

HATCHING SECRETS

BY

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THE FILM

The Iron Lady flickered across the screen in a hazy projection of bitter doggedness filtered through dementia. Jane nodded in and out, a bit like the character herself. The names rang distant bells but it was difficult to remember for whom they once tolled. Janet suddenly seemed so far away as she groaned at the bulky TV set in the gloomy corner, cringing as Reagan smiled on unaware while behind his back and in front of his nose, atrocities were permitted with the fleeting forgetfulness of Nancy's footsteps slithering from beneath her ball gown.

Janet had them labeled as bitter, hard, soul-less creatures with the allure of a vampire. This illusive illusion of charm clung to their aura with the clinging coyness of a blood stain. They had become vampires and like all those who survive time, their blood-letting had been all too easily forgotten. They were looked back at, not with the anger they deserved, but with a fondness for, supposedly, the better times, the greater leaders that peer out from behind the rose-tinted sheen of forgetfulness. A few grateful sheep on a distant island were enough to keep memory of them intact while their own withered away. Both, of course, were equally untrustworthy. Collective memory could play as many tricks as one stretched mind. The Iron Lady smiled as she picked up photos and vaguely remembered who she had once been, or who she felt she had once been, or who she thought she may once have been while the film

attempted the same, with a glittering array of carefully crafted images packed together like cards carefully shuffled to win.

Jane had her own card tricks. Her eyes misted suddenly. Not the film, it withered on agelessly beyond the corner of her eye, but the sensation that her own pack had reached completion. There would be no more jokers. She would have to find the last laugh all by herself. Janet would have willed it that way. Or was willing it that way. The tenses failed. The combinations swirled through her head quicker than the picture frames on the screen. She didn't need Dolby to hear Janet in her ear, all those years ago, soothing as a child, scolding as a Thatcherite, loving as a form that had never left her brain. The cards kept coming, more recently via the internet so she had to print them herself. An umbilical cord stretched, or thrown out to a creature from the distance, in the hope of keeping them close, safe, a life raft in case the water turned turbulent.

THE POLICE

Insistent banging rattled the neatly-panelled door. Not too loud but constant. There would be no ignoring it. He wouldn't have dared anyway. He had nothing to hide and, besides, he thought it was John looking for a lift. Only later did he remember that John had moved to Nottingham two years earlier.

"Mr. Smithers?"

"Yes." He knew he looked puzzled and immediately felt guilty for his lack of confidence.

"I'm Superintendent Goldsmith." He didn't introduce the other three, a normal bobby and two in plain clothes.

One of the suits asked, with perfect politeness, if they could come in. Ray hummed, stepped from foot to foot until hesitancy had made it too late and the dark figures had eaten through his door frame.

"Of course. But it will have to be quick." He attempted to regain some dignity. Pulling his dressing gown tighter, he added: "I have to get to work."

"We all have our work to do," was his only reply, from one of the unknown in a suit.

Cheap suit. Had to be a cop. The other one looked different, another race entirely with a neatly cut design pressed tightly to cut through nonsense and impress from a distance. Looked like something off one of his own photo

shoots, full of the confidence new money pastes over the cracks with. Ray hadn't time to pursue his meanderings further.

He was in no mood for this intrusion. Janet hadn't come back; a longer weekend than he'd suspected and it was annoying him. And he was nervous. He wasn't used to police. Not in his house. He knew how to ask directions and look severely at the traffic wardens, but he had no idea of how to behave in his own front room. He lit a cigarette and coughed; he seldom smoked until after work, and then only five.

"Just a couple of questions Sir, if you don't mind."

He tried to nod casually, and felt a wobbling reminiscence to Bertie Wooster. He choked again, covering himself with a mask of blue smoke. Patiently, Inspector ... what was his name ... waited for it to clear.

"Now sir."

The politeness worked: Ray felt slightly better. Sir. That was always good, if a little threatening given the lilt, the slight slur behind the tone.

"Sir. We believe a certain Janet Winters lives at this address."

Good God! What had happened to her? Here he was annoyed she hadn't back and anything could have happened. Ray jumped forward knocking ash to the carpet, into the creases of his gown. "What's happened. Is she all right? An accident or something?"

"Not quite." And, again, with infinitive ease, the Superintendent waited for him to sit back and calm down. "No sir. Not an accident. It certainly doesn't appear accidental at all." Then he was forced to rush on as Ray appeared on

the point of tears. "I don't mean that sir. As far as we know Miss ... she is Miss, isn't she?"

Ray nodded again, limply, like a cartoon figure.

"As far as we know Miss Winters is perfectly alright. Indeed," and he allowed himself a satisfied twitch at the corner of his mouth, "I would say she is having a wonderful time."

Just a child, she echoed silently.

Bushy eyebrows rose quizzically, gently hinting at an explanation. Greying teeth clenched briefly. She hesitated, avoiding his stare. He had never frightened her at first. When she initially became aware, she never worried, never felt anything beyond the natural. He was as wholesome as the bread crumbs that littered her plate.

Donnelly had given her the bread. Home-made, he assured her. Janet didn't doubt him. She couldn't envisage the formidable Mrs. Donnelly with anything other than the best and the best could only be begotten from her own hands, those sweaty-red, stubby fingers. Janet wasn't sure if she ever stopped baking or washing; she always carried the faint odour of her toil, a streak of white dust beneath her nails. Janet giggled. She wasn't able to withhold the incongruity, the difference between the white powder she herself had left behind and the innocent grains of another life altogether, resting easily in the confined space of Mrs. Donnelly's fingernails.

The bread eaten, she sat fiddling with her cup, her finger flicking the spare crumbs across the table. It felt like time for a drink but she couldn't decide what. Night had set in. At this time of the year it came early, a glove slipped into easily, covering right up to the elbow. The light threw dusky amber shadows along the table. They slipped under the crumbs, appearing to raise them on a dial and highlight their untidiness.

Angrily, she grabbed a rag and scattered them to the night with a rough slapping swish. The clipping wet clack of cloth on wood hung on the air, reverberating like her old teacher's tuning fork. Sometimes it all seemed so childishly simple, and then she wondered if they would ever leave, if she could ever clear the past completely from her blood. Like quitting a drug, the initial shock may be the worse, but the lingering temptation keeps gnawing bones to dust, the mind to crumbs.

Fresh bread and cheese hadn't removed the irritation. It was still too early to search out the boys down the pub. She wasn't sure she felt like it. Initial release had been led by the hand of routine into sensations hovering between boredom and pleasantness. Not tonight.

She left the kitchen. It was this desertion or the effort of cleaning up, of the pointless search for scraps of bread long disguised as just normal dust. It was easier leave than reduce her adrenaline to the mundane level of a damp cloth.

She avoided the sitting-room which she seldom used. It had a stuffiness, a stiffness that refused to make her feel at home. The American still lingered.

She could picture him sprawled in the only soft armchair, she could almost smell his feet. She turned instead and faced the stairs. There was only one cure.

She forced herself up the steps her feet clanking the bare wood, punishing it or themselves for their sluggishness.

There were two upstairs rooms, both equally low, carved from the roof. The biggest was her bedroom looking out over the front of the house, at the end of the narrow corridor that led from the stairs. At the crown of the stairs, to her left, cuddled into the slope of a carefully hone roof, its one bare window staring blankly out to the ocean, was what had become her study.

From top step, touching the landing, without entering, she saw the manuscript lying naked under the table lamp, the pages yellow like slabs of dead flesh. She stood staring at it knowing that she couldn't face it. Her mind was sticky, her thoughts refusing to roll, long cramped before the raw journey down her arm to the pen. Not tonight. Leaning on the door jamb, she paused in an effort to think. The light flickered on as her shoulder knocked against the switch. She left it lit and instinctively, unthinkingly, moved down the corridor to her bedroom.

The moon stretched through the back window, bending around the room to fling the shaft of her shadow before her. Silently, it crept up the door and reached for the knob before she did.

She had left the window open. She crossed and slammed it shut, the glass rattling an unsteady complaint. She brushed damp from the pane, the

specks of an early evening mist hiding in the safety of her house. Wind howled at the eaves, stroking and threatening in its desires to enter. She loved the comfort of being safely indoors on a wet night; of being cosily cocooned, almost teasing the elements outside into further rage. She knew what she wanted. Her shadow flickered in the mirror as she rummaged. The box was in the bottom drawer, partially covered by spare knickers and an old towel.

She flung it through the study door. It landed on the table with a thump, staggered, but clung to the corner. It balanced there. It didn't fall. She scarcely noticed as she continued on down the stairs two steps at a time.

Three minutes later she was back, bottle and glasses in hand. She switched on the lamp and dragged the box to a safer perch in the centre of her table.

Loose pages were pushed absently aside to be replaced with a more vibrant yellow, the glint of a twelve year old on ice. The whiskey warmed her stomach, softened the straight wooded back of her office chair.

Taking a deep breath, she managed to mix it with a sigh. She allowed herself this safety valve, a fuse for the nights just like this when life appeared to have stopped, when there was nothing to do but hide from the rain, and curl up and wait for the skies to blow over before continuing the walk. She peeled away the lid and focused the light.

They were wrapped in plastic. It had been a long time since she had last seen them. Maybe she had thought it would be longer: they were well packaged. Her fingers were forced to unwrap deftly, to skin these precious

fragments slowly. She had almost sealed them too carefully. She thought she felt the corner of one tear. Finally, the pack lay in her hands. Slowly, deliberately, she fanned them out before her.

She drank her whiskey staring at them. Then she poured another and looked again. Twenty five. She counted. Funny how she hadn't noticed at the time how many she had selected. She counted again. Lying before her were definitely twenty five snippets, twenty five edits, a cynical selectioning process which cut out the relevance of all else except these. She wondered in passing if she would select differently now. No. There was no longer anything else to choose from. This was all that remained, everything she had wanted to keep.

Faces peered at her, shining healthily in the light. Ray was there. She knew it was only chance, the random spray of the pack beneath her hands, nevertheless, ironically, he was laughing at her from the very centre of her selection. His arms were around her. The sun was shining; water dripped from his cheeks, glistening on tan skin. She had been so brown then, healthy, almost the kid she had been in Spain years before, before the harsh coat of West Ireland had begun to leave its marks. She glanced at the mirror, forgetting briefly that she wasn't in the bedroom and that there wasn't one. It wasn't necessary: she knew how white she had become. She could imagine the dry crispiness of her flesh, the lines from constantly cringing under this spiteful sky. Maybe she should have gone to the South Seas after all; at least she would still have a tan, her legs would touch the air and her shoulders broaden again under the force of a surfers waves.

Poor Ray. She was sure he was still that healthy golden brown: she was sure. He would have taken a holiday to Turkey, or splashed out on a sun bed: he wouldn't let it fade. At least she'd become was thinner she noted, her hips neater, stomach firmer, despite the Guinness. Fuck Ray. She didn't care what he looked like these days. His suits would be glistening just as always, shoes neatly shined, fingers delicately snapping, missing from her spine.

She began to relax. Her glass refilled itself. Her fingers played with the photos in front of her; abstractly they straightened curling edges; automatically they sorted the pictures into some order, a rough chronological picture story. Twenty five. She pushed Ray to one side, then returned him to his position, no. 24. No time now for petty tiffs. They all had their place, they were all equally removed: they were only snapshots, little colourful grains dancing in uneasy unison; a film, a soap on T.V., a little corny remembrance that would be switched off, forgotten about, lost between the pages of the Sunday Supplement. She giggled.

Once out in the light, unfolded from their wrappings they held no threat at all. She had escaped perfectly. No stains, no chemistry beyond the science that held them in place on the glossy paper. A whiff of plastic snipped the air, the cool, promising whisper of exposure, fleeting, secret moments hatching plots beneath the chemicals that forced them into a solitary, static glimpse of what might, could, may, would have been. She pushed them around but maintained their order. No. 24 was Ray. She smiled gently at 25. Little Jane grinned back, a cheeky chocolate stained laugh challenging the camera to trap

her before she twisted off on another mission. At No. 23, Jane's mother Sue, had her head missing; only her chest and arms had been caught as she struggled to keep the baby clasped between the unseen knees. Janet stroked the tiny cheeks with the tip of her index finger. She mouthed a silent kiss, a little insane squeak that only the childish mind understands. She sipped her drink and moved along, hands shuffling through time as deftly as a fortune teller.

There was Edward. What would Ray have said if he had known? And the others? She laughed. Rod, Sofia, them all, and many others floating down the streams of her memory, scraps kicked free by their images sitting before her. Some forgotten party floated by listlessly. Another beach photo swam along. She counted them until she had passed down to the other end, to number one, another child struggling to move from the camera's lips. She stared at herself. It was creepy, a mirror image cracked out of time. Beside her, at number 2, lay her parents, proud and dignified, not a hint of bitterness back then. At their feet Janet herself appeared again. She followed her own tiny arm as it clasped a wiggling little Kirk from escape. He was standing directly in front, leaning back against her knees.

How ironically warped images become, when refracted through the twistings of time. Unconsciously, she was addressing the photos. Her lips moving silently to cover her drink. They curled around the glass and trembled with the strokes of cold ice. The bottle tipped. She examined them through the whiskey, the microscope of its yellow gauze. They almost seemed to be

whispering back, murmuring together in a joint effort at confusion. Old conversations replayed themselves, subtly re-edited through the vacuum of time. She swirled the ice, clinking it against the glass. A couple of drops escaped to spatter the bundle. She picked the first couple up to blow them dry, to beat them against her jumper. She flicked a faint splatter off Kirk's face.

He's handsome, isn't he?

She nodded silently, happily brushing the plastic face, gently, against the heavy wool of her sweater.

They all are, aren't they?

Her head beckoned further agreement. You know who he is, don't you? she asked.

He paused. Do you want to tell me?

Just a child. She laughed aloud. She couldn't stop. The shrieks escaped, floated, swam around the room carried on the back of the alcohol. She felt his presence more vividly. She had a sudden urge to reach out, to laugh with somebody; and he seemed to understand.

Then she drew back. She caught his face for the first time, her laughter twisted into a scream.

No. No. No! he shouted, curtailing his urge to reach out and hold her. No. No. I won't hurt you. I won't. Don't be afraid.

He stood up and retreated to the window. He hung there defenceless. Out of the light, shadows surrounded him, clinging to his face threateningly. The face from the photo sang to her. She saw pain, felt the terror.

Unthinkingly, for any distraction, her hand beckoned, easing him back to the chair on the other side of the table. She saw him visually relax, the tension slip from his mouth.

I'm sorry. he breathed gently: I didn't mean to...

She said nothing. Her mind was spinning, foggily bewildered at the reality of what must only be a dream.

She glanced down at the photos for comfort or explanation. Stonily, they stared back uncomprehendingly. A sudden urge came over her, a sickening desire for soberness, a fumbling attempt to cram them back into the safety of their cage. She crumpled some of them before giving up the effort.

I'm sorry, he said again, I'm upsetting you. It's just that ...

Don't worry.

She had spoken to him directly. He was still there and she had recognised the fact. The sadness in his eyes had dredged flitting consolation from behind the barriers of reason. It doesn't matter, she muttered, unsure as to who she was comforting. It doesn't matter at all. I was only having a quiet drink ...

May I ... he interrupted the silence, I mean, if you wouldn't mind I'd ...

She followed his indicating hand, the skinny wrist fading into the cuff of a lightly toned red, trembling slightly like a finger approaching a nipple for the first time or the flickering twitch of a hand rising to an incestuous neck beneath the stairs. Of course. Of course. But she made no effort. The sleeve beckoned but she refused the temptation of a mouth, a hardened chin, the dark pools of

watery eyes. She was torn between running from her fantasies, dashing downstairs to the kitchen for another glass and the fear of losing the womb of her drunkenness, of waking herself if forced into the cold of the stair well. Take this, she proffered finally, I've had enough.

He threw what was left back in a gulp. The glass chipped on the table. Automatically, she refilled it. There's no more ice, she apologised, then turning angry with her meekness, her voice broke into a snap: Well there is but I'm damned it I'm going downstairs in the cold to get it. This will have to do.

And it will do fine.

She didn't know what else to say. Feeling soberer now, she managed to stack the photos neatly and pack them back in their box. The lid cracked shut and they were safely locked away. She glanced up but he just smiled. Frustrated, she slammed the box to the far end of the table. She caught his eyes again and simply laughed, a low growl of mocking confusion scratching her throat. Her head slumped, slid down to the table. She slipped her hands beneath it, her knuckles nestling into her cheeks. Her fading chuckles rasped through the room as she dived into sleep. Maybe they're all mad she thought, and he's not really here at all.

He was still here in so much as he had ever been for a long time. Janet didn't try to understand such contradictions. She slept.

She felt much saner in the morning, flushed with the cruel confidence a blistering hangover brings. Her eyes were painfully loose in their sockets; she

was sure she was still half-intoxicated. Her brain throbbed, silently forcing a carefulness in her movements. She decided to clean the house in the euphoria of her dazed mind, her numbed senses.

She started by putting the box back in the drawer. She hadn't forgotten him. The lick of his words, the soothing inflection of an unusual accent, still lapped between her ears. He became a speck of dust in the stumbling of her head spinning. Her thumping reactions allowed no room for logic. Maybe it was the whiskey, or perhaps only a dream. She didn't care, didn't attempt to rationalise what had lodged in her mind as a faintly pleasant sensation.

He hadn't threatened her, she knew that. Whether from the depths of a depraved mind or the shadows of spirit-ridden Ireland, her guest had left lingering expectations but no chills. Like the house itself, he was as intangibly real as anything she now surrounded herself with. In the haze of her hangover, in the wobbling of the womb that was her head, she could sense all her ghosts, ever closer.

An hour later, sitting down with a coffee, she put the cleaning one side and deliberately forced him up for a closer examination. There was a sensation of his being handsome, in a childish way, gangly, too skinny, yet firm beneath the long hair tangling itself amid his eyebrows. His nose was a little long, his mouth a little too thin, but the lips curled pleasantly, filling to allude a firm but gentle sense of humour. And there had been a moustache, hadn't there? Like his hair, speckled with a faint tinge of grey which hadn't quite overcome the rusty brown. Yes, a moustache, of all things, long and wispy like the wings of

some exotic butterfly above his lips. She grinned in the memory. Nothing like Ray, or indeed like any of the others. There had never been a hippie, a real groupie, among them. She could never find one, and when she had, she had become tired of the chase: the hippies were the worse, so laid back she never had had the patience to tame one and try it on for size. She giggled again. Was this where her own fantasies led her? What her deeper desires stirred to the surface? A skinny old ghost, a monster who had lived too long? She thanked her sense of humour: at least she could still laugh at herself. She was feeling better and thought some clean air would heighten the sensation.

The Shop

Mrs O Sullivan nodded to her but didn't say anything.

"Good morning," tried Janet, feeling she should make some effort. Her intentions were hampered by the entry of Mrs Grady. Janet was ignored as the two women discussed eggs and what could rise in the budget six months off, and of grandchildren even further away.

"Young Johnny, Mary's oldest, is supposed to be getting married, you know?"

Mrs Grady didn't, but nodded silently. It didn't really concern her, she was thinking of her own: "So I hear and sure so is Mick. He's got a fine new house, or so I'm told. Done well for himself over there."

"Don't they all. Mary's are all in University now, doctors, lawyers, they'll all get good jobs. Bright they all are. And sure hasn't Mary herself done well enough too."

"She has. She has. I keep telling Kathleen she should be off or stay here all her life. But ..."

Mrs Grady raced on to continue with her own family before there were further interruptions: "... but Margaret has settled down well."

"Husband's an engineer or something important. Big house anyway. He must be earning good money."

They rambled on in self-congratulatory circles, the mumbling, one-sided, chat falling from their tongues like treacle. Janet kept her impatience on a

lease. It used to annoy her. Slowly, she had become more accustomed, to the point where she pitied them: they had nothing else but the faraway dreams of their distantly spread families. The lives of those closest to them were played out in scraps, occasional long distant phone calls, the airmail letters which all added up to little more than a T.V. soap opera. They were abandoned on the edge of the world, of old age, with nothing else to talk about or to interest them but the gilt-star lives of children from long ago. Janet knew it was patronising, but her heart soared with sadness for those weather beaten women forced to continue in the empty shell that their families had become. And she knew she could think what she liked because they would never allow her the opportunity to tell them.

“And Mrs Donnelly's young daughter. What's she doing these days?” Mrs Sullivan asked as she rummaged beneath the counter for the dozen fresh eggs she had put aside for her friend, as promised.

“Ah sure, she hasn't gone far. Still in Dublin I believe. Mrs Donnelly was telling me only the other day. Doing well enough they say, but sure what would you get up there ... might as well be ...”

“I know. Sure I know. Never showed any initiative that one, did she?”

They agreed silently. There was no need for exclamations. They had listened to each other for so long they knew automatically when they did agree and to be quiet when they didn't; they knew too well how to maintain the equilibrium and avoid disorder. Janet had seen enough of them by now to realise that if she hid in the shadows of the shallow shop, she could hear an

entirely different conversation, another slant on the recently expressed opinions and even facts, expressed to someone else only five minutes later. Such was the fickleness or strength of small town diplomacy.

Mrs O Sullivan broke off for a second, her face twisting towards Janet. She said nothing, only her eyebrows rose to hint at a vague, irrelevant question. "No hurry," Janet answered, "I need quite a few things." She didn't, but neither did she want to place her orders before an extra set of watchful eyes: the two behind the counter were threatening enough.

"I won't be a sec.," Mrs Grady muttered, "Just a pound of sugar and 20 fags."

Mrs O'Sullivan squinted at the sparse shelves. She coaxed a stool along the lino in a rasping growl of complaint. It swayed as she stood on it. Janet watched her sturdy legs balance themselves and the equally plump body above them. They were either fat and bulging, or thin and spectral, she thought. There was no in between. And they all looked equally miserable curled up in headscarves on a wet day. They weren't even old. Mrs Grady, yes, but even she was hardly more than sixty two or three, it was hard to tell. Beyond a certain age, their first child, they submitted, adapted, and took on the forms of their grandparents. The women became fat or skinny, the men beer-bellied, speckled with a rash of red veins patching their face together unhealthy. They weren't all like that she knew, only the ones she seemed to meet; only those who'd been left here alone to eke out what remained. She promised reverently that she would never allow herself last that long.

The stool quivered, the sugar slipped off the shelf into a waiting hand. The cigarettes were under the counter. A pencil stub jabbed a sheet of old grease paper. Coins jangled; one ran for the floor. Janet picked it up. They muttered in reward. The weak sunlight entered briefly as Mrs Grady left, the door clattering to a halt behind her.

Janet began to imagine an order; having waited she couldn't just escape with the milk. She bought cheese, cooked ham, a packet of sausages and a few basic necessities like loo paper and anything that would make you use it. She felt guilty about the meat wondering what Sue would say; then it was too late to change her mind.

"Looks like rain again," was Mrs O Sullivan's opening comment as the pencil scraped along the paper. She didn't look up, head down lost in sums.

"Do you think so?" Janet inquired, hoping a question would lead them on a little further, anything for a change.

"You never know, around here."

"No, I suppose not. I'm only getting used to it."

"Nice in the summer though. Will you be here long enough to see it?"

Got me, thought Janet, almost jumping with the swift incisiveness of the blade: there had to be a point, an object for the apparently unthreatening banter. Mrs Grady was probably still waiting outside to return for the latest gossip once she left. "I don't know. Not sure. Depends on how things go ... I'm doing a bit of work ... for myself."

"So I hear." was the only acknowledgement, muttered through the figures of the bill. Janet didn't hear. She tried to sneak a glance at the thick lead scrawlings across the counter. She couldn't discern which was hers and ended up giving a large note which should cover it without having to ask for repetition.

"No boyfriend or anything to take you away?"

Janet was taken aback. Another coin fell. She covered her surprise by searching for it. Risking a smile, she muttered: "No. I'm afraid not," as she handed over the money.

The change came back with a clatter. "You're better off." The old woman busied herself folding brown paper, as if Janet had already left. "Men," a voice sighed, "better off ..."

Janet searched for her eyes but they darted nimbly to one side. "Goodbye then. Thanks," she said nervously. The door clapped in chorus, her only response.

Out on the street Janet could still see the eyes, was still searching them. Had she heard bitterness or regret or only words to pass the time? She could never tell with these people; she could never sift between the jokes and the half-truths without sensing a trail of betrayal, a sensation which inevitably left her feeling guilty.

She was walking towards home. Mrs O'Sullivan was correct: the sun had darkened, surrendering its vanity to the incoming mist. A drop landed on her

nose, another behind the ear. Someone walked past, her head down, gathering speed because of the threatening rain or simply because they didn't know what to say. They both nodded and rushed on. Janet wanted to go home. The idea wiggled in her stomach creating that pleasant sensation of nervous imagination. She told herself she was being stupid, that it was too early in the day to get drunk; and that that was probably the only way she would find him again. Besides, Mrs O Sullivan was probably right: "better off." She would certainly know. She had age on her side.

In her innocence, however, Janet persuaded herself that she had far too much experience to be trapped in anything not of her own construction; Mrs O Sullivan's were only the gripes of a woman grown too old, too quickly beyond her age. Young enough not to imagine, Janet presumed the worse, forgetting that even wrinkles can be inspired by smiles, that a wheeze can hide the glow of a cupped hand.

The house, for all its attractions, was out. She couldn't handle cleaning, or boredom, or disappointment, this morning, or so she told herself. She also had the continuing aftershocks of a hangover. There was only ever one cure. Flanagans was two doors down on the right. She would pop in, just for a second.

Outside the day was dull, heavy as a damp blanket about to drip dry. Nevertheless, her eyes squinted in the further darkness of Flanagans. There

seemed to be no one there at first, only the gloomy smells, the shadowy hints of the night before.

"Give that girl a drink!"

Involuntarily, Janet jumped at the voice lurching from the obscurity. Suddenly, it formed itself and it was Donnelly pulling her in to the bar, his big hand taking a firm hold of her elbow.

"What'll you have then? It's early for you, isn't it? Or are you another of those secret drinkers, not easy in a town this size, is it?" He poked her in the side, laughing at his own wit, calling for a Guinness.

"No. No. A pernod and black," she interrupted.

Mrs Davies looked puzzled, scornful at such an deviously odd request. Janet recoiled as her lips twitched in annoyance. It isn't going to be my day, thought Janet, and I'm not together enough to handle all these confusions. It's as if I have forgotten where I am, the limits it imposes: and I thought I was doing so well. "Only joking," she attempted, "a Guinness would do fine."

"You're right, you're right," Donnelly assured, "never too early for the weight of a good pint."

Mrs Davies jammed the taps down, slapped the glasses on the counter to wait and let the head settle.

They waited in silence. Janet didn't dare put her foot in it again. She'd said enough for one morning; maybe she should have gone straight back home. The idea appealed more and more.

She wasn't sure how she would face the stained glass coming her way. The cream dribbled over the edge, slid down the glass to lap the beer mat and lie in a puddle. Trying not to stain her jeans, Janet leaned forward over the bar to take the first sip without lifting the glass at all. It wasn't as bad as her stomach had expected. She took a longer gulp.

"You ok.?" Donnelly asked, "you look a bit ... "

"Fine now. Just fine."

"Here, come over here and we'll sit down. I need to put my own feet up as well." He led her into the shadows of the corner. Mrs Davies emerged, far too anxiously, from behind the bar to wipe unused tables; to be sure there was nothing inappropriate in their conversation, Janet presumed. She moved noisily. Then she jerked the big front window open. A wet, diluted light rushed in, hesitantly flooding the gloom. Janet started to feel better.

The rain had stopped, she noted, it had only been a shower, a light drizzle, a quick, passing, squall. The Eskimos had thirty names for snow, she had once been told; she was sure that she had heard an equal number for rain during the past two months. She'd also been told the whole thing about the Eskimos was nothing but a myth.

"Hard night, was it?"

Janet smiled, wistfully, woefully. Donnelly tut-tutted, swallowed beer and let his lips lick it clear from his stubble. He hadn't shaved. He looked rough, only his eyes danced. "Solitary drinking?" he sighed sadly, "and we all down in McQuires waiting for you."

Janet kept a grin and sucked up some of her own drink; it was beginning to go down well. "Waiting for me? Was that what you were doing? All night?" It was Donnelly's turn to grin slyly and say nothing.

They sat on a tattered wooden bench, sipping alcohol, lost in their own thoughts until inevitably they centred in the law of diminishing glasses: as the pint ebbed away down their necks, they were forced to lead their thoughts from wandering and focus them on the upcoming decision. The sunlight got up the courage to seep in through a weeping pane as they made their way to the bar for another.

Janet still wanted to get home, achingly nervously at the thought. There was no hurry, she assured herself, one more wouldn't hurt. "Will we have another?" she suggested. "My round."

Donnelly thought about it as if he hadn't been considering the same option for the last five minutes, the last third of his glass. "No. I'll be off."

Janet's face showed her surprise. She turned too fast and caught him straight in the eye. He looked away quickly, then turned back to smile. A big hairy hand patted her knee. "You see, I'm not totally un-reformable." He laughed. "And anyway, the Missus wouldn't allow it. I couldn't turn up stinking of beer at this time of day. God knows what she'd say. Kill me she would." The voice tapered off into a soundless whisper.

Janet didn't ask, held away from intrusion by the unspoken laws of distance. "You're probably right," was all she said, "we can't upset your wife."

She bit her lip. She sensed Mrs Davies flinching as she flicked her cloth over the bar in a particularly vicious wet smacking kiss of finality.

Time to go before she put her foot in it again. it was all too subtle for the state of her brain. She hoped Mrs Davies wouldn't take any references to 'wives' and 'upsetting' in the wrong way. Donnelly looked as if he had the same feeling. His huge chest heaved in a howling laugh, released to frighten off the ghosts or shore up a barrel full of fears. A big hand tousled unyielding black hair, bustling to his eyebrows as if destiny was making them unite. Uneven teeth grinned in a homely tip to the clap of his hand on her shoulders.

"Come on," she said. "We'll go. Might be down again later. You never know."

"Aye. Do girl, come down for a quick one, not good for you to be up there in that house all alone."

"All alone," she repeated after their parting. I wonder what alone really means. What it meant last night. Can you talk when you are alone? Can you sing? Are you allowed to dream, or does that break your solitude?

Janet was walking slowly to avoid the discovery, the anti-climax of what she assured herself would happen: she would walk in the front door and find everything as she had left it, nothing disturbed or cleaned, no intelligent conversation wafting from the kitchen, gently massaged by the smells from some exotic dish simmering on the stove.

No. Nothing like that. Nothing at all. It would all be the same, as unchanged as Donnelly's entry to his own house, the same, day in, day out.

What was Donnelly's wife really like, she wondered then. She had only ever seen her at a distance, plump, rolling on determinably towards the church, confessions or something, Janet got confused between the myriad of ritual obligations. Another woman who surely looked beaten beyond her age. And Donnelly himself wouldn't be that old either, she remembered, fifty five maybe and his wife probably younger. There was something cruel in the weather here, or the isolation, that stifled perception, refracted it slightly so that it was continually, almost unnoticeable, out of focus. Would his wife really kill him? Was she not used to it by now? Or was it more specific, had they just had an argument? Or was it only a twisted expression, another bitter twist of humour? Janet hadn't been there long enough to decide. Every world had its subtleties, and for Janet, who used to be their master, it was still frustrating to be transported, to have moved herself into one where she was but a child.

It was a morbid morning. The clouds still hadn't cleansed themselves fully; the sea still sounded distantly perturbed. She thought there might be a storm brewing behind the brittle stillness of the air, but like her social inadequacies, her weather predictions were equally tangled, and tentatively unsure. A strange dawn, and she wanted to prolong it as long as possible, unsure a she was of what she would encounter when she opened the door and shut it out.

Her hangover had worn away and had taken her confidence with it. Light-headedness had been replaced with a low ache echoing from deep in her brain. The whiskey had killed more brain cells than normal: she wasn't thinking

straight. She forced herself to pick up speed, until long legs were marching her forward determinedly. She nodded to the old couple coming towards her. She wasn't sure who they were but they both smiled back cheerfully before continuing down the street hand in hand.

Automatically, she turned to look after them. They were definitely old, they had to be, and they were still hand in hand: it was no illusion. Even in old age, maybe only then, people smile; even in the rain they smile; even when they can't remember the sun or the erratic bounce your steps become when too young to stroll.

She was right. The house was exactly the way she had left it. She had to tidy it herself; and she had no choice but to cook her own meal. He only turned up when it was prepared. He floated in just in time. She was too shocked to offer him any. He didn't just appear. He came in through the door, as if he'd casually been reading the paper in the sitting room, and had just turned up at the call of 'ready'. In another world he'd smell of a pipe, ash dripping off a well worn jersey. He'd peck her cheek. They'd remember the kids, her parents, watch TV with baked beans, smile away listlessly, trembling in case the truth seeped out. She shivered, wriggled herself from the image and kept her eyes bare.

Janet hated spaghetti. She loved to eat it but shied from its enumerate embarrassing social possibilities: from splattering your host, to accidentally choosing the longest thread and having to spend ten minutes sucking it, un-

weaving it, praying painfully for the end all the time you nod to the boring old fart babbling on at your side. He caught her at just such a moment.

There was no rattling of windows or clapping of thunder; without applause or fanfare, he entered casually, and placed himself carefully on the chair across the table from her. All she could do was choke on the pasta which was leaking from her lips, tying them to the red mess on the plate below.

He apologised immediately. Oh I am sorry ... really sorry. He looked as if he was going to stand up again and go. He didn't. He fumbled instead for words. I'm sorry, he repeated, I didn't mean to startle. I thought that after last night you'd be exp... well that we ... kind of knew each other ... if you know what I mean.

Eyes watering, Janet managed a nod and swallowed the remainder of the string whole. She coughed and grabbed for the water.

Take your time. Finish your meal. It looks good. I insist. I'm in no hurry. I have all the time in the world.

That was what she was afraid of. She could only shake her head as she pushed the plate to one side. No I don't think so, she managed to mutter, still clasping the water. She pressed it firmly to her mouth again, the reality of the cold ice forcing her lips apart to keep her tongue from trembling.

Oh no, but I have, he assured her.

Janet had nothing further to say. She seemed to have lost the thread of their brief conversation, but had no intention of asking for clarification.

I'm in no hurry, he repeated and sat there smiling.

It was like the first deep drag of a joint. Janet's throat had grown dry. She could feel her heart thumping somewhere behind her rib cage: she was glad it was locked in.

With exaggerated care, her arm slid out to clasp the water jug and refill her glass. She sucked the liquid greedily and stood shakily to find her tobacco. She had been trying to cut down but she needed no cognitive dissonance now to reason that these were extenuating circumstances.

He'd stopped grinning. He was just sitting there impassively. He accepted the cigarette when, unthinkingly, she proffered the packet. His head leaned forward discreetly to accept the flame of her lighter. No beard, she noted, and the moustache really was that dawn-like haze of grey flecked with rust. She cursed the little machine in her hand. It wouldn't blaze first go, or second. She hated the subservient proximity of her hand to his face.

I won't bite, he reassured her.

The lighter flared, the flash, she hoped, covering the angry flush rising to fill out her cheeks.

I'm trying to give them up, were the first words to spring from her lips.

They did a belly flop. It was he who gallantly took the lead: I wouldn't worry, was what he proffered before they retreated to the allure of smoky silence.

Easy for you to say, thought Janet, if you really are a fucking ghost. She tried to remember anything she had known or read about the supernatural: it was summed up in two extra large puffs of her tobacco.

Are you not going to finish that? A long lazy finger indicated her food.

An artists hands, she reflected. Capable of enormous sweetness, brushing tenderly, bleeding into an oily mess of watery tragedy. The mess on the plate was turning her stomach: a bundle of tension, she couldn't imagine churning the maze of unfinished spaghetti down on top of it. No. No ...

Do you mind then if I ... Hardly awaiting her brief nod, he pulled the plate closer and began tucking in.

Janet was glad. It let her escape his gaze. It freed her from nagging urges to construct a conversation, the duties of a good hostess were still ingrained deep, she noted with revulsion.

She pulled sternly, allowing the smoke complete freedom in her lungs. Gradually the intensity diminished. She held the fuming stick steadily, gazing at the patterns, less reliant on its consolation as time wore on. What the hell, she reasoned, this was what she was here for: excitement. She promised herself she could banish his illusion with a flick of her wrist if she wanted. Meanwhile, relaxed by such self-assurances, she watched him munch, noting with satisfaction that he wasn't perfect either: he didn't appear to have eaten spaghetti before in his life.

Great, he mumbled.

Good. she replied and stubbed her butt into an ashtray.

Did I frighten you? he inquired as if it was a normal after dinner conversation. Or should I say do? He wiped his chin on his sleeve.

The action re-activated Janet's senses. His clothes hung silently, hinting but not speaking. They belonged to no place, no space or age she recognised. He could have been a punk. And then she remembered her first impression of his being a hippie. Long glazed white shirt with a neat waistcoat, a longer overcoat. She couldn't see if it had tails or not and she had already forgotten his entrance. He could have worn them to a show, a bit untidy, but even to the theatre perhaps: they wouldn't seem out of place, anywhere. She sensed the impression of age, of time warped. Surely the tails were her imagination. How distinctly, not Ray. She was tempted to peep between the legs of the table and prove her suspicions. He never gave her the opportunity.

You make a fine sauce, he commented, the red of his lips wiped shiny.

Thank you, she acknowledged. A laugh was building in her gut. It was ridiculous, not only his being there in this second-hand clothes look, but his being so ... his ability to return her to another time, to one in which she uttered such banalities unembarrassed, in which she had been the master of the meaningless flirt. She didn't enjoy the feeling. Her expression curled into the snarl of tight irony.

It was he, however, who laughed, loud, long and sparkling. The sounds enclosed them until she had no choice but to join him. The gurgling rose about them, cracking off the hard wood of the table between them, and reverberating proudly, held in by the hard stone walls of what had once been her cottage.

As it subsided, she offered him a drink and he nodded in acceptance.

I'm sorry, he apologised again.

What? Again? You shouldn't apologise so much.

Why?

No why. And does that mean you didn't really enjoy ... or even want your food.

Of course I did. I'm not stupid!

I'm glad.

Not stupid at all. It's years since I've had anything so good.

Or anything at all, she interrupted without thinking.

What do you mean?

Nothing. She knew she'd given herself away, that she'd lost the advantage she had been playing for: it had been childish to even attempt playing it that way, to hope that she could trick him with a few carefully chosen words. She wasn't sure how to continue, less certain as she realised the enormity of the next stride. Spectres haunted her words until they bit her teeth and shied back into the depths of a scalding throat.

And, indeed, what could I be but just that?

And do they have no manners? she countered, or is that how all insubstantial bodies gulp down their food? She'd scored. She sensed it, felt the imperceptible heat rise to his cheeks. She was glad. He was reduced to another apology and she felt more in control. She lit a cigarette, and as an after thought, offered him one. She felt she could afford to now.

He accepted. As a ghost I don't have to worry about health of course.

His smile concealed more than humour. Janet felt a growing comfort: they were beginning games she recognised, in which she held all the tricks. You're welcome, she threw in for no reason other than to decrease his comfort. It was the least she could do. What else could he expect, whatever he was: red carpets are reserved for only the few, and they pay well.

Have I frightened you?

Don't give me that shit," she snapped, You're not the first person I've unwittingly cooked for.

Yes. But ... I wasn't expected, was I?

They never are.

They stared at each other. She was no longer afraid to hold his eyes. He was first to drop the stare. I'm not sure, was his only comment as his fingers tipped ash onto the floor.

It was her turn to apologise she felt, but refused the option: Jesus, who the fuck did he think he was?

Their silence held another thirty seconds. It was he who made the first suggestion: Maybe I should go. She refused him a reply. Let him sweat it out. It's nothing to do with me, she argued unreasonably.

It's only that I thought that you might ...

I might what? In control now, she had no intention of letting him finish. He'd terminated her meal, he'd gone far enough already.

And they suddenly seemed to have nothing more to say to each other. Avoiding his eyes, his very presence, Janet felt herself hit by another wave of

dope, the ridiculous of the whole situation: she couldn't resist a giggle. The crescendo rose as he echoed her croak.

They laughed heartily together, not knowing what the joke was but content in the tension of the released sounds. Still smiling, she stood and found the bottle. I presume you'd like some of this. He didn't need to answer, what hadn't even been a question. Glasses rattled against the cupboard door before snapping to the table. The whiskey spurted irregularly; she saw that she was still shaking.

He threw his back in a slurp. She refused to follow, taming her instincts with regular sipping.

May I?

She nodded. He refilled, but took the next more slowly. Whoever he was, she was glad to see that he too needed a stiff one, that his nerves weren't made from icy steel.

Tell me a story.

The incredulity was in her eyes as she forced her voice to reasonable normality.

The story of the cards.

Not tonight Josephine.

Another silence reigned. The whisky broke on its rocks, until they melted it down their throats.

I think I should go.

Pissed off at this stage by the anti-climax of it all, she didn't give a shit.
Do what you like.

And then he was gone.

She finished her whiskey blinking. A faint impression still lingered of his entry, but there was nothing of his more recent exit. "I think I should go," she repeated his words, and then her own: "well go then," or whatever she had said, she could no longer remember. Her first reaction was that she had offended him, before she argued sense to her emotions and tried to analyse exactly what she was talking about.

The kitchen seemed emptier than it ever had before. She was all alone for what appeared to be the first time. She cursed him silently, despite the doubts as to what he had been, or was, or is. An empty plate, and more significantly, two empty glasses whispered the reality of his existence. Deranged she might be, she had never seen herself as completely sane, in the sense that normal people accepted, but neither was she prepared for the self-delusion of drinking two whiskies from two separate glasses. She knew what she drank, she mightn't be proud of it but she never tried to disguise it. A grumbling stomach heightened her awareness. She obviously hadn't eaten. There was nothing left in the pit, and little enough in the bottle. There should be wine in the cellar the American had bequeathed, a deep Spanish red, but she hadn't the energy to fetch it. She drained the remainder of her glass instead.

Empty, empty, so alone. It wasn't natural. The light seemed too bright, her attention too dim now that he had gone. He had, she was in no doubt. Hallucination or spectre, he had eaten her meal, and more than her guts assured her of the fact.

They sat down to continue their hazy fencing. Ray stirred his tea, making sure everything was dissolved. He sipped it waiting for them to begin again. Silence. Spoons clinked like ice melting.

"So you don't know where she is?"

"No. Up north somewhere. I told you. Should be back today."

"I doubt that somehow." It was the guy in the expensive suit again. Definitely not a cop, too little respect for authority - even Ray, with his limited experience of the police, recognised that. Maybe the secret service if they still existed or just some creepy hanger-on with nothing better to do than flash white teeth lovingly, in the most threatening of manners.

"Yes. I do think it's unlikely." The Inspector, or whatever he was, was back in the lead. "She works at Whitney Computer Investments, Huston Road. Isn't that right?"

It was rhetorical. Ray scarcely needed to nod.

"Well ..." A deep pause.

They were getting to it finally, Ray hoped.

"Well, after some careful study, built I may add on mounting evidence and in particular on a withdrawal last Friday, over five million has been

discovered to be, shall I say missing, from the companies stock trading accounts. Mr ahem ... "embarrassingly unsure of the name he indicated the suited man, "... can give you the details if you are interested but for the moment, however it was achieved, there appears to strong, very strong, evidence that Miss ..." He paused again as if he needed the cue-card of his notebook, "... Miss Winters has carefully, methodically, placed these funds at her own disposal. In places, which we have yet to determine."

A lengthy silence followed. Ray had nothing to say. He drained the tea, sugar coating his tongue, barely keeping it from drying in stiff shock.

"Quite a wizard with computers is Miss Winters, or so it would appear. Innocent until proven guilty." They all chuckled, except Ray. Cold tea scalded his throat.

From the howl of the wind a spindly finger beckoned. Hair tangled in a fretting haze she felt herself drawn forward. Breath sucked in the haze, a burning draught of ancient energy, well blended. Her feet had begun to float over the mud. Darkness hid the cliff edge, the thin line distinguishing it from the thundering water below. Such distinctions no longer seemed to matter. She reached out, as he did. Cloak entwined, a sheltering gauze, a compelling gaze. A twist. A wave. A bleat. A shout. Land, water and air breathing as one, a giants snore. She spun above them, exhilaratingly out of control. For a moment he held her. She didn't even dream of him letting go.

The House

With the whiskey scratching her throat, the pleasantly harsh tingle of something just a little wild, she stretched her legs out beneath the table and threw her head back over the chair. Red hair scattered in the dim light, creeping out in a crazed mesh behind her, wriggling as if trying to shape its own world, to paint its own images.

She laughed again, softly, silently, almost gently. Relief flooded her tones, flattening out the edges. She'd always known she would do it, but it was still, despite its tangibility, hard to feel completely at ease. She thought of Jane being released from her playpen: it must be a similar sensation, out alone in a world you had only ever seen from a distance, only dreamed in prayers from behind bars.

The wind howled louder, knocking her window anxiously for a response. She ignored it. She thought she could hear the waves crashing, endless suicides against the rocky walls of her cliffs. She filtered them out also, even as her ears sought their strains, their secret whispers, flimsy desires as they rose to flood her brain. It was nearly bed time but she would have just one more drink. She knew that. She was happy, safe, locked away here in her house, the building in turn gripped firmly in the fist of the surrounding wilderness. Like a Lego brick in Jane's hand, she let the world pass by outside unnoticed. She enjoyed the sensation of being thrown off balance, twirled like the thrills of an amusement park.

The house was nothing extraordinary, only another converted cottage brought by the combined force of money and reinforced concrete from the late nineteenth century to the late twentieth. Even in years, the jump wasn't enormous and the house had adapted without complaints.

The house was little different from the other fifty two in the village, better kept, more lavishly equipped, but it didn't stand too far apart from the others. Even its position failed to separate it. At the far end of Main street, perched with its back to the end of the village, it was the last settlement: the town had never grown any further. That realisation had made Jane laugh, then shiver when she remembered how, elsewhere, such villages have grown beyond human vision, or been surrounded, digested unrecognisably in the scrawl of the modern urban complex. How different it was from Ray's, from that whole country with its land belted down under the weight of criss-crossed motorways, buckled up by the blotches the maps called cities.

Only the wind, the ocean, could be heard here, scarcely rattled by the snort of a passing tractor or the occasional milk lorry slurring through the puddled rain. The toothless gape of an open subway still hadn't been discovered on these bleak slopes. The damp coats of peat had yet to be strapped under concrete, the whiff of turf, the twinge of dung still clung to the air unruffled yet by the steam of petrol driven engines.

Like many others before it, her house had been deserted by the dripping of emigration until finally left completely alone, to be taken care of briefly by a neighbouring family until falling into disrepair, neglected. The Whelan's never

returned to it: they seldom did. Then, many years after the last departure, the factory brought a spark of life. Twenty miles away, in the nearest town, the Americans ploughed money into the ground. One of the managers “fell in love with the countryside.” He proclaimed his delight to a handful of magazines and bought the house to prove it. Only half an hour to work by car! It was his money which had saved the weeping structure, which had set it apart slightly, more than its geography or disrepair, from the others.

It was this American, Janet had to be thankful to. A wine cellar, a brand new roof yawning skyward, strong new beams faking their age, a floor no longer creaking under age and a door that slipped into its frame like pyjamas on a sleeping child.

The factory closed as the grants went dry. The manager, it was rumoured, moved on to a new one in Spain, or Mexico, somewhere South, foreign and cheaper. Three years later Janet inherited the house at a ridiculously reduced rate. Not that it mattered. Money for Janet had recently lost its allusiveness, and it appeared equally unimportant to the American firm who were all too happy to be relieved of their eyesore. Janet bought it, unknowingly keeping up its traditions: another foreigner had moved in.

The woman in Whelan’s came to form a part of the community, a little to one side, out of the ordinary, nevertheless, a strand, a piece in the jigsaw of everyday life which was ever more complicated from being examined so closely. Janet relaxed. She saw through their eyes what a rare specimen she must be, how ridiculous she must look and slowly grew used to laughter.

At first it was at herself. Then, growing confident, it was aimed towards them, her new neighbours themselves. Down in Flanagans, or McQuires, or Tim's, they were all the same, she laughed loud and hearty, more ferociously than she had ever done before. Where they pulling her leg? Again? Tales of this, romances of others, gates that wouldn't shut, ship wrecked Spaniards, her own peoples foolishness, were all fair game. A foreigner in a strange land, she quickly came to recognise herself and see the humour in her pretences: that was her saving.

"Have you told her the story of the American?" Donnelly asked one night, knowing very well that no one had. Heads shook, others nodded towards Tim. He pulled them another pint, then returned to polish the glasses. But he too was listening, he too, behind the outward serenity, the casual flick of his wrists in a glass, was breathing quicker. What was Donnelly up to now? Janet waited. She was getting used to it, had lost the need to solve every pulse immediately. Anyway, she was slightly drunk. Patiently, she sipped her fresh pint and waited to be mocked.

"The American came in here once," chortled Donnelly. And they all laughed. Janet was forced to accompany their snorts, head shaking, hair flying. Was that it she wondered? Was that the joke, that he had actually come in here? She was never sure if she understood everything in this strange world; she was never quite able to control the reins of their humour, as biting as it was funny, bitter sharp as it warmed the heart. They roared on, maybe at her. She forced out the chuckles, then swallowed more Guinness to avoid carrying on

and choking on dry mirth. She moved a little from under Donnelly's arms and perched herself on a stool. She was still taller than most of them. Old men now, hairy and grey, they had no longer any need to worry about appearances, and she loved them for that. They could drink and smoke, wipe their mouth on a cuff, curse or be crude, because they had aged enough not to have to worry. They had seen enough to know it didn't matter and above all, they knew each other too well to shirk away from innocent instincts. She envied their freedom, the naturalness of their laugh. Sitting on the stool, she watched them, soaked up their comfort but still failed to grasp completely how they envied her, her unruly hair entwining pepper-fresh skin, or maybe just her ability to walk in and out of this village at her will.

So they became some kind of friends, mutually envious, equally failing to grasp the others constrictions, fears. They laughed the nights away in the security of beer-warmed minds. In Tim's, or Flanagans, or McGuire's, they were safe, secure, removed from the drizzle, the waves of the ocean beating nosily outside against the walls of their homes.

"Yeah. The American came in here one night," Donnelly began again, "looked around as lost as a pheasant in Galway city. And do you know what he did then?" He turned to face Janet again, to swing his arm back around her shoulders. "Do you know? Go on, give a guess."

She shook her head, eyes twinkling, lips already forming the edges of the laughter she knew had to come. Donnelly smiled widely at the whole group

now. He paused and pulled white froth down his throat in a gulp. "Looked around he did, then turned and walked out."

Gales of laughter, great shouting roars, echoed around the tiny room, bouncing off the hard wooden tables, skidding off their well-worn smoothness, catching in the occasional crack.

"Walked straight out he did. Sure he didn't know what to make of us at all. Not like our little Brit here, eh?"

Janet smiled, but said nothing. She was used to them. She sensed, hoped for, a vague affection behind the bitter labels.

"You saw him, didn't you Tim?" Donnelly continued, "Turned and walked out."

From behind the bar, Tim nodded vaguely. He seldom admitted to anything beyond the fixed price of a pint. His longest speeches came after the budgets, when he proclaimed the price rises in dour tones, lamenting as he did so that he wouldn't see a penny of it. They all agreed. They all calculated how they would have to reduce their consumption: "sure how could you afford it these days." And after the yearly ritual of a quiet couple of nights, life fell back to normal. Tim returned to his post behind the bar, squinting through the smoke at scraps of conversation, and watching faces blur indistinctly in the bottom of the glass in his hand.

"Fair play to you young Janet," Big Joe took up the lead: "at least you didn't walk out."

"And by God, sure we were waiting for it."

They howled again at Pauric's interjection. Pauric, behind his tiny glasses, had flirting eyes that it was almost impossible to catch. Janet tried in vain now, attempting to read beyond his words. Sometimes, even still, she wished she was smaller, and that she could fade away and enjoy their company without constantly having to search for the double meanings, the hidden lives that lay shrouded in such throwaway lines. She wished her hair wasn't so long and curly that it kept tangling every possibility of a quick escape.

"You know we had a bet on it."

"On what?" she asked, turning sideways to face Big Joe, sensing as she did so that once again she was falling for the teasing, that her natural instincts were being played upon; by Big Joe this time, as skilfully as he played the tin whistle.

"On how long you'd stay, of course." His lips curled into a grin above the rim of his glass, a smile disguised as the liquid lifted and his mouth filled with the heavy black beer.

"Ah, but sure the British have always been plucky. We should have guessed she'd hang in there."

Janet wasn't sure who had contributed this. Sometimes they all blended and she failed to distinguish them as they ceased to remember her presence and continued talking in the third person, as if she had been safely at home, curled up in bed far out of their earshot. Donnelly, the tallest but not very high, or at least didn't appear so under the weight of his heavy body. A barrel of a man, limbs well build for work on a farm, he filled empty spaces until they were

crowded as everyone fell into place around him. Heat surged into a spiral of jovial sweat. Big Joe was smaller, flighty, skinny despite his name, hands forever moving in rapid nervous swishes, beating away flies that wouldn't dare approach him out in the open. And Pauric, bespectacled, red-nosed, a big frightening man from the countryside, completed the group, shyly whispering wisecracks in the hope they were picked upon, or maybe just to himself. They were the main three, everyone else joined in, wandered away, leaving this hardcore of faint respectability.

"Ah the British know how to stay. They hung in here long enough."

"Still are."

There were dark mumblings of consent for this last interjection. Janet felt herself shrink into the hard plastic of her stool, its torn cover biting the inside of her leg; she should have worn jeans as she usually did, squirming on the sticky wet plastic, she remembered why.

Tim began muttering about last orders, feigning threats of the Gardai and how they would have his licence if they didn't all go. They ignored him. They all knew too well, including Tim himself, that no Garda would venture out this far on a night like this. They had all heard the storm gathering. The Gardai would play safe in the big towns tonight, and anyway, there was never any promotion in busting a small place like this. "Go on out of that. Give us one more and we'll be on our way quietly."

Tim consented. He had little choice and less inclination. It was ok. on a Saturday when you knew you would be packed, when they even ventured out

from the towns for the chance of an after hours pint. However, on a week night you couldn't afford to turn away business, no matter how late the hour. Fine drinkers they all were, but you never could rely on them; unpredictable, contrary, they shared their custom well, so Tim saw himself forced to treat them well when they were there. He handled the last round across looking grumpy: the few extra pence added up, he told himself, you can't afford to ignore it. He had been reassuring himself in a similar manner for so long that, even now when there was no financial need at all, he continued the old tradition.

"Go on Tim, throw in a short," Big Joe rattled, voice bumping hoarsely on a freshly inhaled cigarette.

The big thick fists slapped the Guinness pump.

"And a Paddy for me too," Donnelly lent his voice to the order, "and one for our young guest here as well. Only lady in town who'd dare drink with us.

They all laughed. Tim looked even grumpier as he fumbled for the extra whiskies: they were taking advantage of him, he thought. She's a bad influence. Who did they think they were. The misuses would sort that lot out, he threatened silently. Glasses slapped on the table. No beer mats, no swipe of his cloth: let them get their elbows wet, it would teach them a lesson. They can't have everything at this time of the night. More grumbles, but he served them regardless, for the few pennies more; and because he enjoyed the banter; and because over countless nights they had all become friends, not as much through speech or confidences, but through the osmosis of proximity: the

most durable, reliable of partnerships are built on the inability to escape. Besides, the young Brit livened things up. After all those years of these boring old bastards, she was something different. She gave their stained humour, vacuous laughs a lightness, a sharpness that had been missing for years.

She stifled a yawn. She still had a half whiskey left. The others appeared to be finished. They were haggling over something with Tim. Another? She hoped not. She slid off her stool and nearly fell: she always forgot how low they were, her long legs had hit the ground far too soon. Big Joe caught her. "Come on now girlie or we'll have to carry you again." She managed a weak smile to match the guffaws. She wanted to be home now. She couldn't face the walk. She wouldn't have cared even if they had to carry her. All she wanted was to be back in the house, her house, safe and warm by the gas fire, or snuggled up in the big double bed, rocked into dreams by the sound of its old groaning oak.

They struggled out into the night air, breath freezing into clouds on the frosty winter howl of the wind. Everything felt damp. Janet pulled her anorak closer, shying away as she did so from its slimy wet glance; inside it was warm but the shiny surface bore the scars of life clutched above the sea. She could hear the waves. They appeared closer, fresher. They seemed to be ringing clearer, each one a different note, until melody formed in the midst of her sluggish brain. They saluted each other, assured themselves they'd meet again and sauntered off in different directions. They had their wives to go to, soft and patiently used to their late hours stumbling. There was little else to do here they assured one another, and sure hadn't everyone their vices: it could be

worse, they confided. And yet, they cursed their men fluently and clouded the morning teas with dark stares. They had long stopped waiting up. They would all be curled up asleep, respite, the gift of a few hours never lived. Another days chores complete, they were snatching a few hours bliss before another awoke.

There was no one in Janet's bed, nobody waiting, only her house. It loomed before her as she marched to the end of the street. She could still hear Big Joe rattling a door behind her, fumbling for a key even though it was never lock. Across the road to her right, the corner of her eye trapped the faint impression of a light clicking on in Donnelly's. Maybe she didn't actually see it, only sensed it, an image imprint re-born from the familiar memories of many similar nights. She wondered what it was like inside those houses. They talked to her, charmed, bought her alcohol, but she knew she would never be invited inside. She could pretend, they could feign, but she was still a stranger, a foreigner, and ultimately hadn't even been here that long. She had lost track of exactly how many weeks, or months perhaps by this stage. Out here on the edge of the world time appeared to pause, to move haltingly in the dim routines of life in space. They would never take her in. She knew that, recognised that she had to be content with what she had, no matter how long she spent there. Even if the boys were willing, she doubted, didn't trust the tight eyes of their wives. She recognised the looks, those eyes that tore behind the facades to probe for

little the little truths that point at the whole story. She wondered what they saw, how much she gave away.

They would never absorb her, and she was glad. She had the bars, the bit of crack, the nonsense as easily swallowed and as comforting as her stout or whiskey. And when she had enough she could leave them, throw the empty bottles away and return to her own world. Just as she had always done.

A spray was coming in over the cliffs, seeping down her neck beneath her ruffled hood. The wind grabbed her sleeves, pushing her awkwardly onwards. The house looked dark, gloomy in the shadows of the night. There were no lamp posts to lend it rouge. Harsh and brazen, it stood there waiting. She stemmed the urge to race the last few steps, to dive up the stairs and into bed. Cold, lonely, it may appear, but she only saw its security only valued its protective stone; inside she could be whole again, she could delve into her mind in peace to weed out the wrinkles and etch out a new personal happiness.

Her fingers fumbled. She still locked her door - the habits of a lifetime still swamped her instincts. Lights flickered. A door slammed, the wind catching it in a sudden crack. She let her breath out in a windy gasp and sped up the stairs. Barely undressed, teeth unwashed, she curled under the duvet and lay there breathing in the familiarity of those strange smells and the crotchety moans of the springs or wooden frame they strung together. She turned over, her eyes catching her shadow in the wardrobe mirror, encased in another obstreperous chunk of wood. She wasn't sure where American tastelessness and ancient crude purposefulness ended or began. It amused her to try and

distinguish the two. The new front door was obviously his, bright and shiny, the varnish glowing ridiculously in the dignified shadows of a more solid frame. The kitchen too held this mixture, fresh pine dove-tailing into beaten, well-scared oak. Sometimes, she deliberately scratched the brazen pine, forcing it to blend, to warp out of time, shed its greenness and merge in with its history.

Sleep rushed at her. Eyes closed in darkness. Despite the wind, the howl of the sea, the cackle of rattled glass, she dreamt of London, of Ray, of the office, of fancy opening shows and dull drab Friday night parties: but only in her nightmares. Her real dreams were filled with the future, hopes baptised in the font of ancient memories, or desires; she could never distinguish the two. Here in her house she could give easy birth to such flights. Here her fantasies were as secure as they were vivid. They would never find her here in her house. It wouldn't allow them.

This was too much. Ray's world had been ruptured. It was flowing away like water from a barrel shot full of holes. "I don't understand. I don't understand. What are you talking about?" he argued, perfectly aware in the back of his mind that his words were no argument at all, that he hadn't even formed a hypothesis. Not at work yet, his emotions overruled such logic.

"Is she here at the moment?"

"We'd like to talk to her." another added.

"Very much." echoed the flashy suit.

They were coming quicker now, from all angles, forming a subtle net of pressure, a pin-striped web that spun down from the chandeliers and wrapped Ray in their sticky folds. They were experts at exhuming truths, sifting ashes to lift the lies and blow them into fires of revenge, beacons of fear in a hopeless world of sodden intrigue.

"No. No. She's been away all weekend. Visiting friends." What were these bastards looking for. Could they not wait until she returned. He hadn't time. Didn't need this. God. Was it only Tuesday. How was he going to work after this. He could phone in sick but Harrison was ringing and he had to sort that contract out once and for all. And fix up that cock-up. Only a pair of shoes, what damn difference did it make which side they were photographed from but they had created such an almighty fuss over the angle. They must be rushing to the future! It's essential for the image! We're looking for that certain ... And Ray could stew in the knowledge of how much re-mounting the photographic session would cost. Amateurs. What a stupid mistake. Cover all options. Should have outlined clearly beforehand anyway. And he'd have to sort it out and carry the blame. "I don't know. I don't know," he whimpered, lost in his thoughts, hardly hearing the question.

"You've no idea where she went?" The Super subtly repeated, a faint line of incredibility rising his eyebrow in a carefully gauged suspicion of disbelief. Ray didn't notice. "No. None at all. North, she said, maybe Cambridge or Bristol. I've never met her parents."

"Bristol isn't really North," someone pointed out, a nasty streak piercing the observation.

"Well she said North." Ray was regaining some of his stubbornness; he could treat them the same way he'd rough-up that bloody photographer when he found him.

The figures before him didn't appreciate the tone. "Now, I'm sure we all want to work together on this one. A little co-operation and we'll finish all the quicker." The Super made the proposition waver between a command and a question: "Unless you're holding something from us. It's vitally important we find her. Quickly."

"North. That's all she said. And why can't you tell me what the hell this is all about. I've got my work to get to.

"Now sir, let's calm down. Make yourself some tea, make us all some tea and we might save a trip down to the station." He paused in fake thought. "We all have a lot of work on our hands." Fingers slipped together in a twist of mirth. "Except perhaps Miss Withers."

The Bar

"Where's the girlfriend tonight?" Big Joe shouted, far too indiscreetly for comfort.

Donnelly ignored him, he was getting tired of the jokes. How should he know any better than the others. "Girlfriend," he muttered under his breath, into the cavern of his glass. "Girlfriend my toe." Twenty years ago we'd all have liked to have got our hands on her I'm sure. Too old for that now. They were laughing. Let them. He pretended not to hear. Someone nudged him on the arm, tugged his elbow. Big Joe's sweaty face appeared around the corner of his eye.

"Will you have another?" he asked.

"Go on. I will of course." Donnelly had no hesitation.

Dave Davies served.

"Lucky we got in early," Pauric proclaimed.

The others nodded silently: lucky they had, and had got a place at the bar from which they could order without shouting. A nod would do. From behind, legs kicked their stools while arms and fingers and damp notes, jerked in, around, above, and beneath, their heads and shoulders in mad attempts at attracting Dave Davies attention. Even for a Saturday night it was busy. Davies was scurrying around like a frightened rat behind the bar, hands weaving

between pumps, the sink, and the till drawer which was hanging open like a parched tongue in the desert.

"But seriously," Big Joe began, "seriously now. We haven't seen her for ages. She's still up there, isn't she? Up in the American's?"

"Aye." Pauric offered, "she was in the shop a few days ago the wife said."

"And your wife would know, if anybody does." Donnelly interjected, rising hoots of mirth from the listeners.

Pauric himself had to agree: "that's true. Too true. But at least she's still around."

They all drank to that, solemnly cracking the heads of their fresh pints. The novelty disappeared quickly.

"My turn," Donnelly grumbled, waving a fist of coins in Davies face. Davies was in no hurry to take it, he knew they'd be around for another while. His eyes were more concerned with the young couple he'd just served: from out of town, here for the late night, he reckoned. Well if they didn't pay soon, they can forget that, he'd get the police down here himself. Reluctantly, under the hot stare of distant eyes, the young lad drew the money from inside his leather jacket. "Young punks," Davies muttered to the three at the bar. "Think they can do what they like in a small town like this."

"Sour bastard, for all the cash he's soaking up," was the young guy's comment. His girlfriend ignored him. She'd been hoping for somewhere quieter. At least they had the car. She comforted herself, and tried to be nice. They

twisted their arms around each other and kissed. And then a longer one, tongues licking until they were happy in the heat of their bodies. There were no seats so they snuggled into each other by the door post. Donnelly scraped his stool along the bar a bit, to avoid their breath in his ear.

"Maybe she's just avoiding us. Got sick of our company or something."

Big Joe thought before replying. "You might be right Pauric. Three old fogies. She could be down in McGuire's or Tim's chatting up some young ones. Who knows."

"Who knows indeed," repeated Donnelly. He paused for a minute over a dying pint. "What do you think she's up to anyway? I mean, writing and all that stuff is all very well." A long slow gulp, blackness creamed white seeping down a long, battle scarred throat. "There must be something more. Why would you want to come out there."

They all took their time now, their minds mulling through the puzzle, fumbling with the complexity of what they'd recently taken for granted.

"Arragh, one of those hippies or something," was Pauric's interpretation, "you know what they're like. The Brits are used to wandering around discovering themselves and talking to the natives and all that auld shite."

"That's the Americans," Donnelly corrected.

"Aren't they all the same," Big Joe concluded. "I don't understand what any of them would be doing in a place like this from the big cities and the like? Sure what would they find her but rain and a few big rocks."

"True enough," the others chorused, reaching for their glasses. Dave had their next ones on, settling, waiting to be topped up. "There are some comforts to this place," someone said eyeing the approaching pints. And they all chortled again. Dave gave them a strange look: not like those three to be drunk this early he thought, if they're ever sober enough to get plastered. He tilled their money and forgot about them: who was he to judge, he reminded himself.

Big Joe decided that he wanted a cigar and waved across at Dave, nearly scattering the glass next to him. "Sorry Danny," he shouted cheerfully at his neighbour. Danny laughed back, winked, slapped him on the back before grabbing his pint quickly and removing it to the safety of his gullet.

"Don't worry," Dave said. he had glanced across at his till and was feeling good: "Don't worry. Sure aren't you my best customers. I'll get you another time."

"Fair play to him," Pauric said.

They agreed as they choked in the smoke. Steam clouds from the cigar scattered around, frightening the shifting bodies queuing behind them. Almost to himself, Donnelly muttered on, attempting to keep their minds on the subject: "Do you know, sure if it wasn't for the accent, she could almost be one of ourselves."

It was Pauric who laughed first. "Well now, I don't know about that." Still chuckling, a raucous cough rose from the back of his throat to emphasise his doubt.

Big Joe agreed: "A mighty strange accent it is alright."

Donnelly dropped the idea and disappeared back to his drink.

It's your turn tonight.

What do you mean? he asked, head jerking up to catch her face.

To cook, idiot. What do you expect? That you can simply turn up here whenever you smell food? Think again. Your turn tonight.

Their eyes met in a spark of laughter. There's no wine until you begin, she added, determinably clanking the bottle from her hands to the table, out of his reach. It stood there defiantly. And I've got the key to the cellar. The American only had one made.

Ok. Fine, he consented, I don't mind. Do you think I can't?

I don't think anything. How can I? She let the thought drop in mid air, but it wouldn't quite fade, rather, it seemed to continue hanging there, suspended in space between them.

Well if there's no more wine, I suppose I'll have to.

"Yes. I think you do."

He rose and began pillaging through the cupboards and then the fridge. Only when he had finished selecting and had begun cutting, did she reach for the corkscrew. The pop of the cork snapped across the clatter of his

knife. Onion fumes bit through the air. Not spaghetti I hope. She held back a chuckle, turning away to hide it.

No no, he assured, I think we'll try something spicier, a touch of the East perhaps.

"Whatever. Have you got everything you need?"

Oh I think so, more or less. Apart from the glass of wine.

God. For a ghost you're certainly into your carnal desires. She handed him one and filled her own.

He rose it and the glasses tinkled in a momentarily salute: Well, there has to be something to live for. He grinned: Even ghosts can't survive on bread alone.

Janet rose to the challenge: So that's what you are. She felt childish under the challenge and knew now why she hadn't dared such an impertinence earlier. What kind of fool was she to be sitting here sipping a good Rioja and pretending they were as normal as a T.V. sit. com.? Frying oil splattered as he dumped the mix onto the pan. Well? Her sentence demanded a reply. Having pushed enough to keep running even if it led over a cliff and into the illusionary abyss, she kept her pulse.

There's plenty of time for all that, was all he said, stirring gently, glass touching his lips.

For you maybe, but I'm mortal. You know what that means, don't you?

We're all mortal. Time runs out for us all. It's only a question of when, and of what speed it is moving at.

God, was all she managed. What a load of shite. She sat down in a sense of regret. She was being silly: nothing more than a perverse fantasy that would lead her nowhere but to ruin. She hadn't even written for two weeks. Instead, she'd lived in the nervous excitement of a teenager on a blind date. She cursed herself silently as she watched his back, the muscles flex as he added spice and blended it together. The only sound was this gentle stirring and the hiss of frying vegetables. The smell rose to fill her kitchen, to seep into the fittings along with countless odours from down the ages. He looked completely at home.

Did you do this for the American? She asked in a sudden instinct.

Who?

Nothing. She let the idea drop. She would be unable to tell if he was lying or not, if his answer rang true or hollow: over the past two weeks she'd lost the ability to differentiate as he sat opposite rolling his tongue over wild stories. Sitting at her table drinking, he was like her mother at bedtime, and she was a child again, listening wild-eyed, suspending doubt to prolong the soothing tones of the voice.

He hadn't even turned around to answer, or to pretend he had heard the question. Who?

Who indeed. What did she herself know of the American apart from the odd scraps of reference which were all that clung to the house, the village,

now that he'd fucked off. Would it be the same with her in a couple of years time, or a month, a week - would the time span make a difference? She didn't imagine so. And him. What scars would he leave behind in a faint whiff of chilli.

She knew she was fooling herself. Two weeks now, more or less, and each time he left, another light layer of complexity shuffled into place; the cobweb expanded gently, its threads tensing perceptively. She had no intention of getting trapped but neither would she brush him away before he had explained himself, or tidied up his own mess: it was a matter of pride. She threw back her glass and approached him from behind. She could sense the hairs on his neck tingle beneath her breath. Her hand grabbed his shoulder, rested there firmly, urging him to twist, to face her head on. The stirring stopped. The flame was flicked off, the vegetables ceased sparkling, settling instead to soak up the grease. He turned, his eyes not daring to avoid hers. Both hands clasped him, silk on a hoarse neck, firmness around a fragile wrinkle. Without a word she pulled him closer. The firmness of her lips cracked, widened and bit him on the nose. He had only time for a glancing grin of surprise before they swallowed his mouth in a billowing kiss.

It was the worse chilli they had ever tasted. They both agreed. It had lain there too long they decided, giggling. He reached for her hand across the table and she let him clasp her fingers for a second before they arched away, back around the firmness of her glass. Staring into the liquid, she smiled; she could still feel his weight pressing over her, the trembles along his back, the glorious surprise in his eyes. She had avoided them later, when they lay

snuggled close to ward off the cold of the floor. Then they had both become hungry. She had opened the second bottle of wine as he returned to his cooking. Standing over the flames, their hands touched, shoulders rested together, lips skimming off ears as the chilli heated and their appetite increased.

She brushed his finger. I think you should go now, was all she said, refusing either of them the pleasure of a full night, the fears of waking up before the nakedness of the dawn. It was better this way, she coaxed herself: it is too soon to create any further expectations.

He didn't move. His glass was empty but she refused to refuel it. His hand pressed tighter over her fingers. Why did you do it?

Did you not enjoy yourself?

Yes, of course." He allowed himself a smile. "But why? it was a bit ...

Unexpected?

Maybe.

And you? Are you not ... exactly that, unexpected? She paused to let him think, to recognise the steel reinforcing her sugary tones. Or do you reserve all rights of surprise for yourself?

No. Of course not.

They stared at each other, searching for a weakness, urged on by the anxiety that follows passion.

Who the fuck are you? She had pushed it aside for two weeks, ignored the unacceptability of his existence, and now it flushed through her face, her voice, all the more intense for having previously been ignored.

He sat back in his chair, the legs creaking, then scraping off the floor. You've said it yourself.

What have I said? He paused again, appearing to search for the words that would explain away their anger, give her reason to believe. His answer was another anti-climax. You've called me a ghost, and I'm afraid, that to you, that is possibly all I can be.

She still refused to refill his glass, even as her own toppled over the brim: the threat faded in a gulp. A ghost. A spectre, she repeated, letting the sounds rasp cruelly between her teeth: Should you not be wrapped up in chains or something? or tucked safely away in the wardrobe? A ghost. Well you sure enjoy a good fuck for all your spirituality.

I didn't just fuck you. He was almost snarling now. I made love.

Well I fucked you! Just to see if you're real.

There was nothing but silence and the rattle of rain on the pane. I think you should go, Janet repeated, and use the door, there's no need for theatricals. Reluctantly, he stood. She avoided his eyes now. She needed to think. She could feel the heat of his proximity but insisted on the discipline of distance.

He paused again, framed by the doorway. Janet. The voice hung silently, promising an illusion, a pound of flesh. You know that maybe you are as much a ghost in my world as I am in yours.

The door blew shut. She hadn't reacted, she had no time for such riddles, had no intention of falling for the trap. He had used her name for the first time and she'd never told him what it was. She had no idea if he had one or not.

Twenty past eleven. It was too late for the pub now. She thought she could hear the distant shouts of people beginning to dribble home. The window was still rattling. The kitchen smelt of chilli but even its hot powder couldn't disguise the remains of a sweeter, a mustier odour. That's one for the books. A ghost on my own kitchen floor! Her laugh rang, shattering the air into shards of flying crystal. She dropped her glass to the hard floor in accompaniment. She would clean the mess in the morning.

"Good night boys," she whispered in the wake of the steps clattering down the street. Her laughter cracked again; it seemed to ring out across the town, before dying in the swathe of an ocean wave. Someone cried out something about a banshee. Someone else mocked him. And another crept home quietly to avoid shivering in the night. The three pubs closed their doors, their owners satisfied, as only the exhausted can be. Sleep crept up with the slow infatuation of a hidden dawn, another night buried beneath soiled sheets, the swirling mists of dreamy breaths puffing a pillow in the rustle of darkness. Kirk crept back to stroke her cheek, scream in her eyes from the depths of that

pond, surrounded by trees rustling in gloom, providing no shade at all. Her hand darted out to grab him one more time, fingers still slippery through the years, as frail and aimless as they had been on her sixteenth birthday. Avoiding the icy air, deep beneath the blankets, her cheeks exploded in fiery guilt, endless loss.