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The Traveller

Mairin Mc Sweeney / MCSMAI001

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**COMPULSORY DECLARATION**

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed by candidate

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

19.05.08

**Abstract – The Traveller**  
**Mairin Mc Sweeney**  
**Batiment F, Le Clos Charmeil, 40 Rue de La Voute,**  
**Veyrier du Lac, 74290, France.**

The concept of the traveller has changed considerably in Irish society over the last fifteen years. Traditionally, the traveller was either the emigrant, forced to leave Ireland to better himself, or the gypsy, marginalized since the time of the Famine (1846). Since the advent of the Celtic Tiger (1994), and the wealth and prosperity it brought, the new traveller is the immigrant or refugee who comes to Ireland because of the opportunities it offers. I also believe that the definition can be broadened to the Irish people themselves, who can learn to travel within their own space by embracing the multitude of cultures, ethnicities, languages and religions that are now a part of the society. In fact, the very definition of ‘Irishness’ is shifting and morphing away from the majority Catholic Celtic nation, to an exciting blend of otherness. We must become travellers by leaving our preconceived notions of ‘the other’ behind, and travelling out of our own personal narrative into the stories of others.

In an attempt to show this shift in ‘Irishness’, and the difficulties it brings, this novel has been structured to echo the great Irish literary work *Ulysses* by James Joyce. While I am not so ludicrous as to compare my effort to Joyce’s, I do not believe that any creative work deserves ‘holy grail’ status. Therefore, while my aims are far more minor than Joyce’s, I felt that shadowing Ulysses would be a perfect way to contemporise the issues that still lie at the heart of the Irish psyche. Just as Joyce set his book on one day, June 16<sup>th</sup> 1904, *The Traveller* is set on June 16<sup>th</sup> 2004 (Centenary Year). In the same way as Joyce used ‘The Odyssey’ as a foundation for a reflection on the Irish society of 1904, *The Traveller* loosely recreates *Ulysses* in contemporary Dublin. Like Joyce, I see this as a way of creating a thread of continuity between the actions of a small group of people in a particular place and the wider historical context, as well as showing the archetypal nature of human relationships.

*The Traveller* does not adhere slavishly to the plotline of *Ulysses*, but builds upon it, creating additional characters and transferring the original themes to a modern context. Where appropriate, I have echoed the style of certain chapters in Joyce’s original, eg. the soliloquy format for the last chapter.

Where Joyce used the central character of Bloom, a Jewish advertising salesman of Hungarian extraction, my central character is Omar, a Muslim journalist of Egyptian descent. They both represent the outsider in their own time, and suffer from being born into a tradition/religion that is alien and threatening to the society in which they live. Neither is a hero in the Homeric sense, but ends up being one through ordinary humanity. In *The Traveller*, the character of Omar is key to exposing the difficulties faced by ‘the stranger’, even one who is half Irish and has grown up in that society. His journey through one day indirectly illuminates the key themes of politics, religion, marginalisation and love, as do the characters of Kinch, Flora, and Bláithín.

## Chapter 1 -Telemachus

Badum, badum, badum. The hollow sound of his companion's heart beat into the cold morning air. *Open your eyes.* Light flooded in, a slow thudding tremor rattling his eardrums. *Remember not to do that again.* The body beside him shifted slightly.

Empty beer bottles littered the floor of the men's toilets. They had slept there after a hard night out, for lack of a better option. Kinch looked out across the bay towards Howth Head. The sky was a burgeoning mass of grey, streaked with electric blue light.

*Meteorological Chaos.* A strip of black cloud deposited its load on the other side of the bay. *Thank God I'm on this side...Northsiders get all the bad luck.* A cigarette pack lay by his side begging to be opened. *Ah the morning fag, can't beat it.* He flicked a match alight, pulled on the short white stick, and pushed the air from his lips with a light groan of pleasure.

Through the small, broken window of the toilet, he could see a crowd gather outside the entrance to Joyce's tower.

'How the hell did Joyce stick living in that, with its big thick walls and windows the size of rat's eyes? I'd go bloody mad.' He kicked the motionless body beside him. 'What do you reckon, Quixote? Like being locked up in a circular stone prison, if you ask me.'

'Que?' A small groan came from the dark-haired young man, and a bloodshot eye opened slowly.

'The Martello tower. You know the one in 'Ulysses.' Joyce lived in it, mad bugger. At least it was because he hadn't a spare penny to rub together. Now they're the in thing and the celebs are queuing up to pay a small bloody fortune. Even bloody Bono lived in the one out in Bray. Like living in a giant Guinness vat, but without the Guinness. Feckin eejits forget why they were built in the first place. You know why?' He kicked his friend again.

'I don't give a sheet Kinch. Shat the fuck up!'

'I'll tell you why.'

His friend groaned and pulled his jacket over his head.

'You know the short, French lad, with the habit of sticking his hand into his jacket,' Kinch eyed his friend for a response. 'Even in Columbia you must have been told about Napoleon, man.'

'I might have been told about him, but I didn't geeve a sheet then and I don't geeve a sheet now.'

Kinch took another drag. 'History's a fuckin nightmare alright. We could all do with waking up from that one.' He blew a perfect ring into the air. 'But, as the bishop said to the prioress, I've started so I'll finish.'

Quixote moaned.

'The shame of it is we could have been invaded by France. The British stuck these giant stone towers all down the East Coast as lookout posts for the big invasion that never came, more's the pity. Just think of it mate: early morning baguettes, pouting sallow-skinned women and crepes oozing with sauce au chocolat. What did we get instead? Greasy bloody chip bags, semi-naked women with beer-bellies, and bread and butter pudding. Quelle bloody Dommage!!' He grabbed the watch from his inside pocket. *Seven forty five, fifteen minutes to the performance, bollox.*

'Quixote, come on, I have to get dressed for the tower. Now!' He chucked the box of cigarettes at his slumbering friend.

'Hijo de puta.' The normally sallow skin looked green with sickness.

‘Fifteen minutes, come on.’ Kinch grabbed his backpack and ran into the cubicle behind.

‘Oh fawk, my head man.’

Kinch wrestled with the right arm of his black suit. The Columbian winced uncomfortably, pulled the black curls from his eyes, and tied them gypsy-like behind his head.

‘Have a jump in the fortyfoot, that’ll cure your head quick enough. Ballbruising stuff!’ Kinch turned back to the cracked, dirty mirror, and glanced at himself through the fragments.

*Need to clean this up.* With the sole of his newly polished shoes he crushed the remnants of a dying cigarette; the tips of his fingers stroked the end of his goatee, sweeping upwards through a crop of dirty blond hair. His pale skin and sharp blue eyes wouldn’t have looked out of place in a Stockholm nightclub. *Not bad for a hard night’s drinking.*

Once he had buttoned the pinstriped waistcoat and stuffed the nose rag in his top lapel, he gazed across the bay. The morning ferry crossed the horizon towards Dun Laoghaire. A golden light crept under the clouds like the fingers of an invisible God. Kinch placed the grey Latin Quarter hat on his head and stepped out into the light. His wrecked-looking friend stripped to his boxers, raced past him, and leapt into the black, cold water.

‘Hijo de Puta Madre, Agggghhhh!’ The Columbian thrashed wildly in the water.

‘Jesus, I was only kidding you mad bastard!’ said Kinch, drawing breath through his clenched teeth.

The crowd had moved to the shore wall to see what all the commotion was about.

‘No worries, ladies and gentleman, just a hypothermic drowning Columbian. An everyday sight around the Forty-Foot these days.’ He tipped his hat towards the assembled crowd.

‘Conjo, it’s like melted snow in here.’

‘In Nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti, Amen.’ Kinch made the sign of the cross over the shivering body in the water beneath him. ‘Gotta go, don’t die on me you mad bastard.’ He picked up his ash plant – a tiny sprig growing from seeds he had planted weeks before – and climbed the ramp towards the Tower entrance. The crowd squeezed their way through the door of the granite tower.

An ageing American woman pointed a plump finger and screamed ‘Look, it’s Dedalus!’

‘Stephen at your service, madam.’ His body stiffened and the ghost of Dedalus stepped inside.

‘Kinch ahoy!’ came the gravelled voice from deep inside the tower.

‘I’m coming,’ Stephen said, turning.

A thin moustached man sat behind the desk at the entrance to the Tower. He picked at his teeth with the top of his pen, and nodded at the crowd as they exited the performance.

‘Hey John, nearly forgot my pay check mate. Should be under the desk with my name on it.’

‘Sure thing Kinch, hang on a minute.’ He emptied the contents of the drawer on the desk: scrawled on post-its, several bic pens, a half-eaten Mars bar, and a deodorant stick. ‘Nope, doesn’t seem to be. Are you sure?’ His resemblance to Joyce combined studied effort, and genetic fortune.

‘Fuck, it’s the third time I asked Mr. Lacey for the cheque, and he keeps putting me off, the bastard.’ Kinch banged his right hand on the oak desk.

‘Sorry.’

'It's not your fault, but does the bastard not realise I'm a starving actor? Does he think I get this bony arse from an abundance of riches?' He slapped his behind with vigour.

'Ah, you know what they're like Kinch. It's all about the bottom line nowadays.'

'Christ almighty this country is reeking with dough and yet they're starving us poor creative bastards.' The crowd squeezed past him, and averted their eyes.

'Guess that was never any different before. Joyce wasn't exactly rolling in it,'

'Well, he could afford to live here, amongst the Yaw brigade for God's sake.' The American lady Kinch had spoken to passed by.

She smiled clearly eager for a chat. 'Great performance, you really entered the character.'

'Why thank you Madam, glad to oblige,' he replied in Dedalus speak.

'I couldn't help overhearing your conversation son, and I just wondered if I could give you a few dollars, as a kind of tip, I mean.' She pushed a ten-euro note his direction.

He stared at the note in her hand. 'That is most kind of you, but I don't know if I should.'

'I insist,' she replied, slipping the note inside his lapel pocket, 'and actually I was thinking you might be able to do me a favour?' She rubbed his right arm and moved closer to him.

Her smell reminded him of the bargain perfume counter in Roches Stores. The brightly coloured clothes were clearly labelled, although they sat on her plump frame uneasily.

'I'll see what I can do,' Kinch replied. He eyed the exit door, and moved towards it as subtly as he could manage.

'It's my grandson's birthday party today. He's twelve, Ennis, where are you love?' she drawled.

The child happily ignored her, occupied with trying to pry Joyce's Death mask from the wall.

John leapt the desk in one movement. 'Young man don't touch that, for God's sake,' The child's neck was the perfect size for his long-fingered hand.

'Aw Gran, this man is hurting me.'

'Don't be silly Ennis, come over here and meet this nice young man who just performed for us.' John deposited the child beside his grandmother, who was too busy smiling at Kinch to notice the boy's discomfort.

'Hi.' The floppy haired kid groaned audibly.

Kinch cocked his hat at the boy with a wink, as the proud Grandmother hooked the child's head under her ample right arm, and proceeded to strangle him with affection.

'Isn't he gorgeous?'

Kinch squeezed out an uneasy smile.

'We've hired out a place in the city centre for a party for this fellow later and there are going to be jugglers and magicians and all sorts of fun stuff. It'll be great, won't it Ennis?' The barely breathing child nodded his head, unable to speak.

'Anyway, there'll be loads of us adults as well so I thought since it's Bloomsday and all, that it'd be so great if you could come and perform a little bit of the book for us. I just love this dressing up as the characters. It's so darling. My Jimmy there is obsessive about the book. To be honest, I tried to read the thing and got a flaming headache, but every sixteenth of June, Jimmy dresses me up like Molly, and we traipse down to the Irish club near us in Houston and booze up a storm. That's the way I like literature, off the page.'

Kinch smiled weakly. 'Sounds great.'

‘Could you bring one of the others, Mulligan or Bloom or someone? I’d pay you well, trust me.’ She pinched his waist and winked as though her eye would fall out.

‘Ehm, well I’m very busy all day as you can well imagine.’ He faltered to allow her time to break in,

‘Please, please, how much do you want? Name your price.’ A Guess bag hung from her shoulder, and she pulled out a bulging wallet.

‘No, but really I only have about two hours off today between 3.00 p.m. and 5.00 p.m.,’ he argued.

‘Well, that’s perfect then. That’s exactly when the party is. We’ve hired out a Café called... what is it again Ennis?’ She released the choking boy.

‘Munchies Gran.’ The child rubbed his neck and moved towards the door at speed.

‘How about fifty dollars an hour or pounds or euros or whatever it is? Oh My God, Jimmy is going to love this!’ Her voice rose two octaves with excitement, and Kinch smiled weakly, wondering at the state of affairs that had brought him to this.

‘Madam, it’s a deal.’ *Well, fifty quid is fifty quid.*

‘I’m Kathleen Kelly.’ She took Kinch’s hand, and squeezed it. He fought back the pain, and smiled at her through clenched teeth. ‘Here’s my card if you need to give us a call.’

She jumped around the Museum, thrilled with her new acquisition.

‘Jimmy, Jimmy, the young man is going to perform for us, isn’t that great?’ The weary looking man tore himself away from Joyce’s writing desk. ‘Great dear.’

Kinch waved a goodbye. ‘Jesus, John, this is what I’ve become. An acting whore, for every eejit who can pay enough. Shoot me now.’ He put two fingers to his temple and pulled the imaginary trigger.

‘Ah sure, you’d be mad not to take the work when it comes your way, although I’m not sure I like the look of that brat. Good luck with that!’

Kinch picked up the ash plant. ‘Yep, well better get on with it. Still have a trillion more performances to pack into this day. At least I got fed during that one. Mulligan makes a damn good pot of tea. Where is the bastard? He raced out of here before I had a chance to chat to him.’

‘Ah you know Frank, stressed out about inhabiting the character correctly. Anyway, I think he’s on in one of the Bloom scenes in the city in the next hour or two.’ John continued to pick his teeth, this time with the edge of his fingernails.

‘Oh yeah, Christ better get going myself. Bloody plant will drive me mental. So much for method acting! *The cock crew / The sky was blue: / The bells in heaven / Were striking eleven / Tis time for this poor soul / To go to heavn ...* See ya mate.’ He tipped his hat to the laughing John.

‘Watch out for the hollybush friend, full of pricks,’ replied John, exploding in a convulsion of laughter.

‘Yeah, full of pricks John, nice one.’ He followed the last of the crowd out the door into the sunlight.

A shivering Quixote sat perched on the edge of his battered Honda fifty.

‘Good man yourself, ready and waiting,’ said Kinch, throwing his thumb in the air.

‘Conjo, I’m bladdy freezing.’ Quixote wrapped his arms around himself, and shivered wildly.

‘Well, that’s what you get for listening to me, mate,’ replied Kinch ‘Should know better. Anyway, let’s hit the road. Want to meet up with Bláithín before I have to rush to Sandymount Strand.’

‘How’re we going to both fit on the bike with that plant man?’ asked the Columbian.

‘Good ol Rozinante can take us all no bother.’ Kinch slapped the seat of the bike with whore-warming enthusiasm.

‘Ok, but where is she, because I have to go busking in town? Need some dineros, man.’

‘I’m meeting her for a coffee in Bewley’s on Grafton Street. Feck it. I have to tell her something she won’t like.’ Kinch threw his leg over the Honda and clutched his plant like a prized pet.

‘Wha conjo, can’t hear you?’ questioned the helmeted Columbian.

‘Nothin man, Grafton St, GRAFTON ST! OK?’ he shouted into the back of the helmet. Quixote stuck his thumb in the air and took off.

They whizzed through the streets of Dun Laoghaire. Hordes of people busily exercised the length of the West pier.

*What was it Joyce had called it again? Oh Yeah, a disappointed bridge. A large lump of rock projecting out into the sea; no destination, incomplete.* How oddly appropriate that seemed to his undetermined path through life. The morning ferry had just arrived in from Holyhead and a steady flow of yellow reg cars were weaving their way out of the port. *The British invasion three times daily: like an endlessly repeating loop of history. At least we can send them back with empty pockets. Reparation of a kind.*

They travelled over a speed bump. A fist of dry earth from the plant catapulted itself at speed all over Kinch’s black suit. *Great! A mucky Dedalus; well I suppose he never washed, but this is taking it a bit too far.* Quixote began singing ‘The Rocky Road to Dublin’ with a guttural Latino curl. Kinch laughed loudly, joining in, as they negotiated a further series of speed bumps through the Blackrock suburbs. Their laughter faded into the traffic noise. *Can’t believe a Columbian knows ‘The Rocky Road’ word for word. Mad. How far we’ve come! Like a river flowing back to the source; the sea water on its back; the Irish return with strangers in their arms. A country that never persecuted the Jews because we never let them in. Hah! Watch out for the Celtic Tigers as the other animals are let into the cage. How predictable we humans are the world over. Still we’re not the worst.* They stopped suddenly at the Hospital lights. ‘Cead Mile Fáilte,’ Kinch sang at an unsuspecting Romanian woman. With a look of suspicion, she pushed a Big Issue magazine in his face. He scrambled with his free hand to dig a euro from his left pocket. The woman coaxed his efforts with a look of urgency. The lights changed and Quixote took off at speed, the desperate woman chasing in vain.

‘Jesus, Quixote, I was trying to buy a magazine,’ Kinch screamed through the speeding air.

‘What man, what, can’t hear a thing through dees helmet?’ replied the Columbian. Kinch didn’t even bother replying. He continued to clutch the plant in his right hand. *Well, at least I tried.*

Quixote stopped the bike by the Stephen’s Green Arch, and Kinch hopped off.

‘Thanks a million man, good luck with the busking. Where will you be? Maybe I can catch up with you later.’ He flicked his blond hair out of his eyes.

‘Sure conjo, How bout The Barge? 12.30 p.m. Great for lunch by the canal.’ The traffic flooded past and Quixote wove his way back into the flow.

Kinch gave him the thumbs up, and crossed the road to fight his way through the throngs of shoppers weaving their way up Grafton Street. A crowd had gathered around a tall lanky comedian with glasses, and a protruding nose. A small microphone strapped to his ear, he strutted gamely through the crowd, eyeballing potential victims. *It’s McSavage doing his terrifying the masses thing again, good man himself. Gas man.* ‘There’s England like a great stalking beast bent over the small cowering figure of Ireland,’ declared the lanky comedian, as he proceeded to grab the imaginary figure of Ireland, and hump her with dirty enthusiasm. Kinch laughed. The slightly uncomfortable crowd rippled with laughter. He weaved his way through the bodies and imagined the crowd to be a giant snake slithering its way through the curving street. It moved silently through the tall buildings, its great dappled skin shining in the sunlight. One of the suit-and-tie brigade passed him, his mobile phones stuck to his ear. ‘Listen Charles, just racing to meet the wife. Bloody wedding anniversary. I’ll have to chat to her for five minutes to keep her happy and then I’ll call you back. Don’t let that cunt O’Brien into the bidding, do you hear me?’ The well dressed man bumped into Kinch’s right side and knocked some more dirt from the worse for wear plant. The man continued on, bashing his way through the crowd like a blinded bull. Kinch narrowed his eyes in contempt. *Cunt is right, St. Patrick didn’t manage to banish all the snakes from Irish shores.*

The usual clutch of people stood under the clock outside Bewleys waiting for their boyfriend or their psychiatrist or god knows who else. He looked up at the old Victorian clock. *10.00 a.m. Shit, don’t have much time.* The large glass door shone in the sunlight as he passed through it, and into the dark back room. His eyes moved around the space, over the wooden tables, past the wine-velvet seating and unlit fireplace. She was sitting under one of the larger stained glass windows at the back, staring at a piece of paper. Dressed in a vintage black bodice, a flowing russet skirt, and high heeled lace up boots; she looked every inch the part. Her deep black hair fell in unruly strands from the flowered clasp on the top of her head. *Damn, there she is, gotta do it, damn!* She scanned the room, her blue eyes falling on Kinch as he lifted his hand to catch her attention. The pixie-like face lit with a smile. He didn’t smile back. A current of confusion darted through his body, and he moved towards her slowly.

‘Hey, how’s the crack?’ He placed the ash-plant on the seat beside him.

‘Oh alright, a bit sick of the smell of kidney. Puke.’

‘Can imagine.’ He pulled a cigarette from the pack in his pocket, and knocked it on the edge of the table. ‘Did the house scene go ok?’

‘Didn’t have much to do in this one really. It’s the soliloquy that’s terrifying me. I’ve practised it a million times and I’m still shitless,’ she replied. ‘I must be mad to have taken it on.’

‘You’ll be great. You were made to play Molly.’

‘Are you planning to light that or just abuse it?’

‘Very funny, Listen Bláithín I...’

She pointed at the plant. ‘What the fuck are you doing with that?’

‘It’s the ash-plant, you know.. he carries it around with him..in the book.’

She scrunched up her face in disbelief. ‘Wha? You’re joking right?’

Kinch looked at her smiling face. *God, this is going to be more difficult than I thought.*

‘What do you mean? Listen Bláith..’

‘You’re actually serious. Jesus, you can be such an eejit. An ash-plant’s a walking stick babes, not a bloody plant, least I think so. You haven’t even read the bloody thing have you?’ she asked.

‘Shite, yeah of course I have, I’m sure you’re wrong, but for fecks sake it’s bloody impossible to figure out what’s happening half the time. Are you telling me I’m wearing half this bloody thing for no reason?’ He pointed to the stains on his suit.

Bláithín clutched the sides of the table, choking on her egg with laughter. ‘God you’re gas babes. That’s why I love you.’ She stroked him affectionately on the cheek, and he felt his skin harden underneath her touch.

A group of eager tourists had gathered at the table beside them, pointing and whispering. Kinch played with his cigarette box, cursing the smoking ban that denied him the immediate stress relief of a good old-fashioned rush of nicotine.

‘Hey babe, it’s like being a couple of film stars.’ She leant over the table and took his hand. He pulled it hand away, and began to play with the egg on her plate.

She sat backwards slowly. ‘What’s the matter Kinch? You’re acting a bit funny.’

‘Listen, I know it isn’t a good time for this Bláithín, but well, I just can’t help it. How do you even say this without sounding like a tosser?’

‘Say what?’ she asked.

‘Well, how about, I think I need some space, or maybe we should take a break, or perhaps the overused, I just don’t think we’re right for each other. Jesus, I’m sorry, I just don’t know how to do this.’

The tea travelled up her nose and she began to choke. ‘Wha? I don’t understand, but I thought we were getting on great.’

‘Well, I know we’re great friends and all, but Jesus, I’m bored Bláithín. I just need a bit more,’ he whispered.

‘A bit more,’ her voice rising, ‘Would that be a bit more affection, or a bit more sex, or a bit more money, or a bit more bloody love, because you know, I bloody well gave it all away to you if you haven’t noticed. Let me check, any extra love lying around?’ She emptied the contents of her pockets on the table with a bang. ‘Nope, all given away to Brian bloody Kinch Nolan by the looks of things!’

‘Christ, Bláith, get a grip,’ he whispered, gesturing for her to sit down. ‘The whole place is staring at us.’

‘Great, they probably think it’s the lost chapter of Ulysses, bloody eejits.’ She waved her arms around her body in a gathering gesture. ‘Yep, the lost chapter folks performed for you for free today, and in the title roll of lying, scheming, bastard is the great Brian Kinch Nolan!’

Kinch took his jacket from the back of the chair. ‘Christ, I’ve had enough. Can you see why I’m leaving you now, you bloody lunatic?’

‘Is that part of it? Is that part of the book?’ questioned an excited group of young Americans sitting near the fireplace.

‘Yes indeed, ‘The Phaeacian Games,’ the All’s Fair in Love and War scene,’ Bláithín replied at the top of her voice. Kinch picked up his hat, and started to move for the door.

‘Kinch, you bastard, you forgot something?’

He turned back to see the plant hurtling his direction at speed. He ducked and it hit the empty fireplace behind him. The Americans scattered wildly. Bláithín rubbed her hands, picked up her shawl, and walked out the front door with determination.

## Chapter 2 - Nestor

As soon as he stepped into the ebb and flow of the crowd, his body slumped heavily and he felt slightly faint. *What the fuck just happened? Need to find Quixote, bollox, need a drink.* He turned onto Wicklow Street. A band was playing the usual Indie Rock fare in the corner of Tower Records. The drumbeat thudded through his brain like lead through glass. *Jesus, they're shite.*

'Don't leave the day job!' he shouted through the door to a puzzled looking group of teenagers, thrashing wildly at the back of the shop. He approached the International Bar corner, and noticed that Quixote was not in his usual spot. *Damn, where's the bugger when I need him?* He lit another badly needed cigarette, and scanned the street. His eye caught the glinting sign above the Butler's Café across the road. 'Philip Lacey, Art Promotions.' *Might as well see if the tight bastard has my money. This day is shaping up badly enough as it is.* Sucking on his cigarette he climbed the steep stairs. *Patron of the Arts my arse. All he gives a damn about are his appearances on the Late Late Show.*

The dyed blonde behind the desk was putting the finishing touches to her scarlet nail polish.

'Yes, hi would Mr. Lacey be around by any chance?' he asked.

'Wha? Yeah, sorry just give me a second,' finishing off her last two digits carefully.

'Tough job.'

'Wha? No not really. Just a minute, the phone's ringing.' She dipped her head in a disturbingly unattractive manner, placed the loudly ringing cordless between the base of her palms, and pressed the answer button with her nose. 'Mr. Philip Lacey's office. How can I help you?' – strangulating the vowels in an effort to impress. *I'm not the only thing the mean bastard is scrimping on around here.* She dismissed the person on the line, and manoeuvred the phone back into the cradle with her head.

'Impressive talent,' he offered with a sly smile.

'Tanks, yeah. I've bin workin on me phone voice.'

'Very nice, yeah, clearly you were made for this job,'

She batted her eyelids furiously, and adjusted her top downwards. 'Gee tanks, Ehm, sorry wha is your name again?'

'Stephen, Stephen Dedalus,' he replied.

'Right Steve, I'll just get Mr. Lacey for you.' *Must try "Adolf Hitler" the next time. Nothing, not a glimmer.*

Lacey sat in a black leather swivel chair: his feet resting on the small locker by his desk.

'Ah, Kinch, how the hell are you my lad? Looking good in all that black, I must say.'

The nasally tones of his faux-british accent grated on Kinch's nerves. 'Very much the part. Yes indeed.'

Kinch smiled. *It's far from Oxford you were raised you posh bollox.*

'Glad you approve Mr. Lacey, and about that...'

'Sit down, sit down lad, for God's sake. You're going to spend enough of this day on your feet.' Lacey guided him forcefully into the hard wooden chair, and grabbed the hat off his head.

'Quite a hat. Love the old style, don't you? So much more civilised. Don't know what the youngsters are wearing nowadays. My nephew goes around with holes deliberately put into his trousers, and he wears the blasted things around the rim of his behind. No style about

nowadays. All those outside influences from across the Atlantic, and God knows where else, don't you think?'

'Well, I don't really know, but ...'

'Yes, yes, I'm sure you agree. Not like Joyce's time. The country is invaded for Godsakes. Hard to tell who's who nowadays.'

'At least we invited the invaders in this time,' interjected Kinch, determined to interrupt the monologue.

'Poppycock, No mind of our own anymore lad, I'm telling you.'

'Indeed you are. Ehm, Mr. Lacey, you wouldn't have that cheque for me, would you?' he asked gently. *Overinflated windbag.*

'Of course my boy, I'm happy to hand out money where money is due.' He walked to the filing cabinet and pulled an envelope from the top drawer. 'Once you've worked for it you've earned it. Not like the wasters begging in the streets, and stuffing up our dole queues.'

'But the country is at near full employment, Mr Lacey! And anyway, the bloody Irish are too fussy to do menial labour now.'

'Maybe so, but not for long. Look at Germany for God's sake. Rightly stuffed after dropping that wall. I'm telling you, it does nobody any good to weaken borders. Destroys cultures and don't tell me you're not terrified by the state of the South Circular Road with all those Arabs up to God knows what! New York first. God knows when the rest of us are going to get smashed into when we least expect it.' He handed the envelope to Kinch. 'Prevention, nine tenths of the law and all that. We'll deserve it otherwise, I tell you. Turning a blind eye never did anyone any good.'

'Christ wouldn't agree,' Kinch said.

He raised the glasses off the bridge of his nose and stared. 'I never took you for a believer, lad.'

'I believe in what's out there on that street, the dark and light of it all.'

'Ah, the ease of vaguery. Need more than that, my boy, need structure to hold it all together.'

*Eejit, Bloody eejit!* 'You've been around longer than I have, Mr Lacey. No doubt you know better.' He stepped backwards turning to face the door.

'How's that girlfriend of yours? Acting her part today as well, fair dues?'

*Bollox, will I never get out of here?* 'Actually, she's not my girlfriend anymore but I'm sure she's fine, need to go...'

'Sorry to hear that my friend. A fine filly. Mutual I hope?'

'Not exactly. I'm sorry, I need to get to the Strand, Mr. Lacey, must go.' He grabbed the door handle with determination.

'Don't mind those women, lad. They are the downfall of us all.' Lacey bent to pick up a newspaper from the desk .

'I nearly forgot, you still do a bit of writing for *The Irish Independent*, don't you?' He waved the paper in Kinch's face.

'Yes, from time to time, why?'

'You wouldn't drop this letter in for me lad, would you? It's to the Editor. Musn't keep my thoughts to myself, I feel. Better to get out there and voice them. Might do some good you know.'

Kinch pushed the letter into his right pocket. 'I'll try, but today is busy.'

‘That’ll do, my boy. Got to fight together to preserve this culture. Take out the sword and give it a whirl,’ mock jousting with the air.

*For Ulster will fight And Ulster will be right.* ‘Go raibh maith agat agus go mbeidh bron agus ocras i do theach fein,’ Kinch said boldly.

‘Got the first part, lad, but what was that second bit? Rusty at the Gaelic.’

‘God, Mary and Jesus be with you,’ Kinch replied.

‘Fine thought, fine thought my lad indeed. Good morning to you,’ moving back to his chair.

‘Good morning Mr. Lacey.’ Kinch tipped his hat downwards, and left the building at speed, much to the dismay of the preening blonde at the door.

University of Cape Town

### Chapter 3 - Bláithín

She hadn't been expecting that! His moods had shifted a lot these days. It was to be expected with the anniversary of his Mother's death; anyone could understand that. Bláithín had done her best to soothe the deadening pain of such an unresolved ending. After all, she had encouraged him to go and see a shrink, and that had helped a lot. She lit a badly needed cigarette and sat by the edge of the Molly Malone statue to soak up whatever relief it could give her.

*Could do with something stronger. Gotta find Quixote. Might sort me out.* A young man in torn jeans and a tie-dye t-shirt, sat in front of her, drawing a portrait in coloured chalk on the path. Two or three people lingered around him, obviously with nothing better to do than gawk at the creative efforts of someone who was down on their luck. He worked diligently from the portrait of a handsome middle-aged woman that lay beside him, capturing the haunted shadows that oozed from her dark green eyes. Bláithín sat down at the Molly Malone statue beside him. 'Afro Celt Sound System,' played on the stereo beside him. Bláithín admired the talent that could imitate another's creation to such perfection. It was the type of craft that lay in the shadows of recognition because it wasn't born from 'original' thought. *Such bullshit* she thought, *we're all the spawn of another's moment*, throwing the man a euro into the hat that lay beside her.

The portrait reminded her of Kinch's Mother. She had been a beautiful woman. Great fun to be around, but her excessively religious nature freaked Bláithín out. Still, she didn't quite understand why Kinch had to be so cruel in the end, refusing to pray by his Mother's bed. Even Bláithín, a confirmed heathen, would have given in to that one. That last day was hell, his Mother's gasping breaths as she begged him; his stony composure on the subject. He could never forgive himself for the stress it caused her in the end. Bláithín had done her best to console him. She didn't deserve this, to be cast aside just when he was getting his feet back on the ground. It was cruel, unfair; when she had done so much. She had held him sobbing through the whole sorry mess for God's sake; put aside her own priorities just to pull him through it all; it just wasn't bloody fair. The tears began to drip over her pale and freckled complexion, as she pulled clumps of her deep auburn hair around her like a protective shield. *Shit, everyone's watching. Why does he always have to make me lose it in public?* The old straw shopping basket she had found in the second hand shop on Liffey Street was beginning to bug her. *How the hell did they carry something this big around with them all the time?* Still she was in character and she had to look the part. Her head was pounding. *Must have been the joints from last night. Fuck it, I really need a line.*

The artist turned to look at her. 'You look a little worse for wear. Everything Ok?'

'Yeah, it's nothing.'

'Well, if you're sure?'

'Thanks.' She wiped her eyes with her sleeve, and forced a weak smile.

'I like your painting. I don't know how you can copy that so perfectly, amazing.'

'Years of practice, sure anyone could do it, just requires a sharp eye and lots of bloody patience,' he replied

'Well I think it's brilliant. By the way, who's the woman in the painting? She reminds me of someone,'

'It's Lady Lavery or Caitlín Ni Houlihan depending on who you talk to...have you heard of them?' he asked

‘I think so. Was it something to do with our old currency or something?’ She struggled to drag a lost scrap of historical fact from her scrambled brain.

‘Yeah, spot on. This was the original painting for our old bank notes, done by her husband, John Lavery...picked it up off the Net...cracks me up that no-one even remembers it now...short memories around here.’ *Heavy Dublin accent* she thought to herself, *but cute in a down and dirty kind of way.*

‘Shit, it’s mad alright. I’ve seen photos of the notes but they were changed before I was born, right?’

‘Yeah, early eighties or something. I have a stack of them at home that my Dad hung onto. I guess I’m a nerd like him cos I got a bit fascinated by the woman on the note. It turns out that she was American. Can you believe it? It’s so fuckin ironic it cracks me up.’ He had a softness in his voice that belied the lank greasy hair and stubbly face. But there was something about him – the smile maybe, his brown eyes – yes, definitely attractive.

‘No kidding. Who was the American?’ she asked, her interest boosted by his enthusiasm.

‘Lady Hazel Lavery. Have a bit of an obsession about her I do. A real beauty. Married to the most famous portrait artist of the time. Apparently she was a really wild one – had loads of lovers, my kind of woman.’ He smiled broadly, and cocked an eyebrow mischievously.

‘Bit of a slut, was she?’

‘Hah, suppose so...like I said, my kind of woman.’

‘An American slut pretending to be an Irish heroine on our currency. It says it all really.’

‘Yeah, so fuckin Irish.’

‘Thanks for cheering me up man,’ she said. ‘It’s been a rough day so far. Murdering the fags for a bit of solace.’

‘Yeah, I can see that. Listen if you fancy something stronger I have some of the white stuff in my gaff. Need a break from this shite anyway.’ He moved closer to her and lowered his voice. She shuffled nervously, a little afraid of this sudden leap in confidentiality. The urge to numb away the sadness was there but she didn’t know this guy – could be dodgy as fuck. Still, it was what she really needed. *Fuck it, fuck it, I can’t.*

‘Really, I wouldn’t mind...it’s a bit early man. Feel like shit, but no thanks anyway,’ she replied.

‘Well, if you change your mind, here’s my number.’ He handed her a self-made business card. ‘Inspiration Portraits – that’s me business, normally like.’ The gold print on the card spelt out an address in Cabra.

‘Well, you never know. Gotta head, nice meeting you though. By the way I’m, Bláithín.’ She stuck out her hand for the proverbial shake.

‘Yeah, Paul, see you round.’

She walked away, and her phone beeped a message. Her Mother was trying to get a hold of her again to perform at her Father’s function that evening. She’d had it up to here trying to explain to the woman that she wasn’t a performing puppet for her Father’s politician cronies. Their understanding of Ulysses probably went no further than attempted buyouts of the aforementioned B&I Ferry boat to Holyhead, or a double yankee on the Gold Cup horse of the same name. She’d learnt her lesson when she found herself auctioned off at one of those glitzy fund-raising events in The Burlington Hotel. She ended up having to go on a date with a balding, pot-bellied associate of her Father’s from Texas, whose idea of charm was to bring her to Bordello’s Strip club, ply her with copious amounts of Moet & Chandon, and encourage her to lap-dance with an

unfortunate Lithuanian stripper. No bloody thanks! Anyway, it was mortifying having anything to do with her Dad these days. All the Tribunal stuff he was caught up in made her blood run cold. She didn't know what to believe.

She turned left towards Nassau Street, and stepped into the road to cross towards Trinity College. An arm grabbed the neck of her jacket and pulled her backwards. A double-decker bus whizzed past the end of her feet, as she fell in a heap of legs and arms on the path in front of Oasis.

'Jesus, that was close!' muttered the dark-skinned young man.

'Hanan, what the fuck just happened?' she asked, her sharp blue eyes alive with fright.

'God girl, are you suicidal today or what?'

'I..I don't know..sorry?'

'That bus was coming straight for you for God's sake!' He lifted them both off the ground.

'God, sorry Hanan, I'm a mess at the moment, I'm not feeling great.'

'Just as well you can be spotted a mile off in that get-up. Looking very sexy in the lace-up boots and that corset...Oooohhhh!!' He glanced at her from head to toe with a look that made her ears glow and her body tingle.

'Yeah well, I feel like a train-wreck, but thanks all the same.'

He picked up his bag. 'No prob. Are you heading over to the College?'

'Yeah. Is Sarah there? I need to tell her something.'

'I was just about to meet her at the Coffee Dock. She's got some Med-Action, students against-the-world-of-oppressors type of thing going on. I know she has to head in the next fifteen minutes.'

'Shit, let's run, need to catch her.' They crossed the street towards the Nassau Street entrance of Trinity College.

'These Med students make me feel like a waster.'

'That's because you are a waster Hanan. Then again, so am I, prancing around in this gear like a plonker,' she replied.

'But we're a charming pair of wasters, and that's much more fun.' He smiled at her warmly, his stare lasting a fraction longer than was comfortable. She didn't really find him attractive. His oval face had strongly marked features that didn't seem to fit his calm nature, and his black hair was cut to within a millimetre of its life, a style that clashed with her hippy tendencies, but his eyes were a shining hazel, and his smile broad, inviting. It struck a soft chord of comfort within her when she bothered to notice.

They fought their way through the flow of students exiting the glass doors of the Arts building. The wall was plastered with a mish-mash of posters for visiting bands, affirmative action groups, student organisations and visiting lecturers. One poster caught her eye: Low, the American Mormon rock group, was playing in Christ Church Cathedral that night. Kinch loved them, and he'd promised to bring her as an early birthday present. *So much for that now.* She was pissed off because she really wanted to see them, but he'd be there and she'd probably beat the shit out of him if she saw him again today. *Bollox.* The tears began to swell behind her eyes. *He's not worth it, not worth it.*

'Are you ok Bláithín?' Hanan touched her gently on the elbow.

She knew the one sure answer to shut up a questioning man. 'Fine, don't worry, just woman's stuff, you know.'

‘Right, right,’ he replied. ‘There’s Sarah with her crew... Hey hun,’ he shouted over the buzz of students.

They picked their way through the crowd to the group of four who were huddled around a lap-top exclaiming over the design of a would-be website for their would-be action group.

‘Hi lads, come over and look at this. It’s like *fab!*’ Sarah sat, perfectly groomed as always, in the middle of the group, holding court. The perfectly tight jeans wrapped around her perfectly slim figure like a skin; hair ramrod straight, and glowing in the sunlight. Her eyes were a type of magazine blue that glowed scarily, like they had been touched up by a Vogue cover artist. Bláithín loved her despite their obvious differences.

She knew this crowd a little. Not a bad lot: an odd assortment of Trinity heads from all over, brought together by Medicine and ‘the cause’ of looking after the down at heel. Admirable though this was she was always suspicious of extremes of any kind, even the liberal kind. Beside Sarah sat Will: every inch the Rugby boy. He usually dressed in striped Polo shirts, and paraded around campus with some preening blond attached to his arm. His current flavour of the month, Portia, sat on his right side blathering on about some inane party she’d been to the night before. Still, he wasn’t so bad. He had once helped Bláithín to change the tyre on her bicycle, when she was a little worse for wear, and incapable of clear thinking. She tried to fight against her anti-rugby attitude, but just the sight of the large groups of beer-swilling polo-shirt wearers made her want to puke.

Beside Will sat Indira, an international student from Dehli, and Naria, the daughter of a Jordanian Minister. She wore the traditional headscarf – by choice – and otherwise was dressed in the usual jeans, Converse and t-shirt of the average Trinity student. Bláithín sat down beside Sarah who was getting an earful from Portia.

‘I swear Sarah, he was *such* a bogger, right. I mean, he wouldn’t stop banging on about some girl in the corner, who was, like – *500 pounds* at least! Can you *believe* it like?’

Sarah nodded disinterestedly, and gave Bláithín *the eyes*.

‘I mean, what the *fuck* is my mother thinking right, sticking me with this *bogger* to look after for a week like. I know he’s my cousin but *Jesus* – right–, I have standards!’

‘Sooo Bláithín, any crack?’ Sarah was desperate to stop the flow of useless information coming from the Barbie doll on her right hand side.

‘Yeah, well, actually hun, need a word, not feeling the best, Kinch just dumped me,’

‘OH MY GOD! The *bastard!*’ and Portia was off blathering on about how they were all the same..blah, blah, blah...and he wasn’t worth it...blah, blah, blah...and actually got around to “plenty more fish in the sea”...blah,blah,blah!!

‘A+ for imagination,’ whispered Sarah in Bláithín’s ear. ‘Right, what do you reckon we should get out of here before our ears hurt?’

‘Great idea, the Coffee Dock maybe?’ Bláithín bent to pick up her bag. Sarah made her excuses to Portia, and grabbed Hanan to let him know what was going on.

‘Aaaanyway, if you need a chat you know where I am right, ... Róisín, ... isn’t it?’ Portia’s heavily made up eyes popped out of her head with mock sympathy.

‘Yeaaaahh. No hassle, Thanks.’ Bláithín was desperate to extricate herself from the situation.

At that moment Will scooped up the anorexic blonde in his overly muscled right arm-pit.

‘She’s something else this one. Isn’t she Bláith? A real sweetheart!’ awaiting a confirmation of the ‘I’ve scored well this time,’ status.

‘Yeah, Will, lucky man.’ Bláithín bit back the sarcastic tone of voice.

‘We’ll go and get, like, completely *vaagina*-faced right and you won’t remember a thing about the retarded wanker after that, I promise, right.’ Portia extricated herself from Will’s grip, and hugged Bláithín as though they were life-long friends.

Sarah grabbed her from the clutches of the fawning blonde. ‘Come on Bláith, Out of here.’ They headed onto the cobble-stoned court-yard at full speed.

‘Christ, can you believe her? What the hell is Will thinking?’ said Sarah.

‘Thinking isn’t Will’s strongpoint when it comes to a bit of action, remember?’ Bláithín laughed. ‘She fits the bill if you ask me.’

‘Guess so. I think I might whack the retarded cow one of these days if she doesn’t shut the fuck up.’ They laughed as they crossed behind the stone arch.

‘Anyway babes, what the fuck happened with Kinch? I thought you guys were getting on great?’ Sarah lowered her voice, and led Bláithín down the steps of The Buttery.

‘So did bloody I. Honestly Sarah, I give up. First John, now this. What the hell is wrong with me?’ The tears began to flow. She followed Sarah to the back corner of the dark, cavernous room.

‘Listen girl, you’re perfect. They’re just wankers. They’re the fucked-up ones, honestly. I like Kinch but who knows what’s going on inside their pea-brains? He’s been really fucked up since his Mother anyway, so it’s not your fault! Don’t do that to yourself.’

‘I know you’re right but I *reaaally* like him hun, I mean, I think I love the bastard, Oh Fuck, I can’t believe this is happening!’

Sarah gave her a tight hug, and wiped away the tears with the corner of her blue silk scarf. She always looked so perfect to Bláithín, not a flaxen hair out of place, not a blemish on her absurdly golden skin, but it was impossible to resent her perfection, when her heart was always in the right place.

‘I know hun, I know it hurts. God it makes me feel like shit because...’ Her voice trailed away.

‘What?’ asked Bláithín.

Sarah looked away. ‘I was thinking of dumping Hanan today.’

Bláithín stifled the obvious comment – that Sarah always got bored once the poor unfortunate became too adoring, which they always did.

‘I see. Why? Not to sound like a stuck record but *I* thought *you guys* were getting on great,’

‘Oh, I don’t know. He’s sweet, and all that, but well, I just don’t feel the buzz anymore.’

Bláithín had heard this many times before but knew that Sarah wasn’t the type who wanted an honest opinion about the subject. ‘Uh-huh.’

‘And all the stuff with his family, and his Dad not wanting to meet me because I’m not Muslim, well, you know I just don’t need that.’

‘Mmmm. But Hanan himself is really cool, and doesn’t believe in all that stuff.’

‘Yeah, he’s non-practising, I guess, but you hear all these stories about how these guys change once they have you.’

Bláithín pulled away from Sarah ‘Well, if you’re not into him, you’re not into him. I guess that’s how Kinch feels about me.’

‘Shit, I didn’t mean it like that Bláith. It’s different. You’re fantastic..not that Hanan isn’t lovely...Oh Jesus, I’m making an arse of this, sorry.’ Sarah shuffled nervously in her chair.

‘Listen hun, you do what you have to do. Don’t mind me, I’ll just be miserable for a while; then scrape myself up off the ground as usual. Thanks for listening anyway.’ Bláithín leaned over to give Sarah a hug and picked up her bag to leave.

‘Are you sure you’re ok? By the way you look fab, and I completely forgot to ask you how it went with the Molly stuff this morning?’

‘Yeah, great. Thank God it was before I met Kinch or I’d have been a wreck. Don’t know how I’m going to cope with the soliloquy this evening.’ Bláithín rubbed her temples with her fingers. ‘It was bad enough before this.’

‘Bláith, you’ll be fucking brilliant. Just think of all that extra passion, and venom you’ll bring to it now girl.’

Bláithín smiled. ‘Yes I said yes I will Yes.’ They laughed, but Bláithín couldn’t escape the sinking feeling of darkness that fell over her like a heavy cloud.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 4 - Proteus

*Unavoidable moody bastard, that Julian Guinness.* Kinch nodded his cap at the stern-looking man waiting for him on the Sydney Parade station platform. *Better get on with it then.*

Kinch approached the small bespectacled man. 'Hi Julian, are you ready for the big narration?'

'I've been waiting for you for thirty minutes. Better things to be doing with my time you know.' His face was a glowing orb of anger.

'Don't get your knickers in a twist, Julian. It's ten to eleven, which is plenty of time in my book.'

'Your attitude leaves a lot to be desired, young man,'

Kinch ignored him to watch the Dart shed its mottled load of tourists. 'This'll be the first time I'm paid to walk on a Strand and look thoughtful. Got to be some perks to this job.'

'Indeed. As your interior monologue I'd better give this text a run over, or God knows what thoughts I'll be giving you.' The small balding man fidgeted with his boater hat and mumbled quietly as they walked.

'Don't let me stop you. I'll practise thinking.'

*Can't believe he's a Guinness. Our national brew in the genes of a fool.* They turned onto Strand Rd. The crowds were gathering by the Tower wall. *A day of towers. Wonder where my flower is? Bonking some other bloke who has more to offer no doubt. Usurper. Hope that's not true. Hmmm, wonder? Been awfully friendly with Quixote these days. Jesus, not possible. Don't even think it. Wouldn't do that. A friend, right? Stop it, stop it, stop this thinking lark. Agggghhhh! Not possible. Must take up Meditation. Silence the little man. Driving me mad. Unavoidable moody thoughts. Unavoidable queues of memory. The sound of her singing, the sight of her naked on the pisspot. The trickle of sound that ran between her slender thighs. I could have sucked it out of her. Oh God.* The sweat ran down his pale skin in large beads of tension.

'Right Kinch, the throngs await us,' Julian said.

He approached the crowd. A black woman with exquisite dark eyes stood at the back of the crowd and fiddled with her programme.

'Ineluctable modality of the visible.'

Julian was off, breaking into narration as they passed the crowd and stepped down onto the crunching shale of the beach, while Kinch silently followed, in character.

'Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot....'

Kinch looked down at his feet. *Hope I don't scuff the hell out of these new shoes. Not exactly designed for a seaside walk.* The crowd followed blandly. He closed his eyes. *Wonder who she is? Striking, yeah, beautiful, black beauty. Strong black thighs wrapped around me. Now that would be something. Wonder how she moans?*

'Ineluctable modality of the audible.'

*Like a deep low whisper, a saxophone's mounting breath, yeah, God, it's hard to walk in the dark. Don't trip. Make a fool of yourself. This lot, shuffling worshippers of the word. And the word was made man. Transubstantiation of the mind. Cannibalistic hordes devouring the*

*thoughts of another. Have to define that which is indefinable. Bet they couldn't put pen to paper if they had to. ...*

*His foot slopped through the remains of a dead jellyfish, splattering the ends of his neatly tailored trousers. That's a tenner onto the laundry bill right there. Their problem not mine. God, that felt like stepping into a dead brain. Slursghhhsss. Suppose it was. Move on, don't flinch, Kinch. Hah, poetry in motion.*

'Am I walking into eternity along Sandymount Strand?'

*No, just into the North Wall, if I don't open my eyes soon. Damn, it would be a bitch to be blind. Feel your way, man. careful, careful.*

'Open your eyes now.'

*I will, and thank God for that. Woah, the light. Floods in like a breath while drowning. Without it darkness. Too late then. Like that poor bugger fell off the Cliffs. Must have felt like flying and then THWACK, the lights go out. Not a bad way to go, I suppose. The roar of the waves sucking you into the dark. Scared of the edges myself. Too tempting to try. Can see it all now? Bláithín wailing up a storm – 'But why, WHY? He seemed so happy.' — Would never come up with the truth. 'Just to see what it felt like.' Still, like tripping around here too much for that lark. The crowd followed at a distance, Julian filling Kinch's silence with words.*

'The dog's bark ran towards him.'

*Here he comes. Damn; hope he knows what he's doing. Afraid of the buggers, since O' Malley's dog – practically savaged me! Good boy, good boy – no...not the trouser leg: Shit! Whose bloody dog is this anyway? Probably Lacey's; clueless, like him. Grin and bear it. The Cocklepickers; a long time since I saw that: ghosts from the past: no-one could be bothered anymore. The smell of my childhood. Mother used to love them or was it periwinkles? The blinking eye; small souls of the sea. God, they could scream for something so small! The pot of death; found that hard to take. She heard nothing: Odd that; just craved the taste of salt; loved to suck it out of their tiny, limp bodies. The smell of memory: that's what it is! hmmm! Alone now.*

'His lips lipped and mouthed fleshless lip of air: mouth to her womb.'

*Now there's a thought. Me inside her, growing; safe. Guess we spend the rest of our lives trying to get back in. Explains it really, the endless search for pussy, especially her's; my Polish flower. You're like her. Aren't you? Mother. How strange we humans are. Mother coveter – Mother fucker. Hah, that's what I am. A slave to the void. Oh well, brings me pleasure all the same; filling the gap! God, I wish she would touch me now. Later, I'll see her later. He's out for the day, so no danger. Time for the letter. Might as well, take out Lacey's. Give it a bash. Sure it's a pile of dung! Foot and Mouth Disease is what the man has, that's for sure. Need to scratch myself down there. Damn, they're all watching. Rub against the rock. Aaahhhh, better now.*

'Touch me. Soft eyes. Soft soft soft hand. I am lonely here.'

*I wonder am I? – without her. That’s where it begins – with her; safe. Closer to where it ends now; closer to her anyway. Lie down, down on the seawashed rocks. It will seep away into the sand, the sadness. Think of something else. Ah Yes! Imagine Her, caressing your thighs, moving her gentle skin around the hump and flow of it all, the hard grasp and pull. Oh God, they’re watching. Stop, Stop! Those thoughts are moving up into the cold air. Quick, jump up, move briskly, Oh Shit! Think of him, that bastard, Reidy, that’ll bring it back to earth. Good, good, that’s it, keep moving. Oh slowly now; slowly, slow ... ooooooo.*

‘In long lassoes from the Cock lake the water flowed full.’

*You’ve got to be kidding me –Now I have to whip it out for all to see! Jaysus, there’s method acting and then there’s bloody mortification! Hope I drank enough. Remember turn your back to them; no need for the shock factor; probably think I’m fakin; no bloody fear after a river of tea. Right, that’s it. Aaaahhh!!*

‘In cups of rocks it slops: flop, slop, slap:’

*Slip, slup, slep, indeed it does. There go the trousers again. Needed that all the same. Jesus, I hope that gorgeous black woman couldn’t see. Mightn’t measure up. The Irish may be the blacks of Europe, but not sure we would compare. Wonder why she’s here. Must be tough. God, I can’t believe they’re following me around like sheep! Guinness is still droning on. I could do with one; a pint o plain, yer only man, ha. Here we go, the final act of indignity: stick the finger right up there; it’s not every day you get to pick your nose on cue. A good wipe now, bloody thing still dangling; the edge of the rock. My God, this is mad. Jimmy boy, you have a lot to answer for. Anyway that’s it. Out of here; the silent ship has sailed.*

## Chapter 5 - Calypso

Mr Omar Wilde was full of thoughts of her as he weaved his way through the crawl of Dublin traffic. The car inched along Camden Street, and he leant over to take a bite from a sausage sandwich he had fried up before he left the house. He had made extra for her, like always. She wasn't in the habit of eating in the morning. She would squeeze every second of sleep out of the day. Spent too much time in that bed of hers. Still, he liked to look at her as she shifted from one side to the other, stretched her long, fluid limbs; her round, soft rump creeping through the sheet invitingly. Such delicate beauty; the sharp green of her stare never seemed old to him, surprised him from the corner of a room when he least expected it.

She had been restless this morning; distracted. He found it hard to talk to her these days, to understand what she was thinking. She seemed out of focus, in a world that he could not access. Maybe he was imagining it, but there was absence in her touch; a shadow-woman moving through a space she had once known, but no longer inhabited. He suspected that her thoughts lay elsewhere; had migrated to another's bed, but how could he know? What was the point in knowing? Loved to mess with those emails, propped up in the bed like a proper invalid; tapping away at that lap-top of hers. Seemed very happy this morning; saw her from the bathroom, practically ate the screen; switched it off as soon he walked in. Maybe he was better off not knowing. Still, a man has pride, for the good and the bad of it.

'Looks like something important?'

'It's nothing tchiki, just a note from Matt Phelan, about the concert this evening. You haven't forgotten, have you? You'll be able to fit it in, right?' He wasn't sure he liked it when she called him that: picked it up from some Spanish man she had dated in the past; never told him what it meant; at least it struck an affectionate note, he supposed.

'I'm traipsing around the Bloomsday performances doing reviews today, but I think that it's over about nine, so should make it.'

'Mmmmm, grand then.' She glanced at the screen distractedly.

'Flora?'

'Yeah?'

'You know I, ehm, well, you look nice today, that's all.' He fumbled with the cap in his hand.

'Mmmmm, thanks tchiki.' She kept staring at the screen intently. 'Listen, can you just boil the kettle before you leave; don't want to have to get out of the bed twice.'

Omar sighed. 'Right love, see you later.'

She didn't even look up to see him leave.

He hopped in the car and headed towards New Street South. Rush hour traffic was at its worst. He wished he had never gotten her the bloody lap-top. Taken his place, it had. She had loved him once, hadn't she? Yes, yes, he was sure. Losing the baby, that had changed things, never right since then. How long ago now? Eleven years, yes, fifteen years married, eleven years, imagine. Ruairi; she wanted an Irish name, to signify newness, beginning again. Never quite got his tongue around it. Would have been doing the holy communion if she got her way. Well, what did he really know of the Pillars of Islam, apart from the chunks of the Qur'an that had been drummed into him as a child? Still, one never forgets. Would have shown his boy the beauty of the scripts, Muhammed's word, beauty in it all the same; all ruined with these messers at the moment. Lumped them all in the same boat now, they did, Arab; Muslim; Palestinian; all the same to them. Drove him mad! Hard for the Palestinians all the same: when you have no home,

no defined home; barricaded like animals, but doesn't justify all that messing all the same. Like the crowd up North, all the same in his opinion.

He looked out the side-window. Camden Street was awash with people moving at speed through the chaos of the early morning rush. A group of Spanish students babbled loudly as they pushed their way past the Asian Market. Two older women laid out the fruit stall for the day. One of the students, slim, dark and covered in piercings, slipped her hand into a box of litchis, hoping to go unnoticed as she meandered on through the chattering voices. The small, high-boned, shop woman was standing behind her. With lightning speed, she grabbed the offending hand, screaming profanities in her native tongue, while the tall, wiry girl, came to life, and flung the little woman from side to side in an effort to escape her angry grasp. Two sharp languages clashed in an explosion of words, 'Put a Madre, Deja me, deja me, la ostia.' The traffic flowed forward. Omar could see the girl's friends yank her from the grasp of the fiery woman. They raced past him, and right, into Grantham Street. The little woman screamed and roared at a female Garda who was tripping her way through the crowd on the other side of the street. The Garda looked largely disinterested, but dutifully picked her way through the traffic to the hysterical woman, with a 'here we go again' look plastered across her face. Omar chuckled to himself, and took another bite of the sandwich.

At that moment, his mobile erupted in the seat beside him.

'Wilde?' the lilting Corkonian accent of his boss, Willy Farrell, blasted its way through his eardrum.

'Yeah, hang on a minute Will, gotta mouthful of sausage.'

'Wilde, where are you?'

'On Camden Street, bloody traffic is hell this morning.'

'Listen, I need a story for the 'Inside People' section of Friday's Indo. Helen's called in with laryngitis or some bloody contagious thing, so you're it! What can you do for me?'

Omar swallowed the last mouthful. 'Shit, boss, I'm on the Bloomsday reviews all day. Don't know if I have time.'

'Well, make time man. It's an emergency. Give me a call back in thirty minutes with an idea, and Wilde?'

'Yeah?'

'Drop into the Office around lunch-time and I'll have a word with you about re-negotiating that contract, ok?'

'Right Will, right, that'd be great. Call you back in a while.'

'Good man.'

Omar cursed vociferously. What was he going to do now? This man would drive him mad. Right, think, think. He glanced out the window as he passed a Halaal shop. An older man sat with an agitated looking young man on the step of the shop. The older man was dressed in traditional Arabic garb. The young man gesticulated wildly, his jeans falling around the crack of his arse, while he waved his finger in the bearded man's face. *Some things are the same in all cultures.* The journalist in him saw an opportunity to butt into this little domestic scene and get some fodder for his eager boss. It was a world he knew something about, having lived with his mother's family in Egypt until the age of eight. He could barely remember it now, but he knew that at the time he had felt traumatised, arriving into a strange country unable to speak their language, and unfamiliar with everything. He remembered missing the open light of the desert, the sharp smell of souk spices, the spray of purple and yellow on the land and in the clothes; now it was like remembering a photograph rather than the source of the memory itself.

He manoeuvred left into Camden Row and squeezed his grey Civic through the narrow laneway past Whelan's music-bar. The clampers were out in force these days but shag it, he had no time, so he mounted the footpath in front of a pretty red-brick townhouse. He turned to grab his notepad, and realised he had forgotten his dictaphone. *Bollox, not again. Get it after.* He ran back into the flow of people on Camden Street. The same two men were continuing to gesticulate wildly in front of the Halaal shop. He approached, and a teenage boy exited the shop to join the argument.

'I know the five pillars of Islam, Papa, but there's nothing in there about not being able to date an Irish woman. We live in Ireland for God sake. I'm Irish.' The older man sighed heavily and raised his bushy eyebrows to the skies.

'Hanan, it is not the fact that she is Irish, it is the fact that she is not Muslim. It just makes life difficult for you, that is all. The whole world is against us right now, why make it harder on yourself?' His soft voice showed concern rather than anger.

Omar stood to one side staring at the travel brochures in the Agency next door.

'It's you and your old-world cronies who make it harder for me. I just want to fit in, be the same as everyone else, don't you understand?'

'No-one is 'the same' anymore, Hanan. This country is awash with different religions and traditions now. Look around you. It doesn't mean you have to put yourself in an impossible situation.'

'It's you who are putting me in an impossible situation Papa. I'll go out with whoever I want to go out with, and I'll marry whoever I want to marry, do you hear me? Anyway Sarah and I aren't serious. It's just a bit of fun. It still doesn't make any difference. I'll be with whoever I want to be with.'

The older man shook his shoulders in a look of resignation. 'We'll see.'

'That sounds like a threat. Khaled, are you hearing this?' Hanan turned to the teenager seated on the vegetable boxes by the window.

'I think Papa is right.'

'Jesus, I'm surrounded by zealots. You're nineteen for God's sake, go out and have some fun like everyone else your age.'

'Fun is for those wasters I went to school with.' The boy jumped to his feet. 'They're a pack of knackers who get sloshed on cider, and smoke doobies on the corner of St. Stephen's Green. No thanks!'

'Oh for God's sake,'

'You need to respect your tradition more, that's what I think. Anyway, those Irish girls are all slags.'

Omar inched his way closer, waiting for a chance to interrupt.

'But you're Irish, you eejit. You were born here! What is wrong with everyone in this family? We're not in Lebanon anymore, Thank God! I've never been there, you've never been there. What the fuck is wrong with you?'

'Mind your language boy,' interrupted the older man.

'Aaaagghhhh. No wonder everyone is suspicious of us in this country. Jesus, I think I might change my name to Redser or Tossier or something fucking stupid, and convert to Catholicism. Can't be worse than this. You all have me driven demented!' Hanan turned suddenly, nostrils flaring, and swept past Omar in a cloud of heat and anger.

Omar took his chance to interrupt. 'Excuse me, sorry but I couldn't help overhearing; sounds like things are a little heated.'

‘Ah, it’s nothing, usual family stuff,’ commented the bearded man. ‘Can I help you?’

‘I’m Omar Wilde. I work for the Irish Independent. I’m working on a story about being Muslim in Ireland. I just wondered if you might have a few minutes to chat to me.’

The old man stroked his beard, his brown eyes sizing up Omar. ‘Well, I don’t know. How do I know what this article is being used for?’

‘Trust me Sir, I’m a Muslim, or at least, I was born a Muslim, in Egypt actually, so I will be sympathetic, I promise. It’s for a section of the newspaper that looks at different people’s lives in Ireland. I’m not out for a big expose or anything. Just want to show how ordinary people are getting by in this country, that’s all.’

The man hesitated, and looked at Omar carefully. ‘Ok then I guess, come on in. I’m Mohammed and this is my son Khaled,’ gesturing to the suspicious looking teenager, who had begun to unpack a box of vegetables behind them.

Omar reached for his notebook, gesturing to Mohammed. ‘Do you mind? Makes it easier to get things exactly right.’

‘Of course, of course.’ The soft-looking man nodded his head, and sat on a seat behind the cash register. He gestured to Omar to take the seat beside him.

After the interview, Omar decided he had better go home for the dictaphone. He turned into Kevin Street, and switched on the radio. The Gift Grub crew were taking the piss out of some Government Tribunal or other. The Taoiseach, ‘Bertie’, was in a dither about ‘Lawlor’s’ shenanigans, ‘Jaysus, Lawlor, you’ll bring us all down with you.’ Omar belly-laughed his way up New Bride Street, wondering at how the country could continue to prosper with the endless corruption Tribunals sucking at the bones of a government no-one took seriously. *Thank God I’m not a politician. Need to have an ego of steel.* He had purchased the 92 Honda Civic from a colleague for a song. A car more than ten years old in this country was considered a piece of junk, no matter its condition. This worked to Omar’s advantage, because his scrupulous nature meant he kept things long after the shelf life dictated otherwise. He mounted the kerb beside the red-brick townhouse, 7 Long Lane. They had been lucky to buy it eight years ago before the price of property went through the roof. If they were out there looking for a house now he would have been living in a shack. Wondering if she would still be in bed, he passed through the newly painted red wooden doorway. Her voice was easily heard from the hall below.

‘Babe, I’ll be here, I promise... What?...No, no he’s out all day...some shite about Bloomsday...Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean that... You know I do,... yes,... yes.’ His stomach lurched. He hesitated, wondering if he should let her go on, let her incriminate herself further, but what was the point? He knew making a fuss about it wouldn’t make any difference. He rattled the doorway at the bottom of the stairs.

‘Flora, I had to come home. Left my dictaphone behind like the bloody eejit I am.’ He entered the bedroom, and pretended not to notice her on the phone. He moved quickly to the dresser table to pick up his things; his eyes traced her in the mirror as she pressed the red button, and put the phone carefully on the bed beside her.

‘Tchiki, you’ve a head like a sieve. That’s the second time you’ve done that in two weeks.’ She looked flustered, her light auburn curls tossed and wild around the edge of her green silk nightie. Omar turned to face her, exhaled lightly and picked up his Dictaphone.

‘I know I’m a fool, a real fool. Can’t seem to get my head around anything nowadays; must be the stuffy atmosphere.’

‘Stuffy. Are you mad? I know it’s warm for Ireland but stuffy is not a concept that this country has ever experienced. Try Krakow in Summer.’

‘Yeah well, I’d better go luv, Farrell is putting me under pressure today.’ He moved towards the doorway; avoided her eyes.

‘Tchiki?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Good luck today.’ She threw him a look mixed with affection and sorrow, a look of regret and recognition: they both knew that it was beyond voicing, beyond rejection; a mutual void of acceptance.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 6 - Flora

She heard the door close behind him. Her head burned from a mixture of anger and guilt; a potent concoction drummed into her through years of Catholic school. That, and an angry grandmother, who wrestled daily with her God. *The oceans of prayers I send him every day and he lets our country be raped over and over*, she would rant while marching off to Mass every day nonetheless. What did Flora care anymore? That was all long behind her. There were certain things she missed; the smell of cooking dough from the corner bakery in downtown Krakow; the easy smiles of the people as they chatted on the market stalls; the slow, crawling pace of life as people moved like chess pieces towards an uncertain future. She remembered a certain similarity in the eyes of the Irish when she arrived sixteen years before. Now it was very different. The quiet glint had been swept away in the whirlwind of prosperity. It gathered momentum with every passing year. Not that she didn't like the buzz of success: the crowds of people chatting animatedly at the corner cafes; the bars oozing with energy, but something had evaporated in the whirl of excitement. She couldn't put her finger on it but she could see it in the corner of her memory. What good were memories to her now? Random facts the brain drags up to construct a past that is largely forgotten; a total misrepresentation of what has actually happened. It annoyed her that she couldn't control her own brain; choose the moments for herself, instead of the random darts of memory that shot through her; of moments that had been bad enough the first time around.

*It's his birthday next week; would have been eleven. Omar will forget.* Well, she couldn't blame him; better to forget. She hated when he got that look in his eyes; that sad acceptance of how things were. Why couldn't he be stronger, better able to stand up to her, to surprise her, but that was never his style. Who could blame her that she had to find that elsewhere: she needed more. The screen of the mobile phone beside her flashed the time. *Half past nine, better get a move on, ring him back later, need to see him today. Dying for it I am! God my hormones are racing.* She moved into the bathroom, and began to run a hot bath; her greatest pleasure no matter what mood she found herself in. Her nightie fell to the ground, and she stared at herself in the mirror. Nothing much had changed in the previous twenty years; a fact for which she was very thankful. She cupped her breasts, sucked in her stomach, and squeezed the skin underneath her buttocks. None of the dreaded orange peel. *Not bad, but for how long?*

The water of the bath rose slowly. She sat on the edge of the bath; poured lavender oil into the rising water; watched her form in the mirror as it shaped through different movements. At the age of thirty-eight, she could seduce a twenty-two year old, and hold his attention above all the soft-skinned beauties that surrounded him. This continued to surprise her. Her power lay on the fringes of acceptability; in the dark shadows of a Mother's love, unfulfilled and craving deliverance. She climbed into the bath and sunk deep into the warm water. It surrounded her, entered within her. It felt like him, warm and comforting. She would hold the long muscular limbs of his youth to her breast, as he slept quietly dreaming in the afterspace of exercised passions; covet the possibility of what she could have been, and never was.

If Ruari had lived, she may never have felt this screaming desire to possess such a young man, but it was what it was, and she couldn't deny it. He needed her for the exact same reasons; to bring his dead Mother to life within her, and she marvelled at the lust that could drive them through their search for dead love. Omar suspected, and that made her feel sick with guilt, but he could never be that to her, never bring back that which she had lost. What's more, his touch reminded her of the origins of her pain. It wasn't his fault but she couldn't bear him inside her,

grunting his sadness through her body like a distant phantom of the man she had once loved. It wasn't fair, she knew: he did his best to try to make her happy, but they had lost something long ago. It had been replaced by a groaning apathy, a comfortable habit that neither of them was willing to dig themselves out of.

Taking a spoonful of shampoo, she worked it through the tangles of her dark hair, scooped the bubbles in her hand and caressed her body with the sweet-smelling liquid. She slid her right hand over the cup of her breast; the tips of her fingers circled her protruding nipples. Her left hand played with her bellybutton, slipped its way slowly towards the soft pink folds of her vulva. She tickled herself gently, a slow tingle that built through the bubbles of the water. Allowing her legs to fall open, she thought of him: shifted her form in the flow of liquid, as though his watery thrustings had convulsed her body in a wave of passion. The water splashed onto the floor, and she exhaled air from her lungs in a long slow groan of release. Her arms fell over the side of the bath, and she slid her mouth below the water line exhaling deeply through her nose.

At that moment, the phone rang on the chair beside her. The name flashed on the small screen. *Bláithín. Shit I have a lesson with her this afternoon. Not answering that now. Can't deal with it.* She left the phone on the chair and climbed out of the bath. The ten o'clock news came on the radio in the background.

'Pope asks for pardon on torture and burnings during the Inquisition,' *Five Hundred years later, no less! Better late than never I suppose. Granny will be pleased!*

The stray hairs around her dark eyebrows were getting harder to shift. Why in God's name was it that as women advanced in years they were in a never-ending battle to fight the matted sprouts of hair that threatened to cover every spare inch of bare skin. Men, of course, spent their time trying to stitch the hair back in. It was one big celestial piss-take at the expense of human-kind.

'Portugal plays Russia in the European Championship tonight.' *Well, that's Omar out for the night. Good news.*

The razor slipped gently down the line of her inner thigh, taking care to remove the hairs from the tops of her toes. Once finished with her legs, she placed the razor gently underneath the lather of foam that lay around the edge of her vagina. With care she pulled it upwards until it reached the top line of her pubic hair.

'Non-nationals nervous of referendum results.' *No Kidding!*

She repeated this movement on the other side and pondered the recent National Referendum. The Irish had been very welcoming when she landed in the country with her violin in hand, and not much else. If Matt Phelan hadn't spotted her playing in the Kracow Philharmonic Orchestra, God knows where she would be right now.

She placed the razor into her black day-bag, moved into the bedroom, and opened the bottom drawer of the wooden cupboard. She reached into the back of the drawer, and pulled out a black lacy bra with matching briefs. They were wrapped carefully in a crumpled white paper that had Happy Anniversary written on it in silver writing. *Time to get some use out of this.* A Pronuptia tag was still attached to the bra, and she cut it off with her teeth. A woman came on the radio from the Refugee Council giving out yards about how the Irish had been taken in all over the World for centuries, and now that it was their turn, they dug in their heels, refusing nationality to non-national babies born in Ireland.

*It's a worry.* She didn't have much reason to begrudge, but what if Ruairí had lived? How would she have felt if her baby was rejected by the place of his birth? It didn't seem fair. She

didn't know all the facts, but it just didn't feel right. It reminded her of the Purgatory that Father Kopinsky spoke of endlessly in Mass when she was a young girl. It horrified her that un-baptised babies were supposedly sent to float in an ether of nothingness, belonging to nowhere, receiving love from no-one. Dogma of any kind frightened her, and she began to wonder what lay behind the Yes votes of the four out of five people who crossed her paths daily. Their smiles and nods of acceptance seemed uncertain to her now. Not that she felt it personally, but she worried for others around her. The world was becoming a fragile place, bursting at the seams, and barely able to contain the humanity within.

She slipped carefully into the briefs, leaned forward to fit her ample breasts into the cups, and returned to the mirror in the bathroom to take a good look at herself. A small hand mirror lay on the dresser beside her. She grabbed it and turned full circle.

With a widening smile she reached for the black sweatshirt dress that lay on the back of the chair. It fit over her shoulders with ease, and she watched as the thin material clung to the soft curves of her body. She looked in the mirror at the face of a woman who could deceive so many people. It was a strong face; high cheekbones, full mouth, but behind the eyes she could see a cold glint. This upset her, but she supposed everyone developed a hard layer in the end. She glanced out the window at the small garden which she had nurtured with determined care. The sun had dried the earth around her azalea bed. It was hard to keep up at this time of the year. The summers were definitely getting warmer, thank God. She placed her feet in a pair of low-heeled sandals, and slung her brown leather satchel over her shoulder. Light streamed through the doorway into the small living room. It caressed the edge of her shoulder and she smiled, knowing he would be with her soon.

## Chapter 7 - The Lotus Eaters

As soon as he shut the door behind him, Omar decided that it was too nice a day to be fighting through the traffic in his car. He reached into the passenger seat for his bag, and slung it on his back. He pressed the door lock from the inside, and banged the car door shut, giving it an extra kick with the side of his hip. *Gotta get that lock fixed.* He pulled out a sheet of paper from the inside pocket of his jacket, and headed towards the city centre. St. Patrick's bells drifted over the hum of the traffic and he walked steadily towards them. A double-decker bus pulled up at the stop one hundred yards ahead. A young woman stepped onto the path in front of him. She was wearing a pale blue summer dress that was cut just below the thigh. He could see the line of her thong; the light material curved around the fullness of her buttocks. His eyes dipped around the edge of her hips. The material of her short skirt swung above her long tanned legs like a hypnotic pendulum. *Bollox, I hate the summer, it's like torture.* The girl disappeared into the Spar shop, and he sighed with sad relief.

The queue in the sub-post office wasn't too bad. It was Pension day and two aul dears were nattering away in front of him about the awful heat, and the state of the young ones nowadays dressed like hoors in their tiny miniskirts, and what about the new smoking ban which meant having to be out on the streets like a homeless person to enjoy a fag anymore. Immediately in front of him was a heavily pregnant young woman.

'When are you due luv?' asked the old lady. She tapped the young woman's stomach knowingly.

'Yesterday, bu dey say you usually go two weeks over with de first one, so here I am. Fit to burst I am,' replied the young woman, with a heavy inner-city accent.

'Do you know if it's a boy or a girl luv?'

'Raader not know. Me fella, Nelson - he's from Nigeria - he wants to know but I keep tellin him, dere's no fun in dat sure.'

'No fun at all. Sure we couldn't know in our day, and it did us no harm apart from a few little fat boys goin around in pink frilly babygrows.' The old lady erupted into a high cackle of laughter. 'Nigeria is it. You're goin to be havin one of those gorgeous creamy babies then, you lucky thing.'

'Yep, at least I won't have to worry about me child bein burnt to a crisp like me Mammy had to. Could end up with a Samantha Mumba, or Phil Lynnot if I'm lucky.'

'Better Samantha than Phil love, poor lad, but I'm sure your baby will be a stunner.'

'Next,' called the lady from behind the bullet-proof cubicle. The pregnant girl moved forward. The aul dears continued nattering.

Omar noticed a poster on the wall advertising a trip to Granada in Spain. His parents had been there on their honeymoon, while his Mother was on one of her concert tours in Europe. He remembered her talking about the markets of the Albaicín, an ocean of competing aromas: the sticky smell of Arabian spices mixed with the pungent odour of smeared dogshit. Apparently, it was a place where the smells of the Orient blended with the incense of the Catholic Rite: a confused concoction of religious origins and cultural identity, a bit like himself. *I must go there. Place of my conception.*

The two pensioners still nattered in the queue ahead of him. The pregnant girl moved away to lick her stamps. A middle aged woman with dyed honey-coloured curls stared out blankly from the bullet-proof cubicle. 'What can I do for you ladies?'

Outside the door, Omar spotted a guy dressed in black. He couldn't see his face but there was something about the way he moved that looked suspicious. The man pulled something over his head. Then another one appeared. He had something in his hand...A long knife. Omar's stomach lurched, and he froze to the spot. He could see now; they were wearing balaclavas. The door opened suddenly. Before the others had even noticed, the smaller man had slipped the bolt upwards and locked them all inside.

The taller of the two moved towards Omar, a sharp butcher's knife in his grasp. 'Get the fuck down. On the fucking floor NOW!'

The older woman began to wail.

The small stocky man pushed his way through and forced everyone onto the floor. 'Shut the fuck up, lady!' It was a young voice. Couldn't have been more than eighteen.

'You. Open the fuckin safe!' The lanky man towered above Omar, his red eyes bulging through the slit of his balaclava like joke-shop eyeballs.

'I don't work here mate.' Omar felt an odd calm wash over his initial panic.

'Open the fucking safe, you fucker.' The youth pushed Omar to the back of the room, and plastered his face up to the bullet-proof glass counter. The Post-Office lady had barricaded herself inside, and was reaching for the phone.

'Don't fucking touch that bitch, or he gets it.'

Omar felt the knife shove against his throat, until it nipped the underside of his chin. 'I don't work here, I don't work here.' He repeated this line like a mantra in calm, steady tones. *High as a kite. Gotta calm him down. Jesus! Thank God it's not a gun. Wish that woman on the floor would just shut up.*

'Open the fucking door bitch!'

The woman inside was motionless. She stared at the balaclavad youth with a look of disbelief. He smelt of ginger spice and lemon soap; had a Dublin accent. Omar realised that he would soon be the casualty of this pathetic attempt at daylight robbery if he didn't join his assailant in waking the woman from her stupor.

'Open the door, for God's sake. I have a knife to my throat.' The startled woman moved to the door and turned the lock. Omar felt the grip loosen from around his neck, and he was pushed to the ground violently.

'You, don't fucking move,' screamed the other black-clad youth. He was smaller with short stocky legs, and danced around the room like a bantam-weight.

The woman opened the door. The lanky youth scrambled into the room; forced her to open the safe and empty the contents into a large sack. Omar placed his hand on the shoulder of the old woman who lay beside him. She was shaking with fear.

He whispered into her ear. 'It'll be alright.'

She smiled at him weakly, and he held her hand to calm her down.

'Jaysus man hurry up, we need to get the fuck out of here.'

Omar stared at the shoes of the agitated thief. The small feet continued to shuffle: white Gola Runners with blue stripes, looking like they had seen better days.

'Right man, let's get the fuck out of here,' said the other. 'Keep the fuck down everyone or we'll slit you.'

Omar picked himself up off the sobbing woman, and checked that she was ok. He watched the two men unlock the door and exit at speed.

He helped the old lady off the floor. 'Are you alright Mam?'

'Ok love, feeling a little shaken but in one piece. The little bastards, if I could get my hands on them I would wring their necks!' Her grey perm shook vigorously.

Omar looked around the room. The other pensioner and the pregnant girl were picking themselves up off the ground. Omar recognised the old man: the newspaper seller who sat on the corner of Exchequer Street and St. Andrews Street. He had never spoken to him, but he was one of those characters you couldn't help but notice.

'Are you both ok?'

The newspaper seller appeared to be breathing laboriously.

'Just need a minute, son. The heart isn't the best. I think that knocked the stuffing out of me.' His chiselled face looked unnaturally red as he lent his slight frame against the door of the cubicle.

'Should I call a doctor? I have a mobile. It's no bother.' Omar guided the frail man to a plastic chair in the corner of the small room.

'No son, I'm grand. Just need a minute to recover. Little bastards got the better of me.'

The grey haired lady looked concerned. 'I think you should let him call, Mick. Sure what harm is there?'

'No, no. I don't like all that fussin, Kitty. Sure look, amn't I grand already.' He picked himself up off the chair, and forced a smile.

'Well, if you're sure.' said Omar.

'Couldn't be surer son,' replied Mick. 'Was on my way to Paddy Powers to put a bet on the Queen Mary Stakes. After that bit of drama, I reckon luck has to turn my way.'

'Maybe you're right. Might put a bet on myself. If you're alright I have to run, and catch a few of the Ulysses performances.'

'What's that son? Ulysses?' He glanced at the listings. 'By God. I heard he's a good horse and with the day that's in it, sure why not?'

'Well, I didn't really mean...'

'Buy you a pint son, if he comes good. Goodbye ladies, it's bin an excitin mornin.'

Omar excused himself, and raced for a taxi.

## Chapter 8 - Flora

Flora often found herself drifting towards the National Gallery. She ate her sandwich on the canal bank; made her way down Baggott Street and right into Merrion Street past the Dáil. There was some commotion outside the stone arch of Government buildings. A group of people held placards – ‘No to American Fighter planes landing in Shannon!’ and chanted ‘Stop Bush visit!’ for the RTE television cameras.

Flora had been asked to perform supporting Christy Moore at the ‘When Bush come to Shove’ concert, organised by the Irish anti-war movement for the following Saturday night. Even though she was no fan of the current American President, she’d turned it down. She did feel somewhat guilty, but she had a serious aversion to politics and anything that was remotely linked. Growing up in post-Nazi, Communist Poland had taught her to steer clear of ideologies, no matter where they came from. When she was a young music student in Krakow everyone had been in a flap about the fall of Communism, and pushing Lech Walesa to power. To be honest, she’d been too busy trying to figure out how to get away to ‘be involved’, but she knew there was a place for such enthusiastic people. She just wasn’t one of them.

The sun drifted in and out of focus behind a floating sea of white. Every time it broke through, the warmth washed over her skin like a gentle blush. She climbed the steps of the large stone edifice. A message reminder beeped in her pocket. Bláithín’s name flashed at her from the screen of her mobile.

‘Flora, sorry will be a little late for lesson. Kinch just broke up with me. Need to talk. Feel like shit. See you at 12.00 p.m...’

*Damn, don’t need this drama. Need to be careful.* She entered the long central corridor of the Gallery with its high ceilings, arched door frame and soothing light. A slow breathing calm descended upon her brain. She loved it here. The solace of creativity was something she could never get enough of. Her own creative nature lay on the darker side of this force; the need to exorcise pain and unfulfilled passion. She would pound a heartbeat into the strings of her violin, until her demons disappeared into the air like phantoms on the edge of daylight. Here she felt the opposite; the colour and form of the paintings moved through her like a sweet opiate. It was a rare opportunity to acquire stillness, and allow it to surround her. She loved churches for the same reason, despite their association with her Catholic past. Slowly, she moved through the rooms. Her eyes scanned the paintings: the fall of a young girl’s arm in the sunlight; the blood-red dawn of a battlefield; the dark tears of a crying child. She felt her emotions speed and blur through wave after wave of colour. She knew where she was going. Always to the same spot. The large canvas was tucked away in the corner of the new Millennium wing of the Gallery. The seat was empty, and she sat down in front of Sir John Lavery’s ‘The Artist’s Studio.’ She had stared into the depths of this painting many times, and never grew sick of its hypnotic energy.

The classily dressed woman at its centre sat bolt upright, her perfectly groomed hair contained within a violet Clara Bow hat; curls escaping delicately around the rim. Her face was strikingly beautiful: high cheekbones, dimpled chin, and languorous eyes. Flora felt the seduction of this woman’s gaze; she wanted to capture her confidence and make it her own. A little girl sat beside the woman, perfectly groomed and looking like a porcelain doll. There was no hint of a mother’s affection in the space that lay between them. The child seemed no more than a delicate possession. Flora was fascinated. She felt admiration for this woman despite her obvious lack of maternal instinct. That same instinct formed a depressing shadow over Flora’s life. She coveted this woman’s cold confidence: the impenetrable yet beautiful shell through

which the pain of life struggled to penetrate. No doubt it was a lonely way to live, but at least it prevented the dull pain of unfulfillment. This gnawed at Flora like a hungry rat. Beside them lay a fine-boned dog; its face oddly shadowing that of its owner. The artist could be seen painting in a mirror at the back of the elegant room. She knew that this was the man's own family, and marvelled at the passionate detachment with which he could portray the distances that lay between them. The admiration and fascination he had for the woman at the centre of his life was palpable. It was also obvious that he struggled to contain her beauty in a space which he could control. She suddenly felt sorry for Omar; sorry for his inability to shape her energy into something he could handle. Washed with sadness, she turned to leave.

'The Laverys,' commented the man seated in his security uniform by the edge of the doorway. 'Beautiful woman, wasn't she?'

'Yes, indeed. I love this painting.' Eager not to be dragged into an unnecessary conversation, she moved towards the opposite doorway.

The man was determined to continue. 'They say she tried to fling herself into Michael Collins's grave at the funeral – she was his lover, you know.'

'Really?' The fact that Hazel Lavery had been the Irish Revolutionary leader's lover did not surprise her – fit the bill. Interested though she was, she was not in the mood for conversation. 'Sorry, I've got to run.' The Irish had a way of forming a conversation in the most unlikely of places. Although largely an attractive trait, there were times when she wished for silence and this was not a concept that sat easily in the minds of this chatty nation.

He nodded his head. 'Well enjoy, love.'

She headed back through the original Gallery and descended the winding stairs into the Shaw room. At the end of the high-ceilinged space, a teenage boy sat transfixed by a large canvas. It struck her that he was not of an age that typically would be caught dead hanging out in a gallery. She looked at the painting that so fascinated the young man. It was a battle scene. Bodies lay strewn around the edge of a burning building. At the centre stood two majestic figures; a woman and a man.' Flora wasn't sure what they were doing. She glanced at the explanation on the left hand side of the painting. 'The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife' by Daniel Maclise. Now it was obvious. *A wedding in the middle of a battle. How odd.* The boy continued to stare at the painting. She noticed a schoolbook sitting beside him on the bench. The name, Khaled Hussein, was scrawled across the cover. She moved to the bench and sat beside the boy, who barely registered her presence.

'Powerful painting.'

'Mmmm.' His eyes glanced sideways with a look of discomfort.

'You like this a lot. Do you mind me asking why?' She realised she was committing the offence that she had been so eager to escape two minutes before, but there was something about this boy that intrigued her. He looked at her with unsmiling eyes.

'It makes me angry.'

'Really, why is that?'

'Strongbow. He just invaded Ireland with his powerful army, murdered everyone, married the daughter of a traitorous Irish King. He just claimed something that wasn't his, and destroyed an ancient culture with arrogance and evil. It's like what's happening to my culture. Being wiped out by that bastard Bush.' His voice displayed a controlled anger: his eyes, cold and impenetrable.

'What do you mean by your culture? You sound Irish to me.'

‘Islam. I live in Ireland, but I’m a Muslim and that makes me a citizen of the world of Islam, a member of the Ummah. That’s more important to me.’ He lapsed into silence. Flora thought carefully about what she should say next.

‘To be honest, I don’t know much about it, although my husband was born a Muslim. But were you born here?’

He nodded.

‘So your parents moved here from?’

‘The Lebanon.’

‘I see. A lot of trouble there. Have you ever visited?’

‘No. I want to go there very badly. I just don’t belong here. It’s not my place.’

‘Well, I’m not from here either. Polish actually. Do you know anything about Poland?’

She didn’t expect a positive reply.

‘The Pope is Polish, right?’

‘Yes, that’s right, comes from Wadowice, not far from Krakow where I grew up.’

He turned to look at her properly, his dark eyes cold, unsmiling. ‘Are you Catholic?’

‘I was born a Catholic, but I don’t believe in any religion really. Too much warring comes from all that crap.’

‘Sometimes the war is necessary.’ There was something in his voice that scared her slightly. Not that she thought this boy could do her any harm, but maybe he wished he could.

‘What do you mean?’

He picked up his backpack to leave. ‘I think I had better go.’

‘Sorry, I hope it wasn’t something I said. I...i just would like to understand these things better.’

‘There’s nothing to understand. Sometimes the gap’s too wide, lady. I need to go.’ Before she had a chance to say goodbye, he disappeared down the corridor at speed.

*What a strange kid.* She was left with a heavy feeling of disquiet; a fractured uneasiness.

Her mobile flashed the time: 11.40 a.m. *Better get back for Bláithín. Wish I could put it off. No choice, I suppose.* The heavens opened as she exited towards Merrion Square. An army of umbrellas flooded past her. She cursed the fact that she had forgotten her ‘just in case’ umbrella again. As she raced across the road, she spotted the boy going in the side gate of the Park. A cold breeze invaded her body. She thought about Omar. *Should try and understand him a bit better, understand his world.* She pulled her scarf over her head, and made a vow to herself to try a little harder, just a little harder.

## Chapter 9 - Hades

Omar sat in the last carriage with two other journalists, Dick Cowen and Mark Jameson. Monsignor Reidy sat beside them in flowing vestments. As the carriage tripped its way slowly past Dermot O' Hurley Avenue, he spotted that lad, Kinch, dressed up in the Dedalus garb. *Meant to interview him later, must give him a buzz.* The Monsignor shifted nervously in his seat, and he sank backwards out of the light. Jameson leaned out the window with his camera.

'Dedalus, gotta catch that,' he muttered, snap, snap, snap. 'Should be a good one.'

'Wasn't that lad's Mother your housekeeper, Monsignor?' Cowen tapped the notepad in his lap.

'Brian?...Mary, yes... grand woman, lovely woman, God Rest her.' Omar noticed an odd nervousness in the demeanour of this otherwise ebullient man. *The Pope's footman. Looks like Shakespeare. Odd that.*

Cowen leant forward. 'Saw your letter in the paper today Monsignor. Glad to see you're supporting the big man on this Limbo thing.'

'Well son, if we can't admit when we're wrong, what hope is there, eh?' Reidy adjusted the flow of his cassock.

'What's that?' asked Omar.

'Haven't you heard, Wilde? The Pope's abolished Limbo, the place where unbaptised babies were damned to float into eternity.' Cowen smiled mischievously. 'I guess eternity is finite after all. What a bloody relief!'

'Nasty business, that Limbo. Scared the hell out of me as a child. Never seemed right now did it,' said Jameson.

The Monsignor looked irritated. 'What's done is done son. We can forget about all that now. Get on with the dirty business of living.'

Jameson pointed his camera towards the window and spoke out of the corner of his mouth. 'Good man, that John Paul. Bit slow off the mark sometimes, but gets there in the end; I suppose.'

Omar strained to see what he was shooting. A group of children were jumping off the walls of the bridge into the river. *The Dodder's looking a little murky these days. Kids must be mad. Catch something dodgy from that they will.*

'Yes, but he hasn't exactly apologised for all that child abuse business in Ferns; sure they all protected that bastard. Monsignor, you must admit that.' Cowen wasn't going to let him off the hook.

'We did what was right in the end, Dick. That's all that counts. Even the Pope himself could do with some forgiveness sometimes.' The edge of his voice had curdled into something uncomfortable.

Omar felt he should dissolve the building tension. 'Sure that's all past us now, Cowen. No point in harbouring grudges.'

Cowen's eyes narrowed. 'Wilde, aren't you a Mecca Man? Hardly in the position to comment.'

Omar felt himself stiffen.

Cowen winked broadly at Reidy. 'Sure myself and the Monsignor here have an understanding. He knows I like to stretch his limits.'

The Monsignor smiled back. 'You're a terrible man Dick.' They laughed, forming a circle of understanding in which Omar was clearly unwelcome. He had always felt awkward around Cowen. In the Office, the spiky man had made it clear that he didn't like Omar. He had the sneaking suspicion that if his name had been Owen or Oisín, Cowen would have treated him with substantially more respect.

'Never been to Mecca in my life, Dick,' interrupted Omar with a forced smile.

Jameson, ever the peace-maker, tried to change the subject. 'So, Monsignor, you've been demoted to a lowly Priest, I see.'

*Nice Fella Jameson, no harm in him..*

'Indeed, indeed. Does it suit me, the old garb?' He stroked the length of his long white cassock. 'I'm not much of an actor. Thank God Joyce didn't give the priest any lines. I just need to look the part, and that I can do.'

Cowen spoke up. 'You've got to hand it to the man. He has us all running around acting the Mick one hundred years after he put pen to paper. Quite a legacy from a man who spent half his life in another country bitching about how awful this one was.'

Omar sat on the edge of the conversation. His three companions continued to natter intimately. The carriage continued to trip its way slowly over the Grand Canal bridge. *Like that fella crawling up the skyscraper. Wonder where he's going?* The horses hooves beat off the tarmac; clip, clomp, clackity-clack. *Syncopated Symphony, Soothing. Like her practising in the parlour. She'll be practising later. Better keep away.* He could see the old Gasworks building in the distance. A flurry of cranes littered the blue sky. Omar imagined the city to be a growing insect trapped inside its cocoon; its limbs stretching and changing shape daily. He had a horrible feeling this evolving creature might drown in its own juices before it had a chance to blossom into something beautiful.

'There's Matt Phelan, richest man in Dublin.' Jameson pointed at the tall, well-built figure. He sauntered along the footpath like he owned the world.

'Is it? ah yes.' The Archbishop tipped his cap towards the man, who responded in kind. 'Talented man. That show of his, Celtic Waters, put this country on the map, it did. Impressive stuff.'

Omar felt uncomfortable. He knew that everyone thought that Flora had a thing with this man Phelan. He wasn't sure himself. What did it matter anyway? Still, the man was an arrogant prick, one way or the other.

'Wasn't your wife in that show Wilde? Quite a player she is.' Cowen arched his eyebrow and tapped his pen vigorously.

'Ehm, yes, travelled all over with it. It was great. She's travelling next month, to Belfast, with the Three Tenors.'

'Indeed,' said Cowen, with a glint in his eye.

Omar nodded his head one too many times, and turned towards the window. *Nosy buggers. No-one knows, no-one really knows.* He thought of her, the look of concentration as she plucked the strings with her index finger, the sweep of her bow. *Two strings to it, but no more than two surely?*

As they passed the walls near Trinity, he noticed the hoardings, stuffed with upcoming events. A man was plastering a poster for Low, playing in Christ Church Cathedral that evening. The cortege turned into D'Olier Street and picked up speed as it approached the bridge. Omar eyed the billboard men lined across the bridge. *'The Traveller.'* *Haven't read that one yet. Must have a look. Can't see their faces. Like ghosts amongst us.*

‘There’s the Nigerians, making a few extra bob on the side. Clever lot, that lot.’ Cowen was clearly looking for a response.

Jameson squinted at the window. ‘Look Arab to me. At least some of them.’

‘We have two Nigerian priests in the Pro-Cathedral, Father Ogunbusola and Father Njoo. Good men,’ responded Reidy. ‘Don’t know what we’d do without them these days.’

‘Low on the native enlistments, are we Monsignor? No-one left to convert.’

‘No Dick, there’s always someone.’ Reidy smiled out of the corner of his thin mouth.

‘Parnell Street is looking like downtown Lagos these days, so I’m sure you must be cleaning up there.’

‘The African people are a devout people. Good, simple, God-fearing people. We’ve lost our simplicity in the middle of all this madness, not necessarily a good thing Dick, even for a cynic like yourself.’ Reidy clutched his cap as the carriage hit a bump.

Omar felt it was time to enter the conversation. ‘Can I ask you, Dick? Have you ever written anything positive about our immigrants? I saw that article you wrote about the ritual sacrificing of animals by an African family in Finglas. It’s just hatemongering. It doesn’t help with the overall picture.’

‘Listen Wilde, stick with the Arts features.’ Cowen leant forward, and waved his pencil in Omar’s face. ‘Real News is about exposing all aspects of society, even the nasty ones – and that was nasty, man.’

‘Gentlemen, gentleman, enough of that. Let’s agree to differ.’ The Monsignor raised his voice to stop the flow of angry discussion.

Omar wished he could hop out of the carriage, and leave the bad air behind him. They turned left, past The Ambassador. The shutter of Jameson’s camera clicked at speed. He snapped a group, dressed in Victorian mourning garb. They doffed their hats at the passing carriages.

‘They really get into it, some of these literary heads, looks great but I have to admit, I’ve never read it, what about you guys?’ asked Jameson.

‘Me neither,’ added Cowen. ‘You two?’ He nodded at Omar, and the Monsignor.

‘No, afraid not,’ replied Omar.

They all turned towards the Monsignor.

He smiled. ‘I’ll leave that up to you fellas to decide whether a Monsignor has read the most scandalous Irish book of all time!’

‘You have, haven’t you? Need to know the enemy, after all,’ replied Cowen.

The Monsignor narrowed his eyes. ‘As a matter of interest, how many of you good men have read the Bible cover to cover?’

Cowen laughed. Jameson looked at Omar blankly.

‘Well you can’t expect the Arab to have read it surely.’ Cowen gestured towards Omar.

‘Actually, I have, maybe not cover to cover but enough to know what it’s all about. And you Cowen, I suppose you’re an expert on the Qur’an?’ Omar wasn’t going to let him away with anymore of his snide comments. Cowen stopped tapping his pen, sat back in his seat and grunted without saying anything.

‘Touché.’ Jameson threw Omar a look of acknowledgement.

The carriage stopped suddenly. They were right outside the Black Church on the Western Way. A real funeral was jamming up the street. Three Gardaí on horseback attempted to unravel the intertwining of the two funeral corteges, one fake and one real.

Jameson jumped up to the window. ‘It’s the real thing blocking the way. Isn’t that mad?’ Omar peered out at the shiny black hearse. He could see a young woman walk slowly behind the

hearse. She was dressed in black, and clutched the hand of a little boy. A tall man with a shaved head, wrapped his long arm around her. She stared blankly at the tiny white coffin. It sat uneasily in the wide back space of the hearse. Omar felt a wave of nausea wash through him. *Newborn, so tiny.* He recognised this scene. *Ruairi.* The name formed in his brain like a sickening mantra. The Monsignor made a sign of the cross, and mumbled a prayer of some kind. Cowen sat quietly in the corner. Jameson's camera shutter sounded like a demented moth. Their horse drawn carriage made its way slowly through the crowd.

'Shame when a child goes before the parent. Against the order of things,' commented the Monsignor.

*How would he know?*

'Indeed.' Jameson glanced at Omar.

Cowen muttered out of the corner of his mouth. 'Thank God the poor little thing wasn't born last week, or it would be floating around in Limbo as we speak. Probably unmarried, those two.'

All three turned to look at Cowen without saying a word.

'What? I'm simply speaking the God-honest truth,' he continued defensively.

'There's a time for humour, and a time for respect, and you are sorely in need of a lesson in the latter, Dick,' said the Monsignor. Cowen sank back into his seat, and began to scribble on his notepad like an idle schoolboy. Everyone lapsed into silence. The carriage moved forward past a hairdressers called Rita's, packed with mid-morning perm washes. Next door, at the Allegro chipper, a gang of young boys wrestled playfully. At the end of Phibsborough road a postman emptied the morning post into a large brown sack. The road continued towards Doyle's corner. Two large, muscular men rolled metal barrels full of porter from the Guinness lorry to the door of the pub. The grey-haired barman stood outside the door of the pub, sleeves rolled above his elbows. He directed the day's feed of porter through the door, a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

Jameson jumped up to the window to point his camera at a commotion on the Royal Canal bridge. Several garda cars had cordoned off an area along the bank of the canal. A body bag lay on the edge of the bank. A crowd of people lined the bridge, staring down to the water below.

'The Grim Reaper is having a busy day today,' said Cowen. 'Bet it's a jumper.'

'Sure it's hardly high enough for that,' said Jameson. 'More common to jump in front of the Dart these days if you want to do yourself in.'

'Gruesome thoughts boys, never a good thing to take your own life. Best not to talk about it,' said the Monsignor, looking the other direction.

'By the way, Monsignor, do they still go straight to hell, or has the Pope done away with that too?' asked Cowen, winking at Jameson.

'Very funny Dick. Sins are sins. That'll never change, and I'd say you've a fair few notched up so watch that smart talk,' said Reidy, with a quick smile.

Omar stared at the nails on his hand. *Could do with a clean. Wish they'd give it a rest.*

'Still, it's a cowardly thing all the same,' said Cowen.

Omar stared at him coldly. *What would you know about courage? Sometimes it's too much, that's all.* His Mother's face flashed through his brain. *She didn't mean it. Leaving me that way. Her eyes, sunken and empty; heart broken and drowning. What do you know of that?*

'It's just a sad thing, Cowen.' Jameson shot Omar a look of sympathy. 'We all have our own private hells to live with. It's just harder for some than others.'

*He knows. Kind man. All over the newspapers after all. Not that Cowen would notice.  
Cold Fish.*

‘We shouldn’t speak ill of the dead, one way or the other,’ said the Monsignor.

Omar sank deep into thought. The sound of his Mother’s voice singing ‘The Irish Lullaby,’ floated through his mind. They passed under the shade of the trees on Prospect Rd. The old Victorian sash windows revealed faces: smiling, creviced, curious, and indifferent. The eyes of Dublin peered out on the past, as it moved slowly through the leafy street. The others continued to chatter. Omar allowed himself to dream. His thoughts flew above the roofs of the fine Victorian houses: like a bird caught on a drift of air, he dipped and dived through the alleys and lanes, past women at washing lines, children in playgrounds, packed offices; swirled through the scent of the sea; followed the line of the river as it widened out, past the Docklands, the Point Theatre; over the queue of people who poured onto the Ulysses ferry, and out into the breadth of the bay: Dublin bay, wide and bright and wild.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 10 - Kinch

The funeral cortege passed and turned left into Bridge Street. Kinch eyed his watch. *Right on cue.* The Gardaí had barricaded off the route. A line of Victorian horse-drawn carriages trotted past solemnly. The black of the carriages gleamed like rain-soaked coal. Although he admired the austere beauty of such a display, Kinch felt a shiver run down his spine. It was as though Death himself was coming to visit the people of Dublin; to populate the empty casket with a city's people. They lined the roadway; excited tourists popping off cameras, while curious locals looked on. He thought of his mother, lying quietly in her grave, deep in the bowels of the earth, and a claustrophobic dread invaded his senses.

*Where is your God now as you rot in the bowels of the earth?* She came to him in a dream the night before, begging him to believe; her ghastly figure floating in the fogs of Limbo. He woke soaked in the sweat of guilt. *Why was your belief not enough, Mother? Why did you need mine? I cannot give what I don't have.* The horse hooves clipped past. A group of American students waved at the lead carriage as though it were a royal parade.

The small, plump girl in front of him jumped around with excitement. 'Hey guys, isn't that cart just like soooooo rad!' Her smile stretched across her face unnaturally, elongated by the traintrack braces that filled her mouth like some weird inquisitional torture instrument.

*Thank God I come from a nation where rotten teeth are a sign of character and a life well-lived!* The last carriage passed by. He recognised its occupants instantly.

*There's the Moor. Nice bloke. Don't have anything against him. Just has no balls, poor bugger. Oh My God HE'S there too! I feel sick inside, all holier than thou in that floaty garb of his. Must be doing the Priest's part. How ironic!*

'Hey, dude, can I have a photo with you like. You look so hot in your costume.' The girl with the traintracks grabbed his arm. He winced as the group of giggling college girls crowded around him.

'Fromage,' said the girl.

He extricated himself and wished them well, not meaning a word of it. His headphones would provide the perfect excuse not to engage, and he stuck them on. He knew it was a bit odd to see Stephen Dedalus wandering around like that, but he had them as well hidden under his hat as he could manage, and he needed a soundtrack to his life, to guide him through his moods. U2's '11 O'clock tick tock' blasted into his brain. *Perfect.*

The crowds collected behind the funeral cortege, and he followed them down Pearse Street. They turned into D'Olier Street and headed for the bridge. Ahead of the cortege he could see a row of sandwichmen standing on O'Connell bridge in perfect formation. Each wore a placard with a single letter spelling out 'The Traveller.' Kinch had applied for a job with this funky new travel publication but had got no reply. He fantasised about being sent to some far-flung destination, and actually being paid for it. He was keeping an eye on the cheap Ryanair flights and hoped to come up with something original. The sandwichmen stretched across half the bridge. They looked foreign. *Probably paid a pittance.* Behind them the sun caught the point of the Spire, and light shot in all directions into the sky.

He passed the enormous stone statue of Daniel O'Connell. The 'Great Liberator' towered above him, covered in a sea of bird-shit. He felt oddly depressed as he turned into Abbey Street to get away from the crowd. The Independent Offices were just ahead of him but he hesitated. *Bit early for the cheque.* He retraced his steps and made his way to the front of the

Anne Summers brightly lit shop. The window was littered with multi-coloured dildos, flavoured condoms, and lingerie that left nothing to the imagination. It wasn't long ago the mere mention of the word 'dildo' would have sent the population skulking into a corner with shame. *Got over that one quickly. Howya Missus. It's far from that crotchless body suit you were raised.* He nodded at the middle-aged woman with the greying roots. He could see she was trying to chat to him, so he paused his iPod.

'I'm lookin for somethin to keep the hubby happy luv. It's his 60<sup>th</sup>. What do you reckon?' She held up the aforesaid item with a dirty grin.

'Yeah, I'm sure he'll love it,' *But maybe not with you inside it!*

'Better than Viagra anyway, Wha?' She cackled loudly, and poked Kinch in the ribs.

'God yeah, anyway.'

Her eyes widened suggestively. 'Get you goin would it young fella.'

*Jaysus!* 'Well, if my girlfriend was in it, yeah, definitely.'

'Lucky girl, to have a fine young man coming in here to buy her somethin hot an sexy.' *Feelin my leg, Oh bollox.* 'My aul fellas still got it in him though. Don't think cos we've one foot in the grave that we're not still mad at it, let me tell ya. Still everyone needs a little spicin up, don't they luv?'

'Sure yeah. Sorry, in a rush, gotta go.' He sped to the back of the shop behind the X-rated items.

*Christ, the aul ones are gone mad nowadays.* He peaked around a vibrator stand and could see that the woman was cashing up her purchase. He couldn't help casting an eye over the dazzling array of male members hanging in front of him. *Holy Shit, look at the size of that one. Black, wouldn't you know. Still, I can hold my own.* He came to the conclusion that he was definitely 'above average', if this was indeed a typical representation.

'Not switching to the other side on me, are you man? We're a dying breed, us heteros.'

'Hanan, Jesus, you frightened me. What the fuck are you doing in this salubrious establishment?' He'd liked Hanan from the first minute he met him at Sarah's party four months before. He was an easy-going guy; no bullshit about him.

'It's Sarah's birthday next week, so I thought I might surprise her with a little hot number. Bit of a pressie to myself, I suppose.' He held up a red silk bra, and thong with matching suspenders. There were little black roses edging the top of the bra and panties.

'That should do the trick...Up to the same thing myself.' A wave of panic hit him like a cold shower when he realised how this would be misinterpreted.

'But man, I thought you broke up with her this morning. In a right state she was. I saw her with Sarah about an hour ago. Second thoughts or what?'

'No, I mean, yeah, that's right. We broke up, but I thought I would get her something to make her feel a bit better.' *Shit, scrambling, bound to smell it.*

'Bit weird man, she might get the wrong idea. Sexy lingerie doesn't usually mean 'I'm breaking up with you.'

'Yeah, I suppose you're right. I'm no good at this breaking up stuff.' *Cringe, I look like an eejit!*

'Think I should give you a few lessons, although come to think of it, I'm usually on the receiving end.' He slapped Kinch on the back amicably. 'Listen, fancy a quick scoop?'

*Shit, that was a close one. Gotta watch what I say. She'd kill me.* 'Yeah sure, why not. Still have thirty minutes to kill before I head in to get my cheque in the Indo. Like everyone else, they owe me a months worth.'

‘Bit strapped myself man, but always a bob or two for a pint, you know.’

‘Priorities Hanan, priorities, I know.’

‘Let’s head round to ‘The Flowing Tide’ for one.’

A sea of people floated up and down O Connell Street, as they exited the shop.

Hanan sighed heavily. ‘Christ man, they’re never going to be finished with those bloody road-works. I don’t know what this street looks like without a building site.’

‘I know. It’s called regeneration, I believe. More like mass destruction and wanking bollox to me.’

They laughed as they turned into Abbey Street, and walked towards the National Theatre.

‘Ever been to the Abbey, Hanan?’

‘Yeah, went to see Othello last year. My Dad loves that play because Othello’s an Arab. It’s fucking stupid. He latches onto anything which promotes ‘our’ culture. Normally gives me a pain up my hole, but I have to say, it was brilliant man.’

‘I wouldn’t have taken you for a Shakespeare lover.’

‘Hey, us Arabs are good for more than blowing up buildings you know.’

Kinch laughed nervously. ‘I was thinking of the fact that you don’t often see an economist with a copy of Shakespeare in their clutches man.’

Hanan laughed, and walked ahead of Kinch into ‘The Flowing Tide.’

‘To be honest, I’m a bit worried about my little brother, Khaled.’ He gestured to the balding barman. ‘Two pints please.’

‘Why so man?’

‘I’ve caught him reading all kinds of subversive shit on the Net. Stuff about Al Qaeda and Bin Laden. It’s not that I don’t think he should be curious, but he’s such a zealot about the whole thing.’ Hanan creased his brow and lowered his voice. ‘I wouldn’t say this to just anyone man. I trust you. It’s hard for a Muslim to even mention this kind of stuff without being stuck in the fucking stereotypical box that everyone loves to see us in. I fucking hate it!’

‘It must be really shit. Jesus Christ, it’s not so long ago that there were signs up in pubs across the water saying ‘No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs.’ Memory’s short man. You guys have taken over the hotspot – much to the delight of the boys up North.’

‘Yeah, it’s a double whammy for me cos I’m Irish as well. Can’t fuckin win!’

‘Yer pints lads.’ The portly barman delivered the pints while making a sign of the cross over them with great aplomb. ‘Hope they’re creamy enough for ye now lads. Enjoy.’

Kinch was always amused by the reverence which surrounded the pouring of a pint of Guinness. It was a rite of passage for the un-initiated into the secret labyrinth of the Irish mind; the dark and complex nature of its flavour, a secret combination of piping and pouring methods, not to mention a little bit of publican magic that was undefinable but well recognised. The fact that it did not ‘travel well’, a proud confirmation of the importance of its origins.

‘About your brother, he’s probably just going through a lot of adolescent angst and all that shit. Maybe you should have a chat with him,’ Kinch suggested.

‘I’ve tried, honest. He just tells me to fuck off back to my Irish friends. Stupid fucker thinks he’s living in the depths of the Lebanon.’ He looked frustrated, anxious, seeking answers.

‘Do you want me to suss him out, man. I think he likes me since I let him share that joint last week.’

‘You did fucking what?’

‘Hey, I saved your ass. You were sucking face big-time with Sarah in your room blasting music. I was just chilling out in the living room thanking God I couldn’t hear a thing. It woke him up. It was all I could think of to stop him going in, and seeing you in flagrante.’

‘Fuck, really. Sorry, I mean thanks, I think. Anyway, yeah, yeah. Listen, can you come round later? I can tell him you’re interested in hearing that weird electronic music he’s been fucking around with.’

Kinch grimaced. ‘You’re jokin. I’d rather shite nails than listen to that stuff.’

‘Ah go on. He knows you’re into music, so he might swallow it.’

‘Jesus. Alright then. Not sure about today but if there’s any time I’ll text you, ok?’

‘Great, yeah great.’

They lapsed into a comfortable silence, sipping their pints slowly.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 11 - Bláithín

Bláithín arrived at Long Lane bang on 12.00p.m. She tied her black bicycle to a lamp-post, and took her violin case out of the wicker basket. As she walked through the iron gate into the tiny front garden, the door opened. Flora stood, illuminated by the sunlight. There was something different about her today: her lustrous hair, the dress as it clung to her rump like the skin of a fruit, the red of her lipstick; a distinct uncontainable beauty. *Hope I look half as good as her at her age.*

‘Hi Bláith, are you ok?’ Flora looked concerned. ‘You’re looking great in that gear, by the way.’

‘I feel like shit. Can you believe that he dumped me? Today of all days. I don’t know how I’ll hold it together for the day.’

Flora closed the door behind them and ushered Bláithín into the cosy living room.

‘I know, it’s not fair, but did you have any sense that it was coming?’

‘Honestly, no. I thought things were fine, although I said something I probably shouldn’t have.’

‘How do you mean?’

Bláithín shrugged her shoulders. ‘Well, we were out on Howth Head at the weekend. It was beautiful and so romantic I kind of told him...I love him.’ The tears began to build behind her eyes. ‘I couldn’t help it. I know, I’m an eejit!’

‘I see.’ Flora put her arms around Bláithín’s shoulders. ‘Men are such cowards.’

Bláithín let the emotion flow through her like rain: hoped this warm, beautiful woman would soak up her pain; comfort her in a way that her own mother was incapable of doing.

Flora reached for a box of tissues on the coffee table beside her. ‘Maybe you’re better off without him. He was never reliable...was he?’

‘I don’t know. I know he’s a little lost, but I guess that’s part of the reason I like him so much.’ Bláithín plonked herself on the red couch beside the fireplace. Flora sat beside her.

‘Little Lost Boys are dangerous. You never know what they’re thinking or what they’re up to.’ Flora looked away towards the fireplace.

Bláithín detected something in Flora’s voice. ‘What do you mean? Do you know something I don’t?’ A piece of stray knowledge perhaps; a clue to a fact that eluded her.

‘Of course not, no. I just mean that Kinch is always a little distant. Isn’t he? You can’t be sure, that’s all...’ Flora got up from the couch and walked around the corner into the kitchen.

‘Can I make you a tea hun? Make you feel a little better.’

‘Mmmm. Yes, please.’

She looked around the room, while Flora potted in the kitchen. Many of Flora’s own paintings, hung on the walls. Female forms in sketches and outline, fractious creatures that seemed to move like glistening shadows under the roof of the ocean. Flora’s violin sat beside a music stand in the corner. Bláithín felt safe here. The old walls were like whispering ghosts, and for some reason that comforted her. Now it contained Flora: her bright, feminine force was everywhere. There was no hint of Omar in this space. It was almost as if she lived alone.

‘Sugar and milk?’ The soft voice drifted around the corner.

‘Just milk thanks.’

‘I recognise the woman in the reproduction you have hanging behind your violin stand. Who is she again?’ Bláithín struggled to place the face.

‘It’s Lady Lavery.’

‘Right, that’s it. There was a guy painting her on the footpath by the Molly Malone statue today. Never noticed you had her on your wall before.’

‘I just put it up this week.’ Flora came out from the kitchen and placed two mugs of tea on the wooden coffee table.

‘Really. Coincidence that. I like her face.’

‘Me too. There’s something in her eyes I recognise.’ Flora poured some milk into the mugs of tea. ‘Can’t quite put my finger on it.’

Bláithín moved closer to the painting. ‘I think she looks like you.’

‘Do you think so? Funny, I never saw that.’ Flora sipped the tea, glanced at herself in the mirror, and then to the painting. ‘Maybe so.’

Bláithín fiddled with a copy of Marie Claire that was sitting on the table in front of her. ‘Maybe I should read my horoscope to see what disasters coming next.’

‘I don’t believe in all that crap. No-one can predict what’s coming next. Just have to do the best we can right now.’

‘Jesus, that’s optimistic. I suppose there’s no point in asking if you think I can get him back then?’ said Bláithín.

Flora smiled. ‘I don’t mean to be so negative. Maybe...I think it’s best to be cool about it all. Stand back...don’t crowd him out. You never know. Men hate to be pressurised.’

Bláithín knew that Flora was no fool when it came to men. She could see how their eyes followed her everywhere she went. ‘I’m not so good at playing the game, unfortunately,’

‘Who is?’ replied Flora. ‘Have you spoken to your mother about it?’

‘You know what she’s like. She’ll be delighted...hated him in the first place...thought he was a waster because he wasn’t some big investment banker or techy millionaire whom she could brag about.’

‘Is she really that bad?’ asked Flora, sipping her tea.

‘Trust me. My friends call her Godzilla for a reason.’

Flora looked at her watch, put her cup on the table, and moved towards the corner of the room.

‘Maybe we should start the lesson hun? I’m afraid I’m a bit pressed for time today.’ She picked up her violin case, unzipped it, and placed the shining instrument on her shoulder.

‘Yeah, ok. I’ll probably suck, I’m in such crap form,’ said Bláithín, reaching for her violin.

‘Just put your emotion into the playing. It can work wonders. Trust me.’

Bláithín moved to hug Flora. ‘I do trust you. You’re a good listener and a good friend.’

Flora dropped the violin to her side, and half hugged Bláithín.

‘Let’s get started.’ Bláithín thought she could feel an irritation in her voice. *I must be imagining it. Don’t know what I feel anymore.* She picked up her instrument, and placed it gently in the crook of her neck. Flora adjusted the music sheet on the stand in front of her.

‘Alegro Moderato, Dvorak. Are you ready?’

‘Ready.’

The two bows moved slowly along the length of the strings: delicate wrists formed soft fluid shapes in the air. The light, wisp of sound seeped into the room slowly, like a child’s sleeping breath. Flora closed her eyes, and Bláithín stared at the page with a look of intense concentration. A wave of calm washed over her. *I will find him again, he will love me.* She wove her thoughts into the strings of her instrument, and allowed the music to soothe away her worry.

## Chapter 12 - Aeolus

The 'funeral' had gone perfectly according to plan. Omar interviewed a few of the cast, including the Monsignor. At the end of the scene, the Monsignor jumped in a cab for the Independent Offices with Omar, Jameson and Cowen. Reidy needed to talk with the Editor about a letter he had sent to the paper. When they got to the door of the Independent, Jameson asked Omar if he wouldn't mind picking up some photographs for him in Kodak on Bachelor's Walk. Omar was sick of being a gofer for all and sundry, but he liked Jameson, who was pressed for time, so he agreed. Jameson chucked him his camera, and asked him to get the roll that was inside developed in a one hour development, just to check what he had. The others went inside, and Omar raced across O'Connell Street, turning right beside the river.

Pockets of people scurried from the surrounding office buildings, desperate to get their one hour of release from the drone of daily activity. Short-skirted women with ironed straight hair, and men in blue ties and pink shirts chattered madly, hyped up on coffee and stress-fuelled adrenaline. He could feel the sweat mat his hair into the side of his head. *Mad heat. No wonder they're out in their droves.* He looked across the bridge, and could see that several of the sandwichmen had broken away, and were having lunch at the end of the boardwalk. The letters crowded around each other. He could make them out. R sat lazily on the edge, seemingly uninterested in the conversation. E listened intently while V gesticulated wildly clearly dominating the conversation. To his right stood another man wearing E. He poured out tea from a flask. Omar could just make out A and L, who nodded vigorously when V got excited. He wished he could get to know who these men were, where they came from, how their lives had been reduced to a single letter. Instead he picked up the camera and began to snap. He zoomed in on their faces. Snap, snap. There was something about this little group: they didn't smile, stared out at the passing parade with detached fascination, as though watching a 3D Cinemax film which they could never be a part of. The shutter stopped suddenly, and the roll began to unwind. *Must get those off Jameson.*

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After Hanan had left, Kinch looked around the walls of The Flowing Tide. The National Theatre's nearest pub was like a museum. Posters and photographs of dead and famous people covered the walls: Michael Mac Liammoir, Cyril Cusack, Siobhán Mc Kenna. He wondered if he could ever reach these walls: earn his place in the collective memory of a people, exist after the last breath of life had been sucked from his lungs. That was the point, after all: all this artistic endeavour; achieve the impossible, live on. But what did he know of these people really? Images on paper, and celluloid; voices falling from a cracked recording. These small fragments and shadows created an impression: a distorted reality; a reconstituted 'memory.' He wondered when he would stop remembering his mother, when she too would blur into shadow.

He sipped the last layer of froth from the bottom of his pint glass, and looked at his watch. *Shit, better text Quixote. Can't meet him at The Barge.* He punched out a message on his mobile, pulled on his jacket and hat, and walked out onto the street. As he approached the door of the Irish Independent, his phone beeped in his pocket. The message was from Quixote: 'In trouble, can't explain. Need your help. At Pearse Street Garda station. Can you come please?' *Damn, what's that about? Been acting a bit weird lately.* He'd call him back as soon as he was finished at the Indo. Abbey Street was a mess: the new Luas tram tracks were being laid at last,

although Kinch remained sceptical about whether it would make a blind bit of difference in the city that brought traffic hell to a fine art.

The day's paper sat in a pile on the way in the door, and he grabbed a copy. *Government fighting again. What's new? Bloody Tribunals, never end. What's this? ...the Columbia Three were freed...sure they did it, but Quixote will be happy.* He climbed the long stairs to the busy office. *Into the belly of the beast.*

The main office was a buzz of activity. Bertie Macken, the Arts Correspondent, busily tapped on his lap-top. His white hair sat wildly above his thin, friendly face.

'Ah, Nolan. Good man. Was worried you wouldn't show.' *Newspapermen, insisting on the surname at all times. Muscular barrier to emotion. Guess it helps them to lynch an acquaintance if the story requires it.*

'I'll always show up for a few extra bob, Bertie, no fear,' replied Kinch.

'Good man yourself. Listen, I'm off for a few weeks. Just wanted to give you the schedule for those upcoming theatre and film reviews. You'll be ok for those I assume?' Bertie shuffled through the mound of papers on his desk.

'Grand, no bother. Where you off to?'

'The wife's brother has a place on the Algarve. I'll be hanging out with all the tax-dodgers. Maybe get a few free pints off them' He laughed and continued to push paper around his desk. 'Jaysus, I can never find anything when I want it.' A pale, red-haired woman sped through the office, passed a package over Kinch's head, and dropped it onto Bertie's already overflowing desk.

'It's the piece about the Bloomsday breakfast, President was there and all. Gay Byrne was shite at the acting.' She moved at speed to the other side of the office.

'Are we talking Gay or Gabriel?' asked Kinch, with a pained expression.

'Gay, I'm afraid. I know, I know. What the fuck is the world coming to?' She ripped open a stack of envelopes on her desk. Kinch observed a rip running the length of her brown tights into the back of a filthy white runner. *Lois Lane you're not!* The large office buzzed with ringing phones, heads in corners tapped madly at lap-tops, shouted questions from one side of the room to the other.

'Tina, are we running with the illegal migrant piece?'

'Yeah, bottom left-hand corner.'

A subeditor dashed over to Bertie's desk. 'Here's the first page layout for tomorrow.'

'Good man, I'll check it over.'

An older man, neat moustache, broad smile, tufts of grey hair protruding underneath his plaid cap, bounded through the door gamely.

'Got me boxes for the afternoon, lads?'

The worse for-wear looking young man seated by the door picked up a box full of newspapers, and handed it to the man.

'There you go Mick. You'll be sweltering out there in this heat today.'

'Jaysus, I know. Saw that piece about the salmon getting sunburnt down the South. Forgot to put on their factor fifty eh?' He slapped the hung-over man on the back with a wheezing laugh.

'Mind the head, Mick, had a rough one last night.' The young man stroked his temple, and squinted with a pained expression.

'Hop over to The Oval and swallow a hair of the dog, lad, that'll soon sort you out. Right, I'm off.'

Kinch nodded a hello in the older man's direction. He nodded back, picked up the box and headed out onto the street.

'How're you getting on with all the commotion?' asked Bertie.

'A bit wrecked. Off to the National Library next. Feel like a minor celeb though. Probably as close as I'll ever get.'

'Ah, here's the bloody thing!' Bertie grabbed a piece of paper from under a half-open sandwich in the corner. 'Sorry about that.' A piece of lettuce had stuck to the corner of the paper, and he wiped it away.

Kinch picked up the schedule with the tips of his fingers, and placed it carefully into the black satchel he was carrying.

'Jaysus, you're some knacker, Macken.'

'It takes one to know one, Nolan,' he replied with a wink. 'Head over to Eileen in accounts and she'll sort you out, good man.' He turned back to his lap-top, and began to type furiously.

Kinch turned to leave, when he remembered the brown envelope in his bag. 'Shit, nearly forgot, Bertie, I have a letter from that windbag, Lacey, moaning on about the state of Ireland or some shite. Can I leave that with you?' Kinch placed the envelope on a spare inch of space beside the lap-top. The wiry man continued typing. 'Not bloody Lacey again! Well, we're running out of toilet paper. I'm sure I can put it to good use.' He nodded to Kinch to leave the item on the desk beside him. 'Good luck today Nolan.'

As he turned to leave, the Editor's door opened at the street side of the room. A mumble of familiar voices emerged.

'Do you hear that Flatley's at it again? Planning some big extravaganza called...wait for it...' Celtic Tiger'. Can you bloody believe it?' Mark Jameson's nostrils flared wildly.

'Well, I enjoyed Celtic Waters all the same,' interrupted the Monsignor.

*Jesus, it's him again. What the fuck? Twice in one day. Need to get the fuck out of here before he sees me. Bloody cheque.* Kinch stepped sideways, into the accountant's office, and hid himself behind the door. A round-faced woman, with spectacles balanced on the end of her flat nose, eyed him curiously.

'Hiding from the law again, are we Brian?'

'No, sorry, just don't want to cross paths with them,' he whispered, pointing to the group assembled outside the Editor's Office.

'Very mysterious. What've you been up to now?'

'Nothing Eileen, too complicated to explain. Listen, do you have that cheque for me so I can get the fuck out of here?'

'Sit your arse down there lad. I have to go upstairs to get the chequebook. God you're a mad one,' and she was out the door, throwing her eyes to heaven.

Kinch sat with his back flat against the wall. The gossiping group didn't spot him, and he cocked an ear to their conversation.

'Was given the knees up by Phelan. The fool is actually going to help finance the bloody thing,' said Cowen in disbelief.

'Fair fucks to the man, he made a bloody fortune on the other one sure, why wouldn't he?' Farrell turned to the Monsignor for agreement.

'Quite so.'

‘Right lads. How’s this for a description? He gave me a copy of the proposal. ‘Celtic Tiger is a green-tinted hymn to Ireland, with pastoral panoramas and bucolic scenes of winsome lasses...’ Jameson clutched his sides with laughter. ‘Can you bloody believe it?’

Cowen cocked an amused eyebrow. ‘Only colic lasses left around here.’

‘Wait for it, there’s more....St. Patrick is represented by a group of monks who alternatively pray and dance about, while banishing a nest of snake-women from Ireland.’ Cowen and Jameson were creased double with the laughing.

‘Wha? We should be so lucky!’ said Cowen.

‘It sounds a tad over the top, doesn’t it lads?’ said the Monsignor.

‘Over and above and out the other side. I think Flatley has finally lost it,’ said Farrell.

Kinch played with his hat in his lap.

‘Wait, the best is yet to come. He high kicks his way through British colonialisation, the Famine (now that’s tasteful!) and the Easter Rising.’

‘Tíocfaidh ár Lá. Adams and the boys will love it,’ said Farrell.

Cowen jiggled around the room, high kicking madly, and knocking a tray of papers onto the floor. ‘Can’t you see Pearse dancing his way out of the GPO, proclamation in hand?’ Eileen passed through the Office at that moment, and cursed vociferously about the mess that, she, no doubt, would have to clean up.

‘As we said, banish those snake-women,’ whispered Cowen. They all laughed in unison.

Eileen slipped back into her Office, and handed Kinch the cheque for two hundred and fifty euros. ‘Here you go, Brian. Don’t put it all on one horse.’

‘Thanks Eileen. Might have a spin on Ascot today sure. Any suggestions?’

‘I actually heard Jameson talking about Damson or something...yes Damson.’

Kinch eyed the back door for a quick exit. ‘Mmmm, never heard of it. Thinking of backing Ulysses, the day that’s in it and all.’

‘Well, sure you’d be mad not to.’

Kinch glanced back at the group in the Office.

Cowen moved to light a cigarette.

‘Outside Dick. No unlawful activity in this Office.’ Farrell edged the protesting journalist towards the door. Cowen ran down the stairs and out the front of the building for a cigarette. Kinch grabbed his hat. *Shit, Cowen will see me now. Never mind.*

‘See you Eileen.’ He sped down the stairs, tripped on the bottom step and fell on his hat.

‘Mr. Nolan, you’re in a bit of a rush.’ Cowen flicked a match off the side of the wall.

‘Yeah Dick, a lot to do today man.’

‘Is that right? Not trying to avoid anyone, are you?’ A doubledecker bus passed by spitting fumes and noise into the air. Kinch strained to hear.

‘Don’t know what you mean, man. Listen, do you have a fag there? I could do with one.’

Kinch cocked a head towards the stairway, making sure he could hear if anyone was coming.

‘Yeah sure.’ Cowen tapped the side of the box, and a cigarette popped out.

‘Thanks man.’

‘Listen Kinch, I’ve been meaning to ask you. I know you have your ear to the ground. I’m doing a new column which features curiosities, odd stories, modern-day fables if you know what I mean. You being an actor and all. Any ideas for me man?’ Cowen tapped the side of his cigarette, watching the ash fall to the ground.

‘Odd stories. Yeah, got one or two of those. Actually just heard one yesterday. You might be interested.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Heard it from a taxi driver,’ said Kinch.

‘The Oracles of Dublin,’ replied Cowen. ‘Go on.’

‘Apparently, last month two Aul ones from the Liberties had saved up to go to London, to do some shopping for the weekend. Never been on a plane, but got one of those cheap Ryanair jobbies. Were delighted with themselves heading out of Ireland for the first time.’

‘Better off in a boat but go on,’ said Cowen in his usual dry tone.

‘They called a taxi, and a Lithuanian man came to pick them up. On the way they got the driver to nip into a random garage, so they could buy their weekly lottery ticket.’

‘Right.’

‘So there they were, wearing the poor man’s ear off about the state of Ireland and too many foreigners stuffing up the place...well you know the story. The poor bastard had left his wife and teenagers in Lithuania, because his wife couldn’t get a working visa. He’s living, sharing with seven others in some shite hovel over near Parnell Square. The man is practically suicidal. Anyway, the aul ones, no doubt feeling squeezed out themselves by the invasion of foreigners in their area, weren’t exactly sympathetic. They hinted that maybe he should go back home to his family. In the mean time, the traffic is monumentally stuck, even for Dublin. The clock is ticking. The two women are like demented banshees. They start to get irritated with the taxi driver. The poor bollox has only just arrived in the country, so he doesn’t know the short cuts.’

Cowen looked at his sceptically. ‘Is this going anywhere Nolan?’

‘Jaysus man, patience is a virtue, so they say.’

‘Never had it man, and never want it, but go on.’

‘As they crawl through the traffic, time passes and the two women finally get out of the taxi, hurling abuse at the stressed driver. They refuse to pay, calling him ‘a useless Spick’ – so much for geographically correct insults! – and hop on a nearby bus.’

‘At least if you’re going to be racist, be an informed racist eh?’ said Cowen.

‘Bit of an oxymoron that mate. Anyway, when they get to the airport, their flight has taken off, and they have to turn around and go home. When she gets back to her flat in the Liberties, the Aul wan, I think it was Mary O’ Brien, sits down to watch ‘Spin the Wheel’ and sure enough her numbers come up for...wait for it... 1,000,000 euros. The poor woman nearly has a heart attack on the spot, goes into her bag for the ticket, and..’

Cowen eyes widen. ‘No fucking way man.’

‘You guessed it, she had left the ticket in the taxi cab.’

‘Divine Justice, divine justice. Hah.’ Cowen threw the butt on the ground.

‘Wait til you hear. That evening the Lithuanian spotted it, and when he saw the numbers come up he decided that it was a gift from God, called his family immediately and told them that their luck had changed. And now the Liberties gals are going mad. There’s some mad fight going on between them all now, because the person in the garage has no idea who they sold the ticket to, and the Lithuanian is swearing blind it was him.’ Kinch stopped to draw breath.

‘I like it. The old vs the new eh? Whose side would you be on?’ asked Cowen.

‘I don’t take sides, maybe that’s my problem, man. Anyway, there’s something in that, I reckon,’ said Kinch.

‘Maybe so. Moral dilemmas are a winner. Do you know where I can get my hands on this taxi driver?’

‘City cabs. I use them all the time. Cheapest around,’ said Kinch.’

‘Great stuff, listen if you hear any others let me know. What’s a good heading for this one, do you reckon?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe, ‘The Parable of the Promised Land’ or ‘Dublin traffic has a lot to answer for!’

Cowen chucked the butt on the ground. ‘Damn right Kinch. Glad I’m a bike man.’

‘Listen man, I have to head, but thanks for the fag and let me know if you do something with that,’ said Kinch.

‘Will do. Thanks for that.’ Cowen disappeared up the stairs.

Kinch picked up the old Trilby, and punched it back into shape. *Thank God these were made to last. Right, out of here.*

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The Oval pub was packed for lunch. Omar saw the Monsignor and Cowen disappear inside. *An unlikely pair. The Cocky Corkonian and the Pious Papist. Off for a scoop. Could do with one myself.* A truck was parked outside the main entrance to the Independent Offices. Two burly tattooed men effortlessly threw boxes into the back while two others raced up and down the stairs, depositing the afternoon edition load on the path beside them. A skinheaded man bashed into Omar on the stairway.

‘Sorry head, in a bit of a rush.’ The old wooden stairway rattled underneath the man’s heavy boots. *Rush, run, rattle, never ends.* He entered the Office. The Editor and sub-editor were deep in conversation bent over the day’s broadsheet.

‘Did ye hear that one lads, Muslims applying for Citizenship are being told they can have only one wife, poor bastards. How will they ever survive?’ said Farrell.

‘I’m still trying to get rid of mine.’ Bertie lifted his head from the lap-top. ‘Maybe we can make a collection. Spare wives to be handed over to the National Muslim Congress by Irish charitable organisation.’

‘Shower of misogynist wankers.’ ‘Lois Lane’ piped up from the far corner of the room.

‘Is that us or the Muslims, Kate?’ asked Farrell.

‘Stick on a dress Boss, and I won’t be able to tell ye apart.’ She stood up, sucked her thumb, and flicked it in the direction of the three laughing men.

‘Hear that Omar, you’re only allowed one wife now. Will Flora be enough for you?’ Bertie cocked an eye to the other two.

‘She’d be enough for me.’ Farrell spoke out of the corner of his mouth.

Omar decided not to be baited into the converstaion. ‘Listen Will, can I have a word about that piece I was supposed to give you?’

‘What piece?’ asked Farrell. ‘Bertie, We just heard the Columbia Three are not being left out of the country. Need to get that on the front page for the late edition. Tim’ll drop it over to you in an hour.’ Farrell turned to go back inside his office.

‘Will, the feature piece you asked me for this morning. I have an idea but...’

‘Shit Wilde, what are you talking about. I gave that piece to Cowen. Never heard back from you man. Gotta be quick off the mark. Kate, make sure to drop the Ascot results on my desk as soon as they come in. Any tips anyone?’

‘Magnier’s horse is hot for the main race,’ replied Kate. ‘Do you want me to a put a few quid on for you boss, when I’m over in Power’s?’

‘Will, what do you mean you gave it to Cowen?’ interrupted Omar.

‘Stick on twenty quid for me Kate.’

‘Will, are you listening to me?’ said Omar. The Editor moved to shut the door.

‘Jesus Wilde, give it a rest. I’m up to my eyes. I don’t have time for this. Just get those reviews over to Bertie by the end of the day.’

‘But what about my contract? You said...’

‘I say lots of things Wilde. Another time.’ He shut the door in Omar’s face.

Omar could feel the humiliation creep up the back of his neck. *Bastard! I’m running to standstill in this place. Why do I bother?* He looked around the Office, and everyone seemed engrossed in their tasks, perhaps a little too engrossed. He crawled back to his desk and sat down despondently.

Eileen passed his desk with a smile. ‘A small surprise for you Omar.’

He stared at the printed cheque, his eyes devouring the numbers. ‘200 euros. What’s that for Eileen?’

‘A present from the Revenue. ‘Actually I’ve been taking too much tax off you. Forgot your tax free allowance. But sure you can have a ball now’

Enjoy.’ Her gap-toothed smile spread across her freckled features. This small woman’s pleasant nature dissolved the sharp bite of his colleagues like aspirin in an overworked brain.

Kate raised her hand over the top of her computer. ‘Fancy a flutter with that Omar? You might as well.’

Omar stared at the small piece of luck that had landed on his desk. ‘What’s the name of Magnier’s horse?’ he asked, flipping the cheque over in his right hand.

‘Damson,’ replied Kate, biting on the edge of her pen.

*A plum horse for a plum sum.* Omar crossed the room. ‘Here. The lot on Damson.’ He signed the back of the cheque and handed it to Kate.

‘Whoohah, good man Wilde. Now that’s a proper bet. More balls than the big man himself.’ She nodded in the Editor’s direction.

Omar felt a wave of satisfaction pour through him. He returned to his desk somewhat appeased. His stomach grumbled beneath his striped shirt. *The time? Davy Byrnes time. Right - lunch.*

## Chapter 13 - Bláithín

All she could think of after leaving Flora's house was finding Kinch and convincing him that he was wrong. They had something; she knew it. She had texted him a million times but he wasn't responding. He would be at the National Library around 2.00 p.m, but she wanted to speak to him before then. She had tried to ring Quixote, but he wasn't answering either. It seemed like the whole world wanted to blank her out. As she got closer to St. Patrick's Cathedral the bells chimed 1.00 p.m. She had to hitch up her ample skirt so it wouldn't get caught in the bicycle chain. *Hope I'm not flashing the world.* Her violin case was strapped to the rack at the back of her bike, and she prayed that some crazy bus driver wouldn't send it hurtling to outer space. Kevin St. was a mess of traffic as usual, and she wove her way through the cars and buses. She could feel the sweat drip down the back of her neck. *I'm definitely overdressed for this lark today. Damn!* The Camden St. lights turned red. She spotted Hanan on the other side of the street sitting outside his Halal shop with his younger brother: what was his name, Kaleb or Kalid or something? The lights turned green. *Always been curious about what they sell. Maybe he's seen Kinch.* She turned right and just avoided being creamed by a taxi eager to plough its way through the intersection. She pulled up in front of the shop; Hanan in deep conversation with his not too happy looking brother.

'How goes it?' she asked cheerfully.

Hanan jumped to his feet. 'Bláith, heading home?'

'Not exactly, actually, I was just wondering if you've seen Kinch around?'

'Actually, I just had a drink with him in 'The Flowing Tide'. Left about thirty minutes ago.'

'Did you know where he was going?'

'Said something about heading into The Irish Independent for a cheque or something.'

'I'm leaving,' said the brother, throwing her a look of disdain.

Hanan grabbed his brother's arm. 'You're going nowhere, Khaled. We're not finished yet.'

'Make me,' said the young man with a look of defiance.

Hanan pushed his brother onto the seat beside him. 'Don't push me. Just sit down and don't move.'

Bláithín suddenly felt uncomfortable. 'Listen, don't worry about it. I need to head anyway.'

Hanan softened his voice and smiled at her in the same way he had smiled at her that morning; in the way that made her feel uncomfortable but happy at the same time. 'Listen Bláith, I know you two had some problems, but I'm pretty sure he's realising what a fool he is. I told him he was mad, and I think he might have a little surprise for you... I told you nothing.'

She could feel her heart pound through her eardrums. 'Really? Are you sure?'

'Just a hunch.' Khaled stared at her with what she could only describe as a look of hatred.

'Listen, thanks Hanan.' She leant over her bike to hug him. He held on for just a fraction longer than she had expected.

'I told him I think you're gorgeous,' he said, stumbling over his words.

She could see Khaled put his fingers in his mouth behind Hanan's back. She shot him an 'I've seen you look' and he grinned back at her.

'Right then, see you later Hanan. Thanks.'

'No Prob.'

Her skirt had a habit of getting stuck in the chain of her bike so she hitched it up, angled her bike across the road, and headed off into the traffic. *That brother of his gives me the creeps. Must check out to see if Quixote is at his usual corner.* She passed a group of eager Bloomites. They waved madly. ‘Molly, Molly, flash us a bit of that fine thigh of yours.’ A pot bellied older man in a pin-striped suit and boater made groping signs with his sausage like hands. *Jesus, sloshed on a breakfast of kidney and champagne, no doubt.*

‘Blazes Boylan has nothing on this.’ He grabbed his crotch with enthusiasm. Bláithín winced. A well-dressed woman hit the man with her well-made handbag.

‘Really Owen, you’re mortifying me.’ A group of equally well-fed men fell around the place laughing.

Bláithín shouted back. ‘You should be so lucky mate.’ She flew past him, and right into Exchequer St. The newspaper seller, Mick, stood on the corner, chatting animatedly with the barman of the Exchequer pub. No sign of Quixote though.

‘Hi, sorry, Mick, isn’t it?’

He stroked the end of his moustache, ‘Yeah love, and you would be?’

‘Just a friend of Quixote’s...the Columbian who’s always busking across the street. You haven’t seen him, have you?’

‘No love, no. He’s gone awol, but if I do, who shall I say dropped by to our little corner of the world?’

‘Bláithín, if that’s ok?’

‘No bother love.’

She looked down at the headlines plastered across the front of Mick’s stand: ‘O’ Leary took 50,000 euro in bribe for Stillorgan land deal.’

*Jesus, Dad. What the fuck have you been up to now?*

She pointed at the pile of Evening Heralds sitting beside the old man’s arm. ‘Could I have one of those please?’

‘No problem love. That O’Leary fella’s a right chancer, isn’t he?’ She could feel the blood rise to her nostrils. ‘Robbin us all blind he is, sittin in that big mansion of his out in Dalkey.’

‘Yeah, yeah. Listen thanks.’ She walked away from the older man in a daze. She balanced her bicycle in one hand, the front page of the newspaper in the other.

‘Bernard O Leary, Fianna Fáil Minister for Justice and ex-Minister for Finance, is embroiled in scandal once again. A reliable source claims to have been present at the house of Fresh Air tycoon, Michael Power, on October 22<sup>nd</sup> last year, when ex-Minister, Power accepted a 50,000 euro ‘donation’ from the prominent businessman. O’Leary has been closely linked to the controversial purchase of land at the old Bórd Gais site on the Stillorgan Dual Carriageway. The beleaguered Minister, on the way to yet another Mahon Tribunal session, refused to comment, stating that he had a solid alibi, his daughter’s birthday dinner at their family home in Dalkey...’

Bláithín could feel her legs buckle underneath her. *Has he not caused me enough trouble already, Jesus!* The Sex and the City ringtone burst from her phone. Her mother’s name flashed at her like a beacon. *Fuck, fuck, better answer it.*

‘Mum.’

‘Bláithín, I’ve been trying to get a hold of you all morning. Did you not see my missed calls?’ The tone of her mother’s voice affected her moods as dramatically as a hormonal surge. She dreaded those first few seconds when she would answer the phone, not knowing whether her day was about to turn away from her. Predictably her mother’s stress vibrated through her eardrum like a migraine.

‘I’m up to my eyes, Mum. You know I’ve loads of performances today.’

‘Have you seen the papers?’

*Thanks for asking me how they went!* ‘Just this second. What the fuck is he up to now?’

‘Don’t curse, and don’t talk about your Father like that.’

‘For God’s sake Mum. Give it a rest. How the fuck can you continue standing up for him?’ She was sick of it. Sick of the lies, sick of the heartache, sick of having to be loyal to a man who barely acknowledged her existence. Sick, sick, sick of it!

‘This is not the time for one of your tantrums, Bláithín. We need you home right now,’ said her mother.

‘What? Are you mad. I have to get ready for my performance tonight. Anyway part of the deal is that I wander around Dublin in the gear so that the tourists are kept happy.’

‘To hell with the tourists Bláithín! This is your family and we need you NOW!’ Her mother’s voice exploded through the earpiece. Bláithín dropped her bicycle with fright; her violin case spilling onto the road. A mercedes headed in her direction at speed and she scrambled to pick it up.

‘Bláithín?’ Her mother’s voice continued to reverberate from the mobile. Mick ran to help her pick up her bicycle.

‘Are you alright?’ he asked, placing the bicycle against the wall behind her.

She held onto her violin for dear life. ‘Yeah, thanks.’

‘Bláithín!!!’ She put the mobile to her ear.

‘Mum. Jesus! I nearly fell in front of a car. No need for the bloody shouting.’

‘Are you all right?’ It sounded like an afterthought; an inconvenient interruption to the flow of necessary conversation.

‘And if I wasn’t?’ She liked to bait her mother. It had become a game that the two of them had perfected in her adult years.

‘Oh for God’s sake, save the dramatics for your performance.’

‘Mum, you have such a way with words.’

‘All right, what do I have to do to persuade you to come home now?’ She could hear the strain in her mother’s voice as she attempted to soften her approach. ‘I’ll drop you back in this evening, I promise.’ Though Bláithín wanted to step out of the crazy loop of her parent’s lives, she was always sucked back in. A sense of duty always seemed to override her common sense in the end.

‘Ok.’

‘Take a taxi. We’ll pay for it.’ Her mother’s relief was palpable. ‘See you soon.’

‘And thank you too Mother,’ muttered Bláithín as the phone beeped back at her.

The taxi pulled up beside her house on Sorrento Rd., and she was besieged by a crowd of reporters.

‘Ms. O’ Leary, can you corroborate your Father’s story?’ A young female reporter shoved a dictaphone in her face. ‘Bláithín, what do you think of your Father’s activities?’ A TV3 microphone nearly clocked her on the chin.

‘No comment.’ She shoved her way through the jostling group. What she hated most was that it made her feel like she had done something wrong, like she was responsible for her father’s behaviour. Nigel Murray, her father’s henchman stood inside the gate waiting to usher her through. The electronic gates clicked open. She slipped through, and left him to fend off the invading reporters. Her mother appeared at the doorway, dressed immaculately in a cream linen trouser suit and mauve silk scarf. *Jesus, even in a crisis she looks like Hilary Clinton!* Her black labrador, Buffy, pushed its way out the door, bounded down the steps, and leapt on Bláithín, showering her with saliva-laden licks.

‘Hey Buff, you beauty, down girl, yes, yes.’ Most of her adolescence was spent with Buffy curled up at the end of her bed, and she sometimes thought that the only one in the house who truly cared about her was this affectionate creature. She managed to extricate herself from the enthusiastic attention, and climbed the steps towards her mother.

‘You didn’t say anything to those vultures out there, did you darling?’ asked her mother ushering her into the bright, spacious hallway.

‘Just told them that I was working my second job, lap-dancing in Lapello’s on the night of October 22<sup>nd</sup>. I didn’t screw up did I?’

Her mother squinted her well plucked eyebrows, and pursed her lips. ‘Really, you don’t have to be such a smart-arse all the time.’

Bláithín turned left through the large oak doorway into a brightly lit reception room. ‘Where is he?’

‘I’m here.’ She turned around. His shirt was open at the neck. The sky blue tie was yanked open, and hung around him like a medal. His white hair, normally groomed and immaculate, flew around his head wildly.

‘You look a little worse for wear Dad.’ She wanted to delay the process of ‘getting into it’. That never ended the way any of them wanted it to.

‘You look lovely Bláith.’ The worst of it was that she loved her father. For all his weakness of character, impulsive meanderings, and downright corrupt behaviour, she could still see the man he once was. The Father who spun her bedtime stories so fabulous that her little friends would beg to stay over to hear them; brought her fishing every Sunday in Summer on Lough Dan; and called her his ‘piseóg áilínn’ whenever he was around to kiss her goodnight. But here he stood before her, defiant as ever in the face of accusation, totally unable to see his own faults. This was despite the fact that at one point or other the front page of every newspaper had run a story about him being one of the most corrupt politicians the country had ever seen.

‘They’re after me again love. I really need your help this time.’ His voice was soft and vulnerable, a voice she knew from her childhood, when he had used it to say things he really meant.

‘Maybe they have good reason Dad.’

‘Do you have to always take their side Bláithín? Did it ever occur to you that I might be innocent?’

‘Not often.’ She knew she could be cruel, and she didn’t like it, but she was past niceness.

‘Well, I am love, but it’s his word against mine, and I need you to back me up on this one.’

‘But you know damn well that you left my birthday dinner at 9.00 p.m. that evening Dad. It had barely got going. I wasn’t so impressed, remember?’

‘What I remember is I went upstairs for a lie-down, Bláithín.’

‘Memory is a very fluid concept around this house. I remember you hopping in your Merc with Nigel, and disappearing for the night.’

‘Jesus, Fionnúla, will you help me with her? She’s impossible.’ Bernard O’ Leary sunk into the brown leather armchair, sighing heavily.

‘Don’t bother Mum, I remember what I saw.’ *I won’t be pulled into this, I won’t.* ‘Why didn’t you get Gráinne or Rachel to back you up? They love to blow your trumpet. You know how I feel about these things?’ She could hear her voice jump an octave, the blood rushed through her veins like caffeine.

Her Father stared at her intensely. ‘The twins are already on my side but I need you as well.’

‘Dad, they’d say anything to keep you happy. All they’re thinking of are their precious trust funds. One year to go and then we’ll see the loyal daughters act go out the window.’ Her Mother jumped to her feet, and moved towards her like a rabid animal.

‘Bláithín, you are going to stop this ‘I’m a rebel’ thing and listen to me. It’s actually very simple. The night in question was your birthday party. Your Father went to Nigel’s house to discuss the case of that Senegalese boy who was being deported. He has no-one except Nigel to back him up, and he’s not exactly Mr. Popular where those vulturous bastards are concerned.’

‘Language Mother.’

Fionnúla O’ Leary glared at her daughter. ‘Bláithín. If you don’t help your Father he will lose his job. Do you know what that means? Forty years of hard work for this country down the drain, not to mind no Dáil pension. For God’s sake, can’t you put your high ideals on hold for once for the sake of this family?’ Her mother shook with anger, and it looked as though her perfectly bobbed haircut was about to fall off her head.

‘Dad, I just need to know and please be honest with me, if I ever meant anything to you. Did you do it? Did you take that money as a bribe? Did you help Power purchase that land? Yes or No.’ She looked him straight in the eye.

He held her gaze. ‘No Bláith, I didn’t.’ The two of them stood transfixed in a moment of appraisal; appraisal of the truth, if any, that lay between them. It was no longer tangible to her: the word of her father had become a shifting mist; an ungraspable wisp of air. She struggled to contain it and shape it into a truth she could understand. He rubbed the end of his nose with his finger. She had noticed this habit of his over the years, and knew what it meant.

‘I don’t believe you.’ Her father slumped in his chair, defeated. She felt her heart rip in two for this man who she loved so much, but she could no longer fight her own beliefs.

Her mother grabbed her shoulder, and smacked her across the face like an errant child. ‘Get out of this house. Get out now before I throw you out.’

Shocked, she picked up her satchel and moved towards the door.

‘And if you think you’re getting a penny more from that fund of yours. Forget it! You’re on your own. Out, get out!’ She looked towards her father and he looked away.

She walked slowly down the front steps, and fought the urge to cry. *What now? Shit the bloody journalists!*

They waited for her like greedy seagulls, clumped around the doorway. *Just say nothing.*

‘Ms. O’ Leary. You’re looking a little upset. Had a fight with your father?’ A young wiry reporter stuck microphone in her face. *Shit, a camera.*

‘No comment.’ She pushed her way through the crowd and walked at speed towards the Dart station. A number of reporters tried to follow. She screamed at them. ‘No comment. Leave me alone!’ They backed off and she began to run, her skirts billowing around her calves. The

tears flowed, and she struggled for breath. She ran faster than she ever remembered running, away from the whole sorry mess of her life.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 14 - Flora

Flora arrived at the Dublin Adult Education Centre on Mountjoy Square just in time for her lunchtime lesson. The Centre gave English language courses for non-nationals. Flora had persuaded them to let her use a room to teach the violin to asylum-seekers desperate for something to do while they waited for their work applications to go through. Flora knew only too well the struggle to fit into a new and different space. She had offered her services for free, wanting to give these people a tangible joy, a creative space in which they could live. The Nigerian woman, Sandra Comfort Sampson, had been coming to the Centre for lessons from Flora since she had arrived in Ireland with her two young daughters four months before. She sat by the doorway to their practice room, her normally sparkling eyes staring dully at a spot on the wall in front of her. Beside her stood Father Ogunbosola, a priest from Sandra's country. He had befriended her when she attended his services in St. Mary's Pro Cathedral. Although Flora was wary of priests, a by-product of her stifling upbringing in Poland, she found Father Ogunbosola to be kind and modest in his beliefs. Sandra's two little girls sat beside her, poking at each other playfully. People milled around the Centre, running from language classes to advisory sessions. She tipped the dazed woman on the shoulder.

'Hi Sandra. Are you ok today? You don't look great.'

'Oh, hi. No, I'm not. Can we go inside, and I'll tell you?'

'Of course, how are you guys?' Flora smiled at the pretty little girls. They giggled and replied shyly together. 'Fine Mizz.' Sandra looked like she had been crying, her eyes puffy and red. Flora ushered them into the tiny room where they normally practiced. The priest followed, guiding the little girls in front of him. They fought playfully amongst each other, tugging at a little cloth doll. Flora shut the door behind them.

'What's wrong Sandra?' The woman placed her head in her hands, and started to sob, her shoulders heaving with the stress. Flora put her arms tentatively around Sandra, and glanced at Father Ogunbosola.

'I'm afraid Sandra has a big problem Flora, and we're wondering if you can help.' The two girls sat down quietly holding hands, and looked nervously at their Mother.

'What happened?' The details of this proud woman's story had come out over coffee several months before. A shy woman, Sandra took her time to trust people, to know that they were someone she could allow into the delicate spiral of pain that had become her life.

'They're deporting us in a couple of days. No more appeals. I ...don't know what to do anymore.' Her hazel eyes fell back inside her head, leaden and heavy with fear and grief.

'Oh My God, no. They can't. The children.' Flora looked at the little girls who hugged each other closely, clearly unsure of how to react to their Mother's distress.

'I know...They don't care.'

'But they have to.'

'Caring is an impediment to progress in this world I'm afraid.' The priest looked grim.

Flora felt a wave of pity creep through her body. Sandra had told her what happened to her first daughter, eighteen months old Anna. Sandra's in-laws in Lagos had taken the baby from her while she was sleeping one night, and butchered the screaming child with a blunt knife to remove her clitoris and her labia. Engrained into their belief system, they felt the child would have no chance of a good marriage, and fall into promiscuity, if she wasn't circumcised. In their eyes, if they didn't step in and save the baby she would succumb to the fallen ways of her parents, who had become immoral imitators of Western culture. Once Sandra realised what was

happening it was too late, and the baby bled to death. Although she rushed her to the hospital alive, there was nothing the doctors could do to save her. Sandra was so traumatised by the incident that she was afraid to have another child. With time, her husband, Michael, persuaded her to try again, and they had two more baby girls. Although her husband fought against his parents to keep his children away from this barbaric tradition, the grandparents hatched plans and made attempts to steal the children from Sandra and her husband. Eventually they could no longer take the risk. Sandra should go alone to Ireland, and apply for asylum for her and the girls. Michael stayed behind and waited.

‘But surely this is her basic human right, to protect her children?’ Flora struggled to understand.

Father Ogunbosola continued. ‘Apparently it has something to do with the definition of a refugee. They’re afraid that if women are seen as a "particular social group" then countries may be at risk of an influx of women claiming asylum on the grounds of gender-based forms of persecution, which are, of course, extensive.’

‘But that’s crazy!’

The priest nodded. ‘I’m afraid logic not compassion is the rule of thumb for this modern world of ours.’

‘I can’t let them send the girls back. I can’t.’ There was a tone in the woman’s voice that filled Flora with dread.

‘Mama, where will they send us back to?’ asked the older of the two girls, clutching the hand of her little sister tightly.

‘Nigeria, Anna, where we came from in the first place,’ replied Sandra. ‘I’ll explain later.’

‘Back to Daddy, but I want to see Daddy. Why can’t we go?’ The petite four year old nestled into her older sister’s armpit.

‘We just can’t Ellie. Bad things will happen.’ Sandra turned to the children and held their hands in hers. ‘Let me just talk to Mrs. Wilde for a minute. We’ll talk later I promise.’ The little girls looked at Flora with curiosity, and nudged closer to the quiet priest who placed a tight, protective arm around them.

‘It’s all right girls. God will look after you all. I promise,’ said the priest in a soft voice.

Flora smiled lamely at the priest, sure that God was way too busy elsewhere to notice the plight of this little family. ‘But what can you do?’

Sandra stared at Flora silently, clearly unsure of how much she was at liberty to reveal.

‘What? Sandra. You can trust me.’

‘Can I?’

‘Of course. God, I would do anything I could in your situation.’ Flora knew what it was to lose a child. She knew that it felt like dying; like a long, slow breathing death that one could never escape, never pass through.

‘I’m going to run. I’m going to hide with the children. Father’s going to help me.’

‘Oh God, Sandra.’

‘I can’t tell you any more, but I just need one favour and I have no-one else to turn to.’

‘She needs you to put them all up in your house for one night, tonight.’ Interrupted the priest. ‘I’m going to make some alternative arrangements but I need until tomorrow.’

‘Please.’

‘You, the music, it’s helped...somehow Flora. That’s why I thought of you. I know you have a kind heart, and you know the hurt of losing a child. You know how that tears you apart.’

Flora reached out and hugged this woman whose life was teetering on the brink of disaster. She held her close, close enough to feel her fear. She found herself thanking God that she did not have to live inside this fear; that her pain had found a bearable space where she could manage it, like an unruly child.

‘Ok, sure. I need to talk to Omar but that will be absolutely fine. Don’t worry.’ *I hope this isn’t a mistake. Omar shouldn’t mind. Bleeding heart that he is.*

‘God, thanks, thank you so much.’ Sandra began to cry again openly, and Flora continued to hug her. The children sat quietly their little faces a picture of confusion and worry.

‘What time do you want to come over?’ Flora wondered when she would have the chance to warn Omar.

‘I have to bring the children to the Doctor on Ormond Quay this afternoon, and go back to the house to pack our things so I was thinking around 6.00 p.m.’

‘6.00 p.m. That’s perfect. I have to head out at 7.30 p.m. I’m playing at the Joyce recital in the National Concert Hall tonight. Is it ok if I leave you guys something to eat? You can just watch the telly for the evening. I should be back around 11.30 p.m.’ *Gives us two hours. Better than nothing.*

‘No problem Flora. Thanks so much.’ Sandra looked at her watch. ‘We’ve got forty-five minutes left. Do you mind if we play?’ Sandra picked up her violin.

‘Are you sure you’re up to it, and with the children here?’ asked Flora.

‘I need to. I need to feel something other than fear. They’re used to me practicing. Girls, you’ll be quiet for Mama while I practice with Mrs. Wilde, won’t you? You don’t mind Father?’ He nodded quietly.

‘Will be a pleasure to hear what you’ve been learning Sandra,’ replied the priest.

‘Hang on one second.’ Flora ran to the cupboard in the corner. She pulled out two pieces of paper and a box of crayons, and handed it to the children.

‘They use this room to teach English to families. Lots of stuff lying around.’ The girls happily set themselves in the corner with the crayons.

‘Say Thank You, Ellie, Anna.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Now Sandra, what would you like to play?’ asked Flora.

‘Salut d’amour. I’ve been working on it.’ Sandra placed her bow against the strings. Flora sat down opposite and nodded her head silently. This time she would watch and listen. Sandra creased her brow as she struck the opening chords; the bow flew back and forth through the air, cut the silence with three sharp, violent blows; then softened into a sublime breath of sound. Flora thought about Ruairi and what she would have done to protect him. *Anything, absolutely anything. When it comes to a child there are no limits.* But she knew Sandra was fighting an uphill battle. This was a small country and if the powers that be wanted to get her, they would find her. It all depended on who you knew in a country of four million people, and Sandra knew no-one. Flora couldn’t bear the thought of these lovely little girls being subjected to such horrors. *Get the word out. Contact the media. What else?* Sandra was lost in the beauty of the music. *Wait a minute. Bláithín, Bláithín is Bernard O Leary’s daughter. Of course. Could I? No harm in trying.* Sandra tripped over a note and stopped playing.

‘That’s beautiful Sandra. You’ve been working hard. I just need you to close your eyes and feel the modulation of the phrases. Feel how they dip and swirl; how they move with your emotion. Well, you know what I mean.’ Flora suddenly felt awkward that she was telling a

woman in such a crisis how to feel. Feeling was not a problem for this woman. It was shaping that feeling which was essential. Shaping it into something meaningful.

‘Right, Ok. I’ll start again.’ Sandra closed her eyes, and her bow flew through the air like a weapon. She sat totally absorbed in the sound she was creating. Flora began to tap out a message with her phone on silent. *‘Bláithín, I need your help. My friend is about to be deported. Horrible story. Can I call? Could you possibly talk to your Dad? Two little girls lives are at stake. Call me in an hour. I will fill you in. Luv Flora XX’*

‘That’s good Sandra, very good.’ She decided she wouldn’t say anything until she knew if it could make any difference. What would be the point?

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## Chapter 15 - Kinch

Kinch had an hour to check what was up with Quixote. A group of sweaty men were working on the Luas tram lines that were due to open at Connolly station in four months. *Probably take four more years, the rate these lads work. Still, should be fun ding-donging it across the city. Like old times.* A large hairy man poured water over himself, babbling in a language that Kinch thought he could recognise. *Poles. Building the city for us they are.*

Crossing over to O'Connell bridge, he spotted 'The Traveller' men chewing on some sandwiches. V seemed very exercised about something. Kinch had a close look at him as he passed over the bridge. *Looks Arabic. They don't look too happy. Must be sweltering.* E had wandered off looking disgusted with the situation. The other four sat to the side like bold children in the face of a reprimanding teacher. Kinch read the letters from right to left as he passed ..L..A..E..R. *It's like a human game of scrabble.* As he passed, A moved to the other side of E and picked up a hammer which he waved at V, while screaming in an Arabic sounding language. Kinch chuckled to himself. *Must go down well with the ladies. 'So what do you do for a living?'. 'Well, I'm a letter.' Fuck – who knows – maybe better than saying I'm an actor.* He crossed over into Westmoreland Street. Herds of people shoved past him nattering wildly. The lunchtime crowd poured into Bewleys Café. *Feeling a little peckish. A quick sanger will do.* He stood in the queue for the take away sandwiches. There was a poster on the wall for the Joyce recitals in the Concert Hall that night. *That's my lady. Wouldn't mind seeing her outside the bedroom. Not possible.* He reached for his mobile and tapped out a text 'Need to see you desperately!! 4.00 p.m. Ok? Got a surprise for you...'

'Excuse me sir, what would you like?' asked the Latino-looking girl behind the counter.

'Ham and coleslaw on a brown roll please?' She shuffled away, slapping mounds of butter onto the inside of the roll. *There go the arteries.* Her hair was chopped into the side of her head, a long tail travelling down the back of her neck. *Mullet girl.* A multitude of earrings studded her small ears, a tiny stud in her nose providing the finishing touches to a look that Kinch found seriously unattractive. *Pretty girl underneath all that mess. No accounting for taste.*

'Anything else, sir?' she asked lazily.

'That's grand.'

She stuck out her hand. 'Three euro fifty.' Kinch could barely see her though the mounds of sticky buns and creamy eclairs.

He took the brown paper bag, ripped it open and stuffed the end of the sandwich in his mouth. *Mmmm. Needed that!* Continuing to chew on the sandwich he crossed the wide street, zigzagging his way through speeding double-decker buses. *Jesus, it's a death-trap around here.* The coleslaw dripped down the front of his face. He chewed at speed, attempting to get as much of the sandwich into him as possible before he reached the Garda station. A large glob of mayonnaise attached itself to the pocket of his jacket. *Bollox, beginning to look like a homeless man.* 'War of the Worlds' was playing in the Screen Cinema. *Wells is turning in his grave. Give that one a skip.*

Two beangardaí sat on the steps of Pearse Street Garda Station, basking in the sun now that it had decided to stick around for a while. Kinch stopped to finish his sandwich. *Don't know why I feel so guilty everytime I go into a Garda station, like I did something when even I don't know what the hell it was.* He scrunched up the paper bag, and lobbed it towards a bin at the corner of the room. It teetered on the edge and fell to the floor. The glass screen at the reception area was pulled shut. He rang the silver bell and waited. A tall garda pulled aside the screen.

'Yep?' He bent his large frame over to peer out at Kinch.

'Hi, I'm just looking for a friend of mine, Quixote Garcia. He sent me a message saying he was here.'

'Indeed. Hang on a minute.' The towering Gard moved into the adjoining room. Kinch could see him talk to a small woman, and point in his direction. She nodded and came out to talk to him.

'Hi, do you mind me asking who you are?' Her country accent tripped off her tongue like a song.

'The name is Brian, Brian Nolan. I'm a friend of Quixote Garcia's. He asked me to come here. Is he in trouble?' Kinch felt increasingly uncomfortable. *What the hell has Quixote been up to now?*

'You could say that all right, Mr. Nolan. He has been arrested for robbing a post office on Upper Kevin Street this morning. Do you mind me asking where you were this morning at approximately ten o'clock?' She stared at him intently, a wave of panic passing through his body.

'You don't think I had anything to do with this, do you?' He felt his leg begin to twitch.

'Just answer the question and I'll be sure you hadn't.' She reminded him of Sister De Victoire from first class. Used to scare the shite out of him with her foot-long bamboo.

'Well?' she reiterated.

'Ehm, let's see, ten o'clock. I think I was in Bewleys with my girlfriend... ex-girlfriend... I think.' *Was it that or Lacey's? Not sure.*

'Is she ex or not? You don't seem sure.' She eyed him suspiciously.

'Yes, yes ex... we broke up this morning actually.'

'Really, well let's hope for your sake she doesn't hold that against you. Might need her to corroborate your story.' A sweat bead hung on the end of his nose.

'Do I look like I'm going to be robbing a Post Office dressed up as Stephen Dedulus, Guard?'

She jotted something onto the notepad in front of her. 'Dressed up as who?'

'You know, Bloomsday. One of Joyce's main characters. Loads of wankers stuffing up the streets in boaters and pin stripes. Surely you must have noticed.'

'Are you being smart with me?' she replied, giving him that De Victoire look.

'No Guard. Just trying to explain why I'm dressed this way.'

'I don't give a flying fuck if you go round with a pair of Mickey Mouse boxers on your head, just don't get smart with me lad. I've enough shite to be dealing with around here.' She waved the pen in his face.

*Frustrated old biddy. A good shag would sort you out.* 'Of course Guard. Listen, can I speak to Quixote? Is he here?'

'Yes, he's here. You can see him with me in the room. Come through the door over to your left.' She walked away and into the adjoining room. *Christ Quixote, What the fuck?* The door opened in front of him.

'This way.' He followed her small stocky frame. They turned left into a corridor with several locked rooms. She rummaged for the keys in her pocket, and opened the heavy metal door. Quixote sat in the corner of a dark cell. A small barred window leaked light into the room from above his head. The walls were covered in graffiti. He sat in the corner on a wooden bench, bent over with a heavy look in his dark eyes.

'Kinch, thanks for coming man.' The Guard stepped in behind him and shut the door.

‘Jesus, Quixote, what the hell is going on?’ Kinch was very aware of the woman standing silently in the corner.

‘It’s a mistake. That’s all. Mistaken identity. I keep telling her. It wasn’t me.’ His eyes pleaded to be believed.

‘But how did you end up in here then?’ Kinch looked to the woman to help fill the gaps. She said nothing.

‘They picked me up in the laneway off Frederick Street. I swear I was only passing through, and I keep telling her I was in the wrong place at the wrong time.’ He pointed to the stone faced Guard. ‘The real guys were dumping their gear in the laneway as I passed by. Que mala suerte! I asked the bloody guy for a smoke, and got caught in the middle when the cops came swooping in. Now they think I was with them, Hijueputas!’

Kinch turned to the Guard. ‘The others must say he wasn’t one of them. Don’t they?’ She smiled without speaking.

‘Apparently, they’re fingering me as their accomplice. Some kind of sick joke, that’s all. I don’t even know the bastards.’

‘What the fuck? This is mad shit.’ Kinch sat down beside his friend, and put his arm around his shoulders.

‘How come you were found with eight grams of coke stuffed down your boot then. Columbian snow, was it?’ said the Guard.

Kinch looked at Quixote, and arched his eyebrows in a question. Quixote shifted uncomfortably looking away towards the wall.

‘Quixote? Is there something you want to tell me man?’ Kinch scrambled through his brain to make sense of it all. Was it possible that his friend was lying? He would have trusted Quixote with his own life, but suddenly he felt unsure.

‘Quixote?’

‘Not here man, in front of her, Zunga! Listen, can you get me a lawyer. I’m not saying another word until I get a lawyer man? Can you do that for me? I don’t know one in this country.’ The woman in the corner raised her eyes to heaven.

‘Yeah, ok man. I’ll have to think about it. I don’t know anyone off the top of my head but I’ll look into it.’

‘Soon Kinch, please. I can’t stay in this place much longer. I’ll go bananas.’ Kinch nodded his head.

‘Right let’s break this little party up then boys.’ The mousey haired Guard shuffled Kinch towards the door.

‘Bye Quixote. Hang in there man. I’ll get back to you later.’ He had no idea what he was going to do, but he gave his friend a reassuring smile nonetheless.

‘Thanks man. Thanks a lot.’ They hugged. Kinch followed the small woman from the room and watched as she locked the heavy door behind her.

She pointed for Kinch to walk back down the corridor. ‘He’s guilty as sin. Don’t let that sincere friendship act fool you.’

‘I’ll be the judge of that, thanks.’ The truth was he wanted to believe Quixote, but he had to admit he had been acting strangely lately: getting lots of mysterious calls that he would never explain, looking tired way too often. Kinch had been suspicious that he was taking drugs again, but Quixote hid it well from him. He knew what Kinch would do if he found out he was back on the blow. Kinch had been through enough, dragging him through rehab the six months before. It bugged Kinch that it was what everyone expected anyway, being Columbian and all that, like the

whole country was a nest of junkies, addicts and dealers. He persuaded his friend to prove them wrong. *Bollox Quixote, I trusted you.* The Guard opened the door to the reception room.

‘See you later then.’

‘Yeah. Bye.’ The scrunched up piece of paper he had fired at the bin was still on the floor, and he kicked it with full force. *Bollox, bollox, bollox, I don’t need this.* It flew out the front door and down the steps. Kinch followed it and stood at the bottom wondering what to do next. He looked at his watch. *Twenty minutes to ‘The National Library’ scene. This is a mess.*

As he crossed the road towards Trinity College, he took out his mobile. He scrolled through the numbers in his address book looking for inspiration. He stopped at Bláithín’s name. He knew that she would be massively pissed off with him, but she loved Quixote, and her Dad was so connected, maybe she could get him to help or at least give a name. He sighed heavily and pressed call. The tone rang four times.

‘Kinch?’

‘Yeah, hi, how are you?’

‘I’m not good.’ Her voice sounded, broken, upset, like she had been cying.

‘I’m sorry Bláith.’ He began to think this was a bad idea.

‘It’s not just you. I’m at the Dart station. I’ve just left my Dad’s house – I had to fend off a million bloody reporters. Have you heard? He’s involved in another bloody scandal.’

‘You’re joking. Never a dull moment with that man,’ replied Kinch

‘We had a fight.’

‘Really, sorry. I’m afraid I’m not going to help. I’ve something heavy to tell you.’ He felt guilty that he had to drag her into his problems, considering everything.

‘Oh Jesus, no. What now?’

‘Quixote’s in jail. They think he robbed a Post Office this morning. He swears he didn’t do it. I want to believe him.’

‘No way! Was it in Upper Kevin Street? I passed by just after.’

‘Yeah, that’s the one. Listen I need to find him a lawyer, obviously not any expensive one. Any ideas?’ Kinch walked at speed up Dawson Street.

‘Christ Kinch, I don’t know. Well, there’s John...John Fenton. He’s a family friend. Helped Dad out a lot, but he fell off the wagon recently, so I know he’s a bit desperate for work.’

‘Can you just ask him Bláith? I’ll owe you.’

‘Be careful saying something like that! You know what they say about signing away your soul to the devil.’ He felt such affection for her at that moment that it made him sad he had to hurt her so much.

‘Better the devil you know than the devil you don’t. You’re a delicious devil after all.’ He meant it, but he had to be careful not to cross the line.

‘Kinch, can we meet up and talk everything over, please? I’ve calmed down now and, well, I just think we need to talk things over.’ Her voice was soft and pleading.

*I’m sorry, so sorry.* He turned left into Molesworth Street, and headed towards the Dáil. ‘Today is crazy hun, especially now. Can we sort Quixote out and talk about things later in the week? I promise I will.’ He felt guilty because he knew that nothing would change. But he needed her now.

‘Ok. I’ll get back to you about John. I’ll have a word with him.’

‘Thanks Bláith. You’re the best,’ and he hung up the phone. The predictable crowd was gathering outside The National Library. He ran over the lines in his head. What was the first one again? The first was always the worst. Oh yes. *‘Monsieur de la Palisse was alive fifteen minutes*

*before his death.* He stepped through the great wooden door of the Library, descending into the character as he passed through.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 16 - Lestrygonians

*Butler's Coffee Chocolates, smooth, sweet elixir of the Gods. Mmmmm. Sticky sweet pleasures.* Omar watched a young blonde scoop large lumps of chocolate ice-cream into a cup, smothering it with a thick treacly sauce. The machine swirled and whirled the sauce into a creamy delight. An eager child danced around her mother in anticipation. The child grabbed the cup, devoured the contents at speed, and deposited half of the sticky sweetness down the front of her blue summer frock. *Slip, slop, slurp it up, love in a cup.* He moved past the door of the café, wishing he had time to indulge, but he was already late for the traditional Davy Byrne's lunch. He hoped to grab Mr. Bloom downing his glass of burgundy, and have a quick word with him for the paper. His stomach groaned at him like a distant sea swell. Vinegar laden wisps of air assaulted his nostrils, oozing from the various eating establishments that lined O'Connell Street. *Fast food hell.* He watched families, young teenagers, and bunches of students fall out from doors of Burger King, Mc Donalds. *Lips oozing burger juices, mayonnaise, ketchup dripping over chins. Savages chomp chomping on dead animal like it's their last meal. Puts me off. Could nearly be a vegetarian at the sight of that.*

At the bridge, the sandwich men were beginning to reassemble. The small group he saw earlier were still clumped at the end of the bridge. Two of the men were bent over the bridge breaking off pieces of bread, and throwing them into the murky Liffey waters. The seagulls swirled like moths above their heads. They ducked and dived, attempting to grab the falling bread before it hit the water. *Liffey sauce, now that would test the guts!!* V, E, A, and L sat solemnly waiting for the others to approach them. *Veal, now that's a meat for the heartless. Pack them up like rats in a sewer, stewing in their own filth, unable to breathe. Must taste the misery in the meat.* A large Guinness lorry passed by. *Miss the smell of the hops all the same. The meaty sweetness that oozed up the river with the wind; the smell of old Dublin; rats gorging in Vats of treacly stout. All cleaned up now. Not the same. Still, tastes good thank God!* He stood at the end of the bridge waiting at the lights to cross into Westmoreland Street. People raced across the street, wove their way through the rushing traffic, buses barely missing them by inches. *Jaywalking nation. It's a wonder we're not all wiped out by now.* Omar held firm to his spot on the kerb, watched for the light to change while the crowds pushed by him. They eyed him suspiciously as if to say 'Who do you think you are? Toeing the line. Trying to show us up are you mate?'

'Omar, is that you?'

He took his eye off the light, and turned. 'Mrs Keane. How are ya? Haven't seen you in ages.' His mother's friend had the same pleasantly smiling face, although she had let her hair go grey and this seemed to emphasise the lines of age etched into her fine features.

She gathered him into a tight hug. 'Ah, it's great to see you Omar.'

'You too. You look great.' He meant it in a way. *Graceful ageing. Never a bad thing.*

'My God, Omar it's been years. You've become a stranger to us boy.'

'I know. Sorry about that. Life runs away with you I suppose.' He knew why he had distanced himself from this woman and the family he had grown up beside. It was too painful to be reminded of his Mother; to be reminded of how she had left him alone, and the way she'd done it. He did everything he could to forget.

'Ah, I know the way it is.' She looked at him with a look that seemed to say, 'I know why. I want to forget too.'

‘How’s Flora?’ She veered them away from the uncomfortable space of memory that had silently passed between them.

‘She’s great thanks. Doing very well with the music. Off to Belfast with The Three Tenors next week.’

‘Isn’t that brilliant? No children yet, or anything I should know about?’ She poked him amicably in the ribs.

He smiled weakly. ‘No.’

‘Ah sure there’s time yet,’ replied the woman. “Speaking of which, our Annie is in Holles Street as we speak. The poor thing has been at it nearly three days. I’ve been in there with her but just taking a break because I’m exhausted. I’m so worried about her but the Doctors say it often happens with the first.’

*Annie Keane, you beauty. Deep hazel eyes. Long ago – love it was.* ‘Annie, God the poor thing. That sounds like torture.’

‘Omar, you should go and visit her when it’s all over. She’d love that.’ Her moist blue eyes smiled at him warmly.

‘Oh I don’t know. I haven’t seen Annie since, well...’ He thought for a second ‘Since the funeral.’ He tried not to think of that now. Twenty years ago it was. How he had found his mother floating in a bath of her own blood, her wrists gushing into the water. That was all he could see now; that awful sight of her; leaving this life; leaving him behind to deal with her absence. He never understood how she could leave him like that; not when for so long, all they had was each other. Had she simply not loved him enough? He would never know.

‘Has it been that long? My God. Well all the more reason you should go and visit Annie. She talks about you frequently, you know. You two were like peas in a pod growing up; the cutest pair of young ones around. Your Mother.’ She hesitated, sensing the pain the mention of her would bring to Omar. ‘Your Mother and I used to imagine ourselves growing old being looked after the by pair of you lovebirds. Strange eh, how things work out.’ Her voice became weak and wistful.

‘Who is she married to? He mightn’t fancy an old boyfriend turning up.’

‘Well, that’s just it. She’s not, I’m afraid. Got pregnant by some African lad who was using her to try to get a visa. Ran off and married someone else as soon as there was another offer. Stupid little fecker. I’d murder him if I got my hands on him.’ Her small head shook furiously.

‘How awful. I see. Well then, maybe, I’ll drop in to see her.’

‘Do Omar, do. She’d love it. She’ll need cheerin up after this ordeal.’ The small handsome woman took him in her arms again, and held him close to her.

‘It’s so good to see you Omar. I miss you and I miss her too, you know. She was my best friend. She’s alive in our dreams love, isn’t she?’

Omar felt a wave of nausea wash over him. ‘Yes, Mrs. Keane. I suppose so.’

‘Breda, love, Breda, for God’s sake, we’re all adults now.’

‘Right Breda.’ The green man began to flash and Omar felt the need to cross away.

‘Sorry Mrs....Breda, have to head, but I’ll drop in later, I promise.’ He meant it too. To see Annie again. That would be something.

‘Bye love. See you then.’

He waved at her as he crossed into Westmoreland Street.

*Annie Keane, pig-tails and freckles. Sherbet dripped across your pert little chin. You pulled me into you, showed me what's what, taught me how to love you. Then I saw her; Flora, and I forgot you, pushed you into the space where memories are locked up.* He passed the nick-nack shop on the corner leading to Temple Bar. It was packed with tourists purchasing leprechaun hats, lucky shamrocks and lumps of Aran bog. *They'd buy anything wrapped up in a pretty package nowadays. Mad!* He glanced right towards Temple Bar. A crowd gathered in the distance: coloured objects floated in the air, drums beat wild energy into the warm air. Curiosity got the better of him, and he diverted to take a look. A young man covered in piercings was walking in his direction.

'Sorry, just wondering. What's going on over there?' Omar asked.

'It's that Macnas crowd from Galway, dressed up as Celtic Cannibalistic Giants or some lark. All looks the same to me mate.' The young man smiled broadly. Omar could see the gleam of a tongue ring as he spoke.

'Thanks.' The man nodded and plodded off in the direction of The Palace Bar. *Must be funny, tasting metal all the time. Everything tinged with cold steel. They say the women love it – down there – like an ice-cube throbbing through their warmth.* Omar inched his way towards the crowd to take a look. The hypnotic rhythm of the drums expanded as he moved towards the parade. Above the heads of the crowd floated exotically colourful creatures: gargoyled heads, grotesque creations of purple clay, green velvet skin, bulging burning eyes that danced frantically above the delighted crowd. They clutched giant ornate spears, and dipped and dived around the edges of the people, occasionally grabbing an unsuspecting child and dumping them in the large clay cauldron at the centre of the parade. A one-eyed monster swept up a tubby child who was happily demolishing a large ice-cream. The child screamed, and dropped the ice-cream on the foot of a none too impressed Asian woman. The Giant whirled him in the air, and placed him carefully in the large pot. *Na Fir Bolg. Bet that little plump one tastes good.* A small woman grabbed her camera to snap her precious boy in the midst of the action.

'It's alright honey, I'm here. You're fine. Smile, Smile,' snap, snap 'They'll take you out in a sec. You look soooooo cute. Cheese.' A man dressed in long dark robes walked slowly in front of the assembled crowd, reading above the swell of the drums. 'I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or ragout.' Omar laughed. *Good ol Jonathan Swift. A sick but entertaining man.* The crowd roared with approval. *Right, enough of that. Gotta get to Davy's.*

Omar turned right onto Westmoreland Street, and passed under the stone pillars of the Bank of Ireland. He gazed across the road at the ageing stone façade of Trinity College. Gossiping students gushed through the grand stone arch. A small clutch held placards and screamed loudly in unison. 'No to American military planes landing in Shannon!' The other students pushed past more concerned about getting to 'Nude' for a bite of lunch. *Some things never change. Meet them in ten years, suited and tied, downing a brandy in 'The Bailey.' Need them, all the same, the protesters, the dissenting voice. The Molly Malone statue shone in the sun. Ample bosoms. A beautiful thing. Remember how it tasted after Ruairi, sweet suckling milk dripping over the edge of my tongue. Strange to me now.* A group of tourists stood watching a young man drawing on the ground. Omar nearly bumped into the businessman in front of him, who jumped suddenly

when a blob of white goo landed on his shoulder, and travelled the length of his well tailored jacket.

‘Cunting birds, Mother fucker. It’s fucking Armani for Christ’s sake.’ He whipped out a handkerchief, and dabbed frantically at the pungent goo. Omar looked upwards at the circle of pigeons above his head. *Bullseye lads! Stupendous accuracy and sharply observed choice of target. Bravo!!* Omar chuckled to himself as he passed the cursing man. Grafton Street was thronged as usual, and he battled his way against the sea of rushing people. A band of Eastern Europeans belted out a lively round of traditional polkas. Two little girls danced, arms locked together in front of the lively accordion player. *Great stuff, not unlike our own diddley-I. Sure it all sounds a bit the same wherever you go. Sean Nós and Arabic trad. Hard to tell the difference if you shut your eyes.*

Brown Thomas windows looked like the inside of a Vaudeville costume tent, dripping in satin, silk, beading and baubles. *Pretty to look at, impossible to buy. Where do they all come from? Rich bastards who buy a skirt for wifey at 500 euros a pop. It’s a mystery with no telling. Wish I could buy Flora one of those.* The last window was done up like a Victorian concert hall. Mannequins sat in rows clutching ornate fans, dressed in red velvet and opulent beading. A bow-tied mannequin clutched a conductor’s baton; a violinist sitting beside him dressed in sky blue silk and creamy lace. Omar remembered his first meeting with Flora. It was in the National Concert Hall at a memorial concert for his mother. He’d sat, dickied up in a monkey suit, mutely reverent, as a series of celebrities sang their way through his Mother’s repertoire. ‘To honour the lifetime achievement of Zaria Sha’rawi, the Egyptian Songbird.’ As they drifted through the soundtrack to his life, he’d sat transfixed by the misery of her absence, until he saw Flora; deep inside the core of the orchestra; this woman with the burning eyes. She played with the type of abandon with which his Mother sang; eyes shut, oblivious to anything outside the beauty of the sound. Flora’s dark green eyes and sumptuous curves complemented her passionate bow-work perfectly; her whole body moulding the shape of a wild beast as she beat life into the strings of her violin. Omar couldn’t keep his eyes off her. He knew that she was all that he could love from that point onwards. That’s why it hurt so much, the blankness of her stare. She looked through him now, not at him. *Mother, Flora; both lost to me.*

He dragged himself away from the window and turned left into Duke Street. He could see a mad crowd piling out of Davy Byrne’s onto the side of the street. The usual assemblage of lawyers, merchant bankers, would-be telecom entrepreneurs, and other young wanna-be’s, packed ‘The Bailey,’ opposite Davey’s. *Give me the Joyceans anyday.* A young woman exited the Bailey ahead of him. She was perfectly groomed, not a hair out of place and legs the length of the Champs Elysee. *Probably a model. Bit too skinny, but nonetheless, mmmm.* A slick looking man in a tailored shirt walked beside her, his arm linked in hers. A red Hermes bag hung off her left shoulder. Out of nowhere a bicycle flew past Omar, and the tracksuit-clad rider ripped the bag from the shoulder of the young woman. She screamed, her companion attempting to run after the cyclist, who disappeared right, towards South Anne Street. *Jaysus. That was quick work.* Omar decided he couldn’t contribute to the situation, and edged his way through the gossiping Bloomsday revellers outside Byrne’s. They watched the mini-drama with fascination. He scanned the inner sanctum of Davey’s for a sighting of Bloom at his lunch. *Nowhere to be seen.* A barman collected the towers of glasses that were piling high on tables.

‘Sorry, just wondering is the guy playing Bloom around?’

'Take a look at the clock mate. Left five minutes ago. Stuffed his face royally he did.' Omar looked at the clock above the bar. *2.05 pm. Damn!* He looked around the bar and there wasn't a space to be had.

'Sorry, I couldn't get a cheese sandwich to go?'

The barman who angled an over laden tray back towards the bar. 'And a glass of burgundy in a tumbler, no doubt,' added the barman.

'Actually no, I don't drink, but a ginger ale will do?'

'Don't drink is it? Ah, I understand, overdid it in your youth?' The barman shot him a look of sympathy.

'No, I never drank actually,' said Omar. *Here we go, the look of horror, an Irishman who doesn't drink. Should be shot on sight. Part of the tradition mate. Why bother explaining?*

The barman shook his head ruefully. 'Right.' He eyed another customer with a 'Can you believe this character look?' Omar was well used to it. *Yes, life without an alcohol soaked liver is a possibility. Worse than murder around here.* The burly moustached barman deposited the tray, lifted the counter, and shouted Omar's order to the kitchen. Omar found a spare inch to lean against the wooden counter. He observed the swell of people; many of them dressed in turn of the century costume. *Like time-travel it is.* A pot-bellied man sat opposite chewing the ear off an American tourist.

'I'm telling you, Damson's the one. Put the lot on that one. I have a friend who knows the Trainer, and he says it's a sure thing. A sure thing.' He shook his head with a wink, dribbling some Guinness on his beard as he drank.

'Is that right? I'll keep that in mind sir. Mighty good of you,' smiled the Yank, sipping neatly on a Malt Whiskey.

'Fine day for the festivities thank god,' piped up a ruddy faced man standing beside Omar at the bar.

'Indeed, lovely day, a bit hot if anything,' Omar watched the sweat drip down the man's thick neck.

'Could I stand you a quick whiskey while you're waiting?'

'That's very kind of you, but I don't....actually I just can't drink right now, but thanks.'

'Ah, right, I understand,' replied the man with a conspiratorial wink. 'The anti-biotics is it? Summer sickness is the worst. I know all about that.' *I don't think there's a single person in this country who understands. Never mind.* The barman slapped the sandwich down in front of Omar.

'For the man who never drank.' The man beside Omar looked at him out of the corner of his eye. 'Is that right? I thought...' He caught the barman's eye and lapsed into silence, both shared a puzzled look.

Omar scrambled in his other pockets and dug out a clump of fivers. He put one of the notes into the barman's outstretched hand.

'Go raibh maith agat.' The barman raced to the till, and placed the change on the counter in front of Omar. Omar wrapped up his sandwich in a napkin, and left.

He took a bite out of his sandwich, the sun's glare blinding him temporarily as he walked down Duke Street. With his other hand he rummaged in his leather satchel to try and find his sunglasses. *Must have left them behind. Hang on... My keys?* He sat down on the side of the path in front of The Duke pub, and emptied the contents of his satchel on the side of the street. *Shit, no keys. Left them hanging inside the door. Can't go back. God knows what she's up to. Don't*

*need anymore surprises. Where's the schedule?* He picked up a piece of paper and had a good look. *Let's see. 2.00 p.m. Bloom & Dedalus in the National library. Right by here. I'll have a quick look.* He placed his things back inside the satchel, stood up and headed towards Dawson Street. A man with dark glasses, and a guide dog sat at the corner café reading the newspaper. *Wha? Didn't know they made newspapers in brail nowadays. Bloody odd. Hang on a minute, Know him. That actor fella, John Cronin. Jaysus, hard to know who's who today.* He crossed into Molesworth Street, heading towards Government buildings. He passed the Passport Offices and spotted Matt Phelan heading in the same direction on the other side of the road. *Shit, it's him. Swaggering arsehole, pin hole and boater, of course. Head down. Mightn't see me. Feel sick.* Omar slowed his pace and watched as the well-dressed tall man headed for the steps of the National Library. *Damn! That's it. Not going in there now. Can't look him in the eye. What does she see in him?* He turned left into Kildare Street and passed the entrance to the Library.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 17 - Bláithín

The train flew past Dun Laoghaire pier. Bláithín hung up the phone and stared out the window. A cluster of little sails bobbed in the sunlight, like Chinese lanterns in a distant parade. A shy wind blew the tiny vessels across the grey-blue light of the sea. She could see the Ulysses ferry heading out for its midday run to Holyhead. It moved slowly from behind the Poolbeg Towers, and out into the stretch of the Bay. Her head was pounding, and she popped two aspirin to give her some relief. A barrel-load of Italian students got on at Blackrock Station. Though she normally loved the pitches and undulations of the Italian language, today it cut through her like cold ice. The train pulled off again slowly. The tide was disappearing into the horizon. *Better call John Fenton.* She still had his name in her phone. He had got her out of deep shit when her friends sent her that CD case full of cannabis from Spain. She nearly had a heart attack when customs at Dublin airport called to say they had a package they wanted to open in front of her. John managed to get her out of that mess without even breathing a word to her parents. He was a decent fella; that had meant a lot. The Italians were hurling a teenager's bag from seat to seat with roaring enthusiasm. She poked the number into her phone, and cupped her ear to block out the noise.

'Hello, John Fenton's office.'

'Hi, this is Bláithín O' Leary. I wonder would John be available, please?'

'One second, and I'll see.' She wasn't sure if it was the same woman who she had dealt with last year. They all sounded the same to her, North Dublin, spoke like they had gum stuck to the top of their palettes; probably did. It was a miracle he could still afford a secretary, considering work wasn't exactly flowing his direction.

'Bláithín.'

'Hi John, listen I'm sorry to disturb you, but I just need an opinion about a friend of mine.' The signal from the phone bumped around. She kept one eye on the Italians, the unfortunate boy's bag flying back and forth over her head like a football.

'It's hard to hear you,' he replied.

'One second, I'm on the train. It's passing Sydney Parade. Always improves after that.'

She knew that John had a soft spot for her. 'I can hear you now. What was that Bláith?'. He had taken her to a lawyers fundraising ball once, dickied up to the nines. After a few too many whiskeys, he had tried to kiss her. Awkward though it was, she had put him off as nicely as she could, and not a word was said since then.

'John, my friend Quixote, the Columbian guy, I think you met him once with Kinch.'

'Yes I remember. Looks like a cross between a heavy-metal Satanist, and a drug dealer.' John was a snob but a funny one; a typical Dublin Four boy whose idea of casual dressing was a pair of well-ironed slacks and the latest Lacoste shirt.

'He's in trouble. Been arrested. They think he was in some post-office heist that he claims he was no way near.'

'Oh he does, does he? Wasn't he in rehab the same time as you?' he asked bluntly.

'Yes, John, he was, but that doesn't make him a thief, and I'm sure he hasn't touched it in months, I'm sure of it.' Even as she said the words she knew she was on dodgy ground. An ex drug addict could never be sure, no matter how hard they tried. She knew all about that.

'Uhhuh.' John didn't believe her, and she didn't believe herself but she didn't care, she would fight as if she did, someone had to.

‘Anyway, he hasn’t got any cash. He’s in big shit and he’s my friend. Can you do me a big favour, and look at his case for me. I’d owe you forever.’ An over-fed Italian boy ran frantically between two boys dressed in Roma t-shirts. Bláithín ducked out of the way as the bag whizzed past her head once more.

‘Where is he?’ The matter-of-fact lawyer in him took over.

‘Pearsé Street Garda station. Kinch knows everything. I can text you his number.’

‘Are you still seeing that waster?’ he asked

‘No, we just broke up, well,... I don’t know, we might get back together.’ She doubted herself as she spoke.

‘Really? You’re too good for him you know.’

‘No-one’s too good for anyone else. There’s just people who match or don’t.’ She knew this was aimed at him and that he wouldn’t like it, but she couldn’t help it. He hesitated.

‘Alright then, give me both their numbers. I’m busy for the next while, but I’ll get back to you.’ They pulled into Lansdowne Road, and the signal began to break up.

‘Thanks a million John, John, are you there? John?’ A piercing low beep echoed in her ear. *Thank God for that. Text him the numbers.* The floating bag hit her smack on the back of the head, and she dropped the phone from fright.

‘Jesus. Fuck!’ She turned on the students who sat back in their seats at speed.

‘Sono spiacente,’ muttered the plump boy, picking up the bag and scuttling back to his seat.

The Roma wearers were creased up with laughter at the other side of the corridor, and Bláithín let rip. ‘Would you ever just leave the poor fecker alone! Give us all a bit of peace for God’s sake!’

The boys stopped laughing and sat down, nudging each other in the ribs. She could feel the tears begin to well behind her eyes again; pressing against her eyeballs waiting to be triggered by something random, like a floating bag, for example. She picked up the phone and texted the business cards to John. Two fat tears slid down her cheeks. *Fuck, Fuck! I want something to make me feel better. Anything.* She thought of that guy she had met in the morning. *What was his name again? Paul something. Hang on. Card here somewhere.* Her bag was stuffed with all sorts of unnecessary things, and she rifled through it until she dug out the card. Rubbing her finger around the edge she hesitated, knowing where it would bring her. She looked out the window as the train pulled slowly past the perfectly cut grass of the National Rugby Stadium. Everything was grey and foggy, bathed in a deadening light. *I just need to see again, to lift myself up a bit.* She rang the number.

‘Hello.’ It was him, she was sure.

‘Ehm, hi, this is Bláithín, the girl from this morning from beside the Molly Malone statue.’

‘Ah, hi, how’s it goin? Have you changed your mind then?’ he asked.

‘Yeah, I guess so, had a bit of a rough day so far. Just need to feel something...well, you know,’ she said, the feeling of guilt drowning her tongue as she spoke.

‘I know exactly. Come on over then. I’ll actually be at my home address – he hesitated – the Ballymun Flats. I’ll be here for the afternoon. Do you know how to get here?’ he asked doubtfully.

There wasn’t a single person in Dublin who didn’t at least roughly know where the flats were. The tallest buildings on the Dublin skyline, they had been built as a cutting edge social experiment in housing in the sixties but had descended into drug infested squalor.

‘No, but I’ll just hop in a taxi from town.... Are you sure?’ She felt foolish to be heaping her miseries on a stranger.

‘Does the Pope pray? Would love to see you again,’ he replied cheerfully.

‘Right, I’ll be there in thirty.’ The train pulled towards Grand Canal Dock. *Might as well hang on until Pearse station. More likely to get a taxi.* She stuck on the headphones of her mobile, and tuned into Today FM. Bell XI’s ‘Beautiful Madness,’ drowned out the noise of the carriage. She gazed out at the Docklands. A multitude of cranes edged the skyline like a herd of giraffes moving slowly through a great industrial jungle. The sun shimmered in dappling waves across the surface of the Dock water, the train travelling slowly through the galaxy of glass and metal that made up the hundreds of new apartment buildings on the waterside. *500,000 euros for a glassy shoebox. What a bargain! Rather live in a caravan. The travellers have it right nowadays.* The train began to slow as it pulled into the red-brick façade of Pearse Station. A crowd piled by the door desperate to be the first to join the sea of people that moved at speed down the corridors of the grand old station. Bláithín joined them.

She emerged onto the street under the railway bridge on Westland Row, and hesitated. *Fuck, I know nothing about this guy. I must be mad. Maybe just a drink instead. Maybe that’ll do.* Her phone beeped to signal a message. *Message from Flora. What’s that about?* She pressed it to read. *Shit! Not more. I can’t take anymore. Why does everyone want so much from me today? Aaaagggghhhh!!* At that moment a taxi crossed the lights at Pearse Street and moved towards her. She stuck her hand in the air, and it pulled up beside her. She lowered the sound just enough.

‘The Ballymun flats please.’

The driver looked at her curiously. ‘Ok.’

She hunched into the corner of the taxi, exhausted. Her body drained from a mixture of relief and disappointment, relief that she would soon be able to feel something other than sadness, and disappointment that she was too weak not to need that. Paul Noonan sang into her ear, *‘You’re mad to burn mad to fly mad to be saved / I stumble through the darkness looking for the day.’*

## Chapter 18 - Flora

The sunlight bounced off the path on Mountjoy Square: Flora reached for her purple sunglasses, and walked in the direction of O'Connell Street. She loved the colour purple. It was unpopular, rarely in fashion, but striking; qualities she appreciated in a world where the 'in thing' changed every couple of months. It was impossible to keep up. She had her own style. People constantly commented on it; she liked that. In the second-hand shops of Temple Bar and The George's Street Arcade, she lived out her fantasies of being other women: the women she read about in the pile of old magazines she kept under her bed. At home, she liked to sit by the window and pour over the images from these pages, imagine these people as they had been in life, drifting off the pages to wander through her house as though they had never left this world. She didn't care much for the written content, but flicked through the images, creating her own hand-made cinematic adventure. Inside the stories she imagined for these people, she created her own story.

An old man whizzed by on a bicycle, the sleeves of his shirt rolled up above his elbows, his basket full of vegetables. He gave her a nod as she crossed Gardiner Street. She liked the way the Irish could look each other in the eye and say hi without even knowing each other. This had surprised her when she first came to the country, although she had noticed it wasn't as commonly seen these days. She glanced at her reflection in the window of a shop. Subtly sexy but comfortable. The black sweatshirt dress clung to her body, fell just above the knee, formed a perfect arc around her breast-line. In it she felt chic with a hint of danger: a subtle provocateur. On her feet she wore Egyptian style sandals. They wound around her long legs; punctuated the simplicity of the dress with a stamp of funk. Her lipstick was a shade redder than usual, a suggestion, an invitation she knew would be acted upon. Her hair was half piled on her head, stray curls falling gently around her oval face; a hint of eyeliner traced around her dark green eyes. She glanced at herself in a passing shop window, thoughts of him drifted through her mind. *Hope he's up for it. His strong mouth. Need it against my skin.*

The Gate Theatre, was showing a production of 'Lady Windermere's Fan,' by Oscar Wilde. She had actually read that once, because Omar left it lying around the house, but only because the picture on the cover of the women in their beautiful, flowing dresses had appealed to her. She loved the Mills and Boones romances that Omar would bring home to her from time to time. The man was always handsome, the woman always passionate, and the ends always happy. She liked that. Omar was always trying to read something complicated like that book they were all banging on about today. She had a look at it, but it confused her, left her wondering what the hell the writer was on about, even if the words sounded beautiful, like a great impenetrable symphony based on a scale alien to the human ear; beautiful but frustrating. She remembered the Mother from Wilde's play, the seductive, 'fallen' woman whose weaknesses had turned her into someone hated, and greatly misunderstood. It was sad how she had to leave her daughter in the end, not revealing her identity to preserve the daughter's 'imagined' version of the perfect Mother. *Can't be sure they'll like you after all: your children. Not a given, but they love you anyway. How strange!*

The little green man began to beep frantically, and she crossed the road into Parnell Street. It was like being transported temporarily to a Nairobi side-street; Mothers carrying babies wrapped in colourful African prints; hip-hop music oozing from local cafés; a hairdressers, advertising wonderful weaves, with not a white customer in sight. She loved dipping through these mini-worlds that had grown up in the tiny corners of Dublin. It made her feel less foreign, less alone with her differences. Tomasz was outside the front of 'Zagloba', the Polish pub,

having a fag with a couple of his mates from the building sites. He spotted her as she crossed the street, and waved with a smile. He was the only family she had in this country; the son of her favourite Aunt, Anna Kalata. She had grown up beside him in Krakow. Aunt Anna's apartment had been one floor up from her sister's, Maria; Flora's mother. Flora had not been close to her mother, who was a conservative Communist, a member of the old guard, unable to cope with the changes brought on by Walesa and the move to democracy. Flora had learned to keep her mouth shut, and secretly plotted her escape away from this claustrophobic world.

The one area in which they had communicated was through music. Maria had been a keen pianist, and was delighted when her young daughter took up the violin, eventually playing with The Krakow Philharmonic Orchestra. The enormous pride her mother took in the work of fellow Poles, Chopin and Gorecki, led to many trips to the Filharmonia concert hall to listen to the great composers. Her mother had imagined a life for Flora, like the great Polish violin virtuosa, Ida Haendal, full of recognition and success. But Flora had other plans. They hardly ever spoke now, the phone immediately passed to her weary father, Andrezej, should her mother pick it up by mistake. This affable, passive man acted as a 'Cold War' interpreter between the two women in his life, trying his best to pass on the essential information such as deaths, births, and marriages without getting dragged into the screaming rows. Her brain shifted into Polish thoughts, Polish words, the Polish space she so rarely accessed these days. When she reverted back to her own language she felt like she had shed a layer of skin; she felt lighter, unburdened by the space of understanding that lay between her and a language she was now confident in, but could never breathe without effort.

'Looking lovely as ever, my dearest cousin.' Tomasz spoke in his native tongue. She felt like a child when he enveloped her in his large, muscular arms.

'Thanks cousin, I just happened to be nearby and I knew you'd probably be here for lunch, being a creature of habit and all that.' She nodded to the unfamiliar faces behind her.

'Flora, this is Antoni, my pal I told you about from Gdansk, and Piotr. They work with me.' The younger, blond man smiled at her, his green eyes shifting from side to side, unable to fix her in his sights.

'H – h – hello,' said the man, his fair skin rising in colour like a blushing thermometer. *Shy, but pretty. Needs a soft woman to wrap around him; give him some confidence.* Flora extended her hand. The older man had the ruddy complexion and hard-edged features of a man who had grown up in the countryside. He looked up from his whiskey to nod a recognition of her presence. 'Hot day, we've been sweating gallons in that warehouse. It's like an oven.' He spoke with a thick rural accent. After taking a slug from his glass, he continued reading the 'Gazeta,' Ireland's Polish weekly newspaper. Tomasz moved inside to get her a gin and tonic. She sat beside the two men, and attempted to start some conversation.

'Anything interesting in the paper today?'

'The usual. Lots of talk of job creation, emigrating young people, and summer concerts. Never changes but you'd miss it all the same, you know?' He raised his head to see if she would agree.

'I don't miss it much, I have to admit.' Flora refused to be dragged into the usual conversation. She was not a nostalgic woman, and largely despised the reminiscent moanings of many of her countrymen. They propped up the bar counters with endless stories of good old Poland, a place where people still had values, not like the greedy Irish who used the Poles to rebuild their precious cities. As far as she could see everyone benefited from this little arrangement and if pushed, she was having none of it.

‘Becoming as Irish as the Irish, are you?’ The man turned on her with an accusing gaze.

‘No, I’m Polish, but I’m also European, and I wouldn’t be here, you wouldn’t be here, and he wouldn’t be here’ – she nodded at the young man beside them who seemed to be looking for a way to get up from the table and leave without causing insult – ‘unless our beloved country was incapable of giving us what we needed in life, so what’s the point in complaining.’

‘Do you know they pay us half what they pay the Irish? It’s a fucking crime, that’s what it is. Ask Tomasz. Tomasz, tell this cousin of yours what we’ve been forced to do because the Irish are bleeding us dry.’

Her tall, fair-haired cousin, returned to the conversation, and placed three glasses on the table carefully. ‘That’s enough Piotr. Flora isn’t here to get an earful from you.’

Piotr refused to give up. ‘Where was it you two went to college again?’

‘Piotr!’ reiterated Tomasz with a glaring look.

‘Just humour me for a second. I have a point to make,’ replied the determined Piotr.

‘Mikolaj Kopernik in Torun, are you happy now?’

‘Never been there, but I know of it. The point is that here we have two college men, two educated men, up to their knees in boxes and paid shit money. Tell her Tomasz. Tell her how much you’re being paid, and how much the Irish are being paid who are doing the same job.’

Tomasz glanced at Flora to gauge her mood. ‘I have to say, it’s true Flora, I know you don’t like to talk about this stuff but I get 360 euros a week, and the Irish get at least 200 euros more and benefits.’

‘That may be so but they’ve taken us in, haven’t they? Who are we to complain if we’re not getting the same as their own, when we’re getting four times the amount we’d get at home?’ Flora could hear her voice rise with frustration. The four of them lapsed into silence.

Tomasz broke the silence. ‘How’s Omar?’

‘Fine, well, you know, the same, always the same.’

Her cousin gave her a knowing look. ‘Are you planning a trip home soon?’

‘If you mean Poland, no. Once a year is enough for me and I was back at Christmas.’

‘Uncle Radoslaw isn’t doing too well. I was onto my Mother yesterday and she reckons there’s only a couple of months in it. I was thinking of heading home next month, just to see him.’

‘You should. Give him my love if you go. I can’t afford to.’

‘But you earn pots in that fancy Symphony of yours. The flights are dirt cheap these days anyway.’

‘Listen Tomasz. You and I are different. I just don’t want to go. I always end up feeling guilty over some bloody thing, and do you know what drives me mad? No-one ever asks me about my life here. It’s as if they think that if we don’t talk about it, it doesn’t exist and I’ve never left. It’s all about getting me back to live the same dreary life as everyone else; so I can justify their decisions, their existences. I’m an inconvenience, a reminder of what they might have done but didn’t. I hate it.’ She could feel the anger bloat her brain, like a slow, creeping migraine.

Tomasz sipped his gin and sighed. ‘You’ve got to get over this thing with your Mother.’ She didn’t like being told what to do. ‘What’s that got to do with anything?’

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘Right Flora. Let’s not talk about it anymore.’

Flora placed her hand on his arm and smiled weakly. She wanted him to understand but it was impossible. He was Polish through and through and had never wanted to be anything else.

‘Listen, I’m off. I wanted to give you these.’ She threw down two tickets on the table. ‘They’re for tonight, in the Concert Hall. It’ll be music from Ulysses and other music to do with Joyce’s time. Should be enjoyable – if you like. I know it’s probably not your thing but I thought...’

‘Thanks Flora. I’d love to.’ He hugged her closely, and she felt the anger seep away.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 19 - The Wandering Rocks

Father Ogunbosola glanced at the clock on the wall of the St. Francis Xavier Presbytery. Five to three. It would take him one hour to walk to St. Fidelma's Orphanage. Sister Makeba had agreed to hide Sandra and the children within the private residence until a 'resolution' could be found. He knew that she had her eye on the young girls as potential recruits to the Sisters of Mercy. Who was he to fly in the face of God's wishes if that was where fate should take them? He passed along Gardiner Row towards Mountjoy Square, acknowledging the nods of members of his congregation who were out and about on their daily business. *Not a white face amongst them. Shame that.*

He turned left into Mountjoy Square, and marvelled at the statuesque stone facades of the Georgian townhouses. They stood to attention like finely attired soldiers at a regal ceremony. This belied the surrounding melee of dilapidation that had crept into this part of the city, eating away at the soul of what was once one of her Majesty's Crown Jewels; the grand city of Dublin. *Grand indeed.* Still he was far from the chaos of Lagos. Poverty showed its face in the North Centre City, he knew, but it was nothing like the arid desperation of African poverty. He thanked God that he could bring some solace to the people who had escaped such thankless desperation. He thanked God he could escape himself, before persecution and torture had dragged him from this world into the next.

He walked straight ahead as the sun disappeared behind a cloud along Dorset Street. A man raised his hand as he approached, passing Macari's chipper.

'Father, lovely day, isn't it?' Mr. Samuel Anyanike walked carefully, his soft eyes sunken behind a gracious smile. He oozed goodness, a desperate goodness that hid a fear of stepping out of line.

'Samuel, good to see you, sparkling day, indeed.' The priest took the smaller man's hand, and shook it with a pointed enthusiasm. 'Off to work soon, are you?' This pious man was a regular in Father Ogonbosola's congregation. He was a good man, a very good man; some kind of a businessman back in Benin City. Fell foul of a land-purchase deal that had gone horribly wrong. The government had decided to seize the land, which was rumoured to have a swell of oil bursting through the soil. The easy solution was to kill the owners. Samuel escaped just in time because of his friend in the Interior Ministry, but his three partners were killed before they could escape. That was the way 'business' was done in Nigeria, one arm dug deep in the pocket, and the other armed with a knife. He never saw his wife and children again.

'Almost reminds me of home, Father,' replied the grey haired man. 'Out for a walk, are you?'

'On an important errand, Samuel. Thought I might as well get some fresh air into me as well,' replied the priest.

'Not so sure about the air being fresh, Father, but at least it's warm for a change.'

'Thank God it is. Anyway, see you in Church on Sunday. A group of the women from South Africa have put together a singing group and are going to treat us with a few hymns from home. Should be something special.'

'Great Father, great. See you then. God bless you.'

'Indeed, God bless you Samuel.' Father Ogonbosola nodded his head graciously and walked towards the canal. He thought of how a man's status can change in a pinprick of time. That gracious, humble man had been rich and important where he came from, and now he was

working nights as a porter on a posh hotel doorway, opening the door for the man he used to be. Humble lessons to be learned, no doubt about that.

He strode on thoughtfully past Fagan's pub: too many of his congregation knew the inside of that establishment; Connolly's butchers where a clutch of woman collected chatting: 'Shag off, she's not screwing Mary Savage's husband is she? Whore.'

Father Ogonbusola looked intently at the women who began to whisper in a fit of giggles. 'What do we care what a darky thinks?' piped up the woman with the spiky bleached blond hair.

A small squat brunette nudged her in the ribs. 'Shut up Noreen. He's a priest.'

'All the same to me.'

Father Ogunbosola slowed his pace, turned around to smile at the women, and nodded his head so that they knew he had heard. He had to put up with this kind of ignorance from time to time. A shame it was, but he understood that it came out of the mouths of insecure people, people whose tiny corner of life was being crowded out by 'the others.' He was 'an other' no matter what type of collar he wore, but he did his best, and the majority of people were just lovely to him. As if to prove the point, a man passed by on a barge under Newcomen bridge, and waved enthusiastically. 'Roasting day Father, thank God,' The bare-chested man clutched a bottle of beer, and drifted up the canal lazily. 'Indeed son, just glorious,' replied the priest. He'd been told that the canal used to be full of tradesmen, barges of corn, and Guinness being hauled across the country from Leixlip to Kells. Now it was mostly used for pleasure pursuits. *Pity. Something beautiful in the slow graceful labour of a working canal. Sure beats the clogged up arteries of a City that can barely breathe.* An intricate mess of articulated lorries and irate commuters beat their way across its streets on a daily basis. They spewed abuse at one another in a vain attempt to exorcise the demon of traffic hell; 'Cunt, you're in the wrong lane,' and 'Wanker, they'd let a monkey on the roads nowadays,' were two delights that Father Ogunbosola had heard in the past week. Thank God he didn't drive. *Would suck the soul out of you.*

He jumped on the 541A double-decker bus. It was packed and he stood clutching the handrail in front of a group of tracksuit-clad lads. They had their eyes firmly fixed on three large Slavs, who were chatting amongst themselves in the rows behind. The hair on the tracksuit-heads was cropped to within a millimetre of life. Their shiny attire and reversed baseball caps proudly displayed a sea of brand-names: Nike, Adidas, Billabong and the like. Father Ogunbosola marvelled at the jewellery store that hung around their necks and out of their ears. It would give the Brothers in the US gold-envy. The tracksuits watched the 'others' intently, clutching their empty cans of Special Brew like weapons. Father could just make out the tones of the Polish language, which he had become familiar with through his ten-o'clock Mass. It was largely attended by Poles. These three looked like the typical, powerhouse, muscular Slavic men, who had brought their families to a life in the packed apartments around Parnell Street. The aim was to rack up the cash. They were a hard-working people, a devout people, and he had a lot respect for them. He sensed that the tracksuits would be crushed into a pulp if they attempted to mess with these lads, but they barely possessed the sober wits to make it off the bus, so he didn't hold out much hope that sense would prevail. He struggled to think of a way to diffuse the impending fracas. As it was, he was barely able to stay on his feet with the speed at which the young, mullet-haired, female bus driver was careering down Clonliffe Road.

Croke Park loomed like a giant Battleship, towering majestically over the red bricked terraces underneath. He went to see Cork play Galway during the Hurling Championships the year before. The players raced like wiry cats around the pitch and hurled the ball like freshly

caught prey. A sight to behold. He gripped the ceiling strap desperately, as the bus screeched to a halt. The punters made their way onto the bus, and he cast an eye back towards the emerging situation. At that moment, the heavily tattooed tracksuit launched an empty Special Brew can towards the tall blond man on the aisle.

The three men looked at each other ominously, stood up and strode towards the tracksuits like security men for a Russian mob boss. The bus took off at speed, and Father braced himself to attempt an intervention. The blond man leant over the wiry tracksuits explaining in a soft voice that he had travelled to this country with his wife and children to do jobs that the Irish wouldn't do, and he didn't want any trouble. Confused, the youngsters looked at each other, unsure how to respond. One of the tracksuits took the lead, and asked him how much a two bed flat in Poland would cost. His friends looked momentarily confused. The bulky Pole replied, '62K', and the tracksuit exploded with enthusiasm, 'Jaysus, are you fuckin kiddin? I heard it was a great place to buy a gaff.' His friends took the cue that these lads were alright, and they all joined in. On first name terms immediately, Johnno quizzed Tomasz about the best place in Warsaw to invest, sharing tips on how if the lads grouped together and bought a property in Ireland, interest only, when the price went up, as it always did, they could borrow against the Irish property to buy in Poland. That's what his aul lad had done with his mates, and the lads themselves had been perusing the Indo property pages for the latest 'big deal'.

Father Ogunbosola was gobsmacked. One never knows what to expect these days. They passed Fairview Park: a dodgy place to hang out, he was told. The young couple who had just got on gripped the handstraps directly in front of him. By some miracle, they managed to balance well enough to grope the hell out of each other with their free hands. Father felt a blush rise through his body. They paid no attention to the mortified priest, the young man devouring the spotty teenage girl as if she were his last meal on Death Row. His free hand had forced entry into the seat of her extremely tight jeans, and miraculously grasped her right buttock with considerable enthusiasm. No more than a foot away, Father Ogunbosola was delighted when he could see his stop near the Casino off the Malahide Road approaching rapidly. He pressed the Stop button frantically. The mullet haired blond jammed on the brakes. He bumped against the couple, and marvelled at how they didn't manage to bite each others tongues off under the circumstances. He thanked the driver for her speedy delivery, God for an uneventful journey, and alighted the bus onto the path. Griffith Avenue basked in a leafy quiet that he sucked into his lungs with relief.

A well-dressed, well-preserved, middle-aged woman nodded at him pleasantly, 'Lovely day Father.' He greeted her warmly, thanking God for the civilised tendencies of suburbia. Striding on towards the large stone edifice of The Marino Institute he reflected on how good it felt to be helping those in need.

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Maria Vleski sat at the corner of Dame Street and Temple Bar, her baby strapped comfortably to her tiny breasts. The Central Bank loomed above her like a large beast; hordes of Spanish students gossiping excitedly on its steps. A box sat in front of Maria with 'Need help to eat, May God Bless you' scrawled in black crayon on an uneven piece of torn cardboard. Her voice echoed like a mumbled prayer in her ear as she repeated the same words over and over to the passing crowds. Dick Cowen raced past at speed. He was late for meeting Mark Jameson, and kicked over the box with his size-eleven black leather shoe. The money scattered like shattered

ice. Maria leapt up in fright and the baby erupted into a wail of shock. Dick looked behind but continued moving.

‘Sorry Lady, in a mad rush.’

Maria yelled after the disappearing newspaper-man in angry Rumanian.

‘Bastard,’ blurted the tiny woman at the top of her voice. That he understood but kept moving. *Time is money Lady, time is money.* The throngs of Dame Street sped past laden with shopping, and barely registered the tiny dark haired woman’s plight. Maria crouched over, attempted to calm the baby, and grabbed the scattered coins in her heavily wrinkled bony hands. She moaned audibly repeating over and over in her native language, ‘May God forgive them. May God forgive them.’

She raced after a five-euro note that a kind older man had miraculously placed in her box at 10.00 a.m. Out of nowhere, a green-eyed, auburn haired woman bent over to pick the note up for her. The woman continued to scurry around the footpath picking up what she could of the coins for Maria. Her smile was warm and consoling, and she placed the money carefully in Maria’s box. The pretty woman opened the cloth bag around her slim shoulder, and placed an extra five euro note of her own on top of what she had collected. Maria rushed to thank her. The woman took Maria’s hand, and held it in hers with an understanding look.

‘I hope your baby isn’t too upset. I saw what happened. This city is full of idiots who are in a hurry to get from A to B and have no idea why.’ Maria recognised the accent as Polish.

‘Thank You, thank you. Kind lady. May God Bless you. God Bless you,’ repeated Maria, as the lady rubbed the head of the tiny baby girl whose scream had reduced to a whimper.

‘She’s beautiful. What’s her name?’ asked the lady.

‘Adriana.’

‘What a gorgeous name!’

‘Thank you. She is named after my Mother.’

The woman smiled at Maria. ‘Well, you look after Adriana and yourself.’ She took Maria’s hand and squeezed it.

Maria could feel this woman’s energy pass into her body, and smiled. The tall lady with the voluptuous curves picked up her violin case, and continued gracefully along Dame Street. Maria watched her disappear into the crowd, and thanked God for the kindness that still existed in the blur and speed of this hungry city. She stared down at her little girl, and began to sing to her. She sang ‘Lui lui,’ a Rumanian lullaby that her mother had sung to her and her siblings every night. The baby settled back into a comfortable sleep, and Maria could feel the tears begin to fall down her cheeks quietly. They flowed as she settled back into the familiar mantra that had become her daily prayer,

‘Need help to eat, May God Bless you.’

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Sandra exited Doctor Chute’s office on Ormonde Quay as a tall priest entered through the freshly painted Georgian wooden door. He smiled at her girls, admired their plaited hair, and wished her the best on this gorgeous day. She accepted gracefully and descended the steps onto the busy Quays.

‘Mama, Mama look, a pretty carriage.’ The girls bounced around with excitement. ‘It looks like a Princess,’ cried the younger Ellie, waving with enthusiasm at Her Excellency the American Ambassador’s wife, Margaret Kenny. She waved back at the little girls who giggled with joy. Sandra smiled, urging the girls to move along as they had to get home to the apartment

on Parnell St. to pack. They were going on a journey, an exciting adventure, and there was no time to waste. The girls followed their anxious mother reluctantly, and bombarded her with a flow of questions.

‘Where Mama? Where? Where are we going? Is it to the seaside? Why Mama? If it’s the seaside can I buy a bucket to build castles? Can I Mama? Can I?’ asked Ellie.

‘It’s not the seaside stupid. Is it Mama?’ interrupted Anna. At nine years old, she knew that things were far from right. ‘After Mrs. Wilde’s we’re going with Father Ogunbosola to where he lives, aren’t we? Isn’t that it?’

‘Yes, Anna that’s it, kind of. I’ll explain when we get there. Come on you two. We have to hurry.’ Sandra wanted the girls to understand, and knew that Anna was growing up fast, but she also wanted them to live as far as possible in a child’s world, a world where fear was a scary neighbour who rarely ventured out into their safe space. She protected them with stories, and fantasies; created a version of their lives that only they inhabited. She hoped that this would protect them in the long run.

In their world, they had left Nigeria because their Father had been chosen to be one of the first men to be sent on the Nigerian mission to the Moon. It was so secret he would live hidden in training for many years. When he landed on the Moon they would be the daughters of the famous Nigerian Astronaut, Michael Njoo. They had to travel to Ireland because the people who had lived there long ago had built the oldest building in the world, Newgrange. Three thousand years before they had dragged the boulders many miles with their bare hands to build a giant tomb for their ancestors. There, on the shortest day of the year, the sun’s ray entered the long dark passage, and illuminated the central burial chamber. This amazing achievement was based on studying the Moon and the Stars and the Sun with only the power of their own eyes. Therefore, Ireland was the best place on earth to learn about the Moon and the Stars. Part of the magic of Michael Njoo’s journey to the moon was that his family had to learn as much as they could, and pray to the God of the Moon every night so that their ancestors could help the rocket to fly safely and quickly there and back. The Irish ancestors knew more than any others, and the girls had to learn as much as possible while they were here, to help their father on his mission. Sandra was a natural born liar: a talent that served her well to convince her daughters of the absolutely secret nature of their supposed mission.

She had taken them to Newgrange many times. On first-name terms with the Caretaker of Dunsink Observatory, she had charmed him into giving some validity to the story in which the girls lived. John Mc Cluskey spent many hours with Ellie and Anna drawing out the night-sky for the fascinated girls. It was a top-secret project so no-one could know. To this point, they had assembled two large scrap-books each stuffed with pictures of Newgrange, the star constellations, and stories of ancient Celts. Sandra was proud of her little project. It kept them busy; protected from the pain of missing their father, but Anna was growing up, asking more and more questions. Sandra sensed it wouldn’t be long before she’d have to tell her the truth.

‘Mama, I’m hungry. Can I get some chips, please, please?’ pleaded Ellie, looking at the overweight teenagers who fell out of Mc Donalds stuffing burgers into their faces.

‘No Ellie, we’ll be home in a sec. I have delicious home-made vegetable soup for you at home. If you’re very good I might have a surprise after.’ She had to be very careful with what little money she had. She lived off the forty euros a week that the Irish government had given her while she waited for the response to her visa application.

‘A surprise. Yey. Is it icecream? Or chocolate? Or Jelly?’ Ellie jumped around poking Anna who gazed at her Mother quietly.

'Wait and see, sugar-lump. It wouldn't be a surprise otherwise.'

'It's probably strawberry jelly again,' said the older girl in a less than excited voice.

Ellie danced around her sister. 'Strawberry jelly, strawberry jelly.'

'I'm sick of strawberry jelly.' Anna pushed her sister away.

'Anna,' snapped Sandra.

The fine boned girl shrugged her shoulders, and walked ahead of her Mother at speed.

'Anna, come back here!' Her daughter's plaited head disappeared around the corner into Parnell St. Sandra grabbed Ellie by the hand, and ran after her. *Is it time? Time for her to know the world is not as it seems.*

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A cacophony of traffic noises greeted Monsignor Reidy as he descended the steps of Dr. Mc Sweeney's office. He felt like he was standing bang in the middle of a Wagner symphony with the percussion drowning out all other sound. His brain began to throb. It was only a ten-minute walk to the Pro-Cathedral, where he had planned to sit in on Father Ogunbosola's late afternoon Polish Mass. The native congregation had dwindled to the size of a pea; however, he was most impressed with the faith of the immigrant community. The Irish could learn a lot from them about enduring hardship, and maintaining loyalty when times were hard. He felt slightly faint as he clutched the railings of the Office on Bachelor's Walk.

'Are you alright Father?' said Mr. Samuel Anyanike, gently taking the Monsignor by the arm.

'Fine, sir, Thank you.' The man had a kind face, but the Monsignor didn't like to accept help unless it was absolutely necessary.

'Ok then. If you're sure?' said Samuel, letting go of Reidy's arm, and continuing on his way to work at The Morrison Hotel.

'I'm sure.' The Monsignor nodded a thank you, raised his head and walked as upright as he could manage towards O'Connell Street. Could do with a drink. Wynne's Hotel on the way for a quick one. Just one. He felt tired, very tired. Perhaps it was for the best that he wasn't long for this life. He had seen too much change in his sixty five years on God's earth. *Too much change indeed.*

A Rumanian beggar, with a child strapped to her back, raised her cap towards the man of the cloth. He smiled at her warmly. 'Bless you my child. May God be with you.' He passed by her, fingering the bunch of euro coins in his pocket. *Encouraging begging is no solution. Bring her to my church if I see her again, poor soul.* He glanced at the shards of sunlight that bounced off The Spire, like visible radio beams enveloping all of Dublin in an ever-evolving broadcast. *Stupid-looking thing. You'd miss Nelson all the same.* A group of Slavic workmen laboured in a lather of muscular sweat, as they lay the tracks for the new Luas line. *Will be nice to see the trams again.* A wave of nausea pulsed through his system. *In God's name who can I tell? Who is there to tell of my misfortune?* He turned right into Lower Abbey Street, heading for Wynne's Hotel.

A group of young girls with skin-tight jeans, pierced eyebrows and bellies the size of Brendan Behan, stood at the newstall on the corner, flicking through magazines.

'Would you look at the state of your man?' said the blonde, whose face resembled a painting easel that had been left out overnight and dried up.

‘Oy pervert with your dog collar,’ she continued, the other three bursting their sides laughing. Monsignor Reidy had never got used to the lack of respect that had riddled the modern community like a Medieval plague.

‘There’s one full of pretty little boys for you here, Father. You’d love that eh?’ she continued. The girl was clearly drunk out of her mind in the middle of the afternoon. *Disgusting behaviour*. He glared at her, and continued walking. He couldn’t grace such vile behaviour with a response. It was hard to maintain one’s composure in the face of such disgusting slurs. A collar meant something different to people now. He knew they had done wrong, the Church, to hide the truth, to hide such people, but he was not one of them, and two thousand years of a glorious tradition should not be wiped out because of a small minority of evildoers. His thoughts drifted back to his own predicament, as he entered the bar of Wynne’s Hotel. *I need to contact the boy. I need to let him know. It’s time*. Luckily it was largely empty except for a group of older men sitting in the corner playing cards.

‘Monsignor,’ signalled one of them, with a tip of the cap.

‘Pat, enjoying the game? He recognised the men who were old Parishioners of his from way back.

‘Paddy here is cleaning me out, Monsignor, but I’m going to get him back when Magnier’s daughter’s horse, ‘Damson’ romps home in ‘The Queen Mary’ this afternoon.’

‘Ulysses’ man, not that jumped-up Billy’s mare. ‘Ulysses’ is the boy for the day that’s in it,’ replied the red-faced man, tugging on his beard.

‘Sentimental shite, Monsignor. Sure no-one would put a penny on that good-for-nothing nag only for all the commotion today. Jimmy Joyce is belly-laughin in his grave at the amount of money that’s going to go down the drain on that cart-horse today. What do you think, Monsignor?’ asked Pat sipping on his whiskey.

‘Not much in the mood for betting today lads, I’m afraid,’ replied Reidy, signalling to the barman to pour him his usual double-brandy.

‘Well, if you change your mind and fancy a flutter, ‘Damson’ is your only man,’ said the bald headed man, returning to the cards.

‘Grand Pat, grand. I’ll remember.’ He sat down at the solid oak counter, and stared at himself in the mirror. A sallow-eyed stranger with a neat crown of grey hair and ageing pale skin looked back at him. He had never grown accustomed to this strange face, a shadow of the man he had once known.

‘Monsignor,’ said Des O’ Shea. ‘You’re looking a little worse for wear. Everything alright?’ The heavy-set barman slid the brandy towards Reidy.

‘Not the best, Des, I’m afraid,’ he replied, swigging back a slug of the brandy.

‘Nothing serious I hope,’ said Des, wiping a glass in his hand.

‘I’m in God’s departure lounge Des, but thankfully I’ve managed to miss a few flights. Not for much longer though.’

‘You don’t mean?’ asked the barman, bending into a low whisper.

‘Just came from Dr. Mc Sweeneys. Have about six months to live. Cancer of the liver actually,’ said Reidy, raising his glass and taking another swig.

‘Well. I’m very sorry to hear that sir. Very sorry indeed.’

‘Sure, at least I’ll get to meet the man himself finally. Should be glad of it, I suppose.’

‘Consider it your retirement Monsignor, and with the pension you’ve racked up, you’ll have a whale of a time in the Lord’s parlour, and brandy by the gallon,’ said the corpulent barman, refilling the Monsignor’s glass with a wink. Reidy laughed.

‘Just hope I’m not in for any nasty surprises,’ he said, raising his glass.

‘Well, if Mohammed greets you at the gates, say you were only messin.’ They laughed together.

‘Des, can I confess something to you?’ asked Reidy. The barman leaned over to listen.

‘There’s someone, a family member, that I haven’t spoken to for a very long time, practically never, but he is the closest living relative to me. Do you think? ...Should I... contact him?’ The Monsignor turned his grey eyes to the bespectacled bar-man.

‘If you feel that’s the right thing to do Monsignor, of course. Is there bad blood between you?’ asked Des Kiely in a whisper.

‘Yes, I’m afraid, bad blood. He may not want to talk to me after I...’ His voice trailed away. The soft-voiced barman leant in further.

‘God loves a trier. Remember that Monsignor.’

‘Indeed he does.’

‘No harm in trying, and if it ends uncomfortably, you’re no worse off. Consider the effort a penance of a kind...if that’s what you feel you need, of course,’ said the barman, touching Reidy softly on his sleeve. ‘Three Hail Marys, an Our Father, and ask God for forgiveness, my son,’ said Des O’Shea, making a sign of the cross and breaking into a barrel of laughter. A smile spread across the tired features of the Monsignor’s face. *‘What will be will be.’*

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The River looked extremely low, even for this time of the year. Bernard O’ Leary stood on the steps of The Four Courts, and ran his fingers over the length of his blue silk tie, repeating the gesture at regular intervals as he spoke.

‘Ok, John, we understand each other, right?’ He fixed John Fenton with a deep-eyed stare.

‘I guess, I don’t know. Are you sure, Bernard?’ asked the towering lawyer. He looked like a retired Rugby player, his 6 ft 7 hulking frame took over the footpath, passers-by having to step off the footpath in order to pass.

‘As I said John, you can have your life back, for once and for all. I’ll get you more work than you can handle, but I need you on my side. You owe my daughter nothing.’ John Fenton looked at the steel-blue eyes of the man he had known for twenty years, and could barely remember why he had liked him in the first place.

‘Do you feel nothing, Bernard, not even for your own daughter?’ asked the gentle man, desperate for some flicker of humanity in the man he had once called a friend.

‘I love my daughter, John. She just doesn’t always know what’s good for her, that’s all. She’s willing to destroy her family for some high ground ideal and I can’t let her.’ Bernard O’ Leary’s voice broke slightly as he spoke, almost as though to script. John Fenton realised that he would never be able to break through the actor’s disguise that the Minister had perfected for the eyes of the public. John stared at the ground, and wondered how he had left himself sink so low.

‘Just call that Kinch lad and arrange a meeting. You know what to do after that. And John, if you ever tell Bláithín, Barbara will learn all about that little incident with my secretary in The Shelbourne last year. I have her wrapped around my finger, so don’t even breathe a doubt in Bláithín’s direction. Do you understand me?’ John Fenton felt a wave of nausea grab his stomach. He understood.

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A group of swooping seagulls hovered overhead as Dick Cowen and Mark Jameson descended the steps of the Four Courts. They had nipped into the Tribunal Hearings to clarify some facts for an article they were putting together.

Mark eyed the circling gulls with suspicion. 'The Palace Bar then, Dick?'

'Sounds good to me. Have had enough of O' Leary and the lads to do me a lifetime.'

Black-robed, red-faced barristers emptied into the streets, heading for their daily constitutional.

'There's Fenton with the man himself – O'Leary. A right pair. The man has a neck of iron. Thought Justice Flynn was going to burst a blood vessel when O'Leary gave his big "I've served my nation" speech the other day. He fancies himself as a modern-day Robin Hood, that fella,' said Jameson. They passed by the Minister, deep in chat with his errant lawyer.

'Robbing Hood is the right name for him alright.' Cowen pulled a fag from the box in his jacket pocket. 'This no-smoking ban is going to kill me.'

Jameson laughed. 'If one of your ex-girlfriends doesn't get to you first Dick. Have you seen that gorgeous blonde again? You know, Phelan's secretary. What's her name?'

'Fiona. Nah, You know me. Not much into the repeats. That one was done and dusted after date two. Good in the sack though, let me tell you. Fine Galway ass on her.' Cowen motioned a circle with his hands.

'You're a terrible man Cowen. Jaysus. Happy to stick with one myself,' replied Jameson.

They turned onto Grattan bridge. 'Too many walks up Croagh Patrick in your childhood man. Sucked the lust out of you. Not a good thing,' said Cowen. The Guards had pushed the traffic to one side. The Ambassadorial Cavalcade passed by on its way towards City Hall. Cowen nodded at An Taoiseach, as the coach passed by at head height.

Jameson snapped a couple of quick shots of the passing cavalcade.

'Good man Bertie. Knows how to put on a show, does that man. The Teflon Taoiseach in his element. Wonder did he spot O'Leary on the way past,' said Cowen. 'He'll never see the inside of a Tribunal, let me tell you. Too smart for that lark is our Bertie.'

The pedestrian light turned green. 'He knows how to play the game alright. All that lark down in Shannon just to keep the Americans happy,' said Jameson. 'So much for being part of Europe. We're playing both sides these days.'

A group of young American students waved enthusiastically at the passing parade.

'Amazing they can still find something to be patriotic about.' Cowen passed under the arch of the Olympia Theatre, Jameson a foot behind. Two floppy-haired youngsters gazed hopefully at that month's Midnight concert line-up.

'Radiohead are playing next week man. Gotta go to that. Thom Yorke flinging himself around a stage like a demented banshee. Should be awesome!' Cowen jammed the air guitar like a demon while singing, 'Fake Plastic Trees.'

'Didn't know you were into the music man,' said Jameson, as Cowen continued his Thom Yorke impersonation.

'Are you jokin? I'm a renaissance man. Into it all, didn't you know.' They passed a Rumanian beggar who eyed Cowen suspiciously.

Jameson noticed the dagger look the small woman threw in Cowen's direction. 'She doesn't like the look of you man.'

'I kicked over her box by mistake on the way to meeting you man. Sure, Jaysus, those Rumanians are so small it's hard to spot then,' said Cowen.

'You're some bastard. Heart of stone.'

They tripped on through the cobblestones of Temple Bar. Gossiping students, excited tourists, and guitar wielding buskers basked in the sunshine of Temple Bar Square. A crowd gathered around two black men. They managed to bend their bodies like play dough as they limboed their way under an impossibly low wooden bar, African beats boomed from the stereo beside them.

‘No wonder the women like the Africans. Talk about a thousand and one positions.’ Cowen winced as he watched the dreadlocked muscular African bend himself in two.

‘There’s the Arab, buying himself some more torn-up old books for that overlaid shelf of his. He has some unbelievable assortment of crap in the corner of his office. Astronomy is the latest kick apparently.’ Cowen eyed Omar at the open-air book stalls in the square. He remained oblivious to his passing colleagues.

‘Now there’s a renaissance man, Cowen. You could learn a thing or two from the gentle Arab, let me tell you.’ Jameson admired Omar’s gentle curiosity about the world. He didn’t like the way his colleagues had designated him the office joke. He sensed that they feared their inability to understand him. They turned right towards Fleet Street.

‘I once had to share a taxi with Wilde and the gorgeous Flora. Have you seen that wife of his? I don’t know what she’s doing with him. Talk about settling,’ said Cowen dismissively. They passed the Thunder Road Café where a child’s party was noisily getting under way. Jameson bristled uncomfortably. ‘Flora’s a lovely woman.’

‘Lovely is right, man. Did I get a bagful of lovely or what? Wilde was too busy blabbing his face off about the bloody Wicklow skies to notice the wife’s tits bouncing out of her dress. We bumped our way through the country pot-holes, and I enjoyed every second of it.’ Cowen made wide groping gestures with his hands.

‘Christ man,’ said Jameson with disgust.

They passed through the stain-glassed portal of The Palace Bar, and Cowen signaled to the rotund bar-man. ‘Two pints of the black Dan, thanks.’

‘Omar has your number Cowen, don’t worry.’

‘Loosen up man. It’s only a bit of fun. That’s all. A bit of fun.’

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The tall, raw-eyed black man sucked phlegm through his nostrils, and swallowed uncomfortably. Wrapped in a blue woollen scarf, he continued to alphabetise the books in a wooden container on the ground. Omar picked up a musty hardback, turning it over in his fingers. J.M. Synge, ‘The Playboy of the Western World.’ He checked to see if anyone was looking as he eyed the inside of the jacket for a date and edition. ‘First edition, 1918.’ He could feel his heart begin to tear through his t-shirt. *Not possible, surely not.* He checked again.

‘How much?’ he asked the sniffing black man. The man spat an ocean of phlegm on the ground, and looked at the back inside cover.

‘Ten euro, sir.’ Omar nearly choked.

‘I’ll take it.’ The man placed the book in a paper bag.

‘Will that be all sir?’ asked the man, dragging his throat painfully. A purple-sleeved book caught Omar’s eye as he fiddled in his pocket for cash. A swooning lady with corpulent bosoms drooped in the arms of a darkly moustached Gable lookalike.

‘Just a minute.’ Omar picked up the book. ‘*An Affair without End.*’ He glanced at the first chapter. *Julio felt his passion aroused in the warmth of her soft, peachy flesh. She pressed her*

lips to his, longing, hoping, that this would not be the last time. Omar eyed the black man who had returned to his stack of books. *Just her type of thing. Mills and Boon. Way to a woman's libido if nothing else.* An old woman beside him poked him in the ribs.

'That's a good one, luv.' Her wrinkled eyes smiled under a comb of feathery hair. 'Lots of passion and lust, and of course, the happy ending. You can't beat the happy ending, can you luv?'

Omar handed the book to the coughing bookseller. 'No, you can't that.'

'Is it for yourself? Didn't know the men were reading the romances nowadays.' The little woman was clearly delighted to have engaged a victim.

'Ehm, no. It's for my wife.' Omar handed a twenty euro note to the bookseller. The ailing blackman arched his eyebrows at Omar as if to say 'You've done well there mate.'

'Ah, isn't that lovely. She's got good taste that wife of yours,' said the little old lady.

'She has indeed.' Omar took the bag of books. 'I have to go I'm afraid. All the best.'

'Take care luv. Hope that book warms her right up for you.' The edges of her nose shook, and she cackled loudly. Omar smiled and moved towards Merchant Arch. *Sweet Old Thing. Hope she gets her happy ending.*

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As the Garda car passed through James's Street, Quixote gazed out the window. They stopped at the lights near the Guinness factory. An older woman looked in at Quixote, a mixture of fear and curiosity on her face. Dressed up in a blue and white Garda car, he supposed he looked like someone to fear.

'Perception is reality,' he said to himself.

'What?' asked Garda Sheila Kelly, from the front passenger seat.

'Perception is reality, I said,' repeated Quixote, baiting the woman to engage.

'And Innocent until proven Guilty too, I suppose,' she added sarcastically.

'That's the general idea.' Quixote stared at the fiery little woman intently.

'Tell me Garcia, how do you think we'd ever get our job done if we believed every two-bit junky that we drag off the streets that he's innocent?'

'Effectively and honestly,' replied Quixote, without flinching.

'Hah, Seán, we are being preached honesty by a Columbian ex-junky who entered the country on an illegal passport, and happened to be 'passing by' a drug-inspired robbery? Now that's balls.' Garda Kelly spoke to her partner as he drove the car past the Guinness Brewery.

'As I said, Perception is Reality.' Quixote looked back out the window, at the hordes of tourists, who stared back at him.

'Leave him alone Sheila,' said the young, red-haired Garda.

'Takin sides, are we Seán?'

'No...maybe he's right, that's all,' said the youngster.

'Christ, you're a wet week out of Templemore, you'll learn.'

Quixote smiled in the back seat.

'What are you smiling at?' she asked.

'Absolutely nothing Guard,' – and broadened his smile.

'You know Sheila, this 'you're too young to know better' crap gives me a pain up my hole. I know it's tough out there, but I believe in proof, that's all,' interrupted Garda Boylan.

‘Well, sometimes the proof is nowhere to be seen, even though you can smell it Seán. That’s where Justice needs a helping hand.’ Quixote coughed a laugh in the back seat.

‘I’ll shut your face for you if you don’t shut up.’ She turned towards Quixote with violent eyes.

Garda Boylan continued to drive along Mt. Brown towards Kilmainham Gaol. ‘Well, don’t include me in your little schemes Sheila. We’ll agree to differ on that one.’

‘Will we now?’

‘Putá,’ whispered Quixote from the back seat.

‘Now that doesn’t sound very friendly, Mr. ex-junky, You might want to take that back,’ She whacked Quixote on the knee with her nightstick. He screamed in pain, rattling the handcuffs that tied him the door.

‘I’m fucking innocent. you frustrated bitch! Cual es la chimbada pues? Why you don’t take it out on someone who deserves it?’ He groaned with pain.

Garda Boylan pulled up to the gates of the jail. ‘Sheila, I’m going to report that.’

‘You say a fucking word, and I’ll tell the Captain I caught you slipping a little pack of grass into your pocket this morning.’ She waved a small square bag of green leaves in the young Guard’s face. ‘Your word against mine, and no-one’s going to believe this junky, so don’t even think of it.’

Garda Boylan stared at her in disbelief.

‘Everything all right?’ asked the stocky Guard on the gate of the Gaol. Sheila shot Boylan a look.

‘Fine Keith. How’s Siobhán? Must be due any day now.’ Quixote looked at Garda Boylan in the rear view mirror, and their eyes met.

‘Yeah Sheila, about a week to go thanks. I’ll let her know you were asking for her.’ The gate-keeper pushed a button, and the large wooden gates slipped sideways slowly. They travelled on into the courtyard in silence.

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Khaled Abbas watched the TRAVELLER men get into formation in front of the Bank of Ireland. V waved to him as he crossed to the other side of Dame Street.

‘As-salamu alaykum,’ shouted the wiry-haired man. Khaled waved back, walking away from Trinity with the instructions that V had given him. He watched people move past him, feeling himself drift through the streets in slow motion. Their blurred faces seemed to blend into one long mass of colour, streaking across his eyelid like a slow-moving comet. He began to chant to himself inside his own mind.

‘In the Name of God, the Compassionate, The Merciful.

By the light of day, and by the dark of night, your Lord has not forsaken you, nor does He abhor you. The life to come holds a richer prize for you than this present life. You shall be gratified with what your Lord will give you.’

Khaled Abbas repeated this chant to himself in a barely discernible mumble of sound. He spotted the lady from the art gallery crossing from Temple Bar. A wave of fear washed over him. He turned left into Georges Street and continued his chant, fighting the inner voice that sought to push the divine words out of his mind.

‘In the Name of God, the Compassionate, The Merciful.’

*Who is the woman? Coincidence. No.*

‘In the Name of God,’

*Concentrate.*

The Compassionate.’

A group of loud American teenagers passed by, a small girl with braces blew a kiss in Khaled’s direction.

*Whores. Everywhere, whores.*

‘The Merciful.’

*Mother. I need you.*

‘In the Name of God, the Compassionate, The Merciful.’

The phone inside his pocket buzzed. He glanced at the flashing name, ‘Father’.

‘Hello, Khaled, where are you?’ said Mohammed Abbas.

‘Just picking up a book I had ordered Father. What’s wrong?’

‘Have you seen the time? I need to go for my angina check-up at 4.00 p.m. You promised me you’d mind the shop, boy. Where are you?’ said his agitated father.

‘Sorry Father, but it will take me at least 30 minutes to get back.’ Khaled glanced at his watch.

‘Well, get back here as quickly as possible. That should be all right. Bye.’ His father hung up just at the point he arrived at the door of the Camden Street Mosque. *30 minutes, that should be enough.* He banged loudly with the brass door knocker. A tall, bearded man, dressed in heavy white robes, answered the door.

‘Khaled. We’ve been expecting you,’ said the man in a gentle voice. He led him down a long corridor, and into a dark, spacious room. A large group of young men knelt in rows on mats on the hard wooden floor. They did not notice him enter, and continued to chant loudly in response to the older man who sat on the floor in front of them. The man nodded in Khaled’s direction. He finished the chant, and signalled to the group of men to continue with their prayers. Khaled followed him into a small room at the back. Another man sat by the window. He had an oval face with strongly marked features, dark eyes and short black hair. He was immediately recognisable. He was Abdullah Al-Sistani, a man who had featured in the Prime Time TV series study of Islam in Ireland, and in the speculative columns of the Irish newspapers. Khaled nodded to Al-Sistani.

‘As-salamu alaykum,’ said the man warmly.

‘Alaykum as-salam.’ Khaled felt excited to be in the presence of such a prominent Sunni of his community. He had often seen him talking to his father’s friends at the Clonskeagh Mosque. Since speculation on what exactly he was up to had grown, his Father had warned him not to engage with this man. Khaled did not like his Father’s lack of commitment. They said that Abdullah Al-Sistani knew Osam Bin Laden personally, and now, here he was, Khaled Abbas, one step away from this man. Bin Laden was a true Muslim. A man who knew the true meaning of the Holy Qur’an. None of the wishy-washy bullshit that the majority of his community applied to their daily lives. A La Carte Islam. Khaled knew better, and he would protect the *ummah* no matter what it meant.

‘Hello, Khaled is it?’ said the pleasant-faced man. He gestured for Khaled to sit.

‘Ahmed tells me you have been studying hard and are ready for the assignment we have for you.’

‘Yes sir, I hope so.’ His body swayed between a mixture of elation and fear.

‘Well it’s time.’ The man placed a firm hand on Khaled’s arm and nodded his head.

Khaled passed the package V had given to him.

‘Ta’widh,’ said the man.

‘Yes,’ said Khaled.

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The flower girls chatted easily at the corner of Grafton St. and Harry Street. The busy shoppers bustled past, women laden with Brown Thomas bags on their way for afternoon tea in The Westbury Hotel. A well-deserved rest from the sweat and flow of the Sales. Matt Phelan was feeling eager, as he perused the vast selection of Agapanthus, carnations, and dahlias. The ‘Traveller’ sandwich men passed by; L, E, E, and R dragging behind.

‘Are those boys ever in the right order?’ asked Matt Phelan.

The pony-tailed, flower-seller looked at him blankly. ‘Sorry Sir?’ She spoke with an Eastern European accent, her pretty face scrunched up with confusion.

‘Never mind.’ His eye travelled the length of her slim body, and rested at the open button just below the line of her ample breasts.

‘Tell me fair lady, what’s the in thing for seducing a woman? Could do with a bit of advice. You look like someone who’s used to a bit of seduction.’ His eyes flickered from her soft pink lips to the peach lace of her bra.

‘Well, sir, does the lady own a pond?’

Phelan looked a little puzzled. ‘I think she has one out the back. Why?’

‘Because, I have something special in pot downstairs if you really want to impress.’ She bent down to get the delicate purple plant underneath the table of flowers. Matt Phelan stared at the fine sallow skin inside her blouse. *More than a handful of peaches in that basket. Wouldn’t mind going downstairs myself.*

She pulled out a purple edged white flower. It floated in a small pot of water. ‘It is lotus flower. Very special sir. It signify sensuality for the Ancient Greeks. It on the label. That impress her sir. Beautiful, no?’

‘Beautiful indeed, but looks a bit messy. Think I’d rather stick to the stemmed, in your hand kind, if that’s ok.’

She looked a little disappointed, and placed the pot back on the ground.

‘Actually, I rather like those sunflowers. Wrap up a bunch of those for me please.’ He watched her intently as she carefully placed a gold bow around the stems of the sunflowers.

He pulled a red rose from one of the bunches beside him, and handed it to the girl, brushing against the arch of her bosom.

‘And this is for you.’ The girl cast a look sideways to the older woman, who was busily selling a bunch of carnations to a fair haired young man.

Matt Phelan lowered his voice to a whisper. ‘The Boss won’t mind once I pay up. What’s the bad news?’ He pulled out a wad of notes from the overflowing wallet jammed into his trouser pocket.

‘Ten euro fifty.’

The Dedalus lookalike tripped past him clutching the bunch of carnations.

He handed her the money, gently tickling the palm of her hand. ‘Pleasure doing business, my dear.’

She blushed. Matt Phelan thanked God for the joys of a hot day and the oceans of bare female flesh it revealed for his considerable pleasure.

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The taxi inched its way along College St. Bláithín could see a golden coach with a police escort passing by the Bank of Ireland.

‘Traffic is mad because of the festivities,’ she said to the taxi driver. He looked at her blankly.

‘You know, James Joyce, the Centenary Year and all that?’

‘Sorry lady. My Engleesh is no good.’ She glanced at his name on the driver’s certificate.

*Boris Abramova.*

‘You from Russia?’ she asked, twirling the bangle on her arm.

‘No, yes, well Chechnya,’ he replied.

‘Ah, there’s a lot of trouble over there, right?’ She wasn’t sure whether she should enter into the complexities of such a conversation.

‘Yees, trouble,’ he replied. The dark expression that fell over his face told her that she was better not to pursue this line of enquiry. He turned left into Aston Quay.

‘Shouldn’t we have gone over Butt Bridge?’ asked Bláithín, a little unsure of the geography north of the river but sensing that they were heading out of their way. The man struggled with a map that he had propped up on the window in front of him.

‘Sorry, but do you know where we’re going?’ said Bláithín. This man’s knowledge of Dublin was clearly sketchy at best.

‘Ballymun Flats, Ballymun Flats,’ repeated the man, as he fought with the map on his lap.

‘How long have you been in Dublin exactly?’ asked Bláithín

‘Yes, yes, I know.’ The man poked the map triumphantly, and Bláithín smiled weakly. She looked over his shoulder. Yes, that’s right. He nodded, giving her the thumbs up. She sat back with a sigh, resigned to the fact that it might take a little longer to get to where she was going than she had originally thought. Something beeped in her pocket. She pulled her mobile from her pocket. *Out of battery. Never mind.*

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‘Como estas Conjo?’ Juanma Gonzales threw his arm around Kinch’s shoulders.

‘Muy bien hombre, muy bien, y tu?’ Kinch hugged his guitar teacher warmly. He and Quixote had been taking flamenco guitar lessons from Juanma for six months.

‘Que dia, hombre. La Ostia, no?’ Juanma Gonzales had the face of a man who had spent his fifty years under the burning heat of an Andalucian sun. Dark and wrinkled: he had the hallmarks of a man who had lived well, who knew the joys of vino tinto, and croquetas on a lazy Spanish afternoon.

Kinch looked over the shoulder of the tall, muscular Spaniard. ‘Le Puta Madre, hombre, le puta madre.’ Cameras snapped madly as an open-topped Dublin sight-seeing bus drifted past the Trinity Gates. Oliver Goldsmith and Edmund Burke stared stonily into the distance of Dame Street.

‘Kinch, you do anything tonight? I have two free tickets to go to de American band ‘Low’ in Christ Church Cathedral this evening. You hear of dat?’ The Spaniard pulled the tickets from his back pocket.

‘You’re joking man. I would die for those.’

Juanma pushed the tickets into Kinch’s side pocket. ‘They’re yours. I cannot go. Enjoy hombre.’

‘Mucho gracias. Estas seguro?’ Kinch drifted back into the language he had learnt in the Sacromonte caves of Granada.

Juanma Gonzales eyed the 46A bus. ‘Seguro, seguro.’ It turned the corner towards them.

‘Mi bus. Hasta Luego hombre. Llama me,’ said the Spaniard, moving towards Grafton St. at speed. Juanma waved his guitar case at the bus as it flew past. Kinch clutched the bunch of carnations he had just bought, and turned to look at the Ambassadorial procession that was heading down Dame St. and towards him. He looked at his watch, 3.20 p.m. The sound of horse hooves and buckled music drifted past. *Right, that’s me off the hook for a while. Time for a bit of pleasure.*

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The queue for Butler’s Chocolate Café was out the door. People queued up to buy ice-cold chocolate frappes, the heat providing the perfect excuse for a seasonal treat. Mounds of people crowded around the Cafés of South William Street, giving this tiny corner of the city a distinctly Parisian feel. *Could be anywhere.* Hanan soaked up the atmosphere as he waited patiently to buy a large box of Butler’s chocolates for Sarah. The girls in front of him were loaded down with shopping bags from BT2 and Airwave.

‘I’m telling you babes, a Japanese deck garden is the only way to go. It’s so user-friendly, and it’s great for barbeques. Who needs to be knee deep in muck? Gardens are a nightmare.’ The petite brunette, with the rod straight hair, pulled out a ‘House & Home’ magazine from under her arm.

She waved a heavily tanned arm in Hanan’s face. *A booth babe.* It amused him how half the women of Ireland miraculously developed tans with the first sniff of sunshine: the task was to spot the ones who really knew what they were doing, and catch them out. *A definite streaking around the wrist, but not a bad job all the same.*

‘Excuse me Ms, I was wondering where you got your tan done? I was thinking of getting my girlfriend a present of a couple of sessions for her birthday,’ he asked, knowing they would be completely flummoxed.

‘Ehm, thanks. Westwood, in Leopardstown, actually,’ said the brunette with a wavering smile.

He smiled graciously, ‘Great, thanks.’ They ordered their skinny café lattés, the brunette whispering to her friend, ‘Shit, is it really that obvious babes?’

Hanan congratulated himself on a job well done. He loved to fuck with the petit-bourgeois mind. It was so easy.

‘What can I get you sir?’ asked the small Chinese man behind the counter.

‘A twenty-euro box of chocolates, thanks man.’ Hanan couldn’t wait to scoff half of these after the hours of free sex Sarah would give him for remembering it was six months since they met. He prided himself on ‘getting it right’ with women. It wasn’t so hard, since most of his friend’s version of romance was a surprise ride, or a drunken evening in Café Bar Deli. They just didn’t get the fact that the smallest little thought produced the biggest results where a woman was concerned. He passed the money over the counter, and headed back outside. The small newspaper seller with the ruddy face was in his usual spot across the road. He wanted to check

what was on in the cinema that night so he could get Sarah nice and warmed up before he surprised her. He fought his way through the traffic, and crossed over to Mick.

‘Sorry mate, do you mind if I have a wee look at the cinema section?’ He didn’t want to have to buy the paper just for that.

‘Fire ahead, lad,’ said Mick, chewing on a sandwich.

‘Let’s see – ‘ReJoyce 2004,’ IFI – James Joyce and the Volta Cinematograph... Can’t get away from that fella at the moment.’

‘Overkill, isn’t it lad?.’ Mick took another bite, and spoke in between chews. ‘Did you know that he started the first cinema ever in Ireland? Could be interesting all the same.’

*I’d rather spend the afternoon scratching my arse.* ‘Yeah, great,’ replied Hanan, continuing to read. ‘Something called ‘The Power of Nightmares’ – The Rise of the Politics of Fear – Now that might be worth seeing. Let’s see ...Iraq...American Neoconservatives ...Radical Islamists. Just the right kind of thing to depress me on a Wednesday evening. Won’t be great for buttering up the girlfriend though.’

‘Not unless she’s had her sense of passion surgically removed boy. Why not go to one of those chick flicks with your one with the great bod – what’s her name? Cameron Diaz. That way you’re both a winner,’ said Mick, swallowing the last bite.

‘Fuck it, I’ll just buy the bloody thing. Here.’ Hanan handed Mick 1 euro 10 cents.

‘Thanks lad. You can take your time with that now. Hope you get results.’ Mick flicked stray bits of bread off his moustache.

Hanan waved a thanks, and walked past the International Bar towards Grafton Street. He stuck on his iPod headphones. Sinéad O Connor sang into his ear, ‘Couldn’t sleep so I went out walking/Thinking about you and hearing us talking.’ He sang along under his breath, ‘And all the things I shouldn’t say/Echo now inside my head.’ He approached Tower Records, incapable of passing the door without a quick look. The usual assortment of piercings, pony-tails and general scruffy cool were collected around the listening posts, and the new releases. He paused his iPod, his brain struggling to separate the competing musical inputs. A suitably shabby looking band played loudly at the back of the shop; a handful of devotees and shop stragglers standing by to listen. The singer with the black mop of hair reminded Hanan of Bille Joe Armstrong from Green Day. *Sounds like The Thrills, won’t be buying that shite.* He went through the list of new releases, and decided he would leave it until next week to get something.

He switched Sinéad back on and left the shop. As he turned the corner into Grafton Street, his mobile buzzed in his pocket. He glanced at the screen. *Message, Sarah...Sorry Hanan, but I’m having second thoughts about our relationship. I’m in an exam until 6.00 a.m. Ring me after and I’ll explain. Please don’t be too pissed with me. X Sarah.* Sinéad sang *Tears from the moon/ fall down like rain/ I reach for you/ I reach in vain* as Hanan felt his heart begin to pump in his chest. *What the fuck? No fucking way. Not like this.* He looked up and could see Will standing in front of the Molly Malone statue watching a parade of some kind pass by. He whipped off his earphones.

‘Will man, Will,’ shouted Hanan.

Will turned his head. ‘Hey Hanan, did you see the wave on Bertie as he passed by? He thinks he’s the Queen.’ Will’s angular face broke into a smile.

‘Yeah, have you seen Sarah?’

‘I think she’s in her Anatomy exam, poor bitch,’ said Will.

‘Did she say anything to you about anything?’ asked Hanan, realising he made no sense whatsoever.

‘Anything about anything? Let’s see. She spoke so I suppose that’s something. Are you alright? You look a bit stressed.’

‘It’s nothing. Thanks man.’ Hanan walked away towards Trinity.

‘No bother. Are you coming to the concert later?’

‘Maybe.’ Hanan saluted the Rugby man and crossed the road; the cavalcade disappearing in the distance. *Bollox, bollox, bollox.*

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Paul Mullens concentrated while he ran his brush carefully along the string of Lady Lavery’s harp. A couple of Japanese tourists snapped photos of the would-be artist marvelling at the exactitude of the imitation, the dappled concrete of a Dublin foothpath providing the unlikely canvas. He could feel his mobile buzzing in his pocket, set his brush aside and glanced at the flashing name. ‘The Boss’. Quick, Answer.

‘Boss.’ He knew his real name – he had so many, Franko, Scorpion, Scumbag, depending on who was talking about him – but Boss was all Paul needed to know about this man who ran the biggest drug-dealing gang in the City. A mesh of such gangs had encircled the City in a web of crime. It could have given New York’s South Bronx a run for its money; the thick rich pelt of the Celtic Tiger providing opportunity a plenty to those willing to make the most of it.

‘Mullens, get your bony arse over here right fuckin now. Need to unload the gear pronto.’ The razor-sharp tones of the Boss shot through his ear like a sharp needle.

‘Right Boss, but I just need to grab a quick bite to eat first. I’m starvin.’

‘I’ll fuckin chew your dick off, and serve it in a sandwich with ketchup if you don’t get over here now. Do you hear me Mullens?’

‘Right, sure, but what’s goin on?’ Paul collected the money from his baseball cap, and piled the chinks into his satchel.

‘There’s been a monumental fuck-up. The lads were nabbed by the cops this morning robbing a post-office. Some Spick lad got caught up in the middle of it all, and the lads, being the thick shits they are, thought it would be a laugh to pretend he was one of us. Fuckin dickwads!’

‘Jaysus, where are they being held?’

‘Pearse Street.’

‘Shit, was Tommo there?’

‘Yeah, if that brother of yours had half a workin brain, I wouldn’t be lookin at another botched fuckin job. You better sort him out Mullens, or you’ll be scrapin him up off the street.’ Paul felt his body lurch with fear. His Ma was going to lose it.

‘Jaysus Boss, he’s not the sharpest, but he’s as loyal as a cocker spaniel. He worships the ground you walk on.’

‘If it’s worshipping I needed I’d become one of those fuckin asshole TV Evangelists. I wouldn’t wipe my arse with an ounce of worship. It’s fuckin results Mullens. Results are all that matters. Do you understand me?’

‘Yeah Boss, results right.’

‘Right, good lad, jump in a taxi. I need you here now.’

From the road in front of him, he could hear the sound of horses hoofs clipping their way past. He looked up. The Taoiseach waved enthusiastically from the gold gilded carriage. ‘Fuckin plonker,’ yelled Paul, ‘It’s far from fuckin regal carriages you were raised, dickhead.’ Paul could feel bile rising in his throat, and hocked a logey towards the passing carriage. A Japanese couple

shuffled away nervously. He packed everything into his satchel, and waited for the commotion to pass. A taxi whizzed towards him, and he flagged it down.

‘Where you off to son?’ asked the grey haired taxi-driver.

‘Crumlin, I’ll show you when we get there.’ *Better not let them know the address. Blacklisted amongst the cabbies who’re in the know.* He grabbed his beeping mobile and looked at the message. *Shit, the girl. She’s on her way to my place.* He pushed Bláithín’s number. It went straight to her answering machine. ‘Hi sorry, it’s Paul. Won’t make it after all. Something urgent came up. Sorry. Call me again. Would love to chat.’ He’d liked the look of that girl. Snobby Southsider but nice enough; a fine thing. He always fancied a bit of the ‘right stuff.’ *Could tell she was a Cokehead straight away. It’s in the eyes. Get her high as a kite and I bet you I can nail her posh ass. Another day.*

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Brian Ward sat in his bedroom pouring over the loot he had managed to grab this morning. Fair dues to Mullens for coming up with the idea. The bicycle meant he could get out of there like a bullet. Even if a cop car spotted him he could dump it in a second. He eyed the red Hermes bag with delight. *That rich bitch probably has fuckin ten of these in every colour anyway.* He opened it. A fake leopardskin purse sat at the bottom the bag. He tore the zip open, and a wad of fifty euro notes fell out. ‘Fuckin A!’ He counted two hundred euro. *Divine fuckin justice. Good man yourself!* He winked at the picture of the Sacred Heart hanging on his wall. Even though he hated the bloody thing, it had been there since before he was born, so he couldn’t be arsed having a fight with his Ma about it. She had hung one in every room in the house, thinking it would bring each of them some kind of luck. Mostly it just freaked Brian out, yerman with his chest wide open like that, so when his Ma wasn’t around, he’d cover it with a poster of Freddie Mercury.

‘Brian, youse in there?’ His father’s voice was slurred.

*Fuckin pissed again. Jaysus!* ‘Yeah Da.’

‘Your Ma needs a hand to the jacks. I’m busy. Can youse give her a hand?’

‘Yeah. Hang on a second.’ Brian grabbed the loot off his bed, and hid it underneath. He opened the door. His Da had the tele on the floor, the back wide open and was fiddling with some wires. A bottle of whiskey sat beside him on the ground. ‘What the fuck you at Da?’

‘The bloody thing is feekin knackered again.’

‘No wonder when you keep messin with it.’

His Father reeked of drink. Nothing new about that, but it pissed Brian off that he had to go tearin the arse out of every appliance in the flat, trying to prove he was good at something, when he hadn’t a fuckin clue.

‘Just help your Ma.’

Brian went into the other bedroom. His Ma was laid up in bed, her tired face the picture of pain.

‘Thanks son. I’m about to burst.’

He pulled the covers off the bed, and put his hand behind his Mother’s head. ‘How you feelin today Ma?’

She dragged her legs slowly to the ground. ‘I’ve been worse, and I’ve sure as hell been better son, but no point in bloody complainin. Just give meself an earache with that shite, and I’ve enough pain as it is.’

He smiled, and eased her to a standing position. They walked through the tiny flat to the bathroom. He helped his Ma off with her dressing gown. ‘I’m alright now.’ You go on out to

your Da, and I'll call you in a sec.' He closed the door beside him, and sat beside his Da while he tinkered with the tele.

'Any word from the Health Board?'

His Da looked up. 'Not a thing. She'll be dead and buried before they get their big fat arses in gear.'

'Jesus Da. She might hear you.'

'She knows it herself son. Without the two thousand euro to get her that dialysis machine it's only a question of time.' His Da sighed, and stopped fiddling with the wires. Useless though he was, he had tried to get another job after being let go from the delivery company he had worked in all his life. Younger, cheaper men had arrived over from those Eastern European countries, and Brian's Dad was out on his ear. At his age, there was no chance of another job and he hit the bottle big time. Who could blame him?

'Something will turn up Da. I promise.' Brian smiled, and winked at the Sacred Heart – and he could have sworn Jesus winked right back.

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The woman behind the desk at the Kodak shop was busy gossiping on the phone. She barely registered Omar's presence as she nattered on about some guy called Terry, and how he had a bloody cheek to think that she would take him back after he had shagged her friend. Omar sighed. 'Excuse me.'

She stuck her hand in the air and continued. Omar raised his voice, 'Excuse me, but I'm in a rush.'

'Just a minute,' she replied.

That was it. Omar could take no more. 'No NOW!'

She threw him a wicked look, excused herself and hung up. 'Jaysus, who got out on the wrong side of bed today!'

Omar pushed the photo slip towards her. 'Can I just have my prints, please?'

'Yeah, yeah, don't get your knickers in a twist luv.' She took a box from under the counter, and pulled out a package that matched his ticket. She pushed them towards Omar, her thin lips twisted into an unpleasant sneer. 'Twenty two euro Mister.'

Omar sighed deeply, and pushed the money her direction. He took the package, opened it, and reached inside, eager to take a look at the photos he had taken. The shots Jameson had taken of the funeral this morning were striking, especially the one of the poor young woman following the child's coffin. He flicked through some more, spotting the sandwichmen at the bottom of the pile. There were a couple of close-ups and then – Bingo – a prize-winner of a photo, taken from the island in the centre of O'Connell Bridge. The road was empty of traffic, and six of the sandwichmen stood beside each other, obviously totally unaware that their random positioning spelt out the word REVEAL. Although Omar didn't exactly know why, he sensed there was something special about this photo. *Definitely a front-page contender. Must talk to Will. At last, a break.*

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Breda Keane gazed out over the green leafy splendour of Merrion Square. She clutched a bunch of yellow-bright sunflowers. *That should cheer her up no end*, she thought, as a group of

students descended the steps of the American College. A frog croaked in her pocket. *Message, quick!* She tore her pocket trying to get at the phone. ‘Mam, it’s coming, quick come!!!’ ‘

‘Holy Mary, Mother of God!’ Her thick ankles wobbled as she took off at speed towards Holles Street.

Mr. Julian Guinness had stopped off in the National Gallery for a bite of lunch. The performance on Sandymount Strand had gone well and he was looking forward to the Joyce concert in the National Concert Hall that night. He exited the Gallery and crossed the road towards Merrion Park. He stood at the footpath, eyeing the passing gilded coach full of dignitaries, when a small, rotund woman flew past him screaming ‘Jesus God, Jesus God. Hang on Annie!’ Her rear end bounced unnaturally. *Now there’s a sight you don’t see every day, thank God.* Mr. Guinness turned back towards the cavalcade, and lowered his hat respectfully, before he crossed the road. The metal heel of his shoes tapped against the footpath. Oscar Wilde lay splayed across a rock inside the railings, painted in greens and reds; he looked like a prize peacock. Mr. Guinness stopped to salute the great man, and tipped his straw hat in the direction of the shiny lookalike. *Mr. Wilde, good day Sir.* Oscar remained languidly silent. *Thank God times have changed Sir. I might have suffered your same fate. What a thought!*

He turned the corner towards the Dáil, and bumped into a young, blind man who tapped his cane against the park railings.

‘Watch where you’re fucking going mate,’ said the man. He turned towards Mr. Guinness in a most alarming manner for someone who was supposedly unable to see. ‘You’re not in the script.’ He continued walking and tapping his cane.

‘Most peculiar,’ muttered Mr. Guinness. ‘The world is full of madmen, Mr. Wilde, let me tell you.’

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James C. Kenny, American Ambassador to Ireland, and his wife Margaret, accompanied by An Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, left the Phoenix Park Gates after a substantial luncheon of kidney and red wine. The cavalcade made its way jauntily toward the Quays. The dignitaries acknowledged the warm greetings of the people of Dublin who stepped out of their hard-working establishments for a proper gawk. The horses, perfectly groomed and attired in crimson plumage, followed the police escort with care, as it moved along the Wolfe Tone Quay towards Rory O Moore Bridge. At the Smithfield entrance off Arran Quay, the cavalcade passed an unconcerned Ms. Portia Staunton, walking her Barbone poodle, Snow. She picked up Snow’s scatological ‘leavings’ in a cardboard box before returning to her fifth floor apartment in Smithfield Market. Ambassador Kenny greatly enjoyed the warmth of the sun as his carriage passed Bernard O’Leary and John Menton, who spoke gravely on the Steps of the Four Courts. O’Leary raised a weary hand to his fellow party-man. Mr. Ahern acknowledged with a gentle nod of his white head. Two young African girls jumped with enthusiasm in front of The Ormonde Hotel, much to the delight of Mrs. Kenny, who commented on their pretty plaited hair. The River was sucked to within a trickle of its life in the heat of the mid-Summer day. The stately plump figure of Monsignor Reidy was easy to spot, as he made his way into the offices of Doctor Donal Mc Sweeney, unaware of the commotion at his back. From their vantage point at the head of Grattan Bridge Dick Cowen and Mark Jameson watched the passing parade with a jaundiced eye: Jameson jumped to professional attention with the click-clack of his camera shutter. An Taoiseach noted the journalists, and smiled deliberately in their direction. The clip-clop parade

jangled its way along Parliament Street, to the considerable delight of a screaming group of American students. They waved their tiny American flags with unbounded enthusiasm. Ambassador Kenny waved back with equal joy, delighted to see his fellow countrymen proudly displaying their colours in the streets of Dublin. A Garda car passed ahead of the parade in front of City Hall, Quixote Garcia thumbing his finger with obvious disdain. An Taoiseach commented to Ambassador Kenny on the considerable strides that had been made by Minister Mc Dowell in fighting crime in Dublin. The horses tripped around the corner, heads cocked high and turned into the wide sweep of Dame Street. It unfurled like a giant stone carpet, Trinity's carved façade proudly standing to attention in the distance. Mrs. Kenny noticed the cold stare of a young man, who mumbled to himself as he turned into George's Street. She felt a cool breeze pass over her like an unrecognised premonition. The jaunty step of Flora Wilde caught the eye of An Taoiseach. She smiled broadly at the Ambassador's wife, taking note of the singular violet of Mrs. Kenny's couture jacket. In Westmoreland Street, Bláithín O'Leary strained to see the passing parade, while the taxi driver struggled with his map. In front of Goldsmith's stony perch, Brian Nolan doffed his Dedulus hat appropriately, to the delight of all members of the gilded carriage. Cursing loudly, Juanma Gonzales paid no heed to Ambassador Kenny, as he pointed out the Provost's house over the shoulder of the discontented Guitar Master. The horses bristled with fright as Paul Mullens hurled unwelcome abuse at the Head of the Irish Government. Bertie Ahern responded by broadening his smile, much to the disgust of the aforementioned artist. Hanan Abbas, chased after Will Philips who watched the proceedings with mild amusement. A yellow sunflower flew across the mouth of the carriage landing in Mrs. Kenny's lap. She acknowledged the sender as being one Mr. Matt Phelan of Celtic Tiger fame. Mr. Phelan was a sight to behold bedecked in azure blue from top to toe. At Trinity's side entrance, a group of students shouted slurs at the unfazed Ambassador while clutching placards and chanting in unison, 'Stop Bush Visit!' Sarah Purser stood in the centre taking the time to protest having just finished her exam. Ambassador Kenny read the The TRAVELLER sandwich men as he passed by unable to register the coldness in their dark eyes. The gateman at the back of Trinity Gates doffed his cap politely. The carriage rolled elegantly past; an assembled group outside Sweny's Chemists delighted at the sight. The Bloomian assemblage waved their caps and canes with great aplomb, and the Ambassador was most delighted. Mrs. Kenny noticed a blind young man tap his cane along the edge of the Merrion Square railings. Mr. John Cronin stared blankly at the passing carriage, thankful that his job was nearing a close. An agitated Breda Keane sped past, bumping into an alarmed Mr. Philip Lacey. He regained his composure, and waved his cane amicably at the Ambassador. At the Royal canal bridge a group of playful children jumped into the thick waters of the canal, splashing the edge of the coach with the impact. Faces peered out of windows along the leafy Avenues around Haddington Road, acknowledged by An Taoiseach. The entourage proceeded on its last piece of the journey to the RDS. Ambassador Kenny and Mrs. Kenny waved proudly at the sentry guards who hopped to attention in front of the American Embassy. An Taoiseach promised that it would be a most entertaining show as the carriage reached its destination in the grounds of the RDS.

## Chapter 20 - Kinch

Kinch passed the Thunder Road Café, deafened by the noise of screaming children. They hurled food at each other with great enthusiasm. *Oh My God, the kid's party.* The little American woman caught his eye and leapt from her chair. *Bollox!*

‘Mr. Finch,’ she shouted into the street, ‘It’s over here.’

Kinch contemplated running, but it was too late now. He groaned and plastered on a smile.

‘We thought you had forgotten,’ said the little woman.

‘Hello, sorry. I’ve been up to my eyes. I’m afraid I forgot.’

‘Not to worry. You’re here now. My friends over there have been dying to have a drink with Stephen Dedalus.’ She nodded to a group of weary looking adults. They raised their glasses enthusiastically, and encouraged him to come in.

‘I’m terribly sorry Mam, but something urgent has come up, and I’m afraid I can’t stay.’

Her face creased with displeasure. Kinch attempted to move away from the door.

‘But you promised. Everyone will be so disappointed,’ she said, ‘Come on, just for ten minutes, so we can get some photos for the folks at home.’ She grabbed his arm and yanked him into the screaming mess of children.

‘Well, ten minutes then.’ There wasn’t much point in protesting. The determined little woman gripped his arm like a crab on heat.

‘Everyone, this is our very own Stephen Dedalus. Didn’t I tell you he was so cute?’

Kinch attempted a weak smile and doffed his hat at the excited group. ‘Ladies and gentlemen.’

‘Oooooohh! Mr. Dedulus, can I get a photo with you and Mike to take back to the kids. My daughter is an English Professor at Yale? She’ll go wild.’ She prodded her weary looking husband. A large, rotund man smiled weakly at Kinch, and moved into photo taking position. His unnaturally tanned wife put her hand around both their waists, and smiled a white-toothed grin.

‘Great guys, now cheeeese!’ shouted the little American woman. She clutched a the Samsung camera like a weapon. The group of adults joined in the cheeing and drowned out the sound of the children for a split second. Kinch made the necessary photo rounds, and contemplated as quick an exit as he could politely manage. Just as he was about to make his excuses, a plump young boy flung a glob of green jelly into the crevice of Kinch’s Trilby hat. The children erupted into laughter, high fiving the boy, who grinned like a loon in Kinch’s direction. *Cheeky little fecker. I’d love to kick that fat arse of yours from here to Sunday.*

‘Mr. Finch, I’m so sorry. Kyle, get over here and apologise. The rotund man grabbed his carbon-copy son by the scruff of the neck, and dragged him to the adult table.

‘Kyle, apologise to Mr. Finch right now.’

The grinning child giggled as he responded. ‘Sorry.’

Kinch wanted to belt the little fecker, who clearly was loving every minute of it. ‘That’s alright.’ Kinch nodded to the Father, and wiped the jelly off the top of his hat. The tanned woman gave the boy a look of disapproval.

‘So Sorry, Mr. Finch. These boys get so carried away with all the excitement. I’m sure he didn’t mean it.’

Kinch was quite sure that the devious little shite meant it, and a lot more. He exchanged a look with the boy as if to say ‘You might be able to fool them, but I’ve got your number mate.’

The man let go of the boy who raced back to the giggling group of youngsters. They were busily assembling other food objects for a fresh assault. *Need to get the hell out of here.*

‘Sorry Madam, but I have got to go.’ He finished wiping off his hat and moved to leave.

She slipped a fifty euro note and a card into his pocket. ‘Awww. Well if you must. That’s my friend Michael’s card. He’s a big businessman. Owns half of Dublin. I mentioned you were doing something for the kids and he told me to tell you that he’s looking for young actors to perform at children’s parties – a new business venture of his. You’d make a bomb. Should give him a call.’ Kinch smiled weakly. *I’d rather sleep in an ocean of shite than put up with a load of brats like them again.* ‘Yeah, sounds great. Thanks all the same.’ He stepped into Fleet Street, and turned left towards Temple Bar.

The sun blinded Kinch as he put his jellyfied hat on his head. *Christ what a pack of brats!* He squinted in the sunlight. *No puedo ver nada.* He felt a sweat bead travel the length of his wide nose, and drop to the ground underneath. Peeling off his black suit jacket, he pondered the joys of Global Warming. *A good ten years of solid sunshine might be better than an eternity of rain after all. Sorry Mother Earth but after a couple of billion years of drowning half to death, us Irish could do with a break.* He took out a cigarette, lit it, took a long slow drag, and blew the smoke into the air.

‘Working on the tan?’ A familiar voice approached. He threw his hand to the sky to block the sun from his eyes.

‘It’s me - Sarah. How’s the actor boy? I suppose I should belt you one for dumping my friend this morning?’

‘Howya Sarah, thanks for sparing me a surprise kick in the groin. That could have been nasty,’ replied Kinch. Sarah confused him completely. Always presented to perfection like an Irishised Barbie doll, she didn’t look the protestor type, but she was always to be found plastering some protest poster against any surface she could find. This time, she was exiting the Amnesty shop on Fleet Street having, no doubt, subscribed to the latest ‘in’ campaign.

‘You know I’m a non-violent woman.’ she replied, ‘But you’re still a bastard! There, my friend-defending conscience is now clear.’

‘Indeed I am. Quite a common trait nowadays I’m told.’ She laughed and nodded in agreement. He looked at the pile of papers in her hand. She raised one up proudly.

“‘Bertie and Bush in bed. No troops for Shannon!’ Like it?”

Kinch oogled the rather nasty cartoon of Bertie Ahern and George W. Bush mad at it in a large iron bed.

‘Tasteful,’ he responded.

‘Yeah, gas isn’t it. Dillon drew it. He’s a bloody genius. Can you believe that war-mongering bastard Bush will be duty-free shopping in Shannon airport next week? Christ, does no-one give a shit about anything real anymore?’ Her cheeks flushed with studied rage.

‘Guess not,’ replied Kinch lazily, knowing that apathy was the ultimate enemy of the Cosmo Campaigner. ‘I thought you were in exams all this week,’ he added as an afterthought.

‘I got out thirty minutes ago. Bloody Anatomy. God I hate it!’

‘Bloody is right. Rather you than me.’ He spotted a copy of what looked like ‘The Qur’an’ under her armpit. ‘Is that what I think it is?’ He bent sideways to read.

‘Well, it’s not the bible.’ she replied, pulling it from under her arm for him to see. ‘Did you know that Mohammed was a regular toy-boy? Married a forty year old woman called

Kadijah when he was twenty five...And she was his boss in the Merchant caravan business. Islam is a lot racier than we give it credit for.'

'Good old Mohammed. A man after my own heart,' replied Kinch with a smirk.

'You know everyone around here could do with a little bit more understanding of what's really going on over there in Iraq. No-one questions a damn thing. Here!' She pushed a handful of posters into Kinch's hand. 'Now you can do something about it.'

'Great.'

'Consider it payback for dumping my sweet friend this morning. Positive Karma to replace the negative, and I'll be watching so don't you dare dump them.'

'To be honest...'

He attempted a protest. 'I don't want to hear it. It's your penance. Just accept it. By the way, are you going to the Low concert tonight?'

'Yeah, I just got a ticket off my pal, Juanma. You going?'

'Wouldn't miss it. Listen, Will and I are on in Holles Street tonight, and we'll be having a few scoops in the interns lounge before we leave. Why not drop in around 10.00 p.m and we can all head together?'

Kinch looked sceptical. 'But won't Bláithín kill you for hanging out with me?'

'Listen, we're all friends and I'm not going to blank you just because you two have fallen out. Anyway, she's not going, so as far as she'll ever know we just met there.'

Kinch smiled. 'So much for the Sisters sticking together.'

'What goes around comes around, and I'm no angel – so let's call it quits.'

Kinch gave her a high five. 'Mum's the word, Sister.'

She laughed. 'Gotta run. See ya later Kinch.' She picked up her posters and headed towards Westmoreland Street.

He sighed heavily, placed the posters under his armpit, and walked towards Temple Bar. The clock on the front of Oliver St. John Gogarty's read 3.45 p.m. *Shit, need to get to her house.*

He walked past the palm tree seat on the edge of Temple Bar Square just as his mobile buzzed in his pocket.

'Yes, John... What? Meet you now? ...but I'm supposed to be meeting someone... Yes, yes, ok. I know. We need to sort out Quixote... I'm sure. Ok. Five minutes, the IFI. Right. See you.' *Shit, better text her.* He tapped a message into his phone, and pressed Send. *Shite! Shite!*

He ran through Temple Bar, weaving his way through the crowds like a pinball. 'Black is the Colour,' drifted from the Quays pub, the traditional music mecca of Temple Bar, over the cobble-stoned streets. A group of English girls passed by dressed in identical French maids outfits. Their bellies oozed out of the outfits. The girl at the centre clutched a large black Dildo comparing its dimensions to unsuspecting passing males. The girls fell about laughing barely able to navigate the cobblestones in their skyscraper high heels. *Pissed at 4.00 p.m. Attractive that.* Much to his relief, Kinch navigated around the screaming group, without having his member assessed. He passed into the long corridor of the Irish Film Institute, dumping the posters by the Events Guide stand on the way in. A group of Bloomites exited, having just attended the Volta film screening. They acknowledged Kinch, who smiled graciously and continued into the bar. The café buzzed with the usual mix of film devotees and wannabe bohemians. Norah Jones's liquid voice drifted over the PA system. John Fenton sat in the corner abstractly gazing at the poster of 'The Quiet Man' on the wall behind him.

‘Maureen O Hara was a fine thing all the same,’ said Kinch, interrupting John’s dreaming.

‘Hey Kinch. Yes, beautiful. Don’t make many like her anymore.’ John gestured to Kinch to sit down.

‘I saw her on the tele being interviewed by Larry King last year and Jesus she’d hardly changed. Eighty something and I’d nearly do her,’ said Kinch.

‘Yes well, I hear you broke up with Bláithín this morning. I guess the younger woman isn’t to your taste.’ John’s voice was tinged with disdain.

‘Relationships are complicated, John. I know you like Bláithín. She’s a fab girl. But it just wasn’t right man, that’s all.’ Kinch felt irritated that he couldn’t seem to get away from this subject. Boy did news travel fast in this city.

Fenton shuffled the papers in front of him, and sucked on a whiskey. ‘Right let’s get down to it. I’m afraid Quixote’s in deep trouble.’

‘But he didn’t do it. What evidence is there?’ said Kinch.

‘The other cons are fingering him as the contact man. His Uncle is a well-known Columbian drug-dealer, and an established fence who works for Tommy Fleming claims he’s sold a ton of coke to your friend. Enough.’ Fenton didn’t drop his gaze for a second.

‘The word of two extremely dodgy groups of individuals. Surely that’s just circumstantial,’ said Kinch.

‘Circumstantial it may be, but damn well good enough to get your friend deported when his visa petition was just about to reach its last stage.’

Kinch didn’t know what to think. His instinct told him that Quixote was innocent, or at least his heart told him he wanted to believe it. ‘That’s hardly justice in action,’

‘Maybe not, but the country is flooded with applications. A possible Columbian drug-dealer wouldn’t exactly make top of the pile.’ Fenton bent closer to Kinch. ‘There may be another way, however.’

Kinch eyed him suspiciously. ‘I’m listening.’

‘Are you aware of the trouble between Bláithín and her father?’

‘Are you talking generally or specifically?’ Kinch knew a lot about the way her father had stuck his big fat nose into their relationship; how he deemed Kinch an unsuitable match for his daughter; how he had pushed her beyond breaking, until Kinch had to face Minister O’Leary and tell him to get the fuck out of their lives.

‘She’s not prepared to back her Father up about the night he was accused of handing a bribe over to Power. It could be the end of him if his own daughter turns against him publicly.’ Fenton shifted as though his pants were too tight for him.

‘And not a minute too soon. That man is a snake.’

‘Whether he is or he isn’t; the thing is, he’s the Minister for Justice, and you know what that means for your friend if he steps in to support his case.’

Kinch could see where this was going, and wanted to hit Fenton there and then. ‘What are you suggesting, Fenton?’

‘I’m suggesting that you persuade Bláithín to be kind to her Father, and he’ll return the favour.’

‘Jesus Christ. Is this your idea or his?’ asked Kinch.

‘Does it really matter? It works for everyone.’ Fenton drained his glass and brought it down to the table with a bang. ‘I’ll never understand what she sees in you Kinch, but the bare fact of it is, you’re about the only one she listens to these days. Talk some reason to her, will

you.’ said Fenton. ‘And one more thing, I know that you’re strapped for cash. There might be a small reward in it for yourself, if you can get her to see sense.’

Kinch could feel his body shake. He jumped to his feet, shouting. ‘You tell O’Leary to stick his money up his fat-cat arse! Not everyone can be bought.’

‘Then kiss goodbye to your Columbian friend, I’m afraid.’

‘Fenton, you’re some shit.’ Kinch picked up his satchel, and pushed the door open with fury.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 21 - Sirens

Golden-haired beauties, opal eyes and limbs lithe and long, drifted by the doorway of the Ormonde Hotel Function room. Omar hesitated about going in – he hated crowds - but Eileen had told him this was where the Editor would be. *Miss Ireland regionals. Mmmm. Beauties abound.* A warm hush fell over the large room. *The flaxen-haired girl on the stage, mesmerising tones like hot lavender oil drifting into the lobby. Voice of an angel. Too far away to make out. Could send me to sleep. Ignore it. Bar. A safer option.* Omar passed through the lobby. He could see Jameson and Cowen chatting to two of the contestants inside the doorway of the function room. *Boys on the job again. Cowen's eyes engorged, leering. Watch out girls. He'd eat you whole.* The room shook with applause. A voice Omar recognised came over the PA system. *Fucking Phelan. Strutting peacock is everywhere. Thought he'd be with her by now.* The sadness washed through him like sour milk. He looked around the room. It was packed with an odd mixture of tourists, Joyceans and Beauty Pageant devotees. *Funny how I never spot the man of the hour. Blooming Leopold. Shadow walking. Too preoccupied to care about all that mullarkey anymore.* He looked around the room and spotted Will Farrell at the table just inside the door of the function room; deep in thought, he clutched a double Jameson. *Ah, the bauld Editor.*

He crossed the room, and tripped on the frayed edge of a piece of carpet. Farrell looked up from his meal. 'Wilde. Should have dived. Sued them for a pretty penny.'

'Hi boss. Listen, could I just have a quick word?'

'Jesus, can't a man get a second to himself?' said Farrell to an invisible God.

'Just five minutes Will. It's important. I was going to talk you tomorrow when all this shite is over with, but now that you're here...' A group of Joyceans were gathered around a man in a black bowler hat. 'Is that him? – Bloom?'

'Looks like it. His back's to us.' Farrell looked at his watch. 'Ten past four. That's about right. Did you get those interviews for me yet?'

Omar tried to ignore the glob of mustard that dripped from the edge of Farrell's coarse red beard. Omar's stomach lurch violently. 'I've been chasing that bastard all day. He's always one step ahead. I'll go over to him as soon as I've had a word, but I have to talk to you.'

Farrell drained the bottom of his glass, and shook his head. 'Never seen you so fired up Wilde. Suppose I should be glad. There's a spark in the Arab after all. ... Go on then.'

Omar moved the papers from the stool beside Farrell, and sat down. 'Will, I have a photo I took. Just want you to take a look at it. Front page stuff, I'm sure.'

Farrell raised his eyebrows. 'That would surprise me Wilde.'

Omar pulled out the photo of the sandwichmen, and pushed it towards Farrell. 'I have an idea for a story that could go with it too.'

Farrell put on his glasses, and had a good look. 'These are the guys on the bridge, right. Good shot.'

'Thanks Boss. You know that piece you were asking me for this morning. I know you gave it to Cowen, but what if I interviewed these guys? Clearly they're immigrants. Thought it would be interesting if I got their stories, you know to REVEAL who they are, and why they're here. The photos perfect to back that up.'

'Not bad, Wilde, but Kate has the 'Focus on Immigrants' brief, and she'd murder me if I let you step on her toes.'

'But Will, you know it's a good idea.' Omar tried to control his frustration.

‘Buy me a drink and I’ll think about it.’ Farrell took a bite of the sandwich in front of him.

Omar shouted over to Pat, who was engrossed in a conversation with two of the Rose contestants.

Lynnia Mohan pulled the mauve satin skirt around her round rump, and placed herself delicately on a tall stool. The skirt slit reached to the top of her thigh, a pale leg revealing itself obviously. *Silky skin, soft, young, wish I could touch, glide over the silk of it.* She turned towards Omar and smiled. He shifted uncomfortably and smiled back. *Eyes of a Minx. Suck you in.* She pawed her ample bosom looking downward to make sure it hadn’t removed itself from the strapless shift. ‘Pat, I’m killed trying to keep these boobs from popping out,’ Lynnia said, her eyes fixed on Omar. She elbowed Mona Kelly.

The tall brunette turned towards Omar, running her pearl fingertips the length of her pale blue dress. ‘I know what you mean Lynnia, sure I’m poured into it.’ She placed her hands under her protruding bosoms pushing them upwards until the nipples showed through the delicate silk.

Omar could feel a shift in his groin, and stifled a groan. The girls both erupted into a fit of giggles.

‘Wilde, are you going to order that drink or what?’ Farrell interrupted.

‘Yeah, sorry... Pat, a pint, and a coke, please.’ *Dirty minxes. So young, lovely. Temptresses.* The distracted barman nodded an assent.

‘Getting a little excited there, are we?’ Farrell asked with a narrow smile. ‘Could be arrested for that. Barely legal.’

‘I don’t know what you mean. I was just...’

‘How is that fine wife of yours, by the way?’

‘Flora’s ...good.’ Omar replied.

‘I’m sure she is.’

‘What do you mean by that?’ said Omar irritated.

‘Nothing, Wilde. Jesus, relax.’

‘About the photo, Boss?’

‘Listen, can you hang on a minute? I’m dying for a fucking slash? Don’t move.’ The small man ran at speed towards the back of the room. Omar looked towards the function room. Monsignor Reidy had snuck in unbeknowns to him and sat with his cronies, Cowen and Jameson. Omar could hear Phelan’s voice bellowing towards them from behind the door. *Never far from the action, that man!* A familiar voice drifted through the door beside Omar’s table. ‘*But take your time, think a lot, think of everything you’ve got. For you will still be here tomorrow, but your dreams may not.*’

Bald Pat arrived at the table with a pint of the black stuff. ‘A fine pair of tarts, aren’t they?’ He nodded towards Lynnia and Mona. ‘Wouldn’t mind a bit of that.’ He winked at Omar who smiled weakly.

‘Who’s that singing? Sounds familiar.’ Omar strained to hear again ‘*It’s always the same, same old story.*’

‘Ronan bloody Keating,’ Pat replied, ‘God preserve us. You think they could do better. The young ones love him I suppose. Girls go mad for him. God knows what they see in the ginger bastard.’

Omar laughed. ‘Sure they always go for the musicians don’t they?’

‘Calling that guy a musician is like calling the Pope an atheist. Yussaf Islam must have lost his mind to let that fella strangulate his song.’

Omar looked at Pat with a puzzled expression.

‘Cat Stevens. He converted you know. Has the beard down to the floor, the whole shibbang. Creepy if you ask me,’ Pat said.

‘No creepier than men in long gowns.’ Omar nodded in the direction of the Monsignor.

‘What the hell is a man of the cloth doing hanging out in a sea of women anyway?’ Pat said wiping the table with a cloth.

Omar watched as the two girls at the bar strode confidently towards him, their stilettoed limbs moving with the silk of their dresses. Lynniah Mohan winked at Omar as she passed raising the slit of her skirt. Mona Kelly wet her full lips with the tip of her tongue and smiled.

‘See ye later girls. Good luck with the competition. Ballybrack’s sure to be a winner.’ Pat kicked Omar under the table. ‘The accents would crack your eardrums, but who cares once you have them on their backs. Sure they’re all the same then, Ballybrack or Foxrock eh?’ He laughed with a croak, picked up Farrell’s empty glass, and headed towards the bar. *Mind like a sewer. Who cares how they sound. Move with grace. Lovely soft skin.* He watched Lynniah Mohan as she sat on Cowen’s lap. She laughed deeply, a gloved arm stretched around his left shoulder. She held her mobile phone to her ear. Pulled Cowen to her, his head against hers, their breaths intermingled as they listened to a mystery sound, a hidden voice. *To breathe her in, pass through me, out and through her angel’s ear, the sunkissed edges of her lobe. To share that sound, the mystery of it, the tingle of a violin’s breath on the warm summer air.*

Omar watched as Phelan picked up his straw hat, said goodbye to his companions and passed by. *Jaunty bastard. You’re off to play her song.* Omar sat unseen, as Phelan jumped into a taxi and sped away. Ronan Keating’s light voice drifted over the crowd. ‘*All the times that I’ve cried, keeping all the things I knew inside. It’s hard, but it’s harder to ignore it.*’ Omar felt a dull sadness seep through him.

‘You look like someone died Wilde?’ interrupted Farrell. He sat down and glanced at his watch, ‘Half past four. I need to get back soon.’

‘But my photo, Boss?’ Omar could feel his chance slipping away from him.

‘Give the photo to Kate. Talk to her about working on the piece with her. We’ll credit you with the photo, and list you as an assistant.’

Omar’s voice rose above the music drifting out of the function room. ‘But Will, it’s MY IDEA!’

Farrell fixed Omar with a burning stare. ‘Conversation over – And get an interview with that bastard Bloom will you for God’s sake!’ He picked up his paper, and headed for the door of the hotel tripping over the carpet on the way. ‘Shite!’

Omar leaned forward clutching his face in his hands. *Might as well give up now. Give it all up.* A piece of ice in the empty glass in front of him slid to the bottom. *Tinkletickling the edge of her spine. She loves that. When the water runs down the crevices of her warm back, into the crevices of her buttocks. He’s at that now. Fucking bastard, Fucking her, Fucking life!* He felt like crying, but didn’t want to make a scene. A deep tenor’s voice filled the bar of the Ormonde. Omar turned to see the Monsignor on stage with Ronan Keating. He read that Reidy had been an accomplished tenor in his youth, before he became a man of the cloth. His voice was warm like a deep rich burgundy wine. It floated through the air to the soft accompaniment of a trickling piano. ‘*Tis the last rose of summer / Left blooming all alone.*’ The room sat silently watching. ‘*All her lovely companions are faded and gone.*’ Lovely Lynniah gazed wistfully into the distance, deep in her thoughts. Cowen looked at her longingly, stroking the nape of her neck with his index finger. ‘*Tho’ the heart be weary / sad the day and long / Still to us at twilight comes*

*love's old song / Comes love's old sweet song.* Omar sighed, and took a swig from the half drunk pint Farrell had left behind. He grimaced. *That didn't help. No time for this moping. Sucks the joy out of life. Where's Bloom? Might as well get something out of this.* He scanned the room, but the man in black was nowhere to be seen. *For Jaysus sake! Gone again.*

Omar felt his bladder expand into pain. He headed to the toilet at the back of the bar. Before entering he could feel a tickle at the back of his neck.

'Mr. Wilde. You look like you could do with some comfort.' Mona Kelly placed her hand gently against the seat of his trousers moving her glossy full lips close to his ear. 'Mr. Cowen told me you would be very grateful if I was nice to you.' She purred, her breath pouring warmth into his earlobe.

'Sorry, I don't know...'

'He told me you have a great influence over the judging panel, you chose them, not that I'm suggesting anything but I can be very nice, very nice, if you can do me a favour if you know what I mean.' She linked her arm with his and pulled him towards the Ladies toilets allowing her free hand to brush against his groin.

Omar felt his head begin to swim with panic and desire. For a split second he thought about lying, about taking this little pleasure that so seldom came his way. She pulled him into the vacant toilet, and towards an empty cubicle. He watched her breasts, the rise and flow of them as her breath deepened. He hesitated. 'I'm sorry Miss, but I don't know what you mean. He's lying. I'm just a journalist. I've nothing to do with the judging.'

She let go of his arm. 'That fucking little shite. I'm going to kill him. You're not lying to me are you?' Her face contorted with confused anger.

'No Miss. Honestly, he's always at me, Cowen. We work together. He's a messer that's all.'

She pushed Omar aside. 'Don't touch me. I'm going to kill that bastard!' Mona Kelly exited the toilet, her brunette curls trailing down her bronzed back, hot fire oozing from her nostrils. Reidy's voice passed over her head. '*And from love's shining circle The gems drop away!*' Omar felt an erection the size of a missile. He moved into the men's toilet at speed. Releasing himself he clutched the wall with his free hand. The urine splashed against the white enamel, passed into the channel beneath him and out into the sewers of Dublin. '*Oh! who would inhabit this bleak world alone?*' he sang to himself, his voice cracking with relief.

## Chapter 22 - Bláithín

The taxi pulled into a concreted space in front of the towers, Snow Patrol blaring on the radio. Bláithín looked out nervously. A crowd of kids were shooting rocks off the top of a rubbish bin with what looked like a pellet gun.

‘Twenty euro fifty, please,’ said the taxi driver.

‘What? Jesus, no wonder I’m stuck with my bike.’ Bláithín rummaged in her bag. She passed the money to the driver. His eyes darted from side to side; the kids circling the car like vultures. Bláithín stepped out, and the taxi took off at speed. A young boy with scruffy hair poked at her with his bb gun.

‘Oy, Missus, got a fag?’

‘No, I don’t smoke. Is this building F?’

A group of ragged looking youngsters moved in behind her.

‘What’s it to you?’ the boy replied.

‘I’m looking for Paul Mullens’s flat.’

‘The Fiddler’s flat is it?’ The boy turned towards a wiry teenager with a hair lip. ‘She’s lookin for your brother Mullens. Jaysus he’s hangin out wi some posh bitches these days.’ The youngsters laughed, and pushed the teenager towards Bláithín.

‘Go on Mullens. Show her what you got.’

‘Get off me, youse bastards.’ He eyed Bláithín with suspicion.

‘She’s after the white stuff, boys. Wants to get herself a bit of Ballymun blow, isn’t that right Ms. Southside?’ Even though this boy only reached to her shoulders, Bláithín was afraid of the cold stare that lay behind his wiry frame.

‘Come wi me,’ said the shy teenager. He nodded his head towards the doorway, and she followed him into the front of the gargantuan blocks. They had punctuated Dublin’s skyline for decades but remained a world as far removed from Bláithín’s as the African Delta. ‘It’s on the tenth floor.’ The boy pressed the button for the lift, and stood watching the light flicker through the numbers above his head. Bláithín could feel sweat drip down the back of her neck. She knew it was too late to turn back. This was unfamiliar territory, and no matter how un-pc it was to admit it, she was terrified. The closest she ever got to this part of Dublin was curled up in her Dalkey bed reading Roddy Doyle novels; and she preferred it that way. She suspected she could get the shit kicked out her for just opening her Dalkeyised mouth.

‘They’ve started to knock one of the Towers, I see.’ She attempted to normalise what felt like a very abnormal situation. The teenager continued to stare at the numbers, shuffling his feet in silence. ‘I hear the new houses will be really modern, really nice. Suppose it will take some getting used to all the same.’ The boy didn’t respond. Just hearing the sound of her own voice helped to calm her down. The door opened, and a tall boy got out with a bicycle. He eyed her carefully.

The young man beside her spoke to the red-haired boy with the bicycle. ‘Brian, any luck this morning?’

‘Not bad at all.’ The red-haired boy eyed Bláithín’s wicker bag. She clutched it to her, cursing herself for being so stupid to have brought it with her.

‘Roigh, in here,’ grunted the other youngster, not allowing his eyes to meet hers. She followed him into the tiny lift. The red-haired boy hopped on his bike, and cycled out of the building. She breathed a sigh of relief. The teenager pressed ten, and the lift began to rise slowly. The smell of piss assaulted her nostrils, and she struggled not to gag. The space between her and

the scowling teenager seemed to grow as she hummed Snow Patrol's 'Chocolate', the last song that had been playing in the taxi before she stepped outside.

'He's not here you know,' the teenager grumbled.

'You mean Paul? He told me he would be,' Bláithín replied.

'Well, he's not. Conor will take care of you.'

'Who?'

'Me udder brudder. He helps Fiddler out wit dis stuff.'

Bláithín wanted to press 0 and go straight back down, but she felt trapped, trapped by her own desperate need. The doors opened. Bláithín followed the young man to the end of a long dark corridor. He took a key out of his jeans pocket and fiddled with the lock. The door squeaked open.

'Trew dere.' He pointed towards a small living room to the left.

'Conor, dere's a lady here. Knows Fiddler. Says he said to come round to get some stuff.'

A tall man with mousy hair, greased back over his ears, stuck his head around the corner.

'Wha? Oh Hi. Hang on. Dere in a sec.'

'See ya.' The teenager looked her in the eye, 'Just watch yourself, roigh, he can get a bit, well...you know.' He headed out the door.

'Sorry, what do you mean?' asked Bláithín, but he had already disappeared down the corridor.

She looked around the small room. It was cluttered with porcelain figurines and photographs. A framed Man United T-shirt sat proudly beside a large print of Roy Keane with his arm around a young man. The green corduroy couch had a hole at one end and the stuffing had spilt onto the edge of the pink carpet. She pushed away the mound of magazines that filled the couch, and perched herself on the edge waiting. She could hear water gushing; then a door opened.

A tall, skinny man came into the room. His blue eyes sank into his skeletal features. He looked like he hadn't eaten in weeks.

'Sorry bout that. Needed a slash. So what can I do you for? Fiddler sent youse did he? Always has an eye for the women, dat boy.' His eyes travelled from the top of her head, around the edge of her bosoms, to the bit of naked flesh that was just showing at the top of her black boots.

'Yeah. He told me he'd be here,' she replied, clutching her bag close to her stomach.

His eyes narrowed, and the dry thin lips shaped a dubious smile. 'Got a bit sidelined, I'm afraid, but I can take care of you just as good.'

'I don't know. Maybe I'll just contact Paul again,' Bláithín stuttered.

'Don't be so stupid girl. I have it all, blow, speed, ecstasy pills, the hard stuff even.' He rolled up his arm to feign an injection. 'I'm guessing you're a blow girl. Helps you to cope with those nobhead rugby boys, and Daddy's disapproving looks. Am I right?' He sat beside her on the couch so that his bony leg rubbed against the edge of her skirt.

She sucked in her breath, determined to leave with something. 'Do you have some? I was thinking about fifty euros worth?'

He reached inside the hole in the couch; dug deep inside the lining. 'Anything for such a pretty lady.' He pulled out a white plastic bag, and laid the contents on the coffee table in front of her. His thin fingers moved through the collection of pills, bottles and needles until they fell on a bag of white powder. He dipped his finger inside the bag, immersing it in the powder. 'Here try a little,' he said, his finger touching the edge of her lips.

She flinched. He pushed his finger through her lips. Afraid to anger him she licked the powder.

‘That’s a good girl.’ She could see him out of the corner of her eye place his other hand over his groin. She stood up suddenly moving towards the door.

He leapt off the couch and blocked her way. ‘Going somewhere.’

‘Get out of my way. I just want to get the fuck out of here.’ Bláithín could feel the tears begin to rise at the back of her eyeballs.

‘You’re not going anywhere Missy.’ He grabbed her by the hair, dragged her to the couch, and pinned her down with the weight of his bony torso. He began to unzip his pants. Bláithín stuck her nails into the corner of his eyesocket. He wailed, his free hand punching her in the side of the face with all the force he could muster. A sharp pain darted through the left side of her skull, and she screamed.

‘Stupid bitch. I’m going to show you who’s boss.’

At that moment, she heard a crack from behind his head, and he reeled back in pain. Paul stood behind his brother, hair blonde as corn, fierce dark eyes, the handle of a handgun aimed at his brother’s head. There was something about his strong physique that frightened and excited her at the same time, but not right now, right now she needed to get the hell out of here.

‘Conor, you fuckin bastard. Get the fuck off her before I shoot you.’ His whole body was tensed, ready for a fight.

‘I was just having some fun Fiddler, Jesus. The fuckin bitch nearly took the eye out of me,’ Conor yelled.

‘You’re a fuckin bollox, Get the fuck out of here!’ Paul shouted at his brother as he stumbled towards the door. ‘Before I fuckin kill you. Haven’t you caused enough fuckin trouble to this family. Jesus I’ve been cleaning up my brother’s shite all day with Tommo’s fuck-up this morning, and now you. Get out of my sight!’

Conor looked at Bláithín, blew her a kiss and left.

‘Are you ok?’ Paul asked.

The left side of Bláithín’s head was wrenched in pain. She pulled down her dress, and sat upright, a web of curls mashed into the side of her cheek.

‘I just need to go, I need to go,’ she repeated, unsure if the man who sat in front of her was any better than the one who had gone before.

‘Jesus, I’m sorry about him. He’s a fuckin bollox! I sent you a text to say I’d be late. Didn’t you get it?’ He looked genuinely concerned.

‘No, I got nothing.’ She glanced at the phone in her pocket. ‘My phone is dead. Shit.’

Paul sat down beside her. She moved away.

‘I’m not going to hurt you, promise. Let me look at that.’ He lightly touched the bruise that was developing around her left temple. ‘It’s not bad. Hang on a sec. I’ve some Arnica.’ He ran towards the kitchen. All Bláithín’s instincts told her to leave, but she felt paralysed, numb. He came back and gently applied the contents of the green tube to the side of her face. ‘I’m so sorry about that wanker. Listen are you alright otherwise?’ His brown eyes were full of worry.

She gathered herself. ‘Yeah, I just want to head. Can you get me a taxi?’

‘Yeah sure. There’s a lad in the next building who has a taxi. He’s a lovely fella, no worries.’ He punched the numbers into his mobile.

‘Hi Frank, listen I’ve someone here who needs a lift to...sorry, where are you goin?’

Bláithín thought for a second. ‘Long Lane. It’s in near Blackpitts.’

He told the taxi driver to be outside the building in five minutes and helped Bláithín to get her stuff together. She eyed the white bag that was sitting on the table in front of her.

‘Do you want to take some wit ye? It’s why you were here, I suppose.’ Paul picked up the bag and poured a small amount into a piece of foil. ‘It’s on me, considerin.’ He put the foil package into her hand and looked at her warmly. ‘I really am sorry. I’m going to fuckin kill him over this, I promise.’

Bláithín smiled weakly. ‘Thanks.’ She moved towards the door. ‘Can you walk me down? I’m just afraid he might be...’

‘No prob.’ They walked down the dark corridor together. They stood in silence waiting for the lift. When they got inside and it began to move, Paul turned towards her. ‘You seem like a nice girl. It’s a nasty business, this fuckin drugs stuff. Maybe you should get yourself a good ol ordinary drinking habit or hop on a plane out of here or sometin. You don’t need this shit.’ His voice was soft, and there was a kindness in his handsome face that made her relax.

‘Maybe,’ Bláithín replied. She was delirious, a concoction of fear, pain and desperation gripping her head in a vice. Confusing though it was, this moment of tenderness made her want to cry with relief. He touched her shoulder gently as they walked out the building and towards the taxi.

‘I know you won’t, but if you ever want to meet up, well, it’d be nice.’

‘Thanks again, but probably not.’ She got in the taxi. Paul stood and watched as the car moved towards the main road. She watched him through the back window, and felt a sadness grip her insides. She began to cry uncontrollably.

‘Are you alright luv? Did something happen?’ asked the taxi driver.

‘Nothing. It doesn’t matter. Don’t mind me.’

‘Where to?’ he asked.

She thought for a second. ‘Long Lane.’ She needed to talk to someone before she spun out of control and Flora had a way of calming her like no-one else. The conversation earlier hadn’t been enough. She’d come clean, ask her for help, before she sank back into the habit she had fought so hard to beat.

## Chapter 23 - Flora

Flora looked at herself in the mirror. *A little bit more eyeliner.* The dark brown pencil sat beside her on the dresser. She picked it up; drew a fine line around her bottom lid. *There. Not bad.* She adjusted her dress, looked around the room, and moved to the corner to place a CD in the portable stereo. Jeff Buckley's 'Mojo Pin' drifted through the room.

The doorbell rang. She looked at herself once more and smiled; danced across the room, her body tingling with anticipation. The door jammed as she opened it and she tugged with all her might. He stood there eyes wide and smiling, clutching a bunch of carnations.

'Baby, I thought I would go mad. I haven't seen you in so long.' Kinch swept her into his arms, kissed the nape of her neck.

'Quick, come in. Someone might see.' She ushered him in, shut the door and fell back into his arms. The carnations went flying. They kissed frantically, and fell on the couch, his large hands cupped the line of her buttocks.

'I thought I was going to die with frustration,' Flora whispered in between kisses.

He smiled, pulling her dress above her head. 'Don't worry, I'll soon take care of that.'

They threw themselves into it, legs elastic and groping. Flora felt him enter her, her body seeped out its tension, his slow movement flowing within her like an opiate.

He came in a slow groan of release, and fell upon her, his heart beating through her skin. Her legs wrapped around his nakedness, her body devouring its prey like a hungry cobra.

'Flora, I...' He hesitated. 'I love you. I'm driven demented.' He sounded stressed.

'Do you?'

'Yeah.'

She fell silent, knowing he expected a similar response. He waited.

'You?'

'I don't know, Kinch, I...I like you, I love this,.' She fell silent.

'And?'

'I need you, but...I don't know. Love and I, we don't get on.'

He moved away, perched on the couch, unsmiling and stiff.

'Is it him? You don't love Omar. If you did you wouldn't do this.' His voice was deflated, tinged with anger.

'You don't know how it is. That's between him and me.' She turned and poked at his crotch with her naked foot. 'Oh silly boy, don't be so serious. We're having lots of fun, aren't we? Who needs more than that?'

'I do,' he replied. 'I'm not just your plaything, you know.'

She moved towards him, put her arms around his torso and nuzzled her head against his chest. 'Of course you're not. You've brought me back to life. You've sucked out the poison in my life. I needed that, need you. I promise you that is as close to love as I have to offer now.' She began to nibble at the cleft of his neck, her right hand touching his penis softly. Her lips traced the edge of his shoulderblades, down the rim of his right nipple, along the line of his hairless chest. She allowed her tongue to trace along the inside of his groin. He moaned, the stiffness in his body leaving, his penis growing at the edge of her cheekbone.

'Flora, I...'

'Sssshhhhhh,' she replied. She took his penis in her mouth, softly, gently; allowed him to feel her desire, to move with her movements, He grew hard, pulled her back up towards him, entered her in one swift movement. Their bodies moved against each other, a hard energy

pulsing through them like hot oil, their limbs grasping, clawing as they exorcised their passion and pain into each other. Deep inside the turmoil of the moment, they did not hear the door open behind them. A woman's voice erupted in a wail behind their heads. Flora turned suddenly. Bláithín stood inside the front door, her face contorted with shock.

'Fuck, Bláith. What are you doing here?' Kinch grabbed a blanket from the couch and attempted to cover himself.

'Not half as much as you, you fucking bastard! Jesus.' Bláithín's tears began to fall uncontrollably, and she pulled the door to leave.

Flora grabbed her blouse and attempted to dress hurriedly. 'Bláithín, let us explain.'

'Fuck off! I thought you were my friend and behind my back the whole time...I'm some idiot, a complete eejit!' Bláithín ran out the door.

'I'll go after her. You wait here. I'll come back.' Kinch dressed in a hurry, and ran out the door after Bláithín.

Flora fell back into the couch, half dressed. She felt numb, unable to move. She assumed the guilt and pushed it aside because it didn't fit. It had been sitting like a grumbling appendix inside her body, something that she could ignore, even though it was ever present and annoying. *Shit, she'll tell Omar. It's all over now, everything.* She grabbed a cushion from the couch, hugged it close to her and began to cry. Jeff Buckley's sublime voice cried in unison with her misery. She sat, her stomach grumbling out its nausea for what seemed like hours, until she remembered Sandra. She glanced at her watch. 4.30 p.m. Sandra was due with the kids any minute.

She put her clothes back on, moved to the mirror over the fireplace and fixed her hair. The music was bringing her down, and she turned the stereo to the radio. The doorbell rang. She took a deep breath and opened the door. Sandra stood with the two kids at the doorstep. The little girls smiled shyly, and clutched either side of their mother's skirt.

'We're not too early, are we?' Sandra asked politely.

'Of course not, Come in, come in.' Anna grabbed her sister by the arm and pulled her through the door past Flora.

'They're so excited to see your lovely house, Flora. I'm afraid we've been stuck in a concrete jungle so long that they get very excited when they see a garden. Do you mind if they go out the back to have a look?' Sandra had such a kind face, bright and beautiful. Flora couldn't help but want to hug this woman everytime she saw her.

'Of course you two, Come on, let me show you.' Flora ushered them through the living room, and into the small but perfectly decorated kitchen. The back door was painted red and in the old style either the top or the bottom half could be opened. The girls raced passed them and out into the sunlight. They squealed with delight, the overgrown pond at the back of the small garden grabbing their attention.

'It's so pretty. Do you do it yourself?' Sandra asked.

'Yes, I love flowers.' Flora tried to suppress the fear that Kinch might arrive back at any moment. She smiled at Sandra weakly.

'Are you alright? You seem a little tired. We could come back later.' Sandra was a perceptive woman.

Flora knew she would be able to tell that something was up but she wasn't in the habit of divulging her dark secrets to anyone. She preferred to keep them locked up, under control. 'I'm fine. Just a little tired. It's all this practicing for the concert this evening.'

The girls ran up to them, their eager faces full of questions. 'Your fish are so beautiful Mizz. What kind of fish are they?' Anna asked.

'They're Japanese Koi fish. Aren't they pretty? They grow very big, you know, but I only got these last year. It takes years,' Flora replied.

'Ellie, stop poking at the fish. You could give them a fright. They might die.' The little girl had taken the fishnet at the side of the pond and prodded underneath the pond moss, causing the fish to scatter wildly. She squealed with delight.

'Mommy, look at the big gold one,' Ellie said.

'Yes baby, it's beautiful, but just sit here on the bench you two and watch them. Don't bother them. They might die of a heart attack. You wouldn't want that would you?' Sandra spoke softly, and ushered the girls onto the wooden bench beside the pond. They sat transfixed, their faces wide with wonder.

Sandra turned and smiled at Flora. 'Sorry about that. I promise I'll keep an eye on them,' she said with a worried expression.

'They're just excited, I understand.' Flora ushered Sandra into the kitchen and showed her where everything was. She walked her around the house, and brought her to the spare bedroom, where a fold out bed had been put together beside the double bed.

'I hope that's ok for you guys?' Flora asked.

'It's perfect, just perfect! Thank you so much for going to so much trouble. I don't know what else...'

Flora placed her hand on Sandra's shoulder. 'Any time, Sandra. I just pray it'll all work out. Do you know where you're going tomorrow?'

'Father Ogunbosala is going to call here later to let me know. I gave him your number. Is that ok?'

'Of course. You just relax, make yourself a cup of tea. There's biscuits in the cupboard and Fanta in the fridge for the girls.

At that moment, Ellie began to scream at the top of her lungs. 'Mommy. Mommy, Anna pushed me in the pond, Mommy!'

Sandra raced out the back, Flora in hot pursuit. The little girl was waist deep in mucky water, crying her heart out. Anna stood over her with a sheepish look on her face.

'Oh My God, Ellie, quick.' Sandra leant over the pond and pulled the drenched little girl onto the wooden deck. She was covered in pondweed and deeply upset.

'Anna, did you do this?' Sandra bellowed at the nine year old. She moved away from her Mother and towards Flora.

'She was trying to scoop up a fish Mommy. I was just trying to stop her. I didn't mean to...' Anna's voice began to break.

'I'm sick and tired of you picking on your sister. She's only six. She could have drowned. Do you understand that, Do you?' Sandra screamed at her daughter. Anna looked at Flora and ran towards the house. 'It's not fair. I was just...' The tears flowed as she raced inside.

'Anna come back here!' Sandra shouted, attempting to clean the pondweed off Ellie's body.

'It's ok Sandra. I'll get her.' Flora followed the little girl who was scrunched into the side of the couch. She clutched a cushion to her face to stifle her crying.

'Sweetheart, don't worry. I know things are tough for you and your Mom. She's doing her best.' Flora attempted to put her arm around Anna who flinched in response.

‘I know, have you ever heard of the film ‘The Wizard of Oz?’ I have it here. It’s about a little girl and her dog, who go to a magic land called Oz and meet all sorts of amazing people. Wouldn’t you like to see that?’ Flora pulled the video out from the small collection under the television and switched on the DVD player.

Anna shifted slightly, one eye appearing from behind the cushion. ‘Somewhere over the rainbow’ drifted through the room. Anna sat up and wiped her eyes.

‘What’s her name?’ Anna asked.

‘You mean the little girl?’ Flora replied.

Anna nodded.

‘Dorothy, and her dog is Toto. It’s been my favourite film since I was a little girl. Do you want to watch it?’ Flora could see the light of curiosity return to the little girl’s eyes.

‘Uh huh.’

‘I’ll even get you some Fanta and biscuits. Would you like that?’

The little girl nodded again, her eyes fixed on the screen as the credits rolled.

Sandra came through the door with Ellie in her arms. Flora pointed to Anna and nodded her head with a smile to confirm that everything was fine.

Sandra mouthed a thank you. ‘She’s soaked, I’m afraid. Do you mind if I take her upstairs and clean her up?’

‘Pretend like it’s your own home. I’m just going to go have a lie down now, if everything’s ok?’

‘Go Flora, before some other drama takes place. I’m sorry. It’s a mother’s life. Someday you’ll know.’

Flora sighed and nodded her head. She knew full well that the time for knowing a mother’s life was passing her by. She followed Sandra up the stairs, walked into her bedroom and shut the door. She collapsed on her bed, numb with exhaustion. Her mobile phone flashed a message beside her on the bed. ‘*Can’t find her. Will be in touch when I can. Love you. K*’ She put the phone beside her on the dresser, curled up in a ball and cried herself to sleep.

## Chapter 24 - Kinch

Kinch ran frantically past St. Pat's Cathedral, and on towards the Camden Street junction. He stopped to catch his breath. He spotted Hanan's Halal shop out of the corner of his eye. *Maybe, just maybe.* The traffic was as brutal as ever and he weaved his way between a double decker bus and a taxi. The lights turned red and the bus disappeared into the distance. The taxi driver screamed, 'Suicidal Wanker!' *Take a chill-pill mate.* Kinch could see Hanan's Father behind the counter. He had been a little nervous of Kinch at first but he disarmed him with his usual blend of humour and charm, and now they got on grand.

'Hi Mr. Abbas. How are things? Just wondering, have you seen Bláithín?'

'Ah the pretty girlfriend. She was here earlier, talking to Hanan...some time this morning. How are you my friend?' The old man had soft brown eyes that peered through a mass of facial hair.

'I'm fine thanks. Is Hanan around?' Kinch replied.

'He's in the back with Khaled. That boy has me driven crazy, let me tell you. He was supposed to be here to take me to the Doctor and he turns up one hour late. What kind of respect is that for a sick old man?'

'That's teenagers for you,' replied Kinch.

Mohammed shook his head, 'He's in a world of his own these days.' He continued unpacking a box of cigarettes and placing them on the shelves. 'I don't know which is worse, the hippy son who doesn't give a care about his heritage, or the devout loner who spends his life on some other dreamy planet?'

'It's a tough call. You know what they say. Children are sent to try you.'

'You're damn right my boy! How do you get on with your father?' asked the old man.

'I'm afraid I never knew him. My mother brought me up alone.' Kinch could feel this conversation go places he did not need to go at this moment.

Mohammed smiled warmly at Kinch. 'Is that right? Well she did a good job from what I can see.'

'Don't know about that Mr. Abbas. Sorry but could I just pop round the back to see Hanan?' Kinch moved towards the back door.

'Of course, my boy. Nice talking to you. Drop in anytime you're passing by, even if Hanan isn't here. It gets a bit boring stuck behind this counter all day long.'

Kinch nodded, 'You bet,' and passed into the back of the shop. He walked down the small corridor and into the living room on the left. Hanan sat juggling the phone in his hand.

'Are you going to abuse it or use it mate?' Kinch said smiling.

'Hey. You're not going to fucking believe it. Sarah dumped me. What the fuck is it? National dump your partner day?'

'You're bloody joking! Jesus, sorry mate. Didn't see that coming.' Kinch sat down beside Hanan.

'Bet you Bláithín didn't see it coming either,' replied Hanan in a slightly caustic tone.

'Don't take it out on me man. Everyone has their own ball of shit to deal with.'

Hanan sighed. 'Sorry, it just sucks.'

'Yeah, what's her story then?' Kinch asked.

'Don't fucking ask me? Some shite about not feeling the magic or something.'

'Cosmo-response 101.'

'Yeah, we blokes are no better I suppose.'

‘Don’t even ask me what I bloody said this morning. It came out arseways anyway and I’m in a right mess now. Why I’m here really.’ Kinch pulled out a cigarette. ‘Do you mind? I desperately need it.’

‘Fire ahead. I’ll just light some incense or something. Dad’ll never notice. So what are you on about?’

Kinch lit the cigarette and took a long drag. ‘It’s Bláithín. I’ve done something really bad Hanan. You’re going to fucking hate me, but I have to tell you.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Do you remember I told you about that gorgeous woman I worked with on the production of The Gigli Concert?’

‘Yeah, yeah, you said she was hot stuff. All the lads were creamin themselves for her,’ Hanan replied.

‘Her name’s Flora? She’s Polish, her husband works with me in the Indo.’ Kinch hesitated, took a drag, and smiled weakly. ‘Well mate, I’ve been having an affair with her for two months now.’

‘You’re fucking joking me.’ Hanan stood up, put his hands on his hips and looked at Kinch, his eyes narrowing. ‘I don’t mean to preach but what about Bláithín? You’ll bloody destroy her. She’s my friend too.’

Kinch felt the guilt seep into his gullet. ‘I know. I just didn’t know how to tell her, and the bloody awful thing is she just walked in and caught us both...well...at it.’

‘No fucking way!’

‘Fraid so. She absolutely freaked out and disappeared. I was hoping maybe you’d seen her.’

‘Think I’d be a bit more clued in if I had. Where were you? At your place?’ Hanan asked.

Kinch took another drag. ‘No, at Flora’s. The thing is, they know each other – Flora’s her violin teacher.’

‘Jaysus man, you know how to fuck a girl right up.’ Hanan could barely look Kinch in the eye.

‘I know, I feel so shite but I just couldn’t help myself. Flora’s so....’ His voice trailed away. ‘Maybe you could call Bláith for me? Find out where she is? If she’s ok? I’m afraid she’ll take something, you know.’

‘God I hope not. Do you have her number there? I don’t have it.’

‘Yeah, here you go.’

Hanan punched in the numbers and waited for a response. The phone hit the answering machine directly. Hanan spoke urgently. ‘Bláith, it’s Hanan. I know what happened with Kinch and that woman. Listen, please just call to tell me you’re ok! You can come over here. I know you must feel like shit. Just come over here.’ He hung up and sat down staring at the phone.

‘What now?’

‘I’m going to ring round to everyone she knows. Can you let me know if you hear from her?’

The door opened and Khaled walked in. ‘Hey,’ he said to Kinch and crossed the room to pick up a jacket that was lying on the back of the couch.

‘Where are you going?’ asked Hanan.

‘None of your bloody business!’ Khaled’s eyes were stony and determined.

The teenager put on his green flak jacket and moved towards the door.

‘Hey Khaled, Kinch was saying that he’d love to come over and look at your iTunes collection, weren’t you man?’

Hanan gave Kinch the eyes, and loathe though he was to get himself involved in anything else at this moment, he reckoned it was a way to salvage his reputation with Hanan. ‘Yeah right. What do you think man?’

Khaled looked at Kinch suspiciously. ‘I don’t know. Maybe.’

‘Whenever it suits, you know,’ replied Kinch.

‘As you wish,’ Khaled replied and closed the door behind him.

‘Fuck man, do you see what I mean? What’s this ‘As you wish’ shit? He’s beginning to even sound like one of those fanatics. My own brother is scaring the shit out of me,’ Hanan said.

Kinch stubbed out his cigarette. ‘Don’t worry about it man. I’ll suss him out. Bit of a private dick in my own way. Listen, I’m off and ...thanks for not hitting me. I know I’ve been a shit.’

Hanan smiled. ‘Nobody’s perfect, but I can’t promise I won’t fuck you up if you mess with Bláithín again. I’ve a bit of a soft spot for her you know.’

Kinch noticed an awkwardness in his friend’s tone. *He fancies her. Interesting.* ‘We can’t all be good guys like you. It would be a fuckin boring world if we were,’ Kinch replied.

They laughed, and Kinch left the shop saying a quick goodbye to Mr. Abbas.

He thought of Flora, and texted her quickly to let her know what was happening. His stomach grumbled; a reminder that he hadn’t eaten since the morning. *Starvin. Soup and sandwich in the Arcade would go down a treat.* He took the mini iPod from his pocket, stuck on his headphones, and pressed shuffle. Glen Hansard’s voice filled his head ‘*Your world changes everyday, It’s a choice you have to make, I can’t help you if I want to...*’ Kinch chuckled. *No truer word, Glen.* Rush hour traffic was gathering momentum. He crossed the road and walked down Wexford Street at speed. Cars inched their way along the long street, their inhabitants chatted on mobiles, caught up on the current issues with *The Last Word*, sang along to the latest tune; one woman curled her hair and adjusted her makeup; all attempted to ignore the building tensions from traffic hell. Kinch thanked his lucky stars that he couldn’t afford a car to tempt him into this sea of frustration. The Frames sang like timely oracles in his ear. ‘*This might take a while to figure out now, So don’t you rush it.*’ He tripped along the footpath thinking about Flora. Her ability to switch from hot to cold in a split second was perplexing. He desperately wanted to possess this independent creature, to feed off her confidence. Could such carnal desire be considered love? Maybe not, but it was all he wanted.

Hansard wailed in his ear: ‘*Cos it’s just a matter of time, You’ve been running so fast.*’

On cue, Kinch began to run. He ran as fast as his body would take him past startled schoolchildren, a group of gossiping old women, he ran straight across the Stephen Street intersection without even looking at the lights. A bus driver screamed out the window at him, ‘You fuckin muppet, do you want to get yourself killed!’ The music screamed in his ear and he continued to run, to run his confusion out of his body, to sweat out his frustrations and guilt. He gritted his teeth, the sweat pouring down his forehead. He ran past the The Palace Pub, cut across the road towards the George’s Street Arcade. The music faded and he slowed down just in front of Simon’s Place. He tore off his headphones and bent over struggling to breath. *Nope, don’t feel any better and I’m fuckin well out of shape too. Bloody great!*

He passed through the door of the busy café, and grabbed a copy of the latest Events guide. The ad for the Low concert was on the back page. It was starting at eight thirty. He

ordered a ham and coleslaw sandwich and a cup of tea. It was hard to manoeuvre with the tray through the crowds of people, but he found a space at the window looking into the Arcade. He had always loved the eclectic atmosphere of this old Victorian Arcade. Vendors sat chatting at their stalls, students mulling over the latest second hand CDs, young girls creating an outfit to die for in the various Vintage Clothing shops. His mobile rang as he chewed on his sandwich. *No Number. Odd.* He picked it up swallowing a bite quickly, 'Hello.'

'Brian?'

He recognised the voice immediately, and nearly choked on his sandwich.

'Brian? Are you there?' The familiar voice shot like a hot arrow through his brain. He was stunned. They hadn't spoken in five years. What the fuck did he want with him now?

'Yeah, I'm here.' He fell silent.

'Brian, I know it's unexpected, but I really need to see you.' He could hear something in this man's voice that he had never noticed before. A fragility, a need.

Kinch felt a cold anger rise within him. 'I can't imagine why. We've gone a lifetime without giving in to such civilities. Why start now?'

'It's important. I know I haven't been there...I know, but now I want to set that right.'

'I suppose this is where I'm supposed to say "Better late than never, Dad." Well, sorry to disappoint, but actually Monsignor, you can fuck right off!' He realised that he was speaking very loudly, the girl beside him ear-wiggling with considerable interest.

'Oh God, I knew this was going to be hard.' Reidy sounded tired, sad even. Kinch felt panicked, unable to deal with this sudden display of emotion after twenty-two years.

'No kidding. That's what happens when you dump your family, reject and shame the woman who loves you, generally act the complete fucking arsehole, and for what, a religion that boasts the protection of abusers and adulterers. Sorry if I seem a little bitter but you might understand, Daddy dearest!'

'Listen to me Brian. Just listen for a second. I'm dying. Cancer of the liver...'

Kinch laughed out loud. 'Well, there you have it. Death, the great motivator.'

'Please son, I'm so sorry, so very very sorry! I need to tell you to your face. I need to explain. Please, just allow me that. One last thing.' It sounded like he was about to cry, which was more than Kinch could take. Reidy continued. 'Just come over to The Presbytery this evening sometime, hear me out, please!'

Kinch couldn't believe what he was hearing. *The Devil has a heart after all, but only when he's shitless about facing the Big Man upstairs. Typical.* 'I'm sorry I can't help you to assuage your guilty conscience. Goodbye.' Kinch hung up the phone, and switched it to silent. The short haired girl beside him was practically sitting on his lap.

'Would you like to hear my whole bloody life story now maybe?' he shouted at the startled girl.

'Sorry, I only...' she stammered, moving her chair backwards.

'Fuckin earwiggers.' He grabbed his sandwich, hat and jacket and headed into the Arcade. He could see his phone ringing again, and ignored it. He stuck on his headphones and turned the volume to maximum. Rory Gallagher screamed 'What's Going On?' *Jesus, the music oracle continues.* Kinch started to sing at the top his voice: "'Can you correct my vision? Help in my decision?'" Take that you bloody bastard.' He punched the air in front of him with venom. "'What's Going On? You know what I'm needing. You won't find me kneeling.'" A group of American students scattered wildly. A small fat girl ran out of his way, looking at him like he was a madman. He moved at speed through the stalls of the Arcade, and out into the sunshine.

He felt like his brain was about to explode. He started to run again. This time he wasn't going to stop. He was just going to keep running until he got run over, or he collapsed from lack of oxygen, or he reached somewhere, someone...Flora, he was going to run to Flora.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 25 - Cyclops

The bar in Slattery's on Capel Street was half empty. Omar had cornered Jameson on his way out of the Ormonde, and asked him if he would have twenty minutes to spare for a quick word. His colleague, being the obliging sort, agreed, once Omar shouted him a pint. Sure it would get them away from the bloomin festivities for a while, Jameson suggested, and god knows he was a bit sick of it all. Omar knew that Mark was a favourite of Farrell's, and hoped he would put in a good word or him about the article.

Omar played to Jameson's ego, praising him for his work. They chatted easily until Jameson recognised a man sitting beside them.

'Damn! It's Caoch O'Sullivan.' Jameson whispered to Omar.

'Who?'

'The brother of that bollox, Martin O'Sullivan, the Sinn Féin TD for South Kerry.'

Omar took a good luck. 'Looks like a tough character. What's up with his eye?'

'It's made of glass – motorbike accident in his late teens. One of his favourite tricks is to pop the bloody thing out and roll it his hand, usually when he's beating the shit out of some unsuspecting fucker.'

'Fuck!' Omar watched to make sure the Kerryman wasn't listening.

'I had dealings with him man on couple of articles I wrote. I wouldn't be his favourite person. Maybe we should get out of here.'

Caoch spotted Jameson. 'Mark Jameson, is it? Taking a break from stitching up this country's patriots are we?' O'Sullivan turned his stool towards Jameson. A young man stood beside the Kerryman; piercings the length of his left ear, and a mullet like a weasel's tail falling between his shoulderblades. He jumped from foot to foot like a boxer, his wiry body ready for action. A skinny pitbull terrier sat at his feet, a low growl building ominously from his black lips.

Jameson laughed. 'Doing my job, Mr. O' Sullivan. That's all. Someone has to.'

'You did a nice job of trying to stitch up my brother with that pack of lies you printed last year. Tough luck, it didn't stick, Jameson. Got yourself kicked out of the Sun on your boney arse I heard. There's justice in the world after all.' Caoch tipped his whiskey glass off that of the mullet headed man, and they laughed.

Omar could see the colour rise in Jameson's face.

'Up for the match then are you Eddie? Get a special pass? Didn't think they left scum like you out of The Kingdom except on special dispensation.' Jameson braced himself.

The situation was building towards something Omar didn't want to be involved in, so he jumped between the two men, and placed his empty coke glass on the bar. 'So you're a Kerryman. My father's side of the family hailed from the great county a few generations back,'

Caoch replied. 'Is that right? What's your name?'

'Wilde, Omar Wilde. I think it was my grandfather was from around Killarney somewhere.'

Caoch moved his gaze, his static eye cold, black and staring. 'Not exactly a Paddy with a name like that, are you? And certainly not a Kerryman!'

'I was born here,' said Omar, 'Hesitant though I am to admit it to a Kerryman, I'm definitely a Jackeen.'

'Never seen a Dublinman with such swarthy skin. Bit of the nigger in you, is there?'

Omar shuddered. He knew this sort of man. He would have to keep his cool above all else. 'My Mother was Egyptian, Arab actually, but I grew up here.'

Caoch shrugged. 'Doesn't make you an Irishman. True Celtic blood can be traced through both sides. None of this diluting business. Watered down genes. A dangerous business.' He allowed his free eye to wander. Omar felt the black dark pupil of the glass eye move with his movements like a trick painting. 'Take Echeverria here. He's a Basque man through and through. Now I've got nothing against other nationalities, once they know who they are, once they stick to their own, you know what I mean.' He moved closer to Omar ominously. 'Pride in ones origins, Celt, Basque or Nigger for that matter, that's what counts.' His voice stretched thin, like the low whistle of a dynamite fuse on its way to detonation.

The young Basqueman nodded vigorously. He joined in, 'In my country we know what it is to be proud of ones origins. *Euskal Herria!*' His Kerry friend saluted his enthusiasm.

'Good man yourself, Itor. *Eire Abú!*' and they clinked glasses once more.

Jameson caught Omar's eye and gave him a 'told you so' look.

The door swung open behind them, and Kate O Reilly bounded over with a smile. 'There you are Wilde. You won't believe it! Your horse ran away with it. Twenty to fucking one, you lucky bastard!'

Omar looked at her in disbelief. 'You're kidding.'

'No messing. As soon as I found out I had to find you. Cowen told me you, and Jameson had disappeared here. Jesus man, you've won a fortune! Here.' She pushed a piece of paper his direction. 'Your bet, and I expect at least a four course champagne meal in Chapter One for bringing you that piece of good news.'

Omar stared at the little piece of paper that was now worth four thousand euro. He could feel the presence of the two men bearing down on him from behind.

'How much did you pull in there, Arabman?' asked the Kerryman, his blue eye narrowing. Omar signalled to Jameson and Kate with his eyes to keep quiet.

'Not much. Might get me a nice suit, right Kate?'

His co-worker looked at the two men and understood. 'Yeah, a nice cheap Hugo Boss if you're lucky in the Sales, or else a night out with me, whichever's cheaper.' She smiled at Omar.

'I'm afraid you're out of my price-range Kate, so Hugo will have to do.'

'Well if you change your mind, you know where I am Omar, chained to my desk as always,' said Kate. '

The Kerryman looked Omar in the eye. 'Tell me Arab. Can you translate our National Anthem then? Let's see what kind of a Dubliner you are now.' The dog pawed his owner, who threw him a piece of a leftover sandwich.

Omar shifted nervously, and looked at Jameson who shrugged his shoulders.

'Leave him alone O'Sullivan. Sure half of Ireland couldn't translate that and sure who gives a fuck at the end of the day!' Jameson interrupted.

The one eyed man began to sing, "In valley green, on towering crag, Our father's fought before us, And conquered 'neath that same old flag That's proudly floating o'er us." Now tell me what you Arabs, Niggers, and Wops have done for this country apart from clean our toilets and shag our women.'

That was it. Omar could take no more. 'There's no point in talking to an eejit like you about the intricate and rich history of the Arab world, its great philosophers, its amazing architecture. You've probably never stepped outside this country except to go vomit your guts up on your once a year holiday in Santa Ponsa.'

The Caoch's voice rose an octave. 'What the fuck do I care about philosophy or any of that shite? It's this world I'm living in Arab. In Ireland ...2004.' His fat cheeks were raw red and glowing.

'For a man who's living in 2004, you spend a hell of a lot of time talking about the past!'

'Come on Omar. Let's get out of here,' said Jameson, sensing the tension was rising beyond something he could control.

Caoch rose above him, his towering frame casting an ominous shadow over Omar. 'Let's see what you're made of son of Sadaam. Let's see how you Arabs can fight. I hear that's what ye do best.' The dog jumped up beside its Master, the wiry Basqueman holding it back with a tight rope wrapped around his bare knuckles.

Omar could feel the hairs stand up in the back of his neck, but remained calm. He spoke softly. 'Fighting and hatred are of no value to me Kerryman. There's only one value which I respect on this godforsaken mess of a planet, and I'm afraid it's something which you are clearly lacking.'

Jameson tugged at Omar's jacket sleeve nervously. 'Just leave it Omar. What's the point?'

The Kerryman moved closer to Omar whose voice had reduced to a whisper. 'What would that be, Mr. Wiseman?'

Omar raised his eyes to meet the cold stare of Caoch. 'Love.'

The Kerryman chuckled to himself. 'Me heart is bleeding, Arabman. Hand me a tissue there, Ito,' he said to the amused Basque.

Omar wasn't finished with him yet. 'Bet it's a long time since you felt love, Kerryman. Wouldn't be too many women out there looking for a one eyed brute to bed them now would there?'

Caoch roared. Omar slipped under his giant armpit, Jameson running out the door ahead of him. The muscular hairy arm of the Kerryman grabbed a plastic bottle that was sitting beside him on the counter. 'I'm going to cut you up, you fucking Arab!' screamed the one-eyed giant banging the bottle against the counter.

Omar flung the door open and turned back for a last word, 'Not with an empty bottle of Miwadi, you're not!' He sneered at the Kerryman who flung the bottle above Omar's head.

The dog reared in the hands of the Basqueman. 'Will I let Pinch go?' screamed the man.

'Let him savage the little bastard! Go Pinch go!' screamed Caoch, his black eye popping out of his head.

Omar hesitated, the heavy door firmly in the grip of his right hand. He had fallen victim to this door many times, it's heavy swing unexpected but deadly. He had been waiting for just the right moment to let it fly at some deserving victim. The wild foaming mouth of the pitbull careered his direction. He paused, letting go of his grip, and listened with pleasure as the door whipped straight into the head of the unsuspecting creature. A loud whine was heard from the other side of the door, and the mad shuffling of feet. Omar smiled, sure that the dog would only be mildly dazed. He picked up his satchel, and raced after Jameson who was pegging it towards the river like a madman. He raced after Jameson, smiling from ear to ear.

As he sped through the street, he thought he could hear a voice above him singing through the clouds. He looked up and a beam of light shot around the black edge of a cloud, descended upon him and in it's layers he could hear his mother's voice, like an angel, singing, bathing him in her joy '*Hallelujah,*' she sang, and then another voice joined in, '*In the Name of God, Full of Compassions, Ever Passionate,*' and then another, '*Many waters cannot quench love, neither can*

*the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be condemned.*' The voices continued to descend upon him one upon the other like a great cosmic flood, '*When Reality is attained, there is neither ego nor object, And within that instant, the karma of eternal suffering is wiped away.*' Omar ran, clutching his head, afraid it would explode, until he reached the boardwalk over the river. The voices continued, messages falling upon him in many languages, many octaves, many accents. He felt overwhelmed, bathed in light warmer than he had ever known, deafened by a choir of voices so pure that he was sure he was going mad, divinely mad. One voice continued to soar above the others, changing language, text but never the pureness of its pitch. *Mother.* He fell to his knees, his arms outstretched, his face staring up towards the air.

'Omar, are you ok?' The cacophony of voices instantly evaporated as Jameson bent over Omar's kneeling body. He could see the light disappear behind a cloud above Jameson's head.

'Omar?' His colleague's face snapped into focus.

'Think I might be going mad Mark.'

'Join the club. Come on.' Mark Jameson picked Omar up, put an arm around his shoulder and walked him down the boardwalk. The two men walked in silence, Omar looked back to see the last trace of light disappear over 'The Ivy Chambers,' like a shooting star in daylight. He smiled to himself. *If this is madness, I'll take it.*

## Chapter 26 - Bláithín

The corridor of Bláithín's Christchurch apartment had been newly painted. The stench of newness hit her nostrils like a strong glue. She stumbled up three flights of stairs, her eyes raw from crying. No 39 was a tiny apartment, the usual Dublin shoebox affair. She shared it with a girl from Galway, Niamh, a mousy but sweet girl, who worked for the Bank of Ireland and was always over at her boyfriend's or home in Galway for the weekends. It was almost like having the place to herself, so Bláithín didn't mind that there wasn't room to swing a cat, although she did wonder why anyone would ever want to do that in the first place. She locked the door behind her, threw her bag on the green couch, put her head in her hands, and began to wail like a banshee. The contents of her bag fell onto the floor.

The small bag of white powder caught her eye. *I fuckin deserve it.* She sat down on the couch and spread the powder on the table in front of her in several long thin lines. She pressed her nose to the table, and ran it the length of the first line inhaling deeply. When she got to the end she sniffed loudly, shook her head and stared out the window. Her nostrils began to glow; the powder coursed through her veins, shot straight through her system like hard rain in a gutter. She could feel her lips form a soft smile, the pain sinking into the background like a bad dream in daylight. She looked across at Christchurch. The bells rang out across the city, their deep, clamorous joy at odds with her pain. *Fucking Bells, I'll drown you out.*

She grabbed a PJ Harvey CD from the shelf beside her, and stuck it in the stereo, turning up the volume to near maximum. The dark growling voice drowned out her sobs. She sang along, the words encircling her like screaming ghosts 'Sheila na Gig, Sheila Na Gig, YOU EXHIBITIONIST!' over and over and over. She Dervish-like, her body twisted like a tree on the edge of a storm. PJ cried, 'Gonna wash that man right out of my hair, Just like the first time someone didn't care! Gonna wash that man right out my hair, Heard it before,' Bláithín screamed, 'No more!' She punched the air frantically and sat back down on the couch to snort up the second line as fast as her nostrils would absorb. Thoughts of Flora, Kinch, her father, mother, ran around her head like a three D cinereel. PJ's words twisted with her own thoughts: 'Put money in your idol hole,' She stared at the coke. *Fuck you all, I'll worship at whatever altar I choose,* and she bent over to inhale another line. Everything speeded up. The cars on the street below blurred into lines of pure white light; seagulls swooped and dived through the traffic like military jets; the words from the stereo sounded like an old vinyl speeded up. 'He said wash your breath, I don't want to be unclean, He said please take your dirty pills away from me.' Bláithín laughed shrilly. 'Not pills mate, but it's all the fuckin same. All helps me to forget you, YOU BASTARD!' She could feel her body heating up, like someone had switched her on. She began to sweat, and stuck her mouth under the tap in the small kitchenette.

There was another sound in the background, a banging. It got louder, *Someone, at the door. Fuck!* A voice screamed through the door 'Bláithín, Bláith, are you ok?' It was John bloody Fenton. She couldn't believe it. What was he doing here? She ran around the room and scooped up the gear, the laundry basket in her bathroom providing the perfect hiding place. 'Bláithín, I'm going to have to call the Police if you don't answer. I'm worried.'

Her nose was raw red and dripping. *Fuck Fuck!* She grabbed the foundation from her dresser, wiped her nose, and attempted to block out the red.

'That's it Bláithín. I'm going to kick this bloody door down.' Fenton was up to high doh, his face a picture of relief when she opened the door, the music still blaring in the background. John looked at her with concern. 'Jesus Bláith. What the fuck is with the music? I can't hear

myself think,' he screamed. 'What?' she shouted, unsure of what he said. Her brain jumped around like a demented flea.

'Turn down the fecking music!'

'Right.'

She left the door open and he followed her in as she switched off the music. He closed the door, his expression forming a question across his brow.

'Your neighbours will call the police if you keep that up girl. Are you alright? You don't look the best.'

'I'm fine,' she replied. Her eyes darted around her head like dolls eyes.

'Have you been taking something?' He stared at her intently.

'No, no, of course not! I'm just not feeling great, Monthly stuff you know.' She sat down on the couch – no sign of powder on the table, nerves propelling her knee towards the top of the coffee table. 'Ow, shit! What do you want?'

'I just wanted a word about your friend, Quixote,' Fenton replied. 'Do you mind?' He pointed to the space on the couch beside her and she nodded.

'And?'

'Did Kinch have a word with you yet?'

'Hah, if that bastard comes near me I'll cut his balls off. Why? Didn't know you and he were getting friendly.' It took all her power to concentrate on the conversation.

'Had a word with him earlier, that's all. It's about your friend. Just want to let you know, it looks like he doesn't have a prayer, and they're talking deportation.'

'Oh fuck! No more! John, I ...I don't think I can deal with this right...'

'There is a chance Bláith, but only you can help him.'

Bláithín's head was pounding. 'What the fuck are you talking about?'

Fenton got up and walked to the window, stared out at Christ Church spires. 'It's your Dad. I know you don't want to hear it. He needs your help...'

'I've been through this shit with him already John. No can do.' She walked to the kitchen, and sucked down a glass of water.

'The thing is, he'll put in a special word for Quixote, get him off the deportation list if you help him out.' John's voice lowered, and his large frame shifted from foot to foot nervously.

Bláithín fixed her gaze on John. 'Nice work John. Finally taken the position as Dad's axeman. I thought you were better than that.'

'It's not like that Bláith. It's just...I need him. I'm fucked without him. You know what it's like for me now.'

There was a sadness in his voice, but all she could feel was hot burning hate for this pathetic man she had once counted as a friend.

'Get out. Get the fuck out!' she screamed at him.

'But..'

'Out!'

He moved to the door. 'Just consider it. It's your friend's life. You don't want to fuck with that. You'd never forgive yourself.'

She grabbed him by the hand, and pushed him towards the door.

'Ok, ok, I'm leaving.' He hesitated. 'I'm sorry,' he added. Bláithín pushed him into the corridor.

'Get the fuck away from me! You're just the same as everyone else. You're all fucking bastards,' and she slammed the door in his face.

The coke ripped through her system like a rabid rat. Despite all the mayhem around her she felt in control, sure of herself for the first time that day. She, Bláithín O' Leary, was better than that shower of dickheads. She'd show them! She looked in the mirror, her pupils shone like diamonds in a deep black bog, her raven curls swept around her head. Her skin, pale, translucent. She liked this woman. 'Molly.' She grabbed a scarlet red lipstick from the bag beside her, traced the line of her delicate lips. She smiled at the results, 'Beautiful Molly,' she whispered at her image. Slowly, she moved towards the face in the mirror, and kissed the cold hard surface, delicately, intently. She moved slowly backwards gazing at the sharp-eyed woman in front of her, as though it were a mysterious stranger who had caught her unawares, twisted her insides into love with a single glance. 'They won't hurt you anymore. No More.' She began softly, 'No More,' her voice gathering sound, 'No More!' she began to chant 'NO MORE' over and over to calm the demons that crowded inside her head like hungry children. She spun her body, around, and around and around in endless circling motion, chanting, singing, until her leg hit off the side of the coffee table, and she fell with all the force of her weight against the thin glass. It shattered like a Saturday night beer bottle, a cloud of glass encircling her falling body. She lay motionless, waiting for the tiny points of pain to etch into her skin. She could feel nothing, absolutely nothing. A large jagged piece of glass lay about an inch from the side of her head. She moved her body slightly and stood up shaking the shards off her clothes like dust. *Wow, that was close.* The exhaustion washed over her until she could feel nothing. At last nothing.

## Chapter 27 - Flora

Voices travelled up the stairs from the living room below. Flora lay on her bed half awake, clutching a pillow like a lost child returned. She could hear Sandra, then a man's voice, Kinch, yes, then footsteps. He entered the room, quietly, moved towards her. She kept her eyes shut and waited. She could feel his breath approach, like a warm Summer breeze against the nape of her neck. He kissed her softly.

'Are you awake?' His voice a delicate whisper.

She turned, her green eyes opening slowly. His face was revealed to her like a large unfolding canvas. 'Mmmm.'

He smiled, and sat beside her on the bed, his hand caressed the inside of her thigh gently. 'Are you ok my love?' he asked.

She hesitated, a feeling growing inside her that she knew she could not prevent, a slow grinding refusal, a negative pulse that had come to her in her sleep, to push this love away from her, back into the shadows where it belonged, in the twilight zone of unacceptable things. She pulled herself up, her back resting on the headboard. 'Did you find her?'

'No. I left messages everywhere. I'm really worried Flora.'

He looked to her like a sad child, a penitent boy whose actions had brought misery that he couldn't possibly have foretold.

'She'll be ok.' She could hear the deep blue cold of her words.

He looked at her, his eyes pleading for comfort. She surprised herself at her ability to move away from his space of need. She could feel herself withdraw like a soldier, hardened by the decisions of War. She moved off the bed, and looked at the clock on her mobile phone.

'It's six thirty. I need to get ready for the concert. Omar could be back any second. I need you to leave.' There was no affection in her voice.

Kinch looked at her carefully. 'What do you mean? You sound so...'

'I need you to leave Kinch – for good.' She had made a decision in an instant, and she was sure.

'You can't be serious. What the hell have I done?' Kinch asked in disbelief.

'I just can't do this anymore.'

'You can't love me. Is that it?'

It was as if she could see a crack appear in his pupil, slowly splitting that innocent love into a fractured cry.

'Listen Kinch. I'm too tired for this and I don't have time. Can we just talk about this another day?'

'No, we can fucking talk about it now! I just fucked up someone I care about, and someone you're supposed to care about, by the way, because I believe in us, no matter how crazy it might seem to other people.'

'I'm sorry, I can't. While it was just us it was fine. Fun. But now...'

 Flora looked at him, and felt sorry she had to hurt him but it had gone too far.

'Fun, Flora, fucking fun!' He moved towards her, reaching out to touch, 'Please Flora, just think about it.'

She recoiled. 'Its over Kinch. Please leave.' She felt terrible for him, but there was no other way. She knew that if she gave him a sliver of hope, he would cling onto it like a dying breath.

‘Jesus I’m some eejit. I actually thought you felt something for me, but you’re as cold as ice, aren’t you. The fucking Polish Ice Queen.’ He grabbed the pillow on the bed beside him and began to beat the bed frantically until the feathers flew around the room. ‘Aaaggghhhh!’ he screamed.

A flurry of footsteps could be heard on the staircase. Sandra flew through the door. ‘Flora. Is everything alright?’ she asked, her eyes wide with worry.

Flora raised her hand, and nodded her head. ‘It’s ok. Kinch is just leaving.’

He put down what was left of the pillow, looked at her, his blue eyes loaded with anger, grabbed his hat and jacket and ran down the stairs and out the door.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 28 - Kinch

The swans were out in force, their white feathers brilliant in the sunlight. A clutch sat by the edge of the water, their long arms stretched wide towards the heat of the sun. The local celebrity, the lone grey goose, lived as one of them, clearly unaware that he was any different. He had been adopted by this group and moved proudly amongst them, providing much amusement for the passers by. Kinch walked carefully along the edge of the canal. *Different in the animal kingdom. None of this ego-driven vanity. The little bugger doesn't have a clue, or else he does a damn good job of pretending.*

Christy Moore sang to him, *'Every wild Irish flower/ It reminds me of my true love on the banks of the Lee.'* His thoughts ranged through Flora, Bláithín, his mother, that man... *That man! God, what does he want with me now? Why is it always too late?* He watched two ducks and two swans drift along beside him, content in their little space of the world. *Funny how they mate for life. Content.* He looked around him as he walked: the little red-brick artisan cottages that lined the edge of the canal spilling their inhabitants onto the path. Young mothers pushed their curly haired youngsters in the latest jog friendly stroller; old women chatted about the heat at the gates of the houses they had spent their whole lives; foreign students soaked up the bit of sun Ireland had to offer, desperate to be transported for just a few moments to the dry heat from whence they came.

The willow trees dripped over his head, their long tendrils casting shadows, like whispering ghosts. He imagined the people who had once walked this path; how they too had danced and dreamed, and how once, just once, they died; disappeared only to be traced back into existence in the memories of those who had known them. Kinch wondered who would remember him, and for how long he would cast a shadow on the memory of others.

He looked at his mobile to see if anyone had got back to him about Bláithín. *Not a damn thing.* He sat down on the bench by Paddy Kavanagh, the Poet's stone-cast image ever transfixed upon the canal bank walk he had so loved. Kinch lay his bag on the statue's lap. 'There you go Paddy, make yourself useful.' He looked at Kavanagh's pondering gaze and smiled. 'Suppose it gets a bit boring sitting around here staring at the same ol' spot everyday. Still it's a relief from all this bloody messing we call life eh mate?' He dragged his brain for the words of this great poet. 'Leafy-with-love banks and the green waters of the canal/ Pouring redemption for me, that I do The will of God./ The Leaving Cert English comes in handy all the same. The will of God eh? Not a believer I'm afraid. Probably do better if I was. So what do you reckon, should I move over to the dark side of the force? Shag a man. Get myself away from all the tortuous complexity of the female mind.' He looked sideways and moved closer to the statue's head. 'You're looking pretty cute yourself there, Paddy. Fancy a ride?' He stroked the cold stone knee and split his sides laughing. A middle aged woman walked past at speed, her eye firmly fixed on Kinch as though he were a recent escapee from St Pat's mental institution.

'Howya Missus, lovely day.' Kinch doffed his hat, and chuckled to himself as she picked up speed, and practically took off running. 'That one could do with a bit of a rooting Paddy, but no, that's it, I'm off women, do you hear me, the celibate life for me...at least for a while.' Kinch tapped a cigarette on the Poet's knee, took out his matches and lit the cigarette, taking a long satisfying drag. 'Fancy a drag Paddy?' he asked the Poet. 'No? Sound man. Tear the lungs out of you it would, not that you care about that anymore,' he added.

‘Can I try?’ A little voice, the size of a ladybird, came from behind his head. He turned around. It was the little girl from Flora’s house. He’d noticed her on the couch, while he had been talking to that black lady, her mother he supposed.

‘You’re the girl from Flora’s. What’s your name?’ Kinch asked softly.

‘Anna, but don’t tell my mama I’m here. I don’t want to go back.’ She stood, half hidden by the tree, her little mouth pursed and determined. ‘Can I try? The cigarette – please?’

‘That would be a bad idea. Your mommy wouldn’t be happy with me.’

Her dark eyes looked sad, tired from crying. ‘I don’t care about her.’

‘Are you ok? Did something happen?’ Kinch was unsure how to deal with this child. He wasn’t comfortable around children at the best of times.

‘I’ve run away,’ she replied. ‘My Mama’s angry with me all the time, and she lies to us. I just want to talk to my Daddy, and she won’t let me. We’re always moving. I hate her!’ She began to cry.

Kinch moved awkwardly towards the little girl. ‘I’m sure she has her reasons. Sometimes it’s hard for adults, and they don’t do a good job of explaining why. I’m sure that’s all it is.’ He knew that he had to take this little girl back, but the last thing he wanted was to go back there.

‘No...she hates me.’ She sat down under the tree and continued to sob.

‘I guarantee you Anna, your Mum loves you. It’s just hard for her. Flora told me a little about you guys. It’s hard for your Mum to have to look after you both alone in a strange country. She loves you more than anything I promise.’ Kinch sat down beside her. ‘Just let me take you back. She’ll be frantic looking for you.’

‘No, I won’t go back. She’ll be even madder now.’ She pulled away, clearly unsure of her new found confidant.

‘I’ll make a deal with you. If you go back with me, I’ll stay with you to make sure she’s not mad, which I promise she won’t be, and if she is I’ll explain everything to her and make sure she understands.’ Kinch had no idea what he was saying really, but he didn’t want to be responsible for anything happening to this fragile little girl. She was such a tiny little thing, all bones and beauty, dark brown eyes, like a frightened doe. He guessed that she didn’t share the goose’s blissful ignorance of difference; her skin must have invited comment from other children, not always kind. ‘And I’ll buy you a cornetto on the way. What do you reckon?’

She looked at him carefully, her crying reduced to a snuffle. ‘You promise you won’t let her get mad at me.’

‘I promise.’

She picked up the little plastic bag at her side, and took his hand.

Kinch started to walk, her little hand feeling out of place in his large man’s hand. He felt awkward, but simultaneously overwhelmed by the need that this little person had of him, the innocent trust she had placed in a complete stranger. They walked back towards the Blackpitts. Kinch asked her many questions, about her school, her teachers. He avoided mentioning her country, the cruel reason her family had been torn in two. Flora had filled him in, but this was not a subject to discuss with an eight year old. She began to open up, telling him about her projects with the stars, her visits to Dunsink.

‘Do you like your Mama?’ she asked him, her face an open book of curiosity.

‘I’m afraid my Mum died,’ he replied, wondering if he should have used one of those more user friendly phrases like ‘passed on’ or ‘has gone to heaven’; but they just bugged him, even in the presence of a child: after all, children were not fools. They knew exactly what it meant.

‘I’m sorry,’ she replied, her little hand squeezing his for just a fraction of a moment. ‘You must be very sad about that.’

‘Yes, I was...am sad about that, but there was nothing I could do. That is why you must love your mum no matter what, Anna, because one day, she may no longer be there, and then you will be very sad.’

She looked at him, and nodded to say she understood. Kinch nipped into a newsagents on Clanbrassil Street and bought them both cornettos. They walked in silence, Anna chomping on her cornetto contentedly. As they approached number seven, the door of the house flung open, Sandra running out, her face cracked with worry. She scooped Anna into her arms. ‘Baby, where on earth did you go? I was so worried! Anna, I would die if anything happened to you.’ She clutched the little girl to her, fighting back the tears.

‘Mama, please don’t be cross anymore. Please.’

‘Of course baby. I just...I’m just tired sometimes Anna. I worry so much about you and Ellie. You know that, don’t you. It’s just because I love you so much.’

Kinch looked at this mother’s anguish and remembered: his own mother’s face as she lay on her deathbed, the life sucked out of her by the ravages of cancer. That last day, all she could think of was him, her boy left behind without her to fend for him. He could tell that that hurt her more than any cancerous growth, leaving such needy love in her wake. How cruel life was sometimes. But he was over all that now. He had got on with it, pulled himself together. He missed her of course, but what was the point in wallowing in all that misery. She was gone and that was that.

Flora walked out behind Sandra. She saw Kinch, her face one big question.

‘Thank you,’ Sandra said, ‘She must have followed you. We were too busy chatting...didn’t notice.’

Kinch knew only too well what they were chatting about. ‘No problem.’ He looked at Flora, who was shuffling awkwardly behind Sandra. She couldn’t look him in the eye.

‘Right, I’m off.’ He turned to leave, and Anna ran after him. She wrapped her arms around his waist and looked up at him smiling. ‘You look after your Mommy now, and I’ll be waiting to hear more about the stars the next time we meet.’

She nodded her head and ran back to her mother. Kinch turned around and walked away. He wanted more than anything to turn around and beg Flora, plead with her to let him love her; but instead he kept walking.

## Chapter 29 - Nausicaa

The June sun drifted towards the earth, slim fingers of yellow spread around the bowl of the world as it moved towards the slumber of night. The sharp edge of a rock irritated the edge of Omar's right buttock. No matter how often he shifted position it seemed to find a new place to poke into his flesh.

*My bloody arse! Still the smoothest stone around. Grin and bear it.*

He had picked up the money from the bookies earlier, and given it to Jameson to put in the office safe. He dreamed about how he would surprise Flora with a piece of jewellery, and then whisk her away to some exotic location. They hadn't had a proper holiday in years, and maybe it was exactly what they needed to fire things up again.

At edge of the black blue bay, he caught sight of the first star, its delicate light struggling to be seen against the dying light of day. The tall cylinders of Poolbeg Station sat on the horizon: steam billowing from the cement stalks into the darkening sky.

*Looks filthy it does. Belching stale air into the world. Supposed to be harmless – still, surely in this day and age they can come up with something a bit easier on the eye.*

To his left, a small group of people played on the damp sand. Two children raced along the edges of the water. The young girl turned to splash the tiny boy, who cried a storm in response.

*Children can be cruel little beggars. Love to torture each other. Don't need to hide it behind the lies and deceit of age; just let rip right in your face. She's the brat of the bunch alright.*

He watched the skinny little girl, a smile spread across her freckled face, trip innocently along the waters edge. A hassled woman folded the small boy into her arms.

*Little torturess! They start young all the same. Never leaves them. The sharp edge of beauty's tongue. Cut you open like the jagged edge of a shell. We're a dumb lot, men. Plain feckin stupid how we keep running back for more.*

The little boy ran to a young woman who sat on a rock, her black skin like dark glass in the shadow of the day. She handed him a bucket and spade, and he raced back to the other woman, the child's mother perhaps, who was busy piling sand for the children. The black woman stretched her long supple legs, and lay back along the edge of the rock. She was close enough to Omar so that he could make out the edge of her breast as it fell out of her bikini top, the dark pink of her large nipple like the inverted navel of an exotic fruit. For the second time today, he could feel desire build in his groin, but this time it was different, not the pure physical reflex of lust, but a rounded intrigue, a sensual urge, a mystical desire of the unknown. The girl looked his direction, her dark red lips formed a pretty smile, shy and unhurried, trusting yet nervous. She looked away, the smile still lingering on the edge of her lips.

*Knows what she's at, all the same. Beautiful negress! Wonder what it's like? Close the eyes, it all smells the same. The salty egg of sex. Funny how we can't smell ourselves. Just as well, might explain too much.*

He watched her as she shifted her body towards him, the edges of her full breasts barely clinging to the ocean-blue bikini. She was not one of these skinny women, who pushed and shoved their bodies into a shape their skin was never naturally supposed to hold. The skin and bone of those women who graced the front of 'Hello' and 'Ok' did nothing for Omar. Their gaunt faces, haunted smiles, like fractious shadows of the real person underneath.

*This one knows who she is, like Flora. Women in the know, a rare thing. To dream of possessing a woman like that. In the end they possess you, that's the danger, I suppose.*

He glanced at his watch.

*Stuck at four thirty. Odd that. He shook it, but the hands didn't move. Thought he'd be here – Mr. Bloom. Might as well accept I'll never catch the bugger. Who gives a flying fuck anyway? Needed a break. Long bloody day.*

The little girl ran up to the black woman, a dead crab in her clutches. Omar could just make out the conversation.

'Gretta, look, look. He's pink underneath.' She pushed the dead creature into the lap of the surprised woman.

'Shauna. I hate dead things. Here, take it love.' She handed it back, her thin fingers holding the leg of the crab, her face the picture of disgust.

'But Gretta, he's so pretty. Look his shell is all pink and orange and red, like the sun.' The girl's blond ringlets dripped wet around her pinched little face. The mother approached with the little boy, who dragged his bucket behind him. She was a small, thin brunette, about forty years old, Omar guessed.

'Girl, I'm going to lose it if I ever have to build another bloody sand castle again in my life,' said the Mother.

Gretta laughed. 'Do you want me to take the kids for a walk?'

'Na, it's ok. It's good for me to spend a bit of time with them. You take a break and relax. Sure you have them all day long.' The Irish woman walked back to the water's edge.

Gretta looked in his direction, and smiled. He smiled carefully. He didn't want to be seen as a dirty old man. After all, there was probably at least twenty years age difference between them. But love could be found in the strangest and most unexpected forms. Not that this was love but maybe...under different circumstances.

She sat back down, and turned to give him a small smile of acknowledgement. A perfectly plaited braid crept down her muscular back. She undid it slowly; her black hair fell in slow curving waves around her long neck, like the flowing surface of an underground river.

*Jesus!* Omar sat behind the rock, only his upper body visible to everyone on the beach. He found his hand reaching into his trousers, as on those nights when Flora lay beside him, dead asleep and unaware of his desire. He watched her as she rubbed cream along the inside of her slim legs.

*Damn, the snake is rising from his den. It's nearly night. No harm, no-one can see.*

A fountain of silent lights, blue, green, gold shot through the sky in the distance. They looked like fireflies playing on the edge of the dying day. The little girl screamed with joy and pointed at the display.

'Look, look Gretta, the fireworks at the docks!'

Gretta stood up, and stared out to the sea. Her face looked like a mixture of wonderment and fear; like a lost child in a strange but beautiful place. Her rounded figure reminded him of one of those paintings he had seen – by that french fella – Gauguin.

He could feel the desire rise beyond the point of control. His arm moved at speed, a warm tingle rising from his toes, his breath heavy and deep. The relief came quickly. She turned. He breathed one last loud breath laden with heat. He was sure she couldn't have seen: her face remained open, shy but approachable.

Much to his surprise she walked towards him. He panicked, cleaning himself up with the edge of his shirt; his zip stuck halfway in the speed of the moment. He tugged at it desperately, having no choice but to give up as she got nearer. *Oh God!*

‘Excuse me, I was just wondering if you might have the time?’ She had a deep pure voice, like a thick warm syrup.

He glanced at his watch and it had stopped at exactly 4.30 p.m. ‘I’m afraid my watch is on the blink, Miss. But it must be eight something with the height of the sun setting and all.’ He could feel the excitement and panic wash through him as he scrambled for something original to say. He looked at her blankly, not a word forming on his lips.

*Eejit Omar! Right there, right in front of you and all you can do is gape at her, mute as a wanker.*

‘Thanks anyway.’ She turned, slowly, revealing a pink stump at the end of her right arm. She had held it hidden behind her back as she walked towards him. She walked back towards her things, her slow grace belying her deformity.

*Nasty looking thing that. Wonder how it happened? Poor girl. Would put a lad off all the same.*

The family had returned to the spot, and were gathering their things to go. Omar watched as Gretta pulled on her clothes, her movements awkward yet determined. She picked up her bag and looked back towards him with the hint of a smile. He nodded his head, and she followed the family back towards Sandymount.

*Flawed Beauty. Makes them want you more, all the same. If Flora weren’t so ... Oh shit...the time, concert. Completely forgot.*

He glanced at his watch temporarily forgetting it was broken. Frustrated, he picked up his things and ran towards the Dart station.

He stood on the platform watching the digital clock count down the minutes to the next train. *Too late now. Give it a miss. She won’t even notice. Pick up the money from the bet and go home.*

The train pulled in and Omar got on, grabbing the last available seat in the carriage. The train was packed with people heading in for the festivities and the fireworks. A heavily pregnant lady stood beside him. Omar watched the group of youngsters in the seats surrounding him, and no-one moved to let the lady sit down.

*Ignorant scuts!* He stood up, signalling to the heavily made-up girl beside him to shift over. ‘Excuse me Mam, would you like to sit down?’

‘Thanks so much,’ replied the pregnant woman, with a relieved and grateful smile.

‘Looks like you’re about to pop any minute there.’

‘I’m the size of a whale. Have about four weeks to go still. Feels like four years at this point though.’ She patted her stomach. ‘They say the first one’s always early though, please God.’

‘You’re a brave woman heading out on the town in that condition,’ Omar continued.

‘Jesus, no bloody fear. I’m just heading into Holles Street for a check up. The cars on the blink, but it’s as easy on the train.’

‘Hope you don’t pop on the way because I’d probably faint at the sight of it. This lot don’t strike me as the medically inclined type.’ Omar nodded towards the group of twenty-somethings done up to the nines for a night on the town.

The woman laughed. 'I think you're safe enough, but you'd definitely be my best bet, so you better start praying.'

Omar liked the look of this confident young woman. He noticed no ring on her left hand, not that that meant anything anymore, but he strongly suspected she was alone in this predicament. He didn't feel he should ask, and embarrass the poor woman in front of a train full of strangers.

'You don't have the time there do you?'

The woman glanced at her watch. 'Ten past nine.'

Omar thought for a second. 'You don't mind if I walk with you, up to the hospital? I could check in and see how my friend Annie is doing.'

'Of course. That would be grand.'

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 30 - Bláithín

The lobby of the Shelbourne Hotel was packed with people milling around in post-election-party mode. The local elections had gone well for Bernard O' Leary's party, not that Bláithín gave a shit. They were all a crowd of money-grabbing, corrupt bastards in her books. She was properly buzzed now, on the kind of invincible high that meant she was capable of anything. She'd show him! He wasn't going to wrap her around his fattened little finger like everyone else. The doorman, dressed in his usual high-hatted regalia, eyed her suspiciously, her white lace skirts blowing up as she spun through the revolving door. She moved at speed before he had a chance to intercept her. She began to speak from the moment she stepped foot in the lobby. *'Yes because he never did a thing like that before as ask her to get his breakfast in bed with a couple of eggs since the City Arms hotel he used to be pretending to be laid up with a sick voice doing his highness to make himself interesting to that old faggot Mrs Riordan...'* Her voice was soft, barely audible. She moved easily through the flow of words which had obsessed her for over a year. It had taken her six months to memorise it properly, section by section, and now the words had become part of her thought process, a separate language as familiar to her as the English language.

She walked through the lobby, and up the stairs towards the front function room. *'...she had too much chat in her about politics and earthquakes and the end of the world let us have a bit of fun first God help the world...'* People on the stairway looked at her with curiosity. Her voice built momentum, as she moved towards the high ceilinged room at the front of the hotel.

'I think that's Molly Bloom. Must be part of it all,' said an older woman to the young lady beside her.

The words flew from Bláithín's lips like jets of poison, *'...and her dog smelling my fur and always edging to get up my petticoats...'* She entered the long room, spotting her father at the far end of the room engrossed in conversation. A small group of confused men sped out of her way. The centre of the long table looked like the perfect stage and she jumped up, her high boots pushing the plates and cutlery onto the floor. She decided to move ahead, treat them to the juicy bits. *'...yes because he must have come three or four times with that tremendous big brute of a thing he has I thought the vein or whatever the dickens they call it was going to burst...'* God Bláithín loved this bit! It made her want to strip naked and writhe like a banshee, but she reckoned she was making enough of a show of herself as it was.

Her father's horrified face gave her all the inspiration to continue. He screamed at her, the blood vessels popping out of his forehead.

'Bláithín, have you lost your mind? Get down for God's sake!' He reached out, and grabbed her arm.

She sneered wildly. 'But Daddy dearest, remember you asked me to come and perform the soliloquy, so here I am!'

'Get down!' He pulled her with force, and she fell against his chest, knocking them both over.

Nigel Murray appeared out of nowhere. He grabbed her right arm firmly, helping Bernard O'Leary up with his left hand. 'That's enough, Bláithín. Come with me now and we'll sort this out.' Nigel's voice was firm and commanding. There was a reason her father used him to sort out his messes. He was the kind of man who never had to raise his voice, but had the power to terrify or influence with the subtle raise of an eyebrow.

‘Nigel, get your hands off me! I’m just giving Dad what he wanted. Oh yeah, and what else is it that you want from me?’

Bernard O’ Leary eyed his daughter, the glint of fear resting in the corner of his eye. ‘Bláithín, I’m warning you.’

Bláithín turned towards the room. A small group of photographers and journalists had raced to the room as soon as the commotion was spotted. On the brink of nailing her Father before the press of Ireland, she stopped short, realising that she was now the one in the position of power. She had one more thing to ask of him. At that moment, as the press gathered for a lynching, she reckoned he would give her anything she wanted.

Murray attempted to pull her away from the room. A microphone was shoved in her face.

‘Ms. O Leary. Are you hinting that your father asked you to lie?’ Charlie Bird’s familiar face stood in front of the RTE camera.

She stared straight at her father. He looked shocked, defeated, maybe even a little heartbroken, but she had to ignore that. She had to come out from under his shadow, and be her own woman. She had her own vision of the world that was sharply at odds with the man who had brought her into it. It was a crushing realisation but one they would both have to accept. ‘No comment.’ Her father let out a long slow breath. There was a cold light in his eyes that had extinguished all affection between them. They were at war, and he was used to winning, but this time it was she who would gain the upper hand.

Bernard O’Leary spoke to the room. ‘If you don’t mind, I’m going to take my daughter home so that she can be looked after. I ask you all to show me some respect with this difficult situation and to give us both some space. I will answer any questions you have after she is properly looked after.’ He nodded to Nigel to continue. The journalists stepped aside. Bláithín let Murray guide her mutely down the corridor, and upstairs to a guest bedroom, in use by her Father. Bernard O’Leary followed her into the room. They stared at each other, her father breaking the ice.

‘I’m calling your Mother. Nigel will take you back to Dalkey.’ He hesitated, a shadow of pain visible behind his cold eyes. ‘You’ve gone too far this time Bláithín. You’re out on your own after this.’ He turned to leave.

‘I’ve been out on my own a long time Daddy. You’ve just been too busy to notice.’ He looked back and shook his head.

‘Daddy?’ She summoned her sweetest voice for what she was about to ask.

‘What?’

‘I could have said what I really think out there, but I didn’t.’ She hesitated. ‘I have just one thing to ask and then I promise, really promise that I won’t be any more trouble. I won’t open my mouth again.’

He narrowed his eyes. ‘Yes?’

‘Please get Quixote released? There’s no real proof against him. Just the word of some scumbags. At least bail him out, until the situation is a bit clearer. Ask John to represent him. He has no-one. I know he’s innocent, Daddy. I promise.’ She held her breath and waited for the response.

O’Leary looked tired. He sat on the edge of the bed, deep in thought. He looked at Nigel Murray, who nodded to him silently. ‘Alright. I’ll have him bailed out, and I’ll get John to look into his case but that’s all I can do. If the facts are against him, that’s not my fault.’

‘Thanks Daddy. Thank you.’ She meant it, if only for a moment.

‘Nigel, look after it. I have to get back and sort out this mess.’

She watched her father compose himself, arrange his features into the face of the public man, confident and competent. He left the room, and she sat on the edge of the bed, her head in her hands.

‘Bláithín, let’s go. The sooner you’re home the better you’ll feel,’ said Nigel Murray.

She knew that facing her mother was the last thing she wanted. Whatever last bit of energy she had was summoned to figure out how to get out of this.

‘I just need to use the bathroom, Nigel.’

He eyed her suspiciously. ‘Let me see your purse.’

‘Fuck off. None of your business.’

‘It is if you are about to snort more of that shit. Let me see.’ He grabbed her bag, and emptied the contents onto the bed.

‘See, I’m not that fucking stupid to bring the stuff out with me. Now I need to use the toilet!’

‘Go on then.’

She locked the door behind her, turned on the tap and pulled her mobile from the pocket inside her petticoats. Hanan’s number popped up, as she shuffled through the numbers. She rang the number.

‘Bláithín?’ The voice on the other end sounded anxious.

She whispered. ‘Hi Hanan, I can’t talk now, but I need your help desperately. It’s a long story but I’m in the Shelbourne Hotel. My Dad has me locked up with his ape of a minder. He’s going to ship me back to Dalkey, and I just can’t face it. He’ll probably get me locked up again. Please, please can you do me a favour and call the Shelbourne desk? Say I’ve locked myself into room 327, and can’t find the key?’

‘Wha? But won’t the guy be there with you?’

‘Not if you call him after – I’ll text you the business card after I hang up. Are you at your father’s?’

‘Yeah. Why?’

‘Go to the public phone on the street outside your shop. Change your voice a little, say that Nigel’s wife’s been in an accident, is unconscious, and in the Urgent Ward of St. Vincents.’

‘Jesus Bláith, that’s a bit harsh. What if he asks me questions I can’t answer?’

‘Anyone who’s just been told something like that isn’t going to look for the fine detail. Just say that’s all you know, and I guarantee you he’ll rush out of here like the arse of his pants is on fire. That way, if he locks me in, the bellhop should get here in time to open the door. It’s all I can think of.’

Hanan sounded worried. ‘Jesus, I don’t know, but if it’s all you can think of – ok. I’ll hop on my bike and meet you at the main Stephen’s Green entrance, ok?’

‘Grand. If anything goes wrong I’ll call you.’

‘Ok. Soon.’ Hanan hung up the phone.

‘Bláithín, are you ok in there?’ asked Nigel Murray.

‘Yeah, grand. Out in a sec.’ She looked at herself in the mirror. Dark circles ringed her blue eyes. She splashed her face with water, and opened the door.

Nigel looked at her suspiciously. ‘I hope you didn’t have anything hidden in your knickers or somewhere?’

‘Give me a break, Nigel. I just needed to freshen up. I feel like I’ve been run over by a double decker.’

‘Come on, let’s go,’ said Nigel.

Bláithín eyed Nigel's mobile phone by the bed in the corner. She willed it to ring. 'Just one sec. I just need to make a phone call to the Concert Hall. I'm supposed to be performing the soliloquy there in a half an hour. If I can't go I'd better let them know. It's a big deal.'

He sighed deeply. 'Go on.'

She rang her own number knowing it would hit her message machine, and spoke into the phone. 'Yeah hi, can I speak to Mr Phelan please?' Nigel's mobile began to ring in the corner. Nigel moved to pick it up. Bláithín continued to talk.

'Sorry, my wife...what? What happened?' He looked like a vein was about to pop in his head. She felt sorry she had to cause him such pain, even temporarily. He wasn't a bad sort, really, but this was no time for guilt. 'Oh My God. Where is she?...Ok, I'll be there in thirty minutes.' He put down the phone, and turned to Bláithín who hung up her mobile.

'That was St. Vincent's Hospital. My wife's been in a car accident. Oh my God! I have to get there now' He looked distressed.

'Shit. Is she alright Nigel?' She could feel the actress in her kicking into action.

'She's unconcious, but stable. They couldn't tell me more. Listen, Bláithín, hang on here and I'll call your father on the way...and no messing, right!'

'Yeah, of course. Go find out what's happening. I'll be good as gold.' She could feel the smile build behind her eyes.

'I have to lock you in. Sorry, but your Dad would never forgive me if you scarpered.'

She broke out her best saddened and weary look. 'I know, I know. Go on.'

Nigel left the room, and locked the door behind him.

She sat on the edge of the bed and chewed on her nails while she waited. A bunch of keys rattled on the other side of the door. It opened, and a small thin man stood smiling at her. 'Ok now, Miss?'

'Great thanks. Don't know what I did with it.' He handed her a spare key, and she waited until he had turned the corner in the corridor. Then she bolted the other way, down the stairs, keeping an eye on the function room. She inched her way along the edge of the wall, into the bar, and out the side door of the hotel that opened onto Kildare Street. She turned left and raced across the road. The usual line of taxi drivers were parked the length of the Green. Hanan was standing underneath the Arch, and spotted her as she turned the corner. She felt a warmth in the pit of her stomach; his smile wide and embracing.

'Thanks a million Hanan! That was stressful.' They hugged.

He took her head in his hands. 'Jesus, Bláith, I've been so worried about you. Kinch told me everything, and even though he's my pal, I gave him a kick up the arse for being a right shit to you, I promise.'

She smiled and kissed him on the forehead. 'You're a real friend Hanan.'

He blushed slightly, letting go of her head. 'The least I could do Bláith. I'm not having the best of days myself. Sarah broke up with me.'

Bláithín tried to hide her lack of surprise. 'You're kidding!' She slipped her arm through his. 'We're a right pair of losers.' They laughed. 'Let's head for a coffee and a chat. I could do with a break from all this drama.'

'Sounds good to me,' said Hanan.

## Chapter 31 - Flora

When she got to the Concert Hall the crowds were out the door. She felt fairly drained after that business with Kinch, but this was an occasion she had been looking forward to, so she wasn't going to let it bother her too much. The Mayor was in the corner of the wide lobby, surrounded by Dublin's glitterati. As usual, they looked like they had just stepped out of a Brown Thomas window display. Flora wasn't in a very sociable mood so she kept her head down, and headed for the dressing room. Matt Phelan intercepted her as she was about to slip through the door. He clutched a bunch of worse-for-wear flowers.

'Flora, my dear. These are for you. A little inspiration for the event at hand.' The sweep of white hair perched under his straw boater, made his recently acquired tan all the more noticeable. It looked suspiciously fake in this light.

'Matt. You shouldn't have, really.' She had been fighting off the advances of this silly man for months now. He was far too old to hold any attraction for her, but he was good to her, she had to admit. Always hooking her up with top-class gigs. She knew she encouraged his interest in her; it worked to her benefit, but she never brought it so far that anything actually happened. She knew the rumours that were flying around about them, and she did nothing to dispel them, knowing it would help to deflect attention from what she was really up to. A dangerous game but she knew how to work it.

'Flora, there's a little party after the gig at my apartment in Hanover Quay. Champagne the works. You have to come! Promise me you'll come.' He grabbed her hand, and cupped it in his.

'I'm very tired Matt. Had a rough day, but if I can summon up the energy I will, I promise.' She smiled sweetly, removing her hand carefully. 'I have to get ready, but thanks.'

'See you later.' He bounded across the room, happy with his progress.

Flora threw her eyes to heaven, and went into the dressing room.

The musicians milled around, putting the last touches to their make-up. Flora wasn't in the mood to chat so, apart from a few polite interchanges, she put her head down, deposited her belongings in her locker, and made her way to the orchestra pit. She sat in her seat, placed the sheet music in front of her, and tuned her violin. She watched the audience make their way to their seats, predominantly white-haired, well dressed and middle class. The white-pillared rotund of the Concert Hall did not arouse in her any connection to the soul of what it contained. Maybe she was too used to the gold-leafed splendour of the European opera house, but it struck her as odd that a people so known for their passion and creative soul allowed the most sublime music to be presented to them in what had once been a University Examination Hall. But the Irish were like that. Architecture was never their strong point. It struck her as oddly reflective of their nature: not the handsomest, but they could outwit and outcharm a dashing Latin with a sharp reply and a wicked smile. Somehow she liked that about them, their boundless enthusiasm and drive, their ability to shape even the worst of circumstances into something to be laughed at; their excessive consumption of life and all it had to offer. However, she hoped that this would not become their undoing, an unwitting cannibalisation of their own culture; like a child fed bread and water for many years who brings himself to vomiting point when presented with a box of rich chocolates. There was certainly a childlike quality about the way this nation enjoyed its new-found wealth, almost as if they expected it to be taken away from them any second. Still, she knew that she was comfortable here. She had always been outside the norm in Poland, an oddity that people didn't quite know what to do with. Here the same difference meant that she

was exotic, desirable, an unknown quantity. Perhaps she was lucky; the colour of her skin, her Catholic background, provided enough of a connection to this people, so that instead of inspiring fear and suspicion she could arouse desire. She wondered how different it might be for Sandra, her exotic beauty an incalculable mystery to all around her. The average person liked to see a bit of themselves in 'the other' after all.

She continued to exercise small musical phrases, her fellow musicians joining in as they slowly took their places. Her mobile beeped beside her, and she cursed herself for having forgotten to switch it off. Curiosity got the better of her. It was her parent's number in Poland. It was very unusual for them to contact her first, so she quickly stepped outside the pit, and pressed 171 to listen to the voice message. Her father's voice sounded immediately distressed, broken.

'Flora, call home immediately! Something has happened to your Mother.' Her stomach lurched violently, her father's voice cracked and on the edge of tears. The concert was about to start: the conductor waved an irritated hand at her to signal that she should take her place. Confused between the demands of the moment and a wave of panic, she decided that she had no choice but to do so and wait for the end of the concert.

'Are you alright?' asked her fellow violinist, Kitty O Shea, obviously spotting her distress.

She hesitated but decided it wasn't the moment. 'Fine thanks.'

The musicians readied their instruments for the start. The conductor raised his baton, nodded his head and moments later his arm swept through the air. The opening chords of 'Blumenlied' by Gustav Lange filled the air. Flora allowed her violin to guide her into the ocean of gentle sound. She poured her anxiety into the music, her face the picture of concentration, while never losing consciousness of the great ensemble of which she played a small but significant part. Even in such a moment of doubt and fear, the grand sweep of it all gave her meaning, a reason to be, an understanding of the possibilities beyond her immediate existence. Her brain darted through the music, thoughts of her mother, the last conversation laden with anger, the woman she had known as a child, the pride she had felt in Flora's accomplishments, the love she didn't know how to shape into understanding. Her violin absorbed her desperate prayer, that this woman who had deeply affected her life for the good and the bad of it was not gone to a place where she couldn't have that last conversation, the one where understanding finds its place, and resolution allows a happy continuance.

## Chapter 32 - Kinch

There were a couple of hours to kill before the Low concert. Kinch walked around the city aimlessly, playing Van Morrison on his iPod. He felt like shit, but he wasn't going to wallow in misery. The slow rhythms of 'TB sheets' drifted through his brain. The lights of the white colonnades of the Dáil were beginning to show against the shadow of dusk. He crossed over to Merrion Square, and hopped the fence into the gardens. An abundance of Rhododendrons flourished around the edge of the newly cut lawns. He lay down in the middle of the square and watched the day's light disappear behind the black slates of Georgian rooftops. The earth had tilted into shadow and he felt a balm of relief that this day was soon drawing to a close. He thought about the previous inhabitants of this fine Square. Wilde and Yeats inking their pens in the candlelight of the high roofed mansions. *So much for the penniless writer!!*

Sarah and Will would be off their shifts soon. The roof of Holles Street was visible above the line of beech trees in the North East corner of the Square. A flap of seagulls led the way to the gates near the hospital. He had a quick look to make sure there were no guards in the vicinity, and hopped back over the fence. A 45 bus passed as he crossed the road towards the Maternity Hospital. His phone rang. Quixote's name flashed on the screen. He pressed stop on his iPod.

'Quixote?'

'Hey Conio. Estoy libre. Out. Where are you?'

'That's great man! I'm heading into Holles Street to meet up with Will and Sarah. We're heading to the Low concert. Did they tell you why they let you go?'

'Not sure. Think it has something to do with Bláithín. They just let me go, and say something about a guy called John Fenton getting in touch with me tomorrow. Think he a pal of Bláith's Dad.'

Kinch stopped at the top of the steps. 'That bollox. Don't know if you're better off inside. Yeah he's a crony of Bernard's. Wonder what he's up to now?'

'What do you mean conio?'

'Nothing man. I was worried shitless about you. You're out. That's the main thing.'

Kinch suspected that all was not as it seemed, but he didn't want to distress his friend with his fears. 'Anyway, jump in a taxi and get your ass over here. I have a spare ticket so come with us. After the day you had, you deserve it.'

'Mucho Gracias. Be there soon.'

'Soon man, ask for the Intern's Canteen.' He hung up, relieved that one more problem seemed at least to be solved.

He pressed play. Van Morrison wailed into his ear '*And the sunlight shining through the crack in the windowpane numbs my brain.*' A tired-looking man descended the steps with a bewildered smile on his face. *First-timer. No clue what's ahead of him, poor bugger.* Kinch found maternity hospitals vaguely disturbing. It was a world that he was so incapable of accessing – happy family life – that he secretly suspected the happiness surrounding the 'great event' was one large conspiracy concocted to trap a man within the wheels of procreation, thereby ensuring the continuation of the human race. He suspected he would never jump on that wheel. Van sang, '*Open up the Window and let me breathe!*' The entrance smelt of newness, not just cleanliness, but it was as if the air was laden with the screaming breath of new life. How appropriate that the first instinct of a tiny baby on the way out of the safe haven of its mother's womb was to scream blue bloody murder. Even in the first moments this tiny person could sense what was ahead of them.

The corridors were brimming with proud and panicked fathers, clutching newly purchased bunches of flowers, their confused toddlers being dragged a foot behind. A skinny young girl, no more than seventeen, passed in a dressing gown. Her enormous bump looked like it would topple over her tiny frame. Van Morrison continued, *'And I can almost smell your TB sheets, On your sick bed.'* Kinch climbed to the second floor ward. The staff canteen was at the end of the corridor. His pals had been interning in this hospital for two months now, so he knew the drill. Strictly speaking outsiders weren't allowed in, but the students could slip in a few friends to the canteen without much comment. He spotted Will sitting at a table with Sarah. They were laying into a plate of dodgy-looking pasta.

Kinch licked his lips. 'That doesn't look half bad.'

'How it looks and how it tastes are two completely different stories. Want some?' Sarah stuck a fork full of pasta in his face, and he swallowed.

He grimaced. 'They don't call it 'hospital food' for nothing.'

'We do have a little something to wash it down. Will signalled to the hipflask that he had hidden under his seat. 'Neat Paddy. Can't beat it.'

Sarah scrunched up her face. 'Yuck!'

Will passed the flask to Kinch under the table. He turned to the wall, and swigged several mouthfuls. 'Whoah! That hits the spot.'

'Any crack?' asked Sarah.

Kinch leant in to talk closer to them. 'Yeah, never got a chance to tell ye, but Quixote got into a spot of bother today. Ended up getting arrested. Anyway, he's out and on his way over here.'

Sarah voice rose an octave. 'What, arrested? But why?'

'It's a long bloody story. I'll let him tell ye. Listen, I have to go to the jacks man. Can you throw me the flask, so I can have a proper swig while I'm in there?'

Will leant into his bag, and pulled out another silver flask. 'Here, I have a spare. Just keep it.'

'Ace man.' Kinch made his way to the men's. He took a slash, and moved to the mirror to wash his hands. He looked wrecked, large rings forming around his eyes. *Sorry Stephen, not looking the best today man.* He took out the flagon and gulped down half of the contents, barely stopping for air. The hot liquid flew through his system, raising his pulse and his mood instantly. *That's more bloody like it!*

He left the toilet, and returned to the canteen. Quixote was sitting beside Will, laying into a plate of pasta.

'Prison food didn't suit, eh mate?' said Kinch.

Quixote jumped up, and hugged his friend fiercely. 'This sheet tastes worse to be honest. Disappointed you won't have to engineer a jail-break?'

'Fuck yeah. Was all geared up to do a Pacino-like blast-you-out-of-prison move.'

Quixote leant in and sniffed Kinch. 'What's that I smell off your breath man?'

Kinch looked around the canteen. When no-one was watching he passed the flask to Quixote. 'Neat whiskey man. Now that will cheer you up.' Quixote gulped it down.

Sarah sighed heavily, and spoke quietly. 'You lot are desperate – getting wasted in a maternity ward. Jesus! I must be mad to be hanging out with you. If we're caught we're fucked.'

'Chill out Sarah. It's grand. There's no-one who can bust our balls around. They've all gone home.'

She threw her eyes to heaven. 'Well I'm pleading innocence if anyone smells a bloody thing, and you had better back me up.'

'Your honour, the fair damsel was a mere victim of unfortunate locational circumstance,' said Kinch.

'That's contagious,' said Quixote, bursting into laughter.

'Fuck yeah man.'

They all laughed.

'How'd the day go anyway Kinch? The performances and all that?' asked Quixote.

'Don't ask, lots of drama, and I'm not talking about the Joycean crap. The less said the better. I could do with a bit of feckin down time.' Kinch was determined to up his mood.

'Blady right. That beech of a beangarda who I was stuck with made my head hurt. Puta Madre, she makes Margaret Thatcher look like Mother Teresa.'

They laughed, attracting the attention of a young blonde nurse.

'Keep it down boys. It's not a brothel in here you know.' The green eyed Westerner attempted a sharp look of disapproval; the hint of a smile sitting on the edge of her thin lips.

'Wouldn't mind a bit of that,' whispered Quixote under his breath.

'Watch out, I know the women from the West. They'd chop you up and serve you for dinner as quick as let you into their knickers,' Will said.

'I can guarantee you my friend, that I would have that woman in a lather of Latin sweat in quicker time than your morning jerk-off.' Quixote cocked a dark eyebrow, the two Irishmen throwing their heads in the air in mock dismissal.

'You Latin blokes might strut around with your bronzed skin and flowing locks but as soon as ye open your mouths, the shite that comes out of them would bore a feckin Saint. We Irish, on the other hand, have the gift of the gab, which means that we can nail women for the rest of our sorry lives, because thanks be to Jaysus they don't give a fuck what we look like!' Will gave Kinch a high five, and Quixote smiled taking a long slug from his cup.

Kinch looked into the corridor. His heart skipped a beat when he saw who was coming his direction. 'No fuckin way lads! It's the Arab.'

'Who?' said Will.

Kinch looked at Quixote, who arched his eyebrows in response. Before either had a chance to come up with a fumbled lie, Omar walked through the door of the canteen and spotted Kinch.

'The actorman. How are things going today? What a coincidence! I was hoping to get a hold of you just to ask a few quick questions for the piece on the Bloomsday performances. Making a right arse of it to be honest. Too much other shite going on, but do you mind?' Omar signalled to the chair beside the lads.

They all looked at each other, unsure how to react.

Kinch took the lead. 'Sure Omar, take a seat, but we have to warn you, we're oiling ourselves up slightly for the night ahead, so don't be shocked if you get a whiff of 'uisce beatha' from under the table. You know what I mean.' Kinch gave Omar a conspiratorial wink.

'Is that right? Well as long as I don't have to partake, I can smell nothing,' replied Omar with a wink.

'Take a seat,' and that was how Kinch found himself sitting beside the one man who could make him feel guiltier than he already did about what had happened that day.

### Chapter 33 - Oxen of The Sun

Omar could see Breda Keane talking to the nurse outside the door of the canteen. The puffy wool of her pink mohair jumper reminded him of the tired candy floss of the yearly carnival that his mother used to bring him to every year. Breda looked exhausted but happy. Her transparent, pale face was delicate, tired, like an overused doll. He took a gulp of his coffee and tapped Kinch on the shoulder.

‘Will ye be around for a while yet?’

Kinch nodded at Omar, and took another swig from the bottle under the table. ‘We’re leaving in about fifteen.’

‘Right, just spotted the person I came to see. Be back in a sec.’

Breda Keane’s bloodshot eyes fell on Omar as he walked into the corridor. She clutched a vase of wilted flowers, the pungent odour of the yellow water seeped into his nostrils unexpectedly.

‘Omar. Just trying to find a bin for these.’

‘They look a little worse for wear alright,’ he replied.

She chucked the flowers into a nearby bin, and handed the vase to a hassled looking orderly, who passed by pushing a trolley of empty bottles.

‘You’re brilliant to drop in. She’s had it at bloody last. Thank Christ! It’s a little boy. He’s so cute.’

‘That’s great, Breda!’

‘Well actually he looks like a little scrunched up ball, but he has big brown eyes. Suppose they’re yerman’s but sure, what can you do?’ Mrs. Keane linked her arm through his, and pulled him down the corridor with considerable force. ‘It happened this afternoon around three thirty. Poor thing is completely wrecked. I told her I’d met you.’

‘I suppose she’s too tired for visitors but I was just passing, and I thought...’

‘Absolutely right to drop in, Omar. Just right. However, between you and me, a woman’s vanity kicks in even at a moment like this, and she told me, she said ‘Mum, if you let Omar Wilde near me and me looking a complete state, after not seeing the man for ten years, I’ll never forgive you!’

He found it hard to focus on her, her body jumping from foot to foot, like a child running across hot burning sand. ‘That’s what she said Omar, but she’d love you to drop in the day after tomorrow when she’s had some rest. Would that be alright? She really wants to see you.’

Her voice tripped through his eardrums like a record at doublespeed.

‘That’s grand Breda, No bother.’ He felt relieved, no longer sure he wanted to see this woman from his past, this ghost of a memory. What was the point in bringing it back to life? Better left alone.

Breda’s sharp eyes stared at him for a second. ‘God Omar, you’ve become so like your Mother it’s amazing.’ She hesitated; looked at him as if she wanted to peel away a layer of skin and let the ghost of his Mother step out from inside him and into the air of the living breathing world.

Omar fell silent not sure how to respond.

Breda shook her head. ‘Come on now and I’ll show you the baby quickly. Sure he’s a gorgeous little thing really.’

Before Omar had a chance to respond, he was dragged down the corridor and into the post-natal ward. The wet, soft breathing of the newborns hung in the air like a cool Kerry

morning. Something about the way they were lined up in long rows of identical glass receptacles, reminded him of his second-year Science class. A deep growling dread had grabbed him by the balls when greasy-haired Mr. Leary wheeled in a row of live frogs in identical glass jars. His enthusiastic classmates, eager to sample the taste of a sanctioned kill, had readied their blades. Omar had shrank to the back of the room, fighting the instinct to flee the execution. For a brief second he'd imagined himself the hero of a grand epic, sent to save these helpless creatures by smashing the jars to the ground in one grand anarchic gesture. Instead, he'd watched in silence like the rest of them. The frantic frogs had slid down the glass surface, their sinewy limbs waving in the air in one last act of desperation.

'There he is.' Breda pointed to receptacle number five in row three. 'She hasn't given him a name yet. Wants to take a good look at him before she decides how to label the poor child for the rest of his life. I'm terrified to ask or suggest. You know what Annie's like. Would eat the head off you if you gave a sideways opinion about somethin, so I'm keepin my mouth shut.'

The child wriggled noiselessly. His coffee skin stood out amongst a row of pallid babies. *Doesn't stand a chance, poor thing.* 'He's lovely.' The newborns were laid out before him like a mini assembly line of humanity.

'Any ideas?' asked Breda, nudging him in the side.

'Sorry?'

'For names?'

He could feel it forming on the tip of his tongue, *Ruairi*, as though it were the only name left available in a vast universe of possibility – *Ruairi*. 'No, sorry. No good at that sort of thing.' He suddenly felt quite sick, and wanted desperately to get away from the humidity of this confined space. 'Sorry Breda, but I just need to have a word with the lad I was talking to earlier before he disappears.' He moved towards the door, and pointed back towards the canteen.

'That's fine luv. You'll drop in another day, won't you? To see Annie?'

'I will yes. I will.' Omar hugged the woman, his body as stiff as a shoproom dummy, and walked back, in short hurried steps, towards the canteen. He opened the top two buttons of his shirt, his breath heavy and laboured.

As Omar approached, the dark-skinned lad was on his feet gesturing wildly to the small group around the table. The pretty blonde looked disgusted. Omar slipped into the room. They didn't notice him as he slipped two euro into the vending machine, and pressed B3 for a bottle of sparking water.

'What do you reckon, boys? "Garcia Insemination Services." It has a ring to it, no?' The young man spoke with a thick accent, maybe South American.

Omar didn't like the look of this guy. He had the same curling sneer as Cowen, a confident cynicism designed to tear a layer of skin from anyone who dared to compete.

'It has no ring to it at all, Quixote, isn't that the point,' added the muscular blond boy, while pointing at the girl's ring finger.

She threw her eyes to heaven. 'The sperm actually have to know which way to swim and last time I checked your sense of direction brought you to Ireland even though you thought you were on your way to London.'

Quixote put his hand to his temple. 'What? You mean I'm not in London, Sarah?'

'I rest my case.'

Quixote continued. 'There's a bull in my village in Columbia called 'Cojones de Oro,' – Golden balls. You can guess why. 3,000 cows a year he gets to ride. Lucky bastard!'

'Sounds like bloody hard work to me,' the blond-haired boy muttered.

‘That my friend, is because you’re a lame-dicked Mick. Us Latins were made for the pleasures of the flesh. The closest this guy gets to a woman’s vagina is queueing for the bus.’ Quixote slapped the boy on the back, and Sarah spat her drink onto the table.

‘God you’re disgusting.’

‘Still at it lads,’ said Omar, aware that he was entering the conversation at a none too comfortable point.

The laughter trailed into a wave of uncomfortable giggling. ‘Yeah. Hi. Sit down.’ Kinch gestured to Omar to retake the seat beside him. ‘I apologise for my Columbian friend. He has a mouth like a beggar’s arse.’ The boy’s eyes were watery and bulging, his breath the scent of a vat of Paddys.

‘I’ve heard worse.’ Omar sat down. *It could have been him. This open-faced boy.*

‘Did you see your friend?’ Kinch asked as Quixote continued to expound on the complete incomprehensibility of the need for artificial insemination in man or beast when the world abounded with virile creatures such as himself. Kinch looked at Omar and threw his eyes to heaven.

‘No. she’s sleeping but I saw the baby. Gorgeous little boy. No name as of yet.’

Kinch nodded. ‘Hard to know what suits, I suppose, on first glance.’

Quixote continued. ‘They have the right idea in China. We’d be better off if every second baby born was sterilised at birth. Sex for pleasure alone. Sounds like heaven to me.’

Sarah kicked him in the shins.

‘So how did the day go?’ Omar asked Kinch, who played with the hat on his lap.

‘Yeah, grand. Didn’t have much to do really. Just wandered around looking like a thespian. Not that difficult.’ Kinch continued to fumble with his hat.

‘Didn’t you dump your girlfriend and ... Oh yeah, get dumped by your mistress a few hours later?’ said Quixote with a wicked smile.

Kinch glared at him, a hot red blush covering his face. ‘My friend has an active imagination.’

‘What’s he talking about?’ Sarah looked at Kinch carefully.

Quixote, three sheets to the wind, wasn’t letting go. ‘This is a man of mystery lads, you don’t know the half of it.’

Omar didn’t like the Columbian’s tone. ‘We all have our secrets, and better kept that way sometimes.’

Kinch dropped his hat.

Omar bent to pick it up, and placed it on the young man’s head. ‘It suits you.’

Kinch looked at Omar with a shy smile of acknowledgement.

The blond-haired boy interrupted. ‘Listen lads, the concert’s starting in fifteen. Better get a move on.’

Kinch turned to Omar. ‘Sorry man, we’re heading to a concert in Christchurch.’ He took a pen and wrote his number on a piece of paper. ‘Give me a buzz if you want to chat about today...well, you know.’ His voice tapered away, a shadow building in the corner of his eye.

‘Actually, I have to head over to ChristChurch myself. Picking up something. Do you mind if I tag along?’ He didn’t feel like going home yet. He knew Jameson would be heading home soon, and could nip over the bridge to give him his money.

Kinch looked surprised. ‘Yeah, sure. Are you going to the concert?’

‘No, no. I’m just meeting someone nearby. Rock concerts aren’t really my thing. A bit beyond that.’ He could tell they all look relieved, but he couldn’t blame them not wanting a near

40-something hanging out with them. 'Thanks.' They all gathered their things and scrambled out the door. Omar looked at Kinch as they exited the building. *Something about that boy. Fragile. Needs protecting.*

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 34 - Bláithín

The coffee pot gurgled in the corner of Bláithín's apartment. Hanan rummaged through the pile of CDs by the stereo. Bláithín watched him from behind, her eye following the curve of his taut body. It was hot, the air wet like the thick smell of a Guatemalan coffee field, or at least as she imagined it would be. She had hoped to go as a volunteer worker in a Mayan village the year before, but life – or rather, her relationship with Kinch – had taken over, so she'd decided to stay. What a feckin eejit she had been. Funny she had never noticed how attractive Hanan was before. His white Arab Strap t-shirt clung to the dark fine muscle of his upper arms. He bent over the CDs, his body coiled tight, tattered jeans just loose enough to allow the imagination to enter in. She felt a warm gush of blood rush through her body. Radiohead's 'Where I end and you begin,' seeped into the room; a dark juicy incense of sound. She cracked open a bottle of wine she had bought the week before.

'Are you sure that's a good idea?' asked Hanan.

'Absolutely. I need to chill out a little.'

She poured them both a glass, and sat close beside him on the couch. She gulped down a large glass of wine.

'Are you very cut up about Sarah?'

He filled his glass. 'Honestly. Not really.' He turned to face her, his hazel eyes taking her in. 'She's not the only woman in the world.'

She could still feel the remains of the coke jangling at the edge of her senses. 'No, she's not.' A warm desire began to pulse through her system. She shifted slightly closer.

'And you? What about Kinch?' He looked at her carefully.

She lowered her voice. 'He's not the only man in the world.'

He smiled. She could sense a nervous space building between them. Hanan leant forward, and began to roll a cigarette. Thom Yorke sang, *'There's a gap in between where I end and you begin.'*

'Feeling any better?' he asked, his eyes fixed on the line of the rolling paper.

'Mmmmm.'

He licked the paper carefully, her eyes following the edge of his movements.

'I could run down to the video shop around the corner and grab us a DVD if you like. It would be a good way to get your mind off things.'

'Guess so.' She continued to watch as he tapped the cigarette on the table, and searched through his pockets for a light, his dark curls falling over his face.

She reached out silently and flicked her thumb on the silver lighter Kinch had bought her in the bazaar in Paris the year before. The flame flickered delicately. She waited for him to notice; watched him as he turned towards her.

He smiled, and sat back beside her, the edge of his leg tight against her body. 'Ah.' He bent towards the light, eyes lifted towards hers, the hard pull of soft lips on the slim cigarette. He moved the cigarette, and the space fell away between them. Their eyes locked for a second. Pure instinct took over, and she pulled him towards her. Their lips met, hard and fast. The music drifted through the air behind them, wrapped them into each other. She slipped her hand underneath his t-shirt, dug her nails into his skin. The air played between their bodies like the fingers of a master guitarist on two wound taut strings. She ripped open the belt of his jeans; pulled the t-shirt over his head. She felt like a hungry cat as she licked the edge of his nipple. He shuddered, his right hand grasped the threads of her bodice, loosened it until her small pert

breasts fell under his fingertips. Within herself, she felt the power of the hunter, the watcher in the darkness. This excited her as she forced him into and through her body, felt his cock become hard as a baseball bat. *Fuck me*, she thought to herself, *Fuck me, Fuck me, FUCK ME!!* She wanted him to abuse her, to hurt her, to suck the poison out of her. He grabbed her head, forced her to look into his eyes. She tried to look away, but he held her there, his voice a calm whisper, 'Bláith, slow, Bláith, slower.' She could feel him loosen inside her, pull away from the space of her anger. 'BLAITHIN! STOP!'

He grabbed her arms, silencing her rabid movements. 'Jesus!'

She froze.

'What the fuck?' he continued.

She looked away, and fell backwards, shrouded in a cloud of shame. He pointed the remote control at the stereo and pressed 'Stop.'

'I didn't mean...' He looked at her silently. The cathedral bells sang into the air in the distance.

She began to cry. He pulled her to him, and held her while she sobbed into his warm skin.

'It's ok.' He stroked the back of her head. A white calm quietened her tears; his smell, the deep wet of pine after the rain has cleansed the earth. He held her tight and stroked her head until they both fell asleep stretched across her green velvet couch like elfin lovers in the dark womb of a forest.

## Chapter 35 - Flora

The moment she struck the last chord of the performance, Flora raced to the changing room and grabbed her bag. She had spotted Tomasz in the audience with Kate, the girl he had been dating, but she was in no mood for unnecessary chat, so she walked straight out the back door and into the Iveagh Gardens. She knew the caretaker, Joe, a shy balding man with a crooked eye. It was hard to get used to at first, but he had such a sweet nature that this small defect almost became a point of attraction, a failing that brought out the mothering instinct in all women who met him. He always let her in, after hours, if she needed a moment to herself after a long concert. A dark cloud hovered over the pristine gardens. She could see the golden strands of the day's dying light skirt the Park's high walls. A deep shadow followed her through the Park and sucked the warmth out of her body. It reminded her of a dream that she had the night before: alone on a dark country road, the sky bright and full of stars. Out of nowhere a giant hovering craft floated above her, its creeping shadow enveloping her in dread. She grabbed her bicycle and cycled at speed through the dark country boreens, but couldn't escape the crawling, silent shadow. Exhausted, she hit a pothole; crashed to the ground and scraped the inside of her leg. Frozen by fear, she watched; a door slide open in the belly of the giant craft. A shaft of light descended upon her, blinding her completely. Then she woke in a sea of sweat and pounding heartbeats.

She felt that same fear now as she put on her black woollen shawl, and sat on a quiet bench near the ornate stone fountain. It spat water into the cool air like the great gushes of a glacial stream. She had seen a documentary about the underground rivers that were growing in the Arctic. The water flow caused large pieces of glacial ice to break off and move into the Northern seas like massive ghost-ships. No good can come of it, she thought to herself, allowing her thoughts to linger on the edge of a space which she was desperately trying to push away from her.

There was no-one to be seen except a pair of squirrels playing around the base of a large oak tree. They remained oblivious to her, scampering up and down the wide trunk like happy children in a playground. Flora stared at her father's number on the screen of her mobile. She had to make the call but hesitated, aware that a moment without such dark knowledge is lighter, freer, unburdened. She willed a sign, some kind of sign that would show her all was ok, that all would continue on its steady path for the time being.

Out of nowhere, a man sat down beside her on the bench. As the day descended into darkness she knew the parks of Dublin became dangerous seedy places, but this old man didn't look like the type who would harm her. He had a large red satchel full of newspapers which he laid down beside him. He turned and smiled. His face showed the story of his life, the gritty brown of Dublin streets; like the city itself, the crevices and alleyways were etched into his tawny skin. The soft blue eyes smiled at her above a neat greying moustache.

'Bit chilly all of a sudden.' His voice was deep and gravelled, a dark brown treacly voice like the hops that lived at the bottom of a Guinness barrel.

'Mmmmm.' She didn't want to be rude, but this was not a moment for meaningless chit chat. They sat in silence, the old man staring at the fountain.

Flora watched the squirrels as they began to wrestle over what looked like a chestnut.

'You know Joe then?'

'Yes.'

'Old pal of mine. Always lets me in here in the evenings. I love it. Gets you away from the madness out there.' He smiled at her. She nodded.

The old man continued to stare at the water. 'Reminds me of music.'

'Sorry?'

'The way the water moves and flows, falls in great crying streams it does – like an Irish ballad.'

She turned and looked at the man who continued to stare at the fountain. He looked sad, his eyes filmy and wet, although in the dark it was hard to tell: maybe he always looked like that.

'I used to come here with my wife, when we were courtin, a long time ago. She was a singer. Used to sing to me here, just the two of us. Had a beautiful voice. Do you sing?' He turned and looked at her, his blue eyes moist and welcoming.

'No, I play...the violin.'

'You play the fiddle. Sure that's fantastic. I knew you had a creative air about you. Play anything I know?'

'Mostly classical. Some Polish folksongs, but you wouldn't know them.'

'Polish eh?' He eyed the violin case sitting on the ground beside her. 'You wouldn't play a quick tune. Anything you like. I'd love to hear one.'

The mobile phone with her Father's number displayed on the screen sat beside her ready to be rung. 'I don't know. I was about to make a phone call.'

'Well, if you're too busy...' His voice trailed away, and a sad light covered his eyes like a film.

She looked at her violin case. 'If you really would like me to?'

'Yes, yes I would, please?'

There was something about this kind, sad little man that she couldn't refuse, so she took out her violin and began to tune it. He sat by, his face eager with anticipation.

She began to play 'The Flower Duet,' from Delibe's Opera, Lakme, a favorite of hers. The music drifted over the gardens like a soft mist. He began to smile, stood up, his small feet stepping out a familiar dance, his arms outstretched to the air. The cloud moved away from the face of the moon, and a light fell on the little man as he circled the fountain, his ruddy face beaming with happiness. They stayed wrapped in that moment for what seemed ages, until Flora noticed her phone ringing on the bench beside her and stopped playing.

She grabbed the phone, but too late.

The man stopped dancing.

'I'm sorry. I need to ring this person back. It's very important.'

'No bother luv, that was beautiful.' He sputtered a cracked warm laugh like dense cigar smoke, picked up his satchel, and stuck out his hand.

'Mick Kelly.'

'Flora Wilde,' she responded.

'Pleased to meet you beautiful Flora. Well, I'll leave you to it.'

She nodded her head and smiled. He moved to walk away, and turned at the edge of the fountain.

'Just remember Flora, they never really leave us – the ones we love. Thank God for that.' He turned and walked towards the back entrance.

She picked up her things and walked towards the entrance. It was time. She pressed her father's number and waited for him to pick up.

'Flora?' His voice sounded anxious.

'Dad. What's happening?' She almost had to think to speak Polish now, although chatting to Tomasz helped.

'Your mother had a heart attack this afternoon. The Doctor only told me an hour ago that she's going to be alright. I'm sorry if I frightened you, but I just didn't know.'

She felt her body shed its worry. 'Thank God! I thought...'

'I know. Thank God. Do you want to talk to her. I'm sitting beside her.'

Flora hesitated. Conversations with her mother were never easy at the best of times.

'Flora?' Her voice sounded weak.

'Mum. Are you ok?'

'Yes. I'm fine. Your father is fussing over me like I have one foot in the grave, but I'm just fine. A small fright that's all.' This had to be the first time since Flora was a young girl that she welcomed the sound of her mother's voice. Sucked it up like hot milk.

'Thank God. I got an awful fright.'

'You can't get rid of me that easily. I'm going to be a thorn in your side for a little while longer, I'm afraid.'

'Don't talk like that, Mum.' Flora fought the usual irritation that came with her mother baiting her into an endless cycle of arguments.

'How's Omar?'

'He's fine – just fine.' She could hear the shadow of doubt penetrating her words, and braced herself for the usual stream of criticism that flowed out of her mother when she asked that question – how she should be a more dutiful attentive wife, how she should try for more children, how Flora's wilful independence didn't allow her husband to be a real man, the head of the household, as it should be. That made Flora laugh, considering this small feisty woman had dominated her father for four decades, and still managed to convince herself that she was a deferring dutiful wife.

'That's good.'

Not the usual response. Flora waited.

'How are you?'

'Ok. Fine, I guess.'

'I'm glad.'

Flora was surprised by how good those two simple words made her feel. The lack of questions floated to her like a peace offering, a rare moment of tender silence.

'Mum, mind yourself will you?' She meant it; much though this woman had caused her years of pain and guilt, to not have her in her life was impossible. So much of who Flora was came from her for the good and the bad of it.

'Yes love, I will.' She could hear something enter between them, like a soft tear. It might be better now – just maybe.

'I'd better go. I have a few people staying in my place. Need to get back to them.'

'Ok Flo.' She hadn't called her that since she was a little girl.

'Bye.'

'Goodbye.' There was something so definite about the way her mother said that word that it scared her. In the speaking of it she was saying: I love you, and I may not get another chance to say it.

## Chapter 36 - Kinch

The sky above Christchurch hung like a heavy black curtain, devoid of light, except for the stagnant glow that hovered over the city like a shroud. Kinch followed his friends through the iron gates, Omar at his side. He felt light-headed: the whiskey had done its job; sucked the day out of his brain and replaced it with a numbing warmth. Quixote was babbling at Sarah about las chicas guapas and los culos sexy. *Christ does he ever think of anything else: has a point though.* The black woman from Flora's apartment passed by. She didn't spot him. He couldn't help noticing her succulent curves, the way the purple t-shirt clung to the outline of her perfect breasts. *Like a sumptuous Maenad. God, I'm just as bad. Flora might be here.* His stomach churned audibly. A group of Italian students jumped into the excavated ruins outside the main Cathedral. They climbed onto each other's shoulders, the plump girl with the camera encouraging their gurning antics. He imagined the Viking Lord, Sitric, bearded and broad, sitting in the corner of this crumbled ruin, the remnants of his great construction, a homage to the Christianity to which he had converted. He wondered what he would have made of this scene. *History repackaged for the masses.* The crowds flowed around him towards the main entrance to the Cathedral. Omar walked beside him, observing the buzz and flow of it all. Kinch spotted Hanan's brother, Khaled, shuffling towards the entrance. He was bundled up in a hoody, his eyes cast to the ground.

'Strange that. My friend's brother, Khaled, is here. He's a weird one. All caught up with his Arabness now. Doesn't seem his style to be at a rock concert.' He spoke more to himself than anyone in particular.

Omar tuned in. 'I recognise him. Interviewed him with his father this morning. The old man's a moderate, but the boy did make some odd comments that made me wonder about him.'

'Easy for the young ones to get caught up in the fanaticism of it all, I suppose.' Kinch felt uncomfortable talking about this subject with Omar.

'I suppose.' Omar gazed at Khaled, clearly deep in thought. 'I'll leave you guys to it. Meeting someone at the Gates here. Enjoy.'

'Sure man. See you round.' Kinch nodded at Omar, and headed into the concert.

'Conio, hurry up. It's starting in ten.' Quixote grabbed Sarah, and ran through the great arched entrance. Will trailed after them, turning to see where Kinch was.

'I'll follow you in man.' Kinch didn't feel much up to idle chit-chat.

Everything blurred around him like a waking dream, the kind where you know you're only dreaming, but it feels so bloody real, and you can't wake yourself up no matter how hard you try. He glanced up towards the hulking stone edifice of the Cathedral. It split the dark sky like a great golden eagle, its beak pointed towards the heavens, wings spread wide around the sprawling city far below. The austere, cold eye of history looking down on the chaos of the moment. A cold shaft of air passed over Kinch like the shadow of the giant bird, and he shivered. He grabbed the silver hip-flask from his pocket and took a swig; the bulky bouncer at the entrance to the Cathedral hadn't spotted him, thank God. He had more than his fair share of run-ins with these characters: failed rugby players and wannabe thugs, whose idea of fun was to ruin someone else's night by chucking some random person out on the street because their runners happened to fall into a vat of white dye. *For Jaysus sake.* Anyway, Mr. Pecs-as-big-as-an-elephant's arse was concentrating on his next victims: a Romanian couple, who had wandered into the melee minus baby and begging bowl, perhaps out for a night on the town. *No fear. So much for the Church's open arms.*

The hollow sound of horse hoofs on asphalt drifted into the courtyard behind Kinch's head. Everyone turned towards the gleaming carriage of the Lord Mayor as it made its way through the bulky gates. Kinch could see Ambassador Kenny and his wife, Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and Councillor Royston Brady, Lord Mayor of Dublin, readying themselves to descend. The concert was being sponsored by Save The Children Northern Ireland who were there to promote the publication 'Count me in' – a report exploring cultural diversity among children and young people in Northern Ireland. The campaigners were out in force, banners waving, voices blaring 'No to Bush visit!.' Kenny and Ahern stuck on their best, 'we can't hear a thing' smiles, and made their way to the concert. The Ambassador was to have a quick word about the Save the Children project at the interval, and then make a rapid escape before his eardrums were blown away by the dense music to follow.

The curious crowd was clearly unimpressed. They knew that it was extremely unlikely that Ambassador Kenny would declare from the altar that George W. Bush was a misguided, bible-thumping eejit, whose invasion of Iraq was as morally intact as a whore's fanny. *Ah well, one can dream.* Mrs. Kenny looked a little worse for wear after her long day, but soldiered on like the dutiful politician's wife that she, no doubt, was. *I'm sure the Ambassador's Residence in the Park makes up for the bunions and the sore face Mrs.*

Royston hopped out gamely. He grinned at the crowd and showed no sign of spotting the indifferent shrugs. The blinding gold chain around his neck provoked comment from the thirty something Dublin girl beside Kinch, 'Hasn't anyone told the fool that bling jewellery is out.' Her well-made-up friends laughed raucously. *Poor Royston...old politicians failing...starting to believe his own publicity. The aul ones turn on him and his career's in the shitter.*

A group of young Americans shook hands with the Ambassador and his wife as they passed Kinch. Bertie trailed behind, nodding his head like a marionette. He had a way about him, it had to be said, no matter what he was up to behind closed doors, and who really wanted to know. *Sure, life was good, all that mattered really.* The Teflon Taoiseach was all smiles, readying to show off his latest pal to the assembled masses. This motley crew were an odd mixture of twenty-something scruffy would-be rock critics; trendy middle-aged liberals, some sporting the Joycean attire of the day; not to forget, a clutch of heavily made-up high-heeled beauties, rail thin and waiting with anticipation for the IT magazine photographer to snap them into the back pages of the Who's Who of Dublin's best. And, last but not least, the gaggles of tourists: American, Asian, European, Antipodean but certainly not African. The black face of Flora's friend, an anomaly; her compatriots firmly stationed outside the gates on the other side of the Liffey, working hard to afford a ticket to the good life.

The crowd followed the dignitaries through the arched door. Kinch took a last swig of whiskey; even he, lapsed Catholic and hardened agnostic, couldn't take a chance that the God who might exist would spot him drinking the devil's juice on his doorstep. *Better safe than sorry.* He turned to enter the cathedral. Khaled was shuffling his way like a medieval penitent behind the assembled crowd; hooded wrapped around his head despite the warmth of the evening. He didn't spot Kinch who stood behind Khaled in the moving crowd. A girl, who stood between them both, tapped Khaled on the shoulder.

'Khaled, is that you?' She had a pretty smile, unhurried but a little shy.

Khaled jerked his head around, his normally languid stare shot through with what looked to Kinch like fear.

'Hi.' There was no hint of a smile in the boy's tired face.

‘I thought that was you. All bundled up in that hoody it’s hard to tell. Are’nt you boiling in that?’ She moved to touch the fabric, and he jumped backwards bumping off the woman in the queue behind him. ‘Hey, watch it!’ she shouted in a lilting Cork accent.

‘Sorry.’ Khaled looked impatient, hopping around like a featherweight before a fight. *He’s not into you girly. Dying to get away.*

The girl looked embarrassed but continued to smile at him, her light blue eyes and elfin features delicate and vulnerable.

‘I..I’m sorry. I just...’ A silence fell between them. Khaled continued to look anxiously from the girl to the crowd in front as it moved forward.

‘Actually, I was thinking of dropping into your shop to ask you...well,’ she continued. The boy looked irritated with this nervous girl. ‘I was just wondering if you were free next weekend? It’s my Debs and Cathal who was supposed to be coming with me can’t cos his Granny’s sick, something about her stomach, cancer I think, poor thing; anyway, I was just wondering, if you’d like to come?’ She let out a long slow breath, and waited.

Khaled was next in line to pass through the ticket booth. He stared at her, the lines in his forehead starched and pronounced. *Odd boy, you’d think he’d be delighted. Gorgeous little thing. He should be so lucky.*

‘No.’ It was so definite. *Bastard!* Kinch looked at this normally shy boy, and saw a strength in him he had never spotted before, a surety, a hard cold anger that ripped through the young girl like the edge of a sharp blade.

She stared at him, unable to speak, clearly fighting to control a well of tears.

Kinch wanted to grab the little fucker, and beat him to a pulp. He decided then and there that he was going to have a sharp word with him as soon as they got through the door, sort out the rude little tosser. Kinch watched Khaled hand over his ticket, his eye trailing after him as he walked through the nave and into Musician’s Corner at the back of the Cathedral. Kinch tapped the shoulder of the clearly distressed girl, who was handing the ticket to the woman at the entrance.

‘Don’t mind him. I know him. He’s a sullen little prick. You can do a lot better. He should be so lucky to get a pretty girl like you.’

She smiled weakly, her eyes moist and brave. ‘Thanks. I just feel like a fool.’

‘He’s the only fool around here.’ He put his hand on her shoulder, and handed his ticket to the teller. ‘In five years time you won’t even remember his name, I promise you.’

‘Maybe. I’d better go. Thanks again.’

Kinch nodded. She moved quickly up the right side of the great arched nave, past Strongbow’s granite tomb, and disappeared into the crowd. Kinch’s eye fell on the great invader’s tomb, covered in a mass of wires that protruded from the sound engineer’s desk beside it. *The Ra would love that*, he chuckled audibly.

His eye followed the line of the white-stone columns as they soared upwards like giant birches, the gentle glow of the chandeliers lighting the elegant curves of the great vaulted ceiling. The vast glowing space of the medieval nave reminded Kinch of a French Alpine Valley, the graceful arches like soaring peaks in the dying light of the day. Ambassador Kenny stood in the pulpit warbling on about the strength of Irish-American relations, and our great tradition of friendship, and Ireland serving as a bridge between the United States and the European Union, and blah, blah, blah. Bertie stood beside him with the look of a proud lover. *Same old clap-trap time after time. Never get sick of the sound of their own voices?*

Kinch glanced towards Musician's corner. Khaled stared upwards towards the second level balcony. Its discreet space sat like a royal box above the bustle of proceedings far below. There was something in the way Khaled moved that reminded him of a hunter, plotting the hushed precision of his next kill. The boy disappeared inside a narrow wooden doorway. Kinch followed, wondering what Khaled was up to.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 37 - Omar

Omar stood at the gates in front of Christchurch Cathedral. The Ambassadorial cavalcade passed by on its way to the concert.

Jameson approached clutching a brown Izather satchel. 'I'll expect a tip.'

Omar winked, 'Don't worry Mark. There'll be an ocean of free pints coming your direction after this. I just didn't feel like going all the way across the river. I knew your shift was off around now. Thanks a million.'

Jameson handed him the bag. 'For God's sake, don't get yourself mugged with this.'

'I reckon I'm safe enough, having been involved in one robbery already today. Luck has to turn my way?'

Jameson shook his head. 'Only the unlucky believe in luck. Watch your back.'

'Don't worry. I'm going to jump in a taxi and head straight home.' Omar eyed the yellow plastic bag. Looked harmless enough, but he knew that this might be a ticket to getting himself and Flora back on track. Although he'd been back to Poland with her many times, they'd never really had a chance to relax together in a beautiful place far away from the daily routine. He was sure that would help; jolt them out of their stupor. He wasn't taking any chances and would get home with this as soon as possible. Omar put the plastic bag in his satchel.

'Right then man. I'm off. See you in the office tomorrow.' Jameson nodded, and walked towards Dame Street.

Omar suddenly realised he was famished. He eyed the clutch of people across the road demolishing big bags of deliciously greasy Burdoch's chips. He glanced at his satchel. A girl walked past with a bag of chips, and the smell assaulted his nostrils. *Just take 5 minutes. What can happen?*

He crossed the road. A small queue reached out the door. His stomach groaned its approval, and he took his place. The day's copy of 'The Irish Times,' stuck out of the side pocket of his satchel, and he had a quick look. He liked to keep an eye on the competition, just to see what they were up to. In the crime section, there was an article about a suspected Al Qaeda strike predicted within the British Isles, possibly in the next couple of weeks. It discussed the possibility of an Al Qaeda cell operating in Dublin, and speculated that, although unlikely, Dublin could be considered a target because of the landing of American Military planes in Shannon. The target might either be an Ambassador or the American President himself. Extra tight security was to surround Bush's visit to Ireland. There were a number of suspects listed with their photographs. His eye fell on one of the faces. He froze. This man was immediately recognisable. He scrambled to take out the photo he had taken earlier, and held it up against the photograph in the paper. Sure enough, it was V, the billboard man from the bridge – no doubt about it. The name underneath the photograph read – *Hussein al-Zawahiri, Commanding Officer, Egyptian al-Jihad. Known ally of Al Qaeda and Osama Bin-Laden.* Omar felt sick, his heart racing. He didn't know what to think. He glanced across to the Cathedral. The empty Ambassador's carriage stood outside waiting. He stared back at the article. The words 'Target' and 'Ambassador' jumped off the page. He ran to the corner, crossed the road, and spotted Kinch disappear through the door just ahead of Khaled. *Jesus, maybe.*

## Chapter 38 - Kinch

The crowd rippled with faint applause as the Ambassador returned to his seat to the left of the Nave. Kinch had spotted the dignatories platform raised high above the audience. The dark spiral staircase he was climbing seemed to lead to the tiny balcony directly above the heads of the Ambassador and the Taoiseach. Dave Fanning took the mike and announced the arrival of the feature act, Low, to the stage. The crowd erupted in raucous enthusiasm as the Mormon American rock band took the stage. A long, slow, wailing note erupted into the air, a soft layer of voices emerging through the blade of sound: *'Oh My My, Little White Lie, Swear I'm going to make it right this time.'* The narrow staircase ascended into the darkness. Kinch felt lifted by the wave of music but his head spun in circles. It reminded him of that scene in *Vertigo* when Jimmy Stewart climbed the stairs, the walls tumbling around him. Kinch grabbed the railings, and pushed himself forward.

He emerged into the soft shadow at the edge of the empty balcony. The crowd below sat transfixed, tremorous harmonies floating through the air like voices from the underworld. Khaled stood underneath the third arch, his body stiff and upright, staring at the people below. He unzipped his jacket, revealing a khaki vest bulging with explosives. A wire ran from the explosives to a simple red button on a black plastic trigger mount, which Khaled held in his hand. Kinch's stomach lurched. Below him, Alan Sparhawk sang in a grinding rasp 'Tonight the Monkey dies.' A wave of adrenaline passed through Kinch like a shot of crystal meth.

'Not sure I like your taste in fashion these days, Khaled. Looks a little restricting, don't you think?' The boy turned abruptly, pulling his hoody around the pack of explosives. 'And in this heat. Are you mad?' Kinch could feel his heart beat through his chest; his instinct told him to keep it cool, his voice a calm measure of restraint.

'How did you find me?'

'Spotted you in the queue. You weren't very nice to that poor girl. Now I can see why.'

'She's just a whore like all the others.'

'She likes you man, that's all.'

'No-one likes me.' Kinch felt an opening.

'She does. Practically ate you with those beautiful blue eyes of hers.'

'Whore.'

'Looked more like an angel to me, but what do I know. Always fucking up with the women. Did you hear I broke up with Bláithín today?' His instinct told him to keep it light, until some part of his panicked brain knew what the hell he should do.

'I have no time for this.'

'All the time in the world. The concert lasts an hour and a half. Why rush? Make the most of it.' Kinch was struck by how vulnerable this young boy looked, weariness forming dark shadows under his eyes; his frail body like a child in fancy dress swamped in the clothes of the grown up he was trying to imitate. He knew he was walking a tightrope in hiking boots, but this was the time, the only time in his long empty life, that mattered. He sucked in a breath, and calmed the thoughts that bashed in his brain like bats in daylight.

'You don't understand. That's your misfortune.'

'Enlighten me if I'm about to die. Might as well give me a chance in the next life as I pretty much sucked at this one man. Want a swig?' Kinch took out his silver hip flask, and offered it to Khaled.

'Don't drink that foul poison.'

‘Sorry, forgot.’ He took a drink and swallowed hard into the beating chasm of his body. ‘Anyway, what’s this all about, because I’m not much up with the religious stuff. Got the shit beaten out of me by the Jesuits in Belvedere. Leaves a bad taste in your mouth.’

‘Why should I waste my breath on you?’

‘Because I’m the last face you’ll see on this glorious earth of ours.’

Khaled stared at the band, who continued to scream ‘*Tonight the Monkey dies.*’

‘Little do they know how right they are.’ said Kinch laughing. *How the fuck can I find this funny? Keep it together, man.*

Khaled’s finger hovered over the little red detonator. ‘It will be a glorious victory for Islam.’

‘How so?’

‘That man.’ His voice was thin and cracked with venom. Khaled pointed underneath him, through the stone balcony to where the American Ambassador sat. ‘He’s the Devil’s representative on this earth.’

‘I never liked George W. but don’t you think that’s a bit harsh?’

‘The Americans declared Holy War on Islam the day they unjustly invaded Iraq. There’ll be no peace in this world until they’ve been wiped off this planet.’

‘And the rest of us?’ Kinch was determined to keep this going, knowing that every second the boy was talking there was a chance they might be spotted. *Dear Lord, I’ll never say a bad word about skinhead security again if they just do their job and spot us up here. Mother put in a good word will ya? I’ll say a Novena every day for the rest of my life, I swear.*

‘Kuffars. There’s no-one innocent in this War. The demonic powers of the West have joined together on a genocidal mission to humiliate, murder, rape and pillage Muslim lands and people. They’re your representatives. Everyone here is guilty.’

‘Heavy stuff. I hate to burst your bubble Khaled but I never had a choice. Was told what to think as soon as I was born into this Catholic-ridden culture. Copped on eventually. Now that I can choose, what if I choose Islam? Would that make me any less guilty for the past, even though I was unaware, an easily influenced boy, like yourself?’

‘I know what I’m doing?’

‘You sure?’

The boy stared into the crowd. Kinch followed his gaze. The young girl Khaled had been talking to sat listening to the soft music; tears streamed down her face. The undulating textures of the Mormon voices sang into the silence, ‘*Your face in windows, Outside forever, Nobody dreamed You’d save the World.*’ A soft whisper of sadness washed over him like the death of a loved one.

‘Did you give her a chance? Everyone deserves a chance to choose for themselves.’

A voice emerged from the darkness behind them:

*‘Those that defame honorable women and cannot produce four witnesses shall be given eighty lashes. Do not accept their testimony ever after, for they are great transgressors – except those among them that afterwards repent and mend their ways. God is forgiving and merciful.’*

Omar stepped into the light.

‘Who the hell are you?’ Khaled stared at Omar in disbelief; Kinch with surprise but relief.

‘A fellow Muslim - Omar Wilde.’ Omar quickly nodded his head at Kinch, and turned back towards the confused teenager. ‘You don’t want to do this son.’

*Where the hell did he come from?* Kinch sat down. *Thank God.*

‘Sunni or Shia?’ The boy shifted nervously, his finger hovering over the button.

‘Does it matter? We’re all one in the eyes of Allah,’ Omar replied.

‘*Permission to take up arms is hereby given to those who are attacked, because they have been wronged,*’ the boy responded, his voice strong and clear.

‘Bravo, you know you’re Qur’an, but you sound Irish to me. That means you’re about to blow up your own. Now I know we’re pretty good at that, but there’s no need to repeat the mess of history no matter what the cause.’

‘First I am a Muslim, and a part of the Ummah, and that has been attacked by the evil Kuffars of the West. Every Muslim has a duty to fight for the preservation of the Ummah.’

‘Then why did you ask me if I was Sunni or Shia. Are we really all so pally in the Muslim world?’ Kinch watched beads of sweat build on the end of Omar’s nose, and hoped he knew what he was doing.

‘Stop playing with me. I’m going to do this.’

‘Go right ahead. Do you mind if I have a swig of that?’ Omar pointed at the hipflask in Kinch’s right hand.

Khaled looked at him with disgust. ‘I thought you said you were Muslim?’

‘Yes, but I’m also an Irishman. Even Allah wouldn’t begrudge an Irishman a drop of uisce beatha on his way out of this life, and into the next.’

Khaled shrugged. ‘*But whoever of you recants and dies an unbeliever, his works shall come to nothing in this world and in the world to come. Such men shall be in the tenants of the Fire, wherein they shall abide for ever.*’

‘I’ll drink to that,’ said Omar.

Kinch eyed the security at the front door. A spotlight sat on the wall to the right of the Guard’s head. It was aimed towards the wall directly below the balcony where they were standing. Kinch eyed the metal flask, and slipped his hand through the railing hoping to deflect the light towards the security guard. Omar continued talking to the increasingly agitated teenager.

‘Have you ever been to the Dome of the Rock?’

‘No. Why?’

‘Do you know that the oldest existing copy of the Qur’anic text is carved into the walls.’

‘Yes, I learned that from my Imam, and?’

‘I saw it you know. It’s very beautiful. I went there with my Mother in 1977. She was a singer. Sometimes she took me with her on concert tours.’

‘Was she a Muslim?’

‘Yes, Egyptian. So beautiful. Her voice sounded like it had descended straight from the breath of a *urīyyāt*.’

Khaled looked at Omar, a sliver of emotion penetrating the hitherto stony expression.

‘My mother is dead.’

‘So is mine. I miss her every day.’

Kinch stared at the explosive device. He imagined the ignition spark travelling at warp speed through the device, plunged into the nitrate packet like a flaming diver into a pool of gasoline; the blinding flash of light. *We won’t feel a thing, I hope.*

Omar continued. ‘Do you know what it says on the ceiling of the south side of the Dome?’

Kinch stretched his arm desperately, the flask half an inch from the light. He hoped Omar had a strong point to make.

‘What?’ replied Khaled.

*‘People of the Book, do not transgress the bounds of your religion. Speak nothing but the truth about God.’*

The boy fell silent. His hand moved down to his side.

Omar moved slowly towards him. ‘It’s not your fault. Life’s a bitch at the best of times but it’s also damn beautiful. Just open your eyes.’

Khaled turned slowly and stared at Omar. The boy looked tired, defeated.

‘You don’t want to do this.’

The beam of light fell on the hip-flask. Kinch glanced quickly at Khaled to make sure he didn’t spot what he was up to. He began to trail the light slowly across the white-stone wall towards the entrance.

Omar moved closer; placed his hand on the boy’s shoulder.

‘These men you know. They’ve forgotten how to live in the here and now. Paradise can exist in this world too, trust me. Mohammed lived a full life, he loved this world as well as the next. There’s no crime in that.’

The words of Low floated up from the room below, ‘Sometimes your voice is not enough.’

Omar smiled.

Kinch strained to hear. ‘You’ve committed no crime yet. No-one need ever know. I know someone who can help us to get that off you.’ He took a long slow breath, and whispered. ‘Trust me.’

The beam of light hit the face of the carved monkey at the entrance pier. Kinch hesitated, turned to listen.

Khaled nodded silently, and slumped to the floor. Omar slid down the wall beside him, his hand gently resting on Khaled’s right shoulder. ‘You’ve chosen well. I’m proud of you.’

Kinch stared at the beam of light as it lit up the monkey’s grimacing features; began to trail it down the wall towards the security guard’s head. He looked back towards Khaled and Omar. They looked exhausted, sitting there in silence, their breaths deep and heavy as if they were tasting the air of the world for the first time. He could almost imagine them painted onto canvas; the perfect study of a father and son at the moment of reconciliation; relief and fear etched across their tired features. He looked back towards the security guard, sighed heavily, drew the flask away from the spotlight slowly, and placed it on the ground beside him.

The crowd erupted into applause.

‘Everything ok lads?’ Kinch was eager to get the hell out of there.

Omar looked at Khaled.

‘Let’s go.’

The boy stared anxiously at the security guards grouped around the entrance.

‘Don’t worry about them. We’re not going to say a word, are we Kinch?’ Omar urged a positive response with his eyes.

‘Yeah, no worries. I was never here.’

‘But what about this?’ Khaled pointed to the explosives wrapped around his body like a cobra.

‘I know a guy, ex-IRA, expert with stuff like that. Did him a favour last year, kept his name out of an article I was working on. He owes me one. I’m sure he won’t say a word. Needs to keep his name out of the papers, you know.’ Omar stood up.

‘Are you sure?’

Omar reached out his hand. 'Sure.'

The boy placed his hand in Omar's, and stood up slowly, like a pregnant woman burdened by the weight of her own body.

Kinch was unsure if he should be a part of what was to follow. 'What about me?'

He knew how these things played out, at least on TV; they take the boy to the IRA guy, he shops them to the police and they all become implicated in the plot, even though they were the bloody saviours of the day. Nice end that would be.

'Come with us. It's better that way. I need you to help me anyway. Let's see this out together.'

Kinch had to admit that he had underestimated Omar. There was a strength in this quiet man, although he still didn't understand how he had found them here. *Strange one, the Arab. Suppose I have no choice.* 'Ok.'

They descended the dark winding staircase, Kinch first, then Khaled, Omar last, the two men forming a protective shield around the boy. He could barely look Khaled in the eye; wished to God he had paid more attention to Hanan's worries earlier that day. *Little did he know!* They emerged into the glowing light of the nave, Mimi Parker's silk voice undulating through the arches of the holy space. They crossed the back of the Cathedral. Kinch glanced nervously at Omar; the security guard stood in front of them, large as a house. They passed straight by him; not a word was said. Kinch fell into the courtyard, smiled at Omar, and grabbed the cigarette packet from his pocket. 'God, I need a fag.'

## Chapter 39 - Circe

The narrow door of Bordello's on Dame Street was unassuming, bland and gave little clue to the activities it housed off this bustling city-centre street, south of the Liffey. A well known strip club, it sat on the edge of Dublin's notorious Temple Bar. Packed with restaurants, bars, and clubs, the narrow cobblestones streets of Nighttown oozed life in all its bawdy glory. Cleaned up to present a white-toothed smile to the newly arrived tourist, what went on behind its carved wooden doors and wrought-iron gateposts was a truer reflection of the excesses that the overfed Celtic Tiger had to offer. Pretty architect-designed apartments became rented-out brothels to fund a 100 million euro business that continued to elude the establishment's efforts to 'do something about it.' Girls flooded in from Estonia, Lithuania, South America and anywhere life had become too hard to survive. The perennial argument, whether they were there by choice, or by force, filled many pages of crime correspondence in the Irish Times. Omar was not a fan of the former premise, and had become only too familiar with the pimps and hustlers who made a fortune on the backs of these women. He had worked around the edges of this story with Cowen the year before: providing research for a controversial article for which he was, of course, never credited. Still, he had learned a lot about the underbelly of the Irish sex industry and had been sure that some day such knowledge might be of use to him. Here it was, the moment.

He had met Bernie Sweeney three times while working with Cowen. An ex-IRA gunman who spent five years in the Maze prison for blowing up a Belfast barber's shop and killing eight innocent bystanders. While Cowen banged down the door of every big-name gangster happily residing in the leafy Dublin suburbs, Omar traipsed through the scumbags and drugdealers of Crumlin and Coolock. This led him straight to Sweeney; a man who preferred to reside out of the limelight that the Scorpion and the General had courted with Hollywood-like enthusiasm.

'Are you sure about this man?' Kinch asked Omar, swallowing another gulp of whiskey.

'You should take it easy with that stuff,' Omar replied. *Hope this lad can hold it together. More than he bargained for.*

'It's something a lot harder I'll be looking for after this bloody day.'

Khaled stood between them, silent, his eyes cast to the floor.

'It'll be alright son, don't worry.'

The door opened. The dark-skinned bouncer looked at them suspiciously. 'Regulars?'

'I know Bernie. Can you tell him Omar Wilde is looking for him? It's urgent. Just say I need that favour, right now.' Omar tried to throw the right amount of punch into his voice, aware that his normal disposition never got him through the door of anywhere more illustrious or indeed debauched than Annabelle's nightclub.

The bug-eyed man stared at the three of them with a 'not too sure' look on his face.

'Hang on a second.' He tapped a number into his mobile, turned his back to them and waited for a reply.

Omar strained to hear above the noise of the traffic.

'Yeah boss, Omar Wilde... yeah, says he needs a favour...yeah...two others...right.' He hung up the phone and turned back towards them.

'Right, in ye come.' He gestured for them to descend the narrow staircase. 'Zara will show ye where to go.'

Omar looked at Khaled. He realised it was a big risk to bring him into a populated nightclub, but he didn't want to let him out of his sight – and what choice did he have? He nodded a thanks, and the three of them descended the stairs and into a dimly lit room. It was

lined with tall mirrors, comfortable seating and a well-stocked bar; had the feel of a modern city-centre pub, except for the scantily clad girls who wandered around the room with trays, and wrapped themselves around a succession of poles like snakes in heat.

Omar could see that Kinch was a bag of nerves. Fuelled with alcohol, he jumped from foot to foot like a bantam weight; his eyes fixed on Khaled like a man possessed.

‘You ok?’ Kinch asked Khaled, who had buried his head deep inside his hoody.

‘Not sure.’

Omar watched Khaled like a hawk, aware that with his hands stuffed inside the pockets of his hoody he could push the button on the explosives without anyone even knowing. He had asked Kinch to keep a close eye on the boy’s mood while he negotiated business. He wasn’t altogether confident that Kinch was capable of controlling the emotions of the situation. The young man was three sheets in the wind, but Omar had no choice but to bring him along; he couldn’t risk having to leave Khaled alone for a split second. They stood in silence waiting for the bouncer to return.

Omar saw Kinch try to engage the silent youngster, who flinched and moved away. The actor obviously decided to resort to his usual brand of humour to try to ease the situation. ‘Not much different than the Quays on a Saturday night, except these girls are actually sexy.’

‘Whores.’ Khaled woke up from his stupor.

‘Yes, well in this case, you might not be far from the truth.’

A perfectly toned young blonde, in a bright gold bikini and matching high heels, greeted them in broken English. ‘Boys, nice to meet you.’

Khaled scrunched into a ball, his eyes dark and closed.

‘He’s a sweetheart, really, once you get to know him.’ Kinch smiled at the young woman barely out of her teens.

‘That’s enough. Not the moment.’ Omar needed to keep control of the situation and Kinch’s persistent humour, in this case obviously a by-product of extreme stress, was an inappropriate irritant, which could literally cause the situation to explode at any moment.

‘Which of you is Omar?’

‘Me.’

‘Right, you boys stay right there.’ She gestured to Kinch and Khaled to take a seat at the high table by the bar. ‘Sila, look after these boys.’ A tanned brunette dressed in a gold bikini stood behind the bar, and nodded. ‘No problem.’

Zara touched Omar on the shoulder and smiled, her lips full and glossy. ‘Come with me a second. The Boss will see you through here.’

Omar glanced back at Khaled and Kinch. ‘Don’t move! Are you ok, Khaled? I’ll only be a second.’

The boy nodded. Omar walked behind Khaled, and put his fingers on his lips so that Kinch could see he should keep his mouth shut. He left them standing by the bar, and followed the buxom girl to a door at the back of the room. Her buttocks, bronzed and smooth, jangled in front of him like two succulent nectarines.

‘Through there.’ She smiled, and a gold tooth shone from the back of her moist mouth.

*What I wouldn’t give to mine that gold.*

A voice like a tenor’s – deceptive, visceral, narcotic – greeted him as he entered the small, plush room. ‘Omar, so good to see you again. How the hell are you?’ A casual bystander would have guessed it the greeting of life-long friends; perhaps, an employer to a treasured ex-employee; a mentor to his star pupil.

Omar smiled. 'Grand, Bernie.' He thought better of that casual sentiment. 'Well actually, in a spot of bother. Could do with a hand. Remember the favour...'

'Don't say another word my man. Sit down there and have a drink – tell me what's up. Is it the Missus again? Up to her old tricks. If you don't mind me saying, I've heard through the grapevine that fidelity isn't her strongpoint. Saw her playing in that Celtic show of hers last year. Talented gorgeous thing you have there Wilde. How the fuck did you do it?' He poured green liquid into a glass and handed it to Omar.

'I don't drink Bernie, sorry.' Omar wanted to get away from the subject in hand.

'You do now. It's the best absinthe money has to offer. Straight out of the depths of Pigalle. Drink up and don't be insulting me with this 'I don't drink' nonsense. Are you an Irishman or what?'

The tone of voice that accompanied Kelly's broad smile did not allow room for protest. Omar knew what it meant. 'Ok then, just this once.' He gulped down the hot green liquid. It hit the pit of his stomach, and glowed like a long-lit fire.

'Good stuff, eh?'

Omar struggled for breath, 'Yeah, lovely.'

Sweeney filled up the glass again, and Omar smiled weakly.

'So, this little problem of yours. Has it something to do with those two lads you dragged in here with you?' Sweeney pointed to a monitor in the corner of the room. The screen was split in four; in the bottom right hand corner he could see Kinch and Khaled sitting by the bar.

*I hope I'm not making a big mistake.* 'Yeah, I'm afraid so.'

'They don't exactly look like anything to worry about. The young one looks like fuckin ET, bundled up in that hoody of his. Here man, down the hatch.' Sweeney raised his glass and gestured for Omar to do the same.

'I don't really want...'. Omar protested.

'Don't take no for an answer Wilde, you know that. Now down it!.'

With no choice in the matter, Omar swallowed the large glass of absinthe. It shot through his system like molten lava.

'Good man, that's what I like to see.' Cahill refilled the glass. 'A bit of fuckin balls. Now what's up with these toerags?'

Omar struggled to regain his composure. 'Do you remember we talked about your expertise with bombmaking equipment the last time I was here?'

Cahill raised his bushy eyebrows. 'Planning to blow up the Independent offices, are you Omar? Heard they pay shite these days but perhaps a little excessive.' He laughed.

Omar smiled and took a deep breath. 'It's the young lad, the one in the grey hoody.'

Cahill took a proper look. 'Glum looking fucker isn't he?'

'Well I wouldn't say you'd exactly be in top form if you had 10 kilos of dynamite strapped to your chest on a hot night.'

Cahill spit out his drink. 'What? You're fucking kidding me right?'

Omar shook his head. 'Afraid not.'

'What in God's name...?'

'You're a well connected man. You must have heard all about the undercover Al Qaeda cell that's 'supposedly' operating out of a Mosque on Camden street.'

Cahill widened his eyes. 'I've heard rumours. Please tell me you didn't bring one of those crazy mother fuckers into my club and strapped? Are you fucking mad?' Cahill moved towards Omar, his bulky frame tense and threatening.

‘Sorry Bernie, but I had no choice, honest. You were the only one I could think of who could get the bloody thing off him.’

‘Jesus Omar, when I said I owed you a favour...’

‘I know, it’s a lot to ask.’

‘These guys are another level of fucking crazy. How the fuck did you get mixed up with this shit?’ Cahill paced up and down the room staring at the screen.

‘It’s a long bloody story. Don’t ask for the details now. Let’s just say Christ Church Cathedral would have been looking like Baghdad Central tonight if I hadn’t talked him down. He’s just a kid. These bastards are experts at twisting their minds.’

The club owner swallowed down a glassful of absinthe. ‘No fucking kidding but it’s not my problem and I want that kid out of my club right now.’ He ran to pick up the phone.

Omar moved towards him and shouted, ‘Just wait a second Bernie. I have a proposition.’

Bernie clutched the phone like a semi-automatic. ‘You have ten seconds.’

‘We have no-where else to go and those fuckers will rip that boy apart for changing his mind. Just consider it an act of humanity, your civic duty, saving the Republic from another invader of a kind. That is your expertise, isn’t it?’ Omar knew he was teetering on the edge of a very high building with that one.

‘You’re one cheeky bastard Wilde. Never saw this side of you before.’ Cahill hesitated, put down the phone, glanced at the screen, and pulled up a chair beside Omar. His eyes were cold as ice. ‘If I do this, we’re even, and don’t you ever darken my doorstep again. Understood.’ His voice was pulled as thin and taut as a tightrope wire.

‘Understood.’ Omar could feel a bead of sweat travel down the back of his neck.

‘Ok, take the boy to Diana’s place on Bachelor’s Walk. You remember where it is?’

Omar remembered only too well Ms. Diana Flaunt, Madam Sin to her friends. She operated a notorious brothel out of a swanky apartment on the banks of the Liffey. A stone’s throw from the heart of Dublin’s Financial District, it housed sixteen prostitutes charging anything up to two hundred and twenty euros an hour. Sounded like a lot, but only amounted to a mere two nights’ drinking bout for the affluent clientele who frequented the place at all hours. Omar had met Cahill and Diana there several times while working on Cowen’s piece. During those short visits, he’d seen all sorts: thirty-something stockbrokers out for a quick lunchtime thrill; ageing civil servants, the white mark of their wedding rings clearly visible on their shaking left hands; well-known politicians; prominent members of the media; priests, imams, pastors, you name it. They’d shuffled through the door ogling the line of juicy girls presented to them with the eyes of hungry beasts. *Ah yes, sex the great equalizer.* The feisty twenty-eight-year-old Madam, herself a hooker of no small repute, watched over proceedings with an eagle eye: the fifty thousand euro she earned a year a paltry sum compared to the millions earned by her silent bosses. Still, she seemed happy enough, although Omar suspected the English woman might one day find herself the attractive face of an industry under tighter and tighter surveillance from the Gardai special operative forces.

‘Yes, I remember.’ Omar’s head buzzed, the absinthe kicking in.

‘There’s a guy called Mc Caffrey, does the security night shift there. An expert with explosives. Used to work closely with me, you don’t need to know any more. I’ll fill him in. I can trust him to keep his mouth shut. I’ll get Goldy to walk you guys there, make sure you don’t come to any harm.’ Cahill glanced at the boys on the screen. Kinch stood with a note between his teeth, the crotch of a buxom brunette one inch from his face. ‘Now get them out of here! All I need is the motherfucker to press the button by mistake and blow us all to hell.’

Omar nodded and moved at speed towards the door. 'Thanks Bernie.'  
'I won't say, anytime,' replied the irritated looking ex-IRA man.

The absinthe was starting to take serious effect. Omar stumbled through the glittering room towards the boys. He clutched his stomach. 'Not feeling so good boys. Things are out of focus...'

'I know what you mean.' Kinch looked dazed. 'Cool, eh? That absinthe stuff?'

Omar shouted. 'Jesus, tell me he didn't have any?' pointing at Khaled.

Khaled raised his head. 'Do you think I would drink the Devil's juice?'

Kinch raised an eyebrow, and chuckled to himself.

The bulky bouncer descended the staircase, and walked up beside them. 'I hear I'm yer escort for the night, boys.'

Kinch looked at Omar, his eyebrows forming a silent question.

'Listen lads, Goldy here is going to take ye to a spot where they can get that thing off. If you don't mind I'm just going to take a second and follow on. Feeling pretty rough after that fucking stuff he gave me to drink in there.'

Khaled looked worried, 'You're not coming?'

'Don't worry. Goldy and Kinch will look after you, right Kinch?' Omar shook his head vigorously. 'I'll follow as soon as I know I'm not going to puke my ring.'

Kinch understood. 'I suppose. Yeah, right. Where are we going?'

'Just follow Goldy, and I'll be right behind you guys. Jesus, my head!'

'Right then lads, follow me.' Goldy smiled. His teeth shone like a jeweller's window. The letters L.O.V.E. were etched into his four front teeth.

Kinch nodded to Omar, and ushered Khaled up the stairs in front of him. 'Don't be long man.'

Omar suddenly felt very faint, and sat against the mirrored wall. He could see his own reflection undulate in the mirror front of him, morph and spin until he could no longer recognise himself, the music twisting his senses into an unfamiliar, grotesque space.

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*The room spins like a carousel; bikini-clad girls, like graceful circus performers, stand on the backs of their gilded horses, sliding their tanned bodies along the poles of the carousel. Their voices lush and syrupy gush through the room; a cacophony of sound like demented Djinn urging their victims to their fate.*

**Zara:** Fancy a ride Mister?

**The Djinn:** (*They sing*)

Out on the road from west Marin  
In a cloud of dust I met two djinn  
One bright as pride and thin  
The other was fat and black as sin  
Isn't this how all good tales begin?

**Omar:** (*Rubs his eyes.*) Definitely going mad!

**Sila:** *(In red velvet bodice and black suspenders, a feather boah wrapped around her slim shoulders. She writhes and weaves atop a shiny black carousel horse.)* Do you recognise me Tchiki? *(She wraps the boah around her crotchless bodice, bends forward, places her fingers in the lobes of her vagina and stretches it wide, until the space between her lips opens to the size of a head.)* Do you know me yet? *(Her voice morphs and twists, deepens to the sound of a dull speeded down forty five.)*

**Omar:** I don't know you foul ghoul. Leave me be.

*(He moves towards the staircase. The seven ghouls laugh raucously in the background.)*

**Sila:** *(Her shape begins to twist into another form, the voice modulating to a sound that Omar recognises.)* Tchiki?

**Omar:** Flora?

*(He looks up; his wife looks handsome, her neck draped with scarlet pearls; the gold-tinged embroidery of her bodice catches the light from the ceiling, hugs her curves, her white blouse open to her breastbone, the billowing white skirt blowing as though a soft breeze had entered the room. A garland of flowers sits on her long golden curls like a spring mountain in the light of the morning sun.)*

**Flora:** Miss Florentyna Molka from here out my sweet little man.

*(She walks with a heavily pregnant cow on a lead, a red silk bow around its thick neck. The cow's eyelashes are unnaturally long and black, its eyes like hazel coloured diamonds.)*

**Flora:** Would you like to milk her Tchiki? She'd like that.

*(The cow bats its eyelids, smiles, and Omar feels an erection grow to the size of the Manhattan skyline. Omar covers himself with shame, his eyes bashful and pleading.)*

**Omar:** I can give you...well, you know...Flora.

**Flora:** Oh Tchiki

**Omar:** Yes my dear.

**Flora:** *(her voice cracking.)* Ca tremble un peu la coeur?

**Omar:** امي اد تن آل *(For you always)*

**Zara:** Ms. Florentyna. You've got a customer.

*(She points to a fat, bald man, bulging eyes, lips like overdone sausages. His tie hangs around his neck like a redundant noose. He waves a one hundred euro note in his right hand.)*

**Flora:** Gotta run.

*(She sashays across the room; loosens her bodice so that her breasts ooze over the top.)*

**Omar:** Suppose so.

*(Omar grabs his hat, stumbles up the stairs and out onto Dame Street. Cars, taxis and buses screech by. Brightly painted pubs, their gilded window frames glistening in the street lights; a cacophony of chat and loud searing music oozes from within the vast chambers; clusters of mini-skirted girls, and drunken lads gather around the entrance sucking on their fags.)*

**Omar:** Oh bloody hell, what was that?

*(Turns into the Temple Bar; trips along the cobblestones, a dark shadow following his steps like a ghost. Gretta crosses the street towards him, dressed in a tight denim mini-skirt and gold sparkly high heels. Her dark nipples push like small iron bullets through her purple, strapless top; the stump of her long arm, bright pink, in the light of the street lamp overhead. She glides along the pavement, spots Omar and leers.)*

**Gretta:** You took me for a whore – dirty bastard!

**Omar:** Me...I never.

*(He walks quickly, a group of black-clad youths emerge from the arch of Meeting House Square; cross in front of him towards the lengthening queue for Temple Bar Music Centre.)*

**Gretta:** I like you for it – dirty, sexy man.

*(She carresses her right breast with her good arm, a cluster of brightly coloured bangles jingle, tingle against her skin.)*

**Omar:** I must be dreaming.

*(He rubs his eyes, opens them slowly. Breda Keane's round pleasant face emerges from the shadows under the arch.)*

**Mrs. Keane:** Omar Wilde! *(She stares at Gretta dubiously.)* Out and about with 'other' women I see. Bold boy!

*(She waves a wrinkled finger, her voice full of aimiable chastisement. Her eyes follow Gretta from the top of her raven hair to the edge of her delicate ankles. The younger woman backs away, crosses the street, and disappears into the crowd in front of the Music Centre.)*

**Mrs. Keane:** Have an eye for the Negro woman, do ya?

**Omar:** (*Hassled*) Don't know the girl at all. She just asked me the time, honest. Imagine, three times in one day to see you. Mad! Out for a bite? Me, I'm just meeting some friends, over the river. Lovely evening, no light though. But who needs it. City lights and all. Gotta go...

*(She follows him the length of Eustace Street; smiles out of the corner of her mouth)*

**Mrs. Keane:** What a load of horseshite. Wait til I speak to that wife of yours!

**Omar:** Flora knows all about it. Everything. No use...

*(They turn right, past the red painted façade of the Temple Bar. Sir William Temple and Lady Martha Temple step down from the wall gracefully. Omar shakes his head and sighs. Sir William, dressed in a red velvet doublet, green satin knee breeches, silk stockings, white lace trimming around his strong neck, takes his Lady wife delicately by the hand. She wears a matching green silk gown similarly trimmed with white lace, her golden hair neatly bundled in a silk kerchief.)*

**Sir William:** If you don't mind me saying, Mister Wilde, she doesn't look your type at all.

**Lady Martha:** Not at all. *(shakes her head like a disapproving school teacher.)* Tut tut.

**Sir William:** That's right dear. Not at all! *(They look at each other disapprovingly.)* We hear you are a man of the world; a renaissance man, so to speak. Would love to hear your impressions on Lord Chichester's 'Articles of Plantation.' Immediate removal of the Irish to specially designated areas, replacement with 'loyal subjects'. Hear, hear. What does the Moor think of that?

**Omar:** *(Moans audibly)*. I don't know any Lord Chichester sir. Just need to get to Bachelor's Walk.

**Sir William:** All in good time my boy. Why not follow us into our lovely home: I can offer a fine malt whiskey; shipped in straight from the depths of Scotland.

*(Brushes them aside, Mrs. Keane racing behind him, her stout heels clacking loudly on the cobblestones.)*

**Omar:** I have no time for this I'm afraid. Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!

**Lady Martha:** Well really! How rude!

*(Omar and Mrs. Keane run past a pair of black buskers, oversized jeans hang around the cracks of their muscular behinds, Mandela's head clings to the well defined chest of the singer, the other's dreadlocks piled into a wollen rasta cap.)*

**Busker:** Yo, we at war

We at war with terrorism, racism but most of all we at war with ourselves – Jesus Walks  
God show me the way because the Devil trying to break me down  
– Jesus Walks with me – with me with me with me.

*(The Rasta man sounds like the percussion section of an orchestra; drum and bass oozes from his lips acapella style. He ducks and dives like a cat on hot coals.)*

**Omar:** Wish he was walking with me right now. I need all the help I can get.

**Mrs. Keane:** You have me...and Annie of course. *(She blushes)* Always had a soft spot for you meself Omar. Who says a woman's ever past it? *(She winks a bright blue eye, and laughs suggestively. He smiles nervously turning left into Merchant's Lane.)* You'll be heading across the Liffey then. Gotta stay on this side, case Annie needs me.

**Omar:** *(looks relieved)* Grand then.

**Mrs. Keane:** You just remember there's always a place for you at my table Omar Wilde.

*(She squeezes his left buttock with her hand, winks and walks away.)*

**Omar:** *(He smiles)* Not a bad ol crone.

*(He turns and climbs the stone steps towards Merchant's Arch. A Romanian gypsy argues with two policemen.)*

**Garda Fox:** There's no place for you here.

**Romanian:** I'm doing no harm.

**Garda Coffey:** *(Sternly)* Don't force us to make you.

**Romanian:** My baby is tired.

*(A small baby sleeps in her arms, a crust of snot under its tiny nose.)*

**Garda Fox:** So are we of this shite, night after night. Now you know the law Maria...I don't have to repeat it to you for the thousandth time. Go home!

*(She picks up her baby and Omar slips a euro into into her hand as he passes.)*

**Romanian:** Bless you.

*(She crosses herself. Omar continues on, and down the steps to the bustling Wellington Quay.)*

**Garda Coffey:** *(Shouts)* Sure, you're only encouraging her.

**Omar:** *(mutters under his breath)* Go arrest a real criminal for a change. I can show you one or two.

*(The traffic flows past like rapids. He watches the little man turn to green, and crosses to the Halfpenny Bridge. He climbs the back of the bridge, the wrought iron railings and Victorian lanterns glow against the black of the water. Omar walks upward until the floor beneath him starts to move.)*

**Omar:** What the fuck now?

*(He grabs the railings, and looks down into the water. A large eye emerges from the shiny body underneath. The great beast's skin is streaked and marbled, giving him a peculiar snow-white hue; his forehead wrinkled and serious.)*

**The Whale:** Going to the Northside Sir?

*(Omar continues to cling to the railings as the giant body of the whale glides forward.)*

**Omar:** If you don't mind.

**The Whale:** Hang on.

*(The eye disappears beneath the water, the floor shifts forward slowly, like a moving walkway. Omar clings onto the railing; allows himself to be moved slowly towards the North side of the river. The walkway comes to a stop at the Lower Ormond Quay: a gush of water sprinkles the centre of the bridge like a single sparkling firework. Omar glances back into the waters and the eye opens, the corner of a smile glinting through the dark pupils.)*

**The Whale:** Happy hunting.

*(The eye winks, closes, and submerges beneath the dank Liffey waters.)*

**Omar:** Well that beats Banagher.

*(A group of gulls hover overhead.)*

**Gulls:** *(Squawking loudly)* Duck!

**Omar:** *(Jumps aside suddenly)* What the hell?

*(A large wet turd splatters white over the footpath one inch from his shiny black shoes.)*

**Gulls:** Sorry bout that. George is having a bit of bother with the bowels.

**Omar:** Thanks for that.

*(He doffs his hat, and turns to cross at the lights. The harsh, grating sound of the crossing signal cuts through his brain like a blunt saw. He feels faint and sits down by the statue of the chatting women on Liffey Street Lower. A young man in a green tracksuit, red New York Yankees baseball cap, and white runners sits beside him, his eyes glazed and shot through the colour of his cap.)*

**Junky:** *(Eyes darting around him. Speaks out of the corner of his mouth.)* Need some gear mister? I can look after you.

**Omar:** *(Warily.)* No, that's ok. I just need to sit down a sec. Seeing funny things. Don't know what's up.

*(The junky looks at him and laughs.)*

**Junky:** Bad trip mister, that's all. I can sort that out for you no fuckin bother. *(He puts his left hand into his pocket and pulls out a bag of pills.)* See this little beauty here.

**Omar:** No really it's ok.

**Junky:** *(Holds a blue pill in his hand. His eyes continue to circle around them.)* Now this little baby is the latest in brain reversal technology, a veritable genius she is. *(Omar stares at the blue pill.)* It's called 'The Wizard,' you know why? *(Omar shakes his head.)* Because my friend, all you have to do, is pop this little baby, tap your feet together three times, say the words 'There's no place like home,' and you're right back where you started, sober as a judge. Fuckin amazin!

**Omar:** *(Interested.)* Really?

**Junky:** Does my Granny fart in bed? Fuckin A! Now you look like a man whose hard drive could do with a wipe? I can throw you this minor miracle for a mere fifty euro.

**Omar:** *(Loudly)* Fifty bloody euro? Are you mad?

**Junky:** *(Puts his hand over Omar's mouth.)* Sssshhhh! Keep it fuckin down Mister. Do you think fuckin miracles come cheap? Even Jesus would pay for this boy. Forty five is the best I can do.

**Omar:** *(Hesitates. Rummages in his pocket and pulls out a fifty euro note.)* You're not messin with me? It's not ecstasy or acid or something; I never heard of this Wizard thing. Just fecking promise me!

**Junky:** *(Eyes the money.)* You can go and look it up on the Web if you don't believe me. Trust me, this is as fuckin real as it gets man! Only a poxbottle with an appetite for grief would mess with his clients. This is my business and you're my client and that's as real as it gets for me Mister, get it?

**Omar:** *(Takes the pill from him and hands him the money.)* Anything I should know about this? Any after effects?

**Junky:** A head as clear the Pope's conscience, that's all.

*(Omar looks down at the pill. It begins to move in his hand, two little eyes opening. It smiles at him like a cartoon M&M, and speaks in a tiny squeaky voice, 'Eat Me!' He looks at the junky, who smiles.)*

**Omar:** Right then.

*(He pops it in his mouth. A blinding light flashes through his skull. He feels his body drop to the ground, his head beats off the seat on the way and all is black. He wakes up at the feet of the statue on Liffey Street. The chatting women have come to life)*

**Betty:** I don't know what that lad handed you but it rightly messed with you my dear.  
*(The old lady looks at him kindly, a bag of shopping by her side.)*

**Mary:** Been out cold for a good half hour, you have. Isn't that right Betty?

**Betty:** No word of a lie. You've been droolin all over my Sunday best shoes. Not a pretty sight. Shouldn't be hanging out with such wasters. Shame on you!

**Mary:** Give the poor lad a break Betty. He doesn't look the best.

**Betty:** No wonder. You young ones are always at the drugs these days. You should get out there and get yourself a good job and stop all that messin, do you here!

*(Omar struggles to his feet, rubs his head.)*

**Omar:** Sorry. I don't know what happened. But you're not...

**Betty:** We're not what?

**Omar:** *(Moans)* Oh never mind. Sorry to bother you. I'd better get going.

**Mary:** That's right young fella and mind yourself. If you ever want a chat, we're right here. Going nowhere.

**Omar:** No kidding.

*(Smiles, doffs his hat and walks along Bachelor's Walk towards O Connell Bridge. His head continues to spin, the affect of the absinthe still rolling through his system. He turns left into the Bachelor's Walk apartments and rings on the red buzzer.)*

**Intercom:** Now state your business.

**Omar:** *(Looks at the piece of paper in his pocket.)* I want to see the Wizard.

*(The door clicks open. Climbs three flights of steps and knocks twice on the red door. A good looking brunette – eyes heavy with mascara, lips a lurid red – opens the door. She is dressed in red patent high heels, a tight red velvet bodice and black leather trousers, a whip in her right hand, and a black folder in the other.)*

**Diana:** *(Stares at him from top to toe and smiles seductively)* Omar Wilde, how the hell are you?

**Omar:** Hi Diana. Are my friends here?

**Diana:** We've been taking right good care of them ducky, don't you worry. Come on in. Just doing the accounts. Can't be too careful these days. Light fingers everywhere.

*(She winks. Omar smiles and follows her into the small living room. Two girls, scantily clad in silk negligees and suspenders, sit around a small round table painting their nails. Kinch is at the other side of the table, a squeezebox in his hands; a young Asian girl draped around his shoulders. He looks up and acknowledges Omar, his eyes roll around his head.)*

**Kinch:** The Maestro! At last.

*(The room spins, Kinch's face changes shape before his eyes, his nose grows and then retracts, his eyes on the end of wires like joke-shop balls. Omar tries to continue the conversation.)*

**Omar:** Sorry, not feeling the best. Still out of it. Where's the boy?

**Kinch:** They're sorting him out. Took him to a warehouse in the street behind...in case the whole thing goes *(throws his hands into the air)* BOOM! We wouldn't want that. These lovely ladies splattered from here to the Phoenix Park...God No!

*(He smiles at the Asian girl who is stroking the inside of his leg.)*

**Omar:** *(Anxiously)* You should have gone with him.

**Kinch:** Had no choice. The guy, Malone – I think – said I had to stay, but not to worry, and they'd be back as soon as it was sorted. And Mimi here's been keeping me company.

*(He slurs his words, his eyes red and moist.)*

**Diana:** Come on luv. Relax yourself there. *(Pushes Omar onto the red velvet couch and sits beside him stroking his hair.)* Now you look like a man who could do with a little fun. I'll take care of you myself if you like. Sixty euro a pop and worth every penny let me tell you.

*(She whispers into Omar's right ear, her breath like a Mistral wind. He shuffles uncomfortably; his eye falls on his wedding ring.)*

**Diana:** Don't mind that. If I was you, I'd take that hunk of lead off your finger and let me remind you what a real woman feels like.

*(She rubs the edge of her whip across his crotch. Omar glances at Kinch.)*

**Kinch:** *(Stares at the Asian girls breasts as she straddles him in the chair.)* I never saw a thing Omar, if you're worried about that.

**Omar:** *(Diana unbuttons the top buttons of his shirt.)* I don't know if I...

**Diana:** Oh yes you do!

*(She cuffs him to her, places her left hand on his crotch, and pulls him slowly off the couch, guides him to the bedroom off the main living room. He follows her, unable to control his lengthening hard-on. She shuts the door behind them, rips open his belt, and his overlarge trousers fall to the floor around his ankle.)*

**Diana:** Well, that saved me a little extra work.

*(She unclicks two fasteners on both sides of her leather trousers, and they fall to the floor. She is wearing suspenders, and a tiny red velvet g-string.)*

**Omar:** *(Omar moans.)* Just don't hurt me too much, please.

**Diana:** *(Softly.)* What was that you said, dear boy?

**Omar:** *(Nervously.)* I never did this...

**Diana:** No but you wanted to, I can tell. *(She pushes him to the floor.)* Get on your knees!

*(Her voice is hard and direct. He falls to his knees, and she straddles him from behind.)*

**Diana:** I could tell you needed a good hiding, from the minute I saw you, you bold boy!

*(She runs the whip the length of his spine. He watches in the mirrored wall as she raises the whip and brings it crashing onto his right buttock.)*

**Omar:** *(Screaming)* Mother of Jaysus!

**Diana:** You like that don't you, you very naughty fella, so naughty I'll have to teach you a proper lesson, you dirty pig!

*(He feels the whip flame his skin once more, and is surprised by the dart of pleasure that runs the length of his hard prick.)*

**Omar:** Please.

*(His voice is soft and pleading.)*

**Diana:** I'm going to show you who's boss around here, you filthy boy.

*(She turns him over and straddles him. She begins to take on another form. He rubs his eyes. She waves the whip in her hand, and it changes shape into a black beaded rosary: the same that his grandmother had wrapped around her hands on her deathbed.)*

**Omar:** Holy Mary, Mother of God!

*(He looks up and Diana is in a long black dress, and starched nun's habit. She turns him over once again, swirls the beads around her head and brings them crashing once more onto his behind.)*

A right thrashing is what you deserve Omar Wilde, for all that interfering with yourself, those dirty thoughts. I've seen the way you look at me, you dirty boy.

**Omar:** Please Sister, I didn't mean. I just need to be touched, to touch someone, and she won't let me.

**Diana:** No wonder with those filthy hands: you never wash. What you need is a good ride, and I'm going to ride you like a prize mare at Cheltenham.

*(He is on all fours. She sits on his back, and whips his backside.)*

**Diana:** Go on boy. Show me what you're made of.

*(Omar begins to shuffle around the room on his knees. She continues to beat his hind quarters.)*

**Diana:** That's it boy, move.

**Omar:** No more, Flora...no more.

*(He shuffles towards the end of the bed, collapses, and begins to cry.)*

**Diana:** Ah now, no need for that.

*(She places her arm around him and he nestles his head into her breast.)*

**Diana:** It's all just a bit of fun.

*(She caresses the top of his head. He closes his eyes and continues to sob. Her voice changes pitch and modulates to the familiar Middle Eastern tones of his mother's voice.)*

**Diana:** I'll take care of you love. Don't be afraid.

*(He keeps his eyes shut. His mother's sallow face, hazel eyes and raven hair appear before him. She smiles, reaches out to touch him.)*

**His Mother:** Feeling better luv.

*(He stretches himself across her lap. She cradles his head in her arms as he slips into sublime darkness.)*

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'Omar, wake up!'

He felt a hand strike the numbness out his face.

'Omar!'

Diana's voice was shrill and harsh. Pain gripped his skull. Her features filled his eyeview: a pretty, overdone face with a hard, cold stare.

'For God's sake. I have a client due in fifteen minutes. You've been out cold for ages. Snap out of it.' She shook his shoulders, and pulled him to his feet.

The room snapped into focus. 'Where am I?'

'At Diana's, remember? Now come on. We've gotta get a move on.'

Omar struggled to his feet. The right side of his brain felt like it had been crushed by a hammer.

'Anytime you fancy another 'clearing' of your emotions, you know where I am. Now cough up mate.' Diana stuck out her hand, her long sharp nails like tiny beautiful weapons. Omar picked up his trousers, and rummaged for some money. He handed her sixty euro and she smiled.

'Right, let's go see what those young ones of yours are up to.'

He pulled on his trousers and shirt, and followed Diana back to the living room. Kinch was in the corner with the Asian girl perched beside him. He clutched an accordion, his fingers tripped over the keys while Mimi poked at his ribs.

'Please, play that one again. It is so vely fun. I like.'

Kinch's eyes rolled around his head like stray marbles. 'Pour toi le monde mon poupee.' He began to play the squeeze box. The music filled the room, and the girl clapped with delight. Kinch sang, his eyes shut.

Dans le port d'Amsterdam  
Y a des marins qui chantent  
Les rêves qui les hantent  
Au large d'Amsterdam

The two girls at the table jumped to their feet, laughed, and waltzed around the room, their feather boahs swung around their ample bosoms like dragons in a Chinese parade. Diana smiled, put her things on the couch and grabbed Omar.

'Come on luv, let's give it a lash.' She spun Omar around the room.

Kinch continued to sing.

Dans le port d'Amsterdam  
Y a des marins qui meurent

Pleins de bière et de drames  
Aux premières lueurs

He growled at the top of his voice, and squeezed the accordion with determination. The others circled the room, spun, wheeled, and swirled around each other.

Enfin ils boivent aux dames  
Qui leur donnent leur joli corps  
Qui leur donnent leur vertu  
Pour une pièce en or

'I'm killed laughin.' Diana let go of Omar, who spun empty handed onto the couch. The girls continued to twirl and twist: the music building to a crescendo.

Kinch screamed into the room like a man possessed.

Dans le port d'Amsterdam!  
Dans le port d'Amsterdam!

He stopped playing, stared straight ahead of him, and started to scream.

'Mother, No! MOTHER!'

The Asian girl tried to calm him. 'There's no-one there sweetie, no-one.'

'It's not her. It's a demon.' Kinch's eyes were wide and wild. He stared and pointed at a blank wall.

Omar moved towards Kinch but Diana jumped in front of him. 'Oh For God's sake. Is everyone off their heads around here today? Sit down! There's nothing there.' She attempted to guide Kinch towards the table.

Now feeling almost a hundred percent sober, Omar decided to take things under his control. 'It's this absinthe stuff. God knows what else they put in it, bloody bastards. Kinch, you're alright lad.' Omar turned to Mimi. 'Can you get some water please?' She ran into the kitchenette.

Kinch grabbed a whip by the wall, jumped onto a chair, and swiped at the air. 'You cursed creature. I don't know you. My mother died. She's gone. That's all! Leave me be!'

Diana screamed, 'The fucking chandelier, Jaysus!'

Kinch's whip sliced the air and landed full force on the faux chandelier; splinters of glass shattered, and spun through the air like tiny fire-flies. 'Leave me alone!'

The girls ducked.

'Get out of here you feckin looper, before I get Malone to come back and sort you out.' Diana grabbed Kinch by the scruff of the neck, and turfed him out the door. He ran down the corridor and disappeared.

Omar grabbed his jacket. 'Shite! I'd better go after him. Give me Malone's number so I can ring and find out what's happening with the other one.'

'I knew you were trouble as soon as I laid eyes on you.' Diana waved her scissor-sharp nails at Omar. 'Give me your phone.' She grabbed Omar's mobile, and tapped the numbers into it. 'Now get out of here and don't come back!' She slammed the door behind him.

Omar descended into the street. Kinch had fallen on the side of the street and vomited into a flowerpot. Garda Fox bent over him with a disapproving look. Omar stood to the side and

watched, while deciding how best to approach the Guard. It was the same fella he had pissed off not long ago, so he would have to go easy.

Garda Fox held his nose. 'Young man, I suggest you move yourself home and sober up before you spew onto half of Dublin.'

Kinch breathed with difficulty. He turned his face towards the unimpressed Guard. 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.' He fell about, the whip still in his hand, and slashed the air like a drunken swordsman.

'What kind of shite are you talking? Anarchy is it? Are you one of those troublemakers that likes to cause havoc in the stands; beating on poor innocent soccer supporters?' The Guard attempted to grab the tumbling man. 'Give me that whip.'

Kinch danced around the guard like a marionette. 'Do you know Sergeant Pluck, that the gross and net result of it is that people who spend most of their natural lives riding iron bicycles over the rocky roadsteads of this parish get their personalities mixed up with the personalities of their bicycle as a result of the interchanging of the atoms of each of them and you would be surprised at the number of people in these parts who nearly are half people and half bicycles?' He laughed madly, and knocked off the Garda's hat with the whip.

'Right, that's it. I'll sort you out, you drunken scut! A good lock-up will sober you up.' Garda Fox grabbed Kinch by the scruff of his jacket, and pulled him towards the Garda car parked opposite. Omar raced over to intercede.

'Sorry Guard. It's alright. He's my...son. A little under the weather, but I'll take it from here. Don't you worry.' Omar grabbed Kinch by the arm.

The Guard looked unimpressed. 'Your son is it? What's your name...and his?'

'Omar Wilde, guard and...Owen.' Kinch laughed out loud. 'Owen, come on lad. I'll get you home.'

'Alright then, but you better have a strong word with this son of yours, Mr. Wilde. Attacking a police officer with a whip, pissed out of his mind, will get him in a lot of trouble. I'll be keeping an eye out for him, so you better sort him out, do you hear?'

A tourist horse and trap pulled up beside them. The driver saluted Omar.

'Omar, in a spot of trouble there?'

'Howya Matty? No, no bother. Just looking after my son, Owen here.' Omar winked noticeably, the Guard standing behind him.

'You know this man?' asked Garda Fox.

'Course I do. One of our finest journalists, Guard. If you're lucky he might do a piece on the strength and bravery of our fine police force, isn't that right Omar?' The cabman spoke with a smile two millimetres shy of a laugh.

'Less of the cheek, but alright then. Will you give this man a hand to take his son home?'

The cabman winked. 'Leave it to me sarge. I'll sort them out.'

Garda Fox helped Omar to pile Kinch into the back of the horse cab. 'Right, I've had enough of this. I'm off.' He crossed the road, got into the garda car, and drove across O'Connell bridge at speed.

'No fear he'd ever be stopped for a ticket.' The cabman finished chewing on a piece of gum and shot it through the air in the direction of the river. It landed on the boater of a passing Joycean. 'Bullseye! That lot have been giving me a pain up my hole all day.'

'Thanks Matty, but now that he's bugged off, I need to take this lad and head to sort something out.' Omar hopped out of the cab, and took Kinch by the arm.

‘No bother man. How do you know this fella?’

‘Long story. He’s a nice lad really. Was a bit worse for wear myself earlier. Bloody absinthe stuff some fecker gave us to drink. Deadly.’ Omar wrapped himself around Kinch. ‘Anyway, have to head. Thanks again.’

‘Anytime Omar. Going to drop the horse home and head over to Mulligan’s later. Do a nighttime shift with the horseless carriages. Good spot to hang out and wait for a call.’ The cabman glanced at the time on his mobile. ‘Better get a move on. Drop over later if you’ve nothing better to do. Not much happening around town tonight, so I’ll probably be sitting on my arse half the night.’

‘I’m a little occupied, but you never know.’

The cabby whipped the grey mare gently, and began to ease her into the flow of nighttime traffic. The large bells around the mare’s neck jingled, the clop of her iron hoofs like hollow music against the tarred streets.

Kinch raised his head, ‘Cast a cold eye on life, on death. Horseman, pass by!’

‘Right, enough of the poetry. We’re going to get you sobered up

They turned right into Litton Lane. A young boy passed by on a bicycle. He was dressed in a red velvet confirmation suit, black tie, and held a copy of the Qu’uran in his right hand. Omar blinked. As the boy passed, he smiled. He had Flora’s green eyes, as recognisable to Omar as his own. ‘Ruairi.’

Ruairi stared straight through Omar and cycled past singing in Egyptian.

Mama zamanha gaya  
Gaya baedeh shiwaya,  
Gayba al'ab wa hagat  
Gayba maha shanta

Omar recognised it immediately as the song his Mother used to sing to him when she put him to bed as a child. Omar watched silently as the boy disappeared around the corner.

## Chapter 40 - Bláithín

The sound of a mobile penetrated Bláithín's dreams. She jerked awake. Hanan lay beside her, naked and in the depths of sleep. She glanced at the clock on the stereo. *Half past Midnight. Damn! Missed the concert.* The phone rang again. *Who the hell is ringing at this time?* She extricated herself from Hanan's arms and raced to the couch. *Not my phone. Same ringtone. Funny.* Kinch's name flashed on the screen of Hanan's phone. She hesitated, struck by a wave of panic and guilt, and picked up the phone.

'Hi, it's Bláithín.'

Kinch's voice was odd; slurred, and distant. 'Bláith, what are you doing with Hanan?...oh never mind. Shit, I feel sick...' She heard the sound of vomiting and then another voice.

'Hello.' It was an older man's voice. She thought she recognised it.

'Hi. This is Bláithín, Kinch's...friend. Who's this?'

'Omar Wilde. You know, Flora's husband.' *What the hell are they doing together?*

'Kinch isn't feeling great. Is Hanan there? We need to have a word.'

She looked Hanan's direction. A gentle snore hummed through the room. 'He's asleep.'

'Can you wake him? It's urgent!' Omar sounded anxious, determined, unlike his normally hesitant self.

'Yeah...Hang on.' She walked over to Hanan, shook his shoulders and pushed the mobile in his face.

'Wha?' His eyes opened slowly.

'Sorry babe, but it's Omar Wilde, for you. He's with Kinch. Says it's urgent.'

He looked at her, his face forming a question.

She whispered. 'Don't ask me. I don't have a clue.'

Hanan shook his head, and took the phone. Bláithín signalled to him to put it up to her ear, so she could listen too. 'Hi.'

'Hello Hanan, I'm a friend of Kinch's and I have your brother with me here. There's been a bit of drama here tonight. I need you to meet us immediately so I can explain.'

'Khaled? With you? What time...?' He glanced at the clock. 'What's happened? Is he ok?'

'Yeah, fine now. Can you meet us on the James Joyce Bridge in fifteen minutes? Are you far away?'

Hanan raised his eyebrows at Bláithín. 'No, really close...but I don't understand?'

'Just trust me,' said Omar

'Ok, fifteen on the bridge.'

'Right.' The phone went dead.

Bláithín threw her hands in the air. 'What the hell is going on?'

'I don't have a fucking clue. This guy Omar...isn't that your one the music teacher's husband?' He looked confused.

'Yep. What the fuck's Kinch doing with him, under the circumstances?...And your brother? Jesus!'

Hanan pulled on his clothes quickly. 'Are you coming?'

Bláithín grabbed a large glass of water. ‘I suppose. Think I’ll beat Kinch to a pulp...but what the fuck!’ She pulled on a pair of jeans, tshirt and knee-high flat boots. ‘No more of this bodice shit for me. Bye bye Molly!’

They walked down Winetavern Street towards the Liffey. The grey bunker-like Civic Offices loomed over the river; cast a dark shadow across the moon-lit night. They turned left onto Merchants Quay, the night-time traffic drifting past. Two homeless people slept on cardboard boxes on the edge of the road. This was a part of Dublin largely deserted at this time of the night. Bláithín felt a little nervous as they passed along Ushers Quay. At the foot of the Liberties it was not unknown to cross paths with the city’s junkies, strung out and looking for a fix. She thanked god she had never tried heroin. It led to a kind of desperation that even she couldn’t touch. The hijacking of an unsuspecting passersby with a potentially HIV-infected syringe was the latest way of feeding the habit, and this was not something she wanted to experience. She kept a sharp eye on her surroundings.

‘Are we going to tell Kinch...about us?’ Hanan asked.

‘Is there an us?’

He looked at her carefully, took her hand in his. ‘I hope so.’

She hesitated and stared at the River. ‘Ok then.’

He smiled, and pulled her under his arm. They walked in silence towards the bridge.

Bláithín could see Kinch lean over the bridge and stare into the water. The other two stood beside him. Kinch stood up to look at them as they approached. ‘You two look very cosy. Something I should know.’ His voice was sharp and cold.

‘It’s none of your fucking business, is it?’ Bláithín could feel a slow, necessary anger seep through her system.

‘So much for the understanding best friend.’ Kinch propped himself up against the bridge edge precariously. His face was pale as a death mask, his words slurred and angry. ‘Didn’t take you long to bone my woman.’

‘You might remember, Mister Holier-than-thou, that the last time I saw you, you were starkers and banging like a mad thing with...’ Bláithín stopped and looked at Omar. He looked wrecked, and was clearly embarrassed at being a part of this domestic dispute.

Kinch glared at Bláithín. His eyes pleaded silently.

Hanan interrupted swiftly. ‘Never mind all that. What the hell are you doing here?’ He walked towards his brother who stood silently by Omar’s side, his eyes cast to the ground.

‘I’m sorry, I...’ Khaled’s voice trailed away. He began to cry gently, and took a step towards his brother.

Hanan looked at Omar and waited for an explanation, Khaled rested the top of his head against his brother’s chest as he cried.

‘He’s had a very rough day. I think you should just get him home. He’ll tell you about it on the way. Ok?’ Omar touched the boy on the shoulder.

‘Yes, Mr. Wilde...but what about the Imam?’ His face was creased with worry.

‘I’ll sort that out for you. You just sort yourself out.’

Bláithín had no idea what they were talking about, but Khaled seemed comforted by what Omar had to say.

Hanan looked concerned. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘You will soon,’ Omar replied, signalling to Hanan not to push his brother.

‘Can you take me home, Hanan?’ Khaled asked, his face grey and fragile.

Bláithín could see Hanan’s surprise. His normally truculent brother needed him, wanted his help. Hanan turned to Bláithín. ‘I’m going. I’ll give you a buzz tomorrow. Ok?’ He kissed her gently on the forehead, and whispered in her ear ‘No more reason to be afraid. I’m here. Promise.’ She nodded silently. Hanan put his arm around his young brother, and guided him in the direction of City Hall.

Bláithín suddenly felt very awkward. On one side stood the man who had smashed her heart to pieces by banging her friend right in front of her; on the other side, innocent and unaware, the cuckolded husband. She didn’t know Omar as such, but the few times she’d met him he’d struck her as friendly and kind, although a bit of an eejit to be blunt about it. The kind of man who drifted through life thinking the best of people, even when they thought the worst of him. She could imagine how his passivity had driven a woman like Flora to dementia. How she ever married him in the first place was a complete mystery. But, all the same, that was no justification for the traitorous bitch to seduce Bláithín’s man. There were rules about that sort of thing, even in bloody Poland. She looked at Kinch. He was clearly terrified that she was about to reveal him for the cheating bastard that he was. A wave of powerful calm washed over her like winter sleep. For the first time that day she could see clearly. She knew what she had to do to suck the stress out of the day, to bring some resolution to her rampant anger.

‘Do you mind Omar? I just need a quick word with Kinch.’

Omar nodded. ‘No bother. I’ll just stand over here. Could do with a small break from all this madness.’ Omar walked to the far side of the bridge and stared towards the grandeur of the Four Courts, its Grecian pillared façade and domed roof floodlit and bright against the night sky.

Bláithín walked to within breathing distance of Kinch and spoke clearly and calmly.

‘It’s a miracle I made it through this day thanks to you, but all things considered, I’m willing to forget it all if you promise me one thing?’

Kinch raised his eyebrows. ‘Yeah? Of course. Anything. What?’

‘Tell him.’ She pointed towards Omar. He had his back to them.

‘What? About Flora?’ Kinch looked dumbfounded. ‘Are you mad? It’ll kill him. He adores her. It’s over anyway. We finished it...after you...’ Kinch looked embarrassed and started to play with a box of cigarettes in his hand.

‘Do it! It’s the decent thing. He deserves to know.’ She fixed him with her eyes, spoke clearly and definitely. She looked at her watch. ‘It’s one o’clock. I’m giving you until two thirty. If I don’t get a text telling me you’ve done it I’m phoning him. I have his home number, remember.’

She felt proud of the strength she had summoned from within herself. She could see him look at her with different eyes, and she liked it.

He shuffled from one foot to the other. ‘Ok. Jesus! Is that it? Would you like me to jump off this bridge as well, with a lead weight tied to me of course? “Heav'n has no Rage, like Love to Hatred turn'd, Nor Hell a Fury, like a Woman scorn'd.”’

She laughed. ‘That feckin poetry of yours drives me mad, but it has its uses sometimes. Oh and the bridge, that would be a nice dramatic extra...if you feel like it.’

He scrunched up his features in a twisted smile. ‘Well, O Leary, you’re a tough bitch after all. Who’d have known?’

She felt satisfied with herself, and knew that she had one more thing to do to feel fully rid of this shite day. 'I've got to go. I'll be awake a while more and watching the phone, so don't forget.'

'Head like an elephant. Not a chance.' Kinch doffed his cap, and walked across the bridge towards Omar.

Bláithín signalled a goodbye to them both, and walked back towards Parliament Street.  
*One more thing.*

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 41 - Flora

The light from the television flickered through the otherwise dark room. The sound was muted. Flora lay on the couch drifting in and out of sleep. She had offered to babysit the children after the concert, so that Sandra could get out for an evening. It had been a long day and she was glad to give her ticket to Sandra for the Low concert in Christchurch. She felt exhausted but somehow unable to return to her bed. She opened her eyes briefly. 'The Wizard of Oz' was playing on TCM. *How odd, at one in the morning?* The world seemed out of kilter, twisted and skewed like an amusement-park mirror maze. Flora glanced at the TV again. Dorothy was locked in the Wicked Witch's castle. She could see Auntie Em in a Crystal Ball but couldn't call to her. Flora loved this scene. No matter how many times she had seen it, she was always afraid Dorothy wouldn't escape. She sat watching Judy Garland speak silently into the darkness.

The doorknocker banged loudly, and she jumped off the couch with fright. *Maybe Sandra? Lost the key.* She opened the door. Bláithín stood on the doorstep, her face composed and unyielding. 'Can I come in?' She spoke softly but definitely. There was only one response.

'Yes. Of course.' Flora felt slightly sick, unsure of what was to come. She shut the door and they turned to face each other. 'I, ehm...'

'Let me speak first. Can I...?' Bláithín gestured to the couch.

'Naturally.' She sat in the armchair opposite. Unable to relax, she teetered on the edge, her back as straight as the spine of a hardback.

'I came to tell you that I don't hate you.' She spoke softly.

Flora let out a long breath of air.

'But I do think what you did was despicable.'

Flora sucked it back in. She decided silence was her best option for now.

'I know it's not easy for you and Omar. You're as different as the Virgin Mary and Heidi Fleiss.'

Flora looked at her blankly.

Bláithín continued. 'Listen, I just want you to know that I don't hold anything against you, but I don't ever want to see you again. It's just better that way.' There was no hint of a smile on her face but no anger either: a kind of cold wisdom, a layer of understanding, a gathered maturity that only comes from pain.

Flora recognised this quality. 'I understand...I'm sorry.' She didn't move; she knew that a weeping apology was not what Bláithín was looking for.

'Ok then.' Bláithín stood up to leave. 'Oh, by the way. I met Kinch. He's going to tell Omar. I thought you should know.' Flora thought she saw the hint of a smile on the edge of Bláithín's lips. The young girl waited for a reaction. Dorothy threw the bucket of water over the witch on the screen behind Bláithín's shoulder.

Flora smiled. 'Touché.'

Bláithín nodded. 'Bye then.' She turned the door handle, but hesitated before leaving. 'Maybe you should leave him – Omar. It might be better for everyone.'

Flora nodded silently. *So much you have to learn.*

Flora closed the door. She walked over to the couch slowly and sat down. She waited for the emotion to hit her like a wave, but instead she felt oddly calm, satisfied even. She had never felt good about her deception, but some small part of her almost felt that people like Omar and Bláithín brought it on themselves. It was too easy to fool them. They needed toughening up to survive in the world, the same world in which Flora had carved her own space, out of

isolation, loneliness and cruelty. She was glad to see Bláithín standing up to her. The television continued to flicker in the darkness. The Good Witch, Glenda, was granting Dorothy her three wishes. Flora clicked her heels and mouthed silently to herself, 'There's no place like home, there's no place like home, there's no place like home.'

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 42 - Eumeas

After the night that was in it, and the still ropy state of his young friend, Omar decided he'd take the Cabby's advice and leg it to Mulligans. Everywhere else was jammed with young ones puking their ring and screaming their heads off. At least they could get a quiet coffee and sober up a little. Kinch tripped along after him listlessly. Much to Omar's astonishment, the 'TRAVELLER' men were still perched against the wall of the bridge. Omar felt a wave of nausea pass through him. He stood back and took a close look at them before he passed. They looked different, African – *Must be the second shift*. As always they were out of position. The T and the two Rs threw scraps to the birds over the bridge. One of the Ls talked frantically on a mobile. The other five, EVAEL, stood listlessly against the bridge. Kinch glanced at them and laughed like a madman. He mumbled under his breath. 'A message from Dog,' and continued to laugh.

'Are you ok?' asked Omar.

'Yeah, no worries.' Kinch looked distracted, stared at the Docklands, deep in thought.

Omar suddenly realised that he had a major scoop on his hands. He had spoken to Khaled about going to the guards, convinced him that because he had backed down and was a minor, the police would protect him in turn for what he knew. This was his big chance to break through with a big story, and no-one could take this away from him. He had taken the photo and he was the only one involved. He decided he should have a quick word with the men. He tapped A on the shoulder. 'Excuse me. Do you mind me asking if you know the men who were on the shift before you?'

'No man. We always do the second shift, and the others are gone by the time we get here.' The young man had a Nigerian accent, kind face, his right ear seriously deformed. Looked like it had been burnt away from the side of his head. Omar couldn't help wondering what had brought this man so far across the world, minus an ear.

'Any of the others know them?' Omar pointed to the others, who were scattered across the bridge.

The young man shouted to his colleagues, none of whom knew the earlier shift. 'Call into the office. Maybe they can help you.' The man scribbled a number on a piece of paper and handed it to Omar.

'Thanks.' Omar took a brown envelope out of his satchel, and slipped the paper into it, placing it back in the satchel. *Office shit now. Deal with that first thing in the morning.*

Kinch was hanging over the bridge looking like he was about to vomit again.

'Come on Kinch. Let's get you something to settle that stomach of yours.' Omar took Kinch by the arm and led him across the bridge. He was no longer sure about this young man. 'You'll keep it to yourself. Everything that happened tonight, right?' He had displayed a certain instability, a lack of control, a liking for the edge of life.

'Yeah man, of course. I'm not an eejit,' Kinch replied.

They continued past Messrs Maguires in silence, and turned right into Hawkins Street. A young girl squatted behind a parked car. Clearly plastered, she pissed a stream into the street. A thick blob of mascara dripped down her right cheek, and she smiled at them as they passed.

'Charming,' said Omar.

Kinch laughed. 'Les Desmoiselles de Dublin. A classy lot. Think I prefer the foreign whores. At least they're not pretending.' He hesitated. 'Might pay a visit back there. Mimi was a hot wee thing.'

Omar didn't like the sound of that. 'Keep far away from there, or anywhere like it. That's no place for a smart lad like you. Just get you in trouble.'

'Thanks Dad, but I think I'm a big enough boy to look after myself now.' There was a sneer in Kinch's voice that Omar didn't really like. He suddenly felt older than his thirty eight years.

They crossed the road towards Poolbeg street. A figure approached from Trinity College direction, and shouted to get Kinch's attention.

'O Noláin, is that you, you bollox?' The light fell on him as he approached. He was a man in his twenties, his blonde hair in dreads, an assortment of metal rings protruding from various parts of his anatomy. There was blood around the edge of his right eyebrow.

'I thought that was you.'

'Jimmy, what the fuck happened to you man?' Kinch pointed at the blood.

'Ah, just some wanker in the Brazen Head. You know one of those polo shirted, up your fuckin arse rugger bugger types. Decided I was lookin at his fuckin bird sideways, and popped me one. Caught the edge of my brow ring. I wouldn't even touch the posh slut with yours, for fucks sake.' He rubbed his forehead with the sleeve of his overlarge jumper. The blood stuck to the wool like jelly.

'Tough luck man.' Kinch looked uncomfortable around this fella. Omar tried to signal that they should move on.

The dreadman wasn't moving. 'Listen man, you wouldn't have a few bob. I just need to catch the nightlink? That fucker and his friends thought it was bloody hilarious to grab my wallet on the sly.'

Kinch fumbled in his pockets. 'Yeah sure, hang on.'

Dreadman picked at his wound. 'I was meaning to ask you, I've been a bit down on my luck, with the actin and all. You wouldn't know of an openin, any old thing?'

Kinch thought for a second, handed him four euros, and a card. 'Well, actually, an American lady handed me this card this afternoon. Something about kids parties, performing. Anyway, not my thing, but if you fancy it.'

'Fuckin A man. Great. You're a pal.'

Omar stood watching the two talking on the corner of Poolbeg and Hawkins street. Out of nowhere a bicycle sped past him, and ripped his satchel off his arm. He recognised him immediately as the same tracksuit wearer who had grabbed the woman's red bag earlier in the day, but he moved too fast to get a look at his face. 'Come back here you fuckin knacker!' Omar raced down Hawkins Street; the tracksuit disappearing around the corner at speed. 'FUCK!'

Kinch and Dreadman caught up with him, as he caught his breath on the corner, the boy flying over Butt Bridge in the distance.

'He's well gone mate,' said the Dreadman.

'No bloody kidding.' Omar sat on the edge of the path and screamed into the night air, 'Aaaaagggggghhhhh!!!' Kinch and Dreadman glanced at each concerned. Although increasingly sober, Omar suddenly felt very sick as he watched his money, and his chance with Flora disappear over the bridge with bicycle boy. Not alone that, but also the photo that was to give him the scoop of his life. He cursed the Gods of Fortune that were well and truly operating against him today.

'Anything important in that?' asked Kinch.

Omar took a deep breath, fought back the tears, and sighed. 'No, not really.' What was the point in explaining? It was gone, and that was that. At least he knew he could tip off the police, but without the photo it was their word against his.

Jimmy glanced at his watch. 'Five to one. Better leg it for the bus. Sorry about that man. Have to have eyes in the back of your head around here!' He clapped Kinch on the back. 'Bye Kinch, and thanks for that.' Dreadman ran up the street towards the Nightlinks.

Omar tapped Kinch on the shoulder. 'Come on if we're to get into the pub.'

Kinch nodded.

They arrived at the big wooden door of No. 8, Poolbeg Street. The blinds were pulled down. Omar knocked the way the Cabby had told him. The door opened slightly. A deep-voiced, balding, burly man, with a beer belly the size of a sack of cement, squinted to take a look at them.

'Do I know ye?' He had a thick country accent, probably from Kerry or Cork, Omar reckoned.

'We're friends of Matty Maher's. He told us we could drop round. We're only lookin for a cup of coffee or a coke or something.'

The barman laughed. 'A coffee is it? What the hell's that?' He opened the door carefully. 'Come on in then.' His breath stank of onions; his nose bright red and bulbous. 'A pair of pioneers we have here lads.' The assortment of late-night drinkers laughed raucously. Omar recognised Matty's voice from the corner.

'It's not the Catholicism that taught him not to drink, Christie.' Matty winked at Omar. 'Good man for dropping in. That young fella's looking a little more with it at this stage.' Matty nodded at Kinch.

Kinch scratched his head, and looked at the bearded cabman with a look of confusion. 'Do I know you?'

Matty let out a deep wail of laughter. 'Never mind lad. You sit down here, and we'll give you a good tonic for that head of yours. Christie, rack up the young man a rock shandy. Just the trick when the thirst of the damned grabs you by the throat. Omar, yourself?'

'Just a coffee, thanks. Milk, no sugar.' Omar frequented this famous Dublin establishment. One of the few places left in Dublin that hadn't stripped away its Victorian mahogany counter tops, confessional screens, dark corners and crevices, and replaced them with brightly coloured, trendy and totally vapid alternatives. It's down and dirty atmosphere was the stuff of legend, and a small comfort in the swirl of chaos and change that enveloped the city at its doorstep. You could find all sorts hidden away in its dark corners: writers, politicians, journalists, actors; a president of the United States had even walked its boards. But only the chosen few got to cosy up late into the night, the traditional pub lock-in now becoming a thing of the past. Such illegal pleasures had been driven away by a Garda force that actually believed in doing their job, more's the shame.

'Sorry Omar, the call of nature. Might be a while. The bowels are not cooperating right now.' Matty winced to emphasise his obvious digestive difficulties.

'Know all about it myself Matty. The feckin piles; that's the real killer.' Omar let out a long slow fart, the power of suggestion obviously getting the better of him. A red blush travelled to the tip of his nose. Kinch waved his hand in front of his face. 'Jaysus man. I know you want to sober me up, but no need to feckin poison me.'

A man sat beside them. Omar could see he wasn't far from his own age, although his face was lined and leathery. He had the look of a man who had spent half his life under a distant

sun. He wore his ginger hair in a pony tail, and cultivated a beard which gave him a wild, artistic edge. The lines around his sharp blue eyes were pronounced and smiling. He seemed to be observing Kinch, sussing him out as a potential conversationalist. Omar wasn't sure this man's company was what they needed at this moment.

He spoke to Kinch, his voice deep and growling, like a great vat of salt and tar boiling in the heat of the sun. 'You a writer?'

Kinch had been staring at the names carved into the oak table. He looked up. 'Not exactly...An actor.'

'Ahhhh! I knew there was a bit of an artist in you. Would I have seen you...'

'Nah. Well, I did a few ads on TV, but no...probably not.'

'It's just, you look familiar. Remind me of a lad I once met when I was sailing in the Carribean. Nice fella, a writer. That's why I thought maybe?..'

Kinch smiled. 'I'm afraid I haven't made it out of Europe so sorry...not that I wouldn't mind.' His voice trailed away.

'Never left Europe. That's feckin mad. You gotta get out there lad, there's a fuckin amazing world out there. I've been at it twenty years now and don't regret a day of it, let me tell ya.' He took a slug from his pint. 'This is the only thing I miss. A decent pint of porter. Tastes like shite everywhere else. They brew it in Barbados and Nigeria, so it's not so bad there. Still, not the same. You need the wet and the misery to give it that little bit extra. Never ceases to amaze me when I see a gang of Rasta lads, sweating like pigs in the heat of the Caribbean, downing the black stuff to quench their thirst. Mad feckers, fair fucks to them.'

The barman arrived to the table with a pot of extremely watery looking coffee. 'There you go now. Would you like a snack bar or something with that?'

'No thanks, that's grand.'

'The Guinness tastes like shite over there and the coffee tastes like shite over here. Don't know how you drink it. Like pisswater.' The red-bearded man was determined to drag Omar into the conversation.

'I wouldn't know, but I'm not that fussy,' Omar replied.

The bearded man grabbed his opportunity. 'They're fucking bastards, those coffee ranchers. Spent a year in Guatemala: a feckin glorious place; live volcanoes spitting lava into the night sky; lakes like oceans, gorgeous!'

Kinch looked interested. Omar not so much.

'They're violent mother fuckers, the Ladinos. Treat the poor Mayan Indians like fuckin slaves. Don't pay them enough to shite, and ship this stuff out in barrel loads for Gavin the bloody stockbroker and Portia the feckin model to suck down skinny lattes like they've gone out of style. Make you want to weep.' The edge of his long beard twitched, his eyes popping out of his head.

'So you're a bit of a traveller then?' asked Omar, more to have something to say than out of interest.

'Yeah. I've been working on the yachts for a good twenty years now. Done a bit of fishing here and there too, but mostly skippering. Worked on a divers' boat in Livingstone, in the North of Guatemala. Been a little bit of everywhere I suppose.'

Kinch sat up straight, his chair turned towards the Traveller. 'That must be great. To just wake up and not be sure where you're off to next. Christ, I'd love that.'

‘It’s the best man. It’s in the blood I suppose. Come from Rathkeale originally, from a good travelling family, the Paavy kind. Pat, Pat Casey and you?...” He stuck out his hand to Kinch.

‘Brian O Nóláin, but everyone calls me Kinch.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘It’s a character in Ulysses...you know Joyce and all that, and a knife blade too apparently. I was playing him today cos it’s Bloomsday.’

The Traveller looked puzzled. ‘What day?’

Kinch glanced at Omar who smiled back and threw his eyes to heaven. ‘Never mind.’

‘Well, I like it whatever the hell it means. My friends like to call me Paavy. I should be insulted but it gives them a laugh so I don’t mind. That’s the ones on the boats - can get away with it when you’re far from Irish shores, but sounds a bit weird here. Like calling a black man a nigger in New York. You’d last about five fuckin seconds. There’s a lad on the boats, black as the ace, from Tobago, and we’re always messin with the N word and he laughs himself stupid every time. The oceans a great place for not giving a shit about all that nonsense. No borders, no barriers...the only place for me.’

Omar decided that this guy was hogging the conversation and interrupted. ‘I fancied myself as a travel journalist once. Imagined myself flitting around the world interviewing all in sundry, but then I met herself, and it just didn’t happen. Have been to Poland a couple of times but that’s about it.’

The Sailor looked at him aghast. ‘I hope she’s worth it.’

Kinch dropped his glass and spilled his shandy all over the floor. ‘Jesus, sorry.’ He ran to the bar and grabbed a cloth to clean it up.

Omar continued. ‘Flora...yes...she’s worth it.’

Pat looked him straight in the eye. ‘Are you happy?’

Omar thought for a second. ‘It’s overrated; happiness. I know what life is...at least I think I do. It’s as easy to grasp that here as out there, once you walk around with your eyes open.’

Kinch put the cloth on the table between them. ‘Not in my book! I’m out of here as soon I can scrape a few bob together. Any advice for me, sailorman?’

The bearded man sat back and thought for a second. ‘Do you have a woman?’

Kinch looked surprised. ‘No...definitely not!’

‘Then you’re grand. But if you have – one day that might come back to haunt you.’ He suddenly looked unhappy, his eyes sad and heavy.

‘There’s a story there. I can smell it,’ said Omar.

‘There’s always a story, for the good and the bad of it. Let’s just say I’m back for a funeral, and I wish I wasn’t.’ He fell silent.

Omar nodded. Kinch drank what was left of his shandy. They waited for him to continue, but he chose not to.

‘So are you happy then? Omar asked.

The man laughed. ‘Nice one, yeah. What do you think? Guess you’re right, it’s overrated. There are other things, aren’t there?’ Omar raised his cup to the sailor. He nodded in return. Kinch fiddled with his glass.

Matty arrived back and sat down beside them. ‘Jaysus, that was a long one!’

They all laughed. ‘Ye’re all looking a little sorry for yereselves. Has someone fuckin died or somethin?’ Omar kicked Matty under the table.

‘Wha? That feckin hurt.’

Kinch smiled and raised his empty glass into the air. ‘I raise a glass gentlemen, empty and all, to our Traveller here – Mr. Casey – a resourceful man who was driven to wander far and wide...by curiosity, the Mother of Creation...an inspiration to us all to get off our fat arses and get out there into the world and start living it.’

‘Too fucking right,’ said Matty, clinking his pint of Guinness off Kinch’s glass. Matty’s mobile beeped a message. ‘Right, better get a move on. See you round, Omar. If you fancy a spot of poker some night give us a buzz.’

‘No bother.’ Omar glanced at the clock on the wall. He wanted to make it home before 2.00 a.m. He was going to have to wake Flora up because he had forgotten his key. He knew that Kinch lived miles away in Sandycove, so he decided to offer him a place to sleep on the couch downstairs. Flora wouldn’t mind. She’d like the fact that he was an actor, and an artist of a kind.

He looked at Kinch and the sailor. They were rabbiting on about World Heritage Sights, and remote places to visit. Omar interrupted. ‘Sorry lads, but Kinch, I’m going to head home. I know you live far away. If you like, you can kip on my couch. I’m sure my wife won’t mind. It costs a fortune to get a taxi. The nightbuses are slow and full of dodgy people. What do you think?’

Kinch hesitated, and looked at his watch. ‘Right...I think I’ll take my chances with the nightbus thanks.’

Omar felt somewhat dismissed by his young friend. He wanted to think it was just his own insecurity that drove him to these conclusions, but Kinch barely seemed to notice him in the presence of the Sailor.

‘So where you off to next?’ Kinch asked the Sailor.

‘Not that exciting. I’m taking the Ulysses ferry at 8.00. a.m. this morning. Have a job as a Skipper for some posh Welsh bloke who wants me to take his family down the West coast of Portugal for a couple of weeks. Sure it’s a few bob in the pocket.’ He stopped and looked at Kinch. ‘Actually, they’re looking for someone, like yourself, to cater and do the scrubwork, help keeping the boat clean and all that. It pays well. Just for three weeks. Interested?’

Kinch opened his eyes wide. ‘Wow. Are you serious?’

‘Nothing like acting on impulse is what I say. Brings you places you can’t even imagine.’

Omar, being the non-impulsive type, thought that this sounded way too sudden an invitation.

‘Eight this morning. Jesus, that’s impulse.’ Kinch sucked back the last of his shandy. ‘You know what – Yeah! Why the hell not?’ Kinch stuck out his hand. ‘It’s a deal!’

Omar spoke up. ‘Are you mad? Sure you’re just coming down from one of the worst highs of your life. You don’t know this fellow from Adam.’ He could hear his voice had risen several octaves.

Kinch glared at Omar.

‘Well, I suppose if it’s what you want.’ Omar backed down. He realised his interest in this young man had gone one step too far. He stepped back and let them at the arrangements. *Could have been me, under different circumstances, I suppose.* The barman picked up the empty glasses and cleaned off the tabletop. ‘Right lads, time to get a move on. Need to get back to the wife before she divorces me.’

Kinch was writing down the time of the Ulysses ferry.

‘Sorry to interrupt, but I suppose, under the circumstances you’ll be wanting to get home quicker?’ Omar asked.

‘Oh Yeah, I guess so. I need to get back to Sandycove to get my stuff. The bus takes forever and the taxi rank is always a mile bloody long. Shit!’ Kinch looked perplexed.

‘Well, if you like, come back to mine anyway, and I’ll call one from there. Know loads of taximen personally. Sure maybe Matty might even be free by then.’ Omar wanted to have one last chat with the young man, to make sure the events of the evening had not been too much for him, to know he would be ok.

Kinch played with his hat for a second. He looked a little worried. ‘That makes some kind of sense, if you don’t mind.’

‘Of course not!’

The sailor picked up the ragged backpack beside him. It was stitched from top to bottom with stickers from all over the world. ‘Well, I’ll see you at the Ulysses, around a quarter past seven. Great stuff. Nice to meet you.’ He shook Omar’s hand, picked up his bag and left.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 43 - Ithaca

What did they discuss as they passed the grand stone edifice of Trinity College and proceeded onwards towards Long Lane?

The events of the day, the madness of religion, the politics of love, taxi queues and their curse upon the nation, loose women, looser men, a traveller's soul, the late night pint and the lack of options, the way the Guinness ripped through the gut like a tornado after a hard night's drinking, yuppie wankers, the branding of a nation, strangers among us and us among them, absent fathers.

How did Kinch react to the last question?

Evasively, awkwardly.

How did Omar proceed following this reaction?

Cautiously, determinedly, with delicate precision. Sensing the aforementioned subject to be a vital influence on the boy's personal journey, he probed, commented on his own lost son, suggested that to delve deeper, find a resolution, might bring some peace to a troubled mind. He spoke of his own father's death, while he was still a child, unable to remember the man; the series of stepfathers that had filled his beautiful mother's life; the last man, Raoul, a Spaniard who had promised her all and left her with nothing, led to her eventual desperation and expiration at her own hands. He counselled him to find the man in question, and have it out with him, because unanswered questions inject little darts of poison into a life until over time it withers away.

Did the young man agree with his suggestions?

He acknowledged his advice and suggested that he might well do something about it sooner rather than later. He hinted that his situation was not the norm but acknowledged that if he was to embark on a new departure, certain elements of the past needed cleaning up. He commented that he saw life as a giant labyrinth with an entry and an exit point, and an indefinable number of twists and turns that required solutions simply to advance. It was the motion that mattered. It gave one the impression of progress when, in fact, the walls remained tall, dark and identical, no matter what turn was taken. If one were to stop, sit and stare into the leafy depths, many forms might emerge: the watery beauty of a mossy sea bed or the dense mystery of an equatorial jungle. The sinewy tendrils of the hedgerow might stretch to form the sylvan image of a bathing nymph, or twist and grimace until the black face of death reached out its muscular limbs and grasped the watcher by the neck, dragging him into the blackness. Better to keep moving, to blur the images with the passage of time, as close to control as man could muster. And to Love: a moveable feast, as easily attached to one as another, a question of timing and convenience; therefore, movement within that sphere of experience was also highly desirable.

Did Omar vary from his young acquaintance on such issues?

He agreed wholeheartedly with the labyrinthine surmise, but differed in his ultimate belief that it was all in the way one looked at a thing. It wasn't the motion that gave the illusion of control, but the way in which a man chose to perceive his surroundings. He thought it not a bad idea at all to take a very long rest, and watch the world move around oneself. It reminded

him of that building in Rome; the Pantheon. He once saw a documentary in which the two millenia which surrounded this august building were speeded up so that the giant pillared structure stood like a God; silent, majestic, masterful. The markets and cafes of Rome swirled around its feet: faces, clothing, styles, transport, changed at warp speed, but the giant stone façade remained unchanged, calm, serene. It absorbed time through its granite skin and held it in its belly like an unborn child. Omar strived to be that solid, that silent within himself. As to love; while he indeed concurred that there were any number of possibilities where love could rest its weary head – his preferences did not even lie completely towards one sex or the other – love should be treated as a newborn infant, nurtured and fed. This showed a greater depth of purpose than to simply chuck the baby out with the bathwater, and start again.

What direction did the two walkers take to arrive at Long Lane?

Walking at a similar pace, the younger of the two tread the footpath with a heavier, more determined step. Turning right from Dame Street into Great George's Street South, they passed a number of late-night bars, still heaving with determined revellers. Omar, a naturally cautious man, hesitated at each crossing light, while his younger friend launched straight ahead, glancing momentarily to make sure he was not to be unexpectedly transported to the next world by an overlarge vehicle. Slowing his pace somewhat for his hesitant acquaintance, Kinch was first to arrive at the corner of Kevin St. Lower. He turned right, forgetting that his knowledge of his eventual destination was something that should, at least, appear uncertain. Passing the literary Ark of the people, the Dublin Public Library, they continued towards New Bride Street: the Spires of St. Patrick's Cathedral rose like great metal spears into the night sky. The older man hurried his pace, caught up with his acquaintance, and declared surprise at the young man's accurate knowledge of the lesser known lanes and byways of Dublin. Kinch assured his companion that Long Lane was frequently used by him and his actor colleagues as a short and direct route joining the legendary music establishment of Whelan's Bar with the primary residences of many of the aforementioned actors in the Blackpitts. Omar affirmed that, indeed, he was aware that it was an area frequented by those of an artistic nature, owing to its low rents and old world character.

How did Omar enter his abode at 7 Long Lane?

He remembered that his house keys had probably resided on his kitchen table for the length of the day in hand. Thus flummoxed, he turned to Kinch who suggested that perhaps his wife might be in the habit of leaving a spare key – women being far more practical creatures – in a secret hiding place. Omar, certain it could not be so, indulged his young friend by raising the mounds of flower pots that adorned the garden edge, and looking underneath them. Lo and behold, there it was, shining like a golden star in the moonlight, a small key he knew immediately to be the key to his front door. He professed much surprise at the event, but thanked his wife in her absence for her presence of mind.

What did Kinch perceive on entering the house?

That the spacious living room was largely unchanged since his prompt exit yesterday afternoon. The man in front of him made a signal, finger to lips, and closed the door gently behind them. Omar noticed a lit candle over the fireplace and moved towards the marble surround. He bent low to blow softly against the light. It flickered for a second and died. He then beckoned silently for Kinch to follow him down the corridor and moved left into the kitchen. He

flicked a switch. A dim light filled the small room. Kinch felt sick, claustrophobic; wished that he could reach over and open a window so that the sharp light of the moon would clear the space of its unanswered questions. But he did not. Instead, he sat at the glass table, and watched as the older man poked at the wood burner, threw some fragments into the dying embers to bring them to light. Omar commented on the fact that his wife lit a fire every night of her life, rain, hail or sunshine. It brought her some peace. She said that to watch the flames dance reminded her of her childhood. Omar loved that about her, that her memories lay far away, somewhere that he could not access. Kinch did not feel free to comment on such thoughts.

What did the host do immediately upon entering the kitchen?

He rummaged through a selection of CD's that Flora had placed beside the hand-held stereo in the kitchen. Aware that the younger generation were in need of constant music accompaniment, he struggled to select something that he hoped would cast him in a favorable light with his younger companion. The choice at hand ran as follows; Victoria de Los Angeles 'Sur les ailes du chant,' Debussy 'Clair de Lune, Chopin 'Cello Sonata in G minor', Bob Dylan 'Blood on the Tracks', Christy Moore 'Ride On', Damien Rice 'O', Eva Cassidy 'Songbird', and much to Omar's extreme mortification, Westlife's Greatest hits, which he promptly dropped behind the stereo lest he should be accused of having purchased such an item. Although inclined towards Dylan and Eva Cassidy, he reckoned that Damien Rice would strike a more youthful and trendy note. Not sure how long Kinch would be keeping him company, he forwarded the disc to his favorite song, 'I remember', to strike the best possible opening note.

How did Kinch react to the choice of music?

Not at all, which Omar took as passive encouragement, well aware that a young man of Kinch's musical interest would be incapable of refraining from derisive comment if the offending accompaniment was not to his taste.

What beverage did the host propose his guest?

A Moroccan tea known locally as The du Hammam; a relaxing blend of green tea, rose petals, green date and red fruits; something his Mother had been in the habit of drinking before going to bed. The young man accepted, provided he could be given the number of the taxi to arrange transport to his house in Sandycove. The host gladly obliged, accessed the drawer of the wooden dresser, and searched for approximately twenty seconds, until he spotted two cards belonging to taximen with whom he was well acquainted. He passed the cards to his guest who called them post haste, and spoke in a most hurried manner, urging the taximan, Bernard Carr – an old schoolfriend of Omar's – to arrive as quickly as possible.

What did the host discuss with his guest while they waited for the taxi to arrive?

He proposed a theory that he had been working on privately for quite a while. The fluxes of history being as they were, it was his observance that two strong waves of change were converging towards each other. The first being the advent of global warming, caused by human interference with the CO<sub>2</sub> levels of the planet; the second, the growing strength of Islam and its influence on the world, whether extremist or pacifist. It suited Planet Earth better if human society was, by its very nature, conformist, conservationist, minimalist and based on the benefit of Ummah or the group at large, and not the individual. It was when the individual was allowed to break free, apply his free will, and behave largely as he chose, that greed became the driving

force and consumption its offspring; thus leading to the cannibalism of the host organism. So, in brief, Omar believed that the restoration of the order of nature, and the conditions by which humans could optimally live on this earth, required, at this point in time, the conformist mentality of Islam. This was the inevitability that this century would lay out before us. Not, he stressed, that his theory was based on any inherent loyalty to the Islamic belief system; it was simply the pragmatic conclusion of a scientifically minded man who had read enough to know what was what.

How did Kinch react to such a dramatic suggestion.

He respectfully declined to agree. Kinch was a believer in the chaos theory. As he saw it, although certain cycles of activity seemed to emerge over a long period of time, the random nature of events meant that each of these cycles differed in key ways, thus making accurate predictions of future events impossible. He did acknowledge that systems that exhibit mathematical chaos are deterministic and thus orderly in some sense. It was not a question of complete disorder – there was definitely an unexplainable element to the Universe, whether referred to as God, or for the more psychologically minded – the collective unconscious (Kinch's personal favorite) – but once the chaotic nature of existence was acknowledged, predictability was a futile exercise. Thus, Carpe Diem, because the day is all there is.

Did the Host acknowledge the difference of opinion gratefully?

Most definitely.

What fragmented thoughts crossed Omar's mind as Kinch continued to elaborate on his premise?

The unbridled enthusiasm of youth. The vast and impossible conundrum of the universe. His wife's lack of interest in all things scientific and questioning. By contrast, her unfettered need for sensual pleasure which she seemed to find everywhere, except in her own home. The overemphasis placed on the decline of the body, as opposed to the growth of wisdom and intellect, a most troubling fact.

Had he given in to the quest for eternal youth?

Only so far as travelling by foot whenever possible to avoid using the car, and attending a weekly soccer session with his journalistic colleagues on the grounds of UCD.

What caused Omar to leave the room post haste?

A sudden explosive wave through his digestive system, indicating an immediate need to relieve himself.

How did Kinch react?

He assured him that he was perfectly comfortable and picked up the February edition of The National Geographic which ran as follows: Han Dynasty, Polar Bears, Phoenix Islands, Lost Inca Outpost, Fastest Monkeys, Carbon Cycle. Omar hoped that would keep him happy and occupied. Damien Rice's 'Eskimo' played a melodious accompaniment to his literary explorations.

Did Omar peruse the pile of reading accompaniment while on the lavatory?

No, he concentrated on passing the Guinness-fuelled movement. It stuck to his guts like glue. Although not wanting to reawake the blinding pain of the bleeding pile he had suffered the week before, he strained with caution, aware that his guest awaited him. He eyed the shelf beside him for a sign of the tube of scheriproct which he, no doubt, would have to make use of in the morning. Instead his eye fell on a blue plastic wrapper: the brand DUREX clearly marked near the torn edge. He knew what that meant, and although he was well aware that Flora was known to 'entertain' while he was out at work, he couldn't bear to have the hard evidence laid out before him. The smell rose from beneath him. He searched for the paper roll, to no avail. Instead he reached for the May edition of 'Time' and tore off the front page. George Bush's big head stared out at Omar. He glanced at the title 'MOMENT OF TRUTH. Does the President who led us into Iraq know how to lead us out?' For once he decided that an intellectual response was not appropriate, and ran the page the length of his arse. This brought him some considerable satisfaction.

What sight greeted Omar on the return to his kitchen?

A vacant seat; the pages of the article on "Fastest Monkeys" open on the table, and a handwritten note propped against the still full mug of tea. Sorry that the taxi had clearly arrived in his absence, he picked up the note, expecting a brief thanks for his hospitality. Instead:

'Sorry Omar, I had to run. I know I'm a bloody coward but I have something I have to tell you. I was too chicken to tell you to your face. I slept with your wife – several times. I know this will come as a complete shock. Honestly, I'm sorry! Please don't take it out on her. With all the talk of clearing out the messes from the past and starting again, I just felt it was only right you should know. If you want to beat the shit out of me, I will be at the Ulysses ferry on the Dublin Docks at 7.15a.m. Probably not coming back. Sorry again!!  
Kinch.'

The respondent felt like he had been hit in the guts with a hammer. Damien Rice sang in the background: 'I find myself exposed tapping doors, but irritate in search of destination.' Parallel waves of sadness and anger crashed within Omar like orchestral symbols. 'I look to my eskimo friend when I'm down, down, down,' the singer wailed, rather absurdly.

What reactions did he immediately consider against both parties?

Murder – messy and resulting in more harm to his person than satisfaction achieved; a proper beating inflicted on both parties – same as above; Divorce – emotional upheaval on a scale that he was not prepared to accept; Emotional retribution, chuck her out on her ear temporarily and threaten divorce even though intentions lie elsewhere – oddly appealing; Immediate destruction of her favorite thing in life, her violin – also very appealing, but not in his nature to destroy beautiful things.

What did he find himself doing immediately after these reflections?

Climbing the stairs towards the offending party. He observed her as she slept, the curves of her body wrapped around a white cotton sheet, the auburn wave of her long hair swept across the sheets like a dark flowing river. Accepting the inevitability of forgiveness, he removed his trousers and placed them on the chair to the left side of the bed. His posterior perched on the side of the bed, he removed his right sock, then his left, unbuttoned his shirt, and as always, climbed into bed, his Dunnes white jocks forming the ever appropriate barrier between him and

behaviour which was no longer deemed acceptable by the woman he had married. Despite such limitations he bent to observe her in slumber. Her skin was pale, translucent. Her lashes long and dark. He kissed the soft skin of her haunches. He lay with his left side against her rump, the weight of the day dragging him slowly into slumber. Barely conscious of his surroundings, he felt her hand move towards him. She laid it cautiously on his bare skin, her fingers moving as gently as the wings of a moth.

Did such unexpected intimacy surprise him?

Yes.

How did he respond?

He allowed her hand to rest itself against him, and followed his subconscious into the dark forgetfulness of sleep.

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## Chapter 44 - Kinch

The seven pointed shape of the Plough hung low in the shimmering night sky. Kinch always looked for it, when he thought to; although he found himself looking up far less these days. He asked the taxi-driver to wait outside Monsignor Reidy's presbytery. It was going to cost him a fortune but he couldn't get on the boat in the morning without putting a shape to the anger that had festered within him throughout his childhood. He planned to get away and stay away. He didn't want any dormant grievances dragging him back unnecessarily. He climbed the steps in front of the red brick building and hesitated under the stone arch of the front door. A series of images flashed through his brain: his mother alone and crying when they were evicted from their home in Dun Laoghaire; Paddy Maloney, the red-haired boy in primary school who frequently referred to Kinch as 'the bastard'; receiving his first communion from the man whom his mother had just revealed to be his father and hoping to be noticed, to no avail; numerous visits to the back of the Monsignor's Sunday mass; many letters sent to this very house with no response. He thought he had learned how to accept it; the rejections, the hypocrisy, the lack of love, but hearing the man's voice earlier in the day was enough to remind him that certain things can never be forgotten.

He pushed the large doorbell and waited. Silence, then the scurrying of feet. The door opened slowly. A middle aged, honey-haired woman stuck her head around the large door, and squinted at him suspiciously.

'Yes?'

'Hello, sorry to bother you so late, but...I need to see the Monsignor, now! Tell him it's Brian.'

She looked more than a little surprised. 'Excuse me, but who? I'm afraid it would be impossible to wake the Monsignor at this time. He has a very busy schedule tomorrow.'

'I can assure you, Miss, he would want you to wake him. If I'm wrong you can call the Guards directly and have me dragged off and incarcerated. Please, it really is urgent.'

She stared at him carefully. 'Well, alright, but God help you son if this is some kind of messing you're up to. Just wait there.' She put the door on the latch and shuffled up the stairs.

Kinch chewed on his fingernails. The taximan had put his seat back and was grabbing the chance for a quick nap.

The door opened. The housekeeper stood wrapped in a pink nightgown. She smiled warmly, although clearly puzzled by these unexpected developments in the middle of the night. 'Follow me, dear.'

They walked down a long corridor and into a room on the right. 'Just wait right here and the Monsignor will be down to you in a second. Would you like a cup of tea and a biscuit?'

'Thanks a lot, but I would hate to keep you up any longer. I'm grand, thanks.'

'Don't worry about that. I'm making one for himself so I'll throw in an extra bag for you.' She winked, and disappeared through a door at the end of the corridor. He sat down in the corner of the large red velvet couch, and poked at the copies of 'Reality' and 'The Messenger' that sat on the table in front of him. His right foot beat a fast rhythm into the oak floorboards. He could hear shuffling on the stairs. He looked up and saw a pair of legs descending the staircase slowly. He wished more than anything in the world that he could suck the life out of a fag to give him strength, but sure the whole country was a smoke-free zone now, let alone one of God's own gaffs.

A haggard face appeared in the doorway. He had seen the man many times, mostly from a distance, but tonight in his dressinggown he looked frail, aged. 'So, Brian. I'm glad you came.' The Monsignor spoke softly. 'Do you normally pay visits in the middle of the night?' It was not an accusation, merely a gentle attempt to break the ice.

'Not usually. I'm leaving the country in the morning early, and I've a funny feeling I might not be back for a while, so I thought, maybe...'

'You were right - to come. I'm glad.'

Kinch stood up, to be on the same level as the large man standing in the doorway. The space between them felt like an unbridgeable valley, an undiscovered and dense jungle. The lady in pink appeared carrying a silver tray full of goodies. 'There ye are now. A pot of tea and a plate of biccies. Just the trick to keep ye awake.' She laid it down on the table. 'That's great Maggie, thanks. You head off to bed now. We're grand.'

'No bother then. Enjoy yer chat. Goodnight.' She tottered up the stairs and out of sight.

The Monsignor moved towards Kinch, and sat on the couch at the other side of the table. 'Sit down now lad. Grab a cup of tea.'

'I don't know what the fuck I'm doing here really.' Kinch suddenly felt very awkward. He sat a couple of feet away from the man whose absence had been a looming anger throughout his life. He was no longer sure it would make him feel better to try to understand.

'I suppose you'd like me to answer some questions...about your mother and me.'

Reidy's grey eyes looked straight at him. He felt bolted to the chair, even though every instinct in his body screamed at him to get the fuck out of there.

'That'd be a start.' He picked up the mug of tea, sat back and waited.

The older man sat on the edge of the couch and stirred a teaspoon of sugar into his tea. 'I know it'll be hard for someone of your age to understand, but it was such a different country in the early eighties, when you were born.'

'Ah yes, the good ol Celtic Tiger and how it's changed us all for the better. One thing that'll never change is human nature, so you won't get away that easily,' replied Kinch.

The older man raised his eyebrows. 'I loved her you know, your mother.'

'Really?' Kinch could feel the anger build inside him.

'We're all products of our time,' continued the Monsignor.

'Then I should be preening around the Financial Centre in a pinstripe with a beamer stuck to my arse. Not everyone falls prey to the inevitable.'

Reidy sighed. 'Then you're a better man than I am.'

'She trusted you and you used her, chucked her out like a used dishcloth when you were finished with her.'

'It wasn't like that. Your Mother and I, we spent all our time around each other. Who can explain these things really? It grew into something it shouldn't have. I take full responsibility. I was weak, young and, to be honest, we just needed each other then.'

'And she didn't need you after.' Kinch struggled to retain a film of control, his voice stretched wiry thin.

'Of course, of course she did, but I was, still am, a man in an important position. Back then it was just after the Pope's visit. What a priest had to say still mattered somehow. It's all changed now. If it was now maybe...?'

'Maybe you'd have left your fancy clothes and house and lived like an ordinary man raising your family?' Kinch wanted to hit him. 'Give me a break!'

'It's not something you'll ever understand. It's a calling and you don't just walk away.'

That was it. Kinch could no longer hold it in. ‘But it’s ok to walk away from the woman you supposedly love and your son, and leave them in the shits, excuse my French. Do you fucking know we were evicted from two houses? My mother worked her arse off but she suffered from depression – I wonder why? I was only a boy. I used to have to cook and clean and look after her. She was out of it, sometimes months at a time. Don’t get me wrong. I don’t blame her. She loved the hell out of me. I blame the person who put her in that state. Fucking you. I fucking blame you with your holier-than-thou, I’m-God’s-representative-on-earth crap! Jesus never said you guys had to be celibate, he never said a bad word against a gay person and for that matter I can’t remember a single bloody passage from the bible where bloody condoms are an issue. It’s some Roman Emperor who came up with all that shite. Not that ye’re all bad, but man, if you’re going to fuck up your family, your bloody family, not the holy family, or the royal bloody family, but your own family, at least check out the veracity of the facts behind the shite you spout on a daily basis.’ He was standing, bent over the table, his whole body arched towards the older man, who sat silently, his eyes wide and staring.

‘I’m sorry son.’

‘Don’t fucking call me son! You have no bloody right. I touched you...on my Communion day. I wanted you to smile, to see me, whisper something, touch me back, any little gesture to show you gave a damn. You shook my hand away; shook it away and moved onto the next boy, without even a smile.’ Kinch could feel the tears begin to pour down his face. ‘You fucking shook me off, like I was a beggar, or a leper. FOR FUCKS SAKE!’ His whole body shook.

The Monsignor stood, moved to embrace him. Kinch pulled away, ran to the fireplace and leaned on the marble surround. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror above the fireplace. His face was red and puffed up; his eyes burning. The Monsignor stood behind him, ashen and tired looking.

‘I don’t blame you being so angry after all this time. I just hoped that maybe...maybe it’s not too late. It’s hard to break away from all that you know. I entered the seminary when I was fifteen. It was impossible for me to understand that there might have been other options. There always was only one option for me. I don’t know Brian. It’s all a bloody mess, but all I can offer now is to make it up to you, with what little time is left.’

Kinch laughed. ‘Well, we have about three hours and then I’m on a boat.’

‘I meant my time. I don’t have much time.’

‘Oh yeah, the cancer.’ Kinch felt bad for sounding so casual, but he wanted to hurt this man as much as he had hurt him.

‘I won’t be in this life much longer. They’ve given me about six months.’

‘I suppose we should hug now, and declare how happy we are that we’ve finally found each other. Well, tough shit! That’s not my style. If you need me to forgive you so St. Peter doesn’t stop you at the pearly gates, you’re on a loser.’

Reidy smiled weakly. ‘To be honest, I’d just like to know you a little before I’m gone.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t call this the best timing in the world,’ replied Kinch.

The Monsignor moved closer to him. ‘It’s never a good time for something this complicated.’

‘You got that right.’ He hesitated. ‘Listen - I’ll think about it.’

‘Ok.’ The Monsignor sounded disappointed.

Kinch took a pen from his inside pocket, and tore off a corner of The Messenger magazine. He scribbled on the paper and handed it to Reidy. ‘My email.’

He smiled briefly. 'Right.'

Kinch picked up his hat. 'I'd better go. The bloody taxi's going to cost me a fortune.'

They both stood awkwardly, three foot of space between them, a muscular barrier that Kinch was far from ready to surmount. 'Ok. I'll see you...maybe.'

The Monsignor nodded.

They walked in silence to the front door. The older man undid a complicated series of locks. 'It's like Fort Knox in here.' The edge of a smile remained on the corner of his mouth, and Kinch smiled back, inside himself where it couldn't be seen.

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## Chapter 45 - Bláithín

One lone fox ran across the grass in front of Bláithín. *So beautiful. Hidden away out of the waking world.* The stars were unusually clear tonight. Despite the glow from the city, Bláithín could make out the dense cloud of the milky way. She was fascinated by falling stars. She often lay on her back counting the August Perseids. Her record was twenty-six in a thirty minute period. *No Tears of San Lorenzo in June but you never know!*

She lay in the middle of the perfectly manicured lawns of Kenmare Heights. Her parent's garden with its angular privet hedges, trimmed flowerbeds and lawns like putting greens, was never a place a child could run wild. When she was about ten years old, and desperate to mark it with her own brand of individual creativity, she mapped out a small nature trail, created paths through the rockery, the flower beds and the wooded area at the back of her house. She dug holes, and planted bamboo sticks with the numbers of the trail. The Chronicles of Narnia – her ten-year-old obsession – provided the imaginary background to her trail. At each of the numbers, she created small scenes to be acted out from the book by her, and her less than willing sister, Gráinne. When she presented her work of inventive genius to her mother, the woman had a conniption fit, accused her of destroying hundreds of pounds' worth of shrubbery, and locked her away in her bedroom for a week. Sure was it any wonder she was so fucked up.

The ground beneath her was hard as a slab of cement. Unusually dry weather for Ireland at any time of the year. She glanced up at her parents' bedroom window. The light was out. She was feeling less brave now than on her long journey out on the night bus. She thought about turning right back around, but she was sure there was no bus back and taxis cost a bloody fortune. Anyway, for some reason, this day had brought her to a place where resolutions were being sought and found. She didn't feel she could pass any more time without having it out with her father once and for all. She rang the doorbell, even though the front door key nestled cosily in her jeans pocket. It would give her an excuse to wake him. The lights went on in the room upstairs. She glanced at her reflection in the side window. Her brown eyes were tired, her jaw clenched and tense. She spoke to herself out loud – a habit of years. 'Don't let him fuck with you. Sort it out. Now!'

She heard the alarm being switched off, and the door opened. Her mother stood in the doorway, dressed in a red silk nightgown, her hair in rollers. 'Oh My God, Bláithín. Your Father has been looking for you everywhere. Where the hell were you?'

Bláithín stepped through the door. 'Where's Dad? I need to speak to him.'

Her Mother shut the door. 'He's fast asleep. He has a press conference first thing in the morning. I think there's been enough drama for one day. Just go to bed, and you can talk to him tomorrow evening.'

'Too late I'm afraid. It's now or never.'

Her Mother threw her eyebrows to the sky. 'Ever with the dramatic ultimatums. I don't think so young lady. You have us run ragged.'

Two pairs of slippered feet appeared at the top of the stairs. Her sisters sat on the top steps, eager for a bit of family drama.

'She's been snorting again Mum. Look at her nose. It's raw red.' Rachel spoke with a slight sneer. Gráinne laughed.

'Have you?' asked her Mother.

‘It doesn’t matter. I feel better now. I’m finished with that, but I need to see Dad. DAD! DAD!’ She shouted at the top of her voice. Her Mother tried to put her hand over her daughter’s mouth, her two sisters purring with laughter like preening cats.

‘She’s high as a kite, Mum. Time to lock her up again I reckon.’ Gráinne dug Rachel in the ribs. They stood to the back as their sleepy Father walked past them and down the stairs. ‘Dad, Bláith’s high again,’ said Gráinne, with a big smile on her face.

Bernard O’Leary pushed back the shock of white hair from his eyes. ‘Jesus Bláithín, I’ve had it with your drama. Where the hell did you run off to? Nigel ran the length and breadth of Dublin looking for you.’

‘It doesn’t matter where I went to. It’s where I’m going that matters.’ She looked him straight in the eye, determined she wasn’t going to be talked down this time.

‘What? Where?’ Fionnúla O’Leary looked at her husband with the look of indignant confusion that she had mastered over the years of fighting with her daughter.

‘Out of this family if it’s the only bloody way I can survive. I can’t do this anymore.’

‘Daddy, she’s an ungrateful tart. Kick her out for once and for all.’ Gráinne’s voice was shrill and clear.

Her father’s milky blue eyes were unmoving. ‘There’s no need for that, is there Bláithín?’

Gráinne continued, ‘Go on Daddy. Stand up to her, for God’s sake. She’s always causing hell in this family. You don’t deserve that.’

Bláithín couldn’t bear the sound of her sister’s jealousy. It had surrounded her whole life like a cloud of poisonous gas. She couldn’t help it if her father had loved her the most. Despite their disagreements, she knew deep down that he saw himself in her strength. Now that same strength had taken her places he refused to recognise.

‘Dad, I just want to tell you that I love you, not in the snivelling lick-arsy way those two go on with, but I do.’

‘Oh Boo Hoo. Get out the bloody hankies,’ Rachel rubbed her eyes mockingly.

‘Shut up Rachel!’ Bernard O’Leary’s voice was loud and clear.

Bláithín smiled at her sister and continued. ‘However, it doesn’t matter any more because I don’t respect you. There’s no reason to go into the reasons why. We all know those.’

Her father spoke slowly. ‘I’d be very careful what you say next Bláithín.’

She could feel the fear creep up her spine like a tarantuala, but she kept going. ‘I will guarantee you Dad, one of these days your lies will catch up with you, and it won’t be those two standing by your side when you realise your mistakes.’ She pointed at her sisters. ‘That day call me and I’ll be there, but not before.’

‘You ungrateful little bitch.’ Fionnúla O’Leary slapped her daughter across the face.

Bláithín winced, fought back the well of tears, and looked at her mother with a look of composed defiance.

‘Fionnúla, for God’s sake.’ Her father silenced her Mother with a withering glance. He turned to fix a hard stare on Bláithín. ‘Are you sure this is how you feel?’ His voice was cold, unyielding.

‘Yes.’

‘So young, and so cruel. It’s impressive.’ replied Bernard O’Leary.

‘Young, and honest,’ replied Bláithín.

‘Well, Ms. Holier-than-thou. This is the last time you darken this doorstep. I have two daughters now, and God knows that’s enough. Your mother is right. You are an ungrateful little

bitch and I rue the day I brought you into this world to cause me and your mother such heartache. Well you have it your way in the end, and don't think you'll get a penny out of us either. You're on your own, Bláithín. I hope you like it!' He walked to the door and opened it.

Her mother stood silently watching, her hand to her mouth. Her sisters held hands tightly at the top of the stairs. She glanced at her family one more time, and walked straight out the door. It shook with violence behind her. She stood at the top of the steps and looked upwards. A small star ripped across the sky. She spoke quietly into the warm night air, 'One.'

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## Chapter 46 - Penelope

Once I breathed I was and now I knew I had to keep going despite the odds wrapped around me like a marauding snake squeezing my life into a tube of space travel towards something anything movement keep up the pace once I listened to the blur of speed which could engulf me in a cloud of forgetfulness a slow seeping green haze of dull contentment a teardrop of hope an icicle of air kissing my bottom like that as though everything were normal between us he didn't know how to fill me up so I could swim through it all he just pushed and panted until his big red roundness lost itself in the folds of my need seeped within me like a crawling disease ridden by his lust lost to me he was in a sea of men who claimed my body like a citadel breached birth it was purest horror to see my baby empty of life giving me nothing to show for the pain of expectation once I was full with anger at a God who could give me hope only to take it away so cruelly I never gave birth again and never would allow him to touch me because he had injected me with this pain although I knew it was not his fault I could no longer feel like a woman in his hands I became a failed mother how I wished he could hold me in this moment of failed womanhood meant other things to me now like wet burning lips embracing moments of hard male skin moving within me the sweet smelling softness of his young eyes on my breasts devouring me with his touch moving with his long limbs wrapped around me until I opened like a flower petal sucking up the air to stay alive is all that matters at the end of the day once I left Poland and felt free to reinvent myself in the world I had known I was a problem to my family my strength of will had broken rules spoken and unspoken like that Russian who came to stay with my Father who had no idea he would sneak into my room late at night with his breath a reek of vodka and his prick as large as a cactus and twice as sharp it cut into my cunt like blunt glass it gave a dull pain like monthly pressures and pints of blood waiting to explode out of a woman like a slaughtered cow we might as well be to half those brutes who stick it inside you without a word of thanks for the effort of touching me became too much for Omar eventually he forgot how in hell is a woman supposed to last a life with a want on her the size of an ocean tell me that there is a solution to a lustless marriage and I'll call you a liar what he is with his skulking around the brothels of Dublin in the name of journalism he touches them his skin smells unfamiliar after a woman always knows though she may chose to deny it not that I'm a saint wouldn't put up with his lack of warmth drove me into other arms where I could feel myself again explode into a life I can't deny that he was handsome when I met him with his shock of black hair and olive skin like Karim in the Dark Seed of Damascus strikes only fear in the hearts of people now after them flinging themselves out of those tower windows like dying birds in the burning heat of hell is where they'll end up good riddance to the evil bastards everywhere nowadays taking advantage of the weaknesses of people to fight and for what but their own greed and power is all that matters to them is nothing in the end there will be nothing it frightens them to think of that and they kill to stop the fear once is all there is no point in worrying about all this politics that he goes on about in that paper of his they all treat him like he's an eejit to care what they think with their shovelling blow up their nostrils like it's the giver of everlasting life is something I would never not want to feel the danger in the nowness of it all the pens of man have tried to tie our hot passions into a pretty pink bow is a thing I hate the way some of them expect you to lie down and take it without a word yes I want to scream fuck me FUCK ME until they come in rivers inside me or on top of me or behind me I don't care once they can hold me after curled up behind me like the words of a love song an old sweet song is something I never tire of like Nat King Cole's velvet voice when I fall in love it will be forever if forever is a day then theres some truth in it that love is a

fickle but necessary friend is all that Omar is to me now friendship may the best kind of love after all the hump and grind is nothing but the sweat on the skin deep beneath the outer layers lies the ugliness that only a friend can love his heavy breath and peculiar ways but he looks after me with a soft hand and a blind eye to my darker side can't be easy for a man to handle after the want has been exorcised out of him once there is a need for more all the same why doesn't he leave me and be done with it would at least be an end if an end were what I wanted to keep going is the truth of it is to battle on makes more sense is not what we are made for sucking in the air without a thought to why we do we just do within the silence around me lie too many questions unanswered they should stay like music in the air with no need of an answer like a singing orchestra in the forest of the night lips touch air and shape it into the colour of the waves the crashing bliss of water upon the skin like blue silence broken by the delicate whistle of the wind against the molten earth blown into the sky like a dancing nymph swirling upwards gushing sliding through the air like rubbish blowing through the city streets late in the vacant hollow of the night when the lights flicker and glow like fireflies in a lost jungle of wet green light and the night and the light of the radio as it asks me to fill the silence once I'll flick the switch and click soft now not to wake him and bend close to him softly just to stop the questions dissolve into the sound like a soft drum beating once Badum.

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## Chapter References

### Chapter 1 - Telemachus:

- Bloomsday (16<sup>th</sup> June) is named after Leopold Bloom, the main character of James Joyce's book 'Ulysses,' originally published by Shakespeare and Company, Paris, February 1922. The book takes place on one day, 16<sup>th</sup> June, 1904 and every 16<sup>th</sup> June, Bloomsday, is celebrated by James Joyce devotees. Scenes of the book are often acted out on the streets of Dublin in celebration.
- **p 4:** - James Joyce, 'Ulysses,' p32 , (Penguin edition, 1992).
- **p 10:** - Translated from Gaelic, 'Go raibh maith agat agus go mbeidh bron agus ocras I do theach fein,' means 'Thank you and may sadness and hunger come to your home.'

### Chapter 3 - Bláithín:

- **p 12:** - Lady Hazel Lavery was the American wife of Sir John Lavery, a famous portrait artist who was commissioned to design the first bank notes of the Irish Republic in 1928. He used his wife as a model for the image of Caithlín Ní Houlihán, a mythical symbol and emblem of Irish nationalism sometimes found in literature, art, and various media representing Ireland as a personified woman.

### Chapter 4 - Proteus:

- **p 17 - 19:** - Julian Guinness' lines in this chapter are quoted from James Joyce's *Ulysses*, pp 45, 56, 60-62 (Penguin edition, 1992).

### Chapter 8 - Flora:

- **p 31:** - One of the Masterpieces of the Irish National Gallery by Sir John Lavery. '*The Artist's Studio: Lady Lavery with her Daughter Alice and Step-Daughter Eileen.*' 1909 – 1913.
- **P 32:** - 'The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife' by Daniel Maclise depicts the first invasion of Ireland by the Anglo-Norman forces in 1170. Strongbow, the Norman leader agreed to marry Aoife, Dermot Mac Murrough's daughter and support him in his bid to depose the High King.
- **p 33:** - The Ummah is the worldwide Islamic community. p 46

### Chapter 10 - Kinch:

- **p 39:** - Daniel O Connell (The Great Liberator), was Ireland's predominant political leader in the first half of the nineteenth century who championed the cause of the Catholic tenants and small-landholders. He campaigned for Catholic Emancipation - the right for Catholics to sit in the Westminster Parliament, denied for over 100 years - and Repeal of the Union between Ireland and Great Britain.

## Chapter 12 - Aeolus:

- **p 47:** - Micheal Flatley was the Irish-american choreographer of 'Riverdance' which debuted during the 1996 Eurovision song contest and went on to earn millions as the most successful International Irish Stage production. It is seen as one of many symbolic catalysts for the success of the Irish economy - the Celtic Tiger – which was to follow.
- **p 48:** - Gerry Adams is the President of Sinn Féin, the political wing of the Irish Republican movement.
- **p 48:** - Pádraig Pearse was the one of the leaders of the Easter 1916 Republican revolt against British occupation of Ireland. He was a signatory of the 'Proclamation of Independence' and shot by the British following the Rising.
- **p 50:** - The Columbia Three were three Irishmen, Niall Connolly, Martin McCauley and James Monaghan accused of being ex-IRA men, and imprisoned in Columbia for allegedly training the Farc guerillas. They escaped and fled to Ireland.

## Chapter 13 - Bláithín:

- **p 53:** - The Mahon Tribunal was set up by the Irish Government in 1997 to investigate property planning corruption.

## Chapter 15 – Kinch:

- **p 65:** - James Joyce, 'Ulysses,' (Penguin edition, 1992). p235.

## Chapter 16 – Lestrygonians

- **p 69:** - In far antiquity the Fir Bolg were the rulers of Ireland (at the time called Ériu)
- **p 69:** - Quote from Jonathon Swift's famous satirical treatise on the state of Irish Society, 'A Modest Proposal.' 1729.

## Chapter 19 – The Wandering Rocks

- **p 91:** - 'The Koran,' Penguin Classics, 50th anniversary edition, 2006. p 428, **93:1**.
- **p 97:** - Martin "The Viper" Foley (November 24, 1952) is one of the Republic of Ireland's better known criminals. He started as a street drug dealer and rose through the ranks to become an associate of Martin Cahill, one of Ireland's most notorious criminals.

## Chapter 25 – Cyclops

- **p 124:** - 'Caoch O'Leary' by John Keegan 1809-1849 is a famous Irish poem. *And, how glad was my young heart / Though earth and sky looked dreary / To see the stranger and his dog / Poor Pinch and Caoch O'Leary.*

### Chapter 30 – Bláithín

- **p 140:** - In this chapter Bláithín quotes from *Ulysses*, p 871, 876-877 (Penguin edition, 1992).

### Chapter 38 – Kinch

- **p 165:** - 'The Koran,' Penguin Classics, 50th anniversary edition, 2006. p 246, **24:1**.
- **p 166:** - 'The Koran,' Penguin Classics, 50th anniversary edition, 2006. p 237, **22:37**.
- **p 166:** - 'The Koran,' Penguin Classics, 50th anniversary edition, 2006. p 32, **2:217**.
- **p 167:** - 'The Koran,' Penguin Classics, 50th anniversary edition, 2006. p 78, **4:171**.

### Chapter 39 – Circe

- **p 176:** - Most sources agree that Dublin's Temple Bar was named after the Temple family, and specifically after Sir William Temple, Provost of Trinity College (1609), whose house and gardens were located there in the early seventeenth century. Large murals of he and his wife are painted on the side of the famous pub, The Temple Bar.
- **p 184:** - 'Amsterdam,' Jacques Brel.

*In the port of Amsterdam / There's a sailor who sings  
Of the dreams that he brings / From the wide open sea /*

*In the port of Amsterdam / There's a sailor who dies /  
Full of beer full of cries / In a drunken down fight. /*

*He drinks to the health / Of the whores of Amsterdam /  
Who have promised their love / To one thousand other men /  
They've bargained their bodies / And their virtue long gone /  
For a few dirty coins*

- **p 186:** - *The Third Policeman* by Flann O'Brien.
- **p 187:** - *Under Ben Bulbin* by W. B. Yeats, in 'WB. Yeats/Collected Poems,' p 401. Picador, 1990.
- **p 187:** - *Mama zamanha gaya*, Egyptian Nursery Rhyme, - [www.mamalisa.com/?p=273&t=es&c=43](http://www.mamalisa.com/?p=273&t=es&c=43), Mommy is coming/ She is almost here/ She is bringing toys and gifts/ She's also got a box.

### Chapter 42 – Eumeas

- **p 190:** - *The Mourning Bride. Act iii. Sc. 8*, William Congreve 1697, p 268.