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What We Leave Behind: A novel and critical commentary

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This thesis is the result of the author's original research. It has been composed by the author and has not been previously submitted for examination which has led to the award of a degree.

Signed:

Date:

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1. *What We Leave Behind*: A novel

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ABSTRACT

This PhD submission consists of: (i) a novel, *What We Leave Behind* (WWLB); and (ii) a critical commentary.

(i). *What We Leave Behind* relates two months in the life of Rowan O'Reilly in 2009, and has four settings: the fictional town of Darden, London, Paris and a retirement community in the Campsies. After being told by her father that her dead mother is alive, Rowan leaves Darden to search for her mother, Marianne, who disappeared in 1978.

In 2004 I discovered a website seeking information on Shelagh McDonald, a Scottish folk singer who released two albums in the Seventies before she disappeared. In 2003 both albums were re-released; however, Shelagh's disappearance remained a mystery. From this beginning, I imagined what would happen if Shelagh had had a child who believed her mother was dead. While mother and daughter relations are crucial to the work, *WWLB* also engages with the legacy of cultural, social and political change of the 1960s and 1970s while investigating how identity is shaped by decline and development in the urban landscape. As well as considering the subjective and selective nature of memory and the role of music in society, the novel examines the plurality of the Scottish working class experience and life in housing estates in Glasgow and Paris.

(ii). The critical commentary discusses the novel's structure and narrative strategies, as well as its themes of marginalia, marginality, motherhood and music in the text. It examines the ways in which *WWLB* responds to the Scottish literary

tradition, specifically its relation to what Clandfield and Lloyd name ‘redevelopment fiction’ (2007, p.124). Thus, the commentary also considers the role of class, language and the use of the vernacular in *WWLB***.** It concludes with an account of the difficulties of transforming researched information into art.

What We Leave Behind

Kerry Ryan

Because the word is angular and has sharp edges/ That cut you
George Szirtes

CHAPTER ONE

The red light flashing above the *Tribal Tattoos* sign meant the alarm was on. No thieving bastards could get at Rowan's tools and yet there was a terrible itch to pull up the shutters, go inside and check the keypad once more. With effort, she turned away and faced the Kilpatricks. Too dark to see the rocks that had cradled her since she was a wean, but they were there in the near distance, up beyond the shopping centre and Darden's housing schemes and Wimpey estates. Treasure could be found in those hills if ye knew where to look: ancient shells from lost seas, fossilised bones, petrified leaves left like bootprints on grey slate. Treasure that told of time slowly passing even if it felt like everything stayed the same. Rowan couldnae see her hills but she sensed their solid presence and it gave her solace. It soothed her.

Dinger and the others had gone off to the Smugglers' Inn because that was the ink team's Saturday night ritual.

'Are ye gonnae come with us?' Dinger had pleaded, surrounded by pale apprentices with Rowan's hearts and stars inked on their crease-free, paper-white skin.

'No the night. I've got a date,' she lied.

Dinger laughed with the others then, showing Rowan his tongue piercing, and said, 'Aye, with the couch and two portions of sweet and sour more like.'

'That's right,' she had replied, watching as they left for the pub, pleased with themselves that they knew her so well.

Heading out of the shopping centre to the main road and home, Rowan wondered if she was becoming a bit of a joke. Recently, she'd been drawn to biographies of spinsters who'd managed to write or paint while living quiet, unassuming lives in the suburbs. Here were others who'd trimmed down and cut off what and who they didnae need anymore, creating a life in miniature, a shoebox existence, though Rowan had learned it was best to stick to the early chapters when they were still *stout-hearted* and *idiosyncratic* individuals and yet to become targets for children's stones.

Was it really wise to spend so much time alone? Rowan was beginning to forget social conventions— remaining silent when she should be talking, talking when she should be silent. Acting the oddball. The freak. Why the hell had she lied to Dinger about having a date and then lied about staying in? Weanish behaviour from a woman of thirty. Showing off to the apprentices, faking a busy social calendar when the mundane truth was that Saturday night would be spent visiting her dad. He had phoned the studio when the others were out for lunch.

'Come over for dinner. I'll do Vietnamese,' Martin had said in a voice that made her wonder if he was getting depressed again.

'That sounds good,' she said. Perhaps it was time to buy him a new cookbook; there were only so many rice rolls a person could eat. 'What's the occasion anyway?'

'Its just been ages since we've made a wee night of it. That's if ye're no busy. If ye're no going out clubbing or something?'

'When was the last time I was out clubbing?'

'OK, then. See ye after work. There's a three for tenner deal on at the offies by the way. A decent enough red.'

‘Just a bottle, Martin. I’m away up the hills tomorrow.’

‘Well, fine. See ye about eight then.’

‘Dad?’

‘What?’

‘Is everything’s alright?’

‘Aye, of course. Can a father no want to see his daughter?’

‘OK. OK. Just asking.’

Was it cancer? Or some other terrible disease? The older he got, the more she prepared for the inevitable. Maybe this was it. Maybe tonight was when she’d find it out. Or, maybe it was his depression again. She was a weather station, alert to changes in air pressure, heavy fronts moving in, dark bands of cloud. When he started to quote Larkin, then she would know for sure that his old despair had returned.

It was hell of an odd, him phoning her at work like that. Her maisonette flat was in the shadow of his high-rise and they were in and out of each other’s houses all the time, though it was true she hadnae seen much of him over the last few weeks.

After his call, Rowan had searched through her bag for antacids, and now she stood at the end of the shopping centre, outside the pawnshop raking through her rucksack for more. The pawn was the only shop open at this time of night and a small queue had formed outside as folk rushed to exchange cheques and DVD players for cash before closing. Once upon a time people came from miles around to visit the centre’s big name stores and to have a go in the All American Bowling Alley. Now empty retail units sat like rotting teeth and *To Let* signs faded in plate-glass windows. The council’s answer had been to build another shopping centre and three fancy new skyscrapers at a derelict

site down by the river, no far from her own home. But it turned out Lehman Brothers had part-financed the development company which went rapidly into administration.

Harbour Peninsula— or Credit Crunch Towers as folk had started calling the place—was to have been the holy grail of mixed tenure living: social housing tenants and home owners together in swish buildings with glass lifts and forecourts with fountains. Yet the shopping centre wasnae half done, the third tower was a patch of earth, and the two finished towers were still empty because home owners couldnae complete and renters hadnae been allowed to move in. It was a shame; Rowan had been looking forward to walking along the new riverside promenade and getting a decent coffee at one of the cafés.

This kind of thing had happened all over the world. In Russia, Korea and Japan, glass and steel towers had been halted at the foundation stage. Heavy plant silenced. Workers in hard hats sent home. Other grand buildings remained nothing but an architect's dream, towering in the imagination only, a blueprint rolled into a tight white tube to lean in the corner and gather dust with twenty others.

Yet as Rowan crossed at the roundabout and walked up the dual carriageway, she could see lights—signs of life in the two towers when all had been dead and dark for months. Surely they hadnae found a new developer? Who in the world had any money left?

At the slip road that lead down into the riverside development, a security guard sat in his van, while across the street a few young team in immaculate white trackies threw chips at each other. Rowan gave the nod to one of the boys—she'd gone to school with his big brother, Sean. Dead now. Stabbed outside the Palm Trees nightclub over some

lassie. He'd been one of Rowan's first tattoo clients. Five or so years ago, she'd inked a wee shamrock just above his heart. For luck.

Regeneration was nothing new in Darden. The town was littered with ugly mistakes raised over Nazi bomb craters. With Harbour Peninsula the council claimed to have learned from past mistakes, covering the town with leaflets, posters and advertising hoardings.

HELP SHAPE DARDEN'S FUTURE.
YOUR TOWN: YOUR SAY.

Almost twenty years ago, her own estate, Littleholm—located at the periphery of Darden and half a mile downriver from the new development—was one of the first modernist housing schemes to be regenerated in the valley after the residents went on strike, refusing to pay any rent. Rowan was only ten or so when the place was stripped to the bare bones, rewired, reclad, damp-proofed, double-glazed and centrally heated. The two high-rises, Ellisland, where Martin lived, and next door, Mossgiel, were reduced from twenty-two floors to fourteen. Across the square, the three squat maisonettes with their balconies and drying areas were rendered in white, made secure, made almost attractive so that on bright, sunny days the windows became portholes reflecting brilliant sunshine, the washing strung across walkways and balconies became signal flags flapping in the salt-tinged breeze coming up from the Clyde's firth as seagulls circled and dived at the maisonettes' mastheads — three great ships at dock underneath two gleaming towers of white and blue.

When, aged nineteen, Rowan was offered a maisonette flat across from her dad, she took it gladly. It was a way to keep an eye on him while staking out her independence, a

stop-gap only. Ten years later, she hadnae got very far. But then she loved her garden flat. Built for single shipyard workers in the early Sixties, it was small and compact and just the right size for one. Nowadays the shipyards were stories old men told each other. Scenes on postcards for scattered family visiting from Canada, New Zealand, Australia. Things were supposed to have been better back then, but no for the O'Reillys. Irish Catholics did all the dirty, dangerous jobs the Masons wouldnae sully themselves with.

At the row of shops that served Littleholm, Rowan picked up speed—Dinger and the apprentices might spot her from Smuggies' window and try to drag her in. Music and shouts came through the pub's double doors. She would know every soul in there and yet that warm feeling that came with being welcomed into the fold would fade soon enough as this Saturday night morphed into every other Saturday night. The apprentices would talk amongst themselves about bands, music, downloading, whatever, before they escaped to go drinking or drugging in more salubrious locations. Dinger and Rowan would be left to have one of those 'used to' conversations that happened when two people had been best mates since they were fifteen. *Mind when ye used to…Mind when I used to…Can ye believe we all used to…*

As she passed the newsagents, Aseem returned her wave with a smile that was really a grimace. Trade had been slow recently. A hand-painted sign blu-tacked on his window stated: SESAME OIL HALF PRICE. Some of Littleholm's residents bought their flats after the regeneration and rented them to Chinese business students attending the local college. Coming home from work, Rowan would sometimes walk into a slipstream of aromatic ginger and garlic drifting out from open kitchen windows. Since the financial collapse, she hadnae got a sniff of any exotic aromas, just the usual Darden reek of

distillery and sewage plant.

She crossed the square, looking at her front door and feeling a twinge of longing. After a long day of listening to her clients and the tattoo gun's whine, she loved going home to where only her breath and heartbeat could be heard. One of the main complaints about Littleholm had been the shocking soundproofing, so during the renovations the contractors had filled the walls with damp-prevention foam that meant once her front door was shut, nothing could be heard from the outside. Since her secret vow of celibacy two years ago, she had finally got to grips with the science of being alone, and now she welcomed her own silent space, craved it like others in Littleholm craved drugs and drink.

But if that wanting mood took hold, that need for the company of others that came down sometimes like a fog, she'd only to run a deep bath and slip under the water. For by some trick of plumbing, noise from the other flats travelled along the pipes to the acrylic bath which, along with the water, acted as a kind of amplifier sending sound to her submerged ears: upstairs or a few doors along someone having sex and shouting in Polish; cackling girls getting ready to go on a night out; a couple arguing; a lonely dog's whine. In the water, she would soak herself in sound coming in and out like a weak radio signal, until the building was lulled to sleep, her bath was cold, and the creases in her fingers and toes throbbed.

Going home for a rest before her dad's was tempting but it was only delaying the inevitable, so she walked across the road and through the car park, past the three and four bedroom blocks popular with joiners and builders who had added driveways for shiny new cars and conservatories they filled with white goods. Over the last few weeks

vans had come to Littleholm to take back the TVs and washing machines folk couldnae now afford to pay off on 40% APR. Everyone agreed times were tough. A bad time for Rowan to be thinking about a new job, although thoughts of moving on teased her every day.

Her speciality was covering up bad tattoos: a Red Hand of Ulster with fingers like thumbs; King Billy riding a horse that looked like a donkey; the Lisbon Lions with faces like burst balloons. How many prison tattoos inked with safety pins had she covered over the years? In her early twenties, she'd served her apprenticeship in a studio no far from Barlinnie, honing her skills on sweating clients with the pasty look of the just-released and a hard-on making a tent in their brand new trousers. Inking over *Revange* or *All Polis Are Basturds*, it had taken all she had no to laugh.

At first she loved turning blotchy, crooked mistakes and fleeting impulses into designs folk were proud to wear. She'd got hooked on what they called 'The Look'—the smile when clients first saw the new tattoo camouflaging the old embarrassment. Now she was tired of ruined skin, preferring to map out virgin territory with her own custom-designs— soaring phoenixes, winged stallions, Japanese carp— but being the boss, Dinger had first dibs on fresh meat. Although, it was true more and more people were asking for her by name. Maybe after dinner she would speak to Martin. Ask him for some advice.

Inside the high-rise lobby, Rowan ignored the concierge in his glass room—a new boy she didnae know. In the lift, she stood with her back to the camera, the wires humming, feeding her image down to him as she tried no to shift from foot to foot under his stranger's gaze.

As teenagers, she and Eddie would jump up and down until the lift stuck, then kiss and do other things while waiting for the fire brigade to arrive and free them. No teenage carry-on like that these days; there was always somebody watching.

When the high-rises were reduced from twenty-two floors to fourteen, the old lift wasnae replaced, so that nowadays it would freeze without encouragement, leaving her trapped in the metal box with a faint sense of guilt and only old, worn out memories of Eddie to keep her company. The lift buttons still went all the way to twenty two despite there being just roof then sky after floor fourteen: a ghost address given to the police, a prank played on rookie postmen. Coming home from school, wondering whether Martin would be happy or sad, she had pressed the dead numbers again and again—16, 18, 20, 22—willing them to light up and send the metal box bursting through the roof, past solitary birds gliding through thin air, past clouds, aeroplanes, satellites even.

Years ago there had been a community shop and a drop-in centre on the twenty-first and twenty-second floors and over at Mossgiel, the walls of the top floor flats were knocked through in order to create one big artists' space/party flat. The squatting, the rent strike, the demonstrations and the formation of the tenants committee had all kicked off when Martin came back from Paris after her mother died. Rowan was only wee and so her memories of that period were bitty. Flashes here and there of the rent strike, being decanted to caravans, the first brick in the community centre wall, and among all of this, Eddie. Always Eddie.

More tangible tokens of that time still existed here and there: a mural of a phoenix on the community centre wall; a mosaic of a dove with an olive branch by the benches behind the allotments. Rowan had at one point considered offering tours to the urban

planners and sociologists who came to Littleholm to understand how it was that the place had morphed from an address to whisper to a popular, well-designed estate with balconies offering nice views of the river. Really, all the clipboard people with their quantitative mapping and theoretical frameworks had to do was speak to Martin, but these days he refused to be what he called a rentaquote for anyone.

On her tour she would've taken the PhD students researching links between social deprivation and Brutalist architecture or tenant activism and UK housing policy to view the murals, the allotments, the dead buttons in the lift, and perhaps all the way to Martin's floor to inspect his next door neighbour's stained glass window. At one stage, a number of doors in the high-rises had stained glass inserts done for free by a few artists squatting the empty flats, but folk replaced them with new doors during or after the renovations. Somehow, this single example of stained glass had survived, although the neighbours had changed often enough over the years.

It was Tam, Martin's best mate and partner in the house clearance business, who'd lived next door with his wife Bel, and it was Bel who had created this particular window, and Tam who had sealed it in with putty. Rowan sometimes wondered if Tam had looked at that image of coloured glass and lead and understood that soon his relationship with Bel would be over. For there was no need to consult symbology books to understand that Bel's composition in glass and lead—a rose with a thistle twisted around its bent-backed stem— heralded the end of her marriage. Some folk said Bel was running a youth hostel outside Inverness, or writing children's books in Wales, or maybe looking after her sick mother in China. Everyone agreed anything was possible.

Just before Christmas, Rowan ran after Tam in the shopping centre, at first believing

he hadnae spotted her standing smoking outside *Tribal.* No longer sporting the ginger beard he once claimed was home to wee mice and birds, he looked vulnerable, blinking behind his thick glasses as if everything he saw surprised him, though no that much in Darden had changed. Picturing him in his old Ford van, Rowan asked him if he was still doing the house clearances, Tam told her, aye, but along the East coast now. Far enough away, he said, nodding towards Littleholm's high-rises just visible above the shopping centre roof. Tam didnae once ask for her dad, his best mate, his one time partner in the clearance business. As she watched him walk away, his check shirt and work boots disappearing among the shoppers in leisure wear, Rowan realised that her dad and Bel had had an affair. There would be no asking Martin for confirmation. There were limits to what they shared. And Bel? She was a ghost who haunted neither of their doors.

Rowan sensed the quiet on entering Martin's flat. Perhaps he was still down the boozer. The usual boxes of books with more books piled on top littered the hallway, forcing her to zigzag up towards the livingroom door. French philosophy, horror, or the worst kind of airport novel, it didnae matter to Martin just as long the book contained some act of handwritten anarchy, some small violation of the pristine margin: *Man vs. Nature* or *Irony* written by a student in a copy of Wordsworth; *Count the waves, Shona* in a volume of love poetry; doodles drawn and quotes scrawled on the end papers or flyleaves of *Anna Karenina* or *Three Men in A Boat*.

He also collected the stuff he found inside books. People left all sorts slotted in-between the pages: combs, concert tickets, recipe cards, love letters, court summonses, money. But his showpiece was a battered copy of R.D Laing's *Knots* filled with what he claimed was the author's own marginal comments—cramped handwriting that became

more erratic the closer it got to the edge. Cheery stuff such as *The fault lies with the rest of the world* and *The noose will strangle every one of us.* How he knew for sure it was Laing's handwriting, Rowan never understood, but he talked about selling it to a university library or private collector after his own book was published.

Ever since Rowan could remember, Martin had been writing a book about all the different types of marginalia. The unfinished manuscript was kept in a locked box under his bed and she wasnae allowed to see it, although sometimes he asked for her advice on his classification system or other small details. Before Christmas, Rowan read a Guardian review about an academic study of marginalia by some professor from England. When Martin asked for the crossword, she made sure the newspaper was missing the review section but he didnae even notice. Current affairs just didnae seem to interest him anymore.

There was a time when he was often in the news, though mostly the local news. Rowan was too young back then to read the articles about long-haired men and women disrupting public meetings by asking impertinent questions about broken streetlights, rats in the closes and shooting galleries. How did you lot manage it? Rowan would ask, considering the haze of hash smoke she had grown up in. How did ye manage to lobby to sort this place out? It was a time when folk believed they could change things, was Martin's only reply.

He was bitter about how it had all ended. Blamed the councillors for quashing his vision. Those fierce men who called him son and quoted *Das Kapital* while lining their pockets, never forgave him for refusing to join them. People and their freedoms were what was important, Martin was supposed to have told them, no some economic theory

cooked up by two syphilitic Germans. After that, the council blocked Martin's plans to turn Littleholm into an artists' colony with rent-free flats for creative types—although they waited until the regeneration works were completed before raising the rent and turfing out those without a tenancy agreement. Soon enough, Martin's mates had moved on to be failed artists somewhere else.

After opening the livingroom door, she saw he was in after all, sitting with his back to her on the armchair closest to the two bar electric fire. He was wearing old-fashioned orange headphones and tinny sounds travelled across the room as the turntable spun a record. This was home: the *sensimilla* smoke, the grease mark on the back of the armchair, the red glow from the two bar fire, the sheepskin rug, worn and bald. Although it had been Martin's home for many years now and had become filled with things she had no connection to, it still contained and always would contain so much that was saturated with her own particular story. The brass owls from that old house with the collapsed roof in the West End; the shells from the camping trip when the tent ended up in the river; the Dr Scott's electric hairbrush tin they found in the municipal dump; and above the mantelpiece, a portrait of Rowan painted back when Martin's hands didnae tremble so much. Rowan aged about five wearing her favourite jumper with the duck on the pocket, the jumper he had washed and ironed for her until it fell apart at the seams. Her chubby face smiling, her hair in pigtails Martin had learned to plait himself.

Next to his painting was one of her own compositions. Her early abstract period, aged three. A blob. A yellow hand perhaps. A spider? Even when she couldnae speak, Rowan would always draw—a wean's fat fist gripping a crayon tight. Nurses, doctors, specialists diagnosed her as dumb or something fancy that meant the same thing. Tests,

hospital visits, but no real explanation. Silenced by rust in the voice box, a blown fuse in the brain. Until at nursery, words came at last. Halting, slow, difficult. They confused her with their double, triple meanings, their slippery trickster nature. When she talked adults laughed with pleasure, pinching her cheek. Other times, they became angry, sad. Best to spend words wisely. Better yet: be seen and no heard.

She crossed the worn carpet to tap Martin on the shoulder but was forced to stop dead in the middle of the room. What was her mother's album doing out on the coffee table beside him? Straining to hear, she now recognised the tinny sound as Marianne's version of *The Bonny Lass of Lern.* In all of these years, she had never known him to listen to *Marianne*. Never. She'd believed he just couldnae bring himself to hear her voice.

Instinct told her to retreat and go down to the hall to the front door and press the bell, acting as if she'd just arrived, but what if he turned and saw her leaving the livingroom? Because there was nothing else to do, Rowan touched him on the arm. He jumped, twisting around to see her standing behind his chair.

'Bloody hell, lassie. Ye almost gave me a heart attack. What time is it?'

'We finished up early so I thought I'd head straight here.'

He was pulling off the headphones, leaning over to cut off the stereo, then was up and round the back of the chair, hugging her. His eyes were bloodshot. Stoned or greeting? Hard to tell. He pulled her in tight, his thin body all bones. Over his shoulder, she looked at the photo of her mother on the album cover. Aged around nineteen, Marianne sat on a stool wearing an embroidered cheesecloth blouse and denim flares, her long, black hair parted in the middle, her big, dark eyes looking over to the left. As a wee lassie, Rowan had spent hours, weeks, months willing those eyes to look straight at her. For this was

the only photograph of her mother she had ever seen.

‘I’ve brought some wine,’ she said, pulling away, heading to the kitchen.

‘Pour it then. But I’ve bought some myself.’

In the galley kitchen, the Dylan poster, stained by the years and an exploding pressure cooker, gave her its usual warning that the times they were a changing. Martin hadnae lied about buying wine. The fridge was so full she had to bin some out-of-date milk to get her own bottle on a shelf.

‘Jesus Christ, Martin. It’s no Hogmanay,’ she shouted, before recalling his fragile state.

‘A boy this afternoon in the pub doing a deal. A lorry load went missing,’ he shouted back. ‘A nice red as well as a white.’

Rowan looked in the cupboard under the sink. Ten bottles or more and a surprise bottle of whisky behind the reds. Martin hated whisky. His daddy’s drink. Wouldnae ever touch it. Someone must have left it behind after a party. When she had poured the wine into two glasses, Rowan hovered about the kitchen folding tea towels that didnae need folding, tidying up the cookbooks, tipping a mug of water into the drouthy herbs on the window sill.

It never stopped feeling strange to see him so vulnerable. A creeping sense of it no being right would grip her, even after all these years. As far as she knew, this listening to *Marianne* was a new development. Years ago when she still lived at home and hadnae yet developed a hatred of songs and singing, Rowan had stuck a piece of sellotape over the album’s sleeve to see if Martin did what his daughter did—if he waited until there was no one in the house so he could have a fly listen. After months of checking the

sticky tape, Rowan surmised it was she alone engaged in such furtive listening. But all of this now? Dear God. Things might be worse than she had imagined.

‘Are ye alright in there?’

‘Aye, coming dad.’

Rowan returned to the living room carrying the glasses of wine and her rucksack. Careful no to make a show of looking, she spotted that *Marianne* was gone. Placed back on the shelves with the other records in his vast collection. Had he filed it under M or slid it in willy-nilly? What a thing for her to be caring about right now.

‘Take yer glass,’ she said, handing him his drink. He looked that strange. Haunted. The stomach acid burned as she sat down on the armchair they thought of as her own. In this chair, she could face Martin yet face away from the junk lining the shelves—junk she had no attachment to: a sheep’s skull; a laughing Buddha; broken spectacles; snow globes; several African masks; around twenty old computer mice; a pickled snake in a bottle; and more odds and sods he’d found in the dark corners of abandoned houses. Residue was what other house clearers called this old shite but to Martin everything was an *objet trouvé*.

‘Ye alright, old man?’

‘Aye, aye. Just tired. Couldnae sleep for next-door partying. Kept slamming their front door and shaking the bloody wall.’

‘Ye didnae go in and join them? Changed days right enough.’

‘I know. I know. Old age comes to even the youngest of us. Who was it said that? Oh, I cannae mind.’

He gulped all of his red wine, leaving nothing but a slebber at the bottom of the

glass.

‘Enjoy that?’ she said, raising an eyebrow. The wine had stained the sides of his mouth turning him into a demented Joker.

‘Wipe your face. The wine,’ she said, pointing at her own mouth to show him. He was wearing a World War Two RAF uniform he’d found clearing a house in Helensburgh. The uniform was too big for his thin frame, making him look like a wee boy playing dress up. He used the rough grey sleeve to rub his face.

‘All gone?’ he asked, eyes big and round.

‘Mostly. A bit just there. Aye, that’s it. What’s for dinner then? I didnae see anything in the fridge except bloody wine.’

She laughed, but he was frowning. After an age, he said, ‘Noodles…with prawns. Prawns and noodles.’

‘Oh aye. Great.’

He looked at his glass then looked at her own. ‘Fancy another?’

With her own still full, she shook her head.

‘Listen, Martin, are ye sure ye’re ok? Ye seem a bit distracted or something.’

He blinked. She’d broken protocol. This wasnae the way they worked, she should know better than that. He waved a dismissive hand and started fussing with his tobacco tin, attempting to put a joint together on top of *The Use and Abuse of History*.

‘These skins are shite. Damp or something.’

He had always had shaking hands. His palsy he called it, though he’d never stepped inside a doctor’s office for a diagnosis. Tonight though, the tremble was worse. As he struggled, something sore moved inside Rowan’s chest, so that she leaned over, taking

the book and tin from him. He didnae protest.

‘I thought ye’d stopped,’ he said, chewing at a yellowed nail.

‘I have. I’m just helping.’

When she looked up, he was pouring white wine into his glass. It mixed with the slebber of red, turning the liquid a sweetie pink.

‘I was having a wee white before ye came in,’ he explained, putting the bottle back down by the side of the magazine rack where he’d stashed it.

She wouldnae comment. She tried no to nark the face off him, but he seemed blinkered enough to blame the blood and bowel cancers his mates were all dying of on bad luck rather than bad living. The thing was when he paid the piper, she’d be the one to wheel him about the place, change his drips and take him for hospital appointments. But what could ye do? The individual was sovereign. Yet the truth was he looked awful—hellish even. After handing him his joint, she took a book from her rucksack and passed it to him.

‘Here, I found this at the chapel jumble.’

The immaculate copy of *The Path Back to God* by Beth Williams had been sitting among unwanted shoes and hand-knitted baby clothes. Slotted inside the pages, a card with a message written in the type of longhand once taught in secretarial colleges big on deportment:

Dear Ben and Jen
Our warmest congratulations on your upcoming wedding. We hope you find inspiration in this small book. We were very pleased to hear of your marriage and we pray that you will know God’s richest blessing on your life together.

With our love,

Aunt Jean
Uncle James

Psalm 34 1-10
The angel of the lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.

P.S Hope all is going well with the pregnancy.

With a practised eye, he scanned the book's title and the message inside the card. All Rowan received in return for her trouble was a half-hearted smile and a whispered thanks. What had she expected? She frowned at him, annoyed, but when he looked at her, his hand shot to his mouth and his eyes widened.

'What is it, dad?'

But he was up, out of his chair, knocking the glass ashtray from the coffee table.

'Oh, shite. Look at the mess I've made,' he said, smearing the stoor of ash and doughts into the sheepskin rug with his trainer. His face was awfy pale.

'Leave it. Leave it. Ye're just making it worse. I'll hoover it later.'

'I need a drink of water. I'm thirsty as hell.'

He stoated into the kitchen, the joint still burning in his hand. The sound of a tap running came into the livingroom. When he returned from the kitchen, he held an empty glass in his hand. Drank his water and still brought the glass in? Dear God. Half-stewed already.

Here we go, Rowan thought when he sat down opposite her, taking a deep breath. Now it's coming. But out came the same old, tired question he always asked, 'So what kind of hellish tattoos have ye come across lately?'

*

Martin pretended to listen as his daughter talked about idiots with tattoos of dead weans or I LOVE COCK inked on their forearms. The wind carried up the sounds of drunken laughter and shouts from the street fourteen floors below his window. Littleholm getting all geared up for Saturday night. A thousand carry-outs waiting to be drunk, cans to be popped, bottles to be unscrewed and emptied. He heard her siren song, his wife's lament:

The joy that we taste is a flash amid darkness,
The joy that we taste is too brilliant to stay

He drank down his wine. He could always change his mind. Tell Rowan tomorrow or next week. No, it had to be tonight or it would be taken out of his hands. *You have until the end of this month*, that English bastard had said. Still, Martin had left it to the last possible day—shitebag that he was. Scrabbling around for a solution, a way out, though he found none. Face the music time, Marty boy, face the music. He didnae know if he could do it. Didnae know if he could find the strength.

Rowan stopped talking and he said the first thing that came into his head. 'Have ye been busy? In the studio, I mean?'

He thought she would be pleased that he'd shown an interest, but she hadnae stopped talking at all and was only pausing for breath. Don't let her make that face again. That face that belongs to someone else.

Quickly, he said, 'Sorry. Sorry. Carry on. What were ye saying?'

As a rule he was careful whenever she was discussing her work, making sure he made

all the right noises. The truth of it was he had no time for tattoos. They'd become an empty spectacle just like everything else. Although, at least she was making a living wage and no working in the supermarket. Or worse, doing social work like every other lassie from Darden daft enough to ruin their minds with university. Rowan's resistance had to be commended. But what did it say that she hadnae bothered to be tattooed herself? It was in a secret place, a place she couldnae show anybody, he'd hear her lie to others. A good liar, aye, but her lies were minnows, sticklebacks in the bottom of a burn, krill in the ocean.

His daughter was talking; he had to listen. This would be the last time they could ever sit like this. Sit like mates. Oh, his poor head. Broken. Shattered into pieces.

'If ye'd been listening, I was actually saying the studio has been fairly quiet,' she said. 'If things don't pick up…I'm no sure. Have ye heard anything about a new developer down at the riverside? I saw lights on in the flats.'

'I've no been paying much attention to what that shower have been up to.'

'Why? What've ye been up to yerself? I've no seen ye for a while.'

'This and that. Farting around. The usual.'

Oh Rowan, his love-begotten daughter. There was silence now and he wished for music to chase away his wife's lament: *You will rue, rue, rue the day*. Why had he listened to her album? A crazy urge. A need to check that he hadnae imagined her. The white witch. The enchantress.

'I was thinking, I don't know, of maybe seeing if anyone else was interested in taking me on,' Rowan said.

'Good for you, love. Good for you.'

That was the right thing to say, surely? On yerself. Keep On Trucking. All the way, sweet baby Jane. Martin sooked at his wine, hiding behind his glass, before stealing a quick glance at his daughter. No, no, no. There she was again, haunting her face. That demon of guilt. That telltale heart. Shooting to his feet, he made to grab his empty glass, knocking the ashtray to the floor again.

'Christ's sake, Dad.'

'I need to check the chicken is defrosted. No be a minute.'

'The prawns,' she said. 'Ye mean the prawns.'

He looked again. There was Marianne. Lurking. He managed to walk towards the galley kitchen. Was that a stagger? Christ. He needed his wits about him. Hell was to come and he had to be prepared, but just a few would help him stop seeing ghosts.

When he switched on the kitchen light, and opened the cupboard, there, set behind bottles of red wine, the whisky glowed like a jewel in a glass case. How many had trapped themselves like bugs in that dirty amber? It seemed there was just no fighting it. He was doomed to grind out that same dull barroom tune as his old man before him. Whisky for blood and shipyard steel for bones.

Till he forgets his loves or debts, An' minds his griefs no more.

He'd wanted none of that. He'd wanted…what had he wanted? To rid himself of his cursed inheritance, to bask in California sunshine and read the Zen poets, to go hunting for Picasso in Breton's hall of mirrors. And yet the need for money and babysitters brought him scurrying back from France to Darden. Leaving Paris for Darden, a more fitting punishment couldnae be thought of.

By a lie, a man annihilates his dignity.

Who was it that said that? Oh, there was just no remembering. Couldnae mind anything. Except her. Except bloody her.

So Rowan wouldnae know about the whisky, he ran the tap again before pouring himself four fingers. Hands rattling. Knocked that back and poured himself another. Disgusting, dirty gear, so it was. A few lines banged around his head.

Like a rotten log
half buried in the ground -
my life, which
has not flowered, comes
to this sad end.

The north wind shrieked down from the Kilpatricks, battering the high-rise, causing the whole building to sway and Martin to sway with it. His hills: the seat of his affection. He could hough it up there. Hide from the world. Camp out by the water of the reservoir. Find a nook and ride out the storm. Darden would be far below, Rowan would be far below and no one would find him. But that bastard would find Rowan and Martin couldnae live with that. He just couldnae.

It was over thirty years since he'd heard his voice but as soon as Martin picked up the phone, he had known who it was. He was sitting on his chair, with a book open on his knee, a glass of red in hand, listening to the wind and thinking about Joan. She'd come to his door that morning asking if he would help re-form the tenant's committee. Littleholm was to be flattened for a golf course or so her cousin who worked for the council was claiming. Oh, these rumours aye fly about, he'd replied. Telling Joan this was better than telling her the truth. Better than telling her he didnae give one wee shite anymore. Let Troy burn. Let Rome fall. What the hell did he care? Every day on his way

to the bookies, he walked past the mural he'd painted on the community centre wall— a phoenix rising from the ashes—it was that faded that soon there would be nothing left of it at all.

Ah, Joan. When they were at school together she could play one song on the guitar, *House of the Rising Sun*. Terrible awful song that. He taught her a few tunes, and a bit more besides. When the phone rang, Martin was savouring the remembered taste of her, sloshing her around his mouth with sips of a decent red— a book open on his lap, a mellow tune on the wireless— until the bastard seared his ear with threats: *I know. I know and you better tell your daughter or I sure as hell will.*

'You alright in there?' His love-begotten daughter in the livingroom, innocent of it all. *We are all murderers. We are all prostitutes.* Krishna, Buddha, Jesus help us.

'Aye. Be out in a minute.' His voice slurred. Caught in the sickly amber trap.

He could do it. He could convince her. He had to choose his words with care— the last gold coins in the gambler's hand. Martin raised his glass to the dark square of window. Dutch courage was better than no courage at all. But his reflection showed him for what he truly was: a monster with a human face—a Geryon. He turned away from the window. Had to stop watching clocks and counting minutes. Now or never. Fortune favours the brave and all that pish. He tried to turn around but his feet wouldnae move. Stuck. Frozen on the thin kitchen linoleum.

'Dad? Who are ye talking to? Dad?'

'No one. I'm coming. A minute just.'

Oh, the weight of it all. Imprisoned and chained to a rock. He turned and dragged himself into the living room, a condemned man deformed by lies, punished with a

termless hell in the eighth circle. His heart. It might burst. It might go. There, warming her hands over the two bar fire, sat his Rowan, his mountain ash. Same old chair she sat in when her hair was in bunches and he'd tell her of the world, how it was and how it should be. She had always listened. All she had to do was listen now.

He dropped himself into the chair and lit a fag, taking a deep drag. Rowan was frowning again. Oh, the pressure. The weight. He was bottling it. Couldnae do it.

'Rowan…'

'What?'

'Rowan…'

'What for Christ's sake?'

'Yer mother…'

'Aye? What about her?'

'She didnae die. She's alive.'

There it was: the ruins of the past sitting on the carpet between them. Rowan laughed and for a moment, he considered laughing with her. Just a joke, just a shitey terrible joke. Martin shook his head and said, 'It's true, darling. I'm sorry. It's true.'

And then he told her a story no unlike the story he'd been telling himself for years. He said, 'You've got to understand. I thought she was dead. You were only a baby, a tiny thing and I thought she'd gone and killed herself. She threatened it all the time.

'I'm so sorry love. It's her old record label. They claim she's alive somewhere but they don't know where. They're talking about re-releasing her album. I didnae want anyone else to tell ye or ye to find out some other way. So I'm telling ye now. But I swear, Rowan, I was sure she was dead.

‘I looked for her for so long. I waited for months. I thought she’d killed herself and yet I hoped that maybe…but she wasnae well. She was mental. Crazy. Talked about doing herself in all the time. Wouldnae stop with the drugs, saying mad stuff like God wasnae talking to her and refusing to sing in the clubs. We had no money. Nothing. Then one day she was gone.

‘I went running down to the river and searched for her. The police told me she’d probably been washed away out to sea. They dragged the Seine and for weeks brought me in to see dead lassies. One girl was in a terrible state. The fish had gotten to her face and I didnae know if it was yer mother. When I saw the birthmark on her arm, I knew it wasnae, but for Marianne to put me through that… all those months of pain and worry, well, I didnae want that for you.

‘When I came home I told folk she was dead because I thought she was. And she was dead in a way. Dead to us. Dead to this family. She had left us one way or another. I’m so sorry love. Ye’ve got to understand. Please.’

Silence. He stole a glance. Her eyes were bulging; her face was white. He’d give her his bones, his marrow, anything she wanted. Moments passed. How many he never knew. He stared at the carpet he carried home from the dump years ago. Carried home for her. Everything he’d done he’d done for her sake. Even telling her this now.

‘She was no good, Rowan. We were happy just the two of us. Happy with her dead and gone. I’ve brought ye up on my own. I’ve been yer mother and yer father and we’ve done ok. We’ve done better than ok. I thought she was dead. Really I did. I just told ye what I thought was the truth. I swear it.’

‘Say it again,’ she rasped. ‘Tell me again.’

So he did. And again. When he'd finished the third time, his daughter asked him in a voice he'd never heard her use before, she asked him of all things, 'What about her ashes?'

He gripped the armchair. He told her he'd scattered the ashes from the top of the Eiffel Tower. Had half-believed in the lie himself, half believed in leaning over the parapet and tipping her dust into the wind. With his eyes back down on the carpet, Martin shook his head—for what else could he do? How could he explain the necessity of each lie that came after that first crooked serpent of a lie, that Leviathan?

Some instinct made him look up just in time to see the glass ashtray hurtling over the coffee table. He was too late to turn away completely and it cracked him on the side of the face, rivening a deep gouge at the side of his eye. Later that night the doctor in A&E would say it could have blinded him if it had impacted a centimetre to the left. He wished it had. He wished it had blinded both eyes. Then he wouldnae have seen what he'd done to her.

CHAPTER TWO

Two weeks after her father's confession, Rowan bought a copy of *Marianne* online and had it delivered to Dinger's house. Since that Saturday night, Littleholm had become a prison, a panopticon with her dad's high-rise functioning as the warden's tower. After banning him from contacting her, Rowan was sure he watched from the fourteenth floor window every time she left her flat to stagger to the pub or to Dinger's house. He was nowhere and everywhere. So one night she just stayed at Dinger's, choosing to live among his mewling cats and mercifully silent guitars, forgetting to wash and change her clothes, sleeping on and off during the day and prowling the floorboards, smoking fag after fag, at night.

'Take as much time off as ye need,' Dinger had said. Her boss, aye, but a friend first. Dear God, they'd been mates since they were fifteen. Her first ever tattoo was on his left thigh, a bat, placed where it could be hidden, though soon it was joined by other creatures of her imagination, spilling on to the right leg, down to the ankle, up to the chest, ending at the wrists. For that first tattoo, they'd used a gun bought from Dinger's cousin. Homemade, dangerous, although they were too inexperienced to understand the risks. The need for precision, for perfection had caused her hand to shake, her heart to beat hard, so that she snapped at Dinger to stay at peace and stop shifting around in the chair before she could get the needle anywhere near him.

That first sharp scratch and, oh, she was smitten. True love, instantly. The thrill of permanence. The inky bloody mess of it. The here, now and forever of it.

‘My turn, ’ Dinger said, when she’d finished.

‘That wasnae the deal. Mine is going to be special. Perfect.’

And that was the intention, yet after a year of planning she decided against the carp she’d spent so many long hours and late nights designing. Too many carps around, even back then. Year after year the same thing—sheets and sheets of designs that would end up recycled and inked on clients’ backs, wrists or shoulders. Her dirty secret—a tattoo artist with no tattoos. She took to making up lies about ink in private places and wearing long sleeved t-shirts to conventions.

All those years of doodling had been perfect preparation for her future career. Phone books, school jotters, toilet walls, the headboard on her bed—no blank space had been safe. At first it was daisies, cats, stars then from age ten, she became obsessed with comic art, spending hours in her bedroom tracing the latest instalment of Strontium Dog, Judge Dredd and the ABC Warriors or creating her own superheroes— female usually and always invincible.

When she told Martin what she wanted to do when she grew up, he’d shown her a book of Diego Rivera’s murals. ‘Look at the power of this man’s work. An artist for the people. Don’t be a field mouse, Rowan. Ye need to shake the grass, no waste yer time creating entertainments.’

An artist for the people— what she was alright, an artist who earned enough money to eat and pay her rent and that was a rare enough thing. An artist producing the kind of work folk around Darden appreciated and thought important, yet sometimes she suspected that still wasnae good enough for Martin.

Tattooing as a career wasnae something she’d considered until after her second year

suffering through a mediocre social sciences degree. She was working a week for Martin and Tam during the summer holidays, clearing a five-floor mansion in Kingsborough Gardens. The place had been sectioned into bedsits until the owner ran off and the bank screwed metal shutters into the windows and doors. On the basement floor, Rowan found a small room with a two-ring cooker, shelves of art theory and literary criticism, Tank Girl and Patti Smith posters on the walls and under the bed, red and pink nylon knickers with black lace edging, used condoms, empty cans of Dutch beer and rolled up black-and-white striped tights.

On top of the kidney-shaped coffee table were stacks of tattoo books—*Skin Art*; *Bodies of Subversion*— and the tenant's complex sketches in neat piles: angelfish, crows, Noh masks, peacocks. Later Martin found Rowan sitting on the floor, the books opened and spread around her, the drawings placed in neat rows on the swirly carpet. In that hour or two, flicking through the books, examining the sketches, the possibility of the art form had revealed itself— how the design could flow, how the separate elements could come together to take shape into something so compelling. What would it be like to do this for a living? she had wondered. To fix your own hours, to wake up on a Monday morning and be eager to go to work?

Yet since Martin had ruined everything, Rowan hadnae been able to think about working. When Dinger returned after shutting up the studio, she would still be lying prone on the sofa where he'd left her that morning. It was obvious he was exhausted from taking on her clients as well as his own, but he wouldnae moan, he'd just go ahead and make her some dinner that she'd pick at, preferring to down his wine and smoke his joints. Greedy for oblivion, Rowan fantasised about the gas given at the dentist, longing

for the pitch-black relief of nothingness. Later, when she was swaying upright on his couch, she would tell him, maybe crying, maybe no, that he was the best, bestest mate ever, and he would nod, patting her unwashed hand, ignoring the dirt under her nails, and laughing at her weak jokes about mummies coming back to life.

Asking Martin for his copy of *Marianne* was out of the question, so she was left to search online for an overpriced collector's copy. The secret tape recording of the album Rowan made as a teenager had been put away in her cupboard with all her other childish things— the matchbox cars, model airplanes and Lego —and she'd left it behind, lost track of it after moving to her own place. By then she knew all of Marianne's songs off by heart anyway, and often, in the following years, lines would come to mind unbidden and unwanted:

Come all you fair and tender girls
That flourish in your prime
Beware, beware if your garden's fair
Let no man steal your thyme

The night she ordered *Marianne,* Dinger had passed out on the sofa—a half-eaten ashet pie in a Styrofoam carton moving up and down on his chest as he snored. Rowan sat on a chair by the window and started up his laptop. In the flat above, she could hear Dinger's mum hoovering, though it was almost midnight. As well as setting up *Tribal,* Dinger bought the flat downstairs from his mum after his dad coughed himself to death and the family was awarded asbestosis damages. Built with phlegm, Dinger would joke sometimes, slapping the tattoo studio's walls. His flat didnae have the soundproofing Rowan's flat had, but he had become an expert, he told her, at having sex without making a sound. Silent movie sex, all jittery and speeded up. As friends, Rowan and

Dinger were well suited. Both had left home without leaving home, even now, in what used to be called middle age.

The first time she ever typed Marianne's name into a search engine was way before Google. No hits whatsoever. Over the years, the number of hits rose from zero to a grand total of six. Mostly a few lines on folk music websites mentioning the album and her tragic death of TB in 1979, and a brief paragraph on a site dedicated to the work of music producer, Archie Doid:

> Marianne (1973) *can be viewed as Doid's last foray into the folk world. After the album's poor sales, he moved towards producing the artists he helped make world famous, and was already creating the slick radio-friendly sound he has became known for.*

Rowan wasnae surprised when Martin had told her that Archie Doid was her mother's boyfriend before she married. It wasnae hard to work out. On the back of *Marianne* a special dedication stated: *TO A.DOID FOR EVERYTHING.* And underneath this, his name again: *PRODUCED BY A.DOID AT ABBEY ROAD STUDIOS.* When the Internet began to make such things feasible, Rowan searched for photos of Archie. He was okay looking from the right angle but no as handsome as Rowan had imagined when she was wee.

It was so strange to see her mother's name, a little bit of her history, her photograph online—the only photograph. For a while calling up those few hits became something Rowan did while waiting for a file to download or an online payment to go through, until she stopped somehow, gave up this little ritual to replace it with another, perhaps checking the weather forecast, or flicking through tattoo galleries for inspiration.

As Dinger snored on, Rowan typed her mother's name into his laptop and then sat

upright in shock. Hundreds of hits: a band called The Tin Drummers cited the album as an influence; some singer called Misty B listed it in her FAV FAV ALBUMS OF ALL TIME!!; and many more record dealers were selling *Marianne* at higher prices. On *Orpheus Record House Online*, in the folk section under the photo scanned from the album cover, the blurb stated:

> *The Seventies witnessed a ton of female singer songwriters and, unfortunately, Marianne Renaudon's 1973 debut album (the only recording she made before her tragic death) was largely ignored on release. Now viewed as a forgotten masterpiece by those heading the recent folk revival, this album is recommended for the stripped down production that succeeds in placing her voice and poignant lyrics centre stage.*

A forgotten masterpiece? That was debatable. But then Rowan hated any kind of singing or song. *Marianne* was to blame. A lament from A-side to B-side about lost lovers, hours, countries, all sung in a voice that seemed to channel generations of grief and disappointment. Rowan hated it. But she hadnae always hated it.

Was it just after her first period? Or, maybe it was after Martin had given her that book on female puberty that Rowan experienced a sudden, desperate urge to gather together the detritus of her dead mother's life. To identify and classify, dissect and label, as if to prove that such a person had in fact existed. Martin said that he had to leave everything—Marianne's books, photographs, letters, clothes—in Paris when the landlady threw him and his baby out. Surely there had to be some wee memento of that time? Some small token?

Left alone in the flat, Rowan raked through the flotsam shored up under the four posts of Martin's bed: unanswered letters, final demands, school reports repeating that same

old refrain, *could do better*. She searched and searched for proof of life, one ear listening for Martin walking in, but Marianne remained a will o' wisp, a phantom. His girlfriends—women Rowan had no recollection of— had signed plaintive letters beginning *If you would only…* or *Why don't you ever…*or *One day we will.* Rowan folded the letters back up without reading any more. The same words, or something like them, would've been whispered too loudly into her dad's ear when she was making a cup of tea, or screamed in the hall while she was trying to do her homework.

There were Polaroids of women Rowan did remember. Hazel posing on her Honda, a single smear of bike oil across her chin. Hazel with one blue eye and one green, chain smoked Turkish cigarettes and taught Rowan how to repair 50cc motorbikes before driving off with their child benefit book. There was Claire, who taught Rowan how to survive a nuclear attack until, upon discovering how close the nuclear base was to Darden, she decided it was a waste of time sitting under a table or painting the windows white. Instead, she described in detail how Rowan's eyes would boil egg-white in their sockets, her brain would spit and hiss, frying in her skull, the flesh would cook on her bones, sloughing off in chunks like stewed steak until there was nothing left but softened stock bones melting into soup on the burnt earth.

When Rowan jumped out of her seat every time an ambulance keened or a ship on the river sounded its foghorn, convinced it was the start of the four-minute warning, Martin sent Claire on her way. He was tired of her sexual demands anyway. Forgetting his daughter was in the room, he told Tam that Claire had always wanted to fuck as if it was the end of the world.

There were photos of Ag, the waitress, squinting into the sun; Frances the ex-nun, her

hands composed as if she was about to pray; Sharon the sad-eyed mother of four who stalked Martin for months; but no trace of Marianne, nowhere to be found.

Rowan knew some things. She knew what Martin had told her. Marianne was born in France but after her father died, her mother married a Glaswegian history teacher and they moved from Paris to Glasgow's southside. When Martin met her she hadnae spoken to her mother for years—a hard-line Catholic who disowned her when she was fifteen. Her father had been an officer in the French army in the Fifties before guerrillas in Algiers shot him dead.

Around 1971, Marianne and Martin met on the train to London when he was on his way to the capital to study art and Marianne was trying to get a recording contract. They met again three or four years later in some pub, where Marianne was singing and Martin was working after being thrown out of art college for doing something or other he wasnae supposed to do. They moved in together and saved money. Marianne wanted to collect folk songs from all the Celtic countries in the world but they only got as far as Paris. They were married by then and Marianne was pregnant. She died two months after her baby was born. Rowan always thought it was a terrible tragedy that her mother had died of TB in the country that invented the cure. It was more than a tragedy, Martin said. After she died, his life spiralled away to nothing. Rowan tried no to take that personally.

These little details and the one album of her recorded voice were all Rowan had, so she began to listen to *Marianne* in the same obsessive way girls of her age listened to manufactured boy bands. Instinct told her that Martin would become even sadder if he heard her playing *Marianne*, so at first she played it when he was out of the house. Yet

soon these stolen moments were just no enough and Rowan liberated his bashed Sony tape recorder with the orange buttons and hooked it up to the ancient record player in the livingroom, filling both sides of a ninety-minute tape with her dead mother's voice.

In secret in her bedroom, she would play and rewind, play and rewind the first few seconds of the first song on the album, *Let No Man Steal Your Thyme.* A simple acoustic number, just before Marianne started strumming on her guitar she counted in the drums, whispering *one, two, three.* Here was her mother's voice, a voice she had no memory of. Rowan lay on her bed holding the small tape machine close to her chest, playing and rewinding, playing and rewinding—imagining Marianne's lips round, her tongue touch the alveolar ridge when she said *one,* the air push through her teeth when she said *two,* and the tongue tip trilling when she whispered the soft *three*. Rowan listened to the album all the way through again and again, but always she came back to that *one, two, three*—the personal note, the scribble at the edge of the song.

One day when they were alone in her bedroom, she allowed Eddie to hear the whole album. 'Christ, Rowan,' he said, tapping his chest to show the place it hurt. 'I don't mean to be cheeky, but that's hard going, so it is.'

She knew what he meant. Listening to those sad songs had begun to feel like a duty. Martin had told her no one bought the album, no one had listened to it so Rowan started to think that if she didnae play it, her mother's voice would disappear from the world and that was what death was like, wasn't it? After weeks of this, she began to turn the volume up on her tape deck. Subconsciously she wanted Martin to hear her playing the album, wanted him to come and talk to her and pull her free from endless obsessive-compulsive cycles of playing and rewinding, playing and rewinding. Martin heard

alright, but instead of talking to her himself, he got Bel next-door to speak to her.

Lovely Bel with her five spice accent— savoury Mandarin, sour English, bitter Russian, salty Glaswegian, and sweet Irish—Bel who had been brought up by her English mother and father in Beijing because they'd fallen for Mao, lovely Bel who had sailed the seven seas and washed up in Darden, married to Tam, she looked over to where Rowan was sitting on the kitchen bench, and came right out with it. She said, 'So you've been listening to your ma's songs a lot, I hear?'

Bel with her hand-knitted jumpers and washed out cotton trousers, who despite knowing the Red Book off by heart, believed in moon goddesses and animal spirits, fairies and imps, had the good grace to avert her eyes as Rowan blushed scarlet on the kitchen bench.

Of course, Rowan denied it, but with one raised eyebrow from Bel, she conceded that, aye, maybe just a few times, here and there.

'Don't think you're in trouble or anything as grim as that,' Bel had said standing by the cooker, stirring conjee she was taught to cook as a wean in China. 'It's just a talk we're having, the pair of us. As we like to do often enough. I told Martin he was worrying about nothing at all. In China, it is called ancestor veneration. Families pay respect to their dead by lighting incense and leaving gifts of rice, sweets and other things at an altar, or they burn spirit money to provide abundance in the next world. It's a way of showing deference to their dead. That's the common thinking anyway. I was for believing this is what you've been up to in your own way, is it not?'

Rowan nodded. This made it sound alright. This made it sound no so weird. Traditional, something *normal* other folk did. She took a sip of her jasmine tea poured

from an old teapot with cracked green glaze; Bel swore the Imperial Prince gave it to her doctor father when the prince became a communist. Bel was filled with stories. Stories within stories: *Scheherazade, the Panchatantra*.

'Mao tried to stamp out ancestor veneration, but he failed with that and more besides. The people, well, they did it in secret anyway. I said to your daddy that you don't have a grave to visit, so you have to find your own way of grieving. The thing is, you shouldn't be feeling you have to hide away if you're as sad as all that. You can talk to me about it or to Martin. None of us are minding. Why, he himself will answer any questions you have. All you have to do is peep up now.'

Rowan knew better than that. Bel didnae understand how Martin could act when ye asked him anything about Marianne. Like one of they crabs at the seashore: the more ye poked it, the more it hid.

'Now all this fash reminds me of a story I heard once,' Bel said and told Rowan one of her made-up parables. This one was a man who visited the ghosts of his dead ancestors so often that when he came home, everyone looked right through him because he had become a ghost too.

'Better sometimes to let the dead rest, my girl,' Bel said. 'Let them have their sleep. They've earned it. Make no mistake about that. Let them be dead to the living world then those who still can, can get on with the business of existing. Now where has that fine young Eddie been hiding? He's a cheeky one with the devil's kiss on his forehead, oh, but handsome enough. There's no denying it.'

That evening after she had eaten Bel's conjee in quick, gulping swallows so she didnae have to hold the slimy rice goo in her mouth for too long, Rowan made her

excuses and went next door to their own flat. Cocooned in her bedroom, she took the tape from the machine and put it away in the cupboard. From then on, Rowan only listened to pirate radio stations playing music they called Acid House. With no autobiography, no narrative, no lyrical ego trip, just beats and bass, listening to that tribal thump she didnae feel that odd lump rise up and almost choke her.

Sometimes though she wondered if house music had allowed her fear of singing and songs to develop into a full-blown phobia—a quivering disgust that made her want to stuff her ears with wax whenever Martin staggered in from the pub and blasted *Woodstock: the Album*, great tears flowing as he lamented lost days of promise with no a care or thought for the neighbours next door.

When *Marianne* arrived by courier, Rowan realised Dinger didnae have a turntable, which meant returning to Littleholm and risking bumping into Martin. It was early afternoon when she walked onto the estate, so she skirted around the back of the community centre in case he was on his way to the bookies or Aseem's.

As Rowan crossed the square and headed towards her maisonette, a little tornado of cherry blossom birled around the pavement in front of her. Cherry blossom in February? Drawing closer, she realised it wasnae blossom at all—it was Martin. He'd been writing on inch square pieces of paper, filling a bucket, opening his fourteenth floor window and allowing the paper squares to glide down on slipstreams of air to the maisonettes, to the shops, to the main road far below. Once upon a time, she had helped him write down lines from poems, quotation books, his own phrases or something he found in the margins of old books. Her mind would go blank when he asked her to write something

so instead she doodled a wee cartoon character or a smiley face. In a grand act of theatre, he would open the window, tip the confetti out and, together, they cheered on the little paper squares as if they were baby birds leaving the nest for the first time. On a good, windy day, they'd fly for miles and she would hang out of the window as much as she dared, watching till the last of them were out of sight, wondering what folk's faces would be like when *Spring departs /Birds cry/ Fishes' eyes are filled with tears* floated down from the air like magic into their chip pokes, their handbags, their open palms.

Now Rowan leaned down and snatched a square of paper from an oily puddle before the thing was soaked through and before she registered her mind's warning no to. It read:

Heartbreak is gratuitous wreckage

The H of the *heartbreak* was blotched and smudged by the puddle water, the black ink turning blue, but she knew every loop and twist of Martin's handwriting. There was no doubt this message was intended for her —she had blocked every other means of communication and so torn sheets from a jotter bought at Aseem's were all he had left. It should read, she raged: *Unnecessary heartbreak is gratuitous wreckage.* All he'd had to do was tell her the truth from the start and by this age it would all have been dealt with and done with—an old scar, faded to thin silver, no this bloody gaping wound that might just be the death of her.

The pieces of paper were everywhere— stuck on car windows, in the ground floor gardens, blown across the square with all the other rubbish. Had he spotted her walking along the dual carriageway and filled the bucket then, or had the paper squares been

lying here all day? Perhaps he had taken to issuing his edicts from above, baptising the long-suffering residents with his thoughts on a daily basis again.

Rowan rolled the square of paper into a tiny ball and flicked it into a puddle. Was he watching her? When she looked up at his window, it was a whiteout of net curtains. Scrutinised from above. Surrounded and hounded by his words. She needed to get to her flat—get in, lock the door and pull the blinds down, get away out from the shadow of his high-rise. Head bent under his real or imagined gaze, she ploughed on. Almost home. Almost safe. Inside the close and along the walkway. Smell of disinfectant. Old graffiti showing through the last year's paint job—*Bundy; Fleeto; Paul is a prick.* Past her neighbours' flat and she was inside, slamming her front door against the world.

A toxic smell of rot pervaded the whole house—the kitchen bin filled with fortnight-old food. Rowan dumped the junk mail offering her coin-operated flatscreen TVs, credit cards with 40% interest and debt counselling onto the coffee table. The full ashtray and the half-emptied bottle of vodka on the glass tabletop were clues to how she'd spent her time before escaping to Dinger's. Next to the glasses, sheets of drawing paper, blank or covered with small mean designs that she'd scored out, and on top of the paper, scattered pieces of Martin. Little bits of his beard; an eye; half a stained yellow smile; a hiking boot. Rowan swept the torn photograph into the bin along with the contents of the ashtray and sat down on the couch.

The dust-covered turntable waited for her on the shelving unit. Did it even work? Top of the range when she bought it, perhaps now it belonged down by the communal bins where every weekend an elephants' graveyard of electric goods— analogue TVs and tape decks— was raised high, or had been raised high until the credit crunch.

She tried no to waste her money on fancy new electrical gear. In her wee flat there wasnae any room for a 44inch TV with surround sound and she preferred it that way. Keeping her house clutter-free was like wearing fresh knickers in case she was knocked down. Rowan imagined that if she died, house clearers would walk in and be thankful for how little work she had left them. And if ever the laziness came on, all she had to remember were Tam's curses when he hosed down somebody else's mess: *dirty bastards, shouldnae be allowed, blind pigs couldnae survive here.* Martin had a higher tolerance. In fact, he liked houses that clearers' called *dumpers.* Messy folk left so much more behind to salvage.

When Rowan started on the clearances, murders or suicides were strictly Adults Only, as were houses where a wean had died or someone had been stabbed. From her seat in the van, she would spot Tam or Martin through the window, shaking his head while stuffing soft toys into a black bag. She was happy to sit in the van. Repossessions were sad enough— red bills and pill and whisky bottles (*never drink spirits, Rowan*), wedding albums and self-help books: *Secrets All Millionaires Know* and *Micromanaging Your Budget.* In every flat, bungalow and villa, she was under strict instructions never to lift a mattress, never to look behind radiators or up on top of wardrobes unless an adult had checked first. But still, ye saw things. Things ye didnae want to see. One summer, she told Martin enough was enough and took a Saturday job cleaning the cat and dog home.

Although she preferred the minimalist approach to interior decoration, just like Martin she had shelves and shelves of books, and just like him she used her collection as a haphazard filing system for bank statements, tax returns, photographs, tattoo designs

that were slotted inside the pages of *Yakuza Ink*, *Symbols and Signs* and *The Single Girl's Guide* like bookmarks. Train and plane tickets—what folk used most often for bookmarks—were rare guests in-between the pages of Rowan's books. She just hated to travel.

'Go on the road,' Martin used to tell her, still half in thrall to the dubious romance of Kerouac. 'Do what I couldnae do.'

But this only confirmed that instead of relishing raising his daughter, he'd been trapped by circumstance into doing it. Although after his first big depression, she knew he was glad to have her close by. He had said as much one night, wasted on E.

Maybe it was Marianne dying in a foreign country or the itinerants Rowan had met growing up that put her off travelling. Seekers, she'd called these transient strangers who came to stay for a few days on their couch, or for longer if Martin liked them enough to invite them into his bed. Some appeared back at the front door, two months or two years later, smelling of sea salt and cigarettes, with tanned faces, white wine from Greece and gonorrhoea. They sat up late smoking the last of their stash with her dad, drinking cheap Retsina and arguing about whether apes should have human rights and where the best place in Kerala was for grass. Their constant restlessness, their dissatisfaction had made her edgy and tense. Sometimes they talked of putting roots down, of renting a place close to the river, but soon enough they were away again to a retreat offering free food and board, a squat in Manchester, a bus being driven all the way to the Hindu Kush.

Or perhaps it was the parts of Spain she had visited with Dinger in their early twenties that put her off travelling, or how when ye were sat by a pool outside some burnt red hotel on the edge of a resort that looked a little like Littleholm, all there was to

do was think about depressed fathers and sick grannies whose legs couldnae carry them further than the corner shop. At home, ye just got on with things, filled up the time with routine—living life, no analysing it, no thinking about what ye should've done and what ye couldnae do now. Home was better. Home was safer.

Rowan poured vodka into a cleanish tumbler then lit a fag from her bag before she had really considered that it was 2.30pm on a Monday afternoon. She'd never been a spectacular drinker. Maybe it was Martin going on for years about no wanting to end up like his old man, or maybe it was because she'd never had bad uncles, wicked stepfathers poke and prod her innards, leaving her in need of something to blank out bad memories. Would it be different now? Now that she had this jagged pain that only faded after stewing herself stupid? She recalled Martin's bottles of wine, the whisky in the cupboard that might have been his after all. Reports had reached her that he was spending every day in Smuggies, refusing to say what or who had led to the five stitches at the side of his eye.

It wouldnae be a hardship, keeping away from the pub in case she bumped into Martin. Sketching, reading and even checking her profile on yourperfectmatch.com was preferable to witnessing what the years and the booze had done to folk she'd known all of her life. Dinger still loved the pub and all the daft banter; maybe Rowan just couldnae see the joke anymore. But then had she ever? Back at university, others went to the local spit and sawdust for cheap drink and to witness first-hand a world they'd only read about in novels set for Contemporary Scottish Lit. They were confident the old woman in the corner smelling of pish and cats who would dance if ye bought her a shammy and put Tina Turner on the jukie, or the old boy with the liver so swelled it was visible through

his Sally Army suit jacket, would never be the shape and shade of their own lives. The fresh-faced students from *Late Capitalist Society: Module A* were sure of this, and sure of themselves in a way that Rowan never would be. How easily life slides away, Martin would say, leaning on a mop in another repossessed house. For a few years after university, invites came for student reunions and nights out with folk whose names she couldnae remember. When she was asked to dress up in a tracksuit and *pretend* to be poor for some party, Rowan changed her email address.

Her mobile rang. Eddie calling from Aberdeen. Synchronicity. As if he could sense all the way up there that Rowan was sitting alone in the cold, dark livingroom sipping vodka from a dirty glass, her thoughts just a heartbeat away from turning towards him. She left the phone to ring out. He'd only ask what she was doing back at the flat and she would have to lie. Wanting to listen to *Marianne* might seem masochistic to anyone else. Or maybe Eddie would understand. He seemed to understand a lot more these days.

Sober now for years, Eddie was never good on the drink and was better off it. When someone slashed him across the neck outside one of the pubs, him and Christine left Darden for Aberdeen where he worked on the roads and studied at night before becoming an engineer for a company that dismantled defunct oil platforms across the globe. The travel had meant the end of him and Christine just last year.

'She just didnae like it at all. Mind you, she liked the money,' he said during his first nervous phone call around six or so months ago. That first phone call when he tried to apologise and Rowan said, all embarrassed, Ah let the past be the past Eddie, for God's sake. Later, she cursed herself for no allowing him to speak. What had he been about to apologise for? Something specific like never saying goodbye? Or just the general way he

was back then: a hard ticket, a total liability with something to prove.

Perhaps if his mum had called him John or Paul like every other boy in Littleholm then he wouldnae have had such a hard time growing up. Living in Darden with a name like Eden meant having to learn to fight from a young age. When they were small, she remembered him being quite proud of his name, but when he was old enough to want to be just like everyone else, all he seemed to say until, largely due to determination and sometimes brute insistence, his new name stuck was: 'Call me Eddie.'

Back when Eddie was still pished, one night he'd told her how much he wished Martin had been his dad. *Lucky Rowan. Lucky girl.* It was Martin that Eddie fell in love with first. Most of her broken boyfriends had been the same. In-between the lessons on how to roll the best joint and play the guitar, in-between talk of jamming with John Martyn, and leading the Littleholm rent strike, they clocked Rowan sitting in the corner drawing or making tea in the kitchen, and decided to fall in love with her too. If she'd met the boy first, she would put off introducing him to Martin for as long as possible, but when they did meet it was always the same and, afterwards, she'd have to listen to the familiar exultations with a weary heart.

Rowan hoped Eddie admired her dad a little bit less now. He'd been shocked when she told him what had happened and then he went all business, right into management mode, suggesting contacting the record company, going to counselling, nothing she was ready for as yet. It was the same voice he used back when they were children pretending to be adults and she told him she was pregnant. He had promised to go with her to the hospital but, of course, when the day came, he was nowhere to be found. His mum, Rosie, came looking for him a few days later, full of tales of how he staggered in and

helped himself to money stuffed inside the smiling Buddha that sat above the TV.

‘He looked so like his dad, Rowan. It was terrifying,’ Rosie said, before sucking hard on a creased little joint pulled from her purse.

But that was then. Now Eddie was fixed. Now Eddie was doing well for himself. The prodigal son, the lad o’pairts. After hearing what had happened with Martin, he tried to convince Rowan to travel up and stay with him in Aberdeen. No funny business. Just pals. Rowan said she would think about it, though that was a lie.

The first time he called her, she hadnae spoken to or seen him for over ten years. He hoped she didnae mind him calling. She didnae. No really. Though for a week or so after, their ghosts were everywhere. Kissing, fighting, cuddling at the benches, at the bus stop, by the canal. There was no grief when the ghosts faded. She had a full diary of appointments at the studio and no time to be mooning about, wallowing in what was past and gone. So no, she hadnae minded him phoning her. No really. Only when he said what everyone who moved away always bloody said.

‘Never imagined you’d still be there. You of all people. Who’d have thought it?’

Folk like Eddie believed that in order to get somewhere ye had to leave Darden. Just as they believed it was lack of ambition, no choice that kept her there. She had a hundred reasons for staying—cheap rent; proximity to her family; how it was better the devil ye know— but they sounded like excuses, and she didnae feel she had to make any, so instead she’d say nothing.

‘That place will bring ye down,’ Eddie had said during that first call. Down the line, Rowan had heard the faint sound of traffic and gulls screeching up in Aberdeen, and she imagined grey granite and the cold North Sea crashing off the harbour, rocking

icebreakers and fishing boats with Norwegian and Danish names.

‘Oh, Eddie, it’s no like it was. We’ve got all sorts now. People like living here, so they do.’

‘I know Littleholm is better. Sure I do. But Darden’s still Darden.’

‘Well Eden, no every bugger wants or needs a bought house, or to go gallivanting around the world.’

‘Nobody, no even my ma, calls me Eden anymore.’

‘It just slipped out.’

‘Actually, it’s no that bad to hear. How funny is that?’

In her livingroom, gripping onto her glass of vodka, she thought of Eddie’s words: *Bring ye down*. As if there was some kind of bad spirit encased within Littleholm’s concrete that sooner or later would result in the residents finding themselves alone in their livingrooms, necking straight vodka on a cold, dark Monday afternoon while wishing evil on those they’d loved and cared for. Rowan put the glass down on the table and pushed it away.

In her rucksack, a brown package with *Fragile Handle with Care* stamped across it. As carefully as possible, she peeled back the layers of bubble wrap to reveal *Marianne* written in Celtic script and the black-and-white photograph she knew so well, her mother’s long hair straight with a middle parting, her dark eyes looking off to the left as always.

Now everything Martin had told her was crowned by a question mark. The attic in Paris, Marianne lying on the bed coughing up brown arterial blood on snowy white sheets—all lies. She had been a good mother and a good wife. Now it was a different:

she was a harpy, a witch, a crazy woman. Martin was Pol Pot, Stalin, rewriting the past for his own benefit. Facts had been censored; people had been erased to suit his own needs. Could Martin have hurt Marianne? Sent her running? Rowan didnae think so but then what did she really know about anything?

She looked at her mother staring off to the left. Enigmatic, someone said years ago. A Mona Lisa smile. A woman filled with secret knowledge. Perhaps, if Rowan played the songs themselves, they would cast a spell, work magic, stop her procrastinating in fear and maybe compel her to contact the record label, or better yet, the music would work to conjure Marianne out of thin air to answer for herself.

At the turntable she put the needle on the first song on the album: *Let No Man Steal Your Thyme.* Crackling came through the speakers. Marianne's voice filled the livingroom.

One, two, three

Rowan was on the floor, curled up in a ball under her parka, eyes squeezed shut, her hands clenched into fists and drawn close to her chest.

Come all you fair and tender girls
That flourish in your prime…

The boiler clicked off, the radiators died, but still Rowan lay on the cold laminate. From the A side to the B side and back again, she lay, only rising to turn the record and replace the needle onto the diamond cut grooves. When the phone rang Rowan crawled on her hands and knees towards the cable to yank it out of the socket, but before she could the next song began and Marianne sang:

Waiting all night to hear your voice
To hear you ask me: just come on over

Rowan paused, the phone cable in her hand. Synchronicity. Sympathetic magic. It would only be Eddie trying her landline. He would've phoned the studio and Dinger would have said she was at home. Still, when Rowan picked up the phone, her heart beat so hard her jaw pulsed.

Archie Doid asked why Rowan hadn't phoned him and when she said she didnae a clue what he was talking about, he said, 'Your old man didn't tell you then? It was me who discovered Marianne was living and breathing. Terrible to keep you in the dark like that. To keep us all in the dark like that. Plain, simple and true.'

He told her they were close to finding Marianne but they hadn't managed to track her down as of yet. He invited Rowan to London. He'd get her up to speed with everything that was going on, including their hopes for the re-release. People—important people—believed *Marianne* was destined to be a real success second time around. Could Rowan sing? Startled, Rowan said, no, no, no. Tone deaf. Couldnae sing a note. Perhaps he sighed then, she couldnae be sure.

At the end of a conversation that had lasted through the whole of the A-side, Archie Doid asked if she had any questions.

A million. However, what she asked was this: 'Was she mad? Was Marianne mad?'

'Sanest person I ever met. Can tell you that straight and true. Tell you that with all my heart.'

Rowan told him to book the next available flight.

CHAPTER THREE

And when you speak, angels sing from above
Everyday words seem to turn into love songs
Louis Armstrong ‘La Vie En Rose’

In the office on the second floor of his Georgian mansion, Archie Doid danced Rowan around the room. When her throat was dry from so many questions and she was a wee bit tipsy on wine worth more than she earned in a month, he asked her what music she wanted to listen to. ‘What sounds?’ he said. ‘What sounds are you into?’ And she had to tell him about no liking songs and singing all that much, shrugging her shoulders and saying, ye know, whatever. Archie’s deep bass laughter reverberated in her feet. ‘And you, Marianne’s daughter too.’ His handsome face turned light pink; his eyes became blue jewels. But then he got sad like most people did after considering what it meant to be as she was. Shook his head and growled in his country singer’s broken voice—‘Jesus, all those songs you’ve never listened to’—and he fished up a remote control, pointing it towards an amp. She panicked then, looking for the door, but he assured her: ‘It’s instrumental. *La Vie en Rose*. Satchmo.’

Aping formality, he stood and asked Rowan to dance, bowing and clicking his bare heels together on the parquet flooring—his feet were tanned a deep brown, a silver toe ring gleamed. She laughed, rose from her chair, taking the proffered hand, warm and dry, as his other hand with the missing finger was placed firmly on her back, pulling her towards him. They swayed together, more or less in time, and they were close enough

for Rowan to feel his heart beat, close enough for her to kiss him if she wanted to.

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Archie had organised a car to pick her up at City Airport. ‘No, no. I’ll get the train,’ she insisted with no understanding of how far it was from City airport to west London. The last time she was in London was over a decade ago to view student accommodation attached to the same college Martin had been expelled from. A bare, narrow room on the twelfth floor with just a desk and a bed destined to be occupied by someone else. From the window, she saw endless rooftops, chimneys with TV aerials, satellite dishes, stretching for miles into a flat, grey horizon. With no hills to cradle her, Rowan had felt strange, vertiginous, and had gripped the windowsill to steady herself.

The hills she loved were no the type to be recommended in guidebooks favouring more impressive chains of rock along the Highland boundary fault, and it was rare to come across serious walkers with stout poles and laminated maps. Sometimes, she would pass another local on bike or on foot, and a nod was all they exchanged, each understanding, without the necessity of words, the desire for solitude propelling them up the steep paths. For at the top of Dundon with its views across hill and glen and loch water, Ben Lomond to the west and the Campsies to the north east, up there in among the trees and running water, far removed from the noise and dirt and human mess that was her town, Rowan could feel a motion and spirit rolling through all things.

It was Martin, of course, who’d taken her up there as a wean. These days, he made noises about getting up early on a Sunday and joining her, yet when the time came, he just wouldnae turn up. Other people had pints and drams, charms and saints, Rowan had

her own ways of seeking spiritual comfort, dawdling up and down her own talismans, face skelped red by the wind.

The Docklands Light Railway shunted her through new-build estates that looked awfy like Harbour Peninsula. It was morning rush hour and the toy train was packed with people in suits heading, she supposed, to Canary Wharf—a city of the future gleaming in the near distance. Watching the news reports about financial institutions closing and seeing folk carrying boxes as they filed out of glass buildings, Rowan wondered what these suddenly jobless people had salvaged from their desks. Important files that were no longer important to anyone and would be left to moulder in garages beside cars the owners couldnae now afford. Staplers? A favourite mug from the kitchen boasting *Bankers Do It Better*? Or photographs from their desks of sons and daughters whose education at the best schools was no longer secure.

Despite the news being filled with job losses and companies collapsing, the little DLR train was packed with the suited and booted. Perhaps as they pretended to read novels and free newspapers, these folk sitting and standing beside Rowan were really wondering if today was the day when their employers, a diamond chip company with a two hundred year history, would ring up void at the till.

How many tattoos were concealed under these office workers' snow-white shirts and pale pink blouses? A hidden identity, a little rebellion, something secret mum and dad in Sussex would never get to see. Although mum and dad probably had their own tattoos inked during some summer of love—Yin-yangs, peace signs, astrological symbols, good luck charms.

All Rowan could see from the train window were those endless rooftops, chimneys

with TV aerials, satellite dishes, stretching for miles, and she wished, oh, for a rabbit's foot, lucky white heather, a four leaf clover—something tactile to hold in her hand, something to grip onto. Instead she made the sign against the evil eye in her pocket as the commuters got off and more came on. She was a yokel, blinking in the bright lights of the big city, wishing for shiny horseshoes and lucky trinkets whittled from wood.

Two hours later in west London, she was lost looking for Archie Doid's house, wandering through avenue after tree-lined avenue of Georgian wedding cake houses iced in stiff whites, and dressed with fluted columns and balustraded balconies. The police sirens and racket of traffic on the main roads faded away in these hushed streets as if in deference to the prosperity on display. At sixteen, Bel was sent by her communist parents to Dublin to live in a house Rowan imagined being similar to those in the streets she now walked. On arrival Bel asked her storybook grandma who smelled of lavender and wore pearls, 'Who live here?' Grandma, standing ramrod straight, replied, 'You and I', pointing at Bel then herself to make sure she was quite understood. Bel, standing in the grand hallway under portraits of folk she would later discover were her relatives, had burst out greeting. Big, racking sobs, she said, while grandma pursed her lips.

Rowan had loved Bel's stories of that fancy house in the Ballsbridge. When other weans drew one-dimensional shacks with smoke coming from the chimney pot, Rowan's were Palladian villas with arches and marble steps. The house clearances soon put paid to any dreaming of that kind when she saw for herself that bricks and mortar couldnae act as ballast against misery and misfortune. This new understanding was only compounded when, in her twenties, she went with boyfriends to their parents' houses for dinner—houses with yew trees and gravel driveways similar to those she had drawn as a

wean. Something happened to her inside those houses. Sitting at dining tables in silence so weighted with all that was unsaid, she babbled like an idiot—Rowan, the quiet one. On and on the words came. It was uncanny, her ability to choose whatever taboo topic the family had tried their best to ignore: affairs, secret alcoholism, embezzlement. Too late Rowan would notice the boyfriend's glower, the mother's mouth set in a grim line, the father twisted in his seat with guilt.

So no such things as enchanted castles and yet, walking the streets of Archie Doid's neighbourhood, passing French windows where Poodles barked and grand pianos sat idle, Rowan felt that old, burning want. Were these no the kind of houses TV told her she was supposed to own, even if it meant 100% mortgages, credit cards, personal loans? But this pressure to consume, to buy bigger, more, better was why she'd stopped watching TV.

Archie Doid's house was the largest in the wide street, set back far from the road and hemmed in by a half acre of wild garden. The gate was open so she walked up the path, yelping when a black shape flitted across the flagstones. A muscular tomcat, the darkest shade of night stalking some poor wee creature through wet fronds of cleavers and groundsel. The cat stalked towards an old tree where a piece of thick rope hung from a branch—a children's swing, abandoned and left to rot or what the gardener had used as a noose when he realised the weeds had won.

The gallows tree shook its leaves at Rowan, whispering *yesh, yesh,* as she hurried up the stone steps towards the black door. Beside the brass knocker, two plaques were screwed onto the doorframe. Polished metal caught a burst of winter sunlight as she read:

ASTERDOID PRODUCTION STUDIOS

Archie Doid had told her on the phone that although the label offices were in central London, he lived and worked in his studios. Would it be okay if she came straight to the studio? Of course, Rowan had said. Of course.

Below the brass plaque, a small newish nameplate stated in plain font:

Barbara Flyer
Regression Therapist

Past lives and all that. New age mince, though harmless enough and nothing to be feart about. Rowan pressed the bell and waited. The wind rushed through the trees, *yesh*, *yesh*, and up the steps to strip her to the ribs. Cold and exposed she stood as the door creaked open and a gaunt woman in a well-cut dress peered out. Bony fingers gripping the door were ringed with silver moulded in the shape of spiders, leaves and scarabs, though it was the woman's eyes that were the most arresting—knocking off one another like pool balls. A female Igor waiting to lead Rowan to rooms where the portraits watched and the bed spun around on the stroke of midnight.

A mean thrill of triumph when the woman told Rowan in a dispirited voice that she wasnae seeing any clients. The regression therapist, of course, the patchouli coming off her in waves.

'It's Archie I'm wanting.'

Bug Eyes sighed with all the weariness in the world and said, 'He's upstairs', before turning on her heel, and marching back up the hallway, leaving Rowan gaping at her bony shoulders. The black cat slunk in the open doorway—all sleekit-like— and padded

up the hall, matching Bug Eyes' haughty stride. A witch's familiar following its sour-souled mistress. As she trailed the woman into the house, Rowan found herself making the sign against the evil eye again and whispering a playground rhyme:

Black-luggie, amber bead,
Rowan-tree an' reed thread,
Put the witches to their speed.

Protection against witchcraft as well as all kinds of bad magic, or so she'd once believed.

Often because of her own minimalist tastes, Rowan experienced sensory overload walking into other people's houses. But no in Archie Doid's place. The huge reception area was a blank of white walls and white flooring. Above the massive stone fireplace, a five-foot pink neon guitar flashed on and off in the dull light. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows, she caught sight of a swimming pool covered in blue plastic sheeting and dead leaves.

Bug Eyes' dour face flashed pink in the neon as she jabbed a finger towards the wide staircase, and said, 'He's up there. First floor to the left. You'll hear the music.'

Rowan shut her mouth before the thanks escaped, turned and started climbing the stairs. Here at last on their wall was a personal touch. A collection of framed black-and-white photos lining the staircase. Rowan vaguely recognised some of the faces pictured, though didnae know any of these famous musicians' names. They stood by mics, mouths stretched in song, and by pianos, smoking, heads bent. Would Marianne's face stare back at her? A photo of Marianne she had never seen?

Like a frantic relative searching a wall pinned with pictures of missing people,

Rowan moved up the stairs, scrutinising each image. The subjects morphed from folk in flares and kaftans, holding acoustic guitars to people behind synthesisers sporting shoulder pads and frenchcombed hair. The last photo was more of a snap than the others: a dark-haired hippie girl sitting cross-legged outside a tent, smiling up at the camera. Almost Marianne, but the chin a little short, the eyes too far apart. Obviously, Marianne just hadnae been famous enough for the wall of fame.

Rowan turned and looked back down the staircase, but Bug Eyes was no longer there. The last of the cat's tail disappeared round the hall door—off to search for more wee beasties to terrorise. Music travelled along the first floor landing. On her second knock, the noise was cut off and Archie Doid shouted from behind the door, 'Well, come the hell in.'

The man in the white shirt and jeans came out from behind the glass desk and made to hug her, but, awkward and blushing, she had already stuck out her damp hand so that he shook that instead. The room was filled with shelves of records, guitars, gold discs and the flashing lights of at least five jukeboxes—countless songs of love and heartbreak, just waiting for their numbers to be punched, for play to be pressed. Dear God.

'You look just like her,' he said. 'Bet you hear that all the time.'

'Yes. Yes, I do,' she lied.

*

When he saw Marianne's daughter standing there at his office door, an old hurt he thought razed to nothing long ago, rose up hard. He remembered that first time with Marianne and wondered if her daughter smelled the same. Wanted to lean right in and sniff her there and then, but shook her hand instead. Later, when the girl went to the bathroom, he raised his hand to his face to see if he could get the scent of her.

Oh, she was Marianne's girl alright. Sure, her accent was thicker than her mother's gentle burr, but she'd the same big eyes and big mouth that could eat you right up. Girl was older of course, older than he'd ever seen Marianne. Creases here and there, forehead showing signs of worry. Well, no wonder. He'd seen photos of the place her old man had brought her up. Kind of place that would age anyone. Reminded him a little of Oldham.

Her hands shook when he passed her a glass of his finest, and he watched as she gulped it down like lemonade. Though nervous, she seemed strong—the way she set her mouth, the way he wondered sometimes if she was taking it all in, and then she'd come out with a question that cut right to the heart of it. Sharp. Just like her mother.

He told her how they'd discovered Marianne was accessing money from a French bank. No point telling her how he knew this. Yet some things there wasn't any point trying to hide —not with her sitting right there in front of him. Might as well be open and honest about how much her mother had meant to him once upon a time. Could talk that much truth at least. Could give the girl that much.

'The first time I saw Marianne was in a back room above a pub. I was looking for a

girl singer and someone told me to check out this chick gigging over in Tottenham Court Road. When I walked in, well, she was introducing the band. She was so quiet, shy I suppose, that Scots reserve made her seem kind of mysterious—but when she sang, she put the chills right through you. Made you believe in God and his angels.

'The band were a couple of art school types she ran into somewhere or other. Sub-Fairport Convention jingle-jangle for the most part, but there was one song she sang on her own with no accompaniment: *Let No Man Steal Your Thyme.* That five octave vocal range had every man in the place on his knees. Bet you never knew she'd considered becoming an opera singer early on. It just wasn't her kind of scene was the thing. Preferred the folky, rootsy troubadour sound and who could blame her?

'At first it was strictly business. I knew talent when I saw it. But after a while…well, I guess it was her pilgrim soul that drew me. She was the type who couldn't sit around doing nothing for too long. She kept me on my toes. Had ideals and was greatly determined about those ideals—God help you if you ever fell short. She knew her own mind, and that was a challenge, but back then I was used to getting too much too easy. I could have had the pick of them, but she put up a fight, and I guess I was ripe for the tussle.

'By the time she caved in and wanted me, I was tit-over-arse in love with her. I'll tell you that now. Tell you that straight and true. Never knew what it felt like, though I'd said it enough times. By the end I began to sound like a woman, always at her, asking her what she was thinking. It was guaranteed to be something interesting. Make no mistake about that.'

The girl was sitting on the edge of her seat, listening hard. She looked at him as he

sparked an unfiltered, and took a long drag, squinting at her through the grey smoke like he'd seen some cowboy do in a movie once, long ago.

'It killed me how that sublime slice of vinyl was never given its due. Of the hundreds of albums I've had a hand in creating, *Marianne* is the one I'm most proud of. Back then, every girl I seemed to meet played the guitar and sang barefoot about Canada or California when they came from Putney or Pinner, but Marianne's voice had a pureness to it those other girls could never replicate. Her voice does something to you. Well, I'm sure you don't need me to tell you that.'

The girl shivered.

'Cold?' He picked up the house phone, dialled Barbara and told her to turn the thermostat up. He hung up on her while she was still complaining.

' Ok...so the thing was I had a gut feeling Marianne wouldn't sell much back then. All that harp and penny whistle. It was just too weird for the folk purists and too acoustic for the folk-rock crowd. Marianne knew what she wanted though, and there was no way of dissuading her once her mind was set hard on something.

'But people like her music now. I saw…on the Internet. People seem to love that album,' the girl said, eyes wide.

'Yeah, great eh? All we had to do was bide our time and wait for a new generation to dig the album out the crates, pass it around among themselves, using the web to spread the good news. Just the other day a band contacted legal, asking if they could organise a tribute night. Wanted to play her songs and get other musicians along who cite her as an influence.'

There was no helping the grin; it almost split his face in two.

‘What’s more I’ve discovered some recordings we never released. I’d forgotten all about them. Anyway, the tracks are good, you see. And the session musicians have all became renowned in their own right so there’s an added consumer interest there.

‘So here’s the gig. Your mother signed a contract stating her album can’t be re-released without her signed permission. Standard kind of thing normally, but because of her missing in action status, it’s left us in a bind. I’ve had my lawyers look up, down and underneath the thing, but it’s watertight. The long and short of it is, we need to find her. So the label, and my good self, we need your help.

‘Now, be under no illusions, Rowan. There won’t be much profit to be made from the re-release. Hell, for me, it’s just about getting it out there again. Getting it appreciated in a way it never was before. So we’re not talking platinum record sales. Not for this kind of niche market.’

The girl shrugged as if to say, what did money matter? *Now all of your music sounds like the ringing of a cash register*—Marianne’s words before she left for the continent. Naïve kind of sentiment people made back then without fear of others busting a gut laughing. What would she think now? Ringtones and advertising tie-ins were the only way to clear any profit. He made *Marianne* for love and that was the last time he was dumb enough to do that. He wasn’t greedy. He didn’t love money. It wasn’t that simple. He loved good times, and, Jesus, good times cost.

Yet the real truth was that during the Eighties, when he’d taken his nose off the mirror long enough to consider the spectacular way he was fucking up his life, he’d been grateful Marianne wasn’t around to hear the sounds he put his name to. Synthesizers and the studio sound. Would it play on American radio? was the only standard he set

himself.

'When I found out Marianne was alive for sure, well it burned somewhere inside that your old man had kept it from you, but trust me when I say, I'd have made sure I'd found her and spoken to her, seen where things stood, before I went bringing all this down on your head.'

The girl nodded as if she appreciated the sentiment. The way she was looking at him made his cock twitch. He wanted her. Wanted her to look at him in that same wanting way all the others had. Not what he'd expected to feel but maybe it made everything just that little bit easier.

'I never could believe Marianne had died. She was healthy as an ox when I last saw her. That was just before she left London with your father. '77, it must have been. Off on their world tour if I remember, though they didn't get very far. I'll tell you this, when I heard through the grapevine she was dead, it didn't make any sense somewhere in here.'

Archie beat his chest with his fist and watched as the girl looked at her sandshoes, embarrassed. He had to be careful. No need to coat the butter on too thick now.

'Back about ten years or so ago, I met a woman I used to run with in the old days. Hadn't seen Sarah for years. She'd got involved with some nasty pieces of work. Sarah's nice, Christian parents paid for her to check in for a little holiday. Sarah and me, we found ourselves in adjoining wards, though I wasn't in to clean up the same kind of mess as Sarah had made, you can rest assured about that, and if I remember right they didn't call them wards, they called each square of locked misery the Lilac Room or the Sunflower Room or some crap. The name made no difference: they still stank of shit, piss and rank desperation.'

There was a knock at the door. Barbara. Too soon. He'd told her to knock on the hour.

'Well, come the hell in,' he hollered.

Babs kept by the door, making a point of ignoring the girl.

'I'm going out and I won't be back until tomorrow,' she said.

It was clear the girl didn't like her. Sat up like a cat stroked the wrong way and made sure not to look in Babs's direction.

'Where are you going?' he said. His poor wife. All her good looks drained away. She'd been the kind of girl who made men sit up and take notice. Not any more.

'Where I'm going is none of your business,' his wife said, slamming his door so hard that if he didn't know better, he would've thought there was some proper apologising to do. Archie turned to the girl.

'What can I say? We've been married so long I could've killed her and done less time.' He laughed and the girl threw him back a tight little smile for his trouble.

'I'm sorry if she's not been very welcoming to your good self. She's angry at the whole world, but only goes and takes it out on me. Or my guests. The truth is I've kept all of this with your mother quiet. Babs didn't know Marianne. Never met her. And my wife gets mean at the mention of ex-girlfriends, no matter how many years it's been.'

The girl smiled in a way that signalled sympathy, but what was important was she thought she knew how things stood between man and wife when that was a tale that would take longer than a day to tell.

'So where was I? Sarah. She was a pretty cool woman, and I was happy to see her in that place, if happy was something I could feel seeing how I was rattling worse than a

snake with the shakes. A few weeks into the programme, we were smoking and shooting the shit, trying to alleviate that eye-popping boredom that comes with being straight when I mentioned Marianne just in passing, cause I knew Sarah had met her back in the sunshine days. So, well did she not say as calm-as-you-like that, oh yeah, she'd bumped into Marianne in Paris a few years back.

'So naturally, I ask when this was and she tells me, not gone three years past. Now, Sarah, having had a love affair with bad men and the bottle, had been out the loop and hadn't heard your mother was supposed to have died, but she swore sure as shit that the woman she saw in Paris was Marianne. Plain, simple and true.

'Now I had to question her some more, for being in love with the bottle is the fastest route to a do-it-yourself lobotomy, and Sarah had had a love affair of Gone With the Wind proportions, though Marianne was someone it was hard to forget, I can vouch for that. Sure I can.

'So I asked Sarah a million questions till I was convinced. It was Marianne alright, though he'd dyed her hair blonde and tried to pretend she didn't know Sarah from Adam. Of course, the first thing I want to do as soon as I get out of rehab is go and find her until I said to myself: hold on now, just a minute, if she'd wanted to be found, she would've made it easy. She could've contacted me anytime day or night, knowing I'd have helped her without taking a breath to think about it.

'So I realised there was no point playing the White Knight and burning rubber to get over there and find her, she just didn't want to be found by me or by anyone. What I did was, I let sleeping dogs sleep the fuck on and got on with getting my own shit together.'

It was a lie. He'd flown to Paris two days after being released. Scoured the streets till

his feet ached, and defeated, he found himself in a dark little bar that sold more than rough spirits, undoing the last three months of clean living that cost him a dirty three thousand a week. Then Barbara came and found him. Took him back to England and home to soothe him through sweated nightmares and visions of vultures circling.

'People started phoning, emailing, Jesus, writing letters, telling us how much they loved Marianne's sound. So we did a little rooting around. We discovered there was no death certificate in Paris or anywhere else in the world. My man discovered enough to make him pretty convinced your mother was more alive than dead. But it was a slow process and we had the whole world to search. See, when she disappeared, there were no street cameras, no credit cards, nothing like that—it was just that much easier to vanish if you wanted to.'

He knew for himself how easy it was back then to thumb your nose at the life God tried to give you and carve yourself a brand new one. A love of risk was what drove him and others like him but it was something else too, it was fear. Fear of returning to what or who they'd left behind.

'My hired help found a trace of Marianne close to the place where Sarah had first spotted her. If you can believe that. Little shop in Pigalle sold tin toys and creepy kind of puppets.'

The first time he took himself over there to look, not trusting anyone else to do the job right, he'd walked right by the shop. Weird little place up a side street neighboured by tit bars and sex shops selling dildos. The second time, he ended up sitting drinking good coffee from a bone china teacup across from the transsexual who'd been Marianne's boss once upon a time. Wondered what it would be like to bend it over the

sink and fuck it in the place its dick had once been. Didn't have the chance to find out though. All he felt were nails on his face when it clawed at him. Nails as false as its tits.

' I took myself to Paris to talk to the shop's proprietor direct, hoping Marianne might still be around somewhere, but of course she was long gone. The she-male confirmed that Marianne was alive, and more than that, she knew where Marianne had gone and got herself to, but then this strange fruit went and clammed up tight. The she-male—hell, I'll call her a woman for she looked as good as any— dug her heels in a stubborn kind of way that made me surprised she'd not truly been born female. Said she wanted to see you first. Make sure it was all on the level before she told anyone anything about Marianne's whereabouts.'

Archie rubbed his cheek where the scratches had been. Angry-looking stripes that took too long to fade. He'd introduced himself as a rep from the record company, mentioning nothing about any shared personal history, and proceedings were moving on politely enough, though the she-male was wary. It was when he noticed her having a look at his hand with the missing finger that she pitched a fit and with no ceremony told him to get the hell out. Spitting crazy Russian.

The thing was, his little finger had come off years after Marianne left London, and a long time after she was supposed to be dead. Whatever it was, he was left bleeding and bemused, standing on the street wondering what the hell had just happened.

'So now you know how the land lies, Rowan. I can't go any further on my own, but if you feel following this up is something you want to do then that's all for the good. If you want to let those sleeping dogs slumber on, then I'll understand, make no mistake. You can turn around and go home and I won't hold it against you.'

‘Marianne could’ve contacted me anytime. Why hide? She didnae want to be found so why should we look for her? Why should I chase her anywhere?’

The girl’s face was pale. She looked tired was the truth of it. Was that a squirm of guilt? There was no time for second thoughts; he was in too deep to flounder now.

‘All these questions are fair enough, Rowan, but I’ll tell you something, Marianne was a good sort. One of the best. I know it simple and true. If I thought I was stirring up a hornet’s nest just so you’d go and get stung, I’d have left well alone but I’ll bet this house and those cars in my garage that something happened. What, I don’t know. But something prevented her from coming to find you. And besides…’ He knew what he had to say; it was like dropping a stone in a well. ‘…I gathered Marianne and her boss were close, and from what I could understand, your mother spoke about you a lot to her over the years and so…you alright? You ok there, darling?’

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Archie led the girl to the en-suite so she could get on with calming herself down. Dialled housekeeping and told her to rustle up some food. Lay the table downstairs. Make it nice. But when he took the girl in the lift and walked out into the dining room, telling her she looked pale and needed something to eat, he wished he’d said keep it simple. The shutters were closed over and a churchload of candles placed around the room. Fresh flowers everywhere. Overkill. Turning his back to the girl, he tried to blow out some candles on the mantelpiece. Hearing his chest wheeze, he gave up. What the hell.

Let the girl think this was how they sat down to dinner every evening.

He watched her examine her cutlery, stare at the vase, then look behind his head at the painting he didn't even like. What was the girl thinking about when she looked at him? Once upon a time, he had styled himself as the kind of cowboy who didn't mind kicking in a few doors to get what he wanted. Still wore the blue jeans and the boots, but turned in his guns a long time ago. Getting clean had been his downfall and his saving grace—stopped him losing his mind, yet made him lose his will-to-power. Neutered him in a way he just didn't expect.

Lately he'd felt strange, stretched thin. Pissing four or five times during the night. Nodding off in the office. It wasn't just his prostrate that kept him up, it was those lost years. Vultures circled around his head, squawking of things he should have done and things it was too late to fix. He didn't let on, of course. Acted breezy at business meetings, finance reviews. Held his own. Yet in the bathroom, away from the small-time Napoleons who wanted to wear his boots, he'd splash water on his face, ignoring the mirror when at one time he would have preened himself like a peacock.

When the food was mostly finished and they'd pushed their plates to the side, the thick worms of pasta glistening in the candlelight, the girl told him what her old man had said about Marianne's mental state and her need for drugs. She was fried with fury at O'Reilly and that suited his needs just fine—anger was as good an incentive as any for action.

'Last time I saw her she was on a real health kick. Pure of mind and pure of liver. You know that kind of thing. Stopped taking dope and drinking whisky while everyone else we knew was still howling up at the moon.

‘See, back then we were a loose federation of the lost and the lonesome—all grasping round the cup, trying to find the handle. Some tried transcendental meditation, but most tried to smoke, snort and sniff their way to nirvana. Much of that last lot are no longer with us but some are just about hanging on by the skin of their teeth.’

He winked a slow wink, but she was too focused on his words to notice his actions.

‘Marianne’s album hadn’t sold. Well, you know that. She had the blues, I guess. She was bored with London and wanted to travel. Start a brand new day. Carnaby Street was filled with tourists, glam rock was gestating into punk and the hippies were smacked out and cynical. I was getting more work—big names— and when I wasn’t working, well, I was entertaining myself other ways. So your old man happened along at just the right time.

‘But somehow I always thought…well, let’s just say it was a shock when she wrote and told me she was married even though she wasn’t pregnant. I’d never have predicted that, but then Marianne was full of old-fashioned notions. Told me she took her vows real serious. Her mother was one of those full-on smiling-for-Jesus types, and maybe it took her daughter in strange ways. But who knows?

‘Looking back, I wonder whether they had time to get to know each other well enough before they started living in close quarters. Moving that fast puts pressure on a relationship. It goes without saying. Don’t get me wrong, Marianne had tongue enough for ten sets of teeth and could give as good as she got, but I heard through the grapevine that they were having problems. Things were getting ugly by some accounts. Though, who knows the truth? The way people talk. Make things up all the time.’

The girl screwed up her face, making herself ugly. Her hands, he saw, were tight fists.

This was almost too easy. There's no pleasure when the kill rolls on its back, offering up its belly for the bullet. Perhaps what was needed was to crank things up a bit. Fishing out his mirror from under the table, he asked her if she'd like a snort.

'Only take a little now for recreational purposes,' he said, opening up a wrap and wondering how many heart pills he had left. 'Celebrations, special events.'

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Curiosity about what kind of purity a man as rich as Archie could buy in, almost had Rowan saying yes to powder that would wire her to the ceiling and keep her up there for days—no like the stamped on shit sold in the Smugglers for fifty a gram. But she found herself shaking her head and saying, no thank you. Archie started folding the wrap back up then stopped, licked his index finger and stuck it in the powder, which he rubbed into his gums before putting the wrap back under the glass table. He had the whitest teeth she had ever seen.

'Can I have some water?' Rowan asked.

Yeah, sure, he replied in that laconic mid-Atlantic accent, walking over to a clear plastic water tank by the jukeboxes and filling up a paper cup.

Her mouth was filmed with red wine, her tongue slow and stunned. When the wine had come, dust still on the bottle, she had gulped instead of savoured like she knew she was supposed to. It was only after discovering that Bug Eyes was his wife that Rowan put the glass down. For the drink had come up on a tray in the dumb waiter by the water

tank, and Rowan imagined the woman of the house down in the kitchen, opening her scarab ring and pouring purple powder into the clotty wine, standing back to watch it fizz and spit, the black cat twisting and twisting around her ankles. Yet Archie soon mentioned something about housekeeping and Rowan realised that, of course, in a house of this size, a house with a hundred rooms, servants would wait like shadows against the wall for a phone to be flicked open and the order to come to uncork bottles, lay tables, cook pasta. Smartish. Pronto. Veet.

In the dining room, they sat across from each other at a long black table that could have seated twenty, compounding her sense of being in some vast out-of-season hotel with its empty hallways and deserted rooms. They ate under a bright chandelier surrounded by unnecessary candles and huge sprays of flowers that caused her to nose run and her eyes to smart. Or rather, Rowan ate, or at least she tried to. Archie drank and smoked and talked about his work. About the recording studios in the basement with the latest state-of –the-art equipment the bands and musicians used. *We make them so welcome they never want to leave,* he said. Rowan thought of Bug Eyes and wondered.

On the wall behind Archie's head was a large portrait of Hunter S. Thompson in reflector sunglasses. The artist had written a long quote around the image:

> *The music business is a cruel and shallow money trench, a long plastic hallway where thieves and pimps run free, and good men die like dogs. There's also a negative side.*

Later, when Archie had gone to the toilet, she would see that as well as being signed by the artist, Hunter S. Thompson had also signed it, providing Archie with a dubious endorsement:

A.D.
Don't die like a dog.
H.S.T.

Rowan thought she had known men a little like Archie, although never as rich. With his teak varnish tan, his white shirt that billowed like a sail, the single stud earring in his right ear, he was a corsair, a buccaneer. When he looked at her with that intent stare, her emotions roiled and stirred— all at sea— swaying her from side-to-side. The type of man women would dash themselves against rocks for. The type who came to the tattoo studio wanting their lover's name covered with yet another, or their girlfriend's initials hidden in a Celtic knot so the wife wouldnae know. Did Archie have ink under the billowing sleeves of his shirt? His first love's name? Would that be Marianne? Surely no. Rowan guessed an older woman. A tryst when other boys were still playing with choo-choos. The archetype, the memory that burned, the one he tried and failed to replace, his very own female Eden. And yet Archie said he hadnae known about love till he met Marianne. What was it about her? What did she do to make these men still moon over her decades later? Perhaps Marianne was the corsair, the buccaneer after all.

The Marianne her dad had described was gentle, quiet and too sensitive for this bad, old world. A fragile creature with a poet's heart, he had said once. Archie's Marianne had tongue enough for ten sets of teeth. What was the truth? Despite him seeming to answer all of her questions directly enough, Rowan had the distinct sense that he was holding out on her. But after years of working in the studio, she had learned that patience was all ye needed with men like Archie; men who talked and talked about themselves would soon enough tell ye everything one way or another.

They could go to Paris the very next day, he said. It was as simple as that. All he had to do was contact his PA. It would all be on the label. But no pressure. No pressure at all. What he insisted on was that she didnae spend the night in some London hotel.

'Won't your wife mind?' Rowan asked.

'Oh no. She won't be back until we're well away.' Then he added quickly, 'That's if you decide to come with me, of course.'

'Of course.'

Rowan had already decided she was going to Paris but because Archie had said that she should take her time to make a decision, she didnae come right out and tell him that there was no going home. Somehow it seemed important that she give him the impression that she was carefully considering her options though she wasnae quite sure why.

He took her to the guest bedroom on the third floor. It was like a suite in a five star hotel: thick carpet, wooden panelling and a ridiculous round bed draped in white velvet. Later, she would try to find the ensuite and be defeated by door after door revealing empty wardrobe after empty wardrobe.

'Try it out,' Archie said, pointing to the bed. 'See if it's comfortable.'

It was odd, gently bouncing while he watched from the doorway. He smiled. His eyes were so blue. His teeth so white. What was he seeing when he looked at her? Something he liked or someone he remembered? And why did it matter so much to her what he thought? She stared at her scuffed trainers, still bouncing a little on the mattress. Words wouldnae come to her aid; her mouth was stuffed with duckdown feathers, her tongue wrapped up tight in thousand-thread cotton.

She sensed him moving, and looked up. He was backing into the hall, saying, ‘Lets go finish our meal. I need a cigar.’

In the small square of lift, heading back down to ground level, Rowan studied her shoes again, wondering what would happen if somehow the lift stuck between floors. Did Archie see her blushing? When she glanced up at him, he was staring at her intently. She looked back down at her feet, feeling about fifteen years old.

In the dining room, the ruins of dinner had been spirited away by the shadows. There was brandy and warmed glasses, coffee and a box of cigars that he offered her, saying, Well you might, a lot of women do these days. Rowan drank her spirit without ice. The warm burn relaxed her while she chain-smoked his Marlboros. It would only be a matter of time before she found out everything. Only a little time. A little drinking. A little dancing.

Archie spun her around the room and the heat of his hand was on her back. The hand with the missing finger. So long since anyone had held her. Sure, firm, close. Once men had loved her too. Men had cried over her, held her close— now that all seemed such a long time ago. They moved together across the parquet flooring, creating a dance of their own in time to the sad music. No lyrics, but a trumpet cried for what could have been, and what could never be, and that was almost as bad. As if sensing her discomfort, Archie brought her in closer to lean on his shoulder, close enough for Rowan to feel his heart beat, close enough to kiss him if she wanted to. She breathed him in. That smell. That smell reminded her of something. Or someone.

It was her dad. It was Martin.

A special brew of alcohol, cigarettes, and sweat. A musk she had imagined particular

to him only.

Rowan pulled away, making for the table and her drink.

'I'm really tired,' she mumbled down to her glass. When had the blinds come down? What time was it? 'I might go and rest.'

The tiredness was a shock. Her body sagged as if someone had cut the string holding her upright.

'Come on. This music's all instrumental. I chose it especially for you.'

He crossed the room and reached for the hand that wasnae holding the glass. 'Come on. This is one of Satchmo's best.'

She couldnae. She couldnae smell him again. Holding her breath, Rowan broke free, shaking her head. What the hell was she up to?

'Well, we'll have a rest. How about a cocktail? That's what we'll do.'

He'd already picked up his phone and flicked it open when she told him no again. He seemed to struggle with that before saying, 'Do you need me to show you to your room?'

After telling him in a voice too high, too forced, that she could manage fine, Rowan was out into the hall. Oh, but the hallway rocked as though drunk, as one foot tried to go in front of another. On the third floor, the corridor had a thousand identical doors. Choosing one at random and flicking on the light switch, she saw an Oriental-themed room panelled in black lacquer with silk cushions on the floor and paper lanterns on low tables. Dirty glasses littered the tables and there was a strange smell in the air. An opium den? The next room had a Moroccan theme: a sunken bath in the middle of mosaic-tiled flooring. Champagne glasses with rotting strawberries sat beside an ice bucket with two

upturned bottles. This time it was obvious what the smell was: the water hadnae been drained from the bath and the rose petals floating on top with the soap scum had turned brown. This house was Disneyland for grown-up but perhaps they needed more efficient cleaning staff.

Prowling along the corridor, she was a cat burglar searching for a safe, a maid with her eye on the silver. A sound made her turn, but there was nothing there, just the creak and groan of the old house as it settled down in the wind. What stories would these walls tell if the ancient boreal stone could speak?

When she finally found the guest room, the first thing she did was lock the door, and after collapsing on the bed, Rowan cursed herself. All of this with Marianne had turned her vulnerable, needy, weak. A woman of her age, carrying on like a schoolgirl with low self-esteem, seduced by some candles and bottles of wine ye couldnae buy in Haddows. Oh, and that terrible music. Lyrics or no lyrics it was moving in a way that shouldnae be allowed, moving in a way that would be outlawed if folk had any sense. Dear God, she hated feeling like this. That desperate need to be wanted that frightened her whenever she sensed its scale, the terrifying depths it ran to.

She remembered reading years ago that Hippocrates saw the womb as an independent animal with a sense of smell and the ability to move through the body, causing all female sense to disappear. Perhaps her womb was an animal, aware of time passing and, with it, the likelihood of fulfilling its biological function. An animal she had no understanding or sense of, until it was almost too late, and there was wetness between her legs and a greedy desire for beginning something, that greedy need she was becoming too tired to fight, when this was a need that had to be fought. When Archie

Doid danced with her, when he looked at her in that way, he was seeing someone else.

Time passed, then came the loud rattle on the door. Rowan sat up straight in bed and shouted, ‘Who is it?’, though she knew fine well who it was.

The door was pushed. The old lock held.

‘Hey, is this door locked?’ He struggled again and then stopped. ‘I found some stills from the photo shoot. You know from the album cover. Took me way back.’

Rowan’s feet were off the bed and on the floor.

‘I thought ye didnae have any,’ she shouted.

No one was sober enough to take any photos nevermind keep them back then, he had claimed.

Instead of answering her, he shouted in a slurred mess of a voice: ‘I’ve mixed us some martinis. I’ve put together a playlist of songs 0you’ve just got to hear.’

‘Honestly Archie, I’m really knackered. I’ll see you in the morning. I’ll see the photos then.’

‘Aw, c’mon. We were just getting to know each other.’

The door handle went up then down. Jesus.

‘Aw, come on. Let your hair down for a while. Go on.’

His voice had become plaintive, childish. There was silence until he said in a mad titter, ‘I’ll huff and I’ll puff…’

God, he was wasted. Had he been having fly dabs into that wrap when she was at the toilet? Of course, he had. After a short silence, he shouted through the door, ‘I’ll tell you this, your mother was always up for a good time. Oh yeah, she liked her fun. Didn’t matter who or what she was doing, she knew how to find herself a good time. There are

plenty who can vouch for that.'

Rowan's hands were fists. If he tried that fucking door one more time, he would be a sorry old man. For perhaps five minutes, she sat up in bed watching the handle. Erratic steps moved down the hallway and she heard the distant sound of the lift whirring.

Perhaps others would have left that old house there and then. But others didnae have as much wearying experience of men who took too much of this and that, losing their sense and reason for a while. Sweet, harmless types were suddenly capable of all kinds of things they couldnae recall the next day. And maybe, just maybe, Rowan held herself a little responsible. A heady mix of wine and high emotion. Perhaps looks were given that shouldnae have been. Perhaps some things that were said would have been better left unsaid. It would all be different in the morning. Contrition would come in the cold light of day. It always did.

Fully clothed, Rowan got under the covers, pulling the thick duvet up to her chin. As she lay there, staring at the ceiling of plaster roses and baby cherubs, her womb began to throb, telling her that, for another month at least, rational thought had won out over the biological imperative. Safe in the knowledge that the door was secure, Rowan did her little trick, developed after years of being forced awake by Martin's all-night parties. Having to listen to everyone heehawing and laughing, singing the old songs over and over, she had learned to sleep with her index fingers jammed into each ear so that the only sound was her heart pumping warm blood, the body beating its own rhythm. Hearing her own secret song was a comfort during childhood and now, here in this stranger's bed, it was a comfort again.

*

Three hours later, Rowan was outside Archie's office, her ear pressed to his door. Her sleep had been fitful with dreams of her dad becoming Archie becoming Eddie becoming Bel until she woke up with a red wine drouth, sweat sticking her to the sheet. After failing to find the en-suite where she would've got on her knees and drank from the bidet such was her thirst, she went downstairs, stopping on the first floor and considering going in to Archie's den to see the photographs of her mother. Thinking of Archie's slurring, aggressive tone, Rowan left the wolf to his cave and headed down the grand staircase past the portraits of famous singers and musicians. When Bug Eyes said a soft hello from a chair under the flashing pink neon of the giant guitar, Rowan yelped. How long had she been back for? What had she seen? What had she heard? Yet Bug Eyes couldnae have been nicer. *Do you want anything? Do you need anything? You are most welcome here. Most welcome.*

At the door to the kitchen, she said, 'You're not leaving us?' as she handed Rowan a glass of the clearest, sweetest water.

'No, not tonight,' Rowan said, looking over the woman's shoulder to the kitchen door where a black key to the outside hung from a nail on the doorjamb.

When Rowan's glass was drained, Bug Eyes said, 'I'm terribly sorry if I was a little brusque when we first met. I thought you were someone else.'

Guilt had Rowan agreeing to a pot of some kind of tea in Barbara's study. Rowan was guided to a Liberty-print couch in front of a burning fire (just how long had Barbara been back for?) and was told to *make herself comfortable*, while the older woman went

to organise the *tea things.* Situated right at the back of the house where Rowan supposed the servants had once slept, Barbara's study was more haphazard, more thrown together than the other rooms—a private sanctuary full of teak side tables with scarves draped over lamps and travellers' trinkets: stone Buddhas, little Peruvian dolls, bowls made from rice bags. In the corner, opposite a piano, an old wooden desk was home to an incongruous state-of-the-art computer and a wire in-tray. And on the table, a framed photo of the same hippie girl who'd smiled down from the gallery at the top of the staircase. A shoulder and headshot, someone had written across in silver pen *Happy Birthday Barbara— 18 with 42 years of experience.* Barbara? Jesus. How come Archie was so well preserved, so fit under the rolled up sleeves and the open collar of his shirt?

Rowan flicked through the pile of correspondence while listening for footsteps in the hall. Boring stuff. Bills and bank statements. A free pass for a spa day. A voucher for Joyoga—whatever that was. But close to the bottom, a letter from an oncology clinic—a reminder for a check-up in May. Poor Barbara. No wonder she was pissed off. Rowan made a solemn promise to the smiling girl in the photograph, she would never call her Bug Eyes again. From now on, it would always be Barbara.

Before Barbara returned, Rowan managed a quick scan of her bookshelves. Most of the titles were to be expected: *The Vision* ™ and *Awakening Your Heart in Five Easy Steps*. Yet among all the self-help were rows of songbooks which, along with the elegant Steinway, caused Rowan to wonder whether Barbara was famous. Or had been. On the bottom row, a few books had their spines turned in, their titles hidden. This was a tease Rowan could never resist, though it had led to unwanted discoveries in other people's homes: erotica of course, and books with a whiff of the gas chamber about them—Ayn

Rand and all that objectivist *Ubermensch* crap—and sad titles that made her want to sit down and cry, *Surviving Abuse* Or: *When A Child Dies.* Barbara's hidden books were just romance novels in sweetie pinks and lilacs. Odd to care so much about what others thought that ye would hide from view such harmless reading material, especially, Rowan couldnae help thinking, at Barbara's age.

Barbara came back into the room with a tray of mugs and a teapot. They found safety in banalities: the state of the economy; house prices in London; Barbara's plans to have the swimming pool filled in and start an organic vegetable garden. Archie was sleeping, Barbara said. Passed out dead drunk was more like it. Maybe his coke hadnae been all that, after all. Were all the mansions in this grand avenue the same? Filled with handmade rugs from the Andes, original pop art, vintage wine and inlaid boxes packed with powder from Peru and hash from Marrakech. Folk who ate organic, but flew luxury class to second and third homes where still they worshipped the holy triumvirate of sex, drugs and rock n' roll, while drawing closer to pensionable age.

'Were you no staying out for the night?' Rowan asked, hearing a wobble in her voice. Barbara was sitting up crosslegged on the couch, just a cushion away. With her black leggings, her baggy grey jumper and hair tied up in a loose ponytail, she looked quite chic. Although Rowan knew nothing about make up, perhaps such a liberal application of black kohl wasnae wise with eyes like Barbara's.

'I was visiting a friend. She became ill and so I had to return home.'

The older woman lifted her knees up to her chest, hugging them tight. Her toenails were painted black. On the same toe as Archie's, a silver toe ring gleamed.

'He told me you're looking for your mother.'

No strictly true. Archie was looking for Marianne and now he had Rowan following the same crumbs. *My wife gets mean at the mention of ex-girlfriends, no matter how many years it's been*. What had Barbara been told and no told? Dear God, this was a minefield. That creeping sick feeling was in Rowan's stomach. That feeling she had carried with her constantly before deciding to become celibate. The same feeling that was there the day the woman whose husband Rowan had been seeing walked into the studio and asked her for a tattoo of a broken heart.

'Has it helped talking to him?' Barbara asked.

'Yes, yes. It's helped.'

Trapped into maintaining Archie's lies, she would kill him in the morning. Or maybe, she would just get the plane back to Glasgow. Maybe that would be punishment enough. Wishful thinking. Rowan would be following Marianne's crumbs. For good or ill.

'He says you look like her,' Barbara said. Her kind expression didnae change, yet Rowan almost apologised for having the cheek, for having the sheer bloody audacity.

'As I said, you're welcome to stay for as long as you want.' Barbara stirred honey into her tea—a bitter brew of rosehip and limeflower. *Black luggie amber bead.* 'You being here makes Archie happy. He likes you.'

The older woman sipped at the steaming liquid, a little smile flashing in-between mouthfuls.

'Your house is…amazing,' Rowan managed. When had Archie told Barbara he liked her? Was he no sleeping? Perhaps they'd spoken on the phone.

'Isn't it? It was a shell when we first took it on. Even in this area, houses were ridiculously cheap back then. If we sold it—and I'd never sell it—it would make fifteen

times what we bought it for. Or rather would have before the housing market collapsed.' Barbara shrugged. 'Did you notice those framed photos hanging from the wall in the downstairs bathroom?'

Rowan shook her head.

'Well, they're all magazine spreads shot here. And film and TV crews have used the house as a location. That was never my intention. I wanted to create somewhere that was a change from the bland hotels the artists who come here usually stay in. And of course, they love it here. I make it my business that they eat well and relax while they're here working hard. Everything that comes out of that kitchen is organic. I make sure of it. We've been recycling too. See that certificate over there?'

Barbara pointed over towards the wall with the piano. Rowan nodded.

'Well, we received that for recycling the most glass bottles in the borough. I'm not sure if that's something to be proud of or not.' Her laugh: tin cans tumbling into a tip.

'Were you…are you a professional singer?' Rowan gestured towards the piano.

'Oh, a long time ago,' Barbara said. 'Now I sing for my own amusement. The life was not for me.'

The life—is this what folk called it? Like the army. Or the mafia.

'Why was that?'

'I suppose sometimes you have all the right things in place and it just doesn't come together. Think of your mother. Her album is sublime, yet it never happened for her. A million people out there can say the same. Coming through our front door, I see groups and solo artists that Archie really believes in. They work damned hard to produce brilliant music; nonetheless, they bomb. These TV talent shows don't help, of course.

You wouldn't believe how hard it is to launch good music nowadays.'

'Do you feel bad about it now? That things never worked out for you?'

Perhaps Marianne was somewhere feeling the same.

Barbara laughed. 'Oh no. I've seen what it does. I was a girl then. I'd hate that kind of attention now. Besides, if you drink champagne every day it soon starts to taste like beer. Much better to work behind the scenes. To guide others.'

Perhaps realising how pompous this sounded, Barbara said, 'And, besides, this house has room for only one star.'

She raised her eyebrows and laughed softly. There was something in the nose, the way it turned up, a little of Marianne here and there, but the eyes were too big, too wild, too staring. Barbara spoke for a while about bands and singers and Rowan pretended to know who she was talking about. The inevitable questions about work came, and when Rowan mentioned tattooing, Barbara said, 'Oh you might be interested in this.' Rowan waited for a legging or a jumper sleeve to be rolled up to reveal a misshapen gecko or a Chinese zodiac symbol for the Year of the Rabbit inked by some half-blind backstreet scratcher in India. Instead, Barbara lifted her baggy jumper over her head to show her bare skin. Her breasts had been cut off—glands, nipples, everything— leaving two long silver scars right across the breastplate. Surrounding these scars, all over her chest and down to her belly button, was some of the best custom tattoo work Rowan had ever seen. A garden of earthly delights: strange shapes, odd flowers, a weird array of devils and demons all inked in the blackest of black. With hardly any protective muscle between skin and bone, it must have nipped like a bitch.

'They tattooed me for my radiation treatment, just four little centimetre scars, and I

thought well, why not go the whole hog?'

Barbara picked up her mug of tea taking a sip, relaxed, despite being naked from the waist up.

'I've rarely seen work of this quality,' Rowan said, sitting forward. A stab of professional jealousy caused her to ask, 'Who did this?'

'There was a tribe in Indonesia. I developed a special relationship with the head shaman. They use tattoos to ward off sickness and, you know, I was never sick again. Of course, they're not strictly my design.'

'No?' Rowan didnae need to be told that. Of course, they were original tribal designs. And the skill, the precise beauty of each intricate figure could only mean someone with years of experience. The skin would've been stretched taut, pins stuck on the end of a stick hammered at high speed with a mallet.

Barbara shook her head and said, 'The designs were dictated by the spirit world. The shaman put me in a trance and when I came to, this…' She circled her chest with a hand. '…this was what I had drawn.'

Barbara the modern primitive. Who would've thought it? Placebo or magic: it didnae matter. It was the faith that Rowan appreciated. A pure faith in the power of ink. A faith Rowan lacked as her own artless skin bore witness.

'A brave thing to do. No to go for reconstruction.'

Most cancer sufferers came into the studio after going through chemo, or their five year all-clear, wanting to mark the occasion with some emblem of survival—a pink ribbon, a smiley face—placed at their dantian or their heart charka. And in some tattoo magazines, Rowan had seen roses or lilies inked under mastectomy scars but never

anything as extreme as this in front of her now.

‘Archie wasn’t happy at first but he grew to appreciate my decision.’

When she pulled her jumper back on, Rowan almost said, don’t, stay how ye are, I want to look. To look and look as others would look in galleries and museums.

Barbara lit an American Spirit. Did she no worry about cancer? After what Rowan had just witnessed even her smoking seemed like an act of bravery. Rowan lit one too.

‘It was tough for him when I became ill. He threw himself into work…and well…men are so bad with their emotions.’ Smoke streamed out of her nostrils. A dragon with its flame extinguished, its talons clipped. ‘In a way becoming sick was one of the best things that ever happened to me. I started to look after myself for once. But Archie doesn’t do well on his own. He gets lonely.’

Rowan imagined their marriage separated by the wide staircase and two floors, him making deals, making plays, (arranging assignations?) on his silver phone while his wife was occupied with downward dogs, channelling and centring, regression therapy and self help books: *Instant Happiness Now!* Resentment must have built up over the months. Looking at Barbara, Rowan felt a sympathetic pain inside her breast. All the ways life maims and cuts, slicing away, scouring down, when all ye’ve ever done is tried to be good.

‘But the regression therapy? That’s something you do now?’

Barbara smiled. ‘I’ll need to take that nameplate down. The truth is I tried it for a while but found it wasn’t for me. I’m more focused on the future now. What will come next. ‘

Rowan sank back into the soft cushions of the couch, hands grasping her mug.

‘Yeah, the future,’ she said. ‘I hope it’s no made of the same stuff as the present.’

A silence and Barbara drew closer. ‘Have you ever tried tarot?’

‘I’ve never tried anything like that,’ Rowan lied. Aged ten or twelve, she’d made her own ouija board using one of Martin’s books as a guide. When all the letters were glued flat, she pressed a glass tumbler onto the cardboard, cool and solid under damp palms, and, as the book instructed, asked if the spirits were in the room. Speak to me, she begged, staring all the while at her mother’s photo. The glass never moved; the dead remained indifferent; Marianne turned out to be as uncommunicative as Martin. Although that was when she had the excuse of being dead.

‘Would you like to try? This is what I turn to when I need answers. The tarot never lies.’

Scratching at the wood, the cat gave a plaintive mew from the other side of the door, a low calling cry in an alien tongue. Rowan shivered, a sudden urge to laugh snuffed out.

‘You’ve never had a tarot reading before?’

‘No. Never. But I always wondered about it,’ Rowan lied again. To appease this woman she’d almost wronged, she’d say anything. It was guilt, and maybe something else. Like keys, purses, bags, Rowan had lost female friends over the years after they accused her of enjoying their mother’s company too much. Men were different. Like the good son he was, Dinger wouldnae question why Rowan wanted to sit in the kitchen upstairs and listen to Mrs Bell talk about her day. Why wouldn’t she? After all, he loved his mammy so much he had moved just as far as the flat downstairs.

Barbara was up, over at the desk, raking through drawers, searching for the cards. Should Rowan tell her about the Spiritualist meeting in the Burgh Hall when she was

thirteen but looked seventeen? The scattered audience—all women of a certain age—seated in a semi-circle of plastic school chairs facing a Formica table and a bench. A woman had guided Rowan to a seat at the back, pressing a polystyrene cup of tepid tea into her hand. Baby tea: all sugar and milk. Like the stuff they give to folk in shock. So sweet it made her teeth ache. When the session or service or whatever it was started, the dour-faced man leading it didnae once glance at Rowan, no matter how many times she tried to catch his eye. To whatever he said there were grateful nods, thanks and sniffles into tissues pulled from bags filled with loose change and bingo pens.

> *Jean, your Iain is doing well this week and asks if ye'll think about him in yer prayers as always. He tells me to pass on that both Willie and Grandpa Kenny have made up their differences in the next realm. Blessings be to all here and in the beyond.*

At the end when they were all stepping out into the dark and wind and rain, the woman who'd made the tea said, nevermind love, maybe ye'll get someone coming through next time. Rowan knew there wouldnae be a next time. The grief and suffering in the room had been alive. A raw, bloody animal breathing ragged breaths. No like her own grief for Marianne: a scab that would've healed if it was only left alone.

The tarot never lies. No such things as spirits. Rowan knew that, yet dark thoughts flapped through her mind like bats. What would the spirits tell Barbara? What would she divine in the cards?

'I'm no sure about this, Barbara. It's late and I'm tired. Maybe we should leave it until tomorrow.'

'But I've found the cards. Look.'

She opened a wooden box and pulled the cards out. Inked in yellow, green and red,

though faded and worn in places, the design was so odd, Rowan was compelled to lean in closer for a better look. Barbara nodded, pleased. Too intricate to be Middle Ages, too three-dimensional, but copies of copies of the original lithographs or woodcuts. One card had two children under the sun's benevolent face. The next card: dogs or wolves baying under a moon. They looked authentic. The real deal. Rowan reached out and touched them; they felt a wee bit greasy, as if coated in the sweated hopes and expectation of maybe hundreds of people. After Barbara took the cards back, Rowan rubbed her hands a little on the side of her trousers.

'My head's a bit fried for this kind of thing tonight,' Rowan said, without looking at her. 'What about tomorrow?'

Later, Rowan would wonder what Barbara might have told her using those tarot cards as a prop. That a tall, silver haired stranger with a gold stud in his ear was her heart's desire, her destiny? That she would soon be travelling to foreign country where she would find the Queen of Swords? The Shekinah? A few weeks after that night, Barbara would say that desperation could make people do all kinds of stupid things they wouldnae normally do, referring by then to Archie and what he was guilty of, though surely his wife could have just as well been referring to that little tarot sideshow in her study at two or three in the morning.

Barbara sat back down on the couch. Tense now. Pensive. After a sigh, she said, 'When I came home tonight I found Archie fast asleep on his desk.' Her words echoed in the silence. Even the cat had stopped meowing. 'He wouldn't wake up at all. You know, I think he had been crying.'

'Well, we drank quite a bit,' Rowan said, staring at the burning tip of her cigarette.

‘Yes, he can become a little upset, a little rambunctious, when he’s had too much.’

Rowan could sense the shift in air pressure. What was coming now? Dear God. What did Barbara know? What had she heard?

‘Don’t we all?’ Rowan managed, punctuating her words with an idiotic titter.

The wood burned in the grate. The cat scratched at the door.

‘You know since my illness my libido has just disappeared like that.’ Barbara snapped her fingers.

‘Is that right?’ Rowan’s eyes were locked on her cigarette. Too frightened to check the other woman’s expression.

‘It’s made things difficult…’

A huge crash somewhere deep in the house. Barbara’s eyes widened. She was up and running out of the room. After waiting for a moment, Rowan rose from the couch and headed down the hall. At the bottom of the staircase, there was Archie, face down and groaning. A large planter had smashed dirt and porcelain all over the parquet. Barbara had him on his side, checking for bumps and bruises. His eyes were rolling around his head. Concussed? As Rowan helped get him sitting upright, leaning his back against the bottom step, she had to breathe through her mouth— the aniseedy spirit coming off him was so strong. His wife took his chin in her hand, saying, ‘Archie…Archie. Are you ok? Are you hurt?’

‘What…you doing… a mess…’

His voice sounded strange. Newcastle? Somewhere north-east. His mid-Atlantic drawl had disappeared.

‘Come on Archie. See if you can walk.’

‘The girl…money…’

‘Ssh.’ Barbara said. ‘You’ve had a bad fall.’

‘Marianne…girl…where…’

‘No, no,’ Barbara said quickly, no looking at Rowan. ‘She’s here. Rowan’s here. Come on. We’ll get you standing.’

‘Don’t understand…we’re…fucked…fucked…’ He shook his head from side to side and tried again to focus. ‘The hell… you know anyway…Nothing what…that’s…’

A curl in the lip. A mean look in the eye.

Thinking about the shadows, Rowan asked, ‘Is there someone who can help us?’ When Barbara looked at Rowan and blinked, she explained, ‘In the house I mean?’

‘No, no, no. It’s only us here. Come on Archie, sit up.’

‘Marianne. Marianne…’

Without looking at Rowan, Barbara said in a quiet voice, ‘Would you mind leaving us? I can manage from here. Go to bed and I’ll see you in the morning. Go on.’

As she walked up the stairs, Rowan could hear Archie still mumbling, ‘…Marianne…Marianne…’

‘Now Archie, come on. We need to get you to bed. Where are your pills?’

Down the hallway Archie’s study door was open. It was too tempting. Soon Rowan was witness to the devastation wrought before he’d tumbled down the stairs like a bad guy in a movie. Dirty glasses beside an overflowing ashtray; the room stank of smoke and stale booze. Bottles all over his desk: beer, more wine and some kind of liqueur—the aniseedy stuff. By his laptop: lines of powder and a rolled up fifty. No photos of Marianne, although there on the turntable beside the amp was her album. That old

photograph as familiar as Rowan's own reflection. Frenzied, with no a care or thought for getting caught, for fifteen or twenty minutes she pulled open drawers, finding in among corporate documents and contracts, bottles of Temazepan, porn mags, poppers, owner's certificates for sports cars, empty coke wraps, betting slips, credit card bills for huge sums. But in among all of this tragic mess nothing of Marianne anywhere.

During her mad search, Rowan must have bumped against the desk, causing the computer screen to change from standby. In full Technicolor she saw what Archie had been looking at: that ridiculous round bed with the covers all kicked off onto the floor, and beside it, Rowan's rucksack. The camera was placed somewhere in the ceiling, perhaps in a plaster rose or a fat-cheeked cherub.

Rowan left Archie's office and stood panting against the wall. This house was the House of Usher, a crypt with a crack in its facade. Mumbling came from along the hall. Rowan snuck along as quietly as she could. Barbara and Archie were still at the foot of stairs, sitting side by side on the bottom step, bare feet among the dirt and smashed porcelain. The two silver toe rings, a mirror image.

Barbara said, 'You need another pill?'

He shook his head slowly. 'Are you crazy? Two will kill me.'

Whatever he'd swallowed had taken away the strangeness in his voice. He sounded like himself again.

'What happened?' Archie asked.

'Don't you remember?'

Another slow shake of the head.

'You banged on her door. Trying to get in. Real subtle, Archie. When I saw her a few

hours later fully dressed and moving through the house I thought she was leaving. I had to come out and stop her.'

'Christ, Barbara, I had everything in hand. You should've just left it alone. Where is she now?'

'I sent her upstairs to bed. Why did you have to get in such a state?'

He groaned. Barbara put her arm around his back, bringing him closer.

Rowan used the back stairs to reach the guest bedroom where she retrieved her rucksack and stuck her fingers up at where the camera might be. A childish act, yet it made her feel a little better. She used the back stairs again to reach the kitchen at the north end of the house. There on the doorjamb was the black key. A twist and a push and she was out. At the gate when Rowan turned for one last look at the house, she saw a room on the first floor yellow with light where two black shapes held each other close, connected, it seemed, by unfathomable bonds.

Soon the full moon would give way to grey morning. How hard would it be to find a puppet shop in Pigalle? A night bus would take her to St Pancras and the train would get her to Paris before the new morning became noon.

CHAPTER FOUR

Le voir un jour
C'est mon rêve joli
J'ai deux amours
Mon pays et Paris

Josephine Baker '*J'ai deux amours*'

'This Doid lies,' Freda hissed. 'I do not know where your mama is. She left and I receive only a postcard.'

In the backroom of *Le Cirque,* Marianne's former boss rose from her chair and searched among the shelves of plastic boxes labelled: *yeux, cheveux, pieds,* before pulling out a wooden box from under some hairpieces, and placing it on the table. There, in amongst tubes of paint, bags of glass eyeballs and buttons, was a postcard of a pink flamingo. Here was Marianne's handwriting. Neat script so tiny that her daughter had to screw up her eyes to read it. Because it was written in French, she handed it back to Freda who translated the three lines into Russian-accented English:

Safe and well
Do not worry
See you in Antilles,
Maria

'Antilles? She went to Antilles?' Rowan imagined Marianne, or Maria as she had called herself in Paris, sitting on the kind of beach advertised in travel agent windows, wearing the cheesecloth shirt from the album cover as turquoise water lapped at her tanned feet.

'No, she is not there. This Antilles was something stupid we said in these days,' Freda said, pursing her red lipsticked mouth together as if the memory displeased her.

‘From one of Josephine Baker’s movies. It is our Shangri La. Our fantasy place. When I read this I know she is not returning.’

Freda had seemed surprised when Marianne’s daughter stepped inside the strange little shop and introduced herself, but once Rowan explained what she had been told, Freda was angry.

‘Why do I do this?’ Freda asked. ‘Why do I ask you come here? I am not cruel. Not so much as this.’

Had Archie believed Freda was holding back information? Had he believed meeting her old friend’s daughter would force Freda to spill her secrets? At their first meeting, Rowan would’ve discovered that Freda hadnae seen Marianne for over ten years. How was he going to talk his way out of that? But Rowan knew he was the type to have plans within plans, the type to talk his way in and out of anything, if he wasnae too wrecked, of course. But why go to all this trouble? Why?

‘I know men and their thoughts,’ Freda said. ‘And this one is greedy.’

Freda waved her cigarette in front of her face as if to ward off Doid’s image. Everything she did was a performance. How she sat, how she talked. Was it learned from the pages of a magazine or something innate? She was an enigma of nature versus nurture, all two metres of her and size twelve feet squeezed into stilettos bought wholesale from the sex shop next door.

If Archie’s motivation was simply greed— *The girl…money*— how much could an old folk album make? Small change, Rowan guessed, at least compared to the sums she had spied in his monthly bank statements. Yet this particular lie of Archie’s wasnae his cruellest. For it turned out that Marianne had only mentioned a baby once, when Freda

commented on her stretch marks.

‘She says she lost it and so I do not question anymore. I must have not understood because I thought she means, you know, a miscarriage.’

So Freda wasnae to be a fairy godmother, granting stories of Marianne weeping in the baby clothes section of the local department store, or keeping a single white bootee wrapped in tender-pink tissue in her top drawer. The past was gone, Freda said, shrugging. It wasnae hard to guess why Marianne became friends with Freda. Here was someone who had made himself into a brand new her. No even biology had stopped Freda becoming who she wanted to be. No even God.

At the blue-and-white tiled table, Marianne’s old boss leaned over and patted Rowan’s arm. Freda’s nails were painted blue and red, a two-thirds tricolore.

‘Maria is good person. We have problems but she is always a friend. Because she does not speak of you, does not mean she is not thinking of you.’ Freda peered at Rowan. ‘You look like her a little, it is true. But you should grow your hair long. It will flatter your face much more.’

Freda first met Marianne in a bar close to the Bois de Boulogne. Marianne was waitressing at night and teaching English to businessmen during the day. She was thirty years old when they met—the same age as Rowan now. All Freda knew for sure was that before coming back to France, Marianne had worked as a cook for a few years on Greek and Turkish pleasure cruisers. A crewmate fell overboard during a party. It was no-one’s fault but there was an investigation. Maria came back to tell his parents in Paris the bad news. She stayed on in the city and did odd jobs here and there: an artist’s model, a sous chef, part-time work in a bookshop until she was sacked. Before the cruise

ships, there might have been some travel.

‘Where to?’

‘I think India. Or Nepal. Some place like this.’

Travelling from country to country, moving from job to job before abandoning each position as if it were a baby. A seeker. Living a peripatetic existence. The life Martin wished for himself, her mother had appropriated while he was left to hold the baby.

‘Was Marianne ever ill? I mean in the head?’

‘She becomes fat,’ Freda said, smoothing down her own thin waist.

‘So?’

‘She becomes fat,’ Freda repeated.

Eventually, Rowan understood that before Marianne left *Le Cirque*, there was a period of low mood where she ate and ate. Chocolates, candies, cakes—Freda had never seen her like that before. Had life tasted so very bitter? She stopped going out with Freda to bars and restaurants, preferring to stay in her room. Yet the weight disappeared when Marianne started going to some kind of dancing class twice a week, pleasing Freda because she looked nice and thin again, though when Freda discovered the dancing was in the North-eastern suburbs, they had an argument.

‘This is bad place. Dangerous. Rapes. Gangs. Filled with criminals. Filled with more Maghrebis than live even around here. You see it on TV.’

Freda described a Parisian suburb of high-rises and maisonettes in a similar tone folk had once used to describe Littleholm. When Marianne refused to stop travelling to the suburbs they were no longer on speaking terms though she continued to work in *Le Cirque* and live above the shop in the flat she shared with Freda. One day, the florist at

the end of the street told Freda that Marianne was spending a large amount of money on flowers every day. For a few days, Freda followed her and discovered she was walking down to the Quai d'Orsay and throwing expensive bouquets in the Seine. It outraged Freda—such an idiot waste of money—and there was a confrontation. What was the point of this? Why waste all of this money? Marianne walked out. A few weeks later, the postcard arrived. No forwarding address. Then the following year on her birthday, Freda received a postcard of Josephine Baker in an envelope, the delivery address typed out. Each year it was the same until two years ago.

'Did she ever say anything about God not talking to her?'

All that stuff with the flowers. That was more than low mood, that was certifiable. But Freda shook her head.

'Martin…my dad says she said this before stopping singing in clubs. But he lies. He lies a lot.'

Freda frowned then sat forward and rapped the table as if calling a committee to order, though it was just the two of them sitting in the back shop.

'Maria always say she is not good singer. A voice like *kot*. When this man, this Doid comes and tells me she is a singer, I laugh until he shows me her photograph. She is younger but that face! It is no one else. After he leaves I think about one night we are drinking too much and she tells me God takes her singing voice away as punishment. I tell her, you are stupid or something like that and we begin to talk about other things. I forget until this man comes, then I remember.'

'Punishment for what?'

'Who knows?'

Punishment for running away and leaving her baby? Yet she had stopped singing before she left. Rowan imagined her and Freda maudlin, drunk on Vodka or French wine. Marianne lamenting her lost singing voice instead of her lost wean. What was Rowan doing in Paris looking for a woman who wanted nothing to do with her? Pushing the wooden box and the postcard across to Freda, she put her head in her hands.

'Come with me,' Freda said, standing up and squeezing past boxes stacked in rows along the narrow hallway, clack clacking into the front of the shop, leaving a slipstream of perfume in her wake.

Le Cirque was empty, as free of customers as it had been when Rowan first arrived in the early afternoon. Parisians sheltering under umbrellas hurried past, sidestepping puddles and ignoring the goods for sale in its window. Off the main drag of Pigalle, *Le Cirque* sold antique automata: a boxing ring with two tin contenders wearing red gloves; a gorilla on a tricycle; a carriage pulled by mechanical horses. The rarer, more expensive automata were kept behind the counter: a white-faced woman in pink crinoline who waved an ostrich fan and curtsied; a rabbit that poked its head out of papier-mâché cabbage; a baby in a cot that cried and waved its arms for milk. In the present climate they didnae sell very well. To pay the rent, *Le Cirque* sold flies in plastic ice, fried eggs, false moustaches and whoopee cushions to the tourists who braved the sex shop-lined street for photos of the automata, and also of Freda, posed like a Vogue model, chin held high for fear of doubling, delicate hands on slim hips.

At the ornate wooden counter beside an antique brass till, Freda picked up a printed history of automata written for tourists in five languages. 'Your mama writes this. For weeks, she works on it. Some Germans complain about mistakes. Who cares about

Germans?'

Marianne's tourist information sheet consisted of three little paragraphs tracing the history of automata. There was an English section denoted by a little Union Jack. It began:

> *Throughout history figures in human and animal form had been put in motion using falling weights, steam and water: the Ancient Greeks created wooden birds that flew; dancing peacocks were invented in the thirteenth-century Mesopotamia; iron men and talking heads in the middle ages. The eighteenth century witnessed some of the most beautifully complex automata made. By the twentieth century, it was a dying art with rich patrons not wishing to pay for time-consuming work. Now, large automata are extremely rare and highly priced. Restoration and replications can be made of any missing or broken pieces. If requested, Le Cirque can match the existing patina of remaining antique parts using special chemicals and skilled handiwork.*

It went on like a boring advertorial for two more paragraphs. When Rowan had finished reading, Freda smiled and said, 'Good, yes?'

Rowan nodded a lie.

'Maria travelled all over. My English is good but English is her language, of course. I learn English working the trans-Europe train routes as a steward. The passengers teach me. Other things too.'

A wink, and Freda walked over to the far wall to the left of the counter, and opened a glass cabinet, with a brass cage and a bird inside. Its feathers were red, green and purple with shots of gold; its beak silver; its glass eyes a dull green.

'This was all Maria's work. Very pretty,' Freda said, reaching behind the cage to turn a clockwork key. 'I do the mechanics, always she does the outsides.'

An ugly, wee thing, the bird spun towards them, opened its mouth and sang its little song. It flapped its wings, lifted one claw off its perch before putting that down and

lifting another, singing its reedy song. What was Freda's point? That someone who gave so much time and effort to make something 'pretty' again couldnae be all bad? Or was her intention clumsier than that? Rowan imagined the student note as if it had been written on the wood-panelled wall in front of her: *bird/cage metaphor*.

The bird was useless, pointless with its wee beak opening, shutting, letting loose that eerie sound. Rowan shuffled from one foot to the other, no wanting to hear anymore

'Do you have any photographs?' She asked, no looking at the bird or its cage.

In the flat above *Le Cirque*, by framed photos and china busts of Josephine Baker, Freda turned the cellophaned pages of a photo album, pointing to a disembodied arm, crossed legs at the edge of a frame, the back of Marianne's dyed blonde head in amongst a crowd of partygoers. As Freda ran out of pages, she apologized: 'What can I say? She did not like the photographs. Would tear into *petit peu*. Like this.' Freda gave a demonstration, tearing at the air with her long nails. 'I believe one or two escaped. I am wrong. But I have a box of her things in storage.'

'What's in it?'

'I keep her room just as it was in case she is coming back, but Josephine Baker…my collection grows, so I put her things away. There will be photographs. It was a long time ago, of course, but I am thinking there was an address book. It could help, perhaps. Or perhaps not.'

'Can you get it?'

'Ok. It takes a little time because it is the weekend.'

This was something, Rowan supposed. A lead, a clue as Freda would later begin to say.

On an armchair, sitting under a canvas of Josephine Baker sporting a skirt of bananas, Rowan examined a photo of Freda standing at a bar raising her glass to whoever was behind the camera, and beside that, a snap of Freda dressed as a cat with an arm around someone just out of shot—Marianne maybe. To see her mother whole, Rowan would have to cut out a leg, a hand, an arm and paste them all together. Make her very own Frankenstein mother.

'Looks like you had fun,' Rowan said, wondering at her resentment. She made me laugh, Freda had said. Told the dirtiest jokes. Lucky old Freda.

'Good times, yes. I look so young,' Freda said, tracing a red nail over a young man wearing tight leather trousers.

'Many you see die of AIDS. They sleep with Haitians or Senegalese. I know better. I am careful. This one is my boyfriend for a time. Very handsome. In those days, I sleep with men for love; Maria sleeps with men for knowledge. If she could learn something, she believe it is fair exchange. She gets what she is looking for. Me? I am always disappointed.' Freda snapped the photo album shut.

'Did she have a tattoo?' Rowan asked. Tattoos were accessory messages, shortcuts to the soul.

'*Oui*. But she takes it off.'

'What do you mean?'

'Burned it,' Freda said, screwing up her handsome face.

With these two words, Rowan learned more about her mother than a year's worth of anecdotes could ever have told her. Every tattoo is a memory and it takes a terrible, desperate determination, and probably a lot of alcohol, to attempt to remove that

memory with red hot metal. Professional experience had taught Rowan that only another's name could cause a loathing so intense that someone would burn her skin into a scarred mess. Whose name had Marianne despised so much? Another mystery, to be stored away with all the rest.

Waiting for Marianne's box to be delivered from storage, Rowan spent most of the next few days in *Le Cirque* or upstairs in Freda's flat. Pigalle was an odd place, Janus-faced, schizoid. At night, the neighbourhood reminded her a little of Blackpool—the beggars, the drunks, the stags and the prostitutes; the stalls that sold postcards of dogs wearing berets or naked dancers along with cheap sunglasses and rip-off designer bags, the coaches filled with gawping tourists that choked the narrow street. In the evening, Rowan would seek sanctuary at Freda's from the coffles of reeling stags and rugby fans stoating from sex shop to strip bar to whore under the red neon of the *Moulin Rouge*.

During the day, when the neon was dead and the strip clubs were shuttered, chic women carrying wicker baskets filled with fresh market produce passed the time of day with the butcher, while schoolgirls wearing gingham and pig tails chased each other past the patisserie and the florists. The cafes with wicker-backed chairs, the swirls of meringues in windows, the strong coffee served on zinc counters, this was the city Rowan had bragged of being born in—*the* Paris where poets and painters haunted the drains, that movie Paris, the city of light and romance and all that jazz. The city Freda had left Russia for, and maybe the homeless girl and the *sans papiers* prostitutes at the end of the street had left their own countries for.

Freda was kind and honest enough, if filled with strange prejudices and opinions, but often when Rowan tried to get her to talk more about Marianne —the AIDS charity

she'd volunteered at until she argued with the manager; the women's centre she attended two evenings a week until she fell out with most of the women—Freda ended up talking about herself. About how the maître d' of such and such said her waist was like a schoolgirl's, or the night when within thirty minutes of walking into a bar, three men gave her their phone numbers. Despite all the automata she had brought back to life, Freda's greatest project was the new feminine self she had moulded and surgically shaped from a male body deemed unfit for purpose. When no fixing some mechanism, she spent long hours staring in the small round mirror kept by her armchair for this very purpose. Talking to Rowan, but with eyes on her reflection, searching, searching for imperfections. If she wasnae staring at herself, she was taking apart some automaton on a tray on her lap. This kind of intricate work fascinated Rowan who would sit in the armchair beside her, watching as the brass cogs were laid out with tweezers on top of a square of black silk. One night, Freda saw her watching, and said, 'We are the same, you and me. There is a word for our suffering: *ataxophobia*, fear of disorder.'

Rowan said nothing, just straightened the ashtray on the coffee table so that it ran parallel to the table's grain.

On Saturday night, *Le Cirque's* boss took Rowan to a bar that she said served a cocktail called the *Freda Fizz*. 'Tingling on the tongue,' Freda had said, then stuck out what seemed to be the only masculine part of her left intact: a large, flat tongue that she wiggled at Rowan until she laughed. Before they went out, Rowan watched, perched on the bed, as the older woman sat at her dressing table applying make-up with such careful absorption that she turned routine into ritual. All those bottles of potions and jars of ointments, what was their purpose? It used to be Martin's painting table that Rowan sat

by, watching him squeeze out tubes of cerulean blue, burnt sienna, cadmium orange. His girlfriends were always the type who favoured the natural look: full armpit hair and washing with water only. In her teens, Rowan experimented with a bit of lippy, a little eyeliner, some foundation, yet it never felt right. She was too pale for foundation, and eyeliner made her eyes look small and mean and piggish.

When Freda was dressed, she suggested Rowan change into something more suitable. Rowan looked down at her denims and trainers and shrugged. ‘It took me years to learn how to look this good.’

Freda didnae laugh. She just looked her up and down like some parody of a bitchy shop attendant, so that Rowan said, ‘Freda, I’m thirty years old. I am the way I am. And I’m happy with that. Mostly, anyway.’

‘You see your mama after I do my magic. All men stare.’

‘I couldn’t imagine anything worse,’ Rowan said, although she could think of many things worse. Much worse.

Freda ignored her anyway and searched through her wardrobe. In amongst chic little two-piece skirt suits with Chanel labels, she found a sequined black dress and made Rowan put it on before attacking her with the make-up brush. Had she done the same with Marianne? In this flat? In this very room? Standing at the full-length mirror beside Freda, who was stunning in a way that appeared effortless despite evidence to the contrary, Rowan looked at herself. She was no princess kissed awake from a nasty spell of cheap denims and duffed-up trainers, but a man in drag—freakish looking in thick make up and gawky in malicious heels that pinched. Even Freda looked puzzled.

‘How can it be?’ she said, turning her this way and that, as if the angle was to blame.

‘How can it be that you look so…so not good?’

When Rowan started laughing, Freda did too. In the bathroom, scrubbing her skin until it hurt, Rowan could hear Freda still laughing. Despite the ridiculousness of the results, it had been soothing having make-up applied, fingers through her hair, stroking and preening. Freda had worked a kind of magic after all. Her soft, warm palms had cracked Rowan like an egg until the talk ran out of her in a way that didnae happen often.

Freda seemed to listen to her tales of sorrow, yet Rowan knew how easy attentiveness was to fake. Last year Dinger had put a sign up on Rowan’s workroom door: THE CONFESSIONAL. Women were the worst for it. As Rowan inked their butterflies, birds and wean’s names, out came tales of broken hearts, cheating lovers, ungrateful children until she was queasy, filled to the brim with others’ misery. Most of the time she chose to believe they confessed so much because she was trustworthy and easy to talk to. Or was it her set-apartness, her difference? Like a priest: part of the community yet always separate. Because what did they want from her? No her opinions, that was for sure. No the truth. They wanted nods, smiles and assuasive comments. They wanted absolution.

As they walked down the street towards the cocktail bar, Freda, tottering on high heels, threaded her arm through Rowan’s, making a point of ignoring the *sans-papiers* outside the metro because, she said, they were nothing like her and did not own a shop, did not even own themselves. The bar was in a dark basement down some steep metal steps. The young blonde barman, wearing a white t-shirt pulled tight over bulging muscles, didnae know what a Freda Fizz was.

‘*Où est Paul, le directeur*?’ Freda asked, but the blonde couldnae remember a

manager called Paul. In the far corner, sipping gin and tonic while watching the door, Freda told Rowan about all the men who had ever wronged her while she ripped little pieces from a folded paper napkin. After the barman brought over their third round of drinks, Freda pulled apart the napkin to reveal a chain of wee men. Rowan clapped her appreciation and the only other punters in the bar both looked over before returning to stare at their drinks. When the barman started putting up chairs, Freda said it was time to go. As Rowan shrugged on her old parka, she noticed the paper chain had fallen to the floor and that someone—the waiter perhaps— had left a dirty shoe print across their torn and ragged little bodies.

In Freda's flat they drank the blackest coffee laced with rough vodka under the sensuous gaze of a hundred different Josephines. Outside the window, pished tourists shouted, brakes screeched, bass from the strip clubs whump-whumped. At one point, a male chorus sang *Flower of Scotland* under the window. Yet when she checked the street below no one was there, only a band of hulking bouncers standing outside the strip club.

She and Freda were an odd couple sitting in parallel armchairs separated by an occasional table and a tray of drinks. Was this how Freda had spent her evenings with Marianne? The radio on low, Freda examining her face in the mirror while humming along to Wagner. Rowan lit a cigarette and blew smoke up to a baroque chandelier that was far too big for a dinky flat no much larger than her own. The whole flat was styled in the Baroque—even the toilet was sprayed gold, though flakes had come off here and there, revealing the original black plastic seat lid and the plain white porcelain.

At shouts from down in the street, Freda sighed. She'd already complained about

Pigalle not being what it once was. Too many immigrants, she had said, forgetting her own émigré status.

'I will tell you something,' Freda said. 'Something I never tell anyone. Only your mama.'

'Ok.'

Rowan took a deep drag of her fag.

'It is why I throw Doid out of *Le Cirque*.'

'I thought ye just knew he was a bastard. That he was up to something,' Rowan said. She had surmised that Freda knew men and knew their thoughts better than she ever could.

'No,' Freda said, slurring just a little. 'It was his little finger.' She wiggled her pinkie in the air. 'The missing finger reminds me of someone I know many years ago.'

She took a little sip of drink, crossing her long legs at the ankle.

'When I was a boy and working on train in top class carriage across Europe I meet man. He takes me to St Petersburg where he lives. At first I think he is good. But he is war criminal. He was tyrant; I was his shadow.'

Rowan imagined a Hollywood baddie— a Russian with a zigzag scar across his face, guilty of nefarious deeds in dark caves in Afghanistan and humid jungles in Indochina. Freda explained that the war criminal made her pick up a suitcase every Friday night from a grand tourist hotel to deliver it across town to a hotel where rooms were rented by the hour and where he was waiting with his Alsatian dog. 'A dirty beast,' Freda said. Did she mean the dog or the man?

'Of course, I suspect it is drugs or money. What else is in suitcase in such a way? But

you know, I was paid good money. Also, I am frightened to say no.'

Surprise at this memory caused the older woman's plucked and pencilled eyebrows to rise. As for Rowan, it was somehow easier to imagine Freda as a young man than ever frightened.

One night the war criminal wasnae there. All night she waited and the next day and the next, listening to the sounds of prostitutes fucking in the rooms next door.

'I sit there as good girl, but of course I am being boy. No one, not even the concierge is coming to the door in all this time. Five days I am mad with hunger. Hunger takes over from fear and I leave.'

The fear came back when she stumbled through the streets towards her flat, convinced this was all part of some test and that the war criminal, or someone who worked for him, was watching from shop doorways and behind windows. Freda stayed put in her flat for two weeks until her food ran out. All that time without looking in the suitcase.

'No even once?' Rowan asked, thinking of Marianne's box yet to be delivered, imagining tearing it open and pulling everything out within seconds.

'No, for I believe all the time he is still watching, still testing.'

Eventually, Freda left the flat and went to the war criminal's bar. No one knew anything. After three months, then six months, he still hadnae appeared. Everyone said he was dead—murdered—or he'd killed himself by jumping in the Neva. Still, Freda never looked in the suitcase. Every knock on the door, every time the phone rang, she was scared.

'One morning something inside snaps. I pull out the suitcase from under the bed and I

am opening and, of course, it is filled with money. Beautiful franc notes—like God Himself say I am to live in Josephine Baker's city. But you see, on top of the money there is a finger. A little finger. A man's.' She held up her hand again and wiggled the slim pinkie that was so like a woman's.

'Archie?' Rowan said, sitting forward in her seat. Shaking her head, Freda gave a dismissive wave.

'No, no, no. Not him. The finger is so black and—how you say— *ratatiné*? Shrivel? Like something *archéologue* find. In bag. In plastic bag. I shut the suitcase, sit on the bed and cry. I am young then and not so confident, so I am worrying.'

Freda shook her head at the memory. Her long earrings bounced off the soft part behind her ear—the soft part only a lover ever touched. Or a mother perhaps. How many lovers had Freda had? On the day Rowan arrived in Paris, an admirer had tried to get into the shop, holding flowers and chocolates. Freda shooed him away and he'd left his presents on the step. Later that night, Rowan walked in on her flushing the dark chocolates down the gold toilet. Too fattening, she said.

'I think about throwing it all in the Neva—money, finger, suitcase—everything. I wish to do this. I am scared. I think money may be a curse. A smell comes from Neva at this time of year. In English, it is difficult to say. Like dirt. Like death. I stand at ice water, but I do not throw the case. I keep money. I am greedy.'

'Did you throw the finger in the river?'

'Good question. But I do not. I am stupid and take it in the suitcase to my home and I try to…try to…*Tirer la chasse*.' Freda made the hand gesture for flushing the toilet. She looked so serious Rowan almost laughed. 'It takes a long time to leave.'

A vision of Freda standing over a gold toilet, trying to flush chocolate-coated fingers away.

‘So whose finger was it?’

‘It was plain the person owning the money was owning the finger. I say to myself it is someone bad like the war criminal. I do not know. When my life, it goes very well, this thing itches. It scratches my mind a little. I spend some of the money but not much. Then I meet Maria and she tells me to stop being scared. Of course, she is right. The past is the past, we agree. So, I use the money to do what I dream about as a boy.

‘But I am always looking at men’s hands. I do not tell your mama. Now I do not check so much anymore. Not many times. When this Doid comes here, I do not know… it make me… *étrange*. As if everything I work for, the life I make is over. Of course, I am a stupid, scared woman. This Doid is never in Saint Petersburg. He is not even speaking Russian. I know because I test *him*. Call him many bad things in my language. He does not blink.

‘But after this Doid come here, I realise all the years I am not feeling ultimate relaxed. In the old Russian tales, some of the times the girl, she finds the golden ring and some of the times, she opens the box and the demon come out. I am not so sure if I find the golden ring or the demon, *tu voir*?’

*

Rowan sat paralysed on the bed where Marianne had once slept. Thirty minutes had passed since the courier had delivered the box. It sat unopened on the pink rug while

Rowan stared out of the window at a cat on the balcony above the shuttered strip club. It was stalking a cooing pigeon perched on a dead neon sign: *Sexy! Sexy! Sexy!* Somewhere in the flat Freda clack-clacked. Smoking, Rowan guessed. Pacing the floorboards. Like Bel's stories all those years ago, the intention of Freda's war criminal story had obviously been cautionary: beware of opening Pandora's box and finding a bottle imp, a monkey's paw, a severed finger. Of course, what Freda didnae understand was that Rowan was an old hand at raking through people's left behind things.

When Martin brought home boxes of books from clearing houses, he also brought home boxes of residue, his *objet trouvés.* Once upon a time, they'd gone through the boxes together, taking out and placing each item on the sheepskin rug, making up stories about whoever had owned a set of false teeth with an anchor etched into the left incisor, or a penny whistle filled with dried peas, or a collection of South American matchboxes. They'd giggle at NHS corsetry with buckles and straps like a straitjacket, love letters, odd shoes. It was after the Spiritualist meeting and her wee chat with Bel that Rowan began to feel creeped out looking at what were mostly dead people's things. Photograph albums were the worst: smiling women raising sherry glasses—*Wemyss Bay 1953*; sitting on donkeys with melting *99ners*; standing by blue Morris Minors or white Bedford vans with weans in shorts—*Carnoustie*; *Burnt Island.* Men in sombreros, tartan scarves—*Ally's Tartan Army*; outside churches, registry offices in flared morning suits and kipper ties or soldier's smart uniforms—*the Black Watch*; proud in flat caps by ships' hulls—*the Queen Mary*; *the QE2*.

That realisation that comes to everyone—that death isnae something that happens to other people— had come early to Rowan. What would happen when she died? Would

folk inspect her drawings and her drawers? When she refused to help, Martin brought the boxes home anyway, though without them raking through the contents together, the boxes were soon stacked up high at the end of the hall. A mausoleum. A crypt. It was one thing to be glad for when Bel and Tam split up and Martin stopped clearing houses: towards the end, holding each object in her palm had been like holding a flake of dead skin.

As Paris got on with its afternoon business outside the window, Rowan got down on her knees and used her house key to score open the taped flaps of Marianne's box. Its contents were a disappointment. Filled with books. French and English hardbacks, paperbacks, some old, some newish, stacked in rows from the bottom to the top. Searching for the address book, Rowan pulled all the books out, placing them in piles on top of the rug. Here was her inheritance: *The Eight Fold Path*, *Wisdom of the Ancients*, *Philosophie de l'Europe*—the library of a committed seeker.

It took a moment of leaning back against the bed where her mother had once slept and staring at the piles of books before Rowan realised what she was looking at. She sat forward, opening a book at random to discover the same neat handwriting from the pink flamingo postcard all over the blank end papers, flyleaves, waste-sheets, the margins. All the books were the same whether marbled, coloured, ornamented, or printed with maps, illustrations, the motif of the library, ex-libris stickers: each book was covered in quotations, indexed page numbers, notes, doodles of trees, birds, flowers and filled with ephemera—postcards, train tickets, cinema stubs.

Rowan shut the copy of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* so hard that dust motes that had lain undisturbed for years rose up and danced in the weak electric light. Oh, Martin. Oh,

dad. An old fool, a stupid old fool she'd loved at such a cost. Was it something he had watched Marianne do when they first met in London? Did he comment in his pass-remarkable way that it was a travesty to treat a book as his new girlfriend did—to deface it like a school jotter—unable then to foresee that after she left him, he would hunt for marginalia in abandoned houses and secondhand bookshops, settling for stranger's words here and there, an envelope used as a bookmark, a disconnected telephone number. The landlady in Paris had sold everything. Had he hoped after returning to Darden that he might come across Marianne's handwriting—that black ink from a time when her love for him still shone bright— in a book that had travelled by car, by ferry to Scotland's shores? In houses and shops all over the Clyde valley, he had discovered paperbacks and hardbacks in twenty different languages with Chilean train tickets, receipts for restaurants in Sydney, or notes scribbled in the back: *Meet Diane, 2pm Times Square*. A single book could travel distances Rowan hadnae managed. Why no Marianne's?

When Marianne wrote in the margins, she argued back, underlining whole paragraphs, writing exclamation marks, question marks, *What rubbish! What nonsense! A weak argument. Ridiculous!* In a slim volume about a female saint, she wrote: *I won't find God in these pages. I need to shut the book and open the shutters.* She liked to read in the bath: a book on canal boats warped and watermarked halfway up its spine. In *Fat is a Feminist Issue*: coffee stains, snail trails of what appeared to be oily salad dressing and blobs of jam. Raspberry, Rowan thought.

Martin liked to argue that marginalia was a historical science, similar to archaeology or palaeontology. By adding flesh to the skeletal remains, to the trace fossils preserved

between layers of pages it was possible to divine who'd held the book in their hands. On the flyleaf of *Le Deuxième Sexe* by de Beauvoir, despite being married at that time, Marianne had written her maiden name: *Marianne Renaudon, July 1978.* She'd staked this claim for ownership the month after her baby was born. In Rowan's experience, books were the last thing people took when they did a runner, but it seemed Marianne had had different priorities. In 1978 she'd abandoned her baby, but managed to take her book.

Oh, that hurt. A searing pain just under the breastbone. Rowan pressed the book's corner hard against her chest. Pain within pain. She pictured a bruise. A blue-black inkblot on pale skin. *Beware of opening Pandora's box.* Dear God.

Minutes passed. With shaking hands, she flicked through more of Marianne's library: *The same old story*, written beside a paragraph on Zen monks; *I agree! The madness of Don Quixote is preferable to the sanity of most men*, in an old copy of Cervantes. *Conventional wisdom is the ruin of our souls*, in a battered Rumi. Rowan's habit of using books as a filing system hadnae originated with Martin after all but her mother. In Marianne's books: a teabag (unused); franc notes; a bus ticket to Berlin; the Joker from a pack of cards; a set of guitar strings; a bookmark from a museum in Grasse; a house key; another house key; a cut up credit card; a postcard of Lourdes; paper clips; a train ticket to Brussels; a letter from an organisation called the *Mouvement pour la Justice 1961*.

In among all of this treasure that Rowan didnae know the value of, she discovered something that had perhaps been pressed in-between the pages for safekeeping over thirty years ago before it was forgotten about. Placed like a gift in a reprint of *Madame Bovary* published in 1975, a black-and-white photo of Martin and Marianne sitting

together on a park bench, trees in the background and leaves on the path by their feet.

Cradling the photograph in her palm, Rowan stared at her parents. How innocent—how unaware— they looked. Martin with a beard, open shirt, beads around his neck, tangled hair down to his shoulders, a little like the depiction of Jesus her gran kept on her bedside table. He was leaning into Marianne, whispering something in her ear. Telling her a joke or something daft, for Rowan knew that look. Her mother was wearing denim flares and a denim waistcoat over a white peasant blouse. Older than the photo on the album cover, she looked so much happier. Her eyes half shut in laughter, a dimple stitched into each cheek—dimples Rowan hadnae known existed. The same dimples she saw when smiling at her reflection in the mirror.

Look, look at them sitting there. Captured, frozen in a single second of time and space.

Hopes no yet dashed, plans yet to be fucked up, ruined. Minds and hearts still whole. Rowan ran a finger over each face. Light and gentle. Her mother so young. Her mother no yet a mother. Her baby a ripped condom away, a mistake yet to be made, or perhaps already growing in her belly. Love in the corner of her smile, in the way her body leaned into Martin's, her left hand with its gleam of wedding ring sitting on the knee of his cord flares. The future must've seemed a long clear road then, something they'd walk along hand in hand. Marianne, no yet wishing to run; Martin, ignorant of the lies he'd tell. Blissful in their ignorance of what was to come.

For who knew how long, Rowan stared at the photo, hearing their sad song. Soon, she was lifting every book and shaking it, greedy now for other images pressed like flowers in-between the pages. Two centimes; a tarnished gold hoop earring; a Man Ray

exhibition ticket; a broken necklace of flat wooden beads; a never-sent postcard depicting a tea plantation in Sri Lanka:

Just like Scotland—wet and cold!
Love
Maria

Who was this postcard intended for? No address, no name. In an old guidebook to Andalusia, Rowan found a single photograph. Marianne standing beside a man who looked French at a zinc bar with red plastic seats and tables with beach umbrellas. The man had his arm around Marianne. From their rolled up trousers, deck shoes and bright t-shirts, Rowan guessed the photo had been taken in the Eighties. Marianne was wearing a white apron dirtied with some kind of red sauce. She had blonde streaks through dark hair that billowed in the wind from the sea. On her right forearm, a mark—a burn perhaps. On the back: *Sebastian, Keffas bar 1983*. In the far distance behind the man's head were aquamarine waves and a boat with a single white sail. Here was Marianne aged twenty-seven. Yet she looked older than that. Her brow furrowed, her smile grave and thin-lipped, hiding teeth from show. The man shone in this photo. *Sebastian*. In contrast to Marianne, his smile was easy, a relaxed arm thrown around her slightly stooped shoulders, the other hand by his side holding a 7-up bottle with a striped straw. Had Marianne saved this photograph from the bin because of the man with his arm around her?

Hiding under an atlas so old that Britannia still ruled the waves was a green hardback with no title or author's name. It was a journal of a kind— filled with spiritual reflections, moral resolutions and descriptions of weather conditions and daily activities

as well as glued in postcards, cinema tickets for *Au revoir, les enfants* and *36 Fillette.* There were film reviews: *the director was a fool.* Descriptions of arguments with waiters beside glued in receipts for expensive meals dated 1994 and 1995: *The meat <u>was</u> too dry!! What terrible service;* the men she'd met—*a quite good night with C. but he talks about his ex too much.* Arguments with Freda:

> *She's become too French. Would trip you up to get a man.*

But relations seemed to always return to a more amicable state. After one argument Marianne wrote:

> *At least she's honest. The most honest woman I know.*

Halfway through and Rowan had found no mention of herself or Martin. What had she expected? The past was a bad tattoo—burned away. Marianne never wrote more than one or two paragraphs though there were attempts at poetry with lines crossed out many times before she gave up. About a third of the way through the journal a single entry caught Rowan's eye:

> *I wanted to belong to something. Now belonging to someone would be enough.*
>
> *I swore I would never give in to this. These dreams about my mother. How about a break, subconscious? Even in sleep, I get no rest. The cousins say she wants to give me money. Blood money. Should I go?*

On the next page Marianne had written:

> *As a child I always felt different. But I mistrusted my mistrust. The way mama would look at me. For the face is the mirror of the mind and the eyes without speaking confess the secrets of the heart. Years of lies. Years of secrets. She used*

to call them dirty Arabs. To me. To the face she scrubbed and scrubbed.

I should never have gone to see her. But I have a name at least.

One line on the opposite page:

He's gone. Dead. Drowned. My father.

Across from this was a glued-in page torn out of a book, the last sentence underlined by hand:

A problem with the official archival sources in France is that a considerable number of bodies, particularly those thrown into the Seine, were never recovered. In 1961 police assassination of Algerians on the banks of the Seine was a routine practice, a convenient way of dumping a body and destroying forensic evidence. Some claim that many dozens of Algerians killed in the courtyard of the Prefecture of Police or some hundred corpses conveyed to the autopsy unit located near the Seine were dumped in the river.

Marianne had then written in her own hand:

I hate this city but I am stranded here. Beached. They threw him in the Seine. They threw him in the Seine.

Terrible gloom. I can't stop eating. Freda rolls her eyes every time I put something in my mouth.

Did he swim past France, Portugal, and Gibraltar, to wash up in Algeria?

What could this mean? Remembering the letter from the *Mouvement pour la Justice 1961*, Rowan had Freda come in from the livingroom and translate it.

'It talks of a man they call Mahmoud Abselem,' she said. 'It says he is Marianne's father and that he was drowned by the police in 1961,' Freda's eyes were wide. 'How

can that be? Her papa is French. In the army. He dies a hero. We drink to him on Bastille day.'

Freda and Rowan blinked at each other. The flowers in the river. The expensive bouquets.

'I am not believing it. She tells me everything. She would tell me this,' Freda said, scanning the letter again while turning a little pink in the face.

I should never have gone to see her. Rowan guessed that Marianne had went to her mother for money and as well as her inheritance, received a deathbed confession. Catholic granny avoiding responsibility, yet going to meet her maker with a clean conscience. What a shock. No the colour of her father's skin or that he came from Algeria exactly—Marianne didnae seem the type for that—but being lied to: *Years of secrets. Years of lies.* Oh, Rowan knew how that went. A never-ending spinning sickness that came with no longer being sure of anything much at all.

Freda went back into the livingroom, still carrying the letter, shaking her head. Rowan flicked on towards the end of the journal—only a few pages left. She read:

> *His family dead. Wars. Disease. A few official records then nothing. No one in this city wants to remember.*

When Marianne wrote next, time seemed to have passed. She wrote of attending meetings about lobbying the French government for an apology, the general treatment of immigrants in France, while also attending what sounded like cultural nights: drumming circles, Sufi poetry readings. *No point telling Freda where I was last night.* Marianne didnae have to write *Perhaps this was what was always missing from my life*, for Rowan

to understand. All it took was reading her breathless account of her first dance class—something called dervish dancing or Sufi dancing.

> *The drumming and the turning gives me what must be holy joy. I spun and in the midst of a spinning world I found my centre. A core, something stable among all that is unstable. A connection in the heart. In an axis as slim as a human hair, I heard God speak to me after decades of silence. I heard Him.*

And there on the last page was the hammer blow— two short paragraphs that changed everything.

> *I read today that the heart is our origin. Before the brains are created in the foetus, the heart is the first to take shape. After three weeks the heart starts beating like a Daf drum. Apparently, this is the joining of the heartbeat of the mother and the foetus.*
>
> *A mother gives herself up to become one with her child, but we were always separate, always alien. She was guilt and I had to watch her grow. One last time for old time's sake, Archie said. And for nine months after, I watched guilt grow.*

Rowan clenched the notebook so hard that it buckled. It just wasnae possible. It couldnae be true. Yet there it was written in neat blue biro in the top left corner of the white page. *Nine months. One last time for old time's sake, Archie said.*

CHAPTER FIVE

After reading and re-reading the marginalia and the journal, Rowan left the spare room to chain-smoke Freda's Sobranie Black Russians down to their gold tips. She was sure Freda's eyes scanned her face for similarities to Doid. As the older woman clack-clacked in her heels, wanting to chew over every detail, Rowan stared at the pearl ashtray as if the truth could be divined from the grey tobacco ash. Sickened by words, those bulldozers, those destroyers of lives, Rowan made her excuses and left, to stumble through Pigalle's streets, past the tourist groups and schoolchildren, junkies and beggars, back to the tired hotel Freda had booked her into. In her room, she rolled spare blankets into fat sausages to seal the bottom of the door, the air vent, the windowsill. Silence. Quiet. Hush. A need to gas herself with dead air. After pulling out the phone cord, Rowan climbed into bed, turned her face to the wall and stayed like that for some time.

There was to be no relief, no let up, no solace. Could it be? Could it really be true? Was it the shame and guilt that drove Marianne away? Over the next three days, Rowan was tortured by endless questions and the sounds of the English couple in the room next door, banging each other and their headboard. The man was the polite type who'd wait until his partner came: EEE EEE, EEE EEE—before he would start—UUUGGGHHH, UUUGGGHH. Finally, the creaking bed would come to rest only for the old pipes to groan as the couple showered the sticky sweat from their bodies. Honeymooners, Rowan guessed. For it happened all day, all night. Did they never go fucking sightseeing?

Rowan lay there clutching the sheets in her fists, going over and over how she'd almost…almost…; the anxiety, the *no, no, no,* building in rhythm with the couple's ecstatic shouts of *yes, yes, yes.*

After three days of ignoring the maid's polite knock and Freda's more insistent rat-tat-tat, Freda herself came marching into the room using a passkey she'd charmed from the concierge.

'I have news. I have a lead, a clue,' she said, putting on a deep voice like Humphrey Bogart.

It seemed that Freda had searched online for the man who signed the letter from the *Mouvement pour la Justice 1961,* and managed to contact him by phone. He put her onto someone who had become close friends with Maria. This friend was called Basaam and he worked in a vegetarian restaurant in central Paris. When Freda phoned, he said, of course he remembered Maria. She stayed with him for a while in his flat in the north of the city but he had not seen her for years.

'No one ever forgets your mama,' Freda said.

'She does a good job of forgetting everyone else,' Rowan said, petulant.

Freda waved this away. 'He will meet you today. When he is finishing work. We question him.'

'Did he no know where she is?'

'This was not long conversation. He is at work. But listen to this, she phones him. Two years ago. Not me, her friend, but this man, this stranger.'

Rowan sat up. 'Were they… together?'

'No. The man is gay.'

Rowan rolled her eyes. ‘How do you know? Did you ask him?’

Freda sat on the end of the bed, searching in her cavernous bag for cigarettes.

‘Oh no. I do not ask him. I just know this. Now get up and get clothes on. We are going. My cigarettes are at *Le Cirque*.’

They were to meet Basaam Abaoudj at a café on the north slope of Montmartre. Protective, Freda insisted on accompanying Rowan. They walked up steep streets filled with tourists. Freda was wearing a fur coat she thoughtfully allowed to swing open so folk could get a decent look at her expensive cleavage. If Freda noticed someone looking—and most couldnae help themselves—she’d toss them a smile like a posy of flowers, a blessing for the devotion she believed was her due. At the top of the Butte Montmarte, a parade was about to begin. Adults, staring up the road, necks craning, held cameras and children’s hands. Above the heads of the crowd, banners with *L’Ecosse a Montmartre* were stretched across the street.

As Freda strode on ahead, Rowan picked up a white leaflet with a little purple thistle at the top. It was a programme of events in French and English: *A Scottish Thistle Night, Whisky Tasting, The Scottish Pipe Band Parade*. A biannual festival to coincide with the Six Nations rugby tournament, so the blurb read. No trick of the imagination then when she’d heard *Flower of Scotland* the other night. Rowan stood with the crowd and waited. In the distance, the sounds of a military tattoo.

No matter how benign the occasion, this kind of thing always reminded her of the Orange Walk. For years they had marched past Littleholm until the police ordered them to march somewhere else. The majority of residents didnae appreciate the Protestants banging drums, playing flutes, waving loyalist flags, right past houses where portraits of

Our Lady hung above the fireplace. Before Littleholm had been called Little Moscow, folk had called it Little Ireland. Rowan remembered the graffiti: *Free Bobby Sands; IRA FOREVER*. On the Glorious Twelfth the young team, including Eddie, would throw bags of shite from the high-rise roofs down on to the lodge members in their smart uniforms and caps while screaming: *dirty fucking orange cunts, IRA ya bas.* No long after she'd put *Marianne* away in the cupboard, Rowan had sat at her bedroom window listening, while far below in the street the marching bands played the Sash and the crowd following behind sang:

> *For those brave men who crossed the Boyne have not fought or died in vain,*
> *Our Unity, Religion, Laws, and Freedom to maintain,*
> *If the call should come we'll follow the drum, and cross that river once more,*
> *That tomorrow's Ulsterman may wear the sash my father wore!*

All those years ago, she had looked down as a squad of boys with Eddie in amongst them, ran into the marchers and started throwing punches. It was mayhem as the marchers, then the police, joined in. Rowan watched from the window as the mob below re-enacted an ancient sectarian war belonging to a country most of them had never visited. The blood, the screaming and the sirens seemed to confirm what she'd recently realised on her own: that songs could be dangerous; they had the power to open old wounds, to inflict pain, to maim and injure.

On the other side of the street Freda had come to a halt and was scanning the mass of people, looking for Rowan, who stood still, unable to gesture or beckon. The crowd ebbed and flowed, talking in all the languages of Babel, and still Rowan stood. Was this what Marianne craved? To disappear, to be a nobody, without a past, without a family?

Before Freda had burst into her hotel room, Rowan had had a sudden, urgent need to

phone Eddie, to hear home in the rise and fall of his accent, but he was at work and was all proper and precise.

‘There’s no way you’re anything but Martin O’Reilly’s daughter. You’re the spit of each other,’ he said as if that was that. ‘Why don’t you come home, Rowan?’

He was her loving husband, waiting patiently for her return, perhaps looking after their children while she was away sorting out what he would call her ‘family trouble’ to other people, rolling his eyes as he leaned down to wipe their youngest’s nose. Only he wasnae her husband: he was a stranger she’d once loved. Or thought she loved. What had Rowan ever known about love, or husbands or children for that matter?

‘Home to where Eddie?’ Rowan hissed. ‘The flat underneath Martin’s high-rise? Don’t fucking think so. Ta much.’

‘You could stay with me.’ His voice, a whisper down the phone line. Feart in case his secretary overheard him.

‘That’s no home to me, neither it is. Up there, fuck knows where. The grim North.’

‘I’ve been looking at flats,’ he said.

‘Oh aye?’

‘In Darden. The new development. They’re selling them off as cheap as hell.’

‘But I thought ye hated the place.’ Her words were arrows and spears shot through the phone. Poor Eden, what had he done wrong? ‘Look, I cannae come home. I need to find Marianne. I need to know the truth. My head’s rotted with all this, so it is.’

She would hang up now. Whatever she had been looking for from Eddie, this phone call wasnae providing it.

‘I’m gonnae go, Eddie. Just don’t do anything daft like buying a flat. Ye hear?’

She didnae wait for a reply; he was still talking when she hung up.

The pipe music in the distance seemed to have stopped. The crowd craned their necks, tutted, shuffled from foot-to-foot. Weans cried. Teenagers sulked. What had happened? A piping accident four streets down? A mad rammy between rival drummers? Some folk began to walk away to ask street artists how much for caricatures, to take photos of the Sacre Coeur, to buy a beret. A tap on her shoulder and Freda was in front of her with a face like fizz. A Freda Fizz. Anonymity had been lost. But all Rowan would have to do to regain it was to turn and walk away with the crowd.

At the crossing, waiting for traffic to pass, an Englishman said, 'Look. Van Gogh's house.' Rowan followed the direction of his finger, but instead of seeing the house, her gaze caught a man standing outside a café who looked just like Archie Doid. A group of Welsh rugby fans passed him, hiding him from view and when they'd gone, he was gone too—if he'd ever been there at all. When she caught up with Freda and told her, breathlessly, what she might have just seen, the older woman spun round, earrings swaying, curling her lovely hands into fists while emitting a low growl. Freda's love was of the loyal, faithful kind guaranteed to become wearying after a while. Had Archie been a figment of Rowan's imagination? A hallucination? Come on, let's go, Rowan said and Freda stalked ahead, stopping every so often to check behind them.

In the café there was no Basaam, just a couple holding hands across the table and a harassed mother feeding her child an orange gloop that soon spread over his gurning face. Freda ordered cappuccinos. Time slowed: Freda clanked her spoon against her coffee cup; the couple whispered; a chair scraped; the baby sang its wee gurgling song; the waitress whistled through her teeth; a football match played on the TV above the

coke machine; in the kitchen, something smashed; then the café door opened, and everyone turned to see a Buddhist monk in dark robes, his hair shaved to the wood. He came and stood by their table and said, ‘Hi. You must be Rowan. I am Paramabandhu. You can call me Basaam.’

She shook his hand, her own limp with surprise. He sat down, shrugging off his light waterproof. No need for Freda’s translation skills, his English was perfect. He’d gone to university in Leeds and had worked at IBM in Paisley as an IT technician. He’d talked with Maria about Glasgow and Scotland all the time.

‘She stayed in my flat for a short time when I returned to my natal village. Looked after my cat. He became very fat.’

‘Do you have any idea where she is? I really need to find her. I really need to ask her something.’ Rowan could hear the hysteria. Noted with surprise, her hands gripping the tablecloth, too close to his hands, to the hands of a perfect stranger.

‘As I told your friend, two years ago I had a call at my aunt’s from Maria. She wanted books. I did not have her books. She told me if I found them to send them on to her new address.’

Rowan sat forward. Almost grasping his hands now across the daisy tablecloth. Freda was sitting up, alert in her chair.

‘Where was it? Where is she?’

‘I am sorry. I cannot remember the address. I might have it at my old flat.’

‘Was it in France? Can you remember?’ Another flash of Marianne sitting on a beach, tanned feet in turquoise water.

‘Oh no. It was in Scotland. Somewhere in Scotland. A place I did not know.’

*

In the café, Freda flirted with Basaam. Perhaps his rough handsomeness had worked to turn her colour blind. They talked in English for Rowan's benefit, but she wasnae listening. Marianne had mentioned a baby. A baby girl.

'She told me she had given away her baby. I thought it…you were adopted. I did not realise...' Basaam frowned. 'I asked her why and she told me she could not cope. She did not want to be like her own mama. They had a bad relationship. French mothers are very strict with their children. Not like in Britain. But Marianne thought it was more than that. She believed her mama never liked her because of who her father was. A sad thing to believe.'

Of course, Rowan asked if Marianne had ever mentioned the father of the baby but he knew nothing about this.

In the café toilet, Rowan cried a little. For what she didnae know. For all of it. A wee girl lost in the supermarket*: I've lost my mammy …Have ye seen my mammy ?…I've lost my daddy…Have ye seen my daddy?* Her reflection in the mirror, an abomination. Pale skin blotched red, bleary eyes. Get a grip. Sort it out. Really, the tears were a poor show. A sob. A petted lip. Two small rivulets down each cheek. Deep inside her was a vast subterranean lake of salt water that threatened to geyser, to burst forth and flow, flow, flow. She gulped and swallowed air to stop the gap, to plug it up. She would not. She will not. Onwards. Onwards. A soldier marching towards the truth. But dear God, what if she already knew the truth? *Mammy. Daddy. Mammy. Daddy. No, no, no.*

So Marianne had been in Scotland two years ago? Was she one of the crowd in

Darden walking up the shopping centre, queuing in the post office? Had she gone into Smuggies to sit with Joan who drank her giro away every Tuesday? Vodka with a Bacardi Breezer in a tall glass; a cherry and a fluorescent straw. *Life is short: my love has gone. Tra la la la.* Did they get talking about Marty O'Reilly and his daughter? Did Joan say, Oh, it's a terrible shame so it is. Her mammy died, so she did. Years ago. When the lassie was just a wean. Did Marianne leave then—tell Joan she was going to the toilet—and walk out and never come back? Do not disturb. Leave well alone. Or was even this just wishful thinking on Rowan's part?

Back at the café table, Rowan asked Basaam if she could go with him to his flat to get Marianne's address. He was in the process of moving, he said, so his place wasnae very hospitable for guests, but she was very welcome, of course .

'It is a long train journey,' Basaam said.

'That's ok,' Rowan said. 'I don't mind.'

Freda sat forward, '*Où habites-tu*?'

'Les Lis. In the north-east.'

Freda sucked in her breath, leaning back in her chair.

'It is not so bad,' Basaam said, his constant smile never faltering. 'Excuse me. I have to…' He nodded towards the toilet.

When he was still in earshot, Freda said, 'This is bad place. This *Les Lis*. A woman like me cannot go with you.'

'Its okay, Freda. He seems like a nice guy and I cannae sit around waiting. I just cannae,' Rowan said.

Rowan liked and trusted Basaam immediately. No because of the robes he wore—

she'd seen too many priests in Darden come and go in disgrace to be that foolish—but because of the man he appeared to be. He was able to perceive the soft heart under Freda's theatrics, understanding at once that she was a flower who would wither away without male attention. So when Freda acted coquettish, smiling sweetly in the same way Josephine Baker did in the films she watched over and over again, Basaam smiled back, calm, unperturbed, polite to a fault when others might've ran scared from the pats on his robed knee and the faux-innocent questions ending in giggles Freda must've thought endearing and girlish.

They left her waving at the bottom of the steps at the Rue de Calvaire. A car tooted its appreciation of her legs or her cleavage and Freda stopped mid-wave and turned to wave to the car instead. At Gare Saint Lazare, Rowan stood in the station forecourt under a huge SORTIE sign, waiting for Basaam to come out of the public toilets. When he came back, he was in civvies: baggy denims and a hooded top under his jacket. His robes were in his rucksack, he explained.

'Do ye have problems where we're going?' Rowan asked, recalling Freda's warning.

'It's the police. When I wear my robes, they stop me all the time. In the city, the police are not so stupid, but out at Les Lis…not so good. Perhaps if my order was Tibetan and wore the orange robes they would find it easier. In Buddhism we are encouraged to shave. This is just as well. For with a beard and my robes, my life would become very inconvenient.'

He laughed so Rowan laughed with him.

The train journey from Gare Saint Lazare station to the suburbs had something in common with the train journey from the Glasgow to Darden. It was as if the city had

lifted up its skirts and shown the world its dirty arse. The detached houses constructed with solid millstone and timber made way for rubbish dumps, scrapyards, gasworks, crap graffiti, broken-down caravans at the side of the train tracks where chained-up dogs barked mad with envy as the gleaming train carriages pulled away.

Basaam was able to confirm that Marianne's dying mother had at last told her daughter the truth. She gave her a name and so Marianne did her research, and after speaking to people who had known him, she found out Mahmoud had disappeared during the demonstrations in 1961. This was when she enlisted the help of *Mouvement pour la Justice 1961*. They were able to tell her that Mahmoud wasnae any kind of activist, just a construction worker going home for his dinner to the hotel where he was staying. It didnae make a difference. He was murdered anyway. There was a curfew for North Africans and the police stopped anyone who looked vaguely like a *Maghrebi*. He was arrested, taken back to the police station, beaten and his body disposed in the river.

'Some were still not so dead and they drowned,' Basaam said, used to this horror, forgetting that Rowan might no want to hear that. Martin's story of the woman who'd drowned in the Seine washed back into Rowan's mind. A face the fish had gotten to. What a horrible, terrible way to die. Knowledge enough to drive someone spinning around and around in search of a centre, an axis, in search of an intimate talk with God Himself.

In the train carriage, Rowan watched a female passenger in the seat opposite. Her black rubber sandshoes had a hole each just on the toe, where a yellowed nail poked out. The woman touched her head, then touched her arms twice with both hands, tapped her feet, once, twice, three times then back again to the head, the arms and so on— again

and again. She kept looking around, up and down, a small animal on the watch for predators. As her head jerked her eyes rolled, hands tapped. Once. Twice. Again and again. The ritual. The compulsion. Rowan looked down at her own hands. Her fingers and thumbs were curled in the sign against the evil eye, the knuckles of her thumbs white, the other fingers rigid. She stuffed her hands into her pockets. Her left hand fell on the key for her flat in Littleholm, snug in the pocket's lining. Gripping it in her palm, she squeezed hard. A brand new ritual all of her own. A secret ritual no one could see.

On the train, Basaam explained that he was moving to an estate a few miles away from Les Lis. Since the last riots four years ago, his old flat had been listed for demolition and although the credit crunch hadnae hit prudent France quite as hard as Britain, this and other redevelopments had been shelved for the near future. Basaam, like many others, had given up waiting and was squatting a flat in another estate with some Buddhist friends. His aunts who had stayed in the tower block opposite had already moved out last year.

'They say too many East Africans arrive.' He shrugged a very Gallic shrug. 'They are old. They have different views. When I take my vows, they tell me it's an excuse to be lazy.' He laughed. 'When I come back from the UK because I miss them, they call me stupid.'

One of the aunts had employed Marianne in her laundry. Marianne started to learn Arabic and go to lessons at the mosque though neither Basaam nor his aunts attended. The Sufi dancing had been held in some kind of cultural centre in Les Lis. Rowan imagined Marianne swirling past stacks of grey plastic chairs, a noticeboard pinned with announcements for the local youth group, a tea urn, a serving hatch leading to the

kitchen. But there was an argument with the centre director's daughter and Marianne stopped attending her evening classes and the mosque.

'It made her sad, I think. She tried to study on her own but it is not the same,' Basaam said, peering out of the train window at the fast-moving landscape.

Arguments, arguments. Marianne should have learned to hold her tongue like Rowan had, allowing folk to declaim and denounce, scold and curse, while ye nodded, murmuring, Oh aye, though yer thoughts were soaring high above the speaker's head, away to a line of rock along the Highland Boundary Fault. No wonder it all went wrong between Martin and Marianne: they were so similar. There must've been bloody tussles, screaming matches, smashed glass and crockery all those years ago. *I fucking think this…You fucking think that.* Instead of a maternal melody, was this the harsh lullaby that had rocked Rowan to silence? Had she lain without a gurgle, a coo, a gibber in her Moses basket, lost among the reeds, staring up at the ceiling where dark shadows lurched at each other's throats?

Basaam claimed he didnae know what the argument was about, though something in the way he worried at the cloth of his jumper caused Rowan to wonder whether lying was permissible in Buddhism if it was the viewed as the lesser evil. She told him about Marianne falling out with people at the women's centre and the AIDS charity. Still, he claimed the argument at the cultural centre wasnae Marianne's fault. (Perhaps none of them were. Perhaps Marianne had just been unlucky. Consistently unlucky).

'Some in Les Lis did not understand why Maria would choose to move there. Some from Les Lis change their name, lie about their address to get a job. Dye their hair. Use creams to lighten the skin. Maria could pass for French, she had a French name, a

Parisian address and a good job in the city. My aunts could never understand why she wanted to share my flat. But I understood. When I went to Algeria, I was disappointed. I thought I would find something there. But it was not my place. Not my country.

'Maria talked about going to Algeria but I explained how bad the situation was becoming with the Islamists. Even then it was bad. Without the Sufi teachings, she started to be…removed. Read in her room. Complained of dizziness and did not like to go outside. She told me she was writing a novel…but I did not see…I never saw her write. You must remember her mama had died and she said it was no big deal, but we say these things and mean the opposite. One day I came home from working in the cafe and my aunt said she didn't come for work. There was a note. Goodbye and thank you, it said. That was all. We missed her. My cat and me, we missed her.'

At the train station, they followed the other passengers through a turnstile: a man in a suit with a briefcase; a woman pulling a case along on wheels by the ticket office; two men in overalls and puffa jackets. These people worked in central Paris, Basaam explained, but couldnae afford to live there. Rents were crazy.

Basaam led her around a corner and there was Les Lis. Eight grey towers pummelling the leaden sky and, at their feet, a gulag of crumbling maisonettes with row upon row of mean windows. It was Littleholm magnified, enlarged, refracted in a funhouse mirror. Rowan marvelled at the sheer scale of it, the uncomprehending ugliness of these grand follies, these grey mistakes. And yet the place seemed familiar. From TV or a newspaper article perhaps.

As they came onto the estate, the rain fell down in a half-hearted way as if it too had given up trying to wash the dog shit, the pigeon shit and the graffiti away. A cyclone of

crisp pokes and plastic bags spun past towards the swings, coming to rest at the car park, deserted apart from a few old Fiats and Citroens. Since the riots, no money had been spent on maintaining Les Lis, and the estate had died in front of Basaam's eyes, he said. Residents with cars used them as unofficial taxis because there was no supermarket anymore. They brought back food and goods to sell on blankets at the square for the folk who didnae have time to take three buses to the nearest *supermarché*. It was no way to live.

Three or four mopeds sped past and one of the drivers yelled. Friendly, Rowan thought going by Basaam's languid wave. It was safe enough, Basaam had said on the train. A bad reputation, and at night sometimes it was best to stay indoors. But he'd seen worse living in Paisley, he said, laughing.

Why had Marianne come here? Was it masochistic? Some need to flagellate herself like a crazed mystic? Yet in the end the place had defeated her and once again she went on the run.

Rowan and Basaam turned a corner and in the distance was a boarded-up shopping mall streaked with carbon from long dead fires. The sounds of a crowd roaring came from somewhere. Her stomach clenched, reacting to her mind's store of images collated from years of news reports showing Paris on fire. A burned out car and motorbike lay in the deserted street. From somewhere a group of boys appeared. Basaam slowed down and Rowan stopped dead. A huge lorry blocked Rowan's view but she was just about able to see the hooded youths— the bourgeois bogeyman—start to tussle with each other in front of the boarded shops. Boys just like these came into the studio for tatts of guns and bullets or lettering that read: THUG LIFE or GANGSTA. Yet when they talked and

talked to try and hide nerves gangstas shouldnae have, their dreams were the same as everyone else: sex, cars, houses—but the hottest, the baddest, the blingest.

In front of the lorry, a black car with tinted windows screeched up beside the boys and two men jumped out holding swords. Rowan grabbed Basaam's jacket, but he shook his head and laughed, pulling her closer to him so she could see around the huge lorry to the camera crew, and the crowd at the far end of the street, kept back by crash barriers, security guards and police. The lorry was a catering van. The boys were extras. The sword-wielding men were actors.

'A movie or a music video. This happens all the time. Come on, walk this way. Security will not let us pass,' Basaam said.

Now she could see huge security men standing with walkie-talkies, keeping the crowd at bay who waited with mobile phones to take photos of the stars and the action. The crowd was shouting a name over and over: *Ba-Ba* or *Ma-Ma.* Basaam took Rowan around the back of the shopping centre, where older men sat away from the noise, huddled over a bottled gas fire, playing some board game, taking turns to roll dice. Wrapped up in big black leather jackets and scarves, they sooked on fags and spat, looking bored. Basaam nodded over—that curt masculine nod— and some of them nodded back.

Rowan's ears thrummed with cold as they walked across a square towards Basaam's high-rise. She had to sidestep dirty nappies dropped from the high-rise windows. Their brown contents had spattered across the tarmac alongside broken eggs and red streaks of ripe tomato. Martin had bits of paper that he threw from windows; some people had nappies, eggs and tomatoes. Years ago, Rowan had thrown eggs from Ellisland's

fourteenth floor window just to see what would happen when they landed. A poetry of their own the way they fell, the way they tumbled down through the air past fourteen floors, cracking into a runny mess far below. How many depressives had thrown themselves from the top of Les Lis's high-rises, twisting and turning in slipstreams of air, to land splatting bloody albumen and strings of membrane far and wide across the hard concrete?

Basaam lived on the twenty-first floor. Up there, where the lift stopped on the top floor, would weans hang out on the stairwell, smoking fags, playing, 'I'll show you, you show me'? The smell of cold night, concrete and burned matches, the names etched on the walls, the *Legalise Cannabis* slogans and the bands: *Pink Floyd*, *Stiff Little Fingers*, *Scheme*. Etched in Les Lis would be French rappers and their clicks, as well as the usual drawings of cocks and balls: little dashes from the head to signify spunk, the balls turned into eyes and the shaft, a nose. Caveman drawings, universal symbols of boredom and inertia.

The corridor leading to Basaam's flat wasnae so bad. Folk had tried to pretty it up with potted plants and curtains on the window. Inside, Rowan waited in the livingroom while Basaam hunted down his address book in the bedroom. A lot of computer hardware lying around: screens, keyboards, boxes of discs. A house in transition functioning as a storage facility only. He hadnae got round to taking his pictures down from the walls. A framed Lotus flower beside traditional scenes of shepherds with goats outside caves, women wrapped in black cloaks standing in adobe hut doorways, men with black teeth drinking strong tea and playing some kind of game around a table like those men huddled around the gas fire down in the dilapidated shopping centre. In one

picture an old woman with tattoos on her face and hands sat on a step outside a hut. Rowan remembered then that in Algeria the women had been the tattooists, working in market squares and at festival days until the Islamists put a stop to it. Perhaps her calling was something in the blood then.

Had her grandfather looked like those old men? No, that was stupid. He'd never lived to be that old, dying around the same age as Basaam. Besides Mahmoud was an Arab and Basaam had already told her his family were Kabyle, an ethnic group she had never heard of. Did they look different to Arabs? Rowan had no idea. It was all so bewildering. Here was a new country to belong to and new songs to learn about old hurts, colonial genocide, ancient wars and long-dead heroes, battles, blood and tribal resentments. Dear God.

Wearied by the pictures on the wall, she went and sat on the couch. Basaam came in from the kitchen, apologising for taking so long and handed over his address book. In the little black book, he'd written:

Marianne Renaudon
Seaann Tearmunn
Lochhead
Scotland

No postcode. That would've been too easy. Where was Lochhead? The Highlands maybe, but she couldnae be sure. Using her mobile, she phoned Eddie for help. Somewhere up north, he said, as though he wasnae up north himself. Perhaps he meant further north: the Orkneys, Shetland. Down the other end of the phone line, he googled *Lochhead* and about a hundred came up.

'Leave it with me,' he said, using that managerial tone he was prone to these days.

‘I’ll investigate properly and get back to you ASAP.’

Basaam offered to go and make apple tea—he’d a kettle packed away in a box somewhere. Rowan nodded slowly. She was catatonic, lobotomised by shocking plot developments, exhausted by the steep curve of her narrative arc. Shuffling to the window, she expected to see Paris in the distance, teasing the residents—so near yet so far—but to the north it was a green surprise of sloping hills and dark forest soon to burst into life in the Spring. A lake shone gold as the sun lowered, streaking red across the sky, but if she looked to the south, the view was blocked by another grey high-rise. This city of concrete, this city in the sky had started as a good intention but paved the way for a road to hell.

From the window, Rowan could see the film crew packing up. It was getting dark out there. Perhaps they did the night shoot in the safety of the studio. Someone was sweeping up and a pick-up truck was pulling away the burnt-out car; they had brought their own rubbish with them it seemed. At the empty car park, two young boys maybe ten or twelve were wrestling each other, doing all the moves, the tough stance. The rest of the crowd were waiting for signed autographs. Police with guns stood stern by the crash barriers while security spoke into their walkie-talkies. Beside police cars, minivans with tinted windows waited to take the stars back to the city.

The people living in these high-rises were living on nothing but dreams, counting out coins for the meter, dreaming of becoming rap stars, guitar heroes, lotto winners while the once brave and new buildings crumbled. In the winter the high-rises would sway in the crosswinds; the residents would crouch in front of electric fires; the lift would break down; the bin chute would become choked with rubbish. This place had defeated

Marianne. Sent her on her way. And yet Martin had stared out of his own window at a view no dissimilar to what Rowan could see now, and stayed put. In the bleak nuclear winter of the early Eighties, he had stayed put. How he had achieved what he had achieved—created a community out of nothing during Maggie's reign— had always been a mystery; now, today in Les Lis, it seemed more like a miracle.

Abandoned by God and by Frenchmen— she had read that somewhere. Maybe it had been about this place. About the internal outsiders living here. But most of the faces in the crowd had been white, and besides Basaam was French. He had been born in Les Lis and his dead father had helped to build the place, yet he had told Rowan that he felt sometimes like a foreigner in his own country. For the O'Reillys, it had been a simple matter to lose the Irish accent, to remember a country only in the old songs whenever nostalgia ached like hunger once had. But what happened when the skin was tattooed with a pigment smart shirts and blouses couldnae hide? What happened then?

The phone in her pocket buzzed. A text message from Eddie.

NO JOY. LET U
KNOW ASAP

Her phone buzzed again. He had texted as though it was just an afterthought, something of no importance:

FORGOT 2 SAY.
BOUGHT FLAT IN DARDEN.
xxx

REFRAIN

After her operation, Rowan was drawn out of her anaesthetic dwam by an Irish voice saying, 'Will you be wanting the soup or the custard?' When Rowan managed to say what she was surprised to feel, 'Is that it? Is it all gone?', the nippy sweetie of a nurse replied with a right sour look, 'Aye. It's gone'. Though Rowan didnae allow herself to think too much about this—about the nurse, her expression, her tone—until much later when she would spend weeks and maybe even months alone, turning over that day in her hands, cradling it, examining it, like she might've done with the newborn who would now never be.

The nurse pushed her way out of the green curtains, and the squeak of her white shoes on the polished tiles was a sherriking. What if Rowan yanked the covers off and danced a pirouette around her bed, her knickers showing through the back of her hospital gown as she spun across the ward and out into the waiting area where women sat pale and tense waiting for their turn under the gas? She might just've been capable of it, though there was blood and cramp and a soaked sanitary towel attached as if by magic to her knickers. Yet on smelling soup, good Scotch broth, thoughts of dancing were soon forgotten. So hungry, she could eat a scabby dug and all its weans. Yuck. Blind puppies with pink skin mewling at their mother's teat. Totally disgusting.

The curtains parted and a smiling auxiliary pushed her trolley to Rowan's bedside. The woman, pleased to see someone with such an appetite for hospital food, watched as

she bolted down spoonfuls. To an offer of seconds, Rowan said yes please, turning on the smile she'd use when granny asked her the same thing at Sunday lunch after mass.

When the wee woman had pushed her trolley to the next bed, Rowan lay back on the pillows. On the other side of the curtain, machines bleeped, phones rang, disembodied voices asked what sounded like important questions, 'Have you checked bed two for the pessary?' 'Is there blood in the urine?' 'Can we call Doctor Clark?'

Had they forgotten about her? After what seemed like ages, a second nurse came behind the curtains and asked who was coming to get her. 'My boyfriend,' Rowan answered. It was weird calling Eddie her boyfriend after years of insisting he was just a pal. When they were wee, she'd got sick-scunnered of everyone asking if they were going out. Folk would say, Are you two wee sweethearts? and she'd reply for the millionth time, We're just pals. No realising back then, of course, that folk's catty comments were forecasting the future.

'Well, get yourself dressed,' the nurse said. 'He should be here soon.'

Rowan did as she was told and put on the comfy things she'd brought in her rucksack. Black joggies and a jumper granny knitted for her twelfth birthday with little Eskimos skating and skiing across the chest and arms. The jumper was too small now, but she liked that. A bit like a hug. Like a wee cuddle. Granny didnae know that she was at the hospital, of course. No one knew. Except Eddie.

The nurse came back through the curtains and pressed a helpline card into Rowan's hand. Years later, it occurred to her to wonder what had happened to that card. Crushed up and papped in the bin or slotted into the pages of some book as became her habit with things she didnae want to keep and didnae seem to want to throw away either.

Maybe one day a marginalia hound like her dad would find the Women's Counselling Service *card stuck inbetween the pages of* The Cider House Rules*, and puzzle at its meaning.*

The nurse told her to sit in the waiting room—the same room she'd sat in at 9am chewing her nails with the other women. On her return, the room was quiet, but soon filled up again. The new arrivals were all older than her. Surely, they should be the ones to know better? Surely, this lot should get the tuts and eye rolls from the nurses? She sensed them looking, peeking over magazines they pretended to read while she pretended to read the posters above their heads promoting safe sex—advertising stable doors to folk whose horses had already bolted. Someone was greeting over in the ward, behind a curtain pulled around the bed. The connecting door between the ward and the waiting room was jammed open and everyone sitting in the plastic chairs could hear. None of the nurses closed the door or tried to go behind the curtains to hush it up.

Eventually, the greeting woman must've been wheeled away to theatre or taken to another room. The waiting room was empty again— just Rowan and a man who kept looking at his watch. When Rowan asked him the time, he jumped in his plastic seat, mumbling 12.30 without looking over. He picked up a fashion magazine and stared at the pages. A keen interest in the latest winter boots? Aye right.

It was 12.30 and still no Eddie. There was nothing to do but wait.

'Is there no one you can phone?'

This was a third nurse. An English woman with a nice crumpled face.

'No, no one.'

'Well, we can't let you out without an escort. Procedure.'

‘I’ll wait. He’ll be here.’

1.30pm and still no sign. The new nurse took pity, bringing Rowan a cup of tea.

‘I’m starving,’ Rowan said. ‘I’ll just go downstairs to the hospital shop and get a sandwich or something.’

The nurse looked down at Rowan’s red slippers. There would be no absconding in this footwear, and yet the nurse seemed to need more reassurance.

‘Leave your rucksack here, love. I’ll look after it.’

Hold it ransom, more like. Oh, she was only doing her job. Making sure Rowan didnae run out the exit and keel over in the parking lot.

‘We’ll get a taxi.’ Eddie had said the night before.

‘Back to Darden?’ Rowan replied, worrying at the frayed arm of the wicker chair. ‘Cost a pure fortune, so it will.’

‘Well, ye’ll maybe be all dizzy or something.’

Staring at him, lying there on his single bed, she’d believed in his capable look. He’d help her into the taxi outside the hospital, tuck her into bed when they got home, bring her cups of sweet tea. Baby tea: all sugar and milk. Like the stuff they give to folk in shock.

In the lift, a young blonde doctor was talking to her pal who must’ve been a doctor too about what a shitty hangover she had. Groaning, she looked to Rowan, maybe realising it wasnae wise to be talking about drinking shots in front of the patients.

Rowan gave the blonde a wee smile to let her know she wasnae anyone to be bothering about. But the blonde just blinked and carried on telling stories about some bar in Yorkhill till the lift stopped at the fourth floor and they both got out. Rowan travelled down to the basement floor wondering what kind of qualifications ye needed to become a doctor. School had chucked her out after too many no shows and Martin wouldnae know— art college for two months twenty years ago. There was no going to the careers service either. They'd arranged an interview at the council—something to do with rent administration. Maybe she should try the local college. Ask them for advice.

Inside the hospital shop, Rowan stood gawping at the rows of chocolate bars. There was a queue at the till. Almost afternoon visiting hours. People stood in line clutching bunches of carnations and boxes of Maltesers and Dairy Milk. Every year at Christmas, Martin would get her a selection box, but she'd only eat the Opal Fruits or the Tutti Fruittis, and yet now she had such a craving for sweetness that she bought three chocolate bars and considered buying more.

Back at the lifts, the button had already been pressed by one of the crowd. Families visiting their sick; a mother holding her toddler's hand; a grandda leaning on a stick. Everyone talking at the same time. Nervous, maybe, to be in such a place. Even to just be visiting. Wishing they were home sitting on their couches, watching the soaps on television. Away from all the real illness and death. She followed the people inside the lift but as the doors were about to close, she left the press of bodies and walked out the hospital's main exit, past idle ambulances and smokers at the door of the cancer clinic.

On the Number 66 bus to Darden, Rowan shivered. Her jacket was inside the rucksack the nurse still had. At the bus stop, no one had noticed her red slippers. She

had watched their eyes, but they were too busy with their own thoughts to clock what was on her feet. The streets the bus moved through were quiet. The calm before school home time. If she was still at school she'd be sitting in double art. What had happened to her clay pots? Papped in the bin, probably.

The bus hadnae any heating on so she jammed her cold hands between her thighs. Oh, her breasts were louping, all achey and sore. What happened to the stuff inside them? Perhaps it all turned to cheese. The blood leaked onto the thick NHS pad between her legs, the cramp tugged. Her womb had been cleared like a house, hosed down, scraped clean of stuff no one wanted.

As she walked past Smuggies, laughter came from the double doors, music, shouts. Her dad would either be in the pub or in the house, hungry. He would never say, Where's my tea? because he knew that'd be wrong. Instead he'd say, Is there anything in the fridge? which meant the same thing, and she'd say, Leave it to me, I'll get ye something, and he'd make a wee show of no wanting her to bother, but would already have started in on his Guardian crossword.

She didnae have to look in the window to see if Eddie was in the pub as well. He'd be in there and if he wasnae, he'd be somewhere that was so much the same as to make no difference at all. In the Coach and Whip or the Three Judges or someone's house. Someone with a crisis loan, a double dunt of a giro, twenty microdots, a bag of pills. It didnae matter where Eddie was. What was done was done. The blood flowed between her legs, it flowed without restraint as she headed away from the pub, powered by the endless possibilities the future seemed to hold.

CHAPTER SIX

Eddie stood at Domestic Arrivals, sipping a double espresso while watching planes take off and land on the runway. Rowan's flight wasnae even up on the board yet but that was okay. He liked airports. Always had done. Despite the number of times he'd flown for work, he was a daft wee boy when the plane took off. All that heat and thrust. Newton's third law: *For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.* Here were laws to believe in and stick to. And others too: Coulomb's, Gauss's, Carnot's, Boyle's. Laws of thermodynamics and electromagnetism that told ye this is *how* and this is *why.* Christine hadnae liked him studying. He'd lain in bed until she was asleep then snuck out into the kitchen to read with the wee lamp turned down low. Before dawn, he used to return to bed, cursing his clumsy size, the potent forcefulness he just couldnae seem to help. He was frightened of himself, of the veiled power resting at his core. Lately, a series of images had risen up from the dark blank of the past: a smear of blood on a white sheet; a girl greeting; a slammed door; and his ma, her face all twisted: *See what ye've done now. See the hurt ye've caused. All the fucking same.*

Maybe Christine had realised what he hadnae and that's why she made such a fuss about the studying. Maybe she'd sensed that he would get promotion after promotion and they'd end up spending more and more time apart: two-month, three-month, six month-long stints offshore. Often while he was away she'd decide to move them lock

and stock to another flat or house and he'd arrive at the new address to find her sitting among packing boxes: a stranger in a stranger's house.

For years, there had been a wildness in his blood, an agitation, a need for movement passed down from maybe his ma's side. The MacLeans were all merchant navy men, migrating like birds when the seasons changed. Offshore, he'd have mental dreams of travelling across an endless sea on the deck of a ship, only to wake up in his tiny bunkroom on an oil platform anchored to the ocean floor. When his blood was stirred like that, he'd haul out of bed, pulling on his running shoes to go for a pelt around the walkways and the heli deck, though he could reel off a hundred company directives forbidding it. Who would give him a bollocking? Just him and his decommissioning team on site with a skeleton crew of chefs, cleaners and bottom-rung button pushers. He was King of the Boundless Sea. Until his bad knee started to loup, forcing him back indoors.

With most of the equipment silenced and the accommodation decks deserted, new team members would complain of eeriness. They always herded together, sharing rooms and toilets despite having the run of the living quarters. But no him. He'd nest a few corridors away from everyone else. Mind you, the last time he was out, he just hadnae felt like being on his own, so had bunked down closer to the rest of them. No too close, mind. He was the gaffer after all.

A man who goes to sea for a living, goes to hell for a pastime.

Last time on a rig just off Norway, insomnia gripped him. He'd gone for runs in the middle of the night, the freezing wind and rain belting as he jogged in waterproofs and soggy sannies. Ship lights on the horizon. The faint honk of foghorns. Sooner or later,

the weather would beat him back indoors and he'd run down empty corridors and bunkrooms supposedly cleared of personal belongings. Yet under metal frame beds or beside a locker, he'd spot a sock rolled up and left on the floor, a set of headphones forgotten when someone packed their bag, or on a bathroom shelf, beard trimmings; and once, under a desk, a photograph of two blonde weans. What kind of man would leave that behind, lying on the floor beside a sweetie wrapper? Eddie put the photo in his wallet, intending to check at the onshore office if anyone had lost it. Yet when he opened his wallet to pay for his espresso at the airport cafe, the two wee faces were still there, grinning up at him.

Last Easter in the shopping centre he met Dinger who told him that Rowan was still living and working in Littleholm with nay weans and nay man hanging about. Eddie hadnae believed it. 'That auld bastard no let her leave hame yet?' he'd joked and Dinger laughed back. It made him feel guilty that, calling Marty a bastard. Eddie had to stop his hand moving to his neck and rubbing at his scar in that nervous way. For Marty had been good to him back in the day. But all this with Rowan was pure bonkers. There'd need to be words. Serious words.

He changed his clothes three times, before leaving for the airport. As usual, tried on a t-shirt, took one look at his neck and put on a shirt. It wasnae Rowan he was worried about—she knew all about him, about who he'd been and who he was—other people were the problem. After dicking around for ages with his hair, papping gel on then washing it out and papping it back on, he decided the side parting with a slight spike would do. When he parked the Beemer outside the airport, a lassie smiled over from her motor. He blinked instead of winked like some kind of mental deficient. At least the

lassie's smile was confirmation he was looking ok, but his hair…he still wasnae sure about it. That was one thing about Christine: she'd always been good with the style advice.

The viewing area at Domestic Arrivals allowed him to see in the far distance, Harbour Peninsula's two towers framed by Darden's hills. His penthouse was on the west-facing corner. Its triple aspect windows were really glass walls allowing for panoramic views of the whole valley. His was one of two show flats. 'How much for the lot?' he asked the wee estate agent boy who probably did cartwheels all the way back to his boss. It was a bargain, was the truth of it. If the recession hadnae lowered prices, he'd have been lucky to afford the second floor facing the car park. Since moving in two weeks ago, he'd only met one neighbour coming up the glass lift. When they got talking, it turned out the boy wasnae a neighbour at all but was paid to go into all the empty flats and turn the lights on and off to give the impression they were occupied.

In the morning Eddie would spot the light switch boy cycling past the new security gates to come and turn all the lights off and reckoned that he must live in Littleholm somewhere. Eddie hadnae managed to go over and see the old estate yet. He'd driven past it, of course, and that was it so far. But that day would come soon enough. One step at a time. It was only yesterday he'd conceded there was no point in stowing a baseball bat in the back of the motor. All the lads who'd wanted to kill him had been murdered or topped themselves, or were eating more porridge than the three bears. Darden still had its problems but they were wee boys' arguments over turf and drugs and petty shite. Nothing to do with him.

He would make it over to Littleholm soon—a shellshock victim revisiting the

battlefield. Other folk with PTSD blank out every detail of the actual trauma but no him. A million times a day he was forced to feel the steel blade press into his throat, the hot blood soaking his shirt, the warm piss wetting his crotch. Wanting to forget so much, compelled him to remember every day. And remember again. And again. Yet everything before he was attacked, all those weeks, months, years, they were like warped film—flashes here and there, images all corrupted, out of sync with no coherence. Talking to Rowan had helped, like baiting memories or something. Some memories that surfaced were good, some were terrible: a smear of blood on the sheet; his ma's twisted face. No point telling Rowan how things were for him these days. Only Christine had known, and look how that had turned out.

The day he met Dinger in the shopping centre was the day Eddie was in Darden to help his ma clear out grandda's house. A shocking job clearing a house. How could Marty have put up with it for all those years? Or Rowan? In among the auld fella's things was a photo of Eddie and Rowan aged about twelve. There they were standing outside the just-built community centre with a bunch of other weans wearing stonewashed denims and ski jackets. When had this been taken? Who had the camera? Eddie had no idea. He recognised some of the faces, though. Knew their stories and how life had gone for them. Suicide, mental breakdowns, and the usual: drugs, drink, stabbed in the jail. The smart ones like him left. That's what usually happened with places like Darden. He had run into folk from his hometown all over the world. They always remembered him; he never had a clue who they were. What the hell you doing here? they'd laugh, pumping his hand, belting him on the back in train stations, shopping malls, hamburger joints. Same as you, he'd never say. Becoming someone else from

somewhere else.

Only Rowan had stayed. As dependable as the town hall clock—the only building in Darden they hadnae tarted up or flattened. For Eddie it was like shifting sands, all these new builds, retail and business parks. Any town. Anywhere. In the space of a year, Grandda's sheltered housing block had become a giant pet store for Christ sake. When Eddie drove past on his way to the airport, new signs said: CLOSING DOWN SALE. Despite signs like these, plans were still being made for development. The Qataris or the Chinese, or whoever still had money enough to buy Harbour Peninsula from the liquidators, wanted to knock down Littleholm and build a golf course. When the time came, he'd have grand views of the wrecking ball swinging into the windows and balconies of Mossgiel and Ellisland.

The day he went to clear grandda's flat, the place was like the Marie Celeste. The auld fella's black jacket hanging from the door, his white trainers on the rug by the fire, the tobacco tin on the black ash coffee table beside a shopping list for food he'd died before he could buy:

Potato Scones
Ayrshire Bacon
Plain Loaf
Tub of Stork (small)

Along with the photo of him and Rowan as weans, Eddie found a photo of grandda with his shipmates from the Royal Auxiliary Fleet. Like everything else in grandda's drawers, his photos were kept in clear plastic bags, a habit leftover from his time in the Navy, though Eddie doubted there was much chance of sixty-foot waves reaching the portholes of a fifth-floor flat in Darden. He'd looked at his young grandda, smiling in his

smart uniform, his arm around the boy next to him and all of a sudden, Eddie remembered.

‘I saw this yin’s guts all over the sand,’ grandda would say, pointing to some poor bastard in the black-and-white photo. ‘Screaming for his mammy, so he was. Acted tough until he saw his innards out him. This wee smout here with the ginger hair, he upturned like a cork in the water. No legs. They’d been blown right off. Stumps. Just blood and flesh stumps.

‘Never take arms against yer brother, son. Never even raise a fist. Wars will cease when men refuse to fight.’

If Eddie remembered rightly, only six of the auld fella’s crew survived the German torpedoes. Grandda became a conscientious objector, and instead of being shot as a coward, he was pardoned due to ‘mental instability’. Maybe it runs in the family. Ha bloody ha.

When Eddie came out of hospital, the stitches still holding his neck together, he had walked across George Square with some of the boys and there was his old grandda with two mates standing in the pishing wet and dark, gripping a banner that said HIROSHIMA: WE WILL NOT FORGET. The shoppers and office workers hurried past in the rain, ignoring the three men and their banner. Eddie had to ignore them as well. For one look at the boys he was hanging about with and grandda would’ve cracked on he was still up to no good, despite almost ending up stone cold dead.

After grandda’s house was cleared, Eddie wandered up and down the local Co-op, bypassing the booze aisle though he could’ve bitten a bottle open with his teeth. He bought every item on grandda’s shopping list, even the minging Stork, and back in

Aberdeen in a house that had gained a For Rent sign and five empty wardrobes since Christine left, he fried up the bacon and the tattie scones, sticking them in-between two slices of plain bread cemented with the rank Stork. He wolfed the piece in big bites, only stopping to burp out indigestion that came with being more used to a high protein/low-carb training diet. Finishing the piece, wiping the grease around his mouth with the back of his hand, he raised his mug of milky tea to the photo of fallen comrades placed on the mantelpiece, then raised his mug again to the picture placed beside it, the photo of grandda and his own fallen comrades.

At the arrivals gate, Eddie checked his image in the mirrored pillar. Rowan's flight was delayed by fifteen minutes. He'd given it a few reps on the weights before coming out, a wee trick to make the blood and oxygen flood the arms, expanding the muscles to look well pumped. But the power was draining, turning his muscles flaccid. Maybe he needed to up his training routine. A few months back, on the Gulf coast, he tried a cycle endurance class offered in the hotel gym. The class leader—a woman with a wee Lycra bra top and shorts showing the washboard stomach—played a heavy bass tune he thought he remembered from way back. Real hands in the air stuff. Thumping bass. Piano chords. Pitched up female vocal. Building up to a crescendo as the lassie shouted C'MON, C'MON. The bass kept pumping and he got lost in the music like he hadnae done in years and years. That very same feeling of euphoria—his heart beating, the sweat down his back—he remembered from necking pills and dancing. Dancing with Rowan.

The more he looked at the lassie at the gym, the more he would've put money on her being a raver once upon a time. When everyone clapped, he looked around and saw they

were mostly men his age—balding, going a little grey, getting a bit lardy. He laughed—a pack of dogs, tongues all hanging out— but he was back the next week with some music she might've liked. Only leading the class this time was some buffed-up guy in pink shorts playing cheesy RnB. And that was the last cycle endurance class he went to.

Yet he was left with a memory of freedom, of no responsibility. Of a total mental loved-upness. After that, offshore or on, wee things about Rowan came back to him: walking to school; shagging on the roof of Mossgiel; sitting in each other's bedrooms listening to music; dancing at some manky warehouse. Sometimes Rowan became the cycle endurance lassie or Christine, and he knew that couldnae be right. His life, his mind, everything was all mixed up.

Maybe there was no hope for him. When he found himself greeting at the news or some rubbish on TV cooked up to manipulate the heartstrings, he wondered what the fuck was happening. Emotions all over the place. Up and down like the proverbial whore. Normal with PTSD and normal after a divorce, his therapist said. Christ, if this was normal he wanted nothing to do with it. Hated all this emotion coming up like puke. Didnae know what to do with it or himself.

'Buy a house and root yourself somewhere,' the therapist said.

'Aye, ok,' he said. 'Buy a house to rattle around alone in?'

'Adopt a dog,' she said.

But he had a better idea.

He'd planned how to greet Rowan when she walked through the arrivals gate. Calm-like. Nonchalant. Though this wasnae what happened. He watched her plane come in,

pressing his body close against the window, craning his neck to get a better look. Out on the tarmac, she was heading down the steps, past the smiling flight attendant. The first time he'd seen her in years, and despite the bulky khaki parka with the hood pulled up, he'd known her. He would always know her.

She stopped fifty yards from the plane, looking down to her left, down the runway. He followed her eyes to the distant towers and the faint line of Darden's hills on the far side of the Clyde. The passengers getting off the plane had to walk around her, one old dear shaking her head as Rowan stood rooted. Finally, when he thought he might have to negotiate with security so he could go out there and get her, she started walking towards the terminal entrance, walking towards him.

When she came through the gate, he didnae do what he'd planned, instead he waved like a schoolgirl, shouting *hiya* in a big loud voice so that the other passengers coming through looked at him funny. Rowan smiled. Yet it wasnae the smile he had imagined.

*

Eddie allowed himself a short nod of satisfaction. There, on the dining table was his signature dish, slow roasted salmon with béarnaise sauce. The fish was the finest ye could buy. Wild, none of this farmed shite. Even the fact that the wine glasses were filled with water couldnae spoil his mood. Rowan was sitting tall in her seat across from him, her skin shining from her shower, her damp hair a crown on her head. Eddie wished then for someone to bear witness, to see them here at this brand new table in this brand new flat, towering high above everyone and everything. Harbour Peninsula: *The Place*

To Live Above All Others.

Things were a bit hairy at first. The shyness had come on him when she walked through the arrivals gate. He'd stared at her ear, her hairline, her hands, anywhere but direct in the eyes. When they got into the motor, he was grateful to have to look at the road. Months ago, he downloaded her photograph from Tribal's website, cropping it so Dinger and some others he didnae know were cut out. During their phone calls, he would open the photo up on his laptop so he could look at her. Since that photo had been taken or perhaps just in the last few weeks, she had become too thin, a bit drawn. But that was ok. That was all right. He'd have her fed up soon enough.

Driving past Littleholm, he was worried she might change her mind and want to go home, but no, they drove into Harbour Peninsula, him gibbering shite about his training routine while she nodded and said the odd thing here and there. How quiet she could be. How it made ye yak and yak. He had forgotten that. On the phone she couldnae get away with sitting in silence, though now he thought she might've wanted to.

It was obvious she loved the penthouse. Oh Eddie, Oh Eddie, she kept saying. Seeing the new security gates had pissed her off, and she hadnae wanted to like the flat but just couldnae help it. Who could? Oh Eddie, she said then burst out laughing. But he knew why she laughed. Look at us, together, here. Top of the world, ma.

It was too windy to go out onto the balcony—the stubby potted palms were bent almost double and stripped to the bare bark. So they stood close to the glass door, and Rowan's head twisted this way and that, looking up the Clyde valley, towards Lanarkshire and the Southern Uplands, then west towards Dumbarton Rock and the Firth of Clyde where the Irish Sea roiled and crashed.

‘These glass walls. It’s as if we’re in the clouds,’ she said, her eyes big, taking everything in. ‘But what did I expect?’

‘No, no. I know what ye mean,’ he said. ‘It’s like a crow’s nest up here. Ye should see it at dawn. The colours just fill the place. I’ve always preferred old buildings but there’s something to be said for this. For the view at any rate. And the thing about new buildings is nay ghosts neither.’

He almost said: *a fresh start*. Careful, careful. Steady as she goes. Honest to Christ, he wanted to be her mate. When she walked through that arrival gate, it was his pity she stirred, nothing else. If something was to happen then it would be because she wanted it, no because he’d played the pester game when she was having a hard time. That just wasnae his style.

‘Amazing, Eddie. I’ll bet ye cannae hear a thing when the windows are shut.’

‘Aye. I suppose it is quiet. We’re…I’m the only occupied flat on this floor.’

Now she was looking across the room to Littleholm—the high-rise roofs just visible through the glass balcony. Quickly, in case she got all maudlin, he said, ‘Come on and see yer bedroom.’

In her bedroom, she admired the décor and he told her, ‘It’s Japanese influenced. I like the clean lines.’

No point telling her it was one of the show flats and he’d had nothing to do with the interior design. In the master bedroom, he slid back the steel doors on the custom made wardrobe then pulled them forward. Back and forth. Back and forth. Rowan watched him from the doorway, still holding the rucksack he’d told her to leave in her bedroom. What was he doing? Showing her how wardrobe doors slid open and shut? For Christ’s

sake. He let go of the handle and said, ‘Come on, I’ll boil the kettle.’

He needed her to stop looking at him like that.

In the hall, he smiled again when she oohed at a painting of a red flower he had bought in Shanghai.

‘Someone told me it looks like a Chinese take-away calendar,’ he said.

‘I like it. They call the chrysanthemum the recluse’s flower. Something to do with it no flowering in the spring but on its own in the autumn. I thought about getting a chrysanthemum tattoo once.’

‘So why didn’t ye?’

‘The same reason I didnae get any of the others. I changed my mind and went off it. It’s what I warn everyone else about. Doing so many cover-ups has just made me too cautious, I guess. I like this painting though.’

‘It’s yours. I’ll put it in yer room.’

‘Oh no, I couldnae. Besides I don’t know how long…’

The blue vein on her pale forehead pulsed, timing the seconds of silence as she struggled to speak. He watched it, wanting to reach out and touch it. Gentle and light. Did he used to do that? A memory somewhere, anchored in the deep.

‘It’s okay,’ he said when she couldnae find the words. ‘Just think of this place as a shelter in a storm. Nay obligations. Whenever ye want to go home, just give me the nod and ye’ll be off.’

‘Thanks, Eden.’

No one called him that anymore. Now when he heard his name—his old name, that name he’d fucking despised—he moved from gas to liquid to a solid someone.

‘Would you tattoo me, Rowan?’

Her laugh was more of a snort. ‘Did ye no hear what I just said? My reply to that question is always “Come back in a year and if ye still want the same tattoo I’ll do it.” Anyway, if I remember rightly ye always fancied a Bukowski tattoo. *Love is a Dog From Hell.* Still want that then?’

‘Are ye sure that was me?’

Another snort. ‘Oh aye, it was you. Although maybe ye just said it to annoy me.’

‘Oh, I cannae mind that. But I’ve been thinking of this tattoo for a while. A narwhal. Its horn twisted around the muscle of the arm. Here and here.’ He pulled up his short sleeve and couldnae help flexing, but only to show her where exactly around the muscle the horn would go.

‘Plain with light blue ink, I was thinking. Nothing filled in. A tracing like those old drawings naturalists used to do. The kind of tattoos old whalerman had once upon a time.’

The arms first then the chest. Folio and octavo whales, mealy-mouthed porpoises and black fins. Kings of the Boundless Sea.

Aye, maybe, was all Rowan managed. She looked knackered, so he encouraged her to go freshen up. ‘When ye’re in the shower make sure you look up at the skylight,’ he said. ‘Ye can almost touch the sky.’

A shame it wasnae dark yet. In the middle of the night, he’d shower just to look up and spot what might be elliptical or spiral galaxies, nebulae or star clusters—pollution made it hard to know what ye were looking at. The truth of it was that space frightened him. Certainties disappeared up there. The universe held too many secrets, threw up too

many questions without answers. Yet still, despite the fear, it fascinated him. On superstructures all over the world, he had stood as waves belted against the steel, stone deaf to warnings to come indoors because in that blue-black sea above his head, a shoal of stars were diving just for him.

While she showered, he spread the Ordnance Survey maps across the coffee table in what he'd taken to calling his games area, a little annex to the left of the breakfast bar where he'd set up the DVD player, a new console, and a cinema projector. This was what he had promised her: if she stayed with him, he'd help her find her ma. So far, he hadnae located a Seann Tearmunn, which turned out to mean 'Place of Sanctuary' in Gaelic but he'd bought maps of every Lochhead in Scotland. When Rowan came in from her shower, nice and fresh, he pointed to the maps on the table and said, 'Welcome to the Area of Operations.' A wee smile, and she was standing beside him.

'Here they are, marked with orange highlighter,' he said, pointing here and there on the maps.

As she leaned over the table to see better, her hip went into his thigh, and the shower gel he'd bought special at the airport that morning hit his nostrils. The same make as Christine used, but no the same fragrance—that would've been too weird. Rowan took a step back and turned to him, her eyes a bit watery.

'I'm dead grateful, Eddie. This means a lot.'

That blue vein on her forehead was a sucker rod pumping. Something in the silence made him think this might be it. It would happen now. He moved towards her. A police siren from the streets below wailed up twenty-five floors, coming in through a gap in the open window. His hands became fists, his jaw tensed, the steel blade in his neck, the hot

blood, the warm pish. His hands itched to touch his throat, to check there was no blood. When he looked at Rowan, she was touching her own throat and making a rasping sound.

'I'm thirsty as hell. Can I have some water?'

'No bother,' he said, breathing slow and steady while walking over to the breakfast bar. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. 'I'll tell ye what I'll do, I'll start cooking.' But before that, he grabbed the remote control, pressing the button to seal the windows tight against the outside.

Too early for dinner but what the hell. He pulled out a stool for her at the breakfast bar and got on with prepping the food. A dab hand at cooking. French was his favourite. An exact discipline, a feat of engineering. Fish were fiddly fuckers but he was a natural. Yet his hands trembled as he pulled out the tiny bones. Excitement, that was all. Apart from his hands, it was just how he'd imagined it. Rowan on the stool, sitting up tall, almost regal, observing him at work. So far, so good. All under control.

He opened the Smeg fridge and from her seat at the breakfast bar, Rowan said, 'Ye having a party? Enough to feed the five thousand in there.'

He looked into the fridge, seeing what she could see. The best name brands, the deli counter bags, the bottles and bottles of water: still, sparkling, a touch of lemon, lime, orange.

'Well, offshore the food's pretty shite, so I suppose I go a bit bananas at the supermarket.' He searched through the fridge for capers and, in order to see to the back of the shelves, was forced to place jars and jars onto the breakfast bar. 'When I was a wean I thought everyone's fridge had a half pint of sour milk and dried-up tattie scones

in it. Now I end up having to chuck a ton at the end of the week. Kind of behaviour that's frowned upon in these straitened times.'

Before he turned away to drop the capers into the sauce, he noticed Rowan looking over at the new projector and all the DVDs lined up in rows, most of them still in the cellophane. He stuck on the extractor fan. All this cooking was making him sweat.

Minutes passed until she said, 'It's worked the opposite for me. Growing up skint has made me too cautious. Too cautious about everything, maybe. Every penny's a prisoner now. Might be I've become a miser. Maybe that's it.'

'Don't be daft. Ye were always dead generous. Did ye no used to cook for half of Littleholm?'

'What do ye mean? Of course I did. Ye liked my cooking well enough yerself. We used to joke, Martin and me, that as soon as I put on a pot to cook dinner, there'd be a wee knock at the front door, and lo and behold there was Eddie waiting like a starving cat.'

He laughed, remembering something. The smell of boiled vegetables. A Bob Dylan poster: *The Times They Are A' Changing.*

'Hungry boy we used to call ye. No mind that?'

'Aye, I do,' he said, thinking he just might. 'Did ye want to go over to the dining table to see the sun setting? It's amazing, so it is. Seven colours of light across Darden and the river.'

'I see it every evening over there in Littleholm,' she said, laughing. It was the first time she had laughed big, full and proper since coming off the plane. It was good to hear that, so it was.

‘But ye can see the sun set all the way to the hills as well as the Clyde,’ he said, using the wooden spoon to point at the north-facing glass wall. ‘Ye couldnae see that all at the same time in yer old flat. Unless ye ran from one room to another. Here, come over and sit at the dining table. Best seat in the house. I’ll bring over the first course.’

Oh, for someone to bear witness, to see them here at this brand new table in this brand new flat, towering high above everyone and everything. Could she feel it? The electricity spiking between them, attracted then propelled, gaining in velocity, back and forth. It ran across him like something alive. The hairs on his arms, on his neck were conductors, tingling in the air and his scar, oh man, his scar crackled with a fierce electric light.

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‘When did these appear?’ Rowan asked when they drove up to the security gates. Eddie shrugged. Last week or the week before. A break-in at the building site had provided the new developers with the excuse. The gates werenae really a surprise. Rowan had already spotted them from the window of the plane as it flew low over Darden, skimming across the Clyde to land at the airport. The sun hadnae long risen in the east, lighting up the town’s frost-covered houses, retail sheds, the railway tracks, the frozen ribbon of canal, turning the glass roof of the shopping centre into a lake of clear ice reflecting clouds and the blue, blue winter morning as she flew down over her town. Home. Home at last.

At the new gates, Eddie flashed a pass and a security guard with sore looking spots pressed a button inside his hut and they were driving up the slip road leaving behind the

sign that stated: VISITORS MUST REPORT TO THE GATEHOUSE. NO DOGS ALLOWED. Rowan knew she should rant and rave about civil liberties, and the right to roam but being with Eddie—actually being with Eddie after no setting eyes on him for a decade— was too much in itself. This was not her life. This was a big cosmic joke. Ha fucking ha.

The shopping plaza was still covered in scaffolding and tarpaulin, and the site of the third tower remained derelict space. On the ground floor of Eddie's tower, empty retail units displayed already fading signs:

POSSIBLE CAFÉ CONCESSION. EXCELLENT RATES

SPEAK TO OUR AGENTS NOW. FAVOURABLE TERMS.

Inside, a doorman behind a desk nodded as they walked towards the glass lift. With the low shrubbery outside and the marble fountain spurting water inside, it was like a corporation's headquarters. There was a swimming pool and a spa on the thirteenth floor, Eddie said. But no enough residents to make it worthwhile opening. The gym was closed too. And apparently, the new developers were in discussions with the council about the number of social housing tenants allocated to the towers. Surprise, surprise.

In the glass lift, she gripped the rail as they were pulled past floor after floor. Memories of them together trapped in the lift caused her to smile and blurt out, 'No jumping up and down in this, eh? I'd be terrified if this broke…' Rowan's face grew hot. What fumbles up against the lift buttons had she made Eddie remember now? Yet when she snuck a look, he seemed distant, lost in other thoughts.

At the top floor, Eddie used a special key and the lift doors opened right into a glass room of light and shadow. There was no denying the penthouse was stunning. A massive reception room with triple aspect floor-to-ceiling windows, an L-shaped balcony with potted palms, a solid oak breakfast bar, and a stainless steel kitchen with all kinds of gadgetry. No her kind of place, and yet later when he shut the windows, there was such an immediate relief of silence that she looked to her hills framed by the glass and imagined his tower was all her own. She would be a Rapunzel who never let down her hair.

The penthouse itself was immaculate. Shining clean. What had she expected? His house to be like his bedroom once was? Socks and empty lager cans lying around? Perhaps the care he had always paid to his clothes had now been transported to all aspects of his life. When he was fourteen or fifteen, he'd begged his mum to buy him an expensive white tracksuit from the catalogue. He handwashed it every night, setting it on a chair in front of the radiator and turning it every so often in order to prevent scorching. Before the tracksuit was paid off, he was being slagged for wearing it all of the time. Was this when he started thieving out of sports shops? Rowan thought it best no to ask him. No here and now in this fancy flat. It might appear unkind.

He showed her the bedroom but Rowan shivered to see him standing by the door when she sat down on the bed. Archie's sly fox smile was in the corner of Eddie's lips. Quickly, she said, 'So what's yer own room like? I bet it's ten times bigger.'

When he took her to the master bedroom, he displayed the built-in wardrobe like a salesman, pulling the doors back and forth. He stopped short of showing her the wardrobe's contents, though she had the distinct feeling he wanted to. What would be

inside? Shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel; shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange with monograms of Indian blue. Eddie had become what they used to call a *shirt man*: a beefed-up guy who drove a flash car and wore shiny leather shoes. He'd been her slender lad, all ribs and jutting bones, now his chest and arms were massive. Often men with the same kind of build came into the studio for squaddie tattoos as a tribute to dead soldier buddies, or they wanted wee designer logos of polo players and crocodiles. They were the kind of men she walked away from if they were ever drunk enough to try and chat her up in a bar.

Oh, but who was Rowan to be bitching about his appearance? She'd seen the way he eyed her sideways in the airport. It had made her wish for Freda's make up to hide the black circles under her eyes, the wrinkles on her forehead, her pale, wan skin. She was nobody to be judging anyone else that was for sure. But how could ye help comparing and contrasting after all these years? How could ye stop yerself? It seemed impossible.

To atone, when they sat down for dinner, she listened extra hard to Eddie's talk of all the countries he'd travelled to: Nigeria, Thailand, Australia, and the Philippines. He brought over the main course, telling her she would love the Barrier Reef and she didnae correct him, just chopped her salmon into little bits, skewering a piece on her fork.

'Did I roast it for too long? I'm still no used to that new oven,' he said.

'No, no. It's lovely. Honestly.'

Too much lemon and a wee bit overdone, but she smiled and chewed and smiled and chewed.

He asked her questions about Paris and Freda though he took care no to mention

Doid. Yet his nervous energy was wearing her out. When on the phone in Paris, he had suggested she stay with him, it had seemed a way to go home without having to actually go back to her flat. But she hadnae really thought it through. Of course, he would demand memories, stories and tales when all she wanted was silence. Soon enough she was asking him if they could talk about something else other than Paris. There was a momentary relief of silence until he asked her in a soft voice, 'Mind that club we used to go to? Those Sonic all-nighters?'

Rowan nodded and he said, 'Well, they're doing them again. I saw a flyer up the town and I recognised the logo. They've called them "Return to the Old School."'

He opened his eyes wide, shaking his head, as if amazed that this could be.

'Mind the laughs we had. The two of us. No worrying about nothing.'

Rowan remembered standing close-pressed with the crowd, the smell of sweat, the cheers and chants, thinking she'd discovered the key to it all only to watch what she'd almost held solid in her hands turn into whisps, vapours, and disappear with the night into nothingness. Still, for Eddie, she nodded and smiled.

'Did ye mind sunbathing on Mossgiel's roof after we'd been out all night? A helicopter came down flying over us dead low and I ran and hid under the water tank. Mind that?'

Oh, Rowan wanted to remember. She tried, really she tried, but it was no use—they'd underlined different paragraphs in the same book.

'Och, we did that a million times,' she managed.

Had they? Or was that the boy who came after Eddie? The boy with the blue eyes so like Eddie's? Or the boy after him with hair like Eddie's or one of the others when she

became desperate and all they had to do was smoke the same fags or drink the same drink as Eddie for her to say, *aye, come on, let's.*

Putting his cutlery down, he looked out the window. 'Some view,' he said.

How many times had he said that now? Countless.

'Aye. It sure is.'

'Ye used to call the hills the seat of yer affection. Was that from a book? A poem or something?'

'The seat of my affection. Oh, I cannae mind that. It's dead nice though. Are ye sure that was me?' she said. 'Are ye sure it wasnae Martin?'

'Oh aye, it was you okay.'

He frowned as if unsure. Rain battered off the balcony. A black cloud so close ye could almost touch it. A passing squall.

Eddie said, 'I'm glad I came back here.'

'Well, I was surprised. All those years we never saw ye. Even for the funerals.'

Did that sound like she was pulling him up? It wasnae her intention. She had searched for his face at each dour send-off. Searched among the crowd of men wearing suits bought for job interviews and only used for court and funerals; searched among the women, faces lined with all their burdens; among the grieving family who would attempt to cure grief with the usual potions and pills that never seemed to cure anything much at all.

'My ma would phone me and tell me who had died.' Eddie was still looking out at the rain. His voice had flattened. 'It got to the stage that every time the phone rang I thought who else has topped themselves? Who else has been murdered? I wanted to go to the

funerals but these things in Darden are guaranteed to end up messy. Ye know what I mean.'

She did. She knew well. Wakes that turned into parties so protracted and mad that hours would disappear like gulps of vodka.

'I know, Eddie. I know what ye mean. I understand.'

Was he even listening? He had an odd look about him. Once upon a time, he had been her very own ethnographic study and she'd known all his expressions, all his rituals. Now he was a stranger, motivated by who knew what?

'My sister was asking for ye by the way,' he said, out of nowhere.

Rowan wondered if this was true. They'd never had much time for each other. Iona lectured instead of talked. Harping on about damage to the environment while blowing Golden Virginia in yer face. His mum's clear favourite, of course.

'Tell Iona I was asking for her too. How's she doing?'

'Aye, good. The weans are fair growing. Would ye believe young Eddie's nearly thirteen?'

'God, that makes me feel right old.'

'Did ye never fancy having children then?' Eddie said, quite relaxed, one hand lightly rubbing his belly.

They hadnae yet spoken about that day at the hospital all those years ago and, for Rowan, the situation had developed into a stubborn kind of stand off. He had to be the one to talk about it first. He had to be.

'No. Never wanted to,' she said, pushing her veg around the plate, refusing to look at him.

‘I was surprised when I found out ye hadnae had any weans. Most lassies who stay in Darden end up having at least two.’

He chuckled like this was funny.

‘Aye, well Eddie, I managed to resist.’

Silence. He stared out the window and she thought of the client who’d come into the studio a few months ago. Rowan was inking a *Le Tigre* tattoo on her left shoulder when the woman said out of nowhere, ‘All of my friends are either getting pregnant or married, all I’m getting is drunk.’ Rowan laughed so hard with her, but later that night, alone in her flat, she’d wondered whether it was really all that funny.

Eddie took a breath and started to speak. Rowan’s heart beat just a little faster.

‘I don’t know if ye know but they’re still planning to build a pontoon. Boats and yachts and pleasure cruisers coming up the Clyde to the new dock,’ Eddie said, with a dreamy look on his face. A look she did remember. A look that came when he had said things like: *Don’t worry*; *Everything will be fine*; *Trust me*.

‘I might get a boat of my own. Always fancied it,’ he said, smiling again.

‘There’ll be no boats coming here. It’s a fantasy cooked up by the council. They might build a pontoon but it will be a home for rats and seagulls and that’s it.’

Her knife and fork clattered onto the plate. The food was cold anyway. Tension locked her neck. Stiffness in the muscles made her wince. She realised now that he hadnae spoken about the termination because he didnae give it a thought. Simple as that. In her head it had bookmarked the beginning of the end for their relationship, but for Eddie it was a page torn out and thrown away.

‘God, that’s right. I mind now ye always were a shocking pessimist, Rowan O’Reilly.

Have ye heard the one about only pessimists being left in Scotland because all of the optimists have emigrated?' Eddie laughed. 'It might take a while but look at Canary Wharf. These things don't happen overnight yet there's no stopping change.'

Had he always looked that smug way when he smiled? The cat that got the cream. Was she a pessimist? Had she no spent all those years when they were together encouraging Eddie to do better, to see his potential? Surely, if she was such a pessimist, she wouldnae be here? Why did folk think they had a right to say such things? No stopping change, he'd said and here they were trying to pretend change hadnae happened, sitting at this dining table acting like some kind of pretend husband and wife. Playing house like they did when they were wee.

'I thought ye were smarter than to believe everything ye read, Eddie. That's all just PR patter and wishful thinking.'

'Ye said ye'd been looking forward to the new development. A few months ago ye were singing its praises. I wouldnae have looked if ye hadnae talked it up so much.'

He was taking the huff, his lip almost petted, but she couldnae seem to stop the words from coming.

'Well Eddie, I was looking forward to having a decent coffee down in the community park that doesnae seem to have been built yet. I was looking forward to walking along the river I've lived by all my life without having to climb over fences. But the only way I'm going to be able to do that is if I buy that penthouse next door to you. And on my wage I don't think that's a possibility. I could go on the council waiting list but it looks like folk might be getting a letter soon telling them no to bother with their new sofas and beds because they're staying put where they are. I'll tell ye, the developers must be

dreaming if they think tourists are suddenly going to start docking their boats or yachts or whatever so they can queue with the junkies at Frank's Cheque and Pawn or buy a pair of leather-look brogues at ShoeRite.'

She was done. Spent. No more words.

'Well, the new developers have got plans. Those security gates are just the start of it.'

She frowned, confused. He shifted in his seat.

'I didnae want to bring the mood down but ye'll hear soon enough, I suppose. They're talking about building a championship golf course by the river out there. Some big sports tournament coming up in five years and they want to build it for that.'

'Where? There's no space…' she said.

Eddie nodded.

'Away and chase yerself. Knock down Littleholm? As if. The council swore nothing would happen to it. They spent thousands reassuring everyone. Your Say. Your Choice. All that shite.'

Littleholm flattened? Ellisland and Mossgiel dynamited, collapsing in on themselves, floor after floor, tumbling down onto the children's play park, the allotments, Aseem's, the community centre, and her own maisonette, her little flat where she'd tried to stake out her independence, imploding into so much concrete dust, metal and shattered glass? Well, why no flatten Littleholm? Why no wreck and ruin everything?

'The council are over a barrel, Rowan. If they want that shopping plaza out there finished they have to go with what the new developers want. And the government willnae help with money. They're too busy with the banks.' He sighed and shook his head. 'Funny though. If folk hadnae been clamouring for a flat in Littleholm with views

of the river they probably wouldnae have thought of building these towers here. But who can say? Just the way these things go.'

Just the way these things go. Hey ho. See ye later. Ta-ta bye.

'Ye know…' he began. '…it's no set in stone. Folk in Darden…maybe they'll fight it.'

Rowan said nothing. This was her cue to say *yes we will* and rattle the table with her fist. Perhaps she was a pessimist after all, for what she thought was, let it tumble, let it all fall to the ground.

Eddie leaned forward. There was a glob of béarnaise on his shirt.

'A lot of people have good memories of Littleholm. My ma's says she's never lived anywhere better even though it's been years since she moved. She greets for the good times but remembers more than me. Ye know she's started getting all down about my da since he died. Says she greets for what he could've been, no for what he was. As if that makes any sense. As if ye can understand that.'

'Is that no what folk do?' Rowan said. 'Grieve for the good parts. Because surely it couldnae all have been bad. It's the only way to cope, the only thing ye can do. Or else, ye have to admit the truth, that ye were a mug from start to finish.'

Rowan picked up her fork again, making patterns in the cold slop of béarnaise. Too many capers, vinegary and sour. This evening was sliding away from her.

'Are ye alright?' Eddie asked, concern creasing his face.

'I'm fine. I'm fine.'

'Are ye sure the food's ok?'

'Oh aye, it's grand.'

She couldnae look at him.

‘No too much oil? Salt?’

‘No, no it’s great. It’s just my appetite has gone. I’ve no been feeling right with everything that’s happened these last few weeks.’

A plea for mercy before everything spun out of control.

‘Look Rowan, ye never let me say I was sorry on the phone. Ye know for everything. My ma said once that if it wasnae for you telling me enough was enough I wouldnae have got my shit together. I should thank ye for that.’

‘That’s good of ye to say that, but I didnae think it was anything to do with me. I thought it was Christine and the attack, of course. After the knife…are ye ok Eddie?’

‘Aye. Why?’

He followed her eyes and looked down. His hand was rubbing his neck with a fury. Where his scar must be. He placed the rogue hand down on the table and tried to smile but the truth was he looked awful peaky.

‘Ye alright?’ she said. ‘Ye sure?’

‘I’m fine. It’s just hot in here is all.’

She watched as poor Eddie gulped down his water. On the phone he’d talked about the attack fine, but maybe, just maybe, he was rubbing his neck with a fury at the other end of the line. Broken men. All the men she had ever loved had been broken, stabbed, beaten. On the day Eddie was slashed, her dad came home, all white-faced, saying over and over again, *the boy, the boy, they’ve hurt the boy.* She’d ran about the house no knowing how to fix this mess because by that time Christine was the one at the hospital, the one crying in Smuggies, the one on the front page of the Darden Press under the

headline: *KNIFE THUGS ATTACK FIANCEE*. Pristine Christine photographed in her skin-tight designer denims doing a sad face for the camera, her skin glowing with a surfeit of meat-derived Vitamin A supplied for free everyday by her butcher father. It was hard to know what to be more surprised at— their engagement, or the fact that the paper had described Eddie as a 'quiet and hard-working' local lad. Maybe the journalist was a seer, a prophet, auguring the future truth of who and what Eddie would become.

Rowan had waited too long to forgive him. Hard lines. Tough titty. By the time she decided he'd been punished enough, he was away with Christine to set up home in a city where no one knew or cared which team he ran with. And Rowan was left to go out with a series of boys then men who were flesh and blood proof of the law of diminishing returns.

Eddie cleared his throat. 'I heard the other day she was pregnant.'

'Who, Christine?'

'Who else?'

'Is that with what's-his-name?' Rowan asked, watching Eddie's hand play with his top button.

'Aye. Him.'

'Oh, I'm sorry, Eddie. Are ye ok about it?'

He drained his water and made a face as though it tasted bad. 'Sometimes. Other times I'm no so good. But what can ye do?'

Eddie was staring out the window. In a second he'd half-raised out of his chair and was shouting, 'Look, Rowan! A ship coming up the Clyde. All lit up.'

He moved towards the window and Rowan stretched up in her seat. A great navy ship

was sailing upriver covered in guns, lights and revolving satellite dishes. Eddie grabbed binoculars from the coffee table and went over to the glass wall standing with his legs apart like a captain on the deck of his ship.

'A gunner, I think. Aye. HMS Monmouth.' He turned and gave her a big grin. His face illuminated.

There he was, the boy she'd known, her slender lad who'd dance in the street, play chap the door runaway, do anything for a dare. There he was after all, after everything. Her own Eddie. Her own Eden. Surely HMS Resilience or HMS Courage would have been more apt? A metaphor for the miracle of existence that was Eddie, here, alive, or perhaps the miracle that was the two of them together in the same room after all the years and all the funerals.

He walked back to the coffee table and fetched up a small notebook.

'What are ye doing?' she asked, trying to sand down her jagged edges.

'It's a wee book I bought for writing down the names of the ships and boats that come up river. Only four so far…but soon there might be more.'

Ah, there was guilt. What had she said? *There will be no boats coming here*. But how was she to know he was so into boats and that? He never used to be. She was sure of it.

'What were we talking about?' he asked, sitting back at the table.

She shook her head. 'It doesnae matter.'

Rowan wanted, needed, to see him as he was now. Or as he had been. Whatever it was.

'Was it big, the ship?'

'Aye. A cracker. Ye can still see it if ye want.'

He half got out of the chair, but she said, ‘I’m happy here’, so he sat down and leaned back, crossing his arms behind his head.

‘Ye really no remember that time with the helicopter? I’d forgotten it too for a while but it came to me just the other day that clearly, so it did.’

Rowan did her best to match his soft tone. ‘Maybe I do. Was it in the summer?’

‘Aye. It was dead funny. Ye nearly died when the helicopter came. We stayed up there for ages after. It was dark when we went back downstairs. Bel had made yer da phone the coppers.’

‘Oh, we must’ve been late back for that. Bel hated the police more than anyone. Bully bastards, she’d call them. Right to their faces. Her, with a portrait of Mao hidden in her bottom drawer. Tam showed it to me once. A sweetheart photo of a mass murderer. Imagine that.’

‘Jesus, Rowan, I forgot. I bumped into Bel the other day in the city. It took me ages to remember who she was. It was embarrassing. Mind you, she’s put the beef on a bit. She was asking for ye, by the way.’

Rowan sat up. ‘What was she saying? How was she?’

‘Aye, fine. I told her ye were having a hard time. She asked if it was to do with yer ma and I said aye, but I didnae tell her anything else because you told me no to speak about it. She wanted to know what was going on but I just said I didnae feel right discussing it. She was dead sweet and gave me her number. Said ye were to phone her day or night for a wee chat. That’ll be nice won’t it?’

‘How did she know it was something to do with my mother?’

‘I took it Martin or someone had told her.’

‘Martin and Bel don’t talk. I’ve only told you and Dinger, and Martin wouldnae have told anyone. He wouldnae want everyone knowing.’

‘Someone else then. Someone else told her. Ye know what it’s like round here. Bad news travels. Or it used to anyway.’

‘No. No one knows. I’m pretty sure.’ Rowan rubbed her face with both hands, and when she emerged, said, ‘Where is it Bel told ye she’s living?’

‘She was in Dublin but sold her family’s big house before the Celtic Tiger lost its bite. I never knew she came from money. Would never have guessed it the way she dressed. Anyway, she bought an old forestry commission property up the Campsies. Got it at auction. Opened some kind of old folk’s home or something. Always was a gem. Dead kind. Doesnae surprise me she’d spend her money doing something like that when the rest of us would pish it up a wall. Well, some of us. Once upon a time maybe…’

He stopped speaking, his eyes wide.

‘Christ, Rowan. There’s a place marked forestry property no far from the Campsies.’

‘Aye? So?’

‘It’s Lochhead, Rowan. It’s called Lochhead.’

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rowan stood where the Clyde lapped at a spit of sand, pebbles and washed-up rubbish that was the nearest thing to a beach Darden had. Resisting the urge to turn around and check whether Eddie was at his window with his binoculars, she watched the river flow past, all swelled with yesterday's rain and maybe meltwater from high up in the hills. *The seat of yer affection.* She was sure that was something Martin used to say, no her, though it was true, whoever had been the one to say it, it was true. Up there past muir and wood, corbett and cairn and loch after loch, Marianne was living with Bel and twelve others in what Bel said was a kind of retirement community, only different. Whatever the place was, it was only eleven or twelve miles away. Marianne, so close, so near for two and a half years.

'How could this happen, Bel? How could she be there with you?' Rowan asked during that first fraught phone call.

'I don't know, love. Perhaps it was the Goddess. Bringing us together.'

If it was a goddess's doing, it was Nemesis. A bitch-deity hell-bent on divine retribution. What presumption was Rowan guilty of that was deserving of such an extreme form of punishment? A wish fulfilment that came with a curse, a red apple with poison at its core. Her mother had been magicked out the grave, only for Rowan to discover with one phone call that Marianne was halfway back to it and there was nothing to be done. Nothing at all.

It used to be difficult to get to this horseshoe of sand and pebble. The shipyards and

the factories, the barbed wire and the guard dogs made it tricky, so that only those game enough would cross the railway line, climb over fences, walk over the asbestos dump, and dreepy down a crumbling wall to stand at the water's edge. It was somehow worth the skint knees and stings from jaggy nettles just to listen to the waves and smell the tang of sea air carried upriver with the tide. Now the new promenade with its metal steps allowed access to the shore for residents only. The original plans had stated that it would be accessible to everyone but security fencing cut the promenade off at either end. Another sign said:

> PERMISSION MUST BE GRANTED BY ESTATE OFFICE
> BEFORE LIGHTING BARBECUES

Despite everything, she'd laughed a little seeing that, thinking of how many old dossers had found their way to the shore over the years to light fires and drink cans of Super. People came because the shore was one of the few places that hadnae been tarmaced, slabbed over, made to serve some kind of industrial purpose. Apart from the shore and, of course, the hills, there was the forgotten wood behind the distillery filled with tall grass, lilac bindweed, wild rose, willow herb and thistle and trees that were said to be remnants of the ancient Caledonian forest. Or there was the reed-choked canal behind the disused railway, where herons or mean, toothy pike, grown fat on flushed away goldfish, could be spotted if ye were patient enough. Void space, borderland on the brink between one carpark and another, one shopping centre and another. Somewhere a little wildness could be found, though wildness wasnae without risk. In the shadow of tree and bush, strangers would lurk looking to rape, bludgeon, bury.

At her feet, rusted cans still littered the sand and pebbles, along with used condoms

lying in-between rocks like dried molluscs—evidence that teens still used this area for the same hurried fucking as she and Eddie had all those years ago. Only these teens paid more consideration to safe sex than they ever had. Time was supposed to teach ye the error of yer ways. This was the common thinking anyway.

Looking at the empty river it was hard to imagine Eddie's pleasure cruisers mooring at the new pontoon. Once upon a time, the Clyde had been hectic with tall ships, frigates, sailboats and steamers travelling back and forth from the colonies. Now the only travellers were in the sky. Seagulls screeched and squawked, flying in lazy arcs—fat on Darden's discarded chips and burgers and all the other rubbish and shite; and higher, airplanes with booming jet engines—a sonic reminder every few minutes, as if Darden needed it, of the advances that had led to the town's decline. All along the river were abandoned timber quays, docks drowned by the rising river levels, ramps fallen into the watery murk, warehouses once stacked to the rafters with custom goods and excise, but now home to birds and rats. And sitting like new teeth in a mouth of rot, brand new apartment blocks beside abandoned building sites. Just that morning, Eddie had brought in the Darden Press and shown her the front-page headline: *We Won't Move!* Under it was a picture of Joan with her arms crossed, standing outside her maisonette flat.

Beside the picture of Joan, a small article said that scientists had discovered that the salmon were coming back to the Clyde in larger numbers than they had in years. It seemed it was a mystery how after half a century of pollution and generations living and dying, the fish had retained the chemical memory of their ancestors' original spawning ground, finding their way past the Firth of Clyde and back upriver. Something in the

genetic wiring had passed on from generation to generation, causing them to fight the tide and sewage to come back home. Home to die.

Martin had told her that there was a time when all ye had to do was dip a bucket into the Clyde, scoop it back out and it would be full of fish, wriggling and thrashing. He claimed as a boy to have seen the last salmon caught in the Clyde before the pollution wiped them out. It was put on display in a fishmongers at St. Enoch's Square and a crowd lined up to pay their respects to the stiff corpse laid out on the marble slab, blood leaking to form little rose petals in blocks of ice arranged reverentially around the body.

After that first phone call to Bel, Rowan had gone to bed early in the room that was supposedly her own and slept a fitful, feverish sleep only to wake up from a nightmare, shouting, screaming. In no time Eddie was in the room, as she struggled to remember who, where, what, until it all slammed back into her brain so that she gasped, needing someone, anyone, to hold her close. Maybe Eddie asked if she was sure and maybe he didnae, for she was back down in the soft pillows when he kicked off his trainers to climb in beside her. Turning her back to him, they spooned, his body warm, solid. She tried no to think of her dream where someone had been injured, killed. His warmth liquefied, loosened her limbs as he pushed into her, whispering something that might've been her name, so that she turned, moving towards him and they began what was the same as all those years before, and yet different, altered. His body a man's now, pressing her down hard into the new mattress, his touch more considerate, though the way he bit his lip and squeezed his eyes shut was the same, would always be the same. Skin on skin, sweat on sweat. Together, then apart, then together again.

At the Clyde's shore, Rowan looked up from the stones, shingle and crushed cans at

her feet to the river, and there among the rise and fall of the waves a thousand sleekit salmon flashed their sides in the sun. Glittering and gleaming. An illusion. A trick of the light. No salmon in the river at this time of year, just parr waiting to become smolts in the spring and swim downstream to the Irish Sea. A cloud came, covering the sun, and the salmon were grey-blue waves. Yet during autumn the fish would return for real, travelling upstream, more maybe than last year and the year before. Their numbers quietly growing, swelling with each coming season just as Eddie hoped would happen with boats and pleasure cruisers on the Clyde.

Marianne had dementia. Plain, simple and true. Bel said her physical health was poor, her speech minimal. She had become as silent as God Himself. Her reasons, her motives would have to remain as opaque as His own. The dementia wasnae the genetic type, the hereditary type, and Rowan had the same chance as everyone else of developing the disease. Something to be grateful for at least, Bel said. And she was right. For if Bel's Goddess hadnae shown her at least this mercy, Rowan might've waded into the Clyde to see if the river would take her for its own.

Eddie had offered to hire a jeep to drive Rowan up the dirt track past the farms, over the hills to the collection of buildings marked Forestry Commission Property on the Ordnance Survey map. When he asked if he should contact Martin, she told him no, no, no. That's the last thing I want. The last thing. Now Eddie was up at his penthouse waiting for Rowan to make her decision. Was she was gonnae go to Bel's place up in the Campsies or bottle it and stay in Littleholm, saving herself from what was bound to be certain heartbreak? Unnecessary heartbreak. Gratuitous wreckage. And who would blame her if she stayed put? If she refused to go? If she refused to be just another

shadow in a room filled with nameless shadows.

Rowan turned away from the water and walked back towards the new metal steps leading up to the promenade. In the glossy brochure Eddie had shown her, the artist depicted the promenade filled with people carrying shopping bags with designer logos, but today only the wind travelled along it with Rowan, who, as she walked, looked towards her hills and further towards the Campsies. There was no choice. She had her own chemical memory to contend with, her own desire to return to her source, even if it would mean the death of her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was Saturday morning and Eddie was driving her to Seann Tearmunn. A mix up at the hire place and he returned to Harbour Peninsula in a white jeep with tinted windows and chrome alloys.

‘Jesus, Eddie. I feel like I’m going to a hen party,’ Rowan said, climbing up into the passenger seat.

‘I know. I know. It was the only 4x4 they had,’ he said, abashed.

‘Can we go to Littleholm first? I need a change of clothes.’

‘Sure. I’d like that actually.’

In the enclosed space, Eddie’s aftershave set off in Rowan the kind of sexual response ad companies strove for. After the first time they slept together, she’d told him, We cannae do this again. He’d nodded, understood, kept a polite distance, and yet later that evening, as he stood warming milk for hot chocolate made with fresh chilli and cinnamon, it was Rowan who’d come into the kitchen, and put her arms around him, kissing his neck above the shirt collar.

They fucked against the Smeg fridge, on top of the breakfast bar beside the crumbs of a half-cut loaf, on his leather couch, scattering the Euros in her trouser pocket across the floor like a scramble at a wedding. In the shower room, he kept telling her to look up at the stars, but she was lost, biting, tasting, devouring. Two years of celibacy had turned her carnivorous. Again, again, her brain cried out as if Eddie was a funfair ride. It was all just distraction, temporary relief. Sometimes a voice in her head asked her what the

hell she was up to. Oh shush, hush, haud yer wheest. Again, again, Rowan cried. Quick, before the postcoital comedown.

Eddie took a left at Littleholm's shops and drove into the scheme. Dogs barked from balconies. Clothes dried on lines. Rebel songs pumped out of open windows where green, white and gold flags were draped. Match day. The Old Firm. A few neighbours were out washing cars, soaping the windows, the bonnets. What was Eddie seeing? His almost smile was hard to read. After years of the place looming large in his imagination, did everything seem small and inconsequential? Perhaps if she hadnae just been driven from Harbour Peninsula, the scheme wouldnae seem so tired. She eyed the pre-emptive graffiti— *WE R CHAMPIONS*— on a garage wall. In the communal area the grass had grown wild and tall. Bags of rubbish were piled outside the backcourts. Was this lack of maintenance a conscientious campaign by the council to lower the tone so they could buy back from owner-occupiers at a lower price? Jesus. Mary. She was becoming as paranoid as Martin.

When Eddie honked the horn at weans kicking a ball in the middle of the road, one of them turned, eyed the ridiculous jeep with its tinted windows and stuck his two fingers up.

'Wee bastard.' Eddie laughed, returning the gesture, though the boy couldnae see him through the window.

Rowan pressed a button and the side window shot down. 'John Francis McGovern, I'm telling yer mammy.'

Eddie and Rowan laughed at the boy's expression as he backed on to the pavement. Before the jeep turned the corner, a neighbour spotted Rowan through the open window.

With the sound of the engine and the distance, it was too difficult to hear what he was saying. As they passed, Rowan turned, twisting in her seat to see his finger jab towards the high-rises.

'Something's wrong, Eddie. It's my dad. Quick.'

Eddie spun the steering wheel, making a sharp turn in the middle of the road. At the corner of Ellisland, an ambulance and a small crowd. Without speaking, Eddie parked the jeep and they both jumped out. A few heads turned in the crowd, and then some more. Elbows nudged. The people silenced by this sudden new development.

Joan pushed her way through the crowd to get to Rowan, and said, 'It might no be yer da, love. All we know is the lifts are broken again and someone heard the ambulance boys moaning about walking up to 14b. They're taking an age to come back down, so they are.'

A thrill in Joan's voice. The first with the bad news. Rowan headed straight for the entrance while Joan was still talking. Voices in the crowd said, Let the lassie through; Move yer arse. At the lobby, the doors swung open and a paramedic wheeled out a man strapped to a stretcher. The folk chorus whispered, Marty? Marty? But the eyes above the oxygen mask rolling with pain and fear were Archie Doid's. When Martin rushed out of the doors with the other paramedic, alive, upright, if a wee bit peaky, some of the crowd cheered and clapped despite the sick man about to be taken to hospital. Ah Martin. There ye are. Good man. On yerself. Heading straight for Rowan, he ignored the pats on the back, the cheers. His hair was all in tufts; his face red, sweating. Had they fought like two old bears? Had he rolled with Archie across the sheepskin rug? *I'm the daddy. No, I'm the daddy.*

‘His heart, I think,’ Martin said, as some of the crowd leaned in to hear. ‘He turned up at my door, clutching his arm. He’d walked up all of the fucking stairs. I told the council to sort the lifts out two bloody weeks ago.’

Had Archie’s breath shortened, his heart started to yammer on floor nine? The dark spots in front of the eyes on floor eleven. The band of pain around his chest spreading out at thirteen, travelling up the throat, down the arm.

‘But what was he doing at yours?’ Rowan asked, as Archie was hoisted into the ambulance.

‘He phoned and we were arguing. I told him ye were back in Darden. Sorry, love. It just slipped out.’

‘But how did ye know I was back?’

Martin didnae answer, but his eyes flicked to Eddie, standing just behind her. Eddie gripped her arm but she shook him off. From the door of the ambulance, the paramedic shouted something and Martin looked at his daughter, eyes full of fear.

‘I said I’d go to the hospital. There’s no one else to go.’

He hated hospitals.

‘I don’t even know who to call,’ he said, patting his shirt again for his rolling tobacco.

But, of course, Rowan knew who to call.

In seconds she was riding up front with the ambulance driver, while Martin sat in the back with the other paramedic who was tending to Archie. He was stable they said, hopefully it wouldnae be too serious, but still the siren wailed a warning to the cars to move aside as the ambulance sped through the loud noon of the town, and onwards to

the city and the Western Hospital's A&E department.

*

Archie took a turn for the worse as the ambulance parked outside the hospital. When he was wheeled away, Rowan and Martin were sent to sit in the relatives' room along the corridor. Under watercolours with soothing intentions, beside a table with a vase of plastic flowers and leaflets on bereavement and terminal illness, Rowan did the sign against the evil eye in the pocket of her parka, no sure if she was hoping Archie would live or die. When they came into the relatives room, her dad had whispered, despite it only being the two of them sitting there, that they shouldnae really be there on account of them no being relatives and that. Of course, Rowan could have told him that he shouldnae presume anything, but the weeks hadnae been kind to him. Cheekbones as sharp as glass, eyes red and rheumy. Prospero without his books. She watched as he wrested the too-loud clock from the wall, throwing its battery out of the window to the shrubbery below.

'Enough to make a man want euthanized,' he growled as he sat back down on the cheap nylon couch opposite, hunching himself over a cup of vending machine coffee. He sniffed, slurped, tapped his feet. Rowan felt the pressure to speak. Where to start? What to say? Words had never been her friends. How could they possibly carry the weight of all the hurt he had caused? After ten minutes of silence, she simply said, 'Ye had no right.' Then waited for the justifications that were sure to come, the demand for specifics, the plaintive excuses, the eloquently argued reasoning. Instead, Martin

continued to stare into his coffee, until at last without looking at her, he replied in an almost whisper, ‘I know.’

Five hours after Rowan and Martin first arrived in the ambulance, Bug Eyes opened the door to the relatives’ room, a woman of substance in a black trouser suit and heels. Ready to fight with doctors, consultants, even death himself. Was she wearing a padded bra? Rowan was vaguely disappointed.

‘How is he?’ Rowan asked, no bothering to introduce her to Martin.

‘Better, but still critical. Is there somewhere we can talk? Alone?’

For once, talk was what Rowan wanted. The sooner, the better. She had questions of her own to ask.

In the canteen that the hospital had attempted to modernise by adding panninis to the menu and flooring the place with laminate, they sat at a table with a view of the carpark. At the table opposite, an old man wearing pyjamas slurped soup past toothless gums. Every so often his grey tongue flicked out to gather drips from his stubble.

‘Archie was warned to take it easy,’ Barbara said. ‘His father died from a heart-attack. When he was the same age. Or so I was told.’

Rowan nodded, no sure what to say. There was some kind of struggle going on in Barbara’s face. She leaned forward a little. If others looked over would they think them mother and daughter? Rowan sat back.

‘Archie’s father was a street sweeper or a bin man or something. An itinerant from what I can gather,’ Barbara said. Her eyebrows rose. ‘Archie’s mother was a prostitute. I know all of this because she told me when she was dying. Things were tough for him

growing up. I don't like to think about what he experienced. He had to fight for everything he's got. Its made him…I don't know.'

Rowan sighed. 'Its no excuse, Barbara. Childhood was hard for a lot of folk; it doesnae mean you've got carte blanche to act the cunt. You always have a choice. Always.'

Barbara lifted her hand to her mouth and then dropped it. 'Oh, I wish you could still smoke in these places, but then I don't have any cigarettes. Do you have any?'

Rowan shook her head. Somehow the thought of standing outside the sliding doors as if they were on a fag break from a shift in the kitchens didnae sit right. And besides, all of this honesty was leading up to something. She looked at Barbara, raising her eyebrows.

'Look Rowan, the truth is that *Marianne* would have provided us with a financial breathing space. We are not very… solvent at the moment I'm afraid.'

How banal. It was greed that had caused all of this. Plain greed.

'How? I cannae see there being much money to be made in forgotten folk albums. Enough to be bothering with all this carry on anyway.'

Barbara shut her eyes. When she opened them, she said, 'A mobile phone company is interested in using one of your mother's songs. They will pay a good amount for the sole rights globally because the song is particularly suited to their needs. Your mother's contract states that none of her music can be used commercially. This is the problem.'

Rowan heard Marianne sing *Late Night Call* as if she was standing at the side of the canteen chair, leaning over and crooning it into her ear.

'Why did Archie no just tell me that he wanted to make money. Why go on about

how it wasnae gonnae make anything?'

Barbara at least had the decency to look uncomfortable. She shook her head, pursed her lips before saying, 'The truth is he didn't want your mother to know. He thought she might not agree. She was principled about these things back in the old days and he thought she might refuse to sign the contract.'

Rowan shook her head. *Had ideals and was greatly determined about those ideals.* But was it more than that? Would Archie have got a bigger slice of the pie if he'd kept quiet about it? Cooked the deal so there was more in it for him?

'He was desperate, Rowan. And desperation does strange things to people. Makes them do all kinds of stupid things they wouldn't normally do. You have to believe me when I tell you I didn't know the extent of his debts. I knew he was in trouble in the company and if he didn't make a good commercial deal then he was going to be forced out. He knew…I knew…we both knew that not working…well work is what he lives for…but there were debts, bad investments, subprime. He borrowed money from certain accounts. Rowan…' Barbara leaned forward, her face pained. '…he mortgaged the house without telling me. I might lose my house. I only found out this week.'

'I'm sorry, Barbara.'

And all of a sudden, Rowan was a little sorry for her. She put her hand in her parka pocket and squeezed her own front door key. Sensing her pity, Barbara began to plead her case.

'There's still a chance we can save the house…the label—his life's work, our life together. If we set up this deal, we can have things in place before the accounts go out in January. Please help us, Rowan. I know you owe us nothing but think about what this

might mean for your mother…and for you. She has the chance to become successful. An opportunity that was denied to her back then. Not many people get a second chance. Not at her age. There could be gigs, tours, new material. And you know it wouldn't just be your mother who could benefit from this. There would be a…finder's fee attached.'

'Well, that's awfy kind, but as I say I have no idea where she is.' Out of pure meanness, Rowan added, 'Plain, simple and true.'

So Barbara would lose her house? That old Georgian pleasure palace repossessed by the bank, cleared out and scraped clean like a womb. Late at night, in other people's homes in Paris and in Darden, Rowan had wandered through its rooms, trying to recall what small things had lined the mantelpiece, the chest of drawers, the teak cabinets. In Barbara's study, in that intimate space, were there pictures of weans on tricycles, pulling faces, first days at school, university graduations, twenty-first birthday parties? Rowan didnae think so and what this might signify had given her a wild kind of hope.

'Look Barbara, did Archie have any children?'

The older woman's nose almost twitched, scenting something strange in the air. She shook her head.

'With anyone else? I mean, someone else besides yerself?'

Abrupt and to the point.

'No,' Barbara said. She tapped her fingers on the table and thought for a moment before saying, 'He couldn't have children. We tried for long enough'

In a voice skittery with emotion, Rowan said, 'Are ye sure?'

'We had the tests. Why all this interest in Archie's reproductive abilities?'

Rowan shrugged. Oh, but her face must've given the game away. A strange gurgling

in her throat. Was it possible she might be about to sing with joy? Rowan gulped air down to block any sound from escaping, but, oh, smiled, grinned, clasped her hands in thanks to Jesus, Mary, God Himself.

'You thought he was your father?' Barbara could be abrupt and direct as well.

Her father? It sounded so laughable, so ridiculous, spoken out-loud like that.

'Did your mother tell you that? You've seen her?'

'It was something she wrote in a diary I read. Something I must've misunderstood.' Rowan waved her hand. It didnae matter now. Forget it. Forget it.

'Well, you can rest assured,' Barbara said. 'Perhaps it is just as well. All those other women— the paternity payments would have crippled us years ago.' She laughed but it was a sad sound.

When Rowan refused to say anymore about her mother, finally Barbara got up from her chair and grabbed her bag.

'Here's my card with my direct number,' she said, trying for a smile though she looked exhausted. 'Please phone me if you hear anything. Please.'

Her heels clacked across the tiled floor and the old man seated at the next table watched her stride past, his spoon held limp and trembling in mid-air.

Rowan waited in the canteen for a while before making her way back to the relatives' room, past wards and wards of the sick and the dying. To see her smiling, folk staring from their hospital beds might've thought she had been given the all-clear—that something that had been eating at her brain, at her heart, at her gut was no longer there, and the thing was, they'd have been right.

Inside the relatives' room, Martin was sitting crosslegged on the floor beside a small

bookcase of donated books, half its contents already piled up on the brown cord carpet.

‘Come on home,’ she said.

‘Littleholm?’ he asked, as if there was anywhere else she called home.

‘Aye. Come on then. Let’s get out of here.’

She helped him put the books away and didnae tell him off when he slipped a copy of Wilkie Collins’ *The Evil Genius* into his jacket pocket.

‘A good yin?’ she asked, as they walked down the hospital corridor.

‘Grade Two but good content. Someone’s written on the title page, *I saw this and thought of you*.’

They laughed at that as they might’ve done before everything was all ruined and wrecked, then they were headed out of the hospital exit, out of the same sliding doors Rowan had made her way through, alone in red slippers, all those years before.

CHAPTER NINE

Where I lived—winter and hard earth,
I sat in my cold stone room
Choosing tough words, granite, flint,

To break the ice. My broken heart—
I tried that, but it skimmed,
flat over the frozen lake.

from ‘Demeter’ by Carol Ann Duffy

Inside the sandstone villa that everyone at Tearmunn called the big house, in the tiny office under the staircase, Rowan heard everything Bel knew and some things she had guessed at. Beyond the bay window, the loch was a mood ring reflecting dark cloud then blue sky, then dark again. In this glen, we have a new season every ten minutes, Bel said once, twice, three times. Rain came thundering across the peaks, passing over the Victorian house and the thirteen lodges set in a semi circle around the loch shore (just the right number for a coven, Bel said). Marianne was living with her nurse in the last lodge by the jetty. Silent. Dead to the world. Lost in streets no one had a map for.

Tea, Bel had said when they arrived from the train station in her ancient jeep. Tea before you meet her. When Bel opened one of her desk drawers and drew out the old teapot with the cracked green glaze, tears boiled behind Rowan’s eyes.

‘Did I ever tell you who this teapot belonged to?’ Bel began. Oh, told it a thousand times, Bel. And a thousand more.

When early morning rain ran down the window, Bel brewed bancha made of raw, green leaf. In the afternoon, a smooth Oolong, and in the evening after Rowan's trip to the last lodge, Lapsang Souchong— the loose leaves, peat black as night, and the aroma, all pine needles, woodsmoke and nostalgia. Under a pinboard stuck with photos of smiling weans and thank you cards, the tea was stored in a wooden chest. Rowan recognised the intricate inlay on its lid, the neat dovetail joints, the well-turned legs.

'Martin?' she asked, pulling and pushing back a drawer that ran as if on skates.

'Yes. A present. Before I left.'

Rowan had never known Bel to blush, but then, of course, she had changed as people do after fifteen years. Her face was a full moon waxing and waning red with emotion; her body had become stout, matronly, as if to make itself a better fit for her role as matriarch of Tearmunn, and that laugh, where had that laugh come from? A deep bass that rose from the belly to send birds flying, cows mooing.

In her office, Bel talked about Marianne's English deserting her at the same time as her legs became unsteady, then when they engaged a French nurse, her French left her too. Thinking music therapy might work, Bel bought a copy of *Marianne* to play but when they played it, her hands went over her ears, her head shook from side to side and she sobbed. Big racking sobs. Now the nurse was too feart to put the classical station on the radio. Bel spoke of person-centred care, how hard they had tried to stop her decline, how desperate they were to make her comfortable, and how miserable Bel and everyone else felt about it all.

Rowan sat and listened in that mess of an office under motivational posters that said *Dare To Live Your Dreams* and *The Will to Succeed Can Overcome the Greatest*

Adversity, and when Bel had finished, Rowan nodded and said, yes, she understood and yes, she did feel a little more prepared now for what lay ahead; and the thing was she thought she might actually be prepared. But of course, Rowan wasnae. No in any way.

By this time, it was late afternoon. The sun was setting west of the spoon shaped loch and the lodges. Red and gold sky all the way to the Clyde and to Eddie. The phone on Bel's desk was on silent, but a red button flashed signalling messages—a hencoop emergency, a piecrust disaster. Despite the GO AWAY sign Bel had stuck outside her office, there had been soft knocks at the door, folk in fleeces and waterproofs peering in at the window only to retreat when they spotted Bel's serious face. People thought they had problems; they didnae know they were living.

Bel set her tea bowl on the desk and stood up. 'Ready?'

'Aye. I suppose.'

Outside the big house, they walked down the cedar-chipped path by the lodges where windchimes hung from porches and wellies dried under the wooden awnings. Somewhere, the sound of chopping wood. A bird cried; a cry of hunger or need. Halfway down the path, Rowan bent over, hands on knees, taking heaving gulps at air that tasted of raked earth and burnt wood.

'I cannae, Bel. I cannae do it,' she managed. 'My legs won't work.'

'It's ok. It's ok,' Bel said, rubbing her back as Rowan started to greet. 'You don't have to do anything. Mother of Joe, you're shaking. Come on back to the house. I've some good Lapsang. Come on with me now.'

That evening Rowan began to feel unwell. She asked Bel for somewhere to lie down

and didnae get up for four weeks. Pneumonia. It set fire to her lungs, to her skin, if her hair brushed against the sheet, she whimpered. She was sicker than she'd ever been before, as if her body was demanding the care and attention she was unwilling to ask for directly. Constant during this time was Bel, as well as other shapes and shadows with water, pills, damp cloths— all administered with the assured touch of the professional carer. Visiting Marianne was banned until the infection had gone completely. Rowan didnae protest.

Other, larger rooms were in the process of being painted so Rowan was given the attic room, a tiny 8x8 square dominated by a huge chimney breast that warmed the wall to fever point. Under the mantle someone had scored on the painted sandstone:

J. Grimstad
1949

How many Norwegian loggers had been squeezed into this room to lie on bunks like *Gäddfiske* in a tin? Now the attic room was like something from a Laura Ashley catalogue. A narrow brass bed, a jug and bowl on a tall chest of drawers, framed paintings of the loch. Instead of looking out of the window and risking a glimpse of Marianne being pushed in her wheelchair along the path, Rowan contented herself with these compositions of the view. A colour-blind painter, his water was purple, his hills blue, his grass red. An alien world where all things were possible.

Marianne had arrived in Tearmunn with an introduction from an old pal of Bel's who lived in Skye. She said she had heard about what they were trying to do and wanted to be a part of it. And what were they trying to do? A retirement community where the word retirement was banned. In the summer the big house became a free holiday home

for single parent families. One evening, a few weeks into her stay, alone in the big house, Rowan sat at the telephone table in the entrance hall beside muddy Wellingtons and damp Kagouls, reading the felt-bound guestbook:

We'll be back next year!!!

Cheers for an amazing break.

You're some bunch!

On the last page, a child's writing with backward letters: *Me and mum thank youse*.

So Marianne had arrived with a rucksack and an offer to work hard for her bed and board. The residents were shorthanded so after an interview process and a vote she was one of them. The story she told was that she'd been living in Skye above a bookshop with the owner. Later, Rowan managed to track down the bookshop owner, a gentle-sounding man with the Gaelic in his voice. He'd met Maria on a ferry crossing to Lewis, and for her he'd shut up his shop, his livelihood, so he could travel around the coast of Scotland, sleeping in a tent. Yes, she'd seemed a little forgetful now that Rowan mentioned it. Was that not just the way of her? He missed her something terrible, despite her moods, though he didnae miss her habit of reading then writing all over his stock. Spoiled his books and then broke his heart. Would Maria mind if he came visiting?

She'd worked hard, Bel said, and overall got on well enough with everyone though there were a few run-ins with other residents. *Had ideals and was greatly determined about those ideals*. However, when the disease came on, she became quieter and quieter.

'I thought this place had mellowed her—it has a magic that way—but I was wrong. It was this bloody awful disease,' Bel said during that first fraught phone call. 'I saw it

often enough when I was nursing and in my own mam's care home. Shouters and screamers become quiet as mice. And the quiet ones turn wild, foul-mouthed. In Marianne's case, the fight just seemed to slip away from her.'

She stopped doing her rota'd tasks and was turning up for the wrong ones. When she finally received her diagnosis it was hard for some of the residents.

'A few of the more skittish members of our bold crew upped and left,' Bel said. 'Oh, I might sound like I blame them but I don't. We were all hale and hearty then and it was easy to believe it would be a good few years before doctors and nurses would be coming up that dirt track with prescriptions and pills. With Marianne getting sick, it came home to some what we were really doing here. That this isn't just a holiday home with pretty views of the loch.'

Bel believed that Marianne had known she was getting ill. According to Bel, a large number of Tearmunn's residents had a family history of degenerative disease. Others had been nurses or perhaps carers for relatives.

'They've seen the insides of enough care homes to know they don't want to end their days slurping liquidized hot dogs through a straw for breakfast. Even in the good care homes—and there are some— its all cross-stitch and afternoon bingo. Now you can't see me taking up with that, can you?'

The night Bel realised who Maria really was, it was an ordinary evening after dinner like any other. Marianne was at the sink washing the dishes and Bel and some others were drying and talking and joking amongst themselves. Then Marianne sang.

'She sang the way Holy Joes say angels sing,' Bel said. 'Even after all those years and fags. Our Maria who said she couldn't whistle in tune.'

Later, Rowan would stand in Tearmunn's flagstone kitchen and imagine the white bowl falling from Bel's grasp, the stoneware cracking against the slate floor, the other residents drying cutlery, turning to whoop and cheer before stopping to listen to the singing coming from a surprising source. Hands still in the suds, would Marianne have been the last to turn? Unaware perhaps, a tap long thought rusted had turned at last, flooding her mouth and the kitchen with song.

'Rowan, I swear I knew that bloody album as well as you. Years ago, your dad wanted me to speak to you about how much you were listening to it, well, the thing was I already knew. There was a month or so when I finished my shift early and I'd go back to the flat to slip into a bath. Now you'll recall for yourself what the plumbing was like in those bloody high-rises. So with your bedroom being next to the bathroom on my side, I'd hear you dawdle in from school and put her music on and then that terrible sad voice would come through the pipes.'

Believing that Marianne had faked her own death—no understanding that Martin had faked it for her—Bel decided to keep her discovery a secret. Oh, but it was tough, she said, knowing that Rowan didnae have a clue and believing that Martin was as much in the dark.

'I had to trust the Goddess that you'd find her,' she said. 'And I was right to.'

Bel promised the Goddess she wouldnae breathe a word to anyone, no even Maria herself unless she brought it up first. She had a duty to confidentiality. It was only when Maria stopped answering to her new name that the residents were told what Bel had known for months. Bel told them there was to be no judging Marianne's actions.

'Sometimes mothers aren't born when their babies are. It is as simple as that,' Bel

said and sighed. ‘Then there are those who can’t have kids and mother everyone else half to death.’

When it became obvious that something was wrong and Marianne was diagnosed, Bel sat her down and told her she should get herself genetically tested for early onset dementia. Just a small percentage of early onset sufferers passed the rogue genes down the generations, but still it was important she checked. Bel would pay for the tests, she wouldnae need to worry about any of that.

‘I couldn’t have been clearer unless I came right out with it. So there we were. Nothing said exactly and a lot of dancing around, but we understood each other without awkward words having to be spoken and me having to break my promise. We went about organising the testing and the results came back and it was just the baddest luck that she had early onset. But Marianne was clearly relieved; and there was only one person she could’ve been relieved for, Rowan. Think on that.’

Rowan did think on it. As she slowly recovered her health in the attic bedroom, all there was to do was think. Circular thoughts tortured her, dark depressions washed over her, pinning her to the bed, so that she couldnae face going downstairs and engaging with anyone—especially no Marianne. Rowan became a madwoman in the attic, a shadow at the window in a white nightgown. Fed and watered by Bel, she didnae do a hand’s turn. Didnae wash a dish or boil a kettle. A child again, yet she had never been that kind of child. All of her life, there had been someone who needed caring for.

Alone in her room, Rowan began to sense the rhythm of Tearmunn. Breakfast was communal and often, if the cock crowing hadnae already startled her awake, the smell of baking bread and the noise of folk laughing, talking, and shouting good morning did.

Several times a day, Bel would come up the steep stairs with a tray of food—a bit of cake, a plate of stew or a fat sandwich, and always a present— a stone smoothed flat by loch water, a fir cone, half a blue eggshell speckled with black pepper or a book. Rowan read everything Bel brought her: *Van Gogh's Madness, A Long Walk in the Pyrenees, The Napoleonic Wars and Their Aftermath*. In her fragile state, she found meaning in everything she read, underlining, starring, and dotting the margins with exclamation marks when Napoleon was quoted as saying that history is a set of lies agreed upon and it requires more courage to suffer than to die.

Company of a sort came from the swallows nesting to the right of her bedroom window. At dusk they would glide and dive, circle and spiral, showing off white rumps and blue-black wings. Perhaps ten times in their lives, these swallows had travelled six thousand miles across the Sahara, past Gibraltar, Spain and France, to fly up Britain's backbone to a wattle hut of mud and feather, shit and eggshell. When her chest wasnae so bad, Rowan would sit up in bed and watch the birds dip in and out of the clootie tree opposite the big house. The breeze blew through hundreds of pieces of material tied around the branches so that they snapped and flapped. A pink frayed ribbon; what looked like an old dishcloth; a school tie, black with a yellow stripe; a strip of a green t-shirt; a piece of blue and white flag; a spotty sock. A cloth chorus, a strange song of hope. Votive offerings, but to what? Fairies, Gods, fate. Two seasons of visitors had burdened the tree with expectation. When day and night the tree sang in the wind, she'd lie in her bed and wonder at the mushed-up psychopathology that made folk tie a strip of cloth around a branch and believe their wishes would come true. The same mushed-up psychopathology that made folk do the sign of the evil eye in their parka pockets.

By around one in the morning, all of the residents would be in their lodges sleeping and the big house was Rowan's own. With its fire extinguishers and safety signs, lists (very short) of house rules and communal dining room, the house was like a hostel, although mercifully free of students strumming guitars and singing at two in the morning. Mind you, sometimes at the weekend, Rowan would hear drunken residents on the way back to their lodges singing:

Arise ye starvelings from yer slumbers
Arise ye prisoners of want

Tearmunn was a last chance for many of these folk. A last chance to make the dream happen. Create their own community with their own rules. Yet it wasnae a commune—Bel was quite specific about that. For although the residents voted on everything, Bel was the boss and had the final say.

'I'm a dictator,' Bel said. 'Though I hope a benevolent enough one. Collective values are all very well, but if it takes three weeks to decide what colour to paint the barn then that's three weeks too long. I could be dead by then for Joe's sake.'

For a while, the residents remained ghost voices funnelled up the chimney breast, snatches of song, a scent of perfume on the stairs; downstairs, a seat still warmed beside the common room window, a wine glass with lipstick, and on the wooden table some leftover curry or lentil stew with a wee note that said: *Rowan, Help Yourself*. Or, in another hand on another night: *Enjoy but watch out for seeds*. Who were all these compassionate strangers? After eating, Rowan would return to the safety of her attic bedroom with the note in her dressing gown pocket to be used for a bookmark.

Years later when Marianne was dead and buried and Bel was too, Rowan discovered

these notes during a voracious reading period in what was by then a large and noisy library at Tearmunn. In among the books were other handwritten notes from the same period, notes she'd forgotten about. She laughed to read how gullible she'd been.

> *Bel tells us that you are feeling a bit better. My back has been bothering me again. Would you mind coming over and giving me a hand with some flatpack furniture? No rush. Whenever you're up for it. I'm in the second lodge on the right.*
>
> *Shona*

Gullible to believe residents who could chop trees into firewood in minutes, pull a breeched calf out of a stubborn cow, repair the roof in high winds, had any real need of her help. It was all Bel's doing, of course. And it had worked. For when all of a sudden the stairs stopped creaking and the notes no longer came, Rowan had emerged from her attic bedroom.

And over the next few days, she found herself sitting among a lifetime of knick-knacks, family photographs and holiday souvenirs, listening to residents speak about where they'd lived, what they'd done with their lives, and what they wanted to do with the time left to them. With their knitted jumpers, rag rugs and cats, it was as if she had known them all her life, or people just like them. They treated her with the same gentle kindness folk extended to the bereaved or the sick. Rowan knew they were over-praising her for screwing in shelves and putting bedside cabinets together, yet she fed off their words. A needy orphan hungry, greedy for love.

It was impossible to guess which of the smiling residents had come to live in Tearmunn because they might end up like Marianne, or with Parkinson's, Huntingdon's, breast cancer, motor neurone disease. When alone, did they practice equations, test how

quickly they could still rise out of a chair or secretly slide hands up inside jumpers checking, checking for lumps, bumps, anything unusual? How did they manage to drag themselves out of bed every day? How was it done? Whenever anyone asked if Rowan had managed to see Marianne yet, she'd shake her head, shifting in her seat. They'd always say *no to worry* or *that's right take yer time*, but was there a flash of something that might've been judgment? Or was this just paranoia?

So when the swallows were in the nest and the residents in their beds, Rowan began to pad downstairs to Bel's office, starting up her ancient computer to read about dementia in peer-reviewed healthcare journals, charity publications, and newspaper articles. Sufferers and carers had set up their own user forums:

> *It's been thirteen months since Johnny was diagnosed.*
>
> *Every day I feel like running out of the door and never coming back*
>
> *My wife is typing this. My hands don't work. I miss playing the piano.*
>
> *With this disease, you find out who your friends are.*
>
> *I am living with dementia not dying with dementia. At least, this is what I tell myself.*

Too much reading of this kind of thing, and Rowan would have to rest back in her chair, looking out of the window to the dark country night, wondering which of the lights in the sky were stars and which were satellites transmitting the concerns of parents, sisters and brothers no longer dependent on Doctor Knowing Best. Searching for information about genetic defects, heart murmurs, brain cancers and the latest surgery techniques, for answers, for a cure, and if there wasnae a cure, for miracles, for

an oil like Lorenzo's, crystal energy healing, an Amazonian superberry: Our New and Recent Discovery!

Rowan came across a forum where adopted adults shared their stories. A few of them had spent years searching for parents only to find fathers or mothers suffering from dementia in care homes. Here were others cheated of condemnation and laying blame. Here were others left with a patchwork person made from odds, ends, whispers, rumours, black and blue ink bruised into the margins of books.

> *I wrote a big list of questions but when I got there, she couldn't feed herself.*
>
> *I thought he was dead so at first, I was really pleased and then things just got frustrating. Sometimes I wish I never tried but now I have two half sisters and we get on okay.*
>
> *I couldn't believe it. My adoptive mother died of the same disease. It was like being punished twice.*

Still, despite all of this sadness, Rowan kept on with her late night research only to find that music therapy was lauded again and again as the therapy that could have the biggest impact on dementia sufferers, even late stage dementia sufferers. Claims for music therapy included improved mood, less anxiety and agitation, as well as increased communication and interaction. It seemed that music played in a therapeutic setting had to be tailored to each individual's life experiences. What had she read in Marianne's journal?

> *The drumming and the turning give me what must be holy joy. I spun and in the midst of a spinning world, I found my centre. A core, something stable among all that is unstable. A connection in the heart. In an axis as slim as a human hair, I heard God speak to me. I heard Him.*

Maybe the problem was that Bel hadnae tried the right kind of music. To Bel and the

others, music was music, but Rowan knew more than anyone how song could foster negative emotions. Perhaps they'd been too cautious, no wanting to upset their first resident to take with something. If Rowan could get Sufi drummers to perform for Marianne, it might act like Ariadne's thread, leading her out of the darkness. Of course, drumming brought with it a risk of bad memories surfacing too. Somehow—a hunch, a stir in the blood—Rowan didnae think that would happen.

In her lodge, Rowan found Bel wedged in an armchair, eating a boiled egg and some toast from a tray on her lap. On the chair next to her, sat a bearded man in workboots and overalls. The flush on Bel's face was enough to tell Rowan he had spent the night.

'Sorry to disturb. The front door was open,' Rowan said, moving from foot to foot. Breakfast smells of toast and coffee caused her stomach to complain. When did she last eat? She'd been up all night reading and re-reading. The man stood up. He had to go anyway, he said. Before he left, he gave Bel a kiss on the cheek. Her round face glowed a nice pink. A hand waving a little erect toast soldier shooed him away. 'Off with you now or I'll never get anything done,' Bel said, her smile beaming.

'So?' Bel said after he had left. 'What couldn't wait until a decent time of the day?'

Rowan circled the rug, outlining her plans. They could re-release *Marianne* and sell *Late Night Call* to the mobile phone company. Bel had right of attorney or guardianship or whatever. Was that no right? Bel nodded, but Rowan was talking again. No need to tell anyone Marianne was alive and found. This would remain their secret. Why no lie and make up a story? That's what everyone did anyway. Why no them? The profits would pay for a music therapist to work every day with Marianne, and any other money could go towards her upkeep. Best to start small at first. A CD of Sufi music perhaps.

Test the waters. Basaam might now someone from the Marianne's old drumming group who could help them with the music. If the CD went well they could move on to trying Marianne with the live music. A Sufi drumming circle based in Edinburgh could be paid to come over and give a private performance. Rowan would stay and manage everything. Dinger would sort out her flat, or Martin, or somebody. When Marianne was better, Rowan could pick up the tattooing. And before Bel said it, Rowan understood that it was a sacrifice when Marianne had done nothing for her ever, but she wanted to do it. She had to do it. So what did Bel think?

A sigh, and Bel patted the empty chair beside her.

Rowan shook her head. 'I'm fine standing. What is it? Why ye got a face on ye like that?'

'I think you're right. I think we probably did give up on the music too soon. We were maybe a bit too careful and cautious like you said. But I also just heard you say something about Marianne getting better. That time won't come, Rowan, love. With the best will in the world, there's going to be no miracle cure for that poor soul down there, not if you brought the whole of Ireland to beat their bodhrans around her day in, day out. Sorry to sound harsh, but these here are the facts.'

'Did I say that?' Rowan put her hands on her hips. 'I didnae mean that kind of better. Christ, Bel, I didnae think she was gonnae start dancing a jig. But you should read what I've read about the benefits of the right kind of music. I've read all the latest research and you havenae. It's all about the kind of music ye play. That's what's most important. There was this Hungarian man who no one could reach…'

Bel interrupted. 'Maybe I've not read any of the latest stuff, but I know that

successful therapy in dementia is not about prolonged periods of lucidity, but about moments. That's all you can expect, Rowan. If she likes the drumming, if it manages to elicit happy memories, it will soothe her, which might help the nurse manage her better. If it goes really well, perhaps you can get facial expressions, body movement, even improved alertness, but you're not going to get a return to full competency or anything close to it. Ask yourself if you've been reading about small gains and imagining huge improvements. Ask yourself that.'

Bel's words were pins. Why was she being like this?

'Rowan, you said it was a sacrifice, something you had to do, and that worries me. After the divorce, when I didn't have a husband to blame for all that was wrong in my life, I threw myself into looking after my poor old mum. I'm not saying I was glad she was ill, but the truth was that it was a relief to have something else to think about besides myself. Most folk who live in Tearmunn can't help themselves from helping. That's why when society gives them a bus pass they won't sit at home doing the crossword.' Bel rubbed her large stomach as if something was hurting her. 'Luckily, there are worse compulsions to have—this one doesn't harm others, it helps them for the most part. And ok, things get done—good things, right and proper things. Oh, but it's a terrible way to live, always seeking substantiation. Spending your life needing a pat on the head. Like I used to do. For me the deed was not the thing as much as the glory in doing it. And it still can be if I don't keep it on a tight reign. You said to me the other week, it's amazing what we do at Tearmunn, but be under no illusions, we need the summer visitors just as much as they need us.

'You've been through some terrible times, love, and you've been ill. You don't look

well yet is the truth.' Her face was full of pity. 'Tend to yourself before tending to anyone else. We can do whatever is needed. Get a music therapist. Find a good CD to play her. After all, this is what we signed up for.

'It goes without saying you are more than welcome here and more than welcome to stay but it should be for the right reasons. After all you've not been to see her yet, which is fine of course, but maybe you need to do that first before thinking about anything else. Because it might be that you need to stay and help Marianne more than she needs you to stay. Have you considered that, Rowan love?'

The timber lodge shook with the force of the front door slamming. Early signs of life— lights in windows, a radio playing somewhere—forced Rowan to skirt round the backs of the buildings to the last lodge by the loch. Above Marianne's place, smoke escaped from the chimney and curled itself into a question mark before the wind blew it away towards the hills. Rowan walked up the three porch steps and stood at the side of the livingroom window. To see and no be seen.

The woman was sitting on an armchair by the open fire, her mouth a slack, black hole, her eyes (Oh Jesus, those eyes) staring at some nothing space in front of her feet. Her face was the image from the album cover crumpled into a ball and never properly smoothed out. Someone—the nurse probably—had put her in a black cardigan buttoned up to the neck and clipped a red clasp into her short dark bob. It was a weanish thing, that red clasp, and it clashed with the dark hair dye and the pale skin. Every so often, her hand grabbed at her skirt, lifting it, almost flashing knickers, before the hand went limp and the skirt dropped down.

It was true after all, those terrible songs were right; the heart could fracture and

break. The fragile walls to the four chambers cracked and caved in, the ventricles, the atria collapsed and gave way. Rowan's poor organ came to grief in her chest, crumbling to nothing, to dust. Bending forward as if for a kiss, she rested her forehead on the shock of frosted glass, and she wept. For who knew how long, she wept.

When the nurse returned, Rowan had already backed away from the window; her heavy tread had caused the timbered lodge to creak and groan like a ship at sea. The nurse sprayed air freshener above her patient who went on staring into space. Was the spray needed to hide the smell of pish and maybe even shite? The window muffled the nurse's words: *there now* or *that's you,* said in the same tone mothers used with their children. When the nurse left the room, the woman lifted her skirt, dropped her hand, jerked her head forward and then lifted her skirt again—an automaton, its mechanism winding down, wearing away to nothing.

What a terrible disease that stripped memories like bark from a tree, leaving just a hollow stump existing, and no existing. Of course, Bel was right: *The deed wasn't the thing but the glory in doing it.* Yet it was something else too. Atonement for the unspecified sins Rowan surely must've committed to be punished in such a way as this. Truly, somewhere deep inside, Rowan believed that if only she could be good enough, or be seen to be good enough, then all of this misery would come to an end. A wean's magical thinking. Pieces of scrap cloth tied to an old, twisted tree. What did Rowan know about dementia or music or therapy or what this woman behind the glass needed? Let her remain a stranger, as had always been her wish. Bel and the others would look after her in better ways than Rowan could ever imagine. She would return to her life over the hills. To a tattoo chair, and a room they called the Confessional. To a silent flat

in the shadow of her father's high-rise.

And really, how could Rowan blame anyone for no wanting to be a mother? After all, she'd taken her own measures against such an outcome. What if Marianne had stayed? Would she have become as bitter as Eddie's mother? Dead drunk every weekend, coming home with love bites all over her neck and more money in her purse than she had gone out on the skite with?

Though slicked in sweat, Rowan shivered. Her body odour funnelled up the hood of her parka, a mushroomy smell that wasnae all that unpleasant. The smell of herself. Her own particular song. *Tend to yourself before you tend to anyone else.* Where to start? How to begin? She looked at the woman behind the glass, waiting for the hand to grab at the skirt, but nothing happened, the hand was still. Until the shoulders trembled. A fit? Something stranger: it was laughter. For a moment Marianne's eyes had shone at something unknowable and her hand lifted to cover her mouth as a laugh shook itself loose. As quick as the flap of a bird's wing, it was there and then it was gone.

How many times had Rowan felt the heat of her own laughter on her own hand? In photos from nights out, student days, work do's there she was with her hand over her mouth, head cocked a little to the side, the same dimples showing. Was it a behavioural trait Rowan had stored from the crib? Or something generations of Renaudon women had repeated down the centuries? As age old as the brown of their eyes.

The moment was gone. Marianne stared into nothing once again. Yet Rowan felt the ropes go loose, felt a slackening inside her. Moments, Bel said. That's all ye can expect. But ye could collect these moments—these laughs, smiles, frowns—cut them out and keep them, press them like scraps in-between the days. Until minute-by-minute, hour-

by-hour, week-by-week they became something more substantial. An album of snapshots, of keepsakes, a commonplace book—aye, with pages missing, soiled, ruined, whole sections lost but enough there to get the shape, to get the sense of the person.

With her left knuckle, Rowan gave the window a gentle rat-a-tat-tat. A wee drum roll, a musical intro, a cue for Marianne to repeat her trick but of course, she didnae react (no then, no yet). With one last look, Rowan turned away from the window and walked down the path to find Bel and tell her that she would be staying in Tearmunn after all. A handclap of thunder rang out over the glen. Rowan would take that as a sign, as encouragement, as a round of applause from the Gods.

*

When Martin arrived at Tearmunn, it was a rare kind of summer's day. The radio barked excitedly about a record-breaking heatwave and traffic jams on the coastal roads. Down at the jetty, kids cannonballed into the still-freezing water as parents on deck chairs watched from the shoreline. Later, the kids were going on a guided tour of the glen and the adults were invited to the big house to attend the drumming circle Rowan had helped arrange. There was to be a buffet of the type of food that made Rowan nostalgic for childhood: cheese quiche, chilli non-carne, vegetarian sausage rolls, stuffed peppers and aubergines. All served with homemade white wine and beer—the sediment, the grapeseed still floating in the cloudy liquid.

Rowan had started phoning Martin when she needed help with rent payments and subletting her flat, yet when all of that was organised the calls continued once a

fortnight. One day, when she was sitting at the telephone table, flicking through the guest book—*We'll come again; Me and Mum Thank Youse*—and listening to Martin go on about a stramash at the council planning meeting, he took a breath and asked out of nowhere, 'Would ye mind if I visited her?'

In case she needed clarification, he said, 'Marianne, I mean.'

Rowan had stared at the glass jar filled with coins until the label—*Please Pay For Your Phone Call*— started to blur and fuzz. At last, unable to keep the surprise from her voice, she managed, 'I don't know. I need to think about it.'

There was no need to think about it. After all, if he wanted to see Marianne then that was up to him. Of course, the nurse would have to be consulted, though really it was Bel whose permission was needed. Bel had never alluded to their affair but sometimes she seemed to want to talk about Martin a little too much.

Bel was in her office reading over a contract from the record label. Archie Doid had retired due to ill health. Financial mismanagement wasnae mentioned, but the label had been sold to a private equity firm because of a lack of capital. Bel and Rowan decided to tell the label that Marianne was in Tearmunn suffering from dementia, but that it would be best if the wider world continued to believe that she was missing. Of course, the label agreed. A mysterious missing singer was more marketable than someone in need of twenty-four hour nursing care.

'Tea?' Rowan asked, sitting down across from Bel at her desk.

'Good timing. Some brewing in the pot there. Silver needle. Help yourself.'

'That was my dad on the phone.'

'Is that right? And how is the bold Martin this weather?'

The smile disappeared when Rowan told her what he wanted.

‘What? Come here?’ Bel said, her fingers worrying at the beads of her necklace. ‘I don’t think it’s a good idea. Everything’s going well. Marianne has been coming on. It might upset her too much. And if it doesn’t upset her, it will upset you yourself’

Bel was right only in the sense that Marianne had been coming on. Between Bel and the nurse, they had initiated a therapeutic programme developed by an American doctor who was also suffering from dementia. The programme had only started but the nurse said Marianne was sleeping better and seemed more content. And she said the Sufi music CD was helping too, although Rowan knew that the nurse was just being kind. Marianne had slept through it each time it was played, but she hadnae got upset. There was that at least.

‘We can go to the city or for a walk, Bel. No need to hang around here when Martin comes,’ Rowan said, realising then that she wanted to be around Tearmunn when her dad met Marianne. Perhaps no in the same room but somewhere close.

‘I don’t mind seeing him. It’s not that. I just don’t think it’s a good idea is all.’

With that, Bel was up and away. Something urgent somewhere. Poor Bel. Her blushing face, a traitor laying bare her heart.

A few hours later, Bel found Rowan sitting on the porch step, visiting her mother after lunch. The nurse had wheeled Marianne out to sit in the sun, leaving her to warm her face and watch the kids at the shore skim stones across the loch water. Who knew what she was really seeing? Shapes, shadows, phantoms from the past. It didnae mater. The near future would bring morphine drips and hospital beds, but until then there would be days like these. Countable days. Each to be taken and stored like a jewel.

With a groan, Bel sat down on the step beside her and said, ‘Oh, I was being a bitch. I don’t want to see him is what it is.’ Silence until she said, ‘I loved him. We had…had something. An affair, I suppose you would call it.’

‘I know. Or at least I guessed.’

‘Oh, you knew? I suppose I wasn’t very good at hiding it.’ She shifted her weight on the step. ‘Now at my age I thought I was over all that, especially after all his shenanigans with you, but the heart remembers what the mind tries to forget. But don’t pay me any attention. Just invite him here if that’s what you think best. I’ll make myself scarce.’

‘He’s not like he was. He’s…different.’

How to explain Martin now? How to explain that old loves were best left wrapped in soft tissue and stored away in the memory? Rowan thought of the bouquets Eddie sent for two weeks solid to apologise for telling her dad she was back in Darden. He had forgotten she hated flowers cut from the ground and tied with ribbon. Hated the waste of it. Someone else in Eddie’s past had revelled in the stink of dying roses, lilies and baby’s breath.

‘Oh, I know he’ll have changed,’ Bel said, slipping her hand into Rowan’s. ‘Haven’t we all? I’m that long in the tooth it’s a wonder I don’t trip up every time I walk. But I’m thinking if I saw him I’d only act as daft as a cabbaged idiot, so it’s best to keep away.’

They sat like that for a while, the warm flesh of Bel’s hand a comfort. Someone called her from across the way and Bel stood up.

‘It wasn’t his fault you know. What happened between us,’ she said, looking down towards Marianne and the shining loch. ‘It was me. I was mad keen and bored out of my

skull. The end of it all wasn't his fault neither, for I wanted him to be something he wasn't. Something he couldn't be.'

'Aye,' Rowan said. 'He can be awkward that way.'

One of the residents picked Martin up from the train station and drove him the six miles past three farmhouses and down a single-track road into the glen. When he got out of the jeep, Rowan and him had a brief hug then stood ill at ease with all that was still unsaid, with all the mistakes yet to be righted. Rowan took his overnight bag from him. It was filled with books, going by the weight. Tenner bet he'd forgotten his washbag and his toothbrush.

Would he like the Tearmunn tour or to go straight to the last lodge by the loch? The tour, he said. Stalling for time, but that was okay. They walked around the grounds, the children's playpark, the barns with the animals, the market garden. At the edge of the forest, they stood in front of the clootie tree with its strange fruit. As the crown of material threshed in the wind, Martin snatched hold of a thin blue strip of cloth at the tip of a branch. As quick as he'd grabbed it, he let go and the branch sprang back. Rowan caught him wiping his hand on the side of his denims.

'Like touching a statue of Mary in chapel or something,' he said, staring at the cloth counterparts of copper pennies in fountains flapping and snapping in the wind.

'Have you…?' he asked

'I'm trying to stop believing in magic. About time at my age.'

And this was true. She was trying. Yet if Martin had happened to glance at her trainers, if he had paid close enough attention, he might have noticed that her laces

didnae match. One was brown and one was green—the missing green lace was on a branch to the left of his head, tied tightly in-between a dishcloth and a long strip of yellow plastic.

'We better go and see her Martin, if she's to go to the drumming in time.'

'Aye. Ok. Here, I made this for her.'

He fished a C90 cassette tape out of his jacket pocket and handed it over.

'Ye don't need to play it if ye don't think it's a good idea,' he said, no quite looking at his daughter. 'I only chose the songs she loved. I didnae want to upset her or anything.'

He'd tippexed over the tape's old title and rewritten: *A MIX FOR MARIANNE*. A vision of Martin up all night for several nights, going through all of his records. Going through the baby boomer songbook. Those terrible sad songs.

So long Marianne, it's time that we began
To laugh and cry and cry
And laugh about it all again

Unlike his usual scrawl, every letter in *A MIX FOR MARIANNE* had been written neatly as if this would help his ex-wife remember how to read. Dear God. As they walked to the last lodge, Martin dawdled behind his daughter on the path and she was glad he couldnae see her face. When they came to the steps leading up to the porch, Rowan said, 'Look through here first, then it willnae be such a shock.'

At the lodge window, Martin's body quivered. The first blow of the axe. More blows to follow for sure. Marianne looked better than at the end of winter, tanned from sitting in the garden and down at the loch, and encouraged by Rowan, the nurse had picked a

hair dye that suited her patient's colouring; still, a different woman altogether from the image Martin had kept stored in his mind like a photo in a locket for all these years. The nurse spotted them through the window and waved.

'Right, Martin, that's your cue.'

He nodded, but still stood on the step, gawping.

'Go on then. In ye get.'

She had to open the door and push him gently, her hand on his back. When the door shut behind him, Rowan walked away, no wanting to witness this first meeting.

About ten minutes later she came to as if from a dream, wandering the path in-between the lodges. What the hell was she doing? All the residents were at the big house, yet here she was stoating about in a dwam looking for someone to borrow a tape recorder from. Was it even a good idea to play new music to Marianne on a day like today? On second thoughts, perhaps it wasnae such a wise move.

Back at the last lodge, Rowan stood at the window. Her parents were sitting side by side on the couch. There must have been something in Martin's tone because, although she couldnae understand the meaning of his words, Marianne laughed—a rare occurrence still, but like salmon in the Clyde, becoming a sight more common. For just a moment, they were posed in a faithful reproduction of the photograph from *Madame Bovary*. Martin leaning in with that cheeky look, Marianne showing her dimples, her hand covering her mouth until she coughed, the nurse said, Oh dearie me, Martin sat back in his chair, and everyone was old and haggard and lost again. It was there and then it was gone. And that would have to be enough.

Engine noise. A white van coming over the rise of the hill. The drummers. By the

time Rowan got to the big house, Bel was there already, saying hello, shaking hands. After helping the three facilitators lift in their equipment— boxes filled with all kinds of drums and percussion instruments—Rowan whispered to Bel, 'I thought ye were going to Glasgow?'

'Well, just call me nosey. I'll get the drummers settled in. Get them some tea.'

'Aye, ye should phone the nurse and get her to bring Marianne. And Martin, of course.'

'Of course.'

Rowan followed Bel into the big house. This old sandstone villa had become almost like home, yet in a few days Rowan would be saying goodbye to Tearmunn. The residents had agreed she could spend four months of the year by the loch and the winter months in Littleholm. With the option, of course, to visit anytime. At night Rowan had started to dream of tattooing and, during the day, ideas for designs floated in and out of her mind: swallows, automata, strange shapes, odd flowers, a weird array of devils and demons all inked in the blackest of black.

Inside the common room, the sofas had been pushed back against the walls and chairs from the dining room placed in a wide circle just as the drummers had requested. A table in the corner held the buffet; bay leaf and oregano smells wafted in from the kitchen. Someone beat the dinner gong and it drew visitors and residents. From her chair by the kitchen, Rowan saw Martin come in through the door, the nurse pushing Marianne asleep in her wheelchair. The nurse made her and her patient a space in the circle and Martin stood about, his hair in his eyes, a hand patting his pockets, looking, Rowan knew, for his rolling tobacco. Something kept her seated, but it didnae matter

because Bel was soon there with him. With all the noise of folk sitting down, scraping chairs, talking, it was impossible to hear what they were saying to each other. Someone blocked Rowan's view, but when she could see again, Bel's hand was pushing the hair away from Martin's eyes. He looked down at Bel and smiled, and allowed her to guide him to a chair to the left of her own.

When everyone was seated, the drumming facilitators came in and the assembled circle clapped a welcome. In her wheelchair, Marianne slept on. Maybe her new medication was too strong. The drumming leader introduced himself as Nihat. No one was to be nervous, he said. Everyone had natural rhythm, even those who believed otherwise. Would they all take up the drums under their seats? These were Daf drums or frame drums, he said. Ancient instruments from Persia. *After three weeks, the heart starts beating like a Daf drum… this is the joining of the heartbeat of the mother and the foetus.*

Rowan examined her drum—white skin stretched across a large hardwood circle with silver hoops hanging from its underside. Something about the drum appealed. Here in its roundness, its curve was eternity. How would a perfect circle tattooed in black on her forearm look? A binding thread, a seed, a mandala with no beginning and no end. Rowan tapped the drum and the silver hoops sounded a waterfall. Everyone else was tapping, hitting, beating tentatively with fingers or the flat of their hand. Everyone except Marianne. The drum placed on her lap remained untouched and the nurse shrugged over to Rowan. This would be just like the thing. After all this palaver, she would sleep right through it.

Nihat brought everyone to order. He instructed the circle to clap a rhythm out,

providing a quick demonstration: BOOM DE BOOM. BOOM BOOM DE BOOM. He explained he would start on the drum but when he gave the nod, everyone was to join in. Just keep drumming and don't stop, he said. The beat is something we all know. If you lose it, it will come back naturally. Just don't stop.

Through all of this, Marianne slept on.

Nihat began beating gently and whispering a word Rowan couldnae catch. Something like hi or hey that grew louder as he beat with more vigour. He nodded and the circle began to beat their drums. Marianne's eyes flew open. The nurse, smiling encouragement, took her hands and placed them on the drumskin. Bel and Martin were slapping their own drums but staring at Marianne, who was frowning, confused. Yet somewhere deep in the inner workings of her brain, somewhere untouched by globs of malformed proteins, some part of her remembered and sent a message down her neck and arms to hands which lifted off the drum before gently landing back on top. Rowan, Bel, Martin watched as she raised her hands and did the same again, beating the lightest of beats. Softly, Marianne was drumming; the woman who couldnae hold a fork was beating the tight drumskin with a circle of twenty people. Her head started nodding, her feet tapping just a little. A small smile came. Her eyes were shone. And there was Rowan, skelping her own drum, going at it, beating the hell out of it in time with everyone else. It was happening. Here. Now. All of them together. A miracle for just this moment.

BOOM DE BOOM. BOOM BOOM DE BOOM.

Martin, Marianne, Bel, everyone. The thunderous thud of twenty people pounding out an ancient rhythm, a mother tongue, as the tempo quickened and slowed, became soft then hard, a ruffle, a tattoo, a drum roll louder than cannonfire, until as one living being the whole circle vibrated into the air. The plaster roses and cobwebs trembled as the drummers rose up, up through the roof, past the chimney pots, soaring into the welcoming blue. Higher than the tallest high-rise, the tallest skyscraper ever built, forty hands beat as one a rhythm their minds had forgotten but their hearts had remembered.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Structure and Narrative Strategies

The initial intention was to write *WWLB* in third person omniscient, slipping in and out of characters' subjectivity. However, after producing several drafts of the first three chapters, I was uncomfortable with what Barthes describes as an 'Author-God' where omniscient narration implies a certain authorial authority and often contains sage reflections and universal 'truths' (1977, p.148). The example below illustrates my initial attempts:

> In a bowl of rock hollowed by a pre-historic river some fifty miles upstream from the Irish Sea and a few miles downstream from the city of Glasgow, an industrial town grew like a barnacle onto the North bank of the River Clyde. First came fishing, then milling flour, cloth, paper—then shipyards and factories. The population swelled with workers and their families from the Highlands, the Lowlands and Ireland. Famished folk with empty pockets and empty bellies, swearing, spitting, crossing themselves, heaving, cutting, lifting, copulating and needing schools, houses, shops, transport. Ministers and priests followed, beating the black book with furious fists, denouncing the God of Commerce as a devil. Devil or a God: it no longer mattered. On and on. Cogs, wheels, ratchets, gears. Make more, build more, sell more.

I replaced the mode of narration with third person limited, or as it is sometimes known, third person subjective, where the fabula is related through the consciousness of the characters. This mode seemed better suited to exploring how representations of the past, whether oral or written, affect the ever-evolving present; its close intimacy can

emphasise how perceptions of the past are in constant flux. Initially the story was focalised completely through Rowan; however, it grew tedious and repetitive to describe the internal world of someone experiencing shock after shock. The revised text allows for different perspectives, with smaller sections focalised through her father, Martin O'Reilly, Archie Doid (record producer and label boss) and Eddie (Rowan's ex-boyfriend).

In *WWLB* the fabula is related largely chronologically and structured into nine chapters with one flashback scene inserted between chapters five and six. Relating events retrospectively in past tense allows for more experimentation between narrative arrangement and the logical chronology of the fabula, with what Mieke Bal describes as 'chronological deviations or anachronies' (Bal 1985, p. 83). When Rowan travels to London to visit Archie Doid, prolepsis is used in order to foreshadow future events. The section begins with a paragraph detailing Archie Doid and Rowan dancing later in the evening:

> In the office on the second floor of his Georgian mansion, Archie Doid danced Rowan around the room. When her throat was dry from so many questions and she was a wee bit tipsy on wine worth more than she earned in a month, he asked her what music she wanted to listen to. 'What sounds?' he said. 'What sounds are you into?' […] She laughed, rose from her chair, taking the proffered hand, warm and dry, as his other hand with the missing finger was placed firmly on her back, pulling her towards him. They swayed together, more or less in time, and they were close enough for Rowan to feel his heart beat, close enough for her to kiss him if she wanted to. (*WWLB*, p.48)

Chronologically this dance happens after Rowan and Archie meet, eat and drink, discuss Marianne, and after he has shown Rowan the guest bedroom where she is to stay. However, the paragraph above is placed at the beginning of this sequence of events.

Rimmon-Kenan argues that prolepses 'replace the kind of suspense deriving from the question "What will happen next?" by another kind of suspense revolving around the question "How is it going to happen?"' (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, p.48). In *WWLB* prolepses aim at forcing the reader to focus on the characters' motives and emotions rather than what happens next.

WWLB also contains flashbacks, or what Genette terms 'external analepses', in order to evoke past events that occurred previously to the start of the novel (Genette 1983). For example, after Rowan discovers her mother is in Scotland there is a temporal shift back to Rowan's experience of having a termination when she was seventeen. In order to minimise reader confusion, italics mark this shift:

> *After her operation, Rowan was drawn out of her anaesthetic dwam by an Irish voice saying, 'Will you be wanting the soup or the custard?' When Rowan managed to say what she was surprised to feel, 'Is that it? Is it all gone?', the nippy sweetie of a nurse replied with a right sour look, 'Aye. Its gone'. Though Rowan didnae allow herself to think too much about this—about the nurse, her expression, her tone—until much later when she'd spend weeks and maybe even months alone, turning over that day in her hands, cradling it, examining it, like she might've done with a newborn who would now never be.* (*WWLB*, p.140)

Although the whole section is analeptic, there is a prolepsis within the flash-forward to sometime in the future when Rowan turns 'that day in her hands', indicating that her termination has emotional repercussions later in her life (*WWLB*, p.140). This section occurs around two-thirds of the way through the novel between chapters five and six and just before the reader is introduced to the character of Eddie— who is responsible for Rowan's pregnancy. Placing analepsis just before events are focalised for the first time through Eddie is a deliberate strategy to manipulate the reader's perceptions of him. In addition, when Rowan stays in Eddie's penthouse, they have a conversation about his

ex-wife's pregnancy without mentioning Rowan's pregnancy when she was seventeen. Thus, the analepsis adds complexity by giving this conversation another layer of meaning. Furthermore, the flashback attempts to underscore the difficulty Rowan has in condemning her mother for abandoning her when Rowan has also taken measures to avoid motherhood.

Within the primary fabula, a secondary story is embedded which reveals that Rowan's maternal grandmother had a relationship with an Algerian that resulted in Marianne's birth. This family secret is related to the reader and to Rowan through marginalia and journal entries in her mother's book collection. Thus, the secondary story is constructed from clues in 'secondary' texts embedded within the novel. Thematically, the secondary story echoes the primary story in the sense that Marianne has been lied to by a parent just as Rowan has been lied to by her father. This mirroring aims to link mother and daughter as well as past and present. That Rowan is able to discern patterns in events from generation to generation and empathise with Marianne, who has, like Rowan, also lived her life believing in a lie, is in the interest of a credible ending. Without this development readers may well believe that the strength of Rowan's anger would prevent her from meeting her mother face to face.

Setting in *WWLB* has a crucial ideological function. When *WWLB* was initially narrated in third person omniscient the intention was to set three sections in Clydebank, London and Paris and have the narrative mimic the cinematic 'long shot' or 'wide shot' before 'zooming' into a 'close up' of the protagonist situated in each location. Constructing Clydebank in the same register and style as Paris and London would, imaginatively at least, imbue this small post-industrial town with an equal status and

stature. In an oft-quoted section of Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* published in 1985 and set largely in Glasgow, the protagonist argues that no one ever imagines living in Glasgow:

> Then think of Florence, Paris, London, New York. Nobody visiting them for the first time is a stranger because he's already visited them in paintings, novels, history, books and films. But if a city hasn't been used by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively […] Imaginatively Glasgow exists as a music-hall song and a few bad novels. That's all we've given to the world outside. It's all we've given to ourselves. (Gray 1985, p.243)

Since the publication of *Lanark* many writers have answered Gray's call for representation, and imaginatively mapped the streets of Glasgow; however, Clydebank, a few miles down river from Glasgow, has rarely featured in any work of fiction. Partly, the aim of *WWLB* is to address this lack. Yet in the process of editing third person omniscient changed to third person limited and Clydebank became the fictional town of Darden—largely because a fictional town allows for greater flexibility and freedom with regards to geography. Nonetheless, Darden is directly influenced by Clydebank's distinct economic and social history. In addition, researching the history of Clydebank, an area of high unemployment and poor health, led to examination of theories of marginality, which in turn led to consideration of the links between theories of marginality and the practice of making marginal comments, as the following section will explicate.

Marginalia and Marginality

In *WWLB* Rowan's mother, Marianne, writes marginalia, and Rowan's father, Martin, collects marginalia, here defined as notes written or printed in the margin of a book or manuscript. The practice of marginalia is a central concept in the novel and, along with its oppositional binary of text, functions as metonymy for the related binaries of centre/periphery, high culture/low culture and body/tattoos as represented in the novel.

Marginalia was most prevalent in medieval times when it was accepted practice to write in the margins of manuscripts to comment on and annotate the text. As Joanna Wolf points out in *Marginal Pedagogy,* these kind of marginal glosses could gain favour over the original text as multiple readers 'added new layers of commentary and responded to the annotations left behind by earlier readers' (Wolf 2002, p.297). In *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (2004), Jackson surveys the range of examples of famous annotators of Western literature, including Pierre de Fermat, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Graham Greene and Boswell. Jackson attempts to historicize the practice of marginalia in order to give it 'more credit' and 'more visibility', highlighting the ways in which she believes marginalia can enhance critical appreciation and historical knowledge (Jackson 2004, p.17). However, Jackson suggests that marginalia are only of value if it has been written by someone of intellectual merit. She loses patience with readers who have 'no special competence', and take it 'upon themselves' to criticize authors from the margins in annotations that are 'pedestrian for the most part, and sometimes worse—careless, ignorant, or abusive' (Jackson 2004, p.17). Thomas Toon,

comparing attitudes to marginalia in the medieval period to contemporary attitudes, writes:

> In our society handwritten additions signal that we are treating the book before us as if we owned it […] Only the most depraved of us think it appropriate to extend the rights of private ownership to public property. (Toon 1991, p76)

This change from acceptable to depraved is illustrated by a copy of *The Dialogic Imagination* by M.M. Bakhtin that I discovered in the British Library's collection. The library authorities have pasted the following warning in the flyleaf of this particular copy:

> The British Library is aware of the mutilation of this book, and the detail of the mutilation incurred. The offender was arrested and successfully prosecuted. The British Library will always seek prosecution in cases where readers are found to have deliberately damaged its collections.

The 'mutilation' consists of a few comments written in red pen in the margins and some underlining. The library's official language is intended to threaten and shame, the use of 'mutilation' posits marginalia as a violent act on the 'body' of the book, and the threat of carcarel punishment all serve to underline just how deviant library authorities consider the contemporary practice of marginalia. However, like Jackson, the British Library modifies its construction of marginalia as deviant if the book is of significant age or the author is someone of note. For example, the library recently published a book showcasing marginalia from its medieval book collection (Nishimura 2009).

My text allowed me to explore the ways in which discourses around marginalia are echoed in discourses surrounding place, class and cultural practices, and led me to Billy Collins's poem 'Marginalia' where he theorises on the writing of marginalia:

> We have all seized the white perimeter as our own
> and reached for a pen if only to show
> we did not just laze in an armchair turning pages;
> we pressed a thought into the wayside,
> planted an impression along the verge.
> (Collins 2001 34-38)

Writing marginalia notes is, Collins suggests, an act 'we' all commit, and yet the reality is that there are those who view marginalia as something deviant, something Other. Collins's use of active voice and action verbs such as 'seized' constructs marginalia as an empowering act of agency. To describe the margins of a book as a 'white perimeter', a 'wayside', a 'verge' conveys a sense of boundary, of borderland separate from the main body of the text while positing the writer of marginalia as a dissident appropriating the white space. McClennan, on the dialectics of exile, argues that exiled writers embrace the notion of 'I write therefore I exist' whereby they create a 'textual presence' (McClennan 2004, p127). Arguably, marginalia are also written as an act of existence, written evidence of existence, a conscious compulsion on the part of a reader to stake a claim and contribute to culture, as Collins suggests.

In *WWLB* Martin O'Reilly collects marginalia rather than practices the act of writing marginal comments; however, making him a connoisseur of ' depraved' marginalia, as well as someone who appreciates the subversion of the hierarchy between writer and reader, relates directly to his role as a community activist. As Thomas McFarland states, marginalia always, whether to a greater or lesser degree, 'invade' their 'host text':

> If one were designing an abstract symbology for literary types, doubtless the best computer symbol for the marginal comment would be a spear-shaped wedge. For the marginal notation forces open the text. (McFarland 1990, p.75-90)

By heading the regeneration campaign on the Littleholm estate, Martin O'Reilly forces open the 'main text' of the national and local media by 'squatting, the rent strike, the demonstrations, the formation of the tenants committee' and he can be seen as creating a 'spear shaped wedge', which results in Littleholm being regenerated and rehabilitated (*WWLB*, p.9 and McFarland, p.75-90).

The discourse surrounding the Littleholm estate has modified over time from marginal to if not quite centre then closer to it, and the fluctuations of the cultural discourse surrounding marginalia reflect the fluctuations in the socio-economic position of the characters in *WWLB*. In *Madness and Civilisation*, Foucault discusses how at the end of the Middle Ages, leprosy resulted in wastelands at the gates of cities that he argues belonged to 'the non-human' (Foucault 1967 in 1989, p.1). Littleholm is situated at the periphery of the town of Darden because it once belonged to the 'non-human', the disenfranchised, the forgotten and the abandoned. It was once an area of territorial stigmatisation, reminiscent of what Wacquant describes as

> isolated and bounded territories increasingly perceived by outsiders and insiders as social purgatories, leprous badlands at the heart of the post-industrial metropolis, where only the refuse of society would accept to dwell. (Wacquant 2007, p.67)

Martin gives voice to the disenfranchised in Littleholm, leading to the tenants securing funding which eventually results in Littleholm no longer being perceived as a desolate wasteland, deviant/depraved, or an 'address to whisper' (*WWLB* p.9). The council intended the new neighbouring estate, Harbour Peninsula, to be a new kind of housing development with social housing tenants given the same size and style of flats as the owner-occupiers; however, with the credit crunch, the social housing tenants are pushed

aside by the new developers, and security gates are erected to bar non-residents from walking on the now private estate. This threatens the neighbouring estate of Littleholm with a return to marginal status as the gates are a physical manifestation of a gulf between different socio-economic groups.

The novel engages with three discernible layers of marginalia: the author of the text, the marginalia writer and the reader of both the text and the marginalia who unconsciously and consciously reflect cultural attitudes when analysing the meaning of marginalia. In Paris, Rowan is given a box of her mother's books and finds:

> On the flyleaf of *Le Deuxième Sexe* by de Beauvoir, despite being married at that time, Marianne had written her maiden name: *Marianne Renaudon, July 1978.* She made this claim for ownership the month after her baby was born. In Rowan's experience, books were the last things people took with them when they did a runner. It seemed Marianne had had different priorities. In 1978 she'd abandoned her baby but taken her book. (*WWLB*, p.112)

The reader of *WWLB* knows from his or her store of cultural knowledge that *The Second Sex* is a feminist text. Using marginalia allows for subtle engagement with the repercussions of feminism on the family unit in the Seventies without resorting to clumsy exposition. Marginal comments also function as a device by which the protagonist can develop a better understanding of both her parents. For example, realising that her father's obsession with marginalia was influenced by her mother's love of writing marginalia allows Rowan's anger towards her father to dissipate somewhat.

Marginalia can be perceived as dialectical because they can inform and be informed by the primary text. Marginalia can 'interrogate' the author's text, posing questions, disputing, agreeing or disagreeing. One way to interpret Marianne's marginalia in books, the seizing of the white space, is as an act of agency, an attack on the dominance of the

primary text, an anarchic act. Another perspective is that Marianne is incapable of producing a primary text and is limited to writing scraps and fragments on the white periphery. For Derrida, the primary text is the 'law, which suffices to itself, is independent and self-sufficient in its structure' and the secondary text, whether footnotes or other forms such as marginalia, is 'parasitic and grafted' and 'tattooed (inserted on the body)' of the main text (Derrida 1991, p.203). When Rowan meets Basaam in a café in Montmartre, he tells her Marianne had talked about writing a novel, a 'primary text'; however, a novel is never mentioned again and the reader can assume that it never came to fruition (*WWLB,* p. 133). Marianne can no longer sing; she is voiceless and creates secondary texts that are 'grafted' or 'inserted' on to the main text of her book collection. Yet whether Marianne's writing of marginal comments is an act of agency or evidence of marginalised status is left open to interpretation.

Since Marianne's voice is largely absent in the novel, marginalia helps the reader, and Rowan, to construct her character. Aldridge, analysing the experience of dementia on sufferers' sense of self, argues that when memory fails, the 'self' fails to achieve a 'performance' in daily life (Aldridge 2000, p.28). If memory is what we use to construct a sense of self, dementia succeeds in deleting memory and, therefore, a sense of self. Because of her mother's dementia, Rowan is never allowed to fully comprehend her mother's 'self'; rather, she has to construct her identity from anecdotal accounts, the scraps of marginalia and a small number of journal entries. Thus, the reader, in tandem with Rowan, is forced to construct Marianne's identity from 'scraps', from her own narrative performance, and in this respect marginalia adds to the reader's understanding of character (*WWLB*, p.110). In 'Marginalia' Collins outlines how identity and meaning

can be constructed from just one sentence in a margin:

> Yet the one I think of most often,
> the one that dangles from me like a locket,
> was written in the copy of Catcher in the Rye
> I borrowed from the local library
> one slow, hot summer.
> I was just beginning high school then,
> reading books on a davenport in my parents' living room,
> and I cannot tell you
> how vastly my loneliness was deepened,
> how poignant and amplified the world before me seemed,
> when I found on one page
>
> A few greasy looking smears
> and next to them, written in soft pencil-
> by a beautiful girl, I could tell
> whom I would never meet-
> "Pardon the egg salad stains, but I'm in love."
> (Collins 2001, 48-63)

The intertextual reference to *Catcher in the Rye* suggests the youth of the marginalia writer in parallel with that of the speaker as Salinger's book is a coming of age novel and most often read when readers are themselves 'coming of age'. The speaker has no way of knowing if the marginalia writer is female or 'beautiful' but he can 'tell' (61) by her 'soft pencil' (60). Thus, the speaker of the poem constructs an identity for the writer of marginalia by decoding clues across the margin and primary text in the same way Rowan and her father construct identities for marginalia writers. Rowan's father claims that the study of marginalia is akin to archaeology or palaeontology because readers add 'flesh to the skeletal remains, to the trace fossils preserved between layers of pages' and in this way 'it was possible to divine who'd held the book in their hands' (*WWLB,* p.126).

What We Leave Behind is, as the title indicates, concerned with the detritus of our existence whether the cultural material left behind in homes, books or the emotional and psychological 'imprints' people leave on each other. Books with ephemera slotted in between the pages—for example, photographs, cinema tickets, and postcards—function in the novel in the same 'intertextual' way as material culture does in houses, in that both are used by the characters to determine and assert subjectivity. For example, Rowan 'reads' Barbara's bookcase and ornaments in order to determine what kind of person Archie Doid's wife is (*WWLB*, p.82).

In *WWLB* book ephemera is also used to allude to plot developments. For example, in Paris, Rowan finds a photograph of her mother and father placed in a copy of *Madame Bovary* and this foreshadows the adultery Rowan soon discovers by reading her mother's journal entries. Therefore, marginalia, household ornaments, books and book ephemera function in the novel as accessory messages, as illustrative shorthand that can, to a certain extent, define subjectivity. This is also the case with tattoos and tattooing, Rowan's occupation and a significant theme in the novel.

Like marginalia, tattoos are 'read' by Rowan and aid her in constructing others' subjectivity. When Rowan discovers that her mother burned off a tattoo, she constructs her as someone with a 'desperate determination' (*WWLB*, p.100). Archie Doid's wife, Barbara, has 'authentic' tribal tattoos, which changes Rowan's opinion about the older woman (*WWLB*, p.82). For Grognard, tattooing is a human compulsion to 'write (on or with) the self; to express the self, and thus to free the soul from the bonded space of the body' (Grognard 1994, p.127). Most often individuals do not 'write' their own tattoos, and instead hire an artist to ink a pre-designed image, or do 'custom work' which

involves consultation with the tattooist and the creation of an original design. Generally, the assumption can be made that even if individuals choose a pre-designed image from a flash sheet on the wall**,** that image best represents their selves, their subjectivity. As Margo DeMello states:

> Except when worn in private areas, tattoos are meant to be read by others. For this reason tattoos as identity markers are not merely private expressions of the need to 'write oneself' but they express the need for others to read them in a certain way as well. (DeMello 2000, p.137)

If a tattoo is an 'accessory message' then it can also usefully be viewed as a paratext. Genette describes paratext as that which accompanies the text in a book and can include the title, the preface, the author's name or illustrations. As Genette states, paratexts are more than a 'boundary or a sealed border', but rather a threshold:

> [a] zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that [...] is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it. (Genette 1997, p.2)

Thus, it can be argued that the body as text is modified by the paratext of tattoos allowing the 'viewer/reader' a 'more pertinent reading' of the body/individual. If we conceptualise tattoos in the same way as paratext, whether or not tattoos allow for a 'better reception' for the body, is dependent on discourses that can modify over time since text is also dependent on discourses that can modify over time. Although tattooing was often associated with particular groups such as the working-class and criminals, it has spread to other social groups. Halnon names this appetite in the middle and upper classes for multiple symbols traditionally associated with the lower classes 'Poor Chic' (Halnon 2002). For Halnon and Cohen the process of gentrification whereby working

class residential areas are transformed into a middle class areas is similar to movement from margin to centre of ‘symbolic neighbourhoods’ in popular culture—tattoos, motorcycles and bodybuilding (Halnon and Cohen 2006, p.33). In the following section, working class culture and ‘gentrification’ will be explored in terms of their metonymic relation to Scottish writing.

Working Class Culture and Gentrification

WWLB follows a tradition of Scottish writing that Clandfield and Lloyd call 'redevelopment fiction' and define as 'literary works that read social and political developments by exploring more concrete kinds of (re) development in architecture and urban planning' (Clandfield and Lloyd 2007, p.124). There appear to be three phases of redevelopment fiction in Scottish literature. The first phase engages with life in the Glasgow slums before and after the period when they were being demolished, and the key work in this respect is *Swing Hammer Swing* (1992) by Jeff Torrington. The second phase engages with life in modernist estates, and very often the failures of these 'grand' estates are used metonymically to indicate the failure of grand narratives. Writers who have situated their work wholly or partially on Scotland's modernist housing schemes include James Kelman, Irvine Welsh, Andrew O'Hagan and Janice Galloway. The third phase of regeneration fiction engages with the gentrification of formerly working class areas, as in Ian Rankin's and Irvine Welsh's depiction of Leith. In common with these works, *WWLB* uses urban architectural history as a framework and, to varying degrees, is concerned with phases two and three. In addition, it aims to introduce a fourth phase that focuses on life in a modernist housing scheme regenerated by the residents themselves.

In novels such as *The Busconductor Hines* (1984) and *How Late It Was How Late* (1994), James Kelman situates his characters in modernist housing estates on the outer edges of Glasgow. Often Kelman's protagonists do not believe in the possibilities of

communal political action, and remain victims of their situations. As Kravitz indicates, the 'impossibility of staying and the difficulty of leaving' is a 'constant refrain' in Kelman's work (Kravitz 1997, p.xxv). For Craig, Kelman's working class world is 'atomised, fragmented', where people are isolated and 'political hope has been severed and only economic deprivation remains' (Craig 1993, p.100). Certainly in Kelman's work, we find evidence of what Lyotard describes as the failure of the grand narrative of 'emancipation of the working or rational subject' (Lyotard 1984, xxiii-iv). At the end of Kelman's *A Disaffection,* set partly on an unnamed housing estate, the protagonist, Pat, who feels alienated from the middle class and the working class, is a tragically disillusioned figure who, the ending suggests, might kill himself:

> He is dangerous to himself and thus to the weans he teaches on that daily basis. If he skids he will fall and crack his skull and the wheel of a vehicle will run over his neck and kill him. That temptation. What is that temptation. That temptation is aye the same temptation and it is suicide, it is actually suicide. (Kelman 1994, p.337)

Kelman's work details life in a postmodern, fractured world without 'grand' unifying concepts or a unified community, a world where social bonds are fragmented, and, in the case of Pat in *A Disaffection,* the only option appears to be suicide.

In contrast, Andrew O'Hagan's *Our Fathers* (1999) suggests that enlightenment ideals are still very much in evidence in working class culture. The novel relates the return of Jamie Bawn as an adult to visit his dying grandfather in the housing scheme his grandfather, an idealistic socialist, was instrumental in building during the municipal housing boom of the 1960s. The housing estate is dilapidated and his grandfather, formerly known in the media as Glasgow's 'Mr Housing', is under investigation for

fraud. Jamie works in demolition and has been asked to help demolish a huge housing estate in Glasgow that his grandfather was also responsible for building. Towards the end of the novel, Jamie attends an AA rally where his now-sober father is speaking:

> Recovery was the story of the moment, and they all told these stories, and listened to the stories of one another, and they brought the old stuff of wars and ideals, of history and dreaming, of enlightenment and love and deliverance and progress, and they made it swell with the narrative of their own improvement. They believed in the unity of needs; they had made a nationhood of self-rescue. Our fathers were dead and gone, here were the living, and every wind of tradition came about them, every breath of the past came in whispers to make them new, and here they were, a gloaming of faces in a tartan séance, a calling down of ghosts from the greenwood side. (O'Hagan 1999, p. 277)

By use of the Scottish word 'gloaming' and the imagery of a 'tartan séance' with 'every wind of tradition', O'Hagan suggests a continuation of a grand narrative of emancipation, collective fellowship, of 'enlightenment and love and deliverance and progress' through the generations. Thus, there is still cohesion and fellowship to be found in working class culture through community, whether this is in the AA where Jamie Bawn's father finds redemption or the social club where Jamie's mother finds love and companionship. The novel ends looking towards the regeneration of housing estates in a post-devolution Scotland, a 'nation of self-rescue', without engaging directly with the lived experience of those in newly regenerated housing on the site of old modernist estates. In this respect, *WWLB* departs from *Our Fathers* in that it details life on a successfully regenerated modernist estate; however, it also echoes O'Hagan's more positive take on working class culture in comparison to Kelman's. *WWLB* illustrates how despite the failure of socialism and living under a Conservative government in the 1980s, Martin O'Reilly and friends, including Martin's old lover and his best friend's

wife, Bel, were able to elicit change and create a better environment for Littleholm residents.

WWLB departs from dominant models in Scottish fiction by focusing on the women and men born after the war who, influenced by counterculture discourse, attempted to create new ways of living outwith traditional social norms and values in Scotland, including the left wing values of the Labour movement and the trade union movement. Alan Spence has written about the baby boomer generation in books such as *The Stone Garden* (1995) and *Way to Go* (1998); however, *WWLB* also departs from Spence's work in that it engages with the lived experience of adult children of baby boomers and their relationships with their parents. The regenerated modernist estate of Littleholm can be seen to function as a metaphor for the cultural 'revolution' in the Sixties and Seventies. Littleholm does not become the self-governing artist's colony Martin envisioned, the artists move away to 'become failed artists somewhere else', yet there is a partial realisation of Martin's vision in that Littleholm becomes a better place to live for those who remain (*WWLB*, p. 12). The suggestion is that despite the failures of the counterculture's utopian vision some aspects of society were changed irrevocably for the better. This is reaffirmed when Rowan travels to a retirement community in the Campsies created for and by baby boomers. On page 154, Eddie comments that the new estate might not have been built if Littleholm had not been successfully regenerated. He tells Rowan that Littleholm might be knocked down to make way for a golf course. This also highlights how regeneration can threaten original communities it claims to benefit. However, through the character of Rowan and using the collapse of the global market in 2008, I hope to offer a more complex examination of the effect of gentrification on local

communities.

In Welsh's novel, *Porno* (2002), Sick Boy takes over the running of a pub in order to make money from the gentrification of Leith:

> This place is a potential goldmine just waiting for a makeover job. You can feel the gentrification creeping up from the Shore and forcing house prices up and I can hear the tills ringing as I give the Port Sunshine a tart-up from Jakey Central to New Leith café society. (Welsh 2002, p.45)

Sick Boy is constructed as the ultimate consumer capitalist who is driven by profit rather than by local community values. At the end of the novel, he is undone by the betrayal of others, left with no profit from his pornographic film, and his pub is closed by the police. Rowan O'Reilly is a character that readers may have more empathy with in comparison to Sick Boy, yet she, like Welsh's character, welcomes the regeneration and thinks it is a 'shame' when work halts and the council runs out of funds (*WWLB*, p.4). The riverside development is planned in consultation with the local residents and only when the developers go into administration is it sold to an investment company who erect security gates and refuse to fulfil their initial developers' promise to house social housing tenants in the new towers. The intention is to highlight the benefits of regeneration where the area is developed in consultation with the public, while also showing that distinct socio-economic differences emerge between the affluent and the poor when regeneration is driven by capital. In this respect, *WWLB* departs from Welsh's *Porno* in that it hopes to offer a more complex analysis of regeneration than merely positing it as harmful to the local community.

The global recession has an influence on each character's life in *WWLB*. Archie Doid has to find Marianne because he is in debt after a series of bad investments. Eddie can

purchase a penthouse flat in Darden because they are being sold at a low price after the collapse of the funders. Freda's automata are not selling well, and the regeneration of Les Lis, the Parisian suburb where Basaam lives, has been put on hold forcing him to squat a house in another estate. Thus, although people can work to effect change, in a globalised economy even those who live in a small town such as Darden, or a suburb miles from the centre of Paris such as Les Lis, are at the mercy of the vagaries of the global market economy. Therefore, although *WWLB* highlights that individuals can collectively change their communities for the better, the characters remain circumscribed by global economic fluctuations. In this respect, *WWLB* echoes Kelman and other Scottish writers' engagement with the effects of macro-global economics at the micro-personal level.

In conceptual terms, the fictional suburb or 'banlieue' of Les Lis in Paris operates as a kind of 'future echo' of what Littleholm estate might have become had Martin O'Reilly not lobbied for change. As Dikec indicates, some banlieues in France are marked by 'deteriorating housing, lack of facilities, education problems, insufficient transportation and a strong territorial stigmatisation' (Dikec 2007, p.177). Hargreaves argues that the term 'banlieue' has become a 'synonym of alterity, deviance and disadvantage' (Hargreaves 1996, p. 607). For Hargreaves the postmodern condition of late-capitalist society will result in the eventual 'banlieuisation' of most of the world, and she claims that we can see this in the third world where decomposition of agrarian structures results in peasants pouring into cities and creating the 'bidonvilles' or shantytowns of Dakar or the *ciduades perdidas* of Mexico City. Irvine Welsh in *Marabou Stork Nightmares* attempts to draw parallels between the working class

experience in housing estates outside Edinburgh and the experience of those living in townships in Johannesburg when his protagonist remarks:

> Edinburgh to me represented serfdom. I realised that it was exactly the same situation as Johannesburg; the only difference was that the Kaffirs were white and called schemies or draftpaks. Back in Edinburgh, we would be Kaffirs; condemned to live out our lives in townships like Muirhouse or So-Wester-Hailes-To or Niddrie, self-contained camps with fuck all in them, miles fae the toon. Brought in tae dae the crap jobs that nae other cunt wanted tae dae, then hassled by the polis if we hung around at night in groups. Edinburgh had the same politics as Johannesburg: it had the same politics as any city. Only we were on the other side. (Welsh 1996, p. 80)

For Milne, this attempt to align the working class experience in Scotland with that of Johannesburg is highly problematic, and Welsh is guilty of colonising and appropriating the suffering of others 'in order to bolster its [Scotland's] own subaltern credentials' (Milne 2003). In *WWLB* Les Lis functions to remind Rowan of what her father and his friends managed to achieve; however, unlike the protagonist in Welsh's novel, Rowan understands that it is race that differentiates the experience of third generation Irish Scots and third generation French Algerians. Rowan aligns skin colour and race with a permanent tattoo marking the subject as Other:

> For the O'Reillys it had been a simple matter to lose the Irish accent, to remember a country only in the old songs whenever nostalgia ached like hunger had. But what happened when the skin was tattooed with a pigment smart shirts and blouses couldnae hide? What happened then? (*WWLB*, p.139)

During my research visits to Paris, I was struck by the difference in mobility between second and third generation French of Algerian descent and second and third generation Scots of Irish descent. In Scotland, Irish immigrants were stigmatised; however, with time this discrimination lessened. Yet it is claimed that in France, North Africans

experience ‘segmented assimilation’ where unlike other immigrants who are ‘accepted’ culturally and socially, they remain discriminated against (Sharpe 2005, p.415). Although third generation French Algerians do not appear statistically as foreigners in France, they are frequently classified as immigrants because of the racialized association between immigration and those of North African origin (Silverman 1992, p.37). In an interview published in a study by Schneider, a third generation French Algerian states:

> Just by the way they look at you, they [the police] give you the feeling that you are a second-class citizen, even if you were born here. Children are stopped for inspection five times, just on the way from their home to the metro! And I’m talking of a walking distance of less than 10 minutes. . . . Today in France the police logic is simple. . .. Here, if you’re black or Arab, it doesn’t matter if you have money or a good job, you’ll remain black or Arab your whole life. (Schneider 2008 p.133)

This police harassment is referred to in *WWLB* when Basaam has to change from his Buddhist robes into normal clothes, or he will be stopped by the police who mistake him for a Jihadist. (*WWLB*, p.129)

Despite the prevalence of racist attitudes towards the descendants of Algerians, there are aspects of French Algerian culture— such as hip-hop influenced by traditional North African music— which have been appropriated by the French middle class:

> [Beur] Street culture now has appeal for mainstream France, particularly French white youth who view it as cool. Beur has blended with hip-hop culture that, in turn, has been co-opted by the white-middle class. (Orlando 2003, p.406)

Halnon argues that ‘fragile middle classes’ distinguish themselves with the ‘victorious aesthetic consumption of lower class symbols in popular culture’ (Halnon 2002, p.501). This process of cultural appropriation is alluded to when Rowan comes across a film crew using the urban setting of Les Lis as a gritty backdrop. The film crew make Les Lis

seem worse than it is, adding rubbish and burned out cars in front of a dilapidated shopping centre, perpetuating and disseminating negative stereotypes of the banlieue. Halnon calls this kind of cultural appropriation 'vacationing in poverty' (Halnon 2002, p.501).

My novel interrogates the cultural voyeurism inadvertently created by the success of Scottish authors such as Laura Hird, Alan Warner and Irvine Welsh writing in the demotic about the working class experience in the 1990s. In *WWLB* when Rowan states that as a university student her fellow students went 'to the local spit and sawdust for cheap drink and to witness first-hand a world they'd only read about in novels set for Contemporary Scottish Lit', I purposefully highlight this cross-class cultural voyeurism (*WWLB*, p.41). The characters partially function to highlight the plurality of working class culture, while subverting deviant depictions of working class youths or 'neds' as is the case when Rowan remembers being asked to dress in a tracksuit and 'pretend' to be poor for a party held by fellow students (*WWLB*, p.41). For some commentators this kind of 'humour' directed at 'neds' or 'chavs' is an 'insidious method of licensing hateful discourses against the poor and other oppressed groups' (Law, 2006, p.28). As Law argues:

> The more explicitly hateful the discourse against the stereotyped Other the more it sanctions the use of draconian powers against the most dominated groups in society, including curfews, exclusions, postcode discrimination, arbitrary policing, punitive laws, the withdrawal of welfare benefits. It is always more than 'just' a joke. (Law 2006, p.29)

Partly my aim was to engage with deviant constructions of working class in the media and subvert media depictions of those from housing schemes as Other. In this way,

WWLB continues the tradition of Scottish authors who include marginalized subjects in literary discourse. However, it also deviates from the tradition in the depiction of fathers in Scottish fiction.

Petrie argues that in Scottish literature there is a 'proliferation of absent fathers' which has a 'symbolic resonance in that lack of strong parental guidance is another way of arguing that Scotland has been historically orphaned from its past' (Petrie 2004, p. 182). For Petrie, the trope of the absent father is indicative of

> the failure of the Scottish nation to fully realize its potential [and is] bound up in some way with these collective representations of the failure of men to take responsibility for themselves, their partners and most of all, their children. (Petrie 2004, p.182)

In O'Hagan's *Our Fathers* Jamie Bawn's father, Robert, is 'cast in a familiar tradition of west-of-Scotland male chauvinism and familial abuse' (Goldie 2005, p.534). Robert is derelict in his parental duty and abuses his wife and child, finally living apart from his family. As a character, Robert supports Petrie's theory in that he is clearly intended to symbolize Scotland as a whole:

> In my father's anger there was something of the nation. Everything torn from the ground; his mind like a rotten field. His was a country of fearful men: proud in the talking, paltry in the living, and every promise another lie. My father bore all the dread that came with the soil—unable to rise or rise again, and slow to see the power in his own hands. Our fathers were made for grief. They were broken-backed. They were sick at heart, weak in the bones. All they wanted was the peace of defeat. They couldn't live in this world. They couldn't stand who they were. Robert's madness was nothing new: he was one of his own kind, bred with long songs of courage, never to show a courageous hand. (O'Hagan 1999, p.8)

Although in *WWLB* Martin is not intended to represent the Scottish nation, the formation of his character and his role in the novel are a direct response to the 'proliferation' of

absent fathers in Scottish fiction. Instead of what Petrie names as the 'struggle of children to deal with the consequences of the missing or deficient father', the protagonist in *WWLB* struggles to deal with consequences of her missing and deficient mother (Petrie, p.182). In order to ensure Martin O'Reilly does not re-inscribe stereotypes of the hard drinking, hard living west of Scotland male, he displays traditionally male and female qualities, attributes and characteristics; he is the nurturer and breadwinner for his daughter. This functions to highlight changes in social constructions of gender, while also subverting stereotypical representations of the Scottish working class male. However, Martin O'Reilly is not a wholly reconstructed male, as can be discerned from the flashback sequence when Rowan returns home from the hospital after having an abortion, wondering if her dad will be in the flat waiting for her to feed him:

> *As she walked past Smuggies, laughter came from the double doors, music, shouts. Her dad would either be in the pub or in the house, hungry. He would never say, Where's my tea? because he knew that'd be wrong. Instead he'd say, Is there anything in the fridge? which meant the same thing, and she'd say, Leave it to me, I'll get ye something, and he'd make a wee show of no wanting her to bother, but would've already have started in on his Guardian crossword.* (*WWLB*, p.145)

Martin understands that asking Rowan to make his tea is wrong, yet he requests his dinner be made in a way that '*meant the same thing'*. The domestic scene depicting the father reading the paper on his chair while the woman of the house cooks satirises the concept of the 'New Man'. Thus, in Martin, we find a confluence of traditional and more contemporary discourses of masculinity.

Initially this scene was developed with Martin reading the *Daily Record*; however, during the editing process the newspaper changed to *The Guardian* as Martin has a

general cultural awareness that departs from traditional views of working class 'scripts'. In addition, I wish to draw attention to the plurality of working class existence underneath the homogenous veneer of the label 'working class'. For Bourdieu

> the difference between the 'sensational' press and the 'informative' press ultimately reproduces the opposition between those who make politics and policy in deeds, in words or in thought, and those who undergo it, between active opinion and opinion that is acted upon. (Bourdieu 1984, p. 455)

Thus, those who choose to read the sensational press have a 'narrow, partial vision' in comparison to those who read 'informative' newspapers (Bourdieu 1984, p. 455). Arguably, since Bourdieu's *Distinction* was first published, working class 'scripts' are no longer as unitary, and changing production, marketing, and consumption patterns have in recent years lead to 'a profusion and proliferation of status symbols that no longer correspond to social-class divisions' (Swatrz 1997, p.177). Martin is someone who has an 'active opinion', an opinion which was at one point 'acted upon', and yet he is very much a member of the working class (Bourdieu 1984, p. 455). The intention with Martin, Eddie and Rowan was to explore the plurality of working class culture, and in doing so I paid close attention to the use of telling cultural details such as newspapers, alcoholic drink, clothes, and how these could work as 'accessory messages' to reinscribe or subvert cultural discourses regarding the working class. The character of Eddie is someone who has enough economic and 'cultural capital' to be considered middle class, and yet he views himself as working class. This reflects a recent study concerned with class in Scotland: of those who had moved from a working class background to the middle class, 80% still described themselves working class (Paterson et al., 2004, p.27). Eddie never explicitly states an affiliation to the working class; instead, this is implied

by his use of the vernacular**,** a feature of the novel I consider in closer detail in the following section.

Dialect and Narration

One of the major struggles in writing *WWLB* was developing non-standard dialect that seemed authentic and yet allowed for ease of reading. It was important to me to mimic as closely as possible the speech rhythms and dialect of the characters in the novel, but striking the right balance between the standard and non-standard dialects took months of experimentation. In spite of the problems of writing in the vernacular, I felt its inclusion was necessary because, as Wardhaugh indicates, despite living in an era of language standardization supported by the mass media, government agencies and public bodies, there is a 'remarkable persistence of both regional and lower-class speech used to demonstrate group solidarity and antipathy towards outside influences' (Wardhaugh 2006, p.181-2). Speakers continue to use 'stigmatised linguistic features' in accordance with the 'community norm' (demotic) when it seems clear that the benefits of adopting the 'social norm' (standard dialect) would be greater, precisely because it is more important that they link with their community (Milroy and Milroy 1998, p.73). In *WWLB* Rowan, Eddie and Martin adopt some features of their community speech because they have a 'strong identification and affiliation with the distinctive patterns of their own locality' (Montgomery 1986, p.67). Thus, their everyday speech can be seen as a hybridised form of two social dialects. Bakhtin describes hybridization as a mixture of

> two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some

> other factor. (Bakhtin 1982, p. 358)

Each section focalised through the characters from Darden contains a hybridized form of two linguistic consciousnesses separated by social differentiation: the social norm and the community norm.

The draft below is evidence of early experimentation with non-standard dialect:

> The red light flashin above the *Tribal Tattoos* sign meant the alarm wis on: no thievin bastards could get at Rowan's tools. Yet there wis a terrible itch tae pull up the shutters, go inside and check the keypad once more. Wi effort, she turned away tae face her hills. Too dark tae see the rocks that had cradled her since she wis a wean, but they wir there in the near distance, up beyond the shoppin centre and Darden's housin schemes and Wimpey estates. Treasure could be found in those hills if ye knew where tae look: ancient shells from lost seas, fossilised bones, petrified leaves left like bootprints on grey slate. Treasure that told of time slowly passin even if it felt like everythin stayed the same. Rowan couldnae see the Kilpatricks but she sensed their solid presence. It gave her solace. It soothed her.

In this example 'to' becomes 'tae', 'with' becomes 'wi', 'was' becomes 'wis', 'were' becomes 'wir' and the 'g' is dropped in each 'ing'. Short and Leech argue that there is no such thing as absolute realism when it comes to rendering non-standard speech by non-standard spelling, rather it is 'pure illusion' (2007 p. 135). They claim that

> in many novels, lower-class characters 'pronounce' *and* as *an'* or *'n*. However, this is a reflection of an elision that occurs naturally in English speech, without respect to dialect. Even a BBC announcer will say 'cats 'n dogs'. (Short and Leech 2007, p.135)

Because of concerns about ease of reading and the necessity of such a liberal use of non-standard, I revised the language to provide a *sense* of non-standard dialect, a 'living flavour of dialect' (Short and Leech 2007, p.135). We can compare the early example

above with the final draft below:

> The red light flashing above the *Tribal Tattoos* sign meant the alarm was on: no thieving bastards could get at Rowan's tools. Yet there was a terrible itch to pull up the shutters, go inside and check the keypad once more. With effort, she turned away to face her hills. Too dark to see the rocks that had cradled her since she was a wean, but they were there in the near distance, up beyond the shopping centre and Darden's housing schemes and Wimpey estates. Treasure could be found in those hills if ye knew where to look: ancient shells from lost seas, fossilised bones, petrified leaves left like bootprints on grey slate. Treasure that told of time slowly passing even if it felt like everything stayed the same. Rowan couldnae see her hills but she sensed their solid presence and it gave her solace. It soothed her. (*WWLB*, p.1)

As well as a hybridized language, *WWLB* makes use of free indirect discourse in order to lessen the distinction between the narrator and character—an approach borne largely from an uneasiness with authors who allow the social norm or the voice of the dominant discourse to control and enclose the community norm. In this respect, Kelman and his rejection of a standard dialect third person narration that encloses vernacular dialogue within its more authoritative narrative voice influences *WWLB*. Kelman's narration elides the linguistic polarity between speaker and narrator by using free indirect discourse and omitting hyphens or inverted commas that mark the difference between speech and narration. Although in *WWLB* punctuation does not deviate from the standard, in the sections focalised through Eddie, Rowan and Martin, the narrative voice utilizes the community norm. This attempts to dissolve the power relation between characters and the narrator, as this example indicates:

> When Dinger returned after shutting up the studio, she would still be lying prone on the couch where he had left her that morning. It was obvious he was exhausted from taking on her clients as well as his own, but he wouldnae moan,

> he'd just go ahead and make her some dinner that she'd pick at, preferring to down his wine and smoke his joints. Greedy for oblivion, she fantasised about the gas given at the dentist, longing for the pitch-black relief of nothingness. Later, when she was swaying upright on his couch, she would tell him, maybe crying, maybe no, that he was the best, bestest mate ever, and he would nod, patting her unwashed hand, ignoring the dirt under her nails, and laughing at her weak jokes about mummies coming back to life. (*WWLB,* p.28)

Bahktin argues that in literary language there is a 'sharply defined boundary between everyday-conversational language and written language', but that certain dialects may be 'legitimised in literature and thus to a certain extent, be appropriated by literary language' (1982, p. 294). It could be argued that Kelman, Welsh, and others writing in the vernacular over the last twenty years have succeeded in legitimising the vernacular Scottish voice in literary terms at least; however, there is also a danger that writing about the working class in Scotland in the vernacular has become a genre in itself. For Sassi, there is a risk that Scottish literature is being defined by the 'complicity of the book industry' who are forever searching for 'marketable icons and labels' into 'new clichés' of 'urban degradation and drug culture' and the 'use of the demotic style, [is] replacing the old clichés of kailyardism, Clydesideism and tartanry' (Sassi 2005, p.168). There is a distinct irony in that the determination of many Scottish writers over the last twenty years to provide the marginalised with a literary voice has resulted in a new kind of 'ghettoization'. From the initial stages of writing *WWLB*, I was aware of the danger of writing within what Bell calls the 'overly fixed boundaries of home' (Bell 2004 p. 41). Yet from the outset, I felt there was still a story to be told within such 'overly fixed boundaries of home' which would engage with themes and styles prevalent in Scottish literature, while hopefully developing these themes and styles further within a

contemporary context, regardless of the vagaries of taste and fashion in publishing. The next section will examine two such themes in *WWLB*: music and mothering.

Music and Mothering

In order to understand why mothers abandon children and how mothering is socially constructed and culturally represented, I consulted studies on motherhood such as *Motherhood: meanings, practices and ideologies* (1999) by Phoenix, Woollet and Lloyd, *Mothering the Self* (2000) by Steph Lawler, and Nancy Chodorow's *Mothering* (1978). I also consulted an organization called MATCH (Mothers Apart From Their Children) which has an archive of newsletters dating from the Seventies containing personal stories of mothers who left their children in the care of fathers or grandparents. This documentation was of invaluable help in understanding the range of emotions women experience when they leave their children, and inspired the idea that Marianne should feel 'voiceless' and unable to sing, mimicking the 'voicelessness' new mothers claim to experience.

In *No Go The Bogeyman*, Marina Warner outlines the relation between sounds and language and the importance of parents' songs and lullabies 'especially the mother's', in child development (Warner 1998, p.230). *WWLB* engages with Warner's concept of 'maternal melody' when, for example, Rowan is wondering about her parents and the arguments they had before her mother ran away:

> Instead of a maternal melody, was this the harsh lullaby that had rocked Rowan to silence? Had she lain without a gurgle, a coo, a gibber in her Moses basket, lost among the reeds, staring up at the ceiling where dark shadows lurched at each other's throats? (*WWLB*, p.132)

According to Warner, songbirds that do not hear the song of their species in the nest

are never able to sing and merely 'slur and gibber' if they are not 'raised in earshot of their own species' (1998, p. 228). This directly inspired Rowan's inability to sing and her slow start in learning how to speak as a toddler. Not hearing her mother's voice in the crib encourages Rowan to listen obsessively to the album, *Marianne*, when she is thirteen. In his critical essay on music, voice and language, Barthes discusses his lover's relation to the voice of a Swiss born baritone, Charles Panzera (Barthes [1985] 2008 p.279). Similarly, as a teenager, Rowan develops a lover's relation to her mother's songs:

> These little details and the one album of her recorded voice were all Rowan had, so she began to listen to *Marianne* in the same obsessive way girls of her age listened to manufactured boy bands. (*WWLB*, p.32)

Rowan soon 'falls out of love' with her mother's songs, and yet feels a sense of duty, a sense of responsibility, compelling her to play each track despite finding the experience traumatic. When her neighbour, Bel, speaks to her about obsessively listening to the album, Rowan is glad of an excuse to put the tape recording away, and from then on develops a strong aversion to song lyrics of any description. After this, songs cause that 'odd lump of something she couldnae name [to] rise up and almost choke her' (*WWLB*, p.32).

In his discussion of song lyrics, Barthes argues that language 'thrusts itself forward, it is the intruder, the nuisance of music' (Barthes [1985] 2008, p.83). Rowan hates hearing what Barthes calls the 'intruder'; she does not enjoy listening to someone else's 'ego trip' and prefers silence, or 'to gas herself with dead air' (*WWLB*, p.120). When she witnesses a riot during an Orange Walk, it reaffirms to her how songs can cause harm:

> The blood, the screaming and the sirens seemed to confirm what she'd recently realised: songs could be dangerous; they had the power to open old wounds, to inflict pain, to maim and injure. (*WWLB*, p.123)

Music initially connects mother and daughter before Rowan becomes estranged from her mother's music, a process that mimics the breakdown in mother and daughter relations that can occur when the daughter becomes a teenager. At the end of *WWLB*, music in the guise of Sufi drumming is what brings family members and estranged friends back together and Marianne back to her 'self', for a short time at least. Sufism teaches that the beat is learned in the womb with the mother, and I used this to emphasise how alienated Marianne feels from her baby. She writes in her journal:

> *I read today that the heart is our origin. Before the brains are created in the foetus, the heart is the first to take shape. After three weeks the heart starts beating like a Daf drum. Apparently, this is the joining of the heartbeat of the mother and the foetus.* (*WWLB*, p.119)

As Sufism is an Islamic mystic practice, the drumming at the end of the novel creates a link to North African culture as well as linking mother and daughter who are using a Daf drum to drum the same beat at last.

Over the course of my research, I examined the ways in which other writers had used music in their work, and Colm Tóibín's short story 'The Song' and Andrew O'Hagan's *Our Fathers* were a particular inspiration (Tóibín 2006, p. 47-55 and O'Hagan 1999). Tóibín's short story is concerned with a young man from Dublin who is brought up by his father and estranged from his folk singer mother who lives in England. The mother returns to Ireland with her folk band and the son travels to the pub incognito where, despite his mother's singing entrancing the audience, he leaves unimpressed and

unwilling to introduce himself (Tóibín 2006, p. 47-55). Tóibín uses intense lyricism to describe the transportative effect of music and this helped to shape the very end of *WWLB* where I also use lyrical language to mimic the sense of euphoria that can come from drumming together in a group. In 'The Song' music brings mother and son together, yet also drives them apart. As the son listens in the bar to his mother, he begins to believe he could sing better and leaves the pub without introducing himself to her. Influenced by Tóibín, I used music as a device to bring mother and daughter together and drive them apart, only to depart from Tóibín and use music to bring mother and daughter together at the very end of the novel.

In parallel with Tóibín, O'Hagan uses music and song in *Our Fathers* to bring together family members; however, in O'Hagan's novel music has a more transformative power. The protagonist, Jamie, travels to a bowling club to meet his estranged mother and argues with a local journalist at the bar but retreats to sit with his mother and her 'making-the-most-of-it pals' who try to forget the argument as the '…club lit up in a flurry of songs' (O'Hagan 1999, p.215). Trying to 'forget' is how Jamie and his mother are attempting to deal with the shared trauma of their past. She takes part in the karaoke and becomes lost in song, 'so easy now, and so free' (p.215). Later in the novel when Jamie attends an AA rally where his father is speaking, everyone in the auditorium stands for 'The Legionnaire's Song'. As the father waves a white handkerchief in the air, Jamie's eyes and his father's eyes meet and they are able to say goodbye. Jamie claims he will never forget his father's face and will remember the AA rally forever, that 'festival of hope' where his father has an 'army of new friends' (O'Hagan 1999, p.178). In both these instances, O'Hagan uses song to represent

the power of the communal experience and the power of music to heal (O'Hagan 1999, p.278).

O'Hagan's use of music and song at the end of *Our Fathers* directly inspired the end of *WWLB* when the drumming circle brings Rowan together with Marianne despite the hurts of the past. As Simpson, discussing creative music therapy, states:

> There is a peculiarly intimate quality to music that can enable two people to mean the same thing in the same moment in a way that is impossible with words and which can transcend the limitations of a disability or illness. (Simpson 2000, p171-2)

When Rowan states at the end of the novel**,** 'It was happening. Here. Now. A miracle for just this moment', this not only refer to the miracle of Marianne drumming but also the 'miracle' of mother and daughter, father and daughter, ex-husband and wife, lover and friends together in the same room. The conclusion will further examine the role of music in *WWLB,* focusing on the difficulties encountered when transforming research material into art.

Conclusion

Many subject areas in *WWLB* required comprehensive practical research. For example, in order to develop knowledge of tattooing, I shadowed a tattoo artist for a week at her studio in London. In addition, I spent several weeks in Paris familiarising myself with the geography of Paris as well as relevant aspects of French culture. In my first year of study, I attended undergraduate French classes at the University of Strathclyde. However, because I had little knowledge of music and its therapeutic application in treating dementia, this area perhaps required the most extensive research.

Over the course of 2008, I spent ten months volunteering for a music and dementia project based within a care home. My tasks at the monthly sessions included monitoring and evaluating each music therapy workshop, interviewing staff, residents and musicians before and after each session, as well as writing an end of project report. I observed violinist, Kokila Gillett, and pianist, Pavel Timofejevsky, establish a close rapport with residents, basing their workshops on repertoire linked directly to participants' lives and memories— an approach which allowed dementia sufferers to reconnect with past experiences. During this period I witnessed how music therapy can enhance confidence and well being, as well as interactions within the care home as families, staff and carers regained glimpses of the residents' personalities. As Oliver Sacks says of people in the throes of dementia: 'Music is no luxury to them, but a necessity, and can have a power beyond anything else to restore them to themselves, and to others, at least for a while, (Sacks 2007, p.147).

As much as this research was invaluable in informing creative practice, much of what

was witnessed had to be ‘re-imagined’ in order to avoid melodrama and, ironically, maintain believability. For example, such is the power of music for dementia sufferers that the care home residents might sing, dance, clap their hands and speak to relatives after months of silence. During one session a man who had often attended concerts at Wigmore Hall with his wife before his illness, conducted the musicians as they played Haydn, tears running down his face, and at the end of the performance forced himself to walk on unsteady legs and shake the musicians’ hands, whispering, Thank you, thank you. The man had not spoken for months. After witnessing these events, I considered creating an ending where the protagonist’s normally silent mother sings or speaks to her daughter during a music therapy session. However, I was concerned that such an ending, despite its basis in fact, would undermine the credibility of the novel and lead to accusations of sentimentality. Understanding that prose can accurately portray real life and yet be unconvincing was a valuable lesson. Despite the melodrama of real life, high emotional states have to be mediated into something subtler for aesthetic effect and for the reader to suspend disbelief. Ultimately the novel is an imaginary world informed by real-world research, a world created through verisimilitude and not the actual ‘real’.

Research proved invaluable when it came to small details of my imaginary world, what Nabokov described as the ‘divine details’ that help breathe life into a work of art and help the reader to continue to ‘believe’ (Nabokov in Connolly, 1999, p. 4). For example, Marianne is wearing a red clasp in her hair when Rowan first sees her; I included this because during my tenure at the care home I noticed a tendency amongst staff to dress the residents in ways perhaps suited to their own personal style and age group (*WWLB*, p.212). However, once again I had to exercise caution when it came to

transforming research into art. As Virginia Woolf wrote: ‘A writer’s country is a territory within his own brain; and we run the risk of disillusionment if we try to turn such phantom cities into tangible bricks and mortar’ (Woolf 1990 [1912], p. 35).

Initially my first and second drafts had around a 120,000 word count and my ‘phantom cities’ had all but collapsed under the weight of superfluous ‘ divine detail’. After trial and error**,** elimination and much redrafting, I came to understand that the novel is not a vehicle for presenting carefully researched information, but rather that it selects and transforms such information according to the demands of motifs and themes. With my next novel I will be prepared for the fact that while there will be redundant research just as there will be redundant writing, this is a necessary process when creating a work of art.

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