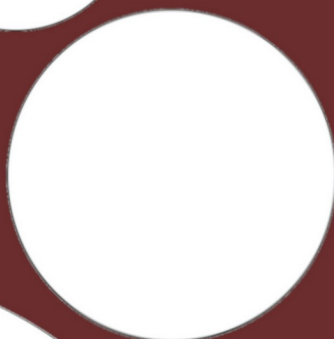
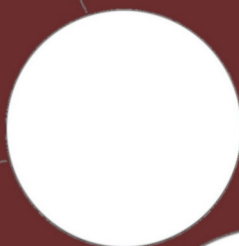


FERGUS DEFFELY

The Fix



βeta Books

Please Note

This is a work of fiction. The characters in it are imaginary with the exception of people shaping historical events. Actual historical events are portrayed as accurately as possible. Where characters from this novel are involved, this description is fictitious. If certain characters resemble people in real life, it is because often people in real life resemble characters from a novel.

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The Fix

by Fergus Deffely

About the Author

Fergus Deffely grew up in Mayo and was introduced to the arts in Galway city. He spent almost fifteen years working as a software developer, where he learned certain principles of design and construction which have found a new life in the dreaming and building of stories.

He is a proud father and a zealous, but less than elegant guitarist. The writer of several short stories and poems, *The Fix* is his first novel.

preciousflaws.wordpress.com

For Jackie

and

for Mona

The Fix

Fergus Deffely

Part 1

Charles

1

Charles Sullivan did not know by whom, or why, but he lived with the certainty he was hated. This sentiment haunted his every word and movement, magnified every transgression, and threw suspicion on every small act of kindness given or received. He fought it, fought the growing compulsion to see his life as a prison, but awoke each day to find himself still enclosed within the hollow bounds of his predicament.

This particular day in May, he stood nervous at his front door. He stared at the road. Nothing was moving. Nothing yet to challenge the stubborn stillness of the morning. Charles became aware of a noise. The droning purr of a tractor from across the fields. Outside of him and within him. And he felt breeze. A brush of air. It entered his front garden and stirred the leaves of the hedge and touched the flesh of his neck.

He shivered.

Fergus Deffely

That will waken me, he told himself. That will surely clear the cobwebs.

Charles held an awkward wad of plastic shopping bags. These were folded unevenly and they slid in his grip, making his fingers uncomfortable. He swept them up to underneath one arm and crammed them there. A bunched mess. He locked the door. Pressing down on the handle. Feeling it steady.

He shuffled his way down two shallow concrete steps. Standing and frowning, he uncrumpled and ordered the bags. Taking the time to fold them into a neat rectangular portfolio.

Better now... that is better.

He stopped himself and slowed his breathing.

Waiting now just a second. Just waiting.

Try and appreciate the day.

It might be a narrow one. It will be narrow. It will be that.

He felt the air fill his lungs. Breathing is...

Yes.

But his attention snaked away. Off to one side. Slipping into the keen absence of his car.

The car of course. Car isn't there. Well.

Yes. Yes. Walking then... it was walking. So...

The Fix

So no point in wasting time all the same. No. Best be going after all. It is time.

Time is, after all, a factor.

Charles stepped out on worn soles along the thin gravel of his footpath.

2

A lens of low cloud focused haze on the day. Before long Charles felt stuffy as he maintained a brisk pace towards the town of Athgarr. The roadside hedges cushioned close to him, primroses sputtering a protest of pastel yellow. Strands and spikes of wild fence growth outlined themselves against a porridge coloured sky. The world, the day seemed to be hanging. Just left there. Like a dress, a suit, a pair of old trousers, discarded, creased, unworn.

When he reached Athgarr, Charles had planned to make his way directly to Lenny Dolan's garage to collect his car. At the Londis shop on the edge of town, he began to feel stranded, when tight appeared Marty Walsh from the bookies further up the street.

Marty flashed in the side of Charles' eye. Caught.

Charles had announced himself in the shop before he entirely realised what had happened.

“Oh, it's quite nippy out there.”

“And the sweat rolling off you.” Olga Chambers, the proprietor, tapped the keys of a blue and yellow plastic calculator. Charles pawed his brow.

“What has you out so early?” asked Olga.

“Oh, I... I... need to pick my car up from... well, I suppose I...”

Olga’s attention was on her accounts.

“It started losing power...” admitted Charles.

“In for repairs is it?” Olga entered a series of numbers in quick succession. Black digits flashed on the silicate grey of the calculator screen.

Charles nodded.

Olga was recording her results in a small notebook.

“Lenny was in earlier,” she said.

“Oh, he was... Yes! He was saying that he had a lot of work on.”

Olga’s face, wise and dispassionate, rose to regard Charles. “He’s a busy man,” she said. Her eyes touched the deli counter at the other side of the shop. “I was telling him about the offer we have on cooked chickens.” She smiled. “Keep the strength up, eh Charles?”

Charles said Yes, that he would.

3

Charles left the shop carrying two bags of groceries. He felt his legs lighter, his breath easier in his lungs. He paused to balance his weight, then began the Main Street climb towards Lenny Dolan's. He fell to reminiscing about how amused he had been when he first discovered the notion that the view is always behind you when you're going uphill.

When he got to Dolan's garage, Lenny looked worried.

"Bad news Charles," he said shaking his head at the ground. "Not good."

"Oh?"

"Clutch," said Lenny. He paused in the oily still air of the garage. "Had to replace it."

"Really?"

"Oh, it was a goner. Burnt out. I don't know how you've been driving that car at all." Lenny smiled in disbelief. "Must have been some struggle with hillstarts?"

Charles nodded in solemn agreement. "A big job then?"

“Big enough. Ah, it's the stripping is worst, you know yourself. They're a hoor to get at.”

The car sat mutely outside the garage doors.

“I put in a couple a new plugs and changed the oil and... a new wiper blade on the passenger side.” Something in Lenny's manner gave Charles the sense that it hadn't gone entirely smoothly. He considered his wallet and became anxious. Lenny winced: “The bad news,” he said. He produced a spiral bound notebook and flipped through the pages. “Come in here with me a minute.” He turned, making his way past the open throat of a Mitsubishi Gallant into a partitioned space of the garage that served as an office. A grease smudged calendar celebrated May with the machined curves of a black off-road. Charles stared at the jeep. Tilted as it was on one side of a sun carved sand dune.

“You weren't below at the match Sunday were you?” A line of plywood shelving ran behind Lenny's head holding a row of dull grey ring binders.

“I certainly was,” said Charles, “Not a bad show?”

“Aw man, I thought they were desperate.”

“Who were? Our lads?”

“Ya, our lads. I know they got the win and all, and fair play, but so loose at the back.” Lenny tapped a pen off his desk and scooped up a receipt book.

Fergus Deffely

“Well, I must say that I thought Ross O’Connell equipped himself admirably,” Charles protested.

“He wasn’t bad now, he wasn’t bad. I’ll give you that. Still though, they need to sort something out with that half-back line... No way they’ll make it to the quarter-finals the way they are.”

“Yes, I...”

“Altogether Charles...” Calm silence. “It’s over three hundred, I’m afraid. Three hundred and eighty two euros, to be exact. It’s the best I can do.” Lenny tore a sheet from the receipt book. He inspected it sorrowfully for a moment before passing it to Charles.

Charles surveyed the receipt, dazzled for an instant by the scripted charge of the total.

“No. That’s fine, I’m sure... I don’t... I don’t have that on me now.”

“No. Problem.” Lenny met Charles’ eyes professionally. “Listen, I’m doing the books on Friday, if you could have it up to me before then that’d be mighty.”

“Of course, I’ll... Yes, of course.”

“Lovely. How’s the Mazda treating you?” Lenny handed Charles the keys.

“Very well. I couldn’t...”

“They’re a solid car them. Solid car.”

“How are the tyres?” Charles looked shyly at the dark green chassis as he asked.

“Not bad now,” said Lenny, “Not too bad. Those ones will do another while.”

They walked to the car. Charles placed his hand softly on the handle of the driver side door. “Alright so,” he said. “Sure, we might see you Sunday for the draw maybe...” He lowered himself into the car. “Oh, but I’ll probably see you before then... of course I...”

Lenny patted one of his palms with a 32mm spanner. “What’s it up to?”

“Am... it’s somewhere well over ten thousand,” said Charles. “Nearly two months now since it was won.”

“A fortune,” Lenny smiled.

“The longest run since we started.”

“Amazing.” Lenny stood with his hands on his hips, looking on as the ignition caught. Listening to the revs of the engine as Charles engaged first gear, second gear.

A lifting wave of Lenny’s arm flickered in the rear view mirror as the car pulled out of the yard.

4

On the outskirts of Galway city, passing the race course, Charles felt the car begin to sag and drift to the left. He deployed a rare curse and nursed his way to a stop on the hard shoulder. Stepping out to verify what he already knew. His rear tyre, squat and sunken, hugged the roadside surface like a dark grey grin. Charles sighed as he set himself to tackle the labour of the repair.

Bloody typical. Squeaking crank of jack needs oil and the whine of wheel nuts. Grease blackening his fingers. Just bloody typical.

Later, in traffic, at the lights on the Tuam road, Charles avoided looking at the bright digital numerals of the dashboard clock, their heat tickling his vision. He breathed through his nose.

The Galway traffic mazed and nuzzled. The baritone cluck of cycling truck engines. Doppler whispers of passing cars. Windscreen shutter-frames, black and blue-grey, quilted whips of motion.

Then waiting.

In the city centre he coaxed his way to a multi-storey car-park and was stirred upwards and into a space on the third floor. He stepped out of the car and oriented himself in the brine snot stench of the docks.

"She's not here, she's at the cinema," said the girl at the door of his daughter's flat. "Some Judd Apatow thing." Cyan and purple nails played nimble patterns about the tears in an oversized black wool cardigan.

"I see," said Charles.

"I don't know which one though. Which cinema?" The girl leaned forward slightly on her tiptoes.

"Do you know will she be here this afternoon?" asked Charles.

The girl brightened.

"She didn't say. I'm off out myself now too. Do you want to leave a note for her?" She daggered her phone from one of the pockets of her cardigan.

"No, no. No need. It's kind of a surprise visit."

The girl yawned. "Well they'll probably be back before long,"

Charles looked down at his hand, to the shopping bag full of groceries that he held.

Fergus Deffely

“Sure, I won’t keep you then.”

“See ya,” said the girl.

“Bye, bye Sophie.”

5

In a café on Eglinton Street, people willowed past in the clear grey light of the street. Open doorway voices filtered into orphaned words, cries, whispers. A clattering accompaniment of dishes and cutlery. The occasional score of espresso steam. The chant of ordering customers.

Charles' eyes flicked to a small stainless-steel teapot that sat on the table before him.

Give it another minute.

After leaving his daughter's apartment, he had walked around onto St. Augustine Street, where he stopped into a second-hand store. He needed a new jacket. Browsing the raingear, he became quickly uncomfortable. Something unsubstantial was lurking behind the limp nylon swish of those navies and blacks and dark greens. Charles withdrew and found himself whistling for a number of steady paces as he walked away.

Fergus Deffely

He turned onto Abbeygate Street and was glad to be amongst a crowd. The pace of the city lifted. He met with the sobering hurry of pedestrians, alert and friendly faces. He hung a left and moved onto Shop Street. Tables of people enjoying coffee and food and talking. He threaded his way through sways of crowd, past bicycles and buskers and was drawn into the market where it was lively. Charles drifted through the streams of voice and colour. Carved wood and laughter and the postponed hint of dark psychedelic knitwear. And bodies in their clothes were close and moving. A tweed lapel, eyebrows and bare arms. And the resigned hiss of frying onions. And the smell of them. The smell of food. Of bread and of curry and people stood eating and talking and Charles cast his eye around but could find no way to stop himself. Nothing to hold on to. And then the crowd was thin and then it was gone and it was quiet on the street.

Charles understood that he must be hungry.

In the café on Eglinton Street, he ate lasagne and drank tea. The seats were comfortable. He opened a newspaper in front of him and watched through the window as the people passed by.

6

After lunch, Charles returned to his daughter's flat. At the entrance gate to the apartments, he met a man in a smart red and navy rain jacket. The jacket looked warm and waterproof. The man held the door for Charles, smiling, his expression suggested that he wished someone would do this kind of thing for him.

In the corridor outside the door of the flat, Charles waited patiently. He had knocked too softly. Try again. Gan! Gan! Gan! His knuckles smart against the teak. He glanced up and down the bareness of the corridor and blinked slowly at the door and waited.

“How are you Gillian?” said Charles.

“Dad? God.” Gillian Sullivan wore a faded black Kylie Minogue t-shirt, tight around her chest and broad shoulders. Her hair was short, in a bob, straight black with red streaks. “What are you doing in Galway?” Her dark brown eyes playfully suspicious.

Fergus Deffely

“Well not a lot now, to be honest,” admitted Charles.

“Did someone let you in outside? You didn't buzz?”

“No, I... Yes. I met a fella on the way out. I was here earlier. Your flatmate said you were gone to the cinema.”

“Sophie?”

“Yes.” Charles felt a flush of heat at the base of his neck. He raised a woven plastic shopping bag of groceries. “I brought some cooked chicken.”

“Who is it?” A man's voice called out from somewhere within the flat.

“It's Dad,” Gillian called over her shoulder. “God. Come in. Come in.”

The television was on. A narrating voice intoning practically, dramatically, the details of extra-terrestrial technology in ancient Egypt. A lean figure stood tall from where he slouched on a deep-cushioned orange couch and stepped towards Charles. He placed a thin cigarette of rolling tobacco between his lips and extended his hand.

“Hey there,” he said.

“You remember Juke.” Gillian stood with one arm across her stomach holding her waist.

“Ah, yes. Of course. Duke,” said Charles. He looked around the room. “It seems brighter in here somehow. Has the place been painted since the last time I was here?”

“No,” Gillian frowned. “Not that I’m aware of anyways.”

“Nah. Time a day probly,” said Juke.

Charles walked to the window and looked out and down onto two lanes of traffic. Juke sank back into the couch.

“Can I take the bag off you Dad?”

Charles placed the bag on the smooth pearled top of the counter that separated the kitchen from the living area. He held it open with both hands. “There are two chickens in there. And a few bits and pieces. There’s some organic lettuce. It’s nice lettuce.”

“Great!” Gillian moved plates and cutlery, the remains of lunch, ketchup and chips, to the sink and dustbin and then began to empty the groceries.

“Oh, and biscuits!” She smiled. “You have us rightly spoiled. I’ll throw on the kettle.”

7

Juke sat watching television. The rear of his head was a small dry explosion of sandy hair. It rested, cushioned motionless against the couch. Giza from the air overlaid with the constellations of the northern hemisphere. Charles moved cautiously avoiding the screen, taking a chair next to the small gas stove. His eye ran around the room. Scrutinising skirting boards and floorboards. Coming to rest eventually on a small discolouration on the wall near the door.

“You are interested in history Duke?”

“Kinda ya?” said Juke.

“Hmm.”

“It's mad like. I don't really believe it, but it's mad what's out there.”

“Egypt, do you mean?”

“Well, not just... but like, a bit. But there's mad stuff... some of the stuff.”

“Yes?”

“Ya...” Juke lowered the volume on the television. “Like, there was this thing on the other day about, you know, doomsday scenarios.”

“Sounds serious.” Charles wagered a smile.

“Fucking Apophis, d'ya ever hear of that?” whispered Juke.

“Apophis?”

“Meteorite. Gonna pass earth 2036. One in forty thousand chance it'll hit... and fucking wipe us out. Entirely!”

In the kitchen the kettle water rose.

“The whole planet,” said Juke. “It's crazy.”

“Really? That's...”

“Ya, it's messed up. An' the hadron collider... no one knows what they're at there like... Like do we know at all, really, how delicate time and space are? You know? How actually easy is it... to rip open a black hole, or something? Scary. The future's dirty man.”

Charles straightened himself. “Well. It's certainly a long way from the pyramids we've come.”

From the kitchen they heard Gillian's voice. “Are you having tea Juke?”

“Ah, no. Maybe coffee maybe.”

Fergus Deffely

Gillian brought three cups from the kitchen and placed them on a small coffee table. She fell onto the couch beside Juke.

“So what's the story?” She threw a coy smile at Charles, her nails picking the small ribbon of plastic that circled one end of the biscuit pack.

“Ah sure, not a lot of news. Got a puncture on the way up.”

“Quel bummeur.” Gillian coaxed a biscuit from the pack and dunked it to about half way in her tea. She quickly swallowed the soft oat and chocolate mush.

“Whereabouts did you get the puncture?” asked Juke, his eyes on the television.

“Ah... Just as I was on the way into the city. Never a dull moment, eh?” Charles reached forward and shepherded a biscuit and his cup of tea from the coffee table.

“Any craic at home?” asked Gillian.

Charles eyes widened. He chewed slowly.

“Ah, the usual. Good match last Sunday.”

“They won then?”

“By three points. Fairly high-scoring game. Against Ardmoyle. Yes... Am... ahead from early in the second half. Scored a load of points in the first ten minutes. Ya, they've come on a lot. Even in the last few months even.”

“No doubt Julia Canning was pacing the sidelines.”

“She was indeed,” Charles nodded a smile.

Gillian turned to Juke. “Athgearn's number one supporter,” she informed him. “She's unreal. I remember her actually screaming at referees.”

“Ha, ha,” Juke laughed, coughing bright flecks of oat into the air.

“An old flame of yours scored a few points,” said Charles.

“Who?” Gillian squinted at him.

“Ronan Durkan...”

“Ronan still living in Athgearn?”

Juke took out a pouch of tobacco and began to roll a cigarette.

“Well, I think he's over in Letterfrack a lot,” said Charles.

“Letter... Frack?” said Juke.

“Yes. He's over there studying something. Oh, something to do with the environment. Bogs, I think. Something like that.”

Gillian looked to the television. Tangle of concrete and iron. Suburban wreckage. Armed men standing next to armoured jeeps. Fighting ongoing in northern Iraq.

Fergus Deffely

Charles took a moment to deal with an oversized gulp of hot tea.

“Lots of people in the market today,” he said, wincing.

Gillian smiled and closed her eyes for a full three seconds. “Spending lots of money no doubt,” she said.

“No, I didn't buy anything at all,” said Charles, “I must be getting sense in my auld age.” He drank again from his tea.

“You could do with a new pair of shoes Dad.” Gillian said this matter-of-factly. She stared at the television. Juke turned his head to look at her. He glanced down at the worn ends of Charles' shoes.

“Fuck sake Gillian?” he said.

“You could do with a new pair yourself an' all.”

On the television, the news had moved on to sports.

Juke looked at Charles, shaking his head in slow disbelief. “Nightmare!” he said.

“The white hat looks absurd on yer man.” Gillian's voice was high. On the television, a golfer and his caddy paced briskly on one of the fairways at St. Andrews. The golfer wore a bright white sun hat.

“Oh,” said Charles, “Tell me, how are things going at the café.”

“Hmm?”

“What's it called? Babel's?”

Gillian pitched her head towards Juke. “Here give us the remote. I want to change this.” Juke gave two small slow shakes of his head. “No,” he said, “Leave it on a sec’.”

Gillian sighed. “Babette's Dad. It's Babette's.”

Charles throttled a smile.

“Do you still like it there?” he asked.

“I'm not working there anymore.”

“Ah, I see. Nice spot that. I liked that place. Babette's.” Charles left his empty cup on the coffee table. “And, so, where are you now then?”

“Please Juke,” said Gillian turning her head towards him. “This is boring.”

“Sure it's nearly over.”

Gillian shook her head. She looked at the floor. “I'm nowhere Dad. I'm not working.”

“Okay,” said Charles, “Okay.”

Juke got up, cleared his throat loudly and obviously and walked out into the hall and disappeared through a door. Gillian picked up the remote control and began switching through channels. Björk appeared on the screen. Skipping about a street in bright colour.

“And you're managing okay for rent?”

“Managing,” said Gillian.

Fergus Deffely

“Well, sure that's the main thing.”

They heard the muted sound of flushing toilet, a short, energetic fit of coughing, the metal tickle of a turning key. Juke walked trancelike into the kitchen absorbed in the screen of his phone.

“You don't find you have too much time on your hands?” Charles voice was warm.

“Nah. No. No, God No.”

“Like myself.”

“And Mum was the same.”

The small of Lorraine Sullivan's back lies soft against Charles' stomach. His nose presses against the back of her head. The sweet acrid smell of her hair and the smell of clean bed linen. She turns her face slowly. Her ear and cheekbone brushing the side of his mouth.

“Let's try to get out of the house tomorrow,” she whispers. She lifts an arm free from the covers and reaches back and places her hand on the side of his face. Fingertips trace the curved paths of his ear.

Charles sighs and smiles into her hair.

“Tomorrow,” he says.

8

Charles stared distantly at the television. Horses, from the air, galloping wild across the American prairie. Running for the sake of it, running because they were free. Browns, bay and black and chestnut and the dust in clouds.

He heard the gentle reminder of Gillian's voice.

"Do you see Úna at all these days?"

"Not quite as much anymore." Charles leant back in his chair. "We still run into each other a fair bit... for the lotto count... and at club meetings... she looks after the finances, you know."

"She doesn't call in for 'business meetings' any more?"

"No," answered Charles, "There'd be no reason for her to be calling to the house."

"Do you remember?" asked Gillian.

Charles looked at her slowly and deliberately.

"The red leather bag on the kitchen table is what I remember," she said. "And the two of them'd be constantly moving. One minute they'd be sitting at the

Fergus Deffely

table and then you'd come back in a few minutes later and they'd be standing by the counter. And always really intent, like they were planning something." Gillian laughed. "It really was like that. Their 'business meetings' you used to call them. Do you remember?"

Charles pushed up a smile.

"She used always call me a 'forest spirit'," said Gillian. "I don't know where she got that from?"

"Well, we'd be lost without her in Athgearn," admitted Charles.

"Shiiiiite." They heard Juke from the kitchen. His disgruntled face lifted from the screen of his phone. "Newcastle down two with five to go." He looked helplessly from Gillian to Charles to Gillian.

"Useless," said Gillian.

"So you're a magpies man?" asked Charles.

"That's very disappointing." Juke's head craned over the screen his phone.

"Juke is an avid fan."

"Hmmm?" said Juke. He swept a hand in front of his face. "Fuckin' flies in here Gillian."

"Well feel free to put out the rubbish if you want."

"Yeah, yeah."

Charles stood up and patted the pockets of his jacket. Juke opened a window in the kitchen area.

“Now. I’ll leave ye in peace,” said Charles. Gillian looked up at him and heard him say: “I’ll owe the parking place a small fortune.”

Gillian frowned. “Is it just me, or does it feel hot and stuffy in here?”

Charles walked to the window and looked out. “It’s been warm all day,” he said. “And a bit dull... Hmm... Yes. Still fairly dull... Mind you, there is a bit of a wind. What’ll you do now for the evening?”

“I’m going to make use of that wind.”

“Mm?”.

“I’ll head out to Rusheen for a while and do some surfing.”

“Surfing?”

“Windsurfing.” Gillian was taken by a sudden burst of energy and twisted herself around and up in her seat to kneeling. She leant on the back of the sofa with her elbows.

“Windsurfing, if you don’t mind,” said Charles. “Rusheen? That’s where? Out Barna ways?”

“Ya...”

“That’s a fair bit out. How do you get there?”

Fergus Deffely

“Bike.”

“Oh, I see. And how often do you do that now? Is it not expensive?”

“No, not really. I have my own board.”

“You don't carry the board on the bike surely?”

“No, that would not be feasible,” droned Gillian.

“I see.” Charles looked out the window again. “And you'll have the wind for it today?” He gazed at the sky.

Gillian looked to the window. “Just about,” she said. “You don't need much.”

“Oh, now before I forget.” Charles' eyes swept the kitchen. “Have you that bag?”

“This it?” Juke held up a thick plastic shopping bag.

“Thank you sir,” said Charles. He took the bag and rolled it into a tight baton. “So being unemployed has its advantages?” he said.

“It's hard work sometimes, I can tell you that,” said Gillian. “But I love it, you know.”

“I'm glad to hear that,” said Charles. “And is it always out in Rusheen you do it?”

“Well, for now. That's where my board is.”

“I see.” Charles swung the rolled bag like a tennis racket. “And if you had a car now with a roof rack? Or a van?”

“That’s the dream,” said Juke absently, while scrolling through a match report on his phone.

“Oh?” said Charles.

Gillian smiled. “Grand designs.”

“Go on...”

“Well, I’ll be certified to teach at the end of July.”

“Teach windsurfing?”

“Yeah.”

“And would there be much demand for that kind of thing?”

“Ah ya, there would be...” Gillian lowered her eyes uncertainly. Her face became clouded, pensive. She bit her lip. “No. I really think there would. In Ireland like... at least...”

Charles tilted his head, calculating. “How would you get around?”

“Well, that’s the thing. I’d need transport. Some way to carry boards and stuff.”

“A car?”

“A van, I’d say.”

Charles raised his eyebrows. “And have you been looking?”

“A bit,” said Gillian glumly. “Money Dad.”

Fergus Deffely

“Oh, who are you telling? What kind of prices are you talking, as a matter of interest?”

“For a van? The ones I was looking at were around five grand.”

“Five thousand.” Charles whistled.

“Yeah. And then a website. And boards and sails and wetsuits and...”

“Never gonna happen,” said Juke, looking up.

Gillian squinted at him. “We’ll see.”

“The fucking bank manager’ll see,” said Juke.

Gillian’s eyes flared. She looked to the floor.

“I think it’s a valid business plan,” she said calmly.

“It’s a valid dream plan,” said Juke.

“You know what Juke?” said Gillian.

Juke returned to his phone.

“He’s probably right anyways,” said Gillian.

No one spoke for a while.

Gillian left the sofa and walked into the kitchen. She looked around. “Have you everything Dad?”

“I think I do,” said Charles. “Yes, I...”

“Say ‘Hello’ to Úna for me.”

“Just push the button when you get down to the gate,” said Juke.

“The... yes...”

Charles walked from the window to the doorway into the hall. Gillian darted over and ambushed him with a swift hug. “See ya Dad.”

“Bye Gillian,” said Charles in wonder.

Outside, he felt uncomfortable as he walked down the unswept corridor.

9

“Jesus, I’m behind am I?” Alf Mooney, hair straggling, jiggled the keys in his pocket.

“Ten minutes, or so,” said Charles.

Alf handed over some money and took a ticket from him.

“Do you know the score at all Charles?”

“No sorry, not a clue.”

Charles wore a high-viz vest with stencilled letters on its back: Athgarr GAA. Around his waist, a large black canvas money-belt.

“Listen,” said Alf. He jabbed the ticket at Charles. “I’ll wander in.” He walked uphill through the car-park and disappeared into the playing field area.

Charles stood bored and alone beside the entrance to the sports grounds. He checked his watch. Twelve minutes past three. He felt as though the day had placed a lock on him. Had bound him with its unnecessarily fine weather, the warmth and sunshine. He sifted and screened the

afternoon in the leaf shadow of a lime tree. And every so often, he could hear the crowd. Rising roars from the pitch. He put his hand to his neck and stretched. With nothing else to do, he began to busy himself inspecting the unused pouches of the money belt. Negotiating zips and clasps. In one a thin slip of paper. Folded. Charles pinched it out. Bus Éireann? A city bus ticket. Where? It was...

“There can't be many left.” A treacle voiced man's voice from behind Charles shocked him.

“God, Christy, you gave me a fright.” Charles held the ticket before him like a candle. Christy Gloss, dark groomed and moustache, red-rheum tainted eyes and firm full lips. His eyebrows bridged in wary judgement.

“Away with the fairies Charles?” He stared at the money-belt and at the ticket. Charles poked it nervously back into its pouch. “No, I'd say they're all gone up,” he said. “A few just shaving it.”

“Not too bad,” conceded Christy.

Below them both, a lone buttercup grew up from out of the grey gravel dust of the driveway.

“Much in the tin?” asked tall Christy.

Charles tapped the flower fondly with the edge of his shoe. “About what you'd expect.”

“Well I'd expect it'd be at least four hundred euro.”

Charles smiled. “Yes. It's in or around that.”

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“Sure that’s respectable,” said Christy. “Here, I’ll take that off you. You might head in and relieve Noel.”

“He’s umpiring?”

“He has to head away.”

“Hm? No trouble, I hope.”

“Cow calving,” said Christy.

Charles unfastened the money-belt and handed it to the Garda.

“Well, I better get a move on so,” he said.

He felt a smile hide his face as he met Christy’s eye. The big man joined his hands behind his back, fumbling with the clips of the belt as Charles strode off up the hill.

10

Play was moving down the field towards him as Charles reached the game. The black and red of Athgarr swam and tightened in clumps against a pour of green jerseys. He saw the ball curl out through the air, kicked to the left wing, bouncing, was lifted, carried. A shoulder. A surge forward, it came fast over the heads of the Athgarr backs.

“Mossy, MosseeEE, MawwwwssSSEEEEE!” Charles heard the roar, saw the hand up. A man inside in too much space. Where were they?

Livestock tumble of limbs.

The keeper naked.

A goal!

The shot came.

No.

It came weak and wide.

“Come on Carralough!” squealed a girl's shrill voice.

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By the goal posts at the other end of the pitch, white-jacketed, Charles identified the cross-armed, burly form of Noel Joyce. Shrunken in the distance, Noel transmitted a bright-hot urgency.

A long drill of supporters stood along the side-line. Summer shirted, red and black headbands and caps and the scarce green of the visitors. Charles striding, rounded the corner flag on the outside. He passed up through the swinging heads of the crowd, their glances and strange stares, sidestepping. A nod here and there. "Hello. How are you. How are you."

He moved up the sideline towards the goal. Past the dugouts.

"Charles." Warm sting of familiarity. The trim patrician figure of Aiden Murray turned from the crowd to meet him. Soft warm hand. "We have some work to do."

"Are we down?" asked Charles. "I've only come in."

"Down two points." Aiden's clear words.

"Shite. They seem to be giving a lot of space there... just there in front of the full-backs." Charles lobbed a thumb in the direction of the Athgarr goal.

"Yes. There's some complacency there, no doubt." Sun white crescents pooled on Aiden's cheekbones. He looked out past Charles onto the field.

"Well. We'll just have to keep fighting," said Charles.

“I admire your positivity,” Aiden smiled to himself.
“Sure two points isn’t a massive gap?”

The refined, oily streak of a magpie partitioned the even blue of the afternoon sky.

“I know the way,” said Charles. “But sure, the problem is... once you have one gap plugged, another opens up.”

Aiden moved his head, tracking the course of the game. “It’s close,” he said. He looked at Charles. “I’m keeping you from your duties Charles?”

“Ah no. They’re short an umpire is all.”

Aiden looked inquisitively up and down the field from one goal to the other.

11

“Dirty, filthy cunt of a ref,” completed Noel Joyce.

He stood by the upright. The visitors’ goalkeeper paced the stud-pocked mud between the posts with his hands on his hips. He kicked at the ground and spat.

“Who’s that?” asked Charles.

“Same bollocks we had last month below in Carrickbawn,” said Noel. His face was tight like a fist.

“Oh yer man... what’s his name, yes...”

“Disallowed that last point, did you see that?”

“Said...”

“He fuckin’ overruled me on it,” Noel whined a warning.

“What? One of our...”

“I’d say it was inside. I’d say it was. But, sure what the fuck do I know. Huh?” Noel was red and serious.

“So we’re owed one,” said Charles.

Noel unbuttoned his jacket and held it out. Charles looked at the whiteness in surprise. "I've to go deal with a heifer," said Noel. "And here's this gobshite now again."

Athgearr had scored a point. The referee, cyan vest and lean, ran towards them. He addressed Charles.

"You're taking over?"

"Yes." Charles brandished the white jacket as evidence.

"Grand," said the referee. "Donal." He held out his hand and Charles took it and they shook.

"And you are?"

"Charles is my name."

"How are you Charles. You can start by lifting that white flag for us." Charles reached to his knee and pulled the clay-thick point of the umpire's flag from the dirt. He waved it above his head signalling a score for the home team.

The referee chocked his whistle into his hand, turned and ran back out onto the field.

Charles looked back, but Noel was already gone.

12

The final score saw the visitors ahead by a point.

Athgarr had been awarded a 45 metre kick in the last seconds. A chance for a draw. Ian Costelloe stepped up. He held the football in the hush of the air and stood with his left shoulder to the goalposts. He looked to the posts.

To the space between them.

To the space between himself and them.

A memory of his mother entered his mind. She had just returned home late after a night out. He was thirteen years old.

He remembered his father had led her into the kitchen. She walked through as though it were her first ever time in the house. She looked at him and her eyes were bright and for a moment the mask over her pride had slipped and she said: "Ian."

It seemed to him that she was looking into his future. But as she stood there and looked, she saw some hidden thing, a fear, a conceit, a warning. His or hers, he did not

know. But a part of the world had broken then. He remembered how she withdrew her eyes and hardened her smile.

The ball curled left of the posts and wide.

13

Players shook hands after the final whistle. They collected near the dugouts and passed around water bottles and track-suit tops and encouragement. Smelling of sweat and Deep Heat.

A crowd drifted over the sideline. Gathering around the players in a scribble of faces.

Curious. Expectant. Uncertain.

Nudges and voices.

Not a bad result now. Could be worse, could be worse.
Marcus, have you water?

On the field, a group of boys were taking penalty kicks.

“Never mind that. We were unlucky.” Seán Geraghty’s clear eyes spoke of the future. He moved amongst the players, managing downcast faces. “A few soft points lads. That’s all it came down to.”

Slap on the back. “Good man Adam. Well played.”

Tired legs and half-smiles and the work of breathing. Seán's voice found them. "Well done Ross. Well fought."

He wrung out small dribbles of optimism.

The crowd began to drain away. Charles circled the field gathering flags. Tramping to each of the goals. Untying nets. His fingers urgent and determined, pecking open knots.

He hauled the bundle of nets and flags to the clubhouse and dumped it outside the door of the narrow storage area. Sweet smelling men spilled from dressing rooms, making for cars.

"How'ya Charles."

"Hello... Corey. How are you. Good game. Well played."

Charles fired the flags roughly onto the storage room floor. Straining, he hoisted the nets onto a row of hooks on the wall.

In the home team's dressing room, he found Christy Gloss standing by the doorway alongside Seán Geraghty. Players lowered their eyes as they passed out under Christy's vigilant glare.

"Thinking you might get a job as a selector Christy?" said Charles.

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Christy's eyes flashed. "Weighing up the pros and cons, is it?" He leered as his face vaulted a snarl.

Charles held up the umpire's jacket. "On the hook?"

"On the hook," said Seán. He waved his hand towards the corner of the dressing room where a dirty huddle of white jackets hung together like a drooping waxen flower.

"I have the nets and flags in," said Charles.

"Okay grand," said Seán, his voice clipped and staccato. Then: "See you later Patrick," to one of the players.

"See you now Patrick," followed Christy, deep and soft. Patrick tread his way lamblike across the threshold.

"Any more at the gate after that Christy?" Charles' voice, as he moved towards the corner, chose to squeak the words.

Christy sucked a breath. A backwards hiss. He smoothed one black nylon sleeve of his jacket. "Not a one," he said.

"And Noel got away okay?" asked Charles.

"Oh, ample time... ample time... Let's hope."

“You're locking up Charles?” Seán picked up a kit bag and a net of footballs. Charles was buried in the corner, his hand groping about, fingers still fumbling for a hook.

Seán and Christy made their way to the door.

“Aaaah... You've the gate money?” Charles cried after Christy's back.

“I have,” said Christy without turning.

14

Charles returned home and ate a cheese and tomato sandwich and drank down a cup of tea, swigging it quickly. He put his dishes by the sink and went out the back of the house where he picked up a strimmer, a hedge shears and a slash-hook. Taking the tools with him, he drove the three kilometres to Bob Dawson's house.

A few weeks previously, Charles and Bob had found their conversation move to the topic of nettles and briars. Bob had confessed that his yard was being slowly but surely overrun by them. Charles suggested tackling the problem but Bob had laughed it off. There were worse things to worry about than an innocent patch of wilderness.

Charles was not persuaded.

After he arrived Bob took him on a short tour of the advancing strands of bramble along the far end of a rough square of back garden. The two men stood, their hands on their hips, estimating the work of clearing.

“Come on,” said Charles. He brought the tools from his car. Bob fetched a pair of shovels, a pick-axe and two pairs of gloves.

They began to work. Tearing and pulling out briars. Throwing them aside in heaps. An hour passed. They took a break. Bob made tea and they stood in the evening sun.

They talked about Bob's nephew, he lived in San Diego. About California.

And time spent in America.

Bob had once been to see Ray Charles play live in Atlanta. Charles said that he would have liked to have seen Ray Charles perform live.

The men took up their tools again and began to work. And after a while, Charles realised to his delight that he had lost track of the time.

15

At the back of Mannion's pub was a courtyard and a small car park. Outside the rear door, three young men stood smoking cigarettes. Two hoods and a hat. Greys and blacks and bands of white sport stripes. They mocked each other and laughed.

“You'll be the wan man.”

“No fucking way.”

“I'm telling you. Mark. Won't he?”

“Ya. You're ruined man. You're ruined.”

“Go way you... with your cheese eyes.”

“Maaaa aa aa... Cheezize!”

Doubled over in snorts of laughter.

“Lads!” Charles' voice interrupted them. “One of ye might get the door for me.” He carried a keg-sized red plastic cylinder in both hands.

“Let him in with the draw drum.”

“Here, you let him in.”

“Ya. Well I will well, an’ all.”

Inside Mannion’s the crowd was scattered in clusters. Familiar faces and names. Footballers, friends and girlfriends. They passed phones in circles. Gossiping. Peering at screens. Giggling and pretending horror.

Charles’ attention was drawn to two strange faces at the other end of the pub. A man and a woman sat together with skin that knew sunshine. Now who were they? Glasses of beer in front of them. Their backs to the oak-panelled wall. Tourists maybe. They sat side by side without talking. Looking out at the other tables and the bar and at the pool table. They looked content, vaguely content, like the memories they were forming.

Charles moved on up through the bar.

Noel Joyce and Marty Walsh sat drinking.

“Until...” Charles heard Noel’s voice passionate as he passed. “Until something is fucking done about it!”

Marty Walsh, part-time truck driver, slink and sallow, his jacket tight and grey and narrow lapels hung from the angles of his shoulders. He sat with his back curled,

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leaning slightly forward. Downing a gulp of porter, he waited for Noel to continue.

Noel sat with his arms folded and stared sulkily at his pint, nursing his irritation until it would next animate him to speech.

Charles moved on past them and past Aiden Murray, who stood talking to a crisply groomed young man. Just arrived, Aiden wore his coat and held an enormous golfing umbrella in one hand. He gripped the lower arm of the man beside him and leant his head sideways as he spoke.

Charles set the draw-drum on a table underneath the television. He returned to the car and brought in the rest of the equipment. The base of the drum and a case that looked like a rugged black toolbox. He dropped these on the table and walked to join Noel and Marty at the bar.

“How are you Marty, how are you keeping?”

“Charles grand now grand,” streamed Marty, but as he half-reached for his pint, he stopped himself with a judder. Charles attempted to parse this momentary awkwardness of Marty. He judged it best to keep clear. He turned instead to Noel. “How did you get on with your business earlier?” he asked.

Noel smacked his lips and resettled his tongue. "Bull calf," he stated.

"Oh, not too bad." Charles imagined a tiny newborn animal and his eyes moved quickly to the window and the sky outside. "Sharp enough out there."

"You wouldn't think it's May," said Noel, shaking the muscles of his face.

"Jesus no," said Marty.

"Still," said Noel. "Couple of bob won't go astray."

"You'll sell it then will you?" asked Charles, who knew nothing about farming.

"Oh I will." Noel raised his eyebrows hungrily. "Eventually..." His pink eyes glistened.

"Every bit helps." Marty spoke darting and quick.

"That's it now," said Noel, as though the matter were resolved.

A loud spill of laughter from further up the bar. A hard, separating laugh opening the air of the pub.

Charles' face clouded.

The world swirled.

He heard the metallic register of the pool table.

The low rumble of the balls.

"So the..." Charles spoke into the floor, but his sentence had nowhere to go. He jerked his head up and his failing

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gaze found by chance, Teresa Ruddy, young behind the bar. Teresa's hair straight and black and black eye-liner and a black t-shirt.

"Teresa," he called out.

"Spew," came from Marty.

Teresa regarded Charles through the opaque windows of her eyes.

"Teresa, Seán might have said to you..." said Charles wincing. "He may have mentioned... the ah, the microphone that I usually use, my own one, isn't working..."

Teresa's face cleared. "Do you want to use one of our mics?"

"Yesplease."

"Just a sec'." She disappeared into a door behind the bar.

"We were lucky Charles." Aiden Murray appeared in the space beside him. Charles rolled towards him, wakened by his voice. "We were lucky," echoed Charles. He paused, listening to the listening silence of Noel and Marty next to him.

"Jesus," Charles closed his eyes. "We'd need to be more careful... or we... we might win a game."

Aiden smiled. "You'll do the draw?"

Charles prepared to speak. "Charles," Aiden spoke his words softly to a figure next to him that Charles could not see, "Looks after the weekly lotto draw for the club."

"For the football?" Charles heard a voice that gave attention to every syllable.

"Yes, for Athgarr," said Aiden.

"No room for error there," said Aiden's well groomed companion appearing from the other side of Aiden. He looked directly at Charles. His eyes and teeth glinted. He waited.

"No. Well... Would you believe... We've actually a sizeable jackpot tonight."

"We'll all be at each other's throats if it's not won soon," said Aiden. "It must be one of the highest?"

"Well we had a summer high for ticket sales this week. I can tell you that much."

Teresa handed Charles a microphone across the bar. "That okay for you?" she asked. "You can plug it in there same as usual."

"Yes. Perfect. Thank you Teresa."

Charles placed one hand on his stomach, feeling the rubbery pudge of his modest paunch.

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“Maybe time for some Karaoke after,” said Aiden's smartly dressed friend. He smiled an instant at the microphone.

Aiden chuckled. “Karaoke. Yes. Maybe a bit of Meatloaf Charles?”

Charles was afflicted by an image of Meatloaf, microphone in hand, holding the patrons of Mannion's in thrall.

“Stranger things...” he started.

“You know Colin?” asked Aiden.

Charles shook his head. “No. I don't think we've met.”

“He's married to Antoinette,” said Aiden. “You know my niece Antoinette?”

“Ah, I see,” said Charles. “You're living in England aren't you?”

“No,” said Colin. “We moved back. Back to Dublin. We're in Ballsbridge.”

“Where the desperate people are,” said Aiden. He touched Colin's elbow and this pressure unsettled his companion's face.

Charles listened attentively.

“Ya. They're still there,” said Colin.

“Colin works in finance,” said Aiden reassuringly.

“Oh. I thought things were picking up?”

“Ah, they are,” said Colin, “But you know, there's still a lot of people struggling.”

“You don't say.” Charles' tight throat swallowed.

“Like there's people for example, who have taken loans out... Using their homes as collateral. Bought property. And then...”

Charles looked unimpressed. “Quite a coincidence,” he said sullenly. “Something very similar to that happened to myself.”

“No!” said Colin.

Aiden became suddenly interested in something at the other end of the bar.

“Oh yes. A few years of threats from the bank. Talk of court orders. Repossession,” Charles sighed. “Wasn't much craic now, I can tell you that.”

Colin broke a practised grin. “Sounds like you might be one of the desperate people yourself,” he said.

16

Beside a table, underneath the television with languid movements, Charles assembled the draw-drum.

He placed the drum onto its base. Checked the turn of it. The drum purring as it spun. He plugged the microphone in and switched it on and blew into it. Expecting the rough reward of noise from Mannion's speakers, he was disappointed. Something wrong. He looked towards the bar and the distant crowd there. Identifying Teresa Ruddy's dark water form.

He saw that she saw him.

He waited patiently.

Charles observed Marty Walsh in the process of transferring his thoughts to the muscled flesh of Noel Joyce's face, his movements quick and pointed as he spoke.

Teresa adjusted something. Flicked a switch.

"Try it now."

“Testing... 1, 2, 3.” Charles’ voice croaked out over the speakers.

The black plastic case contained a tray block of dark foam. The kind used in packing electronic goods. Embedded in the foam were four rows of plastic spheres. Ping pong balls. Six of them to a row. Each of them numbered. Handwritten numbers in black marker. From one to twenty-four.

Charles lifted the tray out of the case and from underneath it, he took a pen and a thin stack of pages. He stared down at the topmost of these. At the arrangement of lines, ink and black, that formed the brave four-story tower of empty boxes in the centre of the page. Brushing his hand across the velvet softness of the paper, he was held by the necessary innocence of it. Of the neat white rectangle before him. Vacant and pure. Free of significance for a few last beats of moment.

The date was: 15 – May – 2016. He scribbled it down.

And checked the time.

9:14 pm.

“I wouldn’t go near it. It’s a pure scam.” Noel, at the bar, wiped his hand through the air.

“Still lot a’ money makes you wonder.” Marty tilted slightly towards Noel’s shaking head.

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“No,” said Noel firmly. “Except from people I know.”

“But you don't know,” said Marty.

“I do know,” said Noel. “No unsolicited emails. Full stop!”

Marty silently absorbed the strictness of this avowal. He looked with concern at the parallel lines of the counter top. Making himself see them extend past the end of the bar, running off to that imaginary place where they could never meet.

“You don't want to end up like what happened to Bob Dawson,” Charles warned. Noel and Marty raised their eyebrows.

“Caught?” Marty's voice rattled the single word.

“Caught badly,” said Charles. “I got an email from him, I didn't know what was going on, some special offer.”

Noel shook his head grimly.

A black track-suited figure manifested itself beside Charles at the bar. “Luka!” A voice called him, his friends by the pool-table. Luka turned his head to them. “Ice.”

“Got the credit card details, the whole lot,” said Charles.

“Mother of Jesus,” said Noel.

“Jesus,” said Marty.

On the other side of the bar, Teresa's pale practised hand laid out a bundle of change on the counter-top. Two

bills, coins, a curled receipt. She looked up and seemed just then to notice Luka where he stood.

“Uh-huh?”

“Absolute fucking disaster,” said Noel.

Luka made a clicking sound with his tongue. “Two bottles of Bulmers and a Club Orange... With ice,” he recited. He scratched the end of his nose.

“Ran up a couple hundred... he had some ordeal getting in touch with the credit card people,” Charles continued.

Marty provided a short series of vigorous nods.

“That’ll stir things up for you,” said Noel.

“It’s rare though,” said Marty.

“Ah, it happens more often than you’d realise,” said Charles.

Luka was taking his wallet from his pocket and paying for the drinks.

“I’d hate that now,” said Noel.

“It’s bad, it’s bad,” said Marty.

And then Luka was sweeping away the triumvirate of bottles and glasses, airlifting them from the bar. He carried them with an easy swagger and placed them with jaded achievement on a table next to the pool table.

Charles felt Aiden Murray’s soft grip on his shoulder. And the warm confidence of his voice: “Now, Charles.”

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Aiden smiled as he waited for Charles to turn and Charles turned and he saw Aiden and Colin studying him and then Aiden asked, “Will Úna be gracing us with her presence tonight?” Charles shook his head and looked at the floor. “No. Not as far as I know.”

“Wouldn't want to have you stepping out of line,” grinned Aiden.

“No,” Charles produced a laugh, “God, No. I...”

SKATTCHISSH!

A crashing loudness. Charles was jolted by the noise. A tray of drinks too close to the edge. Irreversibility of glass and breaking. He felt a wave that was a trough, an ambush of blame and fear. But it wasn't him! It really wasn't him, he hadn't touched the tray. No, he was... almost certain... it was nothing to do with him.

Charles gulped his throat.

“Jesus, it's all chaos,” smiled Aiden.

“We'd want to watch, or someone'll call the cops,” laughed Colin.

Charles felt time begin to tighten. He glanced uncertainly around the pub, his mind grabbing at the familiarities in the place, charting and analysing. Windows, wooden tables and chairs. The tourists had left, their empty glasses still sitting on the table next to the front door. Teresa busy, brushing and swabbing the spill of glass shards and beer. Seán Geraghty had walked in with his brother Gerry. Gerry Geraghty, short and fair-haired and burgundy shirt, moved like a boxer, light and ready on his feet.

Aiden Murray waited beside Charles with comfortable assurance. Accustomed to the political surrender of Mannion's. To its allowances and demands, its spaces and small sympathies. He angled the blades of his eyebrows and looked to the television. "Well, that's the weather over with. Let's be having you now Charles."

Charles smiled an agreement. He waited dutifully while Teresa finished the cleaning.

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When she was once more behind the bar and disposed of brush and dustpan, he asked her to mute the television. He walked to the table that held the lotto gear.

Above the chatter, he heard the teasing sing-song: “We’re going to be riieh – iiiih – iiiich!”

Charles picked up the microphone. It woke with a whine.

“Hello.” His voice came large and clear over the speakers. “Welcome to the Athgearn GAA lotto draw this fine Sunday evening of the fifteenth of May. We’re going to do the draw now. As most of you know, four balls will be picked from a pool of twenty-four. We’ll get to that in a second. First though, I just want to say thanks to everyone who has helped in selling tickets. In particular, I’d like to thank Mannions, Jennings’s Centra, Olga Chambers in Londis and everyone in the Athgearn post office. We have a record jackpot tonight and that, as a result of strong ticket sales. Fourteen thousand, one hundred and twenty euro. Be no harm in the back pocket.”

Charles moved behind the table and rolled up a sleeve.

“I’m going to place the balls in the draw-drum now.”

He took the balls from the tray and released them, in threes and fours, into the hollow interior of the drum. Tapping out their half-life, they bounced to rest. After

adding the last ball, he closed the lid and put one hand on the handle of the drum.

“So without further ado.”

He set the contraption in motion, working and turning, stirring the balls. The drum crooned on its axle, the contents churning in a liquid rattle.

Then silence.

Charles pulled a bare arm from the belly of the drum. Held up a milk grey ping-pong ball to the light. He called out the number on the ball, placed it on its own in the empty tray and recorded the number on the paper beside him.

Looking up, he saw that Christy Gloss had arrived. Charles gave him a short nod. Christy, it seemed, did not notice. Charles turned back to the drum and drew another ball.

And again.

And again.

The last ball drawn was the number 1. Charles wrote it into the bottom box of his record sheet. Above it the other three numbers.

12.

10.

18 at the top.

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He thanked everyone for their time and reminded them that the winners would be contacted and then he turned off the microphone. Signing the record sheet, he gestured to Christy to witness it. Christy approached and leant his shadow over the table as he signed. "I think your pen isn't the best," he said to Charles.

It had stopped working.

Charles sat a while at the table after Christy had left. He sat still and breathed slowly. When he stood up, he felt odd. As though he had found himself suddenly and weirdly inside a large tent. Under a canopy of some kind. The walls and ceiling were curved, they seemed to be flapping, they were further away somehow than they should be and how had the floor been draped with an enormous sheet? By the bar, Christy Gloss's back, dark and motionless, hung in front of Noel and Marty, their blotched forms melding together into one. Charles felt his legs heavy and uncooperative. Every lifting of them was an enormous struggle. His feet swept the ground as though tasked with the tracing of some unknown but delicate pattern. Afraid to look, he became captured by the sudden absurd sense that there were porcelain figurines, Yes, small creatures of delft hiding beneath the floor covering.

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“Are you alright Charles?” Seán Geraghty's voice near him was arresting and comforting.

“How are you Seán,” said Charles from a thin corner of his throat. “And Gerry...”

“Any winners?” beamed Gerry Geraghty's dark eyes.

“No. No winners. Not yet.”

“There's bound to be winners this week anyways,” said Seán.

“Bound to be,” echoed Gerry. “Someone will be buying us all a round of drinks. Ah... and do you know now... speaking of which...”

Charles attention was dragged to the bar, as a cresting laugh erupted from Noel.

“You'll have a pint I suppose,” Gerry said to Seán.

“Well, I don't know another reason I'd be in here,” smiled Seán.

“Yourself Charles?”

“No. I have the... I'm... driving...”

“Julia?” asked Gerry.

“Not the...” started Charles. He looked up and saw that Gerry had directed this last to the space beside him. Charles turned dizzily to see brown hair and bright lips and swollen chest and swollen eyes. His own tired eye was

dragged low into her blouse. Into the heat of her breast flesh. He smelled her sweet floral scent in his stomach.

"I'll have a glass of Guinness, thank you very much Gerry," said Julia.

"Julia, I didn't see you there," said Charles. Julia turned her wide eyes into him.

"Didn't I do well for myself?" she said.

Charles could not bear those eyes and what they might hide. He stared past her, to the side, into the emptiness between her and Seán.

The silence became awkward.

Seán coughed.

"Yes," said Charles, "Very good."

19

Colin stood at the bar. An ochre-bronze light fell on the taps there, on the oak panelling behind, and on the bottles and glasses. Teresa pulled pints.

“God, it feels like it's been a long day,” said Colin.

“Sunday's like that.” Teresa lifted her slow white face.

“Blame the football,” Colin smiled.

20

Beside Marty and Noel, Christy Gloss stood tall and silent. Surrounded by the pulse of words and voices in the pub. He was still, until he acted, his movements brisk and certain. His arm whipped his left hand from the pocket of his jacket. A sweet chirp of nylon. He scanned his watch.

Marty paid for three pints.

Christy's eyes flickered to further down the bar where a tray of empties had been set. He let his gaze rest there, admiring the cool symmetry of the glasses. The frank elliptic locus of their rims. Beside them, white saucers and cups. Coffee-bottomed with oily brown and cream scum.

Pints sat on the bar on three mats. Marty picked one up and handed it to Christy who snarled in appreciation.

"Any fishin'?" asked Marty.

Christy stared at Marty with an expression of disbelief.

"Bits and pieces," he said. "The weather hasn't been the best."

"No," said Noel, "Not enough rain."

Fergus Deffely

Christy drained off the top third off his pint.

“Doesn't matter on the lakes,” said Christy, “So much.” He wiped his thick lips with the back of his hand. “But not so pleasant to be stuck in a boat with it pouring out of the heavens. All the same.”

“Docko killed a good sized fish this weekend,” said Marty.

Noel's face mobilised into real interest: “Where the fuck is Docko I haven't seen him in ages?” he asked.

Christy glared at Noel while he waited for Marty to compose a response.

“Won a bundle a month back,” said Marty. “Off on the jolly.”

“Dirty cunt,” said Noel. “Was it a trout or a salmon?”

“That he caught?” said Marty. “Not sure. About the length of my forearm it was.” Marty held out one arm and indicated his elbow with his other hand.

“That's a monster,” said Noel.

“A monster,” verified Marty.

Noel and Marty shook their heads in mutual disbelief.

“So no luck?” Noel tried Christy again.

Christy stared at Noel.

“A small one today,” said Christy. “A bit beyond the wrist.” He smiled. “Trout.”

Marty looked up from the floor in time to see Julia approach. Julia Canning, steady, moved towards them in denim and satin. Her dark brown eyes fell upon the men, as though she were seeking their trust. She raised her round chin.

“Well, what happens next?” Julia sang the words.

Noel looked away for a moment. “I don't get that one,” he said slowly.

Julia smiled encouragingly at him. “Well, we've had the game, and the lotto... Now what?”

“Sure, what rush is on you,” said Noel, “Aren't we young yet?”

“Ah, there's no need to go bringing age into it... Noel,” said Christy, his lips gleaming.

“Puts a nasty twist on things.” Marty adjusted his backside on the stool.

Julia laughed. She rattled the ice in the remains of her gin and tonic. “Sure, who knows, one of us could be rich!” She swept her gaze across the three men.

Marty lowered his eyes to the floor.

Christy looked over at Noel.

Noel smiled at Julia with a warmth that he hoped he had managed to disguise as mysterious.

Fergus Deffely

“I suppose we’ll find out tomorrow,” she said. Her voice full of soothing and danger. “Sure ye don’t even do it do ye?”

Marty looked up. “Ya. I do it.”

“I get a few tickets ‘s well,” said Noel, “Sure you never know.”

“I never bother,” said Julia dismissively.

With his eyes, Noel, falling into disappointment, indicated that Christy should field this proclamation.

Christy stood still and silent for a few seconds. “Never,” he said.

“It’s..” said Julia.

“I...” said Christy.

“Spew,” said Marty, wriggling on his stool. “Bad odds anyways.”

They found spaces in the bar away from each other’s eyes while they drank.

“You’ll have another one, Julia?” Noel was ordering.

Julia looked at Noel in admiration. And all around the pub, her eye taking in the swatches of people standing and sitting.

“Sure, I suppose I could withstand it,” she said.

“Ah go on,” smiled Noel, “Sure can't Christy drop us all home in the squad car.”

Christy snorted and Julia smiled. She turned her head slowly towards the big man.

“I spend enough fucking time in that thing as it is,” he said. “I'll probably be stuck in it tomorrow for a few hours to measure.”

“It is thankless work Christy,” said Noel.

“Thankless is the word,” said Christy.

Julia looked into her glass. “A gin and tonic then Noel,” she said. “Thank you.”

Marty slapped his knee. “Charles must be gone home”

Noel seemed to ignore him. Concentrating instead on Julia, his expression darkening.

“Are you sure now you're ready for another?” He leered childishly at her.

Julia scowled back.

“Well, I wouldn't say anything,” Noel said approximating a sulk, “only... I'm just after noticing there's still a drop in that...” He cocked his head at the drink she held in her hand.

Julia soured her lip. She looked down her nose into the remnants in the glass. “The stuff at the end there isn't the nicest,” she said. “A bit watery, don't you know.”

Fergus Deffely

“Jaysus,” said Noel, “Waste not, want not, I always say. I wouldn’t like you to think we were putting pressure on you.” He leant back, he seemed pleased with himself and he held himself that way.

“I’ll have a pint,” chirped Marty.

“Oh ya?” Noel formed a disapproving pout.

“Do you know,” said Julia, “I’ve changed my mind.”

“Sorry what was that? Another gin and tonic?” Noel’s body shook with his own mirth as he tumbled out the words.

Julia shook her head in disgust. “Whatever,” she said, “No. Actually, I’ll tell you what. Just water is fine.”

She composed her face and swirled her glass, making tiny whispers out of the last scythes of ice.

They started to talk about farming.

They drew from Noel the story of the calving. Noel related unpoetically the details of the labour and birth. He talked in the abstract, elongating his vowels, as if in hidden sympathy with all dilated cervices. He praised the vet and made talk out of wellingtons and gates and meadows.

They prodded Christy for news of a recent spate of break-ins. Christy smiled and spoke and said nothing. Marty and Julia fell back to joking and so it went on. They grew comfortable and the words grew unimportant. Laughing as though it weren't forbidden and following the miniature directions of their bodies to closing time.

Part II

Christy

1

The outside air hit Christy and lifted him. He opened his chest and drew it in. Feeling the weight of it and of himself and of his legs beneath him. The night was warm and black and he felt a wild surge of possibility. An urgent energy that demanded a purchase in the world. A mark. A sacrifice. Christy closed his eyes and felt the power of it, animal and pure.

It would come...

But when he opened his eyes, something had changed. The moment was too beautiful, too perfect. It shifted its gaze from him and Christy shuddered and felt a shiver run through him. The shadow of a shadow.

Distracted then by his bladder, he transported himself to the car-park and into the dark of the trees. Unzipping his trousers he urinated, asserting himself with glad relief onto the grass. Looking up through early leaves into the night sky.

2

Christy slept silently. His face part sunk into the soft white cotton of the pillow. When he moved, rolled, beneath the surface of his sleep he was aware of the feel of the layers of fabric above and below him. His leg kicked out, over the edge of the mattress. It rested pale and haired against the demanding cream of the thick bedroom carpet.

The room was bright. Blinds. Light, hanging swivel-blinds, admitted a neutral morning light. Christy twitched, sniffed out of his nose. Withdrew his leg. Rolled onto his stomach. Sank both arms underneath his pillow. He slept like this for a while.

Awake, he sat on the edge of the bed. Rubbing one leg, up and down over the dome of his knee as he remembered the night in Mannion's. He felt the tickle of hair along his little finger. Staring towards the window of his bedroom.

At the still blinds. At the strings of tiny white plastic beads hanging in catenaries between each vertical.

In gaps, the depth of the outside world distracted him.

Brushing his teeth, brushing away the salt empty taste of last night's drink, he rinsed toothpaste. Gargled and spat. The tip of his tongue tasted mint and fluoride and blood.

In the shower, he growled as he masturbated. Guiding himself to surrender.

Better now.

Better.

A plate of scrambled eggs and four rashers sat on a thick blue-bordered plate. Toast. Butter. Christy placed a full mug of sparrow-brown tea on the table beside his breakfast. He took a seat. Dragged the Sunday Times across the table from out of a litter of supplements. What was it? An opinion piece on the possibility of new life for the Green Party? He absent-mindedly smeared a forkload of egg into the fold of a half-slice of buttered brown toast. Levering the egg and toast into his mouth, his reading was interrupted, distracted by the taste of salt butter and of wheat and the silken touch of the eggs.

He ate again and read and ate again and turned the page.

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A large photo of Andy Murray in the sports section. Poised for a return. His eye cradled the ball. His arm held back, extended, the racket just out of focus. The moment seemed intimate to Christy. This moment, this everyday act of a tennis player. It was sweet somehow. Made him feel comfortable. Like an unseen intruder.

He turned the page and ran his eye over the weather forecast. Afterwards, as he washed the dishes he squinted at the sky through the kitchen window.

3

Christy drove to Úna Brennan's and pulled his car to a stop outside her house. Úna was working in her garden. She wore an indigo paisley headscarf, a wisp of red-brown hair at her temple. Hunkered beside a wheelbarrow, the muscles of her arm flashed taut, as her hand moved functionally over the ground, pulling weeds. She stood and turned to meet Christy.

"Were you talking to Charles?" she asked.

Christy brought his arms around in front of his chest. "No."

"Are you on duty again tomorrow?"

At this, Christy glanced behind himself at the loud white and yellow of his squad car. He became stiff and said: "Yes, I am. What's up?"

Úna threw her hand onto her hip and looked at the sky across the road.

"Charles can't make it," she said.

"I see."

Fergus Deffely

“Family thing. Gillian. You know Gillian? Charles’ daughter?”

“Right,” said Christy. “Nothing serious, I hope.”

Úna looked at Christy and shook her head.

“Could we get it done without him?” asked Christy.

“Better not.” Úna brushed a line in the air with her trowel.

“I suppose there’s a lot of money involved,” agreed Christy. “So then...”

“So tomorrow. Same time.”

Christy raised his eyebrows. “Right you are Úna. Well. I won’t keep you. Best of luck with the wedding.”

4

The next day, Tuesday, Christy was late to Úna's.

He had been waiting on the road outside the village of Carrickbawn for almost four hours. He received the call early. A car had skidded into a ditch.

The driver stood on the road, bleeding slowly from his forehead, meek and bored. An ambulance was on its way from Castlebar.

They waited.

Christy moved about the scene, adjusting bollards. Gazing up and down the road for oncoming traffic. In the ditch, broken headlights and the lace of cracked windscreen. Dull reflections cloaked the body of the car.

"Jesus, they're taking their time," the driver laughed nervously. He pushed his hands down into the ends of his pockets and hunched his shoulders.

Christy cloaked a dart of rage with a smile. "I'm sure you must have important things for doing," he sneered.

"Ah no, it's not that... it's just..."

Fergus Deffely

Pushing in the back door at Úna's, Christy slid into the utility room. The washing machine churned and slurped and underneath the noise of it, he could hear Úna's voice. Indistinct. Hushed and uncertain. Opening the door of the bright white kitchen and living room, he heard her words: "...can't you guarantor it for her?" An almost whisper. Charles Sullivan sat in a beige wool jumper with his elbows on the kitchen table. He lowered his head and shook it quickly: "I can't," he said. "I don't... I wish I could." He flinched a sideways glance at Christy. Christy left his eyes on the sea-green tiles of the kitchen floor, his face empty of expression. He held the handle of the door.

"Wait and see Charles." Úna sat beside the window, battled by afternoon light. The lines around her eyes directed a warm smile. "Something will turn up," she assured him.

Christy closed the door with a click and cleared his throat.

"Hello Christy," said Úna, "There you are."

She nodded her lean face to an empty place on the kitchen table. To the three books of lotto tickets there. "We have a batch left aside for you."

"How are you Christy?" said Charles.

“I’m alright.” Christy removed his high-viz jacket and placed it on the back of a chair.

“Busy morning?” asked Charles.

“You could say that.” Christy sat down.

Úna rose from her chair. She walked to the kitchen.

“I’ll make some tea,” she said.

The three of them worked through the tickets. Opening the staples on each book. Removing the stubs of the sold tickets. Organising them into piles. Setting the unsold remains of the ticket-books aside for disposal. Then they began scanning for winning numbers. They placed the tickets with three matches in a plastic container in the centre of the table and formed the others back into stacks. And these stacks were rechecked. Each ticket seen by two pairs of eyes.

An hour passed.

“So we have still no winner,” said Charles, “Looks like...”

“Yeh.” Úna was annoyed. “It’s never gone this long.”

Christy snorted. His disgusted eyes resting on the wads of losing tickets.

Fergus Deffely

“Well, at least... I guess it'll be good for ticket sales,” said Úna.

Leaning back in his chair, Christy placed both hands behind his head and stretched his back. “It's a lot of money,” he said. Beside him, Charles' head bowed over the table, swaying slightly.

“Will you do up them three's Charles?”

Charles lifted his chin. “Yes, I was...” he trailed off.

Christy left his chair and side-stepped to the window. He looked out on broken congregations of May colour in the green of Úna's garden. The bare patches of new sown soil. The space between the saplings planted there. Out of professional habit, he registered the positions of Úna's wheelbarrow and buckets and spade and pitchfork.

The container that held the group of tickets bearing three of the winning numbers sat at the centre of the table. Charles took a pen and dragged it towards him. He tipped out the light assortment of stubs, and taking them one at a time, began to silently record serial numbers and names and contact details.

Near the window, Christy chewed slowly on a digestive biscuit. Swallowed. His tongue riding his teeth.

“I'm away,” he said.

Charles jerked his head towards him. “We’ll hardly see you before the weekend.”

Christy strode wordlessly to the door.

“Thanks Christy,” said Úna absently.

5

The black Volvo passed at 92 kilometres per hour. Christy whined to himself and shook and licked coffee from the back of his hand as he started the engine.

Perfect.

He jabbed his cup into a holder between the two front seats, tightening the plastic lid around the rim of it.

The squad car moved onto the road, Christy's foot hard on the accelerator.

Ronan Durkan saw the flashing lights in his rear view mirror and bit his lip as he registered his speed. He slowed and turned carefully into a side road and drove a short distance until he found a space where he could pull in. The squad car stopped behind him.

Ronan lowered his window, as the guard approached the car. "Christy, I'm an eejit," he said.

“Ah, don't say that.” Christy placed both hands on the roof of the Volvo and let his face hang down towards Ronan.

“I was over the limit,” said Ronan.

“Were you?” said Christy. “Well Jesus, you shouldn't be telling the likes of me that!”

Ronan laughed nervously.

“You're heading into town?”

“Well... later, but... training first.”

Christy flashed a look at his watch.

“Ah, sure of course, Tuesdays and Thursdays isn't it?”

“That's it...” said Ronan. “No rest for...”

“I'll tell you now,” cut Christy, slapping the roof of the car for emphasis. “I wanted to have a word with you.”

Ronan squinted out of the window and up, dark and unsure at Christy.

“It's nothing, now, to be overly worried about.” Christy composed a frown. “Ah, it happens all the time, do you know, it's a bloody nuisance, but it's part of the job.”

“Well, I hope I can help.” Ronan's face had become serious.

“No,” said Christy. “Now, I was considering going to your parents, but it might be... well, let's say... a bit more diplomatic coming from yourself.”

Fergus Deffely

Ronan looked perplexed.

“Arrah, teenagers Ronan!”

“Something Tim did?”

“Something Tim does.”

“Oh shite, did you catch him?” asked Ronan.

“It's only a matter of time before I have to,” said Christy. “Do you know? I don't know where they're getting the drink from, but it's getting to be a regular occurrence.”

Ronan shook his head.

“You might have a word with him?” suggested Christy.

“I will of course.”

“Now look, you know yourself... If I don't see him, I have no problem.”

“I know, I know,” said Ronan.

“But, a... gentle reminder wouldn't go astray... I... recommend it.”

“I'll talk to him.”

“Do that. Do.”

Christy stood back from Ronan's car and looked along the road. “Fierce humid,” he said.

“It is... warm,” said Ronan.

“You'll be feeling it up in training.”

“Ah well, plenty of water.”

“That's the trick. I won't keep you then.”

“Sound,” said Ronan. “Well listen thanks a million for the heads up. It'll save Mam and Dad a bit of stress for sure.”

Christy laughed a fake laugh. “It happens. Sure it isn't too long ago since you and I had a similar spot of bother.”

“Oh God, talk about mortified,” said Ronan.

“Mortified you got caught,” smiled Christy. “And there was more than yourself. Who's this else was with you that night?”

“Was me and Gillian Sullivan,” volunteered Ronan automatically.

Christy's stomach buzzed.

“Gillian... That's who it was. Lovely girl, Gillian. How is she getting on?”

“I... wouldn't...”

“You're probably no longer in touch,” pushed Christy.

“No...”

“And who was it? There was another girl Gillian used always be hanging out with...”

Ronan seemed a little confused. He looked at Christy's black, playful eyes.

“Brown haired girl...” suggested Christy.

“I don't know... that'd probably be Nuala.”

“Nuala..?”

Fergus Deffely

“Nuala Jennings.”

“Was it Nuala Jennings?” said Christy surprised. Then. “Sure of course it was.” He put his hands in his pockets and sucked his bottom lip. “Doesn't seem like... what? Five years ago...”

“Six,” said Ronan certainly.

“It would be that... Time flies.”

He patted the roof of the car. “I'll let you go,” he said, “Take it easy Ronan.”

“Okay bye,” said Ronan.

Christy sucked air through his teeth. “Have you room to turn there?” he asked.

“Should be grand now,” said Ronan.

“Good, good. Mind yourself.”

Ronan clutched in and turned the key and pulled away with care.

6

Christy drove into Athgarr and pulled into a space in front of Jennings's Centra. From a tray in the dashboard, he fished out enough change for a can of Coke.

Outside the car he breathed deeply through his nose. Drawing in the warm air of the forecourt. Petrol and freshly baked bread.

And chillies, they had. And a lemon. And...

Where was the soya sauce?

And soya sauce. No. He had soya sauce. But they had the nice soya sauce. He'd get soya sauce. Now... quinoa...

Bob Dawson moved down the aisle. Scanning shelves. He located the rice. So... Quinoa then?

The previous Thursday, Bob had browsed onto You Are What You Eat, a new Irish documentary series on nutrition and diet. He sat watching, intrigued that he didn't feel an urge to change the channel. A few days

Fergus Deffely

afterwards, he came across a recipe for a quinoa salad in the RTE Guide. The picture of the dish was vibrant with leaves and colour – dark greens and wine and yellow and the speckled mushroom white of the quinoa. He read the list of ingredients and carefully noted items in his memory.

There's rice. And there was couscous. But... No. No quinoa? Maybe over by the seeds then? Was there a section with that kind of stuff? No. Nothing. Nothing like that. He might ask.

Approaching the counter, Bob recognized from the rear, Christy Gloss standing there. Christy chatting to Nuala Jennings. Nuala stood with her arms folded across her breasts. She smiled apologetically at the guard. Her delirious eyes saw Christy turning and walking out the door. But Christy stood talking to her across the counter.

"Sure you probably don't go out in Athgarr at all?" he said.

Bob waited in the aisle.

"God, no," uttered Nuala. She laughed, accidentally flashing her eyes at the door.

"Jesus, it's not that bad," sneered Christy.

"Ah no, it's not. It's just most of my friends are up in Galway," said Nuala.

Christy raised his eyebrows. He cracked his can of Coke and lifted it to his lips.

“Like, who now would that be?”

7

Two days later. Thursday evening. Christy drove his own car to Charles' house. He steered along the narrow country roads. The sun shone. Warm liquid, late-May light pooling in the black sheen of the bonnet. Trees poured past on either side. Their reflections flickering across the car like a script of silhouettes.

In Charles' driveway he stood out of the car and turned his face upwards, finding the approaching night. Stretching his arms.

“Yaawwww.”

Forearms thick-haired and strong. The pale green and brown criss-cross of his short-sleeved shirt tightened across his chest.

He took a backpack from the boot of his car and walked around to Charles' back door.

The kitchen was a mess.

Food lay in piles. Spread out across the counter and the kitchen table and the floor.

Charles stood by the open door of his refrigerator. He looked up at Christy in dismay.

"It's only me. No need to look so shocked," said Christy, examining the room. Lettuce, ham, jars and packets, cheese, mayonnaise, rashers. All strewn about the fridge.

"Bit of bother Charles?"

Charles looked helpless. "Yes," he summoned. Then sighed, "Ahhh..." He shook his head. "Bit of a problem."

Christy tried not to smile. His cheeks grew crimson.

"Is it the thermostat?"

Charles shook his head. "I don't think so. There's no spark out of it at all."

"Fuck," said Christy. He moved so he could more properly inspect the fridge. "But there's no water on the floor. No leakage, like. Your freezer must still be okay?"

"It is. Yes. It is. The freezer still seems to be working." Charles stared into the empty, dead space of the refrigerator.

"Well. Every cloud..." said syrupy Christy.

Charles fingered a rotted strip of scallion. "Hmm?"

"I mean... it could be worse."

Fergus Deffely

Charles' shoulders dropped. "I'm afraid it means a new fridge." He stated this as fact. "Bad," he said.

"Ah, I don't know. You might get that repaired Charles." Christy stood with his hands on his hips.

"Not much chance, I think." Charles' face was grey. He massaged his eyes with the tips of his fingers. "A new fridge," he accepted.

Christy took a slow step backwards and waited. After a few seconds, Charles shook himself as though waking from a dream.

"Anyways, where are my manners. I'll throw on the kettle."

8

Charles cleared a space on the kitchen table and they sat. Christy saw that his movements were heavy and laboured. His limbs struggled. As if in obedience to some kind of unattainable precision of motion.

Charles frowned as he poured the tea out. He sat back in his chair, motionless, staring at the calm pine surface of the table. Christy took the sugar bowl in one hand and scooped two swift teaspoons into his cup. He observed Charles' face. His lowered eyes.

"Has Úna made any mention to you about this app?" Christy asked. He stirred the sugar in his tea, his teaspoon whistling.

Charles raised distant eyes. "For the tickets?"

"Mmm," encouraged Christy.

Charles gulped air. "Yes, we've spoken about it..." he said. "I... I don't know... It's the expense of it I'd be wondering about, more than anything."

"You'd be worried you'd get dragged into a hole like?"

Fergus Deffely

Charles met Christy's eyes and winced.

"Ah, I don't know a lot about these things," he said.

"No more than myself," said Christy. "But. It'd mean a lot less work. You'd have a nice neat printout every week with names and numbers."

Charles shook his head. "I don't know," he said, "I'm sure... but... And then there's security. I understand there may be some concerns there?" He looked to Christy for guidance.

Christy smiled. "Ah, it's just a matter of who has access to the app."

"But can we control that?" asked Charles.

"That's not really a problem."

Charles squinted. "Oh, it sounds very simple and straightforward, I'll give you that... but what if one of the phones goes missing. Or worse, gets stolen, or something?"

Christy drank from his tea. He looked out the window, at the cool blue of the sky. He smiled again. "Ah, there'd pin numbers," he said. "I wouldn't be worried about that."

Charles fingered his brow.

"But you're right to be worried about security," followed Christy.

"Yes?" Charles looked confused.

Christy reached down and picked up his backpack. He placed it on his lap and gripped the zipper. "Tell me this Charles," he said, "Do you have any spare lotto balls? Replacement ones, like?"

Charles nodded slowly. "I suppose I have a few around somewhere."

Christy unzipped the bag. From inside it, he produced two white candles and a large hypodermic syringe with a stainless steel tip. He placed these in front of him on the table.

"And we'll need to set up the draw drum. Can we do that? I have something to show you..."

Charles eyes sparked. "Well now, here's a bit of mystery. What do you need? Spare balls? And the draw-drum?"

"That should do us," said Christy. "Oh, and have you a non-stick saucepan?"

"A saucepan?" Charles looked at Christy to see if he was serious.

Christy was serious.

"Saucepans are in the press there to the left of the sink," said Charles, amused. He shook his head. "You work away... I'll get the rest of the stuff."

9

Christy opened the press containing the saucepans. He hunkered down and carefully browsed the selection, picking out a small one with a non-stick surface. He placed the candles on a breadboard and chopped them roughly with a carving knife, pulling away the wicks. The chunks of wax went into the saucepan. He put the pan on the hob at a medium heat.

Charles returned with the draw-drum and base and assembled these in the dining area. He gave the drum a few turns.

It span freely.

In the kitchen, Christy stood over the saucepan. He heard Charles' voice at his shoulder: "And what? You're melting wax?"

"It's a delicate kind of procedure," said Christy. Ghost grey chunks of candle simmered in a thin clear pool.

Christy removed the plunger from the syringe and set it to one side. He lay the syringe's chamber on the top of the cooker so that the steel tip rested on the glowing hob.

"Have you one of them balls there Charles?"

Charles handed him a milk white ping-pong ball. Christy examined the ball, locating a spot along the central seam. He took the syringe from the cooker-top and holding the ping-pong ball steady in his fist, pierced the spot he had selected with the heated tip of it. He pushed the syringe into the ball until its point reached a position roughly at the centre of the sphere.

Christy held his work out for inspection. He nodded his head satisfied. Charles said nothing.

"Now this is the tricky bit."

Christy picked up the plunger part of the syringe and handed it to Charles. "You might hold that... When I'm going to need it, I'm going to need it fast."

"Right," said Charles.

Christy held the syringe vertically with the impaled ball hanging from the tip below and the chamber mouth opened upwards. He took the saucepan of melted wax from the hob and quickly and carefully poured the hot clear liquid into the chamber until it was about half-full. He slung the saucepan roughly onto the top of the cooker.

"Now Charles!"

Fergus Deffely

Charles handed Christy the plunger, which he quickly inserted. Pushing it into the chamber, depressing it. He felt the wax begin to fill the ball.

Give it time.

When the ball was about three-quarters full, he withdrew the syringe, allowing a last droplet of wax to plug the small hole the tip had created in the hard plastic surface.

He held the ball up between his thumb and index finger and grunted.

“Feel that.” Christy handed the ball to Charles.

“It still feels warm.”

Christy grinned. “Feel the weight of it.”

“Oh,” said Charles. Worry slid like porridge across his face.

“Oh, I see.”

10

Christy turned off the hob on the cooker.

“Now. Next.”

He cupped his hands into the box of spare ping-pong balls and lifted out a small puddle of spheres. The kitchen smelt of wax and the freon hint of refrigerator.

There was silence.

Charles stood like a statue.

“That should be enough,” said Christy. The balls piled in his hands like plastic spawn.

He turned away from Charles. “And you have your one.” he said. He walked gingerly to the draw-drum.

Charles' eyes dropped to the wax filled ball he held in his hand.

“Here. Bring it,” said Christy.

He poured the balls from his hands into the drum. They pockered on the floor of it. Charles held his ball out. Held it in front of him like a divining rod. He followed it.

Fergus Deffely

Moving under Christy's patient splintered gaze, to the draw-drum.

"Fire it in there Charles." Christy's beaking eyes did not blink or twitch.

Charles opened his mouth. He moved his head towards the draw-drum, opening and closing his lips. Then he stepped forward suddenly, a jerk, shook his head wildly, held the ball over the opening and released it.

It fell leaden into place among the other balls.

"Now. Charles."

Christy grabbed the handle of the draw-drum and pumped it with his arm. "What are the odds of me pulling your ball out?" He raised his voice over the spinning rattle.

Charles shook his head.

He sighed a resigned sigh.

"Better than average anyways."

Christy stopped the draw-drum. He snapped open the lid and reached in. His hand raked the balls inside. Softly. Concentrating. A tiny smile. He looked at Charles and pulled his arm out.

He held a ball.

Held it up for Charles to see.

The Fix

Charles stared at the ball. Peered into the colour of it. In the fading evening light it looked translucent. Indistinct.

A clouded eye.

He held out his hand.

11

Charles could not remember when it was exactly that the world had turned.

He remembered light once and laughter, and the carefree certainty he brought from youth that whatever he did, he would be liked. That things tended to work out and you didn't pay them much mind. As he passed fifty he remembered looking with reserved sympathy at a stream of people he knew who found themselves foundering in the swamp of middle age. Loss of meaning, failing relationships, illness, alcoholism, depression.

Human beings are the only animals that know they will die, his mind often repeated to him.

He told himself he was ready. It's all about managing expectations. The world isn't so complicated as people are. You find your place in the world and you just get on with it. But that was before he found that language and his words had started to become strange on him.

When was that?

It was after the cancer had taken Lorraine.

It was after Gillian had moved out.

Was it before or after he was let go from work?

Was there even ever though? A moment, a time, a place, where if he could go back and just apply some kind of force, some effort of will, that he could make it all go away? Was there ever? Wasn't it a more a terrible procession of something greater than him, something outside him, pushing him?

And wasn't it that the pain was as much to be in step with it, as it was not to be.

12

Christy glared triumphantly and placed the ball into Charles' hand and Charles' fingers closed around the telling weight of it as though it were a tiny foetus.

"I would not have believed..." began Charles.

"Now," said Christy, "What are the odds of me pulling it out again?"

"But that's not..."

"Oh, but it is Charles. It most definitely is."

Charles shook his head.

"You try," said Christy. He indicated the draw-drum with his index finger.

Charles nodded. "In the interest of science, is it?"

"That's the spirit Charles."

Later, they sat in Charles' unaired sitting-room, breathing the damp smell of the air. Jade and maroon walls hung with paintings and family photographs. A wide hardwood mantelpiece lay over the empty fireplace.

Cluttered. Books, envelopes, a screwdriver, a notepad and pen, a small clock, a photo of Charles' wife and daughter. Lorraine and Gillian Sullivan at the seaside. All smiles and ice-cream cones.

The two men sat in front of the television. On the screen, a nature documentary. Plants: beans, corn and potatoes, sprouted and grew to maturity in the space of seconds. Over and over, exuberant, they burst from the earth and ascended, one after another, inevitably beautiful, as though they were drawn upwards by an alternate gravity. Falling in reverse. Like so many droplets of dye into the clear water of the air.

The men sat side-by-side on the couch. Christy sat resting a foot on one of his knees. He leant back against cushion, the shadows of his black nylon jacket nesting in the green soft of it.

"So there you have it," he said.

Charles stared silently at the screen of the television.

"A colleague of mine, now, that brought that to my attention," pushed Christy. "Well, that and a couple of other things. I'd seen a few circulars, about fraud and that, but never really even gave them a second glance. As they don't really apply to our situation, you know?"

Charles sat still.

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“I know you and Úna, so... no need.” Christy brushed the front of his jacket with a sleeve. Two clean, quick whips. He swung his head to scan the side of Charles’ unblinking face.

“But then, oh Jesus, I’d say it’s more than a month ago now, I was on duty down in Galway, there was a concert on, an open-air thing. And, well, it ended up, I was paired with a fella that I knew from training, we were in Templemore the same time. Arrah now, I’d say it must have been over ten years ago, the last time I saw him.”

On the television, a presenter held a leafy beanstalk in his hand. His mouth moved voicelessly as he pointed to the different parts of the plant.

“Well, he was telling me, that he had uncovered... not now, the fellow in charge... this is down in his part of the country, you understand? Not the fellow in charge of the lotto, but some other chap that used stand in for him the odd time. Do you understand me?”

Charles’ eyes clung to the television.

“Well anyways,” said Christy, “He performed an inspection. I don’t know, what, now, triggered him to get suspicious, but well, yer man must have been flashing a bit of cash around, or something. And what did he find? A syringe... and a rake of candles. Well, he was baffled. As you would be. Until. Didn’t he find the doctored balls.”

“Stupid man,” said Charles.

“He got caught.”

The two men sat in silence for a few seconds.

“Well,” said Christy, drawing a breath. “Anyways. He pursued the matter and discovered that there was a ticket... with the same four numbers as the balls. And who was the name on the ticket? Only a buddy of yer man.”

“Planning his holidays, probably,” said Charles.

“Expensive holiday. I can tell you that.”

Charles held his mouth closed.

Christy said, “So then, I learned. That wasn’t the only place this has been happening!” Charles looked at the man beside him in amazement. “Oh ya,” continued Christy, “And what’s more, the terrible thing,” his voice became hushed, “You can be sure, that for every chancer that’s caught, there’s more getting away with it.”

“Well at least we don’t have that to worry about,” said Charles. He turned his head to the television. Stopped. Turned back again towards Christy.

“No, no,” said Christy, “We’re lucky. We have Úna involved. And there’s the random inspections. Pádraig Moore is not going to bridle any nonsense.” Christy’s tongue ran across his top lip. “But I thought you should know, now, just in case.”

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Something in Charles' face sundered then. His brow gave way. "Well I can't be responsible for everything on my own," he cried.

"Charles?" Christy looked surprised.

"I can't... I can't be expected to... I mean... what do you want me to do? Do you want me to do something?"

"No, no. Jesus Charles. There's no panic. The important thing to remember is..." Christy almost sang the words, "No one would ever suspect you."

Charles placed his face in his hands. "It's a lot. It's just... it's a lot. You know?"

"Sure the world is fucked Charles. People do crazy things."

13

Christy lifted himself and stood over Charles. Tall and bulking black.

“Last month, I got a call. Domestic situation.”

Charles listened. He squinted up. Christy's face had become stoney and serious.

“I drove out, got to the house, was admitted onto the premises. I won't say where it was, but it wasn't Athgarr... Anyways... inside in the kitchen, a man lying stretched out, and blood like you wouldn't believe. On the floor around him mostly, but on the walls too and all over the presses around the sink. Spurts of it like.”

“God!”

“He'd come home drunk and, ah, this man is routinely abusive by all accounts, I'd say he didn't need much of an excuse. He started on her.”

“His wife?”

“Well, his missus. I'm not sure now, if they were actually married, but co-habiting, Yes. But... he must have

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been particularly brutal that night.” Christy shook his head. “She was quite badly injured. But. She made it over to the sink.”

“The sink?” Charles was incredulous.

“A corkscrew, she went at him with.”

“Jesus.”

“Into the leg, Ah, I don't know how many times.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Kids upstairs. Radio blasting. Yer man unconscious from loss of blood. Her curled up in a ball on a chair.”

Charles turned away from Christy's glowing knowing eyes.

“Horrific. Tragic.” Christy turned and walked to the mantelpiece. “They're both still alive, but... Tragic for the kids. They'll never be right after that.”

Christy picked up the screwdriver and examined it. He saw the cross-shaped head of it, wrung from use. The metal torn and twisted. He imagined Charles cursing. It slipping from the head of a screw.

“Tragedy Charles. We are surrounded by it.”

Christy pointed the screwdriver at Charles' eyes. “It's important to keep a sense of perspective.”

“I know. I know well.” Charles did not sound convinced by his own voice.

“And its not like you have to go out of your way to find it, you know?” Christy’s voice deepened. He took a few paces around the room, stopping at the window.

“There’s a cousin of mine, Trevor Byrne, you mightn’t know him?”

“Trevor. Byrne.”

“No. Ah, he lives in there... he has a house in around Claregalway.”

Charles breathed in to say that No, he didn’t know Trevor Byrne, but Christy was talking. “Well. Six months ago, before Christmas it would have been, he was on his way home from the pub. Went to cross the road, just at the lights there, where you turn for Carnmore. Was half way across, he says, when he heard the car. Looks up. Says now, he only caught a glimpse of the driver... some young fella. Not even enough time to tell what kind of car it was. Some black Civic, or Mazda, Toyota.” Christy sucked breath through his teeth. “Reckons the driver must have been doing motorway speed. Now. Through Claregalway this is...”

Charles closed his eyes.

Christy continued: “He sent Trevor about fifteen metres through the air.”

“Jesus.”

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“Hip fractured in eight places. Spinal damage. Paralysis in the left leg.”

“My God.”

“And pain Charles. The worst is the pain. Whatever damage was done... his nerves... he's in constant pain.”

“I...”

“'Agony' is how he describes it. Twenty-four hours a day. Can't even sleep without medication. Makes him dopey. All day long, drugged up.”

Christy tossed the screwdriver in a loping spin and caught it again, the handle falling lightly into his hand.

“It's a pity. I wouldn't mind, but, he was always a busy kind of a fella. You know? With bits of DIY and that. He'd be always fixing stuff up around the house and getting stuck into all these different projects. I remember one time, back when he was only a teenager, he made a go-cart, like a kind of a boxcar, kind of a thing. Had bicycle wheels on it and all, that he pulled out of some dump.”

“Resourceful man.” Charles' forehead lined with concern.

Christy shook his head. “I'd say it's driving him crazy,” he sneered, “Stuck at home the whole time. Can do nothing.”

He looked down at the screwdriver in his hand. Again, he tossed it, spinning, and focusing, caught it.

“Ah, he needs private care. Really. He has no life as it is.

Christy's body became suddenly stiff. He jerked. Pivoted around on one heel and pointed the screwdriver at Charles.

“Now there's a man who could do with winning the Lotto!”

A small, pleading smile broke Charles' face. “Trevor...” he said.

“Every week, he does it. Every fucking week I take his ticket in for him.”

Christy stood over Charles. He held the screwdriver and breathed through his nose.

“You wouldn't mind now Charles, but this man doesn't even have so much as a bank account. They took it off him. Couldn't meet the overdraft payments.”

Charles put his hands over his face. He rubbed his forehead, his fingers massaging his eyes, nose, cheekbones.

“It's a sad state of affairs. That's life, I know, but it gets me down all the same.” Christy lowered the screwdriver. “And the same four numbers he puts in every week. He told me. He said 'Christy, there is only one way of increasing your chances of winning the Lotto.' So I says, 'Go on.' Says he, 'Pick numbers that other people are less

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likely to pick. That way. If you do win, then there's less chance you'll have to share the winnings."

"It's true," said Charles looking up.

"Ya," said Christy. "So Charles." His eyes held Charles. He whispered, "Three, four, five, six."

Charles whispered back, "I know."

"Easy to remember." Christy turned and walked to the window. He stood looking out into the dark and there was a shift of silence and of temperature in the room. A sinking towards something icy and unfamiliar that was at variance with the kindness of the world.

Both men felt it.

Christy spoke first.

"And Charles," he said.

He let himself draw a deep breath.

"Trevor would only need half of that money."

Charles could not raise his head.

"Do you understand me?" asked Christy.

Charles put his face sad into his hands.

"I know," he said.

Úna Brennan stood in her conservatory.

She stood looking out at her garden. Her attention moved along the gallery of shrubs and bushes and flowers. Colours admitting of hope. Yellow. Pale blue. Purple. She felt the draw of memory. Of planting, potting out, of roots in a wheelbarrow, still and vulnerable. Of open soil and secret waiting.

A light breeze came through the open windows and cooled her. The day had been warm and the evening still held a fragile warmth. The sky opened out above the lawn. Blue and deeper blue. A fat white sun tacked into it. Úna squinted and she closed her eyes and her eyelashes, until her vision filled with a tickling rain of light.

Another forty minutes or so, there was no rush. She breathed the evening air. It was nice. She would wear short sleeves and she would walk. She would make coffee first and then she would go.

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Úna upended two peaking scoops of ground coffee into the percolator. Colombian. Sweet warm peat scent. She held the smell of it with her while she added fresh water, closed the lid, flicked the switch.

She leant against the counter. It was silent in the kitchen.

Her eyes closed and she waited.

She stood like this until the percolator began to make its noises. Coffee dripped into the jug. She listened to the sounds of the machine. Soft chokes and hisses and dribbles. Lifting the lids of her eyes, she blinked as they readjusted to the day. Today's labels for the percolator are Smug and Industrious, she decided.

Úna bent and opened the door of the dishwasher. The coffee brewed. She began to empty the dishes. Mindfully reseating delft and cutlery and saucepans in their places around the kitchen. She treated these things functionally. She did not pause to admire their design and craftsmanship. She did not take time to reminisce over meals shared with family and friends. Instead she listened to the tings and shuffle-sounds of the crockery; to the glass and plastic and wood.

By the time she was finished, the coffee was ready.

They would be gathering now in Mannion's. She drank slowly.

Úna was not in the habit of attending the football on Sundays. A Connaught final nine years ago was the last time she had lasted through a full game. In McHale park in Castlebar, she and Lorraine Sullivan and Gillian had cheered from the stands. She remembered her frustration when Mayo were beaten. And later, the glut of red-faced men outside pubs. Squeals and the stink of stale beer and stale urine.

Charles had driven them back to Athgarr.

They were tired and Gillian was tired and bored and kept saying so and the conversation had run out of places to go.

Charles began to sing. He sang 'I Walk The Line' and 'I Got Married In a Fever' and 'Blowing In The Wind' and some Kris Kristofferson song that she couldn't remember the name of.

It was dark by the time they had gotten home.

15

In Mannion's the mood was buoyant. Athgearn had beaten Parke by a significant margin. Úna was greeted by a foil slick of aftershave as she walked through the front door. Pinstripe shirts and bright eyes and clouds of chat and the bobbing voice of a newsreader from the television.

She walked to the bar.

Behind the bar Nell Mannion pivoted and punched customers with her eyes and the flesh of her face thick about her mouth. It was busy. Elbows and money came across the bar at her. Her voice craked. "Wan tick loveen. That's eight euro ninety. Yes? In a pint glass is it?"

Then looking up, her eyes brightening with black, "Úna?"

"Nell, you're busy." Úna touched the flat top of the counter with her hand.

"Arrah, we're soldiering on," said Nell. She separated two pint glasses with a light tap.

"Weathering the storm, just about," Úna smiled.

"I'd say most of the time it feels like we're picking up the pieces after the storm..." Nell didn't seem as though she were joking.

"I don't see Frank around?" Úna's face was pale in the pub lights.

"No such luck." Nell glanced down to check the pint she was filling. She directed the brass stream of lager down the inside of the glass. "He's over in England at a match."

Úna raised her eyebrows. "Well isn't it well for some?"

"Rugby," said Nell.

She lifted the full pint and placed it carefully on the bar. "Now love," she said to its new owner.

Úna stood at the bar with a vodka and lime. Letting the burning sour of the drink run around the inside of her mouth. So who was in?

Further along the bar, separated by a thin oak and stained-glass partition, sat Marty Walsh and Noel Joyce. Marty caressed his stool with the curl of his body. Noel opened his mouth in the wide grimace of a yawn. The hairy brawn of his bare arms folded across his chest.

Closer to Úna stood a group of three young men in smartly pressed shirts. They held pints and satisfied smiles and spoke quietly and knowingly amongst themselves. And nearer to the television, in a worn

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leather jacket, Alf Mooney. Standing awkwardly in the passage inside the front door. He stood with his head craned, drinking, trying to hear the voice of the newsreader.

Seán Geraghty stood on his own with his back to a pillar thick with framed photographs. Anglers, Irish dancers, vintage tractors. Úna took her glass and moved through the crowd towards him.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything,” she said. Seán looked at her, unsure if he was being teased.

“You seemed very deep in contemplation,” suggested Úna.

Seán smiled. “Football,” he said, shaking his head.

“All the permutations and combinations, is it?” asked Úna, sipping her drink.

“Ah, feckin’ injuries Úna.”

“From today? Nobody hurt, I hope?”

“No, nothing serious. No. A few weeks rest now, and a bit of physio... Nothing broken at least.”

“Well that’s good,” said Úna, “My nephew broke his leg just last year. What an ordeal!”

Seán held to Úna’s kind eyes.

“Rock climbing!” she said.

“In Ireland somewhere?”

“Yeah, somewhere in Connemara. One of the adventure centres there.”

“He must have had some spill?”

Úna laughed. “I shouldn’t laugh,” she said, “But he had just finished his climb. And he was getting out of this harness that they wear, you know?”

Seán nodded.

“Tripped on a bit of rope and came down the wrong way on his shin somehow.” Úna shook her head in disbelief at her own story.

Seán’s eyes bulged. “Just when he was starting to relax.”

“Such a nuisance. You forget all the things you can’t do. Even driving, you know.”

“I know well,” said Seán, uncertainly, “Or... I can imagine.” He became distracted by a wedge of light that fell on the tables inside the window.

“Oh, sure you’re stuck then,” he managed, “Nobody likes being in that position.”

“No,” said Úna. “You feel like you’re a burden.”

Neither of them spoke for a few seconds.

“Was he living by himself?” asked Seán.

“Um... no... luckily, he’d actually just moved back home from college. Yes. So, he had people around for support at least.”

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Seán nodded.

“And has he braved the rock-climbing since?”

Úna frowned. “Oh God, I don’t think so. I’m not sure now. He is big into that kind of thing though, so maybe...”

“As long as he avoids the safety equipment, says you.”
Seán’s eyes sparked.

Úna laughed.

16

The front door of Mannion's opened inwards and the bear form of Pádraig Moore made his way into the pub. He wore a light grey fisherman's hat and a dark-navy t-shirt that hung from broad shoulders and a broad back. His wide face surveyed the room picking out Úna and Seán.

"Hello Pádraig," said Úna, "I was hoping we'd see you."

"Hoping for whose sake Úna?" Pádraig laughed, sharing this private joke with himself.

Úna lowered her eyes without smiling. "Well for my own, now, if I'm being honest," she said. "I won't be here next weekend and there were a couple of things that myself and Charles wanted to ask you."

Pádraig hovered soundless and inviolable, enjoying the obstacle of his presence. He lifted one finger to scratch the side of his nose.

Úna's eyelashes hummed. Her eyes tightened. She glanced towards Seán.

"Are you away?" asked Seán.

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“Away?” said Úna. Then, “Oh, away!” She chuckled. “Germany,” she said. “I have friends in Kiel.”

“Kiel? In Germany,” said Seán. “That’s the where they... is there some class of canal there?”

“Ya, that’s it. Beautiful place. But the canal, yes... it used to be more important I think, but there’s still a lot of shipping there.” She looked down. “Lots of boats... marinas... Nice walks by the water.”

“You must be looking forward to it,” said Seán. He drank from his glass.

“Ah, sure it’s good to get away,” admitted Úna.

The cushion of sounds and voices in the pub became accidentally thin just then and held that way for a few full seconds of near complete silence. Time became chill and peaceful, freeing the room from melancholy.

Pádraig Moore stood by Úna and Seán, breathing slowly. In and out, he guided his will through his mind until he found that place of emptiness. From there he held the world hypnotically in stasis. Sharing the craft of his self-correction with these few newborn seconds of evening.

Úna swigged vodka and looked up.

“Well I’d say Charles is ready Pádraig.” She squinted at him. “Will we see how he’s fixed?”

Pádraig guarded his face against expression. Fighting off the necessity for words or intentions, he followed Úna.

17

Charles was seated underneath the television. His head bowed, he pored over a crumpled copy of the Sunday Independent.

“Pádraig is here Charles,” announced Úna.

The newspaper whispered softly as Charles closed and neatly folded it.

“Charles,” stated Pádraig.

“Do you want to take a seat there beside me, might be the handiest?” Charles indicated the position with an open sweep of his arm.

Pádraig lumbered past Úna and lowered himself into the dark wood of the chair.

“Charles, I was telling Pádraig, I won’t be here next weekend.”

“You won’t?” Charles looked off to a distant corner, processing the news.

“No. So if you need anything, you’ll let me know.”

Charles paused in frowning contemplation.

He shook his head. "Fair enough. I will. I will." He looked at Úna and his voice became flat. "I suppose, it depends on whether there's a winner tonight, or not."

Úna raised her eyebrows. "I will be around tomorrow for the count."

"You will."

"Yes. But gone then from Friday. Just wanted to let you know."

"So if there's... I see... Friday," said Charles nodding.

"Okay," Pádraig's voice was low and heavy. "Charles, I'm going to begin the inspection," he stated slowly.

"I'll leave ye to it," said Úna.

"Yes. Thank you. Úna. Pádraig..."

"I'll look at the drum first," said Pádraig.

"Do you not want to see these papers?" asked Charles. He held a small sheaf of loose A4 sheets.

"What are those?" asked Pádraig, rising from his chair.

"The forms from last week."

"No need," said Pádraig, "I'll get to them later."

Pádraig stood and moved to beside the drum and looked down at it. Bending to examine the area on each side where the cylinder's axles met the outer housing.

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“Is it ready to go?” he asked, taking the handle. Charles nodded.

Pádraig span the drum slowly, noticing the even balance of the movement. He nodded in appreciation.

“I’ll take a look at the balls now.”

“Yes, yes,” said Charles. He opened the case containing the lotto balls and slid it across the table. Pádraig picked each ball from the case and quickly held and scanned it. He took a sheet of paper and a pen from his back pocket. Marked in the date. Checked some boxes.

“It’s not yourself that looks after the Carralough lotto, is it? You’ve hardly been through the same rigmarole twice in the same evening? Or are they later?” Charles spoke quickly, “But... No. Sure they’re 8 o’clock, aren’t they?”

“Midnight actually.”

“Midnight?” Charles wrinkled his brow. Then: “Ah! They’ve gone over...”

“They’re using the computerised system.”

Charles shook a single shake of his head. “I see...”

Pádraig held his pen over the form, waiting.

“How are they getting on with it?” asked Charles.

“I don’t hear an awful lot from them.”

“No,” said Charles.

“No,” said Pádraig.

“Probably a good sign, says you,” Charles managed.

18

Charles Sullivan and Pádraig Moore looked down at the sheets of paper arranged on the wooden table top. Pádraig's neat, rounded handwriting covered the pages in blue pen. The polished orange sheen of the surface and the heat of handwritten words flashed in Charles' eye. They hurt him, those words: Acceptable. In Order. Validated.

He shifted his gaze to an empty section of table between the pages and mutely held his focus there. He became still. Pádraig sat beside him, his breath gentle.

Charles tried to rebalance the colours on the top of the table: the amber, white and the dark brown. He permitted himself to soften the demanding contrast of them. Allowing the light to flow between each block. He had just begun to relax this way, when his meditation was smeared by a blotched, bulging shadow and the two men were caught by the ripe stink of cologne.

Looking up, Charles' eyes adjusted to the large, dark form of a man standing between him and the lights overhead. The air around the figure was pale and drained.

"Looks slike you're all sorted..."

Christy Gloss's soothing whisper.

Charles raised his head and squinted. He held his hand up to shield the glare of the lights, as gentle Christy's head weaved back and forth in front of them.

"How are you Christy." Charles breathed sharply, and then, "Yes!" he said with certainty, "Pádraig isn't taking any prisoners."

Pádraig sat and stared impassively at the bar.

Christy took his hands from the pockets of his jacket. "Best be thorough," he said softly, "Gives everyone peace of mind..." His jacket whined as he briskly unzipped it. "That way," he said. He rubbed his hand downwards over the front of his chest and stomach, smoothing his shirt. Then eased his hand into one of his pants pockets. They heard the itching hiss of coins.

"Do you want anything?" he asked, with a slight tap of his head towards the bar.

Nobody spoke for a few seconds.

Pádraig slowly shook his head.

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Charles lowered his eyes. "Nothing for me neither thanks Christy."

Christy stood over the table for a few moments examining the two of them.

"Right, you are," he said. He looked towards the bar and picked out Noel Joyce and Marty Walsh sitting there.

And he turned and walked away.

19

At the bar, drinks were on Marty. He was well up after a combination bet earlier that day and his eyes shone and darted from Noel to Christy as Noel announced the news. Christy stood absorbed in the streams of tiny cream bubbles rising from the black bottom of his pint. "Dogs or ponies?" he asked without lifting his eyes.

"Spew," said Marty. Twisting shyly. "Horses." He wrinkled his nose and added: "The Curragh."

"The Curragh," said Christy. He took the pint and swallowed a thick gulp of it, his eyes closed. "Fair doos."

Marty hugged his arms around himself and rocked his body backwards and forwards, trying to think of something to say.

"You'll be able to retire before long at that rate of going," said Noel. He sat leaning back comfortably against the polished wooden partition behind him. He raised his chin and studied Marty.

"Pure pox," said Marty.

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Noel shook his head. "Sure you'd go mad."

A twitch of confusion crossed Marty's face. "How d'ya mean?"

"Well you can't spend all your fucking time in the bookies," blurted Noel.

Marty looked forlornly at Noel.

"If you fucking retired I mean."

"Ah.. I didn't know what you were on about."

Marty gawked about: at the back of the bar; at the counter; Nell Mannion biting her lower lip as she pulled pints; back to Noel; at the small slather of foam at the corner of Noel's mouth.

"But you would." said Noel.

"Hah?"

"Go mad."

Marty raised his eyebrows and took a deep breath.

"With the boredom," added Christy.

Marty flinched and scrunched his face. "Ya... ya... it'd be bored," he said, and he was momentarily disappointed in himself. "Sure who's retired anyways?" He lifted a slight, pallid hand and draped the long fingers of it across his face. Across his eyes, his nose, his mouth. "Charles'd be," he answered his own question. "Doesn't he manage it somehow?"

Christy frowned and swerved his head away from Marty. Glancing around the faces and bodies in the pub, past Úna Brennan chatting with Seán Geraghty and... Who was that?.. One of the Athgarr half-forwards. A lithe young man in his early twenties who Christy identified as Ross O'Connell.

"Keeps himself busy," said Noel.

"With the games," responded Christy automatically.

"With the matches... ya... And the lottery," continued Noel. "Must take a bit of work all the same."

"It's commitment," said Marty.

"That's the trick," said Noel sighing, "Getting stuck into it every day."

Christy revolved his head heavily towards Noel. "What?" he said flatly.

Noel tightened his eyes. "Arrah, just keeping yourself going."

Christy stared sullenly at him.

Noel said, "He had a few bad years you know?"

Marty winced, sniffed, looked sadly to the floor.

"I heard something about that alright," said Christy, without interest.

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Noel pursed his lips. "Before your time... Or well... Maybe it was just before that. What was it? I don't know. Maybe nine or ten years ago?"

"2006," said Marty gloomily.

"It hit him hard," said Noel.

Marty swallowed.

"Never went back to work?" asked Christy.

"Never went back," affirmed Marty.

Christy lifted his pint. Lowered it. "What's this he did again?"

"Quantity surveyor," said Noel. "He was missed. I know that."

The three men were silent. They listened to the lively stream of voices. The clink of glasses from behind the bar. The news bleating from the television.

"Must be tough all the same," said Noel frowning. "No work. No money coming into the house."

Marty shook his head.

Christy stood motionless.

Noel leant suddenly forward and tapped Marty on the knee: "You'd a right to take him down to the bookies and get him instructed!" He smiled with open eyes.

Marty screwed his face. "Who? Charles?" he said, baffled.

“Or maybe you’d be worried he might lose?” poked Noel.

Christy felt an instant of tightened breath.

Marty drank the end of his pint in a quick swig. His eyes deepened as he gave the suggestion serious consideration. He wrapped himself in his arms, cradling his torso. “Wouldn’t be worried about that...” His mouth twitched and he looked up and his eyes bore a sadness, old and sincere. “Sure isn’t that the first lesson.”

20

Julia Canning arrived at Mannions. She wore a black blouse, adorned with flowers, generous red and purple petals on curving green stems. Curls of dyed-brown hair fell wetly about the flesh of her neck. She smiled broadly and easily as she proceeded from the front door.

The three men observed her movement.

They watched her isolate Lenny Dolan. Handbag and arm and leaping eyes cordoning him off from his drinking companions, she pressed him backwards with an assault of laughter. Lenny dissembled, retreated, faltered. Smiling, he surrendered an assurance.

A soft yes.

Julia grasped his arm, leant close to him conspiratorially, warming him with her body. She whispered a few words, her face solemn. Lenny nodded tamely and was released back to his friends.

She crossed the pub to join the men at the bar.

Noel lifted himself gracefully from his stool. He stood for a moment loosening his shoulders.

“How are you Julia?” he asked. “Will you have a drink?”

Julia beamed at the three men. “Well, that was easy!”

“It’s Marty’s round,” snorted Noel, “I have something I need to get sorted.”

“Ah, Jesus,” said Marty.

Noel turned without further ado and walked off towards the gents.

“What’s with him?” asked Julia.

“Gone to the jacks,” said Marty.

Christy Gloss felt his eyes widen as the tender fragrance of Julia’s perfume began to blend with the thick aura of his cologne.

Julia raised her eyebrows. “Well a man’s gotta do...”

“That’s it now,” said Marty, “That’s it.” He shifted and looked about on the floor for a while; painfully aware of the responsibility he had been left with; of his need to act; of the approach, of the crawling necessity of the next round of drinks.

He lasted this way for a few writhing seconds. He said: “I suppose you’ll have another Christy?” He looked up. To his utter dismay he registered that Christy still held an almost full pint.

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Marty saw the glass and froze. He batted his eyelids.

Towering Christy allowed the edges of his mouth to drop as he regarded Marty.

“Oh, I better,” he said.

There was a crackle of static and the faint whine of feedback as the microphone came to life. They heard the voice of Charles Sullivan: “Testing... Testing... One... Two... Three.”

21

Charles' voice came over the pub speakers.

"If I could have your attention for a moment please..."

Heads turned, chants of "Shush" and "Phwist", and the voices in the pub softened.

Charles continued: "I would like to welcome you all to the Athgearn GAA lotto draw this evening of the 22nd of May. And a beautiful evening if I may say so..."

Charles drew the numbers, while Pádraig recorded them.

Christy stood with his back to the proceedings. He listened, smiling bloodlessly as Marty Walsh indicated the arrival of his new pint of porter.

Charles drew the numbers 5, 15, 17 and 18.

Julia looked about Mannion's, trying to find a sign that someone there might be the winner of the jackpot of what was now almost nineteen thousand euro.

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Charles was thanking everyone for their patience.
Heads were turning. Eyes looked down at slips of tickets.
Hushed queries.

Until, before long, voices and giggles trickled back into
the cooling dark of the pub air.

22

Noel was back from the toilets.

“Sure, we’ll know tomorrow anyways,” he barked. His thick muscles brushed past Christy and Julia as he made his way to his seat.

“Same aul’ shite,” said Marty.

Noel feigned surprise. “Ah, now!” he said. “Ah Jesus, things haven’t gotten that bad surely. Nineteen grand. Not to be sniffed at.”

Marty folded a pair of spindly arms across the front of his black tennis shirt, shaking his head in sullen silence.

After inquiring after Julia’s health, they passed some time chatting. Noel steering the conversation onto a discussion of the current drink driving laws. A favourite topic of his, especially in the company of the Garda.

“You might as well just forget it,” he said, pushing out with his hands from his body.

“There’s no give. There’s no give,” said Marty.

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Noel laid a finger lengthwise across his lips. "I'm not saying it's right," he said, "But there's plenty still at it."

Christy scowled at the floor, colour growing across his cheeks.

"Chancers," said Julia sweetly.

"Who's dancin'?" said Charles, appearing suddenly in the circle amongst them.

Julia laughed. "Not dancin'... chancin'"

Charles smiled. "Ah, right," he said. He wrinkled his brow. "So who's chancin'?" He closed his eyes in a slow blink.

"Fools Charles," said Noel, still and expressionless.

Charles touched Noel's taut face with his eyes, waiting.

"Fools who get into a car, and a feed of drink on them."

Julia ticked the side of her glass with the points of her fingernails.

"And worse," said Christy hoarsely, "Fools who get caught." He sneered at Noel defiantly. "Ya," continued Christy, "It happens." He raised his dwindling pint to his lips and gave it a swift, practised tip. Down the bar Nell Mannion worked beer taps with the brawn of her arm.

"It's bad," said Marty.

“It’s idiotic,” said Noel. His eyes shone crimson and his nostrils darkened. “They should be gutted!” he declared, swelling with threat. “Like fucking pigs!”

“Or lambs,” said Marty quickly.

Noel brushed imaginary crumbs from off the front of his shirt.

“And what?” said Charles, “Is it that there’s not enough taxis, or what?”

“You can never find one in a hurry anyways,” said Julia sternly. Then changing her expression, becoming thoughtful, as though remembering something important, she added, “Or at least that seems to be the case.”

Charles pulled at the sides of his lower lip. “How many in Athgarr these days?”

“Five,” said Marty, “Most nights.”

“That’s including the Quinns?”

“Including the two Quinns, Ya.”

“Be a big switch from driving the lorries Marty,” said Charles.

Noel clacked the bottom of his glass loudly on the top of the bar. “You’d need to be more careful.”

“Careful in a different way,” Christy clarified.

“Careful in case you wouldn’t get paid,” said Marty. Noel looked up, surprised, a benevolent smile on his lips.

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“You’d hardly do the two jobs Marty,” said Julia, winking.

“I’ve enough people giving out to me as it is,” returned Marty, his eyes dark and darting.

Noel and Julia laughed.

23

The following day, Christy, Charles and Úna sat around the table in the living area off Úna's kitchen. The light of the day spilled in through the window. Making mockery of the constant electric optimism of the interior.

They leafed through lottery tickets checking for winning numbers. Working wordlessly. Wrapped in the soft noise of paper whispers and the squeak of chairs.

5..? No. 15..? No.

5..? No. 15..? No.

5..? No. 15..? Yes. 17..? No.

5..? No. 15..? No.

Nothing except the dull repetitive ache of their task.

"Another three," announced Charles. He placed a stub into the small container that held the three-number winners.

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It took another hour before it was over. Úna drank tea and watched and waited. Christy scanned the last few tickets, passing them to Charles for rechecking. Until they knew it would be one more week.

24

Christy and Charles walked out together along Úna's driveway towards the gate. Above them, cloud scoops candy white teased the sun with their edges. The day was relentlessly fine.

Christy shielded his eyes and made his voice grave. "Do you need a lift Charles?"

"Do you know, I think I'll chance walking."

"Sure you have time, you have time."

They crossed Úna's cattle grid and stopped by the squad car. The car gleamed with a white detergent glow. Charles shrank from its brightness.

"Good. Well listen," Christy's tone was serious. "I'm sure I don't need to stress the importance of next weekend."

Charles froze uncomfortably. "Next weekend?"

"Yes. I mean... especially with Úna being out of the country. We need to make absolutely certain that

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everything goes according to plan.” Christy levelled his gaze upon Charles. “You understand me?”

Charles looked miserable. “I know what you mean.”

Christy drew an arm around Charles’ shoulders and Charles felt the hot strength of the man beside him.

“I have every confidence in you Charles, you know that?”

Charles tightened in discomfort. “It’s just... I’m not...”

“Every confidence,” repeated Christy. “And if there’s anything I can do... Anything whatsoever I can do to help you... if there are any problems, or difficulties, you must promise to call me. Will you do that?”

“I can’t...” tried Charles.

“You’ll call me?” Christy smiled a brotherly smile. He patted Charles on the back. “You will of course.”

Charles looked at him helplessly.

“The Mazda isn’t giving you any bother, is it?” asked Christy. He studied Charles. The hunch of his shoulders. The flinch in his eye.

“No. No. Not a bit.”

Warmth and light pressed down on the roadway outside the cattle-grid.

“Good man.” Christy turned and looked down the road. “And you’re sure I can’t offer you a lift?”

Charles shook his head, a No.

“Ah well, sure it’s not a bad day for a walk. Here, listen, I’ve to be off.” Christy extended his hand and Charles took it and he was shaking Christy’s hand and what was this? Some kind of agreement and Charles’ face was trapped in an expression of slack puzzlement.

And before Charles quite knew it, Christy was sitting into the squad car and he was saying: “I’m sure it’ll all go very smoothly.” He bared a band of white teeth through the open window. “I’d hate to even consider what might happen if it doesn’t. Could get ugly. Best not to invite tragedy onto ourselves, eh Charles? Eh?”

Charles fought to control a mess of fear and anger from visiting his face. The engine of the car started. He stepped back. The car pulled away. He was standing at the side of the road. Breathing confectioned petrol fumes. Staring at the shrinking outline of the squad car.

He released a sigh, then turned the other way and walked for home.

A few days passed.

The storeroom was cool and dimly lit. Arranged in lines, on the floor and on shelves, were boxes, crates, packets, and bags. There were breakfast cereals, chocolate bars, batteries and kitchen towels, packet soups and cans of beans and washing-up liquid and sunflower oil.

The low, steady hum of a refrigeration unit nested in the silence.

Olga Chambers' eyelashes fluttered.

How could it have gotten shoved back there where no one could see it?

On the floor in front of her, a crate of cartons of orange juice. 'February 2015' printed on one side.

Over a year out of date. What was the returns policy on orange juice?

She didn't know.

"Olga?" It was Brian, one of the part-timers. His eyes danced, unsure of the necessity of his intrusion.

"What is it Brian?"

“Garda Gloss is here. Something about lottery tickets?”

“I see.”

Olga crouched beside a box of orange juice and took a moment to rehearse the possibilities for Christy’s visit.

“Tell him to hold on. That I’ll be out in a minute.”

A small gang of boys from St. Breda’s secondary school hovered near the sweets section.

“Whabbout them?”

“No. Go ‘way would ya.”

“Here lads.”

“Here, two for two euro these.”

“Show. Show. G’me wan!”

In luminous yellow, Christy Gloss stood by the counter studying his phone, running his finger across the face of it. He looked up as Olga emerged from out of the storeroom door. She noticed the schoolboys and held them in her view as she moved towards Christy.

The corners of Christy’s mouth twitched.

Then Olga was at the counter.

“How are ya,” she said, “How are *you*?”

“Ah, you know yourself,” said Christy. “Busy enough now, running between one thing and another.”

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“I know the way,” said Olga. “I’m mithered with inventory stuff myself.”

Christy winced. “It’s always a struggle with the sums,” he said.

Olga took a shred of loose packing from where it had been left inside the counter. She quickly bundled it, and bending, dropped it into a waste bin. She said, “Seems more like geography than mathematics, most of the time.”

Christy laughed. “Not an easy thing to show someone else, either. I’d say.”

“No. There’s too much stuff in there. But, sure, I’ve only myself to blame.”

From the checkout next to them came the beeping scan of crisps and chocolate bars.

“But what can I do for you? Brian said something about tickets was it?”

Christy turned to face the counter squarely. “I’ll tell you now. We are trying to establish some kind of estimate for next weekend’s jackpot.”

“I see,” said Olga.

“So I just wanted to get a rough idea of numbers.”

Olga raised her eyebrows. “Of ticket sales?”

“Well... Yes, ticket sales.”

“Oh, I don’t know Christy.” She turned to Brian.
“Brian?”

“Hmm?”

“How many lottery tickets would you say have we sold this week?”

Brian closed his mouth as he thought. “Not sure... Maybe forty or fifty?”

Christy glared down at him.

“Roughly,” said Olga, looking at Christy.

“Roughly,” said Christy. He scratched the back of his head.

“And have we many new names, or many from outside the area?”

Olga looked bored. “I don’t think so. Maybe. There might be. I’m not sure.”

“I might take a quick look,” suggested Christy.

“At the book?”

“Just now to get an idea of what we can expect.”

Olga studied Christy’s blinking eyes. “I don’t think it’s anything to get too excited about. The book is here.”

She stepped to one side and picked up a square plastic tub. Christy became suddenly interested in something on the screen of his phone. Olga peeled off the lid of the container. She took out the trim rectangular block of

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tickets and held it up sideways so that Christy could distinctly see the narrow step between the stubs of the sold tickets and the unsold tickets. He glanced up at the book in surprise, as though he were just being introduced to the idea of it.

“I see,” he said.

He held out his hand and Olga handed him the book and Christy held it in his hand. As he closed his fingers around it, he cast a frown and became distracted again by his phone. And as he squinted in concentration and fingered the screen, the phone began to vibrate and ring.

“That’s strange?” He formed an expression of official concern. “Ah, thanks Olga.” He quickly held the phone to his ear. “Christy Gloss.” He paused listening, one hand rhythmically tapping the ticket-book against his leg.

“No. They can’t do that.”

Christy stepped back from the counter listening. Listening.

Then: “Yes, I have it in my notebook.”

Christy glanced up, but could no longer see Olga. “Yes, I have it,” he announced. He turned away. “Well, just bear with me now, it’s out in the car.”

He walked to the door of the shop and opened it. “Who brought it to your attention?” he asked, as he walked outside.

Outside, Christy stood, whipped his head left and right scanning the forecourt, the parking spaces, the road. He sucked in the soft air as he walked quickly to the corner where his squad car was parked. Opened it. Got in. And threw his phone onto the passenger seat.

He sat there for the space of a minute, taking several slow breaths. Then he reached across and took a staple remover from the glove compartment. The small arcs of the metal teeth glinted where they met at their points.

He clicked the jaws together experimentally.

Click. Click.

Next, he studied the ticket-book. It was a slim, narrow book. A flimsy cover folded over the front from where it was attached to the thick, dark-brown cardboard back. Christy positioned the book on his lap and lifted the cover. Stapled pages. Each page a stub and a ticket, separated by serration. Sections for the ticket-holder's contact details and two lotto grids – one on the stub part and one on the

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ticket. Almost half of the tickets in the book had already been sold. He rubbed his thumb along the shelf of torn bare serrations. Feeling the rough tickle of the paper.

Christy lifted his eyes. Looked around the forecourt.

Up and down the road for walkers.

It was quiet.

He used the staple remover to unfasten the staples, straightening the curled legs with pliers. Each in turn. Taking the time to make sure they were as straight as possible. Pointing perpendicularly out from the front, like tiny masts.

He took hold of about half of the pages in the book. He gripped them tight between finger and thumb. These were mostly stubs. He eased them off the staples. Wriggling them free. Taking care they were kept tightly together. And when they were at last free of the staples, he held them away, apart from the book. Examining them. Convincing himself of their reality.

Christy returned his attention to his operation. With the tickets he had removed held in one hand, he used his free hand to repeat the process with one more page. Pulling it, teasing it away, out along the metal tracks of the staples.

A single, unspoiled ticket. It fell into his lap and sat there, faint and white and thin. Bright against the thick cotton navy of his uniform trousers.

He exhaled a sigh.

Another quick check around the forecourt.

Nothing.

Well. Now for the tricky part...

Christy looked up again.

Olga Chambers was standing at the front door of the shop.

Christy thrust, swept the entire clutter from the passenger seat, then from his lap onto the floor. Everything except the pages. He held these vice tight below the level of the window.

Everything.

Shite. Phone gone!

Was she looking?

Bad. Bad.

Stay with it. Don't panic. But she might have seen.

Christy bulked his back against the driver's side window, blocking the view into the car, fishing on the ground for his mobile phone.

Groping.

Aw Jesus. Where?

He felt the hard cool of flat glass and machined metal. His fingers teased the phone into his hand and he lifted it to his ear. He moved his mouth.

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“If there isn’t some kind of a reason...” he made his lips say.

He stared out towards the road and tried to find Olga out of the side of his eye. Was she closer or what?

He would glance up. He would pretend to see her.

But was she even there?

That was the door surely?

It was closed.

No?

Then she hadn’t come out?

Was she inside?

Maybe she was inside.

But... It didn’t matter.

Unlikely she’d seen anything. Very unlikely.

It was fine. It would be fine.

Forget about it.

Don’t stress the small stuff. Get it done.

It took him longer than he would have liked to coax the wad of pages he had removed back down along the legs of the staples. Carefully pressing and pressuring them into their original positions.

He stopped to get a rough idea of the shape of the reassembled book.

Checked the leaves of it were squared off.

They looked... actually... reasonable.

He scanned again to make sure there was no one nearby.

He curved the open staples back down into position.

Check. Check. Check. Everything looked okay. The ticket-book looked fine.

It looked normal. All very normal.

And Olga?

No. She hadn't. She really hadn't.

So then...

Everything was ready.

- o -

Christy returned to the shop. Olga was nowhere to be seen.

He gave the book to Brian, and thanked him, and left.

A kilometre outside of the town, Christy pulled in to the side of the road. He felt a throb of pulse in his chest and across his skull. He sat breathing and listening to the sound of his breathing. Tasting the air in waves and feeling the charge of adrenaline in his blood. His eye flickered greedily to his rear-view mirror.

He gathered the remainder of his operation. Staple-remover. Pliers. The slim, bright ticket bearing the Athgarr GAA Lotto branding and printed number boxes. He grabbed a black canvas backpack from the rear seat and threw everything into it. Everything except the ticket, which he slid with great care into the inside pocket of his uniform jacket.

The sky had clouded over and the air was warm and heavy. From time to time, a light breeze blew carrying the teasing promise of cold. Crows drifted in the sky like sentinels. Minutes passed like this and then before he knew it, almost surprised by it, Christy felt the fast

familiar itch of boredom. The numb green return of outer day. Nothing but distance and nearness and the conspiring rush of wind in trees. Nothing but the ordinary road and the dark grey promise of the asphalt.

Evening came. Christy closed up at the station and drove to his house. The loose gravel of his driveway chattered as his car glided across it. He parked and stepped out, taking backpack and jacket. He stood and stretched. Reaching behind him with his arms. Opening his chest.

A ragged skirt of cypresses surrounded the rudely mown lawn at the front of his bungalow home. Bare concrete kerbing lined each side of the drive.

He held a long breath.

And released.

Inside, the kitchen protested with the smell of several-day-old orange peels. Christy whipped his jacket and bag onto an armchair. Turned on the oven. Took a frozen pizza from the freezer. He removed this from its wrapping and positioned it on a tray. He did not wait for the oven to reach the recommended temperature.

Rubbing his hands together he turned to his jacket. The ticket. The newness of the paper and the smell of it.

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He sat down at the bare kitchen table. Placing the slip of paper in front of him. Aligning it squarely with the table's edges. Christy sat in front of it for several minutes in a self-congratulatory daze. Then he rose and visited the dark of his bedroom. The blinds left closed all day. The air thick with unsweet man-smells. Days-old socks. Months-old bed linen. In a bedside locker sat a few loose ticket stubs, harvested from the previous week's count. He fetched them out.

Back at the table, he unclasped his fist, dropping the tickets he had taken from his locker in a shower onto the surface. They lay untidy, bearing random names, addresses and telephone numbers. Names and addresses in block capitals. Blue ball-point. And below the letters, a wavy bulbous script. Each of the tickets authorised with the same signature:

Brian McLoughlin

Christy took a pen and some sheets of paper from a sideboard drawer. He brought these to the table, sat and selected a stub from the pile. He smoothed it out and set it next to the white empty pages.

With pen and paper, he began practising.

His head moving from ticket to page, over and back, he copied out Brian's signature. Roughly. Letting the pen flow over the paper. Allowing himself mistakes.

He lifted the pen for an initial inspection.

How was it? Well... only vaguely similar.

He began again. Line after line. Copying. Experimenting. A column of scrawl down the blank page. When he got to the bottom he stopped and leant back in his chair. His eye hopping from one line to the next. The first few were nothing like Brian. Instead of gliding curves, there were thick and uncertain arcs. Slight improvements further down the page. Still very obviously different though.

Christy began a second column. He measured his concentration with his tongue. Guiding the pen. Slow movements. It looked wrong. Quicker movements. It still looked wrong.

Well then. Another page.

The pepperoni on the pizza was blackened when the cooking smell of it reminded Christy it was ready. He ate and worked. Repeating the two words over and over.

Brian

McLoughlin

Two. Three pages.

Christy broke to make a cup of tea. He sat at the table, drinking, picking through the rest of the ticket stubs

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scattered there. Checking now the names and addresses. Each word of them. Analysing the letters. Acquainting himself with the small quirks of Brian's handwriting.

He took a clean page, and wrote out:

TREVOR BYRNE,
13 SYCAMORE DRIVE,
CLAREGALWAY,
CO. GALWAY

He pushed the page away from him, looking from it to the tickets. Comparing his letters to the hand-written originals. Over and back. From one to the other.

Well. Could be worse. Easier than the signature, that's for sure.

The remnants of an apple tart came from the fridge. Christy ate it cold. The sour sweetness of the stewed apple brightening the kitchen. He began again. Copying the address now. Forming the letters slowly. Working to keep them natural.

He practised this way until he noticed that it had begun to get dark.

The following day Thursday, Christy stepped through the door of Mannion's at half past nine. The lights in the pub blazed bronze and amber alongside pinpoints of white that speckled the polished wood of the tables and the bar. People in jackets and jeans and shirts. Blacks and greys. Navies. Maroon and blue.

The air was clear. Everything appeared to Christy in high definition. Clean and luminous. He smoothed the front of his jacket, running one finger inside the rind of protective nylon that covered its zipper. He surveyed the room demographically: an older bunch than the usual weekend crowd. Less people. Less women.

At the end of the bar, Noel Joyce and Marty Walsh. Noel sat on a stool by the bar, his back leaning against the partition, gazing accusingly at a copy of the Connaught Telegraph. Beside him, willowy Marty writhed serenely on his seat as he read a message off his phone.

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Christy made his way towards them. Holding back his head as though he were walking into the wind, trying to hide his pride. His large dark eyes moved from face to face in the crowd of the pub.

“Howaya...?”

“Kieran? How’s it going.”

“Good. Good.”

He found himself blocked as he crossed the floor by a fabric square of light-brown, smart cut coat. Aiden Murray stood by the bar talking to a wiry, dark-haired man in his late forties. The man’s eyes bored into the ground as he worked to tie together the strands of Aiden’s narrative. He looked up, and his face noticed Christy. Aiden turned, his closed lips smiled and he held out an arm beckoning the guard into their group of two.

“There’s the man who knows better than I,” he said warmly. His dark-haired companion squinted in confusion.

Christy balanced himself while Aiden continued to hold him in the grip of his smile. “I can’t convince this man to come fishing with me,” pitched Aiden to Christy. He leant conspiratorially towards the man beside him, taking a grip of his forearm. “Christy will back me up, he’s something of a terror for it.”

Christy’s eyebrows lifted guiltily. “Well...” he said.

“The weather hasn’t been great has it?” prompted Aiden.

Christy shook his head experimentally. “Too fine.”

“Too fine,” said Aiden. “Where’s the flood when you need it, eh Christy?”

Christy smiled. “We must not be saying our prayers enough.”

“God help us,” said Aiden in mock exasperation. “We must not.”

“Ah, the numbers are down all over the place,” said Christy. Then remembering, he turned to the other man. “Not that I’m trying to put you off now,” he said sternly. He paused and lifted his hand, one finger pointing upwards. “Have you no interest really?”

The man met Christy’s eyes. He spoke with a cockney accent. “I only ever been out once,” he said. The skin of his face creased into a tangle of hairline cracks as he grinned. “I fell in!”

Christy’s nose twitched.

His ear picked out the low rising and falling thrum of Noel’s voice from further down the bar.

After a few seconds he smiled. “Disaster,” he said quietly. “Was it out of a boat?”

“Getting into a boat... actually,” said the man.

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Christy shook his head. "You'd nearly feel like crying."

Aiden moved aside to let some people pass. Then as though he just remembered, he said: "Will you have a drink Christy?"

Christy looked bored. "I won't," he said, "This time..." He looked down the bar at the figures of Noel and Marty. "There's a couple of men down here, I owe a round."

Aiden smiled his warm smile. "Sure, they might let you away it," he teased.

Christy sucked in his lips. His eyes rolled upwards. He closed his heavy lids and held them closed and sighed. Opening his eyes again he said, "No. It just wouldn't be right." He smiled and vibrated his body in a movement that approximated laughter. "But. Sure, I'm sure I'll be talking to you."

Aiden looked disappointed and shook his head. "Another time perhaps." He moved aside.

29

Noel and Marty were sitting with their eyes solemn and downcast. They didn't look up when Christy joined them.

Christy put his hands in his pockets and straightened himself. "How're ye men?"

A few seconds passed and then Noel looked up obligingly. He sighed. "Touch and go."

Christy's mouth twitched. "What?"

"I said, touch and go," said Noel. He held a beermat, waddling it between finger and thumb.

Christy looked off to one side. Sniffed. Turned back to Noel. Looked at the ground. "Something up?"

Noel shook his head. "Arrah, nothing major."

Christy stood waiting.

Noel tossed the beermat on the counter. "Had two cunts call to my door earlier today..." Christy looked up, sensing danger. Noel continued, "They're telling me I'm going to need my septic tank inspected." Noel looked genuinely upset.

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“Oh shite,” said Christy.

Noel looked at Christy sadly. “Shite indeed.”

“And is there...?” started Christy.

Marty shook suddenly with a loud spasm of coughing. He grabbed at Christy’s arm to steady himself. “Jesus,” he managed, when the coughing had subsided. “It’s the health and fecking safety...” he wisped, “That’s gone beyond a joke.”

Noel layered the air with a sigh, while Christy stared in incredulity at Marty and at his arm and at the grip of it Marty held to.

“Are you alright?” Christy asked. “You’ll be alright,” he said.

The following day, Friday, was quiet at the Garda station. Christy closed early.

He walked to his car under tall banks of white cloud parading eastward. Mushrooming into the air. Pushing up the blue of the sky. Hanging it high above him.

In his house, he reheated a half-eaten curry and sat in front of the television to eat. Around the room, a series of prints broke the pallid geometry of square buttermilk walls. The prints rendered in soft colour. Yellows, peaches, oranges. Stylised images of flowers and fruit.

Christy had been living in the house for just over nine years. His sister had visited once. Soon after he had moved in. Travelling from England with her two children. She had insisted on taking him to a home-store in Castlebar. Helped pick out the prints. Offered advice on shelving, plants, curtains, bed linen. She stayed for a few days, departed with smiles, leaving clear instructions on next steps for the garden.

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They still spoke on the phone a couple of times a year. Sometimes she asked about the house and the garden and Christy lied easily to keep her mind at rest.

In front of the television, he flicked through the channels.

Some reality thing with what? Dogs?

No.

A History Channel documentary on... child labour during the industrial revolution? Hmm...

No.

Gangster movie... black and white... Edward G. Robinson!

Ah, too late, nearly over.

Travel show? Where? Spain. Pamplona. Jewelled light drenched white walls and terracotta rooftops.

Christy's eyes fell closed.

He heard the precise sound of his father's breath.

Hnnn. Hnnn. Hnnn.

Out. Out. Out.

His commanding voice: "Siddown. We'll watch this."

Christy sat into the failing couch. On the screen, a matador brandished a lean javelin before the exhausted hulk of a black sweating beast. Vivid strands of ribboned red flashed from the handle of the weapon.

“Watch,” said The Buck Gloss hungrily.

Christy looked on, following the clockwork movements of the matador. Nothing seemed to be happening. Everything seemed to be happening. Elaborately dressed figures circled the coal black bull.

The animal thrashed.

Tired and angry.

The bullfighter raised the blade in a flourish. The audience held their breath.

“Now,” cried The Buck. And the entirety of him broke into a whining laugh. He began to shake so much he could barely speak.

“Ah, that must be the best,” he whined. Tears on his cheeks. “Oh, the best.” He clenched the thick fingers of his hand into a ball and held it in front of him. “Puttin’ it in,” he said through glistening eyes and teeth. And he jabbed the fist forward.

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Christy looked from his father to the television screen. The bull staggered. Crimson flowed across the gold dirt of loose sand. The matador danced to one side. Struck a pose. Feet together. Upright. One hand resting on his hip.

“Hey!” The Buck spat the single word like a pip from an orange. Christy looked at him, large-eyed and unsure. The Buck’s face sank into a sulk. “Go out and tell your mother, bring me in a cup of tea,” he said. “Good lad.”

31

Saturday night and Mannion's was heaving.

In one corner, a bunch of men and women were celebrating a birthday. Tables strewn with beermats and drinks and wrapping paper and merriment. Faces warm and red. Foreheads decorated with the drooping paper remains of party hats. They raised their glasses and cheered.

Someone had brought a guitar and from time to time a song would begin. A jingling moment of silence followed by the launch of a voice.

The guitar strummed.

Song warbled from the corner.

And all around the pub was thick with bodies. Churning with chat. Squeals and snorts and sweeps and darts of promising eyes. And now from the corner a wave of lifting voice broke into chorus.

People lined the bar waiting for drinks.

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“Vodka and orange juice and a sparkling water,” said Seán Geraghty. He looked across the bar at Frank Mannion with a cheeky smile.

Strong shouldered Frank, brushed one side of his moustache and swivelled his paunch into Seán’s grin.

“Sometimes it comes and sometimes it doesn’t,” he said. He flicked his glance from Seán to the television.

“Whaaat?” Seán’s smile slowly left his face.

Frank looked from the screen back to Seán. He turned to get the drinks. “It’s always the day you least expect it...”

“Jesus Frank... what the hell are you on about?” Seán looked more confused than annoyed.

Frank stood silently with his back to Seán while he attended to the drinks. Ice clinked into a glass. He placed both hands on the counter top behind the bar. Leaned down on them as though he were preparing to lift himself.

“Tell us...” The words came from the back of Frank’s head, “Did Carmel have the baby?”

Seán understood and was relieved.

He shook his head. “No. Not yet,” he said. “Still no sign.”

“Must be close now though,” sang Frank as he twisted a bottle cap. There was the Chaw of carbonated air.

“Sure is.” Seán dropped his eyes easily to the counter. “Any day now.”

Frank placed drinks on the counter top. "That'll be the craic," he said.

Behind him Nell Mannion and Teresa Ruddy moved up and down the bar serving drinks. A curling strand of hair sweat-stuck to Nell's brow. She bent, pulled open a refrigerator door and produced two bottles of cider. Turning automatically, pint glass in hand, she began filling. Waiting. Holding the time. She shot glances down along her section of bar. Who was next? Yer man with the earring. Have only seen him once or twice. Comes in with Ross O'Connell. Look at him. In a world of his own. He must be there ten or fifteen minutes at this stage.

The young man with the earring stood patiently. Rigidly staring at a space somewhere behind the bar. From time to time he looked over. Nell caught his eye. Nodded. "Now," she said.

“The problem with dogs?” Julia Canning laughed close beside Marty Walsh’s ear. Julia, Marty and Noel were huddled on the only three remaining seats at one of Mannion’s low rectangular tables.

“It’s not a problem,” said Julia, “So much...” Noel angled an ear towards her and frowned. It was a large table. People stood close by them. Behind them and around the table. Surrounding them with knees and trousers and handbags and a bubbling flow of blather. “It’s just...” continued Julia. Noel inclined the ear closer.

“I know,” said Marty.

“It’s just they’re always there,” said Julia.

“I know.”

Noel looked disappointed for an instant. Then mildly furious. “Well do you expect them to fuck off on holidays, or what?”

“Ah no. Ah Noel,” Julia shook her head. “That’s not what I meant.”

“You’ve to be responsible,” said Marty.

“Yes. It’s a lot of responsibility.” Julia looked concerned.

“You know, you can’t leave them locked up all the time.”

Noel looked at Julia. His eyes bore a faint scientific pessimism. “Are you thinking of getting a dog Julia?” he asked softly.

“Oh, God no,” said Julia. Marty angled an elbow onto the table and slouched forward, resting his head sideways against the palm of his hand.

“No. My brother has two,” said Julia. “A German shepherd and a golden retriever.”

Noel flashed a glance at Marty. He looked off to one side. He said: “I see... And...”

“They’re lovely dogs,” stated Julia. Noel sucked in a breath and waited while she spoke. “But I don’t have to worry about feeding them and taking them for walks. You know?” She crossed her legs and swept away a mouthful of gin and grape.

She stared sullenly at Noel. “Don’t think I could manage it,” she said.

No one spoke for a while.

“They’re big dogs, them German shepherds,” said Marty.

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Noel looked around. "You'd never keep them fed," he said. He shook his head, admiring the appetite of German shepherds. "Jesus, they make great guard dogs though," he declared suddenly. "Vicious and loyal. Sure isn't that what you want."

"And loud," said Marty.

"Aw, will you stop," said Noel, "They'd scare the shite out of you."

The three of them huddled together awkwardly, looking down at the table, avoiding each other's eyes.

"Why's it so busy in here anyways?" asked Julia. She looked up at a wall of bodies. "All the footballers are in. They're not usually in are they?"

"No match tomorrow," said Marty.

"They've a bye," added Noel.

"Ah." Julia stared into her glass.

Marty uncoiled his arms and drank from his pint. Quietly evaluating the cold solemnity of the porter in his stomach.

"No word of Christy," he said.

"Haven't heard," said Noel flatly. "Probably working."

"Abandoned by the guardian of the peace." Julia smiled mysteriously.

Noel and Marty looked at each other in disbelief.

Marty shook his head.

“Jesus, I’d nearly start a fight now,” said Noel. “Just out of a sense of decorum.”

Marty lowered his eyes bashfully.

Julia held a silent laugh. “Ah that’s you Noel,” she said. “Always the gentleman.”

33

Christy was doing push-ups on his sitting room floor. He had just taken a shower and felt charged with energy and anticipation. Twenty-eight. Twenty-nine. A few minutes beforehand he had been pacing the downstairs rooms of his house. Every few minutes, he had stopped himself by a window. Staring out. Reminding himself that nothing had changed. Not yet. Thirty-five. Thirty-six. But the pieces were all in place. And something was going to change soon. So soon. He could taste it. It was almost unbearable.

Animal and musky.

The heat of the future.

Christy grunted as his forty-three year old arms raised him from the floor one more time. Forty-seven. Forty-eight.

“Kkhhhhhaaaaaaa,” he released for the final push. Fifty.

He stood slowly. Basking for a moment in the endorphin rush. He felt connected to his body. To the

warmth of the evening. The smell of his house. To this position in time and space. But... No. Not yet.

Not quite yet.

Tomorrow though! Oh, tomorrow!

Breaking out of the daze, he returned to the shower and let cool water massage the back of his neck and his shoulders. He stood, dripping onto the bathroom floor. The heat gradually draining from his body.

He returned to the kitchen. Turned on the radio.

And resumed pacing.

34

Charles Sullivan sat at his kitchen table with his head in his hands. Motionless. Breathing softly.

An hour had passed this way.

He gradually lifted his face. Feeling at last the centre of his spinal equilibrium totter from front to back. He found himself staring at the ceiling. At the light there. It hurt his eyes. Those large, kind eyes. Coated with a dropless film of moisture.

The light was sore and it hurt him when he looked. And he sat and he looked. Sealed in by the ceiling. Waiting for the relief that waiting brought.

Suspended. Transfixed.

There were too many questions. Too many unknowns.

There was fear. No matter how much he told himself that this could not be real, it was happening. This is how dread takes form. This is not your imagination, he warned himself. Be very sure of that. He had heard the stories. He felt the weight of consequences he knew were not

preventable. And he knew it was more weight than he had strength left to bear.

Charles felt time giving way. Felt it losing. And he focused all his will towards just keeping at bay the unbound hovering certainty that he was destined to spend forever in this place.

The following day was Sunday. The Lotto draw took place in Mannion's. Charles carried out his duties with care and attention.

The numbers drawn were 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Part III

Úna

1

Úna Brennan thanked the flight attendant and stepped through the door onto the stairway. Into the soft whine of jet noise. The hairs on her arms bristled in the North Dublin air and she stopped to breathe it in, the purity of it masked by the liquorice edge of airport fumes.

She felt the lift of nostalgia. A summer in Madrid after she had finished college. Those two weeks in Vancouver five years ago. The water had been so clear! She brushed a wisp of hair from her face. Sighed. And bent to hoist a trim, teal-coloured case.

In front of her and below her, passengers tranked down steps. A trail of them leading towards the terminal building. The rasp of the airplane's engines slowly dampened behind her as she followed them.

She walked in line with the other passengers to passport control. An expressionless grey-haired man scanned her passport. He looked at Úna's face. Looked

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down at the small stamp sized photograph of her, a smile touching the edge of his eyes.

“Úna.”

He returned the passport.

“Thank you,” she said.

2

Úna exited the Arrivals gate and passed out through the waiting faces. She turned at once and made her way to an escalator and on up to the Mezzanine. She was hungry and needed a coffee and was keen to finish the last few chapters of the book she was reading. The chief suspect, the surgeon, had just been furnished with an alibi. One of his students had come forward. She had been with him that night. Yes. Well, it's never the obvious one is it... Úna's money was on the jilted secretary. Too many convenient mistakes. Anyhow. She'd get through about twenty pages over coffee and read the last of it on the bus.

Oh, but Kiel had been lovely. Lots of time outdoors. Walking. Cycling. Boating. Her friends, Emma and Henri, had seemed genuinely happy to see her. (Well, you didn't always know.) And the food and wine was great. She'd ignored all thoughts of Athgearn and laughed and walked around barefoot and flirted in faltering German. Her mouth wrinkled as she remembered. Hans with the

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sailboat. Did he really own a sailboat? What did he say was the name of it? What was it again? Something positive... hopeful... Santa... something... No. It was... language... no... Esperanza! Yes. That was it. Esperanza.

The three days had flown, and when the time came to leave it was bittersweet. She stood at Emma and Henri's front door while her taxi waited. There were hugs and promises of visiting again soon. "Before Christmas! You must! You must!"

3

In the café, airport people milled around with trays. Accents and languages blended with perfume and cologne. Úna left her case at a nearby table and joined the queue, returning five minutes later with a smoked salmon panini and a latte. She sat and lifted everything in sequence off the tray and removed the tray from the table. Then taking, operationally, the sandwich in both hands, she lifted it to her mouth and closed her teeth over the sweet white dough. Smoked salmon and rocket tickled the inside of her mouth. She chewed experimentally. Tasting slowly. Swallowing the sweet pulp. Not bad. Savouring. Not bad now. The little hint of tartar sauce giving a gentle punch. Another bite and someone at a table nearby, or in the queue for food produced a sentence containing the word “count” and Úna had to fight her mind’s movement towards tickets and records and numbers and Christy and Charles and... No! That was tomorrow. It could wait... and besides... There was a sandwich to get through. And...

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Mmm... that coffee... would require attention. And the jilted secretary... what was her name? It didn't matter... Atkins? Atkinson? Something like that... It wasn't that important. The book was waiting. Zipped in the front pouch of her travel case.

4

The bus purred on the motorway. Fields and trees and bog flowed past blanketing the journey in early summer greens and browns. Úna sat by herself. A light litter of noise from the radio and from chattering passengers.

She had finished her book before the bus crossed the Shannon. The ending had been unsatisfactory. Impossible to predict and scant on revelation. Úna frowned as a wave of irritation carried her into Connacht. In another hour she would be in Galway. The bus would stop at GMIT and she would get out. From there, it was a ten minute walk to the quiet lot where she had parked her car.

And then North to Mayo. And Athgearr. She sighed and gazed out at the horizon, the delicate aftertaste of the weekend suffused into the cold draw of older memories.

It was late by the time she got home. Mild and clear. The moon hung ripe in the night sky. Úna stood outside her car, the travel case at her feet, and allowed her

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attention to move to her senses. She felt the air against her face and hands. Became aware of it in her nostrils as she breathed. It smelt clean and fresh. She listened into the silence and could hear nothing except the purring labour of a distant car engine. Around her the shrubs and flowers and lawn seemed to conspire in the weak light of the moon. It was a beautiful night and Úna felt the rare sweet sting of being. Something of moments forever past and the fragile promise of recurrence. Her face broke in a miniature smile and she clasped her arms around herself and held herself and stood this way for a while.

The car was closer now. She could hear the gears shifting as it turned at the crossroads about a kilometre away. Louder as it came near. A flash of light and noise. It flickered past the house. And then it was gone. Off down the road. Growling its way towards Athgarr. Úna shivered. She unclasped her arms, brushed the hair from her face and lifted her case out onto the smooth surface of her driveway.

5

“One, two, three... four... Four! Oh my God lads, we have a winner!”

Úna Brennan looked up at Christy and Charles with a glow of satisfaction. The two men’s faces stumbled towards expressions of surprise.

“Really?” Christy raised his eyebrows experimentally.

“3, 4, 5 and 6... Yes!” Úna’s eyes fire bright.

Charles shook his head silently at the table.

“Thanks be to God,” said Christy.

Úna laughed. She held the ticket-stub out proudly in front of her: “Oh, that’s great now. I’m delighted.”

Charles pushed his chair back from the table. “I’m only glad it was you that found it Úna,” he said. “At this stage, I’m so tired of staring at numbers I’d say I’d have gone straight past it.”

Úna’s eyes checked Charles’ face as Christy reached for the ticket. “Can I see,” said Christy, “Who is it?”

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Úna read: “Trevor Byrne. From Claregalway. No phone number.”

“Email?” asked Christy.

“No. No email either.” Úna handed Christy the ticket.

“That’s awkward,” said Charles.

Úna smiled. “Sure there’s always something. Oh, but that’s a real relief though. Isn’t it?”

“Sycamore Drive... I think I know it,” said Christy, handing the ticket-stub to Charles. Charles raised a slow arm, avoiding Christy’s eyes. His fingers closed on the ticket and he drew it towards him. Black ink marked circles around the four numbers. The name, and the address in Brian McLoughlin’s blue-inked block capitals. Signed and dated. Charles stared at the ticket-stub in wonder. “There’ll be a few drinks bought in Claregalway,” he spluttered.

“I’ll throw on the kettle,” said Úna.

“Well hold on now...” said Christy.

Úna looked at him appraisingly.

“Well we’re only half way through.” He gestured at the remaining stacks of unchecked tickets.

Úna smiled. “Don’t worry Christy, we haven’t forgotten.” She walked to the kitchen. “Aren’t you the hard taskmaster.”

Úna picked up the kettle and removed the lid. She began to fill it from the cold tap.

“Making sure we dot the i’s and cross the t’s,” said Charles. He winced in surprise at himself as Christy turned the hard points of his eyes on him.

“Ah sure,” laughed Christy, “I’m still hoping someone I know might get a piece of the pie.”

Úna clicked the switch on the kettle. It lit with a subtle electric blue light. She turned and crossed her arms. “It would have been nice if it was someone from Athgarr that won.” She nodded towards the table. “But something tells me we’re not going to get another four numbers out of that lot”.

She turned and reached up and took hold of a dark brown cup.

“Who’s for tea?”

“I’ll have a cup Úna, thank you,” said Christy.

Charles sat with his shoulders sagging and said nothing.

Úna took down a second cup. Placed both on the counter beside the kettle and tossed teabags into them.

Charles roused himself then as though from a sleep. He still held the ticket stub. It seemed rudely surreal in his hand. He placed it carefully in the winners’ container, in the centre of the table. And without pause, he reached for

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another bundle. Tickets that Úna had checked and set aside and that needed to be rechecked.

“Might as well keep going,” he said.

He began to scan the numbers looking for the easily recognisable pattern of 3, 4, 5 and 6.

6

It took another half an hour to complete the count.

“I hope now, we can get in touch with this guy.” Úna pressed one finger on the handle of the empty cup in front of her.

Christy stood by the open living-room window, looking out. A soft breeze rustled the short sleeves of his shirt. “I’ll take a drive out to him,” he said, “And have a chat.”

“You wouldn’t mind?” asked Úna.

“Not at all.” Christy’s face stopped suddenly. His eyebrows climbed. “Ah, shite now! What am I saying? I’m in Dublin for training all this week.”

Úna chewed thoughtfully on biscuit. “Hmmm... I see.”

No one spoke for a moment.

“Charles?” suggested Úna.

“No. I...” started Charles.

“Some kind of problem Charles?” Christy’s voice low and serious.

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“No. It’s...” Charles looked pinkly at Úna. He shook his head. “It’s just, I’m a bit worried about the car...”

“Your own car is it?” said Christy.

“Yes. Well it’s just...”

“Don’t worry about it Charles.” Úna sounded genuine. “If it’s not convenient for you.”

“No, it’s not that.”

“It’s hardly the clutch again,” Christy smiled sweetly.

Charles turned and met the heat of Christy’s eyes. Recoiling, shaking his head, he realised the word, “No.”

Úna walked to the kitchen and left her cup beside the sink.

“Well look...” she began.

“You’ll hardly be in Galway then Charles?” said Christy, folding his arms, “I just had a notion you might be up there anyway.”

Charles looked for the window. Past Christy. Out into sky. His mind became bloated with fear of Galway and for Gillian and he felt, or felt he felt, the whispered fume of threat in Christy’s words.

Úna and Christy waited for him in the small silence.

Charles closed his eyes. “That’s true actually,” he surrendered.

Úna was frowning, obviously confused.

“No. I am supposed to be going to Galway on Thursday,” Charles said.

“But there might be some kind of problem with your car?” suggested Úna.

“Well. Yes... but no. It comes and goes, you know?”

“I see.”

“But... more than likely... I will... be going to Galway on Thursday.”

“Okay,” said Úna. “So you could stop off in Claregalway? Potentially?”

“I can’t imagine any reason why I couldn’t,” admitted Charles.

“Unless there’s car trouble,” said Christy.

“Unless there’s car trouble,” repeated Charles.

“Well sure let’s hope then,” said Úna. “You might get a chance to stop off and give Trevor the news.”

“One way to get a warm welcome,” smiled Christy.

Úna laughed.

“Well, if you do... will you see will he come down and visit us, so we can get a photo for handing over the cheque.”

“I’ll talk to him,” said Charles doubtfully.

“Record jackpot, and all that. Oh, and will you get a phone number off him if you can.”

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“Yes, of course.”

Christy made his voice kind and official then. “And let me know how you get on Charles,” he said. “Or, if there’s anything I can do to help.” His hands went into his pockets. “In case, you know, you have trouble finding him. Or whatever it might be. Anything at all. Just let me know.”

Outside, away from the house, Christy placed a grip on Charles’ elbow. “Listen now, until I tell you,” he said earnestly.

Charles jaw tightened, his lip quivering.

“I’ll call round to you later Charles, we’ll have a chat.”

Charles waited. Breathing through his nose. Staring at the surface of the road.

“You know what about?” said Christy.

“Come on.”

“You do. Ah good. Just a few pointers is all. Nothing too serious.”

He released Charles’ arm and walked to his car.

“Talk to you Charles.”

Christy sat in, turned the key and punched the accelerator. Tyres spat dark grey chippings. He slung the car out onto the road in the direction of Athgarr and was gone.

7

Aiden Murray's arms opened between Charles and Christy Gloss.

"And this is Charles Sullivan. Charles is a great friend of the club and one of our most ardent fundraisers."

Charles came to attention, blinking himself into alertness in the presence of the new Garda.

"A hard job that," said Christy. His eyes searched the creased features of Charles' face.

"Well, you're one to talk," said Charles, loud and sudden. "I couldn't do it." He shook his head. "Not me." He drew in a thick measure his pint, and swallowed. He held out his hand. "Gillis, is i'?" Charles looked through bloodshot eyes from the guard to Aiden in impatient confusion.

"Gloss," said Christy. He took Charles' soft warm hand and shook it. "Christy."

Aiden Murray smiled benevolently. "Not a footballer, Charles, before you ask."

Charles squinted at Aiden. “Hah?” He threw a look at Christy. “Ya, well, neither am I.” He looked the guard up and down. “Mind you, I don’t have your physique.”

Christy’s mouth cornered in a smile.

“No,” said Charles. He slugged off another mouthful of his pint. “I’m not the physical type.” Shaking his head. “Couldn’t do your fecking job. That’s for sure.”

He whirled around then, taking in the tables laid out for the Christmas dinner party. Remembering. “Are’s you staying for the grub?” he asked.

Aiden smiled patiently. “There’s a place for you there of course Christy. You are more than welcome to join us.”

Christy patted the pockets of his trousers. “I might... am... I have to just check in. Have to make a quick phone call.”

“Crooks is it?” said Charles. He had finished his pint. “It’s the time of year for it, isn’t it?”

Christy turned his red face to Charles. “Sorry?”

“At least we’ll have no worries of a row breaking out over the dinner.” Charles leered sideways at Aiden. And swinging back towards Christy, he leaned close to him and said: “We have a big man now to chase away the bad guys.” He tapped the side of his nose with his finger and monkeyed a smile.

“Well, I think now...” said Aiden.

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“Hold on. Hold on,” said Charles. “Have ye no drinks?”

“Just in the door really Charles,” said Aiden.

“Here! Well, here, what are you having?”

Aiden glanced at Christy.

“No, you’re okay Charles, thanks all the same.”

“No. No. No hassle at all,” pressed Charles.

“You’re very kind Charles. Very kind.” Aiden looked up and around. “Ah,” he said, “There’s Seán now. Charles, you’ll have to forgive us.” He touched Christy on the arm. “I must introduce you this man,” he said.

Charles swayed gently on the pub floor as they walked away.

8

The road was dark and quiet. Along one side, a line of trees swollen with summer growth hung their heads, dull and patient in the night. Christy's car was pulled into a lane way, out of the sight of passers-by.

No one was out.

It was late and it was quiet.

Through the open window he could hear the calming noise of a small stream. He thrummed his fingers on the driving wheel in time to the flow of the water.

Yes, he thought. It should work. Minor risk, but there's always a risk.

His session with Charles had gone well.

- o -

"Do you seriously consider, that you expect me to make up this entire scéal?" Charles paced around his kitchen.

"You're not," coaxed Christy.

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“What do you mean, ‘I’m not’?”

“You’re not making it up.”

“Don’t. Christy. Jesus Christ. You know what I mean.”

Christy sniffed, stood tall and folded definite arms. “The problem here Charles, is you seem to have complicated this,” said Christy. He pointed to his head. “In your mind.” Breathing quickly in and out through his nose. “The time for saying ‘I’m not able’ is behind us. Do you understand me?”

Charles’ shaking head looked at Christy and Charles said, “Look now, I just don’t know...”

“Ba, ba, ba,” interrupted Christy, “You know very well Charles. It is really quite simple. It’s not complicated at all.”

“I...”

“All you do. All you do is explain the situation to Úna, exactly as I’ve explained it to you.”

“But the...”

“There’s no need to concern yourself with... what might-be, Charles. It’s very simple. When you feel the doubt taking a hold of you, you just ask yourself... What do I stand to gain? And what do I stand to lose?”

The points of Christy’s eyes drilled into Charles.

Charles stopped pacing and took a step back. Confusion and misery clouded his face. He lowered his head.

Christy waited.

“But afterwards...” began Charles.

“Ah, ah. You’re at it again. There’s no ‘afterwards’. ‘Afterwards’ is not your responsibility. I have given these matters a great amount of consideration. A great amount. And you have no need to concern yourself. Whatsoever.”

Charles looked towards the ceiling as though trying to find a way through. A way out into the sky. “I’ve known Úna for years you know. For more than twenty years...” he tried.

“Which is all the more reason that you want this to go as smoothly as possible.”

Charles closed his eyes.

“Look,” said Christy. “In a month’s time this will be.. a nothing. You’ll remember it. And I’ll remember it. But no one else will ever have a clue. A nothing Charles. You just need to play your part. It’s not... it’s not a thing.”

“Oh, I’m in hell,” wailed Charles. “I’m going to hell.”

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Christy laughed with his arms folded. “Arrah, come on out of that.”

Charles slouched to the table in the dining area and lowered himself onto a chair. He placed both elbows on the table and covered his face with his hands. “I really don’t know if I can do it.”

“You do know,” said Christy slowly and certainly. “You know well.”

For about a minute, neither of the men spoke or moved. Christy stood patiently over the table. Soft and smothering. The pressure of his presence layering the room.

Charles’ shoulders slumped in the chair.

“Tell me again,” he said. “Go through it... what you said...”

Christy took a seat opposite him.

“No problem.”

- o -

Afterwards, in the car, in the tender dark, Christy retraced the tracks of their conversation. Yes. Everything was almost in place.

A wind had risen and a flight of rain draped itself across the windscreen, marbling the world outside. The night slowly surrendered warmth.

Waiting now is all.

Just waiting.

And like that, three days passed.

9

The river that flows past Athgarr is deep and winding and narrow. A diligent movement westward, it reflects the sky from its smooth surface. And walking its banks on a cloudy day, if you catch the reflection of the sky in one of the many long pools, you will know how it found its name: Abhainn Liath, The Grey River.

It touches the northern part of the town, where for the course of five hundred metres or so, the current grows fast and the bed is shallow. The place is marked by the frank, rectangular frame of an old mill. Abandoned except for the silence of its bats and the skitters and whispers of teenagers who gather there to drink cheap beer, cheap vodka, and wine.

Next to the mill is the bridge and the road leading north and on eventually to Castlebar and Westport. Out of the town and across this bridge in the wet morning light drove Christy Gloss. The candied smear of a grin had leaked onto one side of his face. He milked the

accelerator, relishing the power of the car. The danger of the bends. The slick surface of the roads.

More of this, thought Christy. This! Is what it feels like to be a man.

Christy had passed through the town without noticing Úna Brennan. She was unclipping her bicycle helmet outside Londis as the squad car whipped by. Absently absorbing the streak of white and lemon as the car crossed the bridge, she hooked the helmet onto a handlebar and corrected her hair.

Chocolate. Then home.

She pushed inside the shop. Hello. Hello. How are you?

Half an hour later, back at her house, Úna followed the familiar kata of teamaking. Fill kettle. Retrieve cup. Teabag. Teabag into cup.

She laid the chocolate, a small invitation to herself, on her kitchen counter next to the chopping board. Standing there, listening to the early breath of the kettle, making a plan for the morning, she heard her phone ring.

“Charles? How are you...”

She listened.

“Good? Well... sooo... how’s the car?”

10

Christy rapped hard on the front door of Charles' house.

He stood in the heat looking out at the road. Waiting.

He counted sixty seconds.

Another rap. Tang. Tang. Tang.

Waiting.

He restarted his counting. How was it so bloody hot? He had reached the count of fifty-two, when through the stained glass window, he saw a figure approach, grey and shuffling. It stopped inside the door.

Ker-ultch.

The door opened.

A pair of limpid blue eyes looked up from a pale, tired face.

"You're here," stated Charles.

Christy clapped his hands together. "Now Charles," he said. He brushed past and down the hall. Past lines of

photographs. School pictures of Gillian. Wedding photos. Football teams. Soft coats of dust layered on the frames.

Charles shut the front door. He turned mechanically and followed after the guard.

They walked into the gloom of the kitchen. Christy swiped a crop of new sweat from his forehead and looked around. Near to the sink, an uncomfortable pile of unwashed plates and cups. A half-full saucepan of potatoes. The faint smell of bacon grease salted the air.

The two men stood awkwardly for a moment.

“I’ve been giving all of this a lot of thought...” started Charles.

Christy sighed. He turned his back on Charles and walked to the refrigerator. He stopped and leaned forward, examining a postcard on the door of it. A photograph of a street in Naples. Colourful streams of washing strung from one side to the other. He flicked the postcard with his index finger. “Nice.”

He turned slowly and rested his back against the fridge. Hard, knowing eyes levelled themselves at Charles. Like a teacher waiting for a lie. “You have something you need to say,” he said thinly. “Say it.”

Charles took a deep breath and held it until he felt the heat in his lungs.

“I can’t do it,” he spluttered.

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Christy waved a finger in warning. “No. No. I’m stopping you there.” He paused for a few seconds to allow himself time to frown. “Listen now.”

Charles held up a hand, palm forward.

“No,” said Christy. “No.” Loud and firm. “Just. Listen.”

The two men stood facing each other.

“Okay,” said Christy, “So you’ve been torturing yourself. As far as I can tell, that’s what you’ve been doing. Well... this might sound strange, but I can kind of understand that. I can.” He put his hands into his trousers pockets. “This is, after all... The Moment. All very dramatic. Lots of... what do you call it...” Taking one hand from a pocket he placed it flat on his lower stomach. “Emotion.”

Charles turned and shuffled to a press where he kept cups and glasses. He stood there with his back to Christy.

“Yes,” said Christy. “It’s natural to be having doubts.”

“It’s just...”

“What... What you haven’t been focusing on Charles... is the equilibrium involved here.” Christy waited for a moment for the word ‘equilibrium’ to take its hold. He heard it echo in his own head. Eck... wee... lib... ree... um. “Mmm... and that’s completely natural as well. You... might... even say... it is a sensible, scientific approach to take.” Christy smiled to himself. “Necessary even. To kind

of... test the bounds of co-operation.” Christy tapped the floor with the sole of his shoe.

Paq. Paq. Paq.

Charles' hand grappled open a cupboard door.

Paq. Paq. Paq.

“This is a level of... well... Excitement... that I wouldn't expect you to be used to.”

Charles distractedly clattered a glass from one of the shelves.

“But there's a problem...” continued Christy.

“I know...” Charles sounded almost hopeful.

“Not an insurmountable problem. Wait 'till I tell you.”

Charles turned to face Christy.

“You need to listen to me very carefully here now.” All softness had left Christy's voice.

“Do you understand me now Charles? Very carefully. To what I'm saying.”

“What... is it?” whined Charles. He held the glass limply, at an angle.

Christy sighed and raised his eyes to the ceiling.

“So you see,” he said, breathing heavily. “On the one side there are... let's call them... The consequences of our actions.”

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Out and in he breathed the warm, humid air of the kitchen. His eyes rolling.

He went on.

“How they affect you and me and... everyone else.” He stopped a second. Charles’ impulse was to speak. “Poor choices Charles.” The cold of Christy’s voice stopped him. “Poor choices will lead us to a situation where... certain parties might be less inclined to ensure that you... and that those close to you... are protected.”

A flash of alarm crossed Charles’ tired face.

“Oh yes,” continued Christy. “We have to make sure you are well looked after.” He folded his arms. “You know. To make sure that nothing ugly should happen. The world... is a harsh place after all. And we need to keep you out of the way of any nastiness.”

“N... nastiness?”

“You don’t believe it exists?” Christy sounded surprised. “You don’t believe that there are people... maybe people quite close to you... that might wish you harm?”

Charles had frozen.

“This is always the problem,” continued Christy. “It’s human. We build such beautiful walls for ourselves. And so much of the time they do their job. Nice and cosy. Don’t see it. Don’t hear it. It doesn’t exist.” Christy closed his eyes. He put his hands over his ears and shook his head.

Charles watched him in confounded silence.

Christy continued, “Well the denial is finite Charles. The denial is finite. Such things do exist. Outside the walls. There are monsters out there. It’s not funny. This is serious now. I’m talking about real harm. Very real harm.”

Christy was solemn.

“But,” he said. “But...” He held up his hand, his index finger extended. “You can learn. You don’t want to get caught up in these... dangers. No one does. So... You learn.”

Christy closed his hand into a fist and made a slow swing. The ball of it smacked softly against the wall. “*Potential* harm! I should say. Yes. That’s better. Potential harm...”

Charles’ hand had began to shake. He found his legs would not move. He reached to the counter top and placed the glass there, unable to push it in from the edge. “But don’t worry about that Charles,” said Christy’s sweetening voice. “Because... On the other side... balancing all the things we want to avoid... there is after all a motivation... a reason why we make ourselves go out beyond the walls. There are... other things to be found. Good things. Precious things.” Christy smiled. “Really.” And his voice was warm. “I’m sure this probably sounds weird, but... you find a sense of ease after a while. You do. And I know

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you are worried about getting caught. No one wants that. No one.”

Christy crossed his arms.

“Well... That’s an ugliness that can be prevented. If we trust each other. If we find a way to work together.”

Charles stared motionlessly into the space of his kitchen floor.

“And you know what?” Christy unsmiling, clapping a hand on Charles’ shoulder.

Holding.

Squeezing.

“And I’m being honest with you here.”

“Hah?”

“Even though this seems like everything now. Like your entire world has shrunk to this point. You’re telling yourself that if you just do this, it’ll all be over. That this is the hard part. Isn’t that how it seems?”

“Ya?” Charles cried the smallest laugh.

“Well it isn’t,” said Christy.

He moved his head close to Charles.

“You need to dig in,” he said softly. He shook Charles by the shoulder and smelled the cold salt bloom of his sweat.

“Because there’ll be more after this.”

Charles felt his balance failing.

He looked up into the dark angles of Christy's face.

Christy held his eyes. Waiting in the dense mess of the kitchen.

Slowly.

So very slowly.

Charles' lips formed into a small crumpled bud. His eyebrows lifting, he stated, as though providing the answer to a riddle:

"There's always another point of no return."

"Ya," Christy snorted immediately. "Something like that."

He broke away and walked to the patio door and stood looking out into Charles' back garden. The sun beat mercilessly down.

Speaking almost to himself, he said: "Weather is something else..." He unfolded his arms and rested his hands on his hips. He looked out. "Something else."

He turned and walked back through the kitchen and into the hall. "I'll give you ten minutes. And then... well... then... you're up."

Charles heard his footsteps recede down the echoing space of the hall.

11

Christy sat in his car, turned on the radio, and left Charles standing alone in his kitchen. Charles was listening to the dull throb of the refrigerator. To the high keep of birdsong from outside his window. He moved his head slowly from side to side, from back to front, feeling the weight of it with his neck. An exercise his wife Lorraine had taught him years ago, something she was learning at the time in Tai-Chi. He reached out his mind, trying to locate some inner space of relaxation.

He felt a sudden shudder.

An impulse ran through his body, down his spine and into his legs. He jerked with the motion of it, kicking out and connecting the toe of his shoe with the bottom of the kitchen counter. The glass still sitting on the edge trembled there. He grabbed at it, marvelling at his own

unsteadiness. Took hold of it in a clumsy grip. Managed the four stuttered steps he needed to get to the sink.

Water. Cold.

Soring the inside of his mouth.

Christy returned. “All good,” he said. “Well?”

Charles moved quick in response. He took his phone from his pocket and slid it on to the top of the table and sat down beside it. Christy followed quietly, moving to the opposite side of him and standing there. He unzipped his jacket. He took a piece of paper from the inside pocket. The ticket. Trevor’s ticket. He set it by the phone.

Charles pressed some buttons, entered a pin number. The phone was calling Úna. He tapped the screen and both men could hear the dialtone in the tinny acoustics of the dining-room. Christy folded his arms, lightly hugging himself.

Then Úna’s voice:

“Charles?”

“Úna.” Charles’ voice was deep and soft.

“How are you?”

“I’m good.”

“Good? Well... sooo... how’s the car?”

12

“Oh, surviving,” Charles winced.

“Glad to hear it,” Úna laughed. “I had terrible visions of you stranded.”

“Well... No.” A pause. “Not yet, at least... at least not since... no... the last bit of trouble I had was a puncture... thankfully that’s all.”

“I was lucky Charles. The last time I got a puncture... it was down in Ballinrobe... right in the middle of the town. And busy. I was like: This is all I need now. Stress! You know yourself. But... as it turns out... some kind gentleman there was so bold as to change the tyre for me. I couldn’t believe it!”

“What’s the world coming to at all?” said Charles.

“I know,” laughed Úna, “You wouldn’t want to be getting used to it.”

Christy smiled down approvingly.

“Tell me...” said Úna. “Did you make it as far as Claregalway?”

“Well, that’s kind of why I’m ringing,” Charles frowned and closed his eyes. “I met with Trevor.”

“Oh?”

“Ah, it’s a sad kind of a story in a way.”

Charles waited.

Silence.

He went on, “Well, let’s just say that the few bob won’t go astray.”

“Sure, does it ever?”

“Well this is it. Tis rare you get turned away... But this particular situation though... this situation is that this man, Trevor Byrne, is actually quite isolated. Now. What I mean is... it took me nearly ten minutes hammering just to get him to open the door.”

“Oh... I see.”

“Yes. He’s not in great shape... poor man. It seems he was the victim of a hit and run incident a few years back and... ah... it left him in a bad way... a bad way now. Lost the use of his legs... lost his job...”

“He’s in a wheelchair?”

“In a wheelchair... he is... I’d say now... he doesn’t get out very often, this poor man, if you know what I mean...”

“That’s awful,” said Úna. “When did he have the accident?”

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“Am... about... four or five years ago, from what I could gather.”

“I see... And he has no phone even?”

“No phone. No email. No. He’s really quite isolated. Really... you won’t believe this... he doesn’t even have a bank account!”

“God!”

“Ya... Massively overdrawn after the accident. And then out of work, and sure he’s been kind of scraping by ever since.”

“Wow! That sounds horrible.”

“Sure, I know. It’s hard now. It’s hard.”

Christy looked towards the window. His tongue wiped vigorously at his lower lip.

“And how did he take the news of the win then?” asked Úna.

“Oh thrilled sure. Delighted. Didn’t actually believe me at first. I’d say he thought I was some kind of scammer. A cousin of his that was visiting from England that bought the ticket for him. So he hadn’t a clue what I was on about. Not a notion. And then even after he remembered he had the ticket, it took him nearly another ten minutes to find it.”

“And he did... find it?”

“After a fair amount of cursing...”

“Oh God, I wish I’d been there,” said Úna, chuckling. Christy looked concerned.

“It was comical now, to be fair,” said Charles. “I’d say it’s still sinking in.”

“Right... well... so what are we going to do then. He might not want a lot of publicity by the sounds of things.”

“Yes. I asked him that. He said he’d prefer if we didn’t give out his name.”

“That’s a pity, but sure... understandable... and then... will he take a cheque or what?”

“No bank account Úna...”

“No bank account. So what’ll we do?”

“I asked him that too. Well... he... asked... if it was possible, could we pay him cash.”

Silence.

The two men stared at the black glass of the phone. Then Úna’s voice: “Oh wow. That’s a lot of money to be carting around.”

Christy closed his eyes and held himself.

“I know it is,” said Charles.

Silence again.

Then: “And that’s how you left things with him?”

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“Well... I told him I’d call in to him again next week, that I needed to explain the details of his situation and all that. And that I’d let him know.”

Christy gave Charles a quick wink.

“Okay,” said Úna. “Have you talked to Christy at all?”

“No. No. No one now... only yourself.” Charles swallowed.

“Right. Well... leave it with me...”

“No problem,” said Charles.

“Thanks for letting me know.”

“Not at all. Not at all.”

“Bye Charles.”

“Okay. Talk to you.”

Charles pushed the phone away from him. “Christ Jesus.”

Christy was squeezing himself. “Ha ha, Charles, you’re a natural.” He leered down over the table, his smiling lips peeling themselves back over his teeth.

“That’s not me,” said Charles. He shook his head. “Not me.”

“Never mind that,” said Christy. He moved into the kitchen. He took the kettle and began to fill it with water. “You take it easy there. I’ll make us some tea.” Christy

moved quickly as he found cups and spoons and rinsed them in the cold water of the kitchen sink.

Neither men spoke. The only sound was the slow rising noise of the kettle. And the clock measuring out time, ticking through the emptiness in ones and twos.

13

On Saturday, Úna phoned Charles and told him that she had spoken to the accountant and that, given the circumstances, the club could make a once-off cash payment. The usual document of receipt would be amended to facilitate this. She stressed the fact that it was a large amount of cash. And she suggested that Christy should accompany Charles to Claregalway, for her peace of mind and his own. Úna told Charles that she planned to visit the bank to withdraw the money on Tuesday morning, before the count. She asked if he could transport the money on Tuesday afternoon. Would that be a convenient time for him? Charles said that it was and told Úna that he would check with Christy to verify his availability.

Úna thanked him and hung up.

Afterwards, sitting in front of his television with the volume muted, Charles stared at the glowing pink-orange

light of the Himalayan Rock Salt lamp that Gillian had bought for him one Christmas. She would have been fifteen years old. He remembered the sting of her pride in the gift. His own uncertainty and doubt during those years. It had seemed as though the world was sinking. Sundered and broken. Years of financial and emotional security, taken for granted, whipped away like some kind of malevolent magic trick the universe had conspired to play on him. He heard again the loathsome inner song of self-pity.

He closed his eyes and felt the old pain return...

“There is NO fucking alternative!” Noel Joyce's voice was loud and aggressive.

“I'm only saying...” Seán Geraghty's face bright in the heat of Noel's anger.

“There is!” said Marty.

Seán and Noel turned to Marty in surprise. Marty's large eyes blinking slowly.

“Let the banks fail,” said Docko. Mal Doherty, local wild man, a rare presence in Mannion's. The features of his face gouged with time and work. Smelling of the fields.

Noel's forehead folded down upon itself. “Jesus Christ Docko. Let the banks fail? Let the fucking banks fail? Seriously?”

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Seán folded his arms. “It is an alternative Noel... is all we’re saying. Just to have a slightly broader perspective, you know?”

“Do you know what it’d be like?” said Noel, pronouncing each hot word with great care. “It would be like taking a dive off a cliff and telling yourself that you’ll be grand, because you’ll probably grow wings before you hit the fucking ground!”

“Ah, come on,” said Seán. “The way it is, we’re being pushed off the cliff anyways. I mean, how many billions is it now? And they’re adding more to the pile nearly every week.”

“It’s bad,” said Marty.

“It’s fucking horrific,” said Seán.

Christy Gloss, new to town, stood quietly next to Seán. He barely knew these men. His eyes flicked from face to face. Gauging. Estimating.

“Ten years, they’re saying,” said Docko.

“Before it levels off?” questioned Christy.

“That’s what they reckon.”

The men said nothing as they silently absorbed the scale of this unwelcome future.

“You’ll hardly still be manager in ten years,” said Marty.

Seán laughed.

“Yes.” Noel smiled and exhaled a long sigh. “We are forgetting ourselves.” He looked up just then and saw Charles walk past the small group in the direction of the gents toilets.

“Here, Charles,” said Noel. Charles turned his head in shock. He looked confused, as though just woken from a dream. “Here,” said Noel. “You’re not in any mad rush are you?”

Charles stopped himself, “No... I...”

“Only now that...” said Noel. “Well we’re having a few drinks to celebrate. I don’t know if you heard.” Charles seemed confused. He looked forlornly in the direction of the gents. “I didn’t...”

“Athgearr have a new manager taking over. Start of next season.” Noel cast his smiling eyes upon Seán. Charles seemed stunned. “Oh? I... yes! I did hear something... It’s yourself Seán?”

Noel opened his arms. “Stop now, you’ll give him a big head. But here, you might join us for a drink.”

Charles stalled. Awkward. Digging for the correct words.

“Congrats Seán... Jesus... fair play.”

Seán returned a quick smile.

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Noel jumped in: "They have no role for assistant manager Charles. Or no doubt they'd have yourself called up." Charles blinked and looked around for help. "You'd never know," teased Noel's generous voice. "You might get the job across in Carrickbawn yet..."

Charles' face collapsed under the joking. His top lip quivered. He knew only his own small blindness then. His eyes shrunk and his voice became pain. When words came, they were naked and bitter: "I'm sure now," he spat, "The last thing they want is some fucking blow-in landed in on top of them."

He looked up and found his gaze directed to the discrete bulk of Christy Gloss, and onto the thin blade of his smile.

"No," said Noel solemnly. "They wouldn't want that."

"Spew," said Marty.

"Not without the relevant experience," suggested Docko.

Noel's face leaked real disappointment.

Charles opened and closed his mouth.

"You've never tried a bit Charles?" asked Seán.

"No. Not now..."

"Well, if you're ever bored of a Tuesday evening, you know what to do."

"I could..." Charles was lost.

"Just don't be expecting any money," laughed Seán.

"Money?" repeated Charles.

Docko turned and walked off, his long strides carrying him out through the front door.

"What would an assistant manager be paid these days?" asked Christy.

"Jesus, don't ask," said Seán. He dug the palms of his hands into the small of his back and stretched himself.

"You might have to get paid under the table," Noel urged. He took a mouthful of his pint, flashing a smile at Christy.

"That'd be the one," said Charles. Noel swung around towards him, his face suddenly serious and glaring.

"You'd take that, would you Charles?" he said coldly.

From behind the bar they heard the voice of Frank Mannion: "Mind there!" They all looked towards him. Frank's eyes picked out his daughter Laura who was attempting to get by them, returning to the bar with a tall stack of glasses.

"Sorry there," said Laura as she moved delicately past.

14

When Charles phoned Christy to give him the news, he found the guard positively buoyant. Yes. He would accompany Charles to Claregalway. No. There was no problem getting Trevor to sign the receipt. Of course, he would see Charles in Mannion's as usual for the lotto draw the next day. And well done and all that.

After he hung up, Charles walked slowly through his kitchen and living area and stood by the open patio-door in the roasting, ruinous heat. His breath felt distant from him. As though someone else were breathing. And he sensed it again, that warping pull that drew his one world into two.

The limp green of a garden hose lay strewn where he had discarded it, across a grey plastic chair. Charles stood for a long time, watching it drip, staring out at the puddle it made on the paving stones of his patio. At the drops as they fell one after another, the water pooling dark. Encroaching on the hot dry pale of the moulded concrete.

Gaining easily. Growing in volume. Building its potential. Until at last it broke. It found a channel and ran. Because gravity told it that it must. And Charles fell to brooding contemplation. How many aeons ago and where, had the element found within itself, the sincere obedience that would allow it to accept these simple rules of matter?

- o -

A few kilometres away, Christy found he could do nothing that night. He moved around his house, carried by the animal inside him. He decided to head out, to go to the pub. He changed his mind. He turned on the television. Turned it off and tried the radio. It was no better. He turned again to the television. Catching snippets of interviews and movies and ads. Unable to settle, unable to concentrate.

He wondered when it had all tilted. Everything was so clear now. The goal was in front of him. But when, how long ago was it that he had known it would be Charles. When had the irritation turned to dislike. When was that? When had the dislike become contempt? Oh, it was recorded somewhere in his pride, he was sure of that. He felt it all still. The heart saved its pain. He had tried to prevent it. How many times? How many times had he

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extended himself, offered chances. How many opportunities? But it was always the same. All he got back was the feeble excuse of the man's spirit. Ah, the details were not that important. And yet...

His mind leapt about amongst the years.

"You don't get through life without making enemies."

The Buck was a man of few words. He was not in the habit of preaching or lecturing. But there was that one belief of his father's that had always stayed with Christy. He was fifteen, the occasion of his first pint, sitting across the table from his father. The Buck hunched, set in his task, his duty, the transfer of information.

He began: "You're getting to the age now, where you're going to run into fucker's that you don't like. And I don't mean now, the odd gobshite. I mean situations, that after a while... you'll feel you have to do something about..."

And Christy remembered and often remembered the finish of that short speech. The line his father had steered a tight and simple course for. The Buck had cleared his throat with a snort and in the soft pub air, he had opened a passage between them, and he had recited his words, hoarse and irrevocable:

"Even God has an enemy."

After midnight, Christy drank two bottles of beer and climbed into bed. He lay on his back and allowed his mind to race. He felt elated. Drunk with the possibility of success. He lay for hours tracing and retracing the final details. Working everything through.

Ah, just wait now. Just you wait.

He grinned helplessly to himself at the idiotic freedom of it all.

15

The manilla envelope sat stark on Úna Brennan's kitchen table. Charles stood a respectable distance from it, fighting to ignore its presence. Using one hand as a comb, he brushed the light hair of his head and talked with Úna about oil heating and open fires.

You can't beat the open fire, he was saying, when Christy pushed in through the kitchen door. He was in uniform. Pale folds of blue within the gap of a hi-viz jacket.

"Depends on the house too though," Úna allowed.

"How are you Christy?" she asked as the guard carefully shut the door behind him.

"Sorry?" said Christy.

Úna didn't hesitate.

"We were just talking about heating. How nice the open fire is. You know... for during the winter."

"For during the winter..."

“Well...” said Úna, glancing out the window. “For when it’s cold. God! Typical, isn’t it! The sun splitting the stones and here we are talking about fires.”

Christy rubbed his chin. “Ya... Well... ” He broke a smile. “It’s important to be prepared.”

Between them on the kitchen counter, a pepper plant had just begun to fruit. Úna leant near to it and occupied herself for a moment checking the compost.

“What have you yourself?” she asked, her fingers crumbling small dried balls of dirt.

Christy looked suspiciously at Charles.

“Sorry?” he said.

“Have you oil heating, or an open fire?” asked Úna.

“Ah,” said Christy. He glanced around the kitchen, his eyes visiting the table, the envelope there, and the positions of the radiators. “Oil. And one of the rooms has one of them electric fire things... as well.”

“They can be dangerous... those things,” said Úna. “Well... especially if there’s kids around...”

“Ya... they get hot,” Christy’s tongue played across his teeth. “Great for the quick heat though. And they give out a nice bit of light.”

Úna stepped across the kitchen and opened a press. “Where did you buy it?” she asked. She took down a bag of

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sunflower seeds, and from a second press, picked out a small white porcelain bowl.

“The heater? Ah, it was there when I moved in.”

Úna half filled the bowl.

“To be honest,” Christy went on. “I hardly ever use it.”

Úna smiled. “Well,” she said. “I don’t know if ye like sunflower seeds.” She waved the bowl between Christy and Charles. “Ye can help yourselves.”

Charles stood staring at the floor. His vision focused on the metal strip that marked the division between the dining area and the kitchen proper.

“Hrrumm,” Christy coughed.

Úna placed the bowl on the counter. The bone grey seeds sloshed in their white cradle.

Christy drew a breath. “Charles explained the situation regarding this chap in Claregalway. He tells me he’s going to be paid in cash?” Christy made himself sound concerned.

Úna folded her arms. “Ya,” she sighed. “I’m not entirely happy about that... I wouldn’t like to go making a habit of it... but sure... what else can we do really?”

Christy scratched one side of his moustache. “I know, I know.” He looked around the kitchen as though he might find the solution there.

"It's a bit messy," announced Charles.

"It is that," said Úna. "But... you know... it hasn't happened before... and we've been going how long now... five years?"

"Going on six Úna," said Charles.

Úna chewed thoughtfully.

"Six years... Ya. I suppose it must be... so... well, look... it's not like it's millions." She walked to the table and picked up the envelope. "Amazing actually, how small it is."

"You were in the bank," stated Christy.

Úna brandished the envelope in front of her. "Twenty-three thousand, four hundred euro. In one hundred euro notes. There should be... what... two hundred and thirty four of them?"

She looked up, as though expecting an answer. But both Christy and Charles were silent.

The play left her face.

"Will one of ye count it?" she asked, her voice flat.

Christy looked slowly out to the window. As though he needed this moment on his own.

Úna moved her attention to Charles, but Charles was still trapped somewhere on the floor. Aware of the necessity of some kind of action, he hauled his vision

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upwards and found himself looking down at the top of the table.

“Charles?” prodded Úna.

Charles raised his head, slow and blinking. “Ya,” he said. “Sure.”

He stepped forward and reached out his hand and took the envelope. The touch of it rude on the tips of his fingers. His eyes fell closed and he struggled for an instant and became afraid that he would not be able to move at all.

Time flowed past him in a kind of strange undertow. He felt a void opening up, a dislocation of his will from his intention. Charles began to believe helplessly that it was too late. That he would not find his way across. He felt giddy and sick.

It was his body that came to his rescue. His fingers twitched and managed to make a fist. And brushing open the flap of the envelope with the back of his hand, he pulled out the small, neat stack of notes.

He began counting.

16

Úna walked them to the front door.

They had just stepped outside when Christy's phone rang. Walking off to one side he answered. Standing with his back to the others while he talked.

Charles waited with Úna. The air hot and muggy. He had somehow still his coat on and it felt uncomfortable. Too hot. He should take it off. But the envelope...

Charles' mind recoiled at the idea of putting the envelope into one of his pockets. Of adding it to himself. So he held it by his side. Cupped in a pink, sweaty hand.

Úna waited with him.

Around them, the garden clamoured for attention. Along the driveway were flowerbeds. Clusters of geraniums, pansies, camellias. Eager spray of purple, magenta and white. Úna's attention wandered over the flowers as she began to talk to Charles about the growing of broccoli, offering tips and pointers.

Charles nodded. I see. I see. I know.

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“It’s hard to know with fertilizer...” she was saying, when Christy returned frowning.

“Ah... bit of a situation.”

“Oh dear,” said Úna.

“Nothing now... terribly serious,” said Christy. “But... urgent all the same.”

“Right,” said Úna. “It’s a good job it wasn’t ten minutes later, ye’d be gone...”

Christy sucked in his breath and looked out towards the road.

“Will you have to leave it so or what?” asked Úna.

“Well, it’s Galway I have to go to,” said Christy. “So... let me think now... I suppose I can accompany this man to Claregalway. Can do that.” He looked to Charles for confirmation. “We’ll have to take separate cars now... is all. Because, given the way things have turned out, I won’t be able to wait around.”

Charles stared downwards into the tight inking maze of the tarmacadam.

“Charles?”

The tiny chippings packed together. Almost as though they were each individually set by... a host of... by a host of what?

“How does that sound to you?” Úna’s kind voice.

Charles slapped the envelope against the leg of his trousers. He rolled his head. “No,” he admitted desperately. His mind grasping for an excuse in the sudden thin fall of time.

Groping. Failing. He found himself saying instead: “I can’t see any problem with that.”

Úna placed her hand on his arm, smiling.

“Well now,” she said. “A Garda escort? Sure you couldn’t get better!”

Charles’ features could not mobilise an expression.

“And you’ll let me know afterwards Charles... won’t you?”

He forced a smile. “Ah no, sure that’s no inconvenience.” And the glad colours of the flowers caught him and he felt a wave of nausea.

Úna was studying him. Looking into his face. At the slick film of sweat on his forehead. The faint blush of red across his cheeks. He didn’t look well. She should say something. But, No, she told herself, Leave it. It’s probably just the heat.

She took a step back. “You’ll be grand,” she said quickly, “Go on. You better get going. Christy, you need to be going don’t you?”

Christy sniffed and put his hands in his pockets. The afternoon air was thick around the three of them. He

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looked towards Charles and found him with his head turned away. Looking behind him. Back through Úna's front door. Back into the house.

"You have everything?" asked Christy.

"I think..." started Charles.

"Have you your phone?"

Charles turned with a jolt. His hand moving to his pants pocket automatically, where he felt the familiar flat rectangle.

"I have that."

"Nothing else?" prompted Christy.

Charles' hand massaged the hard straight lines of the phone through the outside of his trousers.

"Come on." Christy turned and walked towards the road.

"I... I..." Charles looked into Úna's face and Úna held his eyes, patient and understanding. Waiting for him. The softness of her skin. Where it gathered in fine crêpe at the corners of her eyes. She was standing there beside him. How could she be so close?

If she touched him now...

He heard a loud wet cough. Christy almost at the gate.

Charles blinked.

No. This was all impossible. He felt a yawning inside him. A great emptiness in his chest. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, but when he opened them again Úna was looking away. Out to where the cars were parked. Out to where it was too late.

“I better go,” he recited, spluttered.

He lurched a step. Stopped. Turned and looked back.

“Mind yourself Charles,” said Úna’s gentle voice.

Charles looked up and saw sky and garden and road. And the corridor of the driveway leading out to where Christy stood waiting for him. A breeze blew in through the curtain of shrubs that walled the garden. Charles squinted in it and gulped the air into his lungs as he set himself forward.

Christy led the way. The squad-car gliding smoothly over the surface of the road. He drove at the speed limit.

Following in his own car, Charles felt rushed. It was not his habit to drive at that speed and he found himself racing in order to keep the white rear of the squad-car in view.

He tried the radio.

Joe Duffy... What were they talking about? Break-ins? Someone had been robbed?

Charles found he could not concentrate and changed the channel. And suddenly: music. A happy torrent of pop. Bruno Mars' voice hop-scotched alongside infectious rhythms. But not for Charles'. It rang in his ear. He lowered the volume.

Somewhere between Ballinrobe and Headford, Christy indicated and turned, taking them onto a narrow winding side road. Charles' head swung from side to side, trying to get his bearings. He did not know this way.

Up and down over grassy hills. Farmland. Fields marked out by stone walls. Cows and sheep grazing, lazy in the June warmth.

Charles' phone launched its ringtone.

"Yes?"

"Need to stop off in Tuam Charles."

"Tuam?"

"Indeed," said Christy. "We'll turn before Headford. Do you know it?"

"I'm fairly sure I do..."

"Just there before Headford. Good man. Don't worry about it anyways, just follow me."

The two cars followed bends through Caherlistrane and Belclare. They passed underneath Knockma. Solid, brooding belly of wooded earth. Moving too quickly for its magic to touch them.

Contouring a hill they reached at last the N17. And traffic. Cars and trucks and buses. Christy indicated left for Tuam. Waiting for a break, allowing Charles to follow him onto the easy wideness of the road.

18

On the outskirts of Tuam, traffic was backed up where the construction of the new motorway was in progress. Fencing lined the road. Traffic lights and the iron elbows of machines jutting out into the air.

They pulled into a retail park. Rows of warehouse-tall commercial units surrounded an expanse of white lines that marked out the fishbones of parking spaces.

It was quiet.

Christy parked his car and got out. Walked with quick strides to where Charles was coming to a stop a few metres away in a space facing the road.

Charles slowed the car, stopped. He jerked the handbrake up, hearing and feeling the tight clack of it. He felt his breath shallow. Returning the white grip of his hands to the steering-wheel, he pushed himself firmly into the seat. Feeling a tiny moment of relief as the cushioned support of it met his lower back.

The door on the passenger side opened.

Christy sat in.

He smelled clean.

“Not bad now. Not bad.” Christy swivelled his head around quickly. Checking behind him and off to each side. No one else was nearby. It was quiet.

He threw a smile at Charles. “So then...” He closed his hands and rubbed them together, a lisping whisper that tickled the inside of Charles’ head.

“Do you mind if I take a look?”

The envelope of cash was tucked into a compartment on the driver side door. Light brown and warm against the grey glum interior of the car.

Charles released a heavy sigh.

“Charles? Please...”

No response. Charles’ hands tightened on the steering wheel.

“Charles!” Christy restrained himself from shouting.

Charles jumped and then the reaction was reflex, almost automatic. He clutched downwards and felt the touch of paper and closing his fingers he took a numb, loose grip of the envelope.

“This is wrong.”

“Come on. Come on.”

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Out on the road, cars moved past in the thick peristalsis of the road-work traffic. All Charles could feel was the weight of the paper in his hand.

It felt absurdly light.

Holding the envelope in front of him, he felt the approach now of the handover, sudden and cold, all of its bleak transactionality and finality. And he found he was not functioning. He could not move his arm.

“No,” he said. “I can’t do it.”

I.

Just.

Can’t.

Christy was smiling. He seemed genuinely amused.

“Too late for that now I’m afraid.”

He swept the envelope from out of Charles’ hand.

19

Christy removed the money, tearing quick away the light band of paper surrounding the notes. Then ran his index finger across the edge of the stack, strumming it like a magazine. Strum. Strum.

He nuzzled his finger into the notes, opening them in the middle. Dividing two separate piles. He held these in front of him side by side, measuring their thickness, the one against the other.

“About even,” he remarked. “Here, you can have this one. It’s slightly bigger if anything. Might be a few extra hundred in it... you know... just to show there’s no hard feelings.”

Charles looked at him in amazement, but Christy was all business.

“Have you that receipt?”

“Christy?”

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Ignoring him completely, Christy found the receipt in a black folder on the rear seat. Printed with the oval of the Athgarr GAA stamp in one corner.

He held it, examining it carefully. The cash sum, written twice, in numerals and in words. And the name and the address.

Satisfied, he took a pen from his jacket pocket. Transferred the pen to his left hand, and with a throw of his wrist, scrawled a wild looping 'Trevor Byrne' onto the page. He looked down at the signature.

"What do you reckon?"

Christy selected Charles' attention with a wave of the pen.

"Here," he said, indicating the signature. "You might want to stick an X there, before that."

Charles' eyes were bulging.

"Maybe use a different pen though. Amm... Wait now... Yes. My advice to you is... a suggestion Charles, you understand?"

Charles looked at him sullenly.

"Is to go on to Claregalway. Have a cup of coffee... or buy some groceries... or whatever. Just be seen there... do you know what I mean?" Christy left the receipt on top of the folder.

Charles could not form words.

“I’ve to head in here to Tuam,” continued Christy. “I’ve a few things to get done... so... I won’t keep you.”

He held the thin stack of banknotes out for Charles to take. Charles was a statue. He looked at Christy as though he were watching someone on the television.

Christy levelled a hard stare at him.

“Take it.”

“No.”

“Take it.”

“No.”

Christy sighed. “Here.” He stuck the wad of cash into Charles’ jacket pocket and patted him on the leg.

“There, there,” he said. “It’ll be fine.”

Christy gave a snort and stuffed the other bundle of money into his own pocket.

“I’ll go,” he said. He opened the door.

His left foot had just touched the ground outside, when something stopped him and he sat back into the car.

Charles’ shoulders sank.

“One last thing. I need to just see your phone. Have you your phone on you?”

A whisper of confusion visited Charles’ face. “My phone?”

“Yes, yes,” said Christy, “It’ll only take a second.” Stern. “If you wouldn’t mind Charles.” He held out his hand.

“What?”

Christy closed his eyes. Deep breath. His teeth clenched and his face became hard. Charles felt the air in the car change. Becoming thin and shrunken. And he was suddenly and keenly aware of the physical menace of this man beside him. The threat of him. Charles knew it as a

smell. The smell of real danger, animal and metallic. A hidden thing. An ancient memory. Crawling flesh across the back of his neck and a numbing cold in the base of his skull.

“Nice and quick now,” said Christy. And again, through his teeth, almost a whisper: “Nice and quick.”

Charles fished in his trousers’ pocket and brought out his phone.

“Unlock it now please.”

“Christy, I’m not going to...”

“Listen to me Charles. This is the last piece. I’m not going to take it off you. You can hold the fucking phone. I just need you to unlock the fucking thing. Can you do that?”

Charles shook his head. “It’s a bit weird Christy.”

“Never mind that. It’s necessary... Now... in your own time.” Christy looked away while Charles entered his pin number.

“Good man,” said Christy. He leant in to the phone and pressed the square softkey at the bottom of the screen. The display showed Charles’ apps.

Christy swiped a finger. Gmail. Irish Independant. WhatsApp. Chrome.

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“You’re not on Instagram?” asked Christy. His face straight, eyes bright.

“No Christy.” Charles voice was a squeak. “Not on Instagram.”

“Fair enough so. I’ll have to give you the benefit of the doubt.”

Charles held the phone like a chalice.

Christy pushed out the passenger door and was gone. Charles sat, holding the phone, catching glimpses of Christy in the rear view mirror. And then the squad-car was pulling out of the car-park. And it was turning into the Tuam traffic.

Charles sat trying to catalogue his sensations. The wild throw of adrenaline. Relief and the aching sense of wrong. The peculiar blot of the money in his jacket pocket.

He sat in the car-park for almost an hour. Doing nothing more than breathing. And when he eventually felt the impulse to move, he started his car and drove for home.

21

A month passed. The early June heat slipping away into half-warm days of underwhelming weather. Grass grew. Trees opened full-leaved to the sulky midsummer sun.

The football team were improving. A handful of younger players had brought energy to the seasoned core of the squad. They began to gel and grew organised under the urgings and chastisements of Seán Geraghty.

Merciless training sessions. No nonsense on the pitch. But after each league game, the reward of time to themselves.

They began to feel like a tribe.

Christy took time off for fishing. Travelling north to Lough Conn and the Moy. He fished on his own. Trading tales with the anglers and walkers he met along the way.

Marty Walsh, in his free time, roosted in the bookies. Analysing form and probabilities. Trading tips. June

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turned out a bad month. Every day leaking money. He waited patiently for a win.

Julia got to work redecorating. She had her kitchen units torn out and replaced. Twenty years of the same flimsy shelves. Gone in the space of an hour. A new shower for the bathroom. New light fixtures and brighter colours on the walls of the hall and in the sitting-room.

She invited her parents for dinner. Over roast pork and apple sauce, they aired old grievances, finding meagre comfort in their shared hurting.

And moved on.

They talked of the time after Julia had first moved in, the years before she and her husband had separated. They held smiles up to the memories, but found they wouldn't fit. That they could no longer summon the simple unity of purpose that had seemed to come so easily in those days.

Noel worked his farm. Cut silage. Mucked out barns. Brought cattle to the mart.

He stayed away from Mannion's.

And every Sunday evening after the nine o'clock news, Charles drew the numbers for the lotto.

A win of eight thousand euro near the end of the month. A cousin of Teresa Ruddy's showed up to collect the cheque. Úna and Aiden Murray posed with her for the photographs.

All smiles and bright eyes.

And outside the town, the roadsides grew thick with weed and weed-flower.

Clouds rolled past.

Nothing really changed.

22

The first Sunday in July, Noel Joyce appeared clean-shirted in Mannion's. His silvering hair was cut close to his skull. His face and arms browned from weeks of outdoor work. He had gotten to the pub early and was energised, and by the time Marty arrived, two hours later, he was in fine voice.

Noel and Alf Mooney were talking antiques. Alf had been visiting auctions, jumble sales, car-boot sales, clearance sales. Been picking up what he referred to as 'bargains'. And selling them over the internet. He shared stories of his dealings, victories and near-misses, absorbing Marty and Noel in his new secret world. They listened, mute and uncalculating, the three of them insulated in a comfortable inner space, that wavered just then, and opened. They became aware of it together. A blanket of scent asserting itself. New and cooling. A wave of something like water and orange.

"Howaya Julia," said Noel.

Julia stood with her hands deep in the denim of her jacket pockets.

“Just passing through is it?” teased Noel.

“Ah, sure amn’t I always.” Julia wasn’t smiling.

“Sorry. Go on Alf...” said Noel without pausing. “Tell us. What is it that makes it work? I mean, is there some something they’re not telling us? Like... why isn’t everyone doing it?”

Alf thought to himself for a second.

“There’s no secret,” he said. “It’s just a matter of putting the time in. Finding the right stuff... And pictures! Lot’s of pictures. A lot of sellers don’t post enough images. And to be honest, you can’t have enough. People like to see as much as they can before they buy... well... if you have nothing to hide, that is... but... ya... video is even better even... but...”

“What’s this?” interrupted Julia. “Porn, is it?”

The men laughed.

“Antiques.” Marty informed Julia from out the side of his mouth.

“Oh right.” Julia leant on the rich oak brown of the bar, Frank Mannion brushed one end of his moustache as he took her order.

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“And so... What?” entreated Noel, “You’re off around buying up the place? And do you cover much ground on your travels?”

Alf looked in surprise at Noel. “Arrah, I go where the wind takes me.”

“Anywhere fancy Alf?” Julia wrinkled her nose.

“Eh? Fancy? Oh ya. Sure you’d find estates and that. Getting sold off. Not, now, every week, but every so often. You know? Ah ya, there is... there’s some nice auld houses around...”

The smartly groomed dark of Christy Gloss slid in through the back door.

“Ain’t that grand,” said Julia. “The next thing now, you’ll be hitting Sotheby’s... Or... I forget... is it...?”

Noel exploded.

“That crowd are on a COMPLETELY different level to the likes of us!”

The flesh of his neck suddenly taut. His voice shook with passion. Julia backed away from him.

“I’m telling you.” Noel’s face was growing hot. “We’re nothing but fucking MINNOWS!”

Marty’s eyes widened.

“Noel?” Julia’s quiet voice.

“I’m serious now,” blustered Noel. “We’re down here!” He held the flat of his hand level with his knee. “And there are so many layers...” He moved his hand higher in waves. “All the way up.” He indicated a peak. “Until you reach those fuckers.”

“Well...” tried Alf.

“We are nothing but pawns to them... just pure fucking pawns...”

“Ah, come on...” said Julia. “I don’t know about you...”

Christy came to a stop beside them. He stood trying to not be noticed.

“How are you Christy,” said Alf politely.

Christy stared at him sceptically.

“Wait though now. Seriously.” Noel pushed onwards with his rant. “Compared to that kind of money... what say have we in how the world is run? No. We sit here in our little bubble and... we basically do what we’re told.”

Alf lurched as Noel grabbed at the sleeve of his jacket to steady himself. Dragging the material of it down and tight around Alf’s shoulders.

“Who’s telling you what to do Noel?” asked Julia, turning down her mouth. Her drink was on the bar. She played with it, one fingernail leading it around by the beermat underneath.

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“The powers that be Julia. The powers that be. We don’t know anything about power in this country.”

“What’s this now?” asked Alf. “A song for the plain people of Ireland?”

Noel looked hurt. He released his grip on Alf’s jacket.

“You can laugh Alf. You can laugh away. But we’ve no idea how the ones at the top operate. Not a clue. There’s different rules... different rules for them entirely.”

“For who?” asked Marty.

“Ya. Who is it that has all this power?” pushed Alf.

Julia attracted their attention with a sweep of her glass, a broad arc. “What about Frank there?” she asked. “Does Frank have power?”

“Ah now, that’s different,” said Noel, narrowing his eyes.

Frank had one hand on a tap and was looking at the television at the other end of the bar. He pretended he didn’t hear. Noel gazed warmly at him.

“Yes. He does. Of course, he has power. All of us have some power, after all. But, what I would say Frank has more... is authority.”

“Power and authority are not the same thing?” Alf was losing interest.

Noel seemed satisfied. “Mn.”

“So? What is the difference?” Julia was drawn in.

“There’s a lot of differences...” said Noel. He seemed to have relaxed. “But take one... take one,” he smiled to himself. “Let’s say there’s a pride of lions...”

“Lions?” said Alf, smirking.

“Ya,” said Noel. “Like in Africa.”

“Sure... lions it is,” confirmed Julia.

“And there’s this male, who’s the boss. Fights his way to the top. Gets to make all the babies and sits on his hole all day... Ya? Power. And... Authority. Yes?”

Their attention was on Noel.

“Sure. Go on...”

Noel took a slow swig of his pint, guiding the bitterness of it through his mouth. He smacked his lips. “And let’s say then... there’s an earthquake, or a fucking volcano, or whatever... and our boy gets cut off from the rest of the pride.”

“Out on his own,” darted Marty.

“Out on his own... well... Yes. Now.” Noel stopped for a second, looking from face to face. “He still has power,” he stated certainly. The four others tried to mask their interest in Noel’s words. Christy chewed slowly on a piece of gum.

“Authority is gone though,” completed Noel.

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Julia drew her head away for an instant, as she digested this point. “Ya, but he has less power too,” she said, straightening herself and facing Noel.

Noel’s eyes softened, becoming almost kind.

“Ah, but does he though?”

23

“Wait.” It was Christy who spoke. “So you can have power on your own, but you can’t have authority on your own?”

His words were clear.

“You can have authority over yourself, can’t you?” tried Alf.

“Ah, fuck off.”

“Well...” Alf was caught.

“Well... you can...” Noel waded in again. “But I think what you’re talking about there is more... control. Self control, isn’t it, they say?”

“Is that it?” asked Alf. “Maybe that’s it...” he admitted.

A bent column of grey and beige moved past them. Charles was making his way towards the toilets.

“There’s Charles as well,” announced Noel. “Here Charles... come here a sec’ and help us out.”

Charles raised his head, a delicate smile on his lips. He waited for the question.

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“We’re talking about power Charles.”

“Power?” Charles’ head moved at his neck as he registered Julia and Alf.

“Ya. Tell us...” Noel became serious. “What’s your definition of power?”

All heads turned to Charles. An odd hush broke the chatter of the pub. Charles valiantly retained his smile as the lines in the centre of his forehead bunched.

“Definition of... well... I’ll tell you now... well... it’s... no... not that... emm...”

His mouth moved soundlessly.

They waited.

Suddenly his eyes brightened and eyebrows lifting, he declared, “It’s knowledge! Isn’t it? Isn’t that what they say: Knowledge is power!” His smile tipped towards his eyes, relieved and satisfied with himself.

“Wrong,” said Noel bluntly.

The word punched Charles, taking the wind out of him.

“Knowledge is power,” said Noel, draining the remainder of his pint in a single rich slurp. “But, not all power is knowledge,” he finished.

Marty and Julia looked at Noel in wonder.

Christy sucked in a breath and sniffed. He folded his arms and sneered. "Well, while we're philosophizing," he said. "I'd just like to add..."

Heads turned again.

"Just in case you've forgotten," said Christy. He paused, possessed by a strange kind of inner delirium. "Money can't buy you love," he delivered.

"Spaaauuccckhh," Marty Walsh spluttered a cough.

"Thi'th," Julia tutted. She looked unimpressed. "Where's that coming from?"

Christy kept a serious face. His wet eyes working to hold in his laughter.

Alf Mooney shook his head. "Trying to start a singsong, is it?"

Bodies were brushing past Charles.

Sorry man.

Sorry.

Noel rested an elbow on the counter. "We won't keep you Charles," he said. "Thanks for helping us out."

Charles nodded to the group.

He turned and walked slowly towards the gents.

24

At Spanish Arch in Galway, people scattered the riverside. On benches and on the grass. Under the sun. Reading, talking and laughing. Throwing food to the gulls. The white-grey birds skating in on the blue air to join the clamour of beak and wing. And on both sides of the river, huddles of drinkers warmed up for the night. Sipping cans of beer, naggins of whiskey. Bottles of Buckfast, with red-faced glee.

The sound of guitar music and drums floated across the water from the Claddagh side. Old, easy rhythms blending into the warmth of the afternoon. Jugglers tossed clubs and balls, and sighed, and bent with lazy duty to pick them up when they fell.

Over Wolfe Tone bridge and past Jury's hotel, traffic moved in and out of the city centre. Down along Merchant's Road, where Christy Gloss's car was parked. Where he sat waiting.

One arm hung from the driver side window. Feeling the breeze of the passing traffic. He pushed his feet forward to stretch his legs. They had been in the same position all morning and they felt numb and detached.

He looked out from behind a pair of dark, horn-rimmed sunglasses, studying the exit of a multi-story car-park. Noses of vehicles emerged. Drivers' heads turned. Checking down the street. Pulling out into the traffic. One after another. Over and over. Hundreds of cars. Black. White. Metallic greys and blues. And every so often red. And there was another red now.

And finally.

It was her.

She'd changed from the photographs he'd found on Facebook. Her hair was shorter.

But it was her. No doubt.

And the van. What was it she had on the side of it? Something...? Surfing...? Let's see.

"Nós na Gaoithe Windsurfing."

Oh, very clever.

So that was it. Hard to believe really.

The van moved out onto Merchant's Road and drove towards Eyre Square. Christy noted the registration. He leant his head on the inside of the car door and raised his

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eyes to the blue sky and filled his lungs. Basking there, he heard the daytime sounds of the city. The purr and whine of engines. The half-words of passers-by. Doors closing, Shhunk and Thung.

A few phone calls later. The station in Mill Street. The Motor Tax office. Christy established that it was some time in the middle of June that the van had been registered to Gillian. He found himself grinning at his reflection in the rear view mirror.

So Charles had spent the money. He had actually used it. Kind of amazing. Hope's a dangerous thing, but... well... it made everything a lot more straightforward now. Now that man will have the opportunity... he will have the privilege... to learn a little of what the world is really like. To feel the real hardness of it. It's sad in a way... but some people only understand that one language. No other way to get through to them.

It will break him. That it will.

And when he's broken, everything will be so much easier.

On the way back out of Galway, passing through Terryland, Christy tore open the small paper bag that rested on his passenger seat. He fingered out a doughnut.

Shining and sugar.

He ate it quickly in large uncomfortable bites. Letting it stick to the roof of his mouth. Tasting and feeling the sweet melt of it.

You don't get too many of them, he told himself.

You don't get many of them.

Sunday. The evening was warm. The deep warm that collects after a long fine day. Christy had waited until nine o'clock. He reminded himself that this piece wasn't essential. But that the reaction would be important – Charles' reaction when he saw. And a little authenticity might go a long way towards securing that. Towards turning it into an undeniable thing.

And how it all seemed so strangely routine to him when he got to Charles' house. It had taken less than five minutes to find the spare key. Underneath an ornamental flower-pot near his back door. He'd be doing the draw now, calling out the numbers.

Christy was in and out of the house within ten minutes.

Back at his own place, he felt a hot clarity of thought and action. Each movement, each intention seemed obvious, necessary, and simple. He moved to his bedroom

and untaped a tight-wrapped plastic bundle from the under-side of his bed. One stroke of a blade. He tore away the wrapping. His memory firing at the stream of green one hundred euro notes. He looked at the money. This money. Access to so many small comforts. If...

But no. Don't. Don't get into that now. Stay focused. Stick to the plan.

It'll be worth it.

It will be worth it.

Christy blinked himself back into his sitting-room. Moving his hand before his mind could prevent him, he added the stack of cash to the shoebox he had taken from Charles' house.

Ya. That should do it. Yes. That should be more than enough.

Leave it a few days now is all.

Just a few days.

Charles Sullivan sat without moving, deep in the dark rust cushions of his sitting-room couch. Curtains drawn across to ward off the day. The space in front of him was washed by the weak light of the television screen, as it carouselled silently through adverts. Unable to focus, Charles hid in distrust from the onscreen images of impeccable interiors, bright smiles, and friendly faces. From the sick trance of text and logo. He stared off to the side. Into the curtains. Into the carpet.

He wore, wrapped around him, an old dark grey cardigan. It was a warm cardigan. But it won't close, he told himself. This cardigan. I should try and close it. It used to close. But now it won't anymore. I mean, nothing changed. Nothing noticeable changed. But somehow that bit won't fit in anymore. Because the metal is missing. That bit that goes into the zipper. What is it called? It's a shoe, isn't it? That shoe, that metal shoe bit is missing. And so it won't fit into the zipper. It is called a shoe? Isn't

it? For some reason, I believe its called a shoe. Sometimes they're plastic. They are kind of like those things at the ends of laces. The plastic kinds of things that hold the lace together. So that you can get the lace through the hole. Those have a name as well. I don't know what they're called though. Wait... Am I confusing those two things now? Do I think that the zipper thing is called a shoe because it's like another thing that's got something to do with shoes? Well... maybe... but... no... I believe those bits are actually called shoes.

Beedle, Beedle, Beedle.

Charles' phone was ringing.

Úna.

Could he come over right away.

She sounded serious.

Charles knew as soon as he saw Úna's face that something was wrong. She stood in the kitchen with her arms tightly folded.

There was a strange silence in the room. As though time had somehow reserved a space for this moment. Christy sat by the window. Expressionless. Waiting.

"You're going to have to explain this Charles." Úna's voice sounded cracked and short. She nodded to the table and Charles noticed the shoebox.

And that was when everything changed.

He had kept it. He didn't know why he had kept it. But, something... some voice inside him had stopped him from getting rid of it. Had felt it would be necessary. And now here it was. On Úna's kitchen table.

"I can open it for you," said Christy.

Charles looked at him calmly. "No. Don't do that." He walked to the table. Walked the three steps from where he stood.

“Sorry Úna.” He knew what was in the box.

Úna looked sadly at the floor.

Drawing it towards him, Charles flipped off the lid. And there they were. Twenty-four ping-pong balls, numbered by his attentive hand. He could see the slight differences in the tone and movement of the heavier ones. A large syringe. And a neat stack of one-hundred euro notes.

Charles smiled. “Fairly incriminating Christy, wouldn’t you say? How’d you get into the house?”

“Never mind that,” said Christy, curt and cross.

Charles put his hands into his pockets. He thought of Úna, he looked around. “Okay. I need to make one phone call. And then I’ll try to explain.”

Úna couldn’t look at him. “Make it quick Charles, if you don’t mind. And I’d appreciate it if you didn’t leave the room.”

Charles took his phone from his pocket and dialled. He walked to the other end of the kitchen.

“How are you?” he said into the phone. “Ya. Úna. Brennan’s. Ya. If you don’t mind.” He listened. “That’s sound. Thanks.” He hung up.

Turning back to the others he said, “Don’t you need a warrant to enter someone’s home without their permission?”

Fergus Deffely

Christy stood up with a loud squawk of his chair. “Don’t start down that line now Charles. That’s not going to help you. Not even a small bit.”

“Christy,” said Úna quietly.

Christy raised himself to his full height. His face reddening. “We might be better off starting with where the rest of the money is.” He worked to control his voice.

Charles scratched one side of his neck. “So this the game.”

“Charles,” said Úna.

“I counted it. There’s ten thousand, eight hundred euro in that box.” Christy pointed a finger at the shoebox. “Where is the rest of the money? And Charles. Think carefully now. And... mind you go slow...” Christy clenched a fist and raised it to his hip. There was a strange shudder of the body, and his fist darted forward, barely an inch, into the empty air. “In case you get stuck.” His eyes were bright with triumph and fury.

Charles stood strong in the face of the sheer blistering force of the man. “Yes,” he said to Christy. “It gets worse.” He walked around the table and took a seat.

Úna raised her eyes, checking him as he sat down.

Charles smiled. “Some time in the middle of May. Christy paid me a visit. Some evening in the middle of the week, I’m not sure what day it was.”

“This should be good,” said Christy. He folded his arms.

“He had a syringe with him. I’m not sure if it was that one, but it was one like it.”

“Careful now Charles,” said Christy. His lip twitched. “Be very careful now.”

“He showed me this technique, for my information, don’t you know, of loading these lotto balls with ballast. Wax. From candles.”

“No! I won’t do this.” Christy’s crossed hands swiped outwards, as though to abjure everything he was hearing. “This is my bad. I should have known we’d end up having to listen to something as... as desperate as this.” He shook his head disappointed. “I had hoped to keep this matter between just ourselves... Because I know the both of you. And I wanted to spare the club the embarrassment, you know. But...” He shook his head again. “I can’t... I won’t stand here and listen to these kinds of lies. I’m sorry, but...”

Úna placed a hand on Christy’s arm. “Christy please. Let him give his side. I grant you, I don’t think that it’ll make his situation any better. But let’s have it out. So we can move on.”

She turned to Charles. “If you could explain,” she said. “And please Charles. The accusations... they aren’t helping.”

Fergus Deffely

Charles raised his eyebrows. “Are you sure you want to hear this?”

“Please. Try.”

Charles drew a long breath. “Well there’s not a lot more to tell. Trevor Byrne is not a real person. The ticket. I’m not sure where the ticket came from. I’m guessing from Chambers’s, but...”

“It is from Chambers’,” said Úna. “I checked the serial numbers.”

“Well... that’s basically it.”

Úna stood looking at him. Shaking her head in disbelief.

“But, Charles. Why? What I can’t even begin to understand or imagine... is why?”

Charles swallowed. “Because I was told that if I didn’t... that something undesirable would happen to me, or... What were the words again? ‘To someone close to me’.”

Úna squinted at the absurdity of it all.

“Who,” she said. “Told you that?” She looked at Charles. He seemed so tiny sitting on that chair in her kitchen. He looked back at her for a moment. And then his eyes flicked to Christy.

“Don’t you fucking...” bristled Christy.

“Christy told me that.”

“That’s it.” Christy sounded hurt. He walked from the table towards the door.

“But, Charles,” pleaded Úna. “This sounds crazy.”

“Fucking preposterous!” snarled Christy.

Úna shook her head. She seemed at a loss.

“How is this happening?”

28

From outside Úna's house there was the low growl of an engine. Christy looked up, flashing dangerous eyes at Charles. They heard the loud thump of a car door closing.

"Someone's here," said Úna wiping the beginnings of tears. "Oh, God. Just give me a second. Please just..."

She walked into the hall and the two men heard the front door open. Úna's voice carried clearly into the kitchen. "Oh, it's yourself?"

A low murmur of words.

Then silence.

A minute or so passed.

When Úna returned to the room she was followed by Pádraig Moore. Pádraig brought his large lumbering frame to a stop just inside the door. At the other end of the kitchen, Christy narrowed his eyes.

"Christy?" said Úna.

"Pádraig this is kind of a private matter now, that we're discussing," said Christy. "I don't want to be rude, or

anything, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave whatever business you have for another time."

"Christy... no..." said Úna.

"That's not going to work." Pádraig's voice filled the room, rolling out, deep from his chest.

"What do you mean by that Pádraig?"

Pádraig's eyes were dark brown tunnels. He stood, holding Christy in his gaze. He did not speak.

"He knows," said Charles.

Christy jumped a look towards Charles.

"He knows everything."

Christy halted. His bottom lip separated from the top. It began to drift slowly out over his chin.

"Arrah, what kind of shite is this?" he barked.

"I told him everything."

Christy spluttered. "Don't make me fucking laugh Charles. I suppose he knows where the rest of the money is then, does he?"

"Well, actually... yes, he does," said Charles.

"He does, does he? And does he know that you spent it on a nice new red van for your daughter?" Christy's eyes blazed.

Charles looked confused. "What are you on about?"

"Gillian Sullivan is your daughter?"

Fergus Deffely

“Gillian..?” Charles seemed nervous.

“Who just happens to be driving around in a shiny red Citroën Berlingo... bought exactly four weeks ago. Yes?” Christy snarled defiantly. “Oh, Yes! I’ve done my homework.”

“But...” Charles’ voice was soothing. “Gillian paid for that herself.”

“That’s horseshit Charles!” shouted Christy.

“Christy!” Úna tried to stop him.

“I know for a fact that she wasn’t approved for a loan.” Christy’s face boiled. “And I know you’re in no position to guarantor one. So...”

“Christy the reason...” said Úna.

“What’s that?”

“The reason that Gillian got a loan...”

“What?”

“Is because I guarantored it.”

Christy blinked and swallowed.

“No... I...”

Pádraig moved through a band of sun from the door. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a slim sheaf of one hundred euro notes. Christy stared in disbelief at the money as Pádraig set it on the table.

Christy shook his head slowly from side to side.

“No no no no. There’s some dodgy shit going on here.” He pointed a finger at Pádraig. “I would have expected more from you... Mister...” Pádraig stood in the autumn sun. One side of his face was aglow. Bathed in the yellow-rose warmth of the light.

“Guys?” Úna seemed baffled.

“I don’t know what possible reason you could have...” began Christy, “For this... for what... is now really... a level of... well... just... just pure lies...”

The red had begun to drain from his complexion. He looked from the shoebox to the other stack of notes and back again. “No. This is some kind of sick practical joke. This is going to have to go up the line. I’m going to have to bring this to the attention of...”

“You’re not the only one who knows people in the guards Christy.” The gravity in Pádraig’s voice pulled the tall man closer to his predicament.

“Guys...” Úna again. “What the hell is going on?”

Christy turned wordlessly and walked towards the door.

“Christy!” Úna almost cried. “You’re not leaving?”

“No... I have to...” he tried.

“No Christy,” Úna pleaded. “Please! Don’t leave!” Christy stopped inside the door with his hand on the handle.

Fergus Deffely

“Just... This is surreal lads. Honestly. I can’t make much sense of what’s going on here. At all. I’m starting to believe that this is all some kind of... I don’t know... some kind of... Weird? Prank? Or something, is it?”

She looked at Charles. Odd. He looked somehow younger. She walked forward to the table and picked up the stack of notes Pádraig had left there. “Look,” she said. “Look. Let’s try and reason this through. Please.”

Christy stood at the door.

“Christy.” Úna’s voice was gentle.

He took his hand off the handle.

“Okay. Good.”

She flicked through the money. A blur of paper and the uniform green of the notes. Úna took a deep breath.

“So... we have two stories. Two very different stories.” She frowned. “Christy, it’s not that I don’t believe you. But... well... it’s not that I don’t believe Charles and Pádraig either. But... Jesus... what a mess.” She left the pile of cash down next to the shoebox.

Úna looked around her kitchen.

Charles sat, his body relaxed in the chair, open towards her. One elbow resting on the table. He looked strangely relaxed. Beside him, Pádraig gazed out of the window into Úna’s back garden, his large frame riding the waves of each breath he took.

By the door, Christy stood with his back to them.

Waiting.

Fergus Deffely

And all around her, the comfortable familiarity of her home seemed somehow brittle now. Those tiles by the stove. How had they managed to remain there throughout all these years? Staying dutifully stuck to the walls. It didn't seem natural, now she considered it. And those plates... Could she even remember the last time she'd broken one? What was that? Was it just that she had been lucky? Was it all as random as that? Could it all be that pointless?

But now it had all changed. And she would be forced to change. Because of this – because of what she had learned. Because of this knowledge. Unwelcome as it was, these were two people. She knew these people and it was real. It had emerged, demanding to be known. And it would require great care. It would need time and she would need time and she would need help and... how long had it been going on? She felt the weight of it all begin to congeal, the thick pressure of it.

God!

Are we really all just stumbling through life in a haze of ignorance? Unaware of these carriers of... what? Grudge and silent pain. Sleep-walking past them every day?

All of us. All these secret hurts and hates that survive years of hunting. Perfecting themselves. Tunnelling and nesting and organising. Crafting rules of telling. Exploiting

fears and being exploited. Pain answering pain. What was this? Was this the world? Years old secrets and older still! Because wasn't the only real measure of a secret its age? Its passage through time and discipline. Its endurance of every cold scrutiny. She knew this of herself. She was not without secrets. And she knew how easy it is to be forced out onto that lonely ice where there is no permission for error; for slips. And she knew it happened. When our secrets make themselves enemies of time. When the darkness has decided it no longer needs them and the hiding cannot hold. They must collapse into form. Towards that terrible light that unbinds them. Releases them to the freedom we call truth and the weird weight of its judgement.

And then someone must choose.

Because a choice must be made.

Because pain demands response.

It demands the sacrifice of answer.

In the still space of Úna's kitchen, the men waited.

Epilogue

A month passed.

Neither Charles nor Christy was seen about the town. The live lotto draw was discontinued. The club made the decision to move everything online. Tickets would now be purchased on a website, or through an app. A move that had been talked about for years at club meetings.

No one was particularly surprised.

The seasonal visitors waned. And Athgearn became quiet. Withdrawing indoors as winter drew in.

The football team went from strength to strength. Defying the odds to claim the county final. A fierce physical battle against Breaffy that left the players exhausted, aching, elated.

- o -

Winter came and went.

Spring brushed the town with early growth. Farmers stared into fields of sheep. Counting lambs and calculating thin margins.

Úna and Charles sat at a small table in The Wildflower café. They sat by the window, looking out. People passing in the narrow winding street.

“Are you hungry Charles?” Úna was trying to read the specials on the blackboard near the counter.

Fergus Deffely

“They do a great breakfast in here,” said Charles. “But I’ll try and resist. Maybe something small.”

The place was warm. It smelled of coffee and bread, fresh from the oven. Shelves lined with old bakeware decorated the walls. Weights and scales. Whisks. Spoons. Trays for cupcakes. Tins of powdered milk. A worn canvas apron stretched like a tapestry.

They ordered tea and scones.

“And the new man is in the white house,” said Charles. “Since the last time we were talking.”

Úna, about to take a drink of tea, stopped herself. She lifted her clear eyes towards Charles’ childlike face. “I’ll miss Obama,” she said.

Charles carved his way through his scone. “I dunno.” He lifted a gold wrapped parcel of butter from his plate. “A lot of people forgetting about him pretty quick.”

Úna raised her eyebrows. “Oh?” She drank from her teacup. “Looking forward is a full-time job?” She smiled and turned her head towards the bare earth of a window-box on the far side of the street.

Charles unfolded the leaves of the small yellow rectangle. On the radio, Sharon Shannon, a lively note-stream of music.

“Aiden was telling me about Christy. Did you hear?” Úna asked.

“The transfer?”

“Transferred... Yep, he’s moved on.”

“Above, somewhere above in the midlands, I am told?”

“Mm hmm.”

Charles smeared a film of butter onto his scone. “It’ll be weird,” he said. “Him gone.”

Úna looked at Charles, trying to read him. “Weird,” she said. “Is the word.”

Charles bit into his scone. Tiny cream crumbs fell away from his mouth. “Nice,” he said, once he had eaten. He examined the oily sheen of the butter. “No word of a replacement yet?”

“Hopefully we’ll actually get a replacement.” Úna sipped her tea.

“Hopefully.” Charles bit again into scone.

“Ary huffaduh pluh?” he asked, chewing. Swallowing. Clearing his mouth. Then: “Sorry... Any holiday plans? Speaking of the future and all...”

“Oh, possibly Germany for a week. But nothing definite. Yourself?”

“Honestly?” Charles looked Úna in the eyes. “I think it’s time for something else.”

“Oh?”

“Ya. I’m going to start looking for a job.”

Fergus Deffely

“Oh. Wow Charles. That’ll be a big change!”

“It’s been a while.” Charles leant his elbows on the table.

“What kind of work will you look for?”

“Not sure. Construction is still slow... but...”

“You’ll find something. I’m sure.”

“Something Úna, would be just the thing.”

Charles finished eating and drained his tea and they said their goodbyes. He slung on his jacket and pulled open the door of the café and felt it immediately cold. It had started to rain, thin and mean and he looked down at the worn cobbles of the lane-way and shivered.

“And Charles.” He heard Úna’s voice behind him.

“Eh?” He turned his head.

“Don’t you go taking any chances.” Úna held a mock stern face.

Charles smiled warm an instant in the open door. Then he turned and hunched his shoulders and stepped out into a rude whip of spring rain.

- o -

Out on the water on Rusheen Bay, Gillian Sullivan catches the salt wind. The sweet fresh sting of it in her eyes, she leans back, and is held by the tautness of her

sail. The board cuts through waves and across waves, slapping a slow rhythm on their surface. Over near Silver Strand, seabirds glide towards the shore.

Gillian takes the board around in a wide arc, allowing her muscles to adjust. To accept the position. Following her way through familiar paths to comfort. Feeling the board become an extension of herself, she senses gratitude. This is her place. This land, this air and water. This accident of physics.

She lifts her face to the clouds and the air splits with the cries of gulls. Raucous and victorious and shrill. Calling to the world of brine and tides and distance. And passing out of the circling gourd of Rusheen, she meets the rise and throw of Galway Bay.

She slings her sail and kicks the board west.

Into the open shout of the ocean.

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