

DREAMLAND

A novel

and

MODES OF TEXTUAL DIVISION IN THE POST-2000 NOVEL

Critical Thesis

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Abstract

Dreamland and ‘Modes of Textual Division in the Post-2000 Novel’

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This thesis comprises two parts. The novel, *Dreamland*, is the story of seventeen-year-old Joe Duffy, who leaves his family home in Liverpool in search of his older brother who has gone missing in London. The themes, techniques, and findings examined in the critical thesis have informed the composition of the novel: in particular, the creative work exploits the capacity of techniques of narrative division to interact with linguistic content in the representation of the protagonist’s consciousness.

The second part is a critical study that investigates the form and function of a mode of textual division in a group of twenty-first-century novels whose linguistic content is presented in short narrative sections divided by horizontal margins of white space; it is a technique that imparts an unconventional ‘gappy’ appearance to the pages. This gappy mode of textual division in certain contemporary novels is historicized in two preliminary chapters: the first chapter surveys formative pre-novelistic influences on conventions of narrative division; the second chapter follows the course and career of modes of narrative division in novelistic practice. The primary focus of the thesis is contained in the third chapter where case studies are made of four twenty-first-century novels that share the distinctive gappy format. By a close reading of these works, the thesis analyses how their modes of textual division interact with the linguistic content of the novels to generate a range of interpretative possibilities for their narratives.

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Part I: Novel

Dreamland

Bang on two my apron's hung and my greatcoat's on and I'm out of the butcher's, peggin it through the indoor streets, weaving and dodging Saturday shoppers, doubling it down the escalator. I stop at the sliding doors to pull on my wool hat, and I head out, chin dipped against the pelting cold rain, jogging towards the Parade where Liam's girlfriend works.

I pause inside the chemist's door, hands on my knees, heart thumping in my ears, breath escaping in bunches.

Thin music, the faint clean smell of TCP. Veronica's up at the counter. She turns away from some old biddy in a plastic rain hood and passes a slip of paper up to Mr Hadden – he's leaning through the dispensary hatch, giving me daggers over the top of his glasses. I straighten. Veronica says something to the chemist and he grants her a grim nod and she comes out from behind the counter. She walks towards me, taking me in from my wool hat to my boots.

She shakes her head. The trace of a smile. You're like a drowned rat, Joe!

I glance down. Silvery beads of rain trail from the tips of my hair, there's dark patches of wet on the pink carpet around my feet.

Blue-arsed fly more like, I tell her.

Veronica's brows hitch, she shushes me, casts a worried glance over her shoulder. Mr Hadden's got his back to us as he peers along a shelf of bottles and stacked pill-boxes.

Thought you'd be at home, Veronica says, getting everything set up.

I should be, I tell her, but Mr Simm has only just let me finish work. Anyway, I go, did Liam call you last night?

Veronica smiles. He phoned from some London boozer, said it was quick drink with the lads after finishing the Camden contract.

I do a comedy double-take. One quick drink? Our Liam?

I know, Veronica says, laughing. I told him to take it easy, to get himself back up here in one piece. He said he was all set.

You didn't tell him about the party, did you?

Course not, Joe.

OK, good.

Have you still got much to do?

I take a breath before I speak. Too right I have. I've got to go to the offie with Barry ... *then* cart the ale home ... *then* set up the front room. I'm counting off my wet fingers. And I haven't even bought his friggin card yet. I clasp my thumb. *And*, I need to have a bath, coz I'm friggin *rank* with meat juice.

Veronica laughs. She folds her arms and cocks her head to one side. So, what you doin here then?

I just thought, I go. I pause, coz what I thought is raising heat in my neck. I swallow. I just thought, that if Liam's told you his train gets in around six ... and if I've said to everyone to be at the house for eight ... then if you're there for seven that would give the two of you some ...

I stop myself coz I'm gabbling fluent shite.

Some time for a *catch-up* you mean? A smile twitches at the corners of her mouth.

I look away, my eyes lingering on a hanging display of hairbrushes.

You know something, Joe? I reckon you're more excited about him coming home than I am. Veronica laughs, but it's not a taking the piss kind of laugh.

It's only four stops so I stand at the back, gripping the pole on the platform by the opening. The rain's stopped, there's sudden sunlight on the wet pavement, a run of privets sparkles in front of the memorial gardens.

Veronica came to the house last Tuesday evening. I was out, at footy training. When I got home Mum said, We've a visitor on Saturday, and I just went, Who? – coz I didn't wanna jinx it. Mum goes, Well, who would you think? I could see she was trying to trap a smile. I started flinging questions at her. No, Joseph, I don't know how long he's staying. No, I don't know if he's back for good. Mum sighed. Who knows anything where that brother of yours is concerned? She said that *his girl* had only told her that Liam would be getting a train up from London on Saturday, and that he should be at the house by six.

Wake up Dolly Daydreams.

I snap out of my thoughts. The conductor's staring at me, his eyebrows bunched, a finger scratching at one of his fuzzy ginger sideburns.

Scholar, is it?

No, I tell him, and I dig out the full fare.

You used to be though, didn't you? he goes.

I recognize him now. He works on the 159 to St Augustine's.

I tell him I left a year ago last Easter and he goes, Oh, right, and he pinches off the green ticket.

Truth is, I do still get the 159 to the school, every Thursday night, for Cocker's English class. But I'm not gunna start explaining all that to the clippie.

The street-ends wind by, our local shops fronting the blocks. The Jawbone Tavern on the corner. Aziz's newsagents. Keble Wines where I'll come later with Barry.

The day after Liam phoned Veronica I was cubing chump for the mincer when the idea came into my head. Soon as I got home I said to Mum, What about a party for him, here in the house? She didn't look keen. He wouldn't want any fuss, she said, and *she* wouldn't be doing with any mess. I told her it wouldn't be a wild do, just a few of his mates, no rowdies. Mum looked at me for a moment, I was sure she was about to say no. I fired a last salvo. I told her how someone's twenty-first was a really big deal. I promised her I'd arrange it all, and I said that Liam's mate Barry would deffo help me with getting the drink. I watched her face. She smiled, put her hand on my arm. Well, I suppose that would be nice, she said, you doing that for your brother.

The bus slows for the traffic lights and I jump off at a run.

The hallway's full of the warm spicy smell of baking. I go to the back of the house, snatching a glance at the mantel clock as I pass through the living room – half-two, just gone.

The kitchen's friggin roasting. Mum's working a lump of dough on the Formica, my little sister Janey standing at her side, hands tucked at her back, her chin level with the table top.

Barry been yet?

Mum shakes her head. No, Joseph. Her voice is firm, like I'm buggin her. She tips a nod at the wall shelf. The money's there, she says.

I reach down the folded notes. Five quid. I stuff the cash in my jeans pocket and sit on the edge of the chair by the table.

I'll pay it back to you.

Mum sighs. Oh, I'll survive, she says. I can always get an extra shift at Jacobs.

I like *chocolate* biscuits the best, Janey sing-songs. I give her a gozzy-eyed grin and she laughs and skips through to the living room.

Mum wipes her palms on the front of her apron. She goes to the fridge and brings out a plated sandwich and sets it in front of me on the table.

I'm not hungry.

Eat, she says.

I take a bite. It's the boiled ham I brought home from work yesterday. It's sweet and salty and the bread is soft and fresh.

What time is Cheryl coming tonight?

I look at Mum as I chew. I swallow. She's not, I tell her, she's got other plans.

Mum's hands pause in the mixing bowl. She lifts her head to me, Oh really? she says, that's a shame.

Yeah, I go, all casual. I haven't told Mum about the whole Canada thing, and I'm deffo not getting into it now. She'd only spout that old crap about how the sea's teeming with other fish.

Mum turns away to the sink, starts picking the sticky mix from her fingers under a running tap. I get up and stand beside her so I can see her face.

I might go into town and meet him off the train, I tell her. I wanted to say it like a statement, but it's come out as if I'm asking her permission.

Mum's shoulders lift slightly for a moment. She dries her hands on a tea towel as she looks out the window into the back yard, her eyes lifted towards the grimy brick housebacks of the next street. I'd say your brother can well find his own way from Lime Street, she says. She turns her head to me, smiles. And haven't you enough to be doing here?

I tell her, Yeah, but there's no point me crackin on till I've been to the offie with Barry.

I go to the cooker and check the time on its little clock.

I sit down again, elbows on knees, tumbling my thumbs. My leg starts jiggling.

Where the frig is Barry?

Janey's crouched at a corner of the living room carpet. She glances at me to make sure I'm looking. Watch me, Joe, it's called a forward roll.

Go on, then, I tell her.

My sister's knees and shoulders make muffled bumps against the boards. She stands and does a ballerina curtsey. I tell her she'll brain herself if she's not careful.

In the front room I stand at the bay window.

As if staring into the street will make Barry appear.

I head back to the kitchen.

Mum's in the outside doorway. She jabs her fag into the narrow space of the back yard. Maybe your brother'll haul that yoke to the dump, she says, the thing's an eyesore.

I follow her gaze to the lumpy shrouded shape leaned against the wall. Liam's moped. He bought it about a year ago, from the Exchange and Mart. Sold as seen, the ad said. He rode it for a few months before it conked. I tell Mum that Liam'll most likely get it working again, but she just rolls her eyes and sparks out her fag on a wall-brick.

Some phone-in show. Radio Éireann. The tones of Dublin and Connemara, Kerry and Monaghan. Mum picks up a knobbly green apple and turns it slowly against a paring knife. Curls of cut peel drop onto pages of an old Echo. Between calls the disc jockey

introduces traditional airs, showband tunes. Often the glimmering world is lost in a swirl of hollow noise, the background throb of pirate reggae.

Three o'clock. The news comes on. The newsreader says that two British soldiers have been shot dead in Northern Ireland. They were on a foot patrol on a country road outside Crossmaglen. I glance at Mum – she's bending to slide something onto the oven shelf, but I know she's heard coz of the way she stiffened for a moment at the name of the town. Crossmaglen's just over the border from where we used to live. I want to say something but I know Mum'll close me down. Another man is speaking now, a posh English voice. A callous sniper attack, he calls it. I reckon he's some high-up army fella. The IRA have claimed responsibility, the man says, and that his thoughts are with the families and loved ones of the brave young victims.

Mum crosses herself and looks up at the ceiling, then she goes to the radio and slowly turns the dial.

The commentator at a football match gives a drowsy roll call of surnames as the ball is passed from player to player. She's put it on for Liam. The game'll be finished by the time he gets here, but I like the fact that she's done it. It means we're all in the same place, we all want him back, want him to know that this is his home, even if it isn't anymore. I smile at her, to let her know I understand.

A clatter of the letterbox handle, a couple of solid door thumps.

I'm halfway down the hall when Mum calls after me, Tell Barry I won't have any hard stuff in the house.

I open the front door and see the scabby mustard Escort minivan parked outside. Barry behind the wheel, looking at me with a big stupid grin on him. I grab my greatcoat from the wall hook.

As I walk up to the van, I cant my head, my index tapping on an imaginary wristwatch. Barry winds down his window.

What happened to half-two, Baz?

Just get in will ya, softlad, he says with a smile. I'm on works' time.

Barry's swinging the car through a three-point turn. I shift to face him, The offie's back the other way.

Barry shakes his head. Keble Wines is a fucken rip-off, he says. He grinds out of reverse and we set off down the hill, towards the subway that leads to the docks. Barry flicks me a wink. We'll go see my mate, Scottish Jack. He's got a lock-up. Save yer ma a packet this will, Joey lad.

Nice one, Baz.

Your Liam back for good, then, or is this just a flying visit?

Dunno, I tell him. Why? Do you reckon he could get his job at Baines back?

Barry flashes me a look, his mouth skewed. You havin' a laugh, Joe?

What d'ya mean?

Barry clears his throat. So, he says, let's get this straight. Your brother pisses off to London for what, a month or more, without a word, not so much as a goodbye or kiss me arse, and now he rocks back up at the depot with a fat smile on his gob and he goes, Oh good morning to you, Cliff, I've had me jolly and now I'm reporting back for duty thank you very much.

I give him a deadpan look. That a no, then?

Barry chuckles. Couldn't blame him though, he says, if he wanted to stay down there. Wouldn't mind a taste of that meself. D'ya fancy it, Joe? A little jaunt to see the bright lights?

Deffo, Baz. We'll fix it up with Liam later.

There's a sudden squall of misting rain. Barry flips the creaky wipers on. Not much for anyone round here, is there lad? he says, as he sends a nod through the

windscreen. A stray Alsatian's squatted outside a corner pub, squeezing out a shivery shit. Barry sighs. Fuck me, he says, and we both have to laugh.

We have it all unloaded in the hallway and Barry's clapping invisible dust off his hands. Right then, buggerlugs, he says, I'm gunna have to leave you to it. I need to finish me shift at Baines then get home and wash me balls and get the glad rags on.

Cheers, Baz.

I'll try and turf up early, Joe. Make sure no fucker takes liberties with the buckshee booze.

Don't worry, I tell him. I'll keep the hordes at bay till eight.

Truth is, I don't want Barry firing his innuendos at Liam and Veronica.

I start lugging. I stack the wooden crates of ale in the alcove one side of the chimney breast: two crates of Guinness, one of Mackesons, one of Double Diamond. There's two glass flagons of cider, a few Babychams for Mum, and plenty of bottles of soft drinks – lemonade, American Cream Soda, colas.

I get the wallpaper trestle from the cellar, swipe off the cobwebs, and set it up across the alcove and lay an old pink candlewick bedspread over the top. I set out a mismatched selection of tumblers, and some pint pots Liam's filched from the Jawbone.

I stand back and admire my work.

I sit cross-legged in front of the radiogram and flip through the album rack. The Bachelors, smiling in their Aran cable-knits, that can go. Big Tom and his friggin Mainliners, no way. There's some good stuff that Liam's been getting into – Soft Machine, Tull's Aqualung, Cat Stevens' Tea for the Tillerman. I put these aside coz they'd be either too heavy or too folksy for dancing. I'm left with a couple of K-Tel

compilations, and an album of James Last popular classics that I bought for Mum last Christmas, and a clutch of decent singles.

The mantel clock shows nearly half-four.

I stick on my greatcoat and walk to the main road and along a couple of blocks to Aziz's.

The wire carousel of cards squeaks with every turn.

Mrs Aziz calls over do I need any help.

I ask if she's got anything with a goalie, y'know, flying for a finger-tipped save.

She looks blankly at me like I've spouted double Dutch. Only what is there, she says. We're not W.H. Smiths.

I pick one out – a red-sailed yacht carving through choppy waves, a lighthouse on a headland in the distance. I'll have to go for this one, I reckon it'll give Liam a laugh. I run a thumb across the top where it says *Brother* in shiny gold letters.

While I'm paying, Mrs Aziz asks, When is his birthday?

Today, I tell her.

You kids grow up too fast, she says.

I sit on the edge of my bed and wrap the Harley Davidson T-shirt.

I take the silver tankard from its box. I paid a bit more for one with a see-through glass bottom. At the till I asked the girl how much it would be to get his name put on, and she told me that Woolworths didn't actually do engraving, but Samuels did. Are you a biker, then? she said as she snipped the string ticket off the T-shirt. I told her it was for my brother and she went, Cool. She had a nice husky voice, this girl, and brushed-back blonde hair with ringlets by her ears. I asked if she reckoned it

would be expensive, the engraving. Probably, she said, and gave me this little grin coz she knew I was stringing out the chat. She said a tankard's quite a traditional gift. So, I went, when you say *traditional* you mean corny don't you? Not for me to judge, she said and we held eye contact for a good few beats. I told her about Liam working in London. Fancy, she said. She told me she couldn't see the appeal herself, too many people, stuck-up a lot of them were too. She eyed the apron under my greatcoat and asked if I worked in the precinct. I told her I worked at the butcher's on the upper level. When I told her about my English class with Cocker, she said, Where's that going? It was like she was possessed by Mum for a moment. I didn't have time to explain, coz it was near the end of my lunch hour and Mr Simm's a friggin stickler. As I was walking away from the till she called, Tell your brother Happy Birthday. I turned and said I would. Her smile made her look even prettier. I thought for a moment about asking her to the party, but I reckoned she might think it was weird coz we'd only just met. Besides, I've enough on my plate as it is.

I write *Liam* on the envelope and prop it against the wrapped tankard on the chair by my bed.

I'm downstairs taking my greatcoat from the hook when Mum comes out from the living room, examining some damp pink material that's crumpled in her hand. She pinches it at two corners and flaps it out to an oblong. A pillowcase, she says, not one of ours. She folds the sodden thing neatly lengthways, then across. It must have blown over from the Fishers', she says. Here, Joseph, take this next door.

I can't, I tell her, I need to get to the station. I'm trying to get my coat on but my hand can't find the sleeve hole.

It'll not take you ten seconds, she says. That's the boy, now.

Good lad for your mam, Joe.

Mrs Fisher takes the pillowcase from me and opens the door wide. Come in out of the cold, son, she says, standing back to let me pass. She tips a nod at the joining wall, Has the wanderer returned? I'm about to tell her that I can't stop, that I have to go and meet Liam at Lime Street. I've had all this ready to say, but now she's flapping her hand at me, ushering me in, and I can't seem to open my trap to let the words out.

Mrs Fisher closes the door and heads to the back of the house. Our Stanley's home on leave, she says as she goes. Pop through and say hello.

My boots stay planted. If I'd known Stan was back from Cyprus I wouldn't've come. I can't just leave now though, can I? I'll have to show my face.

I head slowly down the hallway, its brown paisley carpet under a plastic runner. I step around a kit bag slumped against the wall, a cloth badge like a target sewn on, S.E.F. stencilled on the canvas. I stop in the doorway.

Stan's parked on a hard chair in the middle of the living room, facing the corner TV. He doesn't turn his head to me. There's a rugby match on, the sound up loud. Stan has his right foot in a plastic washing-up bowl, his other foot clasped on his knee as he leans in to clip his toenails. The legs of his trousers have been pushed part way up his shins. His mouth makes an ugly little gurn with each snap of the clippers. Stan glances up at the screen. The men brace arms across others' backs and they bend and lock in a scrum on the muddy pitch.

The starburst clock on the chimney-breast shows gone five-to-five.

Mrs Fisher comes from the kitchen with a tumbler of orange pop, a fan of playing cards on the glass. I start telling her I haven't time, but my hand's just gone and taken the drink from her and she's disappeared into the hallway. Christ, she's an old bird but she can't half shift.

A rugby player is sitting on the grass, a bandage taped around his head, a seep of blood showing through. Stan rises, steps towards the TV, his mouth twisted in disgust. Clown! he shouts into the screen. He turns and levers back a leg, like he's about to welly the plastic bowl, but he stops himself.

Stan looks at me, dregs of the scowl on his face. He gives me a glum nod, so I send him one back. A ribbed green vest is stretched over his solid chest, his arms are tanned and curved with muscles. I feel gangly and weak standing there with a kiddy's tumbler of fizzy orange and no place near to set it down.

Stan reaches forward and switches the telly off and slumps heavily back onto the hard chair. The sudden quiet makes the air thin.

Stan gives me an up and down look. He breaks out a smile. You've shot up, haven't ya? What are you now, sixteen? His voice is deep, like my brother's the morning after one of his payday sessions in the Jawbone.

I clear my throat so my own voice doesn't come out weedy. Seventeen. Seventeen, eh? Stan says. Imagine that. Be tall as your kid, soon, won't ya? I've got to shoot, Stan. Liam's expecting me to meet him off the train. He's coming home from London.

So I hear, so I hear, Stan says, nodding. What's he up to down there? Still on the taxis is he?

He's on the buildings.

Stan stumps the wooden chair around so he's facing me. His trousers are a blue-grey material, like felt, with an extra pocket on the side of the thigh, pleated and buttoned. So, you're the man of the house now, eh? He chuckles as he holds eye contact.

I shrug.

The old girl says your Liam left sudden, Stan says. In a van, early doors like. He taps a finger on the side of his nose, juts his chin towards the hallway behind me. Eyes like a shithouse rat, that one.

He's on about the morning Liam left for London, in the Transit, with our cousins Enda and Francie.

Stan's watching me closely. I neck half the drink and go past him to the sideboard on the far wall and leave the glass there. When I turn, Stan has got to his feet.

Good to see you, Stan. Gotta head, or I'll be late.

Old pals, me and your kid, Stan says.

It's like he hasn't heard me but I know he has. He gazes up at a corner of the ceiling as though he's recollecting the good times they've had. His face has a scrubbed-clean look, his smile makes his cheeks shine. They're not mates. Liam says he's a gobshite. I start to smirk so I put a hand to my face and scratch my nose to mask the smile.

Stan looks at me. Bit of a shindig for him tonight, so I believe.

I tell him that it's not really a party, just a few of his mates. Liam won't want Stan Fisher in the house, that's for sure.

Be good to sink a few bevvies with your Lee, Stan says. Get the lowdown on that London high-life. Hear about what I'm missing while I'm away serving queen and country.

I just stare back at him. If I don't speak I'll get away quicker. No one calls him Lee.

Is he still doin' a line with that bird who works in the chemist's? Vicky, isn't it?

Veronica. They're going steady now. I fish out my wool hat and drag it on.

Done well there, your kid, Stan says.

I sidle past him. I turn in the doorway. Good to see ya, Stan. I'll let Liam know you were askin after him.

Anyway, Stan goes, I'll see if I can swing by later.

I shrug. He's got friggin rubbish hearing for a man about town.

Your mam wouldn't mind, would she? Stan puckers his lips and puts a hand to his hip. Da more da merrier, he says, to be sure, to be sure.

He's made himself laugh.

The starburst's sped to ten-past.

The streetlights've come on, I hear their electrics fizz inside the posts as I pass them. I cut through the jigger to the backs coz there's more buses into town down on the dock road. I follow the track along the galvanized fence by the railway lines, ducking and side-stepping to avoid thorny stalks and purple spears poking through from the embankment. I cross the metal bridge over the canal, taking the steps two at a time.

The sky opens out, dark blue above the disused land, the tiny lights of the dock cranes and gantries in the distance.

Up ahead there's a group of people, under a clump of trees near the substation. Three or four lads I reckon. A hovering dot of orange from a cigarette. I drag my wool hat lower over my ears, stuff my hands in my pockets, keep my head down and quicken my stride.

I hear a long wolf-whistle and one of the lads shouting, Aye aye, Hippy! and there's laughing. I've no time for this, but I can feel my paces slow. I turn back and stroll over the straggly damp grass towards them.

I stop a couple of yards from the group. I square my shoulders. Making my voice deeper, I go, Did one of yous say something?

They're gathered around a burnt-out wooden pallet – two standing, the other one in a busted armchair. It's him who jabs his fag at me. Duffy! he goes. You ignoring me, or what?

I step closer. The smoker pushes up from the shadows of his tattered throne.

It's Booey Spratt. I squint at the two lurkers, a couple of skinhead brothers he's started knocking about with.

I drop my shoulders and walk up to him.

I smile. All right, Boo. Didn't recognise you there. I wave an arm around the dark place, What with it being totally friggin pitch black and that.

Booey sucks on his fag, blows the smoke up into the bare branches. Where you leggin it off to? he says.

Town, I tell him, and I flick a look in the general direction.

Goin to see yer bird, are ya? Booey says, in a lecherous old man Steptoe voice.

I tell him about meeting Liam at Lime Street and give him a short version of the Cheryl and Canada thing.

Emigrated! Booey says, his face all sorrowful. That's fucken extreme, mate. But then he starts to crease up, and he laughs so hard he gets bent double in a hacking fit. For a moment I can't see what's so funny, but then I twig and I can't help laughing along with him. Booey's a decent skin. I'd invite him to the party if it wasn't for the two bozos hanging off him.

I start to walk away. Gotta fly, I say.

Eh, Duffy! he calls after me. He coming back to footy practice then, your kid? We need a decent keeper.

I stop and turn.

Probably, I go. See you Tuesday, Boo.

As I jog to the dock road I think of how Liam says playing Gaelic footy as a kid has given him an edge with his hands.

I'm late at the station but so's the train. I go to the stall and grub out a few coins for a half-time Echo. Liam won't have heard any results. Everton are away at Spurs. I scan the pink front page. One-all, Connolly, header.

I go to the barrier at the end of the platform and stand at the back of a huddle of people, all of us quiet and watching the long curve of track.

A misty rain catches in the headlamp beam as the train appears from the dark arch under the road bridge. Here she comes, I hear one woman say, and there's a ripple of excited mutters as we all shuffle forward a bit.

At the carriage doors men lean out, gripping the handles. The engine slows to a stop at the buffers. All along the train figures step down to the platform, bags are hoisted, suitcases lugged.

There's a thick stream of people headed this way.

I see Liam, way down near the back, then I lose sight of him in the crowd. I rise on my toes and crane my neck and I catch another glimpse of his black thatch, and the wild beard he grew over the summer. He gets closer to the barrier so I wave the rolled-up Pink Echo, squinting for a better look. When he's nearly at the gate, the woman beside me calls, Adrian! Adrian! and I see Liam move out to the side of the crowd. The woman is waving her arm like mad now. I look back through the wire mesh. The man's smile is wrong, and he's too short, and his beard is too neatly trimmed. But I still watch him as he presses his way between the bottle-necked figures. The woman quick-steps it to the gate as the man comes through and they get in a clinch, her red-gloved hands reaching each for the other at the back of his black raincoat.

I flick a glance at the faces of the last men trailing through. As if London might've turned Liam fat and bald, or ginger, or stooped and ancient.

There's only me now waiting.

The driver steps down back-ways from the engine, slams the cab door, and comes towards the barrier. He shoots a quip to a guard who's drawing a long bolt across the gate. I step up to them.

When's the next train from London?

The men turn their heads to me. The driver's smile fades. The next one's been delayed, he says.

There's a fault, further down the line, the guard says.

I'm about to ask what he means when the driver sees my expression and he explains how there's another train from Euston on the way, but it's been held up near Stafford because of a problem with the overhead wires.

How long before it's sorted out?

Half an hour, or thereabouts. Then at least another couple of hours before it gets here.

The two men head off together across the concourse, one of them laughing loudly as they go. I look up at the giant clock.

The bus is jammed full. I climb to the upper deck.

I spot an empty spec at the back and hand myself along the poles through a hanging fog of ciggy smoke. I glance at each seated passenger. One man is looking directly back at me, slack mouthed. What's up with *your* gob? he says, giving me daggers, bleary-eyed ones. I hold his gaze as I pass.

I bunch the cuff of my jacket and wipe a clear patch in the misted window. Liam'll be on the train that's stuck in Stafford – bored shitless, sitting in a carriage

staring out through his own reflection at a ploughed field. I lay the side of my head against the cold wet glass and gaze idly out through trickles of city lights.

I smile when the thought arrives. I'm a friggin idiot. Why didn't I think of this all along?

Joseph? It's Mum's voice.

The front room's in darkness, but I can make out her shadowy shape against the glow of a streetlamp on the net curtains. She's looking out of the side bay, up the pavement, the way I've just come.

You're on your own, she says quietly.

I don't even need to ask if my brother's got back while I've been out.

I tell her about Liam not being on the train, and about what the driver said, but that I reckon he'll be on the next one, the one that's stuck at Stafford. He should be here for half-eight, I tell her. I go through what I've hatched on the bus. We'll all cram in here and when we hear the scratch of his key, we'll turn the lights off and as he comes in we'll all jump out at him, everyone screaming, *Surprise!*

Mum doesn't turn from the window.

Mum?

I know to leave her alone when she gets like this.

Janey is sent up to bed at seven. Mum snaps, Now! when my sister dallies.

But I want to see Liam, Janey whines.

Mum tells her she'll see him well enough in the morning. My sister stomps up the stairs, her head down, grumbling about the unfairness of it all, Mum following behind her.

In the front room I put a bar on the fire and flick on its swirly plastic coals. I sit on the edge of the sofa, my leg jiggling as I watch the red and orange lights make slow circuits of the walls.

Veronica gives me a kiss on the cheek and a big hug. She smells of lipstick and cold air and the lemony scent she wears. She gives a little shiver as I take her fur-collared coat and drape it over my arm. Veronica casts her eyes around the hallway and takes a smiling peek into the front room. She turns to me. Where is he, then?

Her eyes narrow as I tell her the whole power lines palaver.

Her smile's gone. She looks at the front door. I should call his digs, she says, holding her lower lip in a little bite.

I tell her how I reckon that once the lines are up again he should be here for half-eight, and I bring her in on my new plan for when he arrives.

Veronica puts a hand to the side of my face for a moment and her smile comes back, just a bit. OK, Joe, she says. I'll just go through and say hello to your mother, then I want you to show me the around the discotheque.

Mum's just taken Janey up, I tell her.

I'll pop up, Veronica says. I need to pay a visit anyway.

I hear their lowered voices drifting down, and Janey giggling and Mum settling her. I bring the coat up to my face, push my nose into the soft collar, inhale a trace of perfume. There's a clatter at the front door then a couple more knocks on the bay window. Voices and laughter.

It's Barry, with a couple of lads from Baines, Doug and Geraint. I tell them about the power lines at Stafford and the new plan.

Barry beams. Fucken ace! he says. We'll scare the livin shit out of him.

I smile and hold out a palm, guiding them into the front room like a waiter.

We'll man the bar for ya Joe, Barry says, and he winks at the other fellas and they laugh. They go in, Barry cradling his gut, buckle-kneed like he's hefting a heavy load.

I'm back and forth between Mum and Veronica in the living room and going out to show in arrivals at the front door. I take coats and jackets and scarves and hats, and pass people over to Barry who asks them what's their poison and generally acts the goat. Big Gordon lumbered in with a Watney's Party Seven under his arm and a few lads from the Jawbone darts team in tow. My mate Grogan's come, with Helen, this girl from Formby he's been seeing, a bit of an uppity type – she looked at me askance when I called him Grogan and not Colin. And Terry Thomson, Liam worked for him at North End Cabs. Terry's come with his missus, Marie – she was clutching a card and a wrapped box that looked suspiciously like a tankard. I told her I'd take that from her and keep it safe.

There's another knock now. I open the door to the twins from across the road, Suzy and Beth Watkins, in matching pastel blue Crimplene mini-dresses and white patent leather boots. I show them to the bar. Barry beams and rubs his hands together and goes, Ooh, look out, double trouble. Doug and Geraint stop leaning against the wall and they pretend to be engaged in polite conversation while grabbing sly side-eyes.

I stack some singles on the radiogram.

This Town Ain't Big Enough for Both of Us drops, and in the piano intro I turn the volume up. Suzy and Beth go to the middle of the floor and start dancing, moving slower than the music, a kind of floaty sway. In the swirly light it's dreamy and strange. Grogan's watching them agog from the sofa and Helen's giving him

evils. She prods him in the side and he mouths, Wha'? at her, all innocent, then he looks over at me like I'm gunna back him up.

I'm sitting a couple of stairs up, staring at the front door while trying to think who's not turned up yet, when the music gets turned off and Barry comes into the hallway. He raises his arm and waggles his wrist at me. It's gone half-past, y'know. Then he's rolling his hand at Doug who's coming down from the bathroom. Get in there and tell everyone to keep shtum, Barry says to him.

There's the clank of the gate latch and two hard raps of the letterbox flap. Mum and Veronica must've heard it coz they're scuttlin' down the hall, giggling like guilty schoolgirls. They go into the front room and there's a chorus of shushing and stifled laughter and the room light is turned off.

A swimmy eye is pressed to the dimpled glass panel. I open the door.

It's Stan Fisher. A big open smile, his brows raised, eyes sharp on me.

I stand square in the doorway. He's not back yet, I tell him.

Stan looks past me, his forehead puckered as his eyes flick around the empty hallway. He flexes his knees, dips his head to glance up the stairs, his face catching a faint glow from the landing light. The collar of his floral shirt is pointed over the lapels of his tan leather jacket.

Behind me I hear Grogan's voice – False alarm, he says, and there's groans and Barry shouts, Well turn the friggin lights back on then! There's laughter and the talk growing loud again.

Sean and Barney from Cocker's evening class pitch up. I wave them inside. They have to sidle past Stan.

I won't be stopping long, Stan says, and he steps into the house. I have to move aside as he brushes by, trailing carbolic and Old Spice.

Veronica comes into the hallway.

Been waylaid, has he, love? Stan says to her. Stan Fisher, by the way. I'm an old mate of Liam's.

Veronica forces out a little smile for him and turns to me. Where's my coat, Joe? she says.

You're not leaving are you?

I'm just going out to call his digs.

I'm coming with you.

Mum looks up from her armchair in the back room.

No joy? Stan Fisher says, his lip plumped. He's standing with his back to the fireplace, his platform shoes planted apart, his thick thighs blocking the heat of the coals.

Veronica looks at Mum. No answer, she says. We tried and tried didn't we, Joe?

I nod. I say that we called the rail enquiries number as well, and they said that the service had been suspended because engineers were still working on the power lines at Stafford.

Mum looks at Stan. Liam might call your mother to let us know, she says to him.

Stan sucks a breath. There's no one in, Mrs D. Me mam's at bingo and me dad's on nights.

I say, Liam might jump on a coach, or he could be thumbing it.

Stan sucks a breath. Unlikely, if you ask me, lad. He looks at the closed living room door, the hubbub of voices and music on the other side. Do you want me to let everyone know? he says to Mum, his eyebrow cocked.

He's a friggin hero, is Stan Fisher.

No, I tell him.

Stan turns his face to me, his chin drawn back a bit.

Joseph's right, Mum says, these people have been good enough to come. Let them enjoy themselves.

I've just seen the Watkins twins out, they said they were off to the Wookey Hollow club, and to tell Liam all the best, and that if he makes it back they'll maybe see him in the Jawbone tomorrow night. Veronica's sister Caz and her fiancé Alan said they had a reservation at some new carvery in Blundellsands. Sean and Barney only stayed for an hour – I told them I'd see them at Cocker's class on Thursday evening, and sorry the music was shit. In an American drawl, Barney went, Yeah, it needed some King Crimson, man. Sean said that they hadn't planned on staying long anyway. A lot of people said the same kind of thing as they were leaving.

It's gone half ten when Barry pokes his head in to the back room. The party's pretty much fizzled, he says. And, much as I'd like to stay and finish the ale on me own, I'm on earlies so I'd best be making tracks.

Thank you, Barry, for helping Joseph out, Mum says.

Not at all, Mrs Duffy.

When I'm seeing him off at the gate, Barry says. Friggin typical, isn't it? Your Liam's gunna get some fucken stick about this, eh lad?

I laugh and tell him cheers for pitchin in, and to take the rest of the Guinesses if he wants.

Nah, Joe. We'll get a refund on 'em.

As he turns to go I remember something. Baz?

Yeah?

Did you mean it? About us going down to visit Liam sometime?

Too right we will, Barry says, with a smile.

Stan has planted himself in the armchair next to Mum's. He's got ale in him now, and I can catch him slurring about how it can't be easy for her, on her own. Mum's shrunk back in her seat. She's uncomfortable coz she never talks about Dad and all that.

Veronica leans towards me on the sofa. I think I'd best be going too, she whispers.

I'll walk with you.

That'd be nice, Joe.

We stand.

I'm off now, Mrs Duffy, Veronica says. I'll pop round tomorrow after I've spoken to Liam.

Stan pipes up. Yeah, he says, let's know how bad his hangover is. He laughs, but nobody else joins in. I swap a look with Veronica. We know Stan's probably right, but we're not gunna give him the benefit.

Stan slaps his palms on the armrests and pushes to his feet. S'pose I'd best be goin meself, he says.

The four of us make our way into the hallway. I hand Veronica her coat and take my greatcoat from the rack.

What are you doing, Joseph? Mum says, her eyes widened.

Joe's offered to walk me home, Mrs Duffy, Veronica says.

No, no, Mum says, looking at me. It's much too late.

I laugh. Mum, it's not even eleven o'clock.

I'll see the young lady home, Fisher says.

There's no need, Veronica says. I think you need your bed, Stanley.

Fisher opens the front door, stands to the side. I insist, he goes. Absolutely no trouble at all.

I lean against the frame of the living room door. There's a fog in my head and my legs've gone to lead. Mum's in her armchair, an unlit Consulate in her hand. She's staring towards the telly but her gaze stops short of the black screen. She bends forward and reaches the fag into the grate, touches the tip against an orange coal.

Go on up, Joseph, she says, you've had a long day of it. Her eyes close slowly as she takes a drag.

Knocking.

My name. And again, louder, reaching into my sleep.

Rattle of the door handle.

Mum says you've to get up for church.

It's Janey, on the landing outside my bedroom.

I pull the covers over my head.

We *know* you're awake, Janey calls. It's the tone she uses to give her dolls a scolding.

I picture my sister, a titty lip, hands planted on her hips, and Mum at the foot of the stairs, fixing her hair at the hallstand mirror.

The thump of my sister's feet as she goes back down.

My head's still half in dreams, vague fleeting images – of the not-Liam Adrian fella in a clinch with the woman at Lime Street, of Mum standing in shadow at the bay window, of coloured lights swirling the walls of the front room and the Watkins twins' floaty dancing, of the pained smiles on people's faces as they make their excuses and leave the party.

I prop myself up on my elbows. Curtained light. I'm in yesterday's clothes, my boots still on. I get out of bed and stomp to the bathroom. At the basin I cup handfuls of cold water over the blear in my eyes.

Mum's standing at the cooker, a frying pan spitting softly on the hob. She turns her head when she hears me enter the kitchen. No word yet, she says quietly, before you ask.

I sit at the table. Janey's smearing runny yolk around her plate with a fold of bread. Don't play with your food, I tell her. My sister pauses her hand, and she looks

at me like I've slapped her face. I reach across to the back of her neck but she stands up and ducks clear of my touch.

I've done you a cooked breakfast, Mum says, and she sets a plate on the table. Steam drifts off the heap of scrambled eggs, there's a delicious tang from the rashers. I lift a triangle of toast and take a bite.

You'll need to get that down you quick, Mum says.

I swallow. I'll go to the late Mass, I tell her. Someone needs to be here in case Veronica calls round.

Mum pours tea in my mug. She shakes her head. You brother's made a holy show of us, she says.

I don't wanna hear this, but I know there's more coming coz of the way she's standing there staring down at me. I get stuck in to the food.

All the bother you went to, she says, all those people who took the trouble to come.

The trains, Mum.

She scoffs. The trains my eye, she says.

I shrug, get busy sawing away at a piece of bacon. I can imagine Liam getting his wages on Friday, and a quick drink with the lads has become one more for the road, and Enda and Francie have turfed up and Liam's birthday's got mentioned and the rounds've got rollin good style. He's spent yesterday curled up in his kip with a head like a box of frogs and the idea of jumping a train back here has gone out the window. I know what he's like.

Mum's saying something. I lift my face to her. What was that?

She shakes her head. Are you even listening to me, Joseph? she says. I said your brother is feckless. Amn't I right?

I won't agree out loud with what she's said.

He didn't know though, did he, that we'd organized a do for him? I say this coz I reckon if she thinks better of Liam she might feel better about herself. I tell her if he'd known about the party he would deffo've come home.

Oh, there'll be a story, a tale of some description, Mum says. I don't doubt that. She checks her watch, leaves the kitchen. I hear her snipe at Janey, Did I not tell you to get your coat on!

Mum appears back in the doorway, tying her headscarf. She tucks the tails of the bow inside her coat collar.

I'll make a start on tidying up, I tell her.

Good, she says. At least there's one son I can depend on.

As she turns away she mutters, That fella'll have the heart tore out of me.

She's more angry than disappointed.

I don't get why she's getting so het up.

Liam being a royal pain in the arse is par for the course.

The front room looks like friggin World War Three. It reeks of spent fags and stale ale, a trace of the Watkin twins' perfume laced with a soupçon of Big Gordon's pits. I fetch a rubbish bag from the stair cupboard and dump stinking butts from the ashtrays and go around the room clanking in the empties. I tip leftovers of mini pork pies and curled sandwich triangles. The old candlewick's blotched with beer stains and a there's a burn hole where some dickhead's rested their cigarette – I bundle it into the bag.

I put the unopened bottles together in one crate and collapse the trestle legs and fold it flat.

Vinyl gets married to sleeve and slotted back on the radiogram shelf.

I gather the wrapped gifts and cards and cradle them in my arms and head upstairs to leave them in Liam's bedroom. It's quiet in the house, just the muffled squeals and laughter from some kids playing on the street outside. I'll hear the knock if Veronica comes.

I toe the door open. The curtains are drawn, my arms are full and I can't get an elbow to the light switch. I step into the grainy dark and take slow steps across the floor like a night burglar. Jesus! I shout, catching my shadowy reflection creeping across the wardrobe mirror. I stand and wait while the grey shapes of the room grow solid.

I lean over Liam's bed and let the envelopes and boxes tumble onto the covers. I flick the bedside lamp on and sit on the edge of the mattress for a breather.

The wall above the headboard is plastered with photographs, pictures clipped from magazines, beer mats. A couple of dolly birds drape over the bonnet of a sports car. Van Morrison wails wild-haired into a mic. Peter Fonda in mirror-shades guns a Harley along a sun-split desert road. There's a strip of four, Liam and Veronica squeezed together in a photo booth, pulling mad faces. And a Polaroid of me. I prise the drawing pin away and flatten the photo on my knee. I'm on the propped moped, and in the background there's a line of tussocky dunes, the pointed tops of pine trees under a bright blue sky. My knuckles are white on the grips and I'm bent forward, my grinning face above the headlamp like I'm speeding towards the camera, my hair flying sideways from a crosswind. This was last May, the trip to Anglesey and the lesson on the beach that Liam had promised me for my birthday.

An image of the girl in Woolies flashes. Her smile. The way she said, Cool, when she saw the Harley T-shirt.

I pin the Polaroid back in its place.

I go downstairs and out to the pavement and look up the hill towards the corner where Veronica would turn onto the street. A green bus crosses the junction.

Bert Harris from the Vaults strolls by, he glances up from the back page of the News of the World and nods me a Mornin' Joe.

Alright, Bert.

Back inside, I swing by the front room for the bag of rubbish and haul it through the house and out to the yard and dump it in the bin.

I stand in front of the moped. Rain has pooled in the dips of the sky-blue tarp, the water's cloudy and furred green round the edges. I squat and lift the hem of the stiff material. On the ground under the foot-rest there's a lidless Family Assortment tin. I drag the box out into the light – a broken drive chain, grubby screws, a couple of rusted metal spanners.

On the way back from Anglesey, about half an hour from home, the bike sputtered and lurched, it started spewing black smoke, the pair of us near choking from it. Liam pulled off the coast road and into a caravan park, where he sweet-talked the woman in the office into giving him use of the phone. Barry drove out to get us and we loaded the bike in the back of the minivan. Liam told Barry he was too skint to take it to a garage, he'd just ditched his job with North End Cabs, and that he'd fix it himself. It sat out here in the yard for a month or so before Liam started working on it. He'd arranged to spend August back in Ireland and wanted to take the bike across as a run-around. I remember one day, near the end of July, blazing hot it was. I'd got home from the precinct and was in the kitchen getting a glass of lemmon, and through the window I saw my brother out here. He had the moped on its side and was looking down at it, frowning, his shirt open over his vest, a shine of sweat on his face and the fume of a fag uncoiling from his hand. I went out and stood beside him. I told him that Mr Cocker knew about motor mechanics, and that I'd ask him what he thought.

I'd been chatting to the teacher after one of the night classes, saying how my brother was trying to fix up his bike. Mr Cocker had said he could recommend a good garage. Liam just flicked his fag-end away and muttered that he didn't need help, specially not from no feckin schoolmaster.

I'm in the hallway on my way back to cart the crate of ale down to the cellar when I glance at the front door, a shadow slipping over the dimpled pane.

Veronica's on the pavement, pulling the gate closed and she looks up when she hears me come out. I thought there was no one at home, she says, I've been knocking for ages. She steps up the path.

Sorry, I tell her, I was out in the back.

Veronica smiles. Your mam and Janey up with the good people?

Yeah.

I reckon Veronica's come coz she knows I'll be on my own.

I close the door and face her in the hallway. Have you spoken to him?

Veronica rolls her eyes. I tried first thing, Joe. Enda picked up. Liam's not here, he grunted. I asked when he'd be back. I've no feckin clue, love, he said. Charming. So I sat by the phone wondering what the hell had happened to him. Then, about half an hour ago, he calls me. Says he's in a phone box.

C'mon then, what's his story?

She tips a nod towards the front room and I follow her in.

Someone's been busy, she says, glancing around.

I couldn't stand the kip of it, I tell her.

Veronica sits on the edge of the sofa with her hands in her lap. So, she says with a sigh. Liam says he left the digs yesterday afternoon, his bag all packed, and

he's walking along the street to get a bus to Euston when this van pulls alongside him, some fella sent to pick him up for work.

For work? I thought he said that the contract finished last Friday.

I know, Veronica says. I said that to him. He said, No, that was the Camden tube job, the gas pipes. Apparently some laggard hadn't turned up at this new site and they were desperate.

Is the job in London?

Veronica shrugs. He didn't say. I reckon so. It was a bit of a one-way conversation to be honest. You know how he is, gabblin away ten to the dozen.

Like when he's hungover, I say. I smile at Veronica, but she doesn't return it.

You're annoyed with him, aren't you, Vee?

Veronica makes a little palms-open gesture. What can I do, Joe? Your brother said if he'd refused the work he'd be out on his neck.

He could've let us know though, I tell her. He obviously didn't even *try* the Fishers', and if he'd phoned the Vaults then Bert would've sent one of his brood up with a message.

Veronica nods. I told him his mother was worried, that we all were. Tell them sorry, he said.

I glance around the room, there's a half-trodden French fancy on the carpet under a chair. Did you mention the party? I ask.

No, Joe, she says quietly, I did not.

I reckon if Veronica suspected the malarkey about the new job was one of Liam's tales she would've told him about the party, just to make him feel guilty.

We'll tell him about it when we see him, eh? Rub it in.

Too right we will, Joe.

Can you picture his face, Vee? His chin'll be on the friggin floor.

Veronica's smile fades. Might be a while though, Joe. He said that this new work was gunna be full tilt for a month, at least.

Till Christmas?

By the sound of it.

Right. I can't help my head dipping.

He said he'd call me Friday evenings, as per.

I nod.

Veronica stands. You'll let your mother know for me?

Yeah. I roll my eyes.

Veronica smiles, coz we both know what Mum'll make of it.

As I'm seeing her off at the gate Veronica glances at the Fishers' house.

You got home alright, then?

Veronica laughs. Obviously.

I mean, Stan didn't try it on or anything, did he?

No, Joe. He was the perfect gentleman.

Probably shit-scared of you reporting back to Liam.

Maybe so.

I watch as she walks quickly up the street, her head tucked. She looks up sharply and has to side-step a woman with a pram who's coming the other way.

Veronica looked pleased last night, when I said I'd walk her home. I reckon she wanted to speak to me without Mum or Stan Fisher tryin to wig in. Especially as we didn't have our usual chat yesterday. Over the couple of months that Liam's been in London, Veronica's walked along to the precinct on her Saturday lunch break. We started off with strolls along the canal towpath, or we'd sit on the monument steps in the memorial gardens. But it's been too cold or teeming down recently, so we've stayed in the shopping centre, parked up on one of the benches in the Atrium and had

our butties together. She'll tell me all the latest from Liam's Friday phone call – like when he had to break up a fist-fight between Enda and Francie, or about when he went to watch Everton's away game at QPR and Bob Latchford gave him a thumbs-up as he stepped down from the team coach. Be sure and tell that bit to our Joe, that's what I imagine he says to her.

When they get back from church, I tell Mum about the phone call, and give her the gist of Liam being on his way to the train station and the van pulling up and Liam being forced to work coz of the laggard.

Mum's bent forward to Janey, unsnagging the zip of her anorak like she's not even listening.

My sister bunny-hops off to the living room, and there's a squawk of cartoon voices from the telly. Mum looks at me, her chin lifted as she loosens the knot of her headscarf.

So he's alive, is he? Good of him to let us know.

I might as well've said that Liam told Veronica he'd got so paralytic he couldn't be arsed coming home.

I just hope he's not making a fool of that girl, Mum says, under her breath. She whips off the scarf and looks over my shoulder into the front room, winces. Go down to the cellar, Joseph, fetch me up the hoover.

My eyes strain to read. The words haven't been going in, anyway.

I check my travel clock. Frig me, not even four and it's near full dark outside.

I splay my Macbeth on the covers beside me. The three witches silhouetted on the horizon, the blasted trees twisting around them like blown ink.

It's that time of a Sunday afternoon when the gloomy feelings come.

Liam used to notice. He wouldn't mention it though. He'd say, Come on, get the cards and we'll have a few hands of twenty-five. Or, Me and Veronica are going to the Commodore later, d'ya want to tag along?

I feel stupid for getting my hopes up the way I did this week. Mum's right, the whole party shambles is gunna be a big laugh with everyone. A holy show. The joke'll be mostly on me.

I knew all along there was a good chance Liam wouldn't turn up. I just set that aside. I thought just believing he'd come home would make it happen.

We'd've been up at the park this afternoon, having a kickabout, maybe Grogan and Barry there too. Liam'd be in the bath now, getting ready to meet Veronica at the Jawbone. I'd hear his radio through the wall, Luxembourg on so high it buzzes the plastic case.

He's got work. He's away till Christmas. These are solid facts and there's no point me dwelling on things that aren't gunna happen. He's not here, so I've got to find good stuff on my own.

Like the Woolies' girl. I'll make a casual swing-by this week, see where that goes.

And there's footy training after work on Tuesday. I played a blinder last week, Grogan said.

Then, Saturday lunchtime, I'll meet Veronica on the Atrium bench and I'll get the latest news from London.

Thursday evening is my English class. Last week Cocker asked the group to write five hundred words on how Shakespeare *dramatises Macbeth's fear and remorse*. Give two examples for each, he said.

I switch the bedside lamp on and pick the book up.

Monday morning at the bus stop and it's foot-to-foot friggin freezin.

I grab my usual side-bench at the back, pull out the Macbeth. The old man next to me goes, At least it's not raining, eh son? I flash the codger a smile, pull my wool hat over my ears and dip my chin between the greatcoat collars.

I turn to the passage I've underlined.

Macbeth does murder sleep ... Macbeth shall sleep no more.

In the Atrium I take the escalator to the upper level. There's thin piped-music all day long, friggin Mantovani or some such, bright fluorescent tubes along the ceiling, huge tubs sprouting long plastic leaves.

The clock on the front of Lloyds shows it's almost five to nine.

As I turn the corner, I see Mr Simm a few shops along, outside the butcher's. He's in his white coat and hat, reaching up the long winding-rod, his heels hinged from the ground, the red and white striped awning stretching slowly out. This is one of what he calls my *daily duties*, but it's not starting time yet, so I hang back. Anyway, who needs shade from the sun when there's no real friggin daylight in here?

As I get close to the shop Mr Simm turns to me. Cutting it fine again, he says, with a grin.

Sorry, I tell him.

In the back room I change into my apron and white coat. I'm not actually sorry though. Cutting it fine doesn't mean I'm late. I've just learned to keep my trap shut and keep the butcher sweet. The days are easier to get through that way. I stick on the white mesh hat and stuff my hair up into the net.

Mr Simm is standing at the block table, his back to me. He bends, and with a dramatic groan he plunges the scouring brush into a steel bucket on the floor and lifts

it out, trailing sparkling foam. He pushes and pulls the steel bristles hard over the wood.

I did that, last night, Mr Simm.

He lobs the brush into the bucket and turns to me, a sour lemon gob on him.

I'll make a start on the display then, I tell him. I head off to the walk-in freezer.

I lean into the window space with a tray of boneless pork loin, square it on the sloped stainless steel. Another of Scotch sirloin. Another of sliced belly pork. New Zealand lamb chops. Prime steaks dimpled by the tenderizing hammer. I place strips of plastic grass around the edges of the trays and go out of the shop and stand beneath the awning to check it looks halfway decent.

Not bad, lad. You could give that Picasso a run for his money.

I turn around and see it's Mr Simm, beaming as his eyes range over the window display. He plants a paw on my shoulder and gives it a squeeze. Right, he says, come on in and I'll give you some advanced training on the operation of the flywheel slicer.

I give him a big fat smile. Great, I tell him.

He sniffs loudly and chuckles to himself as he goes back inside. He's got this gammy right leg. With each step his foot flicks sawdust off to the side. He walks fast, to try and disguise it, but it just makes him look like a wonky clockwork toy.

Lunchtime and we're getting hammered. As per. I hand a woman her change and I'm shooting a quick glance to check the state of the queue when I see her. She's next in the line. She smiles. Her blonde hair's mostly hidden under a red beret, but it's deffo the girl from Woolies.

Mr Simm's bangin on to some fella about what a shambles the country's in, so I'm extra quick serving my customer.

The girl steps up to the counter.

I know Mr Simm'll be wiggin in, so I give the girl a smile and a very professional, What can I get for you today, love?

Just a half-dozen eggs, please.

Good sign, this. She could've got them from the Co-op cheaper and without the wait.

Did your brother like his presents? she says, smiling, head tilted to the side.

I roll my eyes. He didn't actually didn't make it home in the end.

Oh, that's a shame, why was that?

Long story, I tell her. I set the egg box on the counter top.

Has he got a motorbike himself? the beret girl says. I reckon she's the one stringing the old chat out this time.

Mr Simm coughs. Joe, he says, and he nods at the waiting customers.

The girl casts a glance over her shoulder and turns back to me. Bad timing, eh?

Yeah, I go. Sorry.

See you around, she says.

There goes love's young dream, Mr Simm says, as the girl leaves the shop. He looks at me with a grin, the customer he's serving is smiling at me too.

Later in the afternoon one of our regulars comes in. The fella starts bragging to Mr Simm about his eldest who's an apprentice craft engineer at Plessey. As usual, the butcher's suckin up to the customer, tellin him how proud he must be of the lad, and

the fella goes, I am, Trevor. He's doing really brilliant actually, and the company's paying for him to go to technical college.

Nice one, Mr Simm says.

Seems like everyone's in a job with prospects. Even Veronica says Mr Hadden is encouraging her to start studying. Being a craft engineer or a qualified pharmacist sounds like something to crow about.

The Easter before last, Mum announced that she'd lined up a job for when I left school. It's in the *precinct*, she said, like she was naming some magical place. She said, The butcher's a lovely fella, and I've talked him into giving you a trial, starting next month. She had this big expectant smile, as if she thought I should punch the air and do a little dance. Her smile dropped as she watched my face. Are you not pleased? Most young men your age would be grateful to have the chance of a good trade. She said that some extra cash coming into the house wouldn't hurt either.

I know what she gets on the biscuit line will be peanuts. And, before he left, Liam was flitting from job to job, so he was never much cop in the money direction.

Tuesday nights are footy training. I finish work and head through the precinct, my kit stuffed in a Simm's Quality Meats carrier. I take the long way out, so I can walk past Woolies. I throw in a casual passing glance – there's a tubby middle-aged woman at the till where the beret girl was when I bought Liam's gifts.

I go inside the shop and head to the record section. I flip through albums and snatch the odd sly look around the store. It's near closing time and the last handful of shoppers are drifting towards the main doors.

Hawkwind.

Horslips.

I catch a glimpse of the girl, she's on the other side of the shop, but coming this way. I open a gatefold and furrow my brow as I pretend to ponder the lyrics.

I thought it was you!

I turn and give her a blank look for a moment. I crack out a big smile. Oh, hiya. I forgot you worked here.

You into them? she says, tipping a doubtful nod at the Humble Pie I've picked up.

Not really, I tell her.

Me neither, she says.

She goes quickly to the other side of the display and comes back holding out an album. Dark Side of the Moon. I tell her it's an excellent choice, that I've been meaning to get it for ages. I don't tell her I haven't been able to spare the cash. Mr Simm pays my wages direct to Mum each week and she bungs me a few quid. Mum says she's putting half of what she keeps in a savings account for me and that the rest goes towards housekeeping.

Takes a bit of getting into, the girl says.

Sounds perfect, I go. I might buy it at the weekend.

You off home now?

No. I've got training tonight.

The girl gives a quick glance at the bulging plastic bag I'm holding. Right, she says, frowning a bit.

I'd best be off then, I go. I can feel my face getting hot.

The girl smiles. If you wait outside a sec I'll get my coat. You can walk me to the bus stop. I'm dying to hear the saga of the missing brother.

When she comes out of the shop she's wearing the beret and her lipstick is a matching bright red. I let myself think that she's gone to the staff toilet and put the make-up on just for me.

We start walking, towards the back of the precinct where the bus bays are.

What's he doing in London?

Not sure to be honest, I say. Building stuff, contracting.

You mean you don't know?

Not really. Not exactly.

Don't you want to know?

All I know is he's in London and I'd rather he was here.

I think Liam not being here for footy has made me blurt this to the girl.

Miss him, do you?

Suppose. He's someone to talk to who's not my mum.

The girl laughs.

We swap names.

You don't look like a Brenda, I tell her.

She smiles. That meant to be a compliment?

I give her the gist of Liam's new job, how it'll probably be Christmas before he's back.

We come out into the cold air and stop. Brenda glances at the angled line of buses, then looks back at me and smiles.

Give you time to get that tankard engraved, Brenda says, and she gives my upper arm a little squeeze.

I'm gunna come up with something much better than a lousy traditional tankard, though.

Yeah? Like what?

I'm getting his bike fixed up for him.

He's got a motorbike? Brenda says, and her smile broadens. She looks way more interested than when I mentioned my English class.

Yeah. I get a flash of the shrouded moped in the back yard, the tin of bits.

Cool, she says.

I ride it myself, I go. I've had lessons.

A bus pulls up to the kerb. This is mine, Brenda says. She's turning to go.

I could take you for a spin.

Brenda raises her eyebrows. That right? She says, and she turns and hurries to the bus.

I watch her get on. She takes a seat by the window.

Look out, look out, look out.

She looks out, smiles at me.

I made it happen by thinking it would.

I always run from the precinct to footy practice, it's only about ten minutes to the youthie, but it gets my muscles loosened and my blood warmed up.

I swing off the pavement and burst into a last pelt over the car park and down the side-alley, and I make a breasting-the-tape style finish into the spill of light from

the entrance doorway. I drop my bag of kit and press my palms against the breezeblock wall and dip my head between my arms till my heart stops banging.

Echoing shouts from in there, the drum of feet on the boards and a couple of shrill whistle blasts.

I go inside, pausing by the porthole window. Under the bright white lights a five-a-side game's got going. Ronnie, Keith Hughes's dad, is reffing tonight. He's standing on a gymnastics bench along the side wall, the whistle paused in front of his mouth. Jimmy Mac has his foot on the ball, he darts glances around, looking for a quick lay-off, or a runner he can thread to. He rolls the ball forward, drops a shoulder and lamps a shot that skies.

In the changing room lads are stripping off, hopping as they pull on socks, doing leg stretches. I see Grogan, over by the bogs, he's talking to Paul Jones who's got a sweet left foot and had trials with Crewe.

I find a space on a bench and start getting changed.

Grogan spots me and we swap nods and he finishes off with Paul and comes over.

You alright, Duffy? he says, a bit of a frown on him.

Not bad, I go, and I flash him a smile.

Oh, good, Grogan says, looking puzzled. Did he turn up, then? He looks around the changing room as if he might spot Liam there.

Nah, I say, and I give him the edited highlights.

I switch the subject. Anyway, how'd it go with Helen?

Grogan's eyes widen. Crashed and burned, lad. Crashed and *fuck-in* burned.

Did you get it in the neck for pervin Beth and Suzy?

Grogan starts doing this slow dancing, his eyes rolling dreamily, his arms wafting. There's a wolf-whistle from one of the lads nearby.

I laugh. Behave yourself, you haven't got the legs for it.

Grogan stops and slumps his shoulders like that's a massive disappointment to him.

You know what Helen said though, Duffy?

Pray, do tell.

She said, and Grogan pauses to make sure I'm looking at him. She said, I didn't think you were *like* that, Colin. He shakes his head. Like *what*? I said to her. Like *that*, she said.

Sounds like a fascinating conversation, Groggs.

Snooky cow, Grogan says.

She finished with you, then?

He shrugs. I reckon she was uptight anyway.

I tell him, She must be, because who could resist your obvious charms?

I start in to telling Grogan about the Brenda girl, how I reckon she might be up for it. I've bent over to tie my trainers and I'm saying how I might even ask her out, when I see a pair of white Pumas splayed by my feet. I look up – it's Ronnie Hughes, his arms folded high on his chest. Beside him is Booey Spratt with his teeth bared and his shoulders heaving as he gets his breath back from the game.

Getting some *action* are you, Joe? Ronnie says, an eyebrow hitched, a smirk on him.

No, I go, all defensive, and I keep my head down as I yank the double knot.

Aar, Duffy, you're goin' beetroot, Booey says.

I stand up. Button it, Spratt.

Booey laughs. Anyway, where's your kid? He frowns as he scans the faces around the room. You won't get much past Liam Duffy, he says. Hands like bloody shovels.

This is for Ronnie's benefit – he only started helping to run the sessions after Liam went to London.

Yeah, but he can't expect to just friggin waltz in when he feels like and expect a game.

The voice has come from behind me. I swivel on the bench. It's Ben Wright, one of the older lads. He's looking over my head at Ronnie, like I don't exist.

His big mitts are not much use to us unless he's here, Ron, Wright adds.

Fair point, Ronnie says, and he takes a stopwatch from the pocket of his tracksuit bottoms and checks it. C'mon Joe, Colin, grab a bib and let's get started. Ronnie heads off to chat to some lads who are kitted up and filing into the gym hall.

I stand and go around the bench. Wright's in a smiling conflag with another lad by the lockers. I stop beside them.

What's it to you? I say.

Wright pauses his chat and exchanges a look with his mate. He turns to me. I'm a good few inches taller than him, but he's one of those wiry types that you can't shoulder off the ball.

I wasn't speaking to *you*, Wright says, and he turns back to the other lad and carries on talking.

I put myself between the two of them. You wouldn't say that to his face, would ya?

Wright narrows his eyes on me. Listen, Duffy, he says. Not everyone thinks the sun shines out of your big brother's arse. I heard that the idle get didn't even turn up for his own friggin birthday party. He's raised his voice and he gets a few laughs from the lads nearby.

I feel the heat rise in my face, my heart's thumpin in my throat.

What did you call him?

You heard, Wright says. Now do one will ya, Duffy. His hand comes up to push me back but I swipe his arm away and I've got a grip of his shirt and shoved him hard against the lockers and out of nowhere we're scuffling, fists flailing.

My arms get clamped at my sides, I'm in a big bear hug from someone behind me. My chest's thumpin and blood's fizzin in my veins.

Grogan's voice is in my ear. Leave it, Duffy, leave it.

Grogan tried to explain that I hadn't started the ruckus, but Ronnie wasn't havin any of it. He gave me my marching orders, Wright too. My cheek's stingin. He must've had a ring on.

Walking home, I start to wonder what Liam would make of it. I wouldn't tell him myself, but probably one of the older lads who were there would, one night in the Jawbone maybe. Hey Duffy, your kid's been defendin yer honour, y'know. Liam'd probably come to me with a face on him, I can fight my own feckin battles, Joe. Then he'd crack a smile, I hear you had the upper hand, is that right?

I know he'd've done the same for me.

Four or so years ago, I was getting wisecracks from some of the boys at St Augustine's. About my accent. We'd only moved over a couple of years before that, so there was still Irish in my voice, but more and more Liverpool was mixing in as well. This one boy in my year, Robin Wilson, he starts noticing it, repeating the way I said certain things, making a joke of it in front of other lads. Robin wasn't tough, but he was one of those sarcastic types who could make people laugh. He was witty, I have to admit it. A class had just ended and I was yackin to Grogan while we waited for the next teacher to turn up, and I don't remember what Grogan said to me but I told him, *Don't act the maggot*. This Robin lad picked up on it. He repeated the phrase in a corny Irish lilt a couple of times and a few chuckles went around. Duffy's a mongrel, Robin said loudly, and all the class are in fits then, yapping and growling. I laughed myself. I even threw in some barking noises. Then, a week or so later, I'm walking through the precinct with Liam and I hear someone shout, Mongrel! I look across and see Robin and two other boys on the far side of the plastic plants, headed the opposite way. I shoot them a smile and fling them two fingers. I'm walking on but Liam puts his hand on my arm. We stop. Why did they call you that? he says. I tell him it was just a joke, because of my accent being neither one thing or the other. Liam

shakes his head, Not on, that, he says. Wait here. He jogs after the lads, Hey boys! They stop and turn, all three of them quiet as they watch him approach. I didn't hear what he said, I just saw Robin nodding, his face drained white. He never called me mongrel again.

I'm on the path digging my key out when I notice the front room curtains are closed. There's a sliver of light at the bottom where they don't meet, like they've been tugged across in a hurry. It's not normal. I step into the narrow space between the privet and the jut of the window ledge. I hunker and put my face to the gap.

The base of the couch along the left wall, the hem of a skirt, a woman's legs, slippers feet crossed at the ankles. Mum. She makes a palms-up gesture. I duck lower, try to see her face, but I can't see any higher than her middle. I angle my head and can see there's someone standing facing her, shiny black slip-ons, grey slacks with a sharp crease, a white shirt.

I slide my key in with the softest of rasps, and close the door behind me, releasing the snib with a quiet click. I set down my footy bag. The door to the front room is almost fully closed, just a gap of a couple of inches, like when Liam and Veronica sit in here to listen to music while they neck. I have my hand up to push into the room when a voice in there stops me. The man is in the middle of saying something, but his words too muffled for me to make out.

The man finishes speaking, his pitch rising at the end. Whatever he's asked, there's no reply from Mum, at least nothing I can hear. His question hangs there in the quiet. I put an ear to the gap.

It was just my nerves, Mum says. There's a tremble in her words. I was tired, that's all it was, Father.

I twig. Father Hill from St Alexander's, our parish priest. He's a golf and acoustic guitars type.

You're concerned, Father Hill says, in his sad sermon tone. I could see it in your face when I spoke to you after Mass on Sunday morning.

There's a pause now. I imagine Mum's face will be turned up to his, her eyes troubled, glassy. There's a soft rustling noise, maybe the movement of her clothes as she rises, or the whisper of the soles of the priest's shoes over the carpet.

Father Hill clears his throat. Here Oonagh, he says, use this.

I hear Mum politely blowing her nose. Is she crying? She always has to do that when she cries.

A sigh and a sniffle. Thank you for thinking of me, Father, Mum says.

The priest's speaking again, he's lowered his voice. I picture him sitting beside her on the couch, his hand rested on hers in her lap. His soft murmur continues. I can't catch his words, just the low tune of them. I imagine his thumb stroking her knuckles.

I clamp my eyes shut to hear them better, but I've still got ringing in my ear from one of Wright's haymakers.

It was just ... I could tell you were worried, Oonagh ... I didn't want to ask you ... Vincent ... not in front of the little girl.

Why's the priest bringing Dad's name up?

I know, Father, I know, she says.

Stewart, the priest says, call me Stewart.

Jesus.

Listen, the priest says, his voice louder now. Here's an idea, Oonagh. There's an old cohort of mine down there, he taught me at the seminary. Jerry O'Keefe. I'd say his parish is close.

What do you mean? Mum says.

I'll give Jerry a tinkle and ask him to pay Liam a friendly visit. I've a copy of the letter I did for him somewhere. It'll have his address on it.

What letter's that, Father? Mum says.

Did he not tell you? the priest says. Liam called in at the presbytery, he asked if I'd write him a character reference, for the landlord of his digs in London. Cricklewood isn't it? If my memory serves.

Cricklewood?

The foggy way Mum says this tells me she's not lying when she says she hasn't a clue where Liam is living in London. Even Veronica doesn't have the address. Liam told her it was a shared property and letters went missing all the time. And something else doesn't make sense ... Liam said taking the job in London was a spur of the moment thing, not something he had lined up weeks before. Mum told me my brother hadn't said a whit to her about going to London until that morning he left in the Transit with Francie and Enda.

I don't want you going to any trouble, Father, Mum says quickly. He'll be in touch again, when the mood takes him. She laughs, but it's forced.

OK, Oonagh. But promise me you'll call up at the house, if you ever feel in need of a chin wag.

I will, she says. You're awful good, Father.

It's all part of my job description, the priest says, chuckling. It's one of my *pastoral duties* to —

Father Hill stops talking when he sees me come into the room. He grins. Ah, Joseph, the priest says, the main man.

I give him a nod and a weak smile.

You're home early, Mum says. Her smile drops and she frowns at me. What have you done to your face?

I put my hand to the graze on my cheekbone.

Before I can come up with something Father Hill chips in. Some burly centre-back catch you with a trailing elbow? He's smiling, his head tilted to one side.

Something like that, I tell him. I glance at the good teacups and saucers on the coffee table. I look at Mum, smile. What's going on?

Joseph, she says with a laugh. Don't be so rude. Father Hill was good enough to call in to see how we're all doing.

That's it, the priest says, nodding. I've been making my house calls. So! he says. It's slapping the knees and drawing matters to a close kind of word.

No, no. Don't get up Oonagh, he says. I can see myself out.

I leave them to it, head upstairs. I stop on the landing and look down from the darkness as the wedge of light from the front room widens across the hallway floor, the banister rails striping the stair treads. The priest takes his black overcoat from the hallstand. He stands in front of the mirrored panel as watches himself slowly fastening up the buttons.

After the priest goes, Mum doesn't come out of the room straight away. I imagine her sitting alone down there. Whenever I see her upset and ask what's up she'll wave it away, stuff her hanky in her cardigan sleeve and she'll tell me what she told the priest, that it's only her nerves, or that she's not sleeping well. When I see her staring off into space, I sometimes imagine she's thinking about years back, about Dad, that in her mind she's with him at some country dance hall before they were even married.

After a couple of minutes I hear her moving around, the squeak of the rail as the curtains are pulled back, the tattle of cups and saucers, the front room light going off. I catch sight of the top of her head as she comes into the hallway and goes to the back of the house.

Mum's at the sink, a rope of steaming water, foam piling in the basin. She turns the tap off and rests her back against the counter as she dries her hands on a tea towel, looking at me.

I hold eye contact for a second. Are you OK?

Just tired, is all.

You're worried about Liam, aren't you? That's why the priest called isn't it?

Mum laughs. Joseph, she says, I've been worried about your brother since the day he came into this world.

You shouldn't, though, I tell her. I know he's away in London, but he's got work there, and it sounds like he's well thought of, or they wouldn't want him on this new job.

Her face brightens a little as she looks at me.

And he's got Veronica. So London won't be forever, will it?

I'm glad *you* have some sense, son. She tips a nod at my face. If your brother caught a shiner like that, then you could bet your life it wouldn't be at the football that he got it.

It's near closing. I'm alone in the butcher's, staring idly out of the window as the last of the shoppers straggle by, when I see Harry. He's trying to cut across the flow, causing people to halt and go around him, the old fella hunched over his wheeled tartan shopper like it's keeping him upright. Every Wednesday afternoon about this time he comes in.

I pull the door open. Y'alright, Harry? I say it loud, but there's not a flicker in his eyes as he passes me, his breath wheezing and catching.

Boss not about, then? he says as he parks up at the counter. He lifts his head and glances around the shop.

I tell him, Mr Simm has just bobbed out to Lloyds, he shouldn't be long. Usual is it, Harry?

The old fella nods, his gaze drifting over the pyramids of Paxo boxes and tins of marrowfat peas on the glass counter top.

I reach a tube of chopped pork from one of the display trays and clamp it in the slicer. I take my time pushing and pulling the meat against the spinning blade, the mottled pink discs peeling on to the greaseproof sheet in my palm.

About a month ago I heard old Harry tell Mr Simm that his grandson had just been posted to Belfast. This has been their main topic ever since. Harry's grandson has just turned twenty, he's a gunner in the Scots Guards, his daughter's eldest. When him and the butcher talk they use the same lingo as on the telly news – garrisoned and no-go area, detonation and street patrol. Incendiary device.

Anything else I can get for you, Aitch?

He looks at me for a moment before the question registers. Oh, aye lad. Do me half a dozen kidneys, will ya.

I shoot Harry a glance as I'm bagging up. How's tricks with you, anyway? It's a decent impression of Mr Simm.

Harry's expression darkens as he looks at me. Did you watch the news last night, son?

No, I tell him. I plant my hands on my hips. What's happened?

Harry tells me how his grandson was deployed at the checkpoint they showed on the footage. Middle of the night a car speeds past and a petrol bomb gets flung from its window. The hut explodes into flames, Neville and another young soldier in there. Could have killed them both, he says.

I suck in a breath. Bad business that, Harry.

The other lad's in the military hospital, Harry says. He's being treated for severe burns to his legs and lower torso.

The shop door clatters. It's Mr Simm. Hello young man, he says to Harry.

The old boy trundles around to face the butcher. You alright, Trevor?

Fair to middlin', Aitch. Mr Simm flicks a glance my way. Joe on the case is he?

You have him well trained, Harry says.

Mr Simm tells him I'm a work in progress. They chuckle as they look over at me. I flash them a smile. I've finished Harry's order so I go to the window to make a start on taking the trays to the walk-in.

Mr Simm asks Harry, How's the grandson doing, now that it's getting all muck and bullets over there?

I was just sayin to the lad ... Harry says, and he starts running a repeat of the story.

Mr Simm was in the army himself, way back, it's how he got the gammy leg. Still carrying an ounce of German lead in his thigh. That's what he tells customers anyway.

Your grandson's alright though, is he? Mr Simm says.

Harry grunts, Yeah. He gives a couple of grim head shakes. Scum of the earth, aren't they, Trevor?

I go to the standpipe and start filling a bucket to sluice the run-off.

I know, Aitch, I know, Mr Simm says. At least Jerry wore a uniform, eh? He's trying to draw a laugh out of Harry, though none comes. The old fella's got himself all het up in the telling, his eyes watery and his chin quivering as he stares at the butcher.

Fucken Irish cowards, Harry says, his voice cracking over the words. His chin drops and he puts a hand up to his brow.

Come on through and have a sit down, mate, Mr Simm says. He puts an arm around Harry's hunched shoulders and guides him away. The butcher looks at me as they go and he mouths for me to give them a minute.

I flip the door sign to *closed* on my way out.

I walk to the Atrium and plant myself on one of the benches that overlook the escalators. I didn't see the television news last night. Mum won't have it on. She'll let out a long sigh and tell me to switch the channel, muttering, Is there nothing else happening in the world? or, Didn't we leave Ireland to get away from all that?

Thing is, it's hard to get away from it. Seems every news report has something about the bombs and killings, and they're happening over here now, more and more of them. Harry and Mr Simm were talking about it last week. Harry told the butcher that he'd read in the paper about some high-up IRA fella saying that they were bringing their campaign to *the heart of the British establishment* because a bomb in England is worth thirty in Belfast. Mr Simm said, It's not *all* the Irish though, Harry. Maybe the butcher only said that coz he knew I was earwigging. I reckon he's got a soft spot for Mum, the way he's always asking me, How's your lovely Mother? And,

when she comes into the shop, he's all smiles, telling me to make her a brew and generally smarmimg over her.

Mr Simm's sent me out of the shop in case he says something to Harry about the Irish that I'd repeat at home.

With all the stuff that's been going on in Ireland starting to kick off over here, there's gunna be more people having a go at anyone with an Irish accent. I don't get any stick, though. Liam says my voice has more Liverpool than Monaghan in it now – but his own brogue thickened after being in Ireland with the cousins over the summer.

The thing is, if Liam heard Harry say *fucken Irish cowards*, he wouldn't've just walked away. He'd've taken him to task, put the old fella straight, no messin. And if he heard it from someone young, maybe some pissed-up dickhead shoutin the odds across a London pub, then he'd be up in their face with his fists bunched at his sides.

A short fuse he's got, my brother.

Mum knows what Liam's like too. I reckon it's why she looks so tired and fed up sometimes. Like when I came back alone from Lime Street on Saturday, or when everyone had left the party. Even the friggin priest could clock it on her face after Sunday Mass. I can picture her, the church emptying, kneeling at the altar rail with her head on her joined hands, sending up novenas to that patron saint of hopeless causes. Before she knew the simple truth of why Liam hadn't come home she could only concoct worse reasons in her head.

There's a pair of toe-tectors stopped in front of the bench. I look up. It's Conn, one of the security guards, smiling down at me. He lifts his walkie-talkie to his mouth. Earth to Joe, Earth to Joe, he says.

I am afraid to think what I have done. Every noise appals me.

That's both fear *and* remorse.

I'm underlining the passage when I feel the sway of the bus and I look out to see we're curving the roundabout. I snap the book shut and tube it back into my greatcoat pocket. I get off and jog across the dual carriageway towards the brick pillars of the school gates.

It was odd at first, coming back here. And it's even weirder of an evening, with the main buildings locked up and all the classroom windows dark and not a soul about. At least I've stopped getting the twist in my gut that just the sight of the place used to bring on.

As I pass the main entrance one of the doors opens and the cocky watchman pokes his flat-capped head out and peers into the dark. I raise a hand to him and he gives me a nod and a bored, Alright, son, before he disappears back inside. I move onto the path at the edge of the playing fields and head towards the lighted windows of the sixth-form prefabs.

Cocker's motorbike is propped outside the room we use, Karl Foley looking down at it. Cocker doesn't always come on the bike, I reckon coz it's a real shining beauty and he worries it might get nicked or vandalised by some knobhead.

I swap alrights with Karl, stand beside him.

The fuel tank gleams red in the cast of the classroom window, *Norton Commando 750cc* in sloped sliver letters.

It doesn't go with him though, does it? Karl says this in a sarky whisper, and he smirks and shoots a glance through the wire-grilled pane. Cocker's up at the front scrolling the blackboard in his Fair Isle tank-top. I know what Karl's getting at, but it'd be snide to agree out loud.

I sniff and tell Karl it's friggin brass monkeys and I'll see him in there.

Sean Austen's talking to Cocker, who has the board duster paused in his hand as he listens. Barney Thompson is leant back in his chair, one foot on the edge of the desk, reading his Macbeth. It's the same copy we've all got, the three witches under the flailing trees. Barney looks at me over the book and we swap nods and I take my usual seat halfway down.

Karl comes in, Sean goes back to his seat.

Cocker checks his watch. He smiles, touches the bridge of his glasses. Shall we kick-off? he says.

At the end of the hour Cocker goes, OK lads, this is a question from a past paper, write it down and bring your answers along next Thursday. He strokes his wispy beard till he sees we're all ready. He reads out the question. I turn to a fresh page of my Silvine. *Using examples from the text, identify three of Macbeth's character traits that contribute to his ultimate downfall.*

Let's say two hundred words on each fatal flaw, shall we? Cocker says.

Chairs are scraped back and the three other lads start chatting, the usual grumbles and laughter as they bag their books and pull on their coats. I stay at my desk, my head dipped like I'm making some last notes.

You coming, Duffy? It's Barney. He's got a shoulder against the doorframe, Sean and Karl outside in the dark, hovering behind him. I tell him they should go on ahead, that I just want to finish off.

I steal a glance at Cocker as he swipes his spidery words to dust.

I keep my head down. I hear him shucking on his leather jacket, pulling on his gloves.

I feel like I'm gunna chicken out. I close my eyes and imagine the Brenda girl, smiling at me through the bus window.

Cocker coughs. I look up. He's standing right next to my desk.

We need to make a move now, Joe, he says.

I wait while he's locking the pre-fab's door. He says about it being quite a productive session. He takes his helmet from the handlebar and fits it on, looks at me as he adjusts the chin-strap. Something not clear? he says. Want me to go over the concept of the fatal flaw again?

It's not about the class, I tell him.

OK, Cocker says warily, go on.

You know I told you about my brother's moped?

Cocker smiles. Oh yes, he says, the *eyesore*.

Well, you know a while back, you said you might know a decent mechanic?

Yeah, I know a very good one, Cocker says. He twists his mouth. I'm not sure a 50cc bike would be his bag, he says. He'll charge just to give you an estimate.

My head goes down.

Can't your brother get it fixed himself?

He's still in London, I tell him. I want to get it done as a Christmas present coz I only got him a crappy tankard and T-shirt for his twenty-first.

I can tell by the little twitch of the teacher's mouth that he's trying not to smile. Maybe he can smell the lie.

I take my chance. Do you think you could have a quick look at it? I could bring it here next week.

Cocker grimaces. He says, If it's not been used for months then the old fuel might've gone to sludge in the tank ... it would need to be flushed. If the valve seats need regrinding then —

A once-over, that's all, Sir. Sorry, I add, coz I've cut across him.

Cocker looks up at the sky, deep blue over the main school block.

He's leaving a gap before he politely refuses. I shouldn't have asked.

The teacher sighs, turns his face to me, he pushes his glasses up his nose and holds my gaze. Do you know where the Riverside estate is?

I nod.

Bring it to my flat, tomorrow night, around seven. Grab your pen and I'll give you the address.

Fucken bingo!

In my head I see Barney laughing. You're Cocker's blue-eyed boy, Duffy.

I've drenched the chips in vinegar. I eat them on the go, hot and delicious, steam pluming from my mouth as I wolf fingerfuls.

Cocker came in as a replacement for Mrs Benton who had to take early retirement, the Christmas before last. I could tell he was nervous at the first lesson he gave us, the way he smiled all the time and kept touching the bridge of his glasses. He spoke really softly. Some of the strict teachers spoke quietly too, but we knew the difference. A lad at the back shouted, Speak up, Sir! and laughs went around the room, and we all stared at Cocker, everyone hoping for drama to break the boredom.

It's started to rain a bit, so I step it double quick towards the next bus stop.

The concrete shelter's got a pissy tang, but it's lashing it down now, so I'll stop here and finish my chips.

A few lessons in, Cocker had us do this exercise. He strolled between the desks and laid a card in front of each boy. They were old black and white picture-postcards, and ones showing paintings and pottery and sculptures. These are from my personal collection, he said. He told us to please let him have them back in the same condition in which we received them. Mine was double Elvis, both stood with their

legs apart, both pointing a pistol from their hip. I knew it was by Andy Warhol coz I'd watched a documentary about him a few weeks before.

Cocker sat side-saddle on the corner of his desk, like he'd just swung by for a casual gossip with some mates. He said he wanted us all to *spend some time* with our individual cards. Let your minds *freewheel*, he said. He told us he didn't want us to *think* about the image, but to *dream* about it. I glanced around and saw other lads mugging and shooting each other cross-eyed glances. Cocker asked us to open our composition books at a new page and to write non-stop for ten minutes.

A 159 has squealed up at the stop, a couple of head-scarved women get off, clackin about the rain as they scurry along the pavement, arms linked, their heads leaned together.

The bus rumbles off.

I lob in another chip.

When the time was up, Cocker asked if anyone would like to share what they'd written. He pushed up his glasses and looked around the group. I shrunk back in my seat. Andy Clarke stood up and read out something about a flying sea-creature that attacks a fishing boat on the River Mersey and bites the heads off all the crew. There were a few snorts and monster-type growls from other lads. It was kid's stuff. Fuck knows what Andy's postcard showed. Cocker smiled and said, Good effort, thank you for reading, Andrew. He scanned the class again and said, C'mon, who's going to be brave?

I heard Grogan's voice from the desk behind mine, an urgent whisper. *Go 'ed, Duffy!*

My hand went slowly up.

At the end of the lesson we were all filing out of the classroom. Cocker was standing by the door. As I passed him he put a hand to my shoulder and said, Have

you got a minute? When all the other lads had left, he said, That was an interesting piece, Joe. Then he said all this stuff about a vital energy in the writing, and that I'd employed some very striking images. It was a bit embarrassing, with just me and him in the room, but it felt really good too. He asked me if I'd considered a move to the O-level group and I told him that Mrs Benton'd never mentioned that, and anyway it didn't matter coz I was leaving at Easter and I already had a job lined up. He stood there staring at me, his eyes slotted like he was thinking. I didn't know what else to say, and I could feel the heat blooming in my cheeks. I looked away to the classroom door, the drum of feet from the corridor, excited voices. Cocker smiled. He told me I'd best scoot to my next lesson and he hoped to resume our conversation next time.

A couple of weeks before I left school, Cocker told me he was running an evening class, just a little study group for anyone that failed O-level English and wanted to resit the exam next year. He said he realised that wasn't my situation but that he'd had a word with the headmaster and I'd be very welcome to attend. I told him again about the job at the butcher's.

The next weekend Cocker came to the house and sat in the front room with me and Mum. Cocker told her that he thought I had a way with words. He said it would be a shame not to nurture a budding talent. Mum listened, casting the odd glance my way, a puzzled look on her face, like she thought Cocker might've mistaken me for another boy and come to the wrong house. Cocker finished his little speech. He clamped his hands between his knees. What do you think, Mrs Duffy? Mum said, I've agreed with Mr Simm that Joseph can start with him after Easter. What use would books and poems be, when he has the chance of an apprenticeship? Mr Simm says a good trade sets a young man up for life.

Cocker smiled and nodded along as she spoke, then, when she paused, he said, Joe's studies need not interfere with his working life. Not just yet, anyway. But in a

year or two there's no reason why he couldn't progress to A-levels and on to University. Mum's eyes popped when he said that. I was gobsmacked myself.

Think about it, Cocker went on, and maybe talk it over with Mr Duffy too.

There was a little silence then.

Mum looked over at me. Joseph's father passed away, six years ago, she said.

She crossed herself.

I didn't know that, Cocker said, I'm so very sorry.

Yes, Mum said, a heart attack.

Friday evening and it's taken about half an hour to walk the moped to the Riverside estate. I stop outside a flat-roofed boozer and take a breather.

I ask a fella going into the pub for the time.

Twenty minutes early.

I sit straddled on the moped with my feet on the ground. I can see the three tower blocks from here, I just need to cross the road and go along the path with the caged saplings and through the underpass and I'll be there.

I get a funny look from a man and woman as they come out of the lift, their eyes shifting from the bike to my face then to each other as they go by.

I plant a boot on the track to jam the slider and haul the bike inside and press 17. The lift door bumps against the back wheel. I grapple the moped up at angle and hold it there.

Flat 172 has postcards drawing-pinned to the door, a photo of a bronze sculpture of a young man standing with a scythe, and one of a painting of a horse rearing back from a lion that I recognise from the Walker in town.

As the door opens, Cocker's finishing saying something to someone over his shoulder.

He turns to me. Ah, Joe, right, he says, and he gives the moped a suspicious glance.

I ask if I've got the time wrong, even though I know I haven't.

No, no, he says. He strokes his wispy beard for a couple of seconds then he comes out and takes the bike from me and guides it through the doorway. His feet are bare under his frayed loons. He rests the bike against the hallway wall. Behind him is a half-open door to a dim room, a lit candle on a table throwing shadows, opera music playing.

Cocker says he'd invite me in but his friend Daniel has come up from Bristol for the weekend. He says it slipped his mind when he agreed to look at the bike.

I've put all the loose bits in the recess under the seat, I tell him.

He smiles. You're going to have to leave it with me, Joe, he says.

That's great. Thanks.

He says he'll give me a progress report next Thursday. He shuts the door.

I'm at the lift when I hear my name. Cocker's coming towards me. He's holding a paperback book.

The teacher clocks the puzzlement in my eyes. He goes, You know how we were talking in class the other week, about characters in Macbeth not always being how they appear on the surface?

I nod. *There is no art to tell the mind's construction in the face.*

Cocker smiles. Exactly, he says.

He looks down as he flips through the pages. The Great Gatsby's not actually on the O-level syllabus, he says. It's a bit more advanced, but I thought you'd enjoy it. He hands me the book. The cover shows a man in a white waistcoat and shirt, his chiselled jaw in profile as he gazes off into the distance. It's a stone cold classic, Cocker says, and he tells me there's a film of it just come out but that he'll bet a pound to a penny it's not a patch on the novel.

Cheers, I tell him.

He smiles, presses the lift button for me, heads back to his flat.

It started with Catcher in the Rye when I was still at school. I read it that same evening. It was gone three o'clock in the morning when I switched my bedside lamp off. Didn't you get on with it? he asked me the next day when he came to the staff room door and saw me holding it out to him. It was brilliant, I said, smiling. I told him how it was like Holden was talking directly to me, that it didn't feel like a writer

had made him up. That I loved how he was sarcastic and funny and sad all at the same time. Cocker said I should try my hand at composing some stories myself. That he'd be happy to cast an eye over them, if I wanted.

Over the last year and a half, it's become a regular thing. Lord of the Flies, Call of the Wild, the Thirty-Nine Steps. I'll always try and find something interesting to say about the story, when I think it's corny, what I think was good about it. Cocker'll set me some exercise, y'know, re-write a paragraph from one of the books in your own words, or from the point of view of a different character. That kinda thing.

He never lends me books when the other lads in the study group are around. And the writing exercises, they're just between me and him too. But it's not friggin weird or anything.

I see Veronica coming up the Atrium escalator and shift my folded greatcoat from the place I've kept for her on the bench.

I smile as she walks towards me, but she's not meeting my eyes,

Veronica sits.

How's it going?

Yeah, it's going, she says. She's gazing out into the empty space under the dome skylight.

What's up?

There was no call from Liam last night. I gave it an hour before I phoned the digs. Could I speak to Liam Duffy, please? Who is this? some fella barked. Irish, but not one of the cousins. I ask for Liam and whoever it was doesn't say anything but hands the phone over to Francie who comes on saying, Is that Veronica? And I say, It is, Francie. Liam not about? No love, not at the moment. Oh, I go. And I was a bit

surprised, Joe, because he'd said we'd speak. I'm not sure when he'll be back, Francie says, but as soon as he is I'll have him call you, right? And I tell him I suppose so, that's fine, and I'm about to hang up when Francie says, Oh Veronica, sweetheart, while I have you, if he happens to call you first, would you mind telling him to give me a ring. Tell him the boss wants a wee word with him.

A word about what?

Veronica shrugs. It's not the fact of him not calling me, but what your cousin said at the end, like he didn't actually know where Liam was.

What are you thinking?

I don't know.

Here's what I think, Vee. I reckon he's gone and fucked up this new job, hasn't he? He's got himself into a fight or something and got thrown out on his ear and he's gone out and got slaughtered.

The thought had crossed my mind, Joe. Either that or he's taken up with some flighty London piece. Veronica laughs but I can see the worry in her eyes as she looks at me.

Don't be soft, I tell her. He wouldn't do that. He'd do plenty of other things, but he wouldn't do that. Why don't you give me his number? I'll try him from the phone box this afternoon.

She gives me the number and I write it on the back of my hand. As I do, I start thinking of something.

What are you smirking at, Veronica says?

Nothing. I wave the idea away.

Veronica has her head angled at me. There's something, Joe, c'mon.

It's just the other night, in my English class, Cocker was talking about this thing called a fatal flaw. He asked if we could think of any examples from real life. I couldn't stop thinking about Liam and his fists, but I didn't say anything.

That's comforting, Joe.

We sit there for a moment in silence. I should've kept my trap shut. I'm imagining that both of us are trying not to worry now.

Anyway, Joe, Veronica says, what's new with you?

Not much.

She jabs a finger on my upper arm. How's your love life?

I laugh. Well, there's a girl who works in Woolies that I've been chattin to.

Woolies in the precinct? Veronica laughs. God, Joe, you don't cast your net very wide, do you? She nice?

Yeah. I pause. Well, she's pretty and that anyway.

You should ask her out.

D'ya think?

Veronica's eyes flicker, Oh, by the way, she says, I meant to tell you, I had a gentleman caller myself, a couple of evenings back. You'll never guess who.

I look blankly at her.

Stan Fisher.

You're kiddin. Stan Fisher? What was *he* after?

He said he was just passing by and thought he'd knock and say hello.

I'm just looking agog at her, shaking my head.

Veronica laughs. He's actually alright when he hasn't got an audience.

You didn't actually let him in the house, did you?

Dad answered the door. Stan was in full uniform, so he got the red carpet treatment.

I thought he'd gone back to playing toy soldiers.

Royal Air Force, Veronica says, putting me right. Stan said it was his last night of leave and he was flying back to Cyprus the next day.

I get a flash of watching from the end of the step as Veronica went off with him after the party. I see Stan with his hand hovering at the low of her back as they walked up the street.

He's a knobhead, I tell her.

I thought it was decent of him, actually. Veronica laughs. Dad said he'd be quite the catch, a good looking young man like that.

It's an hour till closing and Mr Simm is at the cash register. He prods a finger and the drawer tings open. I'm behind him, sharpening a flensing knife on the leather strop. I know he'll be taking out the ones and fivers, patting and palming them square-edged the way he always does around this time of day.

He ambles off. He's taking the money out to the cashbox in the back room where he sits to write up the daybook.

A woman bustles through the chain curtain, her blue-rinse trapped in a hairnet. I prepare my best smile and go to the counter. She thumps one of our carriers onto the glass top. Sold to me as best this was, lad, she says, her lips pursed as she stares at me. I hear the clatter of the shop door sign. Brenda. We swap quick smiles then I turn back to the woman.

I go to the doorway of the back room. Mr Simm is at his metal desk. I cough, quietly, fearful of making him jump.

What's her problem? the butcher mutters, not looking up. He's obviously caught the tune of her grousing.

I repeat the woman's complaint.

That's not gristle, Mr Simm says. Let the customer know that it's a marbling of fat. Tell her it's what gives meat its flavour. He locks the cash box, turns his head to me. And tell her, if she wants lean then she wants fillet, and if she wants fillet she'll not get it for the price of rump.

I stare at him for a moment, hoping he'll get off his fat arse and go tell her the riddle himself.

Alright, I say.

Brenda has gone.

I give the woman the gist and she huffs out of the shop, saying how she'll take her business elsewhere in future.

I go back to Simm. I heard her, he says, and good bloody riddance.

I tell him I need to pop out for ten minutes coz I've forgotten to pick up Mum's shoes from the menders.

Simm goes, Well, in that case ...

I peg it through the precinct, the apron flapping my legs.

There's no sign of the girl in Woolworths.

I go to the counter and ask a man if Brenda is around. She left about half an hour ago, he tells me.

I race through the indoor streets and out onto the bus bays.

She's there.

I missed you ... just before ...

You were getting ear-ache from that woman. I didn't want to interfere.

I stand hands on hips, smiling at her while my breathing slows.

I was gunna come and see *you* today ... ask you if you fancy going to see a film or something?

Brenda hitches an eyebrow. That's very forward of you, young man.

They're showing the Great Gatsby at the Commodore, I tell her.

Brenda averts her eyes, does a little twisty pout. Not my thing, she says. It sounds boring.

Or I could take you out on the pillion, a spin out to Southport or somewhere?

Brenda smiles. The motorbike back on the road then, is it?

I swallow. Yeah, I go.

OK, you're on.

The afternoon flew by. I greeted regulars by name, told customers to enjoy the rest of their weekends and all that. We'd locked up and I was in the back room with Mr Simm. He swapped his white mesh hat for his white flat cap and put on his overcoat and we walked through the shop together.

Just before I headed away, Mr Simm gave me a little rabbit punch on the front of my shoulder. See? he said, you *can* do it when you make the effort.

Mum's in her armchair watching the Generation Game. Janey's standing between her knees in her gym kit.

I slump on the couch. Mum knows I see Veronica on Saturdays but she's not asked a thing about it, she's just staring at the telly. A young woman fumbles a lump of clay on a potter's wheel while Bruce mugs toothily at the camera.

Watch me, Joe.

C'mon then, let's see, I tell Janey.

My sister rises on her toes, walks across the carpet, raises her arms above her head, drops her hands to the floor, pushes up and her legs go over, the soles of her feet land on the wall. Her socks have frilled cuffs. Her skirt has flipped inside-out. So strange her upside-down face and her smile the wrong way up.

I saw Veronica at lunch, I say.

Is that so, Mum says, not looking away from the screen.

Yeah. She said she'd phoned Liam but he wasn't in. She spoke to Francie and he said he'd get Liam to call her.

And let me guess, he hasn't?

No. She even gave me the number of his digs and I tried him from the precinct.

Mum looks at me. And?

And no answer.

Janey's little arms tremble under her weight. She lets herself down to the floor.

Mum turns her eyes back to the screen. One thing I've learned about your brother, she says, the more you chase him the more he hides. He'll call the girl when it suits *him*, and not before.

Right.

We sit there for a bit.

The Generation Game ends and the news comes on.

First item, another friggen bombing. Down London way. A pub near an army barracks, they're sayin. A reporter speaks to the camera. The windows in the building behind him are blasted out, the surrounding whitewashed wall is blackened from smoke. A man brushes glass splinters into a pile.

Mum crosses herself.

Right, I say. I'm off to Grogan's.

What's that?

I'm off to Grogan's.

All right, love, she says, flapping her hand at me but not looking up, her eyes staring fixedly at the screen. Have a nice time.

As I leave the room, I hear Mum get up and cross to the telly. The channel switches.

I'm only just in the door after late Mass when I notice the tweed overcoat on the stair post. A little brown suitcase on the floor below. Even though I don't recognise them as Liam's things, I can't help the rush of hope as I head to the living room.

There's a man sitting in the armchair beside Mum's. Both him and Mum have their faces turned towards me. The man's smile is broad and open, like he's fixed it on when he heard me come in to the house.

The nest table is set with the good cups and saucers and a plate of Bourbons.

Didn't I tell you, Oonagh, the man says, he doesn't know me from Adam.

I look at Mum.

You remember your Uncle Eugene don't you, Joseph?

Uncle Eugene? What the frig is he doing here?

Oh, yeah, I go, I do now. I squeeze out a smile for him.

Well, it *has* been a while, he says. I can't credit that it's nearly seven years. By Christ where does the time go? I've only just been telling your mammy how much her big sister misses her.

Uncle Eugene stands and takes a step towards me, his hand out.

His grip is crushing and he doesn't let go, and his smile looks ready to split his gob. God, but he's grown, eh Oonagh? he says, his eyes flicking around my face.

Do you think so? Mum says from behind him as she bends forward for the teapot. I suppose he has, so.

Surely now, my uncle says, his grip softening, his mouth closing over his smile. And isn't he become the living image of Vincent? He releases my hand and sits back down.

Mum picks up her cigarettes. She fumbles a bit to open the lid of the box and get a fag out.

My uncle reaches inside his jacket and brings out a folded handkerchief. He offers it to Mum.

I'm perfectly fine, Eugene. But thank you.

My uncle dabs the hanky under his nose and places it back in his pocket. He leans forward and heaps two sugars in his tea, stirs.

How is Auntie Margaret? I ask him.

Uncle Eugene winces, he taps the teaspoon lightly on the cup rim and settles it on the saucer. I'm after telling your mother that Maggie's suffering terrible with the lumbago, he says. He turns sharply to Mum and starts on about what a shame it is we've never gone back, and that Maggie and him would love to have us and they've the space now that the boys are in London.

Mum looks at me, Your uncle's staying with us tonight.

If you're sure I'm not putting you out, Oonagh?

Not at all, she says. Though she doesn't sound exactly ecstatic with the idea.

I ask him if he's going to London.

I am. I'll be getting the train down in the morning.

Will you see Liam?

I'm hoping to, Joseph, he says. He's still beaming. I'm only after asking your mother how he was getting along down there.

Mum stands up. I've just been telling Eugene that we've not heard a thing from your brother. She gives a dry laugh. That fella's a law to himself.

Ah now, go easy on the lad, my uncle says, sure wasn't Liam a great help to me and the boys when he was over. He handles a spade as well as his father, so he does.

Mum stands. She looks at me. Liam's room is a tip, so I'm putting your uncle in your bedroom. I'll go up and put on some fresh sheets.

Uncle Eugene laughs. Don't turf the poor fella out, Oonagh. You'll turn the lad against me.

Joseph doesn't mind, Eugene, Mum says, as she goes into the hallway.

There's the creak of the stairs. The sound of Mum padding around above our heads.

Eugene says, Sit down here a minute and talk to your auld Uncle. He's patting his hand on the seat of Mum's armchair. I perch on the edge.

God but you're the living image of him, he says, taking in my face. He shakes his head in wonder at the miracle of it.

I don't know if he means Dad or Liam and I'm not gunna ask.

You two lads are close, aren't ye? Even for brothers, I'd say. He chuckles. My two are forever boxing nine shades of shite out of each other. He throws a look up at the ceiling coz of the curse.

I shrug.

It's grand that you have him to talk to, man to man. Amn't I right?

I shrug again. He's making me feel tongue-tied like a shy kid.

About girls and the like, I bet. He gives my knee a squeeze and winks. His big Fixodent smile fattens. Your mammy tells me Liam has a girl up here, a gorgeous one by all accounts. Veronica isn't it? He joins his hands, his eyes roll back – *and Saint Veronica wiped Jesus' face with her veil*. He laughs.

I've no friggin clue what he's on about.

Eugene shoots a wary glance at the doorway, then leans closer to me. I get a waft of spicy hair oil. His voice drops to a low drawl. If your brother *does* happen to make contact, you'll let me know, won't you? Just to put my mind at rest. Best we keep it on the QT, just between us men. You know how much she worries, don't you son? And especially after your dad ... You understand what I'm saying to you?

Mum's pretty strong, I say. She can handle whatever it is.

Even so. It won't do us any harm to keep it between ourselves, eh?

I don't really know why he's talking like this. As if I'd hear from Liam and not tell Mum.

Eugene reaches inside his jacket and brings out a folded slip of paper. He hands it to me. I'll be stopping a few days in London, with an old friend, this is his number. He shines his smile on me full-beam.

I look at the number. Sure, I say.

I can hear Eugene through the walls as I lie in Liam's bed, grumbling away to himself and snorting. I have a consciousness of him awake and thinking and it makes me feel weird.

The last time I saw him was six years ago. In Ireland. He was at the homeplace the evening before we left.

Auntie Margaret had come to the cottage earlier that afternoon. She helped Mum with sorting crockery, and folding clothes into boxes. I remember going into the bedroom and seeing them in the middle of a laughing argument, about some dress that my aunt said she'd lent Mum for a dance twenty years ago.

In the evening there was a stream of visitors, twenty or more. The men standing in little group conflabs. The women and old people sitting on hard chairs around the edge of the room, nursing cups of tea. Mr Traynor from the next farm was there, sucking on his pipe – he got all teary-eyed when he spoke about a sister of his who'd married a clerk of works and lived in a place called Coventry.

Auntie Margaret smiled at Mum, It's such a blessing that you and Vincent have good jobs lined up, and a school for Joseph. This was for the benefit of the parish priest who hadn't long arrived on his bicycle. Dad was at the dresser pouring

him a Black Bush into a glass tumbler he'd unwrapped from newspaper. Just a splash now, Vincent. Mum told everyone how good the priest had been in making arrangements with the school authorities in Liverpool. Father Deegan's been a godsend, so he has, Dad said, then he dropped his head, embarrassed at the wrong word he'd used but the priest let out a hearty laugh that made it OK for everyone else to join in.

Mum said how it would make it easier for me, going in at the start of the school year with all the other boys. Father Deegan took a sip of his whiskey, The timing has worked out well enough, he said, nodding slowly as he regarded his drink, his lower lip proudly plumped. Dad told everyone how he'd be working on the buildings for a big company called Laing's – he clamped his arm around Liam's shoulders, gave him a squeeze – and he'd be putting in a word for this bucko, once he turned sixteen.

I've a memory of being outside later, the sky getting dark, but the edges of the grey clouds tinged all orange and purple like bruises. A car turned off the road at the far end of the lane, headlamps dipping and flaring as the wheels bumped slowly over the ruts. It pulled up outside the cottage – Francie at the wheel, Uncle Eugene beside him.

Dad came out of the house with Liam.

Dad put a hand on the top of my head. Go on inside now, son, he said softly.

I caught the occasional glimpse through the window. The four of them standing around the car, smoking and talking and laughing. I wanted to be out there with them.

My hand flaps in the dark till it lands on the alarm clock and kills the tinny jangling.

As I get dressed I start thinking about Uncle Eugene last night, all that weird cloak and dagger business. *Let me know if your brother gets in touch. No cause to trouble your mother with this, we'll keep it strictly on the QT, eh son?*

So Liam's gone off on one again – what odds does it make to my uncle?

All I can think is that Eugene must be thick with this boss fella, the one Francie mentioned to Veronica, the one who wants a *wee word* with my brother. I reckon my uncle wants to keep in with this boss, keep his lads in his good books, by grassing Liam up.

I'm at the head of the stairs when I hear my bedroom door opening. I turn. My uncle comes out, in his Y-fronts and string vest, a little toiletry bag in his hand. He gives me a sleepy nod as he goes into the bathroom.

I head downstairs.

It's not yet fully light outside, but through the kitchen window I can see a vague shape, the arcing orange dot of a fag. I go into the yard.

Is he up? Mum whispers as I come up to her.

Yeah. What's he doing here?

Mum glances up at the faint light in the bathroom's frosted glass. She shakes her head. I haven't seen that man since your father's funeral, she says, and suddenly he shows up out of the blue. She takes a pull, blows away the smoke.

Why didn't you want him sleeping in Liam's room?

Mum glares at me, like I've accused her of something. Eugene Malloy is a nosy Parker, she says, trying to keep her voice down. Your brother has God only knows what in that Aladdin's Cave of his. I didn't want him poking around in there, going back to Margaret with a load of old tittle-tattle. Isn't it only for my sister's sake

that I let him set foot in the house at all. She wraps her open cardigan around herself, clasps her elbow. The hand she's holding up her fag with shakes a bit in the cold air.

I want to tell Mum about Eugene speaking to me on the sly, asking me to phone him at this old friend's place when Liam gets in touch. I'm not gunna tell her, though. My uncle's a bit creepy, what with his hair oil and the way he smiles like he can't stop himself. But I can see the sense in what he said about not bothering my mother. In fact, where Liam's antics are concerned I reckon she prefers not to know.

The muffled sound of the toilet flushing and the gargle in the waste pipe makes both of us look up – the bathroom window is dark. Mum casts away her fag and goes into the house.

I'm in the back of the shop untying my apron when I hear Mr Simm say, Sorry, we're closing now. Whoever he's speaking to says something I don't catch.

I haul on my greatcoat and go through.

Mr Cocker's by the entrance talking to the butcher. Ah, Joe, the teacher says, perfect timing.

Mr Simm holds back the chain curtain for us. I tell him I'll see him in the morning and he just nods, a clouded look in his eyes. The butcher's not had long enough for an interrogation. It's killing him to know who's the posh young fella with a canvas shoulder bag slung over his brown cord jacket.

As we make our way through the strip-lit indoor streets, Cocker says, I've had a look at the bike, Joe. I've done as much as I can.

He sounds like a doctor in a telly play who's about to break terrible news to a patient.

Is it a write-off, then?

Cocker twists his mouth, see-saws his palm. Not quite, he says. But it does need a professional service. To ensure it's properly roadworthy.

I'll tell him.

Good, Cocker says. I don't want your brother's safety on my conscience. And in the meantime it should be kept sheltered.

Liam's got a tarp for it.

Great. Weigh down the edges with stones or something.

I will. Thanks.

We come through the sliding doors and stop outside. Should I come and get it now? I ask him.

That's the idea, Joe, Cocker says, smiling. We walk on in the direction of his estate.

Liam? Cocker says. That's the famous brother's name is it?

Yeah.

Just the two of you, is it?

There's our little sister as well.

Ah, of course, Cocker says. She was there that time I called around to talk to your mother, I remember now.

Yeah. She was probably tumbling across the carpet. Mad as a bat, Janey is.

Cocker laughs. I guess you're closer to Liam, then? I mean, getting his bike fixed for him. It's quite a gesture.

I feel guilty when he says that. I think about coming clean, telling him I want to take a girl for a spin on the moped. Best not try and undo the lie.

Quicker if we take the flyover, I tell him.

You know the lay of the land, Cocker says. I'm still getting used to the area.

We cross at the lights.

What is it he does, your brother?

I'm relieved Cocker's changed tack from the bike.

He was on the buildings for a couple of years, I tell him. Then he jacked it and he was a driver for North End Cabs. And when he left that he was a stacker driver at Baines for a while, but he chucked that to go to London for building work again. He can turn his hand to most things. He was meant to come home for his birthday last week but he's got a new contract so he couldn't make it. I'm gunna visit him down there instead.

I grab a glance at Cocker. He gives me a nod and a smile. I've only gabbled to him coz he's had a look at the moped. I reckon the words are a kind of payment.

You're going to London?

Yeah. Liam's mate is gunna drive us down, a bit of a jaunt.

I'm envious, Cocker says. I went to university in London, you know.

Oh, right.

We don't say anything for a bit. When I sneak a glance at Cocker, he's got this little smile on him.

You liked London, didn't you?

I did, Joe. I was properly homesick at first, but the place gets under your skin.

What was good about it?

Well there's the obvious cultural stuff, he says. Art galleries, museums and suchlike.

I don't reckon that's why Liam's there, I tell him.

Cocker smiles. You're quite different then, the two of you?

Actually, people are always saying how alike we are. Peas in a pod and all that.

You look alike, that what they mean?

Yeah. I s'pose.

You should try and visit an exhibition while you're there, Cocker says. I've got some of my old leaflets and brochures, a decent guidebook too, I think. Remind me when we get to the flat and I'll dig them out for you.

Thanks.

We pause at the junction by the town hall and wait for the lights to change.

Cocker keeps his eyes on mine for a moment. If I'm being totally honest with you, Joe, he says, It's the company of like-minded people that I really miss about London. I think it would be good for you too.

To broaden my horizons?

Cocker laughs. Bit of a cliché isn't it? But yeah, exactly.

We cross.

It's quicker if we cut through the maisonettes, I tell him.

You know all the short cuts, Cocker says, as we turn onto the estate.

Not really, I tell him. It's only coz Big Gordon's flat is here. I tell Cocker how Gordon's a mate of Liam's from the Jawbone, and that me and Liam and Barry used to come to his flat on Sunday afternoons to watch the footy.

We're quiet for a bit, but it's not awkward. As we approach the underpass that leads to the Riverside estate, Cocker says, You miss Liam, don't you? I can tell by the way you talk about him.

He's a total a pain in the arse sometimes. But yeah, a bit.

Sounds like you've a got special bond, Cocker says. Perhaps because of your circumstances.

I give him a blank look.

Losing your dad, I mean, and at such a young age. His voice is plain and flat. Most people act really weird when they mention my dad, their mouths crumpled and their eyes all pitiful.

He was thirty-eight.

Cocker smiles. I meant *you* being so young. Ten were you?

Eleven, just turned.

And it must have been so difficult for your mother, he says. Settling in a new country, three kids to provide for.

She doesn't really talk to me about it, I tell him. She just kind of gets on with things. I don't know what's going on in her head most of the time.

Cocker opens the entrance door of the tower block and looks at me. He grins. I think she might say the same about you, Joe.

The moped's propped in the middle of his living room. There's a coffee table on its side by the wall, and a rolled-up rug is leaned in a corner.

I nod at a dark oily patch on sheets of newspaper spread on the floor below the engine block. Is that a leak?

Cocker shakes his head. It's only some drips from the chain-lube I used.

He goes to the bike and twists the key in the ignition and the machine splutters suddenly to life like it's been shaken from a deep sleep.

I give him a big smile and a double thumbs up.

I know I *look* like a beatnik, Cocker says, smiling too, his voice loud against the rising whine. The bike rocks gently on its props.

Cocker turns the engine off, and swats a hand through a drift of grey smoke. He goes to the room's wide window and opens a metal-framed pane in the centre.

The fumes are smarting my eyes. I take a couple of steps back and stand beside shelves made from planks on whitewashed bricks. A plant at the top trails

skinny leaves. I spot a couple of the novels he's given me to read, the Tom Sawyer, and Of Mice and Men. Leaned against the books on the shelf at eye level is a charcoal drawing. It's of a man, bare-chested, lying on his side with his head rested on an arm, his eyes closed. I wonder if it's Daniel.

Take anything you want, Joe.

I turn. I'll finish the Great Gatsby first, I tell him.

The windows of a neighbouring tower blaze orange from the low sun. I cross the room and stand next to Cocker by the open window. I feel the warmth on my face. We both stay quiet for a while as we watch the gold plate slowly dull.

Are you enjoying the classes, Joe?

I love them, I tell him. It's just I wonder sometimes, y'know, where it's all going.

Oh, Cocker says, sounding surprised. Well ... I could tell you that learning is an end in itself. He smiles. Apologies for another cliché.

It's not gunna get me a job though, is it?

Hmm. I wouldn't write that off, Joe. It's like I explained to your mother – if you do OK in the exams next year, you could come back to St Augustine's and join my A-level group. Then college somewhere.

I look at him. You think I could do all that?

Cocker laughs. Absolutely, Joe. Your work is really good, and the stories you've shown me are fab. I've nothing against the butchery trade, don't think that. Or this place, he says, with a glance outside. But you have to think about where you see yourself five or ten years down the road. You could be a journalist, or a teacher ... or a full-time writer if you put your mind to it.

I look out at the darkening view.

Sorry, Cocker says. I didn't mean to lecture you.

I shrug. I like the idea of this future version of me he's imagining. But it sounds impossible.

I know what's on your mind, Cocker says quietly. But I'm sure your mother will come around to whatever decision you make.

I'm gunna have to get going, Sir.

Cocker laughs. I think you can stop calling me that now. My name's Fran.

OK.

The two of us just stand there at the window.

After a minute or so, Cocker says, Even urban landscapes have their moments of beauty, don't you think?

I try to see what's made him say that. The sun's stuck behind a band of mucky pink clouds where the sky meets the land. Below us, three miniature figures walk along the path, towards the underpass. It's like I'm looking down at one of those architect's models they have under glass in the foyer of the library. I raise my eyes. The land is criss-crossed by the dark rooflines of the streets. I try to work out where home is, but from up here the whole place is strange to me and I don't know if I'm even looking in the right direction. I strain my eyes, search for something familiar. I spot the grey hexagon roof of the precinct, then further off a smudge of security lamps over the industrial park, and a trail of the tiny red tail-lights of traffic on the dual carriageway leaving the city.

Hey, Cocker says quietly.

I turn to him.

You OK, Joe? You look miles away.

I trudge alongside the moped, back the route I came with Cocker, past Big Gordon's maisonette, over the flyover and past the precinct, and into the dark terraced streets towards the new estate where Grogan lives.

There's a covered passage at the side of his house. I push the bike out of sight in there.

Tony, Grogan's stepdad, answers the door.

Duffy the younger, he says. He gives me a gappy smile and smooths a hand over the dirty grey duck's-arse quiff he's probably had since nineteen fifty-odd.

I smile. Is he in?

Tony turns, opens his mouth to bellow into the house but he stops himself coz Grogan's thumping down the stairs behind him.

Y'alright, Joe?

We wait till Tony's sashayed away down the hall.

I need a big favour, I tell him.

Grogan looks wary. Oh aye?

He reads my glance at the side passage and comes out on to the path.

Can you mind this for me?

Fuck me! Is that Liam's?

Yeah. I give him the gist of using it to get off with the Brenda girl and how the teacher's fixed the bike.

You went to Cocker's flat? he says, his chin hanging.

Yeah. Me and *Fran* are like this. I hold up crossed fingers.

Oh, aye? Did he try and *nurture your budding talent*?

I smile. That's quite witty for you, Groggs.

Serves you right for telling me he said it, Grogan says.

True.

Grogan stares at the bike in the shadow of the side wall. It can't stay here, though, he says. It's blockin the bin alley. He cranes his neck and scans left and right, along the fronts of the neighbouring houses. OK, he says, three along, the one with no lights on? I follow his gaze and nod. It's empty, Grogan says, the old biddy snuffed it a few weeks ago. Push it to the far end of her alley and I'll keep dixie on it.

I tell him cheers and that I'll see him at footy tomorrow night.

I finished work at five. I told Mr Simm first thing this morning that I had to pick Janey up from acrobatics coz Mum had overtime. *For your mother, did you say?* Any sentence containing the word Mum works like a charm on the butcher.

I've run all the way to Grogan's estate and wheeled the moped from the dead woman's alley and onto the road. I turn the ignition, the engine hums without coughing and I kick back the prop and twist the throttle. I drive down through the subway and onto the bombie.

The land's marked with the outlines of demolished houses, the streetlamps burning yellow. I stop by the kerb, prop the bike and get off leaving the engine running. I go across the pavement and through stumpy gate-piers and up a path of cracked tiles. This was once someone's front room, a foot-high section of chimney-breast with a strip of wallpaper still stuck on, sprigs of tiny yellow flowers, stems twining. A cellar space is choked full with fallen bricks.

If this was a telly show there'd be a café, one of those trailers that serve tea to a care-worn cop, a greasy spoon place. I'd stand at the hatch, warming my hands around a mug of steaming tea, my greatcoat collar up, a cigarette poking from my fingers. Brenda would walk up, in her red beret, her mac belted to show off her waist. We'd arranged to meet there. I'd spin Brenda a few droll remarks. She'd laugh. I'd get on the moped and she'd climb on behind me and as we moved off her arms would clinch around my front and she'd lay her cheek against my shoulder and I'd get a waft of the perfume she'd put on for me. Later, Brenda would invite me back to her place. I decide she has her own flat.

When I'm at the top of the flyover I see the lights of the shopping centre up ahead. I've an hour before footy training, so there's time.

I take it slug slow along the main road. I try to stick near the kerb but I'm weaving and wobbling a bit.

I drive to the bus bays at the back of the precinct and park nose-in to the kerb. I've a clear view of the exit doors. The pole-clock shows five to six.

Ten minutes later I see Brenda's red beret under the fluorescents. She comes out talking to another girl.

I thumb the horn a couple of times.

Brenda and the other girl stop and look around, not knowing where the tooting sound's come from. I give a few flashes of the headlamp. Brenda spots me. She gives me a vague wave and says something to her friend who goes and sits on a bench by the vending machines. Brenda heads this way.

What's all this? she says, eyeing the moped.

I smile. I thought I'd give you a lift home.

On that? Brenda lifts her eyes from the bike to look at me.

Yeah, I go.

Are you kiddin? she says. Brenda flicks a glance along the waiting area at her friend.

C'mon, jump on. I reach back and give the vinyl seat a slap.

There is no chance of me getting on that thing, she says. Her expression's a mix of amused and confused.

I laugh. Why not?

I thought that when you said a bike you meant, y'know, a proper *motorbike*.

There's heat in my neck.

It is proper, I tell her.

Oh, Joe, she says and she gives her bottom lip a little bite as she looks at me.

It's just a bit ...

A bit what? My cheeks are blazing now. You said you'd come for a spin with me.

Not on that, she says firmly. You don't even have helmets, do ya?

It's safe, I tell her. I've just had it fixed.

Brenda shakes her head. Sorry. Donna's waiting for me. I have to go. She holds my eyes for a beat, forces a little smile, then walks away.

What's your problem? I shout, louder than I meant to. A few people in the bus queue look over this way.

I write, *Macbeth's fatal flaw is his single-minded pursuit of power and status.*

I hold the pen in my teeth, lay the Silvine aside and pick up the play.

I come to a passage that sounds right and I read it out loud.

I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent,

but only vaulting ambition,

which o'erleaps itself and falls on th' other —

There's a couple of knocks downstairs at the front door. I splay the book on my thigh. The sound of Mum going down the hallway, the click of the snib. Oh, hello Barry! and then Barry saying something, some kind of apology, and Mum saying, No, not at all, their voices fading as they go to the back of the house. I sit on the edge of the bed and pull my boots on.

Here he is, Mum says with a smile as I come in to in the living room.

Barry turns around, Got your head in the books again, Joe?

Yeah, I say. You alright, Baz?

Oh, y'know, same old ... He holds his smile, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his Parka. It's like he's lost for words, which isn't like him.

Everything OK, Barry love? Mum says, looking at him with a little frown.

Yeah, yeah, fine Mrs Duffy, Barry says quickly. I've only bobbed round to pick up the booze that was left over from the party. I'll get a refund from Scottish Jack. Unless Joe here has necked it all.

Witty, I tell him.

Mum clasps her hands. Will you take a tea, Barry?

Lovely, Barry says.

Mum goes through to the kitchen.

I tell Barry I've sorted the unused bottles into one crate and put it down in the cellar. He takes his hands out of his pockets and rubs them together and says, Let's crack on then mush, lead the way.

I pull the string and the lightbulb snaps the cramped space into shape.

You heard anything from Liam since the shindig? Barry asks.

I tell him about Veronica speaking to Liam the next day, and give him the gist of the new job that had stopped him coming home for the party.

That was what? Barry says. About ten days ago?

Yeah. Then he was supposed to call Veronica last Friday, I tell him.

And he didn't?

No. She's convinced Liam's had his head turned, but I reckon he's just gone off on one of his benders.

I can't believe he's not spoken to that girl, Barry says, under his breath. I know he's your brother, but he's still a fucken dickhead.

I'm smiling at Barry. But he's just staring blankly back at me, like he's deciding whether to say something.

What is it? Spit it out, Barry, will ya.

OK, Barry says, and he takes a deep breath. I was in the Jawbone last night when Barb, the landlady, she shouts me name over the crowd, and when I look over she's got her hand stretched up in the air, wavin the phone receiver at me.

It was Liam, wasn't it?

Barry shoots a look up the stairs, gives me a nod.

What the frig is he playin at?

Dunno, Joe.

What did he want?

I didn't catch it all. The boozer was rammed, the jukie blarin, every bugger yackin at once. Liam said he was in a phone box and he didn't have much time, but could I do him a massive one. He said he'd left some personal stuff in his locker at Baines and would I get it for him and stow it somewhere safe till he gets back.

What stuff?

Barry hunches his shoulders, He didn't say, lad. I reckon he's just twigged that sooner or later his locker's gunna be allocated to some new fella. For all I know Cliff's already cleared it out.

You didn't get it, then, his stuff?

No Joe, I did not. Cliff stashes the spare keys in his desk drawer. We were snowed with deliveries yesterday, so when I got five minutes I went straight up to the office. But Cliff's planted there on his bony arse, feet on the desk, markin x's on his Spot the Ball. I had to spin him some cock and bull about rotas and weekend shifts. So, no, I couldn't get me hands on the key.

I'm nodding coz the penny's dropped as to why Barry's come. Liam might've kept his own key, I tell him. It might be in the house, in one of his coat pockets or something. I glance up the cellar stairs.

Exactly, Joe, Barry says. He digs a hand in his jeans pocket, brings out a small silver key. It'll have a little placky fob, like this one, except with the number nine on it. If you find it, bring it to the warehouse first thing tomorrow. I'm on earlies, and Cliff won't rock up till half eight.

I tell him, OK, sure. I leave it a couple of beats. Was that all he said?

Pretty much. I told him that you and me might drive down to see him sometime. He didn't sound keen. He said something about him working all angles of the clock.

And he didn't ask about Veronica or Mum, or me even ...

Fuck! Barry says, closing his eyes.

What?

I've just remembered, Barry says, giving me an anxious look. I let it slip about the party. He pulls a guilty face, puffs out his cheeks. I was a few pints down, it just sort of came out. Sorry, Joe. I told him how you'd arranged the invites and set up the room and all the rest.

What did he say to that?

The line went quiet and I think he's gone and I'm going, Liam? Liam?

Then I hear him say, Joey did all that for me? Then the pips start going and we get cut off.

Janey's gone to bed. Mum's watching telly. Columbo's hounding some pompous prick who's stuffed inside a roll-neck and a houndstooth jacket. I'm lying on the couch, looking towards the screen.

Barry's visit is buggin me. Why is Liam calling *him* when he hasn't spoken to Veronica since a week last Sunday? Maybe Veronica's right, maybe my brother has taken up with some flighty piece, and he's not got the bollocks to tell her straight. He's deffo got an eye for women, and he knows how to turn on the charm. And what's in his locker that's so important anyway? Must be something more than a stack of Parades or Mayfairs.

I wait for the freeze frame, and as the credits start I stand up, do a hammy yawn and tell Mum, I'm going up. I've got to finish an essay for Cocker's class tomorrow.

I stop in the doorway.

I'm sleeping in Liam's room tonight.

Mum looks up at me, frowning slightly.

Yeah, I go. My pillow still reeks of whatever Uncle Eugene slicks over his hair.

Mum smiles. OK, Joseph, see you in the morning.

Actually, I'll be gone before you're up. I've got to do a run to the meat market with Mr Simm.

Night then, love.

I stop by the hallstand and shift my greatcoat aside, and Janey's yellow rain mac, and Mum's good wool Sunday coat. An old hooded duffle of Liam's is hanging at the back. I dip a hand in the pockets. A couple of dried-out fag butts, a crusted linen hanky, a ticket stub for Tangerine Dream at the Empire. I arrange the rack to how it was and head upstairs.

I pull out the drawer on Liam's bedside unit. It's a jumble of his stuff – cassettes, a battered ten-pack of Sweet Afton, a lighter whose wheel doesn't spark. I take out a tape box – a brunette in a bikini, looking at me over her shoulder, baby-blue eye-shadow, her index against her pout says whatever we're about to do will be our special secret.

There's a folded map. *England and Wales: A Touring Guide*. The cover has a glossy aerial photo of a roundabout with a flower display of the Union Jack in the middle. I open it up, my arms stretching wide. There's two pen lines been drawn, a blue one tracks left, along the coast to Anglesey. The thicker red felt-tip line kinks and angles down the roads and ends in a couple of wonky rings around London.

I refold the map and start rooting around the drawer again.

Right at the back is a clutter of linty loose change, and in among it, a little silver key on a blue fob. I pick it out and rub my thumb across the dusty plastic window, 9 written on the label. I pocket it in my jeans.

I hear the first sounds in the house, the soft thud of feet on the landing. The toilet flushing. A squeak of a door hinge as Mum goes back into her room. At the window I tug the curtains apart. It's as though someone's strung a black cloak on the outside of the glass. It's my own reflection, quartered in the panes, my shape filled in with shadow against the lighted woodchip.

I grab my greatcoat from the wall hook and I'm out of the front door.

There's a freezing wind whipping through the street. I fix up the coat collar round my neck and pull on my wool hat and double-step it, in and out of the cast of the street lamps that split in whiskery strands that dial and twist through the sleep in my eyes.

I wheel the moped out from the dark side-passage and onto the road. When I twist the ignition key it just makes a click. I rock the bike forward and back a few times and try again. The engine growls noisily awake then settles to a high-pitched whine.

I ride through the subway's slimy dank bricks, and come up onto the derelict land. The wind knives and buffets me, flings grit in my eyes. Off to my left, beyond the canal wall, is the dock road, the dark shape of gantries and cranes bobbing against the sky.

The signboard is rain-wrecked ply fixed to the mesh fence surrounding the goods yard. The flaking letters spell out *Baines Storage and Haulage*.

I prop the bike at the kerb and walk across the yard towards the warehouse building.

The tall concertina gates are shut, but along the gable wall there's a couple of Portakabins, one stacked on the other like they've been flung there by the gale. A dim light shows in the window of the top one.

I climb the checker-plate stairs.

Office, it says on the door.

I'm about to go inside when I glance in the window and see Barry, side on, the muffled sound of his voice as he talks to someone.

I knock hard on the wire-glass pane and push the door open. There's a sudden white glare of overhead tube lights. A man sitting behind a desk is looking up at me. I look at Barry, his eyes are narrowed at me, his mouth tight. I know straight off that the other fella is the boss that's not meant to be here yet.

What can I do for you? the man at the desk says.

Barry goes, Cliff, this is Joe – Liam Duffy's little brother.

The Cliff one leans back in his chair. Bloody 'ell, he says, even without the beard I can see that all right. He folds his arms and takes a good long squint at me, a bit of a smirk on his gob. Turn you lot out in factory somewhere, do they?

I straighten, square my shoulders and take a step toward the desk. I've come for Liam's stuff. From his locker. I dig the key from my jeans pocket, hold it up to Cliff.

Barry, all casual, goes, I'll take him down if you like, boss.

The Cliff fella sucks air through his teeth and he pushes up from his chair and comes around the desk. Strictly speaking, anything in the lockers is company property, he says. He holds his palm out flat.

I close my fingers around the key.

Looks like you've a touch of your brother's defiance, Cliff says, smiling.

I look at Barry, he shrugs, his eyes are saying the game's up. I let go of the key.

Cliff inspects the fob for a second then drops the key into the breast pocket of his shirt. He flashes me another smile. Hope you're not a hot-head like him as well.

I go, What do you mean, *hot-head*? I glance at Barry who's looking down at the floor.

Cliff laughs. Go on, tell him, Baz.

The lad doesn't need to know, boss, Barry says.

C'mon, Baz. It's funny, for fuck's sake.

Barry sighs, turns to me. Your Liam had a bit of a barney with one of the stacker drivers, Joe.

The Cliff one lets out a big old guffaw. A bit of a barney! he says. He looks at me, He fucken decked the lad, the mad bastard. If he hadn't walked I'd've given him his cards.

He was provoked though, boss.

Provoked my hole! Cliff laughs. Kenny was just tryna get a rise out of him. You don't go around lamping people coz you can't take a friggin joke.

C'mon boss, Barry says, his voice lowered. Kenny had no right to say what he said. I'd have flattened him meself.

So would I, Baz, Cliff says. But I can't allow that stuff to happen, can I?

I look at Barry. What stuff —

The phone on the desk starts ringing. Cliff lifts the receiver. Yeah? He listens for a moment, then goes, Alright I'm on me way. He dings the handset down. He picks a clipboard off the desk and he goes out of the office and clumps down the metal stairs.

I'm looking at the empty desk and so's Barry.

Stand here by the door and keep dixie, Barry says.

I follow Barry down the steps. Over at the loading bay is a backed-up curtain-sider, Cliff there waving his clipboard at a couple of men who are wheeling off a pallet-load.

Barry opens the door to the bottom Portakabin and reaches a hand into the dark and the light flickers on. He nods me inside.

A stench of old sweat and Swarfega. A couple of trestle tables, moulded plastic chairs, a steel sink with a few tea-stained mugs on the drainer.

Barry goes to a bank of grey lockers along the wall opposite us, he sticks in the key and opens one of the doors.

He pulls out a white shoulder bag, *Slazenger* on the side. He hunkers, peers into the locker for a moment then straightens. That's your lot, he says, and he bundles the bag into my arms.

I don't move. What exactly did this Kenny fella say to Liam, Baz?

Barry flicks an anxious look up at the ceiling, at the office above. Just banter, Joe. Some bullshit about Liam being Irish, tryna prod his buttons.

Barry opens the Portakabin door, pokes his head out. All clear, he says. Now, off you fuck, Joe, I need to get this key back in Cliff's drawer pronto.

I sling the shoulder strap over my head and slant it across my chest, clutching the bag under my arm as I run back across the goods yard to the moped.

I park the bike outside the maisonettes by Big Gordon's place and walk over to the Wimpy on the Parade.

I buy a tea and order a sausage butty.

I grab a table at the back of the room where it's quiet, just some bloke reading his *Mirror*.

I unzip the Slazenger. I scrabble my fingers about inside. I upend it, shake. Nothing comes out, but there's a soft clunking noise. I set the bag upright on my knees and widen the opening. There's a zipped pocket in the lining.

My hand comes out with a clutch of stuff. A wristwatch. A few photos held in a paperclip. That's all that's in there.

The watch is an old one, an expanding bracelet, its gold casing dull. The seconds hand is stopped. I hold it to my ear. Nothing. I've never seen Liam wearing it. I slip it over my wrist, it hangs loose. I take it off again and set it on the café table.

There's four photos. The one on top is a Polaroid of Liam and Veronica. It must be this year, coz Veronica only gave him the camera as a present last Christmas. The colours are blurry, the edges of things seep into each other. I reckon Liam's been too impatient to wait for it to properly develop. He's standing with his arm around Veronica. It's a recent one, coz his beard's fully grown. They're in front of a stall, its roof is hung with net bags of plastic beach balls and bucket and spade sets. In the background I can make out the wooden struts of a section of a roller coaster. Southport funfair probably. When Liam worked on the taxis he'd drive them out there. He'd tell me afterwards how they'd played pitch n putt, or gone on the whirling waltzers, then had a fish supper at a pub on the way home.

The colours are sharp in the next photo, but there's a cracked wrinkle running across the middle. All of us stiffly posed. Dad's shirtsleeves are rolled up above his elbows, he's got a fag cupped at his side like it won't be noticed. Mum next to him, holding the push-bar of a four-wheeled black pram, Janey in there. Me in my swimmers, smiling. Liam with his arms folded and his chin jutted. Behind us is a stretch of beach, a bit of the promenade, two young women in summer frocks sitting on the rail. The picture used to sit in a frame on the sideboard in the cottage back in

Ireland, I've not seen it since we left. On the back of the photo is stamped, *Bundoran Photographic Studios*, and underneath in pencil, *July, 1968*.

Two months before Dad died.

I asked Mum, one time, why there were no pictures of Dad in the house. She told me it would be too painful for her to see his face every day.

There's a square snap, small enough to fit in my palm, black and white too, but faded to grey tones. Three young men, shirts and ties. Dad's in the middle, his arms looped around the shoulders of the men each side. Uncle Eugene, that ridiculous smile of his. I don't recognise the bearded man with them, a pin in his tie, his dark hair slicked back with a steel-rule parting.

The final photo is another one of Liam's Polaroids.

It makes no sense to me, this one, no matter how long I stare at it.

Sausage butty?

I move my hands back and the waitress sets down the plated sandwich.

The edge of a forest, it looks like, and in front of the trees is a group of five men, three standing at the back, two in front on one knee – like some weird five-a-side team photo. Enda and Francie are the two knelt at the front. Uncle Eugene's standing at the back on the left and a ginger man who I don't recognise is on the right. Liam's there between them. None of them is smiling, not even Eugene. The two cousins have rifles, the butts of their weapons propped on their knees, the barrels angled up to the side. Behind them, my brother has his rifle at his shoulder, and he's aiming it straight at the camera.

Thursday's are half-day closing. Usually I'll spend the afternoon in the library, finishing off whatever homework was set last week. But after I left the butcher's today I've walked straight home, my head a mad tangled knot of thoughts.

I let myself into the empty house. Mum's at work, Janey at school. I go into the front room, unsling the Slazenger and bring out the photograph. I lie on my back on the sofa and hold the Polaroid above my head.

It's been taken this year, coz he's only had the camera since last Christmas. And Liam's got the full wiry beard he came home from Ireland with. That means the picture is from last August, the month he spent at Auntie Margaret's.

Liam showed me some of the other snaps he'd taken. There was one of our old homeplace. It'd been taken from the road, the view of the cottage was partly blocked by trees along the lane, just a corner of a whitewashed gable and the red corrugated roof. Liam said that Francie told him the new owner was a writer, a yank whose family were from the area, and that he'd sold off most of our fields to the neighbouring farms. And there was a photo of Auntie Margaret, pegging sheets onto a clothesline, a horrified expression on her face as she spots the camera. Another Polaroid showed Liam clasping three brimming pints, smiling, a crowded pub behind him. Feckin Francie had taken it, he said.

I focus on the photo in my hand.

There's a fine mist, it blurs the ground and hangs low between the trunks of trees behind the group. Early morning, I reckon. Liam's cheek is pressed against the stock, one eye squeezed shut as he takes aim at the camera.

I stare into the photograph until my eyeballs begin to ache, trying to make some sense of it. Trying to explain it to myself. I search the face of each of the men, but they just stare flatly back at me.

What Cocker said when he handed round the postcards in class. Turn off the logical part of your head. Look beyond what you first see. Don't think about what's in the image, dream it.

I turn the picture face down on my chest and close my eyes.

When I was eleven, or thereabouts, back in Ireland, Dad and Liam used to go out rabbit shooting. I pestered Dad again and again to let me go with them, but he said I was too young, that it would be too dangerous. One Saturday, it must have been near my birthday itself, I came in from kicking a ball around the back field. Dad and Liam were sitting at the pine kitchen table, their rifles laid on sheets of newspaper in front of them. They had this special cleaning oil – Dad put a folded cloth to the opening of the tin and upturned it – the fluid drew a gleam along the thin barrel.

Liam looked across at me, this little smile on his face. Daddy, he said quietly.

My father set the cloth down. He raised his head. I've spoken to your mother, he said. His voice was sombre. You can come along with us in the morning, just this once mind, for your birthday.

The smile near split my face.

My mind wouldn't rest to sleep that night. I kept shifting and turning till Liam hissed, We've to be up at five. Will ya for feck's sake settle.

In the morning I felt a movement in the mattress, a creak of the bedsprings as Liam got out of the bed. I heard him come around to my side. I felt his hand on my shoulder. I'm awake, I said, before he could shake me. I could hear his feet squeak the floorboards as he moved away. I snapped my eyes shut against the sudden brightness of the ceiling light. We got dressed in the cold quiet. Liam opened a drawer in the dresser. Here, he said, and he lobbed a balled pair of his thick socks at me. Tuck your

trouser hems well down inside, he said. It'll protect your legs from stinging nettles and bramble barbs.

Dad was waiting outside the cottage, his rifle slung across his back, a cigarette pinched at his mouth. The three of us set off along the lane towards the road. It was too early for talking. I sent my breath out so it misted like Dad's fag smoke.

After we'd walked a mile or so, Dad put his hand up and the three of us stopped by a culvert bridging the ditch. It was quiet without the clip of our boots on the tarred road, just the rushing noise of the stream in the concrete pipe below us, the screech of a bird somewhere above. Dad raised his eyes to the sky, milky grey through the overhanging branches. He said, First light is the best time, the rabbits'll be coming up for a feed.

Liam took a torch from his shoulder bag and led the way into the woods, turning back now and then to light our steps over a thick root or a sudden dip in the ground.

We came out of the trees into a meadow, the half-light of a brightening sky. Liam switched off the torch and tramped away from us along the edge of the wide space, and after about twenty steps he stopped and turned back. Dad unslung his rifle. Stay back here Joseph, he said quietly. I'll make the first sally, then your brother will take his turn. Dad said it was the sound of his footfalls that would flush the coney out. He moved forward, taking slow high steps through the tall grass, then stopped about ten feet ahead and raised the rifle to his shoulder. He angled the barrel slightly down, his forefinger hooked on the trigger as he watched for a movement in the grass.

I've thought about that morning before, loads of times. It's a good memory. I replay it like a favourite part of an old film. Or a story I'm working on. Each time I add something new, or take some detail away. I don't know if that bird really screeched, or if there was a culvert with water running through it. Some parts I don't

touch, like the gleam the oil drew from the barrel, or me catching Liam's thick socks, or the way Dad pinched his cigarette when he took a drag.

I hear the scratch of a key in the front door, Janey sing-songing my name. I sit up and slip the picture back into the inside pocket of the Slazenger bag and pull the zip closed.

On my Saturday lunch break I go to the bench in the Atrium. If Liam's phoned Barry, then he's sure to have called Veronica last night.

I've waited half an hour, watching for her coming up the escalator. I push up and head to the Parade.

I'm at the counter, waiting to be noticed. Mr Hadden's talking to a young woman, a baby in a pushchair beside her. The chemist holds up a bottle, pink liquid inside, as he explains something about the appropriate dose. He bows his head to see me over his glasses.

Can I help you, son? he says, a fingertip paused on the label of the bottle.

The young woman turns to look at me too.

Can I have a word with Veronica, Mr Hadden?

She's called in sick, he says.

I want to ask what's wrong with her, but I stop myself coz he probably wouldn't tell me, even if the woman wasn't wiggin in.

Right. Thanks.

Hadden carries on talking to the woman.

After I finish work I get the bus home then walk around to Grogan's estate.

I ride the moped up to Veronica's house.

Hawthorn Avenue is all big semi-detacheds with arched porches, set back behind tidy gardens, one pebble-dashed house-front much like the next. I park the moped a few houses further up the road and walk back.

Her dad's burgundy Rover is on the drive.

One press of the bell sets off a friggin endless chime inside. I pull off my wool hat and rake my fingers through my hair.

Veronica's dad opens the front door, then the porch door. He eyes me over the brim of his pipe. Thought you were Liam there for a sec, he says. He chuckles. You're growing into him, aren't you?

I smile. Can I speak to Veronica please, Mr Fletcher?

She's too poorly for visitors at the moment, Joe, he says.

It's OK, Dad. I see Veronica behind him on the stairs, in her dressing gown, a hand to the banister rail as she steps slowly down.

Feeling any better, love?

So-so, Veronica says and she gives her dad a watery smile.

Mr Fletcher takes his beige mackintosh and tweed trilby from the stand. I'm just popping down to the crescent for an ounce of ready rubbed, he says as he puts the coat on. He comes out of the house and gets into the Rover.

We watch him reverse off the drive and onto the road.

You'd best come in.

Veronica sits on the sofa and I take the armchair at its corner. Her hair's unbrushed, her face is pale, her eyes are pink-rimmed.

I waited for you at the Atrium.

Oh, right. Sorry.

When you didn't turn up I went to the chemists. Mr Hadden said you were poorly. Have you caught a bug?

Her hand goes to her stomach. Something like that, she says.

Does she mean women's trouble? I feel heat rise in my neck.

Have you heard from Liam? I ask quickly, even though I know from the state of her face what the answer is.

Ah, right. That's why you're here.

No, I tell her. I wanted to check you were OK, too. You haven't though, have you?

Nope. Veronica gives the word a little pop. Have you? she says, her eyes hardening for a moment.

I drop my head.

C'mon, Joe, spill the beans, she says with a sigh.

I raise my eyes to her. He phoned Barry, I tell her. In the Jawbone, Tuesday night.

Veronica holds my gaze for a few seconds. She shakes her head and looks down at her lap, her fingers fiddling uselessly with a button on her dressing gown.

It suddenly feels like I'm holding everything together and if I make the wrong move, or say the wrong thing, it will all fall apart.

He's probably up the wall with this new job, don't you reckon?

Is that what you think, Joe? Coz I don't. Veronica shakes her head, turns her face towards the window. He'll be out doing whatever he's doing with whoever he's doing it with. She looks back at me. Nice that he found time to phone his drinking buddy, though.

I feel a rush of anger with my brother. He's put me in the shit, got me dreamin up excuses for him when it's him who's in the wrong. But Veronica looks miserable, gazing towards the window again, and I want to make her feel better.

I give Veronica the whole malarkey about Liam only phoning Barry coz he wanted his bag from Baines. I let her have the gist of me rooting around for the locker key and going to the warehouse and me and Baz pulling a fast one on Cliff to get the Slazenger. I'm gabbling, trying to turn it into a story that will get her to smile or laugh the way she usually does. It's not working. I shut my trap.

What was in the bag that was so important? The crown jewels? Veronica's eyebrows hitch as she stares at me. She sounds tired and sarcastic.

I shrug. Nothing much, Vee. Just some photographs, and a shonky old wristwatch.

She turns to me, her expression blank.

I reach inside my greatcoat and bring out the clutch of photos. I turn up the Polaroid of Liam and her at the fairground.

He had this in there.

Veronica takes it from me and holds it in her lap as she looks down at it.

Southport, isn't it? You and him used to go there, didn't you? Y'know, pluck-a-duck and fish suppers?

Veronica sighs, keeps her eyes on the photo. It's not Southport, Joe, she says. It's down south. Start of last month when I went to see him in London. He met me off the train at Euston. He had his little suitcase with him. He said the digs were a *feckin pigsty*, so he was whisking me off to the seaside for the weekend. We stayed in this cute little guesthouse overlooking the promenade and the pier and the sea. This was taken at the funfair. He got one of the stallholders to snap us.

You look happy, anyway. Both of you. The picture obviously means something to him.

Veronica shrugs. She smooths a hand over her knee, like she's rubbing away a crease in the flocky material. That was the last time I saw him, she says. She holds the photo out to me.

You can keep it if you want.

She shakes her head. Give it to him when you see him, she says, with a tight smile.

I take the picture from her. You could go down and visit him again, Vee.

Ha! You know I actually suggested that, when he phoned the day after his party. I even said I'd pay for a B and B in London, so we didn't have to stay in the pigsty digs. A treat for his birthday, I told him.

What did he say?

He said, The timing isn't right, darlin. Veronica's spoken in a deep growly Irish accent. She looks away. I'm such an idiot, she mutters under her breath. I'm convinced he's got those cousins of yours covering for him, while he's off with Belinda or Daphne or whoever it is that's turned his head.

There's sudden fire in her voice, and her eyes flash as she speaks. But it's good, in a way, her thinking this is the worst Liam could be up to in London. As I slip the Polaroid back with the other photos I catch a glimpse of Liam pointing his rifle out at me.

What else have you got there? Veronica leans closer, her head angled as she tries to see.

I quickly put the pictures back in my inside pocket. Nothing, Vee. They're just boring old family snaps. Of all of us back in Ireland. Me in in my swimming togs – really embarrassing.

Must be, Joe. The way you're blushing.

I nod.

I'm gunna speak to Liam, I tell her.

Good luck with that, Veronica says, like she's barely the energy to get the words out.

Yeah. I wanna let him know that Barry and me are coming to see him. So the arsehole needs to give me his address, and he better friggin answer the door when we knock.

There's the faintest brightening in Veronica's eyes.

And I'm gunna get a grip of him and shake him till he tells me why he's being such a fucken knobhead to you. Like this, I go, and I bring my hands together in a choke hold and mime a vigorous throttling of my brother's neck.

You *do* that, Joe, Veronica says. The smile she started to form when I was talking begins to fade. She's staring at my wrist, a tiny fold in the skin between her eyes. Was that the watch in his bag?

Yeah. Why? I rest my hand on my knee and turn the watch so it's face up on my wrist.

Veronica slips a slender finger between the expander and my skin for a moment. It's too big for you, she says.

I know, I tell her, and it's stopped as well.

It *was* working, Veronica says.

You've seen Liam wearing it, then?

Veronica nods. She narrows her eyes at me. You don't know where it came from, do you?

I thought it was probably knock-off, I tell her. Y'know something he's bought in the Jawbone, or through one of Barry's dodgy contacts.

Veronica angles her face up towards the ceiling, heaves a big sigh, then turns to me again.

I look down at the face of the watch.

Look on the back, Veronica says.

I twist the watch. The silver back plate is scoured, dull. I dab a finger on my tongue and rub it on the metal. Three curly letters are finely scratched there.

VBD

I look up at Veronica. She has the hint of a sad smile.

Vincent Brendan Duffy, I say.

Veronica nods. Liam said he found it when he went to Ireland for the funeral.

He said he tried on a tweed jacket of your dad's, and it was in the pocket.

Does Mum know about it?

Veronica shakes her head. Liam said he never told her. He thought she'd get upset and take it off him.

There's no answer.

I cut off the call and dial the number again.

I imagine the repeated ringing echoing around an empty flat, somewhere in London.

Mum's gone to pick up Janey from her after-school gymnastics club. I hang up the greatcoat and go up to my room and flop on the bed. I sit up against the headboard, pull my cuff back. I take off the watch and turn it in my hands. I look at the white disk of the dial, the roman numerals at each quarter, the hands stuck at twenty-five past three.

I've seen the watch before.

The morning we left Ireland, Mum woke me early. Come on now Joseph, she said. Get yourself dressed. She stood back and waited till I swung my legs out from under the warm covers. I rose rubbing sleep from the corners of my eyes. Liam was sitting on a chair, pulling on his boots.

We had the loan of Mr Traynor's Zodiac for the day. Dad reversed, an arm across the back of Mum's seat as he looked over his shoulder. He swung the car round the yard and onto the lane. We passed the box van parked along the gable-end of the cottage. Over the previous days I'd helped Dad and Liam load everything we were taking to Liverpool – tea chests packed with bedding and clothes and ornaments, the kitchen table, bedsteads, my red bicycle lashed on top of the sofa.

I was sat in the back, behind Dad. Liam was across the seat from me. As soon as he got in my brother'd put his head back and closed his eyes, his arms folded across his chest. He slept the whole two hours. I was groggy and tired but it was too cold to sleep. Mum was in the front with Janey in her arms. I remember the quiet in the car as we went through the dark country lanes, the headlamps brushing white light over the thorny hedgerows. Dad reached a hand to the dashboard and the fan heater groaned on – its low whirring woke Janey who started a mewling and catching cry. Shush now, Mum said, gently rocking my baby sister, her eyes fixed on the road ahead. Liam grunted and twisted then settled to sleep again.

When we got to the docks Dad lifted two big suitcases from the boot and him and Liam carried them into the terminal building.

It was only then that Mum told me that Dad was staying on at the homeplace for a week. When I asked why he wasn't coming with us, she said, Your father has business to attend to, then he'll bring the van across and join us. We were standing at the bottom of the sloped walkway, people passing us, young couples with kids, men and women on their own, making their way on board. I looked up at the side of the ship, its line of dimly lit portholes.

They've a cafeteria on board, Mum said. She smiled. You hungry?

No.

They came back out of the terminal building without the suitcases, Dad fitting on his flat cap, Liam looking down at some sheets of paper in his hand.

As they got near, I felt the upset feeling welling in my chest.

Vincent, I heard Mum say quietly, sounding concerned.

Hey now, Joseph, Dad said. We'll have none of that. His voice was soft but the words were firm. He bent at the waist so his eyes were level with mine. He showed me the face of his watch, the expander nested in black hairs. A week is no time at all, he said.

We joined the line of people and walked up the gangway. Mum led us out on to the deck where passengers crowded along the rail on the dock side of the ship. She found a space and stood there holding Janey, Liam alongside her. I stayed with my back against the metal wall. The rumble of the ship's engines grew, the vibrations rising through the soles of my shoes.

People were shouting and waving and then I heard Liam's voice. *I see him! I see him!* My brother was leaning over the rail and pointing down at the quayside. Mum lifted Janey's little arm and flapped it. I walked over. Mum and Liam moved

apart to let me stand between them. Dad's face was raised to us – he took his cap off and waved with it, his smile widening.

Mum went inside with Janey.

Liam took me to the rear deck.

We watched as the dock buildings grew small, and the hills behind the city rose to show themselves then fell and the land became a dark narrow seam. A raucous troupe of gulls kept pace with the ship, hanging above our heads, wheeling and swooping over the churn of our wake.

Two days after we arrived at the digs on Granby Street, Liam and me were playing rounds of pontoon at the table.

There was a sharp knock at the door.

Liam turned his head sharply to Mum.

A woman's voice on the other side said, Mrs Duffy?

Mum went out onto the landing. It was our landlady. I heard her say, They're waiting in my parlour for you, and Mum asking something and the woman said, I don't know, luv, they wouldn't tell me.

I heard their feet going down the stairs.

Liam went to the window and lifted the net. He turned quickly, took his coat from the back of a chair. He'd the door open to leave and I stood up to follow him. No, he said. You stay here with Janey. He pulled the door closed.

I went to the window and saw a police car parked outside.

I left the flat to follow my brother down to the street, but the landlady was standing at the head of the stairs. Your mother has asked me to sit with you until she gets back, she said.

Where are they going? I asked her. Why is there a police car outside?

They'll not be long, son, the woman said and she sat with Janey in her lap,

rocking her and talking quietly to her.

They were gone for hours.

Mum and Liam came back into the flat and the landlady stood up holding the baby.

Liam didn't look at me, he sat on a hard chair, his arms rested on his knees as he stared at the floor.

The landlady started asking Mum what on earth had happened – Mum went to the woman and took Janey from her arms. I need to speak to the boy, Mum said softly.

The landlady said, Of course, and she left.

Mum laid Janey in her cot and came to me, she put a hand on each of my shoulders and looked into my eyes for a few moments. Joseph, she said, I need you to be brave.

I started slowly shaking my head.

Your father has had a heart attack, she said. Her eyes were shiny.

I think I just stared at her, coz I didn't know what she was telling me.

Your father's died, Mum said. He's gone.

I think I must've said, Why?

She said something about there being a history of it on his side of the family.

My cheek was against her stomach, her hands were linked at the back of my head. Then Liam was standing behind me and he had his arms around Mum and I was between them.

They got the night boat back to Ireland that evening. They took Janey. I pleaded to go with them, but Mum said, No, a funeral is no place for a child.

She'd arranged for me to stay out near Ainsdale sands. She said she'd called Father Deegan and he'd made all the arrangements. They were this ancient retired

couple from Derry, the Finnerans. They had a spotless bungalow and a border terrier called Bandit. Every afternoon Mr Finneran would take him for a walk and said I'd to go along. We'd follow the path through the pine woods then he'd let the dog run loose on the beach. Mr Finneran would buy me a choc-ice from the van and we'd sit on the dunes. We watched Bandit bark at a wave coming in, then run back scared as the water broke across the sand.

I glance at the travel clock on the unit. I prise out the winder of the wristwatch with the edge of my thumbnail and set the time. I slowly wind the watch. The spring inside ticking as it tightens.

I've walked the couple of blocks to Barry's.

His missus answers the door holding their new baby.

She's just gone off, Karen mouths at me, and she nods me inside.

Barry's flat out on the couch, a newspaper tented over his face. Karen pauses to toe his shoulder with a slippered foot as she goes to the back kitchen.

Barry rouses, blinking. He sits up, rubs a hand over his face.

Baz?

Joe! Sorry, just grabbin forty.

Been on nights?

Barry rolls his eyes. Yep. He looks up at me. What's the matter, Joe?

I need to ask you about something.

Yeah, fire away, Barry says.

It's about that business with our Liam and Kenny.

Barry glances at the kitchen. Not here, he says. Let's take a walk. I could do with some fresh air anyway.

Barry leads the way through a jigger, then along the path beside the railway fence and onto the overgrown grass of the backs. Not a soul around. We stop under the trees by the substation. Booey's armchair's been burned down to its wooden frame. Probably by Booey himself and those skinhead mates of his.

You heard anything else from him?

Your Liam? Not since he called me looking for his bag, Joe. Not a dicky bird.

Veronica hasn't either. That's another Friday he's missed now.

Friggin knob-end, Barry says with a head-shake.

I nod. I pull back my cuff and angle the watch at him. It belonged to our dad, I tell him. It was in the bag that was in his locker.

Ah, Barry goes, that explains why he wanted to keep the stuff out of Cliff's mitts, doesn't it? He lifts his chin as he looks at me. Was that it, then?

A few old photos, that's all.

Barry looks at me for a couple of seconds. There's something else isn't there, Joe? I can hear your cogs turning from here.

Barry's suddenly forgotten what I said in his living room before he insisted we come out here. Liam and Kenny, Baz. You didn't give me the full story when we were at Baines.

Barry laughs. Like I said, Joe, it was a storm in a teacup.

Don't lie, Baz, I tell him. I know there's more to it. If you don't tell me I'll go see Cliff and get the truth.

Barry keeps his eyes on mine for a few seconds. I don't blink as I stare at him.

He nods. Determined little fucker, aren't ya?

Just spill, Baz.

OK. Well, that day Cliff was on about, the day your Liam lost it, it was just after there'd been a big IRA bomb somewhere down south, loads dead and maimed, same old stuff on the telly news, all the papers plastered with it. It was our tea break and Kenny was holding court, givin the Irish down the banks, talkin shite, fucken Micks this, fucken Paddies that, saying they should all be shipped back to the bogs.

Did Liam hear all this?

Every word, Joe. I mean, you've seen the size of the Portakabin, haven't ya? Kenny was with a couple of lads at the other table, but he was making sure he was speaking loud enough for your Liam to hear. I was sitting with your kid, trying to distract him with some bollocks about the footy or something, but I could see he was tuned in to Kenny. He had his hands linked in one big fist on the table and he was just staring down at them, but his mind seemed somewhere else.

Is this when he lamped him? I ask.

Well, first of all Liam stands up. I put a hand to your brother's arm but he pushes it away and he ambles over to Kenny. I tell him to leave it, he's not worth it, all that, but your brother's not much of a listener is he? Liam stands in front of Kenny, waits for him to pause talking. Kenny looks up at your brother, a stupid grin on his gob. Liam says to Kenny, You'd better fucken watch your mouth. Something like that anyway. Kenny gets to his feet and the two of them are toe to toe. Oh yeah, what the fuck's that supposed to mean? Kenny says. Your kid points his finger an inch from Kenny's face. That's when he said it, the thing that's been naggin at me. Barry pauses, holds eye contact.

C'mon, Baz, just out with it.

Barry passes the palm of his hand across his mouth before he speaks. Liam said, My father died because of loyalist gobshites like you.

I laugh. You wha'? Why did he say that?

Barry stares at me in the light cast from the caged lamp over the substation door. He shrugs.

Then what?

Kenny just gives this nervous giggle. He tells your brother to go fuck himself, but everyone could see he was shit scared.

That when the fight started?

Barry gives a dry laugh. There was no friggin fight, Joe. Like Cliff said, Liam decked Kenny, he dropped him with one punch to the gut. Then he turns and picks up his denim jacket and leaves the Portakabin. I go after him onto the goods yard but he shrugs me off and walks through the gates and away down the road.

Kenny deserved what he got.

Too right he did, lad, Barry says, but he doesn't return my smile.

Tell me again what Liam said to him, Baz.

Barry says slowly, My father died because of loyalist gobshites like you.

I can't stop another little laugh coming out. I shake my head. My dad died of a heart attack, though.

Yeah. I know, Joe.

Maybe Liam was just layin it on thick, to make Kenny feel bad, y'know, for slagging the Irish.

Yeah, Barry says, like he's considering the idea. Maybe, Joe. But I keep thinkin about the look that came into your brother's eyes when he was sat with me while Kenny was mouthin off about the Irish. Fucken scary, it was, lad.

Do you reckon he's got himself in bother again, down in London? And that's why he's gone off the radar?

Barry draws in his chin and he plants his hands in his Parka pockets. Fucked if I know, Joe.

If I get his address will you drive us down to see him, like you said?

Barry pulls a face. He takes his hands from his pockets and holds them out at his sides palm up. We don't even know where the bastard lives. It'd be a friggin needle in a haystack job.

If I get the address will you come?

Barry looks at me for a few seconds. His shoulders heave and drop. OK, Joe.

I get up and dressed for work, just like it's a normal Monday morning. I sling on my greatcoat and go to the back of the house and pick up a slice of toast and say bye to Mum and Janey and head out of the house and up the street towards the bus stop. When I get around the corner I stop in a shop doorway and wait.

After about fifteen minutes I see them going along the main road in the other direction, headed towards the junior school, Janey dawdling, Mum yanking her along. When they're three or four blocks away I walk back to our street. I go into the telephone box and call the butcher's. I tell Mr Simm I've not been well over the weekend and I was gunna come to work but Mum's insisted I go to the surgery. But Doctor Jewell hasn't got an appointment before tomorrow morning.

He grunts, S'pose that's alright.

I close the front door and go upstairs.

I pause on the threshold of Mum's bedroom.

This is friggin stupid.

I switch on the ceiling light and go in.

Mum's single bed, the covers neatly folded back and tucked, her pillow plumped like it's holding its breath. Her hairbrush and hand-mirror aligned on the dressing unit. Janey's bed, stuffed animals and dolls in a neat row.

I sit on the padded stool, avert my eyes from my reflection in the oval mirror. I pull out one of the little brass-handled drawers. Bits of jewellery, pendant earrings, a gold bangle.

I search through each drawer in turn. Nightgowns. Bundles of tights. A packet of Dr Whites that makes me hurriedly slide the drawer shut again.

What am I doing, sneaking around her bedroom, poking and prying about in her private things?

There's a bustle in the velvet folds. A hand comes out and holds the curtain edge, then Tommy Cooper's head appears in the gap, blinking, a bewildered look in his eyes. He walks onto the stage and wanders around, flicking looks this and that way, stopping up short and doing a double-take when he spots the audience. The camera cuts to a section of crowd, an old bird in bottle bottom glasses rocking with laughter.

Mum went up with Janey ten minutes ago.

I hear a squeak of the floorboards above. Feet on the stairs.

I go to the TV and turn the volume down to nothing.

Now, Mum says, with a contented sigh as she settles in her chair and reaches for her Consulates. Oh, he's funny, isn't he? she says. Turn up the sound would you, Joseph?

I get off the sofa and sit in the armchair beside hers.

She turns to me, a little notch formed between her eyes.

I wanna ask you something, Mum.

The bud flares orange at the tip of her cigarette. She waggles the match and leans forward to toss it on the fire. She takes a drag and sends a plume towards the ceiling. I knew there was something on your mind, she says. You've been awful quiet.

I nod.

She smiles. Is it a girl? Or something at work? Do you want me to have a word with Trevor?

I've no idea what to say, how to ask what I want to ask, so I just hold her gaze.

She tilts her head. What is it, son? You're worrying me. Mum's eyes narrow slightly but she doesn't look away.

I reach under the cuff of my jumper and pull the watch off my wrist and set it on the armrest of her chair.

Her eyes seem to shrink back a little. She stares at the watch for a few seconds. Where did you find this?

It was in Liam's room, I tell her. At the back of one of his drawers. I was looking for a cassette of mine he borrowed.

She rests her cigarette in the ashtray then picks up the watch, turns the case, brushes a thumb over the inscription.

You didn't know Liam had it, did you?

She looks up sharply at me. What makes you say that? Her cheeks are pink.

I'm not a dope, Mum. I can tell by your face.

You're not a dope, she says.

So talk to me.

Talk to you about what, son?

About Dad. I say it plain, the way Cocker did when he asked about him.

Your father? she says, sounding puzzled. Why has finding Vincent's old watch brought all this on?

It's not just the watch, I tell her. It's how you dive at the telly whenever there's something on the news – the latest bomb that's gone off or whatever. And we haven't got a single photograph of Dad around the house – it's not normal.

Mum closes her eyes. She doesn't say anything. I can't leave it like this, her clammed up and silent.

Then Uncle Eugene saying, *After what happened to your father*. That's not what someone says about a heart attack is it?

She nods slowly, her eyes still closed.

So talk to me.

She presses her lips together. A tiny silver bead grows in her lower lashes.

Talk to me, Mum, or I'll go to Liam and ask him.

No! she says, and she turns to me, brushing away the tears from her cheeks, a sudden fierceness in her that makes me shift back a bit. You will not go to your brother, she says. You will not go anywhere near him. Do you hear me?

We're quiet again for a while.

You were too young, Mum says softly, her eyes on the TV screen.

Two lines of smiling dancers stream towards the camera, ducking away each side.

I've wanted to tell you, since you left school and started at the butcher's. And your brother has been at me too. You've got to tell him, Mammy, he's seventeen now ... he has to find out sometime ... better it comes from you than someone else.

Mum pulls a wad of tissue from her cardigan sleeve and dabs her eyes. She draws in a long breath. I stay quiet, not taking my eyes off her.

Mum gets up and leaves the room.

Where are you going? I ask, but she doesn't reply.

I hear her go up the stairs. Has she gone to bed? Maybe she's gunna leave it at that. All cloaked in mystery.

I stand up to follow her up, but I hear her coming down again.

She's holding her good handbag, her Sunday one. She switches the TV off and sits back in her chair. She sets the bag on her knee and opens the clasp and dips her head to peer inside.

She brings something out and puts it on the armrest beside the wristwatch.

I sit down.

A Mass card. I recognise its picture of white lilies, a prayer printed over them. At the bottom his name and dates. *Vincent Brendan Duffy. 1930-1968.* Father Deegan posted a batch of the cards from Ireland a few weeks after the funeral. Mum gave one to me and one to Liam.

I look up. I don't understand, I tell her.

Open it, son.

I lift the card and something falls from inside and onto my lap.

It's a newspaper clipping.

I pick up the oblong of paper. Part of an advert for a draper's shop.

I turn the cutting over.

When I've read it, I look up at Mum. She's crying quietly, a hand shielding her eyes.

I look down at the article and read it again.

LOCAL MAN SLAIN. The body of 38 year-old farmer Vincent Duffy (Saint Mary's parish) was found on the lane outside his cottage on Tuesday, 20th August, 1968. Mr Duffy had two gunshots wounds to the head. Officers of the Garda Síochána attended the site after receiving an anonymous phone call. While the killing bears all the hallmarks of the methods used in UVF reprisals, a spokesman for that organisation has denied any responsibility. Mr Duffy was married, with three children.

When I look up from the cutting, Mum is gazing at me. Her eyes are red-rimmed, the soft skin under them is damp with tears. She's holding a balled tissue to her nose.

Why did they kill him?

He was the wrong religion, Joseph. That's all the reason those people need.

I glance down at the report before I speak. It says reprisal, though. Why does it say that? What had he done?

Mum turns her face away, stares into the fireplace, grey smoke rises from the black and orange coals. She shakes her head, quickly, like she's dismissing some private thought.

Mum?

I don't know, Joseph, she says. I don't know. Her shoulders begin to slowly rise and fall.

I reckon she does know, though, and part of me wants to push her hard for an explanation. The same part of me wants to throw the photo of Liam with the rifle at her, and to tell her that I think he's involved too.

I can't. Not seeing her upset like this.

I put a hand on her forearm and give it a little squeeze.

She turns to me, tears welling in her eyes. Oh, Joseph. I'm so, so sorry.

Her head drops and she starts crying, proper heaving sobs with her hands covering her face.

I put an arm around her, make little rubs on her back.

I brush away my tears with the back of my free hand.

It's OK, Mum, I tell her. I get up and bring her a wad of fresh Kleenex from the box on the windowsill.

When she takes the tissues from me she clasps my hand between both of hers and looks up at me. She smiles. You're a good lad, Joseph.

I sit down.

Mum wipes her face, blots her eyes. She blows her nose.

We sit quietly for a while, just the occasional crack and fizz from the coals.

When I fell pregnant with your sister, Mum says, it sparked something in me.

All this business was starting to flare up over there, the shootings and killings. I didn't want to bring a child up in that world. I kept on at your father, that we should move away, leave the country. It would be a fresh start for him. For all of us. He gave in to me, in the end. But then ...

I nod.

Was Dad —

I don't know, Joseph. Mum cuts in sharply.

She's deffo pullin the shutters down.

But this UVF lot don't just kill people for nothing, do they?

Mum's eyes harden on me. Oh, now, she says. Isn't one side as bad as the other – one murder leading to another. It's senseless.

Father Hill knows doesn't he? That's what you were talking to him about last week. I heard dad's name mentioned.

I had to speak to someone, Joseph.

Because you were worried when Liam didn't come back for his party?

I suppose that was it. That fella's a constant worry to me. But it's all explained now isn't it? This new job and what have you.

Yeah, I tell her, and she smiles.

Mum gets to her feet. I think I'll go up now.

It was just me and Liam in the Granby Street flat, a couple of days after they came back from the funeral. I asked him if heart attacks were painful. No, Liam said. It would've been like a lightbulb going out. He snapped his fingers. Daddy wouldn't have known a thing about it.

Earlier this year, a Saturday it must've been, coz I was listening to the football commentary on the radio. Mum was out at the shops and I was looking after Janey. My sister was sitting on the carpet holding a tea party for a couple of her dolls and an old action man of mine. After the match finished the news came on. Near the end of the report, the newsreader said that Mama Cass was dead. He said the rock singer had died of *suspected heart failure*. After a few minutes, Janey said, Joe? Was our Dad tragically young too? She was casually looking down at her dolls, laying them side by side on the carpet – I hadn't realised she was even listening. I felt a pang in my chest, just from the thought that my little sister had made the connection, and that she'd been sitting there thinking about it. I turned the radio off and sat next to her on the floor and I repeated what Liam had told me. I even clicked my friggin fingers.

I try to fill in the gaps, make sense of things. Like the hours between when Mum and Liam went off from Granby Street in the panda car and coming back and telling me about Dad. I picture them leaving the police station. Mum pale from the shock, Liam with his arm around her.

How will we tell Joe? Liam says, as they walk to the police car.

Mum crying, shaking her head, saying something through the sobs.

What did you say, Mammy?

Mum mopping tears from her face with a paper tissue, gathering herself and holding eye contact with Liam. I said, We'll not tell him.

We'll tell him it was the same way as your Granda Patsy.

We'll say his father would not have suffered.

Reprisal is one of the words Simm and Harry use – that and *tit for tat killings*.

I grab the little Collins from the shelf unit.

Reprisal is an act of retaliation. I flip through a few pages. Retaliation is an act of revenge. I flip again. Revenge is the desire to repay an injury or wrong.

Dad was murdered by the UVF in an act of revenge.

Tit for tat.

One thing leading to another.

Revenge follows retaliation follows reprisal.

Like in the play. What Macbeth says when he fears some comeback for him murdering the King.

It will have blood, they say. Blood will have blood.

Cocker said it means that one violent act generates other violent acts. He said the cycle of bloodshed becomes inevitable.

When I asked Liam what he'd been up to in Ireland last summer he told me tales of how he'd helped out with the threshing, driving the combine harvester, building the stacks. How he'd repaired a wall in the byre. How he'd picked spuds for Auntie Margaret in the back field, ripping them from the ground by the root-full and shaking off the dried clay.

Then, when my brother came home, Barry got him shifts on the stackers at Baines. He can only've been there a few weeks, a month tops, when his bust-up with Kenny happened. Liam didn't mention it. He didn't actually say he'd ditched the job until the following week. I heard Mum on the landing outside his bedroom – calling in to him, drumming a knuckle on the door, telling him he was gunna be late for work. Liam muttering something. Mum saying, What do you mean, *you've jacked it in?*

Francie and Enda arrived at the house the following Saturday morning – straight off the night ferry. They'd made a trip back to Ireland in the Transit van, they said. They were on their way back to London. I walked in on Mum and Liam, they were having this whispered argument in the kitchen. Mum was having a go at him coz he knew the cousins were coming but he'd not told her. He said he hadn't mentioned it coz he knew she'd only have conniptions about tidying the house and fretting over where the cousins would sleep. Liam told her not to worry, that Francie and Enda were staying in a bed and breakfast place a couple of streets away. You'll not be put out, Mammy.

In the evening Liam took them to the Jawbone.

I was lying in bed reading when I heard the ructions outside the front door. I got up and pulled on my jeans and went onto the landing and switched on the light. The cousins mocked and jeered as Liam tried to fit his key in the lock. Then the three of them blustered into the hall, my brother finishing some story, his voice raised after

a slew at last orders. A burst of laughter at the punch-line. Then Liam put a finger against his mouth to shush them. Their voices lowered, some new conflag started up. I stopped, rested a hand on the ball of the banister post. Francie was doing most of the talking, Enda's eyes were fixed on his older brother, Liam leaning in to hear. Francie's brows furrowed as he directed his words from Enda to Liam in turn, and he paused till he got a silent nod from them both. Then Francie had one hand out, first finger pointed, directing little stabs in the air in front of Liam's chest. I must've moved, must've caused some shift in the light, coz all of a sudden Francie was looking straight up the stairs at me – he quit talking, caught my brother's eye and flicked a look up in my direction. Liam turned, squinting, his hand raised to shade his eyes from the glare of the landing light behind me. He smiled, his hand palm out to me, almost like a wave.

The next morning, before it was daylight, Liam had gone off to London in the Transit with the cousins.

The usual mad Friday lunchtime rush is over, customers have collected their joints of beef and legs of lamb for the weekend.

Mr Simm sidles up. He stands beside me, his overcoat and hat on, watching as I scour the block table.

You alright, Joe? he says quietly.

I keep my head down, carry on scrubbing. I'm OK, I tell him.

You sure? Mr Simm says. You've been moping around all week. I hope you're not coming down with something. I'll need all hands on deck, with Christmas coming.

I'm fine, I tell him. I take the steel bucket and wire brush to the back room, spill the suds in the metal sink and get changed out of my work things. Mr Simm's been chippin in with these little concerned comments since I came back to work on Tuesday morning. I told him the doctor had said it was just a twenty-four hour thing. I've never seen Doctor Jewell in the butcher's, so it's unlikely he'll grass me up.

Mr Simm goes out for his mid-afternoon saunter around the strip-lit streets.

I'm staring idly out of the window when I see Cocker coming towards the shop. I feel my neck getting hot, coz I skipped his class last night. I open the door for him.

Hi, Joe, how's it going? His eyes flick around my face. You look a tad peaky.

I've had a stomach bug, I tell him. Sorry about the study group.

No, no, that's fine, he says. Your contribution was missed.

I'll be there next week.

Good. That's good.

Cocker smiles and pushes his glasses up and we're just standing looking at each other. I sweep a hand towards the window display. Can I get you anything?

Cocker laughs. No, I'm fine. I'd best get going. I've the afternoon off, so I'm riding the Norton down to Bristol for the weekend. I was passing by the precinct and I thought I'd swing in and check you were OK.

This is odd, coz the precinct's out of his way, if he was headed to the Mersey Tunnel.

Oh! Cocker says, and he holds up an index finger like a thought's just struck him. I've brought you something. He tugs the zip of his leather jacket down far enough for him to reach inside and bring out a book. I expect it's gunna be another novel he thinks I'll like.

The cover shows Nelson's Column, made to look like it's been tied in a knot.

Time Out's Book of London.

I was going to give it to you at the school last night, Cocker says. It's a general guide, but it covers all the major galleries, the Tate, the National. And there's a listing at the back of some of the smaller spaces, like the Hayward ... oh, and the ICA, they usually have some really out-there exhibition on.

I flick through the pages, then look up at him and smile. This is great, I tell him.

You're very welcome. I wasn't sure how soon you plan to visit. Thought I'd drop it off, just in case.

Saturday afternoon. I've just come back from delivering sirloins to the Merton Hotel. As I pass through the shop, Mr Simm goes, You've just missed one of your lady callers.

Was it Brenda?

Who? Simm says, looking confused. No, your brother's girl.

Veronica? When was this?

About ten minutes gone.

Simm takes an envelope from his apron pocket and hands it to me. She's left you a little billy-doo, he says, and he shuffles off to the walk-in.

The envelope is sealed. *Joe* is written on the front. I tear it open.

Meet me in the memorial gardens on your break, Veronica.

I'm coming through the park gates when I see her. She's sitting on the big stone steps around the base of one of the war monuments. As I get nearer, I see Veronica's gaze is fixed straight ahead, her chin tilted up a bit like she's watching the clouds drift above the roofline of the houses opposite the gardens.

I stop at her side. I'm only a couple of feet away, but she's so lost in thought that she doesn't know I'm here.

Vee?

Her eyes flicker and she turns her head quickly to me. She gasps, a hand to her chest. Christ Almighty!

I take a step back. Sorry.

You shouldn't creep up on people like that, Joe.

She looks pale, even with the pink blusher on her cheeks

You not feeling any better?

Veronica holds her legs slanted to one side, like a woman on the cover of one of Mum's knitting patterns. I sit beside her. She gathers in the edge of her fur-collared coat, tucks it under her thigh.

You've heard from him haven't you?

She nods. He's finished with me, she says, her voice flat.

You're kiddin!

Veronica turns to look at me, her eyes are hard and glassy. She's deffo not kiddin. She twists the clasp of her handbag and brings out an envelope and shows it to me. Liam's longhand scrawl. *Miss Veronica Fletcher*, her address. She holds the letter in her lap. I'm staring at her face, my mouth hanging open, but she's just gazing off into space again, making little slow shakes of her head.

I told you, didn't I?

I nod at the letter in her hand. What does it say?

He says it's not fair on *me*, him being away, not knowing when he'll be home. He says he doesn't want to hold *me* back. That it's for the best and that one day I'll understand. That's about it. Your brother's suddenly a man of few words.

I don't get it, I tell her.

Oh, I do, she says. I get it loud and clear.

One day you'll understand? What's that supposed to mean?

It means, Joe, that your brother is spouting all the crap that people say when they're dumping someone. *He doesn't want to hold me back?* Veronica scoffs. It means he's trying to make himself feel better about it, she says.

I'm sorry, I tell her.

A few scruffy pigeons are on the path in front of us, one of them pecks at a wet leaf, flips it. I kick a leg in their direction. The birds scatter, then start waddling back towards us.

Thing is, Joe, it's not quite as simple as he thinks, Veronica says.

What do you mean?

Her eyes are cold stones on mine. Are you still planning on going with Barry to see him in London?

Yeah.

When?

Soon. This weekend maybe. I tell her this coz I know it's the answer she needs before she says whatever it is she's holding back.

Why? I ask her. Do you want me to take a letter to him?

No, not a letter, Joe. I just want you to give him a message.

Sure.

And you have to promise me you'll tell only him. Not Barry or Grogan or that English teacher of yours. And definitely ... *definitely*, not your mother. Do you understand me?

Yeah.

Say it, Joe.

I promise.

Veronica looks at me for a couple of seconds. Then she glances both ways along the path. There's only a man, reading a newspaper, three benches along.

Her eyes are searching mine, like she's taking a moment to decide if she should speak.

Tell your brother he's going to be a father, she says.

I haven't got a single friggin thought in my head. I swallow, nod.

How —

I cut myself off. I don't know the words to use.

Veronica laughs. How do you think, Joe? The usual way.

You sure?

Veronica nods. I've had a test at the doctor's. She thinks I'm about six weeks gone.

I'm about to spout something about how could that be possible when Liam's been away for over two months, but I stop myself when I remember her going down to visit him in London. Him whisking her off to the seaside place.

What am I going to do, Joe? Veronica puts up a hand to shield her eyes.

What do you mean, Vee?

She turns and looks at me. Think about it, Joe. I'm nineteen. Your brother's dumped me. I can't bring a kid up on my own.

He'll be back at Christmas, though. Can't you talk to him about it then?

Christmas is nearly a month away. I'm not waiting for him to decide what he wants to do with his life.

You're not gunna do something ...

Something stupid? Veronica says, her eyes flaring. Thanks for that.

Sorry.

Just give him the message, Joe. She sounds more sad than angry now. That's all I ask. The rest is up to your brother. Can you do that for me?

I nod.

Veronica raises a faint smile. She leans across and kisses me on the cheek. Take care, Joe, she says, and she gets up and strides away.

I watch her leave the park and turn right along the pavement. I can see the top of her hair above the tall privets that border the gardens. She stops and bows out of sight behind the hedge for a couple of seconds then she walks quickly on.

A lump the size of an apple's lodged in my throat.

I tilt my head back until I'm looking straight up the tapering column, past the list of names on the plaque. At the top is a bronze statue, a soldier, the underside of his chin, the peak of his cap. He's looking out to somewhere beyond the trees and rooftops, gripping his rifle at the top of the barrel, the butt planted firm between his feet.

I leave the gardens. I can just about see Veronica, her green wool coat, among the other pedestrians further along on the Parade.

Something tumbles across the pavement a couple of yards ahead. A scrap of paper, a few more pieces lie around the base of a litter bin by the kerb. I glance across the privets at the monument where we sat. This is the place where she paused.

I pick up a ripped square of the letter.

Liam's handwriting.

...hold you back ... one day you ...

I gather the other scraps.

Barry's standing in his front doorway. The baby squalls and wriggles in his arms.

Calm down, lad, he says.

I stop blatherin, try to catch my breath.

We need to go this weekend, Baz.

This weekend? What's brought this on, Joe?

I dunno ... I just think Liam's ... in some kinda trouble down there.

Nah, Joe. It's like you said. He's gone off on one, that's all.

But you said ... you'd drive us down.

Barry's gently bouncing the baby, murmuring softly in its ear. It quietens, gurgles sleepily.

You don't even know his address, Joe.

No. But I know where I can get it. If we go this weekend you won't even need to ask Cliff for the time off.

Barry puts a palm up flat. Stop, Joe, he says. This is mad. I just can't just drop everything and go to London. I've got the little one to think of now. Maybe the other side of Christmas. Sorry, lad.

Villier's Brow, Unadopted Road. I ride the moped up the steep hill. At the crest is the steeple of St Alexander's, its spire black against the dark blue sky.

Halfway up the slope the bike sputters and dies. I leave it leaned against one of the trees that line the road.

The priest's house is a big old brownstone place with a pillared porch. A black Zephyr on the gravel drive. I hinge up the lion's head knocker and let it drop hard.

A light comes on in the hallway, the door opens. A tall old woman, grey hair pulled back in a tight bun. She's a regular at the butcher's, pork knuckles and back bacon, but she's not letting on she recognises me. I flash her a big smile. It doesn't soften the grim set of her mouth. Could I speak to Father Hill, please?

Old hair-bun flicks a glance towards the church, the dimly lit stained glass. He's conducting confessions, she says.

No one else in the church. I go to a pew near the front where I'll be seen. The dark wooden confessional box is along the wall on my right. In the quiet I can hear muffled voices. The priest's deep tone, a woman's response.

When the door of the confessional creaks opens the sound echoes around the church. The woman comes out and scuttles to the communion rail to kneel and say her penance prayers. It's Mrs Palmer, one of the women Mum works with at the biscuit factory.

After a couple of minutes Mrs Palmer crosses herself and pushes to her feet.

I sit forward, head dipped, fingers locked on top of the bench in front.

I hear the woman's steps coming down the aisle.

She passes me and leaves the church.

Another squeak of the confessional box door. I keep my head bowed, my forehead on my joined hands.

The quick clip of leather soles over the stone floor. The footsteps pause for a moment then start again, getting louder as they approach me.

Joseph?

I lift my head. Hello, Father.

Are you here for the sacrament? he asks. There's a hint of surprise in his voice.

No, Father. I just wanted some time to think.

He glances at my linked fingers. Is there something troubling you, Joe?

I shrug.

He glances around the church. You *can* talk to me, you know. He nods at the confessional box. I don't mean in there, he says. Off the record, so to speak. He smiles.

I hold eye contact, make my eyes a bit wide and hopeless without going overboard on it. It's my mum, I tell him. She's worried about my brother and I don't know what to do.

The priest turns to the front of the church, genuflects. He sits beside me on the pew, his hands folded in the lap of his cassock.

The lad in London? Liam isn't it? he says, his voice lowered, and his eyes soft with concern.

I nod.

I swallow a lump of fear before I come out with the lie.

Mum told me that you offered to have someone call in on him, check he was OK.

Oh, yes, he says, I remember. That would be Jerry O'Keefe, he's P.P. at Saint Mungo's in Kentish Town.

I nod and tell him that was it. I try to look properly pensive while I repeat this information in my head so I won't forget it. O'Keefe, Saint Mungo's, Kentish Town.

What's on your mind, Joe?

I just want to write to my brother and tell him to get in touch with Mum.

That sounds like a very considerate thing to do, the priest says.

I swallow again. It's just that I've lost his address, Father.

The priest gives me a kindly, level-eyed look. I cast my eyes around the walls, a gloomy painting of Jesus, the wooden cross on his shoulder, his body bent under the weight.

I remember more of what I earwigged the priest say to Mum.

Liam told me about the reference you gave him, for his digs in London, I thought you might have a copy, y'know, with my brother's address on it.

Aah, the priest says, nodding his head, all somber and sympathetic.

He's not gunna let me have it, is he? I feel stupid for even trying.

Right, right, Father Hill says. He lifts his chin and stares towards the vast empty space under the roof beams. OK, he says, turning his head to me. Here's how I suggest we play this, Joseph. I think what I should do is give the address to your mother, then she'll be able to write to Liam herself.

He's made it all sound bright and sensible. I drop my head. Don't do that, I mumble. If Mum knew I was talking to you about this she'd skin me.

Father Hill laughs. He rises from the pew seat, places his hand on my shoulder. I get you, he says. He taps a finger against the side of his nose and winks. She's a very proud woman, your mother.

I stand up. I'd best be going, I tell the priest.

Mum and Janey have just left the house for morning Mass.

I arrange the four scraps of Liam's letter so the torn edges match up. I read what he's written.

Dear Veronica, I hope this finds you well and I am very sorry I have not been in touch before now. Me working away like this is not fair on you. Especially as I have no notion when I will be home again. I do not want to hold you back. I think it is for the best that I do not contact you.

I hope one day you will understand. Liam

There's nothing more to it than Veronica said. I can see why she thinks he's finishing with her. Anyone would.

I feel like stuffing the letter into his gob till he gags on what he's written. I run a few strips of Sellotape across the joins. I do the same with the envelope and I fold the page in half and slide it inside. I hold the wrinkled envelope under my bedside lamp. The careless slant of Liam's handwriting. *Miss Veronica Fletcher, 160 Hawthorn Road.* A second-class stamp that the dickhead's not even bothered to square in the corner. The inky postmark shows the ringed date alongside a rectangle with a blurry image printed inside it. I turn the envelope over in case he's put a return address. Nothing.

I go to Liam's room and fetch the folded map from the drawer in his bedside unit and sit cross-legged on the bed. The mileage reckoner on the back cover shows Liverpool to London is 202 miles. I close my eyes for a moment to concentrate on working it out – seven hours doing thirty makes 210 miles. I trace my fingertip along the red felt-tip line marked on the roads, through the tunnel dotted under the Mersey,

along the A41 for the length of the Wirral then sharp right, down through Ellesmere Port, Chester, Wolverhampton, and into the wobbly circles around London.

I reach into the wardrobe and pull the Slazenger bag from the back and I put the map in the outside pocket so I can get to it easy. I go to my wardrobe and grab a jumper and a pair of clean underpants and stuff them inside. I gather the clutch of photographs in their rubber band and put them in with Liam's letter in its envelope and I put that in the bigger envelope with the stupid yacht race card I got him for his twenty-first. I spill the cash I've got onto the bed and count it. Enough for fuel and something to eat on the way, with a few quid to spare.

I'll only be away one night, two at the most.

I turn to the back pages of the *Silvine* and write *Cricklewood*.

When I heard Father Hill talking to Mum he told her that's where Liam said his digs are. It sounds like some country place, a little village with a stream trickling through it, surrounded by farmland and forests.

St Mungo's. Kentish Town. Father O'Keefe.

I'll get Liam's address from this London priest. I'll have to spin him some cock and bull, I don't know what, but I'll dream something up.

I'll go to the Cricklewood digs and knock hard on the door like a friggin copper would.

Liam's gunna get it from me big style.

About him lying to me about Dad.

About how he has the heart tore out of Mum.

About our wild animal cousins and whatever shit he's got himself involved in.

About dumping Veronica the way he has.

He'll try and smile his way out of it all. There'll be stories spun.

I've been wantin to tell you for ages.

Ah, but doesn't Mammy worry over nothin.

Sure, that's only me and the lads out on a rabbit hunt.

Ach, Veronica's alright, Joe – but wait'll ye meet Belinda!

I'll listen for a while as he spews all his tales.

Oh, Liam, I forgot to mention, Veronica asked me to give you a message.

His face when I tell him.

He'll phone Veronica.

He'll jack in his job down there.

He'll come home.

It feels like everything's started to crumble and it's about to come crashing down in pieces.

It's up to me to hold it all together.

I'm dotting a Biro on the corner of a blank page of the Silvine.

She's gunna worry, whatever I write.

Best to keep it short and simple.

I've gone to London to stay with Liam for a couple of days. I'll be in touch.

Love, Joe.

I tear out the page and fold it in half and write *Mum* on it. I grab the packed Slazenger from the wardrobe, stick the notebook in the side pocket and go onto the landing.

I leave the note on the carpet outside her bedroom door. It's dark in there, she won't be up for half an hour.

I take the treads slow, a hand to the banister rail.

In the hallway I fasten up my greatcoat, pull on my wool hat and sling the bag slantwise across my chest.

On the step, I put my key in the door and twist it so there's no click from the snitch.

I jog over to Grogan's estate.

The engine starts up smoothly, not even a hiccup. At the T-junction for the main road I slow to a stop and set down a boot, glancing both ways for a break in the traffic. If I turned left I could follow that green 54 bus to the precinct. I'd be waiting outside the butcher's when Mr Simm arrives. He'd do a double-take and check his watch and say, Bloody hell, Joe, what happened? Shit the bed did you?

I flip on the right indicator, lift my foot from the ground, and with a twist of revs I drive the bike through a gap between two cars and join the flow of traffic towards the city.

The route is pretty straightforward. I've memorised the first part of the red line marked on Liam's map. Once I'm through the Mersey tunnel I'll follow the A41 till Wolverhampton, that's about half way, I should be there by lunchtime. I'll get some grub, fill up the petrol tank, then take the turn-off and follow the A5. I should be in London by late afternoon. I'll find my way to Kentish Town and see this O'Keefe priest, get the address of Liam's digs, turf up at his door.

I'm in a queue slowed up for a roundabout. I check the wristwatch, just gone half-nine.

I push on and take the exit signposted Chester, Nantwich, Birmingham.

Mum'll be at work. The women she works with on the conveyor line will be asking if she's OK.

Mr Simm's giving early customers short shrift. He's thinking I've thrown a Monday morning sickie, and he's in a huff coz I've not phoned in yet.

Janey will be sitting cross-legged with the other kids in her classroom while the teacher reads to them.

And Brenda, will she be thinking of me? Doubt it. She obviously reckons the bike's a pathetic joke, and me along with it.

The traffic's thinned. The road's widened to a dual carriageway, I twist back the throttle and the bike bucks and whines as it picks up speed. Sharp sun flashes through the passing hedgerows. No heat in the light though, my fingers are pink from the cold, my knuckles white.

I picture Veronica – forcing a smile as she hands a prescription bag across the counter, then puts a hand to her belly as the customer walks away.

There's an angry cough from the bike. The speedo needle's quivering around the twenty-five mark. There's a clattering noise in the guts of the machine, like it's gargling a clutch of steel ollies. A lorry flies past me, horn blasting, it sends me off-course, onto the verge, the wheels bumping over the grass. I brake to a stop. I set both feet down, shut off the engine. Sudden quiet. Birds singing. The bastard truck now way on up ahead. A couple of bozos pissing themselves laughing in the cab I bet.

My head's pumping blood.

Here's two fingers, fuckers.

I twist the ignition key. Nothing. Just a dull click. I try again. Dead. Fucks sake.

I glance around me, looking for something to blame. A crow lands on a metal five-bar gate and gives me a beady eyed look, like it thinks I'm a knobhead, then flaps off into the field.

I dig my heels, push hard on the grips and grapple the moped onto the road. I get off and walk the bike along.

Cars and lorries leave a gust of fumes as they speed by.

With each full turn of the wheels the brakes clamp and a jolt shoots up my arms.

The main street of the village is a terrace of houses. A general shop, a chippy on the corner that's not open yet.

There's a phone box. I prop the bike and haul the door open.

I dial.

Simm's Quality Meats. Can I help you?

It's Joe, Mr Simm. Sorry I've not turned in. I need a couple of days holiday.

Are you kiddin? You can't just wake up and decide you're taking a holiday, Joe. He chuckles. I reckon he's playing this up for laughs in front of a customer.

I forgot to ask you last week. I'm on my way to London to see Liam.

Pointless me saying no then, isn't it? If you're already on your bleedin way.

I imagine him rolling his eyes to the customer.

Sorry.

Not on this, Joe, Mr Simm says. He sighs. I've got Mrs Fitzgerald waiting here. I'm gunna have to go. We'll talk about this when you're back.

I buy a packet of cheese and onion and sit on a concrete bench. I unzip the Slazenger bag and take out the road map and start on the crisps.

When the bike broke down I'd only just passed the turn-off to Chester. The ready reckoner table says Chester is thirty miles from Liverpool. I've got nowhere. At this rate it'll be the other side of Christmas before I get to London. I should've listened to the teacher. Get the bike professionally serviced, all that. Wise in everything, is Mr Cocker. I glance at the telephone box while I crunch. I think about calling him at St Augustine's. I could get the number of the school from directory enquiries. But it's a another friggin stupid idea. As if the bun-loaf secretary's gunna agree to haul him out of some A-level class to provide me with technical assistance. Anyway, Cocker'd throw a fit if he knew I've been riding the moped, never mind that I'm heading to London on the bastard thing.

I cram in another mouthful.

An old man has stopped in front of the bike. He's having a proper good squint at it. He lifts his eyes to me. I saw you along the way, he says. Given up the ghost, has she?

I just give him a couple of nods, pretend my gob's too full to speak. He might be bored shitless out here in the middle of nowhere, but I'm not in the mood for chit-chat. He gets the message coz he moves on. When he's at the shop door he stops and looks back. He smiles. There's a garage further on, he says, and he flicks a nod along to where the village ends and the hedgerows start.

I prop the moped by the fuel pump and go into the small pebble-dashed building. On one wall of the shop there's a pinboard display of spares. O rings, spark-plugs, replacement headlamp bulbs. The packets are grubby and curled at the corners, like they've been hangin there since Adam was a lad.

I call, Hello?

Nothing.

Outside, a man in baggy-arsed overalls stands with his hand on the pump dispenser.

Fill her up, shall I? he says, an eyebrow cocked.

I don't think fuel's the problem, I tell him. I twist the ignition key so he hears the dead click.

The fella winces. He comes around beside me. Stand aside a sec, he says, let the dog see the rabbit. He squats at the side of the bike, peers at the engine block, pinches away leafy matter stuck to the drive chain.

He straightens and wipes off his palms on the sides of his overalls. You local? he asks.

Liverpool, I tell him, but I'm headed to London.

He looks at me like I've said I'm on a mission to Mars. He shakes his head. Nah, he says, not on that you're not.

He gives little tugs to his earlobe as he thinks.

I ask him if he can get it going again.

The man laughs. Not worth my time, lad, he says. These little 50cc jobs aren't economical to repair.

I shake my head. What the frig do I do? I say this more to myself than to him.

I'm standing here in front of him, clueless, just staring gormlessly at his face like there's gunna be an answer there.

Take it to the scrappy if I was you, the fella says. Never know, they might bung you a few bob for it. He smiles.

It's my brother's bike, I tell him. So it's not my decision.

The man reaches a clump of money from the breast pocket of his overalls, peels off a few grubby notes. Tell you what I'll do, he says. Take this and I'll stow the moped for ya. Then, if you or your brother come back before Christmas with the fiver, you can take the bike away.

And what if we don't?

He shrugs. I'll strip it for bits. I might even fix it up meself, bit of a project like.

It needs to be kept dry, I tell him.

The mechanic laughs. Expert now, are ya?

I take the cash.

The man grapples the moped around and wheels it across to a workshop building. I follow him.

He goes to a bench and rummages about in the clutter on top.

There's a calendar on the wall, *Trucks and Trucking, November 1974*. A bottle blonde gripping a big monkey wrench, her massive jugs smeared with engine oil.

He holds out a little card to me. I take it. *John Crilly, Automotive Engineer*. He's left an oily thumb print on it.

Any idea how I get home from here?

If you walk into the village you can jump a bus as far as Chester. There's a train and coach station there.

It's taken me an hour to get here. I walk from the bus bay and into the station building.

Behind the ticket window a man is chewing slowly as he reads a paperback splayed open by his thumb. I tap a coin on the glass. The man looks up.

What time is the next coach to Liverpool?

They're on the hour, son.

Cheers.

I glance at the clock on the wall behind him. Twenty past three.

If I get the four o'clock coach I'll be home by six. No-one would even know I'd been gone. Tomorrow morning I could turn up for work and give Mr Simm some cock and bull about feeling bad for letting him down.

There's a couple of hooded payphones on the wall outside the station café.

I take out the Silvine. I find the page where I've written down the phone numbers. Father O'Keefe.

The number Uncle Eugene gave me for his pal in London.

Mrs Fisher's.

Veronica's house.

I dial.

Hello?

That you, Vee?

Hi, Joe. It's the flat tone again.

I'm in Chester.

Right, Veronica says. You're phoning to tell me that?

I was on my way to London.

London? she says, sounding a bit brighter. You with Barry?

No. He couldn't make it, so I took the moped.

Hang on, Veronica says. Liam's moped? That thing's a death-trap.

Yeah, well it's totally frigged now.

Does your mother know where you are?

I left her a note.

I hear what sounds like a sigh down the line. Jesus, Joe, Veronica says. As if she doesn't have enough to worry about. You need to call her.

She told me what happened to my dad, Vee. You knew, didn't you?

Ah, OK, Veronica says. Sorry, Joe. Your brother had me sworn to secrecy.

And even after the way he's behaved I didn't think it was my place to tell you something like that. Are you alright?

I just feel a bit weird about it.

I can sort of understand why they kept it from you at the time, Veronica says.

You weren't much older than Janey is.

Yeah, s'pose.

You jumpin a coach back to Liverpool?

I thought you wanted me to tell Liam about ... y'know. What you told me in the memorial gardens. I thought you'd be pleased I was going.

Yeah, but I didn't think you'd set off on your own on some wild flippin goose chase. Veronica sighs. Just get yourself home, Joe. Forget about what I told you – it's my problem, and I'll deal —

Vee?

My dad's pulling onto the drive, Joe. I'd best hang up.

I sit on a bench. I feel stuck. I don't know what to do. My leg starts jiggling and I put a hand on my knee to still it.

Stupid fucken Macbeth comes into my head – the bit about him having stepped so far into blood that he might as well carry on. Cocker called it arriving at the point of no return – and here it is, at friggin Chester coach terminus.

I go up to the ticket window again.

I dig what cash I've got from my jeans pocket and spill it on the counter, start sorting it.

C'mon son, are you buying a ticket or what? The man flicks a look over my shoulder. A woman is waiting behind me.

How much is it to London?

The driver opens a hatch in the side and starts loading the luggage. Because I've only my sports bag I'm one of the first on and I grab a spec on the right, by the window, halfway along. Someone's left a Daily Mirror. I pick the newspaper up and put my bag on the empty seat beside me. I open the paper and look at it. I don't want some nutter trying to talk to me all the way to London.

A passenger pauses in the aisle.

If I don't see them, then they're not there.

I start reading a report. A bomb's been chucked through the window of some fancy restaurant in London. No one dead. Police have raided a house in the north of the city that they suspect is connected to the recent surge in IRA activity. There's a photograph of a block of maisonettes, a uniformed copper posted at one of the front doors.

I try to picture Liam taking part. Of him setting a detonator and planting some incendiary device. Hard as I try I can't see it. The Liam I imagine doing these things

isn't the Liam I know. He doesn't look like him. He's smaller, his beard is the wrong colour, and when he smiles that's not right either. I try to push the notion out of my head. But other images keep flashing. Liam with the rifle. Liam deckin Kenny for what he said about the Irish. Mum crying when I asked what Dad had done for him to get killed by the UVF. Mrs Fisher watching Liam set off in the Transit with Francie and Enda that morning.

I flip the page. There's more stuff about Lord Lucan, the toff that's done a runner, suspected of murdering the nanny. I can't make head nor tail of it to be honest. Belgravia. Mayfair. Kilburn. I can't see the relation between the areas.

How am I ever going to find Liam in that fucken place?

The bus rumbles and shakes as the engine comes on and the interior lights above the aisle go dark.

It's started raining. I lay my head against the window, the white lines clock by, the lights of cars speeding past, red tail-lights misted and twisting in the spray from the tyres.

I try to form pictures in my head. Liam finishing work, bumming a lift back to his digs. Or Liam jumping an underground train from his building site. Or one of the lads he works with says, What do you say we grab a couple of pints, Duffy? Have you ever known me refuse? Liam says. Or he goes, No lads, I'm feckin dog-tired so I'm off home for a kip. Then he tramps along, his boots clagged with mud.

Through the window the moon's bright and full, hanging above a blur of trees at the top of the motorway embankment like it's travelling with the coach.

Liam's in London looking up at the same moon as it moves between the roof ridges and chimney stacks.

The coach is winding through city streets. I lean over the empty seat and ask the man across the aisle where we are.

Birmingham, he says.

We pull in under the bright lights of the coach station. A few people are waiting at the bay. I angle my face to the window while they get on and settle in their seats.

This taken? I look up. A girl is smiling at me.

I lift the Slazenger and put it on the floor between my feet.

Thanks. The girl puts a carpetbag on the seat.

From the corner of my eye I watch as she unbuttons her mint green raincoat, shrugs it off and folds it neatly over. She stretches up to place it on the overhead rack. She has to go up on her toes, her heels rising slightly from the back of her shoes. About twenty, I reckon she is.

I pick up the carpetbag. The girl steps back as I come into the aisle and put it up above. I sit back down.

That's so kind, she says. Weighs a blinking ton, that thing, she says, and she gives a cheery little sigh as she settles herself beside me. There's a brief waft of some flowery perfume.

London? she asks, an eyebrow raised.

Yeah. Are you?

She smiles. Sure am.

I turn my head, as though I'm looking past her to see out of the far side window as the coach reverses. I sneak a look at her. She has her eyes closed, but I know she's awake coz she's sitting properly upright, a little private smile on her face.

She's lovely.

I close my eyes too.

I wake.

The girl in the next seat is leaned forward, smiling at me, but a little frown too.

Are you OK? she says, her eyes flicking about my face. I rub a hand over my eyes.

We're stopped. People are filing towards the front of the vehicle. Outside is a wide space of floodlit gravel, other coaches parked up. A man arching his back.

I turn to the girl. Is this London?

She smiles. Watford Gap, hun. She stands and reaches her coat down from the rack and puts it on. She pulls a silky lemon scarf from the pocket, and loops it around her neck. She waves her hand in front of my face. She laughs. You're still half-asleep. Come and get a breath of fresh.

I hoist the Slazenger over my head and follow her off the coach.

I'll see you over there, in a minute. The girl nods towards a trailer at the edge of the land, a few people gathered at a hatch, a woman reaching down from its brightness with a steaming cup. She flicks me a smile over her shoulder as she goes towards the toilet block. Milky coffee, she says, one sugar.

I take off my wool hat and palm my hair flat and push the long strands behind my ears.

Cheers. The girl raises the Styrofoam cup to her mouth, pouts a blow, takes a sip.

You work in London too? She cocks her head, brow crumpled as she watches my face. Assuming you *have* left school. She winks.

I'm going to stay with my brother. I take a sip of my tea.

Good for you, she says. I've just had a weekend with my sister in Birmingham. What's your plan in the big city?

Probably go to a few galleries, the ICA, places like that.

Arty type, are you? she says. Me too.

And I might look around for a job while I'm there. I've been thinking of moving down. As soon as I say it I feel stupid. But it also feels good, like I can be someone else by just saying things.

Oh, I see, she says. She nods slowly, her eyes on mine. She's one of those girls who aren't always looking over your shoulder for someone more interesting.

What line of work are you in? she asks.

I'm an apprentice automotive engineer, I tell her.

The girl plumps her bottom lip. Oh, right, she says. That sounds interesting. She gives a little sigh. Good jobs are hard to come by, even in London.

I snatch a glance at her face, she's looking down at the little curls of steam rising from her coffee. Ice blue eyes behind long eyelashes.

I ask her what she does for work. She tells me she's a junior seamstress in the rag trade, and she gives me the name of the place. She must twig my blank look coz she says it again, *A la Mode*. It's French for snazzy, she says, y'know, *with it*.

I knew that, I tell her.

The girl laughs, coz she knows I didn't have a clue. The job's pretty boring, to be honest with you, she says. Sewing up the same tedious patterns over and over, when I'd rather be making my own stuff. She tells me how she's doing night classes in textile design so she can get the qualifications to apply to one of the big fashion houses.

I like listening to her, she's got a posh southern voice, but she's not stuck-up, not like Brenda said. She smiles and her eyes flash as she talks about her future.

I tell her I'm studying too, and that I'll be retaking some exams next year, then I'll probably do A-levels. I tell her that I want to study English at college.

Jesus, I'm talking like a complete knobhead, bangin on about the better version of me that Cocker imagines.

You're a man of many parts, she says. Good for you. She leans in and bumps her shoulder against mine and I get a drift of her flowery scent again.

He meeting you at Victoria? The brother?

Yeah, he's meeting me at Victoria. I take another swig of my brew, cold as a witch's tit, the tea now. There's loud revs from behind us, we both turn at the sound. The coach's inside lights are stuttering on, people are going back to their seats.

We'd best get on.

She nods, puts out a hand. I'm Sarah, she says.

I'm John, I say.

She holds her smile and keeps eye contact as we shake hands.

As we walk back to the coach, I feel my cheeks flushing. I don't know why I've lied to her. The mechanic's name just sprung into my head. Suddenly I'm John Crilly, a trainee automotive engineer who's aiming to study English, and I'm heading to London to look for work, and I'm talking to a gorgeous girl. And all of it feels like it's the most natural thing in the world.

We came off the motorway nearly an hour ago. The chat's been good. Sarah's older sister Jenny is studying medicine at Birmingham University. Jenny's the brains in the family. Their dad lives on the Isle of Wight now. The mum lives in the family house in Surrey, near Epsom, where the racecourse is. Sarah said it's dull as ditchwater, her home town. I asked if that's why she left. That was part of it, she said. But things weren't right. She stopped then. Go on, I said. I won't bore you with the details, she said. I'm not bored, I told her. Aren't you the proper charmer, John. But some other time. I couldn't help but smile when she said that. She told me she had her job lined

up and a room in a boarding house in London before she'd even left school. Her landlady's a tyrant, but the rate is affordable and it's handy for work and it's good to be central. She's nineteen.

God, listen to me, she says now. I've only just met you and I've been blathering away like I've known you for years. She takes a deep breath and turns to me, a little frown line on her forehead. Tell me about you. How old are you, for starters?

I'm nearly eighteen.

Sarah holds my gaze for a couple of seconds. Then her eyes flicker and she's looking past me. Ooh, hello! she says, and she turns this way and that, lifting herself to get a better view through the windows each side of the coach. We're at Archway, I could walk home if I got off here.

I glance out, it's just another row of shops – launderettes, grocers, pubs – like the ones we've been passing for the last half an hour.

She slumps back in her seat, glum. I've tried before, mind. These drivers are all bloody jobsworths. She makes a sing-song sigh.

Maybe Sarah would prefer to stay sat here on the coach talking to me.

I remember the name of the place where Father Hill said Liam's digs are.

Are we near Cricklewood?

Not really. It's this side of the river, but over Paddington way, I think. She holds eye contact. Is that where your brother lives then?

Yeah, I think so, I tell her.

She looks puzzled. You need to get hold of one of these. She picks a book from her handbag. *A to Z Streetmap of London*. I'd be lost without mine, she says. She gives the book a little waggle and wedges it between the side of the seat and her thigh.

You *would* be lost without it.

She doesn't laugh. I feel my face getting red again.

I ask her whereabouts she lives.

She looks at me, pulls a horrified face. I can't be telling you that now, can I?

You might be a maniac. Or one of those sexual perverts. She gives me a once-over with her eyes. You've got that look to you.

I keep a straight face. I'm actually wanted for murder, I tell her.

Sarah hoots so loud that a woman in front of us puts her face to the seat gap for a moment, looks at each of us in turn. Sarah claps a hand to her mouth, her shoulders bobbing.

You are a funny one, John, she says. She dabs the skin under her eyes with a tissue.

We're at a big roundabout, a fountain with a column in the middle, a gold statue of a winged woman, her bare arms flung high. Along the aisle, passengers rise and reach coats and bags and parcels down from above. Sarah opens a compact and applies some powder to her cheeks. She does her lipstick, watching her open mouth in the little round mirror. She folds a paper tissue to a triangle and closes her lips on it.

I stand and Sarah angles her knees to let me by. I bring her carpetbag down from the rack. Aw, such a gentleman. Not many like you left, she says, sounding jolly. As I set the bag in front of her feet she puts her hand on my arm. Thank you, John.

I swallow a lump of fear before I speak. Do you think you might fancy meeting up while I'm here?

She's smiling, holding my eyes. You know what, John? I think I would. How long you going to be in town?

A few days at least, I tell her. The lies are trippin out of me without even havin to think them up.

Sarah snaps her handbag open and brings out a pen and her coach ticket. She scribbles something. Here, take this. It's the number of the payphone at my digs. If I don't answer one of the other girls will take down a message for me.

I'm holding the ticket, looking at the name she's written beside the number.

Sarah Burgess.

We could have a coffee, or a drink. In Soho, maybe?

Great! I go ... where's that?

Sarah laughs. She holds out the A to Z. Here, take this.

I flick through the pages, the endless network of streets.

Won't *you* need it? I ask.

You can give it back when I see you, she says, with a wink.

Sarah said she'd best get a wiggle on, before the tube closed for the night. See you soon then, John. She smiled and gave the top of my arm a little rub then walked away. She stopped on her way into the underground and looked down at her purse for a moment. I was willing her to turn and give a last wave and smile. It didn't work. She went quickly down the steps and out of sight.

I'm on one of the benches at the edge of the station concourse. The barriers to the platforms have closed and the expanding gate's been pulled across the underground entrance.

The malarkey with the friggin moped has slowed me down. It's too late to go to Kentish Town and start tracking down this O'Keefe priest. I'll just curl up on this bench for a few hours' kip and start fresh first thing tomorrow. I glance around before I lie down. There's two uniformed coppers at the far side of the concourse, ambling

along together. They pause by a fella who's sweeping the floor – he plaits his hands on top of the broom handle as they chat. The policemen continue their patrol, hands tucked at their backs. They stop by a shuttered heel-bar where a woman with ratty hair is sitting cross-legged, smoking. One of the coppers hunkers beside her. The woman stands up and gathers her bags and her blanket and shuffles towards one of the arched exits.

I leave the station. Fine rain slanting. I jog across the road to a row of lit bus shelters.

I pull out the guidebook that Cocker gave me.

There's a chapter called Accommodation. I turn to the page and trail a finger down the printed columns.

Hotels. London offers a range of luxury ...

Bed and Breakfast. For the more price conscious visitor ...

Hostel Accommodation. When budgets are tight, these no-nonsense ...

At the bottom of each property it shows the nearest underground station.

There's one that shows Victoria tube.

Europa Hostel. 51, Warwick Square, Pimlico.

I bring out the A to Z and flip to the index.

From across the road the house looks grand.

I climb the steps. The white paint on the stone porch columns is flaked.

Through the door's glass panel I see a man sitting behind a desk, his head dipped like he's reading. As I enter the man looks up, sleepy-eyed.

How much for one night? I ask him.

The man closes a magazine and shifts it aside. He picks up a sheet of paper and hands it to me. Here you go, he says.

Tariff Card is printed at the top.

I scan down the column showing the nightly rate.

Dormitory, extended stay is cheapest. Then *Shared room, extended stay*.

I don't fancy kippin with a bunch of dossers.

I hand the sheet back to the man and start diggin the cash from my jeans pocket. The five grubby one-ers John Crilly gave me, a palmful of slummy. I've enough for one night, two at a stretch. I pick out the right money and put it on the desk.

A single for one night, please.

The man drags a drawer open and takes something out. He raises his hooded eyes to me. First floor, he says, pointing the key over his shoulder at a set of brightly lit lino-covered stairs. Breakfast is not included. Facilities are at the end of your landing.

I head up.

I flick on the light and lock the door behind me.

A metal-framed bunk. A small Germolene coloured basin fixed to the wall. I sit on the edge of the thin mattress and un-lace my boots and heel them off, the bedsprings wheezing and creaking.

I go to the window, shift the thin curtain to one side. The wet pavement flags shine orangey from streetlamps. I push up the sash and lean through the opening. Cool air laced with petrol fumes. Railed gardens opposite. At the corner the traffic lights trip – red, red and amber, green. The road is empty of traffic. Not totally silent though. There's an underlying noise, something like the hum of a distant engine idling.

I imagine the dark city as some enormous creature that's laid down for the night, and the low sound is its slow breathing as it sleeps.

I sit at the dresser unit and unzip the Slazenger and take out my Silvine.

I find the coach ticket between the pages. The girl's written her name and phone number along one edge and around a corner. *Sarah Burgess*. Her smile as she held it out for me to take from her fingers. I pick up the ticket and bring it to my nose like I might breathe a faint echo of her perfume. It smells of damp cardboard.

I pull off my wool hat and comb my fingers through my hair. I stare at myself in the middle mirror. I wonder if Sarah's mentioned me to anyone. Maybe she chatted to one of the other girls in her lodgings. Or she's called her sister in Birmingham to let her know she'd arrived home safe. *I met this lad on the coach. He's come down to stay with his brother while he looks for work. An automotive engineer, he is. We're going to meet up for a coffee in Soho.*

I realise that my reflection is smiling back at me.

I raise my hand, widen my smile.

Hello, I'm John Crilly. Pleased to meet you.

I go to the bed and lie back on top of the covers.

A flush from the landing, someone walks past my room, his hacking cough shut off by the thud of a door closing.

My bones are heavy, my eyelids drooping.

A stringy cobweb sways from the bare lightbulb.

A dingy Artexed ceiling – my eyes follow spiral after spiral to their centres.

Kentish Town? the woman at the ticket window says. You want the northbound Piccadilly Line, dahlin'. Change at Warren Street for the Northern.

Along an arched tunnel. Everyone's walking double quick, their faces set forward like they all know where they're going and they're already late.

I stop in the middle of a junction, another lane cutting across, bodies side-step and weave past each other as if it's some dance they've learned from rehearsing it every day. I turn a slow circle among the crowd, looking up at the curved walls. There's an arrow for the Piccadilly Line.

Someone passing brushes roughly against my side. Look lively! the man says as he strides ahead, a briefcase clasped under his arm.

You lost, honey? a woman says. She's stopped beside me. A long kaftan, coloured beads in her hair, round glasses with purple lenses. She smiles.

I'm alright. Thanks. I smile back at her and move on.

There must be forty or fifty people along the platform. The quiet's weird. Back home, even if it's just me and some old bird waiting for the bus to the precinct some chat'll spark – it's too hot or it's too cold or the weather can't make up its blummin mind.

A rumble grows from the tunnel. A hot gust of dry air. A taste of copper coins in my throat.

I get on and stand by the carriage door gripping a hanging strap. I sway and stagger with the tilt and lurch. Hemmed by bodies, their eyes fixed on newspapers, or dragging on ciggies as they gaze blearily into space.

I change at Warren Street.

The train jolts to another stop. I dip my head. Euston. Where Liam would've got his train on his birthday.

A woman stares dumbly at me from the platform. I get the message and step back to let her on. Deffo one of the uppity types.

There's a few market stalls on the street outside the station, one of them selling hot food. I buy a bacon roll. When the man's handing over my change I ask him if he knows where St Mungo's church is. He thinks for a minute, wagging a finger in his lughole, then he turns and calls to the woman at the neighbouring clothes stall.

Saint Mungo's? Yeah, she says, looking at me. It's on Priory Gardens, love. She nods along the road, 'bout 'alf a mile.

Cheers.

I find the page in the A to Z and Biro the route.

Buses and trucks and cars churn on the roundabout behind me.

Blistered gold letters at the top of the signboard.

St. Mungo's Roman Catholic Church – P.P. Fr. J. O'Keefe SBD.

I put a hand to the gate lever and push through.

Half way up the path I stop coz there's a noise from the entrance, one of the big double doors opening.

An old coloured woman comes out. Hefty, in a baggy grey rain mac, a purple fur hat clamped on her head. She carries a metal bucket down the steps and spills sudsy water into the grid of a downpipe – a smell of pine disinfectant. On her way back to the entrance she casts me a wary glance. She reaches the bucket inside and locks up.

The woman comes towards me on the path. When she's near I cast a glance over her shoulder. Is Father O'Keefe in there?

The church is closed, the woman says as she passes me.

I turn and walk alongside. Her gaze is fixed forward.

When we reach the gate I rest my hand on the latch. The old girl raises her face to me, alarm in her widened eyes.

I smile. Is the priest's house close by?

The woman doesn't reply, just glares at my hand.

I open the gate for her.

She gives me an up and down look and steps onto the pavement.

I'm not a down and out, I call to her as she walks away. I just need a quick word with him.

I walk up to the church doors and land a couple of solid thumps with the curl of my fist. The booms echo dully inside. I take a few steps back and cast around the grounds. There's a run of flagstones down the side of the church. I check over my shoulder in case anyone's watching from the street.

Tucked away at the rear of the building is a concreted area, a couple of rubbish bins. I lift a lid. There's just some scraps of newspaper and sodden leaf mould, a burnt-out candle stump. A brown envelope is stuck with wet on the bottom. I grab a brush that's leaned in the corner of the yard and poke and scrape the pole end around. I flick the envelope loose. I have to lean my upper body into the reek. I swallow back a retch.

Got it.

I pull the sodden paper from the envelope.

Dear Father O'Keefe,

Re: Boiler and Heating Contract Renewal

There's an address at the top. I take out Sarah's A to Z.

Vauxhall Gardens is on the opposite page from the church.

I glance at the houses as I go. The street isn't the kind you'd expect a priest to live on. Tree roots have muscled through the pavement slabs and the upper branches end in stumpy fists. Stubby front areas, unkempt hedges, tattered greying nets pinned on windows whose white stone surrounds are grimed. No gravelled driveways like the presbytery at St Alexander's.

I stop outside the house, 137 stickered in silver on the fanlight.

If I don't try this then what else have I got to go on?

I take a deep breath and step up to the door. I give two sharp raps with the letterbox handle. I pull off my wool hat and stuff it in my greatcoat pocket and rake my hair back with my fingers.

Shunt and rattle, bolts being drawn.

The door opens.

The old bloke's in a ribbed white singlet, trouser braces hanging looped from their clips. His eyes frisk me. What is it? he says. His mouth looks narked, like it's permanently stamped that way.

I'm sorry to bother you, I tell him. I'm looking for Father O'Keefe.

The man reaches for something on a ledge inside, brings out some big brown-framed glasses, fits them on.

Yes, he says. How can I help? The lenses magnify his sharp green eyes.

I flash him a polite smile. Morning, Father. I need your help. I've come to London to stay with my friend, but I've lost his address.

Your friend? the priest says, his eyes narrowing. Does he live in this parish?

I think so, I tell him. Or close to here.

The priest canters his head. What's his name, this friend of yours?

Liam. Liam Duffy.

There's a tiny flinch in the priest's eyes as he stares at me.

He nods. You'd best come inside for a minute, son. He steps back to let me pass.

The gloomy hallway is baking hot. The only light is from the element of a red bulb under a Sacred Heart picture on the wall.

The priest fumbles with the latch. I hear the solid clunk as he turns the deadlock. He slips the key into his trouser pocket.

Can't be too careful around here, he says as he pads past me.

I follow him into a small kitchen at the back of the house.

The priest flaps a hand at a chair by a Formica topped table. Take the weight off for a minute, son, he says. I was just about to have a cup of tea. He turns away to the sink.

I sit on the edge of the chair, the Slazenger bag in my lap. My legs starts jiggling.

Do you know him then, Father?

He fills a kettle and sets it on a ring of the hob. The gas ignites with a soft pop.

I stand up. Liam's gunna be waiting for me at his digs, I tell him.

He turns to me, rests against the counter with his arms folded, a kindly smile.

And what do we call *you*, son?

I'm John, I tell him. John Crilly. I pull the mechanic's crumpled card from my greatcoat pocket and hold it up for him.

The priest leans forward, squints as he reads. You're an automotive engineer?

I put my hand to my throat to hide a swallow. Yeah. I've come all the way from Chester. Liam's gunna be wondering where I am.

Yes, of course. You wanted his address.

Yeah. Thanks, Father.

I'll sort that for you now. I'll not be a minute.

The priest leaves the kitchen and slowly draws the door closed behind him, looking in at me until it's fully shut.

The kettle starts a rising whistle. I glance at the door, thinking the priest will come back at the sound. The pitch rises higher, steam starts rattling the tin lid. I go to the cooker and turn the ring off. As the sound dies away, I hear a muffled voice from inside the house.

Maybe the priest's talking to his housekeeper.

I open the door a crack.

It's quiet, then Father O'Keefe's voice. I can't make out his words.

I take a couple of steps forward into the dim hallway.

No, Stewart, he's fine. There's another pause.

Some fantastical tale he's concocted, O'Keefe says. There's another gap then the priest clucks a laugh. I will, Stewart. I'll phone them right away.

Call me Stewart. Father Hill. How the frig does *he* know I'm down here?

And who's gunna be called right away? The coppers?

Lovely, bye now. God bless.

The ding of the handset.

Father O'Keefe comes out of the room and he stops up short in the hallway, the trace of his smile fading. We hold eye contact for a moment. I snatch a glance behind him at the front door and remember the clunk of the deadlock.

He takes a step forwards, his palm out flat at me. Stay where you are, Joseph, he says, his sharp eyes all softened.

I stare at him. There's no point pressing on with the lie.

I just want to see my brother, I tell him. I'll go home once I've spoken to him.

The priest is shaking his head, all sad and sympathetic, but I know for sure he's about to phone the coppers and tell them I'm a runaway or something, and he thinks he's gunna keep me locked up in the house with him till they come.

We can sort this all out, Joseph.

I can feel a thickness in my throat, stupid hot tears begin to prickle. I take in a breath, brush the back of my hand across my eyes. I drop my head.

Good lad, he says. Let's have that cuppa, and you and me will have a friendly wee chat. I look up at him and give him a defeated nod. As he passes he puts a hand on my shoulder and gives it a squeeze.

Before he's at the kitchen door he turns, coz I haven't moved to follow him.

Joseph! he says, his voice firm, like he's bringing a feckless mutt to heel.

I shake my head and turn away and take the stairs at the double.

I hear his feet on the treads behind me. Where on earth do you think you're going? He calls, a laugh trembling his words.

I dart a look around the landing. Through one door I see a toilet, and behind it is a mottled glass window, its sash propped open with a hardback.

I'm closing myself in the bathroom when the priest's hand comes through and grasps my arm. His freckled fingers clasp tight around my wrist making the watch's expander bite into my skin.

Stop this nonsense now, Joseph, he says, the white of his eye showing under a wild eyebrow. Your mother is worried sick.

I grip the handle and pull the door against his arm. The old priest groans but his grip on me has fastened tighter. I slam again, harder this time. He lets out a whimper, jerks back his hand. I put a shoulder against the door and slide the bolt.

Sorry Father, I say under my breath.

I heave the window up as far as I can. The door handle's rattling, there's thumps on the wood, my name being repeated.

Down below is a small yard, a few pigeons patrolling.

A plane's hollow roar fills the sky.

I squeeze through the gap. I lower myself as far as I can before I have to let go and drop.

The birds rise up in a panic of wings. I push up from the ground, but when I stand pain fires from my ankle. I shin the yard wall and lower myself into the back alley and limp along the cobbled gulley. My head's reeling like I'm about to spew so I stop, drop my head, my hands braced against the side-walls as I draw long slow breaths till the dizziness settles.

I hand myself along to a passageway, a street at the end of it.

At the pavement I check left, down toward the priest's house, no sign of him. I set off to the right, a hop-along stride, my hand finding gateposts and privet hedges to keep me from falling. Each land of my foot brings on the sickening faintness.

Two people up ahead, the woman is sitting on a low garden wall, a man on the pavement blocking my way. Where's the fackin fire? the man says, pulling a face as he steps back.

Up at the next junction I see the white nose of a car, its yellow indicator light winking as it turns the corner. The coppers can't have come this quick. I squat beside a parked wagon and wait until the engine noise fades.

The road's dead-ended by a run of high galvanized fencing, splayed in sharp petals at the top. I follow a narrow track of trodden grass, thorny stalks poking through the fence gaps snag at the arm of my greatcoat, placing my steps to avoid crushed drink tins and dog shite.

The lane leads me into an alley between house-backs, cars and buses crossing the opening at the end.

I come out onto the street. A stretch of shops, busy with people.

I've sat on a bench by the closed gates of a little park. I jumped the first double-decker that came. When the bus stopped in this square I got up and hobbled off. I've no friggin idea where I am, a row of white-fronted houses, stone steps between sooty pillars, gates in the black railings down to basement flats.

I get up from the bench but when I put the bad foot to the ground the pain shoots like frig. I drop back onto the wooden slats. My head's woozy, and the black feeling of me fucking everything up brings up a few dry sobs. I take off my boot and sock. My ankle bone's disappeared inside an egg of flesh. I press the lump gently at the edge and it brings back the cold swimmy feeling in my head like I'm about to chuck.

A man and woman, arms linked, chat happily as they come along toward me. I put my hands over my face and bend forward to hide myself. As they get closer they stop talking.

When I look up I see them quickly crossing the road away from me.

There's an itch at my wrist. I pull back my sleeve. The gold watch loose there, a couple of red welts on my skin where the metal expander nipped when the priest grabbed my arm. His eyes wide, pleading with me as he tried to hold on. Then me losing it. Like some trapped wild animal lashing out.

Word's got around quicker than I thought. I've only been gone a day.

Father Hill. Stewart.

Mum's gone up to the priest's place.

Call up anytime, for a chin wag, Oonagh.

I can picture them in his study, the priest in his V-necked golf sweater.

He's remembered me in the church after confessions, giving him the whole sad-eyed act.

Joseph came to see me, only last Saturday, looking for Liam's address.

Did you give it to him, Father?

No, no, I most certainly did not, Oonagh.

So how will he find Liam, without an address, Father?

Hmm. I've an idea what his plan is. I'll give Jerry O'Keefe a tinkle, it won't do any harm.

I don't want to put you out, Father.

He's a runaway, Jerry. His mother is with me, she's beside herself. There's a chance he'll come to you looking for his brother's address, Liam Duffy, that lad in Cricklewood I'd asked you to call in on. Keep your eyes peeled. Yes, his name is Joseph. God bless now.

It's almost funny, the idea that there's some vast connected network of Catholic priests, and that they can put out an APB on me, like in Dragnet.

When it's four o'clock I leave the bench and find a phone box a few streets away.

She'll be home from Jacobs.

Mrs Fisher answers and I have to tell her twice that it's me, Joseph, Joseph Duffy from next door. Once she twigs she's all sharp, telling me not to go anywhere and she'll fetch my mum. I guess everybody does know I've gone then.

When my mum comes on her voice is all quavery. I tell her I haven't got long and she just launches into a long stream of words, asking me where I am, what I've done. I tell her to calm down, not to worry.

Not worry? she says. How can I not worry?

I'm in London, I tell her. I've come to see Liam.

Joseph, she says, and she's fucken serious now all right. You are not to go looking for your brother. Do you hear me? I'm not joking with you. You'll come back *now*. Her words are hard and clear.

She's not worried, she's angry. I can't talk to her when she's like this.

The phone starts beeping for another coin.

I've gotta go, I tell her.

Where am I?

The man at the counter looks at me strange.

I mean, what part of London is this?

You're in Belsize Park, mate, the man says as he hands me over the mug of tea.

I get a table in the steamed window of the café, tip in a couple of spills of sugar from the dispenser.

A gammy ankle, hardly any money, and no single clue where to find my stupid friggin brother.

What's the point of searching for someone if they don't want to be found?

It's hard to admit it to myself but I know my mother's right. This is useless. I should go home. Face the music. Go grovelling back to Mr Simm and my daily duties.

Liam will be in touch. It's Christmas in three weeks, he'll be back for that and Veronica can give him the news herself.

I grub out the cash I've got left.

Enough for another cheap kip tonight and the train back to Liverpool in the morning.

I bring out the London guide and flip through to the accommodation listings. My window overlooks the railway cuttings. The room in this place is even shabbier than last night's. I flop on the bed.

I'm cold to my bones. There's an electric heater in the fire grate, but when I go to switch it on I find bare wires where a plug should be.

The window shudders every time a train goes by. Through the wall I hear a woman's voice, muffled. A man saying something back to her.

Chance'd be a fine thing! I hear the woman say. Laughter.

I pull the covers up over my head and close my eyes.

I wake with a start.

Someone banging on the door. A woman's voice asking a question.

It takes a few seconds before I realise where I am.

I stump to the door in my underpants and open it a slice. The woman's holding an armful of bedding. Check out is ten o'clock, she says.

I look at my watch. It's not even half-nine, I tell her.

The woman shrugs and walks away and stops outside the next room.

Housekeeping! Can I come in?

I sit on the stool at the dressing unit and lift my foot on to my knee. The ankle's deflated a bit. The redness is now mottled with blue and purple, and there's a graze where the swelling's chafed.

I get dressed and sit on the edge of the bed to pull on my boots, lacing the right one tight to stop the rubbing. I stand and walk about the room a couple of times. There's a twinge of pain with each step but I reckon it'll get rested while I travel home.

I pick up the Slazenger and take out Liam's patched-up letter to Veronica. His slanted writing, the wonky stamp.

The blurry image in the little rectangle. I go to the window and angle the envelope to the grey light. What is that? The postmark has wavy lines across the words. It means nothing to me.

Liam'll only find out he's gunna be a dad when he comes home for Christmas. That's three more weeks, that'll make it over six weeks since he could be arsed to talk to her.

Vee won't wanna know him.

She'll cut him off and raise the kid on her own.

Stan Fisher'll start sniffing around her. *He's actually alright when he doesn't have an audience.* When she's all alone with him, that's what she actually means.

I imagine a photo of the two of them. Stan holding Liam's kid in his muscled arms. I add Veronica's parents to the picture, her dad smiling over the brim of his pipe. *Quite a catch, a handsome young man like that.*

Or, that other thing Vee said. About it being her problem and she'd deal with it on her own. Strange way to talk about a baby. A problem to be dealt with.

Or a problem to be got rid of.

I'll have to call Vee and tell her I've completely friggin failed. I find my Silvine in the sports bag and I flip through to find the number for Hadden's.

Something falls from between the pages onto the grubby carpet. I squat to pick it up. It's the coach ticket with the number for Sarah's boarding house.

She's probably not given me a second thought.

My plan was that I'd call her after I found my brother.

I wouldn't've given him Veronica's message. I'd just tell him he had to call her, please, to trust me. I'd wait outside the phone box, watching his face as he listened, seeing his smile grow. He'd call Mum and tell her he was safe. Mum'd be pissed off when he told her about the baby, but she'd feel better when Liam told her he'd jacked in the job in London and was coming home with me at the weekend. He'd call Terry Thomson at North End Cabs and there'd be a chance of some night-shifts. I'd have a few days free in London. I'd go to the Hayward or the ICA and see a really out-there exhibition. I'd think up something to say to Cocker about it. I'd call up Sarah at her lodgings, ask her if she fancied meeting for a coffee in Soho. In the evening, we'd walk through the streets. There'd be neon lights flashing all around us.

The phone number on the coach ticket is useless. Sarah will be at work.

I pack my stuff in the Slazenger and put my greatcoat on. I sit on the edge of the bed.

A dressmakers, she said. French for *with it*.

Good morning, *A la Mode Designs*. It's a man's voice, old sounding, a foreign skew to it.

Can I speak to Sarah Burgess, please? A bus squeals to a stop outside the phone box. I press the receiver to my ear.

Can I ask what it's concerning?

I tell him it's important, that I need to speak to Sarah.

The line goes quiet. There's no purring sound so I know he hasn't hung up.

It's a couple of minutes before I hear a knock as the handset is lifted.

Hello? I can hear the uncertainty in her voice.

It's John, the lad from the coach on Monday.

Oh, hi, she says. Her voice is tight. Maybe she doesn't even remember meeting me.

How did you get this number?

I remembered the French name from when we were on the coach. It was in the directory.

Right, she says.

She probably thinks I'm a maniac after all.

I'm at work at the moment, she says. It would be better if you call me later. On the number I gave you?

I won't be here later, I tell her.

Oh, OK.

I can't decide if she sounds disappointed. Maybe just confused.

Where are you, John? she asks.

I tell her.

Belsize Park isn't far, she says. Could you meet me here?

I'm about to go back to Liverpool, though.

Oh, that's a shame, she says quietly.

Well, I could jump a later train.

Good, she says. Say three o'clock?

I tell her OK.

Riding House Street, number forty-four. It's in Fitzrovia. Got that?

I walk from the phone box, looking up above the shop fronts until I see a street sign on the building at the junction. I stand in a doorway and dig out the A to Z and plot my route.

The park is massive, all pristine rose-beds and signs saying please do not walk on the grass. The sky is clear and blue but the air's freezing, even with my hands stuffed in my greatcoat pocket my fingers are numb from the cold. The path looks to stretch straight ahead for miles, the Post Office Tower poking up over the trees in the distance.

On one of the benches a young woman is looking down at a book, her other hand is gripping the push bar of a hooded pram, gently rocking it.

Further along a man in a business suit is reading a newspaper, holding it spread wide in front of him. The headline says ATROCITY and there's a grid of different photos of faces underneath.

My gammy ankle's rubbing against the inside of my boot. I try to set the bad foot down more lightly as I go. One step one drag, one step one drag. I'm getting

some funny looks from people I pass, hobbling along in my long greatcoat and wool hat, like I'm friggin Aqualung or that hunch-backed king from Shakespeare.

I stand outside the address Sarah gave me. It's a plain brick place, iron framed windows. A brass plate on the door reads: *A la Mode, Garment Manufacturers & Wholesale Tailoring*. I check the wristwatch. I'm over an hour early. I go to the corner of the street and sit on an upturned crate outside a pub.

A man comes past me with a big wooden tray on his shoulder and he trails the air with the spicy smell of hot fresh bread. There's a bakery on the opposite corner, *Grodzinski's* is written in curly gold paint above the window.

Sarah comes out onto the street. I get up and walk along to her, trying to disguise my limp, the way Mr Simm does.

Well now, Sarah says, fancy meeting you here. She's smiling and the brightness in her voice has come back. Sorry about before, she says. Mr Kitsaros doesn't approve of personal calls.

I didn't know how else to get in touch, I tell her.

Sarah starts walking. She pauses after a few steps and looks over her shoulder. Walk and talk, John, she says, I've only an hour and I've an errand to run. Three cards of hooks and eyes, and a reel of bias binding. Her pace quickens and when I move to catch her up the pain shoots through me and brings out a groan and I have to bend and rub the ache.

I glance up, Sarah's strolling back to me. What happened to you? she says, frowning slightly.

I tripped over a tree root yesterday, on the street, I tell her. Must've twisted my ankle. I check her face to see how this has gone down. She nods, but it doesn't

mean she believes me. I straighten and we walk on together, taking it slower. I must be wincing from the foot, coz she stops. Tell you what, she says. You wait for me in that Italian café while I get the chore done. The haberdashery's just the other side of Oxford Street. I won't be long.

Don't look at it like that, John. It's a café-au-lait. Try it.

Sarah brings the smoked glass cup to her mouth and gives a little cooling blow that dips the foam.

The coffee is strong and bitter. I tip in two servings from the sugar dispenser, then another.

A man at the next table is served a plate of bacon, egg and chips. He picks up his knife and fork and starts tucking in. There's a delicious salty waft from the hot food.

Sarah's smiling at me. Hungry, sweetheart? she says. She lifts the padded menu, opens it and casts a brief look down the page.

I reckon when some girls call a man sweetheart, or hun, they're only being friendly, but it feels good to hear Sarah say it to me.

Reasonable. Sarah raps the menu book lightly against the edge of the table. This is my treat ... specially if you're disappearing on me.

I've got money, I tell her. I start to dig in my jeans pocket.

Nah, Sarah says, put it away. I just got paid.

Thanks.

She leans towards me, smiling, her eyes widened. Now, tell me, what have you and your brother been up to in London?

It's not exactly gone according to plan.

How so? she says, her face clouded.

I tell Sarah about Liam just up and offing that morning with the cousins. About how he'd come down here for building work. I tell her about arranging the do for his twenty-first, and him not turning up. About him being out of touch and now Veronica thinks she's been dumped. I leave out the bit about me doing a flit on the eyesore death-trap moped, and that I've lied about my name. And I deffo don't mention the mad mix of thoughts pinballing around my head about what I think Liam might be up to in London with the cousins. Oh, by the way, I reckon my brother's probably a terrorist. Oh really? That's interesting! Yeah, he's fully signed up to the IRA and that. Sarah'd be out of here like a friggin shot, straight down to the nearest cop shop probably.

I tell her how a priest in Kentish Town was my only clue to tracking down my brother, but the old bugger wouldn't let me have the address. I skip the bit about me jamming Father O'Keefe's spindly arm in the WC door. I tell her about the dingy hostels I've been staying in and that I've used up nearly all my cash, so now I'm going home. I dig the A to Z out of the Slazenger bag and put it on the table.

I brought this back for you.

Sarah laughs. Blimey, she says, that's quite a tale. And here's me thinking you were mooning around art galleries and bookshops these last couple of days. She makes a little smile, but there's a dimple formed between her eyebrows. Veronica, she says, is that your brother's girlfriend?

Yeah. He used to phone her every Friday night. But she's not heard from him for three weeks.

Blimey, Sarah says. What do you make of that? Aren't you worried? Not really. It's pretty typical of him. But Veronica's convinced he's hooked up with some London type.

Sarah raises an eyebrow. I feel a flush rise to my cheeks.

Sarah laughs. Oh dear, she says. How terrible.

He wrote her a letter ... y'know, calling it off.

A man comes to our table and we lean back to let him set down our bacon butties. Sarah flashes him a smile then turns her eyes back on me.

These things *do* happen, John.

Yeah, but it doesn't make sense, I tell her. I take a bite of butty. While I chew I unzip the Slazenger and find the Polaroid in the inside pocket. Sarah takes the photo from me, holds it up as she stares at it.

I swallow the food. It's a recent one, I tell her.

Sarah rubs the side of her thumb over their faces. They look blissed out, she says. She looks at the Polaroid a bit longer then turns to me, her eyes scanning my face. I can see the likeness alright. She looks back at the picture. Not the beard, obviously, but the eyes for sure, and around the mouth. Sarah hands the Polaroid back. He's *much* better looking tho', she says, with a wink.

I squeeze out a smile. I've promised Veronica I'd find him, I tell her. It's the main reason I'm here.

There's more to this, isn't there? Sarah says. I can tell by your face.

I set the half-eaten sandwich on my plate. Yeah.

Sarah tilts her head. John?

The heat rises in my neck and my hand goes up to it. I meet Sarah's eyes for a moment before I speak. Veronica's expecting.

Sarah sighs, and she rests back in her chair, nodding like it all suddenly makes sense. And your brother's not happy about it, right? And that's why he's gone into hiding?

I shake my head. Liam doesn't know about it.

Wow! That's tragic, John. It truly is. Sarah's staring at me wide-eyed, her mouth slightly open.

No one else knows, just me and Veronica. And now you. I promised I'd come and let Liam know he was gunna be a father. When he knows, he'll stop pissing around and come home. The big plan hasn't worked out though.

Admitting it out loud makes it feel real and I can feel the heat in my face and my eyes welling.

How awful for her, Sarah says. She leans forward and puts a hand on my arm. Are you absolutely sure you've exhausted all possibilities? Don't you have other family or friends in London who might know where he is? There's Irish all over London, John. Kilburn ... Camden ... Cricklewood ...

No, there's nobody, I tell her.

How about workmates? Sarah says. Do you know the name of the firm he works for?

I shake my head. I'm staring at her now coz something she just said is snagging in my head.

What is it? she asks, watching my face.

What was the name of that place you just mentioned?

Kilburn?

No, the next one.

Camden?

Yeah. Has it got a tube station?

Sarah laughs. It sure has. Why?

Camden tube, I say. He was working there up to the day before his birthday. Laying gas pipes. Then he moved onto some other job.

But you don't know where the new job is?

No. He didn't say.

Sarah smiles. She pushes the A to Z across the table to me. I think you might need this after all, she says.

I start flipping through the pages.

Sarah stands. I really have to go. Will you let me know how you get on?

Yeah. Deffo.

But not at work again, or I'll be in trouble. Have you still got the number for the boarding house that I gave you?

Yeah. Thanks. Sorry if I've made you late.

Not to worry. I'll say the queue was hellish in the haberdashers.

Sarah scrabbles in her purse, picks out some coins and sets them on the red checkered tablecloth.

As she's leaving the café she looks over her shoulder and wiggles her fingers at me. The metal sign clatters against the glass pane as the door closes behind her.

This next one, mate, the clippie says.

I jump off on the high street. Buses and cars and trucks grind in both directions, fine rain drifting through their headlamps. I stump along, clutching my collar closed, head down, dodging other pedestrians. Lighted shop windows reflect on the wet pavement.

I stand at the back of a thick crowd at the traffic lights. Above their heads I see it, written in red brickwork above the brightly lit entrance – Camden Town Station.

The lights change and we all cross.

The road in front of the building has a run of waist-high wooden barriers.

I walk the length of the site, and back again. A line of exposed brown pipe shining in the puddled blue-black earth. Not a workman to be seen. A wooden hut, a

paving slab slanted against the door. I lean across and give the side-wall a couple of thumps for the sake of it.

The rain's started pelting, a freezing trickle slides down the back of my neck. I stand under the awning of a hardware shop that faces onto the works.

A man comes out and lights a cigarette. He frowns as he looks up at the sky. Jesus, he says, casting me a glance.

I smile at him. I nod at the site. Do you know any of the lads who work here?

The Irish mob? the man says. He laughs, checks his watch. Well it's gone opening time, you'll probably find 'em in the nearest boozer.

Which one?

Take your pick, mate. He drops his fag-end, turns a boot on it and goes back inside.

I walk past the station to the big junction. There's a burst of voices, two women yackin as they come out of a pub. As the door closes I catch a glimpse of the drinkers inside in the warm yellow light. I pull my wool hat down over my ears and go in. It's pretty crowded, a hum of conversation and laughter, Big Tom playing through the speakers.

I make a circuit of the place. I go to the hatch at the end of the counter where there's a man rinsing dimpled pots in a sink behind the bar. I pull out the Polaroid, fold it so only Liam's showing.

Does this lad drink here?

The man lifts his head, looks at the photo, then at me. How old are you, son?

I'm eighteen.

Got any proof of that?

I try a few more boozers. Same result. No Liam, and the bum's rush from the staff.

I walk a couple of blocks, until the pain starts twinging in my foot. To one side of a shut-up bookies there's a doorway, the step set back, dark and sheltered. I sit hugging my knees in a choking tang of old piss.

A little red-haired girl stands staring at me, our eyes level. About Janey's age.

I give her a little smile and she waves shyly back before an adult's arm appears and grabs the girl's hand and yanks her out of sight. Kate! I hear the woman say. How many times have I told you?

I lean out of the doorway and see them walking away, the kid's head turning to look back until she's pulled along again. I lose sight of them among the legs and bodies of other people.

Kip of me. I know I'm a sight. Earlier I caught a glimpse in a shop window, I was looking around for the dosser before I twigged.

I shift back, sit side-on in the doorway, pull my wool hat low and brace my boot-soles against the bricks. I stuff my hands in the greatcoat pockets and close my eyes.

Mate?

There's a light coming from behind me. I lift my head. A man silhouetted in the doorway.

You can't sleep there, the man says.

I check the watch. I must've been out of it for a couple of hours.

I push up and move on.

It's stopped raining.

Opposite the dug-up road the display of buckets and ladder-sets and brooms is gone. I glance along the street, both ways. The shops are in darkness now, and the crowd's

thinned. I grip the top of the barrier and raise my bad foot onto the rail and swing myself over.

I lever the slab away with my hands.

I step inside and pull the door closed. When the latch clicks it puts out the street lights and the darkness grows thick around me.

I start to see edges and make out shapes in the hut.

A little trestle with a bench either side and a counter with a plugged-in kettle and some tin canisters. A few donkey jackets and peaked caps hung on nails along the back wall. A couple of shovels and picks leaned in the corner. A few pairs of wellies lined up under the table.

I sit on the bench and take off my boot and sock and put my fingers to the swelling. Less tender now. I pull on the biggest pair of wellies and stand and walk a few steps back and forth like I'm trying out the fit in Freeman Hardy and Willis.

I've bundled one of the donkey jackets – a scratchy, musty pillow.

The sound of car tyres when they pass on the road outside. A soft roaring sound, like the sea when it breaks on sand.

I try to block the thoughts writhing in my head.

Veronica is right – this *is* a wild friggin goose chase.

I don't know where the goose lives or where it might've flown to.

A blast of light behind my eyelids. I scrabble backwards on the boards and sit cowered in the corner of the hut.

There's a man in the doorway. Trousers tucked into workboots. I shield my eyes as I squint up at him. He's got a hand raised, a lump hammer gripped in it.

I get to my feet.

Stay where ye are, so, the man says. His voice is deep, a west of Ireland lilt to it. His eyes flick over me, his brows bunched. Homeless are ye?

I shake my head. No. And I haven't nicked anything. I'm looking for my brother. He's gone missing. I shoot a glance at the dug-up road behind him. He used to work here.

The man's big eyebrows lift a little. Slow down a minute, will ye son.

I nod. Liam Duffy, he's called.

And ye're his brother? The man cocks his head to the side. You've the look of him, alright, he says under his breath.

You know him, then?

Aye, surely. Big yoke of a fella from Monaghan, amn't I right?

I can't stop the smile coming. Yeah.

Milo, by the way, he says vaguely. He sets the hammer on the table and offers me his meaty paw.

Joe, I tell him as we shake.

Milo's older than I first thought. His wild thatch of thick hair is almost white.

Liam's not been in touch for weeks, have you seen him?

He hasn't worked here for a while, son.

Do you know what site he moved to?

Milo's brow crumples. *That*, I don't know.

Did he get in bother, while he was here? I stare at Milo, my mind flashing an image of Liam striding out of Baines with the Kenny fella sprawled in a heap.

No, not that I know of, Milo says. He seemed to rub along well enough with everyone, for the short time he was here, like.

So, why did he leave?

It was a bit strange, Milo says, to be honest with ye.

What way?

He was expected back here on the following Monday. We thought it odd him not showing. He was owed money.

Can you remember when he left? What date it was?

Milo's eyes narrow as he reckons it. He gets up and goes to a metal cabinet. He brings out a thin ledger, sits beside me at the table. He thumbs back a couple of sheets. Here now, he says, looking down at the grid of dates and handwritten names. Above Milo's dirt-grained fingernail is Liam's scribbled signature.

The eighth of November, I say. I look at Milo. That was the day before his birthday.

Milo smiles. Aye, you're right. His twenty-first, amn't I right? I mind him talkin to some of the young skins about it.

He was meant to come home, but he didn't turn up. He phoned his girlfriend the next day saying this contract had finished.

Milo chuckles. No, he says. We'll be working this feckin ditch for a few months yet.

I drop my eyes. I swallow to try and clear the lump thickening in my throat. Milo's fingers are loosely linked on the table. The traffic's rumbling by outside. I lift my head to him.

You think he's in trouble, don't ye son?

Yeah.

What makes you think that? Milo asks.

I shrug, like a kid who can't make sense of a simple question.

Milo's nodding slowly. His smile is kindly. And you've come to rescue him, am I right? He casts a glance at the door. Your white charger tied up outside is it? His smile widens.

The laugh I make is broken by a sob.

Easy, now, Milo says. Easy.

We're quiet for a while.

Don't let your imagination run away with you, Milo says. Your brother's a grown man. Sure, aren't these young bucks always jumping from site to site. I'm sure he'll be in touch with ye all soon, what with Christmas coming.

He's seen me getting upset and he's talking so I don't have to.

Milo tells me that he left Ireland nearly thirty years ago. He used to save money for the fare back there every summer. His homeplace is in County Kerry, outside the town of Listowel. I've not been back for near twenty years, he says, not since Mammy died, God rest her. He says how there's a good community of Irish in London and that eases the homesick feelings.

I lift my head. Do you know a place called Cricklewood?

Ah, I do now, Milo says. Why d'ye ask?

I think that's where he was living.

And you've no address for him?

I shake my head.

There's no shortage of Irish in Cricklewood, Milo says. But you've your work cut out if that's all you have to go on.

Are there Irish pubs?

Oh, surely, Milo says, with an intake of breath. He tilts his face towards the pitched roof. There's the Harp. And Biddy Mulligan's is popular. But that's more in the Kilburn direction. Ah, *now*, Milo says, looking at me, his eyes brightening. The Crown, that's in Cricklewood. It's a big old gin palace of a boozer on the Broadway. A popular one, I'd say.

He gets up and takes a donkey jacket from a nail on the hut wall. He looks at me as he pulls on the coat. You'd best be moving on, son. Before the main man arrives, or we'll both be for the high jump.

I stand.

I hope ye find your big brother, he says. His eyes tell me he doubts it. Tell him Milo Cavanagh says hello.

I deffo will.

Ye can't take the footwear though, Milo says, a skewed smile on him as he looks at my feet.

I don't know what he's on about until I glance down at the green toe-caps of the wellingtons poking from the bottom of my jeans.

Cricklewood ain't on a tube line, the woman at the ticket window says.

I come back out of the underground station onto the high street. The boot's not grating my ankle so much, the pain is almost gone. I see Milo talking to a couple of other men outside the hut. I ready a smile and a wave but he doesn't look my way. I walk further along and go into one of the caffs and buy a milky coffee and plant myself at a table.

In my Silvine I write, *Biddy Mulligan's, the Harp, the Crown*.

Cricklewood's easy enough to find in the A to Z. I start to plot a line from Camden Tube Station, matching the end of a road at the edge of a page with its

continuation somewhere else in the book. After I've done three pages, I put the Biro down. I'm not even sure I've marked the route in the right direction. How does anyone find their way around this friggin city?

I drag back the cuff of my greatcoat. Just gone half eight.

What's the point of heading up there now? The pubs'll be shut. If I go this evening I'll have a better chance.

I remember the knock-backs I got last night when I went into the pubs around here.

The same thing's bound to happen again.

What would I do, stand outside the pubs all night, on the off-chance of seeing Liam going in or coming out?

I've walked for miles. I've passed Euston train station. I walked over to the Post Office Tower. I even went back to Riding House Street and hung about outside A la Mode, hoping that Sarah might appear. After half an hour I found Soho in the A to Z and moved on.

I'm in this massive bookshop. I've wandered around the shelves for a while. I'm imagining meeting Sarah for a coffee, handing across a book. I pick up a copy of The Great Gatsby from a display table. Robert Redford and Mia Farrow, both dressed in white, a sickle moon in the sky, and in the background people with drinks on the lawn of a grand house strung with lights.

I bought you this.

Oh, thank you. I've heard about it.

Maybe we could go see the film?

I'd love that.

I put the book back on the pile. I haven't enough cash left.

I don't even know if she likes reading.

I leave the bookshop and walk down a side-road with an arched passage at the end.

Non-Stop Live Peep Show. Your own private booth. A man comes out through a gold strip-curtain. He pauses in the doorway, looks both ways, scurries along the street, his head down.

The Golden Goose, the space open to the street, the machines strobing lights, the innards of a one-arm bandit gurgling.

A window display, French ticklers, marital aids. A beggar slumped in the doorway necking a bagged-up bottle.

A doorman in a skinny dickie bow, standing in an entrance-way between illuminated panels. *International Hardcore. Swedish Massage.*

Piccadilly Circus. Eros on one leg. Around the fountain steps are smooching couples, laughter from larger groups. Foreign voices. One fella with a droopy moustache is sat strumming a guitar, scraps of newspaper tumbling by. Bright hoardings flash over it all in strobing neon.

Cinzano – the bianco. Coca-Cola refreshes you best.

Guinness Time. A three stories high cuckoo clock shows it's nearly seven.

I've told these girls, I not for answering service. Upstairs I go and back down stairs.

The woman sighs, mutters something in her own language. Hold line one minute.

A woman's rocked up outside waiting to use the phone.

John?

Yeah, you OK?

Yep. How did it go at Camden?

I give Sarah the gist. I skip the bit about dossing in the site hut. I tell her how I spoke to a man called Milo and he remembered Liam working there. I tell her what Milo said about Liam leaving the job the day before his birthday, then not turning up since. It's strange, I tell her, because Liam didn't collect his wages for the work he'd done – why would he do that?

The line is quiet.

Sarah?

I'm here, she says. I don't know what to say to you, John. You seem to have hit a dead-end.

I wanna try something. But I need your help.

How so?

Milo gave the names of some Irish pubs around Cricklewood.

OK, Sarah says, sounding wary, twigging what I'm at.

I thought you could come with me.

Right.

Tonight?

Sarah laughs.

Or tomorrow?

Tomorrow? Sarah says quietly, like she's weighing up the idea.

It's not a date or anything.

Is it not? she says. I can hear the smile in her voice.

Well, maybe a bit.

Where are you, by the way?

Soho.

Sarah laughs. Watch yourself around there, John.

So, will you help me?

I *have* been thinking about your brother's girlfriend, Sarah says, sounding pensive.

Veronica?

Yeah. I really feel for her.

Me too. So?

OK. Come here first, tomorrow around seven. My landlady goes to bingo at the Conservative Club on Friday nights, so you won't get the Spanish Inquisition. We can get a bus from Archway.

I catch the eyes of the woman outside. She looks at her watch.

Great. What's your address? I reach into the sports bag for my pen.

The river. Broad and sluggish, peaks of the dark water caught by the light of the big cast iron lamps along the embankment. I cross a bridge. A tarped-over barge passes below, churning a filthy grey wake.

I pass a dark open-fronted place under the hem of a concrete building. A smoking blaze rising from an oil drum, bright orange in its pocked sides. Silhouetted figures in there, most of them sitting or lying flat out under the walls that edge the space, two or three standing in the middle, wrecked faces caught in the weird glancing light of the flames. I go in between square concrete pillars and find a dark spot to sit along the back wall.

Hey, big yin?

I turn to the voice. Have ya a cigarette? The man's watery eyes glint above the cardboard stall. He coughs and his hand comes up to cover his mouth, a wiry ginger beard on him.

I shake my head, Sorry mate.

Nae bother, son. His words are cracked and dry.

I hug my knees to my chest and drop my head between the greatcoat collars. The sift of the water beyond the riverside walk echoing about the space. A funk of stale piss and ale, drifts of choking smoke from the drum fire.

Where're ya from?

I look across at the bearded fella. He's folded down a flap of his side wall, giving me a gappy smile over the top of it.

Liverpool, I tell him.

He laughs. Thought so, he says. Not a full-on Scouse, though, are ya? Am I right? His mouth hangs open, as he stares at me.

I'm Irish, I tell him. I turn away and rest the back of my head on the wall.

I could sleep here, grab a few hours anyway. I don't want to talk. Not to anyone. I pull the Slazenger bag tight to my side, keep a hand on it, close my eyes.

How long ya been on the streets?

Jesus. This fella really can't take a hint.

I'm not, I tell him. I've hardly the energy to get the words out. Maybe beardy'll get the message and shut his friggin trap. He doesn't. Instead he's cackling away like I've cracked a real side-splitter.

Not on the streets! The fella says. That's fucken hilarious, son. He wheezes a few coughs through his laughter.

A couple of faces at the brazier turn this way. One of them, a woman strolls over.

What's the joke, Finn? the woman says, casting a glance my way.

Beardy repeats our exchange.

The woman doesn't laugh. She shakes her head. He's a runaway, she says, keeping her eyes on me. I can spot them a mile off.

She comes a couple of steps toward me and when she's close she bends forward with her hand reached out. I'm Jenny, she says. Her fingers are red raw, scalded looking. She reeks of woodsmoke.

I nod and give her a little smile but I keep my hands jammed in my pockets.

Suit yourself, this Jenny says, her eyes flashing hard on me. She stalks over to the Finn fella's den, eases herself down beside him.

I hear the crack and rip of a ring-pull. Jenny's head tips back with the can at her mouth.

Finn's eyes are on me again. Happens easy enough, son, he says. One day I had a wife and a bairn and a house and a job, and the next thing ... Finn brings the

fingertips of one hand together then springs them open like he's releasing some tiny bird. Whoosh!

You promised you'd take me up there, I hear Jenny grouse.

Aye, I will hen, Finn says quietly.

I close my eyes.

You sure you've no fags stashed away in that wee baggy of yours? Finn says.

I pretend I'm asleep.

I wake to a scrabbling beside me. I feel the pull of the Slazenger strap on my shoulder.

Get the fuck away!

The Jenny one has her hand on the zip of the bag. Her face freezes for a moment. She grins, then straightens and slouches back to the cardboard shelter.

I get to my feet.

She was only after a fucken cigarette, I hear Finn call as I walk out to the riverside.

I press hard on the bell and take a couple of steps back down the path. I take off my wool hat and push long locks of hair behind my ears and smooth a palm across the fringe. A woman's voice from inside, then a shadow against the frosted door pane. Feet thumping down the stairs. I prepare a smile.

The door opens as far as the chain allows. A young woman puts her face to the gap. She does the head to toe thing, quickly, like she thinks I won't notice. Her nose wrinkles like a bad smell has found it.

Is Sarah Burgess here?

Who shall I say is calling? the girl says. Before I can answer I see Sarah coming behind her.

It's OK Penny, he's for me.

This Penny one holds my gaze, a half-smile on her that's more sarcastic than friendly.

I stand facing Sarah in the hallway. She's in a dressing gown and her hair is dripping wet, her cheeks are pink. You're early, she says, I was in the bath.

I tell her sorry and dip my head. Her bare feet have beads of water on them. A door somewhere up in the house slams shut.

Don't worry about Penny, Sarah whispers, she's just a bit, y'know, *Fulham*. She pushes the tip of her nose up.

An uppity sort?

Sarah laughs, that kind of big ha-ha type of laugh that can't be faked.

Right, she says, lead on, I'm four flights up.

At the turn of the stairs Sarah stops at a door with a pane of patterned glass, perfumed steam drifting out. She tells me to go on up and wait while she finishes off, that her room is at the top of the house, that she's the madwoman in the attic. I smile. She's got this way of keeping a straight face when what she's said is really funny.

The room has a kitchenette in the corner, a two-seater sofa facing a fireplace with an iron surround. In the alcove by the chimney-breast there's a treadle sewing machine and a dressmaker's dummy with the makings of a yellow dress pinned to it. Along the wall where the ceiling slopes there's a bed, a tasselled brown blanket.

Sarah comes into the room, still in her dressing gown, her head tilted as she drags a hairbrush through crackling wet tats.

She stands looking down at me, tapping the brush against her palm, holding her lower lip in a bite. Aren't those the same clothes you were wearing when I met you?

I nod. I didn't expect to be here more than a night, I tell her.

Thought as much.

Sarah goes to the corner of the room where her sewing stuff is. She kneels, flips back the lid of a wicker trunk, starts rummaging through different fabrics, and pulls out a pair of brown slacks and a yellow penny-round shirt.

Come here a sec, John.

Sarah holds the waistband of the flares against my middle. Bit short, she says, but they'll do. She sets the trousers on the bed, flat out, the way a body would lie. The shirt'll be fine under your big coat, she says.

I laugh. I'll be alright the way I am.

No, John, you look like a hobo. Sarah says it plain and flat, like there's no arguing with her. It's a Friday night, people make an effort.

Who do the clothes belong to?

Sarah looks at me. They're my husband's, she says, and she drops her eyes shyly.

Heat rushes into my neck, my ears. I shoot a look at the door like some burly fella's gunna burst in on us. I look back at Sarah, there's a twitch at the corner of her mouth, then she does her big laugh again.

Oh, John, your face! They're remnants, from work. Sarah dabs the edge of a thumb at the corners of her eyes. She's enjoying this more than I am.

I've run you a bath as well.

But —

But nothing. I hope you don't mind me saying this, John. Not only do you look like Grizzly Adams, you smell like I don't know what.

Do I reek? I hook a finger in the neck of the jumper and take a sniff in the gap. She's right.

Sarah's shaking her head, smiling. Does your hostel not run to en-suite?

I tell her there was a problem with the plumbing and the water was running cold.

Ew, she says, and she hugs her arms in a little shudder.

She gathers up the clothes and presses them into my arms. Oh, wait, to complete the ensemble, she says, a finger pointed up. She goes to her dressing-up box. When she turns to face me she's smiling, eyelashes batting, and dangling a long mustard sock from each ear.

She flings the socks at me. Now, chop-chop, before the water gets cold.

When I come into the flat Sarah smiles. Don't *you* scrub up well? She says, giving me an up and down look. How about me. Will I do?

Sarah stands with a hand on her cocked hip. She turns her head to one side and holds the position, chin raised, like she's posing for a photographer. She's wearing a

waisted green cotton dress, her hair held back by a scarf in the same material. She looks older with make-up on.

She looks friggin gorgeous.

Cat got your tongue, John?

Before we left her place Sarah said I should lose the sports bag. She said I could leave it in the flat. I must've looked at her a beat too long coz she went, Don't be getting ideas, you can come and pick it up tomorrow. I took the Silvine from Slazenger with the names of the pubs that Milo told me about, and I stuck the Polaroid of Liam and Veronica between the pages and tubed the notebook in my greatcoat pocket.

When we're seated on the bus I reach into my greatcoat and bring the photo out.

Sarah says, Can I see that again?

The Harp was dead. Not Liam's kinda pub, I told Sarah.

It's near nine as we walk across the car park to the doors of the Crown.

There's music and a hubbub of voices and laughter coming from inside. Sarah stops and turns with her palm against the push plate of the door, *Saloon Bar* etched in the pane. She smiles. Sounds more like it, eh?

It's heaving. Hot as hell after the chill outside. There's a fug of ciggie smoke, a smell of sweating bodies, hairspray, cologne.

I'll go to the bar, Sarah says. She reaches a purse from her coat pocket, flashes me a smile. What would you like?

Even though we're standing really close she's had to raise her voice to be heard.

I'll just have a glass of water.

Sarah laughs. You'll have us thrown out.

A cider then.

Acceptable, Sarah says. I'm having a large G n T. Now, go see if you can nab us a cosy nook.

Sarah heads to the bar but a knot of drinkers is blocking her way. *Scuse!* she says brightly and the group of men move apart to let her through.

Make way for young love, one of the men says, a thick Belfast accent. He holds a toothy smile, his eyes sliding over Sarah's face as she passes him.

Two people are getting up from a corner table, the woman's pulling on her gloves. I sidle and palm my way through the dense crowd and hover nearby until the couple leave. I feel a trickle of sweat down my back. I shuck off the greatcoat and sit facing into the room.

There's music from a juke box, but it's nearly drowned by people gassing, cracking up like they're hearing the funniest joke ever as they neck drinks and suck on fags and send up plumes of grey smoke to thicken the cloud hanging under the ceiling.

Between the bodies I catch sight of Sarah waiting at the counter. She's talking to some old fellas, his wild eyebrows bristling under the brim of a flat cap. Whatever she's said makes him laugh loud, his head tipping back to let it out. Sarah looks over her shoulder and catches my gaze and she pulls a *crikey* face. A man peels away from the bar clasping three pints of Guinness and she steps in to the space.

I scan the room.

There's a group of four men around Liam's age gathered by the juke box, half-cut and raucous and shiny eyed, in grubby jumpers like they've bowled in straight from work. The kind of fellas he'd hang about with I reckon. A new record starts and the lads start singing, arms around shoulders, pint pots waving high as they sway.

Come day, go day, Wish in my heart it were Sunday, Drinking buttermilk thru the week, Whiskey on a Sunday.

Sarah comes back and sets down our drinks. She sits beside me on the bench, turning to smile and thank the woman on her other side for making space.

Any joy? Sarah says, and she takes a sip of her gin and tonic.

I shake my head. I'm gunna have a proper walk around in a minute.

Of course, Sarah says.

The man cups a hand to his ear. Wha'?

Duffy. Liam Duffy.

The blond bearded fella stares at me, his face screwed up. Duffy? He repeats, as though nobody could have that as a name. He turns to his mates around the juke box. Yer man here is looking for an Irish lad that works on the buildings. That sets them all laughing. I repeat Liam's name to them. Lips are plumped, heads shake. One of them chimes that he knows a fair few Duffys but there's not a Liam among them. I ask, What about two brothers, Enda and Francie Malloy? Blank faces all round. One of the fellas says, What's this now, a formal interrogation? And that causes them all to fall about again.

I head away to the other end of the bar, catching Sarah's eye and pointing across the room to signal what I'm doing. She smiles and raises her glass to me.

There's no sign of my brother. It was a waste of time. All of it. What do I do, keep coming back here every night hoping to find him?

I go back to Sarah and slump down beside her. She sees the expression on my face and gives my hand a squeeze.

You brother might not even recognise you, Sarah says, a lightness in her voice. She's smiling, her face tilted slightly down, her pale blue eyes angled up at me through her lashes.

Why's that?

She tweaks my shirt collar. Because you look very dashing.

This is a cheery one, Sarah says.

I smile. I tell her my mum has a whole stack of records like this, that she sits on her own in the front room, smoking while she listens to them.

She sounds a bundle, your mother. Sarah laughs, but I don't join in.

A singing voice rises above the general hubbub. Both of us look towards the sound.

The fella's sitting on the bar, bellowing the words, his hands swinging and swooping above the crowd like he's conducting some drunken orchestra.

I don't know why I mentioned my mum to Sarah.

You get on alright with your parents, John?

My mum's on her own.

Divorce, was it?

No. My dad died six years ago. Back in Ireland.

Oh, I'm sorry, Sarah says. She looks at me. You don't want to talk about it, do you?

I shrug. How about *your* mum and dad? I ask her. You started to tell me, on the coach.

Sarah laughs. Did I? God, what a blabbermouth I am. Well, they split up a few years ago. Dad lives on the Isle of Wight now. My mother's still in Epsom, with her

new bloke. Simon. He works in the city. Sarah puts two fingers to her mouth and does the spewing mime.

You not get on with him?

What makes you think that? Sarah looks at me po-faced then cracks a smile. He's just, y'know ... what's the word? She gives a shiver.

Oily? Pervy?

Keep going, Sarah says. She holds up a finger. Smarmy, that's the word. He moved in to our house with his two boys, Nathaniel and Timothy, seven and eight. Sarah pauses, makes a sour lemons mouth.

Little horrors are they?

Horrors!? Have you seen that film, the one with the perfect blonde kids possessed by the devil?

I smile. The Village of the Damned? I love that film.

Yeah, me too. You wouldn't want to live there though, would you?

I laugh.

Exactly, John. That was when I decided to get the hell out of Dodge.

Bowie comes on. Sarah starts bopping her head side to side, smiling at me as she sings along. *Hey babe, let's go out tonight.* This is more like it, she says, her lips brushing my ear. Must be *someone* with taste in here. She cranes her head and gives the room a sweep.

Only you, I shout back, and she laughs and rocks sideways to bump my shoulder. She swirls her drink, ice-cubes rattle, she flashes her eyes at me.

Sarah comes back from the ladies. She's brightened her lipstick. She's done that for me. It's a good feeling. She squeezes next to me on the pew. I have to lift my arm to

make room for her. I let my arm rest across her shoulders and when I do she leans in to me.

There's a back room as well, you know, Sarah says, and she nods towards the passage at the side of the bar where the toilets must be.

I'll just be a minute, I tell her.

The back room is small, thick with fag smoke. A game of pool is in progress, the green cloth lit by a fringed lamp. The clamour and song of the main room is muffled in here, there's just low-level talk and the occasional clack of the balls.

I hang back, near the door, like I've wandered in to watch.

There are groups of two and three at a row of little round tables along one wall. Liam's not among them.

A man doubles the white off the side cushion, the stripe shudders in the jaw but doesn't go down. Muted taunts and mocking cheers. The other player comes to the table, his upper half blocked from my view by the shade. He leans down into the light and lowers his chin to the cue. His eyes level on the shot, his face bright under the light. He's got a purple shiner, and his nose looks smashed. I can feel the blood thumping in my neck and my breath quickens. I have to stop myself calling out his name. It's Enda.

My cousin moves around the table for his next shot, his steps are weavy and he has to slap a palm on the ledge to steady himself as he goes.

I make a move towards him. When he spots me, his eyes fix hard and his mouth tightens. It's a look that says keep your gob shut.

I step back and wait for the game to end.

Enda lies his cue on the baize and heads my way, not looking at me.

Pissers, now! he says in an urgent whisper as he goes past me and into the bogs.

I push in after him.

A man taking a slash turns his head to me, How's she cuttin'? he slurs. I give him a thin smile. He belches noisily, zips his fly and staggers out of the toilets.

I rap a knuckle on the cubicle door. Enda?

The door opens and my cousin grips my upper arm and yanks me inside. He shunts the bolt.

What's goin on?

Enda presses an index finger to his lips, his breath coming fast. His nose is a mess, the cut ends of stitches sprout from crusted blood along a split. He grips my shoulders, holds me at arm's length to inspect me. What the fuck are you doing here? he says, his words wrapped in a fume of whiskey and fags.

I'm looking for Liam, I tell him. Where is he? My voice sounds weak. I can feel the heat in my face. Enda lowers his eyes, makes slow shakes of his head.

Why you doin that? What's happened?

Enda looks up at me. He's gone, he says.

What d'ya mean he's gone, gone where? I give a brief laugh. My eyes are darting around his mashed-up face.

I don't know, he says.

I try to make eye contact with him. Is he in trouble? Was there a barney? Did he do that to ya?

Enda slumps on to the toilet. He spins the bog roll and rips a handful. He blows one nostril, examines the red-streaked snot. Fucks sake, he says. His eyes meet mine. What are you doing down here, Joseph? Get away home, for fucks sake. He sounds sick and miserable.

If you don't talk to me I'll just go to the coppers.

Enda stares at me. You'll what?

I hold his gaze. I'll need to report him missing, won't I?

The Gents' door squeaks. Edna's eyes widen and he signals silence again.

Pay him no mind when he's drink on him, a man says, isn't he only coddin' you on. Mebbe so, another man says, sounding unconvinced.

The men blether piss-talk.

When we hear them leave the bogs Enda rises. He wriggles the bolt free and opens the door a crack. As he peers out he says, I can't talk to you here.

Where then?

Wait outside the pub while I get my jacket, he says. He leaves the bogs.

In the passageway, I glance along at the pool room. Through the smoky light I can see Enda, talking to some fella who's got a hand on my cousin's shoulder, giving it little pats as he speaks. The man is well dressed. Fawn Crombie coat, white shirt, dark tie. He looks out of place. The man's voice rises. Enda nods.

I take a couple of steps closer, press my back against the wall by the door. Right you are, Mr Maguire, I hear Enda say.

The dapper fella comes past me in the corridor. I see him leave the pub by a side-door.

Sarah's head is dipped, like she's reading something. When I get close she looks up. My greatcoat is laid over her lap. The seaside photo of Liam and Veronica is in her hand.

She smiles. Hello stranger, she says. She hands me the photo. Hope you don't mind, but I rifled your pocket and conducted some enquiries. No joy, I'm afraid. She angles her legs to let me sit.

I don't move.

What's up? she asks, taking in my face, a tiny fold forming between her brows.

I pick up my greatcoat and start to pull it on.

I've got to go, I tell her.

She gets up and comes after me as I press my way through the crowd. I can hear her behind me, trying to keep up. What's happened, John? she says. Talk to me.

I turn. Sarah's eyes show confusion, concern.

One of my cousins is here, I tell her, the ones that Liam lived with. He says *Liam's gone*.

Gone where?

I dunno. Something's happened. But Enda won't speak to me here.

She puts her hand on the side of my neck. I feel the cool touch of her fingers on my skin. I'll come with you then, she says, with a little smile.

No.

Enda strides ahead along the terraced street, his head down, hands stuffed in the pockets of his jean jacket. I follow him, in and out of the yellow cast of road-lamps. He stops at a corner, glances back to check I'm behind him before he makes the turn.

My cousin cuts through an archway in a building and onto land enclosed by three storey flats, galleried levels, dimly lit walkways. I go after him, across a patch of asphalt with a kids' swing and monkey bars. I follow him into a piss-stinking concrete stairwell. Up two flights, glimpses of his legs between the banister railings.

He's three or four flats along, fitting a key.

Enda pushes the door closed behind me. He cups a hand to his mouth. Francie? he calls into the darkness. Any fucker home? No reply comes. Rightso, Enda says. He sounds relieved. I am too. I reckon Enda will say more without his big brother around. We go into a room off the hall, it's lit only by the glow of the walkway ceiling lamp through the thin curtains. A mingled reek hits me – rotted vegetables, damp, fag smoke.

Francie has a hot date at the Galtymore, Enda says. He'll be bollocks deep in Offaly minge.

Did Liam do that kinda thing? I ask Enda. Is that what this is about? Is that why he's not speaking to Veronica? Has he gone off with some London type?

He clucks a laugh, sits on the edge of the grubby settee. He might've flirted with a few, nothing more than that, I'd say. Me and Francie were sick of listening to him going on about that girl of his, Vee this, Vee that.

I knew it, I say, under my breath.

I stare around the place, my eyes adjusting. Greasy dishes and pans are piled in the sink, a low table's littered with beer bottles, an ashtray on a knacker mag is choked with crumpled fag-ends. I look around for some sign of my brother, but I don't really know what I'm looking for.

What d'ya mean he's gone, then? Where's he gone?

Enda shakes his head as he looks up at me. What the fuck are you doing here, Joseph?

I told you. I've come to see Liam. Where is he?

My cousin bends forward and lifts a bottle of stout from the floor, he slaps the crown off on the table edge and tips back a long swig.

Why aren't you saying anything, Enda? Tell me or I'll go to the busies. I fire this at him. He just looks blankly up at me for a moment before he stands, the bottle pointed at my face.

You go to the coppers and you'll be sorry, he says. He swings his arm towards the window, an arc of ale spews across the lino. You'll go home to Liverpool, is what you'll do. In the morning. Even if I have to load you on the fecken bus myself.

His words are slurred, but he's not completely out of it. He starts into a stream of questions, about how long I've been in London, and does my mammy know I'm here, and what the fuck I think I'm doing and that this is no place for me and he's half laughing as he asks, Jesus Christ how the fuck did I even find him anyway?

I hold his gaze. I won't answer his questions. He doesn't know what to do with me and that gives me something over him. He sits again and tips back the dregs and cracks open another bottle.

I'm not thick, Enda. I know Liam's involved in something, that you all are, you and Francie, and Uncle Eugene.

Enda looks at me, a hooded look. I've got his friggin attention now alright.

Yeah. And I know all about my dad dying, that it wasn't a heart attack, that he was killed by the fucken UVF. So I know *he* must've been involved too. I know all about tit for tat and reprisal and retaliation and friggin revenge. Blood will have blood and all that.

Enda gives a short dry laugh. That's a rake of big words, Joseph.

I sit beside my cousin, side-saddle on the arm of the sofa. Tell me what's happened, Enda, I say, trying to sound reasonable, like Mr Cocker when he chats to me like a mate.

Big stones you Duffys have, Enda says. I'll say that for you. Balls like fucken boulders. He clicks his tongue in appreciation.

I give it a bit before I speak. Allow him to neck another couple of looseners.

I don't give a fuck about any of that stuff, Enda. I'm not gunna grass or anything. Just tell me where he is. Please? My face is burning hot. I get up and brush away the stupid tears as I stand looking down at my cousin.

Enda doesn't reply. He starts making little nods of his head, as though there's some slow beat started in there. He looks up at me. Points of light catch in his eyes.

If I tell you what I know will you promise me you'll fuck off home to Liverpool.

I nod. I'll keep my trap shut while the mood's on him to talk.

And stop this shite about going to the police.

Yeah. If you tell me the truth.

And you'll not say a word to Auntie Oonagh?

No, course not.

Enda draws in a deep breath and lets it out in a long sigh. He starts picking at a corner of the bottle's paper label, his eyes fixed on it.

Liam came to stay with us during the summer, back at the homeplace in Ireland.

Yeah, I know. I think of mentioning the Polaroid team photo, but I don't want to stem his flow.

Maguire was over there too, Enda says. He turned up at the homeplace a couple of days before Liam was due to leave. That's when he started getting in your brother's ear about *settling old debts*.

I'm about to ask who he is, this Maguire fella, but the name has flashed a memory. The swanky looking fella in the back room of the pub with Enda. The fawn Crombie, all back-slaps and hail-fellow-well-met. *Right you are, Mr Maguire*.

He was firing Liam up for revenge?

Aye. Denny Maguire knew Uncle Vincent, back in the day. Daddy too. The three of them were close.

When Liam'd been in London for a couple of weeks Maguire asked him to do a wee job.

What d'ya mean, *a wee job*?

Enda shakes his head. You don't want to know, Joseph.

I stare at him. I decide it's best to let him get on with the story.

The plan was that afterwards Liam'd get the first train out of London and go home to you folks in Liverpool.

Was that the day of his twenty-first? The Saturday?

Aye. Maguire planned it for that day, he said it was the perfect cover story.

So Liam didn't do it then, this job?

Enda gives a weary shake of his head. Liam left here that morning in one of Denny's Commer vans. That's the last we saw of him. Enda drags a palm across his mouth. It's a big big fucken mistake your brother has made, he says. Denny Maguire's not a man to be crossed.

He was he in the Crown just now, this Maguire fella. You were talkin to him. That's why you didn't want to be seen with me, isn't it?

Enda nods. Aye, he was. If he knew you were Liam's wee brother we'd be for the high jump, you and me both.

Is it him that gave you the pasting?

Enda scoffs. Ha! Maguire's not one to dirty his hands. He has Micky Farrell, his brute of a ganger. Yon cunt's awful handy with his fists. Enda clicks his tongue. Sure, why have a dog and bark yourself?

Who is he, this Maguire fella?

Enda chuckles. Denny Maguire would have everyone think he's a respectable businessman, hence the dandy get-up. But he's no more than a feckin subcontractor – that ganger of his takes a pick of the lads who rock up outside the Crown every morning. Francie and me got some work with his crew, and your brother did too. All on the lump, cash in hand, no stamp to the feckin taxman, you know what I'm sayin? Maguire hasn't used me nor Francie again since, all thanks to your brother's antics.

So is this Maguire the reason Liam's done a runner?

Bingo, Joe. Enda waves a hand toward the chimney breast. Take your pick of prizes from the top shelf. He gets up and moves to the window, shifts the curtains aside and puts his face to the gap, checks both ways, turns back to me.

A couple of days after your brother did his vanishing act, Maguire was lifted by Special Branch, questioned. They couldn't pin anything on him. But Maguire's convinced that Liam touted on him.

What's that mean?

Enda turns to me. An informant, he says. A turncoat.

My heart's thumpin hard now. You're lying, I tell him. Liam's not a grass.

Enda swallows back a belch. It doesn't matter a tuppenny frig either way, he says. Once Maguire gets the notion in him there's no shaking it. When the job didn't go off, he came here looking for your brother, Farrell in tow. I was on my own and I

told them I hadn't seen Liam since the morning. Which is God's truth. Maguire wasn't havin it. He had Farrell *put some manners in me*. Enda touches the swollen flesh around his mashed-up nose, winces.

Uncle Eugene came to Liverpool coz he was lookin for Liam, didn't he?

Enda gives a long open mouthed-yawn. Daddy's like a feckin lapdog to Maguire, he says.

Liam's probably lying low, I say. Till it blows over. I know I'm saying this coz I want it to be true.

Blows over? Enda repeats. He chuckles. Knowing your brother, he might well think that. But Maguire's *scouts are abroad*, that's the way he has it.

What will they do to him?

That's another thing you don't want to know.

I stare at Enda. I can't speak. My heart is thick in my throat.

Is there anyone who might know where he's gone? Anyone he might've told. Y'know, someone he worked with or something?

Enda's eyes stay shut. Fuck knows, Joe, he mutters. He certainly wouldn't have told me, that's for sure.

Because he knows you'd grass him up to your dad, and this Maguire fella. To save your skin.

Sorry, Joseph. But that's the way it is. Now, save your own feckin skin and get the fuck out of London. Go home to Auntie Oonagh. Forget all this shite, leave your brother to his disappearing act. That's the best for all concerned.

Enda slumps back on the settee.

His head starts dipping.

I want him awake. I know he's only told me this stuff coz he's tired and hammered. In the morning he'll clam up again.

I go to him and shake him by the shoulder. His eyes snap open, he looks at me startled and confused like he's trying to place who I am for a moment then his eyes glaze and his lids droop closed. I shake him again, and again harder. He grumbles but won't wake.

I drop to a ratty armchair.

I picture Liam, in the back room of the Crown. Enda and Francie there with him, holed up at a corner table. It's after-hours, dregs of a night of pints are perched along the ledge of the pool table. This Maguire fella enters the room. Hands are shaken, backs clapped. A barmaid comes in with a tray – a bottle of whiskey, four tumblers. Maguire holds court, three heads leaned towards him, listening.

There's a job to be done, lads. A settling of scores.

All their eyes are turned to Liam.

Can I count on you, Duffy?

My mind's racing, but getting nowhere, like I'm pedalling fast on a bike that's slipped its chain.

Enda mutters loudly, some mad dream language that half wakes him. He grunts angrily and rucks and turns and settles again with the curve of his back to me.

I think of Sarah. I imagine her standing at the mirror in the ladies, leaning in, pouting her lips as she applies fresh lipstick. Her asking to come along, her pale blue eyes on me, her palm on the side of my neck. I put my hand up now to the place under my hair like I might feel some trace of her touch. I try to hold on to these thoughts, fix them in my head to block out the black feelings that are spreading inside me.

I wake. Groggy, my mouth dry.

Enda's sprawled on the settee, face down like he's fallen from a rooftop.

I claw back my sleeve and check the time. Nearly five.

I stand and look down at my zonked-out cousin for a moment then leave the flat.

I pull on my wool hat and grip my greatcoat collars closed as I head towards the concrete stairwell, my breath fogging under the walkway lights.

My head's haywire. I need to get it straight. My thoughts flit from notion to notion like bastard bluebottles that won't settle long enough to be swatted.

Enda. The ugly stitches sprouting from his mashed nose, the sick gleam of his eyes on me.

Maguire's not a man to be crossed.

Get the fuck back to Liverpool, Joe.

Not just Enda though, everyone who's got wind of what I'm at would say the same thing. Mum, Father Hill, that O'Keefe priest. Even Cocker and Barry and Veronica. I imagine them all here, mobbed around me. All of them against me. All of them talking at once, closing down on me, backing me up against the chain-link fence. Over their heads, across the street, I picture Liam. He's a shoulder leaned against the door of that corner boozer, a fag on the go. He holds the cigarette pinched at his mouth, watching me with a lopsided grin, wondering what my next move's gunna be.

A middle-aged woman opens the door. Can I help you? she says, none too friendly.

I smile. Could I speak to Sarah, please?

The woman tutts and rolls her eyes, slams the door shut. Maybe Sarah's given her instructions to look out for an unwanted caller. I take a couple of steps back and rest a hand on the gatepost and look up at the building. There's a small window at the top, under the eaves, a movement in the curtain. I raise my hand and wave, even though I can't see anyone there.

After a couple of minutes Sarah comes out, a wool coat on. She hands me the Slazenger bag, not even looking at me.

Sarah?

She carries on past me, down the steps and away, double-quick along the street. I sling the bag across my chest.

I catch her up and keep pace. She keeps her eyes fixed ahead.

I put a hand to her elbow. She stops, looks at my hand like it's some alien creature that's landed on her arm.

Is there somewhere we can talk, a caff or something? I want to explain.

You need to, Sarah says. I watch her move on down the pavement. After a few steps she stops and turns and looks back at me. You coming or not?

We go into a park at the end of her road. Sarah goes to the first wooden bench along the path.

I sit beside her.

Did you find him, then? she says, staring out across the empty grass. She doesn't sound like she cares either way.

No. He wasn't there.

Right.

Sarah?

What?

I'm really sorry. My cousin said I had to come on my own. You helped me out, and I just abandoned you.

It's fine. I'm a big girl, I know how to catch a bus.

Yeah, I know. But I feel bad about it.

Sarah sniffs. So you should, John, she says, and she cuts me a thin-mouthed look.

I get a pang when she uses my fake name.

I wanted to come and apologise, face to face.

Thanks.

I mean it.

I know, Sarah says. She turns to me at last, forces a smile. So, where *is* your brother, did you find out? Her voice is less frosty, she's not fully thawed though.

My cousin said they'd not seen hide nor hair of Liam, not for weeks. Not since the day he was supposed to come back to Liverpool on his birthday.

You should go to the police, John. Report him as a missing person.

Yeah, I know.

I gaze out across the park, like I'm actually considering it. But there's no way. I don't want the coppers gettin even a sniff of whatever Liam's got involved in. And who knows what lies this Maguire fella might've spun them to get himself off the hook.

Did your cousin have no idea where he might've gone? Sarah says. Or why?

Not really. He was half-cut. He wasn't making much sense.

Is it a girl?

No, I don't think so.

What then?

I don't want to lie to Sarah. In fact I want to tell her everything I know. But if I start into all the stuff about Maguire and jobs and touts and the IRA and the UVF she'll be gone like a shot. Probably straight to the coppers herself.

It's not Liam going AWOL that worries me, I say. That's normal for him.

I pause, to give myself some thinking time.

Go on, Sarah says.

Enda said my brother had a falling out with his boss, let him down on a big job or something. Bit of a hard knock this fella is, according to Enda.

What was it about, this *falling out*?

I don't like the sarcastic way she's repeated what I said.

I dunno, building work or something. I can't meet her eye.

Building work? Sarah says. She tips her head back and lets out a sound that's a laugh mixed up with a sigh.

Why you doin that? I ask her. The heat's blooming in my neck.

Oh, John. I'm not *completely* stupid.

What do you mean? My ears are blazing.

That pub, she says. It might as well've had a big IRA banner strung above the bar. And, after you left, I went back to grab my coat and that drunk chap, the one who was singing to the rafters, he was going around the tables, holding out a hat. A *contribution for our brave volunteers, darlin'?*

I can't think of a reply. I drop my head.

I'm right aren't I? Sarah says, she's leaning forward, trying to make me look at her.

I nod.

And your brother's involved, isn't he?

I look sharply at her.

I can see it in your face, John.

I shake my head. He's not, Sarah. My cousin told me there was this one fella that was tryin to get Liam involved. Liam didn't want anything to do with them. That's why he's disappeared.

What I've told her is true, and even if it's not the whole truth, I feel better for saying it.

Jesus, John.

I turn to her. She looks more sad than angry. Any second now she's gunna stand up and walk off.

Enda says that Liam's card is marked, I tell her. By this boss fella.

For God's sake, Sarah says, her eyes widened. Go. Back. Home. She slaps a hand on her leg with each word. You can be at Euston in half an hour. I'll give you the fare myself. She takes her purse from her handbag, twists the clasp. She stuffs a clutch of one-ers into my palm, closes my hand over them. The touch of her fingers puts a hollow feeling in my gut.

I can't. He's on his own. Out there somewhere. I wave a hand across the grass, the trees at the far edge, the stretch of grey London sky.

You don't even know he's still here. He could be anywhere.

I look down at the crumpled notes. I hand them back to Sarah. I'm not going back, I tell her. Not yet. I don't reckon he knows how much trouble he's in. I need to warn him.

Sarah sighs. So, you're going to wander the whole of London searching for your brother, that it?

Her eyes are fierce on me. When I don't reply she goes, Do you have any idea how enormous this city is, how endless the streets are? Do you have any clue how

easy it would be for someone to hide themselves if they really wanted to? Seems he's doing a pretty good job of disappearing without any help from his little brother.

I can't walk away when I'm getting closer to finding him.

Are you closer, though? Sarah arches an eyebrow. How do you figure that?

This boss that's lookin for Liam. He's got some sort of construction business. I'm gunna try and get work with his crew and see what I can find out. Someone must know where he is.

This is madness, Sarah says, tilting back her head.

It's what I'm gunna do. It's not just to warn him. I need to tell him about Veronica, about the baby, before it's too late.

Sarah's turns to me. Her eyes have softened a bit.

I put a hand on her forearm, hold her gaze. There's other stuff I haven't been straight with you about.

Sarah's eyes widen.

Just give me a chance to tell you. Then if you don't want any more to do with me, I'll walk away.

Sarah stares across the park. She sighs, and she starts shaking her head. She turns to me. I haven't time, she says. I have to be in Epsom this afternoon, for my nan's birthday. I'm already late. She stands.

That it then?

Sarah looks down at me. Come to the boarding house around seven. Heaven knows why, but I'll listen to what you have to say, John.

I dial.

Veronica answers on the second ring.

It's Joe.

Oh, hi, Joe. She sounds like she's barely the energy to speak.

I launch straight into telling her how I found Enda last night. At a pub in Cricklewood that Milo told me about.

Milo?

Yeah. He worked with Liam. At the Camden Tube site. Remember? The gas pipes contract.

Oh, yeah, Veronica says, sort of.

Anyway, Enda told me Liam's had a falling out with his boss. Some fella called Maguire. You heard of him?

The line's quiet for a few seconds. The name's not ringing any bells, Joe. But I obviously don't know the half of what Liam was up to down there, do I?

There's no one else though, Veronica. No flighty piece. Enda said Liam talks about you all the time. That he thinks the world of you.

Funny way of showin it, Veronica says.

Liam's upset this Maguire fella, and that's why he's gone to ground. It's startin to make sense.

Is it, Joe? Veronica sighs. Trouble seems to follow your brother around.

I'm getting close to finding him, Vee.

Listen. I know I asked you to give Liam the message. But I didn't think you'd be down there on your own like this. There's really no need for it.

I'm not on my own, I tell her. I met this girl, on the coach.

Veronica laughs. You're a quick worker, Joseph Duffy, she says, her voice a little brighter. What's her name?

Sarah. She's nice.

I bet. Treat her well. You know you don't have to always behave like your brother.

I laugh. I will, I tell her. Sarah's been helping me look for Liam.

Veronica doesn't reply, but I can hear her breath gusting the mouthpiece.

How are you, Vee? With the baby and that? Have you let anyone else know? Like your Caz, or Stan Fisher?

Stan Fisher! God no. He's a nice fella, but no. It's just between you, me, and the lamp post. I'm gunna have to soon, though. One way or the other.

What do you mean?

Like I told you, Joe. I'm nineteen. And the father has vanished from the face of the planet. I don't get why Liam havin a fall-out with his boss would stop him contacting me.

I think there's more to it than that.

Oh. Like what, Joe?

I dunno. I just do. And I'm getting closer to finding out. I'm gunna get work with this Maguire fella's crew. There might be someone who knows where Liam's gone. I just need a bit more time.

It feels good telling Veronica this. It makes finding my brother feel like a real possibility.

Veronica's gone quiet. Vee? You still there?

Yeah, Joe, I'm still here.

You won't do anything ... y'know ... about the baby?

Veronica sighs. I'll wait, she says. But you need to promise me something.

What's that?

If you don't find Liam in the next few days you'll come home.

I dial.

Hullo?

Baz?

Joe! What the fuck you up to, lad?

I'm in London. I just wondered if you'd heard —

I know you're in London. Are you with Liam?

No. He's gone off on one again. I've no friggin clue where he's —

Shut up a sec and listen to me, softlad. Your Liam's been in touch.

What! Where is he?

I don't know, mate. It wasn't me he called. I bumped into Terry Thomson in the Jawbone, a couple of nights back. He went, You'll never guess who phoned me at work yesterday, Liam fucken Duffy!

The boss from from North End Cabs? Why the frig did Liam phone *him*?

Terry said your kid was tryna get some shifts with a taxi firm and wanted him to, y'know, vouch for Liam havin experience or whatever. Terry said Liam passed the phone to some Irish fella.

Did Terry say where Liam was calling from?

I asked him that very question. Not a clue, he said.

If Liam gets in touch again, will you get him to call me?

Call you where?

I read him out the numbers in the Silvine. First Sarah's boarding house, then A la Mode.

Barry laughs. Sarah, eh? Getting your end away in London? Ya dirty get!

How did you know I was in London?

I called at yours yesterday, to tell you about Liam phonin Terry. Yer ma told me you'd gone.

She OK?

What do *you* think, Joe? She said she's had to make all sorts of excuses to that butcher you work for. And something about you scarperin from a priest's house. That right? Barry makes it all sound parts of some hilarious joke he wants to hear more of.

Does she think I'm with Liam?

I told her you'd probably hooked up with him. I didn't want her thinkin you were wanderin the streets. Barry pauses. You're not are you?

No. I'm alright, Baz. Would you let her know for me?

I already did, Barry says. She was worried about where you're sleepin and what you're doin for money. I said you could look after yerself, that you and me had been planning a trip, that you'd been savin for it, and that we had a few B and B's lined up, so you were probably staying in one of those.

Cheers, Baz.

Didn't enjoy lyin to yer old girl, though, Joe. You need to speak to her y'know.

Yeah. Can't face it, though.

When I put down the handset I slump against the side of the booth. I close my eyes.

I see Mum rockin up at Simm's, smiling at him, tryin her best to smooth things. *I'm sure he'll be back soon, Trevor.*

I imagine Mum being told by the parish priest that I'd hurt Father O'Keefe's arm. *I can't believe he do such a thing.*

I picture Barry telling her that my brother's working on the taxis again. *Well, I hope he sticks with it.*

At least she knows Liam's OK.

We climb the stairs to her flat in silence and go inside.

Sarah nods at my greatcoat. You want to take that off?

I'll keep it on. I'm not sure how long I'll be staying.

Oh, Sarah says. There's a faint quizzical look in her eyes.

I sit on the sofa and she sits on the floor, a couple of feet away.

She draws her legs under herself. Right then, John. I'm all ears.

I hold her gaze for a couple of seconds. There's nothing to read in her expression.

My name isn't John. It's Joe. Joe Duffy.

Sarah arches an eyebrow, her eyes narrow slightly on me, but she doesn't speak. She knows there's more to come.

When I was talking to you on the coach it felt good. Like I wasn't boring old Joe Duffy, the butcher's boy. That I'd left him back in Liverpool.

Butcher's boy? Sarah says.

I snatch a look. She's as confused as hell and I haven't even got going. I'll crack on.

Talking to you made me feel like a different person. Then, when you asked my name, it just sort of came out, John Crilly, automotive engineer. He was this mechanic who helped me earlier that day, when the moped broke down.

There's a *moped* now? Sarah lets out a shocked laugh. I snatch a glance. She's got a hand over her mouth as she stares wide-eyed at me.

I shrug. I just thought that for a couple of hours I could be someone else, chatting to this gorgeous girl. I thought if I told you I was a butcher's lad you'd laugh.

Well you're wrong, Sarah says. And what about all the other stuff you told me? About your brother and Veronica, was that all made up too? She sounds properly pissed off now.

I shake my head. No. Liam's not been in touch with Vee for three weeks. She's just found out she's having his kid and he doesn't know about it. It's why I've come looking for him. That's all true. And I need to tell him, coz if I don't ...

Is Veronica thinking of having an abortion?

She said she'd *deal* with it. I suppose that's what she meant, isn't it?

You know it's *her* choice, don't you? Sarah folds her arms tight over her chest as she stares at me.

I give a glum nod.

What about this business with your brother, this falling out, his card being marked? Was Liam involved with the IRA?

I cast my eyes down.

I don't know. Enda said this Maguire fella was trying to get Liam involved, stoking him up for revenge.

Revenge for what?

I look at Sarah again. For what happened to my dad.

Your dad? Sarah says, her eyes on mine. She makes one slow blink.

D'ya want me to shut up?

Sarah shakes her head. No. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. I'm going to stop asking questions, and you're going to talk.

I tell Sarah everything I know. About Liam going to Ireland last August. About the cousins coming for him a month after he came back to Liverpool and them all setting off in the Transit before light. About the party and the Watkins twins floating in the swirly lights and Grogan getting it in the neck and the power lines at Stafford. About Liam phoning Vee the next day and the laggard and the new job. About him not calling her since. I tell Sarah how Liam phoned Barry at the Jawbone and me finding the number nine locker key and pullin a fast one on Cliff. I give her the gist of the Kenny story and loyalist gobshites and Liam decking him with one punch. About how I confronted Mum about the heart attack lie and her bringing out the newspaper cutting with the Local Man Slain heading. About Mr Simm giving me the billy doo and me going to the memorial gardens and Veronica holding Liam's letter in her lap and thinking she's been dumped for Belinda or Daphne and asking me to tell Liam he's gunna be a father.

I show her the team Polaroid with the rifles.

I tell her about the rabbit shoot with my dad and Liam for my eleventh birthday.

What Enda said about Maguire taking Liam under his wing and getting in his ear about settling an old family score.

About Liam not doing the job. That Enda said I didn't wanna know what the job was. I tell her what a tout is and how Maguire's scouts are abroad and that I don't reckon Liam knows how deep in the shit he is. That Enda said I didn't wanna know that either.

I tell her about phoning Barry while she was in Epsom. That he said Liam's working on the taxis again. That I gave Barry her telephone numbers in case he phones again, I had no other choice.

Sarah just sits there listening.

When I feel there's no more to come out, I stop. I drop my head and put my hands over my face.

My throat's raw from talking. I feel emptied. My insides are hollow.

I hear Sarah stand up. The padded seat of the sofa shifts as she sits beside me.

As I wipe my eyes with the backs of my hands, I ask, Do you want me to go?

Sarah doesn't reply.

I look at her.

Oh, Joe, she says and she put her arms around me and kisses my cheek. She holds me like that and the emptiness grows and spreads, filling my insides until I have to open my mouth and let it out.

Sarah's made coffee in a tall pot with a plunger. A cafetiere, like they have in France, she said. She piled extra sugars in my mug without even asking.

I don't think I've said more than a couple of words since I stopped crying.

Sarah peels away tin foil from the top of a Pyrex dish, slides it into the oven. I brought you some leftovers from Nan's buffet, she says. It's continental lasagne ... will you give it a go?

I nod. Smile.

You can probably take off your war coat now, Joe.

Sarah's been telling me about growing up in a dull as ditchwater semi-detached in Epsom, and her summer holidays at her auntie's bungalow in some seaside place in Kent, and about her visit to see her sister last weekend.

If you hadn't gone to Birmingham you wouldn't have got on my coach.

I know, she says. Do you think we're written in the stars?

Nah. Probably just your bad luck.

Sarah laughs.

She tells me about a boyfriend she'd split up with earlier this year. Gareth. He worked at something called the metal exchange and he had a forest green Triumph MG and used to drive her out of London to stay at a guest house or a country pub.

He sounds like a catch, I say.

It was never really serious. How about you?

I give her the gist of the Cheryl fiasco.

She doesn't laugh the way Booey Spratt did. Poor you, she whispers, her eyes soft.

I flash an image of Sarah and Gareth in bed together. When I was with Cheryl, Liam asked if we'd *done it* yet. I shrugged. He laughed and said, About time too. I just let him carry on thinking that.

I go over the highlights of the Brenda non-starter.

Sarah sighs. Well, you *had* given her the wrong impression about the bike. So I don't blame her.

What have you got? Sarah asks. Let's go through it.

I help Sarah clear the dishes.

I bring the Slazenger bag to the table and Sarah pulls a chair alongside mine.

I take out the photos, and the letter Liam wrote to Veronica.

And that's it?

Yep.

Sarah spreads the photos out in a line. The little family group at Bundoran. Dad as a young man with Eugene and the bearded man. The Polaroid of Liam and Veronica at the seaside. The team photo of Liam pointing the rifle at the camera.

Sarah lifts the last one from the carpet.

You honestly thought this was a rabbit hunt?

I knew it wasn't, I tell her. I just didn't want to believe it.

Sarah's staring at the picture. You poor sod, she says. She looks up at me and smiles.

True, I go.

She puts the photo down and lifts the envelope. She looks at the front of it for a few seconds. I can make out the date, she says. Twenty-sixth, eleven, seventy-four.

Yeah. I know. Nearly two weeks ago.

Sarah nods. I can't make out the postmark, though. It's not printed properly.

I know. I put my finger on the blur of ink. It's like part of a word, I tell her. I can't make sense of it.

A, M, L, A, Sarah says, frowning as she stares at the mark.

Do you think it's a place?

Hmm. Could be. Nowhere I recognize, though. They put all sorts on these postmarks, don't they? Y'know, *Come to Sunny Brighton*, that type of thing.

You can read it, if you want.

Sarah draws out the letter. Unfolds the sheet and tries to smooth the buckles the Sellotape's made.

Ugh! she says when she's finished. I can understand why Veronica thinks she's being dumped.

Enda said that's not what this is about.

Could be both things, Joe. He might be taking refuge with a girl he's hooked up with.

You don't know him, though.

I'm not sure *you* know him as well as you thought, do you?

I shrug.

Sarah fits the letter back in the envelope. There's certainly not a lot to go on, she says with a sigh.

I know.

So, what now, Joseph Duffy?

I need to get in with this Maguire fella's crew. I want to find out if any of them have an idea where Liam is. Or maybe he was mates with another worker. Maybe they're still in touch.

You're going to *work* for this Maguire?

Yeah. I'm gunna have to lose the Liverpool part of my accent. That'd be a giveaway. They're all Irish lads, according to Enda.

You *do* look quite like your brother, Joe. What if someone recognises you?

I've thought about that. Down here they only know Liam as the fella with the big beard, the one he grew in Ireland last summer. When he came back to Liverpool even his mates didn't recognise him at first. No one in London will clock me as his brother.

But didn't this Maguire know Liam without the beard?

I don't think so. Enda says he only met Liam at the end of August. He'd a full growth by then. Anyway, Maguire's not likely to be getting his hands dirty on a building site.

Hmm, Sarah says. You'll need to give them a false name, Joe. But that should come easy to you, shouldn't it? She looks at me, not even the flicker of a smile.

Fair point.

And what about your cousins?

Enda said they're not working for Maguire any more, so they won't be around.

It might take you a while, Joe. Is Veronica OK with that?

Yeah. I phoned her this afternoon. She's not gunna decide anything about the baby. Not for a few days anyway.

Sarah nods. And where are you sleeping tonight?

I shrug. I need to be outside the Crown for seven. So I'll just walk around till then.

I don't think so, Joe.

Sarah goes to a wardrobe and pulls a candy-striped sheet down from the shelf.

You can have the sofa, she says. For a few nights anyway.

I open my eyes and lift up on my elbows.

A figure stands looming in the dim light.

Who the fuck —

A lamp comes on.

What's wrong? It's Sarah, across the room, sitting up in bed. She laughs. My mannequin give you a fright?

Weird, that is, I tell her, laughing.

I get up and head out of the flat for a piss.

Sarah's still propped up in her bed when I come back. You OK?

I go across to her. I give the dummy comedy evils as I go.

You big scaredy cat, she says, and reaches up a hand to mine. You're cold, Joe.

Sarah doesn't let go of my hand so I sit on the edge of the bed.

Lie down for a while, Joe. Sarah says this all matter of fact, so I know it's not an invitation to try anything on.

Sarah shifts onto her side and shuffles back to make room. I lie facing her. She stays under her sheet, but arranges the coverlet over me.

Our heads share opposite ends of the same pillow. I put a palm to the side of her face and she smiles as I make little thumb-strokes on her cheek.

I edge my face a bit closer. Sarah turns her face away.

Don't you want me to?

Course I do. But you need to sleep now, both of us do.

It's not a proper knock-back, though.

Sarah closes her eyes.

I close mine.

I see Liam's big beardy smile. *You're on a promise there, Joey boy!*

I get off the 210 at Golders Green like Sarah told me. I pull the A to Z from my greatcoat pocket and start to follow the line to Cricklewood she's Biro'd on the pages.

Sharp slanting rain, cold needles on my face.

The pub building's in darkness, just a faint gleam on the car park tarmac from the streetlamps. The sky lightening to a pinkish grey. I stand under the brick arch of the main doors for shelter. I check the watch. Near on seven. I'm the first one here.

A man steps over the low wall separating the car park from the street. He walks slowly across the ground, a rucksack over one shoulder, his boots scraping. He glances my way as he goes, grunts a how'ya and I send him a nod. A couple more men arrive and they stand with the first fella under the branches of a tree that overhangs the far corner of the land. Their voices are deep, even though they're talking quietly. One of them lights a cigarette, takes a drag, stamps his feet.

I check the watch. Half seven.

The rain's stopped. A dozen or so men are gathered now, grouped in twos and threes, chat rising, muted laughs. One fella has parked himself on the low wall. There's something familiar about him. I walk across and sit a couple of feet from him. The man glances at me.

Feckin cold, I go.

It's that alright, he says. He takes twenty Gallaher from his coat, flips the lid and offers the open pack to me.

No thanks.

The match flame lights his face for a second. I recognise the broken veins in his cheeks, his pitted boozer's nose. It's the stocious crooner from Saturday night, the fella Sarah said went around the tables with his cap – *A contribution for our brave volunteers, darlin'?*

Not seen you here before, son, he says.

No. First time.

Have you a trade?

No. I'm general, I tell him.

General? he says, looking at me, the fag dangling from his lip. Navvyin, d'ya mean?

Aye, that's it.

Same here. Don't look so worried, son. We'll not be in competition. I'm already on the teamsheet.

He lifts a hand to me. Owen, he says.

John, I tell him as we shake.

There's movement and raised voices from the men. A battered blue VW minibus drives onto the car park, headlights raking the ground. The engine cuts. Owen takes a long suck of his fag before he stands with a groan, drops the butt and gives it a turn of his boot. C'mon so, John, he says.

The various groups come together in the cast of the minibus headlamps. Must be a dozen or more of us.

Behind the wheel is a big unit of a fella.

One of the men, under his breath, goes, Feckin Farrell, just our luck. The driver gets out from the cab and walks our way.

What Enda said. *Micky Farrell, a brute of a ganger.*

Owen, Farrell says.

Michael, says Owen.

Each tips a nod at the other.

Owen climbs into the front passenger seat. On the teamsheet. He must be well in with Maguire.

Farrell hauls the slider door open and turns to face the group. He reaches into his shirt pocket and takes out a scrap of paper and squints down at it. I'll only need four more skins today, he says, his eyes lifted to range our faces. A couple of men move towards the minibus, but Farrell halts them with a raised hand. Hold your fecken horses, lads. His eyes drop to the list again. Is there a chippie amongst ye? he says, looking around us, his brow creased.

Here so, the man beside me calls – he hoists a canvas bag over his shoulder, a wood-saw poking from it. He walks casually through the group and gets into the van. Another regular, I reckon.

And three labourers, Farrell says.

All the remaining men's hands go up, mine too. Farrell steps forward and moves among us. You, he says to a thickset lad around my age. He nods at another man. Prunty, on you go.

There's one more place! someone calls in a thick Dublin accent.

Farrell holds the man's eye, smiles. If I'm in need of a feckin book-keeper I'll know where to come, he says. There's a ripple of laughter and the Dublin fella looks down at his boots.

Rightso, Farrell says, casting around again.

His eyes settle on me. You there, Long Larkin in the bobble hat. He gestures me forward. The remaining men grumble as they shuffle aside to let me through.

John Crilly, I tell the ganger. Farrell gives me a flat look, like it's no odds to him who I am. I step up into the minibus and shove the slider shut behind me.

It's fencing work. A run of it along the bottom of the gardens of a row of newly built semis that back on to the towpath of a canal. Farrell sets the thick-set lad to groundwork – digging a shallow trench for the footings. He sets Prunty to mixing a

board of cement. Farrell puts me with Stocious Owen – we’re to do a tag-team shuttle, carrying slats from a flatbed truck up on the roadbridge. The ganger goes off to talk to Thomas, the chippie, giving him directions about how the cross timbers will need to be cut to size and fitted.

I set down another shoulder-load on a pallet near Thomas.

I can’t think of how to get a conversation going that’s not gunna make it obvious.

I arch my back as I look over the black canal water and above the warehouse buildings on the other side. The sky pinkish, scarfs of grey cloud across it.

No slackin, now, the chippie says, with a smile.

I head back to the truck. I pass Owen coming the other way with his stack of boards. He’s not done more than a couple of runs and he’s already puffing, his face reddened and shiny with sweat. Each time we pass he gives me a nod, a loose-mouthed grin on him.

At midday Farrell calls a break. Twenty minutes, he says.

A couple of the men bring out thermos flasks. I get a waft of steaming soup.

Did you bring no carry-out? Owen says. He offers me a sarnie from opened tin foil. Doorsteps, slabs of red cheese.

I take one. Thanks. We sit on the stone steps by the bridge. We’re out of earshot of the other men.

What part are you from? Owen says.

Cavan, I tell him. It’s a county away from the truth but close enough for the accent.

I'm a Kerryman meself, Owen says. Though I did have an uncle marry into Cavan people. Town of Bailieborough, d'ye know it?

Not well, I tell him. My people are far north of Bailieborough, out in the country, up near the Monaghan border. I take a mouthful of butty, chew, cast him a sly side eye to see if he reacts.

Nothing. Owen just chews away, his mouth open, his rheumy eyes vacant.

Is it the same lads every day? I ask him.

Depends on the job, Owen says. There's a few of us are regular. Mr Maguire likes a dependable crew.

Does he get let down a lot then?

Oh, aye, son. Some of these young fellas are fly-be-nights.

You must have some tales, eh?

Oh. I have surely. Owen perks up, his eyes flashing. There was this lad recently, a big Monaghan buck. Now, let me tell ye —

Owen pauses, coz Farrell's calling around, and the other men are rising, getting back to the job.

Recently, was this?

Owen pushes to his feet with a groan. He swipes crumbs from his greasy trousers. That's a story for another day, John, he says. Now, I'm away for a pish.

It's well in to the afternoon and the light's going. The chippie's a fast worker, the fence is nearly complete. I've been working with Owen. Mentioning Monaghan must've sparked his memory of Liam. If it is Liam he meant, that is. He might get suspicious if I ask him any more questions today.

I pause at the head of the bridge steps, shift a shoulder-load to balance it better. I see three lads further down the towpath in the half-light, coming this way,

towards the site, chatting loudly. A side shove sending one lad staggering towards the edge of the canal. A burst of laughter as he almost goes in the water. I glance back. Farrell and the other men are loading tools onto the flatbed. There's just Thomas, on his own down there, finishing off the run.

The three lads have drawn level with the fence work. One of them – black T-shirt, beefy chested – steps across the grass verge towards the chippie.

There's a raised voice, a London twang. Thomas saying something back, not turning to the lad, his back bent as he holds a spirit level to the edge of an upright.

I squat and offload my boards, stand them tilted against the wall. I walk down the steps to the towpath.

The lad repeats his question, louder. I only hear the last words – *eh, Paddy?*

What's goin on, John? It's Owen, from up on the road behind me.

I dunno, I say, walking on.

As I get close to the site, I call, Y'all right there, boys?

One of the two lads on the path, a stringy fella, says, Look out, here comes another one. The three of them turn and laugh as I approach.

Another one of what? I say to the weasel, fixing my eyes on him.

I hear Thomas's voice. Pay them no mind, son.

The beefy one loses interest in the chippie and he steps back onto the towpath, a couple of yards away, facing me. Another pig ignorant Irish, is what, he says, his teeth bared. Fackin murderers, the lot of ya. He hacks, then he spins a silvery gob in my direction. I feel a fleck of it hit my cheek.

My heart's thumping hard in my throat. Behind me I can hear Owen up on the bridge, summoning the other men. I walk quickly up to the big lad, my hands curling to fists at my sides.

I'm on my side on the wet straggled grass, knees to my belly, hands clutched over my face like it might stop the spin in my head.

I get a flash of the muscled fella coming at me, his punch like an iron block. I dropped like a sack-load of shit and curled into a ball as I took a kick to my gut, then all three of the fuckers were swinging in.

There's a fuzz of voices, the scrape of soles arriving around me. Through my fingers I see Farrell's big black work boots.

I hear Owen's lilt. I heard the ructions, he says. I hollered, Get away the fuck! When the gobshites saw me coming they quit laying in to young John here, ran back the way they came, hurling abuse over their shoulders. Terrorist fackin bogtrotters, one of the scuts shouted. More's the pity they were too far for me to get a hold of them.

I hear a deep laugh. Is that right now, Owen? Farrell says, and there's a few chuckles from the other lads.

The ganger's face is looming down at me, his head tilted. You OK, son? He says. He fishes a grubby snot-rag from his trouser pocket and hands it to me. That's quite the gash you have there, fella. I push myself up onto my elbows. Farrell orders the other lads to wait in the minibus. He drops to his hunkers. What caused the ruckus? he says quietly. Did ye say something to them?

I shake my head. I press the handkerchief to my brow, the smart makes me flinch. The hanky's blotted red.

They were talkin shite to Thomas, I tell him. Hurlin feckin abuse, like Owen said.

So you thought you'd take on the three of them, eh? Farrell says, a skewed smirk on him.

That's when the big bollox floored me, I tell him.

Farrell grins at me. Ye're a ballsy wee shite, but, John Crilly. The ganger straightens. He reaches down a big mitt, hauls me to my feet.

Farrell swings us out of the thick flow of traffic and onto the Crown car park. He pulls up at the pub entrance, ratchets the handbrake. I'll get ye's your money, he says into the rear-view mirror. There's muffled chorus from the back seats. *Good man. Rightso, Mikey.*

Farrell turns to me, narrows his eyes at the cut over my eye. I think you'll live, he says.

I open the passenger door, but as I move pain fires in my ribs. I stay put. The other workmen duck through the slider and gather in a couple of groups – fags are sparked, conversations get going. Farrell gives the pub door a couple of thumps. I check the wristwatch. Ten past six.

Owen's in a huddle with a couple of the men under the red brick porch, waving an arm about as he talks. He catches my eye as he speaks, sends me a wink. I know he's replaying the whole scene with the three English lads. He's been at it the whole way back, painting himself more the hero with each telling.

About ten minutes later Farrell reappears. The chats quieten and the men gather around the ganger. I get out of the minibus and hobble over to join them.

Farrell has a clutch of brown envelopes in his hand. Prunty, he calls. The stocky labourer steps forward and takes his pay with a nod.

All the men get their lump.

Is there any chance of real money? Thomas says to Farrell.

Farrell gives him a flat stare. Don't you well know the score, Tom, he says firmly. He jabs a thumb over his shoulder. Take it to the bar, he says, Deirdre'll gladly cash it for ye.

Thomas shakes his head, stuffs the cheque in the back pocket of his jeans.

Prunty and Stocious Owen and Thomas stand around waiting for the pub to open. Owen has a big loose grin on him as he rubs his palms together for warmth, or more likely the prospect of sinking his first pint of stout.

I look at Farrell's hands, the wage packets are all gone.

Come on inside, Farrell says, seeing me stare. The boss wants a word with ye.

The big saloon room is empty, the tables loaded with upturned chairs. A smell of disinfectant catches in my throat. As we approach the counter I make out a woman standing behind the pumps, her arms folded, her features dark against the lighted shelves of bottles on the back wall.

Deirdre, Farrell says, solemn voiced.

Michael, the woman says, echoing his tone. You can go on through.

I give her a polite smile but I can't make out if she returns it.

I glance over at the empty bench seat under the window. Sarah squeezing in beside me, my arm going around her shoulders.

I follow the ganger into the short passage and past the bogs. Farrell stops at the door to the back room, takes off his cap, rakes a hand through a spring of sandy curls. He gives a polite cough, knuckles a single knock and holds the door open for me with an outstretched arm.

I go inside.

The room is lit a gauzy pink from the shaded lamps fixed on the walls.

This is the lad, Farrell says.

The Maguire fella is at a table in the corner, a white open-necked shirt, a twisty blue ribbon of cigarette smoke rising from an ashtray. His fawn Crombie is laid neatly beside him on the bench seat.

I hear you've been in the wars, son, he says.

I lay a palm to my side, force a pained smile. I'm fine, I tell him.

With his eyes still on me he says, Thank you, Michael.

I hear the door snicking shut.

Sit, sit, Maguire says, waving a hand toward an upholstered stool across the table from him.

As I lower myself to the seat real pain fires from my ribs and I gasp, Jesus!

Take it easy now, Maguire says. He starts to get up, like he's coming to help me.

I'm OK, I tell him, I just need a wee minute. I dip my eyes, heave some deep breaths. Maguire settles back into his seat. Take a minute, he says. A kindly uncle.

I lift my eyes, let my breathing settle.

Thanks.

He reaches a hand across the table. We shake.

Denny Maguire, he says.

John Crilly.

Maguire lifts a bottle of Powers whiskey, twists out the cork with a squeak. He splashes an inch into a cut-glass tumbler and hands it to me. Purely medicinal purposes, he says, his smile expanding. He raises his drink, it flashes gold in the grainy pink light. Like a priest holding up the chalice at that time in the Mass.

Uisce beatha, Maguire whispers. He tips back his chin, the ice tattling as he drains the whiskey.

I lift my glass, hold it a moment under my nose, the fume stings my eyes, the smell is sweet and dangerous. I take a sip. A raw blaze in my throat. I can't stop the coughs coming or my eyes watering.

Not used to the hard stuff, eh John? What age are you?

I'm eighteen, I tell him. Not long turned.

Rightso, Maguire says. He sounds doubtful.

Heat blooms in my cheeks, the burn spreads into my ears. I don't know if it's coz of the whiskey or the lie.

So, Maguire says. He slides something across the table to me. I look at him for a moment. His nod directs me to pick the envelope up.

I riffle a thumb pad across the edges of the grubby green notes. Ten one-ers, maybe more. What's all this for? I ask him.

Maguire chuckles. Let's call it danger money, John. Michael gave me a full account of your wee ... *contretemps*. He lifts his tumbler and tilts it my way. I raise my glass and mirror him. Stood your ground, I'm told, Maguire says. That's a brave thing in a young man like you. Admirable.

I couldn't let them get away with slaggin the Irish.

Maguire stares evenly at me. I hear what you're saying. But it isn't the first time, son, and it won't be the last. He gives a sad smile.

I'm fecken sick of it, I go.

Maguire's eyes cloud. I'm not placing your accent, he says. His smile is open, showing his teeth.

Cavan.

Cavan, he repeats, eyeing me closely. Rightso. You know, you put me in mind of someone.

I can see Maguire's cogs turning as he tries to place me, connect me. My heart's bangin. I need to switch his train of thinking, derail it. He squares a slimline lighter on top of a pack of Sweet Aftons.

There's a knock at the door. The focus returns to Maguire's eyes.

The black-haired barmaid puts her head through the gap, her eyes rest a moment on mine before she flashes Maguire a smile. Can I get you anything else, Denny?

No, no, Deirdre. John's leaving now.

The barmaid kicks a wedge in place under the door. Muffled sounds drift through from the main bar – a raised voice, laughter, quiet again. Music starts up from the jukebox, strains of another mournful ballad.

I take the envelope of cash from the table, fold it and stuff it in the inside pocket of my greatcoat.

Does this mean I'm on the teamsheet? One of the skins says you like to have people you can rely on.

One of the skins? Maguire arches an eyebrow.

One of the lads on the site.

Maguire grunts. Owen, I suppose? That drunken blaggard needs to watch his mouth.

So?

Maguire laughs. I like your style, John. I'll see to it that Michael puts you on the roster.

Two men sidle past me into the room, each giving Maguire a mute nod as they head to the pool table and set their pints along its ledge. Are we alright to put the lamp on, Denny? a Cork voice asks.

As I walk away there's clatter and thunder as the balls are released.

I've caught two buses and a tube to get to Soho. I sit on a bench in the playground opposite the technical college, waiting for Sarah to finish her evening class.

I'm closer to finding Liam. I need to play it cool and careful. Like in footy. When an opposition player is coming at you with the ball, you don't dive in with both feet like Grogan does on Paul Jones. You stay tight to them, mark them close, don't let them turn you. Bide your time before you make the challenge.

Or like that bit in the play. *Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it.* Lady Macbeth is telling her husband to disguise his true motives. Cocker said that appearance and reality are a key theme throughout the text.

All of that stuff feels a million miles way.

I see Sarah in the brightly lit foyer of the building, walking briskly out in her mint green coat. She pauses on the steps, the other students streaming past her. Her lips purse slightly as she looks around for me, her hair flicking across her face with each quick turn of her head. This feels good, like I'm viewing a film of my own life, waiting out of shot before I walk into the scene. I watch her for a few more moments before I call her name and jog across the road.

Sarah waves when she spots me coming, but as I get closer her smile fades and she stares at the gash above my right eye.

Ciao, Bella!

Sarah asks for two cappuccino coffees.

We carry our drinks through the long narrow room, brightly lit and bustling, noisy conversations competing with the clatter and hiss of a big silver coffee machine on the counter and the mocking shouts and bellowed greetings of the Italian waiters.

We find a couple of stools at the shelf along the mirrored wall, down at the back where it's quieter.

There was a scrap, I tell Sarah. On the site. Three yobbos were flinging insults and it all kicked off. I shrug. It was nothing.

Sarah cocks an eyebrow. No more lies you told me, Joe.

I laugh and put my hand on her arm. Honest. I just got caught up in it. But it's worked out well.

How so?

It's got me closer to this Maguire fella. I met him.

Sarah's eye widen. Maguire? The man your cousin told you isn't to be messed with?

Yeah. He treated me like some kinda hero. Bunged me a tenner, y'know for standing up for the Irish.

And he didn't recognise you as Liam's brother?

I shake my head. No. They only met after Liam'd grown the beard, remember?

Sarah shakes her head. She fixes her eyes on mine. You didn't start asking him questions did you?

No way. But when I was on the site I got talking to one of the men. A fella called Owen.

Sarah gives me a puzzled look.

He was the stocious one conducting the crowd in the pub.

The man who came around cap in hand for the cause, Sarah says quietly, like she's reminding herself.

I nod. I reckon he's a bit of a loyal lap-dog to Maguire.

You can't have got much out of him, then?

I sigh. Not really. But I'm sure he knows something. He started to tell me some story about a lad he worked with recently. A *big Monaghan buck*, he called him.

Is that where you're from?

Yeah. I smile.

Are you sure this Owen bloke was talking about Liam?

I grimace, shake my head. He didn't actually say a name.

He might've been suspicious of you asking questions.

Nah, I go. I think he was ready to blurt more, but the break ended, and what with work and then the malarky with the boot-boys I didn't get another chance to talk to him on his own.

Sarah folds her arms. You're going back, aren't you? she says, like she doesn't actually need to ask.

Tomorrow morning. Maguire's guaranteed me I'll be picked. Facing up to those three lads has put me in his good books.

Sarah holds my gaze. You'll be careful, Joe?

Yeah. I'll act the innocent flower.

It's only just gone seven when I get to the Crown. The blue VW minibus is already there. A few men are seated inside and others are gathered on the car park waiting to be picked.

I stop up short a few feet from the back of the group. A man with ginger hair is standing by the slider, casting his eyes around the men.

Stocious Owen's nowhere to be seen.

You're not with this crew today.

I turn to the voice. It's Farrell. You're on a different job, c'mon, I'll drive you. He nods me towards a yellow Hillman parked on the road.

Twenty minutes on and rain is lashing the steamed windows. Farrell leans forward and swipes a clear patch with the forearm of his jacket.

I turn to the ganger. Are we headed to a new site today?

Aye, a new site, that's it, Farrell says, not looking at me, keeping his eyes on the rain-sluiced road ahead. He flicks the indicator and swings us left, onto a side road, where the traffic's lighter. He reaches a pack of Kensitas from the top of the dash, thumbs the lid open and draws a cigarette out between his teeth.

I shift around on the seat to face him.

Did I do something wrong yesterday? My laugh comes out nervous.

Farrell plunges the lighter button. I'm only the ferryman, he says.

The wipers whump and squeak, rain batters the roof.

After half an hour we've left the streets and shops behind. The car moves between hedgerows, leafless trees along the edge of fields.

Farrell turns the Hillman onto a narrow lane. We slowly bump and rock along rutted ground, overhanging branches slap and scrape against the bodywork. Up ahead I make out some low industrial buildings.

There's no sign of other lump-men or any building work going on.

The ganger wrenches up the handbrake on a broad patch of concreted ground, next to a black Humber and a Commer van that are parked nose up to a breezeblock gable wall. Edna's busted face flashes in my head – *Liam took off in Maguire's Commer*. If the van's here then maybe Liam's here too. I'm about to ask what's going on, but Farrell's already getting out.

The ganger comes around to my side and opens the door, gives me an up-flick of his chin.

I get out of the car.

Walk on up ahead, Farrell says, and he nods towards the middle unit. Its roller shutter's down but a door set into it is open.

I don't move. I stare at the ganger.

What is this? I ask him.

You'll find out, he says. Now, on you go. His hand presses lightly on the low of my back.

Musty dark, a whiff of engine oil and Swarfega. I move ahead into the big warehouse space, Farrell behind me. Along the wall, pallets are loaded with sacks of sand and cement. *Blue Circle. British Gypsum*. A bay of sloped gravel, a wheelbarrow upturned on it. A boxy plyboard-walled office in the corner, fluted glass windows.

To your right, Farrell says.

I make the turn.

Maguire is standing by a workbench, arms folded, as he watches me approach.

John, he says, the very man. It's like he's bumped into some long-lost pal.

I try to hold a smile. Is this about the ructions yesterday? I ask.

Maguire chuckles. No, son, he says. He lifts a pack of Sweet Afton from the bench and slides out a cigarette.

I shrug. What's going on then? I ask.

Now, Maguire says, pointing the unlit fag at me. That's the very thing I was going to ask *you*, John. I'm a wee bit confused, you see.

His kindly tone again.

My heart's thick in my throat. I can only stare back at him.

Tell me your full name again, Maguire says.

I swallow. John Crilly.

Rightso. John Crilly. Maguire holds the flame of his slimline lighter to the fag.

He takes a draw and regards the ash bud, then looks back at me and smiles.

I turn my head and look back towards the aisle leading to the shutter door. Farrell is there, sitting on a pallet-load of cement bags, his eyes on me, his hands bunched in his coat pockets.

Maguire looks over my shoulder at the ganger and gives him a nod. I hear Farrell's bootsteps. The squeal of a hinge. I turn my head. Farrell's standing at the door of the little office speaking to someone inside. I turn back to Maguire – he has a hand to the back of his neck and he's making little turns of his head like he's easing away a crick.

Farrell goes back to his perch on the loaded pallet.

A woman comes out of the office, heads this way. A crop of black hair frames her face, a spray of freckles across her cheeks.

The barmaid from the Crown. My chest is rising and falling fast.

So now, Deirdre, Maguire says, keeping his eyes on me.

Denny, she says, looking at me too.

Do you know this young woman, son?

I can't speak. I shake my head.

You don't? Maguire says, acting surprised. On you go sweetheart. Tell the lad what you told me.

Well, Denny. It was near closing, last Friday night. This girl comes to the bar, a pretty thing, all smiles. She starts gassin' away to me about how busy the pub is, and don't us Irish know how to enjoy ourselves. A Brit girl, she was, very well spoken. She gave me a decent tip, then when I thank her, she puts a photograph on the bar-top and asks if I recognise the person in it, that he's gone missing. She says the fella's name is Liam Crilly. I was thrown by that. Half of me was thinking that she might be police, so I said nothing.

Good girl, Maguire says. And who was in the photograph, Deirdre?

Liam Duffy. At a funfair or somesuch. Looking all loved up, his arm around a girl.

I drop my head, close my eyes. I picture Sarah in the pub, when I came back from talking to Enda in the bogs, with the Polaroid of Liam and Veronica in her hand.

I've conducted some enquiries.

My face is blazin, tears are prickling behind my eyelids.

On you go, Deirdre, Maguire says, finish the tale.

I'd my wits about me, Denny. I bite me lip a bit, frownin down at the picture like I'm rackin me brains. He's a familiar look to him, I say, and I tell her that maybe it'll come to me, so if she leaves her details I'll get in touch, if the penny drops like.

Maguire chuckles. That's my girl, he says.

This Brit tells me she's trying to help his young brother trace him. His young brother? says I, is he here with you now? Somewhere, says the girl and she looks around the bar, but you know yourself what a crush there was that night, Denny. Anyway, I found the girl a pen, and I split a beermat and asked her to write down her name and phone number. I was on my way to the back room to let you know when I saw her leaving the pub. With this lad here.

I lift my head and drag my sleeve roughly across my eyes.

You're a superstar Deirdre, Maguire says. He flashes her a big smile. Thank you, sweetheart. Go and wait for me in the Humber. I'll not be long.

Deirdre fires a dark glance at me as she heads out of the warehouse.

Maguire stubs his fag in a tin ashtray. He lifts his head to me, smiles. Now didn't I say you put me in mind of someone, Joseph?

I stare hard at him, my heart thumpin.

Feisty young buck, aren't you? Maguire says. I'd say you take after your father in that respect. More so than Liam, that's for sure. Leaving Liverpool and coming down here. Putting yourself in the line of fire, all to find your big brother.

Who told you? I ask him. But I've twigged before he can answer.

Your cousin told us all about it this morning, Maguire says. Enda took some gentle persuasion, didn't he Michael?

Ah, just wee bit, now, Farrell says.

What do you want Liam for? He's not a friggin tout. And what do you want with me?

Calm yourself now, Joseph. I'm coming to that. But first I need to fill in some gaps in the story you have from Enda. It seems that your cousin spared you the details.

I don't wanna know, I say.

It was a simple enough job, Joseph, Maguire says, like he hasn't heard me. Just a wee package to be deposited in a pillar-box on Piccadilly. But it seems your brother had ... what will we call it? A crisis of conscience? Or maybe it was just plain old-fashioned cowardice.

I picture the London street. The Saturday morning of his birthday. Crowded with people shopping.

My hands form to fists. He's not a fucken murderer, that's why.

Farrell takes a couple of steps towards me.

Maguire stays him with a raised palm.

Then, the week after your brother took off, I was lifted. I spent two nights in Marylebone nick having all manner of impertinences thrust my way.

You don't know it was Liam that informed. It could've been anyone.

Maguire's eyebrows shift up. Bit of a coincidence though, wouldn't you say, son?

Maguire smooths a hand over his hair. I can't begin to imagine what his father, God rest him, would make of his son being a tout. Vincent Duffy was a loyal soldier. One of the very best.

I get a flash of the black and white snap. Dad, Eugene ... the man with the dapper tie-pin, the greased-back hair with the steel rule parting. Older now, clean shaven.

I glance at Farrell. He has a hand inside his jacket, like he's holding something there.

I turn to Maguire. What are you gunna do to me?

Maguire's brow furrows. *Do* with you? You're not much more than a child, Joseph. A maneen. He laughs. It'd be like pulling the legs off a spider.

I hear Farrell chuckle.

You're letting me go?

I am indeed, son.

What if I go to the coppers?

I don't think any good would come of that. You wouldn't want to bring more trouble to your mother's doorstep, do you? And think about Veronica and Sarah. Oh, and wee Janey. Your Uncle Eugene tells me she's a lovely wee thing.

Fuck off.

Maguire winces, as if he's disappointed in me for the curse.

I really don't think we're going to hurt each other. Are we, Joseph?

What about Liam?

Maguire flaps the idea away with a hand. I've bigger fish to fry, son, he says.

So you're not looking for him?

Maguire laughs. No, he says, and he puts a thumb-tip to his chest and makes the shape of an X. Cross my heart and hope to die.

How do I know you're not lying?

As far as I'm concerned, your brother can live with the shame he's brought on your father's name. That'll be punishment enough for him. You can tell him that from me. If you ever see him again, that is.

I drop my head. My breathing quickens and hot tears crowd my eyes.

Now, Michael, I hear Maguire say. Will you run the boy back into London.

I jumped a couple of buses from the Crown after Farrell dropped me there. I've run from Oxford Circus to the Italian café.

I sit at one of the red-checkered tables. My leg jigglin, the smoked glass cup of coffee going cold.

When we left the warehouse and got in the Hillman, Farrell said, You've had a feckin lucky escape there, son, I'll tell you that. He didn't say another word, he just chain smoked and muttered litanies at other drivers.

I don't know how to feel about what Maguire said. I don't even know if I believe all of it. The stuff about my dad being a loyal soldier who did what was asked of him. Maguire didn't actually say dad killed people, but it's what he wants me to think. And it makes sense with what Mum showed me in the newspaper report. A reprisal. Liam believed that too, otherwise he wouldn't have taken part in the drills and camps and training last summer. I can see how he'd be all fired up for revenge, especially when he's got Maguire in his ear, goading him on.

But the thing is Liam didn't do anything.

He didn't post the wee package in a pillar box on Piccadilly.

And I don't care if Liam feels guilt and shame for the rest of his life. It'll mean the dickhead won't get involved again.

I think of Veronica. Of her carrying Liam's kid.

I try not to think about what she'll do when I tell her Liam's nowhere to be found.

I get up and leave the café.

I hear the urgent beeps and press the coin in.

Good afternoon, A la Mode, the man says. Her boss again, I reckon. Machines hum and whir in the background.

Sarah Burgess, please.

She's not here, sir. Can I be of assistance?

Where's she gone?

I'm afraid I don't know, the boss says, flatly. He pauses. Is this a personal —

I cut the call. I grub in my inside pocket and bring out the coach ticket.

I dial.

Hallo? A woman says.

I ask for Sarah.

Bear with me one moment. The voice is posh, husky. Uppity Penny from Fulham.

Outside the box, people rush along the pavement with bags and parcels. A shop window display — dummies of a smiling Mum and Dad, a rosy-cheeked boy kneeling on a rug in front of the fireplace with a stack of Christmas presents.

Joe? Where are you?

I start gabbling. I'm in Fitzrovia. I came to meet you. Farrell drove me out to some country place. Maguire was there. And Deirdre —

Wait, Joe. Listen to me. Meet me at London Bridge train station. I'm leaving the lodgings now. I'll see you on the concourse, by the ticket office. I'll bring your bag.

A bus squeals to a stop. I press the receiver against my ear.

Sarah?

Get the eastbound Central Line from Oxford Circus, then change at Bank for the southbound Northern Line. One stop. You got that?

Yeah, OK. London Bridge. But why?

I think I know where Liam is.

Gloria in excelsis deo.

On the concourse, a Salvation Army brass band plays Christmas songs. A crowd in a half circle are gathered to listen, dark winter coats, and scarves. A pink-faced man with a tinsel crown sways side to side as he sings along. A woman clutching the mittenend hand of her little girl.

I spot Sarah, walking quickly towards me carrying her carpetbag, the Slazenger hanging from her shoulder.

What's goin on? Where is he?

I'll explain when we're on the train, Sarah says.

I take my bag from her, loop it across my chest. Where are we going?

I'll get the tickets. Just wait for me at the barrier, Platform ten.

I look up at the board, the chattering display of departures.

Platform ten shows *All Stations to Dover, 5:17.*

The carriage we're in is jammed with people clutching Christmas shopping, bags bulky with gifts, tubes of wrapping paper poking from them. I hand my way along the aisle towards the front of the train, Sarah following behind me. After three carriages I see two empty seats. I reach her carpetbag up onto the rail.

When we're seated, I turn to her. I want to tell her about Maguire, but I need to know what she means about knowing where Liam is first.

I don't get it, I say. What makes you think he's in Dover?

We're not going to Dover, Sarah says. She smiles. Show me Liam's letter again, and that Polaroid of him and Veronica.

I unzip the sports bag and take them out.

She's holding the face of the envelope up so both of us can read it. The crabby slant of Liam's handwriting. I shrug. What is it?

Sarah points at the postmark. Look, she says.

I know. The twenty-sixth of November, the week before last, what use is that?

Not the date, Joe. Look at the image.

It's just smudgy ink marks, I tell her. I've looked at it till my eyes ache. I take the envelope from her and angle it to the strip lights over the aisle.

It just looks like a line of hill tops, I tell her. I could read the letters, but Amla isn't even a place, Sarah.

Now, look at the photo again, she says.

I stare at the Polaroid. Liam and Veronica smiling. The funfair behind them. The roller coaster. The amusement stalls with the netted bags of beach balls and bucket and spade sets.

I shrug. I've seen it a million times and it tells me nothing, Sarah.

She puts the Polaroid next to the postmark. It's right in front of your eyes, Joe. And you still can't see it?

I put a fingertip to the postmark, the wavy line there. I start to nod, slowly.

That's the roller coaster, isn't it?

Sarah's beaming. Yeah. It's called the Scenic Railway. It's really gentle, that's how I recognized it. And now this, she says, moving my finger down a bit, so it's under the badly printed letters. The whole word isn't there, Joe, you've not been seeing the whole picture.

You can say that again, I say.

Sarah laughs. She takes a pen from her handbag, and turns the envelope over and flattens it on her knee. She prints the letters. A M L A. She looks up at me. I nod. She prints more letters before and after, and moves her hand away.

I frown at the word. Dreamland, what's that?

Remember I told you about my childhood holidays – amusements, penny falls, whirling waltzers, bingo, that sort of thing?

Yeah?

It was Margate, Joe. That's where Dreamland is.

That's where Liam sent the letter to Veronica from?

Yep. I was at work this morning when it dawned on me. I asked Mr Kitsaros for some time off and I went straight to my flat and checked. The letter and the photos were still spread out on the table. I was on pins waiting for you to phone me so I could tell you.

Is Margate a big place? Do you reckon there's loads of taxi companies there?

There'll be a few. But nothing like London.

I feel tears welling. I try to stem a stupid juddering of my chin.

Hey, now, Sarah says. She takes my hand, the letter still in it, and holds it in her lap and gives it a squeeze.

I nod, rub the back of my free hand over my eyes.

I've told Sarah what happened earlier. About Farrell taking me to Maguire, and him bringing Deirdre in, and her saying how the Brit girl had come to the bar and showed her the photo of Liam and that's how they twigged who I was.

Sarah looks horrified. Oh God, I'm so sorry, Joe.

It doesn't matter, I tell her. Not anymore

I could've put you in danger.

You were only trying to help, Sarah. And anyway, I'd fed you a pack of lies at that point.

That's true, Sarah says. But I could have got you in trouble.

But you didn't.

And this Maguire fella just let you go?

Yeah. He said I wasn't worth the effort, and he said that Liam living with shaming our father's name was punishment enough.

Really? He's not looking for your brother? That's an end of it?

Yeah. He made all these threats against my mum and Janey if I ever grass him up.

Scary bastard.

He's that alright.

The train slows into Margate station. We go to the carriage door and I slide the window down and lean out as we jolt to a stop. There's an old man being helped down near the front. Back the other way a burst of laughter from three women tottering along the platform.

I take Sarah's hand and we leave the station, and she leads us to the right and we cross to an island bus shelter then over the road to the promenade. There's a broad stretch of beach, the sand trampled and the sea so black I can't make out where it meets the dark sky.

The prom curves towards the lights of the town a short distance ahead.

We've not come far when Sarah stops. She sets down her carpetbag and stands with her back to the sea. There, she says, her face tilted up at the buildings along the front.

A closed-up bingo hall with a fancy decorated canopy jutting over the street. Above it, the building rises, a windowless three-storey slice of wall like a blade made of bricks against the deep blue of the sky. Down one edge the illuminated yellow letters.

DREAMLAND

Sarah comes into the phone box with me.

Veronica?

That you, Joe?

Yeah. Listen. The last time you saw Liam was in Margate wasn't it?

Veronica pauses. Yeah, that was the place. Is that important?

It's where he wrote that letter to you. It's where we are.

We? My God, are you with Liam?

No, sorry. I meant Sarah.

Ah, right, Veronica says, sounding deflated.

But Liam's here somewhere for sure, Vee. We think he's working on the taxis again, but most of the offices are shut. We asked at one place, but the man didn't recognize Liam from the photo.

Jesus! How have you found all this out?

It's a long story. I take a breath. I need to ask you something. Can you remember where you stayed? What was the name of the hotel?

The line goes quiet. I can't remember, Joe.

Get her to retrace her steps, Sarah says.

I start to ask Veronica but she says, I heard Sarah. Okay. Let me think. We came out of the station and turned right along the prom, the beach on our left. We walked past the pier. Then what did we do? Oh, yeah, we bought a bag of chips to share. There was this curved stone jetty, with a cute little stubby lighthouse at the end. We sat beside it, on the harbour wall. We got terrorized by seagulls.

What hotel, Vee? I roll my eyes at Sarah. She smiles.

OK. We walked back to the prom and crossed to the town. There was a row of B and Bs and guest houses all along the front. Liam said for me to choose. They all

looked much of a muchness. We stopped outside the place coz I liked the name. It was unusual, pretty sounding.

Think, Vee.

I'm trying to, Joe.

The line goes quiet again. I look at Sarah. She rests her cheek against mine.

Joe? You still there?

Yeah.

The Lorelei. It was called the Lorelei.

I'm gunna ask if they remember him.

Gotcha, Sarah says. But leave *this* bit to me.

A middle-aged woman opens the door and peers at the two of us standing side by side on the front step. She gives me a wary up and down.

Could we have a room for one night? Sarah asks, all bright and confident.

It's near ten o'clock, the woman says, casting a glance at the dark prom behind us.

Sarah widens her smile. I know, and we're so sorry. Our train broke down at Gillingham and we had to wait for a coach. This is my little brother.

I nearly believe her myself.

Oh, I see, the woman says.

We're here for our uncle's funeral tomorrow, Sarah says.

I'm sorry for your loss. The woman's gaze softens a bit.

Sarah dips hers eyes. Thank you. It was very sudden.

I have to turn aside and cough to smuggle out the laugh.

Have you got something then? I ask the woman, keeping my face straight.

I've only the sea-view room. It's six pounds including breakfast.

Sounds perfect, Sarah says.

It's a double, though. That be OK? The woman's flicking her concerned eyes between the two of us.

It'll be fine, Sarah says. We're used to topping and tailing.

The woman pulls the door open. I flash a look at the side of Sarah's face as she steps inside. Not even a flicker. I allow myself a smile as I follow them into the hallway.

I pay for the room with some of the money Maguire gave me.

First floor, the woman says, her back to us as she unlocks a small wooden case fixed to the wall.

Sarah takes the key. The woman walks off and goes into a room at the front of the house.

I'll follow you up in a minute.

Sarah taps the side of her nose, then heads to the staircase.

The landlady is alone in the room, standing as she looks down at a TV. Blue light flickers and shifts on the walls.

The camera pans across the wreckage of shattered glass and twisted metal on the pavement. A policeman stands guard in front of the blasted shop window. An armless mannequin lies in the smithereens.

You OK, love? the woman asks.

My brother stayed here, two months ago. I just wondered if you remembered him. His name's Liam Duffy and he was with Veronica, she's his ...

The woman laughs. His girlfriend? His bit on the side? I'm not a prude, son. Can't afford to be, not in this business.

He's a bit older than me, twenty he would've been then, about my height. He's got a black beard.

Even if I did remember him I wouldn't tell you. That's another thing about the hotel trade. Discretion.

I nod.

The woman puts a hand to her hip. You make it sound like he's missing or something.

I just wondered if you remembered him. That's all.

No, can't say I do, love, the woman says, and she turns back to the TV.

A man in a beige mac holds a microphone as he talks to the camera.

While a number of people are being treated for minor injuries, there have been no fatalities. A police spokesman has confirmed that the bombers telephoned a warning to the emergency services. It is due to the swift response of the metropolitan police that the area was cleared before the device detonated.

The bedroom's in darkness. Sarah's at the window, her face to a slice of pale light coming through the narrow gap in the curtains. I close the door quietly and go to her.

What is it?

She lets out a soft breath, her gaze intent on the street. Nothing, she says.

I put my face beside hers, shift the curtain aside.

A couple of cars are parked in the street below. A man walks past the guest house at a clip. Across the road white globe lamps dot the empty prom.

Sarah turns away from the window.

I put my arms around her waist. I link my fingers at the low of her back and bring her closer. She rests her head on my shoulder.

You didn't tell anyone we were coming here, did you?

Course not, Joe, Sarah says, softly. When I asked Mr Kitsaros for the time off I said it was to visit my dad on the Isle of White.

You're just being paranoid, then.

I know.

After a few seconds I go, Hey, Sarah?

What?

D'ya reckon Liam and Veronica stayed in this room?

Ew, Sarah says, what a thing to wonder.

When I put my hands at the top of her arms she lifts her face and smiles.

The kiss is long and deep.

Good grief, Joe!

I look up, Sarah's standing by the table, shaking her head, hers eyes wide as she looks at the half demolished cooked breakfast on my plate.

Sorry, I got started without you. Any luck?

Sarah nods. She sits opposite me. Elsie said the popular firms are on the seafront, near the clocktower.

Elsie?

Our landlady, Sarah says. She said she hoped everything goes as well as it can in the circumstances.

I tilt my head to one side.

Poor Uncle Donald's funeral. Remember?

I flash her a smile as I lay an extra rasher across a piece of toast. Warm butter trickles down my chin when I take a bite.

Sarah passes me a red triangle of serviette. We could take a couple of taxi places each.

I mop the grease, swallow. No, I go. We've only got the one photo of Liam, and we need to use that, coz he might be calling himself some other name.

Good thinking, Sarah says.

So, we'll stick together. You'll be better at charming them, anyway.

Sarah smiles, bats her eyelashes. Aw, Joe, that's very nearly a compliment.

I shrug. S'true, I tell her.

I fold a brown sausage in another round of slathered toast.

Oh, by the way, Sarah says, I've booked the room for another night, hope you don't mind.

I pop my eyes, like I'm shocked she'd suggest such a thing. Well, I go, I think that's very forward of you, Miss Sarah Burgess.

She laughs.

It's not easy to chew and smile at the same time but I'm havin a good go at it.

We've had no joy at a couple of firms by the clocktower.

The town's quiet. Most of the shops are closed – it's either too early in the day or too late in the year. We pass an ice-cream parlour and a net curtained tea-room. And a shop window with shelved glass jars of multi-coloured sweets, and trays piled with cellophane tubes of pink rock.

There's not been a taxi office for the last couple of blocks. The buildings are mostly hotels and guest-houses now. We stop by the steps to a fancy looking place with balconies that overlook the beach.

Sarah frowns as she gazes along the road. Is it worth carrying on, Joe? It doesn't like there's going to be much more this way.

Yeah, I know, I say, but I'm sure there was a place near the train station.

The man at the desk puts on his glasses and peers at the Polaroid.

Nah, I don't think I do. He looks up at me over his frames. He's missing, you say?

Well, we thought he was. But we've found out he moved here, and he's working on the taxis. He's my brother.

Your brother? the man says with a frown. He pushes his glasses back in place and takes another looks at the photo. You sure he's still got that face fuzz?

No, I tell the man. I look at Sarah. She smiles, coz we've both twigged at the same time – that if he's laying low he'll have got rid of the beard to disguise himself from Maguire's lot.

He might be clean shaven now, Sarah says.

He deffo will be, I say. He'll look like me, but with an Irish accent.

And better looking, Sarah says, po-faced. I give her a gentle elbow dig in the side.

The man chuckles, hands me back the photo. His eyes take in my face.

I straighten my back, jut my chin a little.

The man plumps his lip. Hmm, he goes. He shakes his head. Nah, Sorry.

My shoulders slump.

Are there any more firms further along? Sarah says, with a nod in the direction of the train station.

This is the last place on the main drag, the man says. Have you tried near the clocktower?

I nod. My throat is thick. I feel Sarah's arm comes around my back.

What about smaller firms in the town? she asks.

There's a few tinpot outfits, the man says. Thanet Cabs and the like.

Whereabouts is that? I ask.

Back towards the pier. Second side-street after the chip shop. Boss is Tony Foley, little Irish fella.

It's a normal terraced street, each house with a rise of steps to porches supported by grimy white pillars.

This doesn't look right, Sarah says, and she stops and looks back towards the seafront.

I nod. I take a last glance along the street. I see a man, a few houses down, sitting on the bottom step having a smoke.

No, wait a sec, I tell Sarah, and I carry on walking.

He's a young fair-haired fella, twenty-ish. He looks up as I get near, cocks his head, a half-smile.

Is Thanet Cabs on this street? I ask him.

He looks a bit puzzled at the question. Yeah, he says vaguely, looking at my face like he's not fully listening.

Is Mr Foley about?

The lad does a spluttery laugh. Mr Foley! The old man don't get that bleedin title very often. Oh, sorry, love, he says to Sarah, who's stepped up beside me.

Sarah laughs, I've heard worse, she says. I feel her hand touch mine, our fingers lace.

I just need a quick word with him.

Dad's on a fare to Broadstairs. Where is it you want to go? He flicks a nod at a maroon Anglia parked at the kerb.

We don't need a taxi, Sarah says.

Oh. What's it about then?

I bring out the Dreamland Polaroid and hand it to him.

The Foley lad squints an eye against the trail of his fag smoke. He chuckles as he looks at the photo.

We're looking for him, I tell him. He might've shaved the beard off now. He'd look a bit like me. I squeeze Sarah's hand so she doesn't spin the joke again.

Foley looks up. He flicks his fag-end towards the Anglia and stands facing me. His grin broadens to a smile as he holds my gaze. You're Joey's brother, aren't ya? he says. I clocked it the moment I saw ya.

I open my mouth to speak when I feel a tight squeeze from Sarah's hand, her fingernails biting my skin. I catch on. I return a light press, to let her know.

Introduce yourself, Liam, Sarah says, with a laugh.

I put out a hand. We shake.

I'm Ciaran. His face brightens. Ere, he says to Sarah, you ever get the two of 'em mixed up? He chortles away at that one.

All the time, Sarah says, with a little smile.

You know him, then? I ask.

Yeah. Joey did some jobs for us. He came asking for work a few weeks ago. He didn't know the local streets, but Dad gave him the odd booking for longer trips – Ramsgate, Deal, Dover. I think the old man took a bit of a shine to him, a fellow Irishman, all that.

He doesn't work here any more, then?

Ciaran shakes his head. Did his last job a couple of days ago.

Why did he leave, do you know? Sarah asks.

Said it was time for him to move on, Ciaran says. In trouble is he?

No, I tell him. We've come to visit him. Did he say where he was going?

Abroad, I reckon. Always goin on about how he was sick of *this feckin country*. I'd take the piss, tell him he was all talk.

Do you know where Joey was living? Sarah asks.

The lad pulls a face. He didn't live anywhere.

What d'ya mean? I go.

Ciaran laughs. Joey had this old beaten up Commer, parked on some waste ground up behind the amusement park. He was kipping in the van.

Up by Dreamland? I ask.

That's it. He was working there too, at one of the stalls. But it's end of season now, all of that's winding down for the winter.

Which stall was it?

Ciaran smiles. He raises an arm to shoulder height, holds it straight and bends his other arm so his hand is against his cheek. His index curls around an invisible trigger. Pop! he goes. Take your pick from the top shelf an' all that. He laughs.

We walk towards the tall building Sarah pointed out last night when we got off the train. We turn off the front and through a stone arch at the bottom of the Dreamland sign, the letters fixed to the bricks, one below the next.

A few people are walking around, searching for something to do. Most of the booths and stalls are closed, their fronts shuttered, the free-standing ones tarped. The dodgem cars have been pushed together in a corner of the steel-plate floor, a chain threaded through their steering wheels.

Up ahead is a cafeteria, it's inside lights on.

Look, Sarah says. I follow her gaze above the flat roof of the café. There's a section of the roller coaster, its shallow dips and rises supported by wooden struts.

The Scenic Railway.

Sarah nods.

We walk on. Up ahead, two kids are at an open fronted booth, throwing darts. A woman stallholder stands off to the side, gazing at me with a bored expression as I approach. She lays three plastic flighted darts into a tin dish on the fake grass shelf. I grub out the coins and hand them to her. Is there a rifle range too? I ask her, with a smile.

Next row along, she says, thumbing over her shoulder.

Thanks.

Some people! I hear the woman say, as I jog away to join Sarah who's started walking.

We swing right by Cash Bingo – an open fronted place with a few fat rumps perched on fixed stools.

There, I say, at the far end.

It's a mid-forties fella running the stall. Pointed sideburns, steel comb poking from his shirt pocket – an old Teddyboy look to him like Grogan's stepdad.

Does Joey work here?

Just hang fire a minute, son, the man says. He nods at a boy of about ten who has a rifle aimed at a sliding row of flat tin ducks.

A duck falls back with a dull ping. Then another. And a third.

The stallholder looks at me. Joey'll be here at midday, providing he hasn't had a skinful.

I claw back my greatcoat sleeve. Ten to eleven.

We could try looking for the Commer, I say to Sarah, as we walk away.

Hmm, she says. *Waste ground* is a bit vague, though. If he starts at twelve, we'd best plant ourselves here for an hour.

I nod.

We'll go back to that cafeteria, Joe. We can wait there. I'm actually quite peckish.

I'm deffo not, I say.

Sarah smiles. She links her arm through mine as we walk.

The café's a big place. Only a couple of tables taken, though. We go to the long food counter along the back wall. Sarah picks up a tray and pushes it along the shelf. Metal dishes are loaded with steaming food.

You sure you're not having anything, Joe? Not like you.

I can't eat.

Sarah smiles.

A woman behind the counter says, Yes, love?

Sarah scans the display. Two sausages ... some mash.

Onion gravy, dahlin'?

Ooh, yes please. And two milky coffees.

We get a table by the window. I take the seat that gives me a view of the entrance arch.

Staring out won't bring him any sooner, Sarah says, a disc of sausage paused on the fork at her mouth.

I turn back to her. Sorry.

She casts a look around the room. Not exactly jumping, is it?

I look around too. An old fella reading the Racing Post. A bloke in a tan overcoat comes in and walks to the counter. A young mum a couple of tables away bounces a baby on her knee – the woman smiles when she sees me looking and I smile back.

You could phone Veronica, Sarah says. There's a hooded payphone over by the toilets.

I will, I tell her. But I wanna wait till Liam's here. I'll take him to the phone and I'll call her at the chemist's. And when she answers I'll pass him over.

Sarah laughs. So, after all this you're not even going to give him the message?

No. I'm not getting involved any more.

Fair point, Sarah says. You do have one other call to make, though.

I know, I say. I glance at the wristwatch. She'll be at work. I'll call our next door neighbours later, after she's picked Janey up from school. Mrs Fisher will go and fetch her.

My head dips. I stare down at my linked fingers.

Sarah reaches across the table and puts her hand on my arm, gives it a gentle shake. Hey, she says.

I raise my eyes.

Sarah's smiling, her head tilted. This is a good thing, isn't it?

Yeah.

Sarah blinks once. So why are you getting upset?

I'm just thinking of what Mum must've gone through. After Dad died.

Sarah nods.

Knowing he was killed, but telling me it was a heart attack.

Do you resent her for that?

I shake my head. No. I get it now. She was trying to protect me. Janey too.

Tryin to keep the family together and safe. It's why she convinced Dad that we should move to England in the first place. I think she knew what Dad was involved in.

There's a thickening in my throat. Heat rises in my neck. My sight is misted.

But you've put that right now, Joe. Haven't you? You'll all be back together again. Your Mum'll be pleased.

I drag my greatcoat sleeve across my eyes. Yeah.

Do you think Liam will want to travel back to Liverpool straight away? Sarah says.

Probably.

And you'll go with him?

I nod.

We're not going to need the sea-view room tonight, then, I suppose.

Sorry.

Sarah sighs. Yeah. Me too.

I clasp her hand between both of mine. You could come with us.

Sarah laughs. I can't, Joe.

Because of work?

Yep.

I could come visit you in London, I tell her. If you wanted me too. We could go to the ICA or the Tate or the Hayward together. Then for a coffee in Soho.

Sarah puts the tip of her index finger on her lips. Bats her lashes. Ooh, now, let me see.

That a yes, then?

Course it is, you daft bugger.

Or you could come up to Liverpool. Meet Mum. And my mad little gymnast sister. And Veronica – I reckon you two would hit it off.

I'll check my diary, Sarah says, holding a serious face for a couple of seconds. She smiles. Will you be going back to your job at the butchers?

Yeah. Probably. Provided Mum has sweet talked Mr Simm into not sacking me.

And your English classes?

Yeah. Got some catchin up to do, though.

Do you think you'll carry on with the studies?

Deffo. I'll keep the job going till I can go back full-time, for A-levels.

Then what?

Mr Cocker reckons I've got the ability to go further, y'know, do a degree course somewhere.

Sarah smiles. *London* has some very good colleges, I hear.

Is that right? I go. I purse my lips and stroke my chin, like Cocker does when he's musing. I really must look into that.

We both laugh.

What about after college? What do you think you'd do then?

I dunno. Mr Cocker's always at me to write more stories. He says I've a vivid imagination.

Really? Sarah says. I hadn't noticed.

Funny, I go. It's just hard though, making stuff up.

Why don't you write about this, Sarah says. Y'know what's happened to you over the last few weeks.

I smile. Yeah, I say. Maybe I will one day.

I turn my face to the window again, the arched passage from the prom. I check the watch. Ten to twelve. My leg starts jiggling.

Why don't you go out, Joe? Wait for him at the entrance.

On my own?

Sarah smiles. Yeah, exactly. Anyway, you're on pins. It's putting me off my grub.

OK, I tell her. I get up, but I don't move away.

Skidaddle, Sarah says. Bring him back here. She raises her coffee cup to her mouth, blows a little dip in the foam, winks.

I see him a couple of blocks away, coming this way past the tat shops and arcades. It's the swagger as he walks, the smart salute of his arm as he takes a drag, the fag pinched at his mouth then cupped at his side. I want to run to him, but my boots won't move.

He's only twenty feet away now and he still hasn't seen me. I take a step out onto the pavement. I'm directly in his path. As he gets closer he shoots a glance up at the Dreamland sign.

He's about to turn left into the fairground when he sees me and stops.

Joe? Liam says, shaking his head.

I open my mouth to speak but the words are choked in my throat.

Liam walks quickly towards me, smiling.

When he's a couple of feet away, I see my brother's eyes narrow. He frowns, looking past me. He stops at my side. I turn to see what he's seeing.

A man is striding towards us through the archway from Dreamland. He has a hand inside his tan overcoat.

The Duffy boys, isn't it? the man says as he stops a few feet from us. The boss would like a wee word with you both. He nods past me and my brother, towards the prom.

We turn.

A black Humber is parked at the kerb.

Farrell is at the wheel.

The back window goes slowly down.

Maguire. Smiling out at Liam and me.

Preface to the Critical Thesis

Both the critical and creative projects have changed considerably over the period of my research. The proposal I submitted with my application outlined a plan for a polyphonic, composite novel; and for a critical essay that examined the poetics of the composite novel. According to this scheme, the critical and creative theses would dovetail neatly: the novel, an exemplar of the form, would dramatize the concerns of the critical research; while the critical essay would survey and interpret the techniques used in comparative texts that adopt a composite structure. Early drafts of the proposed novel occupied the same storyworld that *Dreamland* does; focusing on the mysterious absence of the same character, Liam Duffy, using a variety of character perspectives to create a portrait (in *absentia*) of Liam. However, as the creative writing progressed, the singular perspective of Liam's younger brother Joe began to preoccupy me more, and his mediating consciousness became the exclusive (first person, present tense) narrative voice.

The concerns of the critical research were informed by creative decisions made in the composition of *Dreamland*. The process of writing the novel made me consider the techniques a wide range of novelists have used, and how those formal decisions can interact with the work's linguistic content to produce meaning for their particular fictional world.

In parallel, creative decisions made in the composition of *Dreamland* were influenced by my attentiveness to the techniques of narrative division that I examine in the critical thesis. My research for the critical thesis required close attention to novelistic techniques of chaptering, paragraphing, and other means by which narrative fiction is visibly segmented. This particular focus has caused a heightened awareness

of these methods that has influenced my writing practice during the composition of the creative thesis.

An early intention was to write a certain type of novel, one that (on the physical surface of the page, at least) would resemble the highly segmented novels I examine in the case study chapter of the critical thesis. In this preconception the gappy form would provide a fixed formal constraint; a set of gappy ‘containers’ into which the linguistic content could, as it were, be poured. As the story emerged I discovered that this rigid approach was not always appropriate to the content of Dreamland. I felt that certain passages of the narrative required a more conventionally continuous layout. While Seamus Heaney is referring to formalism in poetry, his view on how form should be flexed to content resonates with my experience in writing Dreamland: ‘Form is not like a pastry cutter – the dough has to move and discover its own shape.’¹ The novel presented in this thesis is not typical of the very highly segmented novels analysed in the case study chapter of the critical thesis. However my heightened awareness of the interdependence of physical form and narrative content has helped me to make a number of formal decisions on the placement and presentation of textual divisions that respond to my discovery of the fictional world of Dreamland.

¹ Dennis O'Driscoll, ‘To Set the Darkness Echoing,’ *Guardian*, accessed October, 17, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/nov/08/seamus-heaney-interview>.

Part II: Critical Thesis

*Modes of Textual Division
in the
Post-2000 Novel*

INTRODUCTION

The inciting event for this thesis is the noticing of a distinctive typographic layout in contemporary novels. The printed content of the texts thus noticed is so regularly interrupted by horizontal margins of white space as to give their pages a ‘gappy’ appearance. That this initial act of noticing is purely visual is significant: novels in this class draw attention before a word is read because their pages *look markedly different* to those of most novels. In other words, these gappy texts are, on the surface of the page at least, unconventional. These texts deviate from a set of historical conventions of narrative division that combine to give a stereotypical shape to the *mise-en-page* of most novels: the style and placement of subdivisions of book and part and chapter and, at page-level, the use of a convention that sees paragraphs follow in close succession, marked only by indentations of their first lines. Many novels customarily feature line-breaks to divide their printed passages, but they tend to do so sparingly, and such gaps are easily accounted for as marking spatial or temporal transitions. Certain typographically marked conventions of narrative division have become so habitual a feature of the novel that even seemingly minor disruptions of those techniques become visibly conspicuous; the unfamiliar format becomes fore-grounded in the reader’s perception of the text. The arresting disposition of the page has a capacity to generate meaning; William Paulson recognizes this when he states that: ‘the artistic text arises when its reader encounters elements for which the ordinary codes of language are not adequate’ and the reader ‘consider(s) the elements hitherto unencountered as part of a new level of signifying

structure.² If we accept Paulson's set of 'elements hitherto unencountered' to include the unconventional gaps on the material surface of a text, then these elements can be considered for their potential to be 'part of a new level of signifying structure.'

The central intention of this thesis, then, is to investigate the forms and functions of this unconventional gappy mode of narrative division in selected contemporary novels. Using case studies of four representative post-2000 novels, the thesis makes a close reading of the selected texts and explores how the distinctive material form of these novels contributes to their production of meaning. In particular the thesis analyses how this gappy mode of textual division interacts with the linguistic content of the novels to generate a range of interpretative possibilities for their narratives.

The thesis both extends and deviates from other pertinent work in this field. For example, Marco Caracciolo investigates 'the connection between punctuation, typographical marks, and the representation of character consciousness in narrative.'³ Caracciolo's particular focus is on the effect of *all* unconventional extra-linguistic elements of the text (for example page layout and design, typeface, punctuation). However, while the 'gap' and brief 'sections' that are the focus of this thesis are a sub-class of the broad range of the paralinguistic devices examined by Caracciolo, the gap device is not a paralinguistic element he gives critical attention to in his paper. In addition, while Caracciolo foregrounds how paralinguistic components of the text function as vehicles for representing aspects of character consciousness (my own case studies also examine similar functionality for their textual 'gappiness': for example the workings of character memory, and instances of character sleep and inattention) this thesis also detects other effects that do not solely serve to figure character traits.

² William R. Paulson, *The Noise of Culture: Literary Texts in a World of Information* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), p.89.

³ Marco Caracciolo, 'Punctuating Minds,' *Journal of literary semantics*, accessed July 16, 2020, https://www.rug.nl/research/portal/files/13792506/jls_2014_0003.pdf > p.44.

For example, my findings include: the power of the gappy page to unsettle reader expectations of form; the use of gaps to signify narratorial absence; the degree to which gapped and disjunctive sections cohere across the whole text. My attention to this latter idea of whole-text coherence is found also in Ted Gioia's work, where he claims a trend in contemporary fiction that: 'instead of relying on fragmentation as a means of disjunction and dissolution' instead produces 'holistic and coalescent works.'⁴ However, the material divisions in the exemplar texts chosen by Gioia are generally placed in similarly long intervals to those of conventional novelistic chapters, and it is at these junctures that Gioia marks points of 'fragmentation' exemplified by the radical switches of narrator, linguistic style and temporal location in texts such as Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011) and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004). The pages of Gioia's selected texts, unlike the four novels I examine in Chapter 3, are generally conventional in their page layout and modes of textual division. And, while Gioia marks a trend towards narrative coherence in his texts, I look to parse *degrees* of both coherence and disunity in my case study texts. My full findings are presented in the summative section to Chapter 3 of this thesis where I that identifies some common functions and effects of the distinctive material form in the candidate texts.

It is only by setting the material form of these gappy novels against the backdrop of a durable and long-standing set of conventions of layout and textual division that their unconventionality becomes apparent and their presence interpretable. As Patricia Waugh puts it: 'If literature deviates from a norm in order to renew perception ... then the older literary norm necessarily constitutes the "background" against which the

⁴ Ted Gioia, 'The Rise of the Fragmented Novel,' *Fractious Fiction*, accessed July 16, 2020, http://fractiousfiction.com/rise_of_the_fragmented_novel.html.

new textual innovations foreground themselves and can be understood.⁵ To establish this ‘background’ the first two chapters of the thesis historicize modes of narrative division in the contemporary novel.

Chapter One traces the pre-novelistic emergence and evolution of techniques of narrative division prior to 1700 C.E. The chapter presents a necessarily brief survey of millennia of written language, and provides a synthesis of some important moments in the evolution of conventions by which writers (of prose generally) have legibly organised and divided their work. The chapter looks in turn at each of four key formative influences on the development of conventions of narrative division: consultation; attention span; the episode; rhetoric.

Chapter Two examines three dominant conventions that novelists have used to divide their works: the part (and book); the chapter; the paragraph. This chapter surveys over three centuries of novelistic practice, from 1700 C.E. to 2000 C.E. The precise location and date of origin of the novel form is an area of scholarly contention; the post-2000 novels that are the focus of this thesis derive from a Western tradition of conventions of narrative division, so limiting my historical scope to that same tradition is consistent with my central research objectives. The form and function of each of the three devices is interpreted by reference to a range of instances and trends. One exemplar text from each of the three centuries of novelistic practice is used for a closer reading of the application of the technique: for the part and book, Henry Fielding’s *History of Tom Jones: a Foundling* (1749); for the chapter, Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Death of the Heart* (1938); and for paragraphs, Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881).

⁵ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: A Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984), p.66.

Chapter Three analyses the signification of gappy forms of narrative division in contemporary fiction. In case studies of four post-2000 novels a close reading of the text's devices of narrative division is made, and the technique analysed for its function within the story. The chapter concludes with a summative section that synthesizes the findings of the case studies. The stress is on close reading as a means of anatomizing a small but significant corpus of contemporary fiction. My orientation here and throughout the thesis is avowedly formalist rather than symptomatic. No sustained attempt is made to explain reasons for the trend toward gappy novels or to see such a trend as symptomatic of broader literary, cultural or social matters. That said, the readings offered in this third chapter could well provide the groundwork for more symptomatically-oriented accounts of shifts in the forms and ambitions of the contemporary novel.

The scope of the thesis is limited to novels where conventionally printed narrative combines with gaps of white space. Many other writers have produced works that depart more radically from conventional formats to exploit the typographic possibilities offered by the printed book; from the blacked-out and marbled pages of Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759), to the visible disruptions of Max Porter's *Lanny* (2019) where printed passages spool and curl across the page. In similar vein, novels have interleaved their printed linguistic content with non-verbal graphic elements: such as the photographs on the pages of W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001), or the images of Alasdair Gray's lithographic prints accompanying that author's *Lanark* (1981). My scope also excludes poetry; a form where the white space of the page (marked by, for example: lineation, the caesura, the stanza break) is a conventional signifying element. However my scope is restricted exclusively to instances of a singular micro-practice:

the division of novels into brief narrative passages divided by regular gaps of horizontal white space.

My research only considers the material book: the printed codex. The page layout of novels published in digital editions adopt conventions tailored to their electronic medium. For example, the same passage of narrative text can be presented according to the reader's selection of a range of variables; elective adjustments to font-size, for instance, and options such as continuous scrolling, make these editions unsuitable for a thesis where the fixed appearance of the physical printed page is crucial.

There are certain words of nonce terminology recurring in the thesis (particularly in Chapter Three) that require explanation. As a comprehensive term for the formal class of novels marked by unconventional modes of division I coin the adjectival term 'gappy' and its noun form 'gappiness'. These terms are neutral, purely visually descriptive, and uninflected by wider critical or historical connotations: in particular the alternative term 'fragmented', which carries strong associations with the literature and criticism of German Romanticism and Modernism, would be misleading. The passages of printed narrative between the gaps I will call 'sections.' Again, this term is suitably neutral and blandly descriptive: it avoids the confusions that would arise if the term 'paragraph' were used, as that term has distinct functional connotations that I wish to avoid.⁶ The horizontal margin of white space dividing the sections I will refer to, unsurprisingly, as the 'gap'.

The modern printed codex that a reader holds in her hands is the end of a process that sees the manuscript leave the author and pass through other parties: editors, publishers, page designers, typographers and printers. Decisions are made that will modify the appearance of the pages of the published text: the particular typeface;

⁶ Novelistic conventions of paragraphing are examined in more detail in Chapter 2 of the thesis.

the presence of running heads; gutter and margin widths. In this thesis I make an assumption that the distinctive gappiness of their pages are determined by authorial intention rather than the interventions of these extra-artistic parties.

While much critical and theoretical work has been devoted to interpretations of conventions in the novel form, that work has been largely concerned with the text's linguistic content rather than the techniques by which that material is presented on the physical page. There is a lack of scholarly work dedicated to modes of novelistic narrative division. Where literary commentators have noticed the presence of parts and chapters and paragraphs the analysis has been cursory; often amounting to a brief section in texts that aim to provide an overview of the formal features of the novel. In David Lodge's *The Art of Fiction*, for example, an essay entitled 'Chapters etc.' sprints through the topic of parts and chapters in just nine pages.⁷ While John Mullan, in *How Novels Work*, devotes only four pages to the novelistic paragraph (despite Mullan describing the device as: 'this most elemental element of fiction.')⁸ From a theoretical perspective, the object of the investigation, the physical gappiness, is a *formal* feature of the novel, and the work of Formalist and Structuralist theorists are particularly pertinent. The traditions of linguistics and semiotics are relevant too, as are the insights offered by theorists of reader reception. The thesis does not adhere to any single theoretical methodology, rather it invokes from each of these traditions where they help to illustrate a particular point.

⁷ David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1992), pp.162-168.

⁸ John Mullan, *How Novels Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.224-228.

CHAPTER 1

The Pre-novelistic evolution of conventions of narrative division

My investigation into the history and evolution of conventions of narrative division, both novelistic and pre-novelistic, reveals a dearth of scholarly research in the field. Two critics have, however, engaged with both the history of conventions of narrative division and the career of their use in the novel. Phillip Stevick's *The Chapter in Fiction*, first published in 1970, is organised into conceptual chapters such as 'The Chapter as Symbol', 'Parts and Wholes', and 'Cadences'; each theorising an aspect of how chapter divisions operate in the novel form. Nicholas Dames, a professor of English at Columbia University, is currently (according to his website) working on a history of the chapter: Dames has published a number of extracts of his work in scholarly journals, along with some magazine articles that provide summarised accounts of his research. This chapter of the thesis will, of necessity, regularly invoke both Stevick and Dames, and use their work to form a synthesis of some key factors in the evolution of conventions of narrative division.

Dames has commented on the critical blind spot his research seeks to redress:

For readers, the word (chapter), and the thing it describes, is inescapable. And yet few people notice it. Books have been written in chapters for over two millennia now, although that fact has never received the attention it deserves from historians of the written word.⁹

⁹ Nicholas Dames, 'The Chapter: A History,' *New Yorker*, accessed July 16, 2020, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/chapter-history>.

While this lack of critical literature presents a challenge, it is also stimulates my personal interest in examining the origins of formal features of the novel that have become so familiar that they ‘hide in plain sight’ on the page.

The segmentation of narrative as a formal device has a long, slow and heterogenous evolutionary history; as Phillip Stevick says:

From remote antiquity to the beginnings of the novel in the eighteenth century, the mutations of narrative division are as various as the purposes of narrative itself, and one of the reasons that the novel is so rich a genre is that its antecedent forms are so various.¹⁰

The four sub-sections below identify four key influences on the development of what Stevick calls the ‘antecedent forms’ of narrative division that predate their novelistic use.

(i) Narrative division for consultative purposes

The English word *chapter* derives from the Greek *kephalaion* and the Latin *capitulum* or *caput*, literally meaning head, but figuratively denoting a principle topic or point. Variants of the term have fed into common use in Western cultures: the Spanish *capítulo*, the French *chapitre*, the Czech *kapitola*, the German *Kapitel*, the Romanian *capitol*, and the Italian *capitolo*.

In ancient Greece and Rome chapter divisions served a purely practical, rather than aesthetic, function: ‘The first authors who wrote in chapters were not storytellers. They were compilers of knowledge, either utilitarian or speculative, who used

¹⁰ Phillip Stevick, *The Chapter in Fiction* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1970), p.161.

chapters as a way of organizing large miscellanies.¹¹ The earliest chapter divisions, according to Dames, arose in antiquity as a means of navigating ‘long, often heterogenous prose texts, prior even to the advent of the codex.’¹²

In written culture, the technique of chaptering stemmed from the practice in Roman legal texts of prefacing sections with summarized headings, the *capitula*, of what was to follow. This early use of the chapter is therefore a practical one, the division of extended legal texts into easily referenced sections, establishing a commonly agreed system: ‘By the 4th century CE it was no longer unusual for texts to be composed *in capitula*.’¹³ The convention of division as a consultative and referential aid has endured to the present day; long and complex legal documents are still customarily segmented into a fixed hierarchy of numbered sections, clauses and sub-clauses.

In addition to their use in organizing legal texts, there are many examples of marked narrative divisions in factual compendia and informational guides. For example, Cato the Elder’s *De Agri Cultura* (On Farming) from the second century BCE was organised into units that were both numbered and titled, and Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia* (Natural History) from the first century CE came with ‘a *summarium* of topics similar to a modern table of contents.’¹⁴ In these examples the chapter and the index functioned as aids for locating relevant passages in long texts that were written to be consulted according to specific utilitarian need.

The introduction of narrative divisions into standardized printed editions of the Bible illustrates how marked divisions were adopted to aid the referencing and navigability of the textual content. According to Dames, ‘The notion of the capitulum

¹¹ Nicholas Dames, ‘The Chapter: A History,’ *New Yorker*, accessed July 16, 2020.

¹² Nicholas Dames, ‘The Literary Chapter,’ *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, accessed July 16, 2020, <http://literature.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001>.

¹³ Nicholas Dames, ‘The Chapter: A History,’ *New Yorker*, accessed July 16, 2020.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

was imported into Biblical manuscripts in late antiquity, and by the early thirteenth century “chapters” were standardized forms within Western European Bibles.¹⁵ This organization of what had been ‘written as one continuous text, undivided and unlabelled’¹⁶ facilitated the citation and the committing to memory of easily referenced sections. This editorial re-arrangement of the Bible narratives illustrates another important function of narrative division: the creation of discrete units of dramatic action. The use of material divisions to impart shape and order to the narrative is significantly different from a purely navigational function: it is an intervention that also influences the reader’s reception and interpretation of the text. I will look at this further in section (iii) of this chapter, where I examine the use of marked textual divisions to compose ‘episodes’ in the pre-novelistic era.

(ii) Narrative division to accommodate human attention span

There are antecedent instances of narrative division that illustrate how the limits of human receptivity and cognition, and the occasional inattentiveness of the reader (or listener in the oral tradition) were accommodated by divisions in extended pre-novelistic narratives.

Scholarly histories of the Homeric epics provide an insight into how their division into books was a feature of those narratives’ evolution into the printed versions that have become canonical. Stevick describes how festival recitals of Homer’s the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were bound ‘by the limitations of the audience’s attention.’¹⁷ The length of the transcribed Homeric books (about two thousand lines) suggests to Stevick that the probable duration of their oral performance was about

¹⁵ Nicholas Dames, ‘Trollope’s Chapters,’ *Literature Compass*, accessed April 27, 2016, http://criticism.english.illinois.edu/pdf_docs/dames_trollopesshapters.pdf.

¹⁶ Nicholas Dames, ‘The Chapter: A History,’ *New Yorker*, accessed July 16, 2020.

¹⁷ Phillip Stevick, *The Chapter in Fiction*, p.162.

four hours.¹⁸ The reformulation from earlier transcriptions of the two narratives made by Zenodotus in the second century BC (from oral renditions to the twenty-four books that remain customary today) provides: ‘no greater authority for the assumption that the way to write an extended narrative is to write it in chapters.’¹⁹

Bruce Heiden remarks on how critical opinion has been divided on the evolution of the twenty-four books that constitute both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, from their beginnings as oral renditions to their widely recognized contemporary canonical written form: ‘Many scholars since antiquity have believed … they lacked marked segmentation, and the now-familiar presentation was imposed upon them by someone other than their composer(s).’²⁰ Heiden proposes that ‘segment markings’ placed at the end of passages of ‘internally coherent’ narrative require the listeners’ ‘thoughtful retrospection’, and he asserts that these breaks therefore have ‘functional desirability in oral performance.’²¹ This use of breaks in the recitations of Homeric epics, these intermissions in the oral performance, serve to manage and license the listener’s reflection and cognitive processing of their narrative content. Intervals in a live recitation can be seen as a precursory technique to the insertion of chapter, part, and book breaks in the novel – those typographically marked interludes in the text that allow the reader to digest, and reflect upon, a passage of fictional events.

An oral performance of Homer’s epics might have had its own convention of signaled junctures, corresponding with, and analogous to, the closing sentences of novel divisions: ‘Changes in volume, pace, or expressiveness of recitation, or in musical accompaniment, could have arrested an audience’s attention as a critical

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.165.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Bruce Heiden, ‘The Placement of “Book Divisions” in the *Iliad*,’ *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, accessed July 16, 2020, <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=8353073&fileId=S0075426900005723>, pp.68-81.

²¹ *Ibid.*

scene approached.²² There is an inherent link, Heiden posits, between the scenic coherence of an oral performance and the importance of having breaks that allow for its audience's attentiveness, comprehension and reflection. He argues that the conditions of the performance 'had to include some intermissions, and if these intermissions did not coincide with the stages of the story, then they might well have engendered confusion'.²³

From the traditions of oral performance, and through their later transcriptions, protocols of intermissions and intermittent divisions accommodate the human (listeners' and readers') faculties of reception and cognition. Making legible divisions in written narrative recognizes the limits of the reader's reception, their occasional inattentiveness, and their need to rest, eat and work. In this context the periodic marked interruption of the narrative might be seen to acknowledge these extra-textual conditions: the exigencies and distractions of a reader's daily life. Narrative divisions can, as Dames puts it, both 'license and manage' the attention span of the reader, and improve their cognition, reflection, and appreciation of the text.²⁴

(iii) Narrative division to contain psychological units: the episode

As I point out above (in section (i)), the referential functions of narrative division in the legal texts of Roman antiquity were adopted by medieval editors of Biblical texts. In the early thirteenth century a pivotal change took place in the chaptering system of Bible editions that produced effects beyond ease of navigation and reference. Stephen Langton, a member of the theology faculty at the University of Paris, became

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Bruce Heiden, 'The Placement of "Book Divisions" in the *Odyssey*,' *Classical Philology*, Vol. 95., accessed July 16, 2020, <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/449496>, pp.247-259.

²⁴ Nicholas Dames, 'Trollope's Chapters,' *Literature Compass*, accessed April 27, 2016.

frustrated and confused by the multiplicity of versions of the Bible used by his students, each version with a different placement and arrangement of divisions.

Langton decided on an editorial principle of making divisions in the textual content in order to create chapters containing incidents according to their occurrence in a common time or location. To the Gospels, originally continuous, and undivided (and lacking any markers of division), Langton imposed a legible structure that, by the editorial act of separation, implied a narrative coherence for their separate parts.²⁵ The history of variant textual orderings and sub-divisions of the New Testament culminated in a thirteenth-century CE chaptered version that is still in use in the twenty-first century CE. This segmenting of biblical narratives marks a shift in the function of the narrative division; the chapter became a: ‘a narrative form rather than just an editorial practice.’²⁶

Langton’s editorial decisions also made the chapters roughly equal in length, an intervention that applied a formal proportion and symmetry to the collected chapters. The act of textual division influenced the reading of individual Bible chapters as coherent psychological units within the larger narrative. Langton’s unified version of the Vulgate Bible was widely disseminated and became the canonical version. Dames calls Langton’s chapters ‘a dramatic innovation’ and comments that the chapters ‘operate synthetically, at a curious remove from the action, as if from a consciousness hovering above those of the figures in the story.’²⁷ I interpret Dames’ ‘consciousness’ that float above the participants and events of the story as an authorial presence; that by the act of narrative division the invisible hand of the author is revealed. Indeed, Stevick identifies biblical chapter divisions that, he contends, arise

²⁵ The OED defines the episode as ‘A scene or digression complete in itself but forming part of a continuous narrative; each of a series of connected incidents or scenes.’ The episodic Bible divisions enact this dual purpose of disjunction and coherence.

²⁶ Nicholas Dames, ‘The Literary Chapter,’ *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, accessed July 16, 2020.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

not from any internal dramatic impulse, but rather from a motivation to impose order and symmetry, providing a form that encloses discrete narrative units, giving them shape as 'Consistent, coherent and rhetorically closed.'²⁸

Langton's editorial techniques were not without their critics: a debate that provides a pre-novelistic dramatisation of the conflicting forces of cohesion of the whole-text and the autonomy of the divided sections. The philosopher John Locke railed against the imposition of sub-divisions in the Bible, arguing that they corrupted and obscured the theological impact of the scriptures:

The Dividing of them into Chapters and Verses ... whereby they are so chop'd and minc'd, and as they are now Printed, stand so broken and divided, that not only the Common People take the Verses usually for distinct Aphorisms, but even Men of more advanc'd Knowledge in reading them, lose very much of the strength and force of the Coherence, and the Light that depends upon it.²⁹

Dames reads Locke's antipathy as embodying a central debate about narrative division in its many iterations, an inherent conflict between the unity of the discrete chapter and the coherence of the whole text: 'a comprehension of smaller parts rather than coherent wholes might, Locke worried, be a lesser comprehension.'³⁰ Locke is defending what he considers an inviolable wholeness that is corrupted by the insertion of marked divisions. Yet while Locke's personal antipathy to the practice is emphatic,

²⁸ Phillip Stevick, *The Chapter in Fiction*, p.166.

²⁹ John Locke, 'Essay for the Understanding of St. Paul's Epistles, By Consulting St. Paul Himself,' in Nicholas Dames' 'Trollope's Chapters,' *Literature Compass*, accessed April 27, 2016, http://criticism.english.illinois.edu/pdf_docs/dames_trollopeschapters.pdf.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, para.8.

he is at the same time acknowledging that the act of division has the power to influence the reception and interpretation of the text.

(iv) Narrative division as a rhetorical strategy

Methods of narrative division used by medieval rhetoricians, such as Cicero and Quintillan, allowed them to make tonal shifts and transitions in digressive arguments: constituent elements of their texts were thereby assigned a subsidiary purpose. The rhetoricians use of marked divisions to structure their written arguments (whether at the level of phrase, sentence, paragraph or broader categorical sector) was absorbed by writers of prose generally. These formulations of segmentation and ordering of units of discourse were widely sanctioned and promulgated through school and university teaching: as Stevick puts it: ‘Any writer begins to write a paragraph, in any kind of prose for any purpose, carrying with him certain stylized and pedagogic ideas about how a paragraph ought to be made.’³¹

Medieval rhetoricians’ principal of dividing their discourse into units was employing a formal device that corralled and ordered language purposively; with the specific aim of convincing the reader of their argument. Quintilian, for example, constructed his orations as a sequence of connected psychological units of discourse to gradually build a convincing argument. For example, an introductory *exordium* would be succeeded by a factual *narratio* followed by a subdivided series of proofs and concluded by a *peroratio* in which the central argument is cogently summarised.

The protocols of written rhetorical discourse use marked divisions to progress, build and develop thematic narrative *arguments* by the gradual accumulative effect of the subsidiary content of their chapters, books, and parts. The rhetorician’s techniques had wider applications, their methods were, according to Stevick, impressing upon the

³¹ Phillip Stevick, *The Chapter in Fiction*, p.167.

language: ‘Certain principles and predispositions which remain even when language is used for purposes quite different from what they had in mind.’³² The conventions of rhetoric in marking divisions have been considered a significant, perhaps culturally unavoidable, influence on strategies of prose composition: ‘It suffices here to suggest that nearly any writer with a smattering of education from Aristotle to the twentieth century would have been predisposed to think of discourse in terms of rhetorical categories and further predisposed to think of a whole discourse in terms of its separable parts.’³³

Summative

My survey of modes of narrative division predating novelistic practice reveals a range of techniques that are neither native nor exclusive to the novel. The formal device of segmentation existed in many variations across a wide range of disciplines and genres, and the convention was habitual in written texts centuries before 1700:

By the time of the Renaissance, writers of every degree of learning and sophistication had, as part of their common cultural experience, a body of writing including the prophetic, the historical, the poetic, and the homiletic, widely varying in tone and technique, in age and authority, and all of it divided into chapters.³⁴

In concluding his survey of pre-novelistic origins of the division of discourse, Stevick makes a claim for the influence of some of these analogue forms:

³² Phillip Stevick, *The Chapter in Fiction*, p.168.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.169.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.166.

The Homeric book, the biblical chapter, and the rhetorical category, then, are the primary means by which the convention of the chapter became, by the eighteenth century, so thoroughly sanctioned, so necessary, so automatic that almost no one thinks to question it.³⁵

It is worth unpacking Stevick's string of emphatic adjectives: 'sanctioned'; 'necessary'; 'automatic'. 'Sanctioned' has the sense of approval, of validation, of chaptered divisions. I gloss this further: the chapter divisions adopted by eighteenth-century novelists created a convention that established marked divisions as an approved syntactical unit of discourse alongside the sentence and the paragraph. Stevick's 'necessary' implies that the use of chapters was a technical imperative in the composition of extended narratives; that chapters were a prerequisite feature of the form, a component without which the novel would lose some essential identity, some of the quiddity that makes a novel a novel. 'Automatic' seems to claim that the convention was, at the start of the eighteenth century, a normalized compositional default: that chapter divisions were no more questioned by novelists than their adherence to orthodoxies of punctuation, grammar and spelling. Stevick is suggesting that these traditions, these pre-novelistic precursors of textual division, were so culturally pervasive as to make eighteenth century novelists (in England and Europe, at least) predisposed to adopt their techniques. I read Stevick's reference to '*almost* no one' (my italics) as an acknowledgement that while chaptering conventions had become so intrinsically part of the novel form, as if hard-wired into both composition and reading, there were writers who eschewed those conventions.³⁶ Stevick (rather sweepingly) claims that, by the eighteenth-century, the protocol had become so firmly

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.171.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.165. Stevick does not, unfortunately, provide any example of these formally atypical texts.

established that to write an extended narrative without chapter divisions is to appear: ‘either primitive and crude or contrary and perverse.’³⁷

Have certain conventions of narrative division become more deeply entrenched, more normalized, over the last three centuries? How do we interpret the works of twenty-first century novelists that do not adhere to a set of conventional modes of narrative division? Does the prevalence of conventional forms of narrative division assign atypical forms a classification as ‘either primitive and crude or contrary and perverse.’? The remainder of the thesis will address these questions: Chapter 2 traces and examines novelistic conventions of narrative division since 1700; Chapter 3 interprets four post-2000 novels using divisional schemes that are atypical to these long-established conventions.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 2

Novelistic conventions of narrative division 1700 – 2000

The career of the novel form in the three hundred years from 1700 to 2000 is marked by the dominance of three key conventions of narrative division: the part and book; the chapter; the paragraph. I have chosen one paradigmatic novel from each of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries to illustrate how each convention of narrative division contributes to an interpretation of the individual work. From the eighteenth-century, I will examine the use of parts and books in Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones: a Foundling*.³⁸ From the nineteenth-century I will refer to Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady* to illustrate the use of the paragraph convention.³⁹ While from the twentieth century, I will analyse Elizabeth Bowen's chapter technique in her novel *The Death of the Heart*.⁴⁰ The chapter will provide a synthesis of novelistic practices that represent the conventions from which the four post-2000 novels I will examine in the case-studies in Chapter 3 deviate.

I. The Part

When ranked hierarchically, according to the material extent of a novel's printed pages, then the highest level of segmentation is seen in those major divisions commonly presented as parts or books. These large-scale narrative divisions have been a durable feature of novels throughout the last three centuries: such major divisions of narrative are present in the works of Fielding and Sterne in the eighteenth

³⁸ Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones: a Foundling* (London: Penguin Books, 2005).

³⁹ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1982).

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Death of the Heart* (London: Vintage Books, 2012).

century, while, in contemporary fiction the convention remains in widespread use: fifteen of the nineteen novels presented with the Booker Prize between 2000 and 2018 contain, with variations of style, visibly distinct major divisions into parts and books.

Like the subordinate divisions into chapters, paragraphs, and sections, the presence of a part division in the novel form is identifiable by a range of legible conventions of layout, placement, and typography.⁴¹ Typically, the title of a part will be positioned on the recto page, set centrally, and preceded and followed by a blank page; Genette considers the recto page, in Western writing systems, as: ‘the side that has the advantage, perceptually speaking.’⁴² In addition, the part heading is often printed in a larger typeface (often emphatically emboldened) than the typeface used for the main body of the printed narrative.⁴³ A common convention is for Roman numerals to be used in the part’s title (many contemporary novels retain the restrained but explicit formulation: ‘PART I.’).⁴⁴ In contrast to these minimal titling styles, there was a fashion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for the titular apparatus of parts to provide a summary of the narrative they contain. For example, Book I of Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749) is sub-titled: ‘*Containing as much of the birth of the foundling as is necessary or proper to acquaint the reader with in the beginning of this history.*’ The use of this style declined in the course of the nineteenth-century, while recent instances tend to exploit the archaism of the style to produce ironic, parodic, or pastiche effects.⁴⁵

⁴¹ I use the term part for this general class of division.

⁴² Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, transl. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.33.

⁴³ Generally, the larger the physical division of the text the larger its typographical announcement, creating a hierarchy with title-page at the apex, and descending through book to part to chapter; each marked division growing smaller in size of typeface.

⁴⁴ For example: the XV Parts of Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* (2000), and the XII parts of Eleanor Catton’s *The Luminaries* (2013).

⁴⁵ For example, John Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) contains part summaries to mimic the use of that convention in eighteenth-century picaresque novels, for example: ‘PART IV: THE AUTHOR APOLOGISES TO HIS READERS.’

Where a novel is divided into parts the presence of the device is legible at the beginning of the temporally linear act of reading. ‘PART I’, for example, will precede a titled first chapter and the opening paragraph of the narrative. Except where a table of contents is provided (an unusual device in contemporary fiction) the reader proceeds without foreknowledge of the text’s overarching placement and structure of marked divisions. This early presence of the device might prompt questions in the reader: how many Parts will the novel contain? Where will they be placed? How do these large-scale divisions signify in relation to the verbal content? The presence of a part functions to announce the significance of an extended prose sequence in the novel – but, at the same time, it acts to suspend the semantic purpose it promises.

The one hundred and ninety-eight titled chapters of Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* are sub-divisions of eighteen titled books within three overarching parts of roughly equal length.⁴⁶ The part divisions of Fielding’s narrative mark transitions in the protagonist’s story as he travels between three geographical settings: the first part is set in the country; the second part describes Tom’s travels on the road; and the final part depicts the protagonist’s adventures in London. The spatial distribution of Fielding’s parts is not mechanical, nor do they merely provide proportion and symmetry to the physical book: Fielding’s three parts act to emphasise important transitions in the fictional narrative. The parts are placed strategically in respect of the narrative content; they influence and direct the interpretation of significant phases in the story.

Tom Jones was first published in six separate duodecimo volumes, and there is an interplay between the constraints of this physical format and the way in which the narrative is sub-divided. The material requirements of print and publication, as well as aesthetic considerations, have influenced novelists’ decisions on how to employ parts

⁴⁶ Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones: a Foundling*.

in their works. The three-volume novel, or Triple-Decker, was a popular format for new fiction appearing in England in the nineteenth century. During this time all three volumes were published simultaneously; it was a calculated business model that tripled lending fee income for the private libraries through which they were distributed, with readers able to borrow only one volume at a time in return for their annual subscription. The discontinuous publication of (subsequently consolidated) single volume novels became customary. Many Victorian novels also appeared in instalments of separately bound volumes (or ‘monthly numbers’ as they were called). The eight Books of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, for example, were published bimonthly between 1871-72 before they were assembled into a unified edition.⁴⁷ Habits of reading produced by these material conditions of book circulation and publication served to endorse, and reinforce, the convention of making major divisions in a unified work.

The devices of parts (and books) stand at a further remove from the subsidiary divisions of chapter and paragraph that they contain. These major divisions have less power to inflect the verbal content than the chapter, a mode which is more closely embedded in the narrative content; both on the printed page, and in its power to inflect the linguistic content.

II. The Chapter

This mode of division’s graphically conspicuous layout announces its presence in the novel with greater frequency than the labelled major divisions of part or book. The conventional chapter is marked by a title, typically placed at the head of a recto page and often printed in a larger typeface than that of the body text it contains. Chapter heads have taken various forms across the career of the novel, and a number of styles

⁴⁷ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

have moved in and out of fashion according to the historical period. Eighteenth-century novelists often used extended chapter subtitles, for example Fielding's: 'Containing Matters which will surprize the Reader,' and, 'Being the shortest Chapter in this Book.'⁴⁸ There's an authorial, self-reflexive voice in Fielding's formulations that remained evident in works a hundred years later, such as Charles Dickens' subtitling of a chapter of *Oliver Twist*: 'Is a Very Short One, and May Appear of no Great Importance in its Place, but it Should be Read Notwithstanding, as a Sequel to the Last, and as a Key to One that Will Follow When its Time Arrives.'⁴⁹ However the general trend, across three centuries of novels in the Western tradition, has been a shortening of chapter titles; in realist literary fiction the material marking of these divisions during the nineteenth century shows a trend towards the minimal. These restrained formats (for example Jane Austen's novels use of simple 'Chapter I' style headings) have become so common that it suggests the style became a compositional default during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This trend gives the chapter a more neutral function in respect of the narrative that it frames: the inconspicuous presence of the device avoids the reader becoming alert to authorial interventions. This strategy complies with those tenets of realism suggested by Gustave Flaubert, that: 'An author in his book must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere.'⁵⁰ An extreme case of this 'muted' authorial presence can be found in Joyce's *Ulysses* where (in the first unified edition in 1922) the eighteen episodes are marked solely by intervals of white space: without the formal apparatus of a printed title it is only by the conventions of layout and length of their body text that

⁴⁸ Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones: a Foundling*.

⁴⁹ Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2000), p.230.

⁵⁰ From Flaubert's letter to Louise Colet, December 9, 1852. Cited in George J. Becker, *Documents of Modern Literary Realism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p.63.

we might construe these narrative units as chapters.⁵¹

As outlined in Chapter 1, the habitual use of chapter divisions long predates their use in the novel, and the technique continues into the present day as feature of prose composition *generally*. Outside the novel, chapter divisions function as aids to navigation and consultation, a purpose that has continued in written works of history, biography, and academic texts, all of which are habitually sub-divided in this way. The device has, however, been adapted by novelists to function in a number of specialised ways that are instrumental in the composition of extended fiction.

An important novelistic convention is the positioning of chapter divisions at those junctures in the text where these modifications take place. In these cases the chapter device is marking a transition between what Russian Formalist narrative theory distinguishes as the *fabula* (a conception of chronologically ordered, and infinitely detailed, events) and the *syuzhet* (the particular way the raw material of the *fabula* is re-ordered and modified to create a narrative). Elizabeth Bowen's 1938 novel, *The Death of the Heart*, offers examples of how chapter junctures often coincide with deviations from a strictly linear, and continuous, narrative chronology. The novel chronicles a year in the life of Portia Quayne, a recently orphaned sixteen-year-old girl who moves to London into the guardianship of her wealthy half-brother Thomas Quayne and his wife Anna. Chapter 3 of *The Death of the Heart* opens with an extended account of Anna's first meeting with her husband – events that occurred many years before the time of the scenes described in the first two chapters.⁵² Chapter 4 reverts to the time frame and forward chronology of the novel's main action, while Chapter 5 shifts back in time to provide a back-story for Eddie (Portia's disreputable

⁵¹ In a similar way, the way the conventional paragraph is initially recognizable by its unannounced typographic silhouette – a phenomenon examined in section III of this chapter.

⁵² Elizabeth Bowen, *The Death of the Heart* (London: Vintage Books, 2012).

suitors). In these instances, the chapters function to frame the narrative achronology, and the modification of a temporally linear progress is emphasised.⁵³

Chapter transitions can be more subtle in their manipulation of narrative time. In these instances chapter sequences will follow a linear narrative chronology but the transition between chapters will mark a temporal ‘skipping’ forward. Nineteen of the twenty-three chapter transitions of *The Death of the Heart* use this method, orienting the reader by beginning with phrases such as: ‘It was half past ten at night ...’⁵⁴ or ‘Early in March ...’⁵⁵. Similar use of chapters to manage and elide narrative time is common: in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* the chapter boundaries often coincide with gaps in the fictional world’s diurnal clock. In Eliot’s novel the opening of a new chapter signposts these temporal shifts with phrases such as ‘the next day’ or ‘one morning’ or ‘the next evening.’ In general novelistic practice the typographic gap between chapters is used to signify the omission of irrelevant material, or of the passage of night to day, or of events that exist in the *fabula* but are made redundant in the *sjuzhet*.

Another function of the chapter in the novel is to signal a shift in narrative perspective. The first chapter of *The Death of the Heart* is focalised through the consciousness of Anna as she walks through a frosty Regents Park with her friend St Quentin; the following chapter, while temporally continuous, switches the narrative perspective to Portia Quayne as she enters Anna’s house on the fringes of the park. Succeeding chapters continue this technique to introduce the thoughts of, and connections between, the novel’s main *dramatis personae*. The positioning of these switches of narrative focalization at chapter junctures lends a unifying form and focus

⁵³ The term *achronologies* was coined by Gérard Genette who sub-divided it into *analepsis* and *prolepsis*: terms that (crudely) translate to the flashback and the flashforward respectively.

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Death of the Heart*, p.76.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.135.

to these chapters. The juxtaposition of chapters with access to the different characters' interiorities also facilitates a counterpoint effect: for instance in Chapter 1 Anna recounts Portia's childhood in a cold, affectless way, while in Chapter 2 Portia recalls the same period with love and feeling. Many novels use chapter divisions to demarcate multiple narrators in a similar way; for example, in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) chapters contain the individual testimony of the multiple witnesses to the story's central mystery (the theft of a priceless diamond).⁵⁶ Similarly, the fifty-nine chapters of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) each contain the exclusive point of view of one of fifteen characters as they accompany the coffin of Addie Bundren to its burial ground.⁵⁷ More recently, in Graham Swift's *Last Orders* (1996), each chapter is comprised of a monologue by one of the seven characters travelling together to scatter the ashes of a mutual friend.⁵⁸ These instances, and Bowen's novel, use the framing effect of the physical textual division in combination with a selected narrative point-of-view to give the chapter a unity of effect while cohering it to the concerns of the wider narrative.

Variations in a novel's linguistic style or register often occur between one chapter and the next. The final chapters of both Part I and Part II of *The Death of the Heart* are comprised of a series of extracts from Portia's diary, and these chapters are marked by a switch to the first-person voice. These chapters are presented like the 'natural' divisions of a daily journal, a technique of chaptering with instances as old as the novel form itself and still used today.⁵⁹ These chapters do not only provide an abrupt shift in the narrative mode; their position in the novel, both placed as

⁵⁶ Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone* (London: Penguin Classics, 1998).

⁵⁷ William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (London: Vintage Books, 2004).

⁵⁸ Graham Swift, *Last Orders* (London: Picador, 2012).

⁵⁹ Other examples of the epistolary novel are: *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister Aphra Behn* (1684); Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), whose chapters are a composite of fictional newspaper clippings, ship's logs, letters and diary entries. A recent iteration of the form is Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), which alternates chapters between letters and posts to an online messaging platform.

concluding chapters of the first two parts, also draws attention to their being components of an overall patterning of chapters. By not conveying the content of Portia's diaries through a mediating narrative voice, and by framing these chapters as stand-alone units of the novel, the unmediated thoughts of the central character are given an emphasis they would not have if, say, Portia's journal entries were integrated within the third party voice that is dominant in conveying the narrative elsewhere.

My Vintage Classics paperback edition of Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart* has three-hundred and fifty-four pages totalling (at three-hundred words per page) just over one-hundred-thousand words. If I read a page every minute I could, in one uninterrupted sitting, read the whole novel in about six hours; its twenty-three chapter divisions would not stall my progress. Such a continuous *un*-distracted model of reading a novel is not, I propose, the norm. Written language is linear, and the act of reading is unavoidably temporal – a printed page of a novel (in the Western tradition) is read one word at a time, left to right, top to bottom. The novel, as an extended prose form, depends for its reception on the cognitive endurance of a *real* reader – their attention span.⁶⁰ The first published editions of Daniel Defoe's novels did not contain chapters, causing David Lodge to complain that the undivided presentation of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*: 'makes for a somewhat tiring reading experience, and a rather confused impression of the story being told.'⁶¹ The opening chapter of Book II of Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, titled 'Of division in authors', argues that chapter division provides for the reader: 'an inn or resting place, where he may stop and take a glass...' ⁶² Fielding is marking a relation between the material segmentation of a printed text and the reader's reception: 'A volume without

⁶⁰ This real general flesh and blood reader is one I distinguish from the notional 'implied reader': a construct generated within a specific novel, and conceptualized by Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1968).

⁶¹ David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1992), p.163.

⁶² Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), p.90.

any such places of rest resembles the openings of wilds or seas, which tire the eye and fatigues the spirit when entered upon.⁶³ While a chapter break cannot *enforce* a prolonged temporary pause in reading, it is uncontroversial to say that it is at chapter divisions that *most* readers choose to do so. More than simply licensing a recovery of perceptual faculties, the elective pause between chapters also recognises the daily exigencies of a reader's existence outside their engagement with the novel. As Dames puts it: 'The chapter-break helps to root novels in the routines of everyday life.'⁶⁴

In gestalt theory the human capacity to make sense of the whole (the novel) depends on the combined effect of the parts (the chapters). Novels, generally, have not applied chapter divisions in the strictly mechanical way that would merely serve to 'give the reader a break'. The chapters of *The Death of the Heart* are not uniform divisions of the printed text: they range from 7 to 21 pages in length. This modulation of chapter lengths around a mean average length (a characteristic of the chapter convention in the wider canon) gives a loose consistency, an expectation of chapter form in Bowen's novel.

In his Preface to *Roderick Hudson*, Henry James points to the formal challenge facing artists, and no less makers of extended narrative fiction, in imposing formal enclosures: 'Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so.'⁶⁵ The convention of dividing novels into chapters is one means by which order and shape, James' metaphorical 'circle', is imposed on extended printed linear narrative. The chapter serves to frame modifications of chronology, narrator, and narrative perspective that characterise and

⁶³ In similar vein, Laurence Sterne, in *Tristram Shandy* (1759), proposes that: 'chapters relieve the mind.'

⁶⁴ Nicholas Dames, 'The Chapter: A History,' *New Yorker*, accessed July 16, 2020.

⁶⁵ Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (New York: Scribners, 1934), p.5.

distinguish the art of the novel. At the same time chapter intervals accommodate the fact of human attention span and faculties of perception by licensing an interrupted experience of reading.

III. The Paragraph

In contrast to parts, books, and chapters, the paragraph divisions of novels are rarely titled. Nevertheless, the conventional paragraph can be identified as a material typographic form before a word is actually read. At a purely visual level, the paragraph is first perceived, as Paul Rodgers puts it, as: ‘A stretch of language silhouetted between indentations.’⁶⁶ It is by its ‘hard’ line returns and indented first lines that we recognise the distinctive shape of this mode of narrative division on the printed page. Across the history of the novel it has become unsurprising, indeed an expectation, that the printed text be subdivided into paragraphs. However, while a durable feature of the novel, the organisation of writing into paragraphs is not exclusive to that literary form.⁶⁷ The paragraph convention is a mode of punctuation that, along with the rules of grammar and syntax, characterizes prose composition *generally*. As a consequence the conventional paragraph divisions encountered in a novel differ subtly from other modes of narrative division I have examined: parts or books or chapters, while not exclusive to the novel, are more strongly indicative of novel-ness. Attempts to define the paragraph usually approach the convention with this universal quality in mind, but analyses of its particular use in prose fiction are rare. Style guides, prescribing that the paragraph be: ‘devoted, like the sentence, to the

⁶⁶ Paul Rodgers, ‘The Stadium of Discourse,’ *College Composition and Communication*, accessed July 16, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/355692>, p.185.

⁶⁷ As summarised in Chapter 1, the conventions of narrative division have a history and evolution that long predates the origins of the novel in the eighteenth century.

development of one topic,' suggest the qualities of a rigorously structured legal contract rather than a work of literary art.⁶⁸

The conventional paragraph is so common a novelistic technique that its presence has become a formal expectation: the sequential, indented divisions of narrative have become both a manifest feature of, and an unremarkable presence on, the printed page. To borrow a concept from Russian Formalist theory, the conventional paragraph can be read as an element of visible form that 'automatizes' the reception of the text. In this way the normative paragraph can be seen as an instance of a narrative technique that: 'permits the greatest economy of perceptual effort.'⁶⁹ The conventional paragraph rather than arrest the reader, serves to accelerate her progress.

The novels of Henry James are rarely classed as conventional, but despite any innovations they make in their verbal content, the works are presented on the page in conventional paragraphs. James' 1881 novel, *The Portrait of a Lady*, follows the emotional and psychological development of Isabel Archer, a young American heiress recently arrived in London society. The first chapter of *The Portrait of a Lady* is subdivided using a mode of paragraphing that exemplifies not only James' technique within that novel, but the normative style of paragraphing in the wider canon.⁷⁰ In Chapter One of James' novel, the first paragraph constructs a mise-en-scene: the narrative describes the exterior of a country house on the banks of the River Thames where, on a balmy summer afternoon, three men are taking tea on the lawn. The next

⁶⁸ Edwin Herbert Lewis, *History of the English Paragraph* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1894), p.22. This is the only extended monograph I have found that analyses the stylistics of paragraph composition and reviews the course of the device's career in the novel. However, there is a plethora of general pedagogic manuals and styles guides by guardians of 'good' grammar and punctuation which provide advice on paragraph construction, notably Fowler's Usage; and texts by Strunk and White, Eric Partridge, and Lyn Truss.

⁶⁹ Viktor Shklovsky, In *Art as Technique in Literary Theory: An Anthology.*, Eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 2002), pp.15-21.

⁷⁰ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1982).

paragraph elaborates a history of the property and sketches its architectural features and setting. The three ensuing paragraphs, in turn, provide brief character portraits of the three men on the lawn. By interlocking the content of adjacent paragraphs James achieves an effect of forward momentum in the narrative: the layout is so familiar that the physical paragraph breaks are rendered perceptually neutral.

The conventional novel is often characterized by qualities of wholeness and coherence, the degree to which the narrative elements combine to produce a unitary effect. The tendency towards autonomy of the ‘topic’ paragraphs at the opening of *The Portrait of a Lady* might risk producing a disintegrating force for the whole text. James, like many other novelists, avoids a jolt between paragraph divisions by managing the segue, for example when the first paragraph ends: ‘The house that rose beyond the lawn ... in the particularly English picture I have attempted to sketch.’; the second begins: ‘It stood upon a low hill, above the river ...’ The third paragraph concludes: ‘... a little bristling, bustling terrier bestowed a desultory attendance upon the other gentlemen.’; and after a paragraph break continues: ‘One of these was a remarkably well-made man of five-and-thirty ...’ In both these examples the narrative reads smoothly across (and in despite of) the typographic gap, while simultaneously the focus of the narrative is shifting smoothly to a different aspect of the same scene. The legible division of the paragraphs is counteracted by the explicit connections that James builds into their endings and beginnings.

The opening paragraphs of *The Portrait of a Lady* illustrate a double, and paradoxical, function of conventional paragraph sequences – they simultaneously contain discrete content while establishing connections that give continuity and sequential logic to the narrative. In this way, James’ paragraphs bear a hypotactic rather than a paratactic relationship; interrelated in content, the meaning of the narrative in one paragraph depends on the content of the preceding paragraphs. By

exploiting the very familiarity of the conventional paragraph their material presence does not distract the reader from the linguistic content; the device becomes background, as it facilitates progression and development of the narrative.

Paragraphs are visual. An individual novel is often distinguished by the physical shape its paragraphing choices give to its pages. A set of internal conventions becomes evident: average paragraph length, the use of truncated lines when characters' speech is shown, an expectation of shapeliness, and of the ratio between printed language and white space, is gradually established. If James (whose paragraphs and sentences are renowned for being long and elaborate) composed a chapter of *The Portrait of a Lady* in a sequence of single sentence paragraphs, or in a single un-indented block of text, the radical change in layout would draw the reader's attention. The formal choice would require a different interpretation in respect of the (unchanged) verbal content.

Some novelists, particularly in the twentieth century, have chosen to dispense with paragraph divisions completely, for example Marquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975) and W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001).⁷¹ Garth Greenwell's *What Belongs to You* (2016) contains a forty page passage unbroken by conventionally indented paragraphs.⁷² One reviewer of Greenwell's novel considers, in this dense blocky format, that: 'The reader has a sense of an increased and potentially oppressive display of authorial control. Permission to pause while reading has been symbolically withdrawn.'⁷³ The choice of an unconventional layout disrupts the neutral status of paragraphs as perceptually invisible conveyors of linguistic content. In this passage of

⁷¹ Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (London: Penguin Books, 1996). W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2002). Other texts that present extended runs of un-indented printed narrative include: Bolano's *By Night in Chile* (2002); Bernhard's *The Loser* (1983); Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1953); and the Molly Bloom section of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922).

⁷² Garth Greenwell, *What Belongs to You* (London: Picador, 2016).

⁷³ Adam Mars-Jones, 'The Unpronounceable,' *London Review of Books*, accessed July 16, 2020, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n08/adam-mars-jones/the-unpronounceable>.

narrative Greenwell extends the paragraph far beyond conventional limits (including the internal paragraphs conventions Greenwell uses elsewhere in the novel). The long, un-indented paragraph de-automatizes the reader's reception and calls on their active interpretation of Greenwell's strategy and the relation of typographic form to verbal content.

According to E.H. Lewis, the average paragraph length between 1700 and 1900 remained steady at 300 words.⁷⁴ There has been a marked shortening of paragraphs during the twentieth century. Paragraph length in the novel has varied according to prevalent fashions of the time of composition. Paragraphs extending over three or four pages, such as those in James' novels, while common in the late nineteenth century, are less common in post-2000 fiction. The twentieth century has seen, according to Joe Moran, a notable reduction due to two key influences from outside novelistic practice: the influence of the compressed columns of newsprint and the concise exhortations of advertising copy.⁷⁵ John Mullan concurs with this trend in the novel, writing in 2006: 'In general paragraphs have become shorter over the last century.'⁷⁶ However, the paragraph convention has endured such variations due to its material shape on the page – linguistic content can be stretched or contracted within its indented 'silhouette.'

Mullan describes the paragraph as the element of fiction that: 'most fundamentally determines the very *rhythm* of reading.'⁷⁷ (My italics). He contrasts the effect of the 'pulse' of the 'short emphatic paragraphs' in sections of Bronte's *Jane Eyre* with the effect of an eleven page long paragraph in Kafka's *The Trial* where: 'the reader is trapped' and 'looking for some intermission.'⁷⁸ In a similar way,

⁷⁴ Edwin Herbert Lewis, *History of the English Paragraph*, p.171.

⁷⁵ Joe Moran, *First You Write a Sentence* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2019), pp.186-191.

⁷⁶ John Mullan, *How Novels Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.226.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.224.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

contemporary genre novels, crime fiction in particular, are often described as being composed in brief ‘pacy’ paragraphs that produce a faster turning of their pages than the longer paragraphs of ‘slow’ works of literary fiction such as the elaborated three-page paragraphs that feature in the novels of Henry James.

How then might a scheme of paragraph breaks in the prose novel produce rhythmic effects? The origins of the paragraph convention are tied in with the evolution of writing and technologies of printing. Systems of punctuation emerged, employing typographic marks and conventions of layout that impart to the written word some of the qualities of spoken language that condition the reader’s sense and understanding. The typographic marks of the comma, the full stop, and the conventions of paragraph layout, assist the sense and interpretation of texts by giving breath to the undivided words of ancient *scripto continua*.⁷⁹ Despite these graphical interventions of punctuation, and for my focus the paragraph breaks of the novel, writing remains a linear art that enforces a linear reading. According to Peter Elbow, printed text has the capability to produce a rhythmic effect *as a result of* this enforced linear reading: ‘Without linearity, we could have no rhythm.’⁸⁰ Elbow notes the etymology of the word rhythm as a ‘semitechnical Greek term for describing painting and sculpture’ – his argument is that rhythm inheres in ‘aspects of formal design that are perceivable to the eye.’ In the novel, the formal design of its paragraphs, their length and arrangement, serves to regulate reception, to give pace, tempo, and rhythm to a necessarily linear reading.

⁷⁹ I am necessarily telescoping a vast history of the origins of writing systems and print culture covered by works such as Walter Ong’s, *Print, Space and Closure in Orality and Literacy* (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁸⁰ Peter Elbow, ‘The Music of Form: Rethinking Organisation in Writing,’ *College Composition and Communication*, accessed July 16, 2020, <http://www.Jstor.org/stable/20456911>, p.654.

Summative

The three conventions of narrative division I have examined in this chapter are the predominant typographical devices by which novels are divided. The presence of the part, the chapter, and the paragraph is marked by variations in presentational style and by a range of functions that contribute to the production of narrative meaning; these modes of division are so habitual a feature of the novel that they have become an expectation of that form. The emphatic part division, the periodic chapter heading, and the sequential indented paragraph: in combination this hierarchical structure of legible devices give a printed codex the appearance of novel-ness. The case studies that follow in Chapter 3 makes a close reading of texts that break from these long-standing conventions.

CHAPTER 3

Case studies of four post-2000 ‘gappy’ novels

Introduction

The four texts in the case studies that follow have been selected on the basis of their manifest deviations from the historical conventions of novelistic division set out in the previous chapter. While the four novels do not wholly dispense with parts and chapters and paragraphs, they are distinctive in their use of a particular unconventional technique: each of the texts divides short sections of printed text with horizontal margins of white space, which gives the pages their unusually gappy appearance. The novels are examples of a noticeable tendency, evident in many twenty-first century novels, for the narrative to be composed in short narrative sections. This view is supported by Toby Litt who, in his review of Dan Dalton’s 2018 novel, *Johnny Ruin*, marks how the work is: ‘formed out of short paragraphs, sometimes single sentences, isolated by meaningful space.’ Litt figures the layout as a narrative ‘confetti’ that he considers as: ‘in some ways the default form of contemporary, post-internet writing.’⁸¹ While Litt hedges his view (‘in some ways’) his idea of a new ‘default form’ in contemporary fiction sounds like the marking of emerging conventions of composition, where the old orthodoxies of page layout are, to some degree, being succeeded by gappy forms where the white space has a semantic value (Litt’s ‘meaningful space’). In his review of a 2016 novel, Adam Mars-Jones notices a trend in how narratives are presented on the page when he claims that: ‘there are fashions in page layout, and paragraphs have become increasingly choppy over the

⁸¹ Toby Litt, Review of *Johnny Ruin* by Dan Dalton, *Guardian*, accessed July 29, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/apr/12/johnny-ruin-dan-dalton-review>

decades.⁸² Mars-Jones' use of the term 'fashion' carries a pejorative tone, a sense that the layout might be no more than a transient stylistic affectation. The close readings in the following chapter make a critical enquiry into how this gappy mode of division contributes to the meaning of the narrative; the four case-study texts have been selected to illustrate and interpret some of the key effects and functions of the technique.

⁸² Adam Mars-Jones, 'The Unpronounceable,' *London Review of Books*, accessed July 29, 2020, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n08/adam-mars-jones/the-unpronounceable>

Case Study 1

The Absent Therapist

Will Eaves

The Absent Therapist is divided into five titled parts, each comprised of a series of short monologues separated by gaps made up of a long dash inside a triple line-break.⁸³ Generally, there are two or three narrative sections to a page and a total of about one-hundred and fifty such sections in the whole text. The register of each section's (first-person, past tense) voice is colloquial and idiomatic, and while the style evokes the rhythms and diction of everyday speech, the monologues are presented without the hesitations and dead language of verbatim spoken language. Eaves' sentences are grammatical, their syntax is not disrupted, and the conventions of orthography and diction are adhered to.

In 2014 *The Absent Therapist* was shortlisted for the annual Goldsmiths Prize, an award established in 2013: 'to reward fiction that breaks the mould or extends the possibilities of the novel form.'⁸⁴ The organiser's statement contains both an acknowledgement of a set of conventions that constitute 'the novel form', alongside an encouragement to deviate from ('break the mould' of) those conventions. In his Chair of Judges' prize-giving speech, Francis Spufford points to *The Absent Therapist*'s complete omission of a structural feature that provides the wholeness, coherence and continuity associated with the conventional novel: 'It has no explicit narrator or dominating narrative voice at all: the reader must infer the design from a collection of brief, jostling first-person monologues.'⁸⁵

⁸³ Will Eaves, *The Absent Therapist* (London: CB editions, 2014).

⁸⁴ The homepage of the Goldsmiths Prize website, accessed July 16, 2020, <https://www.gold.ac.uk/goldsmiths-prize/about/>.

⁸⁵ Francis Spufford, the Goldsmiths Prize website, accessed July 16, 2020, <https://www.gold.ac.uk/goldsmiths-prize/prize2014/chair-of-judges-speech-2014/>.

A survey of reviews of *The Absent Therapist* reveals that the critics' attempts to classify the formal status of the text do not resolve to a consensus view. Anna Aslanyan, writing in *3:AM* magazine, finds that the divided sections achieve unity as 'confluent streams of consciousness' that counteract the absence of any cohering linear narrative thread.⁸⁶ Aslanyan concludes that while the text is: 'a book with no single plot, yet the author's decision to call it a novel seems justified.'⁸⁷ In an online journal, Simon Sweetman claims that Eaves' previous publication of both novels and poetry might have contributed to an intentional formal hybridity he observes in *The Absent Therapist*: 'he seems to aim (and reside) somewhere between the two.'⁸⁸ Sweetman's analysis is inconclusive in respect of the novel's formal category, although his perception of the text's resistance to simplistic categorisation doesn't temper his evaluation: 'Whatever this is – whether novel/anti-novel or just a twisted stop-start journey of nearly short stories – it's a mini masterpiece.' In contrast, the *Sydney Morning Herald*'s formal classification of the text is, in both senses of the word, categorical: 'It's an experimental novella.' The reviewer claims that the text achieves a unity despite its 'lack of an overarching narrative', and concludes that the accumulative effect is: 'to weave together a host of vignettes and fragments into an elusive and often disarmingly funny whole.'⁸⁹ The 'experimental' heterogeneity and discontinuity of the divided parts, this reviewer implies, would be judged less successful if they did not ultimately cohere into a 'whole'. In stark contrast, Leo Robson reaches an opposed position, finding that: 'Eaves is careful to stop the signification of individual voices from building to a whole' so that, ultimately, it

⁸⁶ Anna Aslanyan, 'The Overhearing,' *3AM Magazine*, accessed July 16, 2020, <http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/the-overhearing/>.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Simon Sweetman, 'The Absent Therapist,' *Off the Tracks*, accessed July 16, 2020, <http://offthetracks.co.nz/will-eaves-the-absent-therapist/>.

⁸⁹ Cameron Woodhead, 'Short Reviews of Fiction,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, accessed 16 July, 2020, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/short-reviews-of-fiction-by-will-eaves-sarah-moss-lee-child-philippa-gregory-20150831-gbjdy.html>.

‘stays a cacophony’⁹⁰. In the *Guardian* newspaper, Nicholas Lezard refuses the text entry to the novelistic canon, but he (archly) avoids assigning *The Absent Therapist* an alternative formal status: ‘I call it a book for want of a more precise term. It’s not a novel, even though it’s described as such on the cover.’⁹¹

These reviews give a sense of the overall arrangement and organisation of *The Absent Therapist*, but a closer critical analysis is required at the level of the page to identify the operation of Eaves’ technique.

⁹⁰ Leo Robson, ‘How to Disappear Completely,’ *New Statesman*, accessed July 16, 2020, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2014/10/how-disappear-completely-novel-exercise-self-scrutiny>.

⁹¹ Nicholas Lezard, ‘The Absent Therapist: Review,’ *Guardian*, accessed July 16, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/feb/11/absent-therapist-will-eaves-review>. A statement from which I detect (and do not contest) an inference that the text’s small publishing house (CB Editions) has decided the book is best commodified as a novel – a marketing decision that avoids the ‘difficult sell’ of applying other (or the absence of any) formal categorisations; and a classification that promotes its eligibility under the submission criteria for the Goldsmiths prize. This question (Is it a novel?) does have a bearing within the scope of my analysis – there are devices of division in *The Absent Therapist* that function, notwithstanding the visible sectioning of the narrative, to promote a wholeness and coherence associated with the novel form. I return to the most important of these below, in my analysis of the peritextual feature of a contents page that is placed at the start of the text.

Figure 3.1

A	<p>or a bolt of lightning, has to get us going. Matter began to twitch billions of years ago, but why did that happen? There's no law of physics saying it has to. Why twitch? Why self-replicate? Why? The leap from the inorganic to the organic – that's the bullet everyone's trying to dodge, isn't it? Where's the switch?</p> <hr/>
B	<p>When I was a child I didn't have an identity and I didn't want one. I was neither boy nor girl, male nor female. I was just a pair of eyes, a nose, some ears. Receiving the world, the brilliant blue sky, people talking above me.</p> <hr/>
C	<p>Neal and Ursula are both epidemiologists, which makes it sound like one of them caught it off the other, but they only work three days a week each, and that rather brings them down to earth in my eyes. I suppose you have to hope that the epidemic doesn't strike on the one day they haven't got covered. Anyway, there we were in the shack on a glorious morning, about to have breakfast, and I've put the kettle on and put some tea in the pot, and Neal watches me and calmly picks up the pot and tips the perfectly good dry leaves into the bin because – I imagine, I assume – I haven't warmed the pot first. With less socially awkward companions, and with more of a guiding intuition of their humanity – I'm put off by the little whirrs and clicks coming from their children – I might have pointed out that you warm a ceramic pot, so</p>

Figure 3.2

	<p>that it doesn't crack. Whereas aluminium conducts, so you don't have to. 'I'm sorry,' I say. Why do I feel as if I have to apologise? 'I'm sorry – I always use bags at home. I'm lazy, I'm afraid.' And Ursula replies, with a sort of pent-up literal-mindedness: 'Oh no, it isn't laziness. We just prefer loose-leaf tea.' Well, I wasn't saying <i>they</i> were lazy, was I? I was saying I'm lazy, although the irony is I'm not.</p> <hr/> <p>D Where do you get your tired ears from?</p> <hr/> <p>E So I go to the conductor, 'Can I smoke on the train?' I'm being polite. Hazel says I'm aggressive but I ain't. Least I'm asking him. Fuck do you want? And he goes, 'Sir. If you smoke you'll be arrested. It's as simple as that. It's as simple as that,' he goes. 'It's been that way for three or four years now. It's a railway by-law.' So I go, 'What if you haven't been in society for three or four years?' and he fucks off down the carriage shaking his head. Nice one. Can't smoke. He'll send me back to prison for smoking. Like to see him try.</p> <hr/> <p>Here is a famous pub. It's called The Portcullis. Legend has it that one of England's most celebrated poets used to come here and walk around naked. He was well known</p>
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The consecutive pages shown in Figures 3.1 and 3.2 are typical of the mise-en-page of the body text of *The Absent Therapist*. The sections of narrative throughout the text are consistently laid out without first-line indentations. Such typographically minor differences to the layout of a normative paragraph are significant in their influence on the interpretation of the narrative content. As outlined in Chapter 2 of this thesis, the conventional paragraph break is a legible device of narrative division whose underlying purpose has evolved to the point where it does not draw attention to itself; the conventional paragraph's ubiquitous presence on the page has become habitualised and the paragraph device functions to promote a continuity of reading, while serving to automatize the reader's uninterrupted reception of the printed discourse.

As illustrated in Figures 3.1 and 3.2, the horizontal gaps between the narrative sections are composed of a triple line space with a long dash left-aligned on the second line of the gap. The dash is about four characters wide, noticeably wider than commonly used typographic marks such as the hyphen [-], en-dash [-], or em-dash [—] that perform a range of punctuative functions.⁹² The bespoke elongated dash in *The Absent Therapist* is also differentiated from some typographic ornaments that are commonly used to mark line-spaced gaps in narrative: for example, the centrally placed asterisk [*], or asterism [**], or dinkus [***]. These devices of visible division generally occur on otherwise conventionally disposed pages, typically to mark subdivisions of a chapter. In this normative practice the devices are placed so sparingly that they do not draw attention to their material presence and their signification is limited to the marking of a temporal or scenic transition in the discourse: the continuity of the discourse in which they intervene is not usually

⁹² For example: the em-dash is often used to mark a sudden truncation of a line of dialogue; the en-dash to separate a date range; the hyphen to form compound words.

interrupted. The use of these conventional markers of division is so customary that their presence on the page confers on them a condition of invisibility that does not arrest the reception of the narrative content they divide. In contrast, the unusually long dash between the sections of *The Absent Therapist* draws the reader's attention to the visible breaks in the narrative text and the same (attentive) reader is required to account for their significance in the interpretation of the narrative content.

The material proximity of adjacent sections of narrative in *The Absent Therapist* suggests there might be some meaningful association between them. To support this interpretation, picture an alternative technique of marking the divisions: for example, if each successive section was presented on a new page (or, less emphatically, if the sections were divided by a solid line from margin to margin). I propose that such a compositional alteration, without any change in the linguistic content, would propose a reading that gives increased autonomy of effect to each section. The multiplicity of monologues in *The Absent Therapist*, by their physical proximity on the page, and by a gap device that divides them yet is permeable, can be considered as both discrete in the narrative *while also* thematically connected. In this way, at the level of the section gap, the text's legible form is providing an interpretative approach to its linguistic content.

It becomes clear in the course of reading *The Absent Therapist* that the consciousnesses represented in the successive monologues do not share a common fictional world, nor do these characters recur: if the text consists of 150 discrete sections it also consists of 150 discrete 'speakers'. This is exemplified by an examination of the sections of Figures 3.1 and 3.2. In section A there is a reflection on the origin of matter in the universe; in B a consideration of childhood identity; in C an anecdote regarding tea-making protocols; in D a surreal question; in E an ex-prisoner tells of trying to smoke on a train. Novels using conventional modes of division can

equally accommodate multiple and diverse voices. However, the isolated sections of *The Absent Therapist* are not mediated by a narrative voice that contextualises the content within these sections, or that provides some higher perspective on the relationship of the disparate parts. The titular absent therapist can be understood as a metaphor for this omission of any narratorial all-seeing eye or all-hearing ear; the structural absence of an organising consciousness in the text. The legible margins of white space between the sections serve to foreground such a strategy, deploying the gaps as emblems on the material page; their mute, but legible, presence enacting the absence of any supervising narrator. Read in this way, *The Absent Therapist* exemplifies what Italo Calvino calls: ‘the manifold text, which replaces the oneness of a thinking “I” with a multiplicity of subjects, voices, and views of the world.’⁹³ It is a quality that gives such texts, and I put *The Absent Therapist* in this class, the potential for almost limitless extension, of new voices being added or removed, or for permutations of the existing order and arrangement of sections without detriment to the aesthetic effect.

The divided sections of *The Absent Therapist* embrace a multiplicity of genres. In Figure 3.1, Section C has the qualities of a self-contained short story, or flash fiction piece; it contains sufficient contextualisation (names and relationships of participants, scenic and dramatic detail) to give a vivid sense of the narrative situation. Other sections adopt a range of distinctively literary modes: the heightened diction of the prose poem: ‘The rocks are bearded with dead moss.’⁹⁴; the confession: ‘I went to the Spanking Club once.’⁹⁵; the pithy wit of the epigram: ‘The rich are always frantically busy and in a hurry to do everything because they have all the time

⁹³ Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. Patrick Creagh (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p.171.

⁹⁴ Will Eaves, *The Absent Therapist*, p.75.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.16.

in the world and don't have to do anything.’⁹⁶ Extra-literary genres also feature as parts of the polyphonic whole, for example the anecdote: ‘So I go to the conductor, “Can I smoke on the train?”’⁹⁷; the philosophical enquiry: ‘Plato says, “A thing is not seen because it is visible, but conversely, visible because it is seen.”’⁹⁸; a section in the style of a sermon: ‘The road to Emmaus is, ladies and gentlemen, a very boring walk.’⁹⁹; the scholarly lecture: ‘Recognition of emotion by a computer isn't going to be enough.’¹⁰⁰

Heteroglossia can exist in fiction regardless of the disposition of the text on the material page; even the most conventional layout of parts, chapters and paragraphs can still accommodate a variety of genres. These disparate linguistic styles will often be incorporated into, for example, dialogue that imitates the idiomatic speech of the participants in the fiction. In *The Absent Therapist* these generic modes are markedly separated (the voices are physically partitioned on the surface of the page) and the fictional worlds of the monologists are connected only by margins of verbal silence. Charles Baxter, considering the concept of ‘silence’ in narrative fiction, expresses the effect that mute gaps between the voices can have on the adjacent narrative content, describing the interstices of white space as: ‘Expressive air-pockets of dead silence ... silence is an intensifier, it strengthens whatever stands on either side of it.’¹⁰¹ Baxter here imparts the gap with a narrative power: rather than a semantically neutral presence on the page, the gap is instrumental in the creation of meaning of the text. The gaps separating the panoply of voiced sections in *The Absent Therapist*, can then, be read as symbols of a narratorial absence, marking an emphatic withholding of, or silent refusal to provide, an explicit connective discourse. However, close

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.96.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.38.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.75.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.54.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.82.

¹⁰¹ Charles Baxter, *Burning Down the House* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 1997), p.176.

examination of a more conventional device of division in the text complicates this interpretation.

Figure 3.3

I	The Absent Therapist	1
II	Where Do You Get Your Tired Ears From?	33
III	We Are Prey	51
IV	Radio Traffic	71
V	A Start in Life	91

The image at Figure 3.3 shows the contents page of *The Absent Therapist*. I will examine first the divisional device of parts, and secondly the contents page itself.

The text is divided at the major level into five parts of approximately equal length, each designated by a roman numeral and a title. This device instantiates a normative tradition of narrative partitioning, the marked subdivision of the whole text into books, parts, and chapters is a commonly adopted practice in the contemporary novel, and it is a technique with long-standing precedents in novelistic practice (I examine these modes of narrative division above, in Chapter 2). In this respect the five titled parts of *The Absent Therapist* conform to a conventional mode of narrative division. The device of marking interleaved parts with numbers and titles (each presented on a separate page, preceding the narrative content of that part) is one of the paratextual elements whose form and function is analysed by Gérard Genette. Genette argues that the use of these numbered ‘intertitles’ can act to distract the reader’s attention away from the narrative content.¹⁰² This effect of impediment to uninterrupted reading that a paratextual component introduces could easily cause the device to draw a little too much attention, not to the text, but to the fact of the book as such: ““This is a novel by Victor Hugo,” proclaims the table of contents of *Les Misérables*. “This,” says the paratext more generally, “is a book.””¹⁰³ Applying Genette’s interpretative approach, the presence of a contents page in *The Absent Therapist* promotes a status of wholeness, a quality of unitarity that speaks of its novel-ness. But while the device was more prevalent among Hugo’s nineteenth century contemporaries, the insertion of a contents page is a less common formal component of twenty-first-century novels; the device is a more expected feature in collections of short stories and poetry. At a practical level the contents page provides

¹⁰² Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, p.316.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

a referential function to the reader of those texts, a means of navigating the physical book. More significantly, the contents page (and the convention of starting each new story or poem on a new page) acknowledges that individual poems and stories are often proposed to be considered for their autonomy of effect, and that the reading of the whole-text need not necessarily be linear. The placing of a contents page at the beginning of *The Absent Therapist* could be understood as an invitation, or even a firm proposal, that the text is composed of parts that do not require a linear reading. The gaps between the narrative sections signify in respect of the narrative's conceptual content; the contents page and titled parts signify in respect of the text's ontological status as a novel.

The Absent Therapist does not have the orthodox novelistic machinery of an organizing narrator, or the recurrence of characters and settings to unify the parts in the whole text. There is, however, a set of thematic motifs evident in many of the voiced passages where a tone of discontent characterizes the narrative: glimpses of unhappy or unfulfilled lives; loneliness; poverty; thwarted ambitions. On this basis *The Absent Therapist* complies with Gerald Graff's description of 'modern experimental texts', works that do not have the progressive plot-lines, and the causality of conventional literary narrative; they: 'depend much more heavily on the reader's ability to locate thematic propositions capable of giving their disjunctive, fragmentary, and refractory details some exemplary meaning and coherence.'¹⁰⁴ Oscar Kenshur states that what he calls 'open works' have 'an 'incompleteness' that is not accidental but deliberate, consisting not only of 'disconnected' but 'unconnectable' fragments.¹⁰⁵ Despite the thematic resonances across the whole-text and the

¹⁰⁴ Gerald Graff, *Literature against itself: Literary ideas in modern society* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979), pp.164-165.

¹⁰⁵ Ralph Lundén, citing Oscar Kenshur's Open Form and the Shape of Ideas, in 'Centrifugal and Centripetal Narrative Strategies in the Short Story Composite and the Episode Film', *The Short Story*

integrative signification of novel-ness promoted by peritextual features of *The Absent Therapist*'s that I have noted (contents, parts, epigraph), ultimately the legibly divided sections are not recuperated by their accumulated content to a singular harmonious wholeness.

Case Study 2

Cove

Cynan Jones

The narrative sections of *Cove* are un-indented, typically between one and five lines long, and contain between one and seven sentences (or sentence fragments).¹⁰⁶

Occasionally there are deviations from this visual pattern, as when two succeeding paragraphs are separated by five line spaces rather than the standard three line spaces.

An additional feature marking division of the narrative is the employment of minimal typographic ornaments: a single asterisk is used twice, a long dash once, and a line of three dots once also.

Cove is divided into three major sections: beginning with six pages without title markings, there follow two further titled divisions – ‘PART I’ of fifty pages, and ‘PART II’ of forty pages. At the point of transition from the initial untitled six-page section to Part I there is a switch in narrative mode, from a female, second person, present tense perspective to a third person, past tense voice that narrates the situation of the unnamed protagonist – a man, alone on a kayak, out at sea.¹⁰⁷ The events of the narrative take place over two days, and the division between the two titled parts marks this temporal transition. Part I ends with the one-line paragraph: ‘You have to stay alive.’; Part II begins: ‘He woke with a strange specific clarity.’ (Periods of sleep and unconsciousness are marked elsewhere by paragraph spacing and the use of typographic ornaments). The emphatically announced part division suggests perhaps a longer period of sleep, and the possibility of a shift in the prospects of the protagonist from the suspense of ‘You have to stay alive.’ to the hope expressed by ‘specific

¹⁰⁶ Cynan Jones, *Cove* (London: Granta Books, 2016).

¹⁰⁷ This first section is only ‘filled in’ by the reading of a later section of the discourse as a dreamlike representation of the protagonist’s hallucinatory consciousness.

clarity'. It can be inferred from the context that the protagonist has had a period of restorative sleep in the interval between the end of Part I and the resumption of the discourse in Part II. The placing of this major titled division (at roughly half-way through the text) marks a turning point in the fictional world; it is the beginning of a new day, a movement from the darkness and the protagonist's exhaustion at the end of Part I to the sun rising and the possibility of better prospects for the imperilled character. The placing of a major visible narrative division at this juncture promotes a reading of its central position as significant, a pivotal point both in the physical text and in the cue to interpretation of the discourse.

Within *Cove*'s three major announced parts, the verbal content is further divided by page breaks, typically every three or four pages. The use of a fresh page to start these sections combines with the regularity of their occurrence to give the legible appearance of conventional chapter breaks. However the omission of chapter titles or numbers marks a deviation from, or a troubling of, the norm. This type of division is sometimes employed to elide events in the story world. In the manner of a cinematic cut, the gaps between these quasi-chapters might mark a passing over of events considered irrelevant in order to move the discourse forward chronologically. These instances are a feature of conventional narrative division, where visible breaks in the typographic content signal an editorial selection of the story elements rather than signifying in respect of the narrative world. When used in this traditional way these visual divisions can be read as having a narrative neutrality, and belong to the class of what Simon Barton terms 'conventional aporia' in the text, visual devices that are 'an "unseen" part of the reader's comprehension of the narrative'.¹⁰⁸ There are, however, occasions in *Cove* where the divisions of these sections interact with narrative

¹⁰⁸ Simon Barton, *Visual Devices in Contemporary Prose Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p.27.

thematic content. Most frequently this extended mode of signification occurs when there are breaks in the consciousness of the character, occasions that are explicit from the narrative exposition immediately preceding or following the page break. For example: 'When he passed out, it was like another white light shot though him', which is placed at the end of one of these quasi-chapters.¹⁰⁹ Another section begins: 'He woke to the sound, far off, of a speedboat engine.'¹¹⁰ The material gaps in the printed narrative can be read as a representation of the temporary absence of the protagonist's consciousness – the narrative voice is focalised through his thoughts and feelings and the material gaps on the page signify the lapse of those faculties.

The main body of the narrative of *Cove* is interleaved with italicised single-page passages of text. The change in font style disrupts the text's prevailing typographic convention. Before any comprehension of their narrative content commences these pages are visibly de-familiarised from the text's predominant internal norm. The shift to an italicised typeface on these interpolated pages draws the reader's attention to, and prompts their expectation of, some corresponding variation in textual content. Indeed, the narrative focalisation shifts in each of these sections to perspectives outside the protagonist's consciousness. These sections are also characterised by stylistic changes in the language of the discourse: the sentences are noticeably longer in these sections, they are more grammatically orthodox, and less staccato than the constructions that, elsewhere, serve to represent the consciousness of the main character: the man who is injured, alone and in peril on the kayak. Suzanne Keen has termed such incongruous interludes 'narrative annexes', passages that allow

¹⁰⁹ Cynan Jones, *Cove*, p.36.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.30.

for the admission of ‘events into fictional worlds whose norms would ordinarily exclude them.’¹¹¹

In *Cove*, one such narrative annex is written in the impersonal register of a meteorological report: ‘*The storm had begun miles out. A patch of air eventually succumbed to tiny variances until it became unstable. Under different pressures, cloud built up and travelled, pushing cool air in front.*’¹¹² In another, we have the close third-person thoughts of a boy who casually observes from the shore: ‘*He was the only one who noticed the distant kayak, a small splinter out to sea, a pale speck on which sat a lone man, his head bound, it seemed to the boy, like some strange Arab.*’¹¹³ The material separation of these sections and their deviant typeface visibly distinguishes these digressions from the central consciousness that elsewhere dominates the narrative. The gappy presentation of narrative sections is retained despite the switch in focalisation from the protagonist: this troubles an interpretation of the gaps on these interleaved pages as conveying a directly mimetic representation of his traumatised condition. At the level of the material surface the consistency in techniques of paragraph division in these adjunctive sections can be interpreted as a strategy aimed at unifying the whole text, giving them a visually familiar (and familial) layout despite the variation in typeface and narrative style.

The narrative divisions of *Cove* (into parts, quasi-chapters, and italicised interludes) are the only points where shifts occur in the linear chronology of the story. The textual divisions at these junctures legibly mark, and thereby draw attention to, the chronological disordering of the narrative. As Culler puts it: ‘a fundamental premise of narratology is that narrative has a double structure: the level of the told (‘the story as a series of events’) and the level of telling, or discourse (‘the story as

¹¹¹ Suzanne Keen, *Narrative Form* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.80.

¹¹² Cynan Jones, *Cove*, p.37.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p.40.

reported in the narrative').¹¹⁴ In *Cove* the narrative divisions draw attention to points where story is being organised as discourse. As Keen has said: 'Subdivisions of narrative literature are marked at the level of discourse with white space, page breaks, numbering, or the separation of individually bound volumes.'¹¹⁵ An example of this in *Cove* is the page break between a paragraph at the end of one of what I have termed quasi chapters: 'When it hits him there is a bright white light.'¹¹⁶ From the context we understand this is the point at which the protagonist is struck by lightning. The text continues on a fresh page: ' He swings the fish from the water ...'¹¹⁷ and this quasi-chapter moves back in the story to events preceding the lightning strike. The interleaved italicized sections also instantiate points where the 'told' is modified in the 'telling', by the introduction of new perspectives on events.

While the devices of sub-division I have examined above contribute to the possible meanings of *Cove*, it is the material separation of printed passages by margins of white space that most singularly characterise what Glyn White terms the 'graphic surface'.¹¹⁸ A closer examination of Jones' techniques of narrative division is required to identify the particular effects they produce in *Cove*.

¹¹⁴ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), p.170.

¹¹⁵ Suzanne Keen, *Narrative Form*, p.17.

¹¹⁶ Cynan Jones, *Cove*, p.10.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.11.

¹¹⁸ Glyn White, *Reading the Graphic Surface: The Presence of the Book in Prose Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p.1.

Figure 3.4

	<p>When he tried the locker again, the pain of his finger shot round his body. He gave up. Somehow he knew it was always stubborn. Just accept the pain. Focus on the fact the land is there.</p> <p>He knew now he had gone out for something, and he knew this was his boat. But it was only now he truly recognised the paddle was gone and understood it. He was less spacey, and more functional. With that came a low panic.</p> <p>The idea of breath on his neck lay under everything. A suspicion someone had been left behind.</p> <p>He turned in his seat and reached for the drybag, husbanding the finger. Used his teeth and hand to open it, spilled out the looser things, took the sun-block, the T-shirt, the old cloth.</p> <p>When he saw the address label on the bag he saw his name. It was like looking into an empty cup. Then he heard a voice say it. The knowledge it gave down was as delicate as an image sitting on the surface of the water, disrupting as he moved to reach it.</p>
A	<p>He let it go, instinctively.</p>

Figure 3.5

B	<p>It does not matter who you are. You know what you are physically, and that you're in a kayak in the middle of the ocean. It only matters what you are, right now.</p>
C	<p>His face hurt to touch. His skin was parched and sore and was stretched and gritty with salt.</p>
D	<p>He rubbed the sunblock in. A baffling thought of holidays. Worked urgently, as if the next few moments were vital.</p>
E	<p>His ears were blistered and cracked, he rubbed the lotion into his hair. He did his dead hand and was frightened by it. That he could not feel it. That the arm lay so inert. It had stretched out now, dormant. He had a sort of horror at his body. How long has this taken to happen? How long have I been out here?</p>
	<p>He looked again at his useless hand, the now purplish fern-like pattern. It seemed to follow his veins, mark tiny capillaries, a leaf skeleton disappearing under the tide-line of ash into the sleeve of his top.</p>

The extract above at Figures 3.4 and 3.5 shows two consecutive pages of *Cove*. Sections A and C use a third person, past tense narrative voice.¹¹⁹ The section of text marked B has the sense of the character's interior monologue, rendering his thoughts in the reflexive second person, present tense. The double spaces between sections function here as a punctuating device to distinguish shifts in the narrative mode by which the protagonist's consciousness is conveyed. It is important to understand that these modulations of narrative voice could be similarly discernable if the extract was presented in a continuous paragraph. Switches between the voice and diction of the narrator and the character can be made in undivided paragraphs, for example, by using the mixed mode of free indirect style. However, the 'gappy' appearance (in Figures 3.4 and 3.5) produces an effect beyond solely a distinctive style of punctuation. Section B, with the untagged access to the consciousness of the character adrift at sea in his fictional world, is emphatically isolated on the page.¹²⁰ This typographic dislocation of protagonist's unmediated existential thoughts (conveyed close to the moment of action in the present tense) from the past tense voice of the narrator is imitative. Sections A, B, and C might be combined into one continuous paragraph without loss of sense of narrative point of view; but if presented in this way the text would not employ the layout of the material page to figuratively supplement the depiction of the solitary plight of the character.

The employment of divisions in *Cove* to isolate the protagonist on the printed page is frequently used; as illustrated by the following excerpted page.

¹¹⁹ Cynan Jones, *Cove*, pp.31-32.

¹²⁰ The OED states that the word *isolated* originates from the Latin *insula*: 'made into an island'. The etymology provides a useful figure for the imitative appearance of the divided sections in *Cove*.

Figure 3.6

	<p>Shouts. Faintly. Loud shouts that reach him quieter than whispers. That seem to carry on the air like faintly visible things. The ringing in his head is a hum now, a low choir, the flick of water on the boat constant, random, like the sound of work in the distance.</p>
	<p>He senses movement, just a shifting air, the smallest breeze that bears the shouts; a sure current, the kayak drifts. Goes sideways past the shingle bay.</p>
A	<p>He is in a dream. He sees, there, a penguin crowd of people bathing in their clothes. In black-and-white suits. They are playing in the water. Children in waistcoats. As if a wedding has run into the sea.</p>
B	<p>Where am I?</p>
C	<p>He lifts his arm. They are far off. Tiny on the shore. Tries to shout. Shouts like a puncture. Like a hiss of air.</p>
	<p>Hears the draw and swash of the waves breaking in the bay, sees the children jump the water. The sound of play. A bus parked on the road behind the beach.</p>

In Figure 3.6 above, the narrative in section B strips away the mediation of the close third person perspective of the preceding section (A) and the section that follows it

(C): the consciousness of the character is materially isolated on the page.¹²¹ This is a strategy that recurs throughout *Cove*; narrative division on these occasions is supplementing the textual content of the discourse, the protagonist is adrift both in his narrative situation and in the representation of his situation on the printed page. The thematic concerns of the discourse are embodied by the devices of narrative division; form and content are combining to generate meaning in the novel in a different way to a normative typographical presentation.

¹²¹ Cynan Jones, *Cove*, p.38.

Figure 3.7

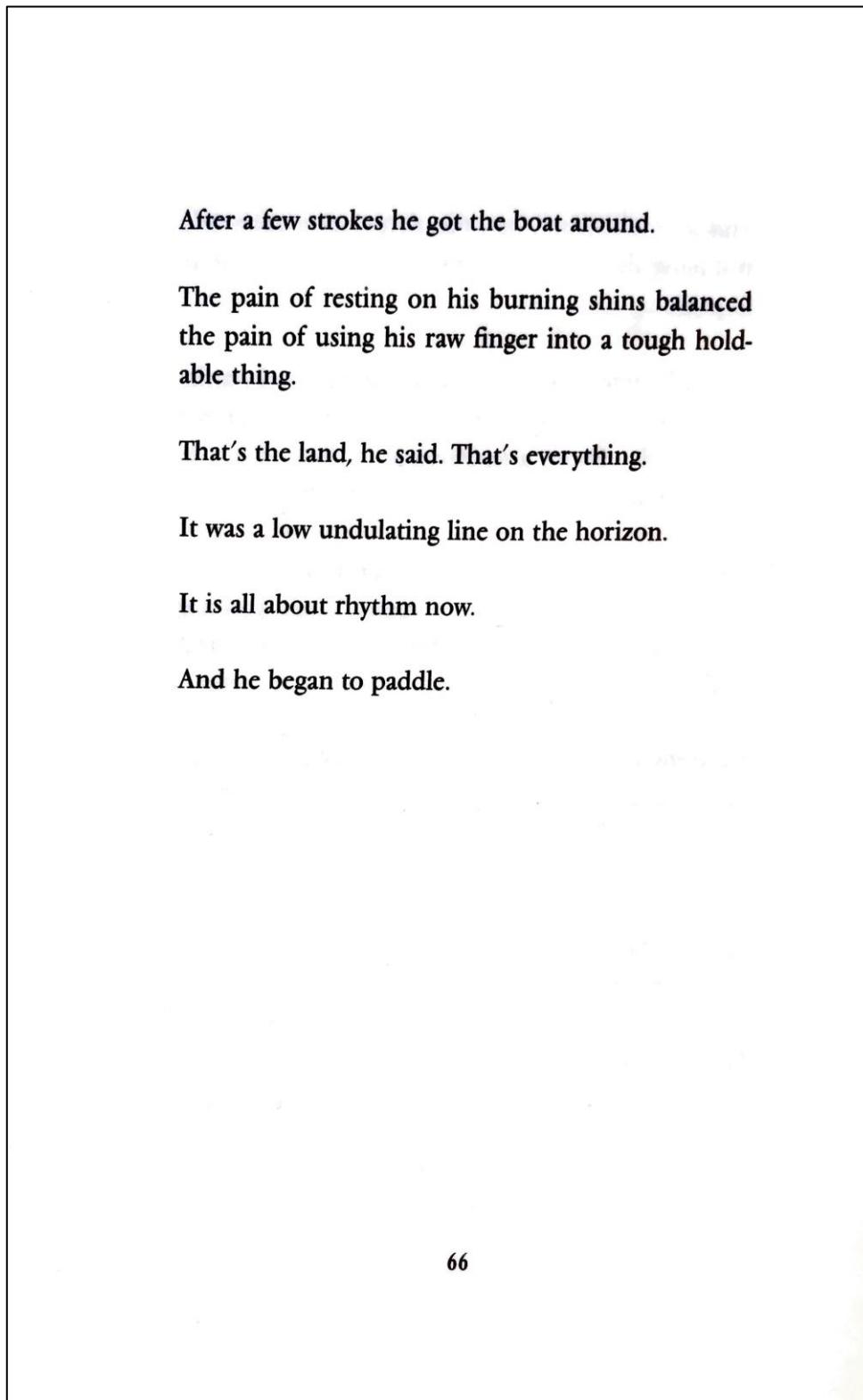


Figure 3.7 (above) shows a page where the section text is shorter than the standard length within *Cove*. The margins of white space and the staccato rhythm of these

paragraphs combine in an imitative way: there is a sense of the man's breathing, of the faltering arrival of his thoughts and perceptions, even of the beat of the oars of the kayak as he begins to paddle forward.¹²² The formal typographic shape of the divided paragraphs on the page is, to use Barton's term, *gesturing* towards a physical imitation of the textual content.¹²³ The visual disposition of the pages of *Cove* are acting as metaphors for the circumstances of the story world: the central character's isolation; the breaks in his consciousness; the broken rhythm of his breathing. In this way the gaps of white space in *Cove* supplement the verbal narrative: Jones' gappy technique produces a second level of signification that interacts with the linguistic content to imitate aspects of the fiction.

¹²² Cynan Jones, *Cove*, p.66.

¹²³ Simon Barton, *Visual Devices in Contemporary Prose Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p.71.

Case Study 3

Dept. of Speculation

Jenny Offill

Dept. of Speculation is a portrait of a marriage in crisis, set in contemporary New York City, and narrated by the wife who is a writer, university teacher, and the mother to a newly born child.¹²⁴ While this synopsis suggests a novel with unexceptional thematic concerns, the material form of the pages is certainly not conventional. The typographic layout of the pages of *Dept. of Speculation* drew attention in the reviews that followed its publication in 2014. Commentators reached for metaphorical and analogous ways of describing Offill's use of short narrative sections separated by double-spaced line gaps, one reviewer describing the novel as: 'a series of short, brilliant segments, creating a narrative collage of moments' and 'shaped like a puzzle'.¹²⁵ The text's gappy presentation was variously figured as resembling: a sequence of vignettes; puzzle pieces; diary entries; journal entries; aphorisms; jokes. One critic noted how Offill's narrator 'speaks to us in very short, double-spaced paragraph dispatches, as if we were riffling through the pages of her private diary'.¹²⁶ Another review compared the layout to an influential pre-novelistic mode of textual division, remarking that the sections of *Dept. of Speculation* are 'set out like a Bible verse'.¹²⁷ Another critic saw a resemblance to the journal style entries

¹²⁴ Jenny Offill, *Dept. of Speculation* (London: Granta Books, 2015).

¹²⁵ Christina Fries, 'Dept. of Speculation,' ZYZZYVA, accessed July 16, 2020, <https://www.zyzyva.org/tag/jenny-offill/>.

¹²⁶ James Wood, 'Mother Courage,' *New Yorker*, accessed July 16, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/03/31/mother-courage-3>

¹²⁷ Lidija Haas, 'Life after Dept. of Speculation,' *Guardian*, accessed July 16, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/feb/28/jenny-offill-dept-speculation-underdog-personas-not-going-to-fly-any-more-interview>.

employed in Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*.¹²⁸ The marking by these critics of unconventional techniques of narrative division in *Dept. of Speculation* and the same critics' attempts to identify, classify and interpret the regular intervals of white space separating the textual sections is recognition that the formal arrangement of the narrative is implicated in the generation of the meaning of the novel. Even at a journalistic register these responses acknowledge some significance in the relationship between the novel's typographic form and its linguistic content.

The unusual brevity of the textual sections of *Dept. of Speculation* and their un-indented formatting, together with the frequency of the line-spaces that divide them, marks them as legibly different to the orthodoxies of page layout inherited and adopted by the majority of contemporary novels. The novel's unconventional layout is evident from its first page:

¹²⁸ Michiko Kakutani, 'For a Wife, the Musing Never Stops,' *New York Times*, accessed July 16, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/30/books/jenny-offills-dept-of-speculation.html>

Figure 3.7

A	1
B	<p>Antelopes have 10x vision, you said. It was the beginning or close to it. That means that on a clear night they can see the rings of Saturn.</p>
C	<p>It was still months before we'd tell each other all our stories. And even then some seemed too small to bother with. So why do they come back to me now? Now, when I'm so weary of all of it.</p>
D	<p>Memories are microscopic. Tiny particles that swarm together and apart. Little people, Edison called them. Entities. He had a theory about where they came from and that theory was outer space.</p>
E	<p>The first time I traveled alone, I went to a restaurant and ordered a steak. But when it came I saw it was just a piece of raw meat cut into pieces. I tried to eat it, but it was too bloody. My throat refused to swallow. Finally, I spit it</p>

The gappy format of the narrative (see Figure 3.7 above) communicates before reading begins. As Culler states: 'By its disposition on the page alone, a poem signals

“I am poetry, do not read me as you would other language.”¹²⁹ I would extend Culler’s point beyond the realm of poetry, and propose that there is signification in the typographic presentation of *Dept. of Speculation*: on an extra-linguistic meta-level the reader’s cognitive faculties are alerted, primed for an interpretation of the relation of content and form.

Dept. of Speculation is divided into forty-six chapters, each containing three or four pages of narrative content. The chapter numbers, such as the one I have referenced A on the sample page (Figure 3.7), are placed top and central on a new page: they use an emboldened typeface noticeably larger than the body text and occur at roughly regular intervals in the physical text. The use of a nominal chapter header is a common strategy to mark major subdivisions of narrative; the technique is long-standing in novelistic practice and the device is now so prevalent that its presence on the page has become normalized. On the sample page (Figure 3.7) we see this convention of chaptering co-existing on the material page with a conspicuously unconventional formal segmentation of the body text. These two devices of narrative division signify in markedly different ways. The use of nominal chapter headers in *Dept. of Speculation* invokes a novelistic tradition that has become such an habitualised feature of the novel as a form that they have become hidden in plain sight. In contrast the unorthodox presentation of the narrative sections arrests the reader’s eye and, without recourse to the rules of the established convention, their purpose in the text is not obvious.

These conventional chapter headers promote the text’s formal categoric status: they signify: ‘this is what a novel *looks* like’. The chapter breaks in *Dept. of Speculation* mark temporal and spatial shifts; pointing to switches in narrative mode;

¹²⁹ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, p.18.

demarcating stylistic transitions. In other words these chapters provide similar functionality as the conventional chapters described in Chapter 2 of the thesis.

Some reviewers have described the discrete passages of narrative in *Dept. of Speculation* as ‘paragraphs’, however there are habits of writing practice that confer on that term both a typographic form (unbroken succession, indented first lines) and certain conceptual qualities (for example as being unified and bounded by a common topic, scene, or description). The sections (B, C, D, E) in Figure 3.7 are differentiated from conventional paragraphs in two materially small but significant ways: they have un-indented first lines, and they are also separated by a double line-space. A paragraph, in orthodox practice, connotes a function of narrative consecution, one paragraph having a progressive relational logic to the preceding paragraph. The conventionally composed paragraph does little to arrest or retard the flow of reading, rather it automatizes the reception of the narrative. Roger Fowler recognizes the effect such normalized novelistic layout has on reading when he says (drawing a distinction with the layout of poetry): ‘Novels are generally more continuous, less punctuated by space; the printed lines reach regularly to the margin, encouraging fast and unbroken reading.’¹³⁰ The textual passages separated by gaps of white space in *Dept. of Speculation* are, by means of minor typographical differences, freeing themselves from the functional associations of the conventional paragraph, and thereby licensing for themselves a potential to contribute additional signification to the linguistic content.

The first two sections on the sample page in Figure 3.7 (B and C), if presented without the interruption of a line space, have common associations of content that might be presented in a single continuous paragraph, or a sequence of two conventionally indented paragraphs. The question arises, then, of the functional

¹³⁰ Roger Fowler, *Linguistics and the Novel* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2003), p.51.

necessity of the white space separating the sections: are these gaps superfluous? Are the white spaces merely, to borrow a phrase from Roland Barthes: ‘increasing the cost of narrative information.’?¹³¹ A closer analysis of these sample sections is required to approach an answer to such questions.

In the all three sections (B, C, D, in Figure 3.7) the theme of memory is present. But it is in D that the content provides a clue to the interpretation of the divided layout. The narrator cites Edison: ‘Memories are microscopic. Tiny particles that swarm together and apart.’ These thematic concerns with memory recur throughout the novel, the narrator both recounting memories while also self-reflexively hypothesizing their nature: their unbidden arrival; their condition as particular (and particulate, in Edison’s conception); their qualitative differences. The narrator’s memories are sometimes profound, sometimes mundane, often trivial, and their connections are elusive. These opening sections of narrative convey the narrator’s attempts to make sense of her disparate memories from some future time of telling, and are presented in piecemeal form.¹³² Form and content are in a reciprocal relation, each providing an interpretative response to the other. The physical white spaces that interrupt the narrative are a visual representation of how the narrator’s memories arrive: in a discontinuous, unstructured, gappy way. Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotic theory established a triad of fundamental categories of the sign: the symbol; the index; the icon.¹³³ While conveyed through the non-iconic conventions of typography, layout, and punctuation the material gaps on the page can be seen as a metaphoric symbols. They serve to represent the thematic concerns (in Peirce’s terms

¹³¹ Roland Barthes, *The Reality Effect*, Trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p.141.

¹³² Commenting on her formal choice, Offill points to the suitability of what she calls the *Dept. of Speculation*’s ‘fragmented form’ as suitable for conveying ‘these shard-like memories [the narrator] is trying to re-assemble.’ Interview with Jenny Offill on Foyle’s website, accessed July 16, 2020, <https://www.foyles.co.uk/jenny-offill>.

¹³³ I borrow Peirce’s semiotic triad, acknowledging the ambiguity, and potential overlap of these classes.

they bear a ‘topographical similarity’ to them) establishing formal correspondences for the conditions of jitteriness, interruption, disorder, disarrayed memories, and the unsayable, that characterize the narrative. The way these memories are set out on the material page performs a formal enactment of what will become one of the novel’s central and recurring preoccupations: the rendering of the workings of the narrator’s memory. The material gap on the page surface corresponds with, or represents, the content of the narrative.

Many sections of the narrative focus on the daily demands and the quotidian routines that characterize the narrator’s experience as a new mother. The narrative content of the two successive pages below (Figures 3.8 and 3.9) provides further interpretative approaches to the segmented formal strategy in relation to this theme.

Figure 3.8

A

What the baby liked best was speed. If I took her outside, I had to walk quickly, even trot a little. If I slowed down or stopped, she would start wailing again. It was the dead of winter and some days I walked or trotted for hours, softly singing.

B

What did you do today, you'd say when you got home from work, and I'd try my best to craft an anecdote for you out of nothing.

C

I read a study once about sleep deprivation. The researchers made cat-sized islands of sand in the middle of a pool of water, then placed very tired cats on top of them. At first, the cats curled up perfectly on the sand and slept, but eventually they'd sprawl out and wake up in water. I can't remember what they were trying to prove exactly. All I took away was that the cats went crazy.

D

The days with the baby felt long but there was nothing expansive about them. Caring for her required me to repeat a series of tasks

Figure 3.9

E

that had the peculiar quality of seeming both urgent and tedious. They cut the day up into little scraps.

F

And that phrase—"sleeping like a baby." Some blonde said it blithely on the subway the other day. I wanted to lie down next to her and scream for five hours in her ear.

G

But the smell of her hair. The way she clasped her hand around my fingers. This was like medicine. For once, I didn't have to think. The animal was ascendant.

H

I ordered a CD online that promised to put even the most colicky baby to sleep. It sounded like a giant heart beating. As if you had been forced to live inside such a heart with no possibility of escape.

Our friend R stopped by one night to see us while it was playing. "Wow. That is some bad techno music," he said. He sat on the couch and drank beer while I paced with the baby.

DEPT. OF SPECULATION

In Figure 3.8 and 3.9 (above) the narrator of *Dept. of Speculation*, who is a novelist, expresses anxiety about the difficulties of conveying the dailyness of her life, implying that it is unsuitable, or at least refractory, as storyable material. She recalls (section B) how she strove to construct some pleasing narrative from her daily life for her husband, an impulse to shape a story ‘out of nothing.’ (‘Nothing’, here, represented by the white space of the gaps that remains after the story has been shaped). In section D, the narrator states that ‘the days with the baby felt long, but there was nothing *expansive* about them.’(my italics) This passage can be distilled to a conceptual opposition that troubles the narrator regularly in the novel: she implies that some types of experience are considered more suitable for a voluble, flowing (‘expansive’) form of expression. The conditions of dailyness of a mother with a new baby resist, at least for the narrator of *Dept. of Speculation*, conventional narrative continuity. In the same section (D) the narrator tells how her day was ‘cut up into *little scraps*.’ (my italics). One of the functions of the interrupted presentation in *Dept. of Speculation* is to represent this subject matter in material form on the page: the *gappiness* of the graphic surface represents the condition of *scrappiness* in the narrator’s rendered experience. Offill has commented on this correlation between the discontinuity in the world of the narrator and the piecemeal form of the text: ‘It seemed right to me that the style be fragmented since the narrator’s thoughts are so often interrupted.’¹³⁴ The discontinuity and divagation of the content of the narrative sections can be read as imitative of the experiential fragmentariness of the narrator’s days as a new mother. The disjunctions of the *mise-en-page* correspond to the narrator’s jittery, skittish days; as such, the material form is representing an aspect of the novel’s thematic content.

¹³⁴ Interview with Jenny Offill on Foyles’ website, accessed July 16, 2020, <https://www.foyles.co.uk/jenny-offill>.

The sample page in Figure 3.9 also illustrates how the gapped sections of *Dept. of Speculation* produce a paratactic effect. Three consecutive sections (F, G, H) are linked by a common topic (the narrator's baby isn't sleeping) but these adjacent sections have a coordinate rather than a subordinate relationship, a paratactic rather than a hypotactic construction. The division of the sections permits for different facets of the narrator's experience to be revealed in a serial rather than a causal way: the content of one section does not dovetail with its adjacent sections, or, borrowing Offill's term, one 'scrap' of experience does not necessarily join neatly with the edges of the next 'scrap'; if the joins were neat they would not be scraps. The submerged rage of the narrator on the subway in (F) is counterpointed by the poignant tone in the next section (G) and the practical solution of the next section (H). The white space of the gap functions to frame each section, allowing each an equivalence of meaning, a strategy that insists the reader give equal consideration to each narrative unit.

The layout of the pages of *Dept. of Speculation* deviates from the norm, but as the reader progresses through the book the recurrence of pages of similarly, if irregularly, double-spaced sections begins to create internal formal norms for the text: the initial unfamiliarity becomes normalized in the course of reading – a customary and expected pattern of mise-en-page is established. However, the final one-page chapter (shown in full in Figure 3.10 below) demonstrates how the dominant formal presentation of the narrative in the novel makes a departure from its own presiding formal conventions.

Figure 3.10

46

Snow. Finally. The world looks blankly beautiful. We take the dog out in it. He races ahead of us, blazing a trail of pee through the whiteness. We walk towards the road. Sometimes the school bus is early, sometimes late. There is ice in the trees, a brisk, bitter wind from the east. The dog appears, dragging his leash. We wait by the mailboxes. One or two trees still have some leaves. You reach out to pick one, show it to me. "It has oblique leaves," you say. "See?" I let you tuck it in my pocket.

The yellow bus pulls up. The doors open and she is there, holding something made of paper and string. It is art, she thinks. Science maybe. The snow is coming down again. Soft wet flakes land on your face. My eyes sting from the wind. Our daughter hands us her crumpled papers, takes off running. You stop and wait for me. We watch as she gets smaller. No one young knows the name of anything.

The presentation in this chapter (Figure 3.10) of a mise-en-page of indented, unbroken paragraphs adopts the convention that has been emphatically resisted on the preceding pages. The reader's attention is arrested by this deviation from the internal

formal norms established to this point. The previously shifting pronouns that denoted the narrator ('I', 'the wife') and her husband ('you', 'he', 'the husband') are brought together for the first time in the first-person plural: 'Snow. Finally. The world looks blankly beautiful. *We* take the dogs out in it.' (my italics).¹³⁵ The chapter content suggests hope for resolution; the narrator's marriage has survived her husband's infidelity, her life seems to be *coming back together*, and the material page has reverted to the legible bibliographic mode of a conventional societal novel.

The gapped sections of *Dept. of Speculation* are often digressive and seemingly unconnected to the progress of sections that convey scenes and reflections from the central story: the narrator's marriage; her motherhood; her husband's affair and their reconciliation. However this main narrative provides the content of more sections than the other heterogeneous, digressive sections. The regular recurrence of this mode of discourse acts as a cohering force to those sections that interrupt it with juxtaposed anecdotes, aphorisms, and quotations. As James Woods puts it in his review of *Dept. of Speculation*: 'The form allows, as sensitive fictional or dramatic monologue usually does, for a managed ratio of randomized coherence,' and that: 'the paragraphs cumulatively overcome their isolation to make a narrative.'¹³⁶ Ultimately, Woods seems to imply, the heterogeneous material of individual sections can be re-assembled. The highly segmented pages of *Dept. of Speculation* might *appear* to suggest disintegration of the narrative (it doesn't *look* like that artifact called the novel) however the unconventional visual disjunctions of the narrative sections are ultimately, to apply the phrase Barthes uses to validate potentially redundant description, 'recuperated by structure.'¹³⁷ Ted Gioia, in his survey of a selection of fragmented contemporary novels, identifies this resolution of the tension between

¹³⁵ Jenny Offill, *Dept. of Speculation*, p.177.

¹³⁶ James Wood, 'Mother Courage,' *New Yorker*, accessed July 16, 2020.

¹³⁷ Roland Barthes, *The Reality Effect*, p.141.

form and coalescence of narrative content as a trait of an emerging hybrid novel, a formal class in which I would include *DoS* : ‘It resists disunity, even as it appears to embody it.’¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Ted Gioia, ‘The Rise of the Fragmented Novel,’ *Fractious Fiction*, accessed July 16, 2020, http://fractiousfiction.com/rise_of_the_fragmented_novel.html.

Case Study 4

Martin John

Anakana Schofield

Anakana Schofield's novel engages with deeply troubling material: the text's eponymous central character is a loner, a man with a psychosexual disorder, a history as an abuser of women, and an exhibitionist.

The text of *Martin John* employs markers of major narrative subdivision similar to conventional chapter headers.¹³⁹ These are placed a third of the way down the recto page, capitalised and sometimes with lower case sub-headers resembling the synoptic 'arguments' used in many eighteenth and nineteenth century novels.¹⁴⁰ Within the major divisions, short passages of text are separated by double-line breaks; a typical page layout contains four or five such sections of narrative. Occasionally a section is placed in isolation at the top of a page that is otherwise blank, for example: 'Harm was done. / Harm was done and further harm would be done,'¹⁴¹ and: 'We've got to get you out, mam said. / It was surrender that sentence. / He was back there again.'¹⁴² There is variation of both the length of the narrative sections and the frequency and length of the gaps of white space that divide them. The segmented presentation of the printed material deviates from the formal conventions of paragraph layout while, at the same time, the irregularity of the occurrence of this form of textual division acts against any predictable design. This irregularity gives the mise-en-page a protean quality. One reviewer describes this unpredictability as the novel's

¹³⁹ Anakana Schofield, *Martin John* (High Wycombe: And Other Stories, 2015)

¹⁴⁰ Chapter 2 of this thesis examines the novelistic fashion for the 'in which' and 'concerning' titular styles containing a summary of the content of the forthcoming chapter.

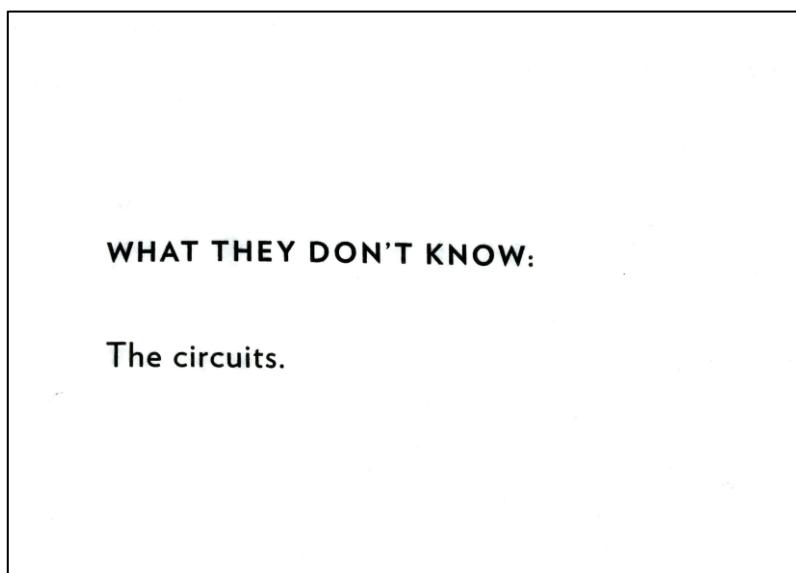
¹⁴¹ Anakana Schofield, *Martin John*, p.63.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p.120.

‘variable and elastic form’.¹⁴³ While one of these adjectives (‘variable’) denotes the purely visual arrangement of the text, the other (‘elastic’) connotes a more qualitative feature: that the length of printed sections and the frequency and modes of narrative division stretch and contract (to extend the figure of elasticity) according to the narrative content.

The verbal content within the titled section breaks generally follow a common thematic thread, often focusing on one of Martin John’s set of daily routines or mental preoccupations. For example, one of the quasi chapter divisions is titled: ‘WHAT THEY DON’T KNOW: / The Circuits.’¹⁴⁴

Figure 3.11



The title page of the section (Figure 3.11 above) indicates the theme of its textual content (excerpted at Figure 3.12 below).

¹⁴³ Review in the *Vancouver Sun*, accessed 16 July, 2020, <http://www.vancouversun.com/news/book+club+novel+martin+john+gets+under+your+skin/11698420/story.html>.

¹⁴⁴ Anakana Schofield, *Martin John*, p.91.

Figure 3.12

Martin John finds value in repetition. He always has. As a child he liked to wander around lampposts in town. It drove his mother mad. It took perpetuity to move him anywhere for he would loop endlessly around every lamppost they passed. Mam could go into a shop and come out and be assured Martin John would still be there doing his lamppost loops.

He takes this repetition to Euston. At Euston Station he does circuits. He walks corner to corner in a square. People look up at the departures board while their suitcases and trolleys interrupt his circuits. If one is interrupted, he prefers to recommence it. This is why he loves Euston. It's an opera with an aria that never ends.

It is concurrently why he is good at his job. Martin John does the most circuits in his job. All the guards know this and encourage him to do fewer circuits. Gary, a guard who does virtually no circuits, pointed out to Martin John he was making the rest of them look shoddy. Martin John agreed he'll do Gary's circuits if Gary does his cleaning. Gary looked blank and pointed out they work opposite shifts. Martin John said that's grand: Gary needs to change shifts. Gary said he doesn't need to change shifts because he has three children he has to take care of at night while his wife works at a factory. What he needs is Martin John to stop doing so many circuits and sit down and watch television instead. It's what all the guards do. He makes this statement a question. You won't be able to keep it up. He makes this statement a warning.

One narrative section (Figure 3.12 above) tells how Martin John walks around the concourse at Euston Station; and the next section relates how he makes similar 'circuits' in the course of shifts at his cleaning job, the narrative describing how

Martin John has found: ‘value in repetition. He always has. As a child he liked to wander around lampposts in town.’¹⁴⁵ While the associative connections between contiguous paragraphs provides narrative coherence, this associative continuity is legibly interrupted by horizontal margins of white space. The act of reading is given a clipped quality; the gaps here can be read as analogous to the silence that sharply separates a series of musical notes played in a *staccato* style.

Other thematically titled chapter-style divisions concern themselves with Martin John’s recurrent obsessions: his ‘refrains’ (‘Harm was done.’ ‘Rain will fall.’); his fixation on his tenant ‘Baldy Conscience’; ‘The Meddlers’; his aversion to words beginning with the letter P. The protagonist’s range of symptomatic behaviour is not assigned to any named medical syndrome in the narrative, the third person narrator of these themed chapters mediates the protagonist’s thoughts and actions without judgement or clinical diagnosis.

The use of the chapter division to present events that have a scenic unity, while still being connected to the wider narrative, is a conventional novelistic strategy. *Martin John* regularly uses this technique: for example, one section (narrated from the perspective of a character who is lying under a train stopped at a station platform) is headed ‘WHAT THEY DIDN’T KNOW: It would be Mary who got him up in the end’.¹⁴⁶ The chapter has a dramatic autonomy – the narrated events are coherent – while the presence of the novel’s protagonist, Martin John, connects them to the whole-text. The novel’s narration is mainly focalised through Martin John, but chapter divisions are employed to mark transitions to a focalisation through other characters: one chapter, ‘WHAT THEY DON’T KNOW: / The girl.’¹⁴⁷ is narrated from the perspective of a twelve-year-old girl who was sexually assaulted by

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.92.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.295.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.181.

Martin John twenty years earlier. Other chapters are, for example, focalised through Martin John's mother, and his Aunt Noanie.

The narrative is often visibly divided at points in the discourse where linear chronology is disordered. For instance, in a chapter titled 'WHAT THEY DON'T KNOW: / The girl.' The narrator mediates the memories of a woman who was subjected to a sexual assault by Martin John when she was twelve years old: '20 years later, as she is sending a text, she is still asking questions that may not be answered.'¹⁴⁸ This analeptic chapter is positioned around two thirds of the way through the novel; the empathetic portrayal of Martin John up to that point is sharply counterpointed by the disturbing and graphic account of the assault and its traumatic effect on the woman's life and relationships. An event that occurs twenty years earlier in the *fabula* is placed on page 181 of 320 pages in the *syuzhet*: the chapter division is marking a point at which the *syuzhet* is articulated from the material of the *fabula*.

Generally, the events of the discourse are told through a limited omniscient narrator who is not a participant in the world of the book. However, sometimes the narrator comments on the act of narration itself. Gaps in the material text mark these thresholds between narrative levels: separated sections are used for these passages of meta-narration, the surrounding margins of white space framing a switch to a voice that comments self-reflexively. The intrusive narrator also makes occasional direct addresses to an implied collective narratee: 'We, who might be sitting nearby, find out-loud pronouncements worrying. We pretend the person, in this case Martin John, has said nothing and we stare ahead. Martin John is grateful for our avoidance.'¹⁴⁹ In another instance the narrator makes clear the constraints within which the narration will work: 'There are simply going to be things we won't know. It's how it is. As it is

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.184.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.58.

in life must it be unto the page. There's the known and the unknown. In the middle is where we wander and wonder.¹⁵⁰ The narrative is divided here at the boundary between the telling and the told; attention is being drawn by the formal device to the rhetorical device of *narrative metalepsis*, a term defined by Genette as: 'any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe.'¹⁵¹ The referents of the pronouns used in the metaleptic paragraphs above are never clearly identified. As they are not assignable by context to participants at the diegetic level we might infer they are addresses from the narrator or (implied) author to the narratee or (implied) reader: 'That's aggressive, but you see this hasn't been an easy book for any of us.'¹⁵² This excerpt draws attention to the demands of both the unconventional formal structure and the difficulty of the subject matter: it could be interpreted as the narrator implying that a story (or *fabula*) that is not 'easy' has a correspondence with the formal presentation of a discourse (or *syuzhet*) that is not conventionally 'easy'.

In *Martin John* (as with the other novels case-studied in this part of the thesis) there is a marked difference from a normative layout of the narrative on the printed page. The predominant novelistic means of dividing a page is the paragraph: a passage of text that is made visibly distinct on the page by its starting on a new, and indented, line. While the material surface of the pages of *Martin John* do sometimes display this conventional style of paragraphing, it is the regular interruptions of the text by wider horizontal margins of white space that mark the pages as conspicuously different from a conventional layout. Furthermore, the textual content between the material gaps in *Martin John* is not indented. It is these two, visibly minor, typographic differences (white space and un-indented first lines) that problematise the

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.32.

¹⁵¹ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, transl. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp.234-235.

¹⁵² Anakana Schofield, *Martin John*, p.219.

identification of the passage of text as a paragraph as it is commonly understood as a discrete unit of sense or content. In common with the other case-study texts, this material deviation liberates these *quasi* paragraphs in *Martin John* from a reader's expectations of a normative function. These reader expectations operate in response to the appearance of the page *prior* to reading and small defamiliarizing disruptions to conventional strategies of division multiply the range of possible interpretations.

Figure 3.13

constipated, which makes Martin John think of bathrooms and Baldy Conscience. The thing that has almighty unsettled Martin John is Ireland is hosting the event and he harbours a deep suspicion of Pat Kenny because his name begins with P. He's anxious about the combination of Pat Kenny and Terry Wogan's voices but it all begins and ends with the P, which is why he puts his fingers in his ears to blot out Portugal.

That night things were terrible for him, the worst he decided. As the hallucinations came and came and never ceased, just more and more of them, he was visited the way he's always visited by her voice in his head.

Get yerself out of there Martin John, get the head down, for God's sake stop with this and put the head down and look at your feet and follow those feet Martin John, would you for the love of God follow them and stop all this nonsense. D'ya hear me now Martin John? I want you to listen and I want you to visit Noanie next Wednesday or so help me God I'll land you Martin John and I'll tear you from the place Martin John. I'll drag you by the collar out of there. I don't know what I have done to deserve this Martin John, but I'll tear you from there and I'll redder your arse before I am a day older.

It's her voice. But it's his head. Always her voice in his head.

The page image above (Figure 3.13) shows how Martin John's mother's intercessions are often italicised and separated from the surrounding discourse.¹⁵³ The gaps here act on one level as punctuation, as demarcating a channelling (through Martin John's interiority) of the mother's voice in the same way as conventional quotation marks. What might be read as an instance of the white space marking a switch of focalisation to the mother's unmediated thoughts, can also be interpreted as mimetic: the visual disengagement of his mother's voice in his head can be seen to represent Martin John's psychological or mental condition. Barton has commented on the significance of modes of visible representation of the complexities of internal realities: 'why would a character's thoughts be represented in a conventionally structured paragraph? Visual devices are one way of attempting to portray the fragmented and non-chronological way in which cognition operates.'¹⁵⁴ The legible dislocation of the mother's 'voice' on the surface of the page can be read as representing symptoms of some condition that the portrayal of his feelings and behaviour elsewhere in the text might support, perhaps some form of dissociative identity disorder, a condition which causes him to separate certain concepts or mental processes from his conscious personality.¹⁵⁵

The omniscient narrative voice in *Martin John* could have allowed for a clearer depiction of past events; however, the narrative elides much of the character's history, and his sexual impulses are only hinted at in the discourse. According to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan: 'In principle, the external focalizer (or narrator-focalizer) knows everything about the represented world, and when he restricts his knowledge,

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.114.

¹⁵⁴ Simon Barton, *Visual Devices in Contemporary Prose Fiction*, p.10.

¹⁵⁵ According to an article in *Psychology Today*: 'People with dissociative identity disorder may describe feeling that they have suddenly become depersonalized observers of their own speech and actions. They might report hearing voices (a child's voice, the voice of a spiritual power), and in some cases, these voices accompany multiple streams of thought that the individual has no control over.' Accessed 16 July, 2020, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/conditions/dissociative-identity-disorder-multiple-personality-disorder>

he does so out of rhetorical considerations.¹⁵⁶ The gaps in *Martin John* might be interpreted as imitative of these strategic restrictions of knowledge: the unsayable, the unspeakable, the ineffable, the unknowable, the unnamable. The typographic absences are combining with the textual content to present intentional information gaps on the material page. Ken Ireland refers to these hermeneutic gaps: ‘the lacunae, what is *not* told’ that ‘constitute the dynamic effectiveness of narrative art.’¹⁵⁷ A possible interpretation is that the hermeneutic gaps that can occur in the most conventionally laid out narratives are, in *Martin John*, materially represented by the margins of white space on the surface of the page. This white space, according to this reading of the devices of division in *Martin John*, represents a typographic narratorial silence on matters of psychological diagnosis or moral judgement of Martin John’s character.

¹⁵⁶ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), p.80.

¹⁵⁷ Ken Ireland, *The Sequential Dynamics of Narrative* (Cranbury NJ: Associated University Presses, 2001), p.36.

Summative

As I outline in the first two chapters of this essay, the norms of novelistic division have a long history during which certain key conventions (the part, the chapter, the paragraph) have become established; these durable devices continue to dominate as a means of narrative subdivision in the contemporary novel. According to Richard Hendel: ‘Though largely forgotten today, methods and rules upon which it is impossible to improve have been developed for centuries.’¹⁵⁸ Hendel’s position is reinforced by John Sutherland, who suggests a fixed and inviolable ideal for page construction: ‘No one at this late and commercially standardised stage of the publishing industry is going to redesign the architecture of the traditional book.’¹⁵⁹ Both Hendel’s and Sutherland’s positions can be seen as endorsing a view of the physical book in which a set of conventions of design and layout have come to dominate the pages of most novels. This thesis accepts this view as true; moreover, and fundamentally, it sees these conventional forms as a background against which minor violations of firmly established conventions of design and layout (specifically, the gappiness of my candidate texts) become, cognitively, figure rather than background. In short, I will argue below, it is the very disruption of Sutherland’s ‘architecture of the book’ that gives the gappy novel its potential for additional significations.

The linguistic content of the four texts I examine above generate diverse fictional worlds, and they are composed using a range of linguistic styles and storytelling modes; like many contemporary novels, the works create characters in a variety of temporal and geographic settings. What distinguishes my chosen texts (and a number of other works of contemporary fiction) is their unusual layout, a visibly

¹⁵⁸ Richard Hendel, *On Book Design* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p.7.

¹⁵⁹ John Sutherland, *How to Read a Novel* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2006), p.145.

striking feature that begins to generate meaning *before* any reading of the verbal content. Alberto Manguel, citing the ophthalmological research conducted by Émile Javal into the physiology of reading, describes how a reader's sight does not attach to the printed linguistic content in a wholly linear (left to right, top to bottom) and uninterrupted way.¹⁶⁰ The potential reader of any novel, visually browsing the book, her eyes making the brief, darting *saccades* of the pages, in the manner identified by Javal, is also noticing (even if the perception is subliminal) the layout of its printed content.

In Figure 3.13 below I have modelled a paradigm of a novelistic page with a conventional layout. As an example of the gappy form, the image in Figure 3.14 is page one of Cynan Jones' *Cove*.

¹⁶⁰ Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (London: Flamingo Books, 1997), p.37.

Figure 3.13

LOREM 1

 Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Integer nec odio. Praesent libero. Sed cursus ante dapibus diam. Sed nisi. Nulla quis sem at nibh elementum imperdiet. Duis sagittis ipsum. Praesent mauris. Fusce nec tellus sed augue semper porta. Mauris massa. Vestibulum lacinia arcu eget nulla. Class aptent taciti sociosqu ad litora torquent per conubia nostra, per inceptos himenaeos. Curabitur sodales ligula in libero. Sed dignissim lacinia nunc. Curabitur tortor. Pellentesque nibh. Aenean quam. In scelerisque sem at dolor. Maecenas mattis. Sed convallis tristique sem. Proin ut ligula vel nunc egestas porttitor. Morbi lectus risus, iaculis vel, suscipit quis, luctus non, massa.

 ‘Fusce ac turpis quis ligula lacinia aliquet,’ Mauris ipsum.

 ‘Nulla metus,’ ullamcorper vel, tincidunt sed, euismod in, nibh.

 ‘Quisque volutpat condimentum velit.’

 Class aptent taciti sociosqu ad litora torquent per conubia nostra, per inceptos himenaeos. Nam nec ante. Sed lacinia, urna non tincidunt mattis, tortor neque adipiscing diam, a cursus ipsum ante quis turpis. Nulla facilisi. Ut fringilla. Suspendisse potenti. Nunc feugiat mi a tellus consequat imperdiet. Vestibulum sapien. Proin quam. Etiam ultrices. Suspendisse in justo eu magna luctus suscipit. Sed lectus. Integer euismod lacus luctus magna. Quisque cursus, metus vitae pharetra auctor, sem massa mattis sem, at interdum magna augue eget diam. Vestibulum ante ipsum primis in faucibus orci luctus et ultrices posuere cubilia Curae; Morbi lacinia molestie dui. Praesent blandit dolor. Sed non quam. In vel mi sit amet augue congue elementum.

 Morbi in ipsum sit amet pede facilisis laoreet. Donec lacus nunc, viverra nec, blandit vel, egestas et, augue. Vestibulum tincidunt malesuada tellus. Ut ultrices ultrices enim. Curabitur sit amet mauris. Morbi in dui quis est pulvinar ullamcorper. Nulla facilisi. Integer lacinia sollicitudin massa. Nam nec ante. Sed lacinia, urna non tincidunt mattis, tortor neque adipiscing diam, a cursus ipsum ante quis turpis. Nulla facilisi. Ut fringilla. Suspendisse potenti.

 Cras metus. Class aptent taciti sociosqu Sed aliquet risus a tortor. Integer id quam. Morbi mi. Quisque nisl felis, venenatis tristique, dignissim in, ultrices sit

Figure 3.14

You hear, on the slight breeze, the *tunt tunt, tunt tunt* before you see the boat. You feel illicit.

When the boat comes alongside they cut the engine.
Shout.

Waves break, the breeze. You don't hear. Swash filters in the pools.

A man in the prow carries a boat hook as if it's a harpoon. They are in drysuits, white helmets, bright life jackets.

One of the crew seats himself on the gunwale and pushes himself into the water. He swims strangely, held up by the lifejacket, lifted and pushed by the water. Like a spaceman.

You are not sure whether the kick comes from the baby or the sureness he has news.

When he comes from the water he stumbles and trips on the stones, clearing his nose of seawater. As if re-finding himself.

For some reason he takes off his gloves as he talks.

text is grouped in what seem to be conventional (indented, justified) ‘blocky’ paragraphs; there is uniformity of leading.¹⁶¹ There are some lines that do not reach the right hand margin, but the conventions of punctuation used to present dialogue might account for this; an isolated mark in the bottom right corner where a page number is habitually placed is unremarkable. At a meta-linguistic level Figure 3.13 *looks* like a standard page image from the majority of texts in the realist tradition of the novel.

Kenneth Burke writes of the categorical expectations of form, expectations that are experienced *prior* to the reception of the work itself. According to Burke, in the process of reading, as these expectations are fulfilled, they provide the appeal of ‘conventional form’, the pleasure derived from ‘form as form.’¹⁶² For the purpose of this exercise I am assuming that the notional viewer of these images brings a category expectation of the page at Figure 3.13 as an excerpt from a novel. This anticipation of form is, for a casual browser, conditioned not only by paratextual devices (the colophon, the copyright page, the cover blurbs, the bookshop display, the library classification), but also by the degree to which the text adheres to, or conspicuously deviates from, conventions of narrative division.

The page from *Cove* at Figure 3.14 is, by contrast, legibly discontinuous: short sections of un-indented text are separated by double-spaced gaps. It does not give the impression of completeness achieved by the page at Figure 3.13, and by its very appearance it unsettles expectations. As Barton puts it: ‘Any arrangement of text that is placed unconventionally on the page carries the meaning of “unconventional” before any further meaning can be decoded from the signifiers themselves.’¹⁶³ The visible deviation from normative appearance in my candidate texts promises linguistic

¹⁶¹ Pronounced *leading*: the typesetting term for the horizontal spacing between lines of type.

¹⁶² Kenneth Burke, *Counter-statement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp.126-127.

¹⁶³ Simon Barton, *Visual Devices in Contemporary Prose Fiction*, p.70.

content that is correspondingly unorthodox, eschewing the norms of the conventional novel.

Walter Ong proposes a positive correlation between a text's typographic form and its linguistic content: 'Print is curiously intolerant of physical incompleteness. It can *convey the impression*, unintentionally and subtly, but very really, that the material the text deals with is similarly complete or self-consistent.'¹⁶⁴ (My emphasis). Conventional novelistic modes of textual layout (as modelled in Figure 3.13 above) 'convey an impression' of wholeness for their, as yet unread, content. The visibly discrete sections of Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* do indeed function to frame starkly juxtaposed narrative units that are self-contained. In the manner of stylistically polished anecdotes, or carefully wrought aphorisms, many sections of *Dept. of Speculation* have an autonomous, stand-alone quality. But the material in these same sections makes connections across the whole text: throughout *Dept. of Speculation* there is only one narrator, and however jittery and juxtaposed the section transitions are, this consistent focalization of events acts as a cohering force; a small cast of characters recur (the narrator, the husband, their child) and a setting (New York City) is regularly established throughout the narrative. *Dept. of Speculation* uses section breaks to mark sudden shifts between the story's present dramatic action, the narrator's memories, and her philosophical digressions. However, while these sections are emphatically discrete (in both printed form and linguistic content), the brief and variegated narrative units of Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* are, ultimately, configurable into a coherent narrative. The short sections can be linked, not by a strictly temporally continuous and progressive plot, but by a pattern that emerges by gradual accretion; as Ted Gioia puts it (in an article surveying the contemporary composite novel) such techniques of division can still produce: '... an

¹⁶⁴ Walter Ong, *Print, Space and Closure in Orality and Literacy* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.130.

exemplary wholeness, a fitting together of the fragments into brilliant patterns.¹⁶⁵ *Dept. of Speculation* illustrates how the physically ‘gappy’ text can, paradoxically, be both autonomous at the level of the individual section yet can produce a narrative wholeness in an act of reading that pieces together its disparate parts.

In contrast to *Dept. of Speculation*, the highly divided parts of *The Absent Therapist* strongly resist re-assembly into a clearly coherent narrative world at the whole-text level. Of the four case-study works it is *The Absent Therapist* that reveals the strongest degree of singularity in its component units: the text’s physically divided sections are differentiated by a wide range of registers, genres, and voices; none of which is allowed to dominate the text. The variegated contents of individual sections are not unified by the presence of a governing narrative voice; nor is there a causal link between the monologic sections; the text has none of the integrating forces traditionally provided (for the novel form) by the development of a plot, or by recurring characters and settings. If there is an integrating force in *The Absent Therapist*, it is one that relies on the reader finding associative thematic connections and resonances across the multiplicity of ‘voices’ in the divided sections. The singularity of its multiple parts makes *The Absent Therapist* an example of how brief autonomous sections can produce what Umberto Eco describes as an *open form*, those works of art that allow for, and for their full effect depend upon, the reader’s participation in the construction of meaning.¹⁶⁶ However, the expectations of discontinuity and disjunction and incompleteness generated by the layout of the text is reinforced by its linguistic content; individual sections of *The Absent Therapist* have an autonomous quality, and they resist collective coherence at the level of the whole text. Similarly managed dis-coherence is evident in Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s*

¹⁶⁵ Ted Gioia, ‘The Rise of the Fragmented Novel,’ *Fractious Fiction*, accessed July 16, 2020.

¹⁶⁶ Umberto Eco, *The Poetics of the Open Work* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p.5.

Night a Traveller, and David Markson's *this is not a novel*: in both novels the interruptions to, and incompleteness of, individual sections is not recuperated at the level of the whole text.¹⁶⁷

The familiar apparatus of conventionally laid out parts, chapters, and paragraphs, serves to automatize the act of reading. These salient devices neither impede the reception of the text, nor do they act to strongly inflect that text's fictional world; rather, they perform an extra-diegetic function, a presence that is mainly navigational, presentational, punctuative. Jerome J. McGann makes a useful distinction between a text's linguistic codes (the printed content) and its bibliographic codes (conveyed by other physical features and form of scripted texts like paper, ink, typefaces, and layout). The unusual, and thus cognitively arresting, gappiness of my candidate texts means that they cannot be interpreted *solely* by reference to those long-standing bibliographic codes by which familiar conventional divisions are understood.¹⁶⁸ The reader must *also* interpret the typographical gappiness of such texts in relation to their printed linguistic content. The intervals of white space in my candidate texts are both physically *and* conceptually implicated in the narrative: their presence is a diegetic element that produces, in combination with the verbal content, a second mode of signification.

The visible gappiness in three of my candidate texts is often used to represent character traits: to emphasize aspects of figural consciousness. Marco Caracciolo uses the term 'paralinguistic cues' to describe those non-verbal elements of a text that, he argues, guide interpretation of aspects of narrator and character consciousness: 'unconventional typography ... can be used to convey the phenomenological "feel" of

¹⁶⁷ Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (London: Vintage, 1998). David Markson, *this is not a novel* (London: CB Editions, 2010).

¹⁶⁸ Jerome J. McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991)

characters' (and narrators') experiences.¹⁶⁹ Caracciollo is drawing a parallel with the way that speech is modified or inflected by non-verbal elements such as tone, pitch, and hand gestures that might accompany the words.

The emphatically polyphonic sections of *The Absent Therapist*, having no single character consciousness, resists a reading of its gaps in this way: the structural division of the many voices is more clearly an extra-diegetic, narratological technique. However, the three other candidate texts contain thematic content that *can* be related to their gappy formal presentation. In *Cove* the central character's isolation, the sparseness of his breathing, and breaks in his consciousness are gestured towards by the regular intervals of white space. In *Dept. of Speculation* one leitmotif is the narrator's preoccupation with her memories, their nature, and their content which is sometimes profound but often trivial. Similarly, that same narrator struggles to combine caring for a new baby with her work as a writer and teacher: the constant interruptions that divide her days. Both the theme of the narrator's particulate memory and her recourse to a note-making method of composition are embodied in the emphatic gappiness of their presentation on the page. In *Martin John* the gaps occur to a less predictable scheme and complement the depiction of a central character who is similarly unpredictable and eludes any simple psychological categorization.¹⁷⁰ The graphically uniform blanks of the gap, according to their context, become an expressive device; the silent white space has the power to inflect, complement, extend, and act as a metaphor for, the concerns of the particular fictional worlds in which they are present.

¹⁶⁹ Marco Caracciollo, 'Punctuating Minds,' *Journal of literary semantics*, accessed July 16, 2020, https://www.rug.nl/research/portal/files/13792506/jls_2014_0003.pdf >

¹⁷⁰ The presentation of deteriorating cognitive abilities and memory loss using typographic gaps and syntactic disruptions finds a less modest exemplar in B.S. Johnson's *House Mother Normal* (London: Picador, 2013).

In the nineteenth century there was consolidation and standardization of conventions of page layout and the visible devices by which novels were divided; during the same century, prose fiction became dominated by the techniques of literary realism. A novel's material form became intertwined with its linguistic content: the realist text was expected to contain divisions into parts and chapters, and to have a body text comprised of continuous single-spaced indented paragraphs. The twentieth century provides instances of literary movements that disrupted, and often radically departed from, these formal conventions.¹⁷¹ Christine Brooke-Rose's 1975 novel, *Thru*, provides a limit case of the use of unconventional typographic devices, deploying what Brian McHale calls its: 'full postmodernist repertoire of destabilizing strategies.'¹⁷² *Thru* contains passages that are crossed out, sections printed upside down; it uses tabular formats, acrostic layouts, and the use of multiple columns of text which trouble the principle of linear reading.¹⁷³ The possibilities for exploiting the physical codex find another exemplar in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010), where printed content is physically excised, forming apertures between the pages.

By comparison, the typographic disruptions of the four novels I have analysed are modest. Similar formal restraint is evident in Zadie Smith's *NW*, where a segmented presentation occurs only in one part of the novel; while in Garth Greenwell's *What Belongs to You* a forty page section without paragraph breaks accounts for only a fifth of a text that is otherwise conventionally presented.¹⁷⁴ While the gappy layout of the pages of such novels embodies certain formal legacies of

¹⁷¹ In particular, novels by writers associated with periodised literary movements: modernism in the first half of the twentieth century; the French *nouveau roman* in the 1950s; the British *avant-garde* in the 1960s; postmodernism in the latter part of the twentieth century.

¹⁷² Brian McHale, 'The Postmodernism(s) of Christine Brooke-Rose,' *Utterly Other Discourse*, Eds. Ellen J. Friedman and Richard Marin (Normal, Illinois: Dalkey Archive, 1995), p.200.

¹⁷³ Christine Brooke-Rose, *Thru* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2012). Double columns are also used in B.S. Johnson's *Albert Angelo* (1964), and in Brigid Brophy's *In Transit* (1969).

¹⁷⁴ Zadie Smith, *NW* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012). Garth Greenwell, *What Belongs to You* (London: Picador, 2016). Other contemporary exemplars of this gappy novelistic form include Kevin Barry's *Night Boat to Tangier* (2019) and Graham Swift's *Mothering Sunday* (2017).

avant-garde fiction, they can also be read as displaying only the surface trappings of experimentalism, of the texts being examples of a more palatable modernism, a *modernism-lite*. This reading chimes with Robert Eaglestone's (loaded) judgement that there is a 'trend' in contemporary novels for a dilution of the techniques of 'extreme playfulness' and 'the emphasis on textuality and on difficulty' evident in postmodernist fiction, but Eaglestone marks that this is: 'not a simple reaction against and rejection of all the techniques of postmodernism, rather a *gentler, more accessible version* of them.'¹⁷⁵ Richard Bradford, in *The Novel Now*, recognizes the same trend, however his judgement is more damning: 'The battle between counter-modernists and postmodernists is over, the former have become more flexible and the latter more market-oriented and both now face the pitiless spotlight of evaluation.'¹⁷⁶ Bradford is marking out a middle ground, occupied by novels that display a hybrid form: such texts employ techniques of innovative fiction, but in moderation; their experimentation is tempered by commercial concerns.

While critics might debate the degree of experimentation and innovation in the gappy novels I have analysed these texts do break with conventions of narrative division in ways that can add new levels of signification to their fictional worlds. The defamiliarized formats of the pages of these gappy novels arrest the reader's attention, the gaps are perceptually foregrounded and in their interaction with the printed linguistic content they have the capacity to generate meaning for the narratives they divide.

¹⁷⁵ Robert Eaglestone, *Contemporary Fiction: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.14.

¹⁷⁶ Richard Bradford, *The Novel Now* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), p.244.

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