairs again past the art room, up once more past the bedridden nuns, up to the dead end where a small diamond of window looks on to the roof.

‘This door’s never open.’

‘Never say never.’ Cara is fiddling with the lock, her hands shaking. I take the key from her, and after a minute the door does shudder open. Blue comes to meet us. Breeze snatches at our long skirts.

‘But do you know the best thing?’

‘No, my lanky miracle-worker,’ I say, ‘tell me the best thing.’

Cara cranes upwards. ‘The best thing is, it was her who gave me the key.’

‘Which her?’ I ask, knowing the answer.

‘Mrs. Mew.’ She is hushed. ‘I told her I’d love to see what everything looked like to the birds. She just slipped it off her bundle of keys and said, “Then you must go up on the roof at lunchtime and draw”.’

‘She never. You nicked it.’

‘I wouldn’t.’ Cara’s voice is stern.

‘I know.’

We lock the door behind us. Over the baked black roof we pick our way, half-expecting a foot to rip through into reality again. Our steps get bolder. Cara does a twirl, her red pleats lifting like cramped wings.

‘Want me to pose?’ I ask, spreading my arms.

‘Nah, it has to be the environment.’ She chooses the longest pencil. For a while we sit against the warmth of the wall, peering over our elbows at the world we have escaped from. Black-habited an inch along the front drive; red jumpers loll and chase across the back lawn. Cara draws and rips, draws and scribbles out, showing me nothing. I shut my eyes, and everything disappears but the sun, scarlet through my lids.

‘I can breathe up here, Pen.’

‘Mmm.’

‘No, seriously, the air is different. Down there, I dunno, I can’t be doing with it.’

I sit up and remember my lines. ‘What’s up with you today? Is it the exams?’

‘Only partly.’ Cara shades in a curve, her mouth pursed. ‘It’s the bloody summer. I won’t see Mr Mew for sixty-seven days, minimum.’

‘Don’t think about that yet. We’ll work something out.’ My eyes are full of light, I can’t come up with any practical suggestions. Why can this girl not just sit in the sun? ‘Maybe –’

‘No but you’re not listening to me.’ Cara slaps down her pencil on the concrete and turns her angry eyes, almost colourless in this glare. ‘It’s like I’m carrying a stone urn on my head across a desert right, only no one can see it but me. The voices are all going “Caaaa-rah! come play tennis, come to disco, come down to breakfast, come on” – when any minute now the urn’s about to topple.’

‘And what if it does?’ I surprise myself by the question.

The corners of her mouth sag. Her breath hisses out. ‘Everything will soak into the ground, and there’ll be nothing left.’

‘Nothing to carry either.’ I cannot prevent the breeze from lifting my voice.

‘You don’t understand,’ Cara tells me. ‘If I didn’t love Mrs. Mew I’d be nothing. I’m just a haze of iron filings round her magnet.’

How can such a tall girl look so small, as if she is being dragged backwards through a tunnel? I wish I could help.’

Her look is gracious. ‘You do.’

‘I wish I could carry your damn urn for you.’

Cara takes my hand, shyly. It’s not something we tend to do. ‘You have the second-nicest eyes in

the world.'

'Why, thank you kindly, ma'am.'

'I wish, Pen, I dunno, I'd like to smile at you. I haven't given you a real smile in ages.'

The faint lips are opening as if to go on explaining, and I kiss them. They are so much softer and less frightening than I expected. I kiss them again, because she hasn't said no.

Then Cara does the most extraordinary thing. She opens the top three buttons of her blouse, picks up my hand and puts it in. She has always claimed to be flat, but under the hot sheen of fabric something is pointing into my palm. I have no idea what to do.

Her eyes are white with surprise.

Experimentally, I curve one finger down, and her eyes narrow, and her mouth slides as if to say something. I kiss the dry lips again. The bell for end of lunch goes, ten times in all. This is the sign for breaking the spell, gathering our possessions and wits, going back to the real world. Neither of us moves.

I suck soft air into my mouth. This rooftop is no longer attached; it has become our flying carpet, nine miles above the convent, sailing nearer to the sun. Cara is pulling up her hem. She is so near I can hear her breathe. She is cradled in my hot skirt. I would do anything for this girl. I will make her smile, make merry, make up for it all.

MONDAY

I woke wet, my body straining to her ghostly wrist.

Three full seconds of lull after I slapped off the alarm clock, before a great fist punched me in the guts.

I lay still for a moment under the shock of it. Then my soles thumped the carpeted boards, my hand lunged for the hairbrush. September sun was blazing through the window. Snap the bra shut with practised fingers, eight strides to the bathroom, face, teeth, underarms, eight strides back.

The phone rang twice, but Mr. Wall got it. I could hear his subdued vowels in the hall.

I had certain techniques for rationing emotion and making the hours click by. I was fairly sure I could do it, having got through other days which were each the first day after something unspeakable. If you put all those previous losses together they might add up to something approaching this one, and similarly, I reasoned, pulling on a loose skirt and shirt and my baggiest grey cardigan, my strengths would add up and be sufficient. Else what? the remaining third of a broken button asked me, but I ignored it and reached for my shoes. Eyes low, averted from everything that might remind me, which would have to include most things. Knotting my laces in a double bow, I focused on the blank wall and saw the grey smear where Cara dabbed correction fluid on a scuff mark the day before she went to Greece. I shut my eyes and concentrated on my laces.

Straightening the pockets of yesterday's trousers, I found my 'To Do' list and used a seashell pin to stick it to the cork board over the desk, between a crumpled sticker that said *Cork Women's Weekend is Fun in '91* and a photo of Grace dangling resentfully from the hammock a couple of summers ago. It was blurred, but then Grace was often blurred.

When I reached the kitchen, the windows were foggy and the kettle had boiled dry. There was an evil-smelling black patch on its base. I wrapped it in a paper bag and pushed it deep into the bin, then I boiled a cupful of water in a saucepan. The tea tasted faintly of garlic.

Grace was up on his hind paws scratching at the back door, his outraged orange face pressed against the glass. Though there was a cat-flap cut for him, he sometimes disdained to use it. I let him in and crouched to stroke him, but his spine shrank under my touch. He headbutted the fridge. He had eaten already, but who was I to stint him at a time of trouble?

Watching the anonymous meat glisten, I couldn't face breakfast. Mr. Wall was nowhere to be seen; he must have put the kettle on to boil then forgotten all about it, something as foreign to his usual careful behaviour as if he had gone to work with no trousers on. I left a scrawl on the phone pad 'If Kate rings from airport I'll be back by nine – Pen.' Handbag on one wrist, money, tissues, car keys, more tissues in case of hysteria, then run. Grace tried to follow me out the door, but I held him back with the side of my shoe.

At the red light I braked and removed the tiny black triangle from my lobe with shaky fingers. Not that the nuns would be contemporary enough to interpret it, even if I forgot, but if you were going to live in a closet you might as well make it draught-proof.

The little light above Sister Dominic's office was green, so it was safe to knock. As always, the door reduced me to twelve years old. Though there had been a decent interval of five years between my leaving the senior school and coming back to teach in the junior, where I had never been a pupil myself, sometimes it seemed that I had been a prisoner of Immac all my life, and this woman m

gracious warder.

~~‘Come in, come in!’ The Dominatrix had her inspiring Monday smile on, and a camel-coloured week-at-a-glance diary open in front of her.~~

I cleared my throat, to give my voice some authority. ‘I’m afraid I’ll be needing a few days of Sister.’

The pale brown mouth began to furl.

‘I know it’s dreadful to give you no notice but I only heard yesterday.’ This scene was going to be harder than I thought.

‘This will cause some hiccups in our schedule. A crisis of some sort, Penelope? A bereavement perhaps?’

I nodded. Which word, out of all the wrong words? ‘My friend’s dead.’ A glossy walnut cross hung on Sister Dominic’s linen chest, holding my eyes. Concentrate, Pen, sound convincing, you’ve years of lying behind you. ‘My housemate. In a crash.’

Her eyes grew owlish. ‘My poor dear girl. Would you like to sit down and have a cup of tea?’

I was alarmed to find myself lacking the energy even to want to scrape my ring into Sister Dominic’s windpipe. I shook my head. How I wished I could make up a story, a complete and satisfying fiction. Maybe a fiancé in a private plane, call him Séamas, say, and let him plummet out of the blue in the Australian outback, and let me cross the world with a black mantilla over my eyes, and don’t ask me any more questions, Sister. But nuns had long memories, and some geriatric at the convent’s unseen dinner table would be bound to connect me with the death notice about that poor skinny Wexford girl, the redhead with the broken home. That was their term for such things, as if when a wife walked out of her house the walls rent themselves in protest and the children were left coughing in the debris.

Sister Dominic waited a few judicious seconds for the tears. I looked her in the eye. ‘Maybe, I was wondering, if I could have up to Wednesday – that’s the funeral – I have to make arrangements, there are family visiting – and be back on Thursday.’ Grammar fell apart in her presence.

The nun consulted her book; the turning leaves sighed. ‘Rather a pity you didn’t think to ring the convent last night. I suppose we could bring in that nice Dundalk girl if it’s no more than three days, she’s always grateful for the work. We don’t want your class to be falling behind, so early in the term.’ Sister Dominic looked over her bifocals with the eyes of a Baroque martyr. ‘I don’t suppose you could go to them now and keep them occupied until I can get hold of the girl? Just till lunchtime.’

Thirty faces rose in front of me, squealing their requests. ‘No, Sister, I’m afraid not, sorry. I have to pick up some visitors from the airport.’

‘Can’t be helped.’ Sister Dominic shut her book with a weighty snap. ‘I’ll have to send Sister Barbara to sit with them if she’s feeling up to it. Now I would love to say a little prayer with you for consolation, but I’m in too much of a hurry; as you know, I don’t like to begin Assembly much past 9.03. You may be sure I’ll have all the children pray for the repose of the soul of...what did you say your friend’s name was?’

‘Cara.’ My throat locked on the word.

‘Of poor Tara.’

I wanted to claw the name back out of her mouth. She didn’t even remember her, after six years of merciless teasing about redheads.

‘Well, Penelope, God grant us all such a swift end.’

Any minute now she’d inform me that the good died young. ‘See you on Thursday, Sister,’ she muttered, backing out of her office as if away from a throne.

I walked downstairs like a zombie. Robbie was staple-gunning his children’s pictures to the noticeboard; he looked relieved to see anyone out of pigtails. I tried to get by with a limp smile, but he called me back. ‘Where you off to at nine in the morning, hen?’

‘Going home.’

‘Lucky bastard,’ he said in a careful whisper.

‘Something’s come up,’ I told him; such an awful euphemism. And then a sudden need for company seized me. ‘If you’ve a free now, could you come for a coffee?’

Robbie pushed his fringe out of his eyes. ‘When have I ever got a free? After getting this lot of potato prints on to the wall I’ve thirty-six infants to club to death.’

I glanced at the rows of printed hearts, clowns’ faces, and something that looked like a purple mushroom, repeated over and over, getting fainter towards the bottom of the paper. How good it would be to be five again, with nothing to do but cut slices out of potatoes.

‘Monday morning, and I’m panting for the weekend already,’ he yawned. ‘You ever going to come walking with me and Sheila and the pups?’

‘Some Sunday, definitely. Give me a ring later, maybe?’ I asked him, my voice getting a little vibrato. ‘Only if you’re not busy,’ I called, and crashed out through the swing doors into the warm air.

Down in the loose gravel of the car park, squashed damsons from an overhanging tree sent up a whiff of ferment. Scrabbling in my handbag for Minnie’s keys, I let my eyes rest on the grass. Across the back lawn a red uniform came loping. Whoever she was, she was going to be late for Assembly. Carrot hair, clashing with the jumper. Shorter, too; a much more ordinary body than the one it had reminded me of.

If I shut my eyes I could see Cara in uniform still, though I had watched her rip it up with relish on the day of the sixth-year party. The red hood she hated in particular; once, bored at the bus stop, she buttoned it on the wrong way round, over her face, and tried to get me to lead her on to the bus, with her repeating, ‘I am noth a monsther. I am the elephanth woman.’

Seventeen and a half, she looked, as long as I knew her. It came flooding at me now, as I stared over the car door at the redhead pounding towards the side entrance, the distillation of god knew how many wintry afternoons.

Ten minutes after the bell I stride out of the school gate with my gaberdine hood up and shielding my face, just in case the day is considering another dash of rain. My mind is full of algebra and whether Mum will have bought any bread. I am always hungry in winter. Halfway to the bus stop, I hear feet flapping behind me on the pavement.

Cara, who was supposed to be out sick. I have to hug her, she looks so Snow White with the cold.

‘Get your hands off me.’ She recoils.

‘Sorry.’

‘You could get us both expelled.’

‘Friends hug,’ I tell her forlornly.

‘Not in uniform.’

I fall into step beside her. ‘I don’t see why you’re giving out to me, I’m not the one who’s been skiving off.’

‘I amn’t skiving exactly.’ When I scan Cara’s pale face, her eyes dip to the ground. ‘I did come in today,’ she says, ‘but when I got off the bus I couldn’t face it, with it being Thursday and all.’

‘What have you got against Thursdays?’

She gives me a pained look. ‘No Art.’

‘Sorry, I forgot.’

‘I knew I wouldn’t get a glimpse of her all day unless I could contrive to be hanging round the noticeboards at the exact second when she’d be coming out of the staff-room.’

‘Ah, Cara, there’s more to life.’ I cannot stop the exasperation from welling out.

She stops in her tracks, suddenly witch-faced. ‘No there isn’t. What’s with you, are you turning

jealous on me? If you can't accept –'

'I've always accepted it.' Careful now, Pen, soften the voice again. 'You know that your, what you feel for Mrs. Mew, is the thing I admire most about you.'

Cara nods reverently, and we fall into step again. 'You see why I couldn't face today. It made more sense to stay away from school and dream of her. I knew I'd do her more good that way.'

We stop at the oak on the corner, and I glance at the bus stop too briefly for her to notice. Probably missed it already. 'So what did you do all day?'

'Hung around the Proddie cemetery mostly; they've got such funny double-barrelled names. Sheltered in the hardware shop when it was raining.'

'Did you have your pack lunch at least?' I know I sound like a mother but I need to ask.

'Cheese sandwiches, but I left them at home; couldn't have faced them anyway.'

My face sinks. 'Ah petal, you need your protein. So what did you eat all day?'

'I must have overdosed on sherbet because I was sick behind a tomb statue of a little girl with wings. I hope she didn't mind.'

'You can't go on like this.' My voice snaps harder than I meant.

Cara stares down at me as if I have stabbed her under the arm. The plump lower lip juts. 'But that's what I said to you on the phone last night, and you said yes I could, if I thought positive thoughts and had lots of comforting hot baths.'

I take a heavy breath. 'No, what I meant was you could go on with life, with coping – but this isn't coping.'

'I cope,' she says in surprise, wiping her fringe out of her eyes. 'I haven't run away to sea or anything. Bet you wish I would, though,' she adds.

'No I don't.' I find it hardest to sound convincing when I am telling the truth.

'Bet you do sometimes. Didn't realize you'd be letting yourself in for all this when we became sort-of-girlfriends, did you?'

'It has its compensations,' I tell her, and she grins wider than a slice of melon. 'So. How long have you been lurking out here?'

'Couple of hours, I think. Left my watch at home so I had to guess by the sun. I thought you might come out early,' Cara adds wistfully; 'hadn't you got a double free after Maths?'

I lean back against the hedge, then feel the wet and straighten up. 'No, sorry, I stayed in the library, it's easier to work there than at home.'

'You're a swot. You prefer books to me.'

'No I don't. Listen, petal, I'm really sorry I didn't come out earlier, but you mustn't stand round in the cold.'

'Yes, boss.' Cara is perking up, twisting her cow's lick between her fingers. 'Can I come home with you now?'

'Ah, you know you can't.'

She opens her grey eyes till she is Deirdre of the Sorrows. She knows I'm a sucker for that look. 'It wouldn't be any bother.'

'It wouldn't be fair to surprise Mammy with a visitor on a Thursday.'

'Why, does she hate Thursdays too?' asks Cara.

'No, you eejit. Daddy's payday's Friday.'

'So?'

I am ridiculously awkward. 'So Mammy won't have been shopping yet, and we might have nothing but baked beans in the house, and Gavin will be mouthing off.'

'Ah,' she says, her forehead still furrowed. 'My dad shops every two days, I think. But I like baked beans,' she smiles.

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