

There is a light and
it never goes out



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Prologue

1999

I'M LISTENING to it now, on a Mediterranean beach on an unseasonably cool June afternoon, reclining on a towel after swimming against the waves for twenty minutes and emerging, togs sticking to my thighs, tired and satisfied in a fragile sun. Lying nearby is a woman with straggly hair, face down with her bikini straps undone and her head to the side, her expression a combination of frown and smile. Beyond her an obese woman struggles with her towel, clasping it to her as she berates two children for some misdemeanour.

To my right a girl sunbathes on her stomach in a gold string bikini, her skin mahogany-brown, almost like it's been painted, artificial but organic at the same time. A well-built man in shorts crouches next to her, trying to engage her in conversation about his dog, a terrier, which had kicked sand on her back a few minutes before. His desperation is obvious, he's practically wearing it as a cologne, every forced laugh and moody stare out to sea, but she doesn't seem to mind. Maybe she's just indulging him, or enjoys the attention. Her name is Antonella, she's pretty in a synthetic sort of way and she seems happy enough.

I smile at this encounter, at how silly and pointless it seems, and also how necessary these moments are, tiny disregarded incidents which will be repeated at dinner-table conversations or recounted to jealous boyfriends just to get a reaction or mulled over, maybe, during a slack moment at work when the mind drifts from imperatives and dawdles down less-rigid paths. The beach smells faintly of sulphur and is dotted with a peculiar seaweed that looks like horse droppings, round and brittle, and the sinister clown chimes of a merry-go-round drift over from a megaphone somewhere far off. I smile and settle my head into a pillow of wet towel on moulded sand, feeling the resurfacing sun on my eyelids.

1994

I'm listening to it now, sitting on a rock jutting out of a stone-strewn field a long way back from the beaten track, shivering pleasurably against a high summer breeze and sipping from a can of metallic-tasting beer. Three

or four others sit ten yards from me, squatting around a wood fire that coughs milky smoke into the evening air which has that weird twilight tint, like a blue filter placed over the world to gently usher us into darkness. They laugh in my direction and call to me to rejoin them, but I shake my head and ask for a few minutes more, to sit on this rock with this drink in my hand and this music in my ears.

The song plays and I watch them, happy to be alone for now. They talk animatedly, hand gestures and expressions, then dissolve into laughter and playful shoves and splutters when cigarette smoke goes down too fast or too strong. Someone stands and snaps a branch apart on their knee, flinging the ends onto the fire, and sparks flare up like a miniature steelworks, a blazing spray of sparks which fan out against the encroaching night. Stray embers land on the tasselled hem of one girl's skirt, and she leaps backwards, shrieking and giggling, beating at her smouldering garment.

I look away and gaze across fields and low hand-built walls which fade into the dimming horizon. A hare suddenly scampers out from behind the cover of a boulder, some way off; then another, then two, three more. They bound forward and stop, looking around with nervous movements, and I wonder if I've ever seen a hare in real-life before. The hares run off towards a cluster of stones propping each other up like a model of Stonehenge, an edifice to mark unmoved time and the insignificance of individual passing.

My gaze moves around and stops at a wide ditch. I'm not sure how it got here, but an old car wreck sits on top, its weight crushing the foliage and loosing soil and small stones. The metal has burned a gorgeous reddish-brown with age and rain and clean air. The car shouldn't be here at all, but there's something lovely about the oxidic way it glows there in the middle of artless nature, surrounded by walls and animal life and the sounds of drunken assembly. I walk towards it through the filtered blue half-light.

2002

I'm listening to it now, my head vertiginous as violent eddies whip the hair up around my face and steal the breath from my mouth, and the sea spins like a vortex seven hundred feet below. I can see gulls floating down there, minuscule white splashes riding currents from the water's serrated surface to way up above the land and my line of vision, then back, halfway down, hovering against the flaking surface of the cliff-face. A dinghy slaps against the rocks, thumping and sloshing as the tide makes hard rubber meet harder stone, and the sea floods in to fill a vacuum left behind by the rising boat.

I hear a car-horn being pressed behind me, urgently but with a strange uncertainty; I don't turn around because I know who is pressing it. The sea is a pungent green near the cliffs, then bleeds into a glittering, hygienic blue all the way to the horizon and a sun that seems to hang lower than its actual position. I remember someone telling me that the exact point of the horizon one sees from sea level is eight miles away, and ponder how much further you can see at this height.

A flurry of wind catches me unawares and I lose my balance, wobbling forward and back. I regain my footing and turn up the Walkman's volume to drown out the crash of the surf and wail of the breeze as the song glides through its second chorus and into the middle eight. Eight miles out: a person could swim that, if they really had to, if some inescapable obligation depended on it. I wonder how far I could swim before exhaustion engulfed me and I slipped gratefully into the sea's sepulchral folds; if I could swim that far if necessary: eight miles out.

The car horn sounds again and it occurs to me that, of course, nobody could reach that place, because it is unfixed; it doesn't exist as a static point in space. The horizon moves as the person moves, inch by liquid inch, stroke by tired stroke, always visible but forever untouchable. Grit blows into my eyes, tossed in circles by the wind, and I blink away the tears and dust. The horn sounds once more, a long, strident note, and I turn my head around, glancing in its direction for a moment. Eight miles out. Pretty near but a hell of a distance away.

The song comes to an end as I turn back towards the thin horizon and the discordant cry of wild birds. I rewind the tape and close my eyes and press play.

Sinéad's Story

A GLINT.

That's probably what you'd call it, a split-second reflection of sunlight off moving metal, over there in the middle-distance, hovering in the blind-spot of Emma's eye. The shady green of forestry rushing by and that glint, there and gone in an instant, and then the green again. They were cycling, Kathryn and Emma, two skinny girls about three miles from home, enjoying the view of undulating hills and fields and strips of road dissecting the landscape like veins on a wrist. They coughed out flies which flew into their mouths, feeling the balm of a late spring sun and the refreshing breeze on their forearms.

Emma was ten at the time and Kathryn slightly older, the daughter of Emma's mother's best friend. They were on a visit from the big smoke, some bland suburb of Dublin that still sounded impossibly glamorous, purely because it was far away, it was big and frantic and out there. Kathryn carried a little of that Dublin presumption, even at a young age; a sort of urban *droit de seigneur* which allowed condescension at Emma's small town with its listless main street and cornball monument in the centre of the square. And that was okay; she had seen both sides, she could compare.

And she was quite nice, really. The two girls didn't like one another at first – pride and childish insecurity erecting a barricade – but that was soon torn down by their respective parents' insistence that they play together, walk to the shops together, just do something, anything together. So while their mothers indulged one another's selective memories and shared a longstanding complicity, the girls hung out and talked, guardedly at first and then less so, keen to boast or divulge or gossip, and somewhere along the way became friends.

They were dressed almost identically in the happily garish fashion of the time: pink or yellow pedal pushers, short-sleeved tops with frills along the sleeve and across the collarbone, sockless feet in trainers, hair bunched high at the back of the head in fat ponytails. Kathryn was taller than Emma, lanky with sleepily beautiful eyes and one ear which stuck out slightly. Emma was an average girl of her age, puny and pale and waiting to burst into growth. Kathryn cycled Emma's rust-brown chopper, and she

tried to ride her elder brother's racer, which was too big with a hard plastic saddle that made for uncomfortable, if not painful, travelling, but sufficed well enough. They were young and summer was almost here and the wind was caressing their throats and mussing up their hair.

A feral dog had died and its body lay rotting in a hooded copse outside town, they had been breathlessly informed that morning by a boy in a stripy t-shirt and flared slacks that scuffed along the ground. So they spun out there on borrowed bikes, legs flying like twirling ropes, giggling as they descended one hill at speed, puffing as they made their laboured ascent on the next.

A dead dog is an irresistible attraction to a ten-year-old: just to stand there, open-mouthed, gawping at its bloated form as flies buzz around its head and the breeze pricks at its fur. It would be lying on its side, probably; stomach distended upwards in a parody of the normal shape; legs together, maybe, with the forepaws stretched out towards something invisible and the hind legs resting, a film covering its half-open eyes. Other kids might be there already: carefree, vigorous boys poking sticks at the corpse and making jokes to their nervous sisters, or hypothesising wildly about what had happened; imaginations on overdrive to fill in the gaps that knowledge left behind.

They were approaching a bend in the road which swung around in a half-circle, with the road continuing its course ahead and a path branching off towards the woods on the right. As they made for the bend, tired now and saddle-sore but energised by expectation, Emma saw it again – the glint. Brightly silver between a small opening in the foliage. Then it became taller and wider and took on a recognisable shape: rectangular with a snout and little round legs.

It was a medium-sized truck, some sort of removal van, parked in a gravel lay-by. The number plates weren't blocked out but were muddied, so the registration was reduced to half-markings. The undercarriage was filthy, like it had driven across bog or wet fields, and the back door was ajar, though Emma couldn't see inside. They slowed to a freewheel as they passed, Kathryn taking the curve and continuing ahead, eager now and

apparently oblivious to the truck's presence, Emma following about five yards behind.

She didn't decrease in pace as she passed and she couldn't have described the feeling, but time seemed to slow down in some way then. Much later she would remember it, or think of it, as being like a panning shot from a war movie – the camera travelling languorously across the scene, freezing the ragged faces of orphans and women and battle survivors. Time became torpid and unhurried, the moment just hanging there, held fast at a certain point in space. It was a little disorienting.

Kathryn was out of sight now, haring down the path under a beautiful canopy of dappled light falling through branches. Emma stopped to catch her breath, straining through the trees for a glimpse of Kathryn's pin-wheeling legs, balancing the bike between her own, and heard a voice. A man's voice, deep, a rural accent with an urban tang – like a countryman who'd lived in Dublin all his adult life – and an edgy undertone, maybe sleep-deprived crankiness. She turned her head to face the speaker. He stood at the back of the van, half-hidden by its bulk, with one foot placed outwards on the ground like he was bracing himself for a heavy lift.

It was funny, but he seemed almost embarrassed at having called after her, like it was a half-formed thought that his mouth acted on before his brain could fully process it, and now it was out there, floating around, Emma had heard it and there was no taking it back. Except she hadn't heard properly at all; the words were a blurry yelp by the time they reached her, nothing but a vocal insignificance amid the burble of the outdoors. He looked at the ground with a peculiar self-consciousness, chewing on the corner of his lip like he was gathering up the courage to speak again. She almost expected him to start shuffling from side to side and twisting his toe in the dirt.

He looked back up and was about to say something else but Emma got there first, calling, 'What?', then cupping her hand to her ear to indicate she hadn't heard him. She flipped the bike around by ninety degrees; her back was twisted and she still couldn't see him properly. He was tall and heavy and had a terrible haircut, a real hatchet job. His polo shirt was a little askew at the collar, like someone had yanked it sideways,

but this guy didn't look as if he minded one way or the other. He remained in position, peeking out from his hiding-place, gaze darting from Emma to the ground to nowhere at all to the road as it stretched out behind them and back to Emma.

‘Could you give me a hand?’

That was a reasonable question, but the way he blurted it out caught Emma by surprise, and she must have started or flashed some other bodily semaphore, because he immediately raised a placating hand. It's cool, it's cool, don't be frightened. He was sweating, sleek rivulets running down his temple and cutting streaks through the dust on his face, and he looked physically tired, like he'd just finished very demanding labour. She speculated on his job. Removals? Deliveries? Some type of strenuous work, anyway; the evidence lay in his arm muscles, his robust deportment.

He asked again, for the third time. ‘Sorry. Could you give me a hand? Please, like a good girl. It's my...’

Stepping out from behind the truck, he gestured toward its back door, then shrugged as if to indicate that she should know what he was talking about. A ‘you know yourself’ shrug. He held up his index and middle finger and said, ‘Two minutes. I just need a hand with something.’ Emma looked behind her, wondering how far down the track Kathryn had cycled, curious as to what assistance a large man should require of a ten-year-old girl. It sounds stupid, after the fact; almost a parody of every warning given to schoolchildren about their safety, a burly fellow with bad hair and a skewed polo shirt asking a young girl to cross the road and help him with his van. Don't accept lifts from strangers. Don't tell your name to strangers. Don't talk to strangers.

But he seemed so bashful, childish even, and the sun was out to play with the wind in accompaniment, and a dead dog was waiting to be stared at, and everything was right and as it should be in her uncomplicated prepubescent universe, that bad thoughts hadn't even crossed Emma's mind. And time still had that bowed quality – not frozen but not moving either, just dreamily *there* – and she seemed oddly removed from her surroundings; and the whole scene was simultaneously so laughable and vaguely disquieting and perfectly natural, that before she

knew she was moving, Emma had alighted from the bike and was walking across the road towards the rear doors of the van and that man's large, supplicating face.

Her bike crunched on gravel as she stopped, about three yards from the van, and stood beside it with legs planted and a confident expression. She tilted her chin upwards, squinting into the sunlight, and waited for him to speak. Emma was almost beginning to enjoy this now. She was scatterbrained and too young to fully comprehend the meaning of small incidents, the direction and momentum of events, and this was kind of fun, actually: standing there like a tribal chief in miniature, proud and clueless, waiting for this outsider to make his request.

The man wiped sweat from his forehead and around his eyes with the corner of his shirt and a look of agitation passed across his countenance, like he maybe wasn't so patient as a patronising little girl propped on the handlebars of her bike. He seemed to hesitate for an instant, half-grimacing with an infinitesimal shake of the head, then looked her in the eyes and smiled. It wasn't an attractive smile: too eager, all in the mouth with the eyes revealing nothing. Emma edged back a few inches without realising it and continued to wait.

'It's, ah, it's in here,' the man said. 'I need... It's my friend. He needs help.'

Emma leaned forward, balancing on the bike's weight, trying to see inside the cloistered van, but the angles were all wrong; she would have to move closer and stand in front of the doors, nearly beside him. He was looking at the ground again, almost like he was trying to pretend that Emma wasn't there, that he didn't really want her help; she was an inconvenience who had happened along at precisely the wrong time. She thought she heard Kathryn's voice in the distance, a screech of exhilaration and revulsion on discovering the poor dog, but couldn't be sure if it was her or a bird calling or the wind getting snagged in tightly bound wire somewhere.

She said, 'Your friend? Is he...?'

A moan emanated from the van's interior, like an over-indulged child demanding its mother's attention for the thousandth time that day,

and another sound, a kick to its side or an elbow maybe; a blow of some sort. Emma jumped; she knitted her eyebrows, perplexed, pointed her index finger at the source of the noise and said, ‘Is that...?’

The man looked almost relieved then, flashing a look to the vehicle’s inside and sighing heavily, like it was all out in the open now, all misunderstandings cleared up, everyone knew what was going on and everything was going to plan. He smiled again, holding his palms upwards, an approximation of a ‘hail-fellow-well-met’ stand-up guy, and moved four or five quick steps towards her. He shrugged, that same ‘you know yourself’ lift of the shoulders, and directed one palm towards the van door.

‘Yeah. Yeah, that’s it. That’s him. He’s sick, you know? Got the ‘flu or something. Need to get him to a doctor. Could you...?’

‘A doctor? There’s one in the town...’ Emma pointed behind her, back to her left. ‘...over there.’

He raised his eyebrows, all gratitude and relief; he started to speak then stopped himself. The noise from the van hadn’t repeated itself; there was something close to silence. The man scratched his neck violently for a few seconds, chasing a bug with bitten fingernails before flicking his catch away with the thumb. Emma wondered where Kathryn was, and realised for the first time – not really on a conscious level, but a concrete thought, all the same – that she hoped Kathryn would come back soon. She wasn’t scared as such but this didn’t feel like the right place for her to be at all; things didn’t seem to be falling where they should. The man tilted his head towards the clouds and casually pointed a finger in Emma’s direction.

‘Yeah. That’s the thing. I need to, ah, I need help...to get him. Into the, ah, the cab. You know?’

His head swung back around and stopped dead level with her eyes. The ghost of something impatient drifted across his face and then, abruptly, he smiled, a cheery smile, raising his eyebrows and tilting his head again, gesturing towards the van with both hands. He nodded.

‘Yeah? Will you givus a hand, like a good girl? With...up the front? You know?’

He moved towards the van, leaning to open the door nearest to him, gesturing again with the free hand. Always that gesture: unthreatening,

chivalrous, welcoming even. After you, my dear. Emma pushed the bike ahead of her, two, three, four feet, until she was coming around to the middle of the van's rear, breasting the closed right-hand door from four feet away, its silvery smoothness flowing past her eyes, then merging into shadow as the inside came into view.

She noticed, as she moved, that the door-handle rubber hung loose, unmoving at the moment though she could picture it flapping when the van was in motion. The metal was dented just underneath the handle, a pinched dimple, as if someone had jabbed it with a spike. The windows were freshly scrubbed – the light cast melted rainbows in the residue of cleaning agents – their inside blacked out by some sort of sheet, tinny and purple. It occurred to Emma that she hadn't noticed a name or insignia on the side of the van. Was it blank, or covered up, or splashed across the vehicle's far side in tawdry colours; or was it right there, staring out at the road and her, loud but maybe not loud enough to someone who didn't think it important?

She stopped; she peeked from under her eyelids at the man standing to her left, holding the door open wide, leaning on the balls of his feet, gazing away from her. Blood pulsed in his throat – two short beats and then a longer one, like a primeval Morse code. One-one two. One-one two. Wiry curls of chest hair sprouted over the neck of his shirt, and Emma suddenly knew that she didn't like him; she didn't want to be there anymore. The van door wobbled and she was turning from it, back towards Kathryn and the copse and the dead dog, when a flash erupted in the womb-like gloom of the van's interior, a shutter-click and then a flash, star-shaped and saintly white, directly into her face. She shut her eyes tight and instinctively pushed one arm outwards, fist thrusting away from her, and when she opened them it was difficult to see with the light spots dancing in front of her eyes and inside her head in a dotted tableau of beautiful colours: neon orange and deep red and washed-out yellow which faded to pure white.

Someone inside the van reached out and brushed off Emma's arm, trying to grab her with a leathery hand that smelled of tobacco and abrasive soap, and she stumbled back, the sound of her feet on the gravel competing with voices, two of them now, swearing and grunting

commands, fuck catch a hold c'mon c'mon someone'll come along move it move it move it. She grazed her hand on the ground and her bicycle fell against the van with a heavy cymbal crash, handlebar skittering against the door as it went to ground, and she felt someone move towards it, cracking their shin-bone off a flailing pedal, then more curses.

Emma swirled around, towards the road, her vision gradually returning as the light spots scurried off to the corners of perception, and leaned forward, balancing her hands on her thighs and staring downwards. The gravel was sharply in focus, bounded by a lush verge and the road which began its course broad and precise, then narrowed and blurred as it curved way off, towards her home. A lock of hair collapsed onto Emma's forehead and as she flicked her head to shake it off, she heard Kathryn's voice calling from a distance, we found it Emma we found it come on. Kathryn was moving closer and travelling at speed, bike rattling along the dirt-track and heart pounding with the unquenchable desire to share gory details, her voice reverberating through the trees, its source constantly shifting.

A door slammed suddenly behind Emma, followed by the scrabbling of feet straining for purchase, attaining it, branching off in two directions. They were leaving, she realised, and she felt angry. Her hand throbbled from where she had scratched it and her legs quivered and she was angry. There was fear, of course, she was terrified; she wanted to shout a warning to Kathryn, yell at her to turn back, get help, call someone. But more than this Emma felt a kind of indignant fury at these people – these men? Probably, but she never saw the second one – who had tried to steal something from her, something they had no right to take.

As she turned back the van was already moving, tyres squealing as gears grinded and the front doors hung open and a dust cloud engulfed the vehicle and her bike which lay like a fallen soldier, head cocked and limbs akimbo. She could see Kathryn now, head bobbing as she laboured along, her ponytail flopping from side to side. The van was pulling out onto the road, no indicator and no indication, and Emma started to run, picking up a stone in one fluid movement and sprinting faster now, fuelled by a reckless energy and emitting a long, lunatic scream, then stopping, steadying

herself and hurling the stone at the back window. The throw fell short, bouncing uselessly off a taillight and onto the road.

For a second she thought they had stopped and were about to return, and wasn't sure if this was something to be happy about or not; but they had merely paused before wrenching the wheel to the left, easing onto the road and away. She thought she caught a glimpse of the driver, the guy in the polo shirt, scowling at her in the mirror. The van's engine made a rough diesel bellow and they were gone. Her eyes started to burn and Emma realised that she was crying.

Kathryn was standing next to her then, babbling about what had happened and who was there and it really was true, the dog was dead and looked disgusting, covered in flies and I swear you could see brains oozing out his nose and mouth, you have to come see. She stopped when Emma didn't answer, wrinkling her face into an endearing expression of concern and placing her hand across Emma's shoulders.

Kathryn said, 'Are you okay? What's wrong?'

Emma shook her head and said, 'Nothing, nothing, I'm fine', keeping her gaze fixed on the ground and her legs under control. The tears had stopped, which surprised her; she had expected to cry for an age, to have Kathryn find her like that and have to fend off her inquisition with vague dismissals. But there weren't any now; she had cried for a few seconds, like a tiny dam-burst, releasing the valve and easing the pressure, and then stopped.

Kathryn beamed, warm and bemused, and slapped Emma's back, then picked her bike up and climbed aboard, grasping the handlebars. Her eyebrows lifted and she nodded in the direction of the copse and the dead dog that everyone simply had to see.

'Well?' she said. 'Are you coming or what?'

Emma strode to where her bike lay, hoisting it upright and brushing dust off the saddle and handlebars. She looked behind her, along the road as it crested a hill, and it was empty: no cars on either side. She turned back to Kathryn who was practically giddy by now, hopping on her toes and making urgent, circular hand movements. Emma smiled at her and Kathryn smiled back.

Emma said, ‘Come on, then – show me this famous dog of yours.’

They cycled slowly across the road, checking for traffic like they’d been instructed. They moved lazily through a tunnel of dappled light falling through overhead branches, tyres rustling on the path, enjoying an unconcealed understanding, and Emma didn’t say anything. She probably should have told Kathryn what had occurred; should have gone home immediately and informed her parents and the authorities and cosseted herself in their determined and protective love.

But that could wait a little while. Because Emma was out in wonderful countryside with her friend; they were young and summer was almost here and the sun was out to play with the wind in accompaniment, and a dead dog was waiting to be stared at; everything was again right and as it should be in their uncomplicated universe, and nobody was going to take that from her.

Sinéad and Me

2002

WHOA. Now *that* was unexpected. A short sharp shock.

Sinéad said, ‘Sorry. I know that’s probably not...you know, what you want to hear. With your...’

She sat in front of me, knees together, kneading her hands like a penitent saying the rosary. She rocked on a straight-backed chair I had brought from my parents’ kitchen into my bedroom. I laughed, an embarrassed yelp, because the moment seemed a little absurd and I felt more than a little discomfited. Here was someone I felt knew me well for over a decade, who was comfortable in my company, and she sat before me like a destitute petitioning the most supercilious of bishops. (Memo to self: stop using so many religious metaphors. It’s not good for your frame of mind.)

She laughed too, looking up with a smile that was equal parts guilty, relieved and amused. I puffed my chest out and waved a hand imperiously, bestowing absolution all round, and said, ‘Don’t worry about it. Jesus, you can tell me things. I’m not in *that* bad a state.’

Sinéad nodded, accepting that everything was cool, and looked around. ‘Can I...? Is it okay to smoke in here?’

She held up a packet of cigarettes, pointing at them with her other hand. I bobbed my head, yes of course, and reached behind me for a flat stone ashtray with an African ink drawing on its base: angular elephants strolling across the veldt. That was a lovely piece of work which had only cost me five pounds in an ethnic shop somewhere on Dublin’s northside. It was unbelievably smooth to the touch, like cold skin, and had turned a soft tan colour over the years. I suppose the stone had reacted with the moisture in the air or something; anyway, it was a beautiful effect.

Sinéad blinked and waved a hand as smoke drifted into her eyes; she took the ashtray and placed it carefully on her lap, balancing the cigarette on the ashtray’s edge where it burned, a curving column of smoke shimmering from its red tip. She gazed at her feet – those were the same black boots she had worn for as long as I could remember, beat-in and softened with yellow laces – then looked at me, determined.

‘Anyway. That really happened,’ she said.

‘Yeah? To you? Jesus. I don’t... I don’t know what to say.’

She hunched her shoulders and nodded, a lethargic movement, and I wished I could think of something reassuring to tell her. But nothing would come to mind so I sat back and waited for her to speak again in that fine-crystal voice, almost too girly for her age and personality.

‘Mm-hm. A *long* time ago,’ she said. ‘Long time. What age are we now – twenty-nine, thirty? So that’d make it, what, twenty years ago or so? Shit. I can’t believe I still remember so much of the details. The colours of our clothes and everything.’

‘So...you were Emma, right?’

Sinéad nodded.

‘Jesus Christ,’ I said. ‘And what...? I mean afterwards, what happened then? Was everything okay?’

She inhaled deeply and concentrated on a spot on the ceiling, chewing on a fingernail like someone who knew exactly what they wanted to say but pretended, for some reason, that the memories were just beyond reach.

‘Yeah. Yeah, it was fine. I forgot all about it, really, until a few years ago. I just sort of went home and decided not to say anything to my parents and forgot all about it. Because I didn’t want to worry them, you know? I guess I figured that the thing was done with now, there wasn’t much they could do and I hadn’t been harmed in any way and... So Kathryn and I went to gawk at the poor old dog – it was there alright, poor thing, it looked like one of its legs had got caught in something and it couldn’t run, and just died, right there in the woods. And then, uh, we went home I suppose, and just got on with whatever it was we were doing.’

Sinéad smiled at me, clean and bright, and I couldn’t tell if it was forced or not. It seemed impulsive, and I knew that smile through years of amity, but it also struck me as overdone, the lips drawn back a fraction too tightly. I wasn’t suspicious – I knew why she would affect levity, that her motives were selfless – but I was worried about her. I looked at the bedroom window and saw that it was cold outside: the glass was obscured by a large oval of condensation which trickled down to the sill as it replenished itself at the top.

I leaned forward and said, ‘And what made you think of it there? After so long?’

She laughed, ‘Ha!’, and clapped her hands, declaring, ‘I *knew* I shouldn’t have told you that, I *knew* it. I should have told you something fun and exciting, something with an adventure...’

‘And maybe some elves and wizards and magic wands as well?’

‘Don’t take the piss. Is it okay? I mean, for you to be hearing all of this? Now?’

I nodded and bestowed another imperious benediction, of course, of course, and she seemed to accept this. A car engine revved underneath the window, the growl amplified by the cold, emphasising the soft silence of my room. I pointed at the handheld stereo which stood on a chest of drawers behind Sinéad’s chair.

‘Music,’ I said. ‘Let’s put on some music. Could you reach...?’

She twisted back and rummaged through a pile of cassettes, scanning their titles and cataloguing undesirables with a flip of the wrist. Without turning back she asked, ‘Anything in particular?’ I replied, ‘Whatever you choose is fine’ and leaned against the headboard, settling into comfortable anticipation of the familiar.

1992

For six months in one of the first years I knew Sinéad I thought I was in love with her. Not properly in love; not the kind of love that makes people commit their lives to each other and truly become part of one consecrated circle. I just felt an unfocused jealousy when she spoke of boyfriends and daydreamed about her in a formless way and tried to convince myself that if only she appreciated my feelings and reciprocated, everything in my life, every teeth-grinding irritation or stub-ended ambition, would sort itself out and things would be grand.

I had loved her, or liked or fantasised or whatever it was, with a juvenile passion, the blind side of my heart convincing my brain, for a while, that the affection and companionship we shared was the real thing, the big L. It wasn’t, of course, and I realised that soon enough. There was

no moment of clarity, no Hollywood *denouement* where I understood how naïve I'd been, rushing to her with a bunch of flowers and kissing her tenderly on the forehead, wishing her Godspeed with the lucky man who would make her his wife. Sinéad would never let anyone make her their property, for one thing.

It was a gradual thing, a slow dawning as I grew up and grew older, until I was reasonably mature and sort of knew what I wanted out of life – or, at least, what I didn't – and specifically knew that I loved Sinéad as a friend, nothing more, and a treasured one at that. It was the type of friendship with responsibilities but no schedules, dedication but no timetable; where two people might not meet or phone or write for a year, two years, five, and not necessarily feel that some imperative of comradeship had been neglected. And that's how it should be: the word 'imperative' has no place in a connection freely formed and maintained.

I actually told her, one drink-sodden night years later, about my former feelings. Somewhere in conversational free-flow, a thematic hiccup between philosophy and pop culture ephemera, I remember this confession slipping out and landing there with a *plop*; a sort of automatic profession, the reckless mouth acting on instinct before the circumspect brain has time to apply the brakes.

'Did I ever tell you how much I fancied you before?'

She took it well enough, anyway, choosing the most judicious option available: laughing and spluttering beer onto her feet.

'I'm serious,' I said. 'I'm actually serious here. I really did.'

'Aw. That's so sweet. And why didn't you ever say anything?'

'Don't fucking patronise me, okay? Just 'cause I've just told you that I used be in love with you... And it *wasn't* love anyway. I wasn't in love. It was just...stupid. It was kids' stuff.'

Sinéad grabbed me around the neck and pulled my head into her throat.

'Ah, c'mere,' she said. 'I'm sure it wasn't kids' stuff. Don't say that about yourself. Sure, we're best friends now, aren't we? You know you can tell me anything.'

‘Anyway. Look, that’s all I wanted to say. Just to let you know that. Like, I’m not coming on to you here or anything. You know that, right? I’m just saying.’

‘I know, I know. You’re just telling me how you used to be in love with me. That’s okay. You’re only human. Happens to the best of us.’

‘I *told* you it wasn’t in love, it was...in like, or something. It was...kinda halfway between the two. D’you know that feeling?’

‘Yeah. You were in love with me. And why didn’t you ever say anything?’

‘Well, I’m saying it now. And I fucking *wasn’t* in love with you. Stop saying that I was.’

2002

Sinéad had chosen a compilation tape I’d made up years ago. It wasn’t very consistent: half of side one and fifteen minutes of side two were love songs, the bones of an earlier compilation I had made for a former girlfriend. The remainder was a hotchpotch of Motown classics, corny pop songs from the 1980s and one or two James Taylor ballads lagging at the rear. I half-wondered how those got on there; I *hate* James Taylor and that insipid mush he calls music.

She yawned, covering her mouth with a slender hand, and said, ‘So what books are you reading lately?’

She was still smoking, and it struck me that this was her second or third cigarette, one clouding into the next, in the few minutes since she had told her story. I didn’t remember Sinéad being such a heavy smoker; I’d always taken her for one of those annoyingly strong-willed people who can smoke whenever, how much and under what circumstances they choose. I knew a guy like that in college; he would smoke heavily for two months approaching exam time, buy a final pack of twenty for the end-of-year drinking binge and then kill the habit, stone dead, the following morning.

Eventually this flirtation caught up with him and forced a proper commitment; he found that he couldn’t cast aside these dalliances so easily

any more. One hungover morning, hacking phlegm and cramping in the stomach, with a mouthful of gall and ambiguous remorse, he found that he was addicted and wanted to smoke more; nicotine had him by the balls and wasn't letting go. I ran into a mutual friend a few years ago who had heard that this other fellow had since been hospitalised with emphysema. I can't remember his name now, and am annoyed at that.

I said, 'Books. What books? Um, I'm reading a lot of Graham Greene at the moment. I'm reading *The Power and the Glory* right now, and I've just finished *The Comedians*. That was excellent. Very powerful. Have you...? Oh, you would have read all of these before, right?'

'Yep. "The twentieth century novel as a force for political and social change." Discuss. "Semiotics in modern and postmodern literature." Discuss. "The absence of God in the works of Graham Greene." Absence? Christ, there was nothing *but* God in Graham Greene.'

'Who was your lecturer for that course again? Fat guy with a goatee. Kinda oily.'

Sinéad smiled impishly and said, 'Ah yes. Professor Fintan Dermody, with the emphasis on "Professor". The clown insisted on being called that, even with the post-grads. Probably the other lecturers, too. So he had a professorship. Big swing. He didn't have to constantly publicise the fact, did he? Still, he would have almost made a decent lecturer if he wasn't so busy acting the self-important prick and screwing under-grads.'

We burst out laughing simultaneously. Sinéad blew smoke out her nose and coughed, and I waited for her to get her breath back.

I said, 'No way!'

She nodded vigorously, still chuckling, and said, 'Yes. Yes way. Dermody? God, yeah. He was notorious for it. The whole faculty knew.'

I grimaced, a cartoonish look of distaste, protesting, 'But he was so...*eurgh*. He was disgusting. Who'd go with that greasy bastard?'

'Silly little girls, darling. Ambitious and driven and willing to go that extra mile. You know the sort. The kind of girl who always wears make-up to class while the rest of us look like we've slept in our clothes, whose hair never looks a strand out of place. The sort of girl who looks

like she irons a crease into her jeans. You know that type? The type that are no fucking help to other women, that's for sure. Just silly little girls.'

1991

First year in university was quite weird for me. I seemed to exist in a split-reality, two coexisting but incompatible worlds, and for a while, I was okay with that. I went to lectures reasonably regularly, took notes reasonably coherently and handed in my essays in a reasonably timely fashion. I got reasonably decent marks and spent reasonable periods in the library, studying reasonably seriously and even reasonably enjoying the work. Everything was very bloody reasonable.

I suppose I had a certain work ethic, deep down, an inherited compulsion to make some sort of use of my time, which dragged me out of bed every morning and drove me towards campus, where I would drift through the motions of class and study and social downtime in a smoky canteen overlooking the river which wound its way through the soothing weatherworn brickwork of the college.

I would drink bitter coffee which cost too much and smoke someone else's cigarettes and engage in pleasantly meaningless conversation with male and female buddies and their buddies and their buddies' girlfriends and boyfriends, while my mind reached for something else. I never quite knew what that something else was, whether it was better or worse or equal to what I had; I just knew it was different, it was not this.

I had only seen Sinéad once before I quit college shortly after Christmas in first year, in a Sociology lecture I was attending because it seemed a comfortable place to kill a rainy hour between classes. I lodged myself inconspicuously into the back row, a few seats from the aisle so I could slip out ten minutes before this class ended and stroll to another building, across campus, for my own. The lecturer was a tall, forbidding man with a silver-grey crop and an Easter Island profile, and was speaking passionately about Third World debt. He didn't seem like a university lecturer at all, this sincere and angry man, railing against the sadly human

avarice at the heart of capitalism and our sadder indifference which permitted it to run rampant.

He thumped the table and declaimed, ‘Brazil has paid back its national debt five, ten, twenty times over. *All* of these countries have paid back their national debt several times over. And still we – *us*; our society, our system, our political and business leaders – still we demand more. We demand blood from a stone and that stone has to keep on giving, no matter what the cost. And there *is* a cost, a massive human cost to our greed and our intransigence.’

His eyes burned with a fierce, sanctified indignation; flecks of spittle leaped from his lips as he kicked against all the pricks. His audience was young and wide-eyed, and he held them effortlessly. It was a lovely sight: an early-fifties man (a father, a husband, a mortgage-holder and healthy eater?) who hadn’t let age obscure the sweet jolt of rage and integrity, bringing the good fight to people still unsophisticated enough to care about these things, before time and the abrasion of day-to-day *realpolitik* ground down their innocence.

I noticed Sinéad sitting in the aisle seat, bobbed hair under a wine-coloured crocheted beret, metrically nodding, mouthing assent to the lecturer’s oration. So great was his zeal, and so infuriating the subject, that I almost leaped to my feet, raised my fist and cried out, ‘Revolution!’ Instead I turned to Sinéad and, grinning, gasped, ‘Fuck, yeah.’ She smiled back, still nodding, and said the same.

The speaker was winding down his spiel; he had picked up several acetates and was arranging them for a presentation. I turned to Sinéad again and whispered, ‘I’m not even supposed to be here’, shrugging and smiling crookedly. She leaned forward conspiratorially and whispered, ‘But I bet you’re glad you are.’

I stayed until the end of the lecture, even though I would miss the start of my own, and was glad I did: I was happy to bathe in the electric babble of fired-up kids, swarming out into the corridor, heads abuzz with world-changing revelations and the fervour of the newly converted. They were my age and I felt a simplistic pride in being among them.

‘Most of them will have forgotten about all of this by lunchtime. They’ll be back talking about MTV or movie magazines or how pissed they were last night.’

Sinéad leaned against the wall facing the lecture theatre, smiling sardonically and clasping her books to her chest. She wore heavy black tights under a black velvet miniskirt, a huge, gloomy sweater with rolled-up sleeves and eyeliner that gave her eyes a faintly feline contour. I remember thinking she was pretty in a non-conventional, Gothic kind of way: soft fabrics and shadows and deep, dark eyes.

I smiled at her, a little bemused, and shuffled over. ‘Oh yeah? What makes you say that?’

She shrugged insouciantly, as if the answer were obvious. ‘Nothing. Just that they’re only kids. *We’re* only kids. We’re young and stupid and we’ve got the attention spans of moron goldfish, and we’ll each have forgotten how angry we felt in there by tomorrow.’

‘I don’t actually know you at all, but you don’t seem like the type to easily forget.’

She winked, a saucy barmaid pastiche, and turned to go, then paused and said, ‘You’re right, you don’t know me. But you’re also right about the other thing. See you ’round, kiddo.’

Sinéad turned and strode down the corridor. I watched her disappear into the throng, then remembered I had a lecture to attend and I was already late. That work ethic took control and pushed me in the opposite direction.

2002

She had drifted into reverie once more, chewing on a fingernail and gazing at the carpet, smoking constantly. It was a mechanical action; cigarette to mouth, draw in, drop hand, hold the smoke for a few seconds, let it out, raise hand again, cigarette to mouth. Sinéad was individualist and stubborn in the nicest possible way; she wouldn’t launch into a whinge about whatever was troubling her, gushing it out in some emotive dam-burst.

She was one of the strongest people I'd ever known, and for some reason that filled me with a weird empathy, a keener desire to take part of the load. I felt an urge to take her hand in one of mine and her face in the other and hold her there like that, smiling together and unspeaking with all things understood. I also felt an urge to smoke myself.

'Can I take one of those?'

Sinéad lit one for me and I pulled on it, making a tight little 'o' with my lips. It felt warm on my tongue and burned my throat on the way down, but that indefinable satisfaction was there. Yes, you're sucking hot poisonous air into your lungs, and that's all there is, but...it still felt good, especially after several months of abstinence. I realised that I couldn't remember the last time I had smoked a cigarette. It almost felt like another lifetime, like that was a different person who bore some vague resemblance to myself, a distant cousin marked with the common facial indicators of our shared ancestry.

'So what's up?' I said. 'What's bothering you?'

She continued looking downwards, seemingly ignoring the question. A different cassette played, a compilation of grunge songs from the early nineties. The volume was turned down low, and I was unsure what band it was. Some of the singers' voices sounded very similar: warm, ragged growls. Sinéad finally looked up.

'Ah, it's just... Shit. I dunno. It's stuff. It's life. It's work and family and where am I going and what am I doing with myself. ...I didn't get the bank loan. They said my idea was "financially unviable in the current economic climate", or words to that effect. The sort of words banks always use when they're really telling you to go screw yourself, anyway. So there you go. That's what's up, I suppose.'

Three months previously Sinéad had quit her job as a copywriter for a large advertising agency, where she had worked since completing her Master's in English literature. It offered an equally fabulous salary and social life – she was such a talented writer – and she had grown to hate it.

'Me writing copy for ads,' she had declared in one of her periodic anti-corporate diatribes, 'is like Michelangelo becoming a photographer for some stupid fucking celebrity magazine. I'm not being a snob here; it's

the same for anyone who's been exposed to great literature. It's just such a waste of all that education, all those fantastic books I read and wonderful minds I encountered. Toni Morrison, John Donne, Sean O'Casey, Percy Bysshe Shelley. Where are you now, folks? When did you all disappear from my head?'

I had thought she was being melodramatic; I told her she was being precious about her work, her schooling, herself. I told her it was just a job.

'No,' she had replied, with a vehemence that took me aback. 'No, it's *not* just a job. It's selling a lie, don't you get it? *I'm* selling a lie every bloody day of my working life. "You're too fat – drink this to slim down." "You're not popular – wear these to look cool." "You're not beautiful enough of yourself – we'll *make* you beautiful." My parents slaved in shitty jobs for years so I could go to college and become a broadminded person and make some sort of positive contribution to society, and instead I spend my time hawking mobile phones and spinning bullshit about the rejuvenative effects of the latest cold cleaner. It's disgusting and fucking immoral and I'm sick of being part of it.'

I had flapped a cynical hand at her and grunted, 'Fine. I'm sick of hearing how sick you are of your job. Why don't you do something about it?'

So she had; she quit the following week, served four weeks' notice, totted up her significant savings and announced her intention of starting a magazine. It would be a proper, 'intelligent' women's magazine, she declaimed one afternoon over coffee. It wouldn't patronise or demean the reader; it wouldn't subtly imply that they were ugly or lonely or in need of outside help; it would flip the bird to the cult of celebrity and a disposable modern culture; it would 'amuse and inform, entertain and encourage'; it would claw the medium back from the vacuous, self-regarding morass into which it had voluntarily slid and offer a grown-up read for grown-up women. It would be brilliant.

Or would *have* been brilliant, had the banks not got cold feet at the thought of an obdurate editor pissing off advertisers because she ranked them somewhere below an axe murderer in terms of standards. Aw, hell. I

clicked my tongue and shook my head, about the only reaction I could think to make.

Then I said, 'Shit. I'm really sorry, babe. What can I say?'

'Nothing. You don't have to say anything. It's just the way of the world, I guess. And there's always tomorrow, right? There's always another bank. There's hope still. I'll make it happen.'

I nodded reassuringly, and wondered if she really did still believe in the magazine; not in its intrinsic worth, but in the possibility of it ever seeing the light of day. She thumped a fist off her thigh, face scrunched up in a cute appropriation of a 'stiff upper lipped' gentleman – mustn't cry, now, lads; must crack on regardless. Sinéad stood up, walked to the bed and placed a hand on my shoulder.

She said, 'Anyway. Forget about it, okay? It's small beans. My problems don't mean shit compared to what's happening with you. Okay? It doesn't mean anything, so don't even think about it.'

But that was where she was irrefutably wrong. Because of what was happening with me, these 'small beans' meant something very great indeed, each one; they meant everything.

1992

After leaving college I had dossed around for several months, lazy and directionless and not particularly bothered by it. I slept late, crawled out of bed and sat in my flat on the broken-down couch, in the same shorts and t-shirt I had worn all night, watching children's television and eating cheese sandwiches and trying to read gargantuan novels by Russian geniuses. I remember sitting down with *Crime and Punishment* one afternoon, head fogged up from fourteen hours' slumber, and opening that first page with an electric thrill of anticipation, the promise of something grand about to unfold in a private ceremony. This was the good stuff, the classic work; hundreds of pages of sumptuous literature, laid out like a banquet for my epicurean delight.

As it happened I found the famous old tome quite boring – leaden prose concerning not much storyline at all – and sold the book to a

chatter, hyperactive friend of a friend who had made it his mission to read all the classics before he turned twenty-one. Then I packed all my books into cardboard boxes, sealed them with masking-tape and strolled into town to find employment.

I got work in a video store, the newly opened flagship of a nationwide chain, which was where I met Sinéad for the second time that autumn. I was standing behind the counter one sunny-white morning, holding an aluminium stepladder as my co-worker, a massively tall, gently spoken guy called Alan, fiddled with a recalcitrant blown light-bulb that just refused to unscrew. He finally managed to wrench the thing from its fittings and replace it, and we had folded away the stepladder and flicked the switch before we noticed that the replacement was a sleazy neon blue. Alan and I laughed and slapped our foreheads and he left to purchase a normal bulb.

I was about to nip into the backroom – where the videocassettes were stored, row after row of black plastic, catalogued and identical – for a surreptitious smoke when I heard someone speak.

‘Hi, I’m looking for that Ingmar Bergman movie. The one about Death. He plays a game of chess in it or something. Hey. Hello? Can I get some service here, please?’

Sinéad stood there with that same sardonic smile, chest out with her head to one side, hands clamped on her hips and a low-hanging tote bag on her shoulder. She looked gorgeous. I felt slightly ill at ease, unprepared to be accosted at my place of work by someone I didn’t even know.

I mumbled, ‘Hey. How are you, um...?’

She still wore the wine beret but otherwise her dress was markedly different: the fuzzy black fabrics had given way to a long, dark-green skirt, multicoloured shirt and olive-green denim jacket, though the black boots were an ever-present. She shot out a hand and declared, ‘Sinéad. Nice to meet you. Again.’

We shook hands. I smiled stupidly and rubbed the inside corner of my eye, a nervous affectation that always manifested itself when I felt at a loss as to what to say.

‘So. Do you really want me to root out that Bergman movie?’

She smiled and said, ‘Nah. I just said that to get your attention. I am actually here on business, though. It’s not just an excuse to see your handsome face or anything.’

I ducked under the counter-flap and stood next to her, sweeping my arm across the shelves. ‘Well, there it is. That’s all we’ve got. What do you need, exactly?’

Sinéad rummaged in her bag for a crumpled piece of paper, smoothing it out and scanning it carefully. I could hear the sounds of a brewery delivery from the pub two doors down: the slam of a trapdoor being opened, beer kegs clanging to the pavement and trundling over concrete, shouts and exhortations, the weirdly pleasing cacophony of hard steel and human endeavour.

‘Okay. I need all this stuff for a course in college. Film studies, right? It’s part of my... Anyway, forget all that: do you have... *Fitzcarraldo*, *Last Tango in Paris* and *Wings of Desire*? ’Cause I gotta have ’em, babe. Jesus. Not one among them would I ever actually *want* to see.’

I mused, ‘Let me see...’, and began flittering my fingers over the ‘World Cinema’ section, left to right, level by level. I saw the *Last Tango* sleeve, bleary and depressing, and pulled the case off the shelf, saying, ‘So what’s this Film Studies thing? Is that what you’re taking for your degree?’

Sinéad unwrapped a chewing-gum and squashed it into her mouth. She held the packet towards me.

‘You want one? No, I’m gonna do English Lit. for the BA. Maybe take Sociology with it. You know, after getting so fired up during that lecture you crashed.’

She was smiling again, mischievous, suggestive of things unsaid. I took a gum from the packet and replied, ‘Yeah, that was a pretty good lecture, alright.’

The other two videos weren’t in stock; unsurprising, really, for a major chain with a ‘stack ’em high, flog ’em often’ approach to film rental. We ordered hundreds of copies of every bullshit Hollywood release,

filling the store from floor to ceiling with grinding mediocrity and corporate orthodoxy, but God forbid anyone would be so crazy as to desire something different. I held up the *Last Tango* case and shrugged.

‘This is it, I’m afraid. You’ll have to go to a proper shop for the other two.’

‘Ah, fuck it. I’ll lie and pretend I’ve watched them. Nobody cares anyway. Okay, how much do I owe you and how do I become a member here?’

‘Nothing, seeing as how I only managed to get one out of three.’

‘Don’t be silly. Come on. What do I owe you?’

‘I told you. Just take the video and have it back by tomorrow. I won’t scan it through. You’ve got a trustworthy face, so I’m trusting you won’t do a runner on me.’

‘Really? Well...that’s very nice of you.’ She twisted her foot and pouted coquettishly. ‘Gee, mister – I don’t know *what* to do to make it up to you.’

I sighed theatrically and smiled at her.

‘Well, if you really feel that strongly about it, my break’s in ten minutes. Meet me in the café across the road and buy me a coffee.’

She winked, a flashback to our first meeting, and cocked a finger at me. ‘It’s a date.’

2002

‘So how are you feeling? I mean, do you feel better?’

I lay back on the pillows and closed my eyes, physically stifled and emotionally jaded. I was tired of answering these sorts of questions; tired of the strained diplomacy of their asking, the forcibly good-humoured expressions of the person asking, the supportive embrace of my hand or squeeze of my shoulder, the hair-trigger readiness to change the subject if I appeared upset or disheartened. Mostly, I hated the knotty, elusive look in their eyes: that look which said, ‘This is killing me to see this happen and know there’s nothing I can do about it.’

Sinéad had stopped smoking. Her mood seemed to have changed in the last fifteen minutes; like she had arisen from a sitting position, stretched her arms wide in the shape of a cross, taken energising breaths and come to rest, tall and well-defined, super-alert. She didn't pull a chair up to the bed and sit there, stooped, the way almost everyone else did. She stood by the window, hands behind her back, gazing across my parents' lawn to the world spluttering by beyond it.

'Hey,' she said. 'Are you going to answer me? I asked you a question.'

'I know, I know. I don't feel like answering your fucking question, okay? I don't want to talk about *me* again. I'm fed up of it.'

Sinéad spun around, shaking her head and wagging her finger in accusation. 'Don't. Okay? Just...don't. Don't get morose on me, got it? Don't start to feel sorry for yourself, you asshole. I won't let you. I can't. Because you're all that's...'

Her words halted in their tracks; she halted in her tracks. She was sobbing, shoulders jerking softly, tresses fallen about her face. I reached my arms towards her, whispering, 'Sinéad. C'mere.'

She tramped over to the bed with a funny childlike step and slumped onto it. I pulled her down into my arms and she rested her head on my shoulder, weeping soundlessly. How the hell did I end up comforting Sinéad?, I wondered in amusement, as the cassette in the deck wound to an end with a snap and I felt more tired than before.

I must have dozed off for a little while then; I looked about me and noticed that Sinéad had resumed her position by the window, proud-backed and chewing on her lower lip. I was about to ask her the time when my mother half-entered the room, opening the door a fraction with the restraint I had grown used to, asking if I needed anything. I waved my hand no and said, 'You remember Sinéad, don't you, Mam? She hasn't been here in a good while.'

My mother opened her eyes wide and put a finger to her lip, saying, 'Oh, of course I do, of course. Sinéad the genius. How's everything, love?'

Sinéad laughed and blushed a little, but I think she enjoyed the near wonderment my mother showed whenever she called. Sinéad was seriously accomplished, and my mother, unguarded and almost naïve person that she was, didn't feel like hiding from that fact. She believed in calling a spade a genius, in a manner of speaking.

Sinéad said, 'I'm grand, Sylvia, thanks. Just called to see himself, you know. And how are you?'

'Ah, fine, fine. Everything's very quiet around here at the moment, with the two younger ones gone off. Would you like anything, love? Tea or coffee or anything?'

Sinéad declined and promised to holler if she changed her mind, and my mother backed out the door, smiling gently at me as she closed it. She looked tired and her nerves seemed frayed at the ends recently; it was upsetting to me, as she had always been a laidback, sanguine person. It was weird seeing her on edge like this, but I didn't really know what I could do about the situation.

'She looks well,' Sinéad said. 'Your mum. She seems in good form.'

'Mm. I think she's a bit rundown at the moment. Probably misses Georgie around the place, causing a commotion. Listen, open that window a little, could you?'

The room was fogged up with smoke and had that dirty, industrial-grey pallor. Sinéad opened the window two inches and I watched the smoke being sucked outside, wisping like a snake, down and under and out. She put on another tape, a crackly compilation of 1960s lounge music. Doris Day was singing *Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps*, her lovely cut-glass voice complementing the staccato strings and percussion.

I smiled to myself and said, 'Jesus, it's funny. Doris Day had such a goody-two-shoes image, you know, the real Miss Prim-and-Proper, white picket fence, baking cookies in her nice pink apron. But she had one hell of a sexy voice.'

'What!? You fancy Doris Day? Oh my God. Your taste is up your ass.'

‘Hey, I didn’t say I fancied her. I said her voice was sexy. And it was. Listen to it, girl. It’s lovely – a real husky purr.’

‘Miaow. You and Doris Day. Still, stranger things have happened. Like you and that girl – what was her name again? Chick with the red hair.’

‘The “chick” with the red hair, as you call her, was named Maureen, and was actually lovely. She was dead sound, if you must know.’

‘Sure.’ Sinéad said. ‘Keep telling yourself that, Romeo. She was boring. You know it, I know it, she probably knew it if she ever took the time to think about anything. Tell me I’m wrong.’

‘You’re totally wrong. She was alright. Seriously. She was good craic.’

‘Right. So why aren’t you still going out with her?’

I grinned wryly and placed my arms under my head. ‘Ah. Well, there’s the rub, isn’t it? Not everyone has your staying power, darling. She, ah...decided that her life lay in a different direction to mine, let’s put it like that.’

‘You mean she split on you?’

I laughed and threw a cushion at Sinéad’s head. She ducked but it caught her temple, mussing up her hair and falling to the ground. She picked it up and prepared to throw it back.

I said, ‘Pretty much, yeah. Hey, it’s like I said – not everyone has your staying power.’

Sinéad looked out the window, staring hard, and pinpricks of moisture were reflected in her eyes by a harsh sun which had squeezed through the clouds. She frowned and muttered, ‘Yeah. Florence fucking Nightingale, that’s me all over.’

Staying power and constancy – those were qualities Sinéad indisputably possessed. I knew this because she had been almost two thousand miles away, on a holiday in Istanbul with two friends, when she logged into her e-mail account and opened a brief message from me, telling her that I was dying and would like to see her. She flew home that day and was in my room that evening, sitting in the same straight-backed

chair brought in from the kitchen, adamant that everything would be okay, doing her damndest not to cry in front of me and shaking those slim shoulders in the light of a bedside lamp.

Constancy and strength were what she had always freely given me; so when I asked to be told a story, one story each from five different people, something personal and unique to them, something from the heart and the brain and the guts, it seemed right and fitting, meaningful even, that Sinéad's should be the first.