The Journey Home

Dermot Bolger

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Аннотация

‘The Journey Home’ is the story of a young boy’s struggle towards maturity, set against a shocking portrait of Ireland: a tough urban landscape, not a rural Eden.Francis Hanrahan, the shy child of grey suburban streets, is Francy at home to his country-born parents. But when he meets Shay, an older, wilder image of himself, he becomes Hano, and is cast out into the night-time world of Dublin – a world of drugs, all-night drinking sessions in bars and snooker halls, and the stench of political corruption.

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Flamingo
An Imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

For Bernadette,
Without whose love and support
this novel would never have been completed

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CHAPTER ONE Sunday

The branches were strewn above them like distorted mosaics of crucifixions, the hawthorn bushes blocking out the few isolated stars to ensnare them within a crooked universe of twigs and briars. Nettles raised their leaves in the wind like the ears of startled dogs to sway a few inches from where his hand lay. Hano could feel their sting on his wrist and longed to rub it in the soothing grass. But he lay motionless, his other arm around her shoulder in the position they had landed when they slid into the overgrown ditch, and listened to the heavy boot-steps ring out on the tarmacadam above his head.

The feet halted with a squeak of polished leather inches from his skull. Hano, gazing at the figure who stretched skyward, could see the man's thick moustache when he shone the torch up before his features were lost as the are of light picked its way along the hedge and fields by the road. Hano moved his hand down to cover Katie's lips though he felt himself more likely to cry out than her. She lay crushed against him, her body relaxed despite their awkward position. It seemed as if danger was a more powerful drug than any peddled on the street and she was adrift, eyes closed, lips slightly open, within its depths. The slow, regular inhaling of her breath came so faintly that she might have been a small night creature in its natural habitat. His own breathing sounded explosive to him. The man was bound to hear, to shine

the light down and call out to the others, to finish it before it had begun. This was her world, not his, and he was lost within it. His numb fury had evaporated and all he felt now was fear.

He swallowed hard, trying to block the recurring images from his mind. But flames lit the space behind his closed eyelids, smoke still seeming to fill his nostrils. The boots moved, spraying gravel down on to his face, beating so harshly on the tar that they might have been pounding his skull and as they retreated he had to restrain himself from moving. He realized how desperately he wanted to be caught, that whatever terrors lay in the cell under the station could be no worse than the unknown journey ahead through the dark. The fallen gravel covered his hand. To shift even a finger would send it trickling noisily down. All his life he had obeyed; the instinct ingrained within him. An image came back from childhood, his father climbing the stairs as he hid after a quarrel, wanting to be found, knowing that his father would gruffly forgive him. A radio crackled from inside the car. There was the click of an automatic weapon being uncocked. The boots paused on the roadway like a parent on the stairs. How warm it had been under that bed, his father's voice coaxing, the scent of cooking from downstairs. The boots drew closer again.

His arm ached to move yet still he held back. If he were alone he would be in the squad car now, the first blows raining against his skull. But she would be there as well, a witness again to his cowardice. Without warning, Katie's teeth bit softly into his fingers, reassuring him with her own fear. The need to

protect her gave him strength, a role in which he could imagine himself strong. With a click the boots stopped and a car door opened. Only when the noise of the engine faded did her teeth ease their grip. Gradually the unfamiliar night sounds reasserted themselves: the beat of wings in the blackness above; tiny paws scuttling through the coarse grass; the sight of a dreaming beast in a field nearby, where high branches creaked like dried bones. They waited for the noise of the motor to return. Overhead a pylon hummed as it stretched back towards the city they had come from. To move was to make a decision, to break the isolated spell of the ditch. He lay against her till he heard the words, 'They're gone', spoken so softly he was uncertain whether they came from her lips or his mind, and felt the dampness of the grass penetrating his side as she untangled her body from his. She scrambled cautiously up on to the roadway and gazed back the way they had come. There was still a glow in the distance and though it was a mile away he could not shake off the tang of smoke. His clothes seemed to reek of it, his hair, the very pores of his skin. Any part of him that wasn't frozen tasted of fire.

'Listen to me, Katie,' he said climbing up beside her, his voice low as if the trees could be informers. 'It's time you started back, do you hear? Otherwise they nail us both when they catch me. They've nothing to connect you with it. Just go home. Follow the road back to the city.'

Although he barely discerned the outline of her head against the black mass of trees, he knew she was staring at him with the

same cold, unblinking look. How he had grown to hate that cold face behind which she observed him, the eyes where he read only contempt, and the jealousy of his intimacy with Shay which she had never broken. Her voice from that afternoon returned, fists clawing at him as she screamed, 'You just stood up here and let them! You were his friend and you let them. You let them! Let them!'

'Are you deaf or what, Katie?' he said again. 'Can you not hear me? Take the road back and just watch out for the cops. Listen, I've done all I can for Shay. Now will you bleeding go, I've to find somewhere to hide.'

He knew the eyes were still staring, the mouth expressionless. He waited and, when she didn't reply, turned and began to walk deeper into the countryside. After a few yards he heard footsteps echoing his own and when he stopped heard them cease as well. He walked on and they commenced, beating behind him. He stopped. They stopped. He began again, then stopped in despair as she followed. He shouted behind him.

'Leave me alone for fuck's sake! What more do you want? Go home Katie, please, go home. Listen, I've nowhere to take you. I don't know where I'm going, I don't know what happens next.'

The moon broke from behind a deep whorl of cloud and Hano caught sight of her face beneath the cropped black hair. She looked tough beyond her sixteen years, the jacket pulled up around her neck, the blue pullover, the dirty jeans, the mud-stained sneakers. Her body was poised, unsmilingly observing

him. Two days it had taken to lose everything. Now there was no Shay to turn to, no one left to differentiate right and wrong. He grabbed a stone from the road, raised his fist in frustration and shouted at her. Her expression never changed. He let the stone fall and stared at the ground.

'He's dead Katie, and I can't bring him back for you. You know I'm a poor substitute. Now for Christ's sake leave me in peace. What more do you want of me? What more?'

The clouds reined back the moonlight and he turned to walk forward, listening as the other footsteps gradually caughc up with his. They plodded on, neither looking at the other until he heard her voice, again almost inaudible.

'Don't want fucking nothing,' she said. 'Just be your fucking self.'

Suddenly her warm hand hesitantly touched his and found its way in between his numb fingers. He closed them over her knuckles and, when he dared to glance down, saw her face was screwed up, scanning the darkness in front. He didn't want the squad car to return. Though nothing could lie ahead but capture, it didn't seem important now that she was ready, for a time at least, to share whatever would come.

Katie or Cait—whoever you are. Can it be just three nights since we lay in that ditch, since you followed me mutely out the black roads? I've grown so used to darkness, have learnt to see things better here. That hole in the corner where the ceiling has collapsed and creepers, like the limbs of a giant spider, descend

to wrap themselves around the smashed wooden rafters, or the daddy-long-legs which stumbles drunkenly towards the beam of the torch shaded by my hand. The fire has crumbled into a nest of ash. What light escapes my fingers filters across the downy weeds left after we cleared the stone floor and catches a few loose strands of your hair.

I never knew you could be at peace until I saw you asleep. Not the Katie I knew back on those streets. I'm half jealous Cait of whatever world you dream of where you belong so well. Last night a sound woke me in alarm. You had laughed in your sleep. You did it again. I looked down and in the half-light could see the faintest of smiles. I've never asked you where you dream of—the city, the country—which world at night becomes your home. I feared ghosts here when I was younger, before I learnt to fear the living. Now I love this darkness, the kiss of winged insects blundering against my skin; the faint drip of water from a broken gutter; the sighing of branches.

There's so much I want to tell you, the parts you know and those you don't. If you were awake I'd never have the chance, even if I could be this honest. You'd interrupt me, dispute facts, want your version to be told. So now even if you can't hear I'll tell you anyway Cait, tell those few strands of hair lit by a torch. Just this last time I'll bring Shay back to life before we move on.

I know it was him you loved, who you came to see each evening when we stared each other out at the doorway, but I don't think you ever knew him, not the Shay I met first, the figure who

vanished into that continent. You loved the man you met when he came home, but I mourned the part of him that was left behind among those autobahns and bahnhofs. Because I loved him too Katie, loved as a brother, loved him selfishly for daring to be what I was afraid to be myself.

Where does our story begin? The first morning I crossed the park to work? No, even before then our paths would have crossed. How often did our parents pass on the main street of the village while the labourers' cottages were being bulldozed and the estates, like a besieging army, began to ring the green post office, the pub with the skittle alley, the old graveyard with its shambling vaults? But my parents and Shay's would not have mixed, being from different worlds, with different sets of experiences. I think of my parents, younger than I can really imagine them, taking the single-decker bus out beyond the cemetery, returning, as they thought, to the familiar hawthorn bushes and streams, to the sanctuary of the countryside. Shay used to laugh about how his father cursed the Corporation for casting them out into exile, complaining about bus fares to work in the brewery he had always walked to, bewildered by the dark lanes behind his house without the shouts of neighbours or the reassuring bustle of traffic.

Years later my father told me that the Church of Ireland built my estate, some half-arsed scheme for a Protestant colony among the fields. They couldn't fill it from their own flock so the likes of my parents were allowed to pay their deposit and transport their country habits from bedsits along the canal back to the

laneways again. A place of streams I'm told it was, each in turn piped underground as more people came. Once a row of gardens collapsed to reveal the water running underneath.

They planted trees in the image of their lost homeland, put down potato beds, built timber hen-houses. I woke to the sound of chicks escaping through the wire mesh to scamper among rows of vegetables. A dozen streets away Shay must have woken to the noise of pigeon lofts, that city man's sport, backyards ringing with displaced Dublin accents. Briefly we played in the same school yard before he was expelled, though neither of us remembered the other. We spoke of it in awe as from another century; the monstrous thug of a vice-principal wasting with cancer among his array of canes; the tricolour flown from the mast beside the concrete steps; the screeching of seagulls which hovered, waiting for boys to be drilled into lines and marched to class, before swooping to fight over the littered bread. I wish I could remember Shay there, those all-important two years older than me, among the swarm of lads stomping after a plastic ball. But I can recall little beyond a hubbub of noise; the stink of fish from a ten-year-old who helped his mother in the processing plant each evening; the twins who shared one pair of plastic sandals for a week, each one barefoot on alternate days. And the ease with which, among such crowds, I could remain invisible. I can still repeat the roll-call of nine-year-old future factory hands and civil servants, but it's myself that I cannot properly recall. I was like some indistinct embryonic creature, a negative through

which nobody had ever shone light. Was I happy or sad? I have no memories of being anything more than a sleepwalker feigning the motions of life, living through the black-and-white rays of the television screen.

Each evening my father came in from Plunkett Motors, took his spade from the shed, and joined the chorus of rural accents across the ruck of hedgerows. I'd hide among the alder bushes bordering the hen run to watch the men dig and weed with the expertise of country hands, while my mother washed clothes by hand in the sink, light from the open kitchen door filtering through the lilac. I felt that square of earth was home, a green expanse formed by the row of long gardens. I'd pull the branches close to me while across the suburb Shay played among the red-brick terraces built by the Corporation. The gardens there were tiny with hardly space for a shed. Shay's gang would scatter with their football if a squad car showed, then resume their games on the next concrete street, voices still calling when only the vaguest shapes could be seen dodging between the street lamps.

We grew up divided by only a few streets so you'd think we would share a background. Yet somehow we didn't. At least not then, not till later when we found we were equally dispossessed. *The children of limbo* was how Shay called us once. We came from nowhere and found we belonged nowhere else. Those gardens I called home were a retreat from the unknown world. When the radio announcer gave the results of the provincial Gaelic matches the backs would straighten, neighbours reverting

to county allegiances as they slagged each other. *And remember, if you feel like singing, do sing an Irish song,* the presenter of the Walton's programme urged and, as the strains of 'Kelly, the Boy from Kilane' and 'The Star of the County Down' crackled from the radio, all the stooping figures who knew the words by heart hummed them in their minds, reassured of who they were no matter what incomprehensible things were occurring outside.

As long as I remained among the hens and barking dogs I too could belong, but each walk home from school by the new shopping arcades, each programme on the television religiously switched on at half five in every terraced house, was thrusting me out into my own time. I began bringing home phrases that couldn't fit in that house when we still knelt for the family rosary. I hid photographs of rock stars beneath my mattress like pornographic pictures, wrote English soccer players' names on my copy book feeling I was committing an act of betrayal.

When I was twelve my father brought me back to the farm bordering the Kerry coast where he had been born. I stood awkwardly in my city clothes, kicking a football back and forth to my cousins across the yard. None of us spoke as we eyed each other suspiciously and waited for our parents to finish reminiscing. Next morning before dawn he took me out to the milking shed lit by a bare bulb. I never saw him so relaxed as when he bent with ease to squeeze the teats, glancing back proudly, urging me to grasp the teats of a huge lurching cow I was frightened of. For the first time I felt the division between us.

I didn't understand it then, but I grew up in perpetual exile: from my parents when on the streets, from my own world when at home. Once Shay told me about visiting his uncles and great aunts left behind in the Liberties. They welcomed him like a returned *émigré* to the courtyards of squalid Victorian flats and led him around the ramshackled streets choked with traffic, pitying him the open spaces of the distant roads he played on.

How can you learn self-respect if you're taught that where you live is not your real home? At fourteen I tried to bridge the gap by journeying out into my father's uncharted countryside. I'd rise before dawn to cook myself breakfast and when I ate at the kitchen table he would come down to place money on the oilcloth beside me and watch from the doorway as I set off to find Ireland. I arrived home with reports he couldn't comprehend: long-haired Germans in battered vans picking up hikers; skinheads battling outside chip shops in Athlone. Then came the final betrayal of something even he couldn't define when, at fifteen, I chose the first friend of my own. 'That old Protestant woman' my father always called her, though she had not been inside any church for half a century.

Looking back, my life was like a candle, briefly sparked into flame in that old woman's caravan among the fields, and extinguished again until I met Shay. The years between speed up —the new intimacy of class-mates in the months before exams; nights studying in each other's houses; weekends stumbling home drunk on two pints from town. I had been a loner before, so used

to solitude I didn't understand what loneliness was. But that last year in school I felt enclosed in the company of friends, finally seeming to belong somewhere.

On the night of the final exam we walked out to Mother Plunkett's Cabin at Kilshane Cross, were barred before closing time and staggered home through country lanes off the North Road in hysterical laughter. After that I rarely saw them again, the release from school shattering our intimacy, leaving us half-embarrassed when we met, reliving the same stale memories. That autumn passed into winter. Sometimes I cadged the money for dances; mostly I just walked the streets putting off my return home. Some mornings polite rejections of my application forms for work lay like poisoned fish washed up on the hall floor, but normally I stared down at an empty, mocking square of lino, and began the same futile rounds of the industrial estates.

I thought my father would never let the garden run to seed even as he grew older, but that year after school I watched it happen without comprehending. The world of the gardens had changed. Where neighbours once kept the city out with hedgerows and chickens, now they used broken glass cemented into concrete walls. A decade had worked its influence. The alder bushes were gone, the last of the hens butchered. Patios had appeared with crazy paving, mock Grecian fonts made of plastic, and everywhere, like a frozen river, concrete reigned. Porches had sprung up bearing ludicrous names, Ashbrook, Riverglade, The Dell, each neighbour jockeying to be the first to discard their

past. Only our garden had remained untouched, the potato beds becoming overgrown and the roof caving in on the felt-covered hut where my hands had once searched for eggs in straw.

Every evening that winter my father's face was like ash, gathered from a burnt-out half-century and spread in a fine crust over his bones. His eyes were more jaded than any I had ever known. He'd come home from work with stories of Pascal Plunkett's moods, collapse into an armchair by the television and stare at his idle eldest son. He said little and I learnt to match his words. We sat in a silence broken only by my mother's fussing, while outside the weeds and nettles choked his dreams. Sometimes he'd cough and, looking up, ask me to chop everything down. 'Tomorrow,' I'd say. 'I'm tired now.' I would mean to put on his rubber boots, take the tools hanging between nails in the shed and walk out as I used to watch him do, but those photocopied rejections seemed to have sapped my strength. I sulked instead, brooding on the few words that passed between us, although it wasn't what he said that hurt but the disbelief in his eyes when I'd mention all the places I had tried for work. In the end I just said nothing. The present made no sense in his world. He stared blankly at the evening news while they carried the victims of the bombings and hijackings away in black plastic sacks.

Christmas froze into January. Blue nights alone in the overgrown garden, making tea in the kitchen at three in the morning. That year had become a posthumous existence. At

night I'd smoke joints in the bathroom, leaning on my toes to blow the smoke out the window, constantly alert for an opening door. I seemed to have lost the power to sleep, gradually losing track of the everyday world. February came and then March, fresh weeds squeezing through the dead grass.

At two o'clock one morning I walked down the garden, wading through weeds like a field of barley. Lines of new extensions stretched on both sides, a lone light burning in a garage twelve doors down. I thought of Jews hiding in cellars, snatching only a few seconds of air before dawn. Now I slept while others worked, rose in the afternoons, seemed to come to life only when darkness came. I had fallen from the cycle of life, with no longer the will-power to struggle. The queues each Tuesday afternoon, men pushing like a human battering ram against the door of the employment exchange. The letters posted out sending one hundred people for interview for a single job that I had to attend in case they checked up and cut my assistance. The fear of daring to hope in case it turned to bitterness when I was turned down; the hatred of leaving the bed and having to face the empty letter rack in the hall.

I turned to go back inside and saw my father standing at the gate beneath the are of bare lilac bushes. At first I thought it was an apparition from the past. He had pulled on a white shirt and a pair of trousers held up by ancient braces. I walked towards him in the blue moonlight, both of us embarrassed, neither knowing how to talk.

'What's going to happen to you, son?'

His voice was low, humble with bewilderment. I would have liked to touch his shoulder, to somehow reassure him. Looking at him I knew that I would leave home soon, that only poverty was keeping me there. Ever since our fight about the old woman in the fields we had both lost the simple ease which had once existed between us. I knew that he was thinking about days further back, times I'd waited beside the lilac bushes wanting to feel important, hoping he'd ask me to fetch some tool from the shed. I longed to say, *Tomorrow dad, we'll take those tools down, fix up the garden the way it used to be.* But I couldn't. I had to turn away.

'I don't know. You go back to bed now. I'm just getting some air.'

He shook his head and I watched him turn and walk up the path. There was a nettle swaying near my hand. I pressed my fingers over it. It stung badly, but at least the pain felt real.

Then one morning, grey and ordinary, a letter from the Voters' Register's office came. The offer was a temporary position starting on the first of the month. I felt there should be bands marching from the kitchen, majorettes turning somersaults on the lino. Instead my mother was scrubbing floors in Plunkett Undertakers, my brothers and sisters were at school. Happiness seemed to underline my isolation. I went out into the street hoping to meet somebody I could share the news with. Behind the supermarket I saw my father in the forecourt of Plunkett Motors. Younger men asked him questions as they stripped an engine. He

pulled on his cigarette, coughed and spat on the tarmacadam. I couldn't find the courage to go across and tell him.

On the way home I remembered a television programme I'd seen about flowers buried in the desert which hibernate for years waiting to burst through their whole life cycle during a single day of rain. I felt strong again, like a young bird about to take flight. And I realized why I'd never touched the quarter-acre of garden where all my childhood memories were buried under bamboo stalks of nettles and clumps of weeds. I had been trying to hold up time, to live on in the past having no future to put in its place.

But now the anticipation of change raced in my bloodstream and I wanted to be rid of that shadow. I returned to the silent house where the stained oilcloth on the table, the flaking paint on the wood, the faded wallpaper in the bedroom which light never entered till evening all seemed to be mocking me, reducing me to the child I'd always been. I took the bailing hook from the shed, donned my father's old boots, and as I worked every blow was like an act of finality, a foretaste of the separations to come.

At five thirty my father walked down to the hedge. I still had the letter in my pocket. *Your tea son,* he said, and I shook my head. He watched me work on for a few moments then turned. I swung fiercely at the last bushes until I stopped, my blood calmed in the afterglow of labour. As darkness fell I lit a cigarette among the ghosts of hen-runs and alder bushes and watched the lit windows of the house occluded by the overgrown lilac I hadn't the heart to touch. I felt severed finally from the life of that

terrace where I had been delivered, red and sickly, by a country midwife. The bonfire of branches and old timber that I had dosed with paraffin and lit was smouldering. I remember a flatness about the evening as if the whole street had been becalmed in time and then, with a swift flapping of wings, a formation of returning swallows swooped over the rooftops and wheeled upwards in a V across the gardens and out into the distance. And when I looked down, the rotten timbers of the hen-house had caught and the carnage began. The shorn surface of the garden looked like a nightmare landscape, fragments lit up and snatched away by the flickering light. Straight black smoke rose to be dissipated into a swirling pall. I watched my childhood burn, the debris of those years borne off into the sky, my final links with what had been home disintegrating into bright quivers of ash.

I'd no idea what lay ahead, all I knew was that as soon as I got my first pay packet I would start the search for a new home, for my own life to begin. I took the letter from my pocket and walked in.

Katie, I smell of clay, I dream of earth, remembering until there is nothing more to forget. Where is this place? One square of fading light high up, one night sailor riding the sky. Old bits of glass and stones, leaves that have blown in. Somebody was here before me, I'm waiting for someone to come. Still can't make sense of it, this dreaming waking coma. Why here, seeing your life run like a film through my skull? Things I could not have known, images I couldn't have remembered.

They start with the click of footsteps that mark out your days. Shifting between one set and the next. Afternoons when weak sunlight catches the long windows of the upstairs classroom. The murmur of schoolgirl voices, a rustle of papers, heads perpetually bent down but you have gone so far Katie, so distant from that room. A nun, white and obsolete, in robes, leans across your desk to examine the smudged paper before you. She smiles, mutters inaudible words and when she lifts her hand she leaves behind five chalky fingerprints like the mark of a skeleton implanted in the wood. You stare in fascination at the dead hand as the footsteps dully click their way back to her desk. A bell rings and you move in a shower of coats and blouses down the waxed corridor by the plaster statue and out into the air. Voices call, bicycles manoeuvre through the crush of bodies, birds take off from the single tree inside the gate. You pass the pub, the bookies beneath my flat, cross the metal bridge indistinct in a babbling group and stand outside the shopping centre by the glass front of Plunkett Auctioneers to place the first cigarette to your lips. You have learnt how to return woodenly the glances of youths, a hard woman of fifteen idling in the click of boots that mount the concrete steps by the bank, watching the swollen queue encircling the bus with trolleys and prams, the taxis loitering by the monument. You put it off, you light up again, joke with the girls positioned around you. But soon you will have to stub that cigarette butt against the rough surface of the wall, lift your bag and walk back across that span of metal, down the twilit laneway by the ruined cottages. You will cross the

darkening green where the horses are tethered, the piebald and the white, the young foal anxious beside its mother, and move, through the glare of headlights, across the main road into the embrace of the estate. The creak of a pram two children push, the gang of lads at the corner who shout. They will not find you out. You have hidden yourself well in parallel jeans and a tight sweater. Your accent cold as a robin stretched dead in winter, your stance blending into the roadways. The depleted trunks of two trees stand as forlorn sentinels of another time. You hunch your shoulders in the cold. You do not allow yourself to remember.

The scent offryingfrom the kitchen. A television shrieking through a wall. Hanging up your coat you hear them, the steps of your uncle overhead crossing the landing to the stairs. He marches down briskly like a man with some purpose, impeccably dressed in his working clothes. His polished shoes go before you towards the table which is set. And each crippled, helpless step is like a hammer beating away at your skull, reminding you of an uncle you once loved. He sits at the head of the table as you sit among his children and sense his eyes scanning the oilcloth, anxious that all of you are fed.

You long to scream your rage for him as he stalks the house like a caged animal. Instead you lower your eyes to avoid the pain concealed in his. His donkey coat hangs by the door. Soon he will rise and take it, walk out through the dark streets to join his ex-workmates. Cigarettes will be lit, the day's news examined. All that will not be mentioned is the sense of shame each carries

on his shoulders since the plant closed down. Tradesmen who were proud of their skill, the blue overalls perpetually clean, the brown wage packet carried home with calm assurance. It was to be like that for ever: a thousand Sunday mornings when children crowded into a car; a tray of pints carried in an evening; a child's eyes wide with half crowns. New words have entered their vocabulary since then. They will not spend long with each other, each inventing some task to take them back to a sofa and a television, the library book unopened with its ageing stamp, the white dot that will summon them finally to bed.

But you will be gone before he returns, back to the street's anonymity. The window ledge of a chip shop, the smell of watered vinegar. A radio on a wall, a squad car slowing as it passes, a boy's hand on your shoulder which you shrug off. It's late now and you know he will be waiting to hear the door. You know that he will search for words in his bulky frame. And you will stand, wanting to run and kiss like once before. But the same stiffness will be inside both of you now. Your feet click out your final moments alone along the deserted streets.

What did I expect that morning as I walked down the park steps at Islandbridge to work? It had rained overnight and the stones were streaked with rusty rivulets of water and oil. I was exhausted at the unfamiliar hour. The letter said the office was located on the top storey of the court-house beside the hulk of the abandoned jail. I crossed the river and walked up past the barracks, going over the litany of names in my mind. It was where

Emmet and Ann Devlin had been held and tortured; where Ernie O'Malley had escaped with the help of Welsh Guards; where James Connolly had been strapped to a chair and carried in by the British to be shot; where the poet Joseph Mary Plunkett had become bridegroom and corpse within one hour of dawn. When Patrick Plunkett first stood for election in the sixties he used to fake a connection by quoting verses from his namesake in the election leaflets that Pascal made my father and other workers deliver door to door.

Now the jail was empty, an echoing presence beside the courthouse where a small crowd had already gathered. My stomach was twisted with anxiety as I entered and paused for directions. The barren hallway made me want to run—the bare flagstones where two children played sailors in cardboard boxes, the single bench along the wall with paint flaking overhead from a once ornate ceiling. An elderly couple rose, the man beckoning with his stick as the women tried to hide behind him.

'Excuse me sir,' he whispered, 'my wife was mugged in Ballybough last year and she's due to give evidence. Her nerves are bad since and we're terrified to meet those young men again. Is there nowhere we can hide?'

It was the first time I had ever been addressed as sir. I mumbled guiltily and pushed on, leaving them looking more nervous and ashamed than the offenders casually standing around. I followed the staircase to a high, cold room partitioned by a warren of stacked shelving and three long benches besieged

by chairs. No one looked up from their newspapers when I entered, each clerk sunk in those final moments before Carol arrived jangling the three keys from the different locks of her old bicycle like a bell, before Mooney's brooding presence mooched wordlessly into his inner office and the morning's work began.

How often in the following months did I enter that room to find a new person standing as I had stood, left to wait awkwardly till someone condescended to look up? I hated them that morning, hated the bowed heads, the odd murmur of voices; hated the same phrases I'd hear over and over: *Are you doing the interview? Did you hear there's a transfer list soon?* Yet later, when Shay left, I often did the same, sinking down beneath Mooney's presence which lit the office like a black bulb draining each breath of life from the room until no one bothered doing one action more than necessary, knowing how he would snap at them for the least step out of line.

Mooney appeared behind me, paused to insert his name on the attendance book and was gone into his office across the room. Though no one moved, I could sense the stiffness entering their shoulders and the relief, like a silent exhaling of breath, when he had passed. His tall, country frame was like a prison warder's, his lined face lacking sufficient bones to hang the red folds of flesh upon. I watched him slam his door, a black-suited Buddha turned bad, the pioneer pin stuck on his lapel, and from deep within I felt an involuntary shudder.

And then Carol was at my elbow like a diminutive burst of

light, gripping it and joking as she led me into the centre of the room and jangled the keys of her bicycle locks for attention. She called my name out to everybody before she had bothered to check it, and suddenly had the clerks scurrying, one showing me where to put my coat, another finding space at a table for me and a third poised to teach me the elemental filing with which I was to pass my days. She was tiny and plump with fading red hair, in her late fifties, as active as Mooney was static, nervous energy bubbling as she shouted commands in her precise south Dublin accent over the dying rustle of newspapers, covering up for her superior with her own workload. She drew the red line in the attendance book as carefully as a heart surgeon with a scalpel, and had clapped her hands for attention when the door behind her opened. She stopped and pursed her lips as a young man strolled in with a leather jacket over his shoulder, then drew a long breath up through her nose, arched her nostrils like a nervous foal, as he approached.

'Hello, mum!' He grinned and bent to peck her on the lips before slipping past to take the vacant seat beside me. Shoulders stiffened at the tables like trees bending in a forest. Carol stood frozen in the position she had been kissed. Then she turned and ran towards the inner office. Almost before the door had slammed the white intercom on the wall was buzzing hysterically and continued to do so while it was being answered. The young man grinned again, held his hand out and asked me my name.

'Francis,' I said. 'Francis Hanrahan.'

'What do they call you at home, Francis or Frank?'

'Francy.'

'Good Jesus! Where did you leave the spade?'

He looked at me closely.

'You're no more from the bog than I am. Would you settle for Hano?'

The buzzing had stopped. The girl replaced the receiver and called over.

'Shay. Mooney wants to see you!'

He grinned and rose to stroll towards the door. When he went in people began whispering about the incident in little huddles. What they said I wasn't sure, I wasn't listening. I think I felt a mixture of admiration and resentment. His words had made me feel relaxed for the first time since entering the room. I was elated and yet suddenly scared, for if the others seemed content to ignore me, now I felt threatened by his very openness. Suddenly I resented him because he seemed all the things I was afraid to be, because I was certain he'd see through me and ridicule the defences I'd built between myself and the world. I wished he was sitting elsewhere, that I was among some anonymous clutter of silent clerks. Charles, a clerk with a face like a slapped arse, a perpetual white shirt and tie and a nose to judge precisely which arse to lick, leaned over disdainfully and whispered, 'Dangerous to know.' I nodded and began filing the cards in front of me, copying the hand motions of the girl on my left side. The door opened and Shay returned to sit beside me. I sneaked a glance at

him. He was only twenty-one but looked older. His jet black hair fell slightly down his shoulder, his skin was dark, as if he were descended from an Armada survivor, his hands were fingering a neat moustache. From somewhere I found courage.

'Well,' I said tentatively. 'Was she a panter or a screamer?'

He threw his head back to laugh in that room of whispering clerks and replied, 'I just said *take your false teeth out, Carol, and wrap your gums around that!'*

I grinned back at him. We bent companionably down and started to work.

They had walked in silence for two hours through the narrow roads that skirted the back of the airport. Like a discarded prop from a B-movie, a radar dish revolved its head slowly at a crossroads by the perimeter fence. A car rocked in the lay-by, one bare leg swaying against the rear window when they crept past. Beyond the fence, snakes of landing lights slithered through the grass, seeming to merge in the distance where the dark hulks of planes were parked. A security van sped across the concrete between floodlit hangars. Then Hano lost all sense of direction. Katie led as they threaded their way through tiny lanes, bypassing the huge expanse of light where he remembered the village of Swords. Three times a vehicle's lights sent them tumbling into a ditch. First it was a tinker's speeding Hiace returning to the camp site they later passed, an island of three caravans in a field of wrecked chassis and upturned wheels stacked like the upturned ghosts of the city's dreams. The second was a squad car cruising

past, and the third time the light stopped and started like a will-o'-the-wisp behind them. He sweated as they climbed in and out of ditches, certain it was the police mocking, herding them like sheep towards a check-point. They watched the headlights beginning to draw level with them as they knelt among the weeds and refuse sacks, his hand squeezing Katie's, waiting for the doors to open. It was an old farmer so drunk that he fell asleep every few seconds and woke with a start. The car appeared to be driving him home. Shot with whiskey, his glazed eyes looked through them as the car creaked past.

Neither had spoken since she'd taken his hand. He clung to its outpost of warmth, his fingers the only part of him that felt alive. Like a scratched record, the screams from that room echoed in his mind. Could it have really been him? He remembered her fingers dressing him like a child, her hands pushing him from the burning house, his numbness as if cast from stone. Once again part of him longed to be rid of her, to be allowed to sink without trace or responsibility. It wasn't the shame of what he had done afterwards but the shame of what she had witnessed at the start which haunted him, making him afraid to look at her as they plodded through the countryside. It was better not to think at all, to sink into this numb cocoon where he just had to concentrate on keeping his footsteps steady.

Hano had no idea where they were heading. Each time they reached a crossing he followed her blindly. Two miles beyond Swords they crossed the main Belfast road, quiet at that time,

rows of cat's-eyes dead for want of light, awaiting the noise of trucks in the distance.

She brought him down a side road where a solitary street light lit a row of old labourers' cottages. A dog padded out from a garden, wagging its tail as it jumped up against him. It was lonely and desperate for attention, following them to the edge of the light and whining mournfully as they were swallowed back by the dark. Without warning, Katie began to whisper like a drowsy person drifting towards sleep.

'You know,' she said, 'this is what I remember best. Did I ever tell you…about being lost out in it, hidden from the world. You know, in Dublin…sometimes I'd lock the bedroom door at night and curl against the wall, but no, it wasn't the same, you know what I mean, not like I remember it. Too artificial, like, who the fuck were you fooling. There'd be voices on the road, street lights. You knew you weren't cut off.'

Katie paused. She might have been addressing herself more than him. Hano listened, uncertain what she was talking about. Her voice was harsher, more like her own, when she continued.

'I killed this feeling, made myself forget. Murdered each fucking memory one by one. Wasn't going to be like my uncle, like his friends. Jesus, the same accents, same phrases they used forty years ago when they worked the land. They sound so stupid, so fucking pathetic. When you leave something Hano you leave it, you go on, you know what I mean. God, I hated those bastards for always reminding me.'

Hano remembered the evening her uncle came looking for her, the same huge hands his own father had, the same outdoors stance, his awkwardness in the tiny hallway. He said nothing, afraid to break the spell and cast them back into the bickering they had always known. Katie's voice mellowed again.

'Funny thing is, you can't kill it fully. Keeps coming back to haunt me…nights like this. Waiting for dada to put out the gas lamp in his room before I'd get out on to the shed roof. You know, twice he caught me and leathered me black and blue, but I still did it, even when he threatened to tie me to the bed. I was eight but I was in love with danger. Not what you'd think now, spacers or being raped by cider heads, but, you know, werewolves and ghosts waiting for you, trees with malicious spirits you have to pass—all that sort of shite Tomas filled my head with.

'Two miles it was from the road to our house, the tarmacadam gave out quarter way there. Except from Tomas's gaff, there wasn't a light for miles. And every few yards you'd shiver, daring yourself on, because you knew the further you went the longer the journey home would be. And that was the real thrill, Hano, that was fucking it. You know, you'd creep forward, shivering at every bush and shift of moonlight, till finally something—I don't know, the creak of a branch, a plastic bag in a ditch—set you off racing back through the dark, knowing that whatever the heck was behind you was gaining at every step, was about to touch your shoulder. You'd long to scream but your throat would be too dry, your legs covered in scratches, your clothes caught

by briars, but you wouldn't care. Your lungs were bursting, legs pounding, but Hano, Jesus, Hano, the thrill of it, you know what I mean, the thrill of the journey home. Like being shot through with electricity. All the pills, all the booze, they were nothing to that.'

He remembered her uncle speaking, with his hands awkwardly gripping the leather belt of his trousers. 'If Katie's here tell her to come home tonight. The aunt gets worried. She can't help herself, keeps wandering off.' Katie stopped and shouted across the dark fields.

'Not bleeding scared of you now goblins or vampires. Come out if you dare!'

She relaxed her grip and began swaying along the road in front of him, teasing him to follow. And despite what had happened his mood lifted and he laughed, running with outstretched hands to chase her. They could have been any young couple on a midnight escapade as she screamed and dodged his grip, twisting and turning on the road, stumbling against the ditch and blundering on. He ran towards her, forgetting everything. Two dogs outside a nearby cottage began to bark and the chorus was taken up in all the other farmyards along the road as they raced past, occasionally catching hold of each other, more often careering freely along. The moon slipped its moorings of cloud again and threw shadows of leaves like crazy paving on the road before them. She turned to look at him and slipped into a deep ditch, barely missing a clump of nettles. He looked down in panic at

her crumpled body lying awkwardly where it had fallen. The countryside was alive with outraged dogs. He climbed quickly in, cupping her neck gently in his palms as he bent to study her face. There seemed no sign of life. He pressed his face closer and suddenly her mouth was open, her tongue burrowing like a saturated animal between his lips. As suddenly as their first kiss had begun it was over, her shoulder pushing him to one side as he lay confused, watching her climb up to the roadway, her face closed, staring ahead as she started to walk onwards into the dark.

It's strange how a city grows into your senses, how you become attuned to its nuances like living with a lover. Even when you sleep it's still there in your mind. Out here Cait, it's a different kind of isolation, a living one. Later on, when I'd walk home at dawn from work in the petrol station, I'd feel a sense of the suburb as being like a creature who'd switched itself off, leaving street lights and advertising signs as sentinels. But out here, even in the dark I can hear the noise of branches shifting, of hunting and hunted creatures. Here nothing really sleeps except with one eye open, alert for danger.

I keep trying to describe that office in my mind. I should know its every mood. Yet there is only a blank when I try to recall it, a dull collage of afternoons staring at an antiquated clock; of childish games played to relieve the monotony, rolls of sellotape hurled across tables, infinite rounds of twenty questions, fencing with the long poles required to open and close windows. In winter two Supersers heated the room. Those nearest the heater were

scalded; those further away wrapped their coats around their shoulders and bent their heads under the long electric lights. That first morning it felt like a crypt, but it took time to realize that underneath the silence people were living a subterranean existence with a private language and private jokes, each clerk equipped with his or her own technique of surviving the tedium. I had always thought of work as involving some personal skill. As a child I'd bring my father down his lunch in Plunkett Motors and watch the men hammering out panels or respraying cars. There seemed a purpose to it all, a definite end-product. The figures worked in their oil-stained overalls with a curious dignity, self-assured in their skill.

That's how I had imagined the adult world. But here there was just the endless procession of blue files and green files to be sorted and stamped. I was earning as much money as my father but was ashamed to tell him what my work involved. After a fortnight I began to imagine some higher official was playing a joke on me, unsorting files at night and putting them back. The names seemed the very ones I had sorted the day before, the details of offspring over eighteen familar before I wrote them down. Shay and Mick had invented a game where they would call out people's names and addresses and make us guess by their ages what the children were christened. Shay said you could learn to date the fashions in children's names like the vintages of fine wines.

Each morning the crocodile of clerks looped its way through

the crowded hallway down to the narrow canteen. We drank tea and talked the gossip and rumours of the office while through the window above the door a garda sergeant called out the names of those charged. It seemed an invisible world to the clerks: they pushed their way past junkies trembling on the steps, past clusters of hard chaws supporting the walls or mothers burdened with children and infinite, helpless patience. Only Shay would nod, pausing to joke with some old lad drinking a bottle of milk on the stairs. Once when we came out they were bringing in a tinker girl. She was no more than fifteen, in the first bud of womanhood. It took four officers to carry her into the courtroom, her body twisting in a grotesque, sensual dance. The clerks paused and then turned to mount the stairs to the dusty shelves while her screams echoed through the building.

What else can I tell you about? The gnawing, all-consuming hatred of Mooney who rarely spoke, confident of his power as he placed his hand on some girl's shoulder to enjoy the tremor of unease that rippled forth. I'd imagine his tongue lightly wetting his lips each time an increment form came on to his desk, or a temporary position came up for renewal. His days were spent making neat reports to personnel on every mistake, drawing black marks with a sensual pleasure. A black-and-white photograph of his wife and two children stood on his desk. Occasionally he would mention them in his Monaghan accent to some new girl, his brow knitting with anxiety about their progress through college, his tongue lolling over their achievements like a

lullaby. Then an hour later he would stand behind her, screeching about her overuse of sellotape.

Six months before I joined a girl was tested for cancer. The hospital decided to keep her in but she insisted on taking a taxi back to the office first. Everyone was at lunch so she left a note for Mooney on the back of a blank voter's form before returning to the surgeon's knife. She woke up without her breast, but slowly recovered, painfully learnt to face the world, to venture out and then return to work. On her first morning back she was sent to personnel. On the desk lay the offending voter's form in a blue folder with a report on the abuse of official stationery.

And finally there was Shay, like a light switched on in a projector. When he came in the office seemed to burst into life. He'd steal some girl's cigarettes and make a show of passing them round, give mock radio commentaries of the Blessed Virgin landing at Knock, secrete sticks of incense in the filing cabinets. Above all he drew people out, spending days, if a new girl came, just getting her to talk. He had worked there for three years before I began and knew every nook where one could hide, every trick to waste a half-hour. The curious thing was that he was the one person Mooney kept his distance from, cautious because he could not put him into any slot. They measured each other like chess players: Mooney, a grand master baffled by the seemingly ridiculous moves his young opponent made; Shay, knowing that the more outrageous his actions were the more Mooney would stall, terrified of being tricked into making any decision.

Most of the girls queued for lunch in the small coffee shop across the road where Carol held court with tales of neighbours in Deansgrange and former clerks who had gone to the bad. As I hovered outside on my first morning Shay took pity on me, whistled softly and nodded across the street towards the Irish Martyrs Bar & Lounge. There an inner circle met. Mary, the longest serving clerk, scapegoat for Carol's tantrums and humours, and Mick, quiet and small, grinning to himself as he wolfed his way through pints of Guinness. The bar was jammed in an uneasy truce between policemen and criminals, nodding familiarly as they waited to be served by the old barmen. When I complained that it was my first day and I was afraid to drink, Mary reluctantly bought me an orange juice and then spiked it with vodka when my back was turned. That lunch-time I began to see the humour behind their serious faces.

Mick was the occupant of a Rathgar bedsit, expelled from college after three years of playing pool, degreeless and a disgrace to his strong farmer father, but with a highest snooker break of seventy-six, a love of German films and a poker fixation. He rarely spoke till the afternoon, as he nursed each morning's hangover in. Mary had just passed the wrong side of thirty. She had joined after school, intending to stay for a year and never managed to leave. Even that first day I knew she never would go now. She told the bluest jokes in her Liberties accent as she spent every penny she had on you, but rarely mentioned her three-year-old child at home, never spoke of the daily struggle

to cope alone. Between them Shay sat, egging them on as they mocked the size of each other's sexual parts while surreptitiously pouring drink into me.

At two o'clock they helped me cautiously back up the stairs, Mary shovelling mints into me to disguise the smell. After every few steps they'd pause to agree how awful they were, then burst out into laughter again. That first afternoon passed in a hazy blur, wedged in between Shay and Mick hiding me at the bottom table. The room swayed in a welter of flying sellotape and blue jokes, the elbows of the lads prodding me whenever I teetered towards laughter.

It seemed unreal when I got home again to face my mother's eager questions. I stood in the shorn garden trying to sober up, suddenly resentful of Shay with his permanent position. He was safe in a job for life. All they needed to give me was three days' notice. He knew the rules while I was being led blindly down. But soon I realized I was not. Shay kept beside me as the first week rolled on, his intuition so refined he could warn me the instant before a door opened or a buzzer rang. And the work was so tedious that despite my apprehension I was drawn in, fascinated by his cool good nature, his audacity. Some mornings Mary gave him a conspiratorial wink and he'd disappear until break time when he discreetly emptied the baby Power in their cups at the top of the table, slipping the empty whiskey bottle back into his pocket before Carol arrived. In the afternoons the voices of solicitors and policemen wafted through the air vent as

we blew smoke from the joint out the downstairs toilet window; his eyes amused at my terror whenever their footsteps came near. And gradually I learnt to surrender my trust to him. He kept me always just the right side of the line, teaching me how to look busy by perpetually carrying a pile of files as I wandered through the room or by stacking work up in front of me to create the appearance of speed.

By the Friday I knew everything about the job that needed to be known. My hands could file the forms away in my sleep. Indeed, when I closed my eyes on the first nights I automatically saw piles of registration forms being ticked and passed from tray to tray. The forms came in cardboard boxes that were carefully stored and returned. Those boxes that had burst open were burnt. That afternoon Shay beckoned me out to the landing. Below, the guard was calling out the last few cases before the weekend. Without looking down I could sense the crush of bodies piling against the court door. Shay selected four of the sturdiest cardboard boxes and reefed them apart with an expert left foot. He handed me two and we were gone. The incinerator was two concrete slabs placed against the wall of the old prison. We burnt each box individually, dutifully standing over them until the last one turned to ash. That was when he told me about the girl with one breast.

'Mooney made Carol do his dirty work, of course. She had visited young Eileen in hospital twice a week. I found Carol up there that lunch-time, her cardigan over her shoulder, eyes raw

with crying.'

I was drifting slowly into friendship with him, the very casualness of it disguising its grip. I had stuck close to him at first simply to learn the rules of work but even after five days it had become more than that in my mind. There was a sense of excitement being in Shay's presence. His friendship made no demands; it was simply given, asking nothing in return, making no attempt to conscript you to any viewpoint or take sides in the petty office wars. The discovery that we were from the same suburb was made not in terms of common links but of differences.

I remember once as a child missing the bus stop at the village and being carried up the long straight road into the Corporation estates in the West. I was terrified by the stories I had heard. I could have been a West Berliner who'd strayed across the Iron Curtain. When I was eight the new dual carriageway made the division complete, took away the woodlands we might have shared, made the only meeting point between the two halves of the village a huge arched pedestrian bridge. He listened incredulously when I confessed to not having been in the Bath Wars, then described how each summer's day the boys in the West would gather on the hill overlooking the river valley that had miraculously survived between them and the next suburb. Below lay the only amenity for miles: a filthy, concrete open-air pool. On the far hill the enemy was massed with strict military ranks observed. Daily pitched battles were fought for possession

of the muddy square of water. That Friday by the prison wall Shay lifted his shirt to show me the scar left on his back from the evening he was captured on a reconnaissance mission and beaten with a bicycle chain. I think now of Ernie O'Malley escaping through the gate that stood behind us that day, both wars a struggle to reach adulthood. To Shay the scar was as much a part of growing up there as Black-and-Tans smashing doors was to his grandfather. I told him instead of my world of hen-runs and potato beds, of opening the back door one night to find a hedgehog trapped in the light, pulling its head in and squatting for hours till it could escape into the dark.

Shay had left home when he started work at eighteen, and perpetually moved from bedsit to bedsit since. I envied him for having made the break. The world he spoke of was magical—late-night snooker halls and twenty-four-hour kebab shops where the eyes of a waitress at four in the morning were lit by Seconal, walking home from a poker session to a flat at dawn with thirty pounds in change. That Friday afternoon I desperately wanted his friendship, wanted his respect, wanted to become a part of his world. I tried to lie and invent experiences but found I hadn't the confidence.

Instead I tried to prove my manhood by cursing Mooney and speaking of the hatred already building in me. It was contagious in that cramped office where no one knew who would be reported next. Only once had I been inside Mooney's inner office where the blinds were kept drawn, giving the room an air of

perpetual twilight. An old-fashioned lamp with a metal shade burned on his desk, highlighting his joined fingers, and a white circle of disordered papers stretched away into the dusk at the table's edge. Leather-bound volumes coated with dust lined the walls except for the space behind the desk where the largest map of the city I had ever seen was hung. The political boundaries had been drawn and redrawn on it as successive governments reshaped the constituencies to their advantage. Once a year when Mooney went reluctantly on holiday with his wife and children, Carol worked in a frenzy to make sense of the papers before his return. I had been sent in to deliver two completed folders and Mooney had ignored my knock and my query about where to leave them. Only when I was leaving did he speak. *I see everything in this office,* he intoned. I turned. In the lamplight it was impossible to see his eyes, only the joined hands motionless on the desk. They picked up the nearest paper, dismissing me. But as I cursed him by the wall of the jail I realized Shay was the only person who didn't share in the collective orgy of hate. For him it would have given Mooney a stature he didn't deserve.

He kicked at the ashes, enjoying the last few breaths of air.

'Listen Hano, that's his world up there. Do you not think he knows how they hate him? I tell you, the man gloats on it. Not only has he got them for eight hours a day, but before work, after work; every waking hour they spend discussing how they hate him makes him the axis of their lives. He lives off it for fuck sake, it gives him importance. Just ignore the cunt. That's what

really kills him.'

Shay grinned and began to walk back towards the office, teaching me the golden rules of survival and promotion. Do nothing unless you absolutely have to. Make no decisions whatsoever. Perpetually pass on responsibility. Remember that no extra work you do, even if you stay till midnight, will ever find its way on to your record. Only your mistakes will be marked down, black marks on your file for ever. Any innovation will be seen as a threat by those above you. Therefore those who do least, who shirk all decisions, will always progress. It was why Mooney, who spent his day brooding behind an *Irish Times* at his filthy desk, now commanded his own section, while Carol, who ran and fetched, who kept the office running single-handed, blundering her way through the work he refused to touch, would never progress beyond being his useful assistant. She had committed the fatal mistake of making herself indispensable and would remain there till Mooney finally retired and some white-shirted graduate came in to modernize the office over her head. I had been wrong to imagine work as an adult world. The same old roles of childhood were played out there. As we walked up the steps I wondered suddenly would I be there till sixty-five, learning to rise the ladder and lick higher arses? The thought frightened me more than the unemployment I had known a week before.

Back in the office Shay and Mary played games to spin out the afternoon. If Mooney was safe from them, Carol rose to

their bait every time. At half-four, Shay cocked his head like an Indian tracker, then clicked his fingers. Mary had reached the Ladies before Carol even opened Mooney's door. I watched Carol discreetly check the locked door as Shay and Mick bent their heads dutifully down. She pretended to examine the stacked shelves beside the toilet, shifting uneasily from foot to foot as the minutes passed. Beside me Shay and Mick took bets and softly hummed 'Singing in the Rain', until after a quarter of an hour Shay raised his head, touched my shoulder lightly and switched his humming to 'Here We Go, Here We Go'.

'Is the post ready, Paula?'

'No, Carol. I'll have it finished in five minutes.'

'What have you been doing all afternoon? Must I do every little thing in this office myself?'

She clenched her fists against her scarlet face and skipped up and down like a child with a rope as she screamed 'There's none of yous good!' Shay watched her flee the room and race across to the toilet in the pub, then picked his watch up.

'Fifteen and a half minutes,' he told Mick. 'You jammy bollox.' He passed a pound across the table and rose to tap three times on the door. Mary emerged with the paper, glanced around surreptitiously and used it to put the clock on five minutes.

At five to five we stampeded down the steps. The weekend, which had been the worst time of the week when I was unemployed, suddenly stretched joyously before me. I stood enjoying the late spring sunshine. Shay had left just in front of

me.

'Good luck mate,' I shouted. 'See you Monday.'

He waved back and then paused.

'What's your hurry?' he said. 'Fancy a pint? Celebrate your first week of survival.'

He stood a few feet from me, happily indifferent to whether I came or not. I thought of my mother at home, my father due in from Plunkett Motors at half-past five, washing his hands in the deep enamel sink, my little sisters running in and out the kitchen door behind him. I didn't want to admit to being expected home.

'Ah, I'm a bit skint. Had to work a back week, you know yourself.'

'Jasus, there'll be enough times when I'll be broke. Get into the car for fuck's sake if that's all that's wrong with you.'

They would wait till the Angelus came on the television, neither praying nor speaking till the chimes stopped, then they'd cover my plate and leave it in the oven. There would be no questions asked when I got home, just silent hurt filling the room of plywood furniture.

A battered Triumph Herald was parked by the prison wall like a relic from Black-and-Tan days. 'My only love,' Shay said, patting the canvas roof, and with great difficulty managing to lower it. The rusty bodywork had received more blows than a punch-drunk boxer. After four attempts the engine reluctantly spluttered to life and we moved off towards town. I felt both guilty and elated, filled with a sense of liberation. And perhaps

because we had spoken earlier of our home place, all the way to town we talked of travel, each charting more mythical journeys across the European continent. Paris, Berlin, Lisbon; places that to me were just names from subtitled films glimpsed when my parents went to bed, but for Shay they were real. He spoke of them like women he would one day sleep with.

That evening was my first glimpse of Shay's Dublin. It was like an invisible world existing parallel to the official one I had known, a grey underworld of nixers and dole where people slagged Shay for actually having a job. One summer he'd worked as a messenger boy on a motor bike and knew every twisted lane and small turning. I kept intending to go home after each place we visited but then he'd suggest another and we'd be gone. There was no premeditation, the evening just drifted on its own course. I'd imagine my mother's plain cooking gradually stuck to the plate, the meat drying up, the shrivelled vegetables. Then Shay would park another pint in front of me and that would put an end to that. I began to see how Shay survived the office without bitterness or hatred. To him it was just a temporary apparition, eight hours of rest before he entered his real world.

At nine o'clock Shay insisted on buying me a Chinese meal, joking that the seagull's leg refused to stop twitching. By then I was talking as I had never talked since I sat in the old woman's caravan, living off every word he spoke, making him laugh with stories about my father's boss. But I shied away from any reference to my home, ashamed of it suddenly as I envied his

freedom, his experience, his accepted adultness. Two girls sat at a nearby table. Occasionally one glanced across at him.

'What do you think?' he asked. 'Will we give it a lash? It's up to yourself.'

I got frightened of being caught out. I was not a virgin but was terrified of the direct approach. My few successes had been scored hurriedly after dances, brought to a messy climax, before bolting as though from the scene of a crime. If we approached I knew I would be tongue-tied. I hesitated and, trying to feign an experienced air, suggested they might not be the type. He grinned at them and gave a mock wave of his hand.

'I don't know,' he said. 'Cute country girls in their bedsits. They may have lost their virginity but they'll probably still have the box it came in.'

But it was obvious I was nervous and when they rose to leave he blew a kiss after them and suggested we play snooker instead.

The hall was a converted warehouse with no sign outside. The old man behind the counter was watching a black-and-white television. He greeted Shay like a son and asked him to mind the gaff while he slipped out to the pub. The walls had been whitewashed once but only vaguely remembered the event. We chose the least ragged of the vacant tables. Shay broke, then leaned on his cue to look around the semi-derelict room.

'I used to live here after I was expelled from school. Old Joe had great hopes for me but I knew I hadn't got it. The place is in tatters now but no wankers come in. I tried a few of the new

ones. Deposits, video cameras, and toss-artists who think a deep screw is a mot with a BA. Fuck this, I said, I must be getting old.'

It was ten o'clock when we left. The old man still hadn't returned but occasionally men left a few quid behind the counter as they wandered out. 'Is it cool?' Shay asked. 'You sure you don't have to head home?' I lied again and followed him through the feverish weekend crowds beneath the neon lights, then down towards a warren of cobbled laneways off Thomas Street. The pub we came to looked shut, the only hint of life being a fine grain of light beneath the closed shutters. A tramp passed, stumbling towards the night shelter. He mumbled a few incomprehensible words, one hand held out as though his fingers were cupping a tiny bird. Two children sleeping rough watched us from the doorway of a boarded-up bakery. Shay tapped three times on the steel shutter and I had the sensation of being watched before it swung open. A middle-aged Monaghan man with an old-fashioned bar apron beckoned and welcomed Shay by name. The downstairs bar was thick with smoke, countrymen nursing pints, a figure with a black beard gesturing drunkenly in the centre of the floor. Two old women sang in a corner, one lifting her hand with perfect timing at regular intervals to straighten the man beside her who was tilting on his bar stool. Nobody there was under fifty, no one born in the city that was kept out by the steel door.

'Gas, isn't it?' Shay said. 'Knocknagow on a Friday evening.'

He gazed in amusement, then headed downstairs to the cellar.

Here the owner's son reigned, the father never coming closer than shouting down from the top step at closing time. Four women with sharp, hardened faces sat in one corner drinking shorts. The dozen people at the long table shouted assorted abuse and greetings at Shay as he grinned and waved two fingers back to them. He called for drink and introduced me to his friends. I began to suss how the locked door kept more than the industrial revolution out. The girl across from me was rolling a joint; the bloke beside Shay passing one in his hands. He took three drags and handed it on to me. The pints arrived. I dipped into the white froth, my head afloat. Two of the women in the corner rose and ascended the stairs, bored looking, stubbing their cigarettes out.

'The massaging hand never stops,' Shay said. 'Pauline there left her bag behind one night so I brought it over to her across the road in the Clean World Health Studio. She was clad in a leather outfit after skelping the arse off some businessman who was looking decidedly green in the face as if he'd got more for his forty quid than he bargained for.'

'Forty quid?' I joked as the next joint reached me. 'Well fuck Father Riley and his bar of chocolate.'

It was to be the first of numerous nights with Shay in haunts like that, always tucked away down crooked lanes. I think he had a phobia about streets that were straight. But that night in Murtagh's stands out because everything was so new and spinning faster and faster. It had all reached a blur when the young man in the check suit appeared, with features so familiar

I drove myself crazy trying to place them. As he spoke he clapped his hands like an American basketball player, his body perpetually jiving as if linked to an inaudible disco rhythm. Shay frowned slightly when he saw him approach. He was the first person there Shay seemed to tolerate more than like. The young man slapped Shay's shoulder and shook hands with me with a polished over-firm grip.

'My main man Seamus. A drink for you and your friend.'

He returned with three tequilas. I copied Shay in licking the salt, drained the glass in one gulp and sank my teeth into the lemon. It was like electricity shooting through my body. I slammed my fist on the table and shook my head. The young man laughed so much he insisted on buying another round. Shay grinned sardonically as he watched me trying to place him.

'Add thirty years,' he said, 'four stone of fat and a bog accent. You've already mentioned him twice tonight.'

I studied the figure arguing animatedly with the two women left in the corner. My brain slowly reconciled the two opposites.

'Plunkett,' I said. 'My da's boss. He's something like him, but Pascal's a bachelor.'

'Fuck your da's boss. He's chicken shit. Who's his famous brother?'

His face had stared at me from lamp-posts at every election time, his eyes gazing from cards dropped into the hallway with fake handwriting underneath. I tried to match the features in front of me now with the image of Patrick Plunkett I had last

seen, repeating rhetorical phrases on a current affairs show as he refused to answer the interviewer's questions.

'Your future, smiling local TD,' Shay said. 'A genuine chip off the old bollox. Justin. So christened because of his one-inch penis. I see he's dispatching the last of his troupe. Would make a great newspaper headline for any editor wanting to go out of business fast.'

The two women in the corner were about to leave.

'Surely the cops know,' I said.

'What fucking country do you live in Hano? You know any guard wants to get transferred to Inisbofin? It may be an embarrassment to the government to have it open; it would be an even greater embarrassment for the fuckers to have to close it down. Youth must have its fling. The party knows he'll drop it when the old bastard expires and he's called upon to inherit the seat. He's being groomed already, two or three funerals a week.'

For the first time I detected bitterness in Shay's voice. But to be angry would be to admit he was a part of their world. Shay shrugged his shoulders and suggested we go upstairs. When I closed my eyes I felt like a boat being rocked from side to side. At the doorway Justin Plunkett pushed a glass into my hand. I heard Shay slagging him about the suit, his good humour returned. Shay's hand was on my shoulder, steering me upstairs, past the country men in their bar, up two more flights and into a tiny room in darkness except for a blazing fire and a single blue spotlight. It shone down on a long-haired figure on a pallet strumming a

guitar. A man crouched beside him, keeping up a rhythm on a hand drum. I found a seat among the stoned crowd and tried to follow the singer's drug-ridden fantasies. Each song lasted quarter of an hour, filled with tortoises making love and nuns in rubber boots.

I felt sick and yet had never felt better as I gazed from the window at the tumbledown lane outside. The sleeping children had gone. A man with a cardboard box and a blanket jealously guarded their spot. Far below, Dublin was moving towards the violent crescendo of its Friday night, taking to the twentieth century like an aborigine to whiskey. Studded punks pissed openly on corners. Glue sniffers stumbled into each other, coats over their arms as they tried to pick pockets. Addicts stalked rich-looking tourists. Stolen cars zigzagged through the distant grey estates where pensioners prayed anxiously behind bolted doors, listening for the smash of glass. In the new disco bars children were queuing, girls of fourteen shoving their way up for last drinks at the bar.

And here I was lost in the city, cut off in some time warp, high and warm above the crumbling streets. I think I slept and when I woke the owner was shouting time from the foot of the stairs. The singer had stopped and accepted a joint from the nearest table. The lad beside me who had been eyeing the guitar stumbled up to grab it, closed his eyes and began to sing:

Like a full force gale
I was lifted up again,

I was lifted up again,
By the Lord…

He wore a broad black hat with a long coat and sang with his eyes closed, living out the dream of Jessie James, the outlaw riding into the Mexican pueblo, the bandit forever condemned to run. He opened his eyes again when he had sung the last refrain, handed the guitar back apologetically and moved down the stairs towards his dingy Rathmines bedsit. I thought of home suddenly, the cremated dinner, my parents waiting for the dot on the television, exchanging glances but never asking each other where I was. I felt guilty once more and yet they suddenly seemed so distant, like an old photograph I'd been carrying around for too long.

'You alive at all Hano?' Shay's voice asked. 'You don't look a well man. A tad under the weather I'd say. Listen, there's a mattress back in my flat if you want to crash there. And I'm after scoring some lovely Leb.'

'What about your wheels?'

'Leave them. Not even Dublin car thieves are that poor.'

Home, like an old ocean liner, broke loose from its moorings and sailed in my mind across the hacked-down garden, further and further through the streets with my parents revolving in their armchairs. I could see it in my mind retreating into the distance and I stood to wave unsteadily after it, grinning as I took each euphoric step down after Shay towards the take-away drink hustled in the bar below and the adventures of crossing the city

through its reeling night-time streets.

Hope. A four-letter word. Hope. Mornings are the worst Katie. You wake when your cousin rises, tumbling into the warm hollow she has vacated on her side of the bed. Two years older than you, she dresses quietly for her work in the fast-food restaurant in town. She arrives home each Thursday with sore arms, tired feet from dodging the assistant manager and ten pounds more than on the dole. When she is gone you lie on, luxuriating in those private moments alone in that room. Then you hear his footsteps start through the wall beside your head. Rising at the same time he did when he walked down for the early shift. You hear the smudging sound of the brush over his boots before they descend the stairs. The routine, that is what is vital for him, the pretence that there is still something to be done. The front door closes and you know he will walk to the mobile shop with the same dilemma, ten cigarettes or a newspaper. You rise quickly before he returns, the situations vacant column always the winner. You will try to have finished your breakfast when the footsteps restart in the hall and hurry to the door before he spreads the page of close type over the Formica to stoop like a man holding a mirror to the lips of a corpse.

Hope, Katie. That is what he pretends to have. You cannot bear to watch the bowed head, the finger moving steadily to the bottom of each column. You reach the school long before the lessons start. Remember, you ran here so eagerly once. Now it is no more than a sanctuary from the despair of that house. There is a wall to smoke behind. A girl says, 'Are you game? The Bounce?' And you slip

quickly back out that gate, skirting the road he will take at half-past nine to the Manpower office, not going in if the same girl is on the desk as the day before, afraid he will lose face by appearing too eager. You run down by the side of the Spanish Nun's, past the green and gold of the Gaelic Club, by the mud-splattered row of caravans, till you find the gap in the hedge and are running fast across the overgrown car-park to reach the vast cavern of the abandoned factory.

Here is education, here you belong. A dozen girls are gathered in the dripping shell where their sisters once bent over rows of machines. Here at last there is no pretence, no talk of imaginary futures. Sometimes they sit in near silence or play ragged impromptu games; sometimes boys come. Somebody lights a cigarette, somebody has pills. A small bottle passes down a corridor of hands till it reaches you. You hold the capsule in your hand, a speckled egg to break apart. You pause, then swallow. Hope. Four-letter words punctuate the jokes you laugh at. A girl leans on your back in tears as laughter almost chokes her. There are colours to watch. The concrete refuses to stay still. There is warmth. A circle of faces to belong to. The sound of a chain being pulled from a gate, the engine stops in the van. The girls by your side pull you on as the unformed security guard unleashes the dog. You race exhilarated across the grass, the sky twisting and buckling. You can hear barking behind you and the girls begin to scream. The wall rushes at you, automatically you jump. The sharp surface grazes your knees before hands pull you clear

and down on to the path beside the carriageway. The footsteps are racing now; you join them—a flock of pigeons circling back towards the estate.

Hano and Katie had followed the weak scraggle of street lights which petered out beyond the green with its pub next to the closed-down swings beside a battered caravan in the tiny amusement park. To their left a new estate of white council houses slept with an unfinished look, out of place among the fields. On their right through the blackness they could breathe in the sharp tang of sea air blowing across the expanse of sucking mud exposed by the low tide. The road wound upwards through moonlit golf courses and the flaking paint of holiday chalets, until it levelled out into a car park on the very brink of the cliff. Hano stood with his arm around Katie when they reached the edge, mesmerized by the scene below. The whole of Dublin was glowing like a living thing sprawled out before his eyes, like the splintered bones of a corpse lit up in an X-ray. Hours before he had still been a part of it, one cell in a vibrant organism. Now up on this headland where Katie had led him he was cut off and isolated from the lives below. She stood almost indulgently beside him while he gazed, then took his hand again to pull him on through the dark. He panicked for a moment when her form vanished before him, thinking she was intent on some suicide pact, before realizing that she had begun to climb carefully down the black and seemingly impossible rock face towards the foam flashing below them. She gripped his hand, never speaking or

looking back, but instinctively choosing the correct path along the slope. Once she slipped and as his arm was jerked forward he heard the noise of pebbles tumbling down to vanish into the sea below, but she didn't cry out though her leg must have been grazed. She was up a second later, nimbly finding footholds in the rock face again. The sea wind blew into their faces, stinging his exhausted eyes, but keeping his limbs awake. He focused his mind solely on reaching the strand alive, no longer wishing to think of the events which had led him here, or the promise of what might happen when he reached solid earth again. His life, as he had lived it, was finished, but there would be time for decisions later; now it was enough to be led. Her warm hand brought him through the teeth of the night, where swaying lights winked across the water, neither judging nor demanding, but human and alive, a tiny embryo of hope.

She stopped and his momentum sent him careering against her back. They had reached the bottom. Without speaking, they walked across the sand which parted beneath their feet, slowing them so they seemed to move in a dream. A dark outline against the V of the cliffs took the shape of a concrete bunker as they approached. On both sides steel shutters glinted in the dark from the closed toilets. There was a narrow exposed entrance at the side of the shelter and a large open space at the front overlooking the sea. Most of the bench against the wall inside had been hacked away, but occasionally a strip of wood still ran between the concrete supports. When Hano struck a match he saw the

walls covered in graffiti before the wind choked the flame. Sand and litter had been blown in across the floor and from one corner the smell of urine lingered. Yet when he squatted below the open window at the front there was shelter from the breeze. Katie was standing beside him, leaning on the concrete sill to gaze out at the waves.

'How do you know this place?' he asked.

'What does it matter?' She replied and huddled down beside him in silence. But after a moment he heard her voice.

'Seems like a lifetime,' she whispered. 'I don't know, so fucking long ago. Often lads would steal a car at night, arse around the streets in it, looking for a chase. But sometimes, you know, they'd just drive out into the country. You'd be with them in the back, killing time, seeing what the stroke was. I loved it and hated it…brought back things I didn't want. We were so spaced you wouldn't think I'd remember any of it. But I know every laneway here like the veins on my wrist. They're the only shagging things that do seem real.'

Katie laughed and leaned against him.

'Last day I went to that kip of a school some teacher starts looking over my shoulder. We'd taken tablets the night before and things seemed to be shooting across the room. My eyes kept jerking round to follow them and I couldn't hear a word the old biddy was saying. She screamed at me and when I looked up she was like some bleeding ghost you know, all the features indistinct, out of focus, like. But they were all that way by

then…figures from another world, days rolling together in a blur, nothing real about it.

'But I remember every second driving out here—it was vivid, Hano, you known what I mean. One time we almost drove as far as Leitrim. I was shouting directions from the back, like a lost animal finding its way home. I got frightened when we got close, screaming for them to turn the car round. They thought I was fucking cracked. "Faster," I kept shouting as we sped back. "Faster! Faster!" Just like that little girl running through the night again, only this time I was racing away from her.'

She was silent and, just when he thought she wasn't going to continue, her voice came out of the darkness again.

'No matter where we went we always wound up here on the coast. I don't know why. Walking down the pier in Rush in the dark or outside the closed-down amusements in Skerries. The cove at Loughshinny or out along the arches of the railway bridge. Out here was my favourite, around Portrane and Donabate. Watching dawn break, you know, all sea-birds and grey light over the water.'

Her voice softened as though the litany of names were soothing her. The edge of hysteria was gone that had always been present in the flat, except for the nights when she just sat sullenly for hours wrapped up in her duffle coat.

'What happened when you reached the coast?' he asked, taking his jacket off and spreading it over both their shoulders. They leaned close together as she searched in her jeans for

cigarettes, lit two and handed him one. He watched the red tip burning upwards towards her lips as she inhaled.

'Fuck all,' she said. 'That's the funny bit. All the screaming and slagging stopped when we hit the shoreline, like we were at the end of a journey. When the wheels touched the sand there'd be silence, all of us just staring out at the sea. It belonged to nobody, no little bollox in a peaked cap could come along at midnight and turn it off. We'd get out then and throw sand, skim stones, that sort of shite. Git and Eileen could swim so we'd smoke a few numbers waiting for them. And you know, blokes who were half-animal in Dublin would talk to you about things they'd normally be ashamed of, mots they had fancied or nightmares or the future stretching away before them. They were too thick to know how bleeding short it was.'

Like a cancer gnawing inside, the stab of jealousy shocked him and he hated the words even as he spoke.

'Have you spent a night with someone here before?'

'What if I did?'

'Who was he?'

Her shoulders hunched defensively and she became that huddled figure in the flat again. Her voice was hard, almost contemptuous.

'For fuck sake Hano, what does it matter to you? You're not a child any more. Aren't we screwed up enough without raising old ghosts? The past is as dead as Shay, you can't own it or change it. So don't explain yourself to me, Hano. I don't want to know

what the fuck you were at in that room back there. And don't ask me questions, right. You're still alive, I'm still alive. That's all that bleeding matters for now.'

She was right, but after what she had seen he still needed to prove himself. But the gesture of placing his arm around her shoulder which would have been so natural a moment before now felt awkward and contrived and her shoulders stiffened beneath his touch. He moved his lips down and while he encountered no resistance, there was no life in her mouth. He knew he should stop, yet like an overwound spring, in his exhaustion and self-disgust, seemed unable to prevent himself—though he knew she would twist away, hurt and withdrawn, with her back turned to him. He laid his head against the wall, his eyes closed, and sighed. The only sound in the hut was of the waves carried in on the damp air. Then, to his surprise, he felt fingers in the dark searching for his hand again.

'What are you trying to prove Hano?' she whispered. 'That you're better than them, or the same or different? You don't need to. Listen, this place is full of ghosts for me. Git and Mono, they're both doing time now. A vicious attack—no reason for it, no excuse. They shared a needle with some junkie inside. They're locked in the Aids unit, wasting away, waiting to die. Beano's up in St Brendan's after burning every brain cell out. Six months ago the world looked up to them in terror. Now the kids on their street wouldn't want to recognize them. Burned out so fast, Hano, like violent, brutal stars, you know what I mean. Never

heard them laugh those last days, just sitting there, no brains, no words, slumped on the canal. “Hey Beano,” I said last time I saw him, “remember the night we crashed the car up in Howth?” He looked through me like that drunk back along the road. They’re gone now Hano, like dada walking across fields to work, Tomas with no light in his cabin. This place was theirs Hano, let them rest here. We’ll find our own maybe, somewhere.’

Then she leaned back until her head lay snugly against his chest and, rolling on to her side, drew her legs up against his and was still. Hano could feel the frustration draining from his body and knew that he was tumbling downwards into a warm drowsiness where sleep would come, as unstoppable as the waves below, crushing on to the wet strand, fainter, and fainter, and faint…

CHAPTER TWO Monday

Hano dreamt of whiteness. Winter time. He was walking from a grey estate of houses down an embankment towards a new road. It had been snowing in the night. Now a single set of footprints curved downwards towards the noise of water. A new steel bridge bypassed the old hunch-backed stone one which was cut off by a row of tar barrels. A circle of Gypsy caravans squatted on the waste ground around it.

Hano knew the place now, the Silver Spoon, the bathing place Shay had often spoken of. The summer evenings when mothers from the West had sat on the grass, watching children in short trousers splashing in the water, their hands holding slices of bread and jam. The footsteps were Shay's, yet there was no sign of movement in the camp site they led to. Scrap iron, parts of cars, a washing machine with one side dented lay on the river bed. To move was like walking through a wall of ice, cutting into his flesh, amputating the movement from his hands. The Gypsies had left clothes out to dry along the tattered bushes near the bridge which had grown solid with frost, rigid to the touch. How long had he been walking like this, searching for Shay? He passed the clothes and then looked back. A pair of old jeans were stretched between branches. Just above them was a ripped check shirt and then, three inches further up, Shay's face grinned at him, also made of cloth, completely flat and stiffened. There

were no hands, no feet and just a necklace of leaves where his neck should have been. Shay seemed to be trying to speak but his features were too frozen to allow him. Hano reached out slowly to touch the face and as his fingers encountered the icy brittleness of the cloth he shuddered and woke.

Hano tried to focus his eyes in the harsh sunlight reflecting off the bare stone of the bunker and, failing, closed them again, leaning his head back and banging it on the wall. The pain shocked him to his senses and he realized that he was freezing and alone. The memory of the dream disturbed him though the details were already obscure. All that remained was the sensation of eternally searching for Shay. Then the memories of the previous night returned and with them came paralysis. He grew rigid with fear, unable even to turn his head towards the doorway. Somehow he had expected that morning would bring normality, a return of his old world. Katie had placed his jacket neatly over him before departing. He told himself he was relieved that she was gone. There would be no responsibilities left in the hours before they caught him. He could wait here shivering in this filthy bunker or walk outside. It made little difference to the outcome. Yet he huddled to whatever small warmth the jacket and his cramped position gave him. What if they already knew he was there? The squad car parked on the beach; two guards calmly smoking on the bonnet as they waited for him to appear? What if Katie hadn't abandoned him, but was crammed into the back seat, a burly hand over her mouth? What if the guards weren't

there? He grinned to himself. What if he had to go on, alone and hungry? There was no fight left in him. He stood cautiously up and turned around. The strand was deserted. An autumn sun was trying to thaw out above the cold waves where, in the distance, a local fishing boat bobbed like a toy Russian trawler. He put his jacket on and walked stiffly out, slapping his legs to restore the circulation.

Then he caught a glimpse of Katie bent between the boulders and limpet-covered rocks where sunlight glinted among the green rock pools. He almost shouted in relief but turned instead and waited by the water's edge till he heard her approach. Relief had given way to defensiveness, like an embarrassed stranger trying to claw some dignity back the morning after a party. He remembered those few mornings when he woke with some girl from work, both toying with life, automatically talking when there was nothing really to say. Now when everything was urgent neither Katie nor he could speak. He realized that he had never really spoken to her until last night, that they had shared the same room dozens of times, muttered the same few words to each other without ever knowing who the other was. He knew she could sense the tension within him.

'I thought you'd gone,' he said at last.

She didn't reply.

'You don't have to stay you know. There's no reason.'

'I'll go if you want,' she said. 'Piss off and leave you here.'

'You should have last night. It's him you always wanted. Why

come with me?'

'Maybe I didn't come with you,' she said. 'Maybe I just came along, you know what I mean.'

Driftwood was strewn on the beach. She moved away to hurl a piece of rotten timber back into the foam. He had always thought of her as retarded for some reason. He remembered the distaste he felt once when drinking by mistake from her cup. She was indistinct to him from dozens of girls he'd seen lining street corners around his home, jeering at passers-by, listlessly watching each day pass, smelling of boredom and adolescence gone stale. It had always puzzled him when Shay called her the country girl.

'Maybe I just hadn't anywhere to go back to,' she muttered after a moment. 'Maybe I couldn't take another morning of it, another night. What the fuck do you know of my life anyway? Your friend killed it for me back there, made me so I could never fit in again. Would have been better if he'd knifed me.'

Hano watched a woman in a grey overcoat with a dog approach from the far side of the beach. She was the first person he had seen since the previous night. He shivered, realizing that every stranger was a threat, to be watched and avoided if possible. It was too late to move back to the bunker. Katie had hunched down watching the wood drift back towards her. The waves crashed in, splashing his feet with spray.

'You scared Hano?' she asked suddenly.

'Yeah.'

'Then I'll go with you. Because I'm scared shitless too.'

'Don't know where I'm going Katie. I've nowhere to go.'

She was silent. He imagined Mooney's desk, the red line being drawn, the unreality of it all.

'Hano?'

He looked up. Her face was drawn, the hair ragged, eyes tired. She mumbled something and, when he looked blankly back, repeated it again in a whisper.

'Will you come home with me Hano? Will you?'

'You know I can't. They'll be looking for me.' He felt a sickness in his stomach as he spoke.

'Not there Hano—*home.* They took me from it one night, half-asleep in the back of a car. Miles of darkness and then I remember waking to street lights flashing on and off like a lighthouse beacon when we'd pass under them. Thinking if I screamed loud enough I'd wake and my parents would come. And all the time my uncle's face staring down at me, his hands stroking my hair and saying in that gruff voice of his, *You've a new daddy now. A new daddy.*

'You know, I told myself I didn't miss it. Drinking with the girls I'd make them laugh with stories. The soldier Ryan who slept in a concrete pipe in his field and moved his cattle into the new house the County Council gave him. Old Tomas's tales, even the way my da…dada used to speak.'

'But how long has it been…?'

'Eight years.'

'Were you ever back?'

'No. That night with the girls in the car…but I told you, I got scared. You know, at first my uncle tried to talk to me about it but I'd put my hands over my ears and scream. One time he even decided to bring his family down to the grave and I bit his hand when he tried to get me into the car. Can't explain it Hano, I waited for months in Dublin for them to come for me, then I blamed them, I cursed them. I was eight, Hano. I didn't want to understand, I just wanted them back.'

Without a glance in their direction, the woman had begun to climb the steps leading from the beach. He became aware of how hungry he was. Katie was looking at him, waiting for him to speak.

'Why not just go Katie? Why do you need me?'

'Listen Hano, don't you think I've tried? All those nights I've slept out, thinking at dawn I'll go. Walking down to the carriageway and watching the trucks, waiting till one stopped and then always just standing there, unable to move. There's an old man there Hano, he could help us.'

'Your man Tomas? Who is he anyway?'

'He's just an old man, a farm labourer. He worked with dada. Two miles into the hills Hano. You'd be safe. He'd take us in.'

England was the place to go. It always had been. The enemy which gave refuge, the dull anonymity of Leeds or Bradford, the digs and building sites his father had flitted between, dreaming always of returning home. If he got away now it might be possible

to gain a new identity, start again. Here it was only a matter of time, there would be nowhere to hide. Yet instinctively he knew that he wouldn't run as he'd done all his life. He had never been bright like Shay but he could be stubborn. He remembered the farewells in Murtagh's, no longer cardboard suitcases and cattle boats, but green cards and holiday visas. Illegal emigrants melting into the streets of American towns. As the airport posters proclaimed, they were the young Europeans, fodder now not just for factory floors but for engineering and computer posts. But once you left you were gone for ever. Shay had tried to return and failed. Hano knew it would be his last way of keeping faith, as senseless and futile as the night he'd sat beside the tramp in the hospital after the fight.

'What if this old lad's not there? He could be dead.'

'Have you a better idea?'

Hano stood up and, pulling his jacket tighter, shrugged his shoulders. Anywhere was as good as nowhere and it was dangerous to stay here. She touched his shoulder.

'Do you still hate me?' she asked.

He shook his head.

'I don't even know you,' he replied.

'I never knew what hate was till I met you,' she said. 'You know, every night walking to the flat I'd pray you'd be out. I'd put my ear to the door to guess whose footsteps were coming down. Shay's were loud and quick in his old boots; yours were a dreary tread. Every time I heard them I'd pray to God you'd fall

and break your neck. You should have seen yourself, opening the door like a nightclub bouncer and mumbling, "Are you coming in or what?" Without you, I thought Shay could be mine. So don't make me ask you for anything, Hano. But I'll go alone this time if you won't come.'

He put his hand hesitantly on her shoulder. She didn't look up or pull away.

'I can't fill his boots, Katie. And I've lived in his shadow so long I don't know what to do without him.'

She touched his hand for a moment and let it fall.

'He's dead, Hano, and I don't want some sort of substitute. You stand or fall by yourself. So don't lead or don't follow me, but if you're going let's just get the fuck away from here together.'

'You know if you're caught with me they'll probably charge you as well.'

She stared back at him without replying.

'Another thing,' he said.

'What?'

'Where the fuck is Leitrim?'

She smiled for the first time, then turned, and without waiting for him, began to walk towards the edge of the rocks. He looked back once at the bunker and followed her. He took her hand as they fought for footholds among the crevice pools and boulders confettied with seaweed and damp moss, but when they had climbed up to the unpaved cliff walk that mimicked the twists of the rock face he let go of it again, uncertainly.

A seal's head bobbed below them like a lost football. A lone sea-bird stood its ground on a rock, head constantly brushing the underside of its wing. There were tentative drops of rain. In the silence the horror of the previous night returned and he felt giddy with terror. He kept trying to justify it in his mind but knew it made no sense to anyone except perhaps to her. The images came back with the clarity and detachment of a horror film that seemed to have no connection with him. His past might have happened to somebody he'd vaguely known and lost contact with. When he'd hang back as Shay plunged them into another bout of lunacy, the older lad would say, 'One day Hano you'll go wild and leave us all only trotting behind you in a cloud of dust.' There was no Shay to see it, but Hano knew he had been thrust from his cocoon and could never manage to climb back. He followed the small figure with the cropped black hair along the cliff path knowing that this time was a bonus, with every second worth fighting for.

A single rusted strand of wire ran between them and a sheer drop. A stone wall with tiny flowers clinging to the crevices divided them from the fields on the far side. Before them a tall water tower rose like an upturned pint glass dwarfing the imitation round tower beside it. It had been built as a folly by a landlord in famine times but a century of weathering made it indistinguishable from the real thing. Behind it the cluster of red-bricked Victorian buildings which formed the Portrane asylum began to appear, flourished with turrets and Gothic trappings like the mansion of some cursed inbred clan. Silent as ghosts a

stooped line of its patients appeared slowly around the corner ahead of them, a nurse's white uniform blazing among the shabby greys and browns of their clothing.

When Hano and Katie reached the first couple they drew back towards the safety of their minder. The line stopped and shied away towards the wall until they had passed. The old men's faces twitched under caps as they watched. The final old woman had a radiant girlish smile and waved back at them from a drugged stupor. Her eyes were the brightest Hano had ever seen. Beside her a bald man in his forties was turning in a constant circle with a slow and perfected step, like a child trying to be dizzy. The others simply looked old, bemused and abandoned. The nurse smiled and motioned her charges into life again. A middle-aged man was doing press-ups on the lawn in front of the hospital. It was impossible to know if he was keeping count or aware that he was being watched. He stretched face down on the grass, gravely raising and lowering his body as though determined to prove his strength or keep the flame of sanity alive in his mind. Katie shuddered and turned away from the wall.

'Christ, I hate asylums,' she said. 'Always remind me of the one at home. A former workhouse it was, a rambling, rundown ruin. It wasn't just for the sick, you know. It was a dumping ground for anyone they didn't want, stuck out on the edge of the town. Whenever we had to pass it, I'd beg mammy to cross the road before we reached the gate. I was always scared she'd leave me there. That was her biggest threat, not dada's strap or the

bogeyman but we'll send you off to the home.'

In Dublin Hano rarely remembered her mumbling more than a few words, and then they had always been of the streets outside. Now that she had begun to talk of Leitrim it was like she'd never stop.

'The time the nuns in the school asked my uncle to take me to the psychologist was when I ran away first. Three nights kipping out in an old car by the Tolka. All I could think of was the spinsters locked up in that place because they couldn't be married off and the backward kids shut away so as not to shame their families before the neighbours. I mean, I knew it wouldn't be like that, it would be all shagging ink blobs and when d'you start using dirty words, but it was the same fear inside me.

'There was this woman, our next neighbour after Tomas, called Mary Roche. She was twenty-five years in that home before her mother died and some relative back from England found out and signed her release papers. Mammy often brought her in because she could hardly feed herself by then. She lived on crackers, single-wrapped slices of cheese. Anything that came in plastic was good because it was what visitors had brought in for the other patients. If mammy left the kitchen she'd sit with her arms in front of her on the table for hours on end.'

'What happened to her?' Hano asked.

Katie shuddered, looking back down the path as if she could still see the line of patients.

'She was only twenty when it happened. Some carpenter down

from Dublin fitting out the family shop. One night her father found her bed empty and caught them in a shed at the back. The carpenter was in hospital a week before he managed to slip out. She was kept locked up. You know I think it wasn't just what she was doing but who she was with. If it had been the doctor's son they would have all been indignant and yet delighted. But it wasn't, so they beat the skin off her back. Once she escaped to Dublin. Her father caught up with her after five days, famished, still in the same clothes, looking for the carpenter's digs. Doctor O'Donnell signed the committal papers. He'd have signed over his granny's corpse for a brandy.'

Katie leaned against the stone wall, staring at the hospital as she spoke. Hano put his hand on her shoulder. She shrugged it off.

'The year I was born, Hano, there was a scandal in the town. No papers carried it, nobody spoke to strangers, but people knew. One evening Mary Roche told my mother. They didn't know I was there, against the side of the dresser, hardly daring to breathe as I tried to make sense of her words. I didn't understand them all but I understood the terror in her voice.

'On weekend nights The Railway Hotel stayed open after hours for select customers. When the owner finally got sick of their drunken talk, Doctor O'Donnell would bring a few cronies across to the asylum—the chemist, the draper, a few big farmers with sons at college, the local councillor with his fainne. I could see them all in my mind as she listed them. They'd drag the

retarded girls out of the wards to use them as whores. Can you imagine it? The stink of whiskey off their breaths and their laughter billowing down the corridor. Do you want the really funny part, Hano? The punch line? They'd bring in little boxes of Smarties for the girls. The two night nurses stayed quiet, they had jobs and families. It could have gone on for ever only some guard, fresh out of training school, reported the whole thing to his superiors and got transferred to the arse of Donegal for his trouble. The only charges were against the publican for after-hours serving. The doctor got the hint or maybe the inspector got in on the act.'

Hano stood back, afraid to touch her hunched-up shoulders. The man on the lawn had finally stopped. He lay face down, motionless.

'When I was eight, Hano, they unveiled a statue to some poor wanker who'd been shot at eighteen by the Black-and-Tans. They'd a pipe band, a priest and altar boys, the usual old shite, the FCA strutting round with empty rifles. The organizing committee had a row of seats on a raised platform. As each of their names were called out I could hear my mother trying to hush Mary Roche as she intoned like the response to a psalm, *He had me! He had me!'*

Katie turned to look at him. Her voice had grown shrill and he saw tears in her eyes.

'So why the fuck do I want to go back? To that fucking pain? Dada waiting in the square for those bastards to give him a day's

work. You know I worked beside him every evening when I finished school. I can see them still arriving in their cars to survey the lines of workers, their eyes watching me stoop in a child's frock and a man's rubber boots to pick potatoes from the muck. I was only eight but I remember the look in their eyes, I knew what it meant. I can still see the leers on the faces of every last bastarding one of them!'

She turned and walked quickly ahead of him, her back hunched as if part of it were broken and all the toughness gone, so that momentarily she looked like the sixteen-year-old child she was.

That first weekend with Shay it was Sunday afternoon before I got home. One event had simply folded into another. I remember lying on the mattress in Shay's flat after Murtagh's in the early hours of Saturday morning, the glowing tips of joints passing back and forth. He had the stereo on and the curtains undrawn so that each number was rolled in the street light filtering through the high windows. I remember the outline of his face in the bed above me, the teeth white as he laughed at some joke, the hands folded behind his head on the pillow as he waited for the joint to return. People arrived and departed from the house all night—the strains of music upstairs, the creak of a bed, a girl's voice on the landing. I don't recall going to sleep. I just woke next morning, my throat raw, my chest on fire from alcohol. Shay was standing beside the two-ringed cooker near the window wearing only his jeans. He lifted the first pancake on to a plate, smeared it with

butter and honey and placed it on the floor beside me.

'We need food badly,' he said. 'Or we'll be rightly destroyed.'

The house was on the corner of a road in Ranelagh. Across the street a greengrocer piled his goods on to the pavement, the fruit gleaming in the sunlight as he stood in his apron to chat with passers-by. The road curved away in a mass of old trees. The pub on the corner was dark, a Lourdes for quiet men seeking the cure. Shay spread the racing pages of the paper on the table in front of us and accepted whispered advice from the two men on stools at the bar. I drank the first pint slowly, savouring its bitterness on my tongue and I thought of home, my mother in a phone box probably phoning the hospitals.

I knew that what I was doing to them was cruel but somehow it seemed necessary. Every hour away gave me a small thrill of power at making them aware of the difference within me. Maybe I was just afraid to go back and face them, but I think I was so mesmerized by Shay as to be incapable of leaving before he told me to go. I wanted to be a part of the world he moved in, feeling more alive in his presence than ever before in my life.

I'd promised myself I'd go home after the last race when we stood on the steps at Leopardstown that afternoon. Then Shay met a friend who had won a share of the tote. Out of obstinacy he'd refused to take a cheque and we waited to escort him back to town by taxi with a plastic bag full of small notes and coins. Again I swore to leave after we had a drink with him, then after we'd eaten and then on the last bus.

The party was on the far side of Rathfarnham, a girl from the office's twenty-first. In the hallway of the house she rented with four others Shay found a bottle of whiskey and one of gin. He emptied them secretly into the basin of punch and went round with a spoon ladling it out. A bonfire blazed in the backgarden. Mick sat on a swing, a six-pack between his legs as he rocked back and forth, the glow of a roll-up sweeping in an are through the air. Figures fluttered in the semi-darkness. I collapsed into a hedge and fell asleep. Shay and Mick must have carried me inside to the living-room floor. I woke next morning stiff as a cloth left out on a line in winter, the blanket placed by Shay still over my shoulders. I found him asleep upstairs, his arm around some girl. He woke and winked, untangling himself discreetly.

Scowling, we wandered through street after street of new homes, completely lost in that new suburb at the foothills of the mountains as remote to us as our own had been to our fathers. The brickwork on each house looked too new, too consciously trying to be old, not to seem like Noddy houses. We grumbled in the clean air, among the brightly painted doors and privet hedges, speaking of the poetry of rusting steel, our favourite old factories, crooked laneways decked with glass and graffiti. Families were climbing into cars for Mass, a dog came proprietorially out to investigate and fled to the sanctuary of his porch when Shay knelt to bark at him. After an hour a bus came. An old tramp sat across from us in the back seat playing a mouth organ and banging his feet in time to the tunes. I knew I finally had to go home. I left

Shay in the city centre looking for his car abandoned on Friday night and nervously got a bus. I tried to rehearse words to myself, remembering the speeches I made to my father in my mind about the old woman. Now the same phrases come back again five years on. This time I swore I'd say them.

But in the end I said little and they said less, though I could see the hurt in their eyes. My young brother told me they had gone to the police earlier that morning. I kept wanting to explain but as soon as I stepped back inside their house I knew that, like trying to talk about the old woman, it was impossible to bridge our worlds.

But this time I think my father wanted to tell me he understood. I had sensed his attitude to me change the first day I returned from work, but to my mother I was still a child. I could hear her scolding him in the kitchen for not being firmer as I lay in my room. I wanted to go down and apologize but by now it had become more than just a weekend. I was punishing them with my silence just for being what they could not help being. A mother and father I loved but no longer belonged to. It was time to enter my own world yet it seemed I couldn't make the break without causing them pain and deliberately denigrating the memories that bound us. What had once united me with my parents now seemed ridiculous—those memories of gardens and jockeybacks. From that Sunday I was like a wound inside their house, festering without air, living only for the evenings when I could take the bus to town.

Because now it was Shay that I lived for. In the weeks that followed I didn't just want to be with him, I wanted to become him. Sometimes it seemed I had almost succeeded. Towards closing time in a pub, if I lowered my head for a moment with his voice still in my ears, I felt physically locked inside his body, seeing through his eyes, sharing his thoughts. At work the girls slagged me for unconsciously imitating his gestures as his key words found their way into my speech. Even Mooney treated me with caution as an appendix of Shay.

Each night spent wandering through bars and parties with him made my home seem more distant. I was split in two, my personality changing each time I opened the front door, the afterglow of being with him reinforcing my isolation in that room where my parents sat trapped before a television. In their company I was sullen, closed in on myself, but once I left I could feel myself change. I would shout and embrace him when he entered the pub and he'd laugh, calming me down like a young puppy. Drink gave me courage to become all my imaginings. I hid behind it, stumbling down alleyways after him, falling, singing, hopping up to ride on his back to shout like a Horse Protestant. I became a jester unleashed, knowing only exhilaration, yet capable of being stilled and made to feel childish by one look of irritation from him.

I longed merely to be allowed to take a blanket and curl up on his floor below the huge bay window. As each evening progressed I'd grow nervy, ordering that last drink for us just a

fraction too late for me to reach the bus stop on time, glancing at the pub clock, dying for him to suggest that I stop over. Sometimes he'd be chatting up a girl or just tired and wouldn't bother and finally I'd have to face the long walk back to my parents' house, with the night oppressive on my shoulders. But more often he would offer me a mattress and I'd casually accept, trying not to sound too excited.

The night would wind leisurely back to his flat, via kebab shops and snooker halls. Shay kept a small axe under the seat of the Triumph Herald and auctioneers' signs and advertising hoardings on quiet corners we passed often vanished in the darkness. Back in the flat he'd chop them up, hold a match to the fire-lighters thrown beneath them, and we'd sit across from each other at the Victorian fireplace, talking over dope and tea about our pasts and our plans. Often the front door banged at two in the morning and Mick would arrive with a group of mates. I'd clear the table while Shay searched for the cards. Dealer's choice for any poker variation; Klondikie, Southern Cross, Ace High, Blind Baseball, Seven- and Five-Card Stud, under a barrage of wisecracks while Ian Dury and Wreckless Eric revolved in the cramped space beneath the sink. If the game flagged he'd throw in a few rounds of In-Betweenies, and we'd dare each other to go for the pot, laughing when somebody lost and had to stoke it.

If dope was plentiful Shay would produce an ornate water pipe from beneath his bed. Slowly it passed along the lips of the gamblers. I'd close my eyes and lean backwards to feel the room

lurch and buckle in my mind, white colours merging into brilliant shades that blazed against my eyelids. I'd open them to arguments about who should go for skins to the twenty-four-hour shop. I'd offer to go and stand blinking in the bright shop, feeling like a criminal as I asked for washing powder and sliced ham as well in an effort not to buy the cigarette papers too conspicuously. The boys would crack up when I returned, clutching the bag of shopping guiltily under my jacket. They'd break for coffee and, still slagging me, hold putting competitions on the carpet with those who were knocked out, betting on those who were left.

Some nights people brought bags of magic mushrooms which Shay fried on a pan with oil and salt despite protests from all. They took time to take effect. On the first night I had forgotten them when the colours began to explode. Shay was sleeping in bed. I lay on the mattress beside the embers of the fire like a man strapped to a galloping horse, feeling the drug like a Martian from a B-movie coming alive in my body. For two days at home I still felt them as I sat before the television with my father, frightened to speak or make a sudden move, paranoid that he would notice the twitching I imagined I had developed.

One night Mick fell asleep lying on the side of the bed. Shay took every poster and cartoon off the wall to collect the Blue-tack on the back. He rolled it into a long sausage stretching from Mick's hands which we joined at his groin up to his mouth. We smeared the tip with mayonnaise and, carrying him gently outside, left him to wake on the front steps. That was the night

Justin Plunkett came by with a slab of black from Morocco smuggled in through the diplomatic bag. He was out of place, deliberately slumming it in his expensive leather jacket among the cluster of jeans and grubby sweat-shirts. He left soon after, blown out by the lads' indifference. On the steps outside he woke Mick.

'Hey, my man, it's not cool, you'll catch cold.'

'Go and fuck yourself!' Mick said and, after thinking about it, added to the retreating back, 'And fuck your politician daddy too', before stumbling back inside. Then, as always, it was back to the cards, money still passing across that table when dawn greyed the window. Finally Shay would kick them out, curl up on his bed, and I'd lie again beside the fire, knowing that in a few hours I would screw up my eyes in the light and walk with him to work, the smell of drink on our breaths, our stomachs empty, our heads sore, our feet stinking and no love for Jesus in our hearts. And that evening I would turn the corner with a shiver of dread, returning to worried looks —my father's sunken smile, my mother's silence, her eyes close to tears—and I'd hate myself for the stab of triumph, as though I could only measure my independence by their growing bewilderment and pain.

The tenant in the room next to Shay's drifted in and out of institutions. Once he had returned home to his native Galway and after two weeks in an asylum there one morning, instead of medication, they gave him thirty pounds and a one-way air ticket to Manchester. Now meals on wheels came once a day to feed

him, harassed social workers calling most evenings. At night we could hear him pacing his flat, perpetually walking in circles. At two o'clock each morning he'd take his dishes out to the front lawn in a basin and wash them kneeling on the grass. He had a key attached with string to some part of his body but rarely managed to find it beneath all his clothes which he wore at once. Most nights when we'd reach the house he'd be standing on the steps, his hands scrambling through his three coats, kicking at the door in desperation.

'Shay!' he'd beseech in his Galway accent. 'Let me in Shay. I'm praying for you Shay, you and your young friend.'

He'd corner us on the step for quarter of an hour, droning on excitedly about how many Masses he'd attended that day and how many miles he had travelled on his free bus pass. Shay claimed that one day there would be plaster-cast statues of him in the glass panels over every Catholic doorway in Dublin, that we should keep the tin-foil containers they left his meals in to sell as future relics. Yet Shay was the only person in that house to rise, at no matter what hour of the morning and with how many curses, to let the shambling figure in. I'd lie on the floor listening to Shay calming him down enough to get him into his room. The other tenants were noises I could rarely put faces to. Their lives were shadows on the landing, the noise of footsteps in the hallway, a locked toilet door, the clink of six packs, a raised television, whispered evacuations on the night before rent day.

In the backyard the landlord had stacked old rotten timbers

of doors and window frames from the four other properties he owned along the street. In times of shortages Shay hacked away at them steadily with his axe. I'd hold a torch, shivering in the night air, and listen to the rhythmical chopping while the lights of a hundred bedsits flickered out across the black, abandoned gardens. That's what I remember most about his small flat, the glowing embers like a bird's nest as I drifted to sleep, and waking, stiff-limbed and hung-over, to the scent of wooden ash.

One night stands out from those first months when everything was so shockingly new. High up in a warren of bedsits, while far below Rathmines was awash with litter and tacky lights. At two in the morning there were still queues in the fast-food shops, music from pirate stations blaring through speakers where girls knifed open pitta bread, flickering shifts of colour carried through windows on to the street from the video screens above the counters. Traffic jammed the narrow roads where the last old ladies lived in crumbling family homes, taxis outside the flats unloading party goers who shrieked and embraced and then quarrelled about splitting the fare. A tramp was slumped on his bench where he slept each night beside the swimming baths, oblivious to the noise around him.

Earlier in the pub beside the canal I had found myself talking all evening to a girl. It had happened spontaneously, we were both drunk and at ease together, laughing in the ruck of bodies against the bar, teasing each other with the anticipation of what might come. Across from us Mick and Shay were joking with some

girls from work. He caught my eye and winked in congratulation.

I cannot remember whose party it was, it was merely a succession of stairs till we reached an attic. Thirty bodies danced in the crowded room where the only light came from candles stuck in bottles. Whoever rented the flat only owned three records which were played over and over. The girl had come with us, she was half-slumped against me as we waltzed until I was almost carrying her. Yet still I raised the bottle we were sharing to her lips, watched the gin dribble down like tears on to her dress. What did she want from me? Would I know what to say to her when I was sober?

But it wasn't really her I was thinking of as we danced. Above all else I wanted Shay to see, I wanted to prove myself. Steps led up to a tiny bedroom with a low, sloping roof. I kicked the door open where a young boy lay unconscious from drink on the bed. I called back to Shay and Mick who took him between them, carrying him down those long flights of stairs to the back garden where they walked him in circles, his bare feet trailing through puddles, till he woke without a clue where he was. The girl had swayed against me so I had to catch her as we watched them carry him past. I led her in and as I turned to lock the door she collapsed without a sound on to the carpeted floor. Light came from a low window divided by a wooden lattice which threw a shadow across the floor in the shape of a crucifix. In a flat across the street I heard a child crying and imagined a young unmarried mother pacing up and down her few feet of space trying to pacify

it before the other tenants complained.

I had to crawl on my knees to find the girl, help her up, manoeuvre her on to the bed. I doubt if either of us got any pleasure. I struggled to stay erect, fumbling in the dark for condoms, trying to undo buttons as people banged on the door; she slept through it, waking occasionally to mumble another man's name. All I kept thinking of was Shay outside, walking with the drunken figure, knowing that for once it was me up here. I came half-heartedly and lay spent in the dark, holding her clumsily in my arms and listening to the commotion on the stairs. I realized I'd forgotten her name, where she worked. I had sobered up but I was scared now, not knowing how to approach her when she woke. I wanted to ask Shay but knew that would make me feel small again in my mind.

When she began to stir I helped her up, got her dressed, hurried her down to the street outside. She wanted to be held a little longer, wanted some words to make sense of what had happened. I wanted to talk to her, ask her to meet me properly again some evening. We walked to the main road, sat on the pavement saying nothing until a taxi approached and I hailed it, helped her into the back and gave the driver a bundle of pound notes and her address.

The police were leaving when I returned, a siren's blue light rinsing the pavement as heads watched from windows along the street. Shay had thought the party had everything except a police raid so he'd phoned them. The host was in the hall, screaming at

Mick and him to get out. Behind them an old black bicycle was unlocked. Shay mounted it and wobbled down the steps on to the footpath. He shouted at me to jump on to the crossbar. The bike swerved as it took my weight, then nearly unbalanced when Mick climbed on to the carrier at the back. The owner ran behind us screaming, as we weaved along the grass verge till we collided with a tree trunk, got up, left the bike there and walked home. Like a puppy with a stick, I waited for some acknowledgement, but neither of them mentioned the girl and I realized that nothing I could have done in that attic would have made Shay think less or more of me. They would have been as cheerfully indifferent if the girl was walking now along the shadowy roads back to find space beside me on the floor of Shay's flat. I thought of the silent taxi driver speeding towards the outer suburbs, of what might have been if I hadn't been afraid it would come between myself and Shay.

What time is it Katie? It stops when you pass into the twilit hangar of the old factory. Intimate afternoons of pills and laughter. Choices are discussed. One girl talks of pregnancy, the independence of a flat and an allowance. Another speaks of England, a bedsit shared with an older sister. Someone repeats stories of council bed-and-breakfasts in Bayswater: Asian children crammed into one room; breakfast a fried egg and a slice of bread in a plastic bag. None speak of the land outside, concrete melting into greenery that stretches away decked in alien foliage. Now all that is real for you begins here. The cold sitting-room

light is forgotten; your uncle's fist clenched around the nun's neat handwriting; a television with the sound turned off; the steel rivets of accusations, his shame at your expulsion. What is his name, can you even remember? Good. What is your own? Even better. One girl disappears with a youth into the gloom where cobwebs hang from girders and torturous water drips at the far end of the cavern. 'Are they?' you ask. 'No,' somebody laughs. 'She has a vampire's teabag in.'

Outside light is glaring. You lurch across the carriageway, past the old cobbler's bypassed by the builders, by the gothic bare-stoned mansion ensnared by Corporation terraces, up the hill of the main street, shivering in the afternoon light. The schoolgirls have been released in trails of bright colours. From outside the clothes shop you watch them come. Who was the girl who laughed among them a few months ago? Another stranger inhabiting your body in limbo. The security guard's uniformed back turns as you slip past into the shop. A voice of metal crackles inside his walkie-talkie as the skirt fits neatly underneath your own. Like arrayed ghosts the clothes hang on racks. An assistant laughs as he chases after her down through the tunnel of clothes and you are gone through the unguarded shop door. Back to twilight, back to warmth, a dozen items laid out on a floor. The young fence lifts them up, hands one back as worthless. He leaves in their place a variegated row of pills, a thin, dung-coloured slab in a tiny plastic bag, a trace of white powder. He retreats from you with patent leather footsteps.

When you speak now it is in a private slang, birthdays and older girls' dole days your only reference points. Your landmarks bordered by a bus to town, a view of sky through corrugated iron, a black road leading inexorably home. One night you sit with two friends by the low carriageway wall where the woodland once stood. A child behind you with his father's axe is chipping away at a young sapling surrounded by mesh. Two youths stop in a stolen Ford, they coax and the three of you climb in, voices singing from the back seat. The last remaining red light is broken. The car shoots on like a released prisoner, but to you, half-stoned, it could be in slow motion. By Mother Plunkett's Cabin it flies, twisting down towards the ancient castle. Overgrown branches whip against both sides of the windscreen, the girls shrieking as the wheels cascade through the flooded hollow. Chained dogs grow frantic inside each farmyard as the car skids against the side gravel and veers sharply right. They slow near the snakes of landing lights laid out around the airport, the flickering reds, the rows of coloured bulbs rising up to meet the belly of the dropping plane. But you have grown quiet now, watching the moon keeping track through the hedgerows. The songs and voices do not penetrate. What nightmare journey are you remembering? What night when he cradled your head in his arms as you cried in the seat; what car that sped under a canopy of branches away from that house; what names of dead parents whom you called out for? If you spoke now how would your voice sound; if you yearned for home which direction would you turn? The car

speeds through a tunnel of trees, the shuttered moonlight between the trunks distorting your features so you look like two different persons.

Hano let her walk ahead of him, silent now like he remembered her from the city. The cliff walk led to a small cove with the ruins of a burnt-out store. Somebody had torn the election posters pasted on the concrete blocks over the windows so that only strips of the candidates' faces were left. Katie paused, then chose a clay path across the deserted golf course towards a hollow crammed with caravans and shabby wooden chalets. Summer was past, the grass grown tall again after the trampling of sandalled feet. They huddled in the porch of a chalet with their backs against the flaking white wall in the morning sunlight. With his finger, Hano traced the name 'Sunnyside' in forlorn black letters on the door.

Katie pressed his hand and slipped around the side. He gazed anxiously back at the flags on the greens as the tinkle of breaking glass came. There were footsteps on wood, rusty bolts dragged back and then he was inside, searching with her for food and warmth, anxiously drawn every few moments to peer through a broken window.

It was musty in the chalet, the spartan furniture riddled with the pinholes of woodworm. They found two blankets, wrapped themselves up and waited for darkness. Both knew how vital it was to get away but were paralysed by fear, reluctant to make a decision as though the night could somehow protect them.

Outside a wind was blowing up. Far off" they heard a tractor and later the noise of music and slogans being broadcast from a speeding van. Towards noon a dog barked as a woman called its name. They rarely spoke until hunger drove them out in the afternoon to plunder the empty caravans. It made little difference what he did now but he still shivered at each smash of glass.

Back under the blankets they shared what little they had found: a crushed bar of chocolate, stale biscuits, a can of beans they opened and ate cold. Katie had discovered a small radio. He hesitated before turning it on, wanting to prolong the time when he could at least pretend he might return to his past. It ranked second in the news bulletin after the report of a low morning turn-out at the polls. The party spokesmen were trying to twist the turn-out to their advantage: the government claimed it proved the people had not wanted an election, while the opposition blamed the level of apathy on disillusionment with the current administration. Both predicted that their supporters would be out in the evening. The longer they waffled on the more Hano allowed himself to hope it had all been some bizarre nightmare.

Then the details of the fire were given, with rhetorical condolences by the same spokesmen. Since morning the government had been turning it into a late campaigning ploy, knowing the opposition wouldn't dare interrupt the saga of one family's grief after two tragedies in a single week. The Junior Minister spoke of being glad of the burden of office at the present time, that the responsibilites of state were shielding his mind

from the awful grief in his heart. When the votes were counted and the country's future secure he would return to his native countryside and mourn among his own. Hano could see Patrick Plunkett in the studio, lips pursed over the microphone, eyes dry as he calculated the chances of bringing home the third seat with his surplus that would ensure they couldn't deny him a full cabinet position next time. The gardai were following a definite line of inquiry but Hano's name was not mentioned on the air. He switched the set off.

'Fuck them,' Katie whispered beside him. 'We'll get away. Tomas will hide you till you decide what to do. He has to be alive. I can feel it. He has to be.'

It could only be a matter of time. When his name was broadcast her uncle would realize. The police would check her old home even though she had never gone back before. But where else did he know outside Dublin? A blurred succession of roadways he had hitched on; the farm his father had come from; the small wood belonging to the old woman. Katie lay calmly beside him like a different person from the one he had known.

'Home?' he said uncertainly.

'That's all Shay ever spoke of,' she said. 'Trying to get home from Europe at the end; I never thought of going home till he began talking about it.'

Shay had simply arrived back saying nothing to him and Hano had never dared to ask. Automatically he made a note to ask Shay now and winced, cursing his memory for letting him forget. He

felt sickened after the voices on the radio.

'Never spoke about it much to me,' he said.

'Coming home, trying to fit back, that sort of thing,' she said. 'If you asked him he'd clam up, stare into space. One night I said to him that when I was stoned I started thinking they'd sucked the air out of Dublin, you know what I mean, and people around me were opening and closing their mouths with nothing coming in, nothing going out.

'It sounded bleeding thick when I said it but he just rolled another cigarette and stared out the window. Then he started talking about nights up in the loading bay of a canning factory in Denmark when he'd look down from the hoist at four in the morning on the workers below, nobody speaking, the limbs just moving automatically. He said he'd start thinking the conveyor belt and the loading machines were alive, that at half-seven they'd stop and the arms of the men would keep on moving back and forth till some cunt remembered to press a switch.'

Those months Shay spent in Europe puzzled Hano like an oppressive weight. He didn't know why they were important, but if he could fathom what happened there he might understand why he was here now. He had the facts that Shay had finally told him on the last night, but they alone could not explain his unease. It hurt to have to ask Katie what he had said as if it somehow gave her possession of part of Shay. He leaned his head against the wall and listened to her.

'Often, you know, I wasn't really sure what the fuck he meant

by things. Once he said you could never go home. It was some old Turk in a hostel filled his head with it.'

Hano listened to her describing Shay's bed with three others in the dormitory, the steel locker, the piece of wall for the pin-ups and photographs, the Yugoslav woman who served them meals on metal plates without a smile. He remembered the easy boredom of the Register's office, the cardboard boxes burning between the blocks as they leaned against the prison wall smoking.

'Anyway, the Turk said you carried home around inside you. It was more real there than when you went home. It didn't change and you weren't changed seeing it.

'It was some week when Shay was broke and spent each night sitting with him. Your man used to scorn the younger Turks for drinking and looking at whores at night. Time went too slow that way he claimed. He'd sleep instead and every hour slept was a victory. He said he was cheating time, making it work for him so he could go home sooner. I told Shay that Beano who did six months in the Joy once said that was what the old lags did as well.

'But no matter what you did this old Turk said, when you went back to your village you were a stranger inside and always would be. You know, Shay'd repeat that like he was bitter, then just look out the window and wait for you to come home, Hano. I don't know what the fuck he was remembering but it was like he'd forgot I was there. Jesus, he'd look so old then, sitting in the shadows, the cigarette burnt away to nothing at his elbow, just

waiting for you. I'd curse you Hano, whatever you knew that kept him apart from me.'

Hano remembered the silence in the kitchen when he'd opened the door, Katie's bitter eyes turning to stare at him. How many lifetimes ago did it seem? Once you left home you could never go back. They lapsed into silence, waiting for darkness, to blunder forth, knowing that nothing lay ahead of them.

At dusk a golfer took them to the main road. He chuckled at Katie's dishevelled hair, taking them for teenage lovers returning to face the music after a night sleeping rough. A van brought them to Balbriggan half an hour before the booths closed. Cars sped down the main street with loudhailers, party workers desperate to get each last vote in.

Hano and Katie queued for chips in The Pop Inn, the crowd joking about the air of frenzy outside. It had been two days since he had eaten anything hot, and now the smell of the boiling grease made his stomach turn. An election agent poked his head in, scanning the faces for somebody. A policeman passed. Hano lowered his head, trying to keep the tremble from his legs. The few late voters were jostled by the canvassers as they made their way to the booths in the town hall. Nobody noticed them as they walked through the square except the punks who sat on the court-house steps with bottles of cider in plastic bags at their feet. They whistled after Katie. Hano grabbed her hand when she seemed about to shout back and steered her off the main street through the terraces of houses by the closed-down hosiery factory. Ornate

plaques high on the wall commemorated medals won at trade fairs in Vienna and Paris before the turn of the century. The names of rock groups were sprayed on the brickwork below. A few boats were tied up at the small harbour, coloured lights reflected on the water from the disco bar on the pier. On the hill the lights of the new estates glowed over empty concrete streets. They passed again into darkness and began walking along the Drogheda road.

A farmer picked them up not far from Gormanstown. He was returning from voting in the city.

'Could you have not voted closer to home?' Hano asked.

'I did, I did,' he chuckled. 'This afternoon. But the brother always gave his number one to Patrick Plunkett and sure there's no reason Plunkett shouldn't have it now just because me brother's dead. Especially this day, the poor man. A fierce fire that was. Ah, but you can be sure the Brits were behind it. And you know why? The Plunketts were the men to stand up to them, like their grandfather did, that's why.'

The booths had closed when they reached Drogheda, the town looking like a dancehall car-park after a holiday weekend. The pubs were jammed. The only faces left on the streets stared from election posters on lamp-posts and leaflets piled like autumn leaves along the ground. There was little traffic. Unloaded trailers of lorries were parked on the quayside beside the crumbling Victorian warehouses. They climbed on to the back of one, stretched on the bare boards and stared at the railway viaduct

spanning the mouth of the Boyne. Katie's head rested tiredly against his shoulder. He stroked her hair, closed his eyes and leaned back against the tail-board. The flashlight came from nowhere. Both knew it was a garda before he spoke.

'Hey! What are you at up there? Come here to me!'

He was running around the side of the trailer before they had jumped to the ground. They heard him call as they dodged through the narrow cobbled streets by the storehouses. The lights of a car turned the corner and bumped down towards them. Hano froze, waiting for the siren to come. Katie pulled him on as the headlights sped past, catching the figure of the garda puffing and slowing down as he cursed their backs.

They didn't stop till they reached the darkness of the Slane road. They rested in the gateway of a field watching the lights of occasional cars heading for the town. When lights came the other way they pressed back against the bushes, afraid to hitch now. To their left the Boyne ran sluggishly towards the sea, silvered occasionally by rocks. They walked on, listening anxiously for the noise of an engine behind them. Twice they pressed themselves flat against the ditch as cars passed, cursing their fear when they were plunged back into darkness in their wake.

They had travelled over a mile before Katie stopped and listened carefully.

'It's a lorry Hano. Fuck it, we'll take a chance.'

The lights were higher off the road, the noise of the engine deeper. Katie placed one foot on the tarmacadam and thumbed

it. It roared past and they had cursed the driver before it skidded to a halt twenty yards in front of them. The driver was in his early thirties. He grinned down at them as they climbed into the warmth of the cab. He was returning to Sligo, having driven since seven the previous evening from Belgium through France and then up from Rosslare. He didn't ask questions, didn't want conversation. He just drove, grey eyes ringed from lack of sleep, smoking cigarette after cigarette as he manoeuvred through the narrow streets of each small town—Slane, Kells, Virginia, Stradone, Ballyhaise, skirting the border beyond Belturbet, before moving down through Ballyconnell. He offered them cigarettes and large bars of continental chocolate, talked about the traffic police on the continent, the rigs of the other drivers waiting in the ferry port. Tomorrow his brother would take the truck to Galway to collect a load for Ostend. He would rest for two days till the truck returned. His wife would still be at home, the two children put to bed. Four years more was all he'd drive. The regulations were stricter now, spies in the cab regulating the hours you were supposed to drive, strikes among dockers, the same hassles always with the customs in England. Where was the profit for a haulier now? Missing the children growing up, feeling a stranger at times in your own home. But the bungalow he'd built from it, that was the best in the district. Last year he'd taken home a fireplace from a shop in Brussels. This time it was a chandelier, the only thing left in the back after unloading in Drogheda. Hano thought of it swaying absurdly

from the ceiling of the container behind them, the young woman waiting at home with the firelight flickering and all the lights turned down. The driver wore a stained blue jumper with no shirt underneath.

'You can't beat it,' he said. 'Going home.'

Katie's eyes stared ahead, her lips moving each time they passed a road sign. The driver pressed a switch on the dashboard and country music began to play. In Dublin with Shay, Hano remembered mocking the corny three-four playing of the Irish country bands. But now, as the headlights swept along the low bushes and stone walls bordering the road far below him and Katie curled warm against his side, the awkward lyrics were magical. Stories of wedding rings and lost love letters, of crossroad meetings, of blankets laid beside rivers. He closed his eyes, never wishing the journey to end. The driver sang along to himself. They passed Bawnboy and Glengevlin in silence and were only miles from Dowra when Katie tugged his hand urgently.

He looked down but she seemed afraid to speak. Her fingers were pulling at his jacket as if trying to tear it off.

'Here,' Hano said uncertainly. The driver stared across at him.

'You sure? It's the arse end of nowhere.'

Katie nodded slowly and the man shrugged his shoulders. He braked and bumped the wheel up against the loose gravel. The air rushed in, freezing when Hano opened the door. Katie jumped and he followed her down. The driver reached under his seat and

threw another large bar of dark chocolate after them.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.