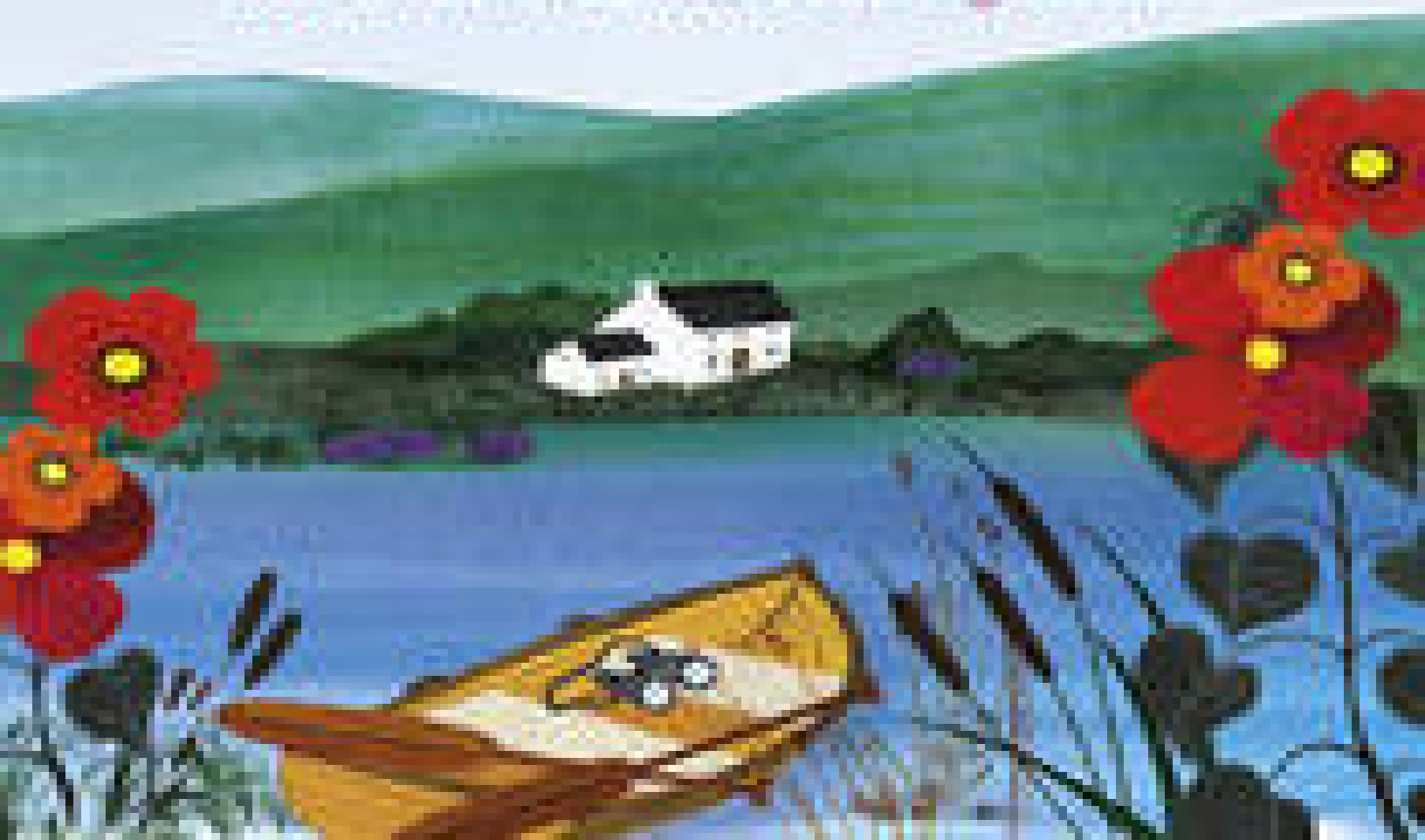


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Maeve Binchy

The Glass Lake

From the author of Minding Frankie



The McMahons lived over the chemist's shop in the main street of Lough Glass. You could get in up the front stairs beside the shop, or else go around the back. There was nobody about when Kit slipped into the yard and climbed the back steps. Clothes were hanging on the line, but Rita wasn't in sight. Kit tiptoed to the window where the jams sat in containers of every sort and shape. She took one of the more common jars. It would be less likely to be missed. With a shock, she saw a figure through the window. Her mother was sitting at the table, perfectly still. There was a faraway look on her face. She hadn't heard Kit, nor did she seem even aware of her surroundings. To Kit's dismay she saw that tears were falling down her mother's face and she wasn't even bothering to wipe them.

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Maeve Binchy was born in Co Dublin and went to school at Holy Child Convent in Killiney. She took a history degree at UCD and taught at various girls' schools, writing travel articles in the long summer holidays. In 1969 she joined the Irish Times, and has written humorous columns from London and all over the world. The Peacock Theatre in Dublin was the scene of her two stage plays, *End of Term* and *Half Promised Land*, and her television play, *Deeply Regretted By*, won two Jacobs Awards and the Best Script Award at the Prague Film Festival. Her last three novels were number one bestsellers; and her books have been adapted for television and cinema. She is married to the writer and broadcaster Gordon Snell.

THE GLASS LAKE Maeve Binchy
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To my dearest Gordon With the greatest gratitude for everything and with
all my love

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HAPTER ONE

Kit had always thought that the Pope had been at her 'of him in their house - a different Pope, a dead one other and father's wedding. There was a picture and the writing underneath said that Martin McMahon and Helen Healy had prostrated themselves at his feet. It had never occurred to her to look for him in the wedding picture. Anyway, it was such an awful photograph, with all those people in embarrassing coats and hats standing in a line. If she'd thought about it at all, Kit might have assumed that the Pope had left before the picture was taken, got on the mail boat in Dun Laoghaire and gone back to Rome. That was why it was such a shock when Mother Bernard explained that the Pope could never ever leave the Holy See; not even a war would make him leave the Vatican. 'But he went to weddings, didn't he?' Kit said. 'Only if they were in Rome.' Mother Bernard knew it all. 'He was at my parents' wedding,' Kit insisted. Mother Bernard looked at the little McMahon girl, a mop of black curly hair and bright blue eyes. A great wall climber, an organiser of much of the devilment that went on in the school yard, but not until now a fantasist. 'I don't think so, Katherine,' the nun said, hoping to stop it there. 'But he was.' Kit was stung. 'They have a framed picture of him on the wall saying that he was there.' 'That's the Papal Blessing, you eejit,' said Clio. 'Everyone has them ... they're ten-a-penny.'

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'I'll thank you not to speak of the Holy Father in those terms, i Cliona Kelly.' Mother Bernard was most disapproving. Neither Kit nor Clio listened to the details of the Concordat that made the Pope an Independent Ruler of his own tiny state. With her face down on the desk and hidden by the upright atlas, Kit hissed abuse towards her best friend. 'Don't you ever call me an eejit again, or you'll be sorry.' Clio was unrepentant. 'Well, you are an eejit. The Pope coming to your parents' wedding. Your parents of all

people!' 'And why shouldn't he be at their wedding if he were let out?', 'Oh, I don't know.' Kit sensed something was not being said. 'What would be wrong with their wedding, for example?' Clio was avoiding the matter. 'Shush, she's looking.' She was right. 'What did I just say, Cliona Kelly?' 'You said that the Holy Father's name was Pacelli, Mother. That he was called that before he was called Pius the Twelfth.' Mother Bernard reluctantly agreed that this was what she had been saying. 'How did you know that?' Kit was full of admiration. 'Always listen with half your mind to something else,' Clio said. Clio was very blonde and tall. She was great at games; she was very quick in class. She had lovely, long hair. Clio was Kit's best friend, and sometimes she hated her.

Clio's younger sister Anna often wanted to walk home with them, but this was greatly discouraged. 'Go away, Anna. You're a pain in the bottom,' Clio said, 'I'll tell Main you said bottom out loud on the road,' Anna said.

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'Mam has better things to do than to listen to stupid tall tales. Go away.' 'You just want to be skitting and laughing with Kit . . .' Anna was stung by the harshness of her dismissal. 'That's all you do all the time. I heard Mam say . . . I don't know what Clio and Kit are always skitting and laughing about.' That made them laugh even more. Arm in arm they ran off and left Anna, who had the bad luck to be seven and have no friends of her own.

There were so many things they could do on the way home from school. That was the great thing about living in a place like Lough Glass, a small town on the edge of a big lake. It wasn't the biggest lake in Ireland but it was a very large one. You couldn't see across to the other side except on a clear day and it was full of little creeks and inlets. Parts of it were clogged up with reeds and rushes. They called it the Glass Lake, which wasn't a real translation. Lough Glass really meant the green lake, all the children knew that. But sometimes it did look like a mirror. They said that if you went out on St Agnes' eve and looked in the lake at sunset, you could see your future. Kit and Clio didn't go in for that kind of thing. The future? The future was tomorrow or the next day, and

anyway there were always too many half-cracked girls and fellows, old ones nearly twenty, pushing each other out of the way to try to see. As if they could see anything except reflections of themselves and each other! Sometimes, on the way home from school, Clio and Kit would call to McMahon's pharmacy to see Kit's father, with the hope of being offered a barley sugar from the jar. Or they would go to the wooden pier that jutted out into the lake to see the fishermen coming in with their catch. They might go up to the golf course and see could they find any lost balls, which they could sell to golfers. They rarely went to each other's houses. There was a

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danger in going home, a danger of being asked to do their homework. To avoid this for as long as possible, the girls dallied on their way back from school. There was never much to look at in the post office; the same things had been in the window for years: pictures of stamps, notices about post office savings stamps and books, the rates on letters going to America. They wouldn't delay long there. Mrs Hanley's, the drapery shop, sometimes had nice Fair Isle jumpers and the occasional pair of shoes you might like. But Mrs Hanley didn't like schoolgirls gathering around the window in case it put other people off. She would come out and shoo them away like hens. 'That's right. Off with you. Off with you,' she would say, sweeping them ahead of her. Then they would creep past Foley's bar with the sour smell of porter coming out, and on past Sullivan's garage, where old Mr Sullivan might be drunk and shout at them, calling attention to their presence. This would be dangerous because McMahon's pharmacy was right across the road and someone would surely be alerted by the shouting. They could look in Wall's hardware in case there was anything exciting like a pair of new sharp shears, or across the road in the Central Hotel, where you might see visitors coming out if you were lucky. Usually you just saw Philip O'Brien's awful father glowering at everyone. There was the meat shop,

which made them feel a bit sick. They could go into Dillon's and look at birthday cards and pretend they were going to buy, but the Dillons never let them read the comics or magazines. Kit's mother would have found them a million things to do if they went home to McMahons'. She could show them how to make shortbread, and Rita the maid would watch too. She might get them to plant a window box, or show them how to take cuttings that would grow. The McMahons didn't have a proper garden like the Kellys did, only a yard at the back. But it was full of plants climbing out of barrels and up walls. Kit's mother had shown them how to do calligraphy and they had written, 'Happy Feast Day' for Mother Bernard. It was in lovely writing that looked as if a monk had done it. Mother Bernard still kept it in her prayer book. Or sometimes she would show them her collection of cigarette cards and the gifts she was going to get when she had a book filled with them. But Clio often asked things like, 'What does your mother do all day, that she has so much time to spend with us?' It seemed like a criticism. As if Mother should be

doing something more important, like going out to tea with people the way Mrs Kelly did. Kit didn't want to give Clio the chance to find fault, so she didn't often invite her home. The thing they liked doing most was going to see Sister Madeleine, the hermit who lived in a very small cottage by the lake. Sister Madeleine had great fun being a hermit, because everyone worried about her and brought her food and firewood. No one could remember when she had come to live in the old abandoned cottage at the water's edge. People were vague about what community Sister Madeleine had belonged to at one time, and why she had left. But nobody doubted her saintliness. Sister Madeleine saw only good in people and animals. Her bent figure was to be seen scattering crumbs for the birds, or stroking the most snarling and bad-tempered dog. She had a tame fox, which came to lap up a saucer of bread and milk in the evenings, and she was rarely without splints to mend a broken wing of a bird she had found on her travels. Father Baily and Mother Bernard, together with Brother Healy from the boys' School, had decided to make Sister Madeleine welcome rather than regard her with suspicion. As far as could be worked out, she believed in the one true God, and did not object to the way any of them interpreted His will. She attended

Mass quietly at the back of the church on Sundays, setting herself up as no rival pulpit. Even Doctor Kelly, Clio's father, said that Sister Madeleine knew as much as he did about some things:

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childbirth, and how to console the dying. Kit's father said that in olden days she might have been thought a Wise Woman or even a witch. She certainly knew how to make poultices and use the roots and berries that grew in abundance around her little home. She never spoke about other people so everyone knew that their secrets were safe. 'What will we bring her?' Kit asked. Nobody ever went to Sister Madeleine empty-handed. 'She always says not to be bringing her things.' Clio was practical. 'Yes, she says that.' Kit still thought they should bring something. 'If we went to your dad's shop he'd give us something.' 'No, he might say we should go straight home,' Kit said. That was a possibility they couldn't risk. 'We could pick some flowers.' Clio was doubtful. 'Yeah, but isn't her place full of flowers?' 'V know!' Kit had a sudden inspiration. 'Rita's making jam. We'll take a pot of it.' That would, of course, mean going home; Rita was the maid at the McMahons'. But the jam was cooling on the back window-, they could just lift a pot of it. This seemed by far the safest way of getting a gift for Sister Madeleine the Hermit without ha~lng to run the gauntlet of a home interrogation. The McMahons lived over the chemist's shop in the main street of Lough Glass. You could get in up the front stairs beside the shop, or else go around the back. There was nobody about when Kit slipped into the yard and climbed the back steps. Clothes were hanging on the line, but Rita wasn't in sight. Kit tiptoed to the window where the jams sat in containers of every sort and shape. She took one of the more commonjars. It would be less likely to be missed. With a shock, she saw a figure through the window. Her mother was sitting at the table, perfectly still. There was a faraway look on her face. She hadn't heard Kit, nor did she seem even aware of her surroundings. To Kit's dismay she

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saw that tears were falling down her mother's face and she wasn't even bothering to wipe them. She moved quietly away. Clio was waiting at the back. 'Were you spotted?' she asked. 'No.' Kit was short. 'What's wrong?' 'Nothing's wrong. You always think something's wrong when nothing ever is.' 'Do you know, Kit, you're becoming as bad a pain in the

bottom as awful Anna is. God, you're lucky you haven't any sisters,' Clio said with feeling. 'I have Emmet.' But they both knew Emmet was no problem. Emmet was a boy, and boys didn't hang around wanting to be part of your secrets. Emmet wouldn't be seen dead with girls. He went his own way, fought his own battles, which were many because he had a speech impediment, and the other boys mimicked his stutter. 'Emin ... Emm ... Emmemm ... Emmet,' they called him. Emmet always answered back. 'At least I'm not the school dunce,' he would say, or, 'At least I don't have the smell of pigs on my boots.' The trouble was, it took him a long time to say these telling things and his tormentors had often gone away. 'What's annoying you?' Clio persisted, as they walked down the lane towards the lake. 'I suppose someone will marry you eventually, Clio. But it'll have to be someone very patient, maybe stone deaf even.' There was no way that Kit McMahon was going to let her best friend Clio worm out of her the fact that it had been very shocking to see her mother sitting crying like that. Sister Madeleine was pleased to see them. Her face was lined from walking in all weathers; her hair was hidden under a short dark veil. It was a cross between a veil and a head scarf really. You could see some grey hair at the front, unlike the nuns at school, who had no hair at all. Theirs was all cut off and sold for wigs.

Sister Madeleine was very old. Kit and Clio didn't know exactly how old, but very old. She was older than their parents, they thought. Older than Mother Bernard. Fifty, or sixty or seventy. You wouldn't know. Clio had

once asked her. They couldn't remember exactly what Sister Madeleine had said, but she certainly hadn't answered the question. She had a way of saying something else entirely, which was a little bit connected with what you had asked, so that you didn't feel you had been rude, but which wasn't anywhere near telling you. 'A pot of jam,' said Sister Madeleine with excitement, as if she were a child getting a bicycle as a surprise. 'Isn't that the nicest thing we could have ... will we all have tea?' It was exciting having tea there, not boring like at home. There was an open fire and a kettle hanging on a hook. People had given Sister Madeleine little stoves and cookers in the past, but she had always passed them on to someone less fortunate. She managed to insult nobody by this recycling of gifts, but you knew that if you gave her anything for own comfort, like a rug or some cushions, it would end up in the caravan of a travelling family or someone who needed it more. The people of Lough Glass had got used to giving the hermit only what she could use in her own daily life. The place was so simple and spare it was almost as if nobody lived there. No possessions, no pictures on the walls, only a cross made out of some simply carved wood. There were mugs, and a jug of milk that someone must have brought her during the day. There was a loaf of bread that had been baked by another friend. She cut slices and spread the jam as if it were a feast that she was preparing. Clio and Kit had never enjoyed bread and jam like it before. Little ducks walked in the door in the sunlight; Sister Madeleine put down her plate so that they could pick at her crumbs. It was always peaceful there; even restless Clio didn't need to be jumping up and moving about. 'Tell me something you learned at school today. I love facts for my mind,' Sister Madeleine said.

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'We learned that Kit McMahon thought the Pope came to her mother and father's wedding,' Clio said. Sister Madeleine never corrected anyone or told them that they were being harsh or cruel, but often people seemed to realise it themselves. Clio felt she had said the wrong thing. 'Of course, it's a mistake anyone could make,' she said grudgingly. 'Maybe one day the Pope will come to Ireland,' Sister Madeleine said. They assured her this could never happen. It was all to

do with a treaty. The Pope had to promise to stay inside the Vatican and not to go out conquering Italy like popes used to do years ago. Sister Madeleine listened with every sign of believing them. They told Sister Madeleine news about Lough Glass, about old Mr Sullivan up at the garage coming out in the middle of the night in his pyjamas chasing angels. He said he had to catch as many as he could before the dawn, and he kept knocking on people's doors asking were there any angels hiding inside. Sister Madeleine was interested in that. She wondered what he could have dreamed that was so convincing. 'He's as mad as a hatter,' Clio explained. 'Well, we are all a bit mad, I expect. It's that stops us being too much alike, you know, like peas in a pod.' They helped her wash and tidy away the remains of tea. As Kit opened the cupboard she saw another pot of jam exactly the same as the one she had brought. Perhaps her mother had been here today. If so, Sister Madeleine had not told them, any more than she told anyone about the visits from Clio and Kit. 'You have some jam already,' Kit said. Sister Madeleine just smiled.

Tea in the McMahon household had been at a quarter past six for as long as Kit could remember. Dad closed the pharmacy at six, but never on the dot. There was always someone who had come for a cough bottle, or a farmer in

for marking fluids for cattle or sheep. It would never do to rush people out the door. A chemist's, after all, was a place you came when you were contemplating some of the greater mysteries of life, like your health or the welfare of someone in the family. It was not a visit that was taken lightly. Kit had often heard her mother asking why she couldn't work in the shop. It would be sensible, she had pleaded. People would like to deal with a woman when they were buying sanitary napkins, or aids for breast feeding, and then there was the cosmetics side of things. Travellers from the various cosmetic companies were paying more and more visits to country pharmacies to sell their wonders. There wasn't a week when someone from Ponds, Coty, Dawn, or Max Factor didn't call. Martin McMahon had very little interest in such things. 'Give me what you think,' he'd say, and take an order of expensive bath soaps and assorted lipsticks. They were badly

displayed, often fading in the window and never sold. Kit's mother had said that the women of Lough Glass were like women everywhere: they would like to look their best. These cosmetic companies would give short training courses to tell the chemists' assistants how best to display the products, how the women customers should use them for best advantage. But Kit's father was adamant. They didn't want to be pushing paints and powders on people who couldn't afford them, selling magic potions promising eternal youth ... 'I wouldn't do that,' Helen McMahon had argued often. 'I'd only learn how to make the best of them and give them advice.' 'They don't want advice,' her husband said. 'They don't want temptation either. Don't they look fine the way they are ... And anyway, would I want people to think that I had to have my wife out working for me, that I can't earn a living for her and my children?' Father would always laugh when he said this and make a funny face. He loved a joke and he could do card tricks and make

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coins disappear. Mother didn't laugh as much, but she smiled at Father and usually agreed with him. She didn't complain like Clio's mother did when he worked late, or when he went with Doctor Kelly to Paddles' bar. Kit thought that Mother would have liked to work in the pharmacy, but she realised that for people such as they were it would have been unsuitable for Father to have let her work there. Only people like Mrs Hanley, who was a widow and ran the drapery, or Mona Fitz, who was the postmistress because she wasn't married, or Mrs Dillon

whose husband was a drunk, worked in businesses. It was the way things were in Lough Glass, and everywhere. Kit couldn't get the vision of her mother's tears out of her mind as they went home from Sister Madeleine's. She walked up the stairs slowly, almost unwilling to go in and discover what was wrong. Perhaps there was some very bad news. But what could it be? Dad was fine; he was there closing up the chemist's. Emmet was home safely from rolling around in the dirt or whatever he did after school. So there couldn't be anything wrong with the family. With a sense of walking on eggshells Kit went into the kitchen, where they all ate their meals. Everything was normal. Mother's eyes might have been a bit bright, but

that was only if you were looking for something. She wore a different dress; she must have changed. Mother always looked so gorgeous, almost like a Spaniard. Someone had sent them a postcard from Spain of a dancer, where the dress was of real material, not just a photograph. Kit always thought it looked just like Mother, with her long hair swept up in a roll, and her big dark eyes. Dad was in great form, so there couldn't have been a row or anything. He was laughing and telling them about old Billy Sullivan coming in for some tonic wine. He had been barred from every other establishment that sold alcohol, and suddenly he had discovered his salvation in the shape of tonic wine. Dad did a great imitation of Mr Sullivan trying to appear sober.

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'I suppose that's why he saw the angels, due to the drink,' Kit said. 'God knows what he'll see after the Emu Burgundy,' her father said ruefully. 'I've had to tell him that's the last of the stock, that you can't get it any more.' 'That's a fie,' said Emmet. 'I know it is, son, but it's tell a lie or have the poor fellow lying on the road, roaring up to the skies.' 'Sister Madeleine says that we're all a bit mad; it's what makes us different from other people,' Kit said. 'Sister Madeleine is a saint,' Mother said. 'Did you go to see her yet, Rita, about the other thing?' 'I will, Mrs McMahan, I will,' Rita said, and put the big dish of macaroni cheese on the table. Even though they ate in the kitchen, Mother always insisted that everything was elegantly served. They had coloured place mats instead of a table cloth, and there was a big raffia mat for the casserole dish. It was decorated with sprigs of parsley, one of Mother's touches for making food look nice. 'Wouldn't it all taste the same no matter the way it looked, Mam?' Rita used to say at one time. 'Let's have it looking nice anyway,' Mother would say gently, and now it was second nature for Rita to cut tomatoes into triangles and slice hard-boiled eggs thinly. Even though the Kellys ate in a separate dining room, Kit knew that their meals were not served as graciously as they were in her home. It was another thing that made her feel her mother was special. Rita was made part of the family, unlike the Kellys' maid. Emmet loved Rita, and was always very curious about her comings and goings. 'What other thing?' Emmet asked. 'Helping me with reading.' Rita spoke out clearly before Emmet could

be asked not to be nosy. 'I never learned it properly at school, you see. I wasn't there often enough.' 'Where were you?' Emmet was envious. It was so wonderful to be able to say casually that you skipped school.

'Usually looking after a baby, or saving the hay, or making the turf.' Rita spoke in a matter of fact way. She didn't sound bitter about the book learning missed, the years of childminding, growing old before her time, culminating in going out to mind other people's children and clean their houses for them.

Not long after tea, Mr Sullivan saw devils everywhere. In the fading light he noticed them creeping with pitchforks into the houses along the street, including the chemist's. Maybe they had gone in through the floorboards and through cracks in the wall. Kit and Emmet listened,

giggling, from the top of the stairs to their father remonstrating with Mr Sullivan, while issuing orders out of the corner of his mouth. 'You're all right Billy. There isn't a devil here except yourself and myself. 'Helen, ring Peter will you. 'Now sit down, Billy, here, and we'll talk the thing out, man to man. 'Helen, let him know how bad it is. 'Billy, listen to me. Am I a man who'd let fellows with pitchforks into my house? 'As quick as he bloody well can, with any kind of tranquilliser he can get into a syringe.' They sat on the stair top and waited until Clio's father arrived. The cries, and shouts of panic, and the hunt for devils stopped. They heard Dr Kelly saying to their father that it was the County Home now. Billy was a danger to himself and everyone else. 'What'll happen to the business?' Dad asked. 'One of those fine sons he threw out will come back and learn to run it for him. At least the uncle sent the boys to school. They may be able to turn it into something rather than the doss house it is,' said Dr Kelly, who did not share Sister Madeleine's view that we Were all different and that's what made us special. Emmet was sitting with his chin in his hands. His stutter

always came back when he was frightened. 'Are they going to lock him up?' he said, his eyes big and round. It took him ten attempts to get his tongue around the word 'lock'. Kit thought suddenly that if she had been given a wish now, at this very moment, it would have been that Emmet's stutter would go. Sometimes it would be that she had long blonde hair like Clio, or that her mother and father might be friends with each other like Dr Kelly and Mrs Kelly were. But tonight it would have been Emmet's speech. When Mr Sullivan had been taken away, Dad and Clio's father went for a drink. Mother went back inside without a word. Kit saw her moving around the sitting room, picking up objects and putting them down, before going to the bedroom and closing the door. Kit knocked. 'Come in, sweetheart.' Mother was sitting at the dressing table brushing her hair. She looked like a princess when her hair was down. 'Are you all right, Main? You seem a bit sad.' Mother put her arm around Kit and drew her towards her. 'I am fine, just fine. What makes you think I'm sad?' Kit didn't want to tell about seeing her through the kitchen window. 'Your face.' 'Well, I suppose I am sad about some things, like that poor fool being tied up and taken off to a mental home for the rest of his life because he couldn't drink in moderation. And about Rita's selfish, greedy parents who had fourteen children and let the older ones rear the younger ones until they could send them out as skivvies and then take half their wages from them ... Otherwise, I'm fine.' Kit looked at her mother's reflection in the mirror doubtfully. 'And are you fine, my little Kit?' 'Not really. Not completely fine.' 'What would you like that you haven't got?' 'I'd like to be quicker,' Kit said. 'I'd like to understand things immediately, the way Clio does, and to have fair hair, and to be able to listen to one thing while saying another. And be taller.'

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'I don't suppose you'd believe me if I told you that you were twenty times more beautiful than Clio,, and much more intelligent.' 'Oh Mam, I'm not.' 'You are, Kit. I swear it. What Clio has is style. I don't know where she got it, but she knows how to make the most of everything she has. Even at twelve she knows what looks well on her and how to smile. That's all it is. It's not beauty, not like you have, and you have my cheek bones, remember. Clio only has Lilian's.'

They laughed together, grown-ups in a conspiracy of mockery. Mrs Kelly had a plump face and no cheek bones at all.

Rita went to Sister Madeleine on Thursdays, her half day. If anyone else called, Sister Madeleine would say, 'Rita and I are reading a bit of poetry. We often do that on a Thursday.' It was such a tactful way of telling them that this was Rita's time, people began to recognise it as such. Rita would bake some scones, or bring a half an apple tart. They would have tea together and bend over the books. As the weeks went on and the summer came, Rita began to have new confidence. She could read without putting her finger under the words; she could guess the harder words from the sense of the sentence. It was time for the writing lessons. Sister Madeleine gave Rita a fountain pen. , I couldn't take that, Sister. It was given to you as a gift.' 'Well, if it's mine, can't I do what I like with it?' Sister Madeleine rarely kept anything that she had been given for more than twenty-four hours. 'Well, could I have a loan of it then, a long loan?' 'I'll lend it to you for the rest of your life,' Sister Madeleine said. There were no boring headline copy books; instead, Rita and Sister Madeleine wrote about Lough Glass and the lake and changing seasons. 'You could write to your sister in America soon,' Sister Madeleine said.

15

Not a real letter, not to a person.' Why not? That's as good as any letter she'll get from these parts, I tell you.' 'Would she want to hear all this about home?' 'She'll be so full of happiness to hear about home you'd nearly hear her thanking you across the Atlantic Ocean.' 'I never got a letter. I wouldn't want them to be thinking above in McMahons' that I was in the class of having people writing to me.' 'She could write to you here.' 'Would the postman bring letters to you, Sister Madeleine?' 'Ah, Tommy Bennet is the most decent man in the world. He delivers letters to me three times a week. Comes down here on his bicycle whatever the weather, and has a cup of tea.' Sister Madeleine didn't add that Tommy never came without some contribution to the store cupboard. Nor that she had been instrumental in

getting his daughter quickly and quietly into a home for unmarried mothers and keeping the secret safe from the interested eyes and ears of Lough Glass. 'And you'd get enough post for that?' Rita asked in wonder. 'People are very kind. They often write to me,' Sister Madeleine said with the same sense of wonder.

Clio and Kit had learned to swim when they were very young. Dr Kelly had stood waist deep in the water to teach them. As a young medical student he had once pulled three dead children from the Glass Lake, children who had drowned in a couple of feet of water because nobody had taught them how to swim. It had made him very angry. There was something accepting and dumb about people who lived on the edge of a hazard and yet did nothing to cope with it.

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1 Like those fishermen over in the West of Ireland who went out in frail boats to fish in the roaring Atlantic. They all wore different kinds of jumpers so they would know whose family it was when a body was found. Each family had its own stitch. Complicated and perverse, Dr Kelly thought. Why hadn't they taught the young fishermen to swim? As soon as the young Kellys and McMahons could walk they were taken to the lake shore. Other families followed suit; the doctor was a figure of great authority. Young Philip O'Brien from the hotel learned, and the Hanley

girls. Of course, old Sullivan from the garage told the doctor to keep his hands off other people's children, so Stevie and Michael probably couldn't swim to this day. Peter Kelly had been in other countries where lakes like this one had been tourist attractions. Scotland, for example. People came to visit places just because there was a lake there. And in Switzerland, where he and Lilian had spent their honeymoon, lakes were all important. But in Ireland in the early fifties, nobody seemed to see their potential. People thought he was mad when he bought a small rowing boat jointly with his friend Martin McMahon. Together they rowed and fished for perch, bream and pike. Big ugly fish all of them, but waiting for them on the everchanging waters of their lake was a restful pastime. The men had been

friends since they were boys. They knew the beds of reeds and rushes where the moorhens sheltered and where sometimes even the swans hid from view. They occasionally had company on the lake as they went out to fish, since a few local people shared their enthusiasm; but normally the only boats you saw on Lough Glass were those carrying animal foodstuff or machinery from one side to the other. Farms had been divided up so peculiarly that often a farmer had bits of land so far apart that the journey across the water could well be the shortest route. Yet another strange thing about Ireland, Peter Kelly often said, those

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inconvenient things that weren't laid on us by a colonial power we managed to do for ourselves by incessant family feuds and differences. Martin was of a sunnier disposition. He believed the best of people; his patience was neverending. There was no situation that couldn't be sorted out by a good laugh. The only thing Martin McMahon ever feared was the lake itself. He used to warn people, even visitors who came into his chemist's shop, to be careful as they went along the paths by the lake shore. Clio and Kit were old enough to take a boat out alone now, they had proved it a dozen times, but Martin still felt nervous. He admitted it to Peter over a pint in Paddles' bar. 'Jesus, Martin! You're turning into an old woman.' Martin didn't take it as an insult. 'I suppose I am. Let me look for any secondary signs: I haven't developed breasts or anything, but I don't need to shave as often ... You could be right, you know.' Peter looked affectionately at his friend. Martin's bluster was hiding a real concern. 'I've watched them, Martin. I'm as anxious as you are that they don't run into trouble ... but they aren't such fools when they're out on the water as they seem to be on dry land. We've drilled that into them. Watch them yourself and you'll see.' 'I will. They're going out tomorrow. Helen says we have to let them go and not wrap them in cotton wool.' 'Helen's right,' Peter said sagely, and they debated whether or not to have another pint. As always on these occasions they made a huge compromise by ordering a half pint. So predictable that Paddles had it ready for them when they got around to ordering it.

'Mr McMahon, will you please tell Anna to go home,' Clio begged Kit's father. 'If I tell her, it only starts a row.' 'Would you like to go for a walk with me?' Kit's father suggested. 'I'd like to go in the boat.' 'I know you would, but they're big, grown-up girls

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now, and they want to be having their own chats. Why don't you and I go and see if we could find a squirrel?' He looked at the girls in the boat. 'I know I'm a fussy. I just came down to be sure you were all right.' 'Of course we're all right.' 'And you'll take no chances? This is a dangerous lake.' 'Daddy, please!' He went off, and they saw Anna grumbling and following him. 'He's very nice, your father,' said Clio, fitting the oars

properly into the oar locks. 'Yes, when you think of the fathers we might have got,' Kit agreed. c Mr Sullivan up in the home.' Clio gave an example. 'Tommy Bennet, the bad-tempered postman.' 'Or Paddles Burns, the barman with the big feet . . They laughed at their lucky escapes. 'People often wonder why your father married your mother, though,' Clio said. Kit felt a bile of defence rise in her throat. 'No, they don't wonder that. You might wonder it. People don't wonder it at all.' 'Keep your hair on. I'm only saying what I heard.' 'Who said what? Where did you hear it?' Kit's face was hot and angry. She could have pushed her friend Clio into the dark lake and held her head down when she surfaced. Kit was almost alarmed at the strength of her feeling. 'Oh, people say things. . . ' Clio was lofty. 'Like what?' 'Like your mother was a different sort of person, not a local person ... you know.' 'No, I don't know. Your mother isn't from here either, she's from Limerick.' 'But she used to come here on holidays. That made her sort of from here.' 'My mother came here when she met Dad, and that makes her from here too.' There were tears in Kit's eyes. 'I'm sorry,' Clio said. She really did sound repentant.

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'What are you sorry about?' 'For saying your mother wasn't from here.' Kit felt she was sorry for more, for hinting at a marriage that was less than satisfactory. 'Oh, don't be stupid Clio. No one cares what you say about where my mother is from, you're so boring. My mother's from Dublin and that's twenty times more interesting than being from old Limerick.' 'Sure,' said Clio. The sunlight went out of the day. Kit didn't enjoy the first summer outing on the lake. She felt Clio didn't either, and there was a sense of relief when they each went home.

Rita got two weeks' holiday every July. 'I'll miss going to Sister Madeleine,' she told Kit. 'Imagine missing lessons,' Kit said. 'Ah, it's what you don't have, you see. Everyone wants what they don't have.' 'What would you really like to do in the holidays?' Kit asked. 'I suppose not to have to go home. It's not a home like this one. My mother'd hardly notice whether I was there or not, except to ask me for money.' 'Well, don't go.' 'What else would I do?' 'Could you stay here and not work?' Kit suggested. 'I'd bring you a cup of tea in the mornings.' Rita laughed. 'No, that wouldn't work. But you're right, I don't have to go home.' Rita said she would discuss it with Sister Madeleine. The hermit might have an idea. The hermit had a great idea. She thought that Mother Bernard in the convent would simply love someone to come and help her spring clean the parlour for a few hours a day, maybe even give it a lick of paint. And in return, Rita could stay in the school and some of the nuns would give her a hand with the lessons. Rita had a great holiday, she said, the best in her life. 'You mean it was nice, staying with the nuns?'

'it was lovely. You don't know the peace of the place and the lovely singing in the chapel, and I had a key and could go to the town to dances or to the pictures. And I got all my food and hours of help at my books.' 'You won't leave us, will you, Rita?' Kit felt a shadow of change fall over them. Rita was honest. 'Not while you're young and the way you are. Not till Emmet's grown up a bit.'

'Mam would die if you left, Rita. You're part of the family.' 'Your mother understands, honestly she does. She and I often talk about trying to take your chance in life; she encourages me to better myself. She knows it means I hope to be doing better than scrubbing floors.' Kit's eyes felt full of tears suddenly. 'It's not safe when you talk like that. I want things always to be the same, not to change.' Rita said, 'That's not going to be the way it is. Look at the way Farouk stopped being a kitten and is a cat now; we wanted him to be a kitten for ever. And look at the way those little ducklings in Sister Madeleine's grew up and sailed away. And your mother wants you and Emmet to be young and nice like you are, but you'll grow up and leave them. It's the way of things.' Kit wished it wasn't the way of things, but she feared that Rita was right.

'Will you come out in the boat with me, Mam?' Kit asked. 'Lord no, my love. I'd not have time for that. Go on yourself with Clio.' 'I'm sick of Clio. I'd like you to come. I want to show you places you haven't been.' 'No Kit, it's not possible.' 'But what do you do in the afternoons, Mam? What do you do that's more important than coming out in the boat?' It was only in the school holidays that Kit was aware of how her mother's pattern of living differed from other people's. Clio's mother was always getting a bus or a lift to

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I I I the big town to look at curtain material or to try on clothes, or to have coffee in one of the smart shops with friends. Mrs Hanley and Mrs Di I I I lion were working in their shops; Philip O'Brien's mother went up to the church and cleaned the brasses or arranged the flowers for Father Bally. There were mothers who went to Mother Bernard and helped make things for the various sales of work, bazaars and functions that were held regularly to aid the Order's work on the missions. Mother did none of these things. She spent time in the kitchen with Rita, helping, experimenting, improving the cooking, much more than other people's mothers spent with maids. Mother arranged leaves and branches as decoration in their sitting room and framed pictures of the lake so that one whole wall had two dozen different

views of Lough Glass. If people came in they were amazed to see the collection. But people didn't often come in. And Mother's work was swift and efficient. She had a lot of time on her own ... all the time in the world to come out with Kit in the boat. 'Tell me,' Kit asked again. 'What do you like doing if you won't come out with me?' 'I live my life the best I can,' her mother said. And Kit felt a shock at the faraway look that came over Helen McMahon's face as she said it.

'Dad, why do you and Mam sleep in different rooms?' Kit asked. She picked a time when the chemist's was empty, when they would not be disturbed. Her father stood in his white coat behind the counter, his glasses pushed back on his head. his round, freckled face full of concentration. Kit was only allowed to sit on the high stool if she didn't distract him. 'What?' he said absently. She began again, but he interrupted. 'I heard you, but why do you ask?' 'I was just asking, Dad.'

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'Did you ask your mother?' 'Yes.' 'And?' 'And she said it was because you snored.' 'So now you know.' 'Yes.'

'Any more questions Kit, or can I get on with earning my living and making up compounds?' 'Why did you and Mam get married?' 'Because we loved each other, and still love each other.' 'How did you know?' ' * You know, Kit, that's it. I'm afraid it's not very satisfactory, but that's the only way I can explain it. Like, I saw your mother at a friend's house in Dublin, and I thought, isn't she lovely and nice and fun and wouldn't it be great if she'd go out with me. And she did, over and over, and then I asked her to marry me and she said yes.' He seemed to be telling it from the heart. But Kit wasn't convinced. 'And did Mam feel the same?' 'Well, darling child. She must have felt the same. I mean, there was nobody with a great big stick saying you must marry this young chemist from Lough Glass who loves you to distraction. Her parents were dead; she didn't do it to please anyone, because I was a safe bet or anything.' 'Were you a safe bet, Daddy?' 'I was a man with a steady job. In 1939, with the world on the edge of the war and everyone very confused by everything, a man with a good job was always a safe bet. still is.' 'And were you surprised that she said yes?' 'I No,

darling, I wasn't surprised, not at that stage. We loved each other, you see. I know it's not like the pictures, ?r the things you youngsters giggle about, but that's what it was for us.' Kit was silent. 'What is it Kit? Why are you asking all this?' 'Nothing, Daddy. You know the way you get to wondering, that's all.'

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'I know the way you get to wondering,' he said. And he left it there, so Kit didn't even have to think any more about what Clio had said. Clio had told her that she had overheard a conversation in her home where someone had said that Martin McMahon had a job keeping that wife of his tied to Lough Glass and the miracle of the whole thing being why she had ever come here in the first place. 'I'm only telling you,' Clio had said, 'because you and I are best friends and I think you ought to know.'

'Sister Madeleine?' 'Yes, Kit.' 'Do you know the way people tell you everything?' 'Well, they tell me things Kit, because I haven't much to tell them, you see. What with gathering sticks and picking flowers and saying my prayers, there isn't much to tell.' 'Do people tell you their secrets, like, their sins even?' Sister Madeleine was shocked. 'No, Kit McMahon. Don't you know as well as I do that the only one we'd tell our sins to is an anointed priest of God, who has the power to act between God and man.' 'Secrets then?' 'What are you saying to me at all? Chook, chook, chook ... will you look at the little bantams. Brother Healy was so kind. He gave me a clutch of eggs and they all hatched out beside the fire ... It was like a miracle.' She knelt on the floor to direct the little chickens away from some perilous journey they were about to make and back into the box of straw she had prepared for them. Kit would not be put off. 'I came by myself today because . . .' 'Yes, I missed Clio. She's a grand friend for you, isn't she?' 'She is and she isn't, Sister Madeleine. She told me that people were talking about my father and mother ... and I wondered . . . I wanted to know maybe if you . . .' Sister Madeleine straightened up. Her lined, weatherbeaten face was in a broad smile, as if she was willing the

anxiety away from Kit. 'Aren't you the grown-up woman of twelve years of age, and don't you know that everyone talks about everyone else? That's what people do in a village ... You're not going to get all upset over that, are you?' 'No, but ... Sister Madeleine seized the word No. 'There, I knew you weren't. You see, it's a funny thing when people go miles and miles away to big cities where they know nobody and

nobody knows them. The whole thing is turned around. It's then they want people to be all interested 'nr them and their doings. We are funny sorts of people, the human race . . . , 'It's just that . . . ' Kit began desperately. She didn't want to discuss the human race. She wanted Sister Madeleine to tell her that everything was all right, that her mother wasn't unhappy or wild or bad, or whatever it was that Clio was suggesting. But she didn't get far. Sister Madeleine was in full flight. 'I knew you'd agree with me, and one of the funniest things - animals are much more simple. I don't know why the Lord thought that we were so special. We're not nearly as loving and good as the animal kingdom.' The old dog, Whiskers, that Sister Madeleine had rescued when someone had tried to drown him in a bag, looked up when she said this. Whiskers seemed to understand when she was saying something good about animals. It was as if the tone of her voice changed. He gave a sort of gurgle to show he approved. 'Whiskers agrees with me. And how's Farouk, that fine noble cat of yours?' , He's fine, Sister Madeleine. Why don't you come and see him?' 'Sure you know me. I'm not one to be visiting people's houses. All I want to know is that he's well and happy, and stalking around Lough Glass as if he owned it.' There they were, talking about Farouk and Whiskers and the human race, and it would be rude now to go back to the reason why Kit had walked down the leafy lane to see Sister Madeleine on her own.

1 'How are things, Kit?' 'Fine, Mrs Kelly.' Lilian Kelly stood back to look more attentively at her daughter's friend. The child was very handsome, with the great head of dark curly hair and those unexpected blue eyes. She would probably be a beauty like her mother. 'And tell me, have you and Clio had a falling out?' 'A falling out?' Kit's blue eyes were too innocent. She repeated the phrase with wonder, as if she hadn't a clue what the words meant. 'Well, it's just that up to now you've been like Siamese twins, joined at the hip. But in the last few weeks you don't seem to be going within a donkey's roar of each other, and that seems a pity, seeing that it's the summer holidays.' She paused, waiting. But she was getting nothing from Kit. 'We didn't have a row, honestly Mrs Kelly.' 'I know. That's what Clio said.' Kit was anxious to be away. 'Nobody listens to their own mother, so maybe you might listen to me instead. You and Clio need each other. This is a small place; you'll always be glad to have a friend here. Whatever silliness this is it doesn't matter, It'll soon be over. Now you know where we live. Come on up to the house this evening, will you?' 'Clio knows where I live too, Mrs Kelly.' 'God protect me from two such stubborn women. I don't know what's going to happen to the next generation . . .' Mrs Kelly sighed and went off good-naturedly. Kit watched her go. Clio's mother was large and square and wore sensible clothes. Today she had on a cotton dress with white cuffs and collar and a small daisy print, and she was carrying a shopping basket. She was like the picture of a mother in a story book. Not like Kit's own mother, who was very thin, and who wore bright greens or crimson or royal blue, and whose clothes were sort of floaty looking. She looked much more like a dancer than a mother.

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Kit sat on the wooden pier. Their boat was tied up beside her, but there was an iron-hard rule that no one took the boat out alone. Someone had been drowned in the lake because she went out alone. It was ages ago, but people still talked about it. Her body wasn't found for a year, and during that year her soul used to haunt the lake calling out, 'Look in the reeds, look in the reeds.' Everyone knew this. It was enough to frighten the most foolhardy, even the boys, from going out on their own.

Kit watched enviously as she saw some of the older boys from the Brothers' school untying a boat, but she would not go back up and pretend to Clio that everything was all right. Because it wasn't. The days seemed very long. There was nobody to talk to. It didn't seem fair to go down to Sister Madeleine on her own. It had been the place that she and Clio always went to, and that one time she had gone to try to find out things, Sister Madeleine must have known what she was after. Rita was always working, or else she had her head in a book. Emmet was too young for any conversation. Daddy was busy and Mother ... Mother. Mother expected Kit to be less clingy, less worried. It had been very easy whe-i Clio was around. Perhaps Mrs Kelly was right and they did need each other. But she was not going to go up to that house. She heard footsteps behind her and felt the spring of the wooden pier as someone walked along. It was Clio. She had two milk chocolate biscuits; their favourites. 'I wouldn't go to your house, and you wouldn't come to mine. This is neutral ground, all right?' she said. Kit paused. 'Sure,' she shrugged. 'We can just go on as we were before the fight.' Clio wanted it defined. 'There wasn't a fight,' Kit reminded her. 'Yeah, I know. But I said something stupid about your mother.' There was a silence. Clio went on to fill it. 'The

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truth is, Kit, that I was jealous. I'd love to have a mother who looks like a film star.' Kit reached out and took one of the Club Milk biscuits. 'Now you're here, we can take out the boat,' she said. The row that had never been was over.

During the holidays Brother Healy came up to the convent for his annual discussion with Mother Bernard. They had many things to discuss, and they got on well together when discussing them. There was the school curriculum for the year, the difficulty of getting lay teachers who would have the same sense of dedication; the terrible problem they shared about

children being wild and undisciplined, preferring the goings-on on the cinema screen to real life as it should be lived in Ireland. They co-ordinated their timetables so that the girls should be released from school at one time and the boys at another, leaving less chance for the two sexes to meet each other and get involved in unnecessary familiarity. Brother Healy and Mother Bernard were such old friends now that they could even indulge in the odd little grumble, about the length of Father Baily's sermons for example. The man was inclined to be hypnotised by the sound of his own voice, they thought. Or the excessive love the children had for that difficult Sister Madeleine. It was somehow highly irritating that this odd woman, who came from a deeply confused and ill-explained background, should have taken such an unexpected place in the hearts and minds of Lough Glass's children, who would do anything for her. They were eager to save stamps, collect silver paper, and gather sticks for her fire. The boys had been outraged when Brother Healy had stamped on a spider. There had been a near mutiny in the classroom. And these were the same lads who would have pulled the wings off flies for sport a few years ago. Mother Bernard said that Sister Madeleine was altogether too tolerant for this world; she seemed to have a

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good word to say for everyone, including the enemies of the Church. She had told some of the impressionable girls that Communists might have their own very reasonable belief in dividing wealth equally. That had been a headache, Mother Bernard said, and one that she could have done without. And it wasn't only the children who were under her spell, Brother Healy said in an aggrieved tone. Oh no, no. A man who should know better, like Martin McMahon the

chemist. Brother Healy had heard with his own ears the man suggesting to Mrs Sullivan, whose poor Billy had been carried off screaming, that she should go to Sister Madeleine for some advice about a nice soothing drink to make her sleep. 'Next stop will be black magic altogether,' said Mother Bernard, nodding feverishly in agreement. And of course, if Martin minded his business and paid a bit of attention to that fancy wife of his, he'd be

better off. Brother Healy might have gone too far now in uncharitable gossip. He knew it and so did Mother Bernard. They both began to shuffle their papers together and end the meeting. It would remain unsaid that Helen McMahon, with her disturbing good looks, walked too much alone, beating at the hedges with a blackthorn stick, her eyes and mind far, far away from Lough Glass and the people who lived there.

It was a Wednesday, and Martin McMahon closed his shop with a sigh of relief. The flypaper was thick with dead bluebottles. He must remove it quickly before Kit or Emmet came in with a lecture about them being God's creatures and how unfair of him to lure them to their death. He was relieved that Kit and Clio Kelly seemed to have got over whatever childish squabble it had been that kept them apart for a few weeks. Girls were so intense at, that age, it was impossible to know their minds. He had asked Helen if they should interfere, try to bring the children together, but Helen had said to let it run its course. And she had been right about everything.

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When Helen said something, it was always likely to happen. She had said that Emmet would be able to cope with his stutter, that he would laugh away the mimicry and criticism. She had been right. She had said Rita was a bright girl when everyone else had thought the child mentally deficient. Helen had known that Billy Sullivan was drinking behind his garage doors when no one else knew. And Helen had told him all those years ago that she could never love him totally, but she would love him as much as she was able to. Which wasn't nearly enough, but he knew it was that or nothing. He had first met her when she was pining for someone else, and she had been open with him. It would not be fair to encourage his attentions, she had said, when her mind was so committed elsewhere. He had agreed to wait around. He had made more and more excuses to be in Dublin, to invite her out. Gradually, they became close. She never spoke of the man who had left her to marry some girl with money. Little by little, the colour returned to her cheeks. He invited her down here to see his place ... his lake, his people ... and she came and walked with him around the shores. 'It might not be the greatest love the world has ever known for you ... but it will for me,' he

said. She said it was the most beautiful proposal that a man could make. She would accept, she said. She sighed as she said it. Helen had told him that she would stay with him, and if she ever left she would tell him why, and it would have to be for a very good reason. She said that it was dangerous to try to know somebody too well. People should have their own reserves, she said, the places they went in their minds, where no one else should follow. He had agreed with her, of course. It was the price he paid for getting her as his wife. But he wished she didn't go off so often and so far in her mind, and he dearly wished she didn't wander around the lake in all kinds of weather.

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She assured him that she loved to do this; it brought her peace to see the lake in its changing seasons. She knew all the kinds of things about its nesting creatures. She felt at home there; she knew all the people around. Once she had told him that it would be lovely to have a little cottage like Sister Madeleine's and have the lake water lap up to your door. He had laughed at that. 'Isn't it hard enough to squash the whole family into this place? How would we fit in the

hermit's cottage?' he had asked. 'I didn't mean the whole family. I was thinking of going there by myself.' Her eyes had been far away that day. He hadn't followed her train of thought; it had been too unsettling. Martin let himself in his own front door beside the chemist's shop. It led straight upstairs to what they called their house, even though Kit had complained that they were the only people she knew who had a house without a downstairs. Rita was setting the table. 'The mistress won't be here, Sir. She said to say she'll see you after your game of golf.' He was disappointed and it showed. 'Women have to have their time off, too,' Kit said defensively. 'Of course they do,' he said, over-jovially. 'And it's a Wednesday, so everyone except Rita has an afternoon off. I'm going to play a round of golf with Clio's father. I'm feeling in powerful form. I'm going to beat him into the ground today. I can see a few pars coming up, and a birdie and an eagle and ... maybe an albatross.' 'Why are they all called after birds?' Emmet wanted to know. 'I suppose because the ball soars like a bird,

or it should anyway ... Come on, I'll be mother,' he said, and began to ladle out the lamb stew. He realised that he had been saying this more and more

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recently. He wondered why on earth Helen had not said she was going out. Where on earth could she be?

From the golf course you got fine views of the lake. People id It was one of the most attractive courses In Ireland. sal Not as rugged as the great championship courses on the coast, but very varied, with rolling parkland and many clusters of trees ... And always the lake, dark blue today with hardly any shadows on it. Peter Kelly and Martin McMahon stopped to rest and look down from the eighth green upon the high ground. It wasn't a busy golf course; they were holding nobody up. There was always time to stand and look down on Lough Glass and its lake. 'The tinkers are back, I see.' Peter pointed out the coloured roofs of caravans on the far shore of the lake. 'They're like the seasons, aren't they? Always coming back the same way and at the same time.' 'Desperate life to Inflict on the children, though. Some of them come up to get bits of machinery out of them or with dog bites. You'd pity them,' said the doctor. 'They come in to me, too, only the very odd time. Often I tell them they know more than I do,' Martin laughed. He had indeed said that between the travellers and old Madeleine there was a very good second line of defence as regards medicine in Lough Glass. 'Some of them are very fine-looking people.' Peter peered into the distance, where two women walked by the water's edge. Martin looked too, and then they both moved at the same time to go back to line up their shots. It was as if they both thought one of the women looked very like Helen McMahon, but neither of them wanted to say it.

Clio told Kit that there was a woman among the travellers who told fortunes. And that she knew everything that was going to happen. But Mother Bernard would kill you stone dead of you went anywhere near her. 'What would Sister Madeleine say?' Kit wondered.

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This was a good idea. Sister Madeleine wasn't black and white about things. Happily they scampered off down the lane to consult her. She thought it might well be possible; some people did have a gift. 'How much silver do you think she'd need to cross her palm? Would a threepence do?' Kit wondered.

'I'd say she'd want more. What would you say, Sister Madeleine?' Clio was excited. It was her birthday next week. Maybe they might get enough money before the caravans left. How marvellous to know the future. To their disappointment, Sister Madeleine didn't seem at all in favour of it. She never told anyone not to do anything; she didn't use words like foolish or unwise; she never spoke of sin or things being wrong. She just looked at them with her eyes burning from her brown, lined face and her look said everything. 'It's not safe to know the future,' she said. And in the silence that followed both Clio and Kit felt themselves shiver. They were glad when Whiskers stood up and gave a long unexplained yowl at nothing in particular.

Rita made her quiet way down the narrow road to Sister Madeleine's cottage. She carried her poetry book and the warm shortbread that was just out of the oven. To her surprise, she heard voices. Usually the hermit was alone when she called for her lessons. She was about to move away, but Sister Madeleine called out. 'Come on in, Rita. We'll have a cup of tea together.' It was the tinker woman who told fortunes. Rita knew her immediately, because she had been to her last year. She had given her half a crown and had heard that her life would change. She would have seven times by seven times the land that her father had owned. That meant she would have nearly fifty acres. The woman had seen that she would have a life with book learning, and she would marry a man who was at this moment across the sea. She also saw that the children of the marriage would be difficult - it wasn't

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She assured him that she loved to do this; it brought her peace to see the lake in its changing seasons. She knew all the kinds of things about its nesting creatures. She felt at home there; she knew all the people around. Once she had told him that it would be lovely to have a little cottage like Sister Madeleine's and have the lake water lap up to your door. He had laughed at that. 'Isn't it hard enough to squash the whole family into this place? How would we fit in the

hermit's cottage?' he had asked. 'I didn't mean the whole family. I was thinking of going there by myself.' Her eyes had been far away that day. He hadn't followed her train of thought; it had been too unsettling. Martin let himself in his own front door beside the chemist's shop. It led straight upstairs to what they called their house, even though Kit had complained that they were the only people she knew who had a house without a downstairs. Rita was setting the table. 'The mistress won't be here, Sir. She said to say she'll see you after your game of golf.' He was disappointed and it showed. 'Women have to have their time off, too,' Kit said defensively. 'Of course they do,' he said, over-jovially. 'And it's a Wednesday, so everyone except Rita has an afternoon off. I'm going to play a round of golf with Cho's father. I'm feeling in powerful form. I'm going to beat him into the ground today. I can see a few pars coming up, and a birdie and an eagle and . . . * maybe an albatross.' 'Why are they all called after birds?' Enimet wanted to know. 'I suppose because the ball soars like a bird, or it should anyway ... Come on, I'll be mother,' he said, and began to ladle out the lamb stew. He realised that he had been saying this more and more

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clear whether in their health or their disposition. She said that Rita, when she died, would be buried in a big cemetery, not in the churchyard in Lough Glass. It had been very exciting to go to the woman, who told fortunes only by the lake shore. She had said she didn't like doing it near the camps, near her own people. They didn't approve of her doing it. She said it was because she was too good. Listening to her, Rita had believed that this might be true. Everything had been said with a great, calm certainty. And the bits about the book learning had begun to come true. Rita had been struck then and now how like the mistress she was. If you saw them in a poor light you'd swear that the tinker woman and Mrs McMahon were sisters. She wondered

what she was doing here with Sister Madeleine, but she would never know. 'Rita and I read poetry together.' Sister Madeleine made the only gesture she would ever make towards an introduction. The woman nodded as if she only expected as much; she was sure that everything else she had seen in the future was, true also. And suddenly, with a slight sense of alarm, so was Rita. There was a man across the sea who would marry her; she would have fifty acres of land, and money in her own right. She would have children and they would not be easy. She thought about her tombstone, far away in a city with lots of other crosses nearby. The woman slipped silently away. ' "My dark Rosaleen ", 'said Sister Madeleine. 'Read it nice and slowly to me. I'll close my eyes and make pictures of it all.' Rita stood in the sunlight by the little window with pots of geraniums people had brought for the hermit and, with the bantam. chicks around her feet, she read: My Dark Rosaleen! My own Rosaleen! Shall glad your heart, shall give you hope,

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Shall give you health, and help, and hope, My Dark Rosaleen! 'Wasn't that beautiful" Sister Madeleine spoke of the poem. Rita laughed aloud with pleasure, sheer pleasure that she had read without stumbling. 'That was beautiful, Rita. Don't ever tell me you couldn't read a poem,' she said.

'Do you know what I was thinking, Sister?' 'No. What were you thinking? Your mind was far away. Poetry does that to you.' 'I was just thinking that if young Emmet were to come to you ... 'Emmet McMahan?' 'Yes. Maybe you could cure his stutter, getting him to read sonnets and everything.' 'I can't cure a stutter.' 'You could make him read. He's too shy to read at school. He's fine with his friends, but he hates it when Brother Healy comes to him in class. He was the same when he was in Babies. He got red in the face with fright.' 'He'd have to want to come. Otherwise, it'd only be a torture to him.' 'I'll tell him the kind of magic you do.' 'I think we should talk less about magic, you know. People might take you seriously.' Rita understood at once. There were people in Lough Glass who were suspicious of Sister Madeleine, the hermit. They thought she might not come in a direct line

from God. It had been whispered that people who believed in herbs and cures from the olden times might be getting their power from the very opposite of God. The Devil hadn't been mentioned, but the word had stood hovering in the air.

Dan O'Brien stood at his door looking up and down the

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street. Business in the Central Hotel was never so pressing that he couldn't find several opportunities during the day to come out and survey the main thoroughfare. Like many towns in Ireland, Lough Glass consisted of one long street. The church was in the middle, the Brothers at one end and the convent strategically placed far at the other, giving the children as little chance of accidental meetings as possible. In between, there were the shops, houses and businesses of his neighbours, fronting on to the same street as he did himself. You could learn a lot by standing at your own door. Dan O'Brien knew that Billy Sullivan's two boys had come back from their uncle's once their father had been locked away. The fiction was that they had been visiting, helping the uncle out with the farm. Everyone knew, of course, that Kathleen had sent them there to avoid the drunken rages and the unsettled atmosphere in the family house. It was hard on children like that. The lads were not to blame for the life they were born into. They were handsome little fellows, too, the very image of Billy himself before his face had turned fleshy from the drink and he had coarsened beyond recognition. They would be company for poor Kathleen, anyway. Stevie must be about sixteen, and Michael was the same age as his own lad, Philip. Philip didn't like him. He said that Michael Sullivan was tough, was always ready for a fight. 'So would you be if you had been brought up with an old man like his,' Dan O'Brien said. 'Not everyone is as lucky as you are, Philip.' Philip had looked at him doubtfully. But then, the young were never satisfied with what they got. Dan watched as the summer afternoon took its leisurely course. There was never much of a sense of urgency in Lough Glass. Even a Fair Day had a relaxed air about it. But when the weather was warm like this, people seemed to move at half speed. He saw young Clio Kelly and Kit McMahon, arm-in

arm, practising the Steps of some dance along the footpath, oblivious to anyone else. It only seemed a few months since those two had skipping ropes, and here they were getting ready for the ballroom. They were twelve, the same age as Philip - an unsettled age. And as he watched, he saw Mother Bernard from the convent walking in a stately manner, accompanied by one of the younger nuns. Her face was one line of disapproval. Even in the holidays, her charges should not behave 1,

that, treating the public road as a place for silly dancing. They sensed her coming, and changed their antics rapidly. Dan smiled to himself at the contrite appearance of the two rascals. He would like to have had a daughter, but his wife was not well enough to face another pregnancy after Philip was born. 'Haven't we the son? Isn't that enough for you?' Mildred had said. As there were going to be no more children, there was no more lovemaking. That was obvious, Mildred had said. Dan O'Brien sighed, as he often did. Imagine being a man with a normal married life, like ... well, like anyone really. His eye fell on Martin McMahon, crossing the road to Sullivan Motors. A man with a spring in his step and a very attractive wife. Imagine being able to take a woman like Helen McMahon upstairs and draw the curtains and... Dan decided not to think about it any more. It was too frustrating.

Mother Bernard and Brother Healy were discussing the autumn retreat. Sometimes the priests who came to do the Mission weren't at all suitable to face the children in a school. But this year they heard that there was a very famous priest coming to Lough Glass, a Father John, who gave sermons that were attended by hundreds of people at a time. They travelled to hear him, or that's what Father Baily had told them.

'I wonder can he keep order with a crowd of hooligans.' Brother Healy had his doubts. Famous preachers could be a bit ethereal for his liking. 'Or realise when those girls are making a fool of him.' Mother Bernard had an eagle eye for mischief makers. 'I don't know why we're even debating it, Mother Berriard. These decisions are never left to us, the people who know about how things should be done.' They often asked each other why they bothered discussing things, but in their hearts they knew that they loved discussing things. As educators of Lough Glass's young they were united in facing the problems of the uncaring world. Secretly Mother Bernard thought that Brother Healy had life easy. Boys were so simple and straightforward. They weren't devious, like girls. Brother Healy thought that it must be a very easy number just to have little girls in a uniform. They didn't write terrible words in the bicycle shed and beat each other black and blue in the yard. But neither of them had much faith that Father John, preacher extraordinary, would keep the minds and attention of the children of this lakeland town.

The day before school reopened the children were all down by the lake enjoying the last hours of freedom, and even though they groaned about the awfulness of going back to the dreaded classroom the next day, quite a few of them were relieved that the long summer was over. Philip O'Brien from the hotel was particularly pleased. It had been very hard to fill the hours. If he stayed in the hotel his father was inclined to say that he should wash the glasses or empty the ashtrays. Emmet McMahon was looking forward to showing off his new confidence. A few weeks with Sister Madeleine had done wonders. He had even asked her if she could do the poems in his school book, in case they might make sense like the ones in her book. As if you read them with your heart.

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'Why doesn't Brother Healy teach them like that?' he asked Sister Madeleine. But she had no explanation. She seemed insistent that Brother Healy did teach them like that. It was very unsatisfactory. Clio Kelly didn't want to go back to school. She was fed up with school. She knew enough now; she wanted to go to a stage school in London and learn to dance and sing, and be discovered by a kind old man who owned a theatre. Anna her younger sister would be quite happy when

lessons started. Anna was in disgrace at home. She claimed she had seen the ghost. She said she saw the woman crying. She couldn't exactly hear what the words were, but she thought it was, 'Look in the reeds, look in the reeds.' Her father had been unexpectedly cross with her and accused her of looking for notice. 'But I did see her,' Anna had wept. 'No, you did not see her. And you are not to go around saying you did. This is a hysterical enough place already without you adding to it. It's dangerous and foolish to let simple people think that an educated girl like you should give in to such foolishness.' Even her mother had been unsympathetic. And Clio had a horrible smirk of superiority, as if she was saying to her family, 'Now wasn't I right about how awful Anna is.' Kit McMahon was pleased to be going back to school. She had made a promise that this year she would work very hard. It had been a promise made during the only good conversation she had had with her mother for as long as she could remember. It was the day she got her first period. Mother had been marvellous, and said all the right things, like wasn't it great she was a woman now, and that this was a fine time to be a woman in Ireland. There was so much freedom and so many choices. Kit expressed some doubt about this. Lough Glass 'wasn't a place that inspired you with a notion of wild and free, and she wondered how very unlimited were the

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options that lay ahead of her. But Mother had been serious. When the next decade came, when they got to the ig60s, there'd be nothing a woman couldn't do. Even this year people were beginning to accept that a woman could run things. Look at poor Kathleen Sullivan over there across the road, filling tractors with fuel, supervising the man from the oil company when he came to restock. A few years ago they wouldn't have taken an order from a woman, preferring to deal with any man, even one as obviously incapable as Billy Sullivan. 'But it all depends on being ready for it, Kit. Will you promise me whatever happens that you'll work hard at school?' 'Yes, yes of

course.' Kit was impatient. Why did it always have to come back to this in the end? But there was something in Mother's face that made this sound different. 'Sit here beside me and hold my hand, and promise me that you'll remember this day. It's an important day for you, let's mark it by something else. Let's make it the day you promised your mother that you'd prepare yourself for the world properly.' Kit had looked at her blankly. 'I know it sounds like the old refrain . . . but if only I were your age again ... if only ... I would work so hard. Oh Kit, if I'd known . . . ' Her mother's face was anguished. Kit was very alarmed. 'Known what? What is it, Main? What didn't you know?' 'That being educated makes you free. Having a career, a place, a position, you can do what you want.' 'But you did what you wanted, didn't you? You married Dad, and you had us?' Kit knew her own face must be white because she saw her mother's expression change. Her mother stroked her cheek. 'Yes, yes of course I did.' She was soothing, like she was when she told Emmet there were no demons in the dark, when she encouraged Farouk the cat to come out from a hidey place behind the sofa. 'So why did you wish ... ?, 'I don't wish it for myself, I wish it for you ... so that

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you'll always be able to choose, so that you won't have to do th' I ings because there's nothing else to do.' Mother was holding her hand. 'Will you tell me something truly?' Kit had asked. 'Of course I will.' 'Are you happy? I often see you looking sad. Is this where you want to be?' 'I love you, Kit and I love Emmet, with all my heart. Your father is the kindest and best man in the whole

world. That is the truth. I would never lie to him and I don't lie to you either.' Mother was looking at her; she wasn't half-looking out the window with her mind abstracted, as she often did. Kit felt a wave of relief flood over her. 'So you're not sad and worried then?' 'I said I wouldn't lie to you and I won't. Sometimes I do get sad and a bit lonely in this little town. I don't love it as much as your father does; he was brought up here and knows every stone of it. I sometimes feel I might go mad if I have to see Lilian Kelly every day, and listen to Kathleen Sullivan whingeing about how hard

life is in the garage, or Mildred O'Brien saying that the dust in the air is making her feel sick .

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-, " - W_ 4L ... you get annoyed with Clio and with school.' Mother had treated her as an equal. Mother had told her the truth. 'So do you believe me now, Kit?' 'Yes, I do,' Kit said. And she did. 'And will you remember, whatever happens, that your passport to the world is to have your own career and that's the only way you are free to choose what you want to do.' It had been a great conversation. She felt much better about everything now. At the back of her mind, she had one nagging worry. Why had Mother said twice,, not once, whatever happens? It was as if Mother could see the future. Like Sister Madeleine seemed to do. Like the gypsy woman down by the lake. But Kit had put it out of her mind. There was too much

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to think of, and wasn't it great that she had got her periods before Clio. That was a real triumph.

Dr Kelly called as Martin was closing the shop. 'I am the living embodiment of temptation. Will you come down to Paddles' with me and have a pint?' In another town the local doctor and chemist might be expected to drink at the hotel, which would have a better class bar, but O'Brien's was so dismal and gloomy that Martin and Peter much preferred to bypass it in favour of Paddles' earthier but more cheerful atmosphere. They settled into a snug. 'My advice?' Martin held his head on one side quizzically. He didn't think there was any real excuse other than a need for a companion. 'It's young Anna. She has me worried. She keeps saying that everyone has a down on her, and that she really did see a woman down at the lake crying . . .' 'At that age they're so full of drama . . .' Martin was consoling. 'I know. God, don't I know. But you know the way you sense when someone's telling the truth?' 'Well, you don't think she saw a ghost?' 'No, but I think she saw something.' Martin was nonplussed. He didn't know what he was expected to say. 'Do you remember her?' 'Remember who?' 'Bridie Daly, or Brigid Daly, or whatever her name was? The one who drowned.' 'How would I remember her? Weren't we only kids?' 'What did she look like?' 'I haven't a clue. When

was it? It was way back.' 'It was in 1920.' 'Peter, we were only eight.' 'Was she dark with long hair? it's just that Anna is so positive.'

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'And what are you thinking?' 'I was wondering was there someone dressing up to frighten the kids.' 'Well if there was they've succeeded, and the kid's father, it seems, too.' Peter laughed. 'Yes, you're right. I suppose it's nonsense. I just didn't like to think of someone deliberately setting out to upset them. Anna has many faults, God knows, but I think she did see something that worried her.' 'And what did she say the woman looked like?' 'You know children . . . they have to relate it to

someone they know. She said she looked like your Helen.'

The senior girls in the convent were going to have a special session of their own with Father John. That meant that the twelve to fifteen-year-olds would hear something the younger ones would not. Anna Kelly was very curious. 'Is it about babies?' she asked. 'Probably,' Clio said loftily. 'I know about babies,' Anna said defiantly. 'I Wish I'd known enough about them to suffocate you while you still were one,' Clio spoke from the heart. 'You and Kit think you're terrific. You're just stupid,' Anna said. 'Yeah, I know. We can't see ghosts and we don't get nightmares ... it's desperate.' They shook her off eventually and went to sit on the low wall of Sullivan's Motor Works. It was a good vantage point to survey Lough Glass and no one could say they were causing trouble if they just sat still. 'Isn't it a wonder that Emmet is so normal. I mean, for a boy and everything,' Clio said in admiration. Privately Kit thought that Anna Kelly might not be so irritating if Clio had ever spoken to her younger sister with anything other than disdain,

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'Emmet's just born that way,' Kit said. 'I never remember him getting into trouble or anything. I suppose they didn't roar at him much because of his stammer. That must have been it.' 'They didn't roar at Anna enough,' Clio said darkly. 'Listen, what do you think he'll really talk to us about? Do you think it might be about doing it?' 'I'd die if he did.' 'I'll die if he doesn't,' Clio said, and they pealed with enough laughter to bring Philip O'Brien's father to his usual position at the door of his hotel to view them with disapproval. Whatever Father John, the Missioner, had intended to talk about to the senior girls in Lough Glass convent was never known, because it happened that his visit coincided with a huge argument that raged through the senior school, about whether Judas was or was not in Hell. Mother Bernard was not considered a satisfactory arbiter on the matter. The girls were persistent that the visiting Missioner give a ruling. There was a very strong view that Judas must be in Hell. 'Hadh't Our Lord said that it were better for that man if he hadn't ever been born?' 'Now that must mean he was in Hell.' 'It could mean that for thousands of years his name would be connected with traitor and betrayer and that was his punishment for betraying Our Lord. Couldn't it?' 'No, it couldn't, because that would only be name calling. Sticks and stones could break your bones but words would never hurt you.' Father John looked at their young faces, heated and red with excitement. He hadn't come across such fervour in a long time. 'But Our Lord couldn't have chosen him as a friend, knowing that he was going to betray him and t hat he'd be sent to Hell. That would mean Our Lord was setting a trap for Judas.' 'He didn't have to betray him, he just did it for the money.'

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'But what would they want with money? They just went around as a gang.' 'But it was over. Judas knew it was coming to an end, that's why he did it.' Father John was used to girls shuffling with embarrassment and asking was French kissing a venial or a mortal sin, and accepting whichever he said it was. He was not normally faced with such cosmic questions and debates on the nature of Free Will and Predestination. He tried to answer as best he could with what was, after

all, fairly inconclusive evidence. He said he thought that, as In all things, the benefit of the doubt must be extended, and that perhaps in his infinite mercy Our Lord had seen fit ... and to remember that one never knew the heart of a sinner, and the words that passed between man and his maker at the moment of death. Loosening his collar a little, he asked Mother Bernard afterwards about their extraordinary preoccupation. 'Was there any case of anyone local who perhaps ended their own life?' 'No, no. Nothing like that. You know the way girls get something into their heads.' Mother Bernard sounded wise and certain. 'Yes, but this is very intense. Are you sure?' 'Years and years ago, long before any of them were born, there was an unfortunate woman who found herself in a certain condition, Father, and is believed to have taken her own life. I think the ignorant people had a story about her ghost or some such nonsense. Maybe they are thinking of that.' Mother Bernard's lips were pursed with disapproval for having to mention a suicide and an out of wedlock pregnancy to a visiting priest. 'That could be it, all right. There are two little girls, two of the younger ones in the front row, a very fair girl and a very dark one, who seem most het up about it, and whether or not people who take their own lives should be buried in Holy Ground.' Mother Bernard sighed. 'That will be Cliona Kelly and

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Mary Katherine McMahon. Those two would argue with you that blackbirds were white, I'm afraid.' 'Well, it's good to be forewarned,' said Father John, as he went back into the convent chapel and told the girls very firmly that, since taking your own life was taking away a gift that God had given you, it was a sin against Hope - one of the two great sins against Hope - despair. And that anyone who did so was not fit to be buried in a Christian burial ground. 'Not even if her poor mind . . .' began the blonde girl in the front pew. 'Not even if her poor mind,' Father John said firmly. He was worn out from it, and he had the boys'school to do still. Serious warnings on the evils of drink and self abuse. Father John sometimes wondered whether any of it did any good at all. But he reminded himself that thinking along those lines was almost a sin against Hope. He must be careful of it.

CHAPTER TWO

'You don't have proper cousins,' Clio said to Kit, as they lay on the two divan beds in Cho's room. 'Oh God, what are you picking on me for now?' Kit groaned. She was reading a magazine article telling you how to soften your hands. 'You never have families of cousins coming to stay.' 'Why would they come to stay? Don't all the other McMahons live just a few miles away?' Kit sighed. Clio could be very tiresome sometimes. 'We have cousins coming from Dublin always, and aunts and things.' 'And you're always saying you hate it.' 'I like Aunt Maura.' 'That's only because she gives you a shilling every time she comes to stay.' 'You've no aunts.' Clio was persistent. 'Oh Clio, will you shut up. Of course I've aunts, what is Aunt Mary and what's Aunt Margaret ...?', 'They're just married to your father's brothers.' 'Well, there's Daddy's sister in the convent in Australia. She's an aunt. You can't expect her to be coming and staying and giving us a shilling, can you?' 'Your mother has no people.' Clio lowered her voice. 'She's a person with no people of her own at all.' There was something in the way she said it which made it obvious that she was repeating it like a parrot from something she had heard.

'What do you mean?' Kit was angry now. 'Just what I said.'

'Of course she has people. She has us, a family, here.' 'It's peculiar, that's all.' 'I'm going on my, It's not peculiar, it's just you are always picking mother for some reason. I thought you said you were giving that up.' 'Keep your shirt on.' 'No, I won't. And I'm going home.' Kit flounced off the bed. Clio was alarmed. 'I didn't mean it.' 'Tyger'. 'Then why did you say it? What kind of booby goes round saying things she doesn't mean?' 'I was only saying. . . ' 'What were you saying?' Kit's eyes flashed. 'I don't know what I was

saying.' 'Neither do U Kit ran lightly out of the room and down the stairs. 'Are you off so soon?' Clio's mother was in the hall. Mrs Kelly always knew when there had been a row. 'I was going to offer you some shortbread,'she said. Many a skirmish had been avoided by the timely appearance of food. But not today. 'I'm sure Clio would love it, but I have to go back home,' Kit said. 'Surely not yet!' 'My mother might be a bit lonely. You see, she is a person who has no people of her own.' Kit was as near to insolent as she could get away with. A dark red flush around Mrs Kelly's cheeks and neck showed her she had been right. She left, pulling the door gently behind her. With a smile she realised that there would be little shortbread for Clio. Good, Kit thought in satisfaction. I hope her mother eats the face off her. Mother wasn't at home. She had gone to Dublin on the day excursion, Rita said. 'What did she want to do that for?' Kit grumbled. 'Wouldn't we all love to go to Dublin on a day excursion,' Rita said.

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'I wouldn't ... we have no people there,' Kit said. 'There's millions of people in Dublin,' Emmet said. 'Thousands,' Kit corrected him absently. 'Well then?' Emmet said. 'Right.' Kit let it go. 'What did you read with Sister Madeleine?' , it's all William Blake now. Somebody gave her a book of his poems and she loves them.' 41 don't know anything he wrote except -Tyger,

'Oh, he wrote lots. That's the only one in the schoolbook, but he wrote thousands and thousands.' 'Maybe dozens and dozens,' Kit corrected. 'Maybe. Say me one.' 'I don't remember them.' 'Oh go on. You say them over and over.' 'I know the one about the piper . . .'Emmet went to the window and stood, as he had stood in Sister Madeleine's cottage, looking out the window. ' "Pipe a song about a Lamb!" So I piped with merry cheer. "Piper, pipe that song again" So I piped: he wept to hear.' He looked so proud of himself. It was a difficult word to say, piper, at the best of times, and coming so often in the one sentence. Sister Madeleine must be a genius to have cured his stutter like that. Kit didn't notice that her father had come in as Emmet was speaking, but the boy hadn't faltered; his confidence Was extraordinary. And as they sat there in the September

evening, she felt a shiver over her. It was as if Mother didn't belong to this family at all, as if all there was was Emmet, and Dad, and Rita and herself. And that mother wouldn't come back.

Mother came back, cold and tired. The heating had broken down on the train; the train itself had broken down twice.

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'How was Dublin?' 'It was noisy, and crowded and everyone seemed to be rushing.' 'That's why we all live here.' Father was delighted. 'That's why we all live here,' Mother said flatly.

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flowers with a stick would be sorry he did it wouldn't know how to say that.' 'I know,' Kit said. She was pleased to know th Madeleine thought her mother had a poet's heart a good and gentle soul. And she'd forgive Clio in good time. Kit watched the flames in the fire. 'I think I'll be a hermit Provided, of course, Clio apologised properly. when I grow up,' she said suddenly. 'You wouldn't want this lonely kind of a life. It's only for odd people like myself.' 'Are you odd, Sister Madeleine?' 'I'm very peculiar. Isn't that a funny word, "peculiar"? I was saying it with Emmet the other day; we were wondering where it came from.' It reminded Kit that Clio said it was peculiar her mother had no family. 'Did you get hurt when people spoke badly about your family when you were young?' 'No child, not ever.' 'How did you make yourself not worry?' 'I suppose I thought if anyone would try to pull down my family they would just be wrong.' Kit was silent. 'As they would be if they said anything about your family.' 'I know.' But the little voice was doubtful. 'Your father is the most respected man in three counties; he's so kind to the poor and he's like a second doctor in the town. Your mother is as gentle and loving a soul as it was ever my good fortune to meet. She has a poet's heart and she loves beauty . . .' The silence lay between them, so Sister Madeleine spoke again. Her face was hard to read; you wouldn't know what she was thinking. She spoke slowly, deliberately. 'Of course, people often say things out of jealousy, because they're not secure in themselves. Because they worry they lash out, like a man with a

stick might hit a hedge and take all the lovely heads off the flowers and not knowing why he did it . . .' Sister Madeleine's voice was hypnotic. It was as if she knew all about Clio. Maybe Clio had been here and told her. Who could know? 'And often a fellow who beat the heads off the
'I'm very sorry,' Clio said. 'That's all right,' Kit said. 'No, it's not. I don't know why I did it, why I keep doing it. I suppose I just want to be one better than you or

something. I don't like myself, that's the truth.' 'And I don't like myself sulking,' said Kit. Their families were relieved. It was always unsettling when Kit and Clio had a falling out. Like thunder in the air, and the hint of a bad storm ahead.

Sometimes it was harder to break the news of a death that was meaningless than one which would cause huge grief. Peter Kelly paused for breath before he went to tell Kalthleen Sullivan that her husband had finally succumbed to the liver disease that had been threatening him as seriously as the brain deterioration which had given him his place in the County Home. He knew there would be no conventional words of grief or consolation. But it was never simple. Kathleen Sullivan took the information with a stony face. Her elder son, Stevie, a dark, good-looking boy who had felt his father's fist once too often, and left of his own volition for the uncle's farm, just shrugged. 'He died a long time ago, Doctor,' he said. The younger boy, Michael, looked confused. 'Will there be a funeral?' he asked. 'Yes, of course,' the doctor said. 'We'll have no funeral,' Stevie said unexpectedly. 'No mourning or making a mockery of the whole thing.'

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His mother looked startled. 'There'll have to be a funeral,' she began. They all seemed to be looking at the doctor for the solution. As he so often felt, Peter Kelly wondered what kind of social structure had made him the fount of all wisdom in such matters. Stevie, a boy of sixteen maybe, looked him

in the eye. 'You're not a hypocrite, Dr Kelly. You wouldn't want a charade.' There was something strong about the boy's face, and determined. Maybe six or seven years of his childhood robbed from him had been a good training for life as well as a high price to pay. The lad should not have to take part in a sham ceremony. 'I think the whole thing can be arranged very quietly at the Home. That is often done in such cases, and just the family attend a Mass there. Father Baily will arrange it, I know.' Kathleen Sullivan looked at him gratefully. 'You're very good, Doctor. I just wish it had all been different.' Her face was set and hard as she spoke. 'I can't go to anyone for sympathy or anything because they'll all say it was for the best, and we're all well rid of him.' 'I know what you mean, Kathleen.' Peter Kelly did, only too well, and if he didn't have any suitable words of comfort, no one else in Lough Glass would be able to find them. 'You could always call on Sister Madeleine,' he said. 'She'll be the very one to comfort you at a time like this.' He sat in his car after he left the house, and watched while Kathleen Sullivan, now wearing her coat and head scarf, followed his advice. He saw her heading down towards the boreen that led to the lake. As he drove home he passed Helen McMahon walking with her hair blowing in the wind. The wind was cold and she wore a woollen dress but had no coat. She looked flushed and excited. He stopped the car. 'Will I drive you back, take the weight off your legs?' he asked. She smiled at him, and he realised again how very beautiful she was. Sometimes he forgot, and didn't really see the beauty that had broken all their hearts in Dublin. The girl with the perfect face, who had chosen Martin McMahon of all people to be her consort. 'No, Peter, I love to walk on an evening like this ... it's so free. Do you see the birds over the lake? Aren't they magnificent?' She looked magnificent. Her eyes were bright, her skin was glowing. He had forgotten that for a slight woman she had such a voluptuous figure; her breasts seemed to strain at the blue wool dress. With a shock he realised that Helen McMahon was pregnant.

'Peter, what is it?' 'You keep asking me that.' He was irritated with Lilian. 'What is what?' 'You haven't said a word all evening. You just keep staring

into the fire.' 'I have things on my mind.' 'Obviously you have. I was just asking what things.' 'Are you some kind of Grand Inquisitor? Can I not even think now without your permission?' he snapped, He saw the tears jump into Lilian's eyes and her plump face pucker. it was very unjust of him. They had the kind of relationship where each would ask the other how they felt and what they were thinking. It was monstrous of him to behave like this. He admitted it. 'I only asked because you looked worried.' Lilian was almost mollified. 'I'm wondering did I do the right thing over Kathleen Sullivan, telling her to have the funeral above in the Home,' said Peter Kelly, and listened with part of his mind to some of his wife's views on the subject while he tried to 'work out the implications of Helen McMahon's pregnancy. In the pit of his stomach was the feeling that all was not as it should be. There was no reason why Martin and Helen should not try for a late baby. Helen must be thirty-seven or thirty

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eight, an age when most women around here would think nothing of having children, But Peter Kelly was uneasy. Just scraps of conversation floating around in the air coming back to disturb him: Clio saying that Kit McMahon's parents slept in different rooms, somethin~ Martin said one night down in Paddles' place about the old days, some reference to making love as if it were all in the past, something Helen had said when Emmet was a toddler, about there being no younger brothers and sisters for him. It all made a crazy jigsaw in his head. And he realised that it had to be crazy because just suppose, suppose for the sake of argument, that all these jumbled ideas spelled out the truth. Who on earth could be the father of Helen McMahon's child if it were not her husband?

Martin heard footsteps on the stairs. He got up and came to the sitting room door. 'Helen?' 'Yes, love.' 'I was looking for you. Did you hear about poor Billy Sullivan?' 'Yes, Dan told me. I suppose It's a blessing in a way. He was never going to get better.' 'Should we go in, do you think?' Martin was always a good neighbour. 'No, Kathleen's not there, only the two lads. I called on my way back.' 'You were out late ...' 'I was just walking. It's a lovely night. They say their mother went down to Sister Madeleine. That was a good idea. She always knows what to say.' 'Were you in the hotel

then?' Helen looked surprised. 'Lord, no. What would I go in there for?' 'You said Dan told you about Billy Sullivan.' 'Doesn't Dan stand there at the door telling the dogs in the street bits of information ... No, I told you, I was walking. Down by the lake.'

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'Why do you want to walk by yourself? Why won't you t me walk with you. ,You know why. I want to think.' 'But what is there to think about?' He looked blank, wildered. 'There's so much to think about that my mind is verflowing ... od, the things you think about?' He 'And are they go
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unded almost fretful of the answer, as if he regretted king. 'We must talk . we have to talk

I ... Helen looked to e door as if to see were they out of earshot. Martin was alarmed. 'There's nothing to talk about. I Sst wanted to know were you happy, that's all.' Helen sighed. A heavy sigh. 'Oh Martin, how many imes have I told you. I was neither happy nor unhappy, fiere was nothing you could have done - it would have ken like asking you to change the weather. . . , He looked at her, crestfallen. His face showed that he knew he should not have asked. 'But it's all different now. It's all changed. And we have dways been honest with each other - that's more than many other couples . . .' She spoke as if giving him crumbs of comfort. 'More than that, surely?' His voice was full of hope. 'Of course more than that - but because I never lied to you, I would always tell you if there was something important.' Martin moved away, putting up his hands as if to ward off any explanation that she was about to begin. Her face was agorused. He was unable to bear it. ~a , 'No, my love, I was wrong. Haven't you every right to walk by yourself? By the lake, or anywhere. What am I doing cross-questioning you? I'm turning into an old Mother Bernard before my time, that's what I'm doing.' 'I want to tell you everything . . .' Her face was empty. 'Now, hasn't enough happened tonight with that poor man across the road going to meet his maker . . .'

'Martin . . .' she interrupted. But he wasn't going to talk. He took her hands and drev her across the room towards him. When she was right beside him he put his arms around her very tight. 'I loyt you, Helen,' he said over and over into her hair. And she murmured, 'I know. I know, Martin, I know., Neither of them saw Kit in the shadow pass the door,, wait for a moment and then go on to her own room. She lay in bed without sleeping for a long time that night. She couldn't decide whether what she had seen was very good or very bad. At least it didn't look as if her mother was wild and fancy free, or whatever Clio was constantly hinting at.

Hallowe'en was a Friday. Kit wondered could they have a party. Mother seemed against it. 'We don't know what we'll be doing,' she said in a fussed sort of way. 'But of course we know what we'll be doing.' Kit was stung by the unfairness of this. 'It's a Friday. We'll be having scrambled eggs and potatoes like every Friday, and 1 only asked for a few friends to come in . . .' Mother looked quite different when she spoke. She seemed to underline every word as if she were giving a message or reading a notice, rather than having a normal conversation. 'Believe me, 1 do know what I'm saying. We do not know what we will be doing on Hallowe'en. This i's not the time to be thinking of Hallowe'en parties. There will be parties again, but not now.' It was very final. It was also very frightening.

'Are there really ghosts on Hallowe'en?' Clio asked Sister Madeleine. 'You know there aren't ghosts,' Sister Madeleine said. 'Well, spirits.' 'There are spirits around us all the time.' Sister Madeleine was being remarkably cheerful about it, as if she wouldn't indulge in Clio Kelly's wish to be dramatic.

'Are you afraid of splrlts~' Clio persisted. She wanted to get a bit of terror into the conversation somehow.

No child, I'm not. How could you be afraid of ing Is spirit) A spirit is a friendly th. it's the life sonjeone - that stays that was in them once - the memory of It around a place.. . - I . . Are there spirits round here,

This was more promising. round the lakeF le who loved the place and ,of course there are - the peop who lived here.' 'And died here?' 'And died here, of course.' ,would Bridie Daly's spirit be here?'

'Bridie Daly?' said "Look in the reeds." The woman 'The woman who ,)y without being married.' Clio who was going to have a bat jipy, for Sister Madeleine, . sounded too eager, too gos' Is She looked at them thoughtfully. 'And are you gir having a party for liallowe'en)' she asked. Kit said nothing. It Clio grumbled, 'Kit was going to have one and then was all cancelled.' J only said I might.' Kit was mutinous. 'Well, it,s stupid to say you might and then give no explanation), Clio said. at Kit sympathetically. The Sister Madeleine looked The Hallowe'en child was distressed about something- ade. 'Have party was not the right distraction to have in you ever seen a tame fox?' she asked them? with the air of a conspirator. o knew 'You can't have a tame fox, can you?' C11 everything. ith the 'Well, you can't have one that You'd trust wl ducklings and the chickens I' sister Madeleine agreed. 'But I have a lovely little fellow I could show you. He's in a box in my bedroom. I can't let him out but you can come in with me and sec.' Her bedroom, The girls looked at each other in delight.

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No one knew what was behind the closed door. Forgotten now were bodies in the lake, spirits of the dead, and the intransigence of cancelling a Hallowe'en party. In they went and Sister Madeleine closed the door behind them. There was a simple bed with a small iron headboard, and a smaller bed-end made the same way. It was covered in a snow-white bedspread. On the wall was a cross, not a crucifix, just a plain cross. There was a small chest of drawers which had no mirror, just a comb and a pair of rosary beads. There was a chair, and a prie-dieu facing the cross. This is where Sister Madeleine must say her prayers. 'You have it very tidy,' Clio said eventually, trying to think of some compliment and finding this the only

thing she could say in honesty about a place which had the comfort of a prison cell. 'Here he is,' cried Sister Madeleine, and pulled out a cardboard box with straw in it. Sitting in the middle was a tiny fox cub with his head on one side. 'Isn't he gorgeous!' Clio and Kit spoke in one voice. They reached out awkwardly as if to stroke him. 'Will he bite?' Clio asked. 'He might nip a little, but he's so small his little teeth wouldn't hurt you.' Any other grown-up in the world would have said not to touch him. 'Will he live here for ever?' Kit wanted to know. 'He broke his leg, you see. I was mending it. . . it's not the kind of thing you can take to the vet. Mr Kenny would not thank you for bringing up a fox to him.' Sister Madeleine knew that even the warm feelings of Lough Glass she enjoyed would not extend towards her harbouring a fox. Foxes were rodents; they killed people's chickens and geese, and little turkeys. If a baby fox were to be cured, then you wouldn't get any branch of the medical profession or establishment to help you. They looked admiringly at the little piece of wood tied to the tiny leg. 'He'll soon be able to walk and run, and then we'll send him off to whatever life awaits him.' Sister Madeleine looked at the

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,i,t,l. pointed face that stared trustingly up at her and stroked his small soft head. ,How can you let him go?' Kit breathed. 'I'd keep him for ever. ,His place is out there. You can't keep anything that wants to go; it's in his nature to be free.' 'But you could make him into a pet - - .' 'No, that wouldn't work. Anything or anyone who is meant to be free will go.'

Kit shivered. It was as if Sister Madeleine was looking into the future. Helen went slowly down the stairs and into the pharmacy. She gave a wan little smile. hoemaker's children never being shod 'It's like the s I I can't find an aspirin up in the bathroom,' she said. He ran to get a glass of water and put out two little tablets for her. His hand lay over hers for a moment. She smiled the same feeble attempt to respond to him. 'You look washed out, love ... did you not sleep?' Martin McMahon spoke very fondly. 'I didn't actually. I kept walking around. I hope I didn't wake the house.' 'You should have come in to me. I'd have fixed you something to make you sleep.' 'Ah, I don't like calling you in the middle of the night. It's bad enough not wanting

you in my bedroom, I don't want to be raising your hopes.' 'The hopes are always there, Helen. Maybe some day)' His face looked eager. She was silent. 'Or some night?' he smiled. 'I have to talk to you, Martin.' He looked concerned; immediately he felt her forehead. 'What is it, love? A fever?' 'No, no, it's not that.' His eyes were wide with distress. 'Well, tell me about it, and don't be putting the heart across me . . .' 'Not here - it's all too long and confused and ... I have

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'Well, I don't know, I really don't know. . .' he said. Helen said not a word to help him decide. 'We don't do this kind of thing very often.' Lilian Kelly was trying to be persuasive. 'Martin, I insist.' Maura seemed eager too. 'Come on now, it'd be my treat, all of you. Let me do this - I'd love it.' She beamed at them all. Helen, what do you think?' He was as eager as a boy. 'Will we be devils?' Lilian and Maura almost clapped their hands with enthusiasm. 'You go, Martin, please. I can't I'm afraid. I have to ' Helen waved her hand vaguely in a direction that could have meant anywhere. Nobody questioned why she wouldn't come, or where she was going.

The Brothers had a half day on Wednesday, the convent did not. Emmet McMahon went to see Sister Madeleine and read the Lays of Ancient Rome with her; over and over he told the story about how Horatius kept the bridge. She closed her eyes and said she could see it all: those brave young men fighting off the enemy hordes, just three of them, and then being flung into the Tiber. Emmet began to see it too, and he spoke it with great confidence. "'Oh, Tiber! Father Tiber! To whom the Romans pray .He interrupted himself. 'Why did the Romans pray to a river?' :They thought it was a God.' They must have been mad.' 'I don't know,' Sister Madeleine speculated. 'It was a very powerful river, rushing and foaming, and it was their livelihood in many ways ... a bit like God to them I suppose.' Sister Madeleine found nothing surprising. , Can you show me the little fox you showed Kit?' he

asked. 'Certainly, but tell me more about those brave Romans first. I love to hear about them.'

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And Emmet McMahon, who had not been able to say his own name in public with any hope of finishing it, stood and declaimed the verses of Lord Macaulay as if it was his mission in life.

'Aunt Maura'll be at home when I get back,' Clio said. 'That's nice for you,' Kit said. 'Yes, She said she'd teach us golf. Would we learn?'

Kit considered it. It would be a very grown-up thing to do, certainly. It would put them in a different class from those who just collected golf balls. But Kit felt a resistance. She wondered why. Possibly because her mother didn't play. Mother had never shown any interest in the game at all. It seemed a bit disloyal somehow for Kit to learn, as if she didn't agree with her mother's choice. 'I'll think about It,' she said eventually. 'With you that means no,' Clio said. (Why do you say that?' 'Because I know you very well.' Clio spoke menacingly. Kit resolved to discuss the golf with her mother that evening; if Mam encouraged her to go ahead, she would. That would show Clio Kelly that she wasn't always right.

'Don't give me very much, Rita. I had a meal that you wouldn't give to a condemned man there was so in

IV the plate,' Martin McMahon said ruefully. 'Why did you eat all that, Daddy?' Emmet asked. 'We went on an outing to the hotel as a treat.' 'How much did it cost?' Emmet wondered. 'I don't know, to tell you the truth. Clio's Auntie Maura paid for all of us.' 'Did Mother enjoy it?' Kit was pleased there had been an outing. 'Ah. Your mother wasn't able to come with us.' 'Where is Mother now?' 'She'll be back later.'

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Kit wished she was there now, she wanted to talk about the golf to her. Why did everyone think it was so normal for Mother not to be around any more?

Clio came around after tea. 'Well, what did you decide,,, 'Decide?' 'About golf, Aunt Maura wants to know.' 'No she doesn't. You want to know.' Kit knew that and said it very definitely. 'Well, she would want to know.' 'I haven't decided yet.' 'What'll we do then?' Clio looked around Kit's bedroom, waiting for inspiration, or an invitation to look at the dance steps of the cha-cha-cha which they had nearly mastered. The pattern of where the feet should go was worse than geometry with Mother Bernard. 'I don't know,' Kit said. She wanted to hear Mother's light step on the stair. There was a silence. 'Are we having a fight?' Clio asked. Kit was full of remorse. She nearly told her best friend that she was just worried because Mother wasn't home. Nearly, but she didn't. 'Clio didn't stay long.' Kit's father was drawing the curtains in the sitting room. 'No, she didn't.' 'Another fight?' 'No, she asked that too,' Kit said. 'Good, that's a relief.' 'Daddy? Where's Mother?' 'She'll be back, love, she likes people not to be policing her.' 'But where is she?' 'I don't know, love. Come on now, and stop pacing the room like a caged animal.' Kit sat down and looked at the patterns in the fire. She saw houses and castles, and big fiery mountains. The same pattern never appeared twice. She looked at her father from time to time.

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lie sat with a book on his lap, but never turned a page In the kitchen Rita sat beside the range. The Aga was a comfort on a windy night like this. She thought of people who had no home like the Old Woman of the Roads in the poem. They had air-ridden print from the Cuala Press of the poem, by Padraic Colum up on the wall. it was a great thing to have a bit of comfort. women travelling on and She wondered about the tinker ho

on in those damp caravans, about Sister- Madeleine who didn't know where the next crust was going to come from, using her wood but it never worried her. Someone would bring for the fire, or potatoes to cook. And Rita thought about the Mistress. What would have her, a fine young

woman with a family that adored her. wandering about down by the lake on a cold windy night like this, instead of sitting by the fire in her own room with the thick velvet curtains drawn. 'people are funny, Farouk,' Rita said to the cat. Owsill and looked out over Farouk leaped up on the wind in the back yards of Lough Glass, as if he, too, might have been out wandering, had he the mind. Emmet was in bed, Father was straining, listening the sound of the door. Kit felt the tick tock of the clock going through her, almost shaking her body. Why did they have a clock with such a loud sound, or maybe it had just forgotten it like this before, got louder. Kit hadn't dominating the whole house. Mother was there. Wouldn't it have been wonderful if teaching her some game. Mother said you could learn anything as having a game from a book. There was no such thing as having a good card sense, you had to do it for yourself. Soon they would hear the door opening and Mother's light step running up the stair. Father would never ask her what kept her out so late ... even though this was surely later than she had ever been out before. a surge of Perhaps he should ask her, Kit thought w,

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impatience. It wasn't normal; it wasn't what Clio would call normal. And then they heard the sound at the door down the stairs. Kit felt the colour return to her face. She and her father exchanged conspiratorial glances of relief, the relief that would not be mentioned when Mother came in. But the door didn't open. It wasn't Mother. It was somebody rattling the door trying to turn the handle and then resorting to knocking. Kit's father ran down to answer it. It was Dan O'Brien from the hotel, and his son Philip. They were wet and windblown. Kit watched them from the top of the stairs. It felt as if everything was moving very slowly. 'Martin, I'm sure everything's all right,' Dan began, 'What is it, man? Tell me. Speak, God damn you.' Father was in a panic, wanting the words which Mr O'Brien didn't seem able to say. 'I'm sure it's all fine, the children are home, aren't they ...?', 'What is it, Dan?' 'It's the boat, your boat ... your boat Martin. It's cut

t loose and it's upside down drifting. There's fellows pulling it in. I said I'd run up and see ... make sure the children were at home.' Dan O'Brien seemed relieved to see the two faces peering down at him. Emmet had come from his bed in his pyjamas and sat huddled on the top of the stairs. 'Well, sure, it's only a boat ... and there's maybe not much damage.' He stopped. Martin McMahon was holding him by the lapels of his Jacket. 'Was there anybody in the boat ... 'Martin now, aren't the children there behind you . . 'Helen?' Martin almost sobbed out the word. 'Helen? Sure what would Helen be doing down there at that time of night? Martin, it's a quarter to ten. Have you taken leave of your senses?' 'Helen . . .' Father cried, and ran out in the rain, leaving the door open.

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,gelenthey heard him cry as he ran down the one gh Glass towards the lake.
.,reet of Loug the bit that Kit 1, That was the bit that was all very slow,

~eard with the words taking ages to come out of Father's r O'Brien's, even though they looked as if ,outh and M nd even when Father ran, his legs ey were shouting. A own the way they showed the ;eenled to be goin. g up and d I slow motion bits in athletics at Path6 News when you saw jump or the long jumP. . eople doing the high ed to normal speed and Kit saw Then things return t her. Emmet's frightened face looking up a 'What's happened?' he began, but he couldn't get the happened and he h* s lips kept circling the start of ,vord out, 1 before he said it. seemed as if he would choke e the hall door, And at the same time, Rita had run to clos ile Philip O'Brien stood vvwhich was banging in and out, whi looking foolish,.unable to elP.d at the boy 'Either come in or go out,' Rita snappe
He came in and followed her up the stairs. 'There was nobody theres' he said to Kit. 11 mean your mother wasn't in it or anything. Thwas you kids tricking and trick-acting with the boat.' if it was 'Well, it wasn't me,' Kit said in a voice that felt as i
coming from somewhere else.et that word out 'Where~s Daddy?' Emmet couldn't g; I either; Ernmet who could read every poem n the Primary

Cert Primer. , Mother home,' Kit said. And she 'He's gone to bring to see what they meant. They listened to the words i 'That's where he's gone. sounded safe - She said them again.

To bring Mother home. ,

They had flashlights down at the lake. r Kelly, and the Sergeant O'Connor was there, and Pete two Sullivan boys from the garage. when they heard the , over the boat They were bending li Martin McMahon's sound of running feet and noises in Helen in throat. It's not Helen. Tell me you haven't found

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1

the lake.' His eyes went from one to another, the semicircle of men he had known all his life. Young Stevie Sullivan looked away; the tears pouring down a man's face were too naked to look at. 'Please, tell me?' Martin said again. Peter Kelly pulled himself together. With his arm around the shaking man he moved him away from the group. 'Now Martin, will you catch hold of yourself. What brought you running down here anyway?' 'Dan came to the house, he said the boat, . . ' 'God blast that great interfering Dan O'Brien into the pit of hell. What did he have to go upsetting you for. . 'Is she ... F 'Martin, there's nothing here, man. Nothing except a boat that wasn't tied up. It was blown out into the lake ... That's all there is.' Martin stood trembling beside his old friend. 'She didn't come home, Peter. I sat there saying she's never been as late as this. I wanted to come looking for her. If only I'd come. But she wanted to be left alone; she said she felt like a prisoner unless she could walk on her own.' 'I know, I know.' Dr Kelly was listening and patting the man's shaking shoulders, but he was looking around him too. In the trees the oil lamps shone through the windows of the caravans. The travellers might have a fire built in a sheltered spot. He could make out their shapes; they stood, watchful, silent, observing the confusion and drama on the lake's edge. 'I'll bring you up there out of the wind,' Peter Kelly said. 'They'll give you somewhere to shelter, till we make sure that everything . . . ' His voice trailed away as if he sensed the uselessness of his words. Peter Kelly had always been in two minds about the travelling

people. He knew for a fact that they took poultry from nearby farms; there weren't enough rabbits in those trees to keep them in food. He knew that some of the boys could be troublesome if they came into Paddles'

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bar. But to be fair, they were often provoked into anger by [ocal's] Peter wished they could see that the travelling life didn't offer much opportunity to the children of their group. The old barely read and write. They never stayed youngsters could know if they

young enough anywhere for any education to be welcomed in the school, which wasn't always the case. They had little need of his services.

They coped with

birth, illness and death in their way. And their way often had more fortitude and dignity than the other way. He had never approached them for a favour before. 'Could you give this man something to throw around his shoulders?' he asked a group of unsmiling men. The men parted and from behind came a woman with a big rug and a cup of something that had steam coming from

it. They sat Martin McMahon on a fallen tree nearby. 'Do you want any help?' said one of the dark men. 'I'd be grateful if you could bring more light down to the

shore,' Peter said simply. And he knew that for the rest of his life he would not be able to remove the image of his friend, sitting on a log wrapped in a rug, while the whole encampment lit up with the blazing torches made from dipping tar-covered sticks into the fire. On to the edge of And then there was the procession down the lake. Martin hugged himself in the rug and moaned. Over and over he said, 'She's not in the lake, she'd have let me know. Helen never told me a lie. She said she wouldn't do anything without letting me know.'

The clock was ticking and there was a little whir between each tick. Kit had never noticed that before. But then she had never sat at the foot of the grandfather clock before, leaning against it, holding her brother in her arms, while Peter O'Brien sat on the bit of stairs that went up further up to the attic

where Rita slept. Rita sat on a chair in the doorway of the kitchen. Once or twice or maybe more often, she got up and said, 'I'll

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throw another log on the fire. They'll need that when they get back.' Someone had sent for Clio. She came through the door and up the stairs. They had left the key in the door. She saw the little tableau. 'My mother said I should come down to you straight away,' she said. They waited for Kit to reply, Kit said nothing. 'She said this was where I should be.' Something exploded in Kit's mind. How dare Clio talk about herself, it was always I, I, I it was the place she should be, she came straight down. She knew she must not speak, not until this huge wave of rage passed over. If she opened her mouth now she would hurl abuse at Clio Kelly, order her out of the house. 'Kit, say something.' Clio stood awkward on the stairs. 'Thanks, Cho,' she gulped. Please may she not say something terrible, something for which she would be apologising for the rest of her life. Emmet sensed the odd silence. 'Mummy . . .' he began, but he couldn't get beyond the first M. Clio looked at him sympathetically. 'Oh Emmet, your stammer has come back,' she said. Philip stood up. 'There's probably enough people here, Clio. Could you go home now,' he said. Clio snapped at him. 'He's right, Cho.' Kit found her voice very calm and clear. 'Thank you very much for coming, but Philip was asked to keep the place sort of clear, for when everyone's coming back,' 'I want to be here when everyone comes back.' Clio seemed like a spoiled child. There was the I again, Kit noticed. 'You're a wonderful friend. I knew you'd understand,' Kit said. And Clio went down the stairs. The clock ticked on with its new whir, and none of them said anything at all. 'There's not going to be anything until the light of day,' said Sergeant O'Connor, shaking his head.

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, 'We mustn't leave it and go home.' Peter Kelly's face possible to tell. rain, with sweat, or tears, or rain, it was impossible to tell. 'Be sensible, man. - you'll have half the land the other half up the graveyard if they go your patients on. There's nothing to be found, I tell you. Go on, tell the

tinkers to go home, will you.'

'Don't call them tinkers, Sean.' But Peter Kelly knew it to try to impose some was neither the time nor the place sensitivity on to Sergeant Sean O'Connor. 'What'll I call them, Household Cavalry) Apache Indians?' e been a great help ... they've no reason 'Come on, they've to be friends to any of us ... they're doing their best 'They look like savages with those torches. They make my flesh creep.' 'if it helped to find her Peter began. 'Oh she'll be found all right, but it won't make any difference to anyone whether it's tonight or next Tuesday week.' 'You're very sure)' Peter said. ~mple direct way of getting to the Sean O'Connor had a s~ truth of things, and tonight it left no area for doubt or hope. 'Sure, wasn't the poor woman out of her witsF the sergeant said. 'Didn't you see her night and day, wandering around here, half talking, to herself? it's only a mystery that she didn't do it sooner. A tall dark woman brought Martin McMahon a cup from her caravan. 'Drink this,' she said. It was like an order. He sipped it and made a face. 'What is it? I thought it was tea,' he said. 'I wouldn't give you anything to harm you she said. Her voice was low; he barely heard it above the wind, and the calling all around the lake's edge. 'Thank you mdeed,' he said, and drank what tasted like Bovril with something sharp in it. It could have been anything; he didn't care.

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'Be calm,' the woman said to him. 'Try not to shake a,,~ tremble, it may well be all right.' 'They think my wife ... he said. 'I know, but she wouldn't. She wouldn't go anywher, without telling you,' said the woman in her low voice tha~ he had to strain to hear. He turned to thank her, to tell her that he knew this was true, but she had slipped back into the shadows. He heard Sergeant O'Connor calling off the search for the night. He saw his friend Peter

coming to take him home. Martin McMahon knew he must be strong for their children. Helen would have wanted that.

Rica heard them coming. She knew by the shufflings and low voices down at the hall door there was no good news to tell. She ran into the kitchen to put on the kettle. Philip O'Brien stood up. It wasn't often he was in charge, but he knew he was in charge now. 'Your father will be all wet from the rain,' he said. Kit was wordless. 'Is there an electric fire in their bedroom? He might want to change.' 'In whose bedroom?' she spoke from far away. 'In your parents' room.' 'They have different rooms.' 'Well, in his room then.' She flashed Philip a grateful look. Clio would always use an opportunity like this to comment on how strange it was that Kit's mother and father did not sleep in the same bed, Philip was being a great help. 'I'll go and plug it in,' she said. It took her away from the top of the stairs; she didn't have to see her father's face when he came up, She didn't want to have to look at it. Emmet wouldn't know how bad things were. He wouldn't know that Mother and Father were unhappy, and that Mother might not be coming back. Might be gone. She wanted the moment on her own.

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The room was cold as she found the one-bar electric fire, she plugged it in the socket in the wall just above the skirting board on the carpet and the fire seemed very clear. The pattern of the fringe of the bedspread hung unevenly, more to one side than the other. He might put on his jacket if Daddy was very

wearing a dressing gown. He wouldn't if there were other people here, and Kit had heard Clio's father's voice, and people like Father Baily and Philip's father were outside. No, he would wear a jacket. She walked past the top of the bed towards the big chair where her father's tweed sports coat hung as it always had. It was then she saw the letter on the pillow - A big white envelope with the word Martin on it. On the wall over Daddy's bed hung the picture of the Pope that Kit had always believed was a guest at their wedding. Time seemed to stand still as she looked at it. The Pope had small round glasses. They looked like a little boy's spectacles that were much too small for him. He had a white fur trim around his

garment, a bit like the frill Santa Claus wore when they went up to Clery's in Dublin for a Christmas treat. He had his hands raised as if to give a blessing. She read the words very slowly: Martin McMahon and Mary Helena Healy humbly prostrate at the feet of your holiness, beg the apostolic blessing on the occasion of their marriage, zoth June 1939. And there was a kind of raised seal beneath. She looked at it as if she had never seen it before. it was as if by memorising every single detail she could somehow control what was about to happen now. she bent And for some reason she never understood, if she down and unplugged the electric fire. It was as wanted it to be thought she had never entered the room. Kit stood with the letter in her hand. Her mother had left a message. She had explained why she had done what she did, For no reason, the words of the priest who had come

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to give their retreat came back to her. The priest who that your life wasn't yours to take, it was a gift fmm and that those who threw it back in God's face had nQ place being mourned by the faithful. And had no place,, the burial grounds of God's family on earth. She cou)id, see his face. And she acted as an automaton. She slipped the envelope deep in the pocket of her blue tunic and went to the stairs to greet the party that was coming up, and to face her father's terrible smile. 'Now there's no sign of an accident. We're not to worry about a thing. Your mother could walk in that door as right as rain. Any minute now.' Nobody spoke. 'Any minute at all,' said Kit's father, with hope written all over his face. Rita built up the fire in the sitting room, and Farouk from his important looking place in frow of the grate. People stood about, awkward, embarrassed, not sure what to say next. Except Clio's father. Dr Kelly always knew what to say. Kit looked at him with gratitude; he was being the host. 'Do you know everyone's frozen solid from standing on the coldest spot in Ireland. Now I hear that Rita has the kettle on. Philip, will you run round to you r father's hotel like a good lad, and ask the barman for a bottle of Paddy and we'll have a hot whiskey for ourselves,

everyone.' 'There's going to be no money changing hands at a time like this.' Philip's father, Mr O'Brien, had a funeral face on him. Dr Kelly hastened to make things more cheerful. 'Well that's very good of you, Dan. And we have a lemon and some cloves, and that'll put the heat into all of us. I'm prescribing it as a doctor now, mind you, so you all have to take heed.' Sergeant O'Connor kept saying he would have a drink, but yet he waited as they were poured out. 'Sean, it's for your own good. Drink it,' Dr Kelly said. 'I don't want to drink this man's whiskey, I have to ask was there a note . . . F

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'What?' Dr Kelly looked at the sergeant in his eyes. 'Or - This you know what I mean have to ask it some time. His father whispered (This is not the time, 'Clio' said. She turned away as if she had not quietly enough for her. 'Jesus God, I haven't been listening - and speak in a lower tone

She heard the sergeant say 'we know?' . . . note, isn't it as well? Peter. if there is a it, 'Don't you ask him, I'll do' it, it's important. Don't, either - - - Don't tell me 'Don't tell me what's important or not or not do . . . ~, ~hat 1. ill - Ige don't take offence.' 'We're all O'Connell as will suit me. Drink that, 111 take as much offence to open your mouth sake, and try no whiskey for God's sake, you've something to say. Then, and she felt sorry, sergeant U - 111 - l - - - h ol. Then she Kit saw Sel ting a te ling off at school ~or him- It was like get to her, saw Clio, s father move through the people to get she moved nearer to them. father. S. Urre Pt't'ously m) old friend - , Martm - . . Martin, t - s t) you don't know anything

'What is it, Peter? Vha 1 say., Peter Kelly you're not saying?' wouldn't don't know anything to me. Would there be a ed, 'But listen looked wretch where on her own ~ question at all that Helen went off some I nyone ... you know ... W* out Like ... Dublin, to see a never gone anywhere Ith , She, d tell me, She's it is between us.) telling me. fhat's the way ou weren't here to 'Where would she leave a note if Y

tell?' qahon finally 'A note ... a message Martin Mcl 'No, no, understood what his f , end was struggling to say. he said , jrist don't I know. But that

ignorant 11 ~ w Jesus Cl or says he can't 90 On looking until bosthoon Sean
O,uonn he's made sure ... ,How dare he even suggest

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'Where, Martin? Let's *ust rule it out for him 'I suppose in the bedroom. . .' Kit saw them wai her father's bedroom, the cold room with the picture Pope over the bed. She stood with her hand at her t~ and realised that they were both watching her. 'Kit will you go back inside out of the cold, --- --with Emmet.' 'Yes,' she said. She watched as they went intc father's bedroom, and then she slipped I I into the kitch, Rita was busy pouring the whiskey into glasses thx cloves and lemon *uice and sugar. 'It's too li I ike a parti my taste,' she grumbled. 'Yes.' Kit stood beside the range. 'I know,' 'Should we put Emmet to bed do you think? Wouia your mother like that if she came horne?' 'I think she would.' Neither of them noticed the if. 'Will you get him, or will IF 'Could you go, Rita, then I'll go and sit with him?' Rita carried the tray of whiskies out of the kitchen, and with a quick move Kit lifted the handle and opened the mouth of the range. The flames inside licked up at her as she threw in the envelope that said Martin, the letter that would mean her mother could not be buried in consecrated ground.

I For a whole week every day was like the day before. Peter Kelly got a friend to come and work in the pharmacy, with instructions to bother Mr McMahon only when really necessary. It seemed that Lough Glass put off having problems that only the chemist could cure. Clio's mother and her aunt were in and out of the McMahon house all the time. They were very polite to Rita. They kept saying that they didn't want to interfere, but they happened to have a pound of ham, or an ap , PIC tart, or an excuse to take the children up to their house. And the days seemed to fit into a sort of mad pattern. They all slept with their doors open. Only Mother's door was closed. Every night Kit dreamed that her mother

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~ j conic back, and said, 1 was in my roon, all the tirne, . never looKed., c had looked in Mother's ,hey did look. Ecryon But 1 O,Connor in case there

were „n, including Sergeant v clues that she had gone awaY --low many

had been all kinds of quest'O,ns. 1) What had were there? were any of them niissing coat, not ~ccases~ Only a jacket, not an over jther been wearing.S were opened as well as the ,aincoat. And the drawer ~rdrobc. Were any Clothes ' S' rig? as so tidy, so neat. Kit felt very proud that everything w~ or would tell h.is felt that m -On" aybe Sergeant O'(fe that Mrs McMhon had beautiful sprigs of lavender in drawers of nightdresses and slips. That her shoes were rider her dresses in the old Polished and neat in a 1" u essing table had silver 3rdrobe That the brushes on the dt rmost of all she w`as ---- -natching the mirror. And 1 mother would have ~eased that she had done what her anted. as what Mother would have wanted. Yes, surely it TV time to think, but from "me to There was hardly any de into her own room to try and work it out. Ime Kit stcvho always knew what she ;he have read ,Was It possible that mother, y wanted that letter foutid~ Sho ' uld! en it had doing, a last wish 'In it. But th it) Suppose there had been re something for i here we not been addressed to her and if tiust Daddy . - . Kit felt young and frightened. But she knew she n . lit thing. She had burned the note, Now have done the rigit could be buried in the when they found mother's body and put flowers on the right place, and they could all 90 men who wore suits Of grave * ke, There were divers in the la [to go down a - rid watch, rubber. Kit had not been allowe~ . ce. Kit couldn't lo was being very n but Clio, told her. Cl'wi her. remember why she ever got annoyed o said 'They want you to come up and stay w th me,' Cli over and over.

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'I know and it's nice of you all, but know. I don't like to leave Daddy alone Clio understood. 'Would it help or be worse to stay here?' she asked. 'It would be different, and we're trying to make feel a bit the same, I think.'

Clio nodded in agreement. 'Can I do anything? I'd anything to help.' 'I know you would.' And Kit did know. 'Well, think then.' 'Tell me what people say, tell me if there are things the, wouldn't say in front of us . . 'Anything, even if it's not what you want to hear?' 'Yes.' So Clio brought her all the gossip of Lough Glass, and Kit got a picture of the investigation. People had been asked if they had seen Mrs McMahon on the bus or at the train station, in the nearby town, out in the road look'n, for a lift, or in anyone else's car. The guards were ruling, out the possibility of her having left the town alive and well. 'Wouldn't it be great if she had just lost her memory~' Clio said. 'If she were found in Dublin and didn't know who she was.' 'Yes,' Kit said flatly. She knew that this would not happen. She knew that Mother had not left Lough Glass that night. Because Mother had written a note to say why she was taking her own life. 'It could have been an accident,' Clio said, trying the minority view. All Lough Glass was saying it had been coming for a long time. The poor woman was unbalanced, there no way she would have taken the boat out on a night like that except to end her life. 'Of course it was an accident,' Kit said, eyes blazing. When Mother's body was found it would be buried properly thanks to the good work Kit had done in thinking fast. It must always be considered an accident.

. . Daddy,,,

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ever become a name ' like Bridie Daly, a c calling in the reeds. ,,,cher "I" , Clio said, to frighten children, a vOlc ow, he's in heaven, she could see us n at the ceiling.ven rIt said, putting as* de the course she's in hea surface that Mother

,,that 5Ortlictirnes bubbled up to the f the damned for all suffering the
 torture 0 be in hell, on. to offer: a The callers to the house were leg' Glass
 had something E.Cryone in 1-Ough a special prayer or a story hope, s and
 had been -,jrd of cOmfo't or . ~ g for three week ,,,one who was missin
 ~:und. Sister Madeleine didn't call. But she never went visiting Kit went
 down the lane to the cople After a week, it with no -Ottage. For the first
 Irrie she wer her, Sister Made eine ... why did she do it. she thought she
 knew how to manage a
 the hermit it was s"P'e* boat out alone. She never did ~,But w never take
 the 1 1 a very kfore ... ed to that night. It was "She must have want . g
 across the moon autiful night. rhe clouds kept racin indow and watched c
 smoke f rom - 11. - - ~ ood -- the w a long tiffle ... You didn't see Mother.
 child, 1 saw nobodY.'. r Madeleine, would she?' wouldn't be in hell, Siste
)rk and looked at Ki t In nun put down the toasting tc er* usly think that ~ii-
 nazement. you can't mean that you s 1' :,)r a moment)' she said.lsn~t it~ it's
 despair, the .W,11, it,s a sin against HOPel ^3ne sin that can't be forgiven.'
 'Where did you hear that?' at Mass, and at the retrea 'At school, 1 suppose.
 And d of reinforcement. rut was t ing to draw up some kin, hat makes You
 (Y h~rd nothing of the sort. But w if
 oU our poor mother took her own 1 c~' bnk that Y

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1

'She must have, Sister, she must have. She was unhappy.' 'We're all
 unhappy, everyone's a bit unhappy.' 'No, but she really was, you don't know
 . . * , Now Sister Madeleine was firm. 'I do know. I krim lot. Your mother
 would not have done such a thing: 'But . . . ' 'No bu ts, Kit. Please believe
 me, I know people. An~ suppo.se, Just s i uppose, your mother did feel that
 there A , no point in going on, I know as sure as we are both sitting here

chat she would have left a note to tell your father an you and your brother
 what had happened to make her feel this way, and to ask your forgiveness . .
 .' There was a, silence. 'And there was no note,' Sister Madeleine said. The
 silence between them was stifling. Kit was tempted to speak. Sister
 Madeleine would not tell, she would advise what to do. But it would be the
 end of everything if she told. Kit said nothing. Sister Madeleine said it
 again. 'Since there was no note, then there was no way that your mother
 took her own life. Believe me, Kit, and sleep peacefully in the boys that
 young Emmet was your bed tonight.' Brother Healy told if there's one
 mennon or murmur 'Yes, Sister Madeleine,' said Kit, with a pain in her chest
 coming back to class. or the ,f you about Mem Mern Memmet, that she felt
 would be there for ever. out of any one c eways off of your lad's stutter I'll
 knock your heads sid one will ever fix them strat The sergeant was at their
 house that evening. He was necks in a way that ric again.' He had a
 ferocious took about him. talking to Rita in the kitchen. The conversation
 ended Would you think it's definite, Brother, that she's when Kit came in.)I
 rien, the young lad from the She looked from one to the other. 'Is there any
 news?' drowned?' asked ph J'p O'B 'Nothing. Nothing new.' Rita spoke.
 hotel. 'I was just asking Rita if she was sure that you had all 'I think we can
 assume that, O'Brien, and we'll go on looked everywhere . . .' saying the
 three Hail Marys that her body will be found.' 'I assure you that if the
 mistress had left any account of 'It's nine days now, Brother,' Philip said. her
 plans, whatever they might have been it would 'Yes, but bodies have been
 found after a longer time have been a great relief to this family, and there is
 no wa than that it's a deep lake, our lake That's why you're anyone would
 have kept it to themselves.' dda The child looked pale to the point of
 fainting, His voice softened. 'I'm sure that's right, Rita. We've all
 0 swill out the pots, I have to do. You ave t His tread ,,,ur job to ions in
 Paces where there s grief.' hard quest the stairs to the street. heavv as he
 went down .

uh,' Rita said. pots, h .1 'SWI ade Kit sm, e- He has a great way of fier
 indignation rn ,,,tt-ng things,' she said. As if we didn't hu I , nt the house
 high and low for a letter ,orn the poor mistress.' 'And suppose we had
 found one ing bosthoons at ,Wouldn't it have stopped them all ask the the

bus office and the railway station did they see . , if there had n tress all
dolloed up in a head been a letter, wouldn't the poor master be at rest instead
of wandering like a lost soul?' Uta didn't know everything. Rita was Kit sat
very still. Ft /lother would be wrong. It the letter had been shown, ~ ke
Bridie buried outside the walls of the cemetery. Li
Daly. Now when they found Mother's body It could be buried with honour.
When they found it.

So
all being warned about it n ght anY' said Michael 'Brother, what would
happen if - - ition the Sullivan. The boy was about to ask what cond

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body would bein. Wouldit have begun to deteriorat kind of thing boys of
that age would love to discus., 'Kindly open your Carty's Irish History,
page f teen,' he roared. Not for the first time he wished he ta the gentle girls
up at Mother Bernard's school. The had told him they were organising a
daily rosary in school chapel for Kit McMahan's mother. Girls we pleasure
to teach. He had said it over and over. There no comparison with what he
had in front of him day in n day out. A
Martin McMahan ate hardly anything. He said he r scalding feeling once
the food was swallowed. It was 1, lump in his chest all day. But he was
adamant that children had their proper meals, 'I don't feel like a whole
dinner,' Emmet had said. 'You need to keep your strength up, boy. Eat it
Rita's made a grand spread for us.' 'And don't you need your strength,
Daddy?' Ern asked. There was no answer. Kit brought a cup of Bovril into
the sitting room lat on, and two fingers of soft buttered toast. She and Rita h
decided that he might be able to manage this. 'Please, Father,'she urged.
'Please. What'll I do if you I sick? Then we'll have no one at all to be able to
tell us what t do.' Her father obediently tried to swallow the spoonful!
'Would it be better. . .'she began. His eyes lifted slowly t, know what she
was going to say. Her father was moving likt a man with a heavy weight
attached to him. 'Would it havc been better if Mother had left a note do you
think ... ?, 'Oh, a million times better. . .' he said. 'Then we'd know why ...

and what ... she did.' 'It could have been an accident, something she didn know was going to happen?' 'Yes, yes it could . . .' 'But even wasn't ... know ... ?,

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t would be better to

be.t., than this, Thall on earth l~ou d r '~ some h. hall 0, and "~"C W d ~ngotlici~s body 'n surely W% a un ay the iji erent. - --- aye arid 90 to pr ury her in a gr han this - - - ?' a on his. They'll

uld be better '11 'h2~' . the lake . . ' ?' knelt beside h~111 ' hef sma he 5 "' They might find her bOdY,Wor' t they' if 5 lake deep lakey it s a treacherous very long tinkle ad, her body for a Very day ~ who are looking * * ' , told me that ,he people o more.The Sergeant 1 -5 eY'll. be looking 11 Off the search.' " s face WO

c going to have to call1Ore ' - * 1 know there was ate - 1d,,t do any n Mother told me. ' she told ther, You col have done. Ing you should a that she'd never hurt you el ou'll h. loved YO11 an saint, she ~ras an ang r mother was a 1 OU OU hat, won t Y ron-,ised'h'm. y, remember t mber it; V-it P ht of broken lice?' of 11 always reme nig It wasn't your 9 hear 1h., mother saY? Then c went tilro" h another to 1 it it the way it was ~ing with astart in the room you should have C . er - - - ly as if it were really outside the would see as clear L a simple wooden crOssvould wal~ ture of tile gray, wit~ ts and sheep x "cy,yard walls. And the 90a 0 had not been allowed to ' rave of the woman wh er the 9 . . burial. Christian c lake., p hilip O'Brien 5 . J, of th all the business of Off the ciragg,"~; ,ve called ut she knew y er rarel left the hotel, b t b. drowned» ' c town. ther d1911T n that 5 'no,whlte~faced for 50 's that mea K son.le hope. ~it 'had been her eyes~e asked with k V1 n under, Mildred O'Brien ~ng and ther - were big I'lac,, V..y deep . that she been Close to stmea- she ha(l nut a bit distant No, lt)U ,,,t motion. d thewornan Oke with no g' P(.1.n McMhon; she had i'un ~1" fathom. rd hard to

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'What will they do for a funeral then?' Philip asked, didn't like the way his parents looked at each other. 'There might not be a funeral anyway,' his father said. "WIL 'f 11 f- A I , is at the ,Vall. They were two of the toughest eered at J have shouted and I Normally they would be. Kit said, 'I don't know, weren't normal then but these -e it and Kit, I don't know some comment and then JhOk not, they on her body? Lon, me for shouts and were not fair to 'Ali, well. It doesn't do to be speaking ill of the dead' title that had happened to then', Dan O'Brien, in his most pious voice. 'But of course I. ' Not after we said I I said. ' . ts. d, I don't know - k under the if there was a sort of shadow over how she got into the 64 ~ 110 I he said to k d UP from'" then the Church has to be very careful . . .' He could see that Philip was about to speak again, so he headed him off 'No need at all to be talking along those lines to the unfortunate McMahon children. It was none of our doing.' The matter was closed. Clio was being a good friend. She wasn't asking questions that couldn't be answered as she so often had in the past She was coming up with no farfetched solutions. She was just there. And sometimes didn't talk at all. It was very comforting. In the old days it had often been Clio who came up with ideas of what they might do, or where their outings might take them. But nowadays she waited and Kit gave her the lead. 'I'd like to go for a walk down by the lake,' Kit said. , AVI I A I'll tell I I.

her Stevie and the other girls. I don't want to see Ouse and leave his car. 'Get into the house j'~Inet of a house J"ne" he shouted. in a way, hard to see because his hair was good-looking and his hair was raised from a day that if such filthy overalls on, and I once saw him. Clio, however, he could see the car or Brylcren up P s(,nobody dressed Stevie Sullivan body I had a nice smile only said - Hello"-'

qt's okay,' Ylit called' 'kle .1 word he said to anybody.' ,That must be the first cJv1 , stev. ie was back into the car agam. krugged. It wa Clio looked at each other and 4 wn-u Kit and ected by a great, gro ,-, , to be defended and Prot en there wasn't any neec

I S, year-old, but not whl in and very rude, 1,~ : "X"n.:f Sullivan could be such a p, e. But to be hones ,Alchae lour their knickers wer o ome with you? Cl o was gentle, ~ zk' what co sim 1114ello" . I ou you i e me I Ing A while back she'd have tossed her head and given all the reasons why it might be a bad idea. 'If you've got the time.' 'I have the time,' Clio said. They walked the main street together. Kit wanted to leave in her schoolbag and tell Rita that she would be late. Since the day of the disappearance, neither she nor Eminent had ever been half a minute later than their expected time of arrival. They knew too well the agony of waiting. 'Where will I say you are?' Rita asked. 'Say I'm with Clio, that's all.' 'Above in her house, is it?' 'Yes, with Clio.' Kit was impatient to be gone. At the garage they saw Michael Sullivan with his friellu

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as a el, nodd to pilillp 5 ta er all he had said W c hot Ing They walked Past th 'ho stood at his doorway heading down to the lake,' 'It's dark for You girls to be c small road. turn down th ere we he said as he saw them ryone knows w11 It,s ~ust for sonic fresh air. Eve are,' Clio called back to him. ' iably along the road that Kit's They walked cOmPan'01 ight of her life. ,cry day Or r` ' mothe'r must have walked e' what she called the walk. 'Going round the block' was 5 arne bacShe either turned down at the hotel and c y round. On did it the other wa the garda station, or else she iings she walked all the way finer days and on longer evei avellers' carrip at one end of the woods and the tr

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the lake, or else she might go in the other direction to Sis Madeleine's cottage and further. It was as if she had been looking for something. Something she couldn't find in the house over the pharmacy or in Lough Glass. And it wasn't as if it was trying to get away from work. Helen McMahon had worked with Rita at the sewing machine, putting new linings on the curtains, turning the sheets so that the same bits didn't get all the wear. Rita and Helen McMahon made jam and marmalade; they bottled fruit and they made pickles. The kitchen shelves of the McMahons' looked as if people were working on them day and night. When she walked by the lake, it was not to escape work. It must have been so that she never had to sit down and think. What had she seen in those dark waters that was better to look at than touring the length of the street like the other women did? Clio's mother would know every item to wear in the one clothes shop, P. Hanley, Drapery. Mrs Kelly often called in, even if she wasn't buying anything, to admire new soft cardigans, or blouses with embroidery on the collar. Other mothers would go into Joseph Wall and Son Hardware Merchants and look at new kitchen beaters, and baking tins. But Kit's mother had no interest in these things. The paths and lanes and woods of the lake were the only places that seemed to gladden her heart. 'I wonder what took her down here all the time,' Kit said eventually as they came to the wooden pier where the boats were moored. 'She was happy here, you said that yourself,' Clio replied. Kit gave her a grateful glance. Clio was being so unexpectedly nice, saying the right thing always instead of the wrong thing. It was as if somebody had told her how to behave. Clio began to speak hesitantly. 'Kit, you'll know my Aunt Maura ... F 'Yes?' Kit was watchful again. Was this some of Clio's old style coming to the surface again? Was she going to

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. e settled normal family, her plump cheerful brother of her nicited them all to play golf, something Kit ,,,,t who had war er mother four long weeks o discuss with h had beer, going t well, she's gone back to Dublin you know .

..

,yes, I know . - - 'oney. She said 'And before she went she gave me some m

I was to get you a treat, and I'd know what treat to get, yes, well Kit was at a loss. 'But I don't know, Kit. I don't know.' It was kind of her ... 'She said it wouldn't cure anything, but it might distract you, sweets, new socks, or a record ... whatever I thought you'd like 'I'd like a record,' Kit said suddenly. 'Well, that's great ... We could go to the town on Saturday and get one.' 'Is there enough money for that?' Kit was taking the bus fare into account, and the lemonade and biscuits they would have afterward. 'Yes, there's plenty ... She gave me three pounds.' 'Three pounds!' They both stood in the wind, awed by the huge amount of money. Kit's eyes filled with tears. Clio's Aunt Maura must have thought that things were too very bad indeed if she gave that much money to distract them. 'Stevie?' 'What is it?' 'Stevie, I want to tell you something.' 'I'm busy.' 'You're always busy, YOU never have time for anything except the cars.' 'You time to, not let ...' 'Well, isn't that what I have to give me, I'm on thinking that if you give your money everyone goes into, Sullivan's it'll be spent on drink instead of on spare parts, like the way it used to be.' 'Promise not to bite the head off of me-'

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'No, I won't promise that. It might well be a thing, your head has to be bitten off for.' 'Then I won't tell you.' Michael was definite now, 'Thanks be to God,' said Sullivan. He had it on his mind. He had to get cleaned up and dress to meet a girl for the first time. Deirdre had agreed to go to the pictures with him. She was seventeen whole year older, and she would expect him to make advances. Stevie Sullivan was anxious to do it right. It was a relief not to have to waste time biting his brother's head* over some misdemeanour that would undoubtedly go to light with a stormy visit from Brother Healy to his in-laws, 'What time will you be home?' Mrs Hanley, the drape felt there was something that didn't sit right on this outfit

'Aw, Main. How many times do I have to tell yo~ Won't I be back on the bus.' 'Yes, and I'll be looking out to see you getting off it,' he mother said in a heavy warning tone. Deirdre nodded meekly. There would be no problem about that. Stevie would drive her in his car for a bit of; court, she imag'ned, and then pick up the bus a mile outa Lough Glass. Her mother could be as suspicious as s~ liked; there was no way she could be caught. Deirdn wiped off the lipstick she had been rehearsing; sl~ wouldn't let them see her leave the house too dolled

,you didn't know her.' Martin was flustered. knew her well enough to know that she would want to try and behave as normal, not turn yourself into a ' ' There was silence. 'We have one hermit in the hernl,t. Lough Glass wouldn't be able to afford Place alrealIKY ith a watery smile. ' P, er elly was rewarded w two . d know her. Did she ever was wrong, Peter. You di was there eve, She never asked me 'She never told me anything.swear it. Like 1 l~i~-thing that you should know about ... 1 h,*ve sworn it for twenty-eight days to you. You ask me e,ery single day, and every single day 1 say the same thing.' Do 1 ask you every day? Every day~'Martin mcMahon looked pitiful. you may have missed out a few.' 'No 1 exaggerate. '111'not come for a pint until they find her body, Peter.' ,Then 1 will be drinking alone for some considerable t . ime, won't I?' The doct- - ookedresigned. 'Why do you say thatV The words seemed bleak and full

of horror. Peter Kelly wiped his brow. 'Jesus, Martin, it's only her body. He. ---- -- . rit, has gone long ago, soared way up over us all. You k~ow that, man, you You admit It?'

know it. Won't

Martin Wept, his shoulders shook, Peter stood beside him, unwilling to reach out. Theirs That would defin tely make them think she was o not been a friendship where a man held another man different kind of outing than the one she had said. through a storm of tears. Eventual, stopped. Meeting a group of girls in the cinema in the town.Mart' looked up, h's face tear-stained and red. 'I

In suppose 1 won't admit it because 1 keep hoping ... Let's go to Paddles'.' 'Come with me to Paddles'.' 'No, Peter.' 'Martin, she's not going to come back, she's not going tO' come in that door you know. 1 know it.' 'No, 1

must stay here.'

'For ever, Martin? For ever and ever? Is that what He1'n would have wanted for you?'

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Emmet told Sister Madeleine that he couldn't concentrate on poetry. it all seemed what had happened.

to remind him of ... of ... ye '

'Well, that's all right, isn't it)' Sister Madeleine said You wouldn't want to forget your mother.' it, the way 'But I don't seem to be able to say it, feel

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used to . - .' His stutter was as bad as Sister Madeleine never gave at, extra time. y sign that t had Ile was 'Well, don't say it at all.'Tc, Sister Mad,, . ea was simple. 'Don't I have to~ Isn't this a lessso 'Not a real lesson. More a chat. It!, because my old eyes can't see y(J candle and firelight.' to read all U read 'Are you very old, Sister that ing tO ~Iladelejne?, Well by 'No, not very old. Much 131der that, than your mother.' Sister M4delein who ever mentioned Mother;e was 'u) "luch 1 subject. 'Do you know what happ hesitantly. 'No child, I don't.' 'But you sit here all the t1rne and looko you might have seen her falli maybe?' 'No Emmet, I didn't. Nobody remember. . .' 'Would it have been terrible couldn't ask this to anyone else ike cl loki hushed him up ... or soothed hi ' * ' I "It ... ?, 5, Sister Madeleine appeared tit" doW ley Would hit give t thought. 'No, I think it would h you know, a lot of dark water * "ve bee e nlatter som velvet, sweeping you away. Just fallin tl Very peace~, I do , 9, been very frightening n t thi Ver, like silki 'And would she have bee~ sadit Would'hil 'I don't think so. She mi%ht you and about Kit. have - - Mothers alw about silly things like people Wearlt, ays . ~1,worried abol doing their homework and h - 9 War, 'Y, you kno, mothers I have known worn aving 11, dry I'd about th Akh to socks 01 . . .

but not, not when she was dr(ase kin eat - - - A' Madeleine noticed that
Emrilet,s w Cls of thip'! er . . I stutt 1~111ti . if sisvi
elne every~

eve tt, 0 Q1 ryone e '5n1Y perx cried to M else "Voided
unUny" he
rig out kit at t4 1 the e ake.,! boat _~
saw ker ' 't was di

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,o sign. 'No, no, of course not, but just hoping that you'd ,ill be all right, that
you'd carry on . that kind of thing, I'd imagine.' 'Imagine her thinking of that
. ,haking. Sister Madeleine looked at him expectantly as if she were
%~*aiting for him to say something else, something positive. And right on
cue Emmet McMahon said, 'Well, she needn't li.ive been worrying. Of
course we can carry on.'

. .1 His voice was

Father Baily gritted his teeth when he saw the McMahons at Mass on
Sunday. He was fast running out of words of CO i nsolation for the family.
There were * just so many times a priest could explain about things being
God's will to a beireaved famil;.

~dAisItAunrdbetdewmoomreanheHheelaernd tMhecMIesashhoeri, who had
come to I of God. It was much more thceouwliidllacocfepthtiattapsothoer
Confession to him and knelt in the dark, telling him that h , er heart was
heavy. What kind of way was that to confess sins? Father Baily felt that he
had often given the woman absolution when she had not really sought I it,
when there Was no contrition, no firm purpose of amendment. fie couldn't
recall now what she had to tell. If only people knew how similar and
unremarkable their sins were to a confessor. But what did stand out was that
she seemed to think she was not in control of her life. She Iccused herself of
feeling. distant, detached, of being an Outsider instead of a participator. But
she had not followed thh'sesfluogwgeers-

tiaornnasnogifngoicnoinmgmtihttees,oodralcioty,kigetting herself on Work.
After Mass he greeted his parishioners by name.

of God. it was much more t 'But you sit here all the time and look out at the lake- disturbed woman Helen McMahan, who had come to you might have seen her falling out of the boat - I Confession to him and knelt in the dark, telling him that maybeY her heart was heavy. What kind of way was that to confess 'No Emmet, I didn't. Nobody saw her, it was dai Isins? Father Balily felt that he had often given the woman

remember. . .' ht it when there I I I ng ..? 'Would it have been terrible ... like choki couldn't ask this to anyone else ... they would hushed him up ... or soothed him down.

absolution when she had not re ly sour, S was no contrition, no firm purp se of amendment. He couldn't recall now what she had to tell. kable thei :)people knew how similar and unremar so,, ~ If only I r id stand out was that Sister Madeleine appeared to give the matter sins were to a confessor. But what di thought. 'No, I think it would have been very pea- she seemed to thl ink shewas I of her life. She

you know, a lot of dark water just falling over, like silko iaccused herself of feeling distant, detached, of being an velvet, sweeping you away . I don't think it would hav loutsider instead of a participator. But she had not followed been very frightening . . .' his suggestions of joining the sodality, getting herself on 'And would she have been sad . . . ?' i r cooking for the sales of 'I don't think so. She might have been worried abo

I u and about Kiti... Mothers always wor,rdy, you kno aYbout silly things like people wearing warm rysocks,D

I doing their homework and having enough to eat . mothers I have known worried about those kinds of thiO

tne tiower-arranging co m ttee, 'wo k Zt*er Mass he greeted his parishioners by name. 'There you are, Dan. Cold day, isn I t it), 'It is Father. Perhaps you'll come and have something to warm you up in the hotel?' ... but not, not when she was drowning. . .' if SO I Well, I'd love to, but I have a few sick calls to make after Madeleine noticed that Emmet's stutter had gone she 920 My breakfast.'

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Father Baily would have liked nothing better than to in the obscurity of the back room of the Central Hotel have three brandies to keep out the cold. But table had been set by his housekeeper, and the go up to Mother Bernard's convent to see an e o t to a farm in the back of beyond to bring Sacramento to a farmer who had not thought to cross door of a church until he got a diagnosis of terminal canc,, and now wanted the Church to come to him. And everywhere he went, people asked him what wou happen when Helen McMahan's body was I he had been vague and hopeful, committing himself nothing, saying that the poor woman must always be everyone's prayers.

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young 'J~ , ou,6n,t you ask one of your friei d , ChO O'Brien from the hotel P.~ 0,,,re my friend Please come- said Sister ,Thank You- Inat would be very ni

\weleinep,ita carved I r saw

the meat? a big piece of beef from Hickeys.

I neveso much meat in my life., Sister Madeleine full of wonder. It's not extravagant it's for today then cold tomorrow, and mince on Tuesday, and there's often enough for ,issoles on a Wednesday.' Rita was proud of the way she

ran the house. Sister Madeleine looked around the kitchen where they sat at the table, a home with a tragedy hanging over it so could almost see it there in the air. she said. He ma e a great point of shaking the hand of Martia~ heavily You know,' McMahan warmly. 'Good man Martin, a tower d I 'The travellers are still looking, You a visitor strength, that's what you are. I pray every day that youl, They all see --- ed to sit up startled, shocked that. .ryone else wanted to avoid.'They get the grace you need . . .' The man looked pale and was mentioning what eve hing to be seen they'll wretched. Father Baily wondered what good his. prayersd the I k if there's anyt I were doing. 'Thank you, Father.' 'And Kit and Emmet. Good, good.' The words w

meaningless, he knew it. But what could he give in the way of comfort?
The only merciful thing was the woman haA

left no note. When they found the body, the coronei would surely be discreet enough to talk of accidents an6 misadventure, They could bury Helen McMahon in t churchyard where she belonged. Sister Madeleine was at Mass, too, quietly in the back d the church, a grey cloak wrapped around her thin shoulders. 'Will you come back and have your Sunday dinner witi us?' Kit said to her suddenly. 'Thank you child, but no. I'm not much good at going tO people's houses.' 'We need you,' Kit said simply. 'You have each other.' 'Yes, but it's not enough these days. It's gone on tOO long. We)ust sit and look at each other.'

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go all aroun a e. see it.' I silence. The McMahons were not able There was a tota' e spoke about the subject upperto respond when someone waited. She never most in their minds. Sister Madelein minded silences; she didn't rush to fill them with i words. 'That's good of them ... to take such an interest,' Martin said eventually. s unease. Sister Madeleine appeared not to notice hi 'Helen was always very courteous to them on her walks, she knew their names and the names of their children. She often asked them about their ways, the language they poke.' Kit looked at her, amazed. She had never known is about her mother. And yet Sister Madeleine spoke - she was 'They ith sincerity n,t making up a story to console them, to wrap the dead up in soothing phrases. ow the need or a funeral,' Si~ter Madeleine said. 'They ave wonderful funerals for their own People. They travel 11 over the country to be there. It's a wall ~ of saying oodbye, of finding a resting place up in the churchyard.'

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'That's if . . .' Kit began. Sister Madeleine interrupted: 'That's if they find her but they will ... either the travellers or someone else, then you'll be able to pray at her grave. Madeleine's tone was firm. She was having no dealings with the idea that He McMahan would be buried outside the walls of churchyard. A grave without a tombstone. Marking he someone who had taken her own life. That night Kit sat with her father. 'It's so long now ... it's over a month ... Would there be any of Mother left to bury?' 'I asked Peter Kelly that, Kit, the other night in Paddy's bar. He said we mustn't think of that, we must think of your mother's spirit and soul left her that night, and what's left of the body doesn't matter.' 'I suppose he's right.' 'I suppose he is, Kit, I suppose he is.'

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Mother Bernard was called out of class.-. The conversation in the classroom rose to a high level, There was great excitement anyway because Deirdre Hanley, a senior girl, had been seen in a hedge with Stevie Sullivan, sort of wrapped around him, not just kissing; mind, but more, much more. They were so anxious for more details that they didn't notice Mother Bernard coming back and were startled by the crack of her voice like a whip across the classroom. 'I expected big, grown-up girls of your age to be able to continue with your work. But I was wrong. Very, very, very wrong.' They had crept shamefacedly back to their places, Mother Bernard's face was white. She must be very angry indeed. 'This time, however, I shall put you on your honour. Each girl is to take out her composition book and write one full page about Advent. The season of waiting, the preparation for Christmas.' They looked at each other in despair. A whole page about Advent. What was there to say about it except that it went on for ever and was nearly as

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1. 'Is as Lent?' 'And there shall be no blots, and no big spaces in your words. This will be a work of which we will all be proud.', Mother Bernard spoke with menace in her tones.

They picked up their pens, knowing that this time she would be no more news about Deirdre. 'Can't it, There's an'ley at this time. me for a ,Katherine McMahan) could you come w, oinent,' Mother Bernard said to Kit. Brother Healy had told Kevin Wall that he would be a very fortunate lad if he were to see the day out without feeling the weight of a stick on both his hands. He busied himself making ,arful, but not fearful enough soaked in ink. Lets out of blotting paper Brother Healy was called to the door, and at his 'I'll be back in five minutes. is that clear?' he roared. And then went to find young Emmet McMahon and told him what he had to tell him. It's kind of job. No training could prepare you for it' wished Brother Healy sighed to himself as his cassock swept down the corridors to the room where the second class were sitting with Brother Doyle, not knowing what lay ahead.

By nightfall everyone in Lough Glass knew. A body had been found in the reeds - it was already badly

decomposed. There wasn't any way that anyone would have to identify it. It was McMahon. Dr Kelly had gone to his friend Mar ould Everyone heard and said that there was no way he should look on something that bore no relation to what his wife had been, The state pathologist had come from Dublin; he had agreed. It would take some days, they were told, A section of the lake had been cordoned off. people told each other how they had heard the ambulance coming- As

if an ambulance would be any use after a month, but still, what other way could the poor woman's body have been brought to the morgue in the hospital. Everyone had a story to tell about the McMahon family. IY

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the surface. Maybe she was too good-looking to be found at 2101-r" t or the place- w at all?' ,Had she a fellow-a fellow in Lough Glass if you God, YO' couldn't have an it's hard a married woman. if you're a single worn enough wit,, every eye in the place watching you ...

'So she wasn't crossed in the mind of a baba or ,nN,thing - - .' 'They ~No., Sergeant O'Connor was suddenly alert. 3 d,'t find anything like that, did

they?' rful. 'No, I'd o.' The young Dublin guard was chee -r anything like that, even was all far too late to discove :)u think?' Iit ad existed. Will we have another, do y4 Philip O'Brien called to the McMahon house to know if t would like him to sitwithherfor abit.,you know, like the night she got lost,' he said.ch a nice way of Kit's eyes filled with tears. That was su putting it. Mother had got ost. aid and reached out 'Thanks very much, Philip,' she si ' and good. But I and stroked his cheek. 'You're very kind think we'd - - .' He interrupted her. 'I know. I just wanted you to know I was always here down the road, like.' He went down the sta . irs again, and felt the spot on his face where Kit McMahon had stroked him. better than it had

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It was oddly peaceful in the house, dities would take been for a month. They knew the form, some days, but the funeral would be next weekend. They had something they could do for Mother now -They could give her a good farewell. 'Are you sorry they found her, Father? Did you hope she might have been alive somewhere, kidnapped even?'

Kit asked. t going to be the case.' 'No, no. I knew that wasn I 'So it's better that she's found?' I to have Mother 'Yes, it's much better. it's bad enough: dead, without leavi her for ever in the take. This way we can go to her grave.' There was a long silence. 'It

Kathleen Sullivan from the garage said that the IZ!5 'gr~l were on in that house all night. None of them must ha~

gone to bed. Clio Kelly said that things were nj~4 different there now , more normal. They had all stopk speaking in funny tight voices. Mrs Hanley from N draper's said she had gone to pay her condolences and tb, very pushy maid of theirs hadn't let her in, had said t6 family were suffering from nervous exhaustion. Mrs Dillon in the newsagent's said that she had a grez demand for Mass cards, because now that there was a bod, and there was going to be a funeral, everyone wanted to show their respect by having a Mass said for the repose ol the soul of Helen McMahon. Sergeant Sean O'Connor had to say that the men who came down from Dublin from garda headquarters were as nice a pair of fellows as he had ever come across.

They told him that he had completed all the paperwork very well, and that he wasn't to worry himself over the length of time it took to find the body. This was wild country around here. 'Indian country,' one of them suggested. They didn't know how a man could live in such a place, with nothing going on. Sean O'Connor didn't like this, he felt it was a bit disparaging, but they told him that Dublin was full of drawbacks too, And they stayed with him in Paddles' bar until an unconscionable time in the morning, no adding to the rest of Lough Glass who were drinking late. 'You know everyone in the place,' one of the guards said to him. 'Indeed I do, and all about them.' 'Did you know the deceased?' 'Of course I did.' 'Why did she do it do you think?' 'Well, we don't know * f she did.' Sean O'Connor had a caution that no number of pints could dislodge. 'No, we don't know she did, but we think she did. drove her to it, do you think?' 'She wasn't right for here. She didn't settle, she sort of

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lab was a terrible accident, K* said. it, You know that,' her 'I know, ' said Kit. And she looked into the flames,' red and gold flickles licking upwards. O~

They were right in thinking that the formalities would be long drawn out. Since Doctor Kelly, who was the local doctor, had identified the body, there had been only a few consultations with the pathologist by way of foul play or of anyone else being There was no question involved. Nor was there any mention of taking a life ' hint of decomposition a unsound mind. If there was doubt about the advancement 'stat,' of the body, it Helen McMahon had only been . was never aired publicly, c

was W, n in the lake a month, Z inter time, the fish in that part of the lake but it there was no need for details. well, And who else could it have been? Nobody from these

parts had disappeared. The coroner spoke of the great need to clear the inland waterways of Ireland. Too many tragic accidents had happened among the reeds and parts of lakes. overgrown And then the body of Helen McMahon was released for burial. On the day of the funeral, Clio arrived at their house. brought You a mantilla.' she said. '~yhat's that?' 'It's like a black lace veil, a bit like a handkerchief. It's ""hat Spanish People and posh Catholics everywhere wear on their heads when they don't w' headscarfs aren't right.,ant hats and when 'Is it for me to wear at the Church?' 1f You'd like to It's a present from Auntie Maura.' to 'She's ' very nice, isn't she)'Usually Kit found sorn thin criticise about Clio's aunt. Clio seemed Pleased. 'She is andA t_ A '

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0. e WaYs knows what Kit nodded r
- t was true. Rita had told her last night that

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's Kelly's sister had come to advise her about the food to ,ve. She had suggested a big ham, and to ask Mr Hickey ,he butcher's to cook it for them. Rita had said they'd ,,er do that, but Clio's aunt had been firm. Theirs was .od custom, always at the shop. The Hickeys would be ..Ppy to do something to help. Let them bring it up on ,j,day afternoon, when it was needed, before the people toe back from the churchyard. Rita said it was a great help. She didn't want to be rounting guard on a huge pot and smelling the whole house with it. She could concentrate now on asking people to bake home-made bread, and asking Mr O'Brien from the hotel to lend them three dozen glasses. And yet Kit felt somehow that it was disloyal to Mother to say that Clio's Aunt Maura was being a great help. ~lother hadn't liked her; she had never said so, but Kit was sure of it. But it was idiotic to think that Mother would want her to carry on a distance that was never even spoken of. Would Mother like Kit to wear the mantilla? Kit stood still, wondering if Mother had thought about her funeral at all, before she had gone and done what she did. When she w as writing the letter, had she

paused to think about how Lough Glass would bury her? A surge of anger passed across Kit. 'Are you okay?' Clio looked worried. 'Yes, I'm fine.' 'Aunt Maura said I wasn't to hang around you in case You wanted to be by yourself.' Clio looked uncertain, her big blue eyes full of concern. Kit was covered in guilt. This was her best friend, who Couldn't do more for her. Why was she always being so prickly and defensive towards her? 'I'd love you to stay,' she said. 'I need you. It would be great to have you there.' Clio's smile lit up the room. 'Do you have a mantilla too?' 'No, Aunt Maura said it was just for you.' Kit put it on. 'It looks terrific. Your mother would have been proud of YOU.'

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And then for the first time in front of her friend Kit., herself go and wept. The hymns at a funeral were always sad. But on this,~, winter afternoon, when the wind whipped up the hle the church was cold and draughty, Father Baily thouo that they had never seemed sadder. Perhaps it was the round simple face of Mat~

w McMahan, bewildered and unbelieving. Maybe the W01 children, the girl in a Spanish type veil, the boy who hadii speech difficulty which was cured and had got as bad as, ever again. Father Baily looked around the church. The cast was assembled as usual. The choir sang'I'll sing a hymn to Mary'. They sang the first verse and the whoit congregation joined in for the second.

'O lily of the valley, O mystic flower what tree What flower e'en the fairest Is half as fair as thee . . .'

Between the coughs and splutters they sang, eyes misted with tears for the woman who had died out on their lake. When he had been saying his Office the previous night, Father Baily had thought about Helen McMahan's death. Suppose she had taken her own life? But he had told himself firmly that God did not expect him to act as judge, jury and executioner. He was

merely the priest to say the funeral mass and to commit her body to its resting place. It was 1952. It wasn't the Middle Ages. Let her rest in peace. The Sullivans stood together, Kathleen and her two sons. Stevie was busy catching the eye of Deirdre Hanley from the drapery shop. Kathleen glared at him. A church was not the place to make eyes at a girl. A funeral was not the time. Michael was kicking the front of his shoe, trying to get some of the loose bits off. She gave him a sharp jab to get him to stop. Michael had been a worry to her for a while. He kept

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„,oping about and asking her strange questions to which there were no answers. Like, if you knew something that other People didn't know, what should you say? Or,

suppose everybody else thought one thing and you knew were you meant to tell them the other thing~ another thing, .nce with such imponderKathleen Sullivan had scant patie she hadn't a ables. Last weekend she had told Michael notion of what he was talking about, and would he please consult his older brother. She was certain it must be about sex in some shape or form, and Stevie would give him the basic information he needed. At any rate, he seemed to be less agitated now. She hoped that Stevie had spoken with some kind of authority. She didn't at all like the glances he ,as giving that big bold strap of a Hanley girl, who was far too old for him, and a forward madam if ever there was

one. ight that it must be desperate to have Kevin Wall thot your mother all eaten up by fish. That's what had happened to Emmet McMahon's mother. And all on the night that he and Michael Sullivan had gone out on the lake. They might have been near to it happening. Michael had been very worried. He said they should tell people that it was they who had taken the boat out that night. Kevin had been against It. They'd get the arses beaten off them, he said. Michael, who didn't have a father to beat the arse off him, said maybe they shouldn't have guards and everyone looking for Emmet McMahon's mother when she hadn't gone near the boat. They had been playing in it and rowing up and down by the pier when it slipped away from them and they couldn't reach it. It had been blown into the middle of the

lake and then the waves had overturned it. Kevin said it didn't matter one way or the other, but Michael had been all frightened. He said with guards involved they could all end in gaol. Anyway, it had all turned out finally, to say nothing. Michael Sullivan was half mad. Of course, his father had died in an asylum. Not that Kevi would mention that.

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Maura Hayes and her sister Lilian stood in good dark coats and their sober velvet hats. Peter blew his nose, loudly many times during the Requiem Mass. Young Clio and Anna stood beside them for the final hymn. 'Kit is holding up very well,' Lilian said approvingly to her daughter. 'Isn't she very composed that she doesn't cry. 'She's cried a lot. Maybe all her tears are gone,' Clio said, Lilian looked at her in surprise. Clio was not always so sensitive. Perhaps the child had more feeling than Lilian had realised. As the crowds came out into the biting cold wind, Stevie Sullivan managed to be near Deirdre Hanley. 'Will you come to my house ... you know, after this? 'Your house? You must be mad!' she said. 'My mother's going to be across the road in McMahon's.' 'Yes, so's mine.' 'So, we'll see from the window when they're all leaving and you can slip home.' 'I see from where?' She ran her tongue across her lips. 'My bedroom. . 'You're joking!' 'A bed's just like a sofa, isn't it?' he said. 'And better than a car seat,' said Deirdre.

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At the grave, Kit spoke to Sister Madeleine. 'Will her soul be at peace now?' she asked. 'Her soul has always been at peace,' said Sister Madeleine. 'It's the rest of us will be at peace because we are seeing her laid to rest.' In her mind Kit saw the white envelope with the word Martin on it. Sister Madeleine took her arm and held it right. 'I beg you think only of what your mother would want of you, to be a strong young woman looking always to the future and not to the past.' Kit stared at Sister Madeleine in amazement. Her mother had indeed wanted that for her, said it in almost those words. 'That's what you must think of now. That's

1~ how you make her feel at peace, knowing that You

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,hat she wanted you to do., y,it looked around and saw all the people of
Loug

gh Glass preParIng to say a decade of the Rosary for Helen it had made this possible. She had burned the ,164ahon- K letter that would have meant her mother being put in an I lanswerefit unmarked grave outside the place where Chri sti

to lie. She held her shoulders back. Irm doing the best I can, Sister,' she said and reached for her father's big cold hand and Emmet's small trembling one, as they stood at the grave in the rain.

There was a grim irony about it. That's what she was in ,,,,r,v ways, an Irish girl in trouble. She had said she would be there every day from four to six. She had said she would ,-a t to hear what he wanted to say. CHAPTER THREE They had arrived on the afternoon of October 30th, tired and wet, she still nauseous with her pregnancy. She had sat by the phone as she had promised for four days. There had been no call. Helen McMahan reached for another cigarette She She had said that she would not get in touch with him, needed to calm herself. She needed to think.' she would wait until he had decided what to do. Her letter She did not believe that Martin could have had been very firm on that point. She would give him time, all the time he wanted to digest the news and to respond to reacted this way. She had fulfilled every promlise that she ha hi . t as he saw fit. Twenty times she had tried to tell him and d ever made him, telling him that she could not love him fully, as she knew there would be no forgetting Louis on every i occasion he had smiled his foolish loving smile, or Gray. She bad said that she would be faithful to Martin and made a silly child's joke. live with him

and be as good a wife as she could possibly be. The only way she could let him know the serious nature of her decision was to write it to him. And now, in spite of the stifling boredom of a small town, her impatience to know his reaction and what he planned. She had sworn she would not leave him without telling to tell the children, she was sitting here in agony. But in ~ dy, him exactly wily. She had written it all out, painstaking fairness meant that she must keep her word. Now she i letter. And put it on his bed before she left. She ~ I couldn't telephone she could not write again. told him about the child. About how she had met L had The days of her new life, the life she had run to with Louis again, how he had said it had been a mistake ever to ouis Gray, the man she had always loved, were nightmare days. have S~e had steeled her heart for the tearful call from Martin left her. They must try for their chance of happiness. begging her to return. She would take nothing. Nothing that Martin had given her. She had prepared explanations for the accusations that she was a monster to leave her children. She was having It had taken her a week to write that letter, the week another chi I before she left. She said he could say whatever he I now, her responsibility was to the future. she would go along with iked, and She knew he would not lower himself to get the children to it. That she had gone away with beseech her to come back. He would not use them as Louis. That she was visiting relatives. That she was ill and Pawns. If he were reasonable and calm, she might be able to needed some treatment. It was all she could give him, the give him advice. choice to cover her departure with whatever story he She had rehearsed how she would tell him that people wanted. Would forget in time, the way they had forgotten about so wasn't much to give him in terms of dignity or face- iliany other people who had left Lough Glass for this saving when you considered how much she was taking. reason or that. There would be questions for a few weeks, She i had given him the address i and phone number of an then the interest would die down. He would not be a figure rls in trouble in London. of scandal or of pity and scorn. organisation that rescued Irish gi . 1 1

And she owed him this . . . she would co-operate wj~, anything he wanted her to do. And she waited for four days and four nights without hearing anything at all. 'Ring him,' Louis had urged. 'No.' She was adamant. 'Jesus, Helena, it's Monday night. You've been gone, since Wednesday. He'll have us both in a madhouse w16 these tactics.' 'They're not tactics, Louis. Martin isn't like that.' She looked at him, his thick dark hair, his handsome face white with worry. He wore a slate blue jacket exactly the colour of his eyes. He was the most handsome man she had ever met in her life. After she had seen him nobody else counted. She still could not believe that he had come back for her. She believed him when he said it had all been a mistake, his own greedy mistake to run away with a rich woman. Helen knew it was true. His face had lines on it now. They made him more handsome than ever, but they were lines of sadness. And what was so wonderful was that he was so grateful she had forgiven him, that she had put behind her his desertion and betrayal. 'I don't deserve you,' he had said a thousand times since he had come back to find her. 'I wouldn't blame you if you sent me away,' he had said. Send him away? Louis Gray, the man she had wanted since she was twenty-three? The man she had still wanted on the day she married Martin McMahon when she was twenty-five? The man she had thought of with her eyes tightly closed every time that Martin made love to her. Send him away? She would have wandered the world looking for him had she thought that there was a chance to get him back. But he had come to look for her. He had come secretly to Lough Glass, to beg her to believe that his eyes were open,

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now. There was just one love in the world for everyone, Louis had said. He had been so wrong to think that could create the same thing with another woman. It appeared that Helen might have been wrong to try and create it with Martin McMahon, kindly, honourable, and dull chemist in Lough Glass. Then it was clear to both of

them that they had to seize it and run. The stolen hours in the spring and summer around the woods of Lough Glass had been proof that the magic was there. The discovery that Helen was pregnant had been the spur they needed. They were like teenage lovers in their excitement about the adventure ahead, irresponsible, uncaring about the end then as they hid from the inquisitive eyes of the world around the small town. Would they disguise themselves when they went to London? It would be just their luck to meet someone from Lough Glass - Lilian over on a secret expedition to have her facial hair dealt with, Mrs Hanley to look at exotic lingerie for her drapery shop. They giggled with each other at the madness of it all, yet when they did arrive Helen had gone immediately to the hairdresser to have her hair cut. It was more than an effort to disguise herself; it was also the start of a new life. Helen watched her long dark curls fall to the ground and she felt the wasted years slipping away. She looked younger, stronger now. And Louis loved it. That was the important thing. Not that anyone would find them in this part of London. Irish visitors would go to Piccadilly or Oxford Street, or Camden Town to see their relations. They wouldn't come to this street in Earl's Court. They had been so lucky to find the flat. It was a room, really, in a tall house which the landlady was in the process of doing up. But so far she had only got around to doing up one floor. She certainly hadn't got around to this room, and by the time she would manage to include that in her plans for making the place more elegant Helen and Louis would be far away, in a house more suitable for a family. They would be living with their child. In the meantime, this was their home, a room in Earl's Court, London SW 5

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Helen had to keep saying it over and over to herself. A city, so big that you had to tell people whether you were north or south or east or west in it. You had to give your area number as well as a name. One street that had little lane way. Lough Glass. After thirteen long years with

This was heady excitement. It was a small room certainly, with a sofa that turned into a bed. There were few adornments: a couple of pictures of Alice Springs left by the previous tenants, who had been Australian, a small table and two wooden chairs. The carpet was threadbare, and the paper that lined the chest of drawers was grimy and smelled of must. The sink had a rust mark where the tap had dripped and the little shelf beside it, which did as dressing table and draining board, had a torn piece of oilcloth. But it was their home, the home she had always wanted to live in with Louis Gray. Four days away from their previous life, Helen had forgotten the carved furniture in her bedroom: the mahogany wardrobes that had belonged to Martin's parents, the graceful dressing table with its ball and claw legs. They were part of something that was far behind. Or that should have been far behind if Martin had played his part in the bargain. Louis was very certain what was happening. 'I don't blame the man, truly I don't. We made him suffer, now he's making us sweat. It's what I'd do if someone stole you away from me.' He hunkered on the floor beside her and looked up at her. Helen didn't want to argue it any further. She had lived for thirteen years with Martin McMahon. It was not in his character to let people sweat, to make them suffer. What she had most feared was that he would telephone her and cry. That he would promise to be better, different, kinder, stronger. . . whatever she wanted him to be. 'I suppose he got the letter?' she said suddenly. 'You said you left it where he couldn't miss it.' I know I did . . .'

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~And no one else would have taken it ... it was ~jdressed to him?' -No one else would have taken it.' Helen had been over ;,is ground before. it wasn't helping her and it was ,eginning to irritate Louis. She forced it Out Of her mind. 'I 've you, Louis,' she said. 1 'And I love you, Helena.'

He had always called her that. It was special between :heni. She remembered helping Kit with her history ,omework - the island where Napoleon spent his exile. ~aint Helena. Like my name, she had said. 'You're Helen.' Kit had corrected her sharply as if there ;-as something dangerous about Mother having a different iame. It was as if the child had known. 'Will you take me out on the town?' she smiled at him. ihe hoped her eyes didn't look as old and tired as they felt .rom inside. 'Now you're talking,' he

said. He got their raincoats and handed her the red square she wore to cover her hair. She tied it like the gypsy woman had tied hers. jaunty, cheerful. 'You are so beautiful,' he said. She bit her lip. She had dreamed so often that he would come back for her. It was impossible to take it in now that he had. They went down the stairs, past the bathroom they shared with three other flats. There were rules on the wall, in a plastic frame so that the writing could not fade with the steam. Hot water from the geyser had to be paid for. The place was to be left as you would like to find it. Sponge bags were not to be left in the bathroom. Helen's thoughts never went back to the big comfortable bathroom over McMahon's pharmacy, where the thick towels were warmed by the radiator, where there was a woolly mat to keep chilly feet warm. 'This is great fun,' Helen said as she ran down the stairs lightly. She saw from his smile that she was doing the right thing. Louis Gray loved life to be easy, to be free from furrowed brows.

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Ivy looked out from her flat near the door. She was: small, wiry woman with short pepper-and-salt hair turning grey. She had a lined face but a bright smile. It was hard to know whether she was nearer forty or fifty. She wore cotton overalls with tiny pink and purple flowers on them. She had the look of someone who had always worked very hard and who could take on any task. Certainly, she found the business of being a landlord to many varied tenants no strain. She had a glass-fronted door with a thick curtain so that she could observe the comings and goings of tenants. 'Off out to enjoy yourselves?' she said. Helen didn't resent Ivy Brown's questions. They weren't like the enquiries back in Lough Glass. 'Going for a walk by the lake, Mrs McMahon?' 'Off on your own again, Helen?' 'And where have you been this afternoon? She hated every greeting from Mrs Hanley of the draper's, from Dan O'Brien of the Central Hotel, from Lilian Kelly the doctor's wife, with the eyes that knew too much. Ivy Brown was different. She only checked the stairs so that Australian youngsters wouldn't bring in a dozen more tenants to sleep on the floor, or that no one sublet so that some could use the room by day and some by night depending on the shifts they worked. 'He's taking me out to see a bit of London, Mrs Brown! She flung her head back and laughed at the pleasure of it all. 'Call me Ivy, dear.

Otherwise we're all Mrs Gray and Mrs Brown, a bit gloomy,' Ivy laughed. Louis stepped forward to shake her hand, to make the change from acquaintance to friend. 'Louis and Helena Gray,' he said. Helen felt a thrill as he said it. Like a sixteen-year-old, not a middle-aged runaway wife, expecting someone else's child, 'Lena Gray,' said Ivy Brown thoughtfully. 'That's a lovely name. Sounds like a film star. You could be a film star, love, and all.'

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...beve walked hand in hand down to Earl's Court Road and old Binger Road. Everywhere seemed to be
...the places named after battles on which something important
...Court noble and Baron ... The places sounded ... ,terloo, and
ow, especially if you had lived for years in ... Snified some, people talked
about paddles' Lane, meaning

a place where he went down to the lake behind a bar run by a thin man who had great big feet. 'We'll be very happy here,' she said, smiling and squeezing his arm. 'I know we will,' he said. A shopkeeper was bringing in the unsold fruit and vegetables that he had on display outside on the pavement. A flower fell on the ground. Louis picked it up. 'Is this any use to you?' he asked the shopkeeper, 'or shall I give it to my beautiful wife?' His smile was infectious. 'That's not your wife, mate.' The man said, his tired face breaking into a smile. 'Oh yes she is, this is Lena Gray, my wife.' Louis seemed outraged. 'But she's not your wife, never. Give her the carnation, wife. You're having too good a time.' They laughed like children as they ran from him up the street and found an Italian restaurant. At the table Louis took her hand. 'Promise me something' 'Anything on earth, you know that.' 'Promise we won't become like couples that have nothing left to say to each other. Promise?' His eyes were troubled. 'I'll always have something to say to you, but you may not always want to listen.' He had tired of listening before and gone away, leaving her weeping for him alone in Dublin. It was in her eyes. 'You are my Lena, like Ivy said, Lena Gray. It's a film star's name. . . . You are full of glamour and beauty, MY love ... Think of yourself now as Lena - . . . as exciting as

living anew life.' His eyes burned and she knew that it was, were to keep him there must be no more talk of one-h, towns, or of being provincial. She would indeed become, Lena Gray, woman enough to hold a man like Louis, with no fear of becoming dull and old. For this whole week they said they would give themselves a honeymoon. No looking for work, no hardships realities of the living they would have to earn. They'd start that next Monday, in November. There would be plenty of time for that. Louis was a salesman. There was nothing he could not sell, He would not have references, of course. Well, he had worked for this company in Ireland, and been highly regarded. Highly regarded until he had run off with their daughter of the family. That was that. They had gone to Spain. The details were never clear, and they had never been asked for. There had been years of movement since then, vaguely accounted for, never probed. And Lena Gray would not probe for them now. Louis had been paid some money to leave the girl, the only child of that family, alone. Naturally, he had refused it. And then when the fire had run out of the relationship, when he had seen what a mistake he had made, he took it to give himself a start in life. The start was never discussed too much either. It had involved going to America and working there, but without a visa, and then there was a time in Greece. He would have come back for Helen, the girl he truly loved, but he had thought it would not have been fair. He, children were babies; she was trying to make a new start for herself. He would not come for her until he could prove he loved her and wanted her for the rest of his life. He had known she was in Lough Glass, of course, And apparently he had come once or twice just to look at her from afar, He would not have spoken to her this year had he not seen her look so unhappy. He saw her on a winter's day last January walking by the lake, tears or rain on her face, hitting away the nettles and bramble. And he had spoken to her.

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, she looked at him wildly 'as if he had come straight herself into his arms' He wouldn't if and then the long, he accused himself of a love waited so much for her mad to V it was perfect * if he had come I've been able to leave. But even if not to he would never could be old enough

the children w, ir own lives without her. But now -t to make the told. at leas
t her if the truth were , ~r, better withOu' had no JOY in -f~ev ould be - g
with a mother who VV dawn. was no life livin see the next day -art, no
hope and no wish to She had been trained herself

he I Kit was able to fend for he months that her mother was planning to
leave)Ver tdone as much as she could for , the '~nd Ernmet - she hadto
Sister Madeleine, . boy, helped his stutter by taking him Oman whose clear
eyes seemed to see on in every heartold hermit W vhat was going maid,
,,rything and know " hat she could for the. And she had even done wis an
education so encouraging her to work t . owan ~ita, abetter companion for
the children when

that she could be n it all happened. nown that. He ... after - - ...61, whe- had
always koth., man. She Martin would survive. She iIad married tier
knowing that she loved an lot leave him -rise that she would r d have had
given him her P'Ollon. -yes, of course it shOul d have without a full
explanat,so emotional. lie woul been face to f ace But he was t~ed. He
woul~ have done something en stay, like threatenpriate, like kneeling and
begging her to Ing to kill himsel f, maybe? eaded for that" But he would
No, he was too level-h ugh to know that it had always accept it. He was
realist eno,ust so odd, so strange that he been on the cards. it was hadn,t
responded.r where they would go the next day Louis was telling heseaside.
There~wls lie would take her on a train , to the * nter where on a beach in
wl nothing as wonderful as to wall -elves. They might go to there was no
one but them' ,at iers jutting out in, the Brighton, and see the two gre P d
walk in the sea. They would go to the pavilion, an

little lanes looking at the tiny shops, each with its own magic. His face was alive with the excitement of showing her these places. 'You will never forget it,' he said. 'I never forget anything I do with you,' she said simply and she saw his eyes water because what she said was obviously true.

Lena Gray never forgot Brighton. That was where six began to lose her child. The feeling was a dragging one, a downward pain, a bit like a period. But she decided to ignore it. They had walked hand in hand as had been promised, and laughed at the grey clouds and run from the white-flecked dark waters. They said that when the child was four they would take him - or her - back here and they would all play on the sands in the summer. They would stay in the same hotel. They would be rich and happy; their child would want for nothing. Lena ignored that dragging cramp in her stomach. At Brighton railway station on the way back she felt dampness but decided not to go to the Ladies to investigate. Some superstition made her feel that if she didn't acknowledge it here in Brighton, where they had been so happy, it would go away. By the time they got to Victoria she was in no doubt, 'Something's wrong,' she said to Louis. 'Can you make it home?' He had fear in his eyes. 'I don't know.' 'It's only whatever number of stops on the District Line,' he said. It passed in a nightmare haze. She remembered being put on the bed and Ivy's face very near her. 'You're all right, love. Hang on. Hang on, stay as still as you can.' Louis was over by the window biting his hand. 'The doctor's coming. He won't be a minute now. Hold my hand.' 'I was going to tell you . . . ' Lena wept. They had been,

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very specifically that this was a house where no one would be allowed. C-Rilcirer v up and down to the The pair, was sharp. The journey would be blood every, somehow intolerable. There seemed to even on Ivy's flowered overall, here, old, tired. Lena mixed. Then a doctor's face, a kind man, a grocer who had given her, then, the

but, up with the green in England, just last week, some week. Maybe every one I

looked the same. the number of weeks pregnant, about. Questions about the pregnancy. What had any complications earlier on in her doctor said then, Lena said. There was no doctor,' Le Ivy explained. 'She's from Ireland, you

see, the ,They have doctors there too,' said the man w, ired face. ilian, 'Don't tell Peter, she said. 'Don't tell Peter and Li * whatever you do.' She gripped the doctor's hand. Her eyes were wild. d. Nnd to Louis standing by the 'No, no,' he soothe d Lilian?' window, 'Who are Peter an in ... back in the place she 'I don't know. People back i came from.' f blood the doctor began. 'Your wife has lost a lot 0 'Will she be all right?' , t need to be taken into hospital. 'Yes, she will. She doesn't We've done everything. 1,11 give her a sedative ... You have children already?' 'No,' Louis said. 'Yes,' said Lena. There was a silence. she has,' Louis said. 'From a previous marriage, 'Poor lamb,' ivy said. 1,11 come again 'I'll send a nurse in the morning. 1 tomorrow on my way home from the surgery 'Thank you, doctor,' Lena's voice was weak. The doctor supported her head as she drank the sedative.

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'The worst is over, Mrs Gray,' he said kindly. 'The 6-., ahead,' 'What did you call me?' She was drowsy. 'You'll sleep now.' He spoke in a low voice to technical matters: towels, buckets, water, keeping room warm. When they had gone Louis came and held her 6 There were rears running down his face. 'I'm so SOr' Lena ... Oh Lena, I'm so sorry this should happen., 'Do you still want me? Do you still want me to stay you, even though there is no baby now, no family fo~ Her face was white and anxious. 'Oh my love. Of course I do ... more than ever my lovt ... Now that there are only the two of us we need caa other more than ever. Nothing will separate us. Nothin Lines seemed to fall from Lena's face and she si,7' holding his hand under her cheek. He sat there for a IoN time stroking her hair. All he could hear was her eytt breathing. Not the hiss of the oil heater that Ivy U brought in. Not the traffic out in the, London street below. She found it a funny world for a couple of days. She kept expecting Rita to come in with tea and scones but it turnd out to be Ivy with Bovril and biscuits, She iound hersd waiting for the children to come home from school. M then Louis would come in the door again beaming with yet another treat. A little glass of tonic wine on a tray with rwo chocolates wrapped up in silver paper. Or a magazine f0f her to read with a card pinned inside saying, 'I love you.' Or a dish of chopped-up chicken he had got from the restaurant on the corner when he had told

them his wife was sick in bed. 'You've got a good one there,' Ivy said sagely about Louis when he had gone running off on yet another errand, 'Don't I know it?' The colour was coming back to Lena's cheeks, 'Other fellow a sod, was he?' Ivy asked sympathetically. 'Other fellow?' Lena was bewildered.

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- husband you know You said, he said the ,~our first I hit the doctor was ~erc - . . ' not at all.' He wasn't a sod. NO, No Ivy- - Well, you never know. "Oh no. , ~ush her foot in it. . f to show felt she had e said vaguely. Then, as I Takes all sorts - -My first husband was no loss. he said,

now it-'was so kind to her. a was glad - Iv' been split up long then?' first husband the shutters on the Lena drew down conversation. she How" could tell this woman that she had left Martin How would Ivy, or anyone, Nicmahon just nine days ago had gone to ks ago Lena Gray understand that two weeks later in Lough Glass with her husband Martin and James people had thought that she was Helen, children, and p McMahon. By Sunday Lena had colour in her cheeks.

,How long have I been in bed?' she asked IVY you're not ready to get 'It happened on Thursday up yet.' 'But I have to. We're meant to be looking for jobs

tomorrow. 'Not a chance of it, Not for another week at least.' ,you don't understand and , . I told the doctor I'd keep an 'No. You don't understand the Employment u go down to even on you. Letting YO Exchange isn't keeping an eye on you. I have to, Ivy. Truly. Louis may not get a job at once, I can do anything - - . ' t not this week, Believe me.~ 'I'm sure you can, but to. 'I need to.' Lena spoke the words she didn't want need to, for the rent. you must have the rent.' She was ,uis had bought, the reckless thinking of the treats Louis could disregard for money that had to be paid to Ivy. lie w probably say that she was a good soul, she'd not push them for';, not for a week ...

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But Lena had her pride. She would not let this woman think that they were the type of people who would skip a week's payment. Even if she had to drag herself over, Ivy bit her lip. 'One week's not going to come bet,,, us,' she said. 'No.' Lena was adamant. 'Well then, let Louis earn it, love. I'm not taking any money you get out of your bed to make, and that's my promise.' They heard his foot on the stair. Lena looked up, alarmed. 'Not a word please, Ivy.' 'As long as you know my word is law.' Her frown was terrifying but they laughed together. 'What are you two conspiring about?' Louis came in with his arms full of newspapers. 'Louis, did you buy the whole shop?' Lena looked up in dismay at the selection. 'Had to, my darling. This isn't for pleasure, this is my research. I've got to find a job tomorrow, or have I forgotten? I have to take care of my beautiful sick wife, pay my wicked landlady . . .' He looked mischievously from one to another. Ivy spoke first. 'The circumstances have changed. I wouldn't mind letting you have a couple of weeks' credit.' Louis leaned over and patted Ivy on the hand. 'You're a good true friend to us, even though you've only known us a week. I don't want you to think that we're just unreliable Paddies who come in and take advantage of your hospital. We'll pay, Ivy. We want to be here a long time.' Ivy stood up from the chair beside the bed. 'I'll leave you, to it then. You're a lucky girl, Lena. You got yourself a real ~:

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man.' 111

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'Don't I know it.' She smiled up at him. 'And any references or anything ... I'd be happy Ivy said. 'That's so good of you.' His eyes were warm with gratitude. 'People are very good,' he said as he spread the papers across the bed.

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of his dark hair. 'Isn't she so kind, it would

,,,a stroke & she could break your heart - , imagine poor Ivy thinking you a reference. up on it,' he said. He was '111 be very glad to take her 'erious.

houseF Lena was ,1,Y1 A landlady running a rooming
,tonished. 11 say 1'rn.reliable?' Vell, who else wi s, in a company ... you
can't 'But Louis in busines ference from Ivy ,a,; you have a re g. it won't be
a . Louis sighed. It won't be business, clarlin matter of talking to sales
directors, or miarketing managers.
you know that. it'll be whatever I can get . Ivy will be very ant a job as a
hotel porter, or in a bar. She can "eful If I wl n days.' say she's known me
for five years, not te You can't take a job like Lena lc~oked at him aghast
that, Louis I won't have it. it was never meant to be
this way.' ,It was always meant to be this way ' he said, holding both her
hands. It,s)ust that I was the fool who didn't see it. And you gave me the
second chance.' She cried for a long time. She cried over the lost baby. And
the dreams of Louis having a fine living, dreams which were based on
nothing.
She cried because she heard the church bells ring some where in west
London and she thought of her children
going to Mass and she had absolutely no idea what Martin had told them
about her. She cried because she knew she was a bad mother, the worst kind
of mother. One who could leave her own children. No wonder God had
taken this much-wanted child away from her. had tears in 'I'll make it all
right, believe me.' His eyes them too. -thing - 'Louis, tell me some
Anything, my love. Anything.' Is that why this Is God very angry with us
oke. 'Is it a happened?' She touched her stomach as she sp punishment, a
warnIngF
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1 'Of course it isn't.' He was utterly certain, 'But you're not all that well up
on God. You've no to Mass all the time.' She was doubtful. 'No. But 1 know
he's there, and he's the God of 14 He said that himself, d'dn't he? He said
that a, greatest Of the commandments, that you should have k for each other
and for God.' 'Yes, but 1 think he meant that we should ... 'You think he
meant ... You think he meant... No now, now. What way's this to go on?
When You're haR you think he meant great things for us. When you arch
you think he meant punishments and all this doorn a gloom . . .'He held his

head on one side and smiled at her. 'What kind of faith have you at all, that you start giving everyone bad motives. The accident. The car said it. Brought on by stress maybe . . . and he hadn't an idea how much stress ... Listen love, you can't stop thinking that God is lined up against us. He was one of the things meant to be on our side.' 'I know.' She felt better. He was very reassuring. 'So?' 'So, I'll stop attacking him and laying it all at his door.' 'Excellent. Now a great big blow, then help me find a job.' She blew her nose, wiped her eyes, and looked through the Situations Vacant advertisements with a heart that was much less heavy. 'I'll go to Mass myself next Sunday,' she said in a low mutter. 'That way God will know I haven't given up on Him.' 'God knows that,' Louis said. 'If you didn't give up on me who treated you really badly you won't give up on God.' It was a strangely endless week. On Monday Lou's came home despondent. There were any number of building jobs, he said, Half of Ireland seemed to be over in London signing on with

the farm tractor, using a reel. But the child, the competence or the liking to swing a hammer had not been. It had been a wasted day. - A, XC or car, ined to be cheerful. 'Now, stop looking depressed. Listen to me. This is He was, 11, 5 out of that 1 :0 ,0 upset. Day Two will be fine. If You're 9 p.m. One. Did it worse for me. I can't

like so, In our final then it makes the. I, 11 only have to be honest and tell you the truth, no up lies. said. She lay awake saw through in what he he didn't let him he slept beside her, but she, day night with. Louis she was. now how anxious - ie elated. He had got, Jill fine. Louis came in a big Day Two' was tomorrow. As a hall porter, job and would start the underground. He would begin at 7, 10, not far away On for the first two weeks, but there. in the a.m. and work days which was great. About the possibility of nights after that. Why is it great?' Lena wanted to know. days for Because then of course he could use some of them, the ones for which they, for interviews for other jobs, 'that great? The wasn't suited. Meanwhile, that he was more sensible' twenty-four hours was secure. It had only taken him to find it wouldn't. I find honourable employment here, but Lena couldn't smile. She forced him to do into the right position. I can't bear you say - his,' she said. - hard enough

to do the bloody Jesus Christ thing without you being so negative, I know, stricken. But he was quick burst out. I didn't mean to lash to apologise. They sort of out at you. It was hard, I might be too darling; I didn't mean to. The reconciliation was as sweet as ever. I think there would be things. I think they had always known in to trip them up along the way. The main thing was to recognise them, admit them. They were both so Sorry.

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On Wednesday night Louis had funny stories about the hotel. The head porter was a crook, the manager... hopelessly ineffectual, the receptionist had a mother-in-law, and she was a woman, the guests he had talked to, mainly American GI soldiers serving in the various theatres of war, nice fellows, kids a lot of them. The day seemed long, but it was interesting. Lena took a huge interest and learned all their names. Thursday night Louis told her the head porter had tried to take a tip that should have belonged to Louis, but the lady had insisted. 'It's for the nice wee man with the blue eyes,' she said. The head porter had smiled good-naturedly in front of the Scottish lady, but out of the corner of his mouth he hissed to Louis, 'I have my eye on you.' 'What did you say?' Lena showed great enthusiasm. 'I said that I had my eye on his job. That silenced him. Lena pealed with laughter. Louis would be out of there, gone to something worse than him in days, or weeks at the very worst. On Friday Louis was tired, but he had a pay packet: They got paid every Friday, and his three days' work paid the rent. They handed it to Ivy in an envelope. 'I think you're well enough to go out and celebrate,' he said. 'My treat. A couple of pints in a place that a friend of mine runs.' They went on a red bus. Lena's legs felt weak still, but she was buoyed up by the outing. Ivy pointed out places, her as the bus went through the London traffic, and Louis pointed out other places. She felt like a child on a birthday treat. Ivy showed her a big office where she had worked during the war, and areas that had been bombed. She said that this was a great deal shop and that was why it was a honourable pawnbroker in case they fell on a really

s

y time, and to be sure to say that Ivy had recommended h10

He Louis showed her restaurants and hotels and theatres,

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I the names, but he didn't have a little story 90 to al was part of Louis' past,
-h one like Ivy did- This teful to be 19111th eac . about but was gra of

she didn't enquire . new a lot o a big noisy pub where ivy k ~1 ~n 'rbey go, I
snov, home for a local,' Louis said ,y far frc sed to work here, but we won't
go into 2,11 ,~h love, I u ,1,.It noW. Lena's hand. This was more ,Certainly.,
Louis squeezed it. Going out on a raffish adventure where things 't be said
this was the kind of thing they liked. ,r,,,tn ree of them. A lot of People
Thev sat at a table, the thnd Henry and over and were introduced as Doris a
Nobby and Steve and the landlord was called Ernest. A . sr,311 man with a
lot of tattoos up his arm. He made it his Iness to corne to the table several
times. L)US I ause, unlike the pubs at lena and Louis noticed thil bec go up
to the h,)me, there wasn't table service. You had to
nar to get your pint refilled. But not Ivy. d Louis' pint were refilled by the
Their glasses of bitter an o money change gumor, as people called him.
Lena saw n t c)ugh to buy a drink themselves hands. T ey had just en, an~
offered but the offer was waved away. 'He likes to 'Ernest ~ill look after us,'
Ivy said firmly. do that! small During the evening Lena saw Ivy's eyes
follow the wiZened man as he moved behind the bar and greeted
customers. From time to time his eyes sought out 1%~'s and he smiled.
Some of the customers asked, 'How's Charlotte then?' and Ernest always
said 'Gone to her mother's like every Friday.' Lena knew why Ivy visited .
on Fridays only. She wondered how long it had been going on. ivy might
tell her gain? she might not. This was not some time. But then a Idee Lough
Glass, where everyone's life was discussed insid Out until it had no
meaning any more.

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Tonight in Paddles' bar they would be saying, _ Suddenly she realised with a start that she didn't what they would be saying. Had Martin said she had on a vest? Had he said she was sick? No. Surely Peter would need to have been involved in that. But what had he told the children? She felt her cheeks redden with rage that he hadn't told her what story he was going to give Kit and Emmet. She had urged him to tell them the truth if he could bear it, and to let them work it out for themselves. But that had obviously not been done. Ivy was talking to Ernest, the two of them sitting together like a long-married couple while she picked a bit of fluff from the sleeve of his jacket. Lena felt Louis' eyes on her. She smiled, shaking away memories of Lough Glass. 'What are you thinking about?' he asked her. 'I was thinking how I'm well enough to get a job now ... and next week I'll take us all out for a celebration,' she said. 'I don't want you to have to work.', 'I don't want you to either, but it's only for a while. Then we'll have careers and a home like real people_' she smiled brightly. It was one of the many lies she told him.

On Saturday Lena dressed herself up and went to Millar's Employment Agency. She stood outside and took them very deep breaths. She drew in the cold London air down to her toes. This could be the start of many fruitless interviews. What would they want with her? A woman with no shorthand. No typing speeds to speak of. references. She was too old to be an office junior. She too ill equipped to be an office senior. At the desk sat a woman in a cardigan, sucking a pencil. She had a pleasant smile and a vague expression on her face. She was a gentle woman, not at all the sort of person one might have expected to come across in an employment agency.

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form across the desk and Lena filled it

Then she picked up her hand. At almost every category she felt a shakiness as she told herself so she felt like a loser. DC: - ritten reference, Own name, -ience or any other - I have, I of the local school leavers had 'In he had more than some, in to take the time to think on her own,

With a man in the hall encouragingly at the way to hide bird's nest, in order to hair like the kind of card, [read- At least this wasn't - the her own feelings about 'id order her out of the old laugh at her and, man who wouldn't -wasting valuable time. ,ing that she had been 016ce, imply anything,' she said with a

bright ,There, I think that's eve sne watched the Lena dug her nails into her palms as She through the completed form. ,oman read slowly logise. ,illed herself not to explain, not to aPc ... well to know what exactly jes rather hard to see you could. . . where we might -oh I know I'm Lena put on her most confident face. not the run of the mill clerical or secretarial appointment, ,he said, hardly believing the sound of her own voice. 'But .thing where my ~ere might be some I was hoping that tb might be useful.' particular skills, more mature qualities. he other side of the 'Like what, exactly?'The woman at t na realised. desk was more embarrassed than she was, Le d. 'Excuse me, what is your name` 'Miss Park. Jessica Park.' he kind of firm that ,well, Miss Park, you know maybe t wants someone who can try anything, not a young w Oman on her way up through sc---e kind of ladder Somewhere that I could turn my hand to anything, to answering the phone, doing the filing, making the tea keeping the place n . ice, thinking up new ideas - . .' Lena iooked around the Gingy office of Millar's EmplOYmerit Agency, waving her hands to illustrate her point- Every office wants someone 'I know what you mean stfully. At that point the phone l_ike you,' said miss Park wi: I rang and immediately after two girls came 1.n say ng they ust wanted leaflets, and the phone rang again,

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It had given Lena time to think. When Jessica Park free again she decided to speak her thoughts 'F~r ex4, here is this office,' she said, hoping the sha~e In her v was not obvious, 'I can see you're very b UsY. Perhaps~ is just the kind of place I might be useful.' Jessica Park was not a decision maker; she seek alarmed. 'Oh no, I don't think so . . .' she began. 'Well why not? You seem very overworked. I could, some of the more routine stuff. You know, keep z, files . . . , 'But I don't know anything about you ... 'You form. 'I don't run the place ... Mr Millar will need . 'Why don't I start now? You can see whether I'm good or not, and then you can ask Mr Millan' 'I don't know, I'm sure. . . ' Lena paused. It was hard to tell what age Jessica Pin was. She might have been forty or forty-five. But she coi equally have been thirty-five, a woman who had taken x care of herself and aged beyond her years. Lena decided to choose this option. 'Well, Jessica. It call you that

because I can see you're younger than I am ... Why don't we give it a try? Nothing to lose, nothing to pay if it doesn't work out.' 'Jessie actually, and I'm a little older than you,' Jesi admitted. 'But all right. Just so long as we don't get into any trouble.' 'What trouble can we get into? Look, I'll find a chair to sit beside you.' Before Jessica could change her mind, Lena installed. She sharpened pencils, tidied up the desk and rearranged the enrolment forms so that there was a carbon paper attached to each one and a second sheet below, 'I never thought of that,' Jessie said in wonder. 'Of course you did,' said Lena. 'It's just you're too busy to have time for it.' Lena answered the phone with a cheerful 'Millar's Employment Agency, how can we help know everything about me.' she indicated;

12.6

), which was a vast improvement on Jessie's tentative '0" e familiar She said that she would really like to become stem. That way she could be of the

he filing SY s and left

E - mce. Jessie gave her vague outline test assistance -ough the lists until she found 'real' resorted to, it Lena said. ~Crto ,d it wasn't long before she tracked down ,h,t she wanted sector, that she was really interested in. ing. The kinds The situations vacant in Sales and Market for, once is Gray might be able to apply ,j jobs that Lou and where to go. knew what was wanted ,you Mean you just walked in and said they needed you?' L,,Is was amazed. t ,More or less,' Lena laughed, hardly daring to believe it h,d worked. There was no need to tell him how frightened she had been. Miss Park was intelligent to have Mr Millar had said that Mr y people she saw, picked a mature woman from the man and to suggest her. Jessie had been delighted with the unexpected praise. Lena would start on Monday. s about her real reason for taking She said nothing to Loui~ ht turn out to be for the job, and the possible gold mine it might self i her role as them. She wanted to call these firms her in employment agency and arm herself with the information. Then Louis could apply on his own behalf. she It was all working out for the best. Lena thought would be able to talk to God without bitterness at Mass

next day. Ivy was so sorry but she didn't know where there were Roman Catholic churches. She was always seeing them. She'd ask. She said there was a great big one in Kilburn, Quex Road it was. Always huge crowds going in and out of it on a Sunday. That might be the place. 'Kilburn ... Would it be a bit Irish for us? People know us?' she asked Louis. 'ne from Lough Grass No,' he said. 'There's hardly any em .igrated since you've left-'
... would

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'No, no of course not. But you. Would people you?' 'It doesn't matter if they know me, love. It's you on the run. Anyway, am I coming?' 'I'd like you to, if you wouldn't hate it. just to thanks.' 'Well, I've a lot to give thanks for. Of course I'll cok

It was such an adventure going to Mass in London. F~ the right bus, remembering which direction to take, Crossing Kilburn High Road and following the crN with head scarves and collars turned up against the cok There were a few Polish people, and Italians too. They knew nobody. Lena compared it to the Sunday journey to Mass Lough Glass. Good morning Mrs Hanley, Mr Foley, ~ Mildred, Mr Hickey, Mother Bernard, Mrs Dillon, Hel Lilian, Hello Peter. How nice to see you again, Main How are you Kathleen? Stevie? You were exhausted bdeft! you got up to the church. And then when you got the you recognised everyone's cough and splutter. And yo, knew what Father Baily would say before he said it. The familiar Latin words washed over her. It must terrible being a Protestant. You couldn't have the sz% service all over the world. You wouldn't undersu~ Protestants in Africa or Germany. Being a Catholic was% safe. And indeed if you were like Louis, so simple. It w3sl God of Love up there looking down. Lena felt peaceful and happy as they came out of the c0i wind. just by the church was a kiosk that sold newspaper~

1~

'They're all the Irish provincial ones, or religious 0110 Louis said. 'I'll get a real paper from the man over here a~ we'll go and have a Sunday drink. Okay V Lena nodded her encouragement, but she looked at headlines all the same. There were all the papers ft0o home: the Kerryman, the Cork Weekly

Examiner, & Wexford Free Press, the Connaught Tribune. And aMO14
them the paper that was delivered to the pharmacy c3a

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the -rhey looked at it for the times of the cinema, . j , or sale, for news of
fellow county men and ~roPert~ ho had done well in civil service
examinations, ,,,,men v~ho had married or celebrated a golden g, overseas,
w n g - ~ she saw them on the

She v~-as about to look away whene of)icture of the take in Lough Glass
and SOM ~ror,t page, a j he heading 'Search Called ,he boats. underneath it
was t oman.' off For Missing Lough GlassW at Helen ,~Xlith her eyes
widening in disbelief she read th Martin 'fe of noted Lough Glass
pharmacist, NjcMahon, v"n walking by the treacherous \ iad last been
seeber. Divers and . IcMahori, I on Wednesday5 29 Octo ~ake waters-
infested water of the lake %olunteers had searched the reed , but nothing
had been ,hat gave Lough Glass its name iound. A boat had been seen
upside down and it was n must have taken it out and assumed that M i rs
McMahl in that led to Cope W th the sudden squalls that blow up reg ion.
'Are you going to buy it?' asked the man who sold the
papers. Helen handed him half a crown and began to walk ,y5 ey're dear,
but not still th away, clutching the paper - 'H(that dear,' he called after her
with her change. . But she didn't hear. 'Louis,' she called, her voice roaring
in her own ears. 'Louis, oh my God. - .' They lifted her to her feet, everyone
suggesting something different - air, brandy, whiskey, water, tea, walk her
around, sit her do wn. The man trying to give her change kept Insisting that
it be put into her handbag. Eventually, his arms supported her along the
road. 1~alf walking, half being carried, she knew they were hastening to
somewhere they could be alone. He kept saying that they should get a
doctor. lose, just get me 'Believe me, there is nothing more to somewhere
away from people.' . 'Please, darling, please.'There were mainly Irish
accents in the bar, but they were far away. They were all

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concentrated on their own business. They had no in in the man and woman who sat with the untouched b between them while they read unbelievably the accou, the search for Helen McMahon. 'He can't have got the whole town out, detectives from Dublin Castle.' Louis was shaki head. 'He mustn't have got the note,' Helen said, 'He riit have thought I was really in the lake ... Oh my God. Oj my God, what have I done?' 'But we've been over this a hundred times alte*, Where did you put the note?' 'In his room.' 'And how could he not see it? How, tell me?' 'Suppose he didn't go in there?' 'Lena, have sense. He must have gone in there. They p the guards, for God's sake. The guards would have gonei there even if he didn't.' 'He couldn't do all this, bring all this horror on children, let them think I was lying dead in the bottomd the lake like poor Bridie Daly.' 'Who was she?' 'It doesn't matter. Martin wouldn't have done this, not to the children.' 'Well then, how could he not have got the note?' Lod face was anguished and he kept looking back at the acco'O in case the article might go away. 'The maid. You say she wouldn't have kept it?' 'No, not a chance.' 'To blackmail you, or anything?' 'We're talking about Rita. No, that's not possible, 'The children then. Suppose one of them opened it Suppose they didn't want to believe you'd gone. YO1 know how strange children can be. Hid the note and pretended none of it was true.' 'No.' She spoke simply. 'How can you be so sure?' 'I know them, Louis. They're my children. First, they

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it if it was addressed to Martin ... But if Idn't Open 1 did if they did. se it.' se they did. just suppo ed it he would show it to his father. If Kit .IfEninictopen uld have phoned me in London. She 'd it she wo 1- oment we arrived. She would
~enclephonea t '

,id have t, ed that 1 corne home.' ,,c demand 'lence. 's spoke. There was a 51on for ever, when Loul seemed to have 9One)t that he read it?' ill ou accef he could have unleashed ~nd it very hard to think , she waved at the newspaper. 1,',n'ight have been his only way of coping, you know.' There was another silen. ce 1 . ,1,11 have to know, LOuls. 'What do you mcan. t as' tand up ' 1 telephone him.' She almost wen if to S He looked at her in

alarm. V 'And say what) what would you say 'Tell them to stop looking in the lake. Tell my children I'm alive. . .' back to them. You're not, arc ,But you're not going ".Ou?I was almost too much to bear. The longing in his eyes ~ Louis.' 'You know I'm not going bael , 'Then think. Think for a moment.' read it yourself, all 'What is there to think about) Y` when 1 left. Vin a that stuff about what 1 was wearing They u hear about on the news. rni ' ssing 1 person, like yoHer voice became alinost think 1 m in the lake for God's hysterical. 'They nlight even have a funeral, sike.' "Not without a bodY5 they can t. presumed dead. 1 can't be presumed 'But they'll have me ir mother dead. Not for my children. They ;,nust know the' is alive and well and happy, not in the mud and the reeds at zh Glass.' the bottom of the lake in Lough 'It's not your fault they think that.

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'What do you me "8 not my fault? I left them', :n 1t, is 'staid s lowly. 'How do you say that?' 'That's what he told them, You gave h,m a choice what he could say. This is what he said.' 'But he can't say that. It's preposterous. He can,t them their mother is dead. I want to see them. i waij meet them, watch them grow up.' Louis looked at her sadly. 'Did you ever think he wc,4 let you do that?' 'Of course I did.' 'That he would forgive you and say, "There there, yj have a n*cc life with Lou*s in London, and from tirnew time come home to Lough Glass and we'll all kill the fatt~ calf." ' 'No, not like that.' 'But like what then? Think, Lena. Think. This i Martin's way. It might be the best way.' She leaped to her feet. 'To tell two innocent children dvi I'm dead because he can't face telling them I left him!' 'Maybe he thinks that it'd be better for them. You'it always saying it's a mass of whispers that place. Maybe & sympathy over a dead mother is better than the gossip ovel one that ran away.' 'I don , t believe any of this. I'm going to ring him, Loui I have to.' 'That's so unfair of you. You told the poor bastard ths the one thing you'd do for him was let him sort it Ott whatever way he wanted. You'd give him that digniq, Wasn't that what you wrote?' 'I don't know the exact words.' 'Was it or wasn't it?' 'I didn't have carbon paper,' she snapped. 'But we went over it often enough.' 'That's what I told him,'she agreed. 'But I must knowmust know do they really. . .' All the

fight had gone out of her. 'Suppose they do think you're dead, Lena. Think, I
beg
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'I might not be the best for the little girl and the little
phone now you'll have to go home and explain things' Martin will be in
deep trouble. You're making it so. Think of all the harm you might do.' She
said, tears falling down her face.

'Right. We'll ring them.'
-d 111 say I want to speak to you, find I'll ring,' he said - [what I'm told.'
'You can't.' 111 get change,' he said, His lace - in line as he went to the bar.
'ke 111, - - - - not re brandy in one gulp. It felt I
, wallowing nettles. 111ey didn't phone from the bar, there was too much
but just along the road they came to a public box 'What will you say?' Lena
asked for the tenth time. Louis had said little, but now as they heard the
phone
ringing he held her face in one hand and said, 'I'll say - that's right. Trust me.
I'll wait to see what he says first.' She gripped - - tight and leaned very close so
that
, she could hear. 'Lough Glass three double nine.' it was Kit's voice. Lena
raised the hand that held Louis' hand to her lips to listen to the words. Then
the operator came on the line. 'A call from London for you ... Go ahead,
caller.' 'Hello.' Louis spoke in a slightly altered voice, 'is that McMahan's?'
'Yes, this is McMahan's' in Lough Glass.' 'Is Mr McMahan there please?'
Lena's 'No, I'm sorry. He's out at the moment. 111 eyes widened. Martin
should be well back from Mass by now. They should have started their
lunch. The house had gone to pieces since she left, Then she remembered
this was a house in mourning, a house where everyone professed to think
she was drowned. 'When will he return' she asked proudly 'May I ask who's
calling, please?' Lena smiled
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Only twelve and already practical and efficient. Don't, information until you get information. 'My name's Smith. I'm a commercial representative. been to your parents' chemistIs in the nature of bus~t, calls.' 1

I yes. U ~,~jjj I ask MY t"". "" - ' . g to be ~,~o 10. it was just a call, in case I was goin . ing that way. Please don't tell him and disturb him. I'm truded ... at such a time Orry to have in 'This is our home, not the chemist's,' Kit explained,-tt was an accident,' Kit said. 'They had prayers for the 'I know, I'm sorry to intrude on you. Might I have-1 of her soul at Mass today.' word with your mother?' Lena squeezed his hand so ha;~y,s, I m sure. rm sure.' Kit explained. 'So I won)t say it hurt him. Her eyes were enormous. What was theso that she'd be at peace, going to say? It seemed an age before she answered. What did she want Kit to say? Something like,There, been a lot of confusion over where my mother . s, but *t wi all be sorted out before Christmas.' 'You're ringing from London?' Kit said. 'That's right, yes.' 'Then you won't have heard. There's been a ter accident. My mother was drowned.' There was a pause she struggled to get her breath again. Louis said nothing. His face was'white. Then, in choked voice, he said, 'I'm very sorry.' 'Yes, I know you would be.' The voice was very s Lena had often fantasised about her child Louis. She knew they would like each other had felt it would turn out to be all right. But that was befo this. Before this terrible turn in events. 'So where is your father now?' he asked. 'He's having lunch with friends of ours. They're tryi to take his mind off things a bit.' That would be the Kellys, thought Lena. 'And why did you not go?' Louis sounded genuin caring. The lump in Lena's throat was enormous. 'I thought someone should be here in case there was news, you know. . .' 'What kind of news?' 'Well, they haven't found in case they fou Mummy's body,'said Kit. Louls'face was working but couldn't speak. 'Are you still there?' she asked.

) 1 „u rang. 9 No. And is your little brother manag rig ,How did you know 1 had a brother?' 'i think your father and mother said it when 1 was in the shop.' c was always talking about us.' Kit's 'I bet she did. Sh 'It was only the winds you know. It ,oice was near tears. %,ould have been all right but for the winds.' There was a s lence. The silences had eaten up a lot of the three minutes. 'Do you wa... 1 -- -----e, caller?' asked the operator.

'No, thank you. We have finished,' Louis said. And across the distance on that wet November Sunday it,s voic e saying 'Goodbye' and again, they heard K* hesitantly, i ase she hadri signed off properly, 'Good~ye now.' They hung up and held each other tight in the phone box as the rain lashed against the window. And anyone who came hoping to make a call saw the anguish between them and went away. Nobody could ask a couple who had obviously had such bad news to leave a phone 1 ox and go 1 out into the real world.

. Al ri ht?'

'I Cou id, when they were at home ld kill him,' Louis sai sitting in this half world of disbelief. 'If he did it on purpose.' 'Let's go through it again.' Louis would ask, How could he not know?' And ~ways it was unanswerable.

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They couldn't sleep, even though they needed to, both had jobs to go to in the morning. Once Louis asked in a wide- awake voice, U heth,,4 people wouldn't buy his bloody cough bottles if ZQ thought his wife had run away, but they would if she drowned?' 'Don't ask me. 1 don't know him at all.' 'You lived with him for thirteen years of your life., She was silent. Then an hour later she asked, 'What di Kit mean about the winds ... what winds?' 'I suppose the night we left.' 'I don't remember any winds.' 'Neither do 1, but then . . .' He didn't need to say any more. They would hm noticed either thunderstorm nor snow on the n*ghtdiq began their new life. She had crossed to the far side of the lake before gypsy camp where Louis was waiting with his car, well, 6 friend's car. His friend had known nothing of

the pig only that Louis needed transport for the day. They had driven to Dublin and taken the tram to Dun Laoghaire. They were the first people on the boat. And they had talked all night from Holyhead to Euston, and laughed over their breakfast in a Lyons' Corner House. And all this time, every day and night since then, people in Lough Glass had assumed that Helen was at the bottom of their lake. Louis was right. Martin's bitterness must have been greater than any of them could ever have realised.

Jessie had a mother who was poorly. She had been poorly for a long time. Nothing that you could put your finger on. Lena learned this in a lot of detail on her first full day work, on that first Monday. 'Why don't you pop back and see her at lunchtime?' Lena suggested. 'Ooh, I couldn't do that.' Jessie was very timid. 'Why ever not? I'm here, aren't I? I can hold the fort.'

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v

wouldn't like to take your job. I'm your third lace wide
I'm not going Jessie, to go out and leave poor assistant- I'm not going 's In that I
can't handle 'Pen to be public. If anything come What's the sense of

'I ask Helen to see Miss Park later on. I'll be about your bottle 5" g here when
you're worried, another, suppose Mr Millar comes in. 'Buts perhaps better than that you
have gone to investigate lace could say V There's a big positionery. you
could too, on Your 'a e * if they have any on the corner. Why don't You see if
envelopes at a discount for buy) We do get a lot of time, They should give
us a reduction.' 'I'd do that.' Jessie was riddled with doubt 'Yes ... I could, but this
why I was hired, to Please go,' Lena insisted- 'Is man who can keep things
be a little-- sensible mature woman ticking over? Let me earn MY wages. ,Will
you be all right?' 'Lena felt her smile was nailed ,i'll be fine. I've lots to
do onto her face. If only Jessie Park knew how much she did many decisions
she had to make if she have to do, how run Ke them. could just get a little
peace to manage a real job, Lena While she was pretending to keep do
whether or not to Gray was going to have to decide today n McMahon was
telephone Lough Glass and say that Helen Louis had not alive and well.
riours of conversation with and convinced her. She couldn't write her own

obituary move out of the lives of Kit and Emmet. I , ad continued to Even if the baby she had been carrying I ce the f act that live within her, she would still have had to f a o believe she had somehow allowed her son.and dauthat she was dead. it was no use railing against Martin and She wanted some time to think. his weakness of character. Time on her own, where she had access to a telephone- of ortant to get poor Jessie out That's why it was so imp the office. looking up the job opportunities for Lena delayedpended on what she did now- if she Louis. After all, a lot de

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were to telephone home and tell the news that she was,! and well, then it might change everything. 1E M h that she and Louis would not be starting their life-'a planned here, in London. It might mean that she have to return home and face the consequences of, thing she had done. So it would be folly to try to set up interviews for hit, when she did not even know whether they would still be here. She tried to imagine the scene of Louis escorting he, back to Lough Glass. Her imagination let her down. She could not begin to run the conversation that would take place between the three of them, Martin, Louis and herself in the sitting room. There were no words, no explanations. She thought of the children holding her, clutching her. Of Kit saying,I knew you weren't dead. I just knew it.'Of Emmet with his stutter getting worse until every word seemed to choke him. She thought of Rita being discreet, and baffled, in the background. She thought of the false conversation with Peter and Lilian. Of Maura, Lilian's sister, being determinedly cheerful and saying that life was short and they should all rejoice in the good fortune that had resulted from all this instead of dwelling on the bad side. All the time she tried to inagine a role for Lou's and couldn't find one. His smile, his charm, his love for her would all be so inappropriate. She knew she Would have to go alone. And she supposed she would have to go. You couldn't tell two inno-children the news that their mother was not dead without telling It to their faces. She didn't even think about talking to Martin. The years of respect for him had just vanished. She could not believe that anyone could have behaved in such a way over a blow to his pride. She must really not have known Martin at all.

Jessie left, and took her incessant chatter with her. Lena hoped for some time on her own. But the lunch hour was

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Agencies in Millar's Employment Yard of the busiest opened to change use those -already in jobs which they for other „rich break to seek details and to register

hed off her feet. Perhaps it was all for the Lena was busy with applications, as the wire trays filled up to

best, she thought. Perhaps she would not form and personal details set out even if she did have or anything had lifted a telephone receiver and, have been the she free if she had spoken to Martin in „„ice she not have been able to control her pharma until the children she should wait I anger with; were home from school - none else? But who? or should she go through some sister? Not the Kellys. Never the Kellys. Now, if Sister O'Leah had had a telephone. Lena smiled at the instrument like a telephone in the hermit's of a modern in 1, the cottage. ~You're smiling, that's good,' Jessie said to her. 'le?' Lena pulled herself 'Do you mean I don't always smile to get together. I'm the one that, you look a different woman today, was here on Saturday. I thought You had something bad

happen to you over the weekend.' Jessie looked eager to hear. I'd like a bit of it But Lena was well able for her. 'No, Now, how was your Mum? Glad to see you 'Well, it was a good thing I did go back.' Jessie began lengthy tale of her mother's difficulty in digesting

her food. Up to this, Lena had thought that Mrs Hanley in the was the only woman in the world drapery at Lough Glass "es, all whose food passed through a hundred different stages of them fascinating to herself before it was digested. Now she realized that Mrs Flanley had a sister-figure in West London. ce in moulding her face. Lena had thirteen years experience of Mrs Hanley's gullet' into an expression of interest in a

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It was no problem to assume acceptable interest in the digestive tract of Jessle Park's mother. Her hands were busy putting new and clearer labels on the files; her mind was hundreds of miles away by a winter lake in Ireland. She knew when she saw Louis' face that there would be no conversation about it tonight. This was not a man who would sit down to work out yet again the best way to tell her children that she was still alive. He was tired and drawn from his long day. His hands were chapped and his shoulders ached. 'Do we have the money for a hot bath, or is it madness?' he asked. His eyes were like huge dark smudges in his face, his smile as lopsided and heartbreaking as she had ever known. She felt such a rush of love and protection for him that it nearly took her breath away. She would work from dusk to dawn and then to dusk again to look after him, to take away his tiredness. And she knew that he would do that for her, too. Remember how he had nearly died of anguish over her miscarriage, how he had sat holding her hand and stroking her brow, leaving only to get some treat. Her eyes filled with tears. This was her man, her great love. She was so lucky. So few people really had the love of their lives with them. Most people yearned for lost chances. For opportunities missed. It would be a stupid woman who would give away one moment of this treasure by fretting and agonising and trying to redefine the past. She would think about it herself. She would not waste one precious minute of her time with Louis in what he would think was re-going over old ground. 'I think this company can run to a hot bath for one of the workers,' she said, eyes bright and dancing. 'But on one condition.' 'What's that?' 'That I get to come into the bathroom and rub you back.' 'Ivy'll be shocked, goings-on in the bathroom.' 'Back rubbings isn't goings-on. . .'

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'It might lead to it, though. Mightn't it?' He looked at her eagerly. 'It certainly will,' she said - her way of saying, 'Oh, I'd say it most certainly will.' 'I'll make love again. And not just tell him that she felt able to start startled her. _not able ... eager, to a degree that I will splash out on a bath then,' said Louis happily, picking up his towel and sponge bag and reaching for a spoon from the saucer of coins that they called Spending

'Nioney. There was no mention of the crisis in Lough Glass that Lena woke at five in the morning and couldn't get back perhaps we'll talk about it. Perhaps the time will pass 'O sleep. Perhaps be right, she told herself. But as she thought, she knew she was deceiving herself. As far as Louis Gray was concerned, her life in Lough Glass was over. In some ways, the way it was seen to be over seemed the best solution. He was busy planning their new life. He did not want to be dragged back to her old life. The faces of Kit and Emmet were as clear as if they were in Kit thrown by projection on to the wall opposite the bed, pushing her hair out of her eyes, face wet from rain and tears at the lake, her expression grim and set; Emmet, his eyes bewildered, raising his hand to his throat as he often did when he stammered, in an effort to force the words out. She couldn't let them believe she was dead. She would find a way to tell them.

She didn't find a way on Tuesday. Mr Millar called at the agency. Louis. I don't His visits always made Jessie very nervous. I know what he thinks he's at, coming spying,' she hissed to Lena. (It is his business,' Lena said mildly. 'He just wants to make sure it's going well, see if there's anything we need, that sort of thing.' Jessie was doubtful. 'if he thought it was all going well

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and we were running it properly, then he wouldn't need come in at all,' she said, biting her lip. Lena forced herself to laugh even though her mind was far from the subject. 'Come on now, Jessie. Let's look on the bright side. Because it is going well, he likes to be here and to be a part of it. Did you ever think of it that way?, Jessie never had. 'I suppose it's being married and all that makes you so confident, Lena,' she said. Lena swallowed. Imagine they thought she was confident. She was as weak as a kitten, if only they knew. 'Let's make him very welcome when he comes in today, and get him involved in it rather than waiting until he's gone to make our plans. , 'I

wonder . . . 'Jessie didn't want to rock the boat. 'Let's try it anyway,' Lena said.

'I was wondering, Mr Millar, do you think that we might have some chairs and a little table so that clients could sit down while they're waiting?' 'I don't know about that,' he said. He was a tall, bald man with an egg-like head and face, and an expression of permanent surprise. 'You know, if we made them feel that this was a place where they could drop in ... almost a social occasion rather than standing in a line queueing like they might at a post office or a bank.' 'But what would be the advantage to us?' Jessie began to cringe, but Lena knew that the man just wanted to know. He wasn't dismissing the suggestion. , 'Miss Park was pointing out to me - you know she 5 being marvellous at showing me the ropes - well, she was saying that so much of our business is actually repeat business. Someone will come again if they got a good placing the first time.' 'Yes, but armchairs . . . 'Oh I don't mean anything very grand, Mr Millar. think what Miss Park had in mind was the feeling that

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„jillar's was a sort of place they could trust, a place they felt ~,horne in.' Her smile was bi~ight and confident. dding 'It's a good idea, Miss Park. Yes it And he was no 1 wonder where we'd get that kind of furniture.' Mr Millar. ,you wouldn't need to spend too much

i . 'He looked at a loss. 'The N u,d need to look around a bit 'Odo this, of course, is Miss Park. She's „J person to ssie looked ,onderful at finding exactly the right thing.'Je ;p, She gave the impression of someone who had never ,een able to fin.d the right thing: the right cardigan, „irstyle, expression on her face. But Lena sailed past that. you know, these second-hand places. I bet with a bit of ~ ing there'd be great bargains there.

Suppose after her „until I mean if ... What do you ,jnYl hour That is, F ;,ilrik ... Even Jessie's slow uptake got the message this time, '-ena was trying to get her time off so that she could spend ~i with her mother."If I were to have a little extra time)" she Degan, like a dog begging to be whipped. 'It would pay for itself over and over,' Lena finished for ier. 'Well, if you wouldn't mind, Miss Park?' He was ioubtful about everything. Fortunately, jessWs naturally

apologetic manner stood her in good stead. She didn't sound too eager for the whole endeavour. 'I suppose I could - . .' she began. Then Mr Millar became eager. 'We could have a couple of ashtrays,' he ventured. 'An old umbrella stand even, for weather like this.' 'A table with all our information on it, rather than having them read it at the Counter, taking up time.' Lena remembered to curb the enthusiasm before they might get carried away and abandon the whole project as being unrealistic. * 'Yes, and as Miss Park said, it wouldn't have to cost a lot., Mr Millar went away happy. Delighted, in fact, with his Visit.

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i

1 Jessie looked at Lena as if she had braved a lion. 'I don't know how you think of things, I really don't. As you always make me look so good.' She was like a sparrow in her gratitude. 'You are good,' Lena said. 'You were very good to find me and let me work here.' 'It was the best thing I ever did in my life,' Jessie said happily. Lena patted her on the hand. 'Right. Now don't rush furniture too quickly. Not for a couple of weeks anyway. Gives you more time to get home without it all being a bit of a rush.' I Lena realised she had been acting all day. Acting since she got up and told Louis that she had slept so well and happily in his arms. When she told Ivy she was just sweeping the office and making the tea because she didn't want to seem to have a better job than Louis had. She had been acting a whole series of little charades to convince her mother, to job seekers who came in, promising everyone that huge opportunities existed. Was this what it was going to be like from now on? There had been so many years of acting already in Louisa Glass. Assuming an interest in the new lumber racks that Mrs Hanley had got in, individually boxed in the drapery, forcing her face to smile at Lilian Kelly's stream of consciousness about people she didn't know who lived in big houses in the country. Telling the Hickeys that the round steak was good and the rib steak was inclined to be a bit tough, but that naturally if you didn't pay for sirloin then you didn't get sirloin. Acting at home she felt Martin's eyes on her. Knowing that he would ask, as he so often did, 'Are you happy?' 'Are things all right?' And trying not to give him her answer in a

scream. The only time she hadn't acted was with her children And yet she had been able to put on her coat and leave them. Leave them to follow Louis Gray. She had thought it would turn out so differently. A ne'

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new baby~hers and lways wanted. I the life she had aha had happen~ld . She ha ost the , AnO "J-. as dead and ~ouls - i rily ~ack home thought that shew her)are cabin where Sister

;t: e longed to be in the small sf S~be able to talk as she had talked th-, madeleine advice, critical or otherwise, but the is over in there 'vas noSornehow, it she could talk thi "" - 1king nelped, Igs would become clearer. n lrl~t of erous fantasy. imagining telling a n.u But ted to please your fancy man by putting that yo , your children that you were not ,,if the moment you to d belief ~eacI. It would be bey nd anyone's d her face into a position that Lena sighcu ---- -called Dawn, who rnight be acceptable to a younF w.orn' wanted a job as a hotel recept.ionist. ut they take one look 'I've gone for lots of interviews, b . vedtoneat me and say I wouldn't do,' she said in an aggrie rk at the Dawn looked like a tart. Her blonde hai r was da roots, her nails were dirty and her lipstick was a big re Psh across her face. Lena told her. you give the 'You're too glamorous - looking inwrong impression. They want something safe bit? Come change yourappearance a ,iotel. Why don't you on, it's worth it ... I ever taken such The girl listened, f ascinated. No one had an interest in her before~ 'Like what way change myself, -Irs Gray?' Her eyes were bright and eager. . ered Lena looked at her thoughtfully and gave her consid advice. Nothing appeared as cri Everything itioning for a sounded positive. 'Getting a jobIII see it we part. It's like being an actress. Now, Dawn, we can get you the role you want. ade bordering on love as awn gave her a look of gratit' e corning in she left to see, to nails, hair, and outfit, befor I tomorrow for a dress rehearsal. 'This is a terrific agency, she said from the door,,It,s more than an agency really, Itys a place you'd want to come back to.'

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Lena, Jessie and Mr Millar looked at each other delighted. They were on their way.

Louis ran up the stairs excitedly. 'They want me to desk tonight,' he said. 'The desk?' 'Yes. Someone called in sick, they have nobody. So I'm promoted from porter to night manager.' 'Will you have to work all night?' 'Yup. That's what we night managers do. Now, that's not too bad in terms of climbing the ladder, is it?' He was like a glowing handsome puppy dog looking for praise, Lena looked at him as dispassionately as she could. No wonder the hotel saw him as a person who could stand behind a desk welcoming late guests, coping with any problems that might arise. It was amazing that they had let him wear a porter's uniform at all. He was obviously a man who should have higher status. 'You'll be exhausted.' 'Ah, but I'll have tomorrow off,' he said. 'And I thought maybe you might have a diplomatic flu and stay here to keep me company.' 'You'll need to sleep.' 'I'll sleep better if my arms were around you.' 'We'll see.' She smiled at him. It was not the time to tell him she was devastated that he would not be here tonight to discuss with her finally what she must do. And how to give the children the good news. She knew that it was not the time to tell him that she had no intention of taking a day off from her job. Instead she smiled as they found him a shirt that would be up to his new position. 'Will you miss me? Will you be lonely?' 'Yes to the first, no to the second. I'll put my feet up, maybe go out and explore the neighbourhood.' 'And you won't do anything ... you know, you won't make any decisions?'

1460 to ring horn. She knew that. 'Not you and I', she was asking her mind. 'Not until in the world,' Lena said about the night, and make them together.' seemed relieved. And then he was off, his quick light

and after he had come down, running down the stairs 50 seconds for the first time lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. NOW, her own this morning, she was on since she had - and no other calls on her. But not. With time to thin low. The walls of the room, with them, didn't seem right somehow seemed to be closing in on

nk and orange paper, sto and how ~-cir P, of Monte Cri -~r. She remembered the Count h. s inust be oved a little--s d* walls of his cell rr' There was stance „pedltig in her room. had been ttween he table and the windo igarette she knew ---tore. B t. c she had finished j --- - tay there a niinute longer. c could not to think 1,m going to be a dropper ~ don't want YOU t say that. 1 call always do with the ,No, love. Donn doing the football pools. She gave ,)mpany.' ivy had beeweeek. When she won, it was i great deal of time every, buy a big hotel by the 3~ng to change her ~ - . She would she would I'Ve like scaside, install a full-time manager, n the cop ~oc". 'Isn't that right' a lady in a flat of her own ohe cat purred happily Hearthrug~' she asked the old cat. T in anticipation. 1 grizzled head 'They're a great Lena troked his ok though comfort, cats. 1 was very, fond ot parouk at home,

~e was truly the cat that walked by itself Her eyes seemed 'Was that when you were a little girl?' the first time id. It wa! 'No, no. just back home,' Lena sal y had noticed. she had let down the guard - She realised that 'v Ivy said nothing jut busied herself making the tea. There was no need to explain. Lena felt the same case that she felt ' cottage, though two places more In Sister Madeleine's different would be hard to find.

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Sister Madeleine on this winter night would be sittjr~, her re, speakingwith some neofl_,jughG1asssciti!.,,i, It might be Rita planning her future; it might be Pa~d4 the man i who had run a bar for thirEy-seven years withol ever having a drink in it. Perhaps it was Kathleen Sulh% the mo irnful widow who ran the garage and seemed 11 despair over every aspect of it, including her two stra i ppmg, sons. And there would be some animal sitting on a sacki fox, a dog, a turkey that had been saved from beconiq Christmas Dinner because it had the good luck to wandj~ to the hermi house. And there would be no questioning, no trying to Mai the indefensible. As it was here in Earl's Court in the busy room whm there was hardly a square inch of the wallpaper showin& The wall was covered with shelves of knick -a- A there were pictures of outings long ago. A big mirror

was almost useless as a looking glass since so many letters and postcards had been wedged into its frame. There were vases of coloured glass, gnomes, little egg cups and souvenir ashtrays. And yet the place had the same feel. A place where you could be yourself. And where no one would demand any explanation that you might not be ready to give. Very simply, as if it had been intended, Lena Gray began to tell Ivy Brown the story. The tea was poured, the packet of biscuits opened. And when it got to the bit about Sunday, the discovery of the newspaper, the phone call home, Ivy stood up and without a word produced two small glasses and a bottle of brandy. Lena opened her handbag and showed the cutting. At no stage did Ivy's small quizzical face look anything but sympathetic. Ivy registered no shock, no disbelief, not even as she smoothed out the newspaper page and read of the death that had distressed everyone so much. Ivy seemed to take it all in, and to realise the enormity without resorting to panic. Sister Madeleine never reached out and touched Ivy.

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... warmth and support without the clasp of the Brown was the same. She stood across at the end of her sitting room and leaned against the chest of drawers that held all her records. ---A%Vers t

Her arms were crossed. She looked like the kind of ...ure you would see in a newspaper to illustrate the ideal
British housewife. What that was needed was to have her hair floral pinny was tied tightly around her shoulders. Her smile listened to the ...nd ...irame, her face set in a grim line and ...c ...unfo ...ding. The waves of solidarity and support were ...t ...t ...t ...ar If she had held a weeping Lena close to her breast, Sister Madeleine would have radiated more concern. 'Well, love,' she said after a long pause. 'You've made up your mind, haven't you?' 'No.' Lena was surprised. She had never been so much at
...ea. 'You have, Lena.' Ivy was very sure. 'Why do you say that? What have I decided to do?' 'You're not going to phone them. love. That's it, isn't it? You're not going to do a thing. You're going to let them ...ou ...ink you're dead.' They talked for what must have been hours. Lena told of how Louis had loved her and left her. How he had come back. How this was the life she had dreamed of. She painted a picture of Martin McMahon that she hoped was

fair. Until Sunday she would have spoken with admiration and deep affection. 'I --ere would have , been guilt, even though she had kept her part of the b g to the letter. But the letter was it. that she ever had for His reaction had killed any feeling. . ~i . The man was a monster, a victim of small town ectability. They went through it bit by bit, 1i eshehad dOrple with Louis. The possibility of the letter not getting to ; , I I 'un- The eventual knowledge that this must not be a reasonable thing to suppose. But with Ivy it was not a strain to talk. She didn't have to lea' upsetting her at every turn. And in the end Ivy was as urishaken as she had been at the outset.

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Louis Gray was the love of Lena's life. She had lla~ for him for thirteen years, and now they were to h " get er,11, and Lena both knew that nothing would be do,,,6 would *eopardise this. 'But my children?' Lena's voice was shaky. It as aZ, she knew that tears were not far away, 'What can you give them by going back?' Ivy asked.Th, silence between them was not a hostile one, Lena trieduo think. She could hold them, and stroke them. But t4 would be taking, not giving. She might shame thern. Aq then she would leave them again anyway. 'Why do you have to leave them twice?' Ivy asked. 'Wasn't once ha~ enough?' 'If they drag the lake and don't find a body, they'll know I'm not dead. They'll start looking.' As she spoke, Lera knew she had begun to make up her mind. She was, in faa only hunting for flaws or danger areas in the plan. 'You said it was a deep lake.' 'Yes, yes.' 'So there may well have been people who drowned there and were never found.' 'Yes, that's true.' 'You love him, Lena. Let him know you're not go14 back to your other life. Let him be very sure. He doesn't want you wavering or dithering.' 'He left me to waver and dither for half a lifetime.' 'Yes. But you forgave him. You ran off with him. Don" end up losing them all.' 'Maybe I only ran after a dream.' 'It seems substantial enough. Don't lose him, Leril. There'll be too many waiting to catch him if you let him 0 from your grasp.' She seemed to speak with gre" authority. 'Do you know all this because you did iff 'No, love. I know it because I didn't do it.' Lena look~ at her blankly. 'Ernest, in the pub. He may not be a

looker like your Louis is, but he's the man I loved, and still do-' 'Ernest?
That we met on Friday?'

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t that I've met every Friday for years now. t him on Fridays?' 'Why do YOU
Me' ,5,Caus, it,s what makes the week have a bit of purpose t,1T me, a,nd
because his cow of a wife goes to her mother on
ndaYs, ?I

'And what happened.'t brave enough.' Again the 1 hadn't the guts- I
wasnindy glasses. 'I 1,nce was an easy one. Ivy refilled their br. ,,orked in
the pub with h M. 1 d just started when the war broke out. Ron, that's my
husband, he was called up. Anyway, it was a good time then. it sounds silly
to say we all enjoyed the war, but you know what I mean. Folk were ~ ery
friendly - you didn't know whether anyone would be here next week. it
made for a lot of s hortcuts. I might never have got to kno.. --nesti it hadn't
been for the time. You see, there were air raid warnings, and we went down
to shelters, and we all listened to the radio in the pub. it was very close, like
people being wrecked together after a ship
goes down.' memory of it all. 'He had two children Ivy smiled at
theispecting things and Charlotte was all eyes of course, st before they even
began. And there was lots of chat about our brave boys fighting at the front
and the tarts of w* -s
having a great time running around. Everyone got the drift of it; it made
things very unpleasant.' 'And did you love Ron at all?' 'No. Not like I knew
love when I met Ernest. You see, girls just got married then. And I wasn't a
raving beauty, as You can see. I didn't get many offers. I was glad to take
Ron. I was twenty-nine, nearly thirty, v~ I.e.. .. - - ed. He was ten years
older. He wanted everything just so. He hked a nice clean house, a good
meal on the table. He didn't ever want to go out. When we didn't have
children he didn't seem all that put out. I think he thought they'd mess up
the house. I went and got myself tested and all, but he wouldn't. I said we
might adopt and he said he wouldn't raise another man's son.' '(h IVY, I'm
so sorry.'

'Yes. Well, it was no worse than a lot of people had. Afrom what you say people in your Lough Glass put up whatever hand they were dealt too.'

'Absolutely. All of them except me.' 'Well, I had your chance and didn't take it. That's why know what I'm talking about.' 'Ernest?' Lena asked. 'Yes. He said we should go off together. But I wu guilty. I was dead guilty. There I was, my husband out fighting for his country. Ernest with a wife and family, I was afraid. Afraid he'd regret it, that I wouldn't be wornag enough for him. Afraid that Ron would have a breakdownt I didn't go, you see.' 'And what happened in the pub?' 'The pub. Yes. There was more action there than there was out at the Front, I tell you. Charlotte seemed to knov all about it by radar. She knew when he had asked me top with him, and when I said no. She picked her time perfectly. She said that she'd like me to leave and not darken the door again while she was on the premises. I lefi that day.' 'What did you do?' 'I went back to our flat and I cleaned it until it shone. When Ron came home from the war he had less to say than before he went. He was very discontented. The country didn't appreciate the soldiers, he said. There was no pleasing him. And then the lovely Charlotte wrote to him and told him that she thought he ought to know. it drove him over the top. He said I was filth and I was disgust~rlg and he didn't want to know. There's a nice depressing story for you, isn't it love?' 'What are you telling me?' 'I'm telling you I have my Friday nights.' 'And Ron?' 'He left. It was strange really. He Just said he wanted to hear no more about it. He moved out that very week, the week he heard from Charlotte.' 'And did you want him to stay?'

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,At the time I suppose I did. I was frightened. I had no I had nothing to show for my life. But of course he , 'Inc, he hated me, and I didn't even know him. I ,ad to go, s flat. It was as different to the place we ,noved here to thi u could imagine. I cleaned the house, ,,,d together as yo jn6 I did cleaning in other houses. I got the money together and when the house went on the market I got a mortgage and bought it.'

'Wasn't that wonderful)' Lena's eyes shone with

Amiration. ,cold comfort as they say. Believe me, Lena, very cold.
When I think of what I could have had.' 'And did you think ... will she ...
supposeshe.. 'It's too late, love. I made my decision. I let go of my ~hance.'
There was a silence. 'I know what you're telling me,' Lena said eventually.
'You have him, you love him you've always loved him
I If you ring them at home, you'll have lost everything.' 'So I have to fake
being dead?' 'You never pretended to be dead. You left a letter telling what
you did. You can't be blamed for what they think.' 'Kit and Emmet?' Lena's
face was white. 'This way they'll remember you with love, not hate.' 'I don't
think I can do it.' 'I've seen you look at him. You'll do it,' said Ivy.
Louis was back in high good humour at seven-thirty in the morning. 'So
you're going to take the day off and spoil me~' he asked, head on one side,
looking at her with the half smile she loved so much. 'Better than that,' Lena
said to him. 'I'm going to drag You into bed with me now, and love you to
death, then let You sleep peacefully for the day.' He was about to complain.
But she had already taken off h he liked to see her undress. "You're a very
bossy lady,' he said. She had started to ulbutton his shirt.
er blouse slowly in the way

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~1 ~

He was asleep before she left the flat.

'You always look so bright and cheerful, Mrs Cra3, ' , 14 Mr Millar approvingly. She looked up at him from desk, pleased. She had crept from her bed so as not to wake Louis;j had dressed in the bathroom; she had run along thto, the rush hour crowds on wet streets. Her mind was ta,, at the enormity of allowing her children to think of he C% more as having drowned in the lake beside their homer, s6 had miscarried a child. And yet this man thought she looked bright 4 cheerful. Back in Lough Glass people always thought she loolj~ tired. 'Have you had the flu, Mrs McMahon?' they mio ask in Hi key's the butcher's. 'Do you need a tonicPeter Kelly had boomed so often. 'You look pale, Hein year my love,' Martin must have said a hundred times a

it But here, in the midst of terrible confusion but v th~ man she loved, they all told her she looked blooming atil happy. It must prove something. 'It's a very nice place to work, Mr Millar, and it's greatto be in at the start of such new changes with you and Min Park.' Lena Gray had brightened up their office and their liva, She could see this in their faces and it made her feel betm than ever.

The days passed. Sometimes they flew by, and Len; wondered how it could be time to close, she could har6 remember having reached lunch time.

Other days tin" went so slowly she wondered was the world coming to 11 end and had everything slowed down. She roamed the second-hand shops and auction rooms of London 06 found wonderful wall hangings and Indian bedspreads 10 drape the shabby furniture in the flat. She bought I briefcase, a leather one with brass locks, for Louis. Sh, polished it until it shone.

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* I for a hall porter,' he said f lly really essenna How man times have they asked

h ng days are drawi ng cc Me i 'ju tj 3o night manager. Your porteri

C~Ose- y did, and indeed the ie night desk three times a was working on ~1
 ~co, Lou~s ~ Arid it didn't seem fitting for the guests to meet Ce I Istration
 to appear one they had known in the adrn ni ",roe their bags. went with him
 to see where he on, evening Lena ,orked. ilf I see it,' she said. much better q
 can imagine You . first. It's very hard to explain He hadn't wanted it at e at
 work , you know. I'M hy,'he said. 'I sort of play a rol "'Amy real self reed.
 'Neither am I,' Lena ag ,W he had let her come. I impressed with the)4r
 Williams the manager had beethad dark-haired woman that the ~andsome ,
 Ong you hidden,' ~roduced. 'No wonder he has been kee i Mr Williams
 said. y 'Ah, that's very flattering Lena knew iust how to repl, 5 - all my
 fault. I'm still so of you, Mr Williams, but it'~ rowing herself at his
 unfamiliar with London.' She was th son who didn't rnercy, saying she was
 a country per understand the 'big CitY. Not flirting, that would have been
 cras - s Mr Williams, a It was exactly the right course to take 'I hope You
 large bluff man, became protective and gallant. lued have both taken to the
 place. Louis is a very va employee.' 'Oh, we intend to make a good life
 here, I assure you. London has so much to Offer" -wife and 'I'm surprised
 you can leave this attractive
 work here at night.' wouldn't be my choice, Mr Lena spoke quickly. 'It ork
 his way Williams. But I know that if Louis wants to w ut * his n the deskin
 the day time he has to p In working o I

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hours at the more antisocial end of things as welp -11ev smiled. This was
 not a couple who groaned or cornpj,~ But it was a couple who Intended to
 move upward,. It was not long before Louis Gray was offered a posink on
 the desk as an assistant manager. He was unfaiLil, courteous to those who
 had worked with him as pone, Particularly the head porter, who had been so
 diffic, when he came first. The Christmas lights were going up in London.
 Len forced her mind away from the trains of thought t6 brought her down
 the road to Hickey's to order dt turkey. There would be no decorations
 above McMahan', pharmacy this year. As she had guessed, ivy did not refer
 to the conversa6ca they had had together on the wet Tuesday night when
 Lent had decided against ringing Lough Glass. If Ivy understood how

strange and hard the decision had been she gave no sign, just little gestures of friendship. A pot of homemade jam that someone had given her, a couple of records that she didn't play any more. Lena knew that these were gifts because she had heard Louis say how much he loved 'Singing in the Rain'. Ivy made no mention of Christmas. She must have known it would be a time of tension and drama for the young couple on the second floor. Sometimes Lem wondered about the kind of Christmases Louis had spent during the long years of their separation. But part of the promise and the plan had been that they would not talk about the past. He would not ask about sleeping with her husband. She would not ask him about the times and the people and the places she knew nothing of. It worked very well. They had their own little world. Sometimes he came to Sunday Mass with her, sometimes it was easier when he didn't go with her. Then she could buy the paper and read about what was happening in Lough Glass and the places for fifty miles around it. She read of things bought and sold, of children born, and of people buried.

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On Sunday, 21 December, when she went to the big in Quex Foad Kilburn to pray that God would help her how to make Christmas a good Christmas for herself and with God. She said to herself, Lena made a decision always loved sinners, and showed them that she had her only sin had been to run away with her. Mercy and that if he had a more forgiving eye. then God might see it with I I don't lie,

..I , I don't steal , .so' , Lena said, I don't cheat, husband and wife. I sit front the one big one that we are husbands ~'a I don't blaspheme, say bad things about people, ~),,t miss Mass.' She had no way of knowing that. But then, even if you weren't living in was going on with the death didn't know whether God would forgive sin you Of You had to try to interpret I-Its ,~,ng with the deal either,;--'specially in - it was hard sometimes- 1 'Answers in your heart sneezing. It is ~ I a big strange church with a lot of coughing and was a cold December day. that told Lena went to the kiosk and bought the paper for her of home. She read that her body had been found in the state of death by misadventure had been true. That a very large crowd had attended her funeral returned. And that at the parish church in Lough Glass . Through

her tears she saw that the chief mourners had been the late woman's husband Martin McMahon of the Lough Glass pharmacy, son Emmet John. 'her daughter Mary Katherine and her ~ Their mother was dead and buried now in the churchyard. Someone else's bones had been found. And identified as hers. I ought suddenly and knew somehow, God had Lena t~. acted for her. Perhaps He had answered her prayers. Lena had no decision to make now. Now she could never go home.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Lilian Kelly brought up the subject again. 'Petq,l wish you'd put it more clearly to Martin. Tell him% bring the lot of them here for their Christilz dinner.' 'I suggested it. . 'Ah, you only suggested it ... Tell them it would be t~ right thing to do. And that girl of theirs in the kitchen, m if he's worried about her. She can help Lizzle htrt Lizzie'd be glad of it. They don't want to be sitting lookir~ at each other in that house after all that happened there.' 'Nothing happened there, Lilian,' Peter Kelly said. lit was reading a medical journal as always, and seemed to 91vt little attention to his wife. Lilian appealed to her sister Maura, who had corneto join them for the Christmas holiday. 'Come on, Mam Tell him they can't sit there looking at each other. 'But they're going to have to some time,' Maura sai 'Maybe they should get used to it rather than running away.' Peter looked up, surprised. 'That's what Martin Said himself.' 'Well then.'

In the hotel Dan O'Brien asked Mildred did she think thI should ask the McMahons in for their Christmas dinner'We don't want to be imposing on them.' 'It wouldn't be imposing, it would be a kindness.'f)" didn't relish the thought of yet another empty celebratioli with his wife and son, and little conversation. At least the

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of the McMahons might force some talk around ~inrier table,. oing to have their own kind of a meal, think they re 9 lip suggested. Lake things seem normal,' Phil, 'now, to W itti ng at his table and toA,ould have loved Kit s t wouldn't happen. to serve her, but he knew 1 id Mildred O'Brien. She you are then,' sai arty Helen McMahon, and everyone something suspicious

about her death. here were a lot of people in Lough Glass had ended her own life.

Hanley in the drapery was having severe trouble with

Deirdre. You want to go where on daughte, ~rtstrnas Day)' she. asked visiting graves, you know.' ~out foroa walk, I d n't know. Whos, people who died, marn. rhat's what's done on Christmas for the dear departed.' They go and say prayers d at the moment, Except "You have no dear departe eful., ,,,urself might be heading that way if you're not car 'You're a selfish, unfeeling person.' 'Tell me, who would you I pray for if you went out on Christmas Day - - . just one. yard for Stevie 'Well, I could pray up at the grave Sullivan's father.' there Yo ever liked that 'He's not buried there, he's buried in a madhouse thirty 7iiles away!' Deirdre Hanley,s mother was triumphant. 'Well, for Kit McMahon,s mother.' 'She's barely buried. Come on out of that, Deirdre, you -ant to go out to eet up to no good with someone, and when I find out wl~o it is there'll be trouble I tell you.' dre that there was or no note, t thought she 'Who could get up to no good in this town?' Deir asked with a sigh. ou. is it that young 'You could. And I have MY eye on y fellow, Dan O'Brien's son.horror and revul . 'Philip O'Brien!' There was genuine sion in Deirdre Hanley's voice.

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Mrs Hanley knew she had to look elsewhere suspect.

Sister Madeleine refused invitations for Christmas Day, b~., was said that she had more on her table than most of... people in Lough Glass. They tactfully found out what oi. were bringing so that items would not be duplicated, Rita said she'd just take her a loaf of bread. 'At leat~ know you'll eat that. You'll be giving the plum pudding the gypsies and the slices of turkey to the little fox: whatever you have nowadays.' 'I have a big lame

goose,' said Sister Madeleine. 'Anc would be very undiplomatic of me to feed her something nearly related as a turkey. But you're right, I love t": bread.' 'It'll be very hard above in the house there on Thursdt,, Rita said. 'No harder than any other day.' Sister Madeleine ws surprisingly unsympathetic. 'But you know, thinking back on - other Christins Days . , . ' 'It's better that she's safely buried. It does give people, sort of peace, you know.' 'Would you mind where you were buried yourseli, Sister Madeleine?' 'No, not at all. But then, I'm as odd as two left shoCL You know that.' 'Is there anything I should do, do you think?' 'No, I don't believe in putting on an act. Whatevei going to happen will happen.' 'I wish they'd talk about her.' 'They might at Christmas.'

'Brother Healy! Always good to see you, They tell me 0 the Christmas Crib down at St John's has to be seen to be believed.' Mother Bernard was loftily gracious.

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I Kevin Wall. ,Ail the work of that young criminal

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Apparently ~he hermit gave him gree i nery i ay and all n myster of things. The Lord moves I ious ways,

Mother Bernard.' 'And isn't it a good thing that the Lord directed them ,-here to find the body of poor Helen McMahon in time to have her buried in Holy Ground before Christmas?' The ,un spoke as if it were another tiresome problem that God had conveniently tidied up and got out of the way before the Christmas season. But Brother Healy knew what she meant. 'Lord have mercy on her. It was indeed,' he said. Teachers hear mthan they are meant to, and he had in the School yard, speculation, mainly , There was some complicated story that young Wall had taken out the McMahons' boat and that this meant that Emmet's mother had not drowned from it. And then there were runiours that she might have been having a romance with one of the gypsies. Maybe she had run away with him. Or they were hiding her in their caravans. Nothing you'd want to burden Scan O'Connor with up at the Garda Station, but all the same, it was great when that body had been found. Mothier Bernard was right, it

had Mahon and finish her troubled life as if it should be finished, with hymns being sung and Father Baily accompanying the coffin to the churchyard.

'What does Emmet think about Santa Claus?' Clio asked on Christmas Eve. 'He thinks like we all think.' 'No, I mean, would he be expecting something ... Your father mightn't remember.' 'It was always Mam that did it.' Kit was defensive in the recall of her mother's good deeds. 'Oh!' Clio was surprised. 'It's all right. He knows, but I'll do it for him anyway. Something beside the chimney.'

heard a lot of

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1 '

'And who'll do it for you?' 'Dad might leave me some soap from the chemist, s., sounded doubtful. There were so many things that Mother used to do, things that everyone took for granted. At Christmas time, she used to fill the house with holly boughs; Father used to laugh and say it was like living in a forest. He would never say that again. Mother used to go to town and buy preserves ages before Christmas and there was never a trace of them around the house. Kit still didn't know how she had got the bicycles home with her the year of the bikes, or how she had hidden the record player last year. Was it only last year when everything had been all right? And Mother knew the right kind of clothes to get Rita - always something brand new in a box from the big town. Kit and Father didn't even know what size Rita was and couldn't go looking or measuring or anything. Mother always had boxes of crackers stored somewhere, and long paper chains that criss-crossed the kitchen. Kit wondered should she look for them. They weren't in the kitchen cupboards. Perhaps they were in Mother's room, her little secret surprise. But they were in mourning. Maybe they wouldn't have a Christmas tree even. They would have to have a crib, with the straw in it. That hadn't to do with celebrating, that had to do with welcoming baby Jesus. Kit sighed with the weary burden of it all. Clio thought it was still about the Christmas stockings, 'We could do them for you, you know, my mother and father could. They'd be glad to do something,' Clio said, her eyes full of tears. Kit shook her head. 'No, I'll manage it, thanks very much all the same. The

Santa Claus bit isn't the worst bit, let me tell you.' 'What is the worst bit?' 'She won't know how I turn out. She'll never know-' 'She'll know from heaven.' 'Yes,' Kit said. The silence lay between them. DesPlte

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forting words that Father Baily had intoned over c corn ^Offin, Kit knew that her mother had not been met by , he ' d let into paradise. She had committed the angels anh'ch there is no forgiveness.

sin against Hope) for w 1 Kit's inother was in Hell.

'Christmas Eve c.an be hell on earth,' ivy said to Lena. 'Everyone running round doing their last-minute if Christmas comes on people by surprise, shopping. it's as 1 it was on its way. I as if they hadn't known for weeks i n't know why 'We work until lunchtime, though I do Nobody wants to come to look for a job on Christmas

Eve.' Millar and Jessie Park have nowhere to 'Probably Mr go,'Ivy said shrewdly. 'I'm sure you're right.' Lena realised that this was indeed true. Some people's lives just revolved around their work. In the hotel where Louis worked they stayed open for Christmas mainly because the staff had nowhere else to go. Mr Williams had told them there would be a big staff meal at four o'clock. He would be honoured if Lena would join [hem. It had indeed been an answer to all her problems. There would be no false re-creating of a Christmas scene ior the two of them. The flat had been nicely decorated but t would make things much easier for herif they had a duty 61 net o attend. 'And what will you do for the day?' Lena looked into Ivy's face as she spoke and she knew the other woman was lying, 'Oh, don't let me begin. I have to go here, there and everywhere. I'm like a doctor on Christmas Day . . . too ,nany obligations from the past.' Lena nodded sympathetically. It was better that way.

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'Isn't this a barbarous country that they don't have pubs on Christmas Day?' Peter Kelly said to Kit' they walked home from Mass. 'Aren't you the one who's always saying it's the loss of pubs that has us in the state we're in, as a nation?' 'Ah yes, but that's a different argument entirely.' 'Would you like to come in then and have something sociable?' Kit thought her father looked weary of having people sympathise all over taken its toll. Dr Kelly seemed to sense this too. 'Not at all. Enough of chat, go back to the family.' 'Yes.' The word hung there, empty and sad.

They took off their coats and blew on their fingers. 'That smells very nice, Rita.' 'Thank you, sir.' They sat down together, the four of them, as they had done since Helen had left that day two months before Martin sat in the seat that Helen had used, and Kit had moved to her father's place. Emmet had moved upstairs and Rita sat in the place that Emmet used to have. When Helen McMahon had been alive they still ate in the kitchen, but Rita had taken her meal at the end of the table, or sometimes she had just served and eaten her own meal later. It might appear that the departure of the mistress had somehow equalised things more, had done away with the class distinctions, but this was not Mother's fault, and Kit wanted that known, defined in some way. 'You could always have had your Christmas dinner with us Rita, do you know that? I mean, it was just that you'd be standing up making gravy and everything.' 'Of course I know that,' Rita said. 'Rita doesn't need to be told such a thing.' Her father sounded sharp. 'But Daddy, in a way people have to say things. Sister' Madeleine says that we don't often say the most important things, we say little silly ones.'

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'To, for her, true for her,' Father nodded. He looked old Kit thought. He nodded like an old man would at things. They were silent for a while after and neither of them knew what to say. 'It, as if non lly. will I serve it, sir, dish it up for Father, the eventua

for us all, you - - * that. That would be fine.' Father's face, yes please, R'dark hollows under his look~ wretched; he had great menibering, just not have

slept at all last night, re ,,5, lieembered all the Christmas Eyes 'i . ke they had all reffl ~efore, when there was so much to do. This one had ,eenied unbearably long. ,Well,,we have grapefruit first,' Rita said. 'The mistress ,,aught nie to cut it with a)agged edge you see, so that it . or something ... and to put a ,ooks a bit like an ornament ided into four like a ,,lac~ cherry 0,1 top of each one div d a bit of angelica pretending to be the stein tlower ' . . an istress said it didn't hurt to make of the flower. The rn entation is what.she called * it.' things look nice ... Pres grapefruit, trying to think of They all studied the. something to say about it.'No one else in Lough There was a lump in Kit's throat. Glass or anywhere else would be having anything as nice as

this,'she said in a voice that sounded unnatural in her own cars. it was as if she were reading lines from a play. right, her father said. 'Nobody 'Oh, that's right, that's id so else would have a dinner like this, we always sa He didn't quite finish the sentence because it was obvious that he realised that nobody else was having a dinner under such circumstances. Everywhere else behind the closed curtains of Lough Glass people were eating and drinking? they were planning an afternoon laughing or arguing or sleeping in front of the fire. . They weren't sitting b bolt of agrapefruitso Itter upright trying to swallow sections it stuck on their tongues and made their eyes water again. And when the turkey came to the table they all looked away from Father's face. Mother used to say that it was well he had chosen to be a chemist and not a surgeon or the

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population here would have been wiped out. Mother h,, taught herself to carve, and did it deftly. Rita had not like, to usurp her position. 'Isn't this grand?' Father said with a death head grin or, his face trying to cheer them up. 'This is the grandes: turkey we ever had.' They said that every year too, an6 talked about the Hickey family going to the turkey market five miles away and picking the best, the plumpest a,~ youngest birds. There was a silence. 'Isn't it gran~ Emmet?' Poor Father was waving the carving knife, trying to smile and spread cheer. He didn't realise he looked like a butcherous murderer in a film, or in one of the mobile theatres that came to the town every two years. Emmet looked at him mutely. 'Say something,

lad. Your mother wouldn't want you to be moping there and all of you sitting in silence; she'd like there to be a bit of a chat. It's Christmas Day, and we're all here and you have the memory of a great mother to keep with you for the rest of your lives. Isn't that grand?' Emmet looked at his father's red face, 'It's not grand at all, Daddy,' he said. 'It's ttt-ttt-errible.' His stutter was as bad as it had ever been before. 'We have to pretend that things are all right, Emmet son,' he said. 'Don't we, Kit? Don't we, Rita?' They looked at him wordlessly. Then Kit said, 'Mother wouldn't pretend. I don't think she'd have said things were grand if they weren't.' They could hear the clock on the landing ticking. In other houses people would barely hear a word anyone else was saying, but in this house they could hear the purring of the old cat, the ticking of a clock and the gurgling sounds Of saucepans still simmering on the Aga cooker beside them, Father's face was grim, grey and grim. Kit looked at him in anguish., Father must still be turning in his bed at night wondering why Mother had left that night and got drowned. For the hundredth time she wondered had she done the right thing in burning that letter. And yet again she told

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that she had. Think of what would have happened ,ther's body had been found if her daughter had ,hen 1`110 vay she had? And Father must have heard,

V, ,ot acted in the v too th tory that fool KevinWall had told about how he t e s too he McMahon boat out on the night that Mother had

drowwc if anyone would believe Kevin Wall even if he d. As i told you today was Christmas Day. Father was speaking again.,I,m going to start by telling the truth just like your mother did . . .' His voice broke. 'And the truth is that it'snot all right,'he saidthroughhis tears.'It's terrible. I miss her so much I can't be comforted by the thought of seeing her in heaven later on. I'm so lonely for her , ..'His shoulders heaved. The mood changed. Kit and) and put their arms around him. Emmet left their places to g(wded together for what seemed a lon.g time. Rita sat e the kitchen ~heeyrcprolace. She was like the background. Like curtains, like old Farouk asleep on the stool beside the Aga. Like the grey wet rain outside. And then they stopped, and it was as if a thunderstorm had cleared the air. They spoke with lighter

voices; the tightrope of pretence had been taken away. Wasn't it extraordinary that Sister Madeleine had more or less ioretold to her that thiould happen? is W Into the midst of this came a sharp shrill sound. it was the telephone ringing. On Christmas Day, a day when nobody made any calls except for an emergency.

In the Dryden Hotel they made a great effort to have a cheerful Christmas for the staff. A lot of them had been there a long time. M ost had weathered the war years with loyalty and, as James Williams knew, there were many I

who had no real homes to go to. t up in the hall to A Christmas tree that had been se establish a festive mood for guests was now in the dining ~Oorn, and everyone had a role, including spouses. Lena's job was to do place cards.

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Louis gave her the list. 'They want artistic wr,'tin,,,,, explained. 'It's a mad idea, but you did volunteer. 'No, I think it's a good idea. It'll be a souvenir c~ .. day,' she said. She asked him to bring her a sheaf of Dr.,',~ Hotel notepaper, so that she could stick the name on tc,,,'. each card. 'It's more like an invitation then,' she said, painstakingly wrote out the names. Barry Jones, Anton, Bari, Michael Kelly, Gladys Wood . . . Each one great attention and little holly leaves and berries drawR an order. At the start they were shy, awkward to be allowed to s.. down at the tables instead of serving at them or sweepin. up under them. But James Williams kept circulating th: bowl of punch and soon the inhibitions went. By the tim: they were carving the turkey some of them had ahead, pulled the Christmas crackers which were meant for & plum pudding stage. There was a roar of conversation from 'I the twenty-nine strangely assorted people sitting around the table. Lena slipped away to the ladies' room and just beside the door she saw the little booth for the telephone. It was fivethirty in the afternoon. This time last year she had been down by the lake with the children, walking off the ~ffwl of the dinner. That's what she would have called it, but escaping the stifling walls of the house is what it would have been. Martin had looked at her eagerly, but she had advised him to have a little sleep by the fire. At the time she had felt guilty denying her husband the simple pleasure of I walk

with his own wife on Christmas Day. Now she felt no pity, only rage with the man she W begged to play fair. If it had not been for Martin she could have spoken to Kit and to Emmet this Christmas, sent them presents, told them that she loved them, planned for them to come and see her at Easter. Anger rose in her throat. She could feel it. Before she realised what she was doing she was in the phone box and dialling the operator. She gave the number and waited. , The operator came back. 'It appears that Lough Glass' 168

smjlylace~ caller, with a manual exchange. Unless the the nature of an emergency it cannot be put CA is in . ias Day.' through on Christn ' she said in a tight voice. ,It I . s an emergency, Y ringing as She heard the clicks and the sounds, the long ,he phone rang in the post o'fice on the corner of Lakeview Road and the main street. it seemed to ring endlessly.. Lena rs Hanley next door hadn't come in and

wondered that M answered it. She was as nosy as anyone in the town. Surely she wondered who could be ringing for what emergency. But eventually the slow feet of Mona Fitz must have moved themselves to the phone. Lena heard her halting voice and the sense of outrage that she had been woken from her sleep. The number of the house was given. 'It's only emergency calls on Christmas Day,' Mona said. Lena clenched her fists with impatience. What trouble was it to the stupid woman just to plug the bloody piece of equipment into one of the row of holes in front of her. She could have it done and finished with by the time she went into all this tiresome explanation and cross questioning. 'That's what the caller says; it is an emergency.' 'Very well, so.' Lena could imagine her putting on her glasses to direct the call a few yards down the street. , 'Hello,' he sa A few rings and she heard Martin reply. id, his voice hesitant and doubtful. Did he know that she would ring on Christmas Day) That he couldn't keep her from her children for ever just by pretending she was dead. Was he frightened now, and in an agony wondering how he was going to explain the whole terrible mess that he had created? 'Hello,' Martin said again. 'Who's that?' The whole terrible mess - it could be undone in a moment. But so would Lena~s life. The life that had only just begun. She said nothing and clicked the bar in the cradle that held the receiver. She

could hear the operator in London saying 'Are You there, caller) Your number has been reached . - .'

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She could hear Mona Fitz saying, 'What kind of emergency is this? If there's no one on the line?' She heard Martin saying 'Hello. Hello. Who is it?', Then Mona spoke to Martin. 'I wouldn't have let it happen for the world, Martin, but it's a man from England, from London. They said it was an emergency.' 'A man ... ?' Martin sounded startled, but not guilty, He didn't sound like a man who was trying to hush everything up. But then she didn't know him at all. 'No, Martin. I think I was only speaking to the operator ... Hold on till I see if he's still there.' Lena listened, She heard Martin and Mona and the operator discuss the fact that someone had definitely phoned that number. 'It's all right, I have the number the caller was phoning from. I'll get them back,' he said. She hung up, shaking from head to toe. Why had she done anything so stupid? Now they would call the hotel, and ask who had phoned Lough Glass in Ireland. Louis would be furious. The coins in her hand were hot and sweaty. Then, as she knew it would, the phone rang. She lifted the receiver at the first sound. 'Were you trying to call Lough Glass in the Irish Republic?' 'No,' Lena said, she tried to put a Cockney accent into her voice. 'But someone from that number was calling Lough Glass . . . ' 'No, I said I was calling Loughrea . . . ' she said. The operator got back to the others. 'It was the wrong place,' he said. 'I don't know how you got mixed up with Lough Glass and Loughrea,' Mona grumbled. 'That's all right then,' said Martin. 'Caller, do you want to give me the Loughrea number then?' The operator was a man who had to work 00 Christmas Day and did not seem to be enjoying it. Lena said nothing. In the background she heard her daughter asking who was on the phone.

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Nothing Kit. It's someone trying to phone couldn't hear what Kit said, but whatever it was 'That's a roundabout,' Martin laughed. Had she said, to do it, (Caller), The operator was impatient now. 'It's too late,' she said, 'Listen, I've changed my mind. It has to be a million,' said the young man.

~TSo 1~11 hang up now.' Lena was anxious that there could be no further checking on the number.
 .y,, Madam.' 'ot going to call back?' She wanted to 'And you are n, nake sure it was safe to leave the booth ,No, Madam. Goodbye, Madam.' She stood in the box ~.eling dizzy. She hadn't been buried a week and her .aughter was already able to laugh about things. She took ~eep breaths until she had the strength to walk back to the :est ivities. 'Are you all right?' it was James Williams who asked the ,uestion. 'You've been gone a long time.' 'I'm fine . . . Did I miss anything?' she asked. Louis was the centre of a laughing group. Gladys Wood, ,,hose name she had carefully written out, had a paper hat a rakish angle and her arm around Louis' neck. 'Read my fortune to me again,' she shouted happily. 'It says you will meet a dark handsome man,' Louis read .bediently from the little piece of paper that Gladys had ound in her Christmas cracker. 'I've met him,' screamed Gladys. 'Oh dear,' whispered James Williams. His benevolent ,,nile of the owner glad to see the staff enjoying themselves was a little strained.azed at her own 'A little over-excited.' Lena was am Power of speech. She had thought that after the incident on the telephone she might not be able to talk at all. 'For 364 days a year that woman works in the still room, quiet as a mouse. Christmas, regular as clockwork, she gets drunk. And spends the rest of the year apologising for it.' 'Will she get sick, do you think?' Lena asked, in a
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detached professional way, as if she were asking th, t~ a train. 'Very probably, I fear.' 'Do you th) r out, ink someone should take he J44 case?' Lena was looking at Louis' Jacket. It had beei~ Christmas present to him, and had cost a lot of mo,,ey. didn't want to see it ruined. 'Yes, I wonder could I prevail on you . 'Well, I don't think I am exactly the person Who sho~ approach her. After all, it is my husband she is m,,a. handling. Perhaps it might be thought I had a spe~ interest in seeing her escorted from the room.' 'You are truly wonderful, Mrs Gray,' he s his fingers for Eric the head porter. 'Lena,'she corrected him. 'Lena,'he smiled, and ordered Eric to get one of theoi to march M*ss Wood out to the ladies' room and to sta with

her. Right now. Louis ran a finger around his collar and smiled at this ruefully. He could have escaped earlier, Lena thought with a touch of annoyance. But then, women always went for Louis,~ was used to that. It made him smile, and she had to remember to smile about it too.

'What are you going to make as a New Year resolution~! Clio was eager to know. 'I haven't thought, what with everything.' Clio had thought. 'I'm going to get good-looking, reP good-looking, mind.' 'But you are good-looking, aren't you?' 'No I'm not. I'm like a picture in a children's book-11il Dish Ran Away With The Spoon,' Clio said tragically. Kit giggled. 'Which are you, the dish or the spoon?' 'I'm like both of them.' 'Oh, don't be silly, Clio, you can't be like both. On" thin, one's fat.'

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- ns, no character both have awful dull expressions I ijCeS J1KC Lh-10011- character?' a how arv , Ou going to get c beaut to read books and look at what vM going like.' get themselves up , We haven't any money for .00 you mean Clothes

ng on.' No. I s t their fares, their Way Of 901 wed to wear make-up.'1,11 look re not alto fault, That's my resolution ,S,,p finding ashin when I'm thirteen. S.re,g~e good-looking. Who's stopping you are, Kit, You're always SO ... I don't know, so are you going to learn? Kit was contrite- 1Vhat Ways \javbe I could learn.them too.') your eyelashes. it makes I kr1ow about putting vaseline 01 - our cheeks a bit to ~,,em grow And I think we sh(ulcl suck in ,e is . interesting shapes in our faces,' said Clio, S. 'hey puckered their faces in and laughed at the result rhere must be more to it than that,' Kit said. ~we,ll learn.' Clio was determined. 'it looks as if we're going to kiss someone. 'We should practise that, too.' 'On who, for heaven's sakeF 'On anyone who turns UP. 'You can't be serious. else will we know * f we're doing it 'Of course I am. How r ghO' Like who?' Kit was practical. ays ogling ,you could ~,"ss Philip (,jjrien; he's a1w you.. " ,And who would you kiss~' chly 'Stevie Sullivan, maybe. lio smiled Hanley? Kit w" 'But isn't he always kissing Deirdre surprised that Clio should choose someone so busy 'She's old. She'll 90 off in looks. Men often turn to Younger women.'

'She's only sixteen.' 'Yes, well. In 1953 she'll be seventeen and she'll go and on, just getting older.' 'Do you like Stevie?' 'No. But he's good-looking.' 'And is Philip O'Brien good-looking?' 'No, but he's keen on you.' Clio had the world sorted out,,

1

There was snow in January. Anna Kelly threw a snowball at Emmet McMahon. In the time-honoured ritual she scooped a handful of snow and pushed it down her neck and, she screamed with excitement. He laughed too. 'Are you over it now?' Anna asked. 'Over it?' 'Your mammy being dead?' 'No, I'm not over it. I've sort of got used to it, I suppose.' 'Can I play with you and Kevin Wall?' she asked, 'No, Anna. I'm sorry, but you're a girl.' 'But that's not fair.' 'It's the way it is.' Emmet was philosophical. 'Kit and Clio won't let me play with them, they're girls.' 'But they're old girls.' 'Are they horrible to you like they are to me?' Anna hoped Emmet was a victim too. 'No, they're not horrible at all.' 'I wish I was really really old. Like twenty. Then I'd know what to do.' 'What would you do?' Emmet was interested. Anna was a funny little thing in her scarlet coat and pointed hood and red excited face. 'I'd come back here and take Clio and Kit out on the lake and hold them both under the water and drown them,' she said triumphantly. Then she remembered. 'Oh Emmet,' she said. Emmet said nothing 'Emmet, I'm so sorry.' so He was walking away. Anna ran after him. 'Fni stupid. That's why nobody will play with me. I just want you to know I forgot. That's all. I just forgot.'

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1. It was M,V mother and I didn't turn,d.yel, well I forget' and ~"~fje began to stammer at the words t ing down her face. , ~ h,r,. Anna had tears runnI his garage. nt Stevie Sullivan came out 0 .~t that niornemet. She's only a baby. Don't

.4~ , leave her alone, EM ~ e~, I __,ke her cry- s heel and went into his house. Emmet turned on his . ed face to Stevie- 'I have no ,kna tUTned her tear-stain

.~iendsi' she said. Stevi looking idly down ,yeah, that's a problem,' sai .1e, case he might catch ,,ie road towards Hanley's drapery in usiastic friend Deirdre taking a little stroll ,,,ht of his entb -covered street of Lough Glass with plans ,owrithe snow :or another meeting.

~j,nes Williams took a personal interest in training Louis

'Gray to be the person that most customers met first when Dryden. He made sure that the ~hev arrived at the well dressed and smartly turned ,nandsome Irishman was At. I , I can get my shirts done in the hotel laundry,' Lou s told Lena proudly ' 'That'll save you washing. and ironing. , d It certainl~ saved time and space. But in a way she ha. d -nloyed doing it for him. it was part of playing husban and wife. Back in Lough Glass she had never done. the ironing. Rita had done it as a matter of course. sometimes now she wondered how bad she spent her days in a home where she had no role. and more successes. And Louis told of more ime where people just wanted This was a place and a t a the ability to get on Proof that you could do a job and h d r-ything. There was with others. The war had changed eve no need for written certificates and corning up through some traditional profession. rating when he said Lena knew that Louis was not exaggethat being on that desk was being at the heart of the whole

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hotel. Eve one in the D den had to consult some aspect of the way the place ran. The housekeeper,, the chambermaids checked about the imes that different rooms should be made up. He would talk to j chef about the possibility of placing a copy of the menu ti a stand in the hall. This way, when visitors were going, they might be persuaded to come back again for 6A lunch. It was Louis who suggested that the porters wear nul badges. 'I know who I am, thank you,' said Eric, the iie~ porter, who had always regretted having allowed Loulsto be taken on and to rise so far above him. Louis never acknowledged any resentment. Perhaps didn't even see it. 'Of course you do, Eric. And so do t6 regulars. But what about th one-off Americans? Theyt want to know the name of the good guy who welcorne4

them to the Dryden.' Eric saw the reason for it, but did not notice any
 increw in his tips. In fact, most of the dollars that changed ban& went
 towards Louis Gray. Americans did appreciate the personal service, the way
 he remembered their names, how he could give them good suggestions of
 where to go ~ how to spend the holidays. Nobody ever called Louis a
 manager; he was Mr Gray on the desk. People were urged to consult him
 On everything and Louis never let them down. 'I'd never get another job
 nearly as good as this. I must make myself as indispensable as I can possibly
 be here,' DC said, and Lena knew he was right. Not even the most glowing
 reference would give Louis an entrée to any similar position at another
 hotel. He had no written qualifications, but he would always get by on
 charm. Oil" installed. Her mind went sometimes to his previous lives in
 Spain and in Greece. Even back in the early days in Dublin travelling
 salesman, which was how she had first met he was never impatient with
 people or seeming anxious to

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out of their company but always restless to do more or whatever was
 going, That was in and so alive with more out and in. He looked that there (ture in
 one moment, extraordinary "I", *le. Little by
 lot of this due to Lew boy ITTU at the front desk.

was added, small increased and so did his
 room behind the boxes, broken month his wages
 and a small store along by She had seen
 'S I transformed. All the old boys out- In their place ~ Little the place was -rs
 were moved 'haZg to show too much wear in ,),),,cles and legless ~ , e old
 tables beginning, found an umbrella - iron reception rooms- Louisly stand.
 ~Carooms of brass coat hooks on a mahogany ~[and arid a row of in the
 crowded area No longer did he have to put his coat ~d yet no one could
 pushed. And where staff garments were, himself no lordly airs. He was ,
 mention it. He was giving the place tidier,
 Used room. Making only taking over a disu, ,n fact. With pleasure that people
 who were senior Lou' is noted 7otel took him very seriously, but he him in
 status It, the he moved cautiously, that room and close the door, 'I can't)ust
 go in there told to Lena. how when I,m meant to be on the desk,' he said ,

someone w 'Have you any friend In maintenance, vy)s door. n the top of it? Like I Then you a - '--- - urtain. ive you could even have a cult-, ide it would gi could see when you were wanted , outs you the option of being in or out. And it worked. if he not'ced the expansion st tenden James Williams, e desk, must have approved of tes of the new clerk on th no One entered Louis them because nothing was said. And Gray's territory without knocking. tronger. Lena was 'Tiie month. F-SS- - eirlovegrew" Inottalkabout. sure of that. There was nothing they co' They spoke of her children and how she had done the best thing for them. He praised her for her courage.'YOU , re like a heroine, a real-life heroine,' he would tell her. And he rneant it. As he stroked her hair and took her face in his

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hands he said she was like a lioness, and there was Qt~ she could not do. Sometimes Lena wondered whether there Migh, other people in London living new lives like she as' Perhaps there were hundreds of thousands of them, people who left one way of living and took up another. It was,,t,, hard as it sounded. After all, here she was with a new husband - In the eyes of the world anyway - a new home,, new job, a new look. Few people from Lough Glass would recognise the tailored, trim figure hastening through the streets of London as Helen McMahon, wife of Martin the cheerful local chemist. If they saw her bending over files and encouraging young applicants for jobs in large companies they would be amazed. Mrs McMahon, so private a person, someone who didn't engage in long chats, yet here she was urging these girls to make the best of themselves, telling them the sky was the limit, begging them to take more night classes, increase their speeds, improve their image. How would Mrs McMahon of Lough Glass know such things and get people to believe her? When she looked back on her life there, thirteen years of living in the small community by the lake, Lena realised that there was so much she could have done. She could have suggested that she work with Mrs Hanley and brighten uP her dowdy shop, get in the kind of clothes that the women of Lough Glass would have enjoyed wearing, colourftil garments for the children; she would have suggested training one of the Hanley daughters as a dressmaker so that alterations could be done on the premises. Or Mildred

O'Brien in the hotel? Look at all the things she could have done to help the Central Hotel out of the last century, things that she was doing now with Louis for the Dryden. If she had persuaded Martin to let her work in the pharmacy, she could have done the kind of windows and displays she was doing here in an employment agency where there was so little scope. Think what she might have done if she had all those soaps and cosmetics to work on,

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she could have lined the windows with greenery and decorated them with fancy materials and papers so that no one would have resisted coming to see. But? Martin wouldn't hear of it. No wife of mine, she would have to go to work. He used to say it with his face as if by standing alone hour after hour in pride, bursting with the key place he was somehow making her

... that dreary place, to a queen, someone who wouldn't have to raise a hand. A lot of the time she had felt grateful to him, Martin the demanding husband who had taken her to a peaceful place by a big beautiful lake when her heart was broken and yearning for Louis who had left her. Martin, who had asked her no questions and promised her escape from anxiety and a restless life. But now she felt totally different about him. No longer could she see his jokes as kindly meant and his funny faces as loving attempts to entertain her. Now she saw everything about him as a deep and destructive insecurity, a wish to trap her, keep her like a caged bird. A man who could not face up to the fact that his wife had left him for another man, but who had carried on a charade even to the point of getting his friend different bodies as hers.

Peter to identify a totally

new set of these) They were barbarians. She had given birth to two children in a land of barbarians. And a little for her children. Although she talked to Lena about them to Louis, it was only skimming the surface. She could not let him know how large a part of her mind they occupied. Louis was in many ways a child himself; he would not want to share this part of her with Kit and Enriet. She loved and needed him so much, it would be an act of folly to weep and cling to him and tell him how much she missed her children. It would be to tell him that he was not enough for her, that the

decision to go with him had involved too much sacrifice. And that was not true. (Id Sister Madeleine had once said to her that in the end people do what they want to do. Even not doing something is a decision. So she had decided to leave her children. She

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must remember that and face it, even though she could -. have foreseen that Martin would go through this grot, charade, letting them think she was dead, She had made choice to leave them. She must have wanted to be,,16 Louis more than with them. It was a harsh fact to face but Lena felt stronger for, admitting it to herself. She must plunge herself into the new life and live it without regret. Live it in as full a way,, possible, do all the things that she always had the power to, do but never the chance. Sometimes she wondered would they be surprised back in Lough Glass to know just how very much she was doing. And to know that there were not enough hours in the day for all she had to do, that she was nearly running Millar's Employment Agency on her own. *but one Neither Mr Millar nor Jessie Park had contrived single idea to her entire reorganisation programme. But they were easy to lead and quick to agree that business had doubled. Bigger and better-known bureaux had come to have a look at them. There had even been a feature about their new-look offices in a local paper. Lena had kept very much in the background. 'Please, Mrs Gray, you would be an adornment to the picture,' Mr Millar begged. Lena had prepared for this. She had given Jess' voucher to a hairdresser and the loan of a smart jacket to replace the old fuzzy cardigan. 'No, no truly. You are the ones who run it,' Lena said, refusing to pose for the press picture. After all, she was meant to be dead. There was no use having her photograph in a newspaper. Who knew who might see it?

'You're looking pale,' Ivy said to her one day. 'I don't know what it is, but I don't feel great, certainly,' Lena agreed. 'Are you pregnant?' Ivy asked. 'No, not that.' Lena spoke sharply. All she saw Ivy look at her thoughtfully.

Those S01

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,tons of eyes understood everything. They probably understood that Louis and Lena would not have a child. r~, Inatter had been brought up and

discussed. But both careers were starting out so well here. Perhaps they had not thought of it for the moment. Lena smiled wryly. She was in a hurry of putting things off for the moment.

At the 1(years of age. Next year she would be forty. The 1949-50 season that she had probably passed already. The Christmas loss in Brighton was her last. The two she had just begun to have, Ireland were lost to her. She was a woman with all children. A career woman, as they were beginning to call themselves in the London of 1953.

Suppose I were to send you a lot of business, could we come to a deal?' Lena asked Grace at the hairdresser's, Grace had once come to Millar's looking for a secretarial

job. She was so elegant looking and had such a way with customers that Lena realised she would be lost in an office. Her sympathetic personality was much more suited to a shop where she would meet the public. Grace West, a tall, handsome young woman whose mother was from Trinidad, had been anxious to get what they called an office job - a step up. She had been doubtful at first - it would be such a start about hairdressing. A lot of West Indian girls did that. wouldn't be seen as a great success. 'You'll be a 'Yes, but when you're running the place, then you'll be a success,' Lena had said. Grace did not do people's hair, she made the appointments, she kept the till, she strolled around in her elegant suits, advising and admiring. 'A little more conditioner on Mrs Jones, I think,' said she - 'Would say. 'Why not give Miss Nixon an extra rinse with a little squeeze of fresh lemon?' customers thought they were getting special attention. They loved it. 'What, she'd deal?' Grace pretended to be resigned. She was standing behind the chair as Lena got her usual Friday shampoo and set. Only the best hairdresser in the salon was allowed to touch Mrs Gray's wavy dark hair.

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The others didn't see that no money changed hands - Grace knew how to pay her debts. Lena Gray had gone to this position by advising her every step of

they had almost rehearsed the interview line by line. 'A lot of the girls who come in to us ... they haven't idea how to present themselves.' 'Who are you telling?' Grace remembered how she had been until Lena taught her height, her colour and her startling good looks into an asset. 'You were always a looker,' Lena said. 'No, they come in with frightened faces and no make-up, or else look like something from a music hall. Suppose I sent you at least ten a week, would you throw in a free make-up lesson as well?' 'Ten a week? You'd never get that.' Grace's eyes were wide in disbelief. 'That would be the deal. If I get less, you do.' 'ha,--give the discount.' 'What kind of make-up lesson? In a classroom?' 'No. just telling them what would suit them. You don't sell them anything, just tell them how to put it on so it doesn't look as if it was laid on with a garden trowel.' Grace laughed. 'You have such funny ways of running things.' 'What do you think? Is it worth your while?' 'Of course it is. Some day, when you're famous I'll say that I helped you on in your career, like you did for me,' 'Famous. I doubt it.' 'I don't. I see that Mr Millar handing over to you a set of big interviews in the papers . . .' Grace was excited. 'No. I don't see that at all.' Lena spoke quietly. Whatever happened, there would be no interviews for her in any paper. Not now.

Clio was a month older than Kit, so for the whole month of

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thirteen", 'There's many a country I could get you to go to', she said. 'I don't think that's a very foolish thing to do all the said. They were, arranging the day brought in a series of jars along with her. Clio asked. it seemed. I think) having reached an age where she was off to land, she might be able to be a technician', --, 'I don't think so.' adamant.

at all.' Sister Madeleine was, 'No, not go why? But 'If that's what you're going to do eventually, Clio asked. 'I don't do it soon. Sorry the wrong person, you see it,' 'Because you might mind', 'I don't think so. I could do that any time,' Clio said. 'ew. 'It's They looked at Sister Madeleine for another minute of luck anyway,' she said, poking. a matter with I of course It was different for you, since you had a feeling about that. You had the call, I thought. There was no luck, I thought. Clio said. I don't think so at all, Sister. 'Where was a silence. would you like to have been married, you think?' Kit asked. 'I don't know.' 'Oh I was.' Sister

Madeleine looked at the clear blue eyes, smiling as if they should have known that she would, that Madeleine

They looked at her open-mouthed. 'Arrived?' said Kit. 'To a man?' asked Clio. Sister Madeleine said, as if that 'It was a long time ago, I - in the meantime - did everything. The goose came beside me foolishly, no moment, waddling and looking from the side, as if it was that the girls had no skill. 'It is too good to get it a, _Pr1(

'Well, would you look at Bernadette.' Sister Madeleine's face creased into a smile, as if a friend had come in for tea. 'You're welcome in, Bernadette. The girls here will get you a bit of cornmeal in a nice dish now.' But Sister Clio and Kit would hear no more about Adele's marriage.

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'She did say married?' 'Yes, I heard her.' 'To a man. Not just to Christ or anything.' 'No. She agreed with that. She said it was long.' They sat down on the mossy stone by the lakeside. 'She couldn't have been married. Not sleeping with him, man and all.' 'Well she said it, didn't she?' 'I wonder does anyone else know,' Clio said. 'I'm not going to tell anyone, are you?' Kit said suddenly. Clio seemed disappointed. It would have been a good thing to tell. 'She didn't say to keep it a secret.' 'No Clio, but she sort of trusted us, didn't she?' Clio thought about it. This way there was some importance attached to the momentous piece of information that had just been given. If they were guardians of a huge and privileged piece of information that no one else knew, then Clio Kelly could just about keep it to herself. 'I suppose so.' 'Imagine her telling us. You and me,' Kit said in wonder, Clio liked that. 'She knows we wouldn't let each other down,' she said. They walked home companionably and came up from the lake by Paddles' bar. Paddles was standing at his door. 'When will you ladies be old enough to frequent my premises?' he asked. They giggled, 'Ah, it'll be a few years yet, Paddles,' Clio said. 'Well, the place will be honoured, Miss Kelly, when you're ready for us.' They clutched each other with laughter the whole way home. Imagine, whatever age you were, wanting to go into Paddles' bar! 'Maybe you could have your thirteenth birthday there. We could send out invitations. Miss Kit McMahon will be launched into society at Paddles' bar

on z June 19 5 3 -'Jl of They laughed so much they had to hold onto the wo
the Central Hotel to stop themselves falling,

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you,re havirig great fun.' Philip was ~er,,env'ous.\ve're planning Kit's
birthday partyt C io said. - kre you having a party?' Philip brightened up.
,Oj course not. She's in mourningt' Clio snapped. 'But
o reason why we couldn't have a laugh over it.'

N,eryone in London was getting ready for the oronation. There would be
bunting on the houses in the

treet. I was getting hers ready. She had some since the nd of tl~e war, kept
as a sort ot souvenir from the really rable days down in the King's Head,
~J't`?11 be a great day,' she told Lena. 'I suppose so. ,sorry, I keep forgetting
you're not all that interested, being Irish and all.' 'No, it's not that. of course
I'm interested. I keep I . orgetting it ... pm working so hard these days 'Don't
I see it. You're home later every night.'

i 'Well, so's Louis ivy's face was full of 'Don't work too hard, love. concern.
And she was right of course. Lena did stay later and later at the agency,
writing letters to large companies explaining ,he kind of screening
techniques they used, how Millar's ~Id notjust send any applicant for any
job. She also had a mailing list of schools and secretarial colleges. A
Millar's I I I I girt would get much more than a list of job opportunities. She
would get career advice and more intelligent women would assess her
potential, giving young applicants the necessary confidence to prepare them
for interviews and ior their early working career. Mention was made of the
low-price hairdressing. and Tnake-up services and of the fashion
suggestions. Business WU increasing at a great rate. Mr Millar had doubled
her 14ary in six months. Lena had insisted on a similar rise for
Jessie Park.

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'We're a team, Mr Millar. I couldn't work with, Jessie,' she had said. Mr Millar's eyes were sharp. He saw the change in, and new confidence of Miss Park, who had been, he m% mouselike of employees. If Lena Gray could do this for a woman that she had outstripped a hundredfold and should remain loyal and supportive then she was indeed a treasure and must be humoured. Anyway, profits were looking very good. He could afford to pay Jessie as well. He had met Mrs Gray's husband once, a strikingly handsome Irishman. A hotel manager, it appeared. She was very quiet and uninformative about her private life. Which made a refreshing change to the daily detail they picked from Jessie Park. 'Mr Millar,' Lena said. 'Miss Park and I were wondering should we do a special window display for the Coronation? 'But what would we say in our window?' Jessie looked at them eagerly. Jessie didn't look so gormless these days; she had a smartly fastened blouse with a modern cameo brooch. Instead of a picture it was a 'Millar's' in the blue and gold which had become the company colours. The cushions on the new chairs were blue and gold, as was the decoration on their stationery, the fresh paint on the exterior, the frames for the pictures on the walls. Jessie used to wear floppy, open-necked blouses until Lena had thought up this smart new uniform for them, a white blouse, a blue skirt and a gold-looking scarf. Jessie's new hairstyle and the occasional application of make-up had transformed her. Lena had even suggested that with an increased wage packet Jessie might pay someone to look after her mother on an occasional evening, and she could get accustomed to having some free time. It was such a relief to hear Jessie talking about how much she had enjoyed singing in the Rain. Lena and Mr Millar would have listened to every song and every line of the dialogue over and over rather than revert to Mrs Park's eating difficulties.

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The old Jessie would have agreed with Mr Millar that she didn't know she was sure, but today Jessie spoke up. 'In a way, Mr Millar, our very colours are royal, you know. A nice blue and gold display in the window, with a picture of the new Queen. - ' 'Yes, that's a great idea.' Lena said. 'We could put

something like "Welcome to a New Elizabethan Age ... from Millar's, who look to a great future for all of us" . . . ' They loved it. They were so excited. A lump came to Lena's) throat at their eagerness. Were the English much more simple and less critical than the Irish? Or was it that she had never been able to play any part in the town where she had withered away for thirteen years)

'Do you think they should get a television in the hotel for the coronation?' Louis asked. 'You mean they haven't got one? Not one in the whole place?' 'No. It sort of prides itself on being quiet.' 'It'll pride itself on being empty before long.' He looked at her in surprise. This wasn't the usual way Lena spoke. It ~'as too sharp. 'Nothing's wrong. Maybe I'm just tired.' 'Very well. I'll know not to ask in future,' Louis said. He had a funny tight look around his lips. 'Touis!' she cried in alarm. 'Oh Louis, please don't sulk.' 'Sulk? Me! I'm not sulking. You're the one who bit the ,iead off me.' He was really hurt. , , I'm sorry. It's all my fault.' There was silence. 'Louts, I ~ad a rotten day.' 'Mine wasn't great either.' She reached for him, but he pulled away. 'Lo.uis, please ~alk to me about the television set. I'm very interested, honestly. Truly, truly I am.' She was beseeching him now. 'No, Helena. It's all right. This time the Dryden Hotel will have to manage without your advice.' im 'I spoke quickly. I'm She pleaded with h' again.

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sorry. You often do too when you're tired. It doesn,t anything, not between us. Does it?' 'No. Of course not,' He was frosty. She bit her lip. She would do whatever it took to get hip, back to the way he had been before she had so stupi~, snapped at him. Did it need more apology or was it besz(Q change the subject? She decided to move on. 'We've bet having all kinds of debates about how to celebrate the da~, too,' she began cheerfully, 'How interesting.' Louis spoke with a deliberate sneer. She had never seen his face curl up like that. 'Love?' She felt her face redden. 'No, go on. Tell me more tales of Mr Millar and Jessie Park. I mean, these are really interesting people now. Not just dross like the poor fools that try to earn a living In t~ Dryden Hotel.' 'I must have sounded sharper than I meant to. I can't td you

how sorry I am.' Lena hung her head. She hoped he would come over and put his arms around her, say that it didn't matter, that they were both over tired. Maybe he might say they would go out to the little Italian restaurant and they would be closer because of it. But he was a long time coming over to her and she began to doubt that this would happen. She heard his hand on the door handle and looked up, 'Where are you going, Louis?' she asked. 'Out.' 'But where out?' 'You told me, Helena, that the thing that drove you through all those years in Lough Glass was when people kept asking you where you were going. just out. Isn't that enough?' 'No, it's not enough. We love each other ... Don't go-' 'We don't want to stifle each other.' 'I won't stifle you. Please.' She was begging now. Had Martin begged her this way? Louis came towards her and took both her hands in his. 'Listen, my love. We're annoyed with each other. Let's cool off.'

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to. -that's what grownLet me see if you can.,
 I want to see you, remember, do. We're in it almost. His smile was so lovely, so much a part of her almost paralysed. Did she want to see it. She felt)
 Could she plead with him once

before him, 'Once upon a time - Not a word - He released her. She said nothing. could
 door close behind him. She went down, and she heard the door down to Ivy for
 consolation. She would not go in - at she would go out - and a piece of
 cheese at the corner she bought an apple on towards Millar's Employment
 "top, and walked in, and looked around her with anxiety, she let
 herself achieve, somewhat least, had been an assurance. This, the little
 glass on the table in London. This :ning to show for her many -dited letters from
 , covered noticeboard with carefully e here;
 satisfied customers; the blue and gold motif everywhere. 'It edited by Jessie's mother,
 who had now some cushions cover - blue, the gold painted tray with the 1
 found a role in life, as served to all who came in.
 "In the room where coffee was served. desk and took out her files - Exactly Lena sat down
 at the things which she needed. A few hours on her own to sort that was the time
 she hardly ever had to herself so good. This everything ready for, "you will see
 was she to run home and have

~Ouis. ot think about him because it made Louis. She would n .-er shake with rage at the injustice Of it all'

The time flew past. She could hardly believe that it was art jump. This was later than she had ~leven. She felt her he would be long home by now, and intended to stay. He .here might be more words if she were to Say she had gone m to the agency. But she couldn't pretend t.o have been wandering around London on her own all this timeAs she ran up the stairs she rehearsed what she would say, but first she would see what mood he was in. That was

I t fire off herself, She the secret. Respond to him, don . had not opened the door and the flat was empty- Lou's ~ome back yet. When he'd said he was going out, he'd meant it.

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ing out 1~ ,he began. It was she was w~, Wa, bad crowd ~ W(U awake. It was twenty past three. He slipped qui, ~.,At t down as she -tlv linib the bed beside her. He did not reach for c 1 of course not. See you this evening. her, which w,,,*, ' no. b k' automatic gesture whenever he got into bed. Where could he have been until this time of c., morning? He was too proud to go back to his place 0~ work; he wouldn't have gone back to catch up on thin~, like Lena had done. Which meant that he musthavebeen, someone's house. Someone he knew well enough i'C' entertain him until all hours in the morning. She made lit: breathing sound even, as if she were asleep. Lena Gray could swear that she slept not a wink that night. Her head was full of pictures, but none of them wert dreams. She pictured her daughter Kit. It would be her birthday on 2 June, the day of the Coronation. She would be thirteen years of age, a girl whose mother was dead. If only she had been able to write to her. Suppose Martin had let them think that she was far

away and never coming back, but that she could still write them letters. And as the light came up on London, and the yellow blinds on their window started to turn a pale colour rather than seeming black like the night, Lena knew that was what she would do. She would write a letter to her daughter. Pretending to be someone else. The thought of it made her feel exhilarated. Nobody seeing her get up and dress would have thought that this was a woman who had not slept all night. Louis was surprised, she could see that. 'Less angry with the world today?' he asked, head on one side waiting for her to apologise yet again. But he got no apology. 'Weren't we like a pair of Kilkenny cats last night?' 'h' said, marvelling at it. Louis paused. This wasn't what he had expected. "Xh't made us like that do you think?" 'As you said, crowding each other out. . .' She was anxious to be gone; it was written all over her. So now naturally he wanted her to stay. 'I didn't M13' Her eyes were closed when he came in, but Igo

01 like you when I came across. I didn't W, ~ asleep. out like a light.' She kissed him then. I was head, and he pulled her back to his lap. Also on the fore for old people ' .31C ' e. We don't kiss like that. That's owed to him, but she .True, true,' she laughed, and responded firmly. 'Let's not start anything we can't ,1,iiied away ' She laughed at tonight, hey? hey? . 03ntinue See You him suggestively. ' he said. ,you're a terrible tease. e . t wasn't at the forefront of They were happy again. But I s she could write 'ner mind. Her brain was racing with way w her daughter.

Njr Millar was at work before her. ,you remind me of a said to Lena. 'What Little PeopleY sed to come and do the work at 'I don't know ... They u spin and weave or something light for some fairy prince, and ... Do you now it but why do I remind you 'I think I've heard of it all right, of 0' 'I think someone must have come in. at night and done all %,our work. The basket is full. of letters 'tten and notes made.' 'I came in for an hour or two last night.' it you here.' 'I don't know what lucky good fairy brought 'ie took off his glasses and polished them. My brother nse. Now, sed to laugh h at me, and say I had no business se

a few short months he wants to buy into the business 'What do you think of that~' 'What do you think of it, Mr MillarY Lena knew that brothers. Mrs Gray. -'ere was littl-, love lost between the 'thout his help really, 'I'm happier doing it W, I That is, if you're going to stay.
story about the Little People,'

he
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During the morning, her thoughts went back to conversations she had had with Kit about a previous They had of their nature been sparse. You didn't tell daughter that you only married because You were or, he re bound and that your every waking thought was so filld with the memory of Louis Gray it didn't really niat,,. what you did. Had she spoken of the girls she was in dig's with when she was at secretarial college? Possibly. it was so hard to remember. But if she couldn't remember then maybe Kit wouldn't either. She would write the letter and see how it looked.

Dear Kit, You will find it strange to get a letter from someone you do not know. But a while back 1 read in an Insh newspaper about the death of your mother and 1 wanted to write and offer sympathy. 1 do not know your father because your mother and 1 were friends long long ago when we were very young, well before she met him. Sometimes she used to write to me about you all, and the life you lived in Lough Glass. 1 even remember the date you were born, and know that you will be thirteen verY shortly. Your mother was so pleased with her little girl, she wrote and told me about all the dark hair you ha~ as a baby, and determined little fists. 1 don't want to write to you at home in case it makes your father sad. Your mother told me that there was a sort of second postal system in Lough Glass and that people often write care of this nun. If you would like to write to me, and to know rnof' things about your mother as a girl when we were all onlyY about four or five years older than you are now, then I" me know. 1 hope 1 might hear from you, but if not 1 Will understand. At your age you will have more important things to do than writing to strangers in London.

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~ ~ ~ 1

wish~s for a happy birthday from your „Other's old friend, Leria Gray Then she put the letter into the red pillar box on the corner of the street, Lena left her hand for a long time on the Inouth where the le.tters drop in. it was like reaching out her hand and touching her daughter.

Tommy Bennet helped to sort the letters at the post office. Mona Fitz was very interested in the origin of a lot of them. ~he could comment when the Hanleys got a few dollars in a fit letter from America. Sometimes she examined the mail that arrived for Sister Madeleine. For a woman who said she had retreated from.the world, she was still using quite a [(t of the world's services. Like the postal systemTommy Bennet deflected any comment. Sister Madeleine was a saint as far as he was concerned. She had when done the impossible and made things all right. Tommy's fifteen-year-old daughter came home with the most feared news in any Irish village, the news of an unexpected pregnancy. He had wept at Sister Madeleine's fireplace. And somehow the hermit had made it all right. A friend had been found and his daughter went to live with her. Another friend had been found somewhere else who adopted the baby. And Sister Madeleine had found a third friend who gave the girl a job. Nobody in Lough Glass knew the secret. Nor even suspected there was anything unusual about the girl's long absence. Tommy delivered three letters to the hermit's cottage on a warm sunny morning in late May. One contained a five pound note, to be put to good causes, She gave the note to Tommy. 'Give it where it should be given.' 'I don't like you trusting me to dole out all that money. I mightn't give it away right.' 'What would I be doing with it? You know where it is needed,' she insisted.

i

Tommy always felt a hundred feet tall; Sister Madeline, thought he was a man of responsibility. Nobody else did. His wife thought he was lazy, Mona Fitz the post-mistress thought he was soft. His own daughter, whose he had saved, thought him old-fashioned and strict, knew nothing of her father's role in her good fortune, 'I'll leave you in peace to read your other letters, sister., 'Put on a pot of tea for us both, it's a thirsty walk up and down that lane.' Sister Madeleine shooed the collect' animals in front of her and sat on the little three legged stool to read the letter addressed to her. Dear Sister, I am a friend of the late Helen McMahon, and would like to correspond with her daughter Ki For a variety of reasons I do not wish to write to her at her house. I have said to the child that I do not wish to make Martin McMahon sad to see reminders of his dead wife coming to his home, but the truth is that I was part of Helen's life when she loved another man. This would make it inappropriate for me to resurrect such Memories for him. I shall write nothing disturbing to the girl, and you are at liberty to read my letters in case you think the effect will be unsettling. I am sending what I hope will be the first of many letters to you, I am marking (the corner of the envelope KM so that you will know they are for her. And perhaps you might send some message to say whether this is acceptable to you.

Yours sincerely, Lena Gray

It was neatly typed. There was an address in West London and it said in capital letters PLEASE ENSURE THAT YOU WRITE C/O MRS Ivy BROWN. Sister Madeleine looked out over the lake for a long time. When Tommy made the tea and brought it out to her he stood for quite a while looking at the small woman entirely lost in thought.

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reat

with d ZS. Will you go and see if you

possibly do, Ose for e,' Sister Madeleine said later that

'Is he gone, Sister?' Nigel somewhere couldn't say truthfully, but he's lying,

you,ve always been able to make dogs Come to YOU Clio headed off, pleased to be singled out. Kit looked after her jealously. 'I'm better with cats eajlv, _ If,' she said. know it,' Sister Madeleine agreed. 'The cats Kit McMahon. E en half-wild cats.' nearly talk to you~ she gave Kit the letter. There were very few words, but Kit k~new it was something to be opened at home alone. And probably not sornething to be shared with Cho - T I - -, ince i had been addressed to Sister Madeleine's home, something to be shared with her father. She must have read the letter forty times. She knew every line of it off by heart. Mother had told this woman all about her, about her little fists, her dark hair. She might have told 'her more. The letter was typed, which made it easy to read. But it looked like a business letter that would come to the

. She so unded nice, but a bit standoffish too. Was it Mrs Gray or Miss Gray? Did she want to know more) Kit felt reassured because Sister Madeleine had said that Mother had in the past mentioned this woman was a friend. 'I didn't know Mother had any friends , ' Kit had said. 'Your mother was a friend to everyone,' Sister %deletne had said. 'She as, I know s W, he was.' Kit's eyes were shining. 'People liked her a lot, didn't they?' 'Very much so.' The old nun nodded in agreement. 'But you didn't know her well, she didn't come here all that often did she?' Kit was eager to hear more good about her mother. 'But you don't have to meet people often to know them.' That was true. You sort of knew immediately

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-~i

who you liked and who you didn't. 'What did you and Mother talk about when she came here?' 'Oh, this and that.' There was seal of confessio,, anyone s conversations with Sister Madeleine. 'But she didn't talk about this Lena Gray?' Kit's fjce as troubled. 'She mainly talked about you, about you and Emmet. Helen McMahon on her infrequent visits spoke with such love about her children that it was inconceivable she could have drowned herself and left them behind. Sister Madeleine had always believed that. It took Kit two weeks to think of something to write back She began once or twice. But it always seemed wrong, it seen d like a school essay, or else too friendly for someone she hardly knew. She wondered what Mother

would have done. Mother would have thought about it for a bit, not rushed in. That's what Kit would do, too.

'I've given your address, Ivy, in case I get any post,' she said. 'Well, it's your address too, isn't it?' Ivy was mystified, 'No, I mean your flat.' 'I see.' 'No you don't.' 'Are you going to tell me then?' 'It's just that I want to get a letter from Ireland now and then that I'd prefer Louis didn't know about.' 'Be very careful, Lena.' 'No. It's nothing like love letters ... There was a silence between them. 'But it's from Ireland?' 'Yes. It's a kind of lifeline to my daughter. 'Who thinks you're dead?'

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be me, I'm pretending to be

'YES~ return not - Another me.' Someone else. love. I really wouldn't.' wouldn't~ lie done t.

IT I not still sulking Louis asked. 'Of course not, I was never sulking in fact, I was being bad tempered. YOU were the one who was sulking! Let's forget the memory of the row, right.' Her eyes laughed and there was nothing but ease and pleasure between them. 'Right, so you, come and watch it down there ... I 'Certainly not- I, I'm going to be in London for a big historic occasion like this, I'm going street.' 'The rugs and a flask.' 'You'll have to queue all night while we have found a 'No, of course I won't. Ivy and Jess come.

about the television in the hotel?'

to watch it on the

'And what about me? What about Mr Millar and Jessie's mother, and the rest of the cast?' 'You have to work, you've told me a dozen times- Ivy couldn't want to go to Ernest's pub because the horrible Charlotte will be there. Mrs Park will be parked on a potty in front of their television. Now Mr Millar will at a neighbour's look! Now, does that bother his brother whom he hates answer the interrogation?' she asked jokingly. 'I love you,' Louis said suddenly. 'Do you?' she said. 'I should hope so. Didn't I run away with, 'And I didn't run

away with you too)' But it wasn't an equal running away- silver 'Of course you did,'Lena said gently. "We ran like fish across the sea.'

3

sked. 'Did Mother have a best friend like I have Clio?' Kit a 'Well, she had Clio s mum of course.' But they both knew that wasn't true. Mother hadn't liked Lilian Kelly.

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'I mean before. Before she met you. 'She had the girls in the digs. She spoke of therna bit.

'What were they called, Daddy?' 'It's so long ago, love, I can't remember. There Dorothy I think, and a Kathleen maybe. . 'Would she have been called Lena?' 'I don't know. Why?' 'I just wondered what people shorten their names to Might the short name for Kathleen be Lena?' She locktd flushed and eager. Martin McMahon gave it some thought. She seemed to want it to be that way. 'I think it might have been all right, It certainly is a way of shortening the name,' he said. Kit nodded, satisfied. As he did so often Martin McMahon wished he knew what was going on in his daughter's mind. Boys were so much simpler. He went fishing with Emmet many evenings on the lake. At first Emmet had been unwilling to touch the boat, but Martin had persevered. 'We have no idea what happened that night, but we know one thing. Your mother would want you to grow up as part of this lake that she loved so much. She wouldn't want you to stay away from it.' 'But the boat, Daddy . . .' 'The boat is part of the lake, son. We won't ever know what happened in that boat and how your poor mother got dragged away. She'd surely want yourself and myself to go out in it and love the place as she did.' It had been the right thing to say. His son went with him happily on the lake. And it seemed that Emmet enjoyed his fishing trips catching perch and pike. The boy never noticed that his father's eyes were dead as he rowed.

'No letters for you to my flat, Lena.' 'No? Well, there you go.' 'You're getting lots of London expressions,' ivy said.

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, g to live in London then I'd better learn to go in rs Lena said. ,Ilk like Londone ing of going back across ' q thought VO" night be think sea, f that.' No, there s not any chance 0 * I s ... F ivy persisted. .~ut the lifeline ry dangerous, very foolish.' -probably just as You said- Vei

, 'rake that hard look off your face, Lena Gray. I'm your said it was dangerous or foolish, I just never i you to take care.' , You're a great friend, Ivy. -When I get the chance to be, but that's not at the ,,ment, so let it lie.' ivy went back into her room on the ,,,,round floor. She didn't ask Lena in. She knew the time for tntirnacY was not now.

Jessie Park was worried whether her mother might be able to make the bathroom in her neighbour's house during the Coronation. 'She get very excited you know, when things are emotionaPLena listened patiently.' Oh Lena. I know I'm wittering on a bit and I'm always telling you my woes, but I just don't know where to turn and you're always so calm, so practical.' Lena looked at her kindly. It was a huge compliment to be called calm and practical, a woman like she was, on the run, living a false life with a man who might leave her again as he had done before. Here she was in this great strange city, heartbroken that she had heard nothing from Kit and fearing that the letter had frightened the child. Yet ' Jessie thought she was as strong as an oak tree. 'Let's see,' she said. 'Didn't you. tell me that flat was all on one level? There won't be any stairs.'

'I know, Lena, but she moves so very slowly. Suppose 'he had a little accident?' Jessie bit her lip. 'I saw some pads in a chemist's last week. She could wear those and then there'd be no problem.' and positive,

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Lena was bright

Jessie thanked her so profusely that it almost broug~, tears to Lena's eyes. It was so easy to solve a little proble,, for someone else when they asked, and so hai your own ...

In the Dryden Hotel all the preparations had gone ahead for the Coronation Day. The chairs had been arranged in a semicircle in the drawing room just as Lena had suggested to Louis, and he had advised the hotel. 'Your lovely wife will not be with us for the day?' James Williams said with disappointment. He thought that Lena would have added a touch of class to the proceedings. 'Sadly no. She is needed in her own work.' 'I'm not surprised. I'm sure she is excellent in that employment agency. Perhaps she might be able to find places for us as they become vacant.' 'Ah, yes. Of course she's always looking for the perfect position for her husband,' Louis joked. 'I'd be sorry to lose you, Louis. You'd never take anything without letting us discuss a salary and conditions.' 'Mr Williams, I wouldn't even want you to think I was speaking seriously.' 'And although I have asked you a dozen times to call me James you never will.' 'I am very happy here.' 'And is your wife happy in London? She doesn't yearn for somewhere else?' 'What makes you ask that, Mr Williams.' Louis' eyes had narrowed. 'I don't know. Something she said at Christmas, about everyone on earth should be forced to work in London for a time. I thought there was a message in those words.' 'She's my wife, and I never heard a message like that.' The words were perfectly polite but James Williams decided not to pursue it any further.

2010

It'll be great to go to

England for the Coronation?

wouldn't

'Where would we stay - she's going to go. Aunt Maura has friends there. She'd be glad to take us if we asked her?' Kit won, 'No, probably not. It's still wartime and they'd say

'You're too young.' Kit said. 'I'd love to go anywhere, I will be too old.

By the time they let us 'I know. So old.' Liam was glum and resigned about

it, 'Philip O'Brien's going to Belfast with his mother,' Ki

revealed. 'Where with Philip's? Yeah, but imagine going anywhere.' 'He's all right though, I like him.' Liam was 'You're going to marry him. I can see that.' Liam

definite. it. why ,You're always saying that. I haven't a notion of do you keep saying it. 'Because he fancies you.'

vell?' I t you don't fancy him. People 'It doesn t matter thal always end up marrying people that fancy them. 'That couldn't work out.' Kit fought it'No, I mean women do, girls do.' ,Why? I thought we were the ones meant to do the choosing and refus i ing and all that.' real life we marry 'No, that's only in books and films- In people who want to marry us. 'All women do thatF 'Yes. Honestly.' 'Your mother? My mother?' Kit thought about it. 'Yes. Yes, definitely.' 'And nobody fancied your Aunt Maura. 'That's different. She told me that she wasted time on a man who didn't fancy her, That was her mistake.' always 'But was it a mistakeY Ki wanted toknow.'You It said she was very happy, happier than anyone we know.'

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'Yes, I know I did say that, but that's the way Maybeinside she's desperately unhappy.' 'What about Sister Madeleine, who says she was rnari, and is a nun?' 'I'll never understand that,' said Clio. 'Not till the da, d'e.'

'What are you thinking about?' Lena asked. Louis smiled at her lazily. 'I was thinking how beautiful you are,' he said. 'No you weren't.' 'Then why ask me?' 'I don't know. I suppose I sometimes want to kno,~what goes on in your handsome head. We had a cat at horrit called Farouk. I used to look at him and wonder what could be going on in his head.' 'And am I like Farouk - a cat?' 'Not nearly as handsome, I'm afraid.' 'I don't like you saying "at home". Lough Glass is not your home, Your home is with me. It has always in some way been with me.' She looked at him for a moment or two. A few weeks back she would have rushed in, begged, pleaded, said that she had been using only a form of words. But the night that he had left in the petty sulk, the night she knew she needed to write to her daughter, everything had changed. She didn't wish to tie him to her with humble words of apology; it could be no love if it was bought at such a pr 'Well, tell me, do you agree?' He was challenging her. 'No, my love, I don't. It wasn't where I wanted to be but I was there for thirteen damn years and other people called it my home and it was where I lived. So if I ment, in on passing that a cat who lived there with me, a fine handson" cat called Farouk lived at home with me . . . I don't think it's a slip of the tongue that

is going to make or break us-' He looked at her with admiration.

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Will, a sudden flash of regret, she realised that if she had w he might never have left her in haved lik ~ this years ag :e first place. But if he had stayed ... what about Kit and - ,,,,t? would they have * been the same people? Or ~,iferent people? Or not existed at all? h paying for them not to have existed pr cc was wort i: All.

i'm going to have a perm for the Coronanon,'Jessie Park

'Great idea,' Lena said. 'Mr Millar has invited us both around to his brother's is evening.' Jessie spoke with reverence. ,iouseth' ,Yes. I hope you'll go and tell me about it. I have to meet ouis, I think he's a bit let down that I won't be with him

ill day . . .' She saw Jessie's face crumble. 'Oh Lena, do you have to? Please come to Mr Millar's.

You can be with Louis any night. This is special , , Lena looked at her fondly. Although she still called him Nlr Millar, Jessie had v ry fond thoughts about ier employer. Lena had seen her looking at him in a way that had nothing to do with the employment agency. 'No, honestly. I would if I could, but this is something I have to do. Anyway, you'll have more fun without me. I'd only be a gooseberry.' 'He doesn't see me in that way at all.' Jessie's face was long and sad. 'How do we know what way men see things? You'd need a fleet of interpreters to work out what they're thinking ... but't's better you go on your own. You'll get to know him more than if I were there.' 'Do you think so? Do you think it will be all right?' 'Certainly it will. It's not as if he were a stranger, a man You only met at a party or somewhere. You and he have so 11111ch in common, shared so much already - . .' Lena was

14 of encouragement - ----- en you 'But I never know,%. 're not there.' Jessie looked flustered.

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a perm?' 'Oh indeed I do, and anyway it will cost half as much. Grace owes us. We've been sending so much business her way, she practically runs the salon on the people we refer., jessie left for the salon cheerfully, full of plans. Lena picked up the phone. 'Grace, do me a favour. When jessie makes a booking give her everything, I mean every single thing. I'll sort it out with you later. Nails, facial, colour anything you think.' 'She's never going to look for a new job?' 'Better than that,' Lena said, 'she's looking for romance.'

'Maybe this is the time to begin.' 'I hope I'll look all right. Do you think it's worth trying.'

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Deirdre Hanley called to the pharmacy. 'I came to know if you'd be needing an assistant or anything, Mr McMahon,' she said, 'Are you going to study pharmacy, Deirdre?' Martin McMahon was surprised. 'No, but I wouldn't need to for working here, would I?' 'Well, to be any help to me you would really.' He spoke mildly. She was a restless girl, Mrs Hanley's daughter. A child who had always been loud in her impatience for the day when she could leave Lough Glass. Sometimes she had asked it of Helen and found, Martin feared, only too even so, sympathetic an audience. 'But isn't it all a matter of trying to get people to buy make-up and all?' she asked. 'I think there's a bit more to it than that, Deirdre, But were you going to train as a beautician? Is that it?' 'You wouldn't need much training, Mr McMahon. All you'd need is to talk one of the cosmetic companies into giving you a bit of a course, then you push their stuff, tell people it's great. You know the sort of thing.'

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'And you'd like to do that in Lough Glass?' 'yeah, why not?' 'But do you think ... Suppose we were able to find a place for you here which I don't think is possible ... Do you think you'd be happy doing that?' 'I Mr McMahon, you have to do something from dawn to

dusk to justify your existence. That's what it's all about,' Deirdre Hanley said. 'And you'd like your existence here in Lough Glass?' He'd had nothing but despair from this child about her home town. What had changed her? Deirdre looked across the road at Sullivan's garage, It was only a glance, but in McMahon remembered having seen her with Stevie larti Sullivan on a few occasions. Usually down by the lake or away from the public eye. 'What would your mother like ~ou to do?' he asked suddenly. , 'She'd like me to get out of here. She says she doesn't know why but she thinks it would be the best thing for

Deirdre. You'd be much more exciting to him if 'Go, I you were an out of town girl.' Nr McMahon, imagine you knowing all about women and life and everything,' said Deirdre in amazement. 'I know,'Martin McMahon said goodnaturally. 'Isn't it extraordinary all right!' 'Will the pair of you come into the chemist's with me, do You think?' he asked the children that night. 'Now?' Emmet asked in surprise. Once the door had been locked their father hardly ever opened it again, unless it was an emergency for someone. 'No, I meant in the future,' he said. 'Would you like us to?' Kit asked. 'Only if you want to, or one of you wants to. It's long hours and you'd need to enjoy the work.' :1 thought I might be an actress,' Kit said. And I thought I'd be a priest out on the Missions,' ~rnmnet said.

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'Oh well then, it's all settled.'8e looked fror other. 'Father Ernmet . '71 , I Out in Nigeria ... w a looked around her w i th delight at the crowds w jetermined to enjoy the great day. Less than ten ye white soutane, saving souls, and then back to ca. , T ~ ~ ley had been in the middle of a terrible war. Thirte night of Katherina McMahon in the Abbey The, a busy life for me. I suppose 1, I . n to help me., d better take Deir "I"" ago, the day h r child was born, the day that Man 1 ::, Vept for joy at her bedside to say they had a beautt 'Deirdre Hanley?' Emmet and Kit sa'.. Iter there had been fear and pani'c in these stre disbelief. id in :She came looking for a job today, to help 01 'YOU wouldn't want her Daddy,' Kit said. 'I don't have to be a pri' rushed st, it was just an ide EMM 'And get accepted as an actrt to honest. . . , 'SO You might fall back on the chemist,s; failed.' iko 'Exactly,, said Kit. Y11;:1.1

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ren are marvellous 'Martin McM air around him. 'Who'd be'l,,,lthout
thern,~hon said to the

On the morning Of 2 June Lena woke eagerly. H
daughter was thirteen today. She mark the day for her, make * Oped Martin
woul She got an urg It specia , cheerful. c to ring him and wh. down the
phone. She longed to cry a isper encouragemen very hard to live wi nd te 1
thout her chilren, bu 1 h 'm that it wai was a fanciful th' t she knew tb 'rig to
indulge herself. She had a life to livt A life of her own. And here she was in
London on the day Of the Coronation. Everyone was listening to the
wireless from the moment they got UP. It was as if they feared the whole
thing might be cancelled. They wanted to know every detail. Tht
c newspapers wer full of the splendour of the day and,
minute by minute itinerary 90 to Westirn. of how the procession woLild

ceremony. Inster Abbey, and a step-by-step guide to the
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)ndon. a way Lena thought the English didn't have enough ~ratlons; they
didn't have St Patrick's Day, and -us Christi Processions, and the Blessings
of the :s, and pilgrimages to Croagh Patrick and all the things
I ,ive people a chance to take a day off and think about ,thing else. It was
heartening to see them all smile and to strangers. She made her way to the
corner that Ivy 'nanaged to secure by knowing the family that owned a ,]
shop there. The children bad been out since long)re dawn guarding the
places for them. There were little -)den stools and picnic baskets, and flags
and bunting. or a moment Lena felt as if she were outside herself ~Ing at it
from somewhere else. She didn't feet part of great excitement and
anticipation. The knowledge that :young Queen was going to pass feet away
didn't fill her :,i awe. But neither was it foreign to her. These were as ~ch
her people as were those who lived in the main street ~ough Glass. ihe was
as much at home here as she would be anywhere :he world. They settled
into their vantage point and heard the news Ut Everest. Britain had
conquered the highest 'ountain in the world; the excitement knew no
bounds. le roar became louder as the carriages came into view, the ~rses
gleaming and decorated with magnificent brocades .d livery. And then the

smiling but slightly anxious face :~Princess Elizabeth, as they still referred to her, waving "r gloved hand, eagerly responding to all the love and ~'elcome from the pavements. She seemed to look straight at them, they A said it, Ivy, ~3sie, everyone all around. And Lena thought it too. She
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looked back and waved at the woman who was going to crowned. A woman who still had her little boy and g~'J, She felt tears spring into her eyes. A man beside her clutched her arm. 'It's a great day love, You'll be able to tell your children abo" this.' Lena squeezed his arm back. 'Great day, great day,'sh, stumbled.

'Do you always know what o do, Sister Madeleine?' 'No, Kit, I hardly ever know what to do.' 'But you don't worry about it.' 'No, that's true. I don't.' 'Is that why you weren't good at being marrled?' 'I never said I wasn't good at being married.' 'No, but you can't have been, otherwise you'd still be married, wouldn't you, not a nun?' . 'Oh, you think I left a marriage and went into a convent, is that it?' 'But isn't that what you told us, Clio and myself?' Poor Kit was wishing she hadn't brought it up. The nun's blut eyes were interested and alive, but giving nothing awayA mean we didn't just imagine it, did we?' 'I did have a husband once, but he left me. He went away far across the world.' 'Did you have a fight?' Kit was sympathetic. 'No, not at all. I thought everything was fine. He wasn't happy, he said.' She looked out over the take as shc remembered it. 'And did the nuns take you then because he wasn't coming back any more?' . 'Oh no. Not for a long time. I sat in the house polishing it and cleaning it and growing the flowers in the garden and telling everyone he was coming back soon . . 'Where was all this, Sister Madeleine?' 'Oh, far away from here. But anyway, the weeks passed

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d the months and one day I asked myself what I was CL JUdde a little voice in me say that all I was doing, and UOions, keeping silver clean doing really was minding possessbe doing something ,.6 polishi ng glass ... I surely should

else.' ,So what did you do he bank for m ,I sold it all, and I put the money in
t and said I husband, and I wrote a letter to a friend of his

.15 going to join a convent, and that if ever he came back
,,crything was there for him.' 'And did he come back, Sister Madeleine?' I as
very calm. 11 don't know, Kit. I don't think so.' She w
Not sad or confused. ,So you were a nu 'For a while. Then one day I asked
myself in the convent what I was doing, Polishing tables in the parlour, and
polishing pews in the church and the marble around the
base of the altar. And I heard the little voice from God again.' 'What did it
say this time?' Kit scarcely dared to believe -11ing her all this, that Sister
Madeleine was te 'It said the same thing. it said that I was spending my time
polishing and cleaning possessions. They weren't mine admittedly, they
belonged the convent, but still it didn't seem a good thing to be doing.' 'So
you left and came here?' 'Yes. That was it, more or less.' 'And you couldn't
hear a voice from God saying that You're wrapped up in possessions here
because you haven't any.' Kit looked around the spare house and marvelled
at how it had all turned out. 'Yes, I think it was the right thing to do. I hope
so.' 'But it was God talking, wasn't it?' '(f course it was, but God is always
talking to us.. The thing is to be sure and hear the bit that He wants us to
hear.' 'Like when making up your mind you think one thing is right and then
you think the other is.' Kit seemed to know the problem of indecision.

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'Exactly, Kit. You have to listen carefully and)rk,, what is actually being
said, what God wants you to do, 'And is it an actual voice, like you and me
talkirg,,. 'No. It's more a feeling.' 'So if 1 wasn't sure whether to do
something or not I'd just wait and see which feeling was the stronger.' 'It
usually works.' Kit closed her eyes. 'But you can,t force it, Kit. It's not like a
fairy granting you three wishes or anything.' Kit stared out over the lake. It
was so calm not a ripple. A perfect June day. 'Write to her, K*t,'Siste,'

Madeleine said. 'What?' Kit started in alarm. 'You're wondering whether to write to your mother's friend or not. It can't do any harm. Write to her.' 'Lena?' Ivy!, Ivy hadn't seen Louis was there too. 'Did you think of coming down to the pub on Friday? Ernest was asking about you both the other day.' 'Hey, that would be good,' Louis said. 'But can we never buy a drink there? That's the only thing that bothers me about it. Tell Ernest, he'd understand.' 'The only thing Ernest can do for me, Louis, is to buy my friends a few beers. He loves to do it, give him the chance.' 'Oh, I'm easily turned into a kept man,' Louis said, continuing up the stairs. Ivy called up after them, 'I have that leaflet you wanted, Lena ... you know, about those evening classes . - .'. Louis groaned. 'She's not taking up more act' 'ties, is she? Don't encourage her, Ivy. Please, if you love me do,'" encourage her.' 'They're not for me, silly. They're for the clients. Right' * h Ivy, I'll come down later and have a look at them "It

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- was calm, she looked as if nothing had fier voice l,,pened. But inside she was churning. from her daughter. A letter was waiting, the letter in her hand. 'It's a child's 1-ena. You wrote to the children.' writing, ,you knew that. q didn't kno~ IOU, I really am. looked at each other for a

'in fr g t tied, too.' They long moment. Then ivy pulled out a chair. 'Sit down and read i t. I'll get us both a drink.' Lena began to read.

they'd write back. I'm frightened for

Dear Miss Gray, or maybe it's Mrs Gray, you didn't say. I took a long time to answer because I was thinking. I almost felt afraid. I don't know what I was afraid of. I think I am worried that you'll tell me something sad about my mother, like that she wrote to you and said she didn't love us or she was unhappy in Lough Glass. you to know she had a great time here, a So I wanted,, really good time. We have a terrific home, and Daddy is so good to everyone, and was best of all to Mother because he didn't fuss her. He knew she liked to walk by herself, and even if he was lonely he let her go. Sometimes he would stand at the kitchen window at the back of the house where it looks down over the take and h say, 'Look there's your mother walking by the lide, she loves the lake in Lough Glass.' And she had a

I lot of friends here, the Kellys were great friends of all ours, and my mother knew everyone in the town, and the, all still talk about her. So I thought I'd tell you that, in case you were going to tell Emmet and myself that Mother didn't have a good time or had any complaints. So that you would know what it was like. I haven't told Emmet about your letter because he's

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very young and doesn't really understand anythin all. It's not much of a letter but I wanted to explain-, Yours faithfully, Kit McMahon

Lena looked at Ivy. Her face was empty, as if Someone had reached in and taken all the life and feeling out of it, jv~ wondered if Lena were going to faint, she had never seen such a deathly white. 'Oh my God, Ivy,' she said. 'My God. What have I done? Oh Ivy, what on God's earth have I done?' 'It's all right, it's all right,' Ivy soothed. 'I have destroyed so many lives. Oh I wish I were at the bottom of the lake like they all think. That's where I deserve to be.' 'Stop 't!' Ivy spoke in a voice that Lena had never heard her use. 'Stop it this minute. I can't abide that kind of self pity. Think. You have a man upstairs who loves you and who is the love of your life. And now you have a chance to set the record straight, to make amends to this child.' 'How can I make amends? How can I evei--undo all this?' 'Tell her Helen McMahon was as happy as a sandboy. Tell her a pack of lies, let her have some good thoughts about her mother. You can do that.' 'It would all be a lie. I can't write my daughter lies.' 'Well you sure as hell can't write her the truth, can you?' Ivy said, refilling the glasses.

Clio's Aunt Maura brought them both Coronation mugsShe had a great time in London, she said. Very exciting, Everyone was in such a good mood. She was always very kind to Kit, and managed to say the right thing much more often t , did.,you look lovely, Kit, you're so tall and strong-looking too. Your mother would be proud of you.' Mrs Kelly always said 'your poor mother', as if Mother was someone to be pitied 212

~h had a great love for this place, she knew every fern and .~ e io's Aunt Maura said, and ,,e6 that grew by the lake,' Cl'ered clear of -any ,elly would

have ste Mrs Ya difficult thin; to do in Lough Glass nof the lake, ts. Kit had "entlo ue that Mother knew all the plan And it was tr Lena Gray, Mother's friend in London. ,wd that 1r'm r Lena, not Miss or Mrs. The

had been asked to call he;ting letters about mother wOrnan typed such long, interesthem to Dad. Surely it that Kit would love to have shownhow much would cheer up his sad heart to read about lake in the mother loved the place, sunset over the d cowslips in d the little clumps of primroses an evenings, an y was right; these But she knew t6t Lena Gra ~~erspring-g anyone else. hou hts that somehow didn't concern And Kit's heart was full to think that her mother had lovedher so much she had written all thesethings abouther

to a woman in England. it was so strange that Mother had never mentioned her. How private Mother must have been to have kept this great friendship all to herself .

Lena kept all her letters from Kit in Ivy's fla- 'It's not that I don't trust Louis,' she told Ivyi 'I know, love.' ivy did know. . a. 'It's such a _ omfort to me,' Lena sal

,I know, love, I know.' - about something, aren't 'But you're warning me again you), get too close to her.' 'Don't tell her too much. Don't 'Sister Madeleine?' 'Yes, Kit.' 'Do I ask too many q people don't have 'Not at all. It,s good to ask question! to answer them any more fully than they want to.'

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'So, I was wondering . . .' she paused. It was as if ~ didn't want to know the answer. 'I was wondering did mother use you as a letter box too?' 'Why do you ask that, child?' 'Well, you see her friend, Lena . . h . s e sort of said tlir, she and mother were writing to each other al thet'me,aod I never saw any letters coming from England up at honie, We'd have noticed the stamp, you see.' 'I know, I know.' Sister Madeleine was thoughtful, But she had not said yes or no. 'So did she, do you think?' 'Did

she what, Kit?' 'Did she get letters addressed to her through you?' 'Well, of course, there could be lots of ways Everyone does things differently.' Sister Madeleine was sliding away without refusing to answer. 'How do you mean?' Kit was trying her best. 'About people being different? It's a thing that could keep you thinking every day of your life how different we all are. And how different the animals are from each other. Like how do the little ducks know they can swim, and the little sparrows know they can fly. And people have such different ways of looking at things. 'Take your mother now. She knew every name of every child over there in the gypsy camp, and they all knew her, yet they lived such different lives. They would have done anything for your mother.' 'So, you mean she could have had letters addressed there?' 'Neither you nor I would ask them, would we, Kit? V5 like what we've always said, people are special. They h0c their own lives in their souls to live, And I wouldn't tell anyone about our conversations or who writes letters to whom. And you wouldn't tell Clio about what I told you, all about my cleaning those possessions, because we kno'W that it doesn't have to come up. Not that we're making secrets or anything - there's just no need to know 'I know.' Kit knew that she would never know whether

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- was the letter box for Lena Gray and Mother. But she this Now Only one problem. If Lena was so .25 sure it was. nd, why couldn't Father have i d such a close frie ,,c an know,, about t~ ard welcomed Rita to the convent w th

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~,jj eotshuerre - B Aerrne y v W Our
exceiienutswuroertkhhateryeo,uofwcaonutrtsoe dout I wonder are b this, R
e

Y e taking advantageof You-' ,,o Moth it is a pleasure.

I love to clean your lodgings like the Queen of England . coming to a convent in Lough Glass on traved you., Mother Bernard, of course, of the new Queen of England thinking herself approv ,he itead of a chu h. Any

church. And I don't well, it's her loss, Mother, I tell you that. A want to go back to my family. They don't need me and they only upset me. Also - . . ' She paused. 'Possibly. 'Do you have a young man in Lough GI Mother Bernard was coy. 'No, what I was going to 'No, not a fear of it, MO Emmet and Kit. 'MY, ay, I don't like to be too far from neart goes out to them.' 'Kit seems to be managing very well, better than I would have th'Yes, of the three of them she does seem to have found if she had a secret. Maybe she some kind of peace. It's as I prays to her mother, do you think?' Mother Bernard didn't want to go as far as this. 1 01 er. beautiful things. I get , wouldn't have . q can't see he r is, min ed

Although it would be a sin against charity to go around repeating it, Mother Bernard was one of the very sizeable number who believed that Helen McMahon might well ,have ended her own life, and would therefore not be in a place where anyone might pray to her with any hope of an answer.
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CHAPTER FIVE

Maura was very reassuring to hers' 'They're ister Lilian Kell, . all terrible between thirteen and It's their glands . . . I nature. .'. t's to do "'C"' Witt, 'Nobody has a nature like Clio. I'll swing for her befor, it's over, I really will., 'N , no, I see it everywhere. It's their bodies you sThey?re all ready to breed and raifamilies Ut so , fused ti~b clety won't let them, and so it's a very cosen e 'All we need is for them to be breeding all That's the onl th-round us. ly ing she hasn't done Yet.' Lilian Kelly's mouth was grim. Clio was a handful. The odd thing was that motherless girl who had been restless and wild lhetrlff, seemed to ha caught the attve settled down. Clio's blonde good looks W ention of many a young man, but her parena had been strict. There would be no outings of that sort until the summer she left school. Lessons were important. Fun could come later. Maura came down almost every weekend. She saidit was no distance

from Dublin. She loved seeing them all. And as the months and indeed years went by the weekends had fallen into a pattern. There would be a supper up at Kellvs' on a Friday night. And the next day spent playing golf. Martin t McMahon had been assured b y his friend the doctor bat exercise was essential for a man in his forties. They would have dinner in the golf club o' a' aturday night. n S

Martin had to be persuaded that it was a good thing to

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I eir own devices some of the time. his children to th

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we elen would want you to encourage them to be ~,,endent,' Maura had said. And that had settled it. McMahon liked the easy way that she mentioned dead wife. So many people dropped their voices when mentioned her. If they mentioned her at all. But while every other girl fought with a mother, Kit NicMahon developed a friendship that became closer and ,10,er with her mother's friend, Lena. Lena's typed letters arrived at Sister Madeleine's cottage week after week, pages and pages of conversation and memory and reaction to things that Kit wrote to her. Sister Madeleine mentioned the letters once. And only once, 'She writes long letters, your mother's friend?' Kit had paused for a moment. 'I'd show them to you, 51ster Madeleine, but ... it's hard to say ... it's kind of - not exactly a secret but you'd get the feeling she's only writing to me.' 'Oh, child. Don't think for a moment that I'd want to read what she says ... She tells you good things about your mother . . .' 'Marvellous things, they must have known every single thing about each other. But then, they wrote to each othe a lot. You know that because they must have written through here.' Sister Madeleine looked into the fire and said nothing. J feel so much better about Mother. I know her properly, what she was like as a child and everything. ft, I s like finding her diary or something . . .' That's a great blessing for you,' Sister Madeleine said, and she watched the little flame catch the wood. Lena had a ritual about reading the letters. It was in Ivy's flat at the kitchen table, surrounded by the ~luttered shelves, the walls on which there wasn't an inch 'f free space so great was the festooning of postcards, scarves, Ornaments and posters.

She would sip her small brandy and be transported, world of breezes on the lake, end of term exams, F4 Baily being an hour late because he had forgotter, thatt clocks went on. She read about her own son getting his tonsils out,t eating only) elly and ice cream, and how Rita had done ~ secretarial course but fortunately hadn't left to go I Dublin and get a goodjob; she was working in the offi,,, Sullivan's Garage across the road. Lena read of people she had disliked for thirteen yeu whom she now found fascinating. The Hickeys weren't speaking to each other, it,~ peared. If anyone went into the butcher's and askeflot three lamb &ps Mrs Hickey would repeat the phrase'. the tones of a Christian Martyr and then Mr Hickey wouk go and chop them. The days when she would talk to ~x customers and shout in to her husband were gone. M wrote that it was better than going to a play just to go in a~ watch them. Sometimes she begged Rita to let her go an~ do the shopping just for the sheer fun Qf it. She read about Philip O'Brien being so nice, and 6 mother being so awful. How Clio was fighting with her mother too, and how Deirdre Hanley wasn't in the door Hanley's drapery before she and her mother had a row. 'I sometimes think that if my mother had lived we wo~4 have had a fight too. Otherwise it wouldn't be natural! Lena's hands shook as she read this. She wrote page aftff page about it.

Your mother always spoke of you so lovingly, you W"" so strong, so full of courage. You would never 112` fought, you would have seen her for all she was, her weaknesses as well ...

Then she stopped and tore the pages up. She mustn't give herself away. She had been so careful for these years. She must not throw it all away now.

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the accounts for Stevie Sullivan that there was woman, felt kept is motberl a mournful iate about this , There was not entirely appropri w road and thing rning across tl olie of the McMahons CO uld set the -nit M*al -rs as she did. She decided she wo 'itt'[19 on al ff on a correct footing. !,lationship 0 -ng to be with us in the mornings,

,I,m glad you're go, ~Jta. you, Mrs Sullivan.' 1han e a little ironing a couple
 'And I thought maybe I'd leav Pita looked at her politely. But sal days a
 week your own time) Of course nothing. 'rO do in Mrs Sullivan?' was that
 you said, when she was beaten. She began to time, of course your soy, ising
 the problem, isn't it? pe we'll be to hours a morning. 1110ith in that
 rrespondence dealt W, i I ,,et a to be a challenge, isn't it?' work across the
 ,ime. It,s certa ack to domestic ,And then road)' it was a barb I've always
 felt to see it. But Rita pretended not wouldn't dream mcMahons' was my
 home in many ways - I ea.' Ir McMaha--- until his cMdren are rear fty asked
 Martin about Rita's Ob ' In Padd-, was proud of 'What was Kathleen knew -
 areat.,If there's 'That's always me to work three 11 his books and i co inly
 going you,11 go b
 'She seems to be doing very well.' , Martin Rita. 'She's cleaned it up for a
 start'I know, didn't I see it. Fresh paint, shelves, filing cabinets, .. old -
 Uffivan's! Could you beI'd say she has a hard time with Kathleen. , said
 Peter athleen ' 'Everyone has a hard time with Y ' t much of a Kelly 'But on
 the other hand, she wasn t deal hand herself, and she's got a handful in those
 two boys.
 'Stevie's a bit of a lad, isn't he)' Martin. Stevie 'We'll have to lock up our
 daughters, Sullivan knows a lot more than you and I knew when we we ' re
 nineteen.'Michael, a hooligan. 11imself and ,knd the young lad,

young Wall were found drinking the dregs Of enipt, bottles behind Shea's
 the other night. Little pups., But Peter Kelly was not as outraged as he
 might have sounded. He was very tolerant of what other people , Lough
 Glass regarded as the criminal side of young people, He couldn't see that it
 was all that very bad for Clio to have gone out in her mother's black satin
 slip to the pictures on a summer night, but Lilian still hadn't recovered from

die outrage. 'It's a great blessing that Maura comes down so regularly,' he confided to Martin. 'Lilian would be at Clio's throat a lot of the time if we didn't have company to be pleasant in front of, so to speak . . .' Martin's face brightened up. 'She's great company, Maura. I'm surprised that she's able to find so much time to visit, but it's grand to see her.' Peter Kelly sipped his pint thoughtfully. He knew very well why Maura found so much time to come and visit. He wondered would Martin McMahon ever realise that he was the main attraction. Rita realised it, however. She spoke about it to Sister Madeleine. 'I thought that might be the way the land was lying all right.' 'How on earth would you know, Sister? You don't go visiting ... How do you know things?' 'I just feel them.' Sister Madeleine knew that Kit mentioned how her father laughed when Clio's aunt was around, and that the golf had become a regular feature of the weekends. 'When Emmet came to read his poetry with her, he sometimes mentioned Anna Kelly's aunt. She liked poetry too apparently, and had often asked him to read for her because she had forgotten her glasses. 'And is she a kind woman?' Sister Madeleine asked. 'Very, I'd say.' 'Well, maybe he should think?' ask her to supper, don't you'

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was wondering about that, with the Kellys, would you Oh, I'd say so, the first time anyway.'

.. . and next week we've asked the Kellys and Clio's Aunt Maura to supper. It's a mad idea really, but Rita said that Dad was getting too many meals up in their house, and not giving any in return. I said that Dad paid

for meals in O'Brien's Hotel or up at the golf club, but Rita said hadn't he got his own home to entertain them in. So that's it. Not us mind you, not Emmet and me, or Clio and Anna or anything. . . just grown-ups. There'll be soup and roast lamb and trifle. And wine. Dad's delighted. I'm in two minds. You might think this is very silly but I feel it's a bit disloyal. You see, when Mother was here she could have cooked a meal for the Kellys and their Aunt Maura any time she wanted to. Mother was such a terrific cook. It seems silly all of us struggling to make a dinner when she could have done it so easily. But she didn't. Perhaps she didn't like the Kellys. It's

so hard to know. I have this feeling that if she had liked them then she would have had this dinner. . .

Lena felt her eyes mist over. How little escaped the quick ~iiind of a child. She had neither liked nor disliked the Kellys; they represented all that was safe and dull about Lough Glass. She had deliberately held herself from confiding in them from a wish to stay separate and free, as if she knew Louis would come back one day and take her away. And now she had left the legacy of that indifference with this innocent girl who thought so well of her that even after her death she didn't want to do anything to compromise her memory. Lena wrote immediately.

I don't know if you're right about the Kelly family. Helen always spoke of them in her letters as people she liked. She said you and Clio had such a stormy

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friendship - sometimes it was till death do us times worst enemies. I know she didn't want t' `p1 y go~, with them, but she sometimes felt guilty aboutjep~,... ing your father of it. She used to urge him apparentIN, but he'd say no, not without her. So it's good now that he does play. I hope the dinrit, party goes well. I'd love to be a fly on the wall.

'What'll happen if he marries again?' Ivy asked one day. 'Who?' 'Your ex.

Martin.' 'Oh, he won't marry again.' Lena was surprised at the question.

'From all you tell me I know these characters better than Mrs Dale's Diary

... Ehere's this Maura appearing a lot' 'He wouldn't marry Maura.' Lena

smiled at the thought. 'Well, why not? Everyone thinks you're dead, he's fret

to marry. Wouldn't it be sensible?' 'Martin wasn't sensible when it came to

love. If he had been sensible he'd have married Maura in the first place and

none of this mess would have happened.' 'And Kit and Emmet would never

have existed.' 'It might have been better. They're only existing for me in a

limbo.' :What's wrong, love?' I don't know, Ivy. I don't know.'

But Lena did know what was wrong. Louis had been restless. He had been nearly five years in one place. He felt it was time to move on. He said they should go somewhere warm, like the south of Spain. A lot more British people were going there these days." They could get a partnership there. There wasn't much he didn't know about the business. They could make a killing", Live in a proper climate. 'What about my job?' Lena had asked. 'It's only a job, darling. You went in there the first 62' and stayed . . .'

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'S(d*d you,' she countered. 'But do we both stayed because 'Ve got thing of the jobs.' ,Lcna. I t ere are millions of *obs.'

,rhey,re our jobs, they're our careers. You practically run the Dryden, I practically run Millar's.' ,So? We're not married to them,' Louis had said. ,Nor to each other,' she had replied. it was a bit of a problem, the marriage business. Technically Helen McMahon was dead. If she went to get a birth certificate, then a corresponding death certificate might be produced. Better not to risk it and unearth the Lord knew how many problems. That's what they had said. But there was a part of Lena that thought Louis had taken the whole thing very calmly if he had really loved her with the deep love he claimed, he would have made some more determined attempts to marry her. Jessie Park and Mr Millar had a long romance. It was assisted throughout by the best efforts of Lena Gray. Often on a Saturday Mr Millar, Jessie and Lena had lunch together. Then Lena would excuse herself early and leave them to chat. They made the big decisions about the business at these meetings. Lena would take notes and type them up on Mondays. Business at the agency was booming; they to take on someone else. Probably someone young, they thought. Young and glamorous looking. 'What about Dawn Jones?' Lena had suggested. 'She's betw enjobs. We couldn't get much more glamorous than her.' 'Would Dawn find us lively enough?' Jessie wondered. 'She usually likes places with lots going on.' . . 'Lots going on with us,' Mr Millar said, missing the Point. 'I think Dawn's a bit tired of getting pawed by people,' Lena said. 'She might well be glad of a spell in a more responsible setting.'

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Dawn Jones had been one of their earliest sl,,, stories. She had arrived for an interview looking like a tan about to set out for Soho: heavy make-up, long 7-cut sweat-soaked and nicotine-stained fingers. 'None of my sisters even had an office job. I'd love to say I worked in an Office,' Dawn had begged. Her innocence and enthusiasm had appealed to Jessie and Lena. Tactfully they had advised her about dresses,,, differently and she had been given a new hair do in Grace West's salon. Her typing speeds were adequate; it had not proved difficult to place the lovely Dawn in any office. The problem was that it had proved difficult to persuade many of her employers and colleagues to keep their hands off her. There was something about Dawn even in a neat navy twin set and pale blue skirt that suggested excitement and adventure. She had done a spell in the Dryden, in Mr Williams' office. Louis had said she was sweet but silly. Nothing you could put a finger on, but just not someone you'd trust to take a message or type up a report. Dawn had left the Dryden after three months and James Williams had got a pleasant middle-aged woman, motherly, efficient, much more what was needed. An excellent reference had been provided for Dawn, but everywhere it was the same story. She was too sexy to be taken seriously. Lena wondered if this might be to their advantage. Young girls loved someone to follow, a role model they could identify with. She and Jessie were too old and settled; if they saw Dawn in Millar's they might think that secretarial work was much more glittering than they had believed. Jim Millar said yes, he saw the point, and Jessie said she thought Jim was absolutely right. So Dawn was approached. 'I'm not sure, Mrs Gray, really. I don't know. Would it be right here, do you think?' Dawn looked doubtfully around the office. 'We're doing a face lift, Dawn. And having journalists and photographers come in and everything.'

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she had won the battle. She sent a press release to the local newspapers and to the trade she sent a description of Dawn with it her job in a model agency to agency had been a brief interlude and had not wanted to dwell. There were

of modelling, it appeared. Still, it gave rest of the ~ be necessary glamour to attract the inte

t e and took pictures of Dawn then they ,knd if they cam e there was to mention Millar's also, the agency wher ell as on and presentation as w emphasis on grooming ds. It was just the right . 'rlg and shorthand spee quiries for the ,~proach and resulted in a great many en ,jessie and Jim were delighted. ICY* Jessie was ,It,, going so well I can hardly believe 1

reathless. would I do without 1Y two girls?' said Jim "What , lillar looking at them both with pride. ' Jessie asked in a Do you think he's fond Of me, Lena? whisper when Mr Millar had left. ,of course he is, of course he is,' Lena was.reassuring -1 wish I knew what to do, I'm so inexperienced at all this sort of thing ... you'd know, Lena.' felt she 'No, I'm pretty hopeless too,' Lena said. She . the ,poke the truth. She had no idea how to cope with)uis had for her until recently . She kind of passion that L(w;1,d have,given anything on earth to know. u~veso terrific looking and YO Lit.....re so well, d I was wondering, had you ""you leA5~

- got such a gorgeous husban ,n h ts or anything ...)' Jessie's big pale eyes were , "Onties. And V,

'Oes, ,ho had left 1111ar S. rhe model Dawn ,e on which dcfintltons fulyl ofinnocence and hope. takes his time over things but 'I think he's a man who Lena said. makes the right decision in the end,' as biting ,,suppose someone else comes along?' Jessica w

er lower lip. Ibelieve me-' 'No, not for Mr Mi lar
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And Jessie did because Lena looked so authoritative only she knew, Lena thought, if only she knew where' was asking advice about love and marriage. Slit Dawn was delighted with all the publicity. you,,t really done

me a good turn, Mrs Gray,' she said, 'and I'm working here with women actually. I didn't think I would. They're sort of more reasonable than men, aren't they?', 'Some of them are, I suppose,' Lena tried to hide her smile. Dawn was proving a good choice. They had even included her name in the brochure they sent out, just -in order to use her picture. Lena was proud of all they had achieved, and she couldn't help talking about it to Louis. He was still in poor form but at least he had stopped mentioning Spain. 'You're putting a lot of effort into that place,' Louis said to her. 'So are you, in the Dryden. It's the kind of people we are.' She sat on the floor with her head in his lap. She loved the evenings they had together; the shabby flat was in no way small and shabby to her. 'What's the point?' Louis said waving around him. 'Working our guts out to keep four walls in a kip like this? 'It isn't a kip.' Lena was indignant. 'Well it's hardly the Camino Real,' he said, his mouth turned down. He was playing with her hair as she spoke, idly twisting the strands around. Louis touched a lot. He wasn't a man to sit in his own space and make statements across a table, he always had a hand on her arm or neck, or was stroking her cheek. 'What's the Camino Real?' she asked. 'It's just a phrase ... like the kind of names hotels would have, but in Spain ... where we could easily work . . .' She was silent. 'Easily,' he said again, his big dark eyes pleading at her. She felt a rising panic in her throat. She must keep the conversation away from Spain. Lena would have given up so much else, so much that was far more important. She could arrange for Kit to write to her anywhere, that wasn't

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oblerri- The problem was that if Louis went to Spain one. She could not get a passport. Lena Gray would go alone 110 would not exist.

,Do you think we should get drunk?' Clio asked Kit. ,Now?, -they were walking up to school for the last frantic weeks of revision before the exams.

,veil, not this minute but soonish. it's an experience we haven't yet had.' and go back to even ,How soonish) Should we turn round or make us a paddles' or maybe ask Mr and Mrs O'Brien a few cocktails before class~', you make a jeer out of everything,' Clio complained. t.)Kit was indignant. I'm prepared to do 'I do not think I might be poor anything, you know I am. But I think that's nothing to get plastered just coming up to the exams,

Suppose it took a hold of us like those old fellows with runny eyes and red noses waiting for Foley's to open.' clio giggled. Sometimes Kit could be very funny. But then sometimes for no reason she flared up and took offence, There were certain subjects that made her very touchy. Clio was dying to ask her whether she thought that Aunt Maura might be going to get engaged to Kit's father, and if she would like the idea of having a stepmother and of their being cousins. But this was territory she mustn't venture into. ow whether Aunt Maura and Mr She would love to kn bit, And if they got McMahon ... well ... courted a Normally these married, would they do it properly in bed, ith a best friend, but with were things you could talk about w nuts Kit McMahon there were so many areas that were off li ~ 'Have you ever been drunk, properly out of your mind drunk?' Kit asked Stevie Sullivan. andsome even when 'Why do you ask?'he said. He was h nreli covered in grease and wearing filthy overalls. But u able of course. Everyone knew that.

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'It's just that you've done most things. Clio and I are thinking of getting drunk when we finish our exams and I was looking for suggestions. Like what's cheap and and wouldn't make us too sick?' 'You're asking the wrong one. I don't know.' 'I bet you do,' Kit insisted. 'No truly, we had too much of that in this house when I was young.' Kit had forgotten. She felt ashamed that she hadn't remembered the alcoholic father who saw animals and all kinds of things emerging from walls when he was in the horrors. But she decided against apologising. She hated people saying thoughtless things about drownings or people gone missing and then being covered with confusion. She disliked the embarrassment and the apologies more than the original mistake. 'Yes, I suppose that makes sense,' she said in a matter of fact way. 'It does to me, but not to Michael. He'd drink it off a sore foot as they say.' 'God, who are they, the people who say that?' Kit recoiled at the thought. 'The kind of low people I mix with, Kit McMahon,'he said and left her.

There was always a keen rivalry between Mother Bernard and Brother Healy about the Leaving Certificate results, They were published in the local newspaper so that all could see and compare. Brother Healy always

said that the odds were weighted in favour of Mother Bernard. Girls did all those easy subjects like art and domestic science. it was not so difficult for Mother Bernard to build up a frightening total of passes and honours amongst her pupils. But the nuns were adamant that she had a harder route to go. Many of the small farmers were anxious for their daughters only to learn the basic skills that would turn them into acceptable farmers' wives. When the time came they were suspicious of girls learning French and Latin.

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would have preferred classes in buttermaking and They I .and in many ways they had a point. Why poultry raising to leave her ? - the expectations of a girl who was going to raise a parish ;,ther's house and move into one fairly similar

away ? a very bright crop this year, Brother ,And have You asked courteously but disguising

Healy?' mother Bernard the lie of the land and assess her deeper interest to know own chances in this year's contest. s and idle blocks 'Dunderheads, Mother Bernard. Dunces de la crime

of wood ... and you have the crime this time I expect?' ther. Empty vessels with ,Empty vessels I'm afraid, Brother I I nothing tinkling inside except jazz music. ght,' agreed ,This jazz is a great distraction to them all ri Brother Healy. re about the ways of the youth of Wise though they were not sound on its musical taste. jazz Lough Glass they were not . n that it had been a previous was not the enemy with' generation. The noise tinkling in the hearts of the young people of Lough Glass was the early sound of rock and roll.

'Peter, will You speak to Clio?' 'No, Lilian. To be frank, I won't.' 't speak to your 'Well, that's a nice thing to say, you won't own daughter.' 'She's only my daughter, my own daughter, and I'm only asked to speak to her when some dreadful thing has to be happened for which some terrible punishment is meted out. As it happens ... as it happens, Lilian) I've had a very bad day, a horrible day. And I'm not going to speak to either of my own daughters or even my own wife, I'm going down to Paddles' for a pint with my friend

Martin. Right?' Vell, sorry for existing, and running your house and
!aising your children, both of whom are turning into Juvenile delinquents.'

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'Let them turn, they'll turn back again when there's no future in it.'
Peter Kelly was out the door. knew Anna's offence had something to do
with cosmetic, and perfume. He suspected that Clio's had something to do
with getting her ears pierced like a gypsy without asking permission. It
was too trivial. He banged out of the house and down the road towards the
privacy and peace of Paddles'. There wasn't much peace in Paddles', as it
happened. Mr Hickey was singing away in a corner. 'If I've told you once,
John, I've told you a dozen times. This is not a singing house,' Paddles
remonstrated with him. 'Oh bollocks, Paddles. You wouldn't know a singing
house if you saw one.' 'Well I see that one and what's more I run it, and
you're getting no more drink in it unless you cut out that caterwauling this
instant,' Paddles said. 'Are you barring me? Do my ears deceive me or do I
hear you barring me - John J. Hickey, High Class Victualler, barred from
your pathetic premises?' 'You heard me, John,' Paddles said. 'Well, I'd deem
it an honour to be barred from such a dump. An honour I will wear proudly.'
He staggered to the door. 'And an honour not to have a drink with the scum
who frequent it.' Mr Hickey smiled pleasantly around at all his neighbours,
friends and clients before stepping out briefly into the fresh air that he
would encounter on the way to Foley's bar. Martin and Peter exchanged
glances. 'That was a good day's work, Paddles,' Peter said approvingly.
'Can't you frighten him, Dr Kelly) Tell him his liver's packing up. It
probably is,' Paddles said. 'No, I can't, Paddles. I'm in a poor position to be
telling him that, seeing as I've seen him across this bar every night since
time began. And you're in an equally poor position' Paddles, seeing that you
sell him the drink. it's a strange world where no one takes any
responsibility.'

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paddles had moved away, going to serve the other
of the bar when the door flew open and Mrs Hickey stood there carrying
something very alarming on a tray. 'What's that, Mrs Hickey?' Paddles'
voice sounded less

than confident. 'Ah Paddles, this is a sheep's head. I thought you'd like

to see it, and maybe the rest of the clientele might like to have a look at it too ... There was an uneasy murmuring around the premises, a low dark pub, very basic in its design and decor, and not a place where ladies came at all, not to mention carrying a large sheep's head on a white butcher's tray. 'Yes, well thank you, Mrs Hickey. Thank you indeed.' 'I'll just take it round so everyone can see it properly,' she said. She had a , , mad glint in her eye. No one wished to upset her or even enter into it with her. They nodded and muttered vague sounds of approval as the object was carried around for their inspection. 'This is the way John looks when he comes home from here each evening; he has the features and colour of a sheep's head. I thought you should not be denied the pleasure of seeing his for yourself.' 'Well, John isn't actually here himself at the moment . . .' Paddles began uneasily. 'But when we see him ... well . . .' his voice trailed away. 'No need to mention it at all , Mrs Hickey said airily 'Just wanted you all to be aware of everything that's going

on , . 'Thank you, Mrs Hickey,' said Paddles gravely, in the tone of voice that implied the show was over. 'Would you live anywhere else?' Martin asked Peter Kelly when Mrs Hickey and her tray were safely off the premises. Peter Kelly had come in about to inveigh against the kind of society they lived in, people who had told him that a baby's death was all for the best, all for the best because you see she hadn't got a father. It had upset him greatly that a pious morality should be so inverted that it could think a

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bastard child better dead than surviving to be a child raised with love in a small mountain cottage. But there ;,, Martin, peaceable, easy going and

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-d the lake was her garden,' Uta said. She was
1~ al . ut er hand over her

She didn't stop and put her self-consciously, suddenly remembering that Helen McMahon ought as usual, and in the take, 'She said no one could have a better had died. I couldn't care less about her, or, their, didn't inherit that from her. I see, Kit said. place of your Own,' Rita surrounding you will when you have a join. 'Now, get some clothes on before

Sergeant p over the wall and arrests you for o,Connor comes indecent exposure.

Lena looked around her little home and tried to be ,biective. Why did Louis say it was a kip? Why did he say they hadn,t much to show for their years of hard work? ,y's house had improved considerably since they had gone to live there. The outside was painted and the railings had been repaired. So many of London's railings had disappeared during the war, wrenched up to form part of the war effort. Lena had never known that before. The hall was carpeted now and the banisters had been replaced. In fact the only flat that had not been given an overhaul was the one that she and Louis lived in. And they had beautified it themselves, done it up with pictures and rugs and wall hangings. To Lena it was a haven, the place where she made passionate love to the man who was the centre of her life, where she cooked him little meals and talked to him and looked out at the sky of London ... She felt the freedom of the place everywhere she looked. True, it was small. But they didn't entertain People; they didn't want to. Louis was Out so late, his hours were getting worse and worse. It was the same everywhere, once you got some responsibility, you found Your life was no longer your own. But Lena loved it here. She loved the undemanding friendship of ivy Brown, she would never find anyone to

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share her post secrets with such glee. She loved being around the corner from the agency. She could even dasb home at lunch time and put a flower and a love letter and maybe a sticky almond bun for him to find if hecame home early on a split shift. And Louis loved this place too. He had shopped with her in markets for outlandishly coloured bedspreads, and for the mirror with a cherub on the side of it that looked as decadent as you could get. Why had he said it was a dump, a kip, and that they had nothing to show for their time here? He liked Ivy and it was near the tube station. Perhaps it just wasn't smart enough for his image of how they should live. A flat without a bathroom. But suppose, suppose one of the other flats in the house came free ... suppose. But it was silly to think that. Most of the people in the house were settled. She must not start chasing rainbows.

But there was a God or a fate or something, Lena told herself. Three days later Ivy told her that the New Zealanders on the second floor were leaving. 'Homesick, they say.' Ivy shook her head doubtfully. 'You couldn't be homesick for out there surely.' Anyway, they'd given her a month's rent and they were moving out now. 'You can help me choose the tenants,' ivy offered. 'After all, they'll be your neighbours. You want to have people you'll get along with.' 'How did they leave it?' Lena asked. 'Come and have a look.' Ivy picked the key of her rack and they went upstairs. It had high ceilings and big windows. This was never a place that LoulS Gray could dismiss and run down. Notlif they furnished it properly. 'How much does it cost?' Lena asked. 'I never offered it to you .
. I thought you were saving for a place of your own to buy,' Ivy said. OW
'No, no nothing like that.' Lena would not let Ivy kn that the savings were very little. They spent what they had

She would have to make economies to rent this place but ,ould be worth it ,Does he know?' ivy asked.

,of course not, I only knew myself ten seconds ago. 'Let Me get it spruced up a b t before you show ,what will you do?' rhey stood looking at it, minds What do you think?' ' es over from full of ideas. 'Ernest can send me a few chippi rk for the pub, you know, meant to be doing a day's wo i the Brewery but out on six other jobs at the same time.' 'A big cupboard in the bedroom maybe.' 'To hang all Louis Gray's)ackets in and lay out his nice shoes: ivy was teasing her. 'Don't say a word against him. a week, 'I wouldn't dare,' Ivy said. 'Listen, give me then I'll show it to the pair of you and see what you think. if you change your mind, that's no problem. I'll let it anyway.' 'I'd say he'll love it,' Lena said, her heart full of hope again. This might chase the notion of Spain out of his mind. For a while anyway. excited by the proportion And he did love it. He was so he told Ivy- He of the rooms, better than the Dryden, waltzed Lena around the big empty rooms and said that at last they'd have space for a proper life in London. He bought a bottle of champagne and the three of them drank the health of the new ho i me. and 'I can't wait to move in' Louis said. He was eager excited like a child, he moved around the room touching the walls, the door handles ... stroking them almost. 'Now we're making something of ourselves,' he said, as Pleased as punch.

There was a hoteliers' conference in Scarborough. 'That's a place I've always wanted to go,' said Lena. 'I'll tell you about it.'

'Will I not see it with you?'Lena had been about to take a few days off from the agency. 'No spouses, I'm afraid.' 'Tell me about it then,' she said with a great smile.

She was choosing fabric for the curtains of the new flat when she ran into James Williams in Selfridges. 'More blue and gold for your agency?' he asked. He had remembered. 'No, just browsing.' 'You're looking fit and well.' He always eyed her rather over-appreciatively she thought. 'Thank you, James.' She smiled her routine smile acknowledging the compliment. 'Enjoy Scarborough,' he said. 'Will you be there too?' she said, her voice coming somehow through the icy feeling in her throat. 'No, I have no excuse, unfortunately. They do some work, but mainly it's a thank you to a lot of these guys who work so hard and such highly unsocial hours.~Gives them a chance to entertain their wives properly without having to count the pennies.' 'And do all wives go?' 'Yes. They're not going to pass on a trip like that. Enjoy it anyway.' 'I will,' she said. And held the counter to steady herself

it's probably all in my mind, Kit wrote, but I have this feeling that Dad and Clio's Aunt Maura are walking out. I know that's a very old-fashioned expression, but I can't think what else to call it. And there's nobody I could say it to. They've had a couple of meals in O'Brien's Hotel. Philip told me their heads were very close, but Philip is always talking about people's heads being close. It's sort of on his mind. But would you think at their age they might really and

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truly be thinking of getting married? I know It wouldn't come to anything like that without Dad discussing it with us, but I was very keen to know what you thought.

. time the answer came to Kit is so fast. It was

very quickly. It must be a very short letter. ...e been by return of Post - so would

Write and tell me. Do you think Maura happy? He has had a hard life. He make your father and you and Emmet deserves happiness, Then tell me would it make you upset to see another woman like it or walking around where your mother did, in her room. When You tell me these things I'll write and tell You what I think.

Kit wrote: (he had a separate room) I How did you know Mother would have told never told you that. I can't believe she told you. Please let me know.

Lena paced her office. She must never write quickly again. That's how mistakes happened. But it was all right. It could be covered.

How observant you are, Kit, Lena wrote. Your mother did indeed tell me that she had a separate room. She said she didn't sleep well at night with anyone else in the room. She didn't need to ask me to tell it to nobody, since I spoke to nobody about her. Our

correspondence was a sort of secret life, in a way like yours and mine is. Other people might think it sad,

pathetic even. But I don't. And I hope you don't. Your mother never did. You have no idea how lonely I felt when her letters ceased. Tell me you understand.

I understand, Kit wrote. But I don't know why you knew that Mother died. You must have read in a letter, I hoped writing to you that you have known at once when she stopped complaining, so I only said that in the first letter, Lena wrote; that I could get on to introduce myself to you, Perhaps

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you might not have wanted to write, to stay in touch out of loyalty to your mother. I didn't want to tell about our letter writing.

It's all so confusing, Kit wrote. You're such a mystery, woman, I know nothing about you, nothing at all. And yet you know everything about me. Did you tell my mother about yourself? Did she destroy your letters? There was nothing found when she left. Nothing at all that would make us know of you. I'll tell you anything you like, Lena wrote. Just make a list of questions and I'll try to answer them.

She knew it was risky. She was getting in too deep. She would have to invent a persona for Lena, a past that had never existed. She feared what questions would be asked. In fact, there were no searching questions. It was as if Kit had decided it would be impolite. Instead, there was something much more heartbreaking, something Lena could never have foreseen. And yet, of course, it was the normal response of a friend. Kit wanted her to come to Ireland.

Can you come and see us? You have plenty of money And if you want it all to be a secret still you could just stay in O'Brien's Hotel.

There were ways in which Kit hoped she wouldn't come' Maybe she would be a disappointment to meet. Perhaps she would have a funny cockney accent from living in England. Perhaps she wouldn't be nearly as nice to talk to as to write to. But it was getting to be silly now, and if Lena was Mother's age she must be in her middle forties, too old really for having a life writing to a teenage girl in Ireland about events long ago. Lena sounded very normal, and she had a husband who was a hotelier. And she worked in a big employment agency somewhere. And she lived in some woman called Mrs Brown's house.

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od maybe she was made I Kit would know he came Madelein
like Miss Havisham - Anyway
Dear Sister . C, - 1

, as a postbox for me for years you have been acting with a lack of want to thank you for your discretion and curiosity Kit McMahon speaks of you with such admiration and devotion I wonder if I could ask you a question that I come to you for great favour. Kit has suggested a great variety of reasons I do not want to do Glass. For ~ ~ but I am so. it would not be good for her or for anyone. By myself first in this instance, I am not thinking about myself. From what Kit tells me. You really thinking of some solution to a seemingly impossible situation. can always come up with a way you could help impossible situation. if there is any sense not to meet Kit to see that it would be a good thing for ~ our debt. ,h Glass or at 111 would be for ever in your life I just know You I don't want to invent a string of lies ,
will believe me when I say it would not ' be for the best. Yours in despair,
dear Sister Madeleine, Lena Gray My dear child, I have always believed that there is a life of the imagination which suffers when it is mixed with reality. Lives can live in Two worlds can be kept separate. parallels and never meet. I wish you peace and happiness and the knowledge that you have friends, and have always had them, here. Yours sincerely in Jesus Christ,
Madeleine shO' Lena handed the letter to Ivy. 'She knows, doesn't ,I expect so', Ivy said. What now. I know for 'She won't tell,' Lena said. That is certain.'

'Are you doing a line with Philip O'Brien?' Clio derna, 14 to know. ~:t: 'God, Clio. I wish I had a different friend. I've 6 I'll saying It for ever, of course I'm not doing a line Philip. Whatever that means.' 'He's always here. Hanging around. Or else you, te,, there,' Clio grumbled. 'Well, we do live beside each other.' 'Has he kissed you?' 'Shut up.' 'We swore to tell each other everything. I told you about the spin the bottle at the party.' 'I told you about everything. It's just that there's not anything to tell.' 'So he did kiss you, but because you and he are in love you can't tell me, is that it?' Kit couldn't stop giggling. 'That's not it, okay? He sort of kissed me, but he missed because I didn't know it was happening, and I looked the other way and he got my chin. And he said sorry, and I said sorry and we tried again, and it seemed a bit awkward. So you know every single thing. Now, will you leave me alone.' 'When did all this happen?' Clio wasn't satisfied. 'Oh, Clio. It was a day last week. . 'And you never told me.' 'I'll tell you what I will tell you. Stevie Sullivan's got a new girl.' 'No!' Now this did seem a matter of interest and some disappointment to Clio. 'Yes. An American girl staying at O'Brien's Hotel. tier parents came here to look for their roots. They're up in the graveyard most of the time, and she went across the road and got talking to Stevie.' 'I bet she did.' 'She's gorgeous looking, according to Philip. And anyway, Stevie came over to the hotel and she said to her Mom and Pop that he was taking her to meet a gang of kids across the lake, and they said fine. And there was no gang

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;~6s at all of course. It was Just Stevie putting %he act I ne soon,' Clio said grimly. nce & she'll be gothey'll be out of here like have found their rootsBye from Mr Stevie fro m hell, And it'll be Bye)Jllivan S little new pal.' It's another Careers talk this afternoon,' Kit groaned.

-~eah , hopeless,' Clio said. q suppose they have to tell whats available.' -
 Nothing's available except nursing and teaching, and
 ~',a't,s only if you get called.' o said. 'And I'd hate both of those,' Cli you to
 be a doctor,'Kit mother Bernard's mad keen for
 s because she want,~ to say that a doctor came out 1hat it the convent here,
 and because she'd like me to have my for seven years. .ead down studying
 'So wha. t are you going to do?' Maura says its a great 'I'm going to do a
 B.A. Aunt ,,epping stone.' 'Where will it make you step 'Into the arms of a
 rich husband, I hope.' 'You don't want that.' as well, and experienced. I don't
 'No, I want him sexy want him missing my mouth and hitting me on the
 chin with his nose., Cl-)) 'IS it a wonder that nobody'd teU you anything,
 10. 'But you're getting very secretive altogether,' Clio said, with narrowing
 eyes. 'What about now'
 'You go down to Sister Madeleine's when I'm not with you, for one thing.'
 'Yes.' And 'And then there's this face-bashing w ith Philip.
 ~Wre going off mysteriously to study-' . three 'Well, I do study. We are
 doing our Leaving in Months, time, if you haven't forgotten. And are you
 studying now. 'Yes:

'You haven't any books, you only have paper. 'I'm making notes.' 'Let's see.'
 Clio snatched the writing case and u, it. Inside she saw a stamped envelope
 and a half letter. 'No you're not studying, you're writing let, love letters.'
 'Give it to me.' Kit's face was white with anger. 'Let me read . . .' 'Give it to
 me, Clio.' Clio was reading 'Dearest ... dearest what, I can his name.'
 W1 A a cry Kit lunged at her. 'You are such a selfist., greedy person. You
 have no manners, you have rc decency.' 'No manners, no decency,' Clio
 mocked, holding the letter high. But Kit gave her a totally unexpected
 punch it stomach that winded her. Then Kit grabbed the lettei ran out of the
 classroom. She met Mother Bernard in the corridor. 'Ladies are rarely seen
 running, Mary Katherine.' 'I know. Sorry, Mother. I was running to the
 library to do more revision.' 'Right. But Just walk briskly. Do you feel all
 right? You look flushed.' 'I'm fine, Mother.' Kit escaped before the groaning
 lit should be discovered and further explanations sought.
 'Emmet, will you deliver a note up to Kellys' for nie.' 'No.' 'I'll pay you.'
 'How much? Threepence?' 'I was going to say a penny. 'I won't do it for a

penny.' 'You're a horrible, horrible person,' 'Okay. I won't do it at all.' 'When I think of all I do for you.' Kit was stung. 'What exactly do you do for me?'
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protect you. ~o do you protect me from people shouting at you- me. People ~~-
rorn P,O y you don't Protect ,ob, don't be silly it ~"~oiit at everyone. nicely
about Youalways speak you* , not that bad. Why

wh shouldn't Y00 I'T,, y about me u be giving out
O !Ul ~ir sisters and brothers ,E,eryone else gives Out about the
3on)c Who gives out. Clio does. Stevie does. Patsy Hanley gives out about
'Deirdre.' mmet shrugged as if these were people With vell,' E I crosses to
bear. tten as everyone else. I used to 'oh all right. Be as to think you were
special.' 'What did you want deliveredF 'A note to Cho! with it yourself?
You and 'Why couldn't you walk up I Clio have a path worn to each other's
houses.' 'I'm not talking to her! 'So it's a note making it all up?' 'Noit's not.
It's a note saying how bad she is, and how she pokes her horrible nose
everywhere it isn't wanted.'
-Itiatil. only make th ... V .-rse.' Emmet was philosophical. 'Yes, but I don , t
care. They couldn't be bad enough between us as far as I'm concerned! ill,
and it will 'But then you'll go and apolOV Sall be back where it was! Emmet
had seen these fights ebb and flow over the years. I don't think so this time.'
'That's what you always say,, Emmet said. 'You'll forgive her or she'll
forgive you, and things will be the same for a while.' qui e right. That was
the Kit thought about it. He was it
even think nicely
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way the pattern always had been. But not this time,, Clio had almost
snatched her secret from her. Out of nothing but sheer pique she had nearly
found., that Mother's friend Lena was writing these letters. And Clio
discovered that then it would all have been over. h' so me way Kit knew that
it had to be secret to continue, sh, wished that Lena had been able to say

something sensibit about why she couldn't come to Lough Glass, it SOurid,~ like a load of excuses. 'So what happens now?' Emmet asked. He was wonder. ing whether to bring his price down. But life was full of surprises. 'I'll tell you what happens next,' Kit said cheerfully tucking her arm into his. 'I am going to buy you an ice cream, how about that?' 'What do I have to do for it?' Emmet asked suspiciously. 'Nothing, nothing at all. just admit that you have tht best sister in these parts for miles.' 'I suppose I do really,' Emmet said thoughtfully. Ansl together they ran up towards the shop before Kit might change her mind,

'Sweetheart?' Louis rang Lena at the agency. 'The very person,' she said, and the smile came into her voice. 'You know this conference?' 'Oh, yes.' Did it sound casual enough, she wondere& Did it give any telltale hint that she had been thinkile about nothing else for weeks? 'The rules have changed.' 'In what way?' 'We are allowed to take spouses, partners, whatever-',~ great silence. 'So . . 'So Louis?' 'So, isn't that great? Pack your glad rags and we'll have I ball.' 'I can't.'

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wh t?' nged to babyllt 11 that. I've arra ove, you know ~In ti the office open. No, there are too PArk, and to keep Cople, 1 can It back out n. you can't turn p ike this al,,al 1 never have anything 1 11 this up.' arlier 1 wouldn't have set a 1,d known e

know carlier~' 1 didn't bloody ' on a train journey, ',, she would love to have gone ho Yorkshire. She. would have taken out a ,X~er,ses paid, tog places like the Wash and wondered were they passif' the Humber. d for the first time since the time They wout~ have staye I otel. , h, rniscarriage, that terribleysit to Brighton, in a h would have had free time, time to talk and ,,,,ther. They and She could have looked well for him, together. ed in front of i other ---en hal not n her)py. She could have sparkI im proud of her. The tight k ~cople and made hi se he would have wanted ,~amach would have gone becau to f all between them. She heard she had allowed a silenceor is that 10, ,m grumble.'Are you making your mind up, 'Why didn't you tell me earlier?5 she asked. lairsing ,Because 1 didn't kn ow earlier,' he said, as if exp

an idiot or a child. Lena said. James Williams knew earlier,' what do you
 nican~I did there 'I met him. And he asked me was I going. I said he
 thought there were.' were no spouses; he said he cried triumphantly. 'He was
 'And he was right' L - start that this was the way it was one who said from -
 --In would be.' someone else have Lena felt very very tired. What would come
 in her shoes? A cleverer woman? Would she have - with him, stormed her
 crossed everything and gone, gone could she have allowed to go back into his
 heart again? Or would herself to be persuaded slowly, played hard to get? 'I can't
 go, Louis,' she said. Because she had thought she

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would be alone for the weekend Lena had set up so many activities to distract
 her that she was going to be busy, second of the time. Now she realised
 with this, it would be impossible to unpick them. There were
 too many people depending on her. Louis believed she was sulking, and trying to
 make a point about staying behind. She decided it would be best not to
 apologise or explain to, I must. just to let him know that she would have
 loved the trip. 'Let me take you to lunch on the Friday,' she suggested. 'I
 don't know. If you've time to go gallivanting off to lunch with men like me,
 why haven't you got time to come to Scarborough?' 'Because, you idiot, I
 thought you couldn't take me. Come on, let's have a lunch like people do in
 the movies: She had persuaded him, But as Lena sat in her office and
 studied her face in the mirror of her compact she saw with alarm that she
 must look many many years older than she was. There was a tight drawn
 look, a near-permanent frown. Her hair seemed dull and her eyes lifeless.
 No wonder he had asked someone else to Scarborough. Someone who had
 let him down at the last moment. No, no. She would not allow herself to
 think that way. But what a dreary wife she would look. 'Jessie,' she said
 suddenly standing up. 'I have to go out on business. See you after lunch.'
 She knew her voice sounded raspy and tinny. "A Dawn and the two other
 assistants look up in surprise. Mrs Gray always spoke gently and moved

smoothly from 011 to place. She didn't grab up a handbag and scamper out
Me way she had today. Dawn looked after her in amazement. 'What's
happened to her?' she asked. Jess ic a didn't like office gossip, and
especially not about Lena. 'Carry on, Dawn,' she said briskly. .0 Jim But
inside in the inner sanctum she confessed t Millar that she thought Lena
Gray was working too hard 246
looking after my m d I go out; she" urn while you an 'She 5 deal with
workmen here carpenters she ~Orrlirq In to . e so that

a herself. She's got the girls doing overtime !OuS ole new filing system set
up by Monday ,,Il have the wh, I don't know - some husband of hers going
to thinkif Vhat~l s that hand working in here all hours of the day and night?'
q think he's going away on some conference or other.' ,Maybe that's what
has her on edge,' said Jim Millar.

-Grace can you squeeze ilm 111. 'Sure thing. come to the end cubicle.'

Grace started to

:ake out the shampoo. you're the manager meant 'Not You yourself ,ne of
the girls.'glad to say.' Grace's sing-song ,They're all busy, Urn ,oice never
sounded anything other than cheerful, yet Lena knew he had a hard life. The
man Grace lovedtwo children by other women. They were not spoken of
look old and sad and no use to anyone. 'I feel so awful. I 'Tired maybe?'
Grace suggested. 'We know what tired means.' They laughed. it was a polite
way of saying that age was showing. I 'Work, is it?' Grace asked as her firm
fingers massaged

Lena'sscalp. uttered into the towel as she leaned over 'No,' Lena m the
basin. 'No, work runs itself.' 'Me too,' Grace said 'Funny isn't 0 Men make
such a

big deal about work. To women like you and me it's nothing. Nothing at all.'
'lie has someone else,' Lena said as she sat and looked at herself turbanned
with a towel. 'No, I'm sure that's not so,' Grace said. 'I'm sure it is.' 'I'll give
you a hot oi I treatment, make your hair shinier, and I'll look out some nice
make up for you. 'It won't get him back.' 'Perhaps he has not gone.

'I think he has ... you know the way you k~,, thN things.' Grace had massaged in the warm olive oil and the towel with another one. 'Has he said he has son,,,,, else?' 'No, of course not.' 'Well then . . .' 'I didn't ask him,' Lena confessed. 'No of course you didn't,' Grace grinned. 'But I can't stop thinking about it ... all the time, everywhere: at home, at work, in bed, even here. And I'm going to find out, I really am. I can't steep until I know., 'Not much sign of sleep recently.' Grace gently touche~ the dark shadows under Lena's eyes. Lena wanted to cry and hold the woman close to her. But it was a public plac~, and she had years and years of experience at hiding her feelings. 'Think of something nice. Think of something you really know is constant and true . . 'My daughter,' Lena said. 'Grace looked up startled. In all the time they had known each other the previous life had not been discussed. Only Ivy knew the whole story. 'How old is she?' Graced asked gently. 'Soon to be seventeen.' 'That's a great age. They're lovely at seventeen. And can you talk to her?' 'No, not directly.' 'Why?' 'She thinks I'm dead,' Lena said. And wondered had anyone in the world ever felt so lonely before.

'Well, well, don't you look a treat,' he said in the restaurant. And indeed she did. Grace had worked miracles. he 'Have to send you off with a good memory of rne,'S said smiling at him. 'I wish it weren't only the memory.'

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but honestly it, s only a weekend ... 'hre'll be She was determined to make a virtue out of it now

~one this Way. ould feel them without on her, she c ook so alive,' he said. u1s. ss of wine and go home, hey?' - hat! Vfe've rived.'- go away to the

We can be ho mutes. I can't i as and leav business behind me.' lie 11 still arouse him, make him wanted her no ~esire her, Lena smiled. 'Well, I said let's have lunch like people do the mov . ies, but this is even better,' she said, and went ahead of him out of the restaurant. ivy heard They ran like youngsters down the road, and if make conversation. them come in she didn't come out to . ht. When they got into the flat he held her very tig

There's no other woman in the world for me except you, Lena,' he said. 'Oh God, I need you so much. I can't tell you how much I need you.' Afterwards she helped Louis pack his case. 'I', a very understanding man,' he said, as she folded his

'And tell me, Louis Gray, how is that?' She was with him. No letting, 'don't -,, it had to be that, yes were ,,king, UP- , you ~Tharik you, Louis. Let's have a glass. We only just arrived in a few minutes unfinished work. She could determine to laugh and be happy with letting him go away with the memory of a grousing, such

woman at home. and 'My wife doesn't do her duty, her conjugal duty, accompany me on a works' outing-' His smile across the case was heartbreaking. 'Aha, but I'm not your wife, Louis.' 'Vell, whose fault is that? I must be the only man in the world teamed up with a woman who is officially dead. I'd Marry you tomorrow if I could. you know that.' 'Do IF She couldn't help the question. 'Well, if you don't know you'll never know.' He reached into the shelf of the cupboard where they kept his

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underwear. As he took out his folded underpants, well, so know it, Lena thought grimly, and I never heard a and socks, two packets of condoms remained deliberate~ t . on The letter went on. on the shelf. 'Not much point in taking those if I can't take you,,~, said. 'None at all,' Lena laughed. But her laugh was hollow. There were many chemists, where such things could be bought between here and Scarborough.

I suppose it's because I'm so involved in an employment agency that I wonder about what you'll do when you leave school, Lena wrote to Kit. You see, girls get such a poor start because nobody gives them any proper career advice at all. You don't talk much about the future, and I am very interested in what you are going to decide to do. You never say whether you'd like to be taken on in the pharmacy or not, or whether you want to go to university.

She didn't expect a reply so soon.

It's funny you should ask that question just then, but I've been thinking I'd love to do hotel management, Now there are things for this and against. The main thing against is this boy, Philip O'Brien. I've told you all about him. He's very nice, but he sort of likes me more than I like him. I'm not the kind of girl people fancy much, so it's quite nice . . . but I wouldn't want him to get the notion that I was going to enrol in Cathal Brugha Street, the hotel school, just to follow him, or be with him. Lots of times he has talked about us running the hotel together in Lough Glass, and honestly, Lena, if you saw it you'd prefer to be in partnership with the Draculas running their castle,

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perhaps I am in a hotel. Maybe I could come and your husband could put in a word for me. The letter in her hand. It was a letter Lena sat for a while with. It might all unknowingly start a grotesque thought that Louis might, dark-haired with her daughter. A beautiful

relationship. Yes, Almost seventeen years old, a prize girl with dancing feet. What a girl, or any man who might think he was growing old. The cruel fate to allow a situation where mother and daughter could be seduced by the same man. Where daughter and mother share Louis Gray as a first lover. No other woman in London. Kit could never meet him, it could never come to the Ivy's name. There he was, She only had Ivy's address, verify their flat. As that would identify we have no names on but of suppose Kit were to come. Kit didn't know the name

Millar's Employment Agency. She didn't know the name or how to tell where Louis worked. The name Dryden had featured in any letter. Not been allowed to appear that was all. She knew Louis' name of course, but Lena wrote: 'has changed'. The problem is, Kit, that everything is changing here. The hotel industry has changed. Louis' connections, so he's moving. He's any real written qualifications to think that's going into marketing. Everyone sees, at the moment where the future lies. He is in Scarborough at the moment trying to sort out his future ... so he'd be no use to you at all. I miss him a lot I can tell

you. The weekend seems very long - - .' Kit read the letter. She read it over and over it was obvious that Lena and Louis had had a row. The~ might even be going to separate, divorce possibly. it was England after all, where such things could happen. g her She wished she had a phone number, she could in

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and say something helpful. But what could she say,
11 McMahon, almost seventeen and studying for her Lea,i-: Certificate? Kit who knew nothing about men except she really didn't want Philip O'Brien to go on kiissiing`~,'] Imagine her being able to say something helpful to L'c`Gray, who was so confident and ran a huge agency and, a handsome husband. Many times in her letters she had said things that made Kit know Louis was handsome. Like he had a new)'acket, or how well he had looked in the car they had been lent that time, or the night he had worn the dinner jacket for t6 formal function. Kit knew that Lena Gray must be beautiful too. It was clear to see that Louis Gray would want to have a beautiful wife. On Saturday Lena played gin rummy with Mrs Park. 'I wish I had more people to play cards with. The days are very long,' she said. 'Why don't you move to the little close I was telling you about before? They have a dining room where everyone has their lunch, then you all go back to your own flats in the evening. That way there are plenty Of 13-01crds with all afternoon.' a I Was she imagining i t, or did Mrs Park look wistful. Oh well, we'll wait and see,' she said. 'Oh, that's not like you, Mrs Park. A fine decisive woman like yourself. Surely you must make up your own mind.' 'Lena, you don't understand. You don't have children of your own. Jessie is very dependent on me. She loves to come home and make my lunch. Her day is built around itShe might think I didn't need her. . .' 'Oh, I don't know, Mrs Park,' she said 'From what Jessie tells me I know she'd love to think you had more 01' life of your own.' 'But what about her life',' 'I could involve her in more social outings if I thoug you were able to take care of yourself more. I don't 111~1

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lise when I think

at you re right. Mrs Park was doubtful

t then I may not be. Why don't you test o Jessie when she comes home.'

'An able to get her to go out a bit and meet

. ~'olplev Park, truly I would.' I would, Mrs kind, Lena Gray, but you don't ,you're very i i mother and daughter. You ,nderstand how it is between a ,ant the very best for your girt. it's like that from the 're born. Nothing can ever get in the way of moment they it., 're ri ght, Mrs Park,' said Lena Gray, with a ,I,m sure you I I ;orced smile on her face.

1,~Amoved her curtain. Lena stopped at the door. 1, right, F1 ghti igale)

Are you going to come

in and have a chat?' 'You don't need to cheer me up,' Lena said. 'No, selfish, I don't. But maybe I want to be cheered up myself,) Ivy said. 'You!' Lena raised her eyes to heaven, ,y me., Ivy's mouth was in a tightline. Perhaps for once she waslow spirits. Lena went in and sat down. .k her to sociah, p to vou. ,line I,rnn~t sure th q think I am, bu out, suggest it t d you'd be 'It's Charlotte,' Ivy said. 'Charlotte? What's she done now)' Lena had scant patience with the dog-in-the-manger wife. Charlotte did Rot appear to want Ernest for herself, and yet she would let no one else have him. 'She's gone and got cancer, that's what,' Ivy said.

'Nor 'Yes. That)s what he said. He left an hour ago. On the way back to the hospital. She won't come out, Lena.' , Lena looked at her blankly. it was one of those very rare times when she didn't know what to say. Part of her Ivalited to be glad, glad that the unknown woman who had ItOod between Ivy and happiness would no longer be she feels she should 90

there. But she couldn't rejoice in another woman', 'Where had she got it, Ivy?' 'Everywhere.' 'And an operation?' 'No use.' 'How is Ernest taking it?' 'Hard to know. He was very quiet. He insisted he wanted to sit here. We hardly said anything.' IVY looked up at her pitifully, her eyes were red from crying. 'Do you know, Lena. I've been sitting here thinking, it may be that there's nothing to say.' Lena looked bewildered. She didn't follow what Ivy meant. 'We left it too long, too late.' 'But you're always so close, every Friday of the year-nearly.' 'Fooling ourselves probably. When Charlotte's gone it will all be gone. Mark my words.' 'No, I won't mark your words. What a silly expression.' 'It's only a saying,' Ivy said. 'You say lots of things that mean half nothing too, Irish things.' 'Well, what were you trying to say?' Lena's voice was more gentle. 'I suppose I'm saying that it only lasted because it was impossible. Now that this bloody illness might make it possible he's off like a bat out of hell.' Lena saw the pain in her friend's face. 'Listen, of course he's upset. He's guilty too, and relieved, and guilty about being relieved. He's a mass of feeling, why pick out the worst one to dwell on?' 'If you've loved someone for as long as I have you can read them like a book.' 'You can read them wrong sometimes,' Lena said. She might have been wrong herself about Louis. She might have imagined this whole thing about him being interested in someone else, asking some other woman to go on the trip with him and then being left suddenly, the lurch. It was possible after all. And look at how he had been so loving yesterday afternoon before he went on the train. And remember how

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in the bed he was about the new apartment. And how he'd her and find it hard to sleep without her. It was possible, wasn't that? Where she was so hard and seeing dangers - but have been working to, like M19 none. there were ideas could see better. Like Grace

maybe somebody outside. How? a house, what he might have been telling the truth. Had you told. 'That he really didn't know spouses were bad

ask ~,6ted-' ought that,' Lena had replied. 'Which 'No, I hadn't thi rust him.' And Grace had ,~,ows how very deeply I mist ig aside. ~ried to give her a hope that she was brushit , just as she was doing now to ivy. Try ing to convince ht the love of a lifetime had not been wasted. 'Do you are wonderful. I wish the world was ivy, womer ,un by women. I 'it is,' said Ivy, with a trace of her former self returning.

Lena woke with a headache on Sunday morning. She ve to have been waking in Scarborough in ~"co,u"!s~ sornos. What was it that James Williams had said when he was describing it to her ... just a little holiday to thank the employees for putting in such antisocial hours I ice to be with their wives in n*

surroundings. She must have been insane to have arranged all t . hese million things to do. Minding Mrs Park, supervising C rs that she had hijacked from Ernest's pub to do finishing touches to the ne flat in ivy's house and to the office. She must have been crazy to offer those giris extra rmoney to come in on Sunday and set the place up properly. The day seemed very long. She kept thinking of other things. Like what they were doing on a sunny Sunday in Lough Glass. She knew so much more about the place now write a bock about the hen she lived there. 11- . -ust based on Kit's People of the small lakeside community). letters. She wondered about Jessie and Jim Millar. Maybe

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this weekend would be the one where they wouldrn,k, their minds. Or rather, Jim would. Jessie's mind already made up. She thought about Ivy and her love the strange dour Ernest. She thought of the won,_ Charlotte whom she had never met, lying in a hospital which she would never leave. Did this woman believe M God and that he was going to take her to heaven? But then did anyone believe in God, Lena wondered, How could Martin McMahon, a man she could luvt sworn had a firm personal faith in a God who was 10 powerful, possibly contemplate a bigamous marriage witli Maura Hayes? He knew she was alive, Martin knew that he had a hv' wife. Lena shook her head in disbelief at the thought of him standing in the church in Lough Glass while Father Baily pronounced him and Maura man and wife, having asked anyone to say if they knew any reason why they

shouldn't be joined together. Possibly Kit was imagining at all. The child might be lonely. Well, she must be lonely otherwise she wouldn't pour her heart and soul out like that in letters. Maybe she hoped for a pleasant placid unchallenging stepmother to replace the mother she had loved so much. The mother who was taken from her by her father's arrogance and vanity. As these thoughts went through her head Lena worked

on, organising the new shelf space, encouraging the girls to fill it in the correct manner. Never again would they be confused about application forms, leaflets, documentation. This was a very professional set up. She had even thought of a picnic for them, and as they sat down to eat at three-thirty Lena said that she thought they had done brilliantly. 'But you're paying us until six, we'd better eat up quickly,' Dawn said. Beautiful Dawn, who could have been a cover girl with her flawless skin and her shining hair. She looked years younger than she must be.

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„,c worked like slaves, you all get paid until SIX, 'No, what we set up a great let,s enjoy the feeling but relax, i dher cup of coffee from the blue and gold it . tCe., Leria rats,, at were used to give clients coffee when he Inugs th ,,lugs, t c to call and discuss work. ,h,Y carr . and finished the sandwiches she had

They tidied up i, and the shortbread biscuits. And.,rought for their lope. 'Go out and enjoy what little cry, each an enve ~a,e t1h ,here is of the weekend,' she said. They ran like children released from school. They were 1 hardly more than that, the two younger ones. Dawn hung k fo, a moment, 'That was fun, Mrs Gray, 1 did enjoy 'bac" ' it. Nobody could ever had told me that a while back hat 1,d enjoy working On a Sunday, but 1 did.' 'Don ' t run yourself down, Dawn. You could be a business tycoon if you wanted,' Le.na laughed at her. 'No I'm not cut out for it. Finding me a nice rich husba cl, that's what I'll start doing soon.' 1 1 't the only goal.'

Marriage isr, 'How can you say nr ous husband.'
going to say more
that, Mrs Gray? You've got a

ge 'What?' Lena had forgotten for a moment. that of course Dawn had worked in the Dryden some time back. She

I would have known Louis then. That's true, Dawn, I've been very lucky.'

'He's lucky too,' Dawn said. She looked as if she were . d. but changed her mind, Lena walte 'Very lucky too,' Dawn said. Then she went out into the warm London air. Lena sat at her desk and wondered whether Louis could Possibly have had any kind of fling with Dawn Jones. 14aybe he had even asked her to go to this conference with him and she had changed her mind. Dawn Jones, born in 1932, would have been a goldenhaired moppet when Lena went up the aisle to her loveless mrrriage. It, wasn't possible. Then she took a deep breath. N, It wasn't possible. This was the way to go mad. The lure-fire way to end up in a mental hospital.

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Louis loved her, he told her that. He would be home 4 1 her tonight. Dawn was a brainless child, Louis pro% hardly met her when she was in the Dryden she h~ worked for James Williams. It was only because she vq, tired and had so much on her mind. The phone ran2 sh,-11, beside her as she sat in the empty office. It was J,~si,. 'Oh Jessie ... well, it all went very well. Tell Jim lhz the place is fantastic, and the ca penters took all the I rubbish away with them so you'd never know there been any work done at all.' She was eager to give the g,,~ news. 'Lena, Lena, we're getting married,' Jessie cried. asked me to do him the honour of becoming I "' "" Those were his words, Lena. Isn't it wonderfulY Unaccountably, two tears came down Lena's faceAt's wonderful news, Jessie. I'm so happy for you,' she said as h ars splashed into one of the blue and gold ashtrays. 'We're going round to tell Mother tonight, but I wanted you to be the very first to know.' Lena said that she thought it was the most marvellous thing she had ever heard. She sat quite still for a long time after the call. She had an almost uncontrollable urge to ring her daughter. But fortunately she just

managed to resist it. After an age she stood up from her chair, cleaned the ashtray, packed the picnic things in her basket and locked up the offices. She walked very slowly down the road with its Sunday evening crowds beginning to gather for whatever festivities they had in mind. She went home and lay on her bed to wait for Louis. At eleven o'clock he burst into the flat. 'Oh God, I missed you, Lena. Lena, I love you,' he said and he launched himself at her like an over-affectionate puppy dog. 'I brought you a rose,' he said. It was all done up with a fern and a safety pin, as if a corsage. It didn't matter where he got it; he might have found it, or bought it, or stood for ages while it was being made up. Someone could have left it on the train,

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It mattered at all. He smelled of the sea and she had brought it for her. 'Nothing else, h', that friend of yours and Clio, this Mother you know's Nunt Maura spoke 'hesitantly, y,), Clio Miss Hayes.' 'Sister Madeleine, see her?'

'You mean?' 'It and Clio had not been do you mean?' 'About us' it was the longest for twenty days - town seemed to be aware of it', asking 'I. Most of the CTV then at all about You Clio, aunt la Yhed. 'NO, no on at sorting things every fine person - but some thin eleine was about the 'Yes, good Idamant about that. And sister Madeleine made it up, only person in the place who hadn't argued with Cho. It was moving in on her if You, it's just that I didn't feel respect. No, no, it was your territory Kit looked at the woman with relief nothing on, it's Everyone sort of talks to her, and she took the seal of confession*' 'It be considered like a, So, if I went to see her it would be easier by dropping *ing In)' Hayes, to ask, I mean. ThaiCs very nice of You Miss and do You q wouldn't want to tread on your toes. A feel like calling me Maura~', hink you might ever more said Kit - And indeed she was, 'I'd be happy to, than happy. It would be great. Mrs Kelly. Better still, Imagine saying it in front of imagine saying It In front of Clio Sister Madeleine, I'm Maura Hayes 'of course you are. Haven't I often seen you at Mass on a Sunday with Dr Kelly.' 't you, Sister.' 'I hear nothing but good about

'I'm blessed to live in such a warm place, Maura %~'oul~ you join me in a cup of tea and some nice scones) R- up In McMahons'is a gifted cook and she often leaves' "" of these in case someone drops by.' me a batch 'A fine girl indeed, Sister. Maybe she should bet,,, herself.' 'I know, I know. It's a problemn.' They both knew the problems. Rita would not leave the McMahons until the place was settled. The question A-as now which would mention that a solution might be in sight. The hermit decided to make it easy for Maura Hayes, 'Of course, you're a regular visitor here to these parts yourself,' she said. 'I do come down often. My sister has such a happy home here herself.' 'And one day you might make a happy home yourself.' 'There are many who might say I was far too old to be considering any such thing.' 'I wouldn't say that, Maura. I've never been a great advocate of young marriages myself. They don't seem to work somehow. The danger, of course, in leaving it late is that you mightn't be able to replace what had gone before. That would only be a danger if you were trying to replace it with the same thing. I wouldn't imagine you'd be trying to do that.' 'No indeed. if it were to happen I'm sure it would be a very different variety.' 'Well then ... I feel very sure it would work very well-' The kettle that had been moved to the centre of the fife began to hiss and splutter. The old nun lifted it awaY deftly. By the time they had finished their tea a lot had been, straightened out. Without confidences being broken ?r anyone named by name, Maura understood that if Martin McMahan were to be enthusiastic about a union there would be no opposition with the house. The daughter ~it would be going to Dublin to study hotel management. The

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Ernmetwas, like all boys, hardly aware of his ion id Ri a was only looking for an iurroll"aings. The mai It so that she could .use to leave the family in good hands in a eX ~ blin. There was a chance of a position' jo and live in Du I mended by Sullivans of r hire company. Warmly recom 'at -igss she would be sure to

get the position and Loug ~,~art a fuller life. be anything like as special as Helen,' q wouldn't ever maura said in a small voice 0, of course not.'

N Maura ached to ask what she was really like, what had ,he talked about, had she ever said what made her soul so ~,Irrnented and so far away as she paced the length and breadth of Lough Glass. But there would be no point. The nun would just look away across the lake, the lake where Helen had met her death, and would speak distantly. It's hard to know what anyone's like, she might Say. Maura ,ould not ask. Instead she said, if it does work out, and Niartin and I do make a life together, do you think that would have been pleased rather than

Helen McMahon upset about UF The nun's eyes seemed very far away, as if she was thinking of something much further away than the take. There was a long silence. Then, 'I think she would be very pleased,, she said slowly.

They moved flat two weeks after Scarborough. Louis was 0 loving and enthusiastic about it all. He didn't menti. n Spain any more. He said no more about England being finished and men of vision getting out.while the going was good. He was so much the old Louis that the days and nights of bleak despair almost disappeared. Almost, but not quite. He was still out very late. And he resented it terribly if Lena asked him why. 'Sweetheart, is it clocking in and clocking out at home as well as at work?' he said impatiently.

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And of course she had been wrong about that weekend, Lots of people had said to her it.was a pity she wasn't there, 1 the whole thing had been an innocent Mix up. And she must have been mad to think there was anything betv,,,:e, him and Dawn Jones. Dawn worked beside her day in and day out, putting in extra hours coming up to the officj~ opening of the new premises. If Louis telephoned, Diwn would say 'Oh hello, Mr Gray, I'll get her for you now,, Unless she had been trained in the Royal Shakespeare Company, she wouldn't have been able to do that and hide

i, ou, a liaison. Lena felt she had been foolishly suspic S, Vet she knew that this was not the same Louis who had run with her to London so eagerly and

without a care. This was a man who did not feel caught up with her to the exclusion of all others as he had once been, as she still was. Sometimes he stayed on a bit in the Dryden because a few of them were having a drink in the pub around the corner. It didn't do to be seen imbibing on your own premises. 'You were having a drink rather than coming home?' Lena had said. But she had only said it once in that hurt tone. 'Jesus Christ, Lena. If I tell you where I am you get offended, and if I don't tell you where I am you get offended. Shall we go down to some ironmonger now and get a ball and chain welded on. It would save us a lot of trouble.' 'Don't be an idiot,' she said in a voice disguising her terror. She had seen real annoyance and impatience in his eyes.

The new premises were opened in May, and there was the expected publicity. Yet again Dawn was photographed and Lena managed to stay out of the limelight, but this time there was something she could offer in return. 'Mr Millar, our managing director, and Miss Park, our senior executive, are going to be married later this year, she told the reporters who attended the opening ceremony for Millar's new-look agency.

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Nobody except her own colleagues would notice that she was not properly acknowledged. Some of the clients, maybe Louis would know why, so would Ivy. 'Are you on the run, by any chance?' she Grace did ask. 'Are you published telling everyone's secrets, when the papers would like to except Lena's, and showing every face except that

of the woman who made the agency what it was. 'Sort of,' Lena said. 'Not the law, we're all right there, I think * , 'A man then.' 'Well, yes. I more ran to one than from one.' 'But there was one, and a daughter?' 'Yes, and a handsome boy.' 'I hope he's worth it ... your Louis.' 'Grace, you know he isn't. Stop having silly hopes like that.' And they collapsed in giggles. I miss the laughing more than anything else, Clio wrote, I don't miss the secrets and the plans. Those are separate, and different anyway. I should never have looked at your letter, and the truth is that I didn't see who it was to. But I shouldn't have looked. I was trying to see was Philip and if you were holding out on me.

if If ever we do get to be friends again I swear I will always regard letters as sacred. Also, I don't want to spend any more time persuading you to come to university with me. I know you won't, and it's your life. I'm not much of a friend, I know, a bit bossy, and I'm very ashamed about that letter. But I'm lonely and I miss you, and I can't study properly and I was wondering whether you thought it might be worth patching it up. Love Clio
Dear Clio, Okay. But remember something. We don't have to be friends. There's no law saying that we must walk for ever two by two in this town or anywhere. I'm glad you

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got in touch. I'm sick to death of Lonny Donegan. fi,,, ,~hy do YO11 want it back? you anything better to play? I Love Kit
Emmet delivered the letter to the Kellys' hou . 'They're mad, aren't they?' Anna Kelly said to hjnl. 'Stone mad,' Emmet agreed. 'They go to the same school, sit in the same classroorr, and they use us as postmen.' 'It must have been a big row,' Emmet said in wonder. 'Don't you know what it was?' 'No, Kit never said.' 'Clio's never talked of anything else. Apparently, Kit dropped some letter and Clio picked it up and gave it back to her and accidentally looked to see who she was writing to. And Kit lost her head altogether.' 'And who was she writing to that was so secret?' Emmet asked. 'A fellow called Len,' said Anna, proud to be the bearer of such important news.

'Thanks Emmet, you're a pal.' 'No,' said Emmet, 'I'm an eejit.' 'Why do you say that?' 'I felt such a fool. I didn't know you have a fellow called Len. Anna Kelly had to tell me.' 'What fellow called Len?' Kit was mystified. 'The one you wrote the letter to, the one that you let fall.' Kit looked at him levelly. 'Was Clio at home when yot, went there?' 'No, just Anna.' 'I'll give you anything if you go and get it back.' 'No, Kit. This is silly, you're going mad.' 'I may be, but I'll give you sixpence.' 'You haven't got sixpence.' 'I'll give you the sixpence out of the bottom of the Infant of Prague statue and then I'll put it back when I get MY pocket money.'

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Emmet. 1, ease. ' - not meant to be like this.' , -you're Old- You ream. 1,11 do anything for You)ut it's the way I I .1 ~nol%" t . ng for the rest of your

life .~v JJnJe you want somethi
1,11,60 it., eemed doubtful.

,will you?, He s s day, remember this act you did for ,1,11 ,nember th, qie, I
ing at all?' Emmet weighed it up. ,And you,11 do anyth' ,yes. Hurry.' If h '
back?' go off as quick as you can.' rhen it doesn't count, so
bit of a doormat)' Anna Kelly asked Emmet. ,kre you a 'No, I did a great
deal,' Emmet sal 'What was it. I want ever in life.' any favour ,She,s going
to do me nnalaughed., 'That's soft. She won't.' A ie, Emmet sal ,She will.
Kit's as straight as a d pocketing the letter and going home. told the sixth
years At school next day Mother Bernard that she had now counted exactly
twenty-three working ,rayer to the I-Ioly Spirit and days for intensive
re~ision, F~d soon be upon little else. The Leaving Certificate wOul She
wanted to hear them with all its attendant anxieties- was nothing of silliness
or divilment until the examination
over. hear you sent a letter up and then At break Clio said, " thought better
of it.' ce's as good as ever,' Kit said. 'Your information servi Iour mind?'
'Why, Kit? Why did you change y 'You don't know what I said.'i it open and
told me. 'Yes I do. Anna read it, she steame(offering.' I've brought you "Ole
sera sera" as a peace 'You're such a liar, Clio. You lie ,bout everything.'
Clio's face reddened. 'No I don't. I have it in my
sch(olbag.'

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'You said you didn't see who it was to, but you 'Only the name - - .' 'You
said I dropped it on the floor. You didn't sa, ,o snatched it.' 'Bloody Anna.'
And for the first time Kit smiled. 'All right, dishonest old fraud, give me the
record and come r,und this evening and we'll go for a walk.' 'We're meant to
be studying!' Clio could hardly believe the long row was over. 'Well, study
then. I'm going for a walk.' 'And you'll tell me everything,' Clio said. 'I'll tell
you nothing,' Kit promised.

Martin had not asked Maura Hayes to marry him. He just couldn't say the words. They were like lines from a play, He knew that every woman deserved to be proposed to, but he was afraid it would come out wrong. He was afraid that the echo of years ago would sound through what he said without his intending it to. He was hoping that somehow it could all be agreed to and organised without having to ask. She was so understanding and undemanding. She cheered him up and made him laugh. She loved to go walking with him, but she didn't choose the routes that Helen had walked so ceaselessly by the lake. Instead, she found new places to go, a sheltered glen where you saw the mountains in the far distance, and just a shimmering line of the lake on one side, Sometimes she packed a flask of coffee and a slice of Fullers cake that she had brought down from Dublin. It was companionable and close, something Martin had never known in a marriage. He had spoken to both his children separately, told them that his friendship with Maura Hayes was special. Both had said they were enthusiastic. Kit in particular. 'Dad, you don't have to explain to us that she's not Mother. We know that. And she's very nice. I always liked her much more than Clio's mother.'

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drank a pint each night with Martin in Peter Kelly bar The solidarity was huge but the subject was paddles, other men knew that when there was never broached. But then it would be said. to be said., given in his heart, some unfinished sorriethin A.1d Yet ~vented Martin McMahon from doing what he business, pre

knew was the honourable and right thing to do. It ~epressed him that he seemed to be a weak man, unsure ,as of his life where ,d dithering. There were so many are where he gave he was sure and confident : in the pharmacy, d ice and consolation as well as compound medicines; as a a is children had been able to trust a friend. iat for the past years hi him and talk to him. Even, possibly, as I o deserved But not as a suitor to this good woman wh . . th more from him.,I wonder are you wasting your time wi ,e, Maura,' he said to h.er. -th you was wasted.' q wouldn't say any time spent w, She was calm, unflustered. 'I am not what you hoped.'

.1 "You are what you are dly. it was the night before the He looked at her fon n so helpful to Kit, Leaving Certificate started.. She had bee bout showing ations were all i explaining to her that examin i u would be what you did know rather that fearing YO caught out in what you didn't know. Kit had foun d it not only use ful but a revelation. 'I never knew that,' she said truthfully said, going over an ,well, that's the system,' Maura had I old examination paper -'Look, here when it says as an essay title "The place I love most in Ireland" or here it says, "T11Y earliest memory" - * * Now You were telling me that you know all about Glendalough and you were hoping to get a u could subject like "A place of historic interest". YO always turn either of those titles to your advantage Maura suggested she have tea and a chocolate biscuit to take with her to bed. Martin and Maura sat in the large sofa, side by side. He had never sat there with Helen. She had perched on the

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window seat, or gone to read in a narrow chair that had been gradually moved to a position importance over the years. Helen's bedroom had become a store room. The signs of her presence had lessened but her spirit was still there. Martin reached for Maura's hand. 'It's not fa),r or, Maura. I'm not ready, you see.' 'Did I ask you to be ready ... for anything?' She leaned over and kissed him, the kind of kisses they had, gentle and lingering. This was not an area where he compared her to Helen. Helen had never reached to kiss him in her whole life. Helen had just accepted his love. lit never knew whether it pleased her or not. There had been no sign of great delight, and certainly none of revulsion. But it had been a passive thing. Never had she raised her hand to stroke his cheek even. He clung to Maura. 'Is it fair to ask you to give me some more time?' he murmured into her neck. She smelled of Elizabeth Arden Blue Grass soap and talcum powder. He felt himself aroused to hold her longer and to know her body more. But this would be the final betrayal. If he were to have Maura Hayes it must be as a wife and a life companion. Not as a quick coupling on their sofa. She seemed to know this, and pulled gently away.'Have all the time you want, Martin,' she said. 'What else am doing that you're keeping me from?' just

then they heard a foot on the stair, and Kit knocked at the door. 'I just wanted to tell you I can't sleep, The tea didn't work.' 'Would you like to come in and talk?' Maura was courteous, not directive. 'Well, what I'd really like to do is to walk up to Sister Madeleine's for a half hour or so.' Kit always said where she was going. The history of going out for a walk and not returning was too heavy in this house for anyone to make unexplained journeys. 'I don't know. Isn't it a bit late?' Martin sounded worried.

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Madeleine is probably the best place on earth to "step, that woman is able to make everything manageable, reasonable," look and ran down the stairs to find her a grateful word of consolation in sister. "I could find the same kinship WIS does." Martin had never been jealous that everyone else had most of Opal confide in the old, lined woman.

learned to hold in such respect go there so 'h Glass Se Helen used to go probably because she might think that she knows too much' 'Uch. Yo, find out something for yourself~ ming to be CO,,,nkvouwe, , Martin was surprised 'Th, yes quite true- out that side of it. Whatever ~Vell, I wouldn't worry about to be totally secret.' "Re has been told or not told seems - 'I'll be off now~aura gathered her cardigan and handbag to Lilian and Peter thinking I'm up to no -Jayes ~ja,tln-I don't want a smile on her face. If I were a , (od: She had a brave heart that Martin could make no commitment was hurt to the heart - it She waved to him as he knew she was not going to show" * bleen Sullivan's stood at the door, then watched Kai, (right the) would be able to retain twitch- At least she W(CU had left the widow, home ~Octor, a foolish sister-in-law at a reasonably respectable time" Si important to you, sister "Tell me now why the exam is 'O' t Madeleine asked. e you must be the only person in 'Oh Sister Madeleine ~w that the Leaving is the making Ireland who doesn't know or breaking of You- MY whole life depends on it 'I'd hardly say that. Cathal Brugha Street 'Well, does. If I get into it for two whole do Hotel Manager's. I had, MY Training College and rear. Otherwise "I'll be" years and then I have a chance life is over.' could always go back to school 'Or 'I suppose You suggest another year.' The one was a mild one. , with all 'Another year at school with Mother Bernar(, those horrible girls in Fifth Year laughing and mocking

1

you, with Clio gone off to Dublin to university. pd Sister Madeleine, die ... and anyway I want t,_, C something, be someone. Not just for myself.' ,who for?' 'Well, for Daddy, so he wouldn't look foolish dov~,n Paddles' bar with Dr Kelly. And ... well, for my moth really.' 'I know.' Sister Madeleine did know. 'I told her I'd amount to something. You know... long ago. 'And you have and will.' 'But these are kind of milestones, markers along way, these exams.' 'Your mother told you that?' 'No. Lena, her friend, you know ... who writes here. She told me.' 'You pay a lot of heed to this friend)' 'Yes. You see, she knew Mother very well ... it's almost like . . . ' 'It must be.' 'I wish she'd come over here ... I did suggest it, I Kit said. 'Maybe she prefers to live in her own world.' 'I'll have to wait until I go over to see her then.' 'Yes, but that may be a while. In the meantime you carl stay friends with her by writing.' 'It mightn't be all that time, Sister Madeleine. After the Leaving I think I'm going to London.' 'You are?' The nun seemed startled. 'Yes. Daddy said I could have a holiday.' 'But London! On your own? 'it wouldn't be on my own, it would be with Clio an~ others from our class. Mother Bernard's arranging that "" can stay in a convent in London, then none of our parents 'bl ire will get frightened and think we're going to join the w t slave traffic.' 'My goodness. And what will you do?' 'Well, I'm going to see Lena.'

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It' coming to visio'

0 1 t ink ul'Itlell her that Ymoeud f urthe' awa~ e spoke. , a Will yo Is eyes saened surprise her. , hall usual Y. Madeleineturn upEventually S11 Leaving

t, 11, cairn take. s1ster at You get your looked acros make sure th)r you tonight" III have to Spec ial. prayers f(~, 1~- twas eager ~,ll' 9" hen* I'll say a posary - I "t"ficat t neel down and Say nt (n'ou k support she could co" f seventeen, h -UP woman 0 ~now how Muc Ire a grown u n to a

request and hear 16t, yo 'I I want a ~;Owl iust wants to "Stf' d. He doesn t
 knov God, it should be grante That" not how eason, Why of Hail Marysal
 totting up jutely right, but t numeric I n works. ladeleine was abso'de tather
 ly "-- that ma . . of Sit ~new tna' s the kinu - us ,r Bernard SsP'c'o . s sure
 that this "aanother time Wa and Moth' Bally, Brother Healy . It was the kind
 of talk that at ,lne herralt at the stake. ,ight have had her burne the lake
 Sister Madeleine took Ns ylt w ent off home by
 out hermtins Paper McMahon is Dear Lena Gray, you know that Kit ificate
 I am writing to le t Leaving Cert don when the with a ig to 0 to Lon I~o
 surprise you ' hopir * gshe wants I excitement after a examination is over * '
 : lose their s you might like to that Surprises visit, I feel and thought that
 perhap certain age, ventullity- a lease let me ~d for such an e be prepare hng
 I can do for Y" based if there is anyt. to suggest a relationshi to you know, I
 have tried 00 drawn ut I am afraid she is t as well as your entirely on letters
 b :)ther, ,s of her m(emorle let matters rest there and your M' rownfuture,tO
 woman.- iust like insights about hel med YOur'g She is a very dctermin her
 mother. - n Jesus Chr'st\$

Yours sincerely 1

Madeleinewhich flat I live in,) Lena said to Ivy* 'She doesn't know

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'No, but all she has to do is ask anyone on the stairs,, 1,, said. 'She'll ask
 you. You'll say we're away.' 'Yes, but she'll come back when she thinks
 vou,11 back.' 'I'll write and say we're going away for the summer., 'You
 can't keep running away from her.' 'I can't rmeet her, we know that.' 'Could
 you dye your hair, wear sunglasses?' ivy was serious. 'I'm her mother, for
 God's sake.' 'I'm trying to help.'Ivy was aggrieved. Things were hard for her.
 Ernest spent every evening at the hospital, whert Charlotte was sinking fast.
 He called at Ivy's flat for a drink on the way home each night. A drink and a
 11on, recounting of the guilt he felt in his life at how poorly he had treated
 his wife. It was increasingly hard to bear. Lena was full of shame at having

spoken so harshly. 'I'm terrified, that's why I'm snapping at you. You're the only friend I have in the world.' 'I'm not your only friend ... you have dozens of friends. You have Louis, and all those people at work who dote on you and depend on you. You have a daughter who loves you even 'if she doesn't know who you are ... Don't tell me about having few friends.' 'Oh, Ivy. Do you know what I'd love to do for you? I'd love to take you to Ireland for a holiday.' 'So, take me,' Ivy challenged. 'I can't, you know that. They'd see me, they'd find out. 'Yes. I imagine they have armed guards posted at the airport and the ferries, waiting for you,' Ivy scoffed. 'After all, they do that when anyone drowns in a lake, is found and buried.' Ivy sounded bitter. 'We could go some day. I'm too frail these days. Everything's coming apart,' Lena said. 'Don't crack up on me, Lena. Charlotte only has another week at the most.'

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.Carl, 'Me to London?' Anna Kelly asked. don't even let her think of talking like that,'

10)aparoyt;ste~ - Leaving ~_11 shush, ALnna, when you get your ~flcoo*urse you can go to London. in three years' C,,t,ficate 0 -sent OppOr,jaie- wouldn't this be a heaven -But Daddy, . er me and my mind

, big sister could look aft . "glity? M,d , by travel, and I'd be in no danger.' %~Oujd get broa er th Anna,' Clio warned. ,Don't waste your brea' . mind. I asked Kit McMahon -None of the others would i d they all and Eileen Hi key who are going an c j arit \X they didn t care.' ,of course they don't care. You aren't their rotten ,ister,'Clio was incensed, q hope you won't go, Aunt Maura spoke unexpectedly. Anna,' she said. 'Why is that?' Anna was suspicious. ,well you see, I'll be coming down for the golf tournament and we need to have caddies, but everyone in the club is taken up and Martin McMahon and I were wondering whether you and Emmet might do it for us. 'No, I don't think - - -, 'It's awfully well paid5' said Aunt Maura. 'And much more fun in a way than trailing around London in the heat with a lot of people who aren't your real friends. I know use Martin and I I'm only trying to persuade y~u beca I s, but would like our own families to be there to support u there'll be lots of parties, and a dance with a lot of young People.'

'I was never allowed to a dance -when I was her age.' ChO '~7aS stung. ng,
Clio,' 'The world is changing since you were you ,kna said. For a fraction
of a second Clio's eyes met those of Aunt Maura. There was a hint of a
smile. Clio knew that where i, her aunt had succeeded io one else could
have in Putting an end to Annals bleating. Although Anna Kelly
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was only fourteen, she was showing alarming tenic,,,, getting her own way
in everything she sugge,te,~

'Do you think they're ever going to do anything a are they going to go on
mooning about for eve,-:, asked her husband. 'I don't know,' Peter Kelly said
mildly. 'Well you must know. He's your friend.' 'She's your sister,' he
countered. 'There are things you can't say to sisters if they are o,~ and still
spinsters,' Lilian explained. 'Yes, and there are things you can't say to
friends If ti~, are old and have been through a lot,' Dr Peter Kelly saa I
'It's nice to ... you down here so regularly, Maura,' Sistr Madeleine said.
'Well, Sister, I'll come for as long as I think he likes me to be here.' 'He likes
you to be here.' 'But would you know? I'm not being rude to you, bu~
would you?' 'I think I would, Maura. From what people say.' Maura realised
that people did say a lot and Sister Madeleine listened a lot. She probably
did know. 'You're such a kind person I wish there was something I could do
for you.' Sister Madeleine looked at her thoughtfully. 'There is something I
would like done, but it's very, very complicated, and I could never tell you
why.' 'I wouldn't need to know why.' 'No, God bless you, I don't think you
would. Well, I'll ask you and it may not be possible, but if you could - , .
'Please ask, Sister. It would be a great pleasure to ~O anything for you,
anything at all.' 'You know there's talk of Clio and Kit and a few Ot the girls
in Sixth Year going to London after the LeavIno Cert . . . ' 'Don't I know it.
They talk of so little else.'

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i
was wondering
1
was could you

,~es lw~t I " what I I to go? I Maura de Kit ,a Clio no , go

,ers" a on earth? I m Soi`i7' 1 ~or t 'But a while she said, 'I think it would be very' ,a,ase& Att", difficult. that.' was afraid of Is there a good reason ' ,kna'y good reason. I London is 'A veT ~ Ild do. I can't tell them . I c1n,t think what I co, , t of f er to take them to France or ~'all of typhoid fever. I can rying anaged to prevent Anna fron' t i ,n,thing, I've just M . b as my caddy in the to go with them by offering her a *)0 Is there no one if urn-ament.' There was a silence. to, 1~ke?'Nlaura asked. it ,No one I could ask the herm sai)ng the very ura felt a surge of pride that she was am(,~Ia, J believe Mother Bernard tew who could be approached. up in the convent is organising it, maybe if she told 'No. Sadly she'd need every detail and these are ,mpossible to give.' Thee was another silence. Trii really tryingbut I can't think of any single thing that would distract them, not at this stage.' are.' i g anyway. I know you 'Thank you for tryin 1 'What will you do now -11 sort things out, and I suppose I 'll pray that the Lord wl rn like that you won t puzzle too much about what May see a very odd request.' ,I will put it right out of my mind and forget it was ever mentioned.' Maura Hayes syniled- ver and took her hand. And Sister madeleme reached 0)uld make an excellent This was a truly kind woman who w(ahon if ... if wife and companion for poor Martin Mc~4 - . . well, if things were different.

Charlotte died in hospital on aThursday morning. Ivy wanted to come to the hospital to be with Ernest, but

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he said no. 'I'll just stay in the waiting room aua~everyone in case you need me,' Ivy had pleaded. 'No, love. Honestly. Don't cause a fuss. Don,t make trouble at this stage for everyone, Stay at horne. I come to you later in the day.' Thursday passed and Ernest never came. Ivy rang pub around closing

time. She spoke to a barman she knew, 'He's with his family in the front snug, IVY. It's probably best I don't tell him you rang.' 'Absolutely,' Ivy said. She sat in her little room awake all night. She was sure he would come at some stage, when everyone else had gone home. At three o'clock she heard a taxi drawing up at the door, She moved the curtain and looked out, but the taxi was not Ernest, it was a Woman in a white cotton polo-necked sweater, with very blonde hair, very red lips and very high heels. She had got out of the taxi to kiss Louis Gray goodbye properly with a great deal of squeaking and lifting one leg at a time as she embraced him. She was oblivious to his shushing sounds as he paid the taxi and urged the driver to take her away as quickly as possible.

'Will I go to the funeral with you?' Lena asked. 'What?' 'You'll need someone to go with. You can hardly be up in mourning with the family. I thought you'd need a there 1 friend as a sort of disguise.' , Lord, Lena, you're great.' 'So I'll go with you then. When is it?' 'Love, we're not going, whenever it is. it would not be~ as Ernest has put it, appropriate. Can you imagine Emma knowing a big word like appropriate?' 'But of course we can go. Anyone can go to a funeral.' 'In Ireland maybe. Not here.' 'They don't sell tickets, do they? We'll go.' 'He doesn't want us. Why push?' 'All right, all right. Maybe she has relatives, maybe it will be small. Maybe he's right not to want you there.'

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,sn,t want me anywhere. That's what Fin mourn~ic does oody Charlotte,' Ivy said, riot bl
you definite about doing hotel management?' Philip
~'Bnefi asked. you know that.'

.Sure I am, Philip . n Dublin.' ,So we'll be together together. I'm staying in
'At classe; yes, but not exactly to! nd the corner. e hostel in Mountjoy
Square. It's just around I'd say it's a bit grim. nd uncle and I know that will ,I'm
saying with my aunt a bit as glum these days. He had agreed Phil ,e gri en
Kit had said she didn't want to get into ,jnwillingly wh at because of exams.
kissing and groping and , all th ,It might distract me, she had lied to him,
The day the Leaving Certificate finished Philip came back. 'it won't distract
you now)' he said, eager as the two

Jack Russell terriers that terrorised people in the Central Hotel. So Kit had to give him a different excuse. 'It's an i odd -.1me for a girl, being seventeen. Please be understanding, I promise I don't fancy anyone else, but I really and truly ~on't want to get involved at the moment.' Id ask. 'But aren't YOU fond of me?' Philip wou 'Very fond of you. I 'So then?' He was eternally hopeful. 'So then you'll understand.' I waiting for you? 'And are you waiting for me and am Just tell me,' Philip had begged. 'Let's say we're not hunting for anyone else, but if someone else turned up for You it WOuldn , t be a betrayal or anything- I'd quite understand,' she had said. 'And for you, Kit?' 'I won't have time for anyone busy., 'No you're not. You're on holiday.'

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else to turn up. I'm SO

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'I'm going to London. Who could turn up in London,. 'You're only going to London for ten days: 'Then I'll be back. Philip, please.' And because he didn't want to be tiring, he st,ppe~ And they went to the pictures just on their own, ,, sometimes with Emmet, sometimes with Clio. Bc,u,e,'U' Clio said, Anna was so awful and such a troublemaker, the only thing to do was to let her come to places wh,,,,he couldn't do much harm, like at the cinema, a place where nobody had to talk to her.

Dear Kit, I am so eager to hear the result of your exams. It will be so exciting to plan your course in hotel management. Do tell me more about it. And what are you going to do for the holidays? I'll be away a lot travelling, but your letters may be forwarded to me, so I can reply from wherever I am. It's a pity I won't be in London during the summer because, unlike everyone else, I actually enjoy the city when all the visitors come. If you have Sister Madeleine praying for you, and your father's nice friend, Maura Hayes,

rooting for you, and if you've done all the work you say you did, I'm sure you don't need me on the case as well. But I do keep my fingers crossed for you. Love as always, Lena

'London could be very crowded during the summer) Maura Hayes said to Kit the day after she got this letter, from Lena. 'I'd say it's nice when it's full of tourists, holiday people,' Kit said. 'Not the best time to see it in a way.' 'Oh don't join all the others who say not to go, please, Maura.'

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not saying not to go ... , V, what are You saying)' Kit asked. fully, and for don't know - now,, Maura answered truthfully. Martin

made both of them laugh helplessly. In to the kitchen and asked what the joke was. 'Nah, I don't know. If I were to go through the whole conversation. I laugh in it,' said Maura, wiping her eyes. 'I wouldn't be upset,' Kit agreed. 'Probably, I heard the whole Rita was finishing the ironing. She had to understand was that it was really change and all she could do was move. Miss Hayes was a very nice girl. I'd never find anyone who got on so well with a person. He would be with his children.

Mr Bernard got a phone call in the school. It was from Mrs. O'Leary. It was of a lady in London. She wanted to know when the results of the Leaving Certificate were expected. 'They arrived today,' Mother Bernard sounded pleased. It had been a very good result as far as she was concerned. The lady wanted to enquire about the successes and failures. 'And to whom am I speaking?' Mother Bernard couldn't resist that the head

of the Wall girl and young Hickey asked. 'Yes, not to any stranger on the phone. 'I am a distant relation of Cliona Kelly.' The woman had. If Mother Bernard thought it odd that this not called the Kelly family she said nothing. Instead, she listed with pride the number of Honours Cliona Kelly had got in her examination. 'And her friend, Kit McMahon?' 'I Mary Katherine McMahon did very well also. The whole standard was very high.' 'And I believe the girls are coming on a visit to London, to your sister's house?' 'That is so, but I was going to write a letter there to whoever you would suggest ... perhaps arranging to meet Cliona. Can you ... ?' 'I'll tell you what date they are arriving.

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i 'Mother Lucy is in charge of the London house and girls for the duration of their stay. They will be arri,,in' 9 August for nine full days ... And you are?' 9 'Thank you so much, Mother Bernard.' The connect, was broken. Mother Bernard looked at the rece,,,, H, did this woman know she was Mother Bernard,

At Mass on Sunday Mother Bernard was talking to t Kellys. 'Your relation rang up from England to e~, about Cliona's Leaving results,' she said. :England?' said Peter Kelly. Relation?' said Lilian. 'That's what she said.' Mother Bernard sourid(defensive. What could she mean, they asked each other on the w; home. 'Getting a bit dozy maybe,' Lilian suggested, 'She seems sharp enough.' Peter was thoughtful. 'Let's hope she lasts out for Anna's time anyway.' Ulia was always practical.

d and so 1 am off on a tour, leaving 8 August. 1 tol you I'd be out of London for about two weeks. Still, les a great opportunity for me. Hope your summer plam are going well, and that you have everything ready for your new life in Dublin. Again, 1 want to say how great it was to hear froin You so quickly. Thank you so much for writing on the day you got your results. 1 kept crossing my fingers and go, on with my work. 1 drank your health last night wit~' my friend, Ivy Brown. It's so exciting to be on your way at last.

'What will I do if Louis comes in?' Ivy asked. He 'He won't.' Lena was grim.'As you very well know. hasn't been in much.' 'He never stays out all night.' Ivy was aghast. 'No, but if Kit comes to look for me, it won't be at ing They won't clash.' 'And what about you? Suppose she sees you on the street

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b, ""-Ijion people in this City.' Oer~ S eig there aren't.' ,N;,t In this road, 1,m hiding on her, she doesn't know 't think 30esn

F,elaxl Ivy rn Me. xed.' ,you're ,Olt rela, use my daughter's going to be in the W,ll that s beca citv and I want to see her.' Ile eelling about it, I really do..' I have ar, awful f nings in your ,Norlsense, Ivy-, just let me spend the eve ,ck kitchen' that s all.' liow do, you know she'll come looking for you I knov",

boat journey was marvellous fun. They met a great ,,,d of Irish builders who had been back home for their relief that they were ,,,jrrirner holidays- It f edom. _ngland and rei naking the return journey to F 'Why are they all singing about how wonderful Ireland it), Kit asked, s if they're leaving I That's the point of Irish songs. They're only good If You sing them while you're abroad.' Clio was very knowledgeable. ,1,,gine! we,re abroad,' Kit said. 'Nearly.' Clio was being Uty. at's abroad. 'We're in the middle of the Irish Sea. Th We're beyond the three-mile limit.' ile they sang The men asked them to come and listen wh I the 'Rose of Tralee'. it was always good to have beautifu pris listening when you sang that song. vell 'We really are going to London,' whispered Clio see real teddy boys, real cof fee bars, everything.' 'I know,'said Kit.'I know.'She was thinking about how she would find her mother's friend, Lena, the woman who knew much more about her mother than anyone. She would go to her house and ask Mrs Brown where she was. Then she would go and surprise her.

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y If ever they had thought Mother Bernard was b,o till~ soon realised that compared to Mother Lucy, shQ wild and free soul. Mother Lucy assumed that the,, v,,OQ all want to see cultural sights only, and that evenings ,,,k be spent playing table tennis and making cocoa on,, th, Rosary had been said in the convent chapel. Although they enjoyed the visits to Westminster Abb,,. and the Tower of London, the Planetarium and M,da~, Tussaud's, the girls were bleakly disappointed with thti, escorted tour. It was tantalising being so near and yet,, far. 'We could always escape,'Jane Wall said. 'is it worth the bloody troubleF Clio asked. 'It will b~ painted as black as sin.

They'll think at home we did 6, devil and all, and all just for a cup of coffee in Soho.'

'Your aunt rang again, Cliona,' Mother Lucy said on third night. 'My aunt?' Clio was alarmed. 'There isn't anything~, wrong, is there?' 'No, she just wanted to know your movements, if you had any free time on your own.' Clio shrugged at Kit. 'Why on earth did she want to know that?' she said. 'I don't know. I think she may have wanted to take you~ out somewhere, she was very anxious to be filled in on your timetable.' It was a mystery. Aunt Maura, in London. 'Is she going to ring again?' Clio wanted to know. 'I'm not sure. But if she does want to take you out then assume it will be in order.' Clio's eyes met Kit's and began to dance. 'if she does ring again, then it would be nice to see her,' Clio said in her fawning voice. 'Yes, well, of course.' 'Maura's not in London, She's back in Lough Gla" playing golf,' Kit whispered later.

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it must be some glorious mistake sent by -1 00A."but atrick and St Jude, the patron saint Of Ind ~c p message for . Go out and ring and leave a cases ?I hey'll think where

,,,,,here, phone box in the street. T

~Ulre .. in the bathroom.and put the money in.'MaY 1 ~,t fojr,3 a red phone box Ik to Cliona Kelly? it's her aunt.' She asked the little ded the door. ~,er who min t through to Cliona in the noment Kit was pu om 'Hello,' she whispered, terrified that it ro, , to be unmasked -,as all going , how nice of You to call. Mother and -oh Aunt Maura ret in touch-' so much hoping YOU would 9 1* were)w Of Clio's les. &it listened wordlessly to the easy fl(- iso much love to meet Aunt Maura. at five .ley would would be happy j,ck tomorrow. No, no, Mother Lucy : for just a few hours. let Kit and herself out imagine your aunt 'Aren't you lucky,' said Jane Wall. ' :~Ing in London.' in fate.' I know,) said CliO- 'Makes you believe , , V Clio asked. 'Where will we go ~What will we do)' ,you go where You like. Irn going off on my own. but ~oh Kit, you can't. We can go on our own, ~~gether.' ludicrous grown-up 'You're the one who said it was ,d up in a convent.' -,omen like us being tic an you're going to get 'Well it is of course, but it doesn't me leave me. I got You ,o some kind of mood and go off and o

is in London.' ~As free time. After A it is my aunt wh I there is no aunt in London. It is 'You know as. well as .r at the door made.')me kind c» f mistake that poor siste 'It's still me that got it-'out to a phone box.' 'No it isn't. I was the one who went 'Where are you going ; o Clio demanded. TM not telling YOU- 1 m going nowhere. I'm just trying ~0 be free,,
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'We can be free together, and have a bit of fun.,
10 'No we can't. Stop whingeing, Cli . Do what you We'll meet at ten and then you can tell me everythi.,.1 'I hate you at times.' 'I know, I hate you at times, too, but a lot of the tim, get on quite well,' Kit said. 'I can't imagine why,' Clio grumbled. Kit had the map and she knew where to catch th, underground to Earl's Court. But first she had to sha4 Clio. 'You've been talking about Soho since we were fifteen. You)ust get on a bus and get out at . . 'You're meeting someone, I know that's what you,re doing,' Clio said. 'Clio, already you're eating into the bit of free time we have. Will you get the bus or will you not?' When she was sure that the bus had gone out of view carrying Clio aboard, Kit ran down the steps of the station and took the Circle Line. At least she would see the house where Lena and Louis Gray lived. She would leave a note and maybe talk to this Mrs Brown. Once or twice she had asked in letters who Mrs Brown was, but there had never been a real explanation. Kit felt a surge of excitement well up in her throat. In twenty minutes she would be there. Kit had thought it would be a more fashionable street. Somehow she had always seen it as a place with big houses that had drives leading up to them. She thought that Mrs Brown m' be an au it, or a relative anyway. A woman whom they partly looked after. But this was definitely the road. And number 27 was definitely the place she had been writing letters for almost four years. Lena had never said the place was elegant, but neithcr had she said it was so ordinary. The paint was peeling OD several of the doors and nearby the railings were rustY There were dustbins in the street and in basements- It wasn't the kind of place that this friend of Mother's shOula be living in. Kit looked at her own reflection in a window. She had dressed carefully, in her best tartan skirt, and a yel10"

she VVC re a tartan scarf around her neck, a present ~lcuse - he had put on lipstick, of course, as soon as Maura. S (ver her shoulder she wore a left the convent gate long dark curly hair was tied up houlder bag. Her bon. She thought Lena would think ,,ith ,mart black rib if Lena were there, Anyway, ,, bacirnade an effort, that is Ismart girl.

would tell her that Kit was a something ,his, I rs BrO'O" anxiety that was near dread7 With a feeling of- McMahon knocked on the he couldn't understand, Kit 5'oor of ,umber 27me -rl to Millar's at lunchtime. 'Quick half Louis had co I ,,nt)'he asked Lena. had such iked to see Louis Gray; he jessle Park always li-d her finger at him. ~jst,nction and good looks. She wagge In she said see us nearly often enoug 'You don't come to the with mock severity. Jessie had certainly improved over Ir. ,cars. Her hair was no longer the wild bird's nest of ha' '5he wore a smart grey dress with a blue and gold scarf; her nos were painted. She looked a perfectly acceptable London business woman. day, Jessie,' he said. 'You look very lovely to redictable. Lena had seen the Her blush a ad smile were p f so many women since she irne response on the faces C ~ad been with Louis. A - response to flattery. An innocent P~tasure at being appreciated and admired , - ntS. This was Lena excused herself from the clie 7portam. ~--came to see her at work. A sudden ~ear come to her. Had Kit arrived? Had she met Louis? impossible. She had checked Then she told herself this wasThere would M the convent where the girls were staying. me; the ~e no chance of Ki t bei ng released during the dayn e(lucational programme was too intense, I d she sat They walked side by side to the pub nearby, an at the table while he bought them a drink. off,' he 'kemember you tried to make me get this week siid. 'Yes.' She had begged him, beseeched, offered to take

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them to any hotel, offered to go where he'd ch, But had said it was impossible, he was needed at the i"otel had become annoyed about it also,

claiming that Le-~ never accepted that he, too, had responsibilities at work. She had dropped it. 'You go alone if you need a holiday so badly,' he had said. But Lena couldn't leave number 27 knowing that Kit McMahon was on her way there to give her a surprise. She couldn't risk that Kit might meet Louis and learn everything. His smile was as warm as ever. 'My love ... Wasn't it well that you didn't let me weaken and take a little holiday?' 'Why was that?' She forced her voice to be up and bright. 'They're sending me to Paris,' he said triumphantly, 'To Paris?' Her heart was like a stone, 'Not for ever. just for ten days. To see how this Frerick hotel is run. It's an exchange. A Frenchman is coming here, Won't that set their pulses racing at the Dryden?' 'Not as much as you do.' It was an automatic response, but oddly it came out wrong. It sounded bitter, it sounded like an accusation. 'So I'm off.' 'You're off?' 'Well, you can hardly come with me, can you?' he asked, 'I suppose I could get some time . . . 'You don't have a passport,' Louis said. His glance was very level. Of course Lena didn't have a passport. How could a dead woman get a passport? He could go abroad for ever without her. 'When do you go?' she asked. 'I thought today,' he said. Lena's head felt very heavy, as if it was a great weight to lift up and, look him in the eye. 'Do you love me at all' Louis?' she asked. 'I love you very much,' he said. There was silence, 'you believe me?' he asked. 'I don't know.' Her voice was bleak. She saw the

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- his face. This was what he hated, but she was too weary to care. And he was going anyway, as light and cheerful, or heavy and gloom she would find. 'Why would I stay if I know, you should know,' he said slowly, 'I'm here, aren't I?

signed. 'That's right-' She was sure don't make me go with this big draggy feeling of about it- it's an opportunity, it's a chance, it's you are making squeaks)USE like a wife now, It's jolly and like YOU more like me to be J ou're right. It's much Of smiles and turn a blind eye to what's happening. 'And what is happening?' His voice was very cold, 'what's happening is that you are treating ' me like dirt. . . ng all hours of the night - - .ou are com, . a public place.' He Put 'his ,oh, God, no. Not a scene in ~..ead in his hands. . - S that you know you can do 'What's happening I you don't have to marry

anything you bloody well like. ric because I'm dead. 'You don't have to take me abroad ried already. Did you think of ,ecause I'm dead and bu ~at, did you)' Her laugh had a hysterical tinge. 'Jesus, Lena, get a hold of yourself.' He looked around

. im, alarmed. 'I've got a hold of myself all right, but I have no hold on v,ou, none at all.' I We don't Now he was angry. Nor should you have. ~elieve in all that business of tying each other down. We've Deen through this. Love isn't about making rules - thou

shalt not do this or do that - - .' - g off to France with 'And love certainly isn't about goin adays.' '~katever bit of stuff you're sleeping with now 'Lena, you're disgusting. Ring the Dryden, ask them am I doing an exchange, ask them.' e bloody bit of 'Give me credit for something, for sorn, a call like lignity ~ Do you tbink 1, d lower myself to make 'hat to check on you?'

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'See, you have it every way now. You want proof, 1 you proof, you won't take it.' 'Go to Paris. I'm sick of you, Louis, go there and there.' ,I just might,' he said. 'And if 1 do ... You sent

The afternoon was stifling. Jessie looked at her se,e,~ times, but always Lena waved away any question sympathy. 'Not bad news, was it?' Dawn asked. 'Absolutely not. Louis is going to France, I may him there at the weekend.' , Aren't you a lucky couple,' Dawn said in genuine admiration. At six o'clock, with a great sense of relief, she put her cover on her typerwiter, locked her files into her drawer, and left the office. Louis would be out of the flat by now. He would have gone straight home and packed his things. The only problem was how much he had packed. Enough for ten days in France, or enough for a longer time away from her. And as he had said, it was she who had sent him. She put off the evil moment of arriving home, and went to a pub. 'You're too good-looking to drink alone,' the barman said as Lena bought her gin and tonic. 'Chat me up at your peril,' she said to him. He laughed but he moved away smartly. There was something about her eye that made him know she wasn't joking.

ivy made tea for the strikingly attractive Irish girl in her fresh yellow blouse and tartan skirt. She was a younger version of Lena, with the same shiny curly hair, and big dark eyes. 'I thought you'd be different, Mrs Brown. I've been sending you letters for years, I didn't know you'd be she paused. 'I'd be what?' Ivy had a mock threatening look.

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and kind of fun. I got the impression you youngf making people be quiet in front of
,ere old and sort 0 wrote about me?' always .Is that what Lena ou, she wrote
,% She wrote nothing about Y 111 about her

So. , so little of her life here, but a me I know interested in everyabout *
other. And she's so I letters, I'm tin,e v;ith rn.y 11" bit selfish in MY t makes
me a do, I afraid - I orn you, I do know that.' ,She ~oves.to hear fr ,What a
pity she isn't here.' Kit sounded so bereft Ivy found herself swal lowing.
~Yes ... well, you can't have let 'her know you were com ing. 1,m sure she'd
have stayed q wanted it to be a surprise-' 'And didn't you know she was
901n away) She didn't
tell you?, odd, I go, Yes, she did. But you know this is very b oing, that it
wasn't really feeling that she might not e g definite. I thought she might still
be here.' 'And now you've had a wasted journey. She\$\$ L vou. I know
where she lives. 'No it's not, I,ve mei . the only person who ever made sense
of anything about MY mother to me. They were great friends. And I can see
why. Lena's such a letter writer, she makes it like a con versation.' 'Yes, I'm
sure,' Ivy said. You 'I don't suppose you, could show me their flat.
know, I bet she wouldn t mind.' from me and they 'No love, I'd better not.
People rent have absolute privacy. It wouldn't be right.' 'But you ha e all the
keys hanging, on the wall here. v emerg'Yes, but that's only for an
)p 'Am I not an emergency roken . just sonleone.she'll be heartb 'No,
darling. you're , Ivy,s voice broke off. Behind to miss, and she'll say - - - Kit
there was a hammering or, the door. 'Sorry love, just a moment - , ., Ivy
leaped to the door

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with a speed Kit wouldn't have suspected her capable "f just before Ivy pulled the door behind her Kit saw. a ven, handsome man in an open-necked white shirt Ind gre',, flannels standing there. He looked like a film star. 'Ivy . . .he began. 'I'll talk to you further down the corridor if that's a~ right.' 'Hey, where's the fire?' Kit saw him being dragged ut of view. She looked around Ivy's amazing room. Every irth of wall was covered with pictures and posters, programmes, beer mats and little clippings from magazines. You could never get bored in this room, Kit thought, it would be a comforting place to stay. But she must not wear out her welcome. She would have to leave when she finished the tea. She could write a letter to Lena, and leave it. The voices outside seemed to be raised. The handsome man, whoever he was, did not seem to meet with Ivy's approval. 'Listen here, let me leave the box in here out of the way. You don't want people falling over it, breaking their necks and suing you, do you?' 'I'll take it in later. I said, it's all right.' But he would hear nothing of it. A big wooden chest was pushed in the door and then the man looked up and saw Kit. 'Well for heavens sake,' he said. 'Hello,' she smiled. Ivy seemed very anxious to get him out. 'So if that's everything,' she said. 'I'll give you my key, Ivy, hang it up there with the others. The box will be collected later.' 'Fine, fine,' Ivy cut across him. 'Yes, I understand everything. Safe journey.' 'And who's this?' His smile was so warm. 'That's a friend of mine. Her name is Mary Katherine Kit opened her mouth amazed. 'Lovely to meet you, Mary . . .he said. 'And you?' She had an upward lilt on the words as if asking him to give his name.

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,ere 'I~as a boot from the street. -your taxi won't wait
1,y said. They spoke in the hall and through the the man was trying to kiss
Ivy on 'I in. ~ - ~do c reco ed from h*

bee cous. ~~'ho lot of trouble., Mary watherine.ed to change an, and manag
r th 1 . your ni-ther's friend sente - nce b batismal name and that this Avs

said that school.' OW YOU W -r,nLondon.'Kit ing about me ove ,Imagine you 1 _~Asped her hands with pleasure. er out. The girl had 1,,ry na,11 heart to shoo h t borne by now she . And if l_ena wasn lowhere else 90 anyway, ' prob d be late. They had an agreement that ld not pause at her door. ,Kit, sweetheart, will you hold on a moment? 1 have to rig upstairs. 1,11 be rigtit back.' ivy ran up the ~eave somethi aper. Sbe's bere? she wrote, a~d st,irs with a pencil and p the stairs door. Then, she came down slipped it under the v6. She hadn't read the label two at a time. Kit hadn't mo g that it was to . shad left, the label sayin on the box that Lout nbe collected, the label giving his ow of tea,' Ivy said. c was Ptle ' 1111. or. Kit could see k and noticed sh

,We,li have another cup eping you. ,If you're sure I'm not ke, le company.' And since 'No my love, I'M haPPY With tl a life without T-ouis it l_ena was going to conic home to etails f or her about the would be good if at least there were d visit from her child. , looked up. There was opened. Ivy is be' He".9'r' ~rouble,

The hall door that made Kit look too, the something about her glanceld see was the sense of anxiety, the frown. All she cou outline of a dark-haired wonlan through the glass door. The curtain obscured a better view. al voice. 'I've 'It's all right,' Ivy called in a high unnatur ' She couldn't left a note in your room. NO need to come in.

hear what was being said outside. It sounded a b:~ strangled. 'I'll come up and talk to you later. I have a vi

lsj,,~just now.' It was said like the lines from a very bad act,,, . Kit never knew afterwards what made her do it, but sh,. went to the door. She had a feeling it was Lena, hom, unexpectedly. The woman who was about to go up th, stairs turned as the door opened. There she stood. A woman in a cream dress with a cream jacket, loose over her shoulders, a long blue and

gold scr. around her neck. Her dark curly hair was like a frame around her face. Kit gave a cry that sounded strangled in her throat, The moment lasted for ever. The woman on the stairs, I,, Brown in the doorway behind and Kit with her hand to her throat. 'Mother!' she cried. 'Mother!' Nobody said anything. 'Mother,' Kit said again. Lena stretched out her hand - but Kit backed away. 'You didn't die - you ran away. You're not drowned you just left us - you left us.' She was white as she looked at the figure on the stairs, 'You let us think you were dead,' she cried 11) horrot, and with her eyes full of tears made for the front door out into the street.

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CHAPTER SIX

cached her as she Rot to h, traffic lights. 'Please,' ly,b', 'begged please cimc back.' ,dvltality had g~ne was ashen; 911 the life , at chatting I i~it's face ight girl who had s her. This was no.t the br efore. But thccl~ 'be was a girl ,,,,y,s room a few minutes b ed out but Kit shrank ,~ho had seen a ghost. ck,Ivy reach . n the 'I beg You to come ba e shock. Don't stay here 1 ~ac~ - It,s been a terrib i Idly Street: ' 1~)ked around her wi (1 must 90 1 must go. 'on the big red buses swirling In every direct, ' it the traffic looked different from the so unfamiliar, people who of a London peop ' le back borne. The thud and Pound s afraid evening. r wrist; she wa ivy didn't touch, didn't grab he along into the traffic..

it would break f ree and run heal id, that Y,* ou so much,' Ivy sa hoping It 'Your mother loves Y the right thing.. fla~ed. ,My mother is dead,' l~it 'No, no.' she drowned she drowned in the lake . . . it. 'She's dead, rily one who knows i herself. 1 know that 1'n' the o' ... 1 Wit's voice She can't be here ... she drowned herself ,f hysteria. ut a STall, had the high tinge c control. She P lly realised it was time to take 1 don't care what You w . WY arm around Wit's shoulders. ae alone. 1,m taking you ba~ allowed to 1supported the girl saY, you can't be , d she halt led. half 'Ith me now.' A_ rid in the do-1 of her owl, ~ack to nurnbCr 2 7 a

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i Lena wasn't there. It was as the place had been not t, nilnutes ago, the walls covered in their idiotic decor.~,,, Kit sat on the same chair where she had been sitting wht. she had heard the woman on the stairs and gone out, investigate. What had drawn her there? Suppose she had not gon,~ Her head felt very strange, as If the top of it had turned int paper. Then she heard a roaring in her cars and felt the floo, rise up towards her. Everywhere it seemed there we,~ voices shouting, shouting from a distance. Then she felt something Jabbing at her face and a strange terrible smell that nearly choked her. Ivy's face came into focus, big now and anxious, very near her. She had a smil bottle in her hand. 'Don't speak, just sniff it.' 'What? What?' 'It's smelling salts, sal volatile they call It ... You fainted.' 'I never faint,' Kit said indignantly. 'You're fine now. Here, let me help you on to the sofa.' 'Where is she?' Kit asked. The whole thing had come back to her with all its enormity. 'She's upstairs. She won't come down until 1 tell her.' 'I don't want to see her.' 'Shush, shush ... all right. Put your head between your knees for a bit to get the blood back.' 'I don't want . . .' 'Did you hear me? 1 said 1 won't get her until you're ready.' 'I won't he ready.' 'Right. Now for a cup of very sweet tea.' 'I don't take sugar . . .' Kit began. 'You do today,' Ivy said in a voice that was not going tO be argued with. The strong sweet tea began to bring back some of the colour. Eventually Kit spoke. 'Was she here from the start? From the very beginning, when we thought she was dead~'

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'She,,, tell you herself.' .No., another biscuit ... please Kit, it's what ,mt)re tear when people 'had a shock. it worked did in the wa now.'The wornan was trying so hard. i ill work s like buttons. She and bright eye She had a lined face, ' c monkey that Kit ked a little like a friendly inquislt" ew' h in the zoo. Was that the time they had gon it

le seen hen Father had brought mother, or was it the next year w ~ething to take their EffIrriet ond herself as a treat, as som i all? ,,iinds off the tragedy that had happened to then ut to refuse the second cup but She had been abo - is woman jilenly she realised that it was the only thing thi n,ad to ~i,e; so she took it.Ki asked. ,How did she know to come to you It 'What do You

mean?' 'Were you friends already?' 'I rent flats, rooms, That's all.' 'But You're friends now.' 'y 'we're friends now.'

es, e was full of misery and Why?' Kit asked, Her fac incomprehension. I erson. Whowouldn't Why? Because she s such a great p ful and be friends with her?' Ivy was brisk and cheer 3eliberately misunderstanding the question. She wasn't ~,o . ing to attempt to answer that.one. all, and cking on Ivy's w They could hear the clock ti I ere were footsteps outside the muffled sound of traffic. Th le from Dn the stairs, but it was not Lena. it was the c.oup the third floor going out. Kit and Ivy strained to see through the net curtain. When they heard the hall door click IVY said -almost Ir . iumphantly, 11 told you she said she wouldn't come ~awn until you wanted to see her here.' A silence. (Or to go up to her even J can't.' 'Take your time.'

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~ 1

' o, not any time.' There was another silence then Ivy asked'Do vou if I go up and tell her rhaL you're all right? No, fpyo,, '~",C

4e won't fetch her downstairs. It's just that she'll want know.' 1~1 'What does she care whether we're all right or said. 'Please Kit, don't let me leave her sitting there not knowing. I won't be a minute,' Kit said nothing. 'Dor,t run away. 'I'm not the one that ran away,' Kit said. 'She'll tell you.' 'No.' 'When you want to hear,' Ivy said and was gone. Kit went to the door after she heard Ivy's footsteps go upstairs. This was the room where her letters had arrived for 0 those years, letters to Lena Gray, saying private secret things about her mother, talking about the grave and the flowers they had planted around it. She had told this Lena secrets she had told no one, and all the time she had been deceived. A wave of anger and shame rose in her. She would not leave it like this, slip quietly away from this house and pretend that it hadn't happened. Mother was alive, Father must be told, and Emmet and everyone. it was almost too huge to grapple with. She felt dizzy ir once more, as if she was about to faiat again. But she steeled herself. She would go up the stairs and speak to her mother. She would find out what had happened and whY, Why her mother had left them all like that to come her , e and live in this place in London, letting them hunt for her in the lake. at Kit went out and climbed the stairs. She would knock doors until she

found them. But she didn't need to. She heard Ivy's voice on the first floor.
-1,11 go back down to her, Lena. The child has had such a shock sht
shouldn't be on her own.' Then Ivy saw Kit on the stairs She stood aside
silently to let the girl walk into the room"

110t~ Kit

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LS sitting in a chair with a small rug by her She was shimmering; Ivy. ~ad , out

CL ,Jers. hurriedly. She had a glass of water in her hand; ~ousl~ , put it all, were
1 or softly behind her as if they he do 1

;~, ~ne- a daughter. ~mother,30do it?' Kit said. Her eyes were hard and :J.-hy
did you'Why did you let us think you were ,,, ~oice was cold Jeal` , Lena's
voice was flat. from us, u , had to. ve to. If you wanted to go away ,you
didn't have Emmet and me, you could have gone for Daddy and ~ing, not
have us have told us you were g(and thinking YOU I could be aying for
You ... tion nurturing for you, pr ~ns up with the emo voice was breaking ,ere in
hell.' Kit's , ~)f what she was saying. ~s were wide in horror. Lena said
nothing, Her eye -ble way. Her turned out in the worst way' and Everything
had t' her. She was filled with loathing daughter had found Tell the girl that it
was contempt. Must Lena speak now -yal? or should she . her father who
had done the real betrayal: 'had at least one protect him? Let yit think that she I
o who trustworthy parent instead of being saddled with tw
had let her down? ~ and strong. And Lena knew the The girl was so fier~, %
her letters. Now she would never secrets of her heart from the open
cupboard hear any more. it was as bad a pain as which had once held Louis
Gray's suits- own. Lena indicated a chair but the girl would not sit d
Instead, she looked around the room, her face working, - Lena's eyes try .
ing to get control of herself Possibly ~ishing followed her, wondering how
she saw the place, wide she could read the thoughts that were darting
around in

Kies head. She took a breath as if to speak and then changed her '~e
windows and pulled mind. she went Over to one of them to look at the street
beneath. Again back the heavy curtain'

it was as if she was struggling to work something she trusted herself to speak. Lena sat there, eyes enormous, hand shaking as down her glass of water. Everything seemed to ha into slow motion. 'Say something,' Lena said. Kit's voice was steady. 'Why should 1 say an. What have I got to say? You're the one who sho~, something.' 'Will you listen?' 'Yes.' 'I made a decision. 1 loved another man ... it was ""h powerful love 1 . left you and Emmet and my life with you 'And where is he, the man you loved so much?' Ther. was a sneer in Kit's voice. 'He's not here,' Lena said. 'But why did you pretend to be dead?' The voice had a false calm as if she were holding on by a thread. 'I didn't pretend to be dead. That's something that came about by mistake.' 'Oh listen to me,' the temper broke, 'now listen to me. Since I've been twelve 1 thought you were dead. My brother and 1 go up to your grave; you are prayed for c, ,, year on your anniversary. Daddy's face is so sad when he speaks about you it would make a stone statue cry ... arid here you are in this place ... because you loved some other man ... a man who doesn't love you ... ' . . . and you say it's only a mistake that people think you're dead ... you must be mad, mad.' Kit's anger somehow galvanised Lena. She flung the rug from her shoulder and stood up to face her daughter. 'I was no part of this conspiracy to pretend 1 was dead. 1 told your father that 1 was leaving him. 1 said that he must choose Is how to explain it to his neighbours and friends, that thi was the least 1 could give him, some dignity ... 'I didn't make any demands ... 1 wasn't in a position to do so 1 just said 1 hoped he'd let me see you over the years.' 'You did not tell Daddy you were leaving. You didn't

what kind of lies you tell yourself, don,t care heard him ,ell bo. . to lie to me. I,m the one who flot going I'm the one who ril ht after night in his room re still 1.n.ing S him by the lake all the time they we 1;il~ed VVI),king for You- hen the body came back and he was so

,,,, %vas there w]you'd rest easy in your grave. ,Ielsej and he said that
 knows a I i this set I about this ... ~,n,t tell Me that Daddy tanding a few feet
 from each He doesn't.' They were s t face, angry and upset gave him cred,
 ,He must be a much better actor than great bitterness in ,or if he fooled you
 as well.' Lena had a er voice. 'And I will never forgive myself for what I
 have mmet, but he has his sharein the blame - I 30,le to you and E left him a
 letter.' ,old him. He knows. 'What?' q left him a long letter telling him
 everything, asking for
 riothing5 not even understanding.' iv She held her Kit backed away. 'A
 letter. Oh my Go~ - Mahon hand to her throat. Her f ace had gone white.
 Kit Mc had never fainted before this day, and now she thought she
 was about to do so again. She staggered as the floor started its climb
 towards her but she --- -ed back the dizzi ness and
 nausea. that you're not going to believe me,' Lena said. 'I know . was
 strangled. 'Yes, I do believe you.' Kit's voice 'You knew?' Lena said. 'I found
 it ... and I put it in the Aga. 'You whatF 'I burned it.' 'You burned it? A letter
 addressed to someone else? In :he name of God, why did you do that) Jesus
 Christ, why
 did you do that?' 'I wante6 you to be buried in the churchyard,' Kit said
 knew you,d commi ted suicide they simply, 'it they 'wouldn't let you. why
 did you 'But I ddn't cornm-- suicide. Oh God, have to interfere?'
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1

'I thought you had ... I 'What made you think that? What right h decide what
 to do? I can't believe this, I really ca",t
 .'Ev ryone was loo I b,l,,, w king for you. There we ith Ights and Sergeant
 O'Connor turned upside down ... I 'But for Christ's sake . . the letter
 1 c peopl, 0ii, ... and the b,,!
 If You had given Your fath,,

'But You had been so strange ... so wild, don't remember ... that's what we thought.' 'it on Yourse to 'think.' That's what ou thought, what you took 'Quite a lot of people thought it, as it happens.' :How do you know?, You hear whispers.' 'And what about the inquest ... the put-up job betwee your father and Peter Kelly, identifying some othe unfortunate as me?' 'They thought it was you, that's what we all Ehought.' 'But who was it? Whose body is in my grave)' Kit looked at her, stricken. 'I don't know. It could have been someone who drowned a long time ago.' Lena dismissed this. 'Imagine. He would have done anything to bide the fact that I'd left him.' Kit was very quiet. 'Father doesn't know you left him. Thanks to me Father thinks you're dead.' Lena looQ at her and let the horror of this sink in, For years and years Martin really bad thought she had drowned herself in the lake on hi s doorstep. How could this grotesque thing have happened? 'And does he know why.. * or did he suspect that I was about to leave him and that's why I took my life?' 'No, he doesn't think you took your life. He thinks thai you drowned accidentally. He may be one of the few, but he thinks that. He told Emmet and me over and over.'

Lena reached for a packet of cigarettes. Automatically she stretched the pack towards Kit. Kit shook her head.

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1, roor, that had heard such shouting was now so silent tking of the match sounded like a whip the str ,racking. After an eternity Kit said, 'I'm sorry for burning the aw. it seemed like the only thing to do at the time.' Another long silence and Lena said: 'You don't know ,w sorry I am to have left you, but at the time ... at the :]V.. .' Lena sat down, but Kit still stood. ,you could have come back to us, told us you were 111ve, that it had been a mistake.' Lena said nothing. ,an, I couldn't have unburned the letter, and anyway An't know I should have. But you didn't want to, did ,ou? You didn't mind leaving us there thinking ... :hinking. - .' 'I was trapped,' Lena said. 'I promised your father . . 'You made the trap,' Kit said. 'And don't talk of what ,ou promised Daddy. Presumably you promised you'd ~ove, honour and obey him when you got married. You didn't think much of that promise.' 'Sit down, please, Kit.' 'No, I won't sit down. I don't feel like

sitting down.' 'You look very pale ... you look ill.' 'People at home don't say ill, we say sick. You're 'orgetting words even . . .' 'Xit, sit down. You and I may not have much time to talk ... this may be our only chance.' 'I don't want a cosy chat.' 'I don't want a cosy chat either.' But Kit sank into a chair gratefully, her legs were feeling very wobbly. 'What's the very worst part of it)' Lena asked eventually. 'What you did to Daddy.' There was a silence. And then Lena said very gently, 'Or what you did to him?' 'No, that is not fair. I'm not going to take the blame for this., 'I'm not asking you to take the blame, I'm just asking YOU to talk to me ... tell me what we should do

110,w . . ,

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I How can I talk to you? I haven't seen You since I , , , child of twelve ... I don't know who You are. I dor, know anything about you.' Kit seemed to shrink from her. Lena hardly dared to speak. Anything she said see,, to upset the child further. She sat there i i Waiting. Even,, ally she could bear it no longer. 'You do know ab,,t we have been writing to each other for years-, Kit's eyes were cold. 'No, you're wrong. . . you krj~% all about me. You know things nobody else on ea,~ knows. I told them all to you in good faith. I ko,, nothing about you. Nothing but lies.' 'I wrote the truth,' Lena cried. 'I wrote that y (~ Ur mother loved you and was so proud of you ... did~n t I tell you that ... all the time?' 'It was lies, you didn't say my mother had left ... run away and left us there to think she was dead.' Lena's eyes flashed. 'And you certainly didn't wntt saying that you had burned the letter of explanation.' 'I didn't do that because I wanted to protect her reputation.' Lena noted with pain that she spoke of her mother ia the third person. As if, in any real sense, her mother was dead. And would always remain so. 'You seemed fond of me in your letters, Lena tric 'And I am that person who wrote. All the things I tol.d you were true. I work in the employment agency, Louis works in the hotel . . 'I don't care about any of that. You can't think that an: of that has any interest for me. I want to go now.' Ion 'Don't go, I beg you. You can't go out there in Lonc all alone with this terrible news.' rl's 'I've had terrible news before. I survived.' The g, voice was bitter. I 'Just sit for a while. I won't talk if it annoys you. Bu don't want you to be alone after this shock.' 'You didn't care about the shock before ... when You

I"Z.,

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1 ' 1~ it had her hand against her mouth, fist *,ent away, were W11,ug back the tears. hold her,. to ake no gesture to .bed a ly thing keeping ~P~ The on Ltina to leave. strength and

.h her. ttempt to gather the ' ,j, . fighting back the tears. Her ,,er in this mostio.t. gherknucklesin . ,ljrlge t S al i in .~twaswor .0 give way. ' it, she rested her (forts not t t stare at y to the outside sat very, still. She didn' ut the window Leria d and looked 0 ri, ordinary lives. ,,ad on her han~,0,1, livi where PC ed at her..11 for ages ~i, raised her head and looe Able to sit sti) h had always been like this. Cvery6ne else was got er hey sat by the lake. and out, Mother ,,d. When t and pointing things running here and thereand peaceful, not needing to v;ould sit there composed ' 't the fire, ~peak or to move. And at night when they sat a twisters lid do card tricks or teach them tongue hther wou Ludo with them. And and riddles, or he would play'S sometimes her Mother iust sat there looking at the flame .' g nothing but roking hiffl, say' hand on F arouk's neck st being peaceful. f c then.,Why had this man come in It had all s eerned SO 5, . st the and taken Mother away from them) The anger again the man who had broken up their U-ves took over from tears. Kit was able to speak.ventually. us)' she asked c 5 -if she wer, knew she must ' l~it was Polled room ~as her a leave it. She was , . -,A she va

'Does he know about U, ely startled. 'Does who know?' Lena seerned.gen in. , 'The man . Louis whatever his narne is. you, of OV . Lou--- Yes, lie knows about '311 Ilia course he does yit,s voice was full If 'And he still took you away?' distaste. wanted to go. ou must real* e how 'I went w* llingly. 1 ' go how else could 1 have much 1 must have wanlec` ' hear left you?' 1 don't want to Kit put her hands over her cars.

what you wanted. 1 don,t want to think about You

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wanting. It makes me sick to think about it.' F- face,,. red and upset. It was hard enough for a girl to think her mother mating with her father let alone think wanting anyone else. Lena realised this. 'I only said it because I wanted the blame,' she said. 'Blame!' The word from Kit sounded like a snort. Lena feared that Kit might leave, that suddenly she might get up and go out that door without turning her head. 'What are we going to do?' she asked again, 'I don't know what you mean.' 'Are you going to tell Emmet and ... well your father that ... that things are not the way they thought?' 'You've always known things weren't the way we thought.' 'Kit, please ... you know this was not my intention. It's what you did that brought this about.' 'So what are you asking me?' Kit's voice was cold. There was a long pause. Then Lena raised her head and looked at her daughter in the eye. 'I suppose I'm asking whether you want me alive or dead,' There was another pause, then Kit said slowly: 'I think since you've wanted to be dead as far as we're concerned for the last five years ... you should stay dead.' She stood up to leave the room; and for Lena it was like the lid closing on her coffin.

Ivy saw the girl go down the stairs and walk towards the hall door. Her face looked more composed now. She didn't look as if she needed anyone to support her, help her through the traffic. She looked as if she could manage by herself. But her face was very dead. There was something empty and cold about her expression which had not been there before. Ivy longed to go up to Lena. She wanted more than anything to comfort the woman who had lost her lover and her daughter in one day. But she knew better than to approach her. Lena knew where she lived. When she was ready she would come downstairs. Not before.

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-,,, and a group Of girls er It had a juke box ~~~b found a Cat ~ d ' How wonderful to record after recording 3Wn age P ' 1 ' nes, Their mothers hadn't ,r,, live it, ordinary horror, d. None of these girls had 1 1 e that. ended to be dead to have .IS and pret, Ost. Th ~in 3Way ' ey had enough mo

Orne across a gh after play. «, out with „lows they were goin, talked of the fe girls with London accents ere black ipie of d iff erent thern w of lif c went on, pec this whole kit ;arne street, and nobody l~urs and dozens Of caf ~s in thes on the street like at home. everyone g since the day ~.,lc And this is where Mother had been livin 'ne drowned~ Ly) He'd be so ~jother alive. What would l~"lnlo' ould Father say when he heard? „lighted. Daddy. What w j , the black heavyweight again. But they couldn't And then hear now. it would be too much hurt ney couldn't hap » iness after all these years. And it was all Kit's fault. ften over the past Years she had wondered guiltily if ~,hseohaod, done the right thing by burning that letter. But she ,ad always told herself that God would know she had done fo bl Mother to have a or c ' t of motives, She wanted - es th inal outside ~urial place with everyone else. Not like a crim ~he walls. She had done it for love of Mother. But who would care now or understand thatshe had meant it for the : Dest? She had created the most terrible situation for ,everyone. Kit felt the cof fee scald her throatThe best thing was that no one should ever know. That 'he wanted It. Kit didn't think of was the way that ... s who sat in the I net as Mother ... not this thin woman I . , Louis ... and elegant apartment and talked about wann, , 19 why should ~eeding him or whatever it was she said- . AErnmet be put through everything Kit had been through And Father. What would "t do to Father to think his beloved Helen who he had cried over so much had left him

because she wanted this man called Louis?

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And where was this Louis anyway? If she wa, ~(3 ^ about him, why wasn't he there or any sign of 'k -4v remembered that man who had come itnto 1,

handsome dark-haired man like an actor. But that cob, 16, have been Louis; he was going away somewhere. He was leaving a big crate of his belongings to be collected, but it wasn't Mother's Louis. Anyway, he was far too young, 'Too young to be Mother's fancy man. 9. Someone touched her arm. She looked up, startled, Surely Mother or Mrs Brown couldn't have followed her here. But it was a boy of about eighteen. 'Are you on your own?' he asked. 'Yes,' Kit looked at him cautiously. 'Would you like to join us?' He waved over at a table where the group was sitting. They smiled encouragingly. 'No, thank you ... thank you very much. . 'Come on, can't have you sitting on your own when there's music playing,' the boy said. Kit looked at him doubtfully. They were just singing and clapping to the music. As she and Clio would have done with them had things been different. She couldn't sit with them laughing, pretending that nothing was wrong. But neither could she sit with her thoughts going round and round like a red hot circle in a groove, with no solution. 'Thank you,' she smiled at him. He looked pleased to have brought such a pretty, well-dressed girl to their table. She smiled brightly and nodded at their names. She must have told them she was Kit because that's what they called her when she said she had to go, and ran from the cafe to catch a bus back to the convent. Clio was walking up and down grumbling. 'You're late,' she said. 'No, you're early.' It was the way they had always been. Yet the last time Kit had seen Clio she hadn't known the awful fact. The fact that Mother had never died; she had

P6

And that night had helped her to continue the letter. Shepton by burning Clio, was still sulking that they did you do it? 10 one to do the town together. Yes. ~. In the, 91 a coffee bar,' Kit shrugged. 'Of places. at, all? I saw lots

Then 1 Good for you. people?, Clio (,s eyes were piggy ,). Did you get talking to PC ~n for flat 'o' they played the juke box.' , yeah, a whole group. Then , , , k, d were there fellows? Yes, it's mind was miles away. Miles from Mainly fellows.' j, o and from the coffee bar.

What were they like?' about you ~' Kit knew she must, They were okay. What make things seem normal. I no satisfying adventures But Clio obviously had - found (.i London on her own., 1) just looked here and there.

What were their names, Who?' 'The fellows you met.' obviously couldn't. 'I Can't remember.' Kit, per the steps to the Church looked alarmed as they walked through the door. Kit, you didn't have sex with any of them, did you? - Clio asked suddenly. 'Jesus, why would you say that?' Clio never failed to surprise her. 'Well, you look different,' Clio said, 'And you know how you can always tell someone who's done it from someone who hasn't.' 'Point you, but I didn't. We didn't get 'Sorry to disappoint' it in the coffee bar. Maybe too many people there or something.' 'Oh shut it up, Kit. It's just that you've changed. I don't know so well and something. Know what it is, but I know what happened, of my virginity on a coffee table, I can't. It wasn't the loss of it all you that.'

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'What was it?', 'It was nothing. It was being in a strange really a part of it. I suppose. I don't know, That was the right thing to say Clio thought it felt her Outing a miserable failure she that Kit McMahon had - It was consoling to him and found nothing to do odd that she looked as if something had happened either, had been in an accident or something. Well, a, if she Kit hardly slept all night. She sat and looked out of the window as the dawn came up over London if her mother She wondered was worrying the same way, No, she was, probably with this Louis that she had with her. Again, Kit wondered was it possible that Louis had been the handsome man who was leaving his belongings to collect later. on going to Then a thought came from nowhere, with pain of a sharp cold wind through the force and Mother knew Suppose Louis had gone, and that she was now proven Mother might come home after all. She might come back to be alive, then Louis Glass after all those years and try to take up life again. Come back as a ghost to Poor Father who thought she was a dead Saint. And to Emmet who had been so Young when she had drowned. And to Stop Maura Hayes from getting married to Father. Of course Maura Hayes could never marry Father now, And no one would ever forgive Mother Alternately Kit's face burned with a feverish heat and felt ice cold. By morning light she was alone, far too unwell to join them on the excursion

which that day was a walking tour Of Dickens' London.
 Mother Lucy was worried 'Do you often get such a reaction?' she asked.
 The girl had a high temperature certainly.
 'I'll be fine if I can lie in bed for a while. In a nice dark room,' Kit had said.
 'I'll call in on you every hour or so,' Mother Lucy said. 'That'll put a stop to
 your gaj'P,' Clio said.

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no gallop. You are such a pain, Clio. Such an awful ,c_tr2ck pain.' finj
 y,our coffee shop will I tell them you'll be back more." clio was annoyed
 that Kit wasn't coming with Things were much funnier when Kit was there,
 but did look as if she had caught some illness or
 as ~ se C. 1 1 Kit lay in the small narrow bed in the dormitory that :1,jd
 eight girls. Eight English girls slept here during term
 1 The girls from Lough Glass slept here this week. All m them could go to
 sleep on these pillows without hav* ing ~arbed wire coils of fear around
 their heart. Ki 1 t lay with her eyes open in the dark room, and every :me
 the nun put her head around the door she pretended to ,c asleep. This way
 there was no need for more speculation i~out what might have caused her
 fever.
 had not slept. By six o'clock she knew there wasn't any chance of closing her eyes.
 She got up and dressed and went ,ownstairs. She pushed a note under Ivy's
 door. I'll talk to you tonight, she wrote. There was no need to say anything
 else. Ivy would know how grateful she was to be left alone last night. Ivy
 knew she wasn't closing her out, excluding her from a life which she had
 once invited her to join. At Millar's Lena began to write a letter to her
 daughter. ~he wrote and wrote, tearing up the pages, ripping them from her
 typewriter. She tried to write by hand but that ~idn't , work either. When the
 door rattled and Dawn Jones ,ame in, Lena had given up. There were no
 words to say 11Y of the million things that should be said. She had torn the
 rejected letters into tiny fragments. Therapeutic `lrtiost, reducing them to
 confetti-sized pieces from which 10 clue could be read. No one would ever
 know that the calm Mrs Gray had 'Petit a night in anguish. That in one day
 she had found her daughter, lost her again, and been abandoned by the man

,be had lived with as man and wife for five years. She had lothIng to live for, yet she was going to live through this

09

3

day. The thoughts that had chased around in through the wakeful hours had convinced her

ca daughter was right. She must remain dead. She h,~ enough harm and hurt already. But what had come to her in a sudden and urwel,oit, flash had been the fear that perhaps Kit would cimnge ~,, mind. When the initial horror and revulsion had passedb,, when her own guilt at the part she had played - the tr4c and well meaning gesture of burning a letter to avoid the disgrace of public suicide - then she might change her view She might think that her duty lay in revealing that she W found Lena, that it was her duty to tell Emmet his mother was alive, and then to tell Martin. Lena's guilt at what had happened to Martin knew no bounds. She had misjudged him utterly. For years the man had lived in the shadow of her death, her possible suicide. Kit had said the town was full of whispers. He had survivd it, brought them up to revere her memory. He could not be exposed now as what he was, a man whose wife had run oft with another man, and had allowed the explanation of her death by drowning to be accepted. Martin deserved more dignity. He deserved some happlness. Kit must be warned never to relent. During the night Lena had thought that she would find the words if she were at her desk, the desk where she had so often written long letters to the daughter of a supposedly dead friend. Letters that would n ever be written Or answered again. But it had not been possible to write the words. And there was Dawn, fresh as a daisy. 'Well, I thought 11 was an early bird ... but no, you're here before me again. Dawn's voice was like the chirrup of a bird, She looked like a little canary or a budgie in her blue and

gold outfit, he' shining hair and her perfect make-up. Lena felt old and tired. 'Dawn, I may have to take some time off today. I wonder, could you get your pad and corn i C in to me until I list some of my work that you and less" may have to divide between you.'

LL I,

~NERNEM 3 'c)

. I , ~Ars Gray.' Dawn listened attentively. , a i full

,C its ,ertair, thought Lena. Dawn who had slept So dozen admirers. Her only dec I

sleep and had to go out with. _.,~ht ~ caav would be who 1 7. She knocked on Ivy" to number. 2 stairs Lena went back a minute can you come u he,, you have ,or-'INYI W was alarmed* 'Shall I take ,~tchire- so frail looking, Ivy she was)' he asked. ")U to the doctor. S airs would be nice.' .No just a helpingssed and got into her . VV took Lena's clotad shared but which at S . She folded the , the big bed th now , e3l ,as far too wide andthen handed her a d laid the it over ,~othes an were a lady's maid. Lena slipped -,,h,dress as if she pain and tiredness. ,net head. Her face was lined deep with Neither of them had spoken. Lena. She's a Then Ivy said, she's a very beautiful girl, ,,,,Iy daughter for You to have . - .' She couldn't have said anything more guaranteed to open the barrier that was holding back the tears. Lena h.ad but hearing ivy Brown praise not cried since it all began,er she had lost for ever hand up the sta hes as she un , dre he and Lous h empty for he, m on a chair,

the beauty and warmth of the daughter seemed an age. Let it all out. She cried like a baby for what after a very long time was she persuaded to blow, cried only, tragedy the her nose and tell her the depth of the love by her daughter wrong that in all innocence her father had done ensuring that Helen McMahon could never go back and see her family again.

Id you,., Martin 'You didn't enjoy it all that much, did McMahon said. it was a lot of money and 'Oh I did, Daddy, and ~Everything made a lot on things 'That doesn't matter. We sometimes say, I

Was it a bit schoolish, is that it, it doesn't work out
30

1

'No it was fine, I told you. I sent you cards ~,., everything.' Sat 'Where did you like best?' Emmet asked. Kit looked at him suddenly. He reminded her, mother saying, 'What was the worst thing?' She swayed, and tried to find something to say that would satisfy, think I liked the Tower of London best,' she said'. 'And this fever you got?' Her father was still 'It was only a temperature for a day or two ... Oh know the way nuns fuss.' 'Clio was telling Peter about it. She said you were in bed two days.' 'Clio is worse than the nuns, Daddy.' 'Don't let poor Mother Bernard hear you say that, after all the effort she put into educating the pair of you. , Her father had been satisfactorily sidetracked. Trust Clio to make it into a big, big deal.

1

'There you are, Kit McMahon.' That was Father Bailey's normal greeting to people. He more or less gave them permission to exist by saying it. 'Here I am, Father,' said Kit mischievously. He looked at her sharply to see if she was making fun of him, but couldn't prove it. 'And tell me, what did you bring back from London?' 'It was interesting, Father. We were lucky to have been

given such an opportunity.' She spoke primly as if she were a little girl reciting what she had been told to a'

y Clio giggled. 'A fine place in its own way,' Father Baily said 'st look at it for what it is, there isn't a thing you could critic, about it.' Kit wondered how you could look at London as were something other than it was, but decided this was not the time to argue it with the elderly priest. 'Were you e"" there yourself, Father?' she asked. 'I passed through it twice on the way to the Holy City, he said.

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there cOffee 'shops at that - time?' Clio asked much time to spend In coffee shops,' Father left. 'Think what he ;111~- said- Clio hissed as they . . hern.'

.Just as we if he had been given the time to visit t htha"e seen I I -eat coincidence your being in London at the \(.35n t it a 91 school trip?' Mother Bernard said to tirne as our a Haves. \i3ur I at N4other?) ,what's tt , out to meet you f rom the ,you know, Clio and Kit going . t., ~elling me about I Mother Luc~ wal' s but didn't want ... She was at a los Mother Lucy :, let the nun. realise. her Bernard said agaWhat a Coincidence-!' Mot id, her brow darkening. Wasn't it?' Maura sal Oh Clio a word please.' ,yes, ~unt Maura?'

1

Was there some confusion in Mother Bernard's mind, tell her I was in London when you wemF or did anyone I 'd 'I swear I didn't. I swear It,, Clio sai . 'Well who did, C110"e daft nun over there said our 'I haven't a clue. But sorn used the heaven-sent opporiunt phoned so we kind of dn't turn your back on runity . . ., Clio giggled. 'You coul a heaven-sent chance like that, could you)' it go on the heaven sent 'And where did you and Ki opportunity 'I don't know where Kit went) she was most mysterious I had a dull time actually, looked in shop windows and went in and out of caf 6s and bars pretendiM,' I was looking t . or someone.' . re about this sudden aunt who 'And did you not enqui was asking for you?' was a bit of rare Clio shrugged. 'Nope, I just thought I good luck. But I was wrong.

Orla Dillon, now Orla Reilly, was in her mother's shop. 'Why can't I help you, Mammy? You used complain that I didn't help.' 'That was when you were living here. Now you live with your husband and I'd like you to go back to him.', 'God, Mammy. You'd need to get out of that from time to time. I told him you needed a bit of a hand in the shop.' 'Well, you told him wrong. And who is minding that, baby?' 'His mother. Give her something to do, Mrs Reilly, that's old rip.' 'I've said it once and I won't say it again, there's no work for you here, Orla.' 'Mammy, please.' 'You should have thought of this before all the other business.' Her mother's face was hard. Orla's shotgun wedding had not been a matter of pleasure to her family. Clio and Kit were reading the magazine managed to read about five for every one they bought. Clio had been following the whole conversation between Orla, and her mother. 'Marriage isn't all it's cracked up to be, she whispered to Kit. 'What?' Kit said. 'You're miles away,' Clio said. It was like talking to the side of a wall talking to Kit McMahon these days. She just had no interest in anything. The prospectus from St Mary's Catering College in Cathal Brugha Street arrived. It lay unopened on the table for three days. 'Aren't you going to open it, Kit?' Rita asked. 'It will have all the details about your uniforms and everything.' 'I will, of course,' Kit said. But she didn't. 'Catering?' Mrs Hanley in the drapery said. 'Catering, I'm sure that's very nice. You're not going to university?' then, like Clio?

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Mrs Hanley would love to learn the hotel business. Very good course. You learn to cook and all kinds of things. I'm disappointed you're not going to he had his heart set on it.' he never said Hanley. 'Had he? You know could go Aid- He never a word about that. Maybe I should

and as never knew that till you said it this

I, ~nute- I may be mistaken and you wouldn't want to ~Well now, . ~ople:
 Mrs Hanley looked alan-ned. ,,ound upsetting p, 1~'it" ey were blazing
 with annoyance. She didn't ashamed that her daughter ~.low that Zrs
 Hanley was socaf6in Dublin ,)eirdre was working in a low class kind of I en
 waiting tables properly, just clearing up after ,,c to be a ve ounts and all
 your father r~ity? I know looked at Mr
 ,eople with a broom and a cloth - she did everything she ould to belittle the
 opportunities and futures of others lass. ,,om Lough G , t know that the red-
 faced angry girl in Mrs Hanley didn ,ont of her had hardly heeded her
 words and their er said k hirn
 -,eaning. It was just the trigger of mentioning her father
 :hat had set off the storm. Kit slept badly at night and concentrated not at all
 during ~~,e day. What if her mother were to write from England)r, worse
 still, arrive) Suppose ---at the nice safe future that . ,, ffather seemed about
 to embark on was going to blow a%,ay in front of their eyes?
 mmet, you smell of drink,' Kit said. 'Oh, do P I thought't would have gone
 by now.' 'You thought what?' 'You won't tell?' 'Did I ever tell?' ,well,
 Michael Sullivan and Kevin Wall and I ... we had cocktail.' 1 don't b8leve
 this.' ,yes, we ,,lade it from all the bottles outside Foley's. We
 'Dured it ' o a *ug and shook it.'
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'You are mad, Emmet. Quite mad.' 'Actually, it was awful. And it was
 mainly there was hardly anything left in the whiskey a:-,i bt.an-d4 bottles.'
 'What a shame,' Kit said. 'But anyway, thanks for telling me, I'll wash teeth
 'Why on earth did you do it?' Kit asked. 'It was something to do. Sometimes
 it's kind here. Wouldn't you say that's true?' Kit looked at Emmet and bit her
 lip. Should she tell him~
 'How are you, Kit?' Stevie Sullivan called. 'Not well,' Kit said. 'I hate to
 hear of a good-looking girl not being in good form.' Stev'e smiled a crooked
 ttractive smile. It cut no ice with Kit McMahon. 'I'd be a lot better if ~,ou
 could stop your brot her arranging cocktail parties in the back yard of
 Foley's and Paddles', she said. 'What are you all of a sudden? Pioneer Total
 Abstinence Society? Father Matthew Apostle of Temperance?' Steve asked.
 'I'm someone who'd prefer my own brother not to come home stinking of

booze,' she said. 'Okay,' Stevie nodded. 'What do you mean, Okay?' 'I mean, Okay, I'll stop it.' 'Thanks,' she said, and let herself in the door. As she climbed the stairs Kit asked herself why she had reacted so strongly to something that was only a kid's game. They hadn't been really drunk. It was pretending to be grownup. But she told herself that it was for her father. Daddy had enough behind him. And enough ahead of him, Because Kit now thought this was too big a secret to keep. She wouldn't be able to hide it as she had hidden the burning of the letter. It would all come out now, everything, and the', lives would all be ruined. She dreamed that Mother was home, and that they

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I saw. U-t, tea in. the kitchen. 'Don't be too hard on Kit,'
rig and they all sat grouped together with -- he,,vas say, nd them. Kit
seemed to be the outcast far (%_ -tanding I'll" I Cross the table. And in her
dream she heard Maura noisy sobs.

lovely present for You to start your new career, have a N4rs lianley handed
Kit a flat box. 'That's very nice of you, Mrs Hanley.' .Open It allu a- do , - -
like it.' wa~ a lemon-coloured, short-sleeved jumper, some,~jng Kit would
never have worn. But under a jacket it
night look all right. 'It's beautiful, Mrs Hanley. That's very kind of you.' 'I
spoke a bit out of turn the other day. You were a good not ce of me.' 'Irl not
to take any I Kit looked at her blankly. She hadn't an idea what the v,-ornan
was talking about. Everything was so odd these days, and she could hardly
remember anything she had 3o . ne since she came back from London. It all
seemed ,uspended somehow, unreal.

The days and nights were endless in London for Lena. She
slept or tried to sleep curled up in a little corner of the great bed that they
had shared so happily. hine . . . there was In the office she worked on like a
mac, 1 re. No plans no purpose to the working day for her any mo tor an
evening meal with Louis, no running home at lunchtime to catch him on hi
s split shifts so that they could have an hour together. Imposs'ble to believe
that her birthday would come and

go, and nobody would - now. Louis in France would have forgotten. Kit in Ireland would not remember. Everyone else in Ireland thought she was dead. Maybe Ivy knew but she would be tactful enough to realise that this year there 'Was nothing to celebrate.

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I

while she was awake. And when she slept she dreamed often that Lou's head would come back. She would wake cold and cramped and real"

Sometimes on Saturday lunchtimes when they closed the agency doors Lena congratulated herself that she survived another week. Perhaps this is what the rest of life would be like, unless of course her daughter would be no longer. Unless she was unmasked as a liar, if not well, in London. Living in the empty bed of a dead man who had left her, just as she had left her own husband. Some days were harder than others. There was a widow, who came in looking for part-time work saying she had to be home at four o'clock in the afternoon when her son, back from school. 'He's thirteen, you see, and they really need their mothers at that age,' she confided to Lena. To her surprise Mrs Gray's eyes filled with tears. 'Yes, expect they do,' she said earnestly. 'Let's try everything until we get you something suitable.' And Lena threw herself into the task. It was as if she could somehow reach out to Emmet by helping this woman to see her son. She thought about Emmet a lot. Perhaps he might be less hard of heart, less quick to condemn than Kit had been. After all, he was blameless in every way. He had burned no note of explanation. Was there a way she could write to him, tell him she was alive? Or was this the way madness lay? And then there was Martin. Martin whom she had so sorely misjudged. Was it better, as Kit had said, that she remain dead? But suppose that Kit was not constant in her intentions? Might she not give in and admit everything? Would it be fairer to Martin to tell him now, tell him herself, rather than let him hear it second hand? She had given him her promise that she would never leave him without explanation, but he had not known. Was she only telling him because Louis

had gone? Or would he think that this was the case? Like mice, the thoughts scurried around in her head

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h h d is not true. ne nigrt she reamed she went back to

I 't th g

Glass' ~t she ot off a bus outside the Mercy ,d walked through the town, past the Lakeview Convent ~L. d up to the Kelly house, past the Post Road which Fitz closed the door in her face. - "" where N101"i me out and talk to her but nrrny the postman tried to CO tied him back; and the curtains in the Garda Njona ca oad twitched as they saw her but ~,,Cjon across the r,,,body came out to greet her. Mrs Hanley had Early Closing written on the shop so as to avoid meeting her. And a sullen crowd stood in the doorways of Foley's sullivan's garage was desertedg Wall's hardware,,,pie turned the other way; Father Baily hastened up ~hurch Road so as not to have to see her, so she tried to ,ome back up the street on the other side in case there eet her; but at Paddles' the doors ula be someone to m I ,vere closed and Mrs Dillon didn't speak. Dan and Mildred O'Brien in the Central Hotel avoided her eye. And then she was at the pharmacy. 'I'm home,' she Aied up the stairs. But there was no reply. Rita, dressed in came to the top of the stairs. 'I'm afraid you can't in Mam, the Mistress's dead,' Rita sai solemnly.'l "Orne I I I id Am the Mistress,' Lena cried in her dream. 'I know, Mam, ~ I %t You can't come in. A:t that she woke up sweating. It was true. There was no .ife of any sort ahead for her. She might as well be dead.

Lena missed the letters terribly. There was no point in iooking in to Ivy hopefully, There would never be a letter from Kit again. Never a letter overflowing with news to her mother's friend. Kit missed the letters. There was nobody to sound off to, no one to tell about all the things that lay ahead, the catering college, the dog-like devotion of Philip O'Brien, the. increasing bossiness of Clio. The Lena Gray , she had written to would have been able to come up with some course of action about everything, everything, of course, except what was really wrong.

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~~ ~t ~

it was a great lacking, the letters. Not havi-, S Ist, Madeleine slip her the envelope with the Englii,' which she would take home and read in her room. N stair.

I knowledge that these letters were all lies made the, less. She could hardly bear to think of what they had aid S~ didn't believe Lena Gray any more.

About anythii, There was a postcard from Philip. He was in K~I'Iarney Dear Kit, 1 have a holiday job here in this hotel that you see 0, the front of the card. Imagine having a Picture of you, hotel on the card. How boastful. 1 can't wait to start the course, can you` We'll be sc much ahead of the others, after all we're going out together. They'll all have to find new friends. Love, Philip

Dear Kit, Your father tells me that you will be in the Mountjoy Square Hostel, which 1 am sure will be excellent for you while you are studying in Catering College. 1 also realise that some of the greatest joys of coming to Dublin centre around the sense of freedom you have from home, and everything connected with your own place. 1 would like you to know that 1 have a very comfortable flat in Rathmines. If ever you would like to come and see Pie 1 would be delighted. But most of all 1 want you to kno', that 1 shall not be sitting at home waiting for you. 1 leave work at five-thirty and very often when the weather Is good 1 go on the golf course an hour after that time. often 1 go to the cinema, or to the houses of friends. Sometime' people come to my flat for supper. 1 tell you this so that you will know 1 am not tryini~ ~O seek for company, nor am 1 trying to keep an eye on YOu while you are in Dublin. But this is my phone nurnbel vou'd like to come for a meal some time. JUSt in case , Yours affectionately, Maura
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Sullivan t)ear Michael __,11 wisher.
youhave been observed

from a i3e var, Ic This 11 3rs from 'bottle, out, lous Publ' ,in lass . ease. 'It be informedant o,Connor wi ill beat the Fat er nt your brother who wl And most 'm 'bit out Of you. arned. you have been w

Dear Philip, . doing when we get to Dublin we Whatever else we are you to know this Yether. I want ave not going out tog that there will be no MISI .~Orn the very Start So nderstanding. if u take it in the right spirit), Love (but only' Yo Kit oon in Dublini Steele,' Rita said. ,~hey want me to start ske a dream.' 'Oh Jesus i you run everything here 'It's nearly time.' t moved in with Martin yet.' 'But your woman hasn't they are very close y of Miss Hayes, ,If you are speaking,.....engagement as ""-' - the dregs inends. But you are right there is no I, k 1 P,' h G ,ses it, Loug ust now C tely. Serge h Ballyporta vet.' d keep the garage ,I thought you,d stay with me an afloat.' Stevie.' ,your mother doesn't approve of me, 'Don't mind her. I don't.' mpty the rubbish, scrub 'It's not pleasant to be asked to e the pots take in the washing - - -' you don't do any of those things. 'But com e off it, Rita~ It,s a game.' She'ust asks you, you refuse. J . . I , 've

'Not to me it Is" t- . There's another reason ... You 'I don't believe this , been offered , better job?' 'No, not really.'

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'What do you mean?' 'I've come from nothing, I've made myself acceptable. want to be somewhere that I am accepted.' 'I pay you well.' 'If I went on the streets I'd be paid even better. isn't everything.' 'Okay, I've been working my arse off here. I agree I don't have time to be polite to people.' 'You're quite polite to customers, Stevie. And to the people who might get you a Ford agency.' He looked stricken. 'That's true.' 'And to girls who catch your eye, and to people you want credit from, or those you think might be in the wa'v of buying a new car.' 'You've had your eyes open.' 'Yes, and I don't particularly like everything that I see: 'Jesus, Rita, I'm ashamed. That's all I can say.' 'Funnily, I think you mean it,' Rita said. 'So will everything be all right now? I've learned my lesson, and I'll be as good as gold.' He smiled

his heartbreaking smile. 'You're only a kid, Stevie. That won't work with me.' Rita laughed at him. 'So what do I have to do?' 'Nothing, really. just a nice reference and I'll be off tonight. Everything's in apple-pie order.'

'You're never walking out on me.' 'More on your mother.' 'She's nothing to do with this.' 'Then she has no business in your office.' 'Who taught you to be so tough?' 'Mrs McMahon, the Lord have mercy on her. 'I doubt if he will, she drowned herself.' 'You've a big mouth, Stevie Sullivan.' 'I'll give you a lot more money. Stay, Rita. Please.' 'No, thanks all the same.' 'Who will I get?' 'An older woman, even older than me.'

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'A are YOU9 Rita

? you're only a girl.' 'I,m a g,,d five years older than You.' 'That's nothing these days.' 'e who'll frighten the ,Get ,,,,cone older. And sorneon of your mother.' CIA\SUS out 1. the reference you want rorn me. 1 say "" ta smiled at him.

A havetwritten here,' R' , McMahon can't Rita. 1 really can't,' Mart in

,aid to her. ,It,s tInle for me to go, sir. ,Is there anything 1 can say to make you stay ~ . rig you did here was always for my good, but 1 'Everythi you someone~ sir. someone to work in my ,,ld find Rita., 'There's no one that could equal you, young cousin of 'What 1 was going to suggest was a mine. She might iust work mornings, do the cleaning, roning and wash the vegetables ... Y ou,ll probably be 1le to make your own arrangements and maybe want the ~ouse run in a different way.' It was as near as she Could ome to telling him that it was time he married Maura.

'I

Maura Hayes opened the letter. it was typed and post marked Lough Glass. is is an extraordinary letter, Mrs You may think tf offended by it then my judgement Hayes, and if you are has been wrong. who it was from. The signature Maura hastened to see Then she understood. The 'Rita Moore' meant nothing i - ,se was telling her that 01 who had worked in Martin s hou~ 0 vacancies. Houseshe was

leaving. That there were two keepers, and in the office across the road 'Is there an understanding between you and young Kit
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'I Street Coll McMahon?' Dan O'Brien asked her. His son the the course began in the Cathal Brugha night before.
:What do you mean?' You know what I mean.' 'No I don't, actually,' Philip said.

'Well, actually, for your information I meant to do so, and she intends to be boyfriend and girlfriend?' 'And suppose we did?'

'Suppose you did, I want to warn you that she could be a bit flighty like her mother, and I wouldn't want to think that you'd have your name up with someone like that.' 'Thank you, Father.' 'Don't take that tone with me.' 'What tone?' 'Mildred, speak to him.' 'There isn't any point, is there? He's determined to be like all the modern youth today.'

edge C,

'Sister Madeleine,' said Kit. 'There was a thin to say about the letters from London.' 'What's that now?', 'I think my mother's friend now, at the hostel.'

'Yes, of course . .

or, was keeping things secret from you.' 'Just didn't want you to think I took things for granted, 'No, of course not ... and often things that sound complicated are quite simple Sister Madeleine was lighthearted about her alternative postal service. 'Anyway, Kit,

when you're as old as I am and half talking to the birds and the foxes and the butterflies that come in at the end of the summer, you're not sure what you know and what you're only dreaming. . . ' 'Does everyone have a secret, do you think?' 'Certainly. Some are more important than others, of course.'

Kit looked at her. There was one more thing she wanted

that was going

write to me in Dublin will write

It was hard to know how to put it. 'Suppose you something ... something that should actually stop something ... I The nun's eyes were very blue and gave away. 'I was wondering if that were to happen to something, someone ... should that someone try to change what was going to happen, you know, by saying everything, or would it be better to let things go ahead?' 'A very hard question, all right.' Sister Madeleine was unpathetic. 'But you'd need to know more before you could answer ... is that it?' 'No, no. Not at all. I couldn't answer a question like that with anyone else. They'd have to find the solution all on their own. They'd know it in their hearts anyway.' 'They might know what they want but that needn't be the right thing.' 'If it was the right thing that helped people and made them happy . . .' Sister Madeleine paused. Not for the first time the thought crossed Kit's mind that the hermit had an easy, simplistic view of the laws of God that might not be found totally acceptable to the more official wings of the Church.

Lena bought the paper every week. She read it from cover to cover, wishing there was more about Lough Glass and less about the surrounding countryside and villages in the area. She read it first in fear. Fear that news of a great local scandal might be revealed. And then as the weeks went on she realised that Kit had not broken down under the strain of the knowledge she had come by. There were not going to be stories unmasking the great mistake that had been made identifying a body all those years ago. Lena read how two Lough Glass students had been accepted in St Mary's College of Catering. Kit was described as daughter of Martin McMahon, the

well-known pharmacist and his late wife, Mrs JJ, McMahon. She read of the new drainage scheme, the improved roads and the campaign for street lighting. She saw a picture of a bus shelter and read the outraged correspondence when it had been defaced. And one day, most unexpectedly, she read that Njarti McMahon, pharmacist of Lough Glass, and Miss Maura Hayes were to marry. She sat still for a very long time. Then she read it again. Kit McMahon must be a strong girl to be able to take that in her stride. At her age she could allow her father to make a bigamous marriage. She knew

that her mother was alive and she would have the courage to stand in a church and watch a wedding ceremony that she knew was a sham. She must be very courageous indeed to face the wrath of the Church or the State if it ever came to light. Either that or she must hate her mother and have forced herself to believe that she was really dead.

Kit knew it was the right thing to do. She had no doubts at all. Sister Madeleine was right; you followed your conscience. But she did have one worry. Suppose Lena . . . found it out. Suppose Lena wanted to spoil things. She might come at the last moment. It would be unforgivable if Kit were to let her father's day be ruined, and have him and Maura made into a laughing stock. But she couldn't write and ask a favour now. 1 She had left that day knowing she was doing the right thing. Her mother didn't exist for them any more in the way she once had. She couldn't go crawling now, begging! pleading, asking her not to come back and haunt the happiness that had been so slow to come to this family. She would have to hope and pray that Lena would never hear about the wedding. How could she hear? She didn't know anyone who lived in Lough Glass. It wasn't going to be on the news or anything.

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hard to pray in conventional terms about this. Kit skirted the Issue of God's church wooping prayers which 't Vie^, '111 marriage too, ~, as n' ~, 3d was out for the b

about it for a long Uncle.rid saying the

tho'39ht of Maura Hayes a holding the hand said all over the world. Martin taking that Couples 5Maura presiding at the table in the house to finish bed. ion, buying Ernmer's or . going to Kit's graduation

,,,thes. into the night. But what was another 511e smoked late 1 lly of them.

,,,epless night? She had had so nia At lunBy inorning she had made up her mind. "rig streets and . smarter shopP, he took a bus to one of the She had it wrapped for dress. ,pc,,t two hours choosing a cc. She addressed it to Kit and took it to a post Office~tudent, St ,0'ta~e on First year 1710tel

Management S Dublin. ~l,Mah 3 Cathal Brugha Street, \lary,s College of Catering, change her mind she put in a ~nd before she had time to_ e this to wear at the wedding ,,te,,, thought you might like

And she left the parcel into their hands so that she could ,have no second thoughts. bout the dress? nor even about She didn't tell IvY, not. ' t wasn,t spoken the wedding. Somehow it was. better if 1 vulnerable, less ~bout it made her own position less c

'Or ~ y night. Ern rn t dreamed abo ut the children evey

f(she 1 re - behind rocks on a beach, 11 know you re ~ooking or her everywhe calling always, behind trees in a wood, rie back, come back.' And of Kit ~h le Lse come out, cOn t the church gate. r`ere, p a 1 to the wedding, wearing Z dress, and standing stonily W in, you triust not come 'You can~,t come 1 you're buried over there. Remember this and 90 away.
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Maura Hayes gave a lot of thought to the wedding. It would be small but not hole- In - the-corner. it sho,, be held in Dublin, far from the eyes of a to Lough Glass. Lilian would be her matron of honou,l Peter the best man. Or was that the wrong way) At . ter a Peter had been best man at Martin's first wedding, -,vhen1ht had married Helen with all the hope that had beer, invoiv,; there. But if it weren't Peter who else would it be? Man," , had no other close friend in Lough Glass or anywhere. it would be deliberate and wrong to exclude Peter, Maura would wear a cream-coloured suit and a blue hat with a cream ribbon. Maura's wedding plans came as a surprise to her Dublin friends, who hadn't somehow thought of sensible, golfing Maura as a likely bride. They heard of this kind.widower, a pharmacist in a small country town, with two children whom Maura liked very much and who as far as she could tell seemed pleased that she was marrying their father. They learned with amazement that Maura had already found herself a job in this town. There was; a position as a bookkeeper/administrator in a fast growing motor business. It was two steps from her front door. And her sister was married to the local doctor, and there was great golf. Her colleagues and friends were grudgingly pleased on her behalf. Father Bailly from Lough Glass would attend as a guest, but the couple would be married by a priest that Maura knew in her own parish in Dublin, There would be about twenty people to lunch in a restaurant. Maura had studied the earlier wedding pictures, the ones taken in 1939. On that occasion there had been sixtv

people. Maura recognised the brother and sisters of Martin, a dispersed, silent family who met only at funerals and weddings. They would not be included in this guest list. It would look like asking for a present a second time round. She saw her sister Lilian, young and innocent looking, Peter as the best man. She saw the bridesmaid, a girl called

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i

her eyes stayed long on the beautiful face of the Martin McMahon had loved Dorothy, and then, - I mean, the woman that ended her unreasonable love. ... how did it one day by the lake. He had already told her all - 'about it, to Heleni to himself

truthful and fair, to ever, led his to Nora - He said she was something that formed. searched the face. What had she been while she stood for the photographs? the years with a kind, good man like that out of the hurt of a man who had left loved and hoped to marry) The face was ... like a sand Maura's eyes, thinking that day Had she hoped that Martin would smile, 'er, a man she had sweet, But were big and dark, the smile was the whole story, 'val, the eyes I saw even someone who didn't know that could see that this was not the normal expression of a bride on her wedding day? This was someone looking out way beyond the camera to something no one else could see. As to her reflections, and went back to her the hotel were invited, mainly to list. The O'Briens from that get over their sense of grievance at the wedding not being held in their premises, Young Phil' it might come too. Maura would cater college with Ki sume that all young people liked to ask Kit, It was foolish to ask up next door. each other just because they grew

seconds '

Ivy called Millar's Agency. 'I'm afraid she's with a client, Mrs Brown,' Dawn said

'Can any of the rest of us help you? it'll only take thirty 'No, darling, tell her it's Ivy 'But, . Mrs Brown, I know you're a friend and everything, but she is with a very senior businessman, someone who might be able to put a lot of

business her way. I don't know whether she'd thank me or indeed thank you for being interrupted.' 'She'll thank us,' Ivy said.

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'Mrs Gray, Mrs Ivy Brown Is Most persistew. -%jav her through 'Thank you, yes, Dawn.' Lena's voice was url,'ffl, d Ivy knew that Dawn would be listening. (h Leq, sorry to interrupt you, but Mr Tyrone turned up 1coki, for his key. I told him I had given it to you., 'And so you did.' Lena's voice was bright. i 'So I suppose I should mention to Mr Tyronu when,-,u might be back.' 'Tonight. Eight o'clock at the very earliest, and thank you so much for calling, Ivy.' Lena hung up. But Ivy remained on the line until she heard the cl,,ck showing that Dawn had hung up also. She smiled to herself grimly. They had never had to use a code before, Ijow quick Lena was on the uptake. Together they had giggled about how handsome Louis was, that he really did look like a film star. Tyrone Power possibly. Ivy would not give young Dawn the satisfaction of knowing that Mrs Gray's erring husband was back. And particularly Ivy did not want to let Dawn or anyone kn,,,~, how eagerly and willingly Lena would take him back. Eight o'clock. That meant she must be going to the hairdresser.

Grace was philosophical. 'Of course I don't think you're silly. I think you're right. Look as well as you can ... that way if he stays you'll be glad you made the effort. If he doesn't you'll think you look so damn good anyway you'll have no trouble getting any other man.' 'I don't want any other man, of course ' said Lena. 'Of course,' Grace agreed. 'That's the problem, That's the meaning of the universe, isn't It?' Ivy had been upstairs and tidied round, She had polished the table by the window and put a glass bowl of gold roses in the Centre of it. She had ironed some of Lena's blouses and put fresh sheets on the bed. She had thrown out the remains of old, hastily grabbed meals, the packets Of slightly stale biscuits, and installed instead some fresh

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ine. Something a ham .118 01.natocs. And a bottle Of bi k as if she had been expectingLou s, ut WA not)0o , speration either~ Otwou(,,)Peaaice of

de butshefound . h eave ed much in recent years, whj~ h,dn,t pay a little wish all 63Y that LOUIS return J-.N he would find something

hers ~lj offering UP That this time Id be glorious Wou hi staythat would mak e in,eet, a place where There was a caf6 across the str CUPS Of tea. kn,ca had bea- vy duty sandwiches and big Lhes and his vor thereout Of it because of is clol Louis C, ray sat eptable because of hi s easy way W'~ sunt,ril but still acc ow about the chances of a horse in gople, his need to kr out of the corner of his eye he i the following day's races. Lena would atched number 2 7 - S id that lie had been therefor an hour. IVY a be back at eight. Lena would not know he was Corning xcused himself f rOm a home. hen he saw her Corning he e across the road. "e V s ion on I form, and slipped the stairs. ,anted to catch net as she went up the corner. Lena,'

He saw her legs disappearing around called sof tlY - . A woman she looked around, glowing and confident - 1-ler hair, which never -,hat any man would stop to look at her make-up perfect. ~eased to amaze him, 'was shining, , day , rig home after a longwork~,F No other woman return d close to her. She I ooked like this lie went up and stOO)ig and dancing I . jaisy, her eyes were smelled as fresh as a (with interest and surpri 'Well, well, well,' Lena said

tse ~lowly. 'You didn't call into Ivy.' Ing like old 'I don't every night, no.' They were speak'

riends. -), He pointed upwards at their flat. 'Can I come in -our home. of course you can come 'Well, Louis, it's Ysuch an actress? She m.' How had she learned to be 7narvelled at her own skills. iid you had it.' 'I gave my key bac~ to Ivy- She S2 ould have 'As indeed I have.' Lena knew that Ivy W
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returned the key in her absence. And as she went in to, newly cleaned flat her heart filled with love for the '

90 woman downstairs. Everything was perfect for the reconciliation, for the promises, the assurances, the night . love. And there on the mantelpiece where no one could miss it, in a small glass dish was Louis' key. Lena went straight over to it, picked it up and handed it to him. 'I brought some champagne,' Louis said. 'That's nice.' Lena had steeled herself, drilled herself, day, to be calm. 'I thought if you'd let me come home it would be a celebration, and if you wouldn't then I could drink it to console myself.' He smiled his boyish smile. Lena smiled back. In a way it was no different to her going to the hairdressers and having a facial. As Grace had said, if Louis stayed then it would be a celebration, if not, a consolation. Very much the same thing. 'Let's celebrate then,' she said, and she turned her face a little to one side as he came to take her in his arms, she didn't want him to see how much she hungered to hold him so tight that she would squeeze the breath from him. She wanted to kiss his lips, his eyes, his neck, to take his clothes off slowly and walk with him into the bedroom. But this way she would seem too eager. He moved her face to kiss her lips. 'I'm a fool, Lena,' he said. 'No more than most of us,' she said. 'This is my home. I knew that five minutes after I left it. 'And now you're back,' she said. 'Don't you want to know ... to hear?' 'Oh no, I do most certainly not want to know NOW are you going to pour me a glass of champagne or is this all just an empty promise?' 'There'll be no more empty promises, Lena,' he said. 'I'll love you for ever and I'll never leave again.'

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, a beet' h'Pful' What would you like me to wear?'

0, ~.6 \Maura- I I as \)whatever YOU would rather you like. 1~1t, what , Kit had for later. have a say in 1. ,e n1c, , our day, YOU should lead to say

",701 it's y I d filled with tears. She tried to say, 'ur,,, es h, tcome.' And Daddy but the words wouldn't things Of eternal things men don't really notice .n1 had added. 'But- ng I can do that would ~, It tell me if there's, any ,nport . for You. ,help to make it nice your father is. marrying Me 'Th, fact that you are happy, having found her , Maura said

e - e - very nice for me) lak s it "ice at last. Maura. It,s lust that he's
 hopeless at 'And Emnlet too ifferent way, ,avIng it. in a ,,A boy remembers
 a mother ~Uppose. nine when it happened he was Only her. I ,No, that's not
 so,h ne who was closer to Ana anyway I was always t ' 0 11 a baby in many
 ways. He ,nderst0od her more, he was st, I ... He didn't know lust saw her as
 "there's MY Mummy I her as a person, as I did-' - , marrying agam. ~
 pleased that Martin s q hope she'd be Uld be no ou se I,M such a different
 person, it IWO question of tr' ying to be a second Helen.'

TM sure she would" Kit said, at she was allowing a Kit asked herself how
 was it tha bit in the s s nf ul. There was marriage to go ahead that wa I
 .ediment to this service which asked if anyone knew any in"? riest asked
 ther. And when the p ould couple being joined toge Lther had a living wife,
 w who knew that her fo and ,his, Kit, She had after all asked Sister
 Madeleine, say nothing. hat she thought was right Sister Madeleine had said
 to do v it. it was a huge responsibility, but she would do'

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Kit settled into the College of Catering with great ea, The very first week
 she met a girl called Frankie Bam with dancing eyes and a sense of
 rebellion. Frankie vq's going t i o go to America eventually and travel coast
 to coas managing a hotel here and there along the way. 'Would we be able to
 do that, do you think?' Kit vjis doubtful. 'Certainly we will, Aren't we going
 to to do the City and Guilds Exams? That's the highest qualificati n I I I 'on
 in the world,' said Frankie confidently. Kit was pleased about this. There
 would be no fear of ending up jobless after two and a half years and
 ha~'ingto go meekly into the Central Hotel and work with Philip's awful
 parents and maybe marry him just to keep everyone quiet. Philip was
 enjoying the college too. He showed her proudly how he had sewed on his
 own name tapes. 'Aren't you the little treasure?' Kit had teased him. 'A prize
 for any girl.'But he had flushed and she felt ashamed. Wouldn't itbe
 wonderful if he fancied Frankie. She tried to bring them together, but it
 didn't work. Frankie had a flat with two other girls, Philip lived in his
 uncle's house, Kit was in the hostel. Dublin was filled with things to do.
 The problem was to choose. She arranged to go and meet Rita. Philip was
 waiting patiently for her after the lecture as she knew he would be. 'No,

Philip. I have arranged to meet someone, honestly.' 'Who?' 'J beg your pardon?' 'I mean, is it anyone I know?' Philip realised that he had been too proprietorial. 'It is actually. It's Rita Moore.' 'Rita, your maid from Lough Glass?' 'Yes.' Kit didn't like the snobbish way he said it; it~`as very like his mother. 'I mean you re meeting her in a caf6 ... and evervth~nll, he said, astounded by the democracy of it all.

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11M i wn at a table ourse not - - - going to sit 60 own., ot c d then eat on MN her to serve me an as ked., i shortly. ,I Only 3' ere told,' Kit said '03 You "" news, and details of 110' Peggy the

N%.anted all the ng her job. who came for a few hours was do, do vou think?' es make any changes, 4ill miss Hay11 mean I'd like her to make it into , F ,I hope so, it said. oving into our place.' you know nOt)ust m' ita said. .ier place, edding,' R* ,She's going to ask me to the w 'I krJow. What are you going to wear. might it's the very thing. An ,I saw a suit in ClerY's- Sort of light green. What'll you ,et shoes to match. it's a 01 wear yourself, K, - ddy gave me nioney to buy an outfit. I 'I don't know. D; e yet.' haver"t seen anything I lik Id that there was a ,~,ext morning at the college Kit was to parcel for her. it When she saw that it was from London she took' tothe ladles' cloakroom where, heart beating like a hammer, she opened it. What could Lena Gray be doing nOw~ What awful secret was there here that was going to upset them all) silk dress in amazele grey and white. She unpacked tl ment and read the note. The dress didn't look like much, but that wasn't important; what was important was the note. I thought you might like sometbing to wear at the wedding.L. She read it over and over. What it meant was that she was giving her blessing tO.the wedding. Helen McMahon was saying that the marriage could go ahead and she would not interfere. Tears came 4nwn Kit's face, tears of pure relief. I gain. It was silk, maybe even She looked at the dress a fortune. She would try it pure silk. it must have cost a 335

on tonight and then she would think of what she write. That is if she did write. But you'd have to write to thank for something like this Which was probably what Lena wanted.

Clio's hostel was near the university, There were girls from~, all over Ireland there, some of them from very posh families. Most of them had never heard of Lough Glass. Lots of them had been to boarding schools and knew each other. It wasn't as easy as Clio had thought to make friends. And it was the same at lectures. In some magical way her people seemed to Clio found her first days at University College, Dublin

It was much less fun than she had hoped they would be. For the first time in her life she was a little bit lonely. For the first time she realised she was a very small fish in a pond and she couldn't even see the edges. She cheered herself up with the thought that however bad it was for her it must be worse for Kit with all those awful hotel people from everywhere. And down at the other end of O'Connell Street, miles away from where all the action was.

Kit went out to supper with Philip O'Brien. She invited him and said it was her treat. 'What's this about?' Philip was suspicious. 'I want to talk to you properly and if I am your guest then I think you've invited me out, like asking someone out.' 'Well you're asking me out, isn't that the same?' he grumbled. 'You know it isn't,' Kit said firmly. He was tall, Philip, and his freckles seemed to suit him more, his hair had stopped standing up at odd angles, he didn't have that slightly puzzled look he had as a youngster. He had a sense of humour. In most ways he was perfect, 'Is the perfect friend. Apart from one way, and that's what Nita wanted to talk about.

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'...going to have spaghetti,' she said looking at the
"tinned spaghetti," Philip said. "I like to eat - I love I loved tinned spaghetti.. It's much easier - Good - you saying that in the train. I let them hear it. Now we're a couple of yahoos thinking of talking to you about, I think it

...that's exactly what I want

h.t? Spaghetti?' 'V d you said, a couple of yahoos ... No the wo, rom big cities- They from Dublin or f lot of them are place like Lough Glass would be a A everyone from a boo., dng about the word yahoo, t" the word at worried me.' ~ple t. people,' Philip was aggrieved. s what you call two * ie to live and ill us. I have my whole 11 It'is' not what you c, rry about. I can t find myself sliding into a sort 'ng,to,wok you as well as everything else.' pairing with t see what's so terrible - - I ., he began. b a ed 'I donl mething that has to e gree ,les not terrible, It's just so by one and the other 90 ople, not assumed etween two Pe j,ong without thinking.' hilip asked. 'will you be my girlfriend?' P 'No, Philip.' 'Why?' 'Because I want to be me, ~oyfriend.' 'For ever?' ever, but until I meet one, and it n't t be 'No, not for I Igh '~Ou, and we both agree.' 'But you have met me., Philip was very conf'Philip, I,m your friend, not your girlfriend. And if,you my fork in your eyes. say but you are a girl, 1,11 stick , 'I'll always want you as my girlfriend,' he said Simply'You can go off with whoever you like, but I'll always be thlre for you in Lough Glass with the hotel, and maybe we "light even get married.'

1 want to be without a

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'Philip, you're eighteen. Nobody get, s eighteen.' The waitress was standing there. 'People who love each other get married at eight,_ Philip said, ignoring the girl poised with her little Otd,rb,.'. 'They don't unless they're pregnant,' Kit said spirit. 'We could get pregnant. That would be a great Philip said. 'Jesus!' said the waitress. 'I'll come back when vou,,, something less dramatic on your mind, like what'~ou,r, going to have for your supper.' 1 cl,

'Are they a terrible crowd of hicks down there?' Clj~ asked. She and Kit were having coffee in Grafton Street, 'Stop talking about down there. It would take me la, time to walk to my college than you to yours.' 'Yeah, but what are they like?' 'Very nice mainly. It's quite hard work. You have to concentrate a bit, but I suppose I'll get the hang 'if it" 'And what will you do in the end, I mean where will it take you?' 'Christ, how do I know, Clio? I've only been in it a week. How about you? Where's B.A. going to take you?' 'Aunt Maura said it's a great basis for meeting people.' 'Maura says she

never said that. 'I wish you wouldn't talk to her behind my back about things I told you. She is my aunt you know.' 'And she's going to be my stepmother.' They both laughed. They were squabbling like they did when they were seven years of age. 'Maybe we'll always go on like this,' Clio said. 'Oh yes. When we're old ladies holidaying in the south of France, fighting about our deck chairs in the sun and out poodles,' Kit agreed. 'You getting away from Philip O'Brien, crochety old owner of the Central Hotel.' 'Why don't you see me as the owner of a string of hotels of my own?'

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1, or what

-, on-ien do,' Clio said. married some 5 -,ut you? will you have rn I what abl
rn First Arts

„jjtable fellow trouble there. I'll be looking 'God no. f ri, re's no one suit t the
1,1w,,ers and the medics.' -,r,ongs never have the patience. A doctor,s
Arfe? Clio, you'd t up with.' - at what your mother has to pu planning ,,),k s
wife, a specialist's wife ... I'm A S,rgeon said. Then she asked, 'What are
you properly,' Clio „r,rig anywaN d white dress,' Kit said. „A sort of grey an
-A,,hat material F ,Silk, sort of silk.' ou get it" ,No, Where did y 'In a small
shop on a side street.' Kit was evasive. „you're not exactly killing yourself
then, are you?' ,it's quite nice. it looks weddingy.' Kit defended the
dress. 'Grey and white, it sounds like a postulant nun to me.' Well, let's wait
and see, will we" Does it feel funny your father getting married again?'
kenna Kelly asked Emmet as they met at the sweet counter 4 Dillon's
grocery. 'What do you mean funny?' Emmet asked. Anna was pretty. She
had blonde curly hair and a gorgeous smile. They were going to be sort of
related after the wedding. vell, will you call her Mummy)' Anna wanted to
know 'Lord no. We call her Maura already.' 'And will she steep in your
father's room or y our nother's room?' Anna wanted to know all the details 'I
don't know. I didn't ask, Daddy's, I suppose. That's
what married people do.' 'Why didn't your mother then?' e it to Daddy.' 'She
had a cold, she didn't want to giv
'A cold', The whole time - id. He spoke without 'That's what I was told,'
Emmet sai guile,

Something changed in Anna. 'Yes, well, \$Orne do, she agreed, and companionably they discussed relative merits of Cleeves toffees, which _____ flatter, , Scots Clan, which were more chunky but dearer. Mrs Dillon watched them. At least these two didn't look likely to pocket half the display when no one was looking~ but you couldn't be too careful.

Something cornfilelelY'llff"er" then you him to n-e 5 ielen , ,Orr , about cost.' He was able , to speak of I ")Lilull - , I without his face contorting. ~Jyno- I it. she must have them N4artiri. I hose belong to K -,~ 0, ~11 -y-one, maybe. Three years 11en she's twent 'Or.lc dly. , em to her. She should wear them '11L YOU n,,j,t give h ~1 - , - Don't have them altered for me. I have pleasure Yh.' _Icu~ ,Thev're all there somewhere. I never even looked at

I licll -first.' Maura ,Fine Let's leave them for Kit's twenty hem, though. She had fingered them sadly. looked at I -lip, a pair of marcasite iDrooch, a locket, a diamante (~Ings that might have been real rubies and might not But moltl~' she had noticed two rings, an engagement ring and a wedding ring. Helen McMahon had not taken home on the night she went out in the boat on the ~ake. ~aura wondered whether Sergeant Sean O'Connor or the detectives from Dublin had enquired about that at :he time. It surely must have been a pointer to the state of mind of someone who might have been thought to end ,heir own life if they had carefully removed valuable jewellery and left it behind.

Maura hadn't wanted an engagement ring. 'We're too, mature for that,' she said to Martin. 'We're not old, don't say that.' 'I didn't say old, I meant we didn't have to get engaged ... We had an understanding in the real sense of the word.' 'I don't know how you waited so long and were so understanding when I was such a ditherer,' Martin said .

'Shush, we've been through that before. You had much more to sort out than I did.' Maura could afford to be generous now she told herself. Her months

and months of coping with Martin's indecision were over. He was now deeply committed to their marriage. He would make it work, he would make her happy. He knew these things were possible. And as for Maura herself, she could hardly believe her good fortune in having chased the ghost of the beautiful, restless-looking woman who was her predecessor. Martin and Maura could walk by the lake of an autumn evening now without pausing, stricken, to remember that this was where Helen's life had ended. 'I want the wedding day to be the best day in the world for you.' 'It will,' Maura said. 'Then let me get you some jewel if you won't have a diamond engagement ring. I want you to have more than a plain wedding ring. Would you like a diamond brooch, do you think?' His face was eager to please her. 'No, my love. Truly.' 'There are jewels of Helen's in a box, you know that. Suppose I were to bring them to a jeweller in the town and

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Are you asking Stevie Sullivan to the wedding?' Clio asked her Aunt Maura. 'No. There was a lot of debate about that. He is my nephew, but then think of his future boss, that would mean - , and he is a neighbour but another and that means a no. And think of his terrible little brother.' 'Saying, Clio added. 'He is a single man and quite good looking. I'm for disappearing from 'Yes, but he also has a reputation - , I lies in tow. Maura knew Public functions with young ladies.' 'Martin and I added the whole world of Lough Glass no I it up and it came out against asking him. 'Imagine you working for him, Aunt Maura. He came from nothing.' 'Imagine you using an expression like that ... a young

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girl like you.' Maura's eyes were cold. Clio realised, that she often misjudged her aunt. Aunt Maura (the same cosy, gossipy way of looking at the world her own mother did. There was very little gossip, or - bso. lutely no feeling that some people were acceptable, and some were not. The week before the wedding gifts poured in to the chemist's shop. And even more important for Maura and Martin were the accompanying notes wishing them well. People said that it was good to see two such nice people finding happiness. Maura was a known visitor to the town, in recent years, and as a child had grown up only a few miles away. It wasn't as if Martin McMahon

was looking outside for a stranger. As he had before. Mona from the post office gave some Belleek china. She said she thought there was something gracious about it which would suit the new Mrs McMahon. Mildred O'Brien chose a small set of silver coffee spoons. The Walls sent a glass bonbon dish with a silver handle. The Hickeys, who had been intending to send meat as they always did if the event was being held in Lough Glass, stirred themselves and sent something which looked suspiciously like a prarn rug. Paddles sent four bottles of brandy and four bottles of whiskey, on the grounds that the groom and the bride's brother-in-law would consume that amount easily in any given year. There was an embroidered sampler from Mother Bernard and the community, a history of the county from Brother Healy and the Brothers' school, a set of saucepans from Mrs Hickey in the drapery and from Sister Madeleine a great clump of white heather and a tub to plant it in. She said that, although it was superstitious to believe that white heather was lucky, at least it might be nice to have this as a symbol of their marriage and that when it grew every year it would remind them of their good fortune in coming together.

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as at the heather thoughtfully. Sister Madeleine 'it looks of God and this was not a marriage in the eyes that with it. ...a, going along it * It's vet she, yit felt the world was turning. Sometimes ing about Lough Glass,' Louis

'I'll never tell me anything, J to Lena on Saturday morning. cry trivial.' 'I'd my love, but you said it was very petty things. Or it was you know, then, C, lei, so none of I know you must think but I'm not totally insensitive to the children. and about Martin.' 'I, I, I a' From time to time, Lena told ... I mean, I am interested in well, don't shut me out of everything that concerns you. I do love you.' He sounded defensive. 'I know! 'How do you know? He seemed to doubt the rather flat tone of voice. back,' she said. Again it was 'I know because you came as if she was saying something by rote. in fact she was repeating his own words to her. Why would I come back to you if I didn't love you? 'But Louis was watchful. Lena 'Well that's all right then. I didn't seem herself this morning.. 'What do you think the place is like now?' asked for a Lena looked at him for

a long moment. She debated whether to tell him that her husband was marrying Maura Hayes at 11 a.m. and that she had spent a week's salary on a dress for her daughter Kit to wear at the ceremony. She wondered was it possible that, if she were to fill him in on the important areas of her own life, he would be able to feel involved with her to such a degree that he could put aside all the many distractions of his world. But the moment ended - She knew it would not be possible. She would not get the reaction she hoped for. Instead, she would get blame and recrimination for having hidden the

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met the girl in London.

fact that she had written to her daughter for years,

'Oh, I expect it will be like any other day,' she ordinary Saturday in Lough Glass.'

Stevie Sullivan said since he'd be in Dublin anyway, they'd drive to the church, and drive them back to the reception. 'We can't accept that Stevie . . .' Martin began to protest. 'Jesus, Martin, isn't it a grand easy wedding present. Let me do it for you.' Stevie was a handsome young man now of twenty-one, with his long dark hair falling over his eyes and his tanned skin. When Stevie was a boy he had often heard part of his father's drunken rages include the possibility that his mother had lain down with the tinkers ... how else could she have produced such an unlikely looking son for himself. Stevie had heard her reply that since it had been such a hellish thing to have to lie down for her husband she was unlikely to repeat the experience with anyone else, tinker or no tinker. His own experience of sex had made him think that his mother must have missed out a lot on life if this had been her attitude. But it was a view he kept to himself. 'Anyway, you can rely on me, Maura. You wouldn't want to be having any truck with these Dublin fellows.' She was grateful. It would be good to have a friendly face beside her as she set off to the church. She had packed the possessions that she needed from her flat in Dublin and brought them in advance to Lough Glass. The flat had been painted and let to a young couple who had

already moved in. Maura had hoped that in the future Kit and ChO might be able to share the flat. It would be handy for them; It had two bedrooms, it was central. But she thought that they might not be temperamentally suited to sharing a flat 344

va- an edge between them that , did not suggest a real ,~Cre I I a wishing to score off each other. She "riaship, 111ore idea until the-, had made up their ". 1~o suggest the 1 "i about life.

a dark suit, that could almost have been a ~,,Cvic wore otel to collect Maura. en he came to the h .."orni, W ' he said - look lovely, Maura he was little `1 oil e her and, even though was the first to se e was pleased, A flush came over than a child5 still sh "Than, you Stevie.' f,ce and neck to kit themselves ,,,, pleased to see my staff know how 'he said, ~~i, and C40 s tood side by side in the big churc i h. about the dress since she lio had t ceased to gripe it was, that did you say e hat kind of a shop side street.')h I told you, in a you,re lying in your teeth.' why would I lie?' made.' Because that's the way you're ,ksk anyone. Ask Daddy. Ask Maura.' a smart dress. you lied to them too, This is a really goo ~ost a fortune. Did you steal i0' ou shut up and let You have a very diseased mind. Will Y en)oy my father's wedding. ation turning ~~t that moment they saw the small congreg

und. Maura Hayes was walking up the church with her --ther. Martin McMahon stood beaming at the altar rails. 'She looks great,' Clio whisperd. 'That's a terrific

At., Most of us did,' Kit said loftily'She probably stole itStevie was outside the church holding open the door of ning,' Philip said to Clio ~e car. 'I didn't know he was cot have a brass 'Oh, he gets anywhere,' Clio said- "f you Id * open to -,A and flash good looks like that, the wor is)u.1 nted by this. Is that his car)' he Philip seemed disappOi Aed.

'Yes.' Clio still sounded scornful. 'Part of the Sill Motor Service is to realise that there will be, time, people's lives, functions, when they'll need a bit of, Stevie's ahead of the game.' 'Do women like him?' 'Yes, but only in a very obvious kind of way. I personally wouldn't touch him with a barge pole, been with every maid and skivvy from here to Lough (, ~ and back.' 'Slept with them, you mean?' Philip's eyes were roiling. 'So I hear.' 'And none of them got ... um . pregnant?' 'Apparently not. Or if they did, we didn't hear.' Maura had chosen the hotel well. There was a sherry reception in a big bright room with chintzy cover~ couches and chairs. The waitresses moved around efficiently, making sure that glasses were well filled. When they went in to sit down the late autumn sun was slanting in the windows on the group. The seating plan had been carefully thought out. Kit and Emmet sat on either side of Rita. The O'Briens were divided up so that they could not glare at each other. Lilian Kelly was put beside two of Maura's work colleagues so that she could talk about shops in Dublin and the races. There was a grapefruit cocktail, then chicken and ham, and ice cream with hot chocolate sauce. The wedding cake was small, one tier. the 'There won't be any need to keep a tier - for christening,' Mildred O'Brien who nodded, bewildered. Ien explained to her. The speeches were very simple. Peter Kelly said how; this was the happiest day for a long time. And how great it ~s that his good friend had found a partner for the rest of his life. Everyone clapped. Then Martin thanked everyone for their support in con, hat wish them well. He said it was particularly gratifying t Maura had so many friends already in Lough Glass, an" would in many senses for her be like coming home, They

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ht the speeches were over but Maura McMahon ipple went through the group. Women jus A little r "'X p . I bli Brides never. rel~ spoke in pu Ic Taiy thanks to Martin, and to say this

,I would I ike to add nthank most of the happiest day of my life. But I want to -nd F,,Irnet McMahon for I Kit a ~ They ing their father with me. ~13r they will always Ijrt,n and Helen, ory of their mother wi of us. Without Helen McMahon , Wuld not have existed. Without Helen, Martin wo~ld not his years of happiness in a first marriage. I lave known all she gave to us, I

hope her spirit knows :hank her for what a feeling of warmth there is towards her this day. And I assure you all that I will do my very best to make Martin 3s happy as he deserves to be. He is a truly good man.' There was a silence as people took in the depth of feeling d Then they clapped and clapped and raised -gan to tinkle 0 , st in the corner be her W r' ' ~heir glasses. And the piani i had checked. ,, that a few songs could be called for. Maura There had been no singing at Martin and Helen's wedding. Stevie Sullivan stood outside the door. Maura had not

I

,Inanged her outfit. The wedding dress and jacket were Ui ~le for travelling. The cases were packed and had it suita been put in the back of the car.

'You're looking fairly irresistible, Kit,' Stevie said.

'Better resist me, though,' Kit said. 'I believe you're taking them to the train.'

'That's not what I heard,' he said. start their 'But aren't you going to take them off to honeymocin?' 'Right in one.' 'Sov 'So, it)s not the 'The airport?, Galway, 'They're going to London,' Stevie said. 'Didn't they tell you?)

'I, ever fade

their generosity in

are the children of be that, 1 hope the For them or for Kit and Emmet station, it's the airport.' were going to Kit had thought they

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CHAPTU SEVEN

vY could hardly be] *eve it when she saw the letter vIt the Irish stamp andithe foreign -looking P05~n~a.k th~ Inobody could read. She twitched her curtain as Lena ran downstairs on her way to work. Lena scarcely dared to hope. She sat down kitchen and read it. It was one page. It had no beginni~g, no greeting. But then neither had her note to Kit.

Thank you very much for the beautiful dress, it looked very well and was much admired.'It arrived at th~ college over a week ago but 1 waited until

now to write. So that I could tell you the ceremony has taken place. It all went very well and they have gone to London today. I thought it was Galway that they were going to, but apparently know London" the Regent Palace Hotel, London. London is a huge city but I thought you would want to know. Just in case. Once more, thank you for the dress. Kit

Lena sat holding the letter. 'Is it bad news?', Ivy asked. 'No. Not bad news, no.' 'Well, is she speaking to you?', 'No, not really speaking to me. Not yet, no.' 'Oh come on, Lena. Don't make me beg ... What is it?' 'It's a sort of contact, sort of warning me of something ... but I haven't told you the whole background. Can I do that some long, lonely evening?'

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many of those ahead of us,' Ivy agreed. 'Theerrie's brought to the agency she found Jessie Park in her office for her. Jessie was a changed person to me, in her tight, grey, clustered woman in the cardigan that Lena had covered the first day. Now a trim short woman of about seven, Jessie exuded confidence. Her mother played a living demon with the other tenants in the sheltered accommodation and seemed to have forgotten her festive problems.

They had set the date; they were going to have a small wedding. Just eight people to sit down to a lunch in a hotel. Could Lena be one of the witnesses? Jim Millar's brother would be the other. And they would love Lena's Louis to be as a guest to the wedding of course. Lena embraced and said how happy she was. She very much hoped that Louis would be free. His hours were difficult. She said all the right things. But her mind was far away. She was breathing up a prayer of thanks to Kit for having informed her about Martin and Maura being in London. Suppose for example that Jessie's wedding lunch had been in the Regent Palace Hotel? There had been stranger coincidences. To be forewarned was very useful indeed.

- 'He knew that Louis wouldn't want to go the wedding. 'Oh Darling heart, don't I get enough of this every day at work?' he said smiling at her despairingly and holding his hands out as if to show that it was raining weddings on him every time he moved. The Dryden did a very scant wedding business indeed. But Lena didn't make an issue out of it. 'I know. Just to let you know that you're welcome and they'd love if you could get

away. That's all.' 'Can you get me out of it?' He seemed pleased. Easily, she said. She saw the little tension lines around his eyes relax. Perhaps Louis Gray didn't like the idea of going to Weddings with her, watching other People making Partnerships for a future together. And Louis was in such

good form these days, so light-hearted and happy, would be ludicrous to make a fuss over his attendance function. It would of its very nature be as dry as Z, Louis would hate it. But because she hadn't forced him or complained, as even more loving than ever. And he called unexpectedly, the office one day with a bottle of champagne for the happy couple. 'I'm so sorry I can't be there,' he said. There was regret in his eyes and voice. Lena listened to him and even she felt that there were ways in which Louis Gray was sorry he would not be attending. Jim Millar and Jessie Park were of course delighted with him. 'He's a great man, that husband of yours. I'm sure he's a top businessman,' Jim Millar said. 'I think they value him a lot at the Dryden,' Lena agreed. 'I'm surprised he doesn't run his own hotel,' Jessie said. 'He may one day,' Lena said. But she didn't think that far ahead. She had discovered that you got by better taking life in short bursts.

She dressed in front of Louis. He lay making admiring sounds from the bed. It was one of his late mornings. 'You're far too glamorous for that crowd,' he said. 'Let's you and me go off somewhere and dazzle the world.' 'I'll see you later,' she blew him a kiss. 'Come home sober,' he called after her. 'I think that's fairly likely,' she laughed. The wedding luncheon ended nice and early as everyone had known it would. Mrs Park was brought back to her new friends; Jessie and Jim caught the train for St Ives. They were going back to Cornwall, where their romance had begun. Lena assured them she had many things to do. Without her realising it, her feet took her towards the Regent Palace. She stopped and studied hard her appearance in a shop window mirror. She was wearing a cream-coloured suit with lilac trim. Her hat was in velvet

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Itch the trisn'. She had a large black bag, black gloves and court shoes. She wore a fair amount of make-up, high heels and applied make-up. Surely she could not look like an onion in the dirndl skirts and loose flowing dresses of

had known years ago that I had to give her away. People often recognised

Her eyes met hers by the eyes alone. She stopped in Boots and bought a pair of sunglasses. 'Not much call for those these days,' said the young girl selling them. 'Not going to rob a bank,' Lena explained. 'Want anyone to help you carry it all away?' the girl asked. Louis was right about the English. They were dying to talk; it was just that they needed someone to start them. Lena studied herself in the sunglasses. That was just the trick. She positioned herself in the lounge of the Regent Palace. She had no other plans for the rest of the day, she would wait here until she saw them going in or coming out.

James Williams couldn't believe it. He had thought that the well-dressed woman in sunglasses was Louis Gray's wife with that hair and those legs. There weren't many doctors sitting in the foyer of a But what on earth was she in a hotel like this? It was almost as if she were waiting to pick someone up. But perhaps she was just waiting to meet that handsome, if feckless, husband. James Williams wondered whether Mrs Gray had any idea of her husband's popularity with the ladies. He declined to listen to whispers in his own hotel, thinking it beneath him. But he would have to be deaf not to have

known that Louis Gray had gone off with some rich, spoiled young American to Paris not long ago. Possibly Mrs Gray put up with it. Sitting in front of a He looked over at the elegant figure with sunglasses, drink, which she was studying throat. Perhaps she might even be here consoling herself. It was an attractive thought, but Jaynes Williams had a meeting in one of the conference rooms

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When he came down through the hall again, she was still there. 'What's the lady drinking?' he asked the waiter. 'She's refused other drinks that

were offered.' 'She won't from me, I know her.' He learned it was, and orange. He ordered one for both of them and just:, the tray arrived he appeared at her table. 'Re,~Ily, Williams,' she said. 'Really, Mrs Gray.' It was always their joke to be formal. 'Were you waiting here by any chance hoping I'd tuup?' He was playful, flattering, flirtatious. 'No, I'm sorry to disappoint you. I just came in to talit the weight of my feet,' she said. 'Just came in? Wasn't I lucky!' 'Just this minute,' Lena Gray said. He looked at her wil,~, interest. She had been in this lounge for over two hours. What on earth was making her lie to him like this? They talked away, Lena and James, about the world in general and hotels in particular. At no kage did either of them mention Louis Gray, who was the only person they had in common. They had another round and another. Three gins and oranges with him, and perhaps niore before he arrived. James was wondering if by the m?sl amazing good fortune he had got lucky with this attractive Irishwoman. Her voice was not slurred. He couldn't see her eyes because of the ridiculous glasses, but she said she had an eye infection and needed to wear them. He thought there was something a little odd and lightheaded about her behaviour, and at one stage she stood up and excused herself very suddenly. She didn't go to the ladies' as he expected, she went instead to stand by the gates of the I'ft' She stood quite near a middle-aged couple who vv.ere carrying a lot of shopping - typical out-of-town tOul"ts and shoppers. If it hadn't been so ridiculous Jarries Williams would have thought that the elegant Lena Gray had gone over to eavesdrop what they were saying.

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was five years since she had seen them. Her head was , She must remember this moment. Cliz zy* till i n a bulky suit. it looked new, this one, but Martin V~as , - -five, a year ot een mad, by a tailor. He was forty ,had n)ljer than Louis, but he could have been ten or fifteen years

'Ider. His stance was the same, slightly stooped. His good ,atured smile was there. His arms were full of bags, from Br,ti~ h Home Stores, C & A, and even Uberty's. Was ,,,t ingdi i happy, he looked like he used ,, h fferent? He looke(;, 'When he had been playing with the children or had pushed ~he boat out on the lake. He looked less anxious to please. And Maura Hayes. Maura, whom she hated to meet ~ecatise she was the jovial sister of Lilian,

the woman who made it very difficult to refuse an invitation. Was she older, or younger than Lilian? Had she been told? Had she ever listened? She looked flushed and happy. 'I'd love a cup of tea,' Lena heard her say. 'Is that a real country hick thing to want?' 'And this from the city sophisticate working in Dublin

all those years)' he said laughing. 'But I imagine that they'll have no difficulty in bringing a tray to the room.' 'Do you think so?' She looked as if all her problems had been solved at a stroke. 'This isn't the Central Hotel in Lough Glass, you know,' he said. She was so near she could touch them, the ghost of the wife they had thought was dead. Her appearance would destroy so many lives. Filled with the self-pity that gin can often bring, Lena started to weep. Perhaps it would have been better if she had died in the lake that night. She looked flushed when she came back. James Williams leaned across the table. 'If you're in no hurry home . . . - F he asked. His tone was polite, it was not remotely like a P.I. position. 'If I'm not, Mr Williams ... ?, 'Then I was wondering what we might do .'He was walking on eggshells now- her voice had got shaky, there seemed to be glistening tears on her face.

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'I was wondering if you might like me to give you ~ I. a taxi , I I perhaps?' iftip 'To where?' 'To wherever you'd like to go next. Somewh, , for another drink possibly? A bit to e2t? Home t(, ..Our doorstep? To the Dryden Hotel?'

'Anywhere you say.'She took off her glasses and-oked at him. She had been crying, but her eyes did not infected. She was very upset. look I 'You're a very intell'ingennot man, James Williams, very smooth, very P in contr match for you. I think I'm so capable and olished. opl, but I'm only a poor country hick. That's the word I heard tvvo people using a few minutes ago. That's what I am, a hick.' 'No. No,' he protested 'PI 11 you?' 'A chance to go now while I still have two le s to me to the door,' she said. She put on her sunglasses. She was a very attractive woman. If ever he saw anyone who needed a strong shoulder to cry on over something it was Lena Gray. After she had cried she would feel grateful to him. He considered it for a moment.

But only a moment. Off we go then, I'll find you a taxi.' His hand lightly on her arm he steered her out into the traffic of Piccadilly Circus.

ease to me. What can I offer

g carry

'I see you didn't take my advice,' Louis said as Lena stumbled in the door.

'What advice was that?' Lena couldn't get the words

out. I and you said theretbought I said You should stay sober, was no

question but that you would.' He looked at her quizzically, She had flung off

her shoes and her hat was at an awkward angle on her head. 'Yesh,' she

smiled at him, 'That's what I thought. But I was wrong.' 'You're a

sweetheart,' he said. And peeled off her good suit, hung it carefully on a

hanger and steered her to bed.

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Twice in the night she got up to be sick. if Louis heard he made no sound.

He lay breathing ,,,tly. He never dreamed, or at least he couldn't remem 'her

his dreams. A man who had so much to remember,

why did none of it come out in dreams) Lena had dreamed of James

Williams and %A-hat might have happened if she had accepted the offer he

;was so definitely making. She shuddered to think she had been so near to

saying yes. Louis was on an early shift.'I didn't wake you,'he wrote i I in a

note. 'Your lovely little snores sounded as if they deserved to be allowed to

continue. See you tonight.' She had never felt worse. Why did people

drink too much if this is how it left them feeling next morning? She wasn't

at all sure that she could make the office. She called in on Ivy. 'How did the

wedding go?' Ivy said, pouring coffee. 'They seemed to be happy, buying

lots of stuff in Oxford Street and going back to the hotel to have tea served

in the bedroom.' 'You went on their honeymoon with them?' Ivy asked,

shocked. 'No, that was something else. Ivy, do you think I should have

something like a prairie oyster?' 'A what?' 'It's to cure a hangover.' 'What is

it?' 'You're the one with the contacts in the pub.' 'Not any more,' Ivy said.

'Well, I need to know. Would Ernest know?' 'I expect he would.' 'What's his

number?' 'Lena, you're mad. It's only nine-thirty in the morning.'

,~,Ytesi,,Frri half an hour late for work already. I can't go in h or I'd

collapse. Give me his home number or I'll ring directory enquiries.' 'I've always said you're mad.' Hello Ernest, it's Lena Gray.

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'Yes?' he sounded cautious. 'You do remember me)' 'Well, Yes.' 'Ernest, very simply, what's a prairie oyster? something to do with raw eggs and nothing to oysters, am I right?' h 'A raw egg in a glass, a tablespoon of sherry, so' ~'Lca and Perrins, shake like mad and swallow in one.' 'Thank you, Ernest.' 'Have you got all the ingredients?' 'Yes, I think so. Thanks.' 'Will she be all right, do you think?' 'Who?' 'Ivy. I presume she's been over-indulging.' Lena paused for a moment. Perhaps this was a way to get Ivy back with Ernest. 'I do hope so, Ernest. She doesn't tell you, but it's all hitting her very badly.' 'Could you - urn - tell her ... ?, 'Yes?' 'Tell her ... to take care.' 'Maybe you should tell her yourself, Ernest.' 'It's difficult.' 'No, it's not. These things are easy.' 'But she's always pissed drunk.' 'No, she's not, last night was special. It was some kind of anniversary between you both. I don't know exactly, But whatever it was it hit her hard.' Lena hardly dared io lift her eyes to meet Ivy's. 'Yeah well, it's about this time of year that she and I ... But you don't want to bother.' I 'It's none of my business. All I know is that she won I hear a word against you, Ernest. I have tried, God help me I've tried to say a few, but she won't listen.' 'You're a very good friend, Lena. Even with you being Irish and not understanding any of our ways,' he said. 'Thank you, Ernest,' she said humbly and hung up. 'I'll kill you here and now in my own kitchen,' said.

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.,~o, get two eggs, sherry, worcester sauce, and a saucer put on top of the glass.' Why, ` that it won't all fall out when 1 shake ~,\,o, 1 mean why should 1 do any of this for you?' 'Because 1 think 1 may have saved your great romance t . or vou. Hurry5 ivy. 1 might be about to die.' as it a great wedding?' Dawn asked. ,Simply lovely,' Lena said.

'I was hoping I might be asked.' 'There were very few of us there. Honestly, it was only a handful.' 'Was your husband there, Mrs Gray?' 'No. Louis wasn't able to go, sadly.' Dawn went back to her work. Lena looked over at her blonde head bent over the papers at her desk. Dawn was a spectacular looking girl. Lena and Jessie had arranged that she take public speaking lessons and it had been a wise investment. Now Dawn could stand up in front of any gathering of school leavers. Lena knew that the students would listen to the words that came from a slim young glamour girl only a few years older than themselves. If Dawn talked about the need to get good typing speeds, exact shorthand symbols and office routine then they would accept it. Such advice coming from Jessie or herself would carry little weight. Lena felt her head heavy and she had an inexplicable thirst. She must have drunk six glasses of water by lunchtime. Is this the way all heavy drinkers felt? The regulars in Paddles' and Foley's back in Lough Glass? The regulars in Ernest's bar? Did they all have to rehydrate 9 1 themselves the next morning? What a pointless exercise it was. She would never get drunk again.

'Ernest is coming around tonight,' Ivy said. 'Great stuff. Have you said "Thank you, Lena"?'

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'No, I haven't. I've said I wonder why I am now cast in the role of a screaming alcoholic.' 'You could be a reformed alcoholic. Men love that,' Lena suggested. 'Ernest actually pleased,' Ivy said. I know you are.' 'But I don't want to put too much hope in it.' 'No, of course not.' Lena lay down on her bed and drifted off to sleep. When she woke Louis was standing beside her, 'Hello, is my poor drunk?' he said, full of sympathy and love. 'I'm so sorry Louis, was I disgusting?' 'No, you were sweet, you were like a floppy bunny. You couldn't sit or stand or anything.' He handed her a cup of tea which she drank thirstily. 'And what was I saying?' She was ninety per cent sure she hadn't mentioned the Regent Palace Hotel, the journey to spy on the newly married couple. 'Nothing too intelligible, great difficulty in pronouncing words with an S in them.' He stroked her forehead. 'More tea, then I'll scramble you some eggs . . . that's all you'll be able to do. Trust me Louis.' Lena closed her eyes. How strange it all was. Here she was lying in

bed while Louls Gray got her a cup of tea. A couple of miles away Maura Hayes was lying in bed while Martin also arranged for tea to be served. Lena let her mind wander back to the way they looked ... Martin and Maura. At ease with each other, that was definite, like people who had been friends and loved each other for years and had only just realised it. Martin wasn't straining and struggling to please her as he would have been with Helen. Maura was making no effort to concentrate. They were well matched. Lena wondered whether there was any passion between them. There must be some sexual love. They would hardly enter into a relationship unless they had planned to consummate it. But she found herself unable to imagine it.

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She could hardly remember her own coupling with Martin. Sex had always meant Louis, from the very first time she had known him and known he was for her. It didn't make her uneasy, thinking about Martin and Maura even on their London honeymoon, nor about seeing Maura sleeping beside Martin in the bedroom that Helen NicMihon had abandoned early in their marriage. It was just that she couldn't imagine it at all.

Josie and Jim came back from their honeymoon. They were anxious that the wedding party had been a success. 'I think everyone enjoyed it,' Jessie said. 'Oh yes, it was wonderful,' Lena assured her. 'My brother didn't say much about it, but then he's a silent man,' said Jim Millar. This was an understatement. He had been almost wordless through the ceremony and the lunch that followed it. 'My mother enjoyed it, though?' Jessie was hoping it had been the great social event that she wanted to remember it as. 'It was a wonderful day,' Lena said. 'A marvellous happy occasion. We won't ever forget it.' She was rewarded by the relief and pleasure in Jessie's 'Yes, and in Jim's when she looked at him triumphantly. The truth was that Lena had hardly any memory whatsoever of anything that day except standing beside Martin and Maura as they waited to go upstairs.

Ivy grumbled from time to time that Ernest had taken a very strong stance about things like sherry trifle. He said it could be the beginning of the slippery slope. But it seemed a small price to pay to have him back in her

life. He called regularly. Sometimes Lena spoke to him. 'I owe you a great debt of gratitude,' he said once conspiratorially. 'I always thought that Ivy was a woman who could take care of herself, run her own life. I never knew she'd gone to pieces.'

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The months passed in Lough Glass as they did else, and people were so accustomed to seeing McMahon and his wife Maura walking together exchanging affectionate smiles that the memory of Helen had, from the forefront of every mind. 'She's a lot dumper than her predecessor,' O'Brien said, looking out the hotel window at the McMahons striding along with Rusty, their red setter, puppy. Mildred had never liked Helen when she was young, but she didn't seem to be pleased either with the second Mrs McMahon. Dan said 'She doesn't have Helen's way with her, that's true,' he said, thinking back wistfully on the slow swish of Helen McMahon's skirt as she walked down the lane behind the hotel, her hair tumbling down her back, her eyes restless. Maura went from time to time to see Sister Madeleine. Once she brought a pane of glass and some putty. 'At least you won't give this away,' she said, knocking out the broken window with a hammer and collecting the shattered glass on old newspapers. 'Don't be too sure of it. There are plenty of people worse off than I am,' said the hermit. 'This is the first window I've ever put in. You wouldn't destroy my faith in myself by taking it out to give to someone else?' 'You sound very happy, Maura.' 'I am, thank God, very happy indeed, and what's more, I'm blessed in those two children.' 'You wouldn't be if you weren't so good to them.' 'I was wondering . . .' Maura lined the window frame with the putty as she spoke. 'I was wondering whether you'd put my mind at rest over something. . . ' to 'My own mind is so confused, Maura, I'm never one to set myself up as an adviser to other people's minds.'

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still you know, dreams, and things, I think, you see them on 5 or 6. It will be real at 0.11, I think that's the best time to move more and maybe you'll see a "I move

ry silly., went to the fire ounas ve , Madeleine h ings always do'the flames- -
tthata ,e, tle over -Where now , 'Sri ,.Re old black k. glass tile slightly ~jaura
eased the into place. back to adn"re er than the She said, standing at deal
bett -ad been V which was a gre; I ,oked windON.11, s,,eraLl pieces Out Of
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keej)li~l as e a lovely clean Shiny. Maura.' The tea '~cj 'lonly sel ... fhank
you again, 6rarn that aisturv, ,6nd -and rai see or 1Nnd what did you e were
in London "'Ou. I s when w . as close as I 31n` tv ,jt,SsOOdd.ButItw`
es,deu5,)ull ,on,an came and stood b I

"Yes~, ,h, Alwasab

Onsland sort

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foursome and sornetim V1avin, A They were . dinn ari easy .1 to the It was
such c talk turne, Saturday. . . 'he' Ouples.,Vih, they were joined by ot)eter
CIYY said-', 'her chest," dicine; You hermit. listen to c 'She lwon,t let n-ie-
truckwith modern ni notice. don't think she has any for her to take any have
to be a Tnystic or a gypsy

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'She's warm enough in there, the place is Maura said, 1 A 11

C snu~ yes, I s war g what's she inhahm,,, T

, smoke, and her bedding could be damp. still,),ou:,,,h, well be talking to
the wall, she was always full of ~r' notions, She'll live and die by them.'
acke, 'I tried to give her a preparation for chilblains 1,-,t vea, and she
thanked me and said they'd go in their mvii ti'me., Martin shook his head
about her. 'But I think she's fairly sound in her own head,' %laura said. 'She
certainly cured Emmet's stutter,' Martin agreed. 'And she calmed Clio down

when she was behaving ilke someone bound for the gallows,, Lilian added. 'She doesn't encourage foolish fantasies. She's as practical as Mother Bernard in many ways,' Maura said. They talked about Mother Bernard and her drive to build a new wing on the convent; her fundraising activities had Lough Glass demented. Maura's mind wandered away from the conversation. She thought of the way the nun had been so adamant it couldn't have been Helen McMahon she had seen in London. What it undoubtedly must be was the imagination playing tricks. Like a tree can take on the image of a dangerous bogey man if you're frightened, like a shadow on the window pane can look like an intruder rather than a branch waving. So it was when Maura had been thinking of Helen she would automatically think any woman of the same age and size might be she. 'I wasn't thinking about her, you see,' Maura had countered. 'How was she dressed? It 'She had dark glasses and a little hat. Purple feathers. was so like her, Sister Madeleine.' The nun threw back her head and laughed away Maura's anxieties. 'Well now, don't you believe me?' 'Helen McMahon in sunglasses? Indoors? And in a hat' In all the years I saw her here she never wore a hat . - .'

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supp~),;e cren't thin~ing of her even though You ic-vel. That's see, st have been on another 1 ' vou mu fferen Jous Y, ed her features on to a totaliy di

vou transpos beside you.' Sister Macieleine ha

' r Standing. explanation. ^ " at he obvious st be right. Of course maura knew she mu

1 ing college, but there was still hev lea a 1~ in the cater ma with Frankie, 1 fr rned C. ften Kit went to the cine ,,,c ee tim iing some devilment and great at ho as always planrstel for her friend Kit. ,,eg(tiating late passes from the ho ;he didn't have the Fraillkle was cheerful and casual. ~ c criticise with such ,,thouse . intensity of CliO nor did sh wanted. She t do exactly what she. ,,trage ,it didn'th her family. Invited K It for 3 weekend to (,nrk to stay wl

~i, would love to 'have gone but it was at the end of the ,')onth and ~he had spent most of her allowance. She didn't am fare. Frankie shrugz,,,;d, Anol,,, time. it was ,,VC "C ', uestioning a'-ld 1 relief, Kit thought ot all elle `ross q

analysis that she would have got from, Clio. elies in fits, of them 'nerv Ther i
 c were some parl, g way into the night, [ous with people singing and
 laughin some of them messy evenings ~hat shoul parties at all because they
 were , ,t excuses f or groping. Kit y behaved to go in and Frankle thought
 that it was badl search of groping to a public place. This was a private
 matter, they said, and clucked at each other pretending to
 De nuns until they fell about laughing. ever see you,' Clio 'What do you do
 all the time? In she said met complained, Kit tried to explain but nothing jo
 said diswith any approval. It sounds awful,' Cl
 Missively. 'Then you're just as well out of it.' Kit was unconcerned. 'But I
 wOu'M like to meet you for coffee now and then. We are meant t,, be
 friends.'

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Clio shut up sounding like a fourteen-year-ol to Bewley's in Grafton Street
 tomorrow.'

'Have you gone all the way yet?' Clio asked Kiz, 'Are you out of your
 mind?' Kit asked. 'Does that mean out of my mind, yes, or out ~~f mind,
 no?' Clio had an infectious grin. That was wh,, the, fights had never lasted
 long when they were young, They didn't have fights now. They were much
 too oh, for tha~ sort of silliness. 'The answer is No, as you know very well,'
 Kj~, said. 'Me neither.' Clio was sheepish. 'I didn't ask, remember that. I am
 mature enough t, think it's people's own business.' 'I wonder, are we Just the
 odd ones out? Like, everyone else doing it and being mature and not
 telling,' Clio sounded very unsure. 'Well, we know Deirdre Hanley does it
 with everyone she sees. We know that Orla Dillon from the newsagent's at
 home was stupid enough to do it with that man from the mountains and is
 married to him now, which is about as bad as could happen.' 'I don't mean
 people like that,' Clio said. 'I mean people like us.' 'Well, they are like us.
 They come from Lough Glass.' 'No, you know, middle-class-people, upper-
 class people' 'Clio, you sound like Margaret Rutherford in a film.' K~t
 pealed with laughter. 'I'm being serious. How would we know?' 'We
 wouldn't. We'd have to work it out for ourselves. 'There must be some way
 of knowing., Clio looked ver, Y agitated. Kit looked at her with interest.
 'Why, is it important. 'It's very important.' 'Well, I suppose people like us do

if we want to and don't if we don't want to.' 'We don't if we're afraid we'll go to hell, or people might talk about us and give us a bad name.'

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It think It's simple as that.' 'r VOU, ever" Pn I've spelled out every,rPoss' ~,"P \)What do you want the fellow -uality. Corinor, you know just that Michael O'ejlin~ You about unattractive Commerce student aid know. A tall, brother of Kevin O'Connor h, a wealthy ,ery irritating lau, ... sons of a very

I" Catering College I - ~omething o'n ch with their own car in Dublin eve- Cal ea ... Clio had spoken s of as regards luxury ,, about Michael O'Conwhat about MichaelF and that I'm only being a .He says everyone does it,th the world-' 11) lish prov . incial. Out of step W1 '0 t to or do you not?' ,Tell, do you wa" ,I don't want to lose him.' ound.' ,If he likes You he'll hang ar001 of PhIjosophy, 'That's only the Mother Bernard sch ~,t, They don't han; around nowadays e hi F And do you A irn. ,yes, of course I dO-'e you laugh? Does he understand ,,Why? Does he mak n-ing ne same things?' itb him. I like I 'Not particularly. But I like being v yish Kit thought. to sonletimes looked very bab .,is girl.' Cliing for a degree at University - . th Not like someone study oodbye unless you have 5e"" W' 'And does he Say it~ , 'He calls it making love-' 'Whatever it's called. i I that, but you'd know that's ,well, he doesn't quite say what's meant.' 'It's blackmail.' one properly without. 'He say, you can't love some 'I bet he does.' Kit sounded sarcastic- Kevin did it Cho's eyes flashed. 'He also says his brother with YOU,; 'He wbat),

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Clio looked alarmed at the emphatic response. what he said, after some party apparently.' Kit got up from the table, her face red with rage.,1h,, ~~ some advice for you, Clio ... Take 1 if You like, or igno, it. That is a great big lie. His stupid ox of a brot her did to take the knickers off me one night and I refused, becaz~ whenever I lose my virginity it will not be with one of thost pig ignorant O'Connors, with their stupid laughs and tlleL, lies and

thinking they're God-all-bloody-mightys 1. theL, cars going vroom-vroom. The people at the other tables looked up with grej,, interest as the handsome dark-haired girt with the lo% black curly hair and the smart red jacket flung some cojr! on the table and stormed out of the restaurant. It wasn't every day that you overheard a conversation that covered lies and virginity and knickers and God-all-bloodymighty. Dublin was changing.

A hundred times Lena thought of an excuse to send Yut a short letter, a postcard even. But she always dismissed it as being too flimsy. The girl would shy away again if she were to attempt to contact her. After all, Kit's note had onlv. been a belated thank you letter for the dress and a warning about the presence of Martin and Maura in her city. it had not been a letter with any warmth or wish to rekindle I friendship. he But there might be something. Some possible excuse I could find that would give her a reason. Lena raked the local newspaper for any item of interest, something that might reasonably trigger a communication, She SO an item about the difficulties of getting employment in the. hotel industry. She cut it out and pasted it on a shc" "t paper. Then she added the Millar's Agency brochure on 'opportunities in the hotel trade' and posted them to Kit her college.

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second year - now. it would be time for her ~it was ill heros. tions and)obs. Surely she could not take dlinkaboutP 1 1 0Celice at thil. d over until she was sat sfied ore the note Over a' ; still the same Lena W' hat the address wal w,th it. She rmade sure t . nor her office

wn, She wanted neither Louis. th Ireland. In Careof ivy 13,0 response wi ,,g,,gues to know of this cor end the note she wrote said. d your Tho.aght this might be of some interest to you an jellow students. well. Hope the course is going's Sincerest wishes for your success and happiness ~nd she signed it L.

ething the as Maura who not ced that there was som -_,,atter with Emmet. fuss, he said. Anyway, he was He didn't want any ther Healy wouldn't take kindly playing in a match. Bro :o fits crying off - you don't mind,' 'I'll get Peter to have a look at you, I ~laura insisted.-eally,

Maura, I'd know if there 'I'm quite grown UP I In was anything wrong with me.' They looked each other' :he eye. This was their first confrontation. slim and sometimes Emmet was a handsome boy, I -iuch in demand . ry hurter and n --ail-looking. He was a wl that missing a match wasn't c,n the team. Maura knewnanced except in the case something that would be countead aches and pains, his)i dire emergency. But the boy h f h- s eyes were yellow. skin looked sallow and the whites o I an She wasn't going to back down-I ~now you are Of adult, Emmet, believe me I do. And if it were a matter Ste askingome up and wait in the surgery and wa you to cl I wouldn't try to force it on time and make it all officia

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you. But Peter Is my brother-in-law. Is it all right if I ask him to took at you, just look, this evening?' Emmet grinned. 'You're too reasonable, Maura, That', the problem.' Peter Kelly said that Emmet McMahon had acitt jaundice. it could be cured at home. A darkened room, a lot of barley water, a heavy dose of those M and B tablets examination of the urine which was as red as port wine. Maura came across twice a morning from her job in Stevie Sullivan's. His father came up twice a morning from the chemist's below. Anna Kelly was off school recovering from measles. She called in too and read to him. 'What would you like? You wouldn't like Desir&,it's a great story about Napoleon's girlfriend.' 'No, I'd prefer something else if you wouldn't mind, poetry maybe.' 'Will I do some from our text book) It could be revision for the exams.' 'No, the only good thing about all this is not having to think of revision or school. Do you know any funny poems?' 'Not by heart, no,' Anna said. They seemed to be at a loss. 'I have a book of funny poems at home though Ogden Nash ... would that do?' 'Well, if you're passing. I 'I'll go and get it,' she offered. 'I don't want to waste all your time off.' He was solicitous. 'No, heavens no. Anyway, you're the one with the bad sickness, I only had measles.' illness, and Emmet felt important that he had a serious I was flattered that Anna had gone all the way uP to Lakeview Road to get the book. They loved Ogden Nash. The house rang to the sound Of their laughter as they read to each other. When Kit came back from

Dublin she found them the" together day after day - her brother Emmet with the yellow skin and the yellowed eyes, Anna Kelly with the
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rash of fading measles spots. They looked ~ar~ bro'Oln , ,,,te
cortippanionable together.

debated for a long time about writing to Lena. The 1ena not have a had to
be acknowledged. But di d L ad

at her son had been very ill and h ,ight to know th ',C~,overed, of course
she had forfeited any rights when she 1 went A1;aY. But if she had been
able to have the letter she en she would at least have had sonic .,it delivered,
th their wellbeing. if the letter ~nowledge of her children and then Father
and ,ad been delivered rather than burned,
slaura could never have married. it was always the same circle of thoughts.
Kit never got any further in her understanding of them. You just had to
make it all fit in with the way things were rather than ing. wishing and
wonder' uch for the brochures, she wrote Thank you ve * ry rn eventually.
it's interesting the range of opportunities that are on offer in Britain. We do
the same examinaour college would. ~e tions here so anyone from age
opportunities qualified. We hear all the time of the hi ism in Ireland which
will come, our way as soon as touri i begins to take off properly, but it is
very interesting i to read about the specialisation that is already happening
over in England. Emmet is now recovering from a bad bout of jaundice. He
was well looked after and cared for, and he should be back in school in two
weeks. 1 just thought you would want to know. 1 too send you kind wishes,
Kit [y son lying in bed with jaundice, Lena read about her on'i which after
all was a form of hepatitis. She felt jealous. jealous of Maura Hayes, who
got to bring him. beef tea and chicken brot h, who made a little 1 of lemon
barley water. Lena would gauze cover for his jug ed his have done all that
and more. She could have strok

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forehead and changed his pyjamas. She would have sat an, told him stories
and read poetry to him. Her mind wl, i away thinking about it. Louis
touched her hand. She always arranged that th,, had a relaxed breakfast

together. Real coffee, a warmed re, ' and honey. She set the table nicely with a pink cloth. it helped to give him a good start to the day. 'And what were you dreaming about?' he asked. 'I was thinking that my son has jaundice ... and I hope he'll be all right,' she said before she could check herself. 'How on earth do you know that?' He looked alarmed. But she had recovered. 'You asked me what I was dreaming about. That's what I dreamed.' Her smile was reassuring. He looked sympathetic. 'I don't go on about it because there's no point in speculating. But I do know how hard it is for you.' 'I know, Louis. I know you know.' 'It's a pity we never had a child, you and v 'Yes, it is.' Her voice was dead. 'But still, you must think of the boy and girl ... I know that.' It was as if he was forgiving her, excusing her for harking back to her son and daughter. 'From time to time, yes.' 'You're not sorry ever that you left ...)' He knew what the answer was going to be. She paused before she said it. His face had a flicker of anxiety but then it creased into a great smile. 'You know, Louis, that I loved you all my life. Any time away from you was wasted time ... How can you ask me to do I regret doing', anything that meant I had the chance to be with you?' 'He seemed moved. Did he ever feel any guilt at having jilted her, abandoned her all those years ago? About being so constantly unfaithful to her now. He said over and over that she was the only woman with the power to hold him. But that could easily mean she was the only woman foolish enough to stay with him through such a series of humiliations. Was that what he considered holding him.

a!

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years ago, when she had told Martin McMahon that him because she still loved the ~ h, couldn't marry I he had said In a puzzled way I f another mail, time was infatuation. At the t*

Medlory 0 - wasn't love, it ~hat surely, this was so silly to try to define ated her terrible Y, I t, had irrit, she had said. What did one person mean, things by words, r mean by love? I, y infatuation or obsession and another neat little The whole thing couldn't be tidied away with labels. she still believed that. She looked at the line of Louis I shes, and won Gray's jaw and the shadow of h's eyelids i he d,,ed what a different turn

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'How's the young lad?' Stevie asked, 'Over the worst of it. He's as yellow as a duck's foot but he's on the mend.' Maura spoke with relief and concern, She had been worried by the illness. 'That's good. Listen Maura. I'll be out for a few hours this afternoon. In fact, I mightn't be back at all. it's all under control, isn't it?' 'The business is, Stevie, yes.' 'What on earth do you mean by that?' What she had meant was that Stevie Sullivan's private life was in no way under control. Maura McMahon had eyes in her head. She knew

about the pretty little Orla Dillon from the newsagent's shop. Orla who had married in great haste a couple of years back and lived with her husband's father, in a faraway parish. Orla had been spotted with Stevie a couple of times in places which were, to say the least of it, unwise. She had telephoned this morning. Even though she gave another name, Maura knew her voice. Obviously an afternoon meeting was planned. 'I don't mean anything, Stevie.' She lowered her glance, 'Great. Well, I'll be off then. The two young lads are okay on the forecourt, and take the phone off the hook " you took back in on Emmet. . .' He stood at the door

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. Holding his car keys, a tall handsome young man. Far too swinging full of promise to get into a messy situation intelligent and a girl, and all her in-laws from the back of with that Dillon, he reminds. I know I'm not your mother . . .' she began. 'Her class', thank God you're not, Maura. A younger smarter person entirely . .

She looked after him in despair. His mother indeed was unlikely to give him any constructive advice. She was a sour woman, hardened by the life she had led, but unable to realise that its quality had proved. She passed her time by making jibes at Maura. She would have thought the pharmacist would be able to support a wife himself. And she managed to mention many a time that the first Mrs McMahon never saw any need to burden herself with a job outside the home. Maura took no notice. Kathleen Sullivan was a pity. That's what people said about her, she was a poor pity. She couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes across the road. Long enough to change her stepson's pyjama sock, to give him a wet flannel to wipe his forehead, neck and hands, and a bar of Kit Kat as a treat. He was well on the road to recovery. She let herself out quietly and didn't even pause to look back. She found the door open. Things were knocked from every shelf, and the desk drawers were upside down on the floor. Maura had often heard of people saying they were rooted to the ground by a shock, and she realised it was a good description. Her feet 'I she heard the s were not able to move. Not until sounds of creaking ... a faint sound coming from beyond the door : into the

Sullivan's house. It was then that her feet began to move and she ran to find Kathleen Sullivan lying on the floor, her two hands raised for help. She had been savagely beaten, her face and hair were covered in blood. Somebody had attacked her in a frenzy, and had very nearly killed her. ~ They all praised Maura for being so level-headed, but she pushed away the praise. It was easy. she had her

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husband in the chemist's shop a few yards away, brother-in-law at the other end of a telephone. If anything, she blamed herself for having left the office. Had she been there Kathleen might not have been attacked. 'Don't say that,' Martin whispered. 'It might have been you. God, Maura. Suppose it had been you. . . .', She had been tactful, too, about Stevie's absence. He had told her that he had a meeting. It was with financial advisers, she assumed. No, not the bank, not the accountants. He would be back. She insisted on staying on the premises until he returned. Kathleen had been taken by ambulance to the hospital in the town. She had lost a great deal of blood and needed to be examined for broken bones. Her wounds were too deep to be stitched without anaesthetic. Peter's face had been grim. 'You don't look all that well yourself, Maura. Go back across the road home,' he suggested. 'That's what I keep telling her.' She knew she must keep the shrill note out of her voice, lest it sound like a tinge of hysteria- 'Let me stay, please. I was minding the place for Stevie Sullivan. I want to be here when he gets back.' Sergeant O'Connor said he'd stay too. 'Ah Sean, can't you go back to the station for God's sake? I'll tell Stevie to call when he gets back.' 'No, I'll wait too.' Sean's face was set. 'I can tell you what's missing. I'm waiting too, Maura.' 'We'll have a bit of a wait.' 'Is it young Dillon?' 'I've no idea who Stevie's meeting ... He said 'Okay Maura, leave it.' The sergeant sounded weary, 'Only, if it's Orla Dillon, I hear they usually go to empty house up behind the churchyard.' 'How would you hear things like that?' 'It's my job.' 'It's not. It's a gossip's job, a scandalmonger's job.'

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.., would I be wasting my time going up there, would you

not going to get me to say I it

.~,qo it vvas short-cuts I was thinking of really. Like, ,,,,Id mean we'd all get home hours earlier,'

.Well then ... ook out the keys of the Garda car. sean stood up and t ~obody knew where they could have come from. There in the area. There were no ~Idn , t been any other burglaries ..tar fingerprints. could it have been a professional gang~ Sean O'Connor ~::~n't think so. Professionals might h , ave left the place in ssed so many car ,ich a mess,3cuments that could have easily translated into money,

n rt'ificates, endorsed cheques a d even ,gistration cc I ark of an organised gang. .,urnber plates. It ' hadn't the hallm couldn't Kathleen Sullivan, recovering in hospital, rernember how many there had been amongst her issAants. Sometimes she thought it had only been one, a ~ig fellow with coarse black eyebrows and a smell of sweat)ff him. Other times she thought it must have been two,

Decause something hit her from around the back and the ~ark-faced fellow was in front of her. suggested. She 'It could have been the desk,' the sergeant

I iad hit her head on that. to hit her. Yes, but it hadn't risen up She felt there were two. Whoever it was hadn't come in a

-at, the lads who filled up with petrol knew that. They been in and out.

None of them ,~)uld account for who had . it must have been someone A left to go into the house who had seen -; ,ho came in the back, someone watching ho I :he pharmacy. Someone w Nlaura cross the road to t I ladt expected to find Kathleen in the office. There What bad she been doing in the office anyway ~k'as no need to ask. Everyone from Maura to Stevie to *geant O'Connor knew that she had pounced on the ,oPportunity of Maura going back across the road to come

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and have a rummage around, probably in Maura's hari~ba~ too. Not to take anything mind, but to get informnat," , . . find out how much there was in a post office book, st, the age on a driving licence, know what kind of letters sh, carried. They didn't even bother to ask Kathleen why she was ln there.

Which was a relief to the older woman as she lay in the hospital recovering from her injuries and accepting the sympathy of Lough Glass.

'I shouldn't have gone across the road,' Maura said to Stevie. 'I shouldn't have been where I was,' he grinned. 'They mightn't have gone for me, fine strong woman that I am,' she said. Her voice was still shaky. 'My life is bad enough, Maura. If they did have a go at you, I'd have to be looking at Martin McMahon for the rest of my life. I wouldn't have liked that. Just as the man has got a bit of a life for himself at last.' Maura smiled with pleasure at that remark. 'Did you know Helen?' 'Not really. Who knew her? She was, as they say, a looker, but even with my enthusiasm for ladies I think I probably felt a bit young for her.' 'I pity the woman you marry, Stevie Sullivan.' 'No you don't. People who say that have an insane urge to be part of the excitement.' 'Aren't you full of yourself! Will we start the clean up tonight? Scan is finished with everything.' 'Oh God no. Let's not go within a mile of it. Will you come down to Paddles' and I'll buy you a drink to help us recover?' 'No, Paddles doesn't like females. They upset the tenor of his ways.' Stevie laughed. 'The Central then?' 'No honestly, I'll go back across the road. Poor Emmet doesn't know what's happening. Come with me there, Martin would be delighted.'

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will, My legs are a bit shaky.' A lot of Stevie's shakes with the fright he got when the love nest was so hard to do with thought he was suddenly interrupted by the sergeant. He so. I -laws, and it, ought to have to deal with all Orla Dillon's in

" I'd not have been an engagement which he would have wound out of alive, Conn. He needed a drink. Anywhere.

beside Emmet's bed. She wore a white cardigan over a pale blue dress. Her blonde hair, like Clio's, was shiny and the colour of corn. Stevie hadn't realised that she was such an attractive little thing, well, Lucky Emmet. His own little Florence Night, I wish; perhaps, he said admiringly. 'I'm laying Old Maid,' Anna explained. 'Never a fear that you'll be that, Anna,' Stevie smiled. 'Oh I don't know, it could be worse. Imagine marrying anyone from round here.' 'You don't only have to choose from round here,' her Aunt Maura said. 'You did,' Anna said. 'Yes, but that

was when I was mature, shall we say, and knew that this is where I wanted to be. Now Emmet, I was coming in, in case you were lonely ... but you're not.' 'Have they caught them?' Emmet's eyes were eager and bright. 'Not yet,' Stevie said. 'But don't worry, they're not hanging around. The guards think they have gone off out the back again, the way they got in. Up the lane and out by the church. They're halfway between here and Dublin now,' 'Why did they choose your place?' Anna asked. 'Fastest growing car business in the lanlds.,' Stevie said. Anna looked at her aunt to confirm thi 'You don't think I'd be working there otherwise,' Maura sa~id 'Come on, Stevie. I'll get you that drink I promised YOU They went into the sitting room. Martin was on the

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phone to Kit. The robbery h;d been reported on the rien She had heard Lough Glasi mentioned and wanted know was everyone all right, 'Talk to her,' he gestured tagerly to Maura. 'Oh Maura,' Kit burst irito tears. 'I was so something might have happened to you. Thank God it was only batty old Kathleen.' Maura held the receiver for a while before replacing it. She was hardly able to speak vith the emotion she felt that her stepdaughter should cry over her possible safety. it was more than she had ever hoped for. That, and the look of relief and love in Martin's eye! as he poured them all a large brandy. Purely medicinal of course.

Sister Madeleine poured out a cup of tea for Mrs Dillon. 'It's a hard world to understand, all right,' she sai I d . 'I came to you, Sister Madeleine, because you know all about the wickedness that goes on and you're not above in a pulpit preaching about it and forgiving people or not forgiving them as the case may be.' Mrs Dillon from the newsagent's and confectioner's nodded her head vigorously as she spoke. This was serious praise for the hermit. Sister Madeleine accepted the high regard. She didn't sav that it wasn't actually her position to forgive sins of to ascend a pulpit. It was easier to let people think they had a second line of approach. An alternative confession, if y0i, liked to put it that way. The woman was very worried about the behaviour of her daughter Orla. 'Maybe she should never have m arriedinto that clan,' Mrs Dillon said. 'But Father Baily was very anxious that it should be done as quickly as possible not.'~ give scandal, or "any more scandal" as he put ItMadeleine murmured and sighed as she always did and people

always took great comfort from it. 'No blame was being attributed. That was why people loved to come and see her. It was more soothing than anything. But When advice was being sought, she let you work it out.

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fear that Orla may be neglecting her child and that I no, stand. for.' Mrs Dillon's head bobbed up and 'But Sister Madeleine you can't talk to young e were. ,ople these days. They're not afraid like w She might be afraid of her husband's brothers, though,'

-,Ste, Madeleine said eventually. If you were to hint that they had been drinking somewhere and that a rumour had ~Onle to their ears. You might find that that would work ,oliders . Mrs Dillon left, thanking the nun as if she had performed a miracle. This is exactly what she would do. That was precisely the route to take. Ne * ither of them commented on the fact that it was a trick, a lie even. it would work.

Alone no~ Sister Madeleine , poured a saucer of milk for the blinded kitten that some children had brought her. The vet had said that it would be kinder to have put the animal to sleep but Sister Madeleine said that she would care for it, point it at the food and keep it safe from anything that

might be a danger. It was a frail little thing, trembling as well it might after all that had happened to it in its short life.

But she was rewarded with the purring when it realised that its face had been pointed towards something as comforting as bread and milk. Then she heard the sound. It was a rough, gasping breath. And very near her door. At first she thought it was an animal; once a deer had come right up to the water's edge in front of her cottage, But there was a grunt as well.

Sister Madeleine never felt fear. When the big form ~oomed up at the doorway she was calm, calmer than the man with the bushy eyebrows and blood-streaked arm, a man who had been in some fight and had been injured. He I than had very wild eyes and he was more startled to see her she him. He had thought that the cottage was empty. 'Don't move and you won't get hurt,'he shouted at her. Sister Madeleine stood without stirring; her hand was at her neck fingering the simple cross she wore on a chain.

Her hair was pulled as always into a short grey veil. Her clothes marked her out as a nun. Not one that lived in a
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convent perhaps, but with the grey skirt and cardigan, sensible laced shoes, she could be nothing else. The nun-like thing about her was the fact that when asked to move she stayed so utterly still. Her eyes never left his face. After what seemed like a very long time his face began to crumple. 'Help me, Sister. Please help me,' he said. And the tears began to pour down his face. Very gently, so as not to frighten him, Sister Madeleine moved towards him, and motioned him to a chair. 'Sit down, friend,' she said, in a slow calm voice. 'Sit down and let me look at your poor arm.' 'At least it's not the tinkers,' Scan O'Connor said to his wife. 'Why should it be the unfortunate tinkers?' she defended them. 'That's what I'm saying. No one can say it was them. They've all gone off on some outing or to some horse fair whatever it is they do.' 'If you talked to them more instead of frightening the daylights out of them you'd know what they do,' said Maggie O'Connor. 'Jesus, isn't it hard to say anything to anyone these days without being taken up wrong,' said Sean O'Connor, feeling very hard done by. They had no idea who had robbed Sullivan's and battered Kathleen so severely. It looked to be the work of a madman. But how had a madman got away so skilfully? 'It's no concern of anyone else's,' Sister Madeleine said as she washed the man's wound. He kept asking her to look out the door, fearing that she would run off and tell someone that he was there. 'Don't get out of where I can see you,' he said, his great forehead darkening even further. 'I have to get more water,' Sister Madeleine spoke

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I of making excuses. 'It without fear or any sense - e to boil it.' - 'e, from the pump outside and then I have corn in the chair. There was something about her

lie lay back that made him feel she wouldn't turn him in. ,I,m in trouble)' he said eventually. ,I,m sure you are.' She said it mildly as if he had said he was from Donegal or from Galway, a matter of no huge concern. She said that the wound didn't need to be stitched s far as she could see. If she bandaged it up the skin would a gether. 'You might like to give yourself a probably knit to! I bit of a splash out at the pump there. Mind your poor arm of course, try not to wet it ... but it Would make you more comfortable before we had tea.' 'Tea?' He couldn't believe it. 'I was going to put a lot of sugar in it, it gives you energy when you've had an accident.' 'It wasn't an accident.' 'Well, whatever it was. And I have some nice fresh bread that Mrs Dillon brought . . . ' 'People come here?' He was alert and watchful. 'Not at night. Go on now.' She was gentle and firm at the same time. Soon he was sitting, half-washed and more relaxed, at her table swallowing cup after cup of sugared tea. He had gulped slices of warm buttered bread. 'You're a good woman,' he said eventually. 'No, I'm the same as anyone else.' 'You wouldn't want to let people like me come in and take a loan of you like this. Some of them wouldn't be decent men like I am.' i 'No, I If she were hiding a smile he didn't see it. generally find people are generous and decent if you let He pounded on the table with his spoon in agreement. That's exactly it, but people don't let them be. That's where you're right.' 'Would you care to sleep the night here by the fire) There's a rug and a cushion.' them be.'

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His big face almost crumpled. 'You don't understand . you see.' 'I don't have to understand. The fire is there if You'd like to stay rather than going out into the wind.' 'Well, you see, Sister. There's a Possibility that people would come looking for me.' 'Not in my house, not in the night they wouldn't.' 'I wouldn't sleep easy, 1 really wouldn't.' She sighed and took him to the door. 'Do you see in a straight line from here a big tree on its own away from the others?' 'Yes,' he squinted into the night. 'There's a tree-house up there. Steps in the trunk and up there a secret tree-house. Children made it a long

fi., ago.' 'And would they want it now?' 'They're grown up and away from it now.'

It was the talk of the town. For days Mona Fitz said that her heart was in her mouth because those kind of gangs came back and did post offices; she had read of this happening. Wall's hardware put padlocks on every door. If the gang had made their getaway down the back lane they might have seen all the pickings that lay waiting for them in Wall's. They could come back again another day. Dan and Mildred O'Brien in the Central Hotel were depressed. The place was bad enough, they said, without having the reputation of a town where there were armed robberies. And of course it was written up in the local press.

There was extensive coverage in the paper that LenJ bought every week. She read the details of what seemed a violent and senseless crime. Without having to be told she could sense the town's relief that Maura McMahon had been on an errand of mercy and was not in her custody',

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Reading between the lines she knew that Position. I ~athleen Sullivan would have been snooping. it was not news that gave her any pleasure to read, but at least it provided an excuse to write again to Kit.

I read with concern about the events in the garage across the road from where you live. I just wanted you to know how sympathetic I feel and how I hope everyone has recovered from the shock. I do not wish you to feel that you always have to acknowledge every note I write to you. But when I feel such an urge to let you know how very involved and concerned I am, I'm sure you will forgive me for writing.

She signed it 'Lena'.

'Kit, I was going to sort of say that you and I were going off together for a weekend,' Clio said on the phone. 'Why were you going to sort of say that?' 'Because I'm going off for a weekend.' 'And . . . ' 'You know the way Aunt Maura's always poking her nose into things and asking am I all right - - .' 'Yes.' Kit didn't mind it as it happened. Maura only asked enough to make sure that they had enough money, entertainment, sources of clean clothes. She didn't question them about their friends. But then of course, Clio was probably up to no good and. felt threatened by even the simplest request for

information. , So I thought I'd say you and I had gone to Cork. it's the kind of thing we might do.' 'It's nothing like the kind of thing we might do.' 'Well, will you go along with it?' 'When for?' 'Weekend after next.' 'Where are you going, Cho?' 'I don't know exactly.'

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'You do. You're going off to lose your virginity~that terrible Michael O'Connor, aren't you?' 'Kit, really!' 'Aren't you?' 'Well, possibly.' 'Oh, you're such an eejit.' 'Sorry, Sister Mary Katherine, I didn't realise talking to a fully professed nun.' 'I didn't mean it, I mean him.' 'Just because you don't like his brother . . . I don't like him and neither do you, Clio. You only like that they're rich.' 'That's not true. I've met his family and I like them. i don't care whether they're wealthy or not.' 'I've met a bit of their family in that fellow Kevin and I don't like him at all. I especially don't like what he's been saying about me. I wish I could get back at him ... I'll think of a way.' 'Oh, don't make such a drama out of it,' Clio complained. 'They're very nice really. They have this elder sister Mary Paula. You never saw anything like her clothes, you wouldn't believe it. And she's~ been everywhere hotels in Switzerland, France ... everywhere.' 'Did she train . . . ? As a hotel manager?' 'No, I think it was just experience. She was in this great skiing place.' 'Lots of opportunities for skiing jobs in Ireland,' Kit said sarcastically. 'Oh stop condemning them all. Listen, what are you doing that weekend anyway?' 'As it happens I am going to Cork to stay with Frankle,' Kit said. 'But you can't come, either of you.' 'That's all right, I'll just say I'm going there and that will provide some kind of smoke screen. What's her second name?' 'Who?' 'Frankie?' 'I don't know, I never asked.'

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. I'll make up a '011 don't be such a pain and a pig, Kit. . . es 1 thi k nartle, God you,r, so uncooperative. Sometim in ,ou're getting as mad as your mother.' There was a silence. Kit hung UP.

Rankic and Kit laughed all the way train. fat old man bought them fizzy orange drinks and olate biscuits. He said he loved to see young girls cat 'hoc and drink and laugh. o see,' Frankie whispered to Kit. 'That's all he's going t

one. Stop, Frankie you're going 'We can't take another 5 excitedly, too far.' Kit felt guilty as the man looked at them hoping for something . for his heavy investment. 'It's his choice,' Frankie said. e lived in County They got a bus to the town where sh uch. Cork. It was bigger than Lough Glass but not m d a Frankie's father ran a pub. He said that when he ha ager and a son a solicitor he was going daughter a hotel man' rankie's to retire, sell the pub, and that was his plan. F ied out mother said he would never retire. He would be carr of the pub with his arrn still up in the position of pulling pints. He had done it since he was eighteen years old; he knew no other life. y-going people. Much less full Of They were happy, eas kground than the nonsense and questions about her bac and Kellys would have been, but somehow less stylish elegant than her mother would have made her house for a guest. Kit wondered why she thought of her mother suddenly. The house in Lough Glass had been run by Maura for a sizeable time now. Why did she think of it as her mother's place stiM ld write to Lena again, but there She wondered if she shou art a correspondence wasn't a reason. She was not going to st deception. all over again. Not after an the lies. All the down to Cork on the . possibly a squeeze ... in return

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Frankie's brother Paddy came home from Dub] 'n too He had got a lift from a fellow who had a hopeless car; h, wasn't in until nearly midnight. 'Oh good,'he said when he saw Kit.'A nice bird for the weekend.' 'Not really,' Kit said loftily. 'You know what I mean. It was a term of admiration,'he said. 'Oh well, thank you then,' she said good-naturedly, Paddy was a law student. He attended lectures in the Four Courts, he said. And that was the bit that had some freedom about It, the rest was being apprenticed to his mother's brother which was like being a galley slave. 'He's not that bad, is he?' Frankie defended her uncle. 'Easy now, you don't have to work for him ... still, it's a good training.' They sat companionably in Frankie's father's pub. Paddy was drinking half pints of stout, the girls were drinking bitter lemon. A few regulars, who didn't feel it necessary to observe the licensing hours, were sitting around with the air of people who had a perfect right to

be there and wouldn't cause any trouble just as long as they were left in peace. Paddy told the girls about some of the work he had to do. Debt collecting was the side of it he hated most. It meant going into houses where women with children in their arms tried to explain why money hadn't been paid by a man who was not there to make the explanation himself. You saw all of life in a solicitor's office, he said. They had people with no lights on bicycles, applications for publicans' licences, a woman who had choked eating a piece of poultry that had not been properly carved. Now they'd better watch out for that sort of thing when they were hotel managers, because she had got quite a lot of compensation, as it happened. And there was a claim for damages from a woman who had got a big scar on her face. It diminished her chances of marriage so she would get a lump sum.

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,Is it only women who get that money for disfigurement, or is it men as well?' 'Only women in terms of losing marriage prospects,' Paddy said cheerfully. 'Men could get married if they had faces criss-crossed with scars; it wouldn't affect their

chances at all.' 'That's very unfair, isn't it?' Kit said. 'It sort of says that women can only get married if they look all right.' 'It's true,' Paddy said. 'And this woman is entitled to big compensation. What does a woman have to offer anyway except her appearance and her reputation?' Frankie laughed. 'That's straight from the nuns,' she said. 'Well, it's case law as it happens,' Paddy said. 'If you take a woman's reputation away falsely, you have to pay.' 'Tell me more about that,' said Kit, her eyes shining with excitement. 'Tell me all about that, I'm fascinated.' They had great fun during the weekend writing the letter. Paddy said that the more threatening you made it the greater the chance of there being a craven response. 'We're looking for high compensation here,' he said. 'That fellow is the son of Fingers O'Connor. He's very well known; he wouldn't want any scandal getting out. He'll pay all right.' 'I don't expect him to pay,' Kit said. 'I just want to terrify him.' 'Anyway, you're not a real solicitor,' Frankie said. 'He won't know that if we use the office stationery,' Paddy said.

Kit sent a postcard to Lena. It was a picture of the Blarney Stone in Cork, the place you were meant to kiss and then you got the gift of the gab for

ever, or so they told the tourists.

Having a nice weekend here with friends. Thank you for your enquiry about the drama in Lough Glass. It's

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all passed over now, though nobody has a clue,,,h, it or why. Look after yourself, Kit

'Who do you know in London?' Frankie asked as Kit posted the letter. 'Oh, just a woman I got to know. She's been very good about writing. This seemed an interesting

6- ~ a card from.' Or to send her,

,Sure, and you don't have to say too much on a card,' Frankie agreed. After Clio, Frankie was a very restless friend.

He lived very peaceably in the tree house. It was a quiet place, but he liked the sound of the lake lapping below, and

with the call of the birds singing. The nun was a very reasonable woman. She said she was an outcast herself 'in her way and she understood. He had tried to tell her that first night, but she wouldn't listen. Then the next day he knew she had heard because her face was different. 'Where is the other man?' she had asked him. 'The people of the village had said there were at least two, maybe even a gang.' He became very agitated when he heard this. Now they would be definitely after him and maybe with tracker dogs. He told her he had done it on his own. He had needed money and he had waited in the lane until that woman had left. How was he to know that the old one was going to creep in as soon as she was out of the place? And the screaming and roaring ... well, he had to hit her just to shut her up. He hadn't intended it to be so hard. 'What's your name?' Sister Madeleine had asked him. This conversation was carried on the whole length of a tree. The man sat in the tree house, wrapped in the rug she had given him, Sister Madeleine sat on a tree trunk. 'You're asking me to give my name?' he said in disbelief, 'I have to call you something. I'm Madeleine,' she said.

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I id.'Francis Xavier Byrne.'There was ,I,m Francis,' he said I a S-lence. She thought of the day he had been baptised and someone had considered this was a fine, fitting name. 'And where do you live . . . usually, that is, Francis?' ,I live ... I live . . ' he stopped. She was still. 'I used to live in a home, Sister Madeleine, but I got out of it. The trouble was I needed money. I hated the home ... they should never call it that. This place is more of a home than that was.' 'Then stay here,' she said simply. 'You mean that? After what I did?' 'I'm not a judge and a Jury, I'm Just another person living on the same earth,' she said. He spent most of the day sleeping in his treehouse. Sergeant O'Connor came later that day. He said they were searching the area. 'You'd tell us if you saw or heard anything, wouldn't you?' He looked at the woman's unsettling eyes. 'Well, sure I never go up to the town at all, Sergeant. And who do I see but friends dropping in?' 'Well, if you saw anything unusual you'd tell your friends, wouldn't you?' He was in some doubt as she looked back at him directly. 'You see all there is to be seen here, Sean. Just a two-room cottage.' The door of her simple bedroom was open, with its white coverlet and its crucifix on the wall. Was it his imagination or had she always kept that door closed before? It was almost as if she was showing him that nobody was harboured here. Sean knew he was becoming tired and fanciful about this. 'I'll leave you on your own, Sister. God, I nearly stepped on that little cat of yours. Is it sick?' 'It's blind, poor little thing.' Sister Madeleine picked it up and stroked it. 'Not much of a life for a cat if it can't see where it's going. I'm surprised you wouldn't do the right thing and let it be put to sleep,' he said.

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'We don't always know what the right thing is,' Sister Madeleine said. 'No? Well, the right thing if any group of men turn up here is to let us know where to find them and not to be making them tea and sandwiches.' 'Is it a gang? It's not one person then?' Her face was bland. 'It's a gang. I'll be seeing you, Sister.' He was thoughtful as he walked away. He looked around him, but there was no sign of a boat in or out, no blood around the place, and the one thing they did know was that one of them, or maybe indeed the only one, was bleeding like a stuck pig. Sister Madeleine smiled and stroked the kitten. She was glad that she had thought of burning all the torn

bits of shirt and sheet that she had used to mop up the blood. She sat for a long time looking at the lake, wondering was she doing the right thing. Usually she was fairly clear about what to do, you did what hurt nobody. But this man had beaten poor Kathleen Sullivan and might have killed her. Was he a dangerous person who should be handed over? She didn't think so, but for the first time in a long time a shadow of indecision came across Sister Madeleine's mind.

'All the yellow look has gone off you now,' Anna said proudly to Emmet, as if it had been entirely her own doing. 'I know. I don't look so like a rat.' 'You never looked like a rat.' Anna ruffled his hair, 'You're very good-looking actually.' There was a pause. 'As it happens,' Anna added so that he would be sure. 'Yeah, of course.' 'I wouldn't say it otherwise.' 'It's just that I'd like to look ... well okay, if I were to be a bit around with you.' 'What do you mean, a bit around?' 'Well you know, the pictures, or a walk or something. 'Are you asking me to do a line with you?' Her eyes were dancing, she seemed eager.

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,you know my stutter is inclined to come back at ,nomenents of high emotion and drama like this,' he said. 10h, is that what we're in the middle of?' Anna held her head on one side and looked at him quizzically. ,Very much so,' Emmet said. He was making fun of himself in case she might ridicule him. Everything depended on what she said now.

,well, it would be very inconvement,' Anna said after a time. ,How's that?' 'If your stutter came back when you were trying to say I was beautiful or something . . . Too many starnmers over the bb-bb-bb would have me very uneasy ... I 'Why might I say you were beautiful?' He still didn't want to believe that she might be taking him seriously enough. , Because I said you were very good-looking. It might have been a nice way to return & compliment.' Again her smile was arch. But he thought he read enthusiasm in it. 'You're very beautiful, Anna,' he said. 'There now, not a stutter or a hesitation. Perhaps it's not a moment of high drama or emotion at all.' She blew him a kiss and he heard her feet running down the stairs and out onto the street. Emmet McMahon hugged himself. He had never felt so happy in his life.

Emmet was almost ready to go back to school but he still looked a little shaken. Maura decided to suggest a family holiday, a week in one of the big seaside resorts which would be quiet now that the summer was over. She looked up prices and presented Martin with the idea. 'Maybe we could even get Kit to come for a long weekend. She has the Monday off anyway. Suppose she was to take the Friday as well?' Maura was so enthusiastic about her new family and this was hard to resist. 'I'd say she'd love it,' Martin said. 'But aren't you going to have great difficulty in prising young

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Romeo away from the scenes of his Conquest?' They had been observing discreetly the romance of Emmet and Anna from a distance and without comment. 'Aha, but suppose the object of desire is coming with Us?' Maura laughed. 'Peter and Lilian say it's just the sort of thing they could do with too and there are these two little houses side by side. It will be like magic,' Maura said. Emmet was very sorry but he didn't really want to leave Lough Glass. With an earnest face he spoke of having to do his revision and get back to school. He had no idea how transparent he was being. Anyone could have seen that he didn't want to leave the place where Anna Kelly lived. Martin teased him a bit. 'It would be a great rest, you know, probably the last time anyone will ever pay for a holiday for you and order you not to work,' he said. 'I know Dad, and it's very kind ... but just at the moment. . . ' He looked embarrassed refusing the generosity. 'Oh, go on, Emmet, if you don't want to go she won't take me.' Martin often pretended that he had no standing at all in the family. 'Oh, I have to take you, I promised Peter and Lilian when we all arranged the trip that I would make you take a rest and I've got the time off myself from Stevie, and you can have that nice young fellow who did relief before for you. . . oh, are the Kellys going?' Emmet said eagerly. 'Yes indeed they are, and I'm sure Anna'll be very disappointed you're not going to be there.' 'Maybe it would be a disappointment for you then, if I didn't come,' he said to Maura. 'Yes, it would have been a bit of a disappointment, all right,' Maura admitted. His face was radiant at this stage. 'Maybe I'll just stroll up to the Kellys' and discuss it a bit,' he said. 'Put on your jacket,' his father said. 'You're not totally cured yet.' 'Oh but I am. I'm absolutely better.'

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,I as very surprised when Clio said she'd come with us,' Lilian Kelly said to her husband. .j)on,t look a gift horse In the mouth.' Peter Kelly was glad that his elder daughter had shown an interest in going

to a quiet holiday resort, off-season. . ,It won't be glittering,' he had said, in case there should be any misunderstanding. ,You can get a bellyful of glitter,'Clio said mysteriously. Philip heard about the trip. 'I might be there as it happens at that time.' 'No you won't,' Kit said. 'It never crossed your mind to be there at that time. If you turn up I shall take it as definite proof that you followed me.' 'I only do it for your own good.' He was defensive. 'Whaff 'Follow you.' 'You d ared to follow me. Where did you follow me?' 'To the station when you were going to Cork.' 'To Cork? You followed me to CorkV Her face was white with rage. 'No, only to the station. To make sure you weren't going off with that great ape ... 'What great ape? Not that I'm not entitled to go off with any great ape, but which one do you mean?' 'I mean Kevin O'Connor. He told us all he slept with You and that you were mad to do it again . . . I knew it wasn't true, but I didn't think he'd talk like that unless he had some hopes.' Philip was very upset. 'Why are you telling me all this filth and madness?' Kit shouted at him. 'You asked.' 'I did not ask. I just asked you not to follow us to the seaside. I had no idea about all this rake of lies ... I was thinking about getting a solicitor's letter written to that Kevin O'Connor. . . There's a crime saying you did when YOU didn't ... By God he'll suffer from this ... Ithought itwas just Clio exaggerating.'

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'Well, don't tell him . . . ' 1

11 'Yes 1 will tell him, you weak, yellow coward. ape is going to be sorry he ever met me.' That

Clio and Kit walked along the beach. It was a lovely time of the year to come. just too cool for anyone to expect them to be spartan enough to try out the cold Atlantic waters; warm enough to walk easily on the damp, firm sand without any sense of discomfort. 'Before you tell me all about it in glorious technicolour I have to tell you something about that family,' Kit said. 'What makes you think I'm going to tell you anything at all? You were so unhelpful about the weekend,' Clio grumbled. 'And I'm going to be even more unhelpful now,' Kit said with some pleasure. 'Tell me.' 'I'm going to sue his brother.' She stood away to observe fully the reaction on Clio's face. 'Sue him? What in the name of God for?' 'For impugning unchastity to a woman, that what it's called.' 'What?' 'I told you, he tells people like his own brother that he has had sexual relations with me. That is not true. I am a n unmarried woman; to imply I had sexual relations is implying I am unchaste. It is diminishing my marriage prospects. He'll have to pay for that.' 'Jesus,' Clio began. 'And it's not only you. Stop panicking, you're not the only one who heard. He told Philip O'Brien too, which is like putting it on the sIX-thirty news on Radio Eireann.' Kit's eyes blazed at the injustice of it all. 'And will it go to court?' 'Oh, I hope so.' 'Oh, God. When?' 'I've Well, if he doesn't apologise and pay full costs and gi

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tile a sum of money to compensate for my reputation being t2ken away - - ,Your reputation hasn't been taken away.' 'Yes It has. If his awful brother tells you ... if he tells PhilIP ... What's that but taking away a reputation?'

'No Kit, don't do it. I beg you.' 'It's too late. It's done.' 'You've sued him? You've sued Michael O'Connor's brother?' 'I've sent him a solicitor's letter.' 'You can't. You're not old enough. You have to be twenty-one.' 'No I don't.' 'It's posted?' 'Yeah, nothing to it. He says they're three-a-penny.' 'That can't be true. I never heard of it. You never heard it until this time.' 'No, solicitor's letters about anything, I mean. They told me I had to be prepared to go through with it if he said that I was a tramp and all. So I said I'm a virgin, I can prove that, so he's a liar.' Clio was sitting on a rock looking greener than the seaweed around her. 'You've ruined everything for me and Michael, ruined it.' 'Not at all, quite the contrary. You can warn Michael that if Kevin challenges this I'm going the whole distance to fight him. I'm very,

very interested in having sex with someone, when the time comes and I will not have that great, drunken, ignorant ape who I wouldn't sleep with if he were the last man on earth and I was about to die wondering ... going around saying he did it with me. You can tell him that. I'd actually enjoy it.' 'Kit, your father, Aunt Maura ... what would everyone say?' 'They'd say that I was terrific and I set a high store by myself. Now, tell me about your weekend with Michael.'

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toining The Kellys and McMahons had rented two ad . lodges. There were three bedrooms in each. Ther were little verandahs on the front that looked out on the lon~ strand. They saw Emmet and Anna walking very close together but not hand in hand. That took place when the, were around the corner and out of the verandah's view.' They saw Clio and Kit talking intensely. 'They seem to have remained friends in spite of all the ups and downs,' Lilian Kelly said. 'They seem to, all right,' said Maura, who watched the way the two girls spoke. It wasn't the easy laughter of girls finding everything funny, it was much more intense than that.

The rains came and the tree-house was very damp. it needed a firmer roof. Tommy Bennet the postman was a helpful man. 'Do you know what would be a great ease to me, Tommy, is a couple of sheets of lino or tarpaulin, something that would keep that rain out of a caravan.' 'Now, Sister, I've told you a thousand times they coul6 buy and sell us, those tinkers.' 'I'm not talking about the travelling people across the lake who are good friends to this community, but about another friend who has a caravan. You often ask if Ehere's anything you could do for me. This is something I couldn't thank you enough for.' 'Say no more.' Tommy Bennet hated these people taking advantage of the kind nun. 'I'll have it for you in a day of two.' As he left the house he put on his cape. The rain was lashing against the door. 'Ah, would you look at that,' he said. 'The poor little kitten is half drowned in a big dish Of water.' 'What? Where?' Sister Madeleine ran out in the rail', mindless of getting wet. There it was, panting and struggling for life but

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,io,sly nearly gone. 'Let me finish her off in the barrel, ob - She's not going to make had a poor 11*ttle thing. kind heart. ~No!, Sister Madeleine cried.

it, Sister. It's gasping for breath, it's dying. Ah, look at We can't will it back to life. Be fair to it, Be kind to it.

s~ster- it was blind anyway, always hitting into things, maybe we should have let it go at the start.' tears were mixed with rain on Sister Madeleine's face. ,Drown it then, Tommy,' she said and turned away. it only took a few seconds for the small wet limbs to stop moving. 'There, Sister. All at peace now,' he said. He wondered at the nun. She took the body and put it ,nto a box that had once held Cornflakes. 'I'll bury her tater,' she said. Other animals had died - she had the place surrounded with little crosses, she knew what foxes and tame hares and elderly dogs lay under each simple marker. Why was there such a fuss about a poor blind kitten that everyone had said she was mad to have kept in the first place? He wasn't to know that she saw the kitten as an omen, some kind of sign that she hadn't always done the right thing.

'I've stopped saying my prayers, but you're the kind of I woman that would bring you back to them,' said Francis Xavier Byrne as he chewed the lamb chops down to the bone. The young Hickey boy had been so grateful for a reference that Sister Madeleine had written him he had agreed to do anything for her. 'Just the odd bit of meat, whenever you think there's some your parents don't need. I don't want you to take from their earnings,' she had said. He understood that he wasn't to tell them about it either. 'Is it for the gypsies?' he had asked. 'It's for someone who needs meat to make them strong,' she had said. 'We could always say a prayer together, Francis,' she said.

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'What would we pray for?' 'We could give thanks that Kathleen of hospital and back in her house again.' 'I don't have all that sympathy for her, to be honest. she came at me herself like a demon out of hell.' 'W i ell you were attacking her and robbing her son,, premises. just because you stay here I don't want you to think that I approve of everything you do.' 'But you know why I did it.' 'Do IF 'You know I didn't mean to do it. I needed something to keep going. I couldn't be cooped up. You said yourself that you hated the feeling of being cooped up.' it.' 'I didn't rob and steal and hit people to get

out of 'You didn't need to, Sister,' he said. And again the sureness i came i back that she was doing the right thing. When the blind kitten died, Sister Madeleine wondered had it been a message from God that she might not always be right in her feelings, that the loudest voice she heard in her mind might just be her own.

Sullivan will be out

'Do you know I think you got a suntan even in this weather,' Stevie said admiringly to Anna Kelly. 'Well, they always say it's the wind that tans you,' she said smiling. 'Only one more year and then you'll be a free wornan,' he said, looking up and down the tall blonde g' ith the perfect teeth and the bright smile. irl wi Anna liked the admiration. 'Free from school, but not what you'd call free, Stevie Sullivan,' she said. 'And what would I call free?' cOh something much racier than me altogether,' she said. She went home pleased with herself. It wasn't bad to have the two best-looking fellows in Lough Glass interested in her. Not that she'd pay any attention to Stevie. Everyone knew what he had been up to.

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1-hey were old enough now to have a flat in Dublin. Es.e~one thought that Kit and Clio would share. E.eryone in Lough Glass, that was. Except perhaps maura. ,Won't you be lonely in a little bedsitter of your own?' martin worried about his daughter.

'No, Dad, and it's so near College and everything . . 'But if you were to share with Clio . . . you could both afford somewhere nicer.' 'We'd do no work ... we'd the time A nyway, we Dublin.'

be laughing and talking all have different friends in

Maura glanced at him and Martin let the matter drop.

Frankie helped Kit to move into her little room. 'I wish there was room for you in our place,' she said. 'But I was the last one in so I can't throw any of the others out.' 'No, I mean it, I like being on my own., And mainly Kit did like being by herself. She could study when she wanted to and if she needed friends she could go to Frankie's flat or to see Clio who had also got a place on her own. But Michael O'Connor spent a lot of time there. Clio's need to be without flatmates had a lot to do with Michael O'Connor's idea of entertainment. Not that she would ever let on to them back home. 'Now,

isn't that fine?' Frankie admired that way she had tacked a brightly coloured bedspread to the wall and fitted lino on to the little shelf where the kitchen things assembled by Maura were arranged. Frankie's brother Paddy, the law student, had helped them too. 'I pretended I was delivering a summons,' he said. 'You'll get fired one day.' Kit was amazed at how casually Paddy took his job. 'Nephew of the boss! Not a chance,' he said cheerfully. 'Oh well then,' Kit laughed at him. 'Hey, why don't I just put in an appearance in the office,

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show them I'm alive, and then take you girls to beans and chips?' He made it sound a great outing. Kit and Frankie said it was the best offer they had had all week. He was back in fifteen minutes, racing up the stairs waving a paper and so excited that he could hardly speak. 'You won't believe it! He's paid, he's paid. I have the cheque here for you!' 'What, what?' 'Fingers O'Connor. A cheque from him in absolute settlement. He fell for it ... he's paid what we asked for . . .' The girls looked at him in disbelief. 'But isn't it illegal ... I mean it's not a real demand ... from a real solicitor,' Kit said. 'Could you get struck off the rolls before you get on to them?' Frankie wondered. 'No, it's all legitimate ... look at what he's written . . . The letter was addressed to Paddy.

Dear Mr Barry I am sure I can rely on your discretion in this matter. The statement attributed to my son Kevin is agreed to be entirely false, and shall never be repeated. I am enclosing a cheque made payable to Miss McMahan, who has my son's assurances that no further statement of this nature shall ever be made concerning her character or behaviour to any other person. If there are legal fees above and beyond this I shall be happy to pay them. Please mark any correspondence in this matter Strictly Private. I look forward to hearing from you. Yours sincerely, Francis Fingleton O'Connor

They whooped with delight when Paddy finished reading it out. 'Can we keep it, do you think?' Kit said.

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,you can ... you earned it by being reported as unchaste.' Better than beans and chips, take you out to something better than beans and chips,' Kit said. 'We have to cash it first,' Frankie said. 'Fingers' cheque won't bounce,'

Paddy said. office

'What will you do about fees? You can't get your to send him a bill when they don't know they've sent him i this.' Kit hardly dared to t~ink it was true. 'Oh, I'll write him a generous letter and say that since he paid so promptly and that since you are a personal friend of .ine 1 will not charge any fee. That leaves me In the clear.' 'You're terrific, Paddy,' Kit said. He looked embarrassed. H 1 is freckled face reddened and he didn't know how to take the compliment. 'What's this about a slap-up meal?' he said. 'Anywhere you like,' Kit said. Paddy Barry's letter had got her the kind of sum of money she would never have dreamed of. The whole year's allowance for pocket money that she got from her father. Weren't these old-fashioned laws about women's reputations absolutely marvellous. 'Hi, Philip, it's Kit.' 'Yes?' His voice sounded fearful. What was she goi Ing to throw at him now? 'I'm going to take you out on the town for a great night out,' she said. 'You are?' 'Where would you like to go?' 'Don't make fun of me, Kit. Please.' 'I swear I want to take you on a treat. Suppose someone asked you, what would you say? Don't think what I'd like, what you'd like.' , I'd like to go to the pictures first to Mon Oncle, the French one, you know, like Monsieur Hulot's Holiday we saw, then I'd like to go to Jammet's, for just a main course, not a full meal. I'd love to see the way they serve It.'

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'Done,' said Kit. 'Where'll we meet? Let's look up tht times at the cinema.' 'Why, Kit?' 'Because you're my friend.' 'No. Why really?' 'Because thanks to you I got a fortune from awful lKe,in O'Connor. A fortune.' 'How much?' 'You'll never know, you'll have your night out and that's it.' Kit went to Switzers in Grafton Street and bought a face nightdress for Clio. She gave it to her in a box all wrapped in tissue. 'What's this?' Clio was suspicious. The ape paid, the big bad ape, he ran for cover. I owe it to you.' 'They all think you're cracked, you know. A screw loose is what they say.' 'Good. Then I won't have to be bridesmaid.' 'Stop making jokes. What did he say when he gave you the money?' 'He said nothing. It was all done through solicitors with mutual assurances of confidentiality.' 'So how much

did you get?' 'You heard me, assurances of confidentiality.' 'I'm your friend. I'm the one who put you on the track.' 'You get a nightie. Enjoy it, though how you could, I do not know.' 'You're no authority on anything.' 'I know. Don't you keep reminding me.'

'Why can't Emmet come up to Dublin for a weekend? -I'll show him the ropes,' Kit asked. 'We might all go together some time,' Maura suggested. No, I'd love to show my little brother Dublin. Go on, Maura. Let me feel a big important person,' Kit pleaded, Maura's smile was so warm and nice Kit felt a heel.

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n at once. Maura gave I Emmet was to come to towphilip lived in a flat now so there would be a bed for if yo Emmet there. 'Only I u don't hang on and spy, and follow and do all those awful things,' Kit said. q told you, that phase of my life is over,' Philip said. I He

v6,as much nicer now. The night at jammet's, Dublin's poshest restaurant, had been a huge success. Philip had discussed wines with the waiters as if he were a regular visitor. lip 'What are you going to do to entertain him?' Phi asked. 'I warned you, no spying,' Kit threatened. 'What do I care what you do?' Philip asked. 'Even if my future brother-in-law is shown none of his capital city I'll say nothing.' 'That's the boy,' Kit said approvingly. The postcard of the Blarney Stone from Kit had been a breakthrough as far as Lena was concerned. There was no reason for it. it wasn't thanking her for anything . . . not in any real sense. And Kit had asked her to look after herself. The girt who had run from her in disgust all those months ago had softened enough to ask her to take care. it was a ray of hope. Lena kept these letters carefully in a drawer in ivy's kitchen. Sometimes she took them out to read them again. The last one was definitely full of promise. Lena waited until she left London to send Kit a card. She and Dawn went to talk to sixth formers in four different I I cities. It meant spending the night in Birmingham. Lena bought a postcard of the Bull.Ring and addressed it. I'm here spreading the good news of our agency to schoolgirls. Very exhausting but satisfying all the same. I think maybe I should have been a school teacher. All I know is that I was extremely foolish to have had no

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career for so long. Have you got a date for you, And I'd be so interested to know about Your brothe',; too, of course. 1 hope you are well and happy.

Lena

She debated putting love but decided against it. 'Are you sending a card to Mr Gray?' Dawn asked her, 'Hardly, Dawn. I'll be home to him tomorrow night., 'He's so nice, Mr Gray. Great fun and everything ... he was the life and soul at the Dryden.' 'I forgot you knew him then.' Lena had forgotten. Dawn had been with her so long in Millar's she had almost forgotten the tempestuous, shortlived series of appointments they had found for her in offices and hotels, and where there always was some incident of Dawn being highly fancied by the most unsuitable men in the company. As far as she knew that hadn't happened in the Dryden. James Williams was not the type. 'Did you like Mr Williams?' she asked Dawn. 'I can't say I remember him, Mrs Gray.' Dawn's big blue eyes were unaware of a lot of people who had passed through her life. 'Oh, well. It's a long time back now.' 'That's true.' Dawn looked around the dining room in the hotel. They were the centre of many appreciative glances, the blonde girl and the dark handsome woman. Nobody could quite place what they were doing there. They looked too respectable to approach and yet surely Dawn's eyes promised a lot of fun. Lena smiled to herself to think how the great James Williams would feel to be so instantly forgotten by a pretty little secretary like Dawn Jones. But then with the familiar turn of her heart she remembered that Dawn hadn't forgotten Louis Gray or

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full he had been. ,,t,l was how she put
The life and soul of the Dryden it.

peculatively at Back in the office she found herself looking s blonde girl that she had thought was such an asset to She had, of course, been ,Vjillar's Employment Agency ,uite right in insisting that a young attractive girl

would ,11 the whole idea better than any other approach from a different generation. She must beat down this absurd and dangerous suspicion. She could not be jealous of every single woman who had ever worked with Louis. Pausing to pick up some papers in an outer office she heard Dawn talking to Jennifer the receptionist on the desk.

Honestly she was so nice, and she's done so much times I feel guilty, dead guilty about her for me. Sorn husband.' Dawn noticed Jennifer staring horrified over her shoulder and she met Lena's smile. 'Oh, Mrs Gray - . 'Dawn's face reddened. Lena said nothing, just stood there with the smile nailed on her face. 'Mrs Gray, you know what I mean. It was all a bit of fun, nobody meant anything by it.' 'I know indeed, Dawn . . . a bit of fun is what it was.' 'And you're not upset ... F 'About Louis having a bit of fun . . . heavens, what do you take me for?' she said and left them.

I

She barely got to the bathroom basin in time to throw up. Louis and this girl, this girl whom he knew had been sent to his hotel by Lena. Lena rinsed her face and reapplied her make up. She returned to her desk and managed to avoid Dawn for the rest of the day. That evening she went to Jessie's would like to dismiss Dawn Jones.

'I missed you when you were that night to her. 'I wasn't away for long. 'No, but any time is long.

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office and said she
in Birmingham,' Louis said

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'It was hard work,' she said. 'Dawn and I were alm,, hoarse at the end of it.' 'Dawn?' he said. She looked at him. He probably didn't remember Dawn. Truthfully. The bit of fun had been so pass"19, fleet, that it had not stayed in his mind. 'Dawn Jones, remember she used to work for jam,, Williams once?' 'Oh yes.' Now he did remember. 'And how did she get on there ... with you?' 'F1 I ine, just fine. I think she's leaving the agency though.' 'Oh is she? Why's that?' 'I'm not really sure,' Lena said, turning off the light. Rita was well established now in the car-hire company In Dublin. She was walking out with one of her colleagues. He came from Donegal, far far

away. She thought of the gypsy who had said she would marry a man from far away, She hoped this was the man. His name was Timothy and one day soon he was going to introduce her to his mother. Rita had told him she didn't come from important stock. Not from any people you could speak of. Her father and mother had lost interest in her when she had gone as a girl to be a maid at the McMahons'. She didn't want Timothy to have any false impressions. Timothy told her that nothing mattered less. He said that all that old nonsense was about time too. Once or twice Rita wondered whether she should ask Kit if she might meet Timothy. it would give her a bit of standing if a lovely, confident young hotel management student appeared as her friend. But Kit had enough to do and Rita would not abuse their friendship. One day she would meet Timothy and that would be fine. Emmet went up to Kellys' to tell Anna about his trip to

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Dublin, Kit was going to meet him off the train and he would stay with Philip O'Brien, who had improved beyond all measure, apparently. They were going to the pictures and on a little train out to Bray to the amusements. And Kit had a friend who was a law student who was going

to take them to see a prison and a tattooist. it was going to be a fantastic weekend, everything he'd want to do. He hated leaving Lough Glass and Anna of course, but then she'd had so many outings recently ... there was a school trip here and a careers talk there and he had not really seen her for ages. Lilian Kelly opened the door. 'Hello, Emmet,' she said, surprised.

There was something about her voice that alerted Emmet. He said nothing, just grinned. 'I thought Anna was with you,' she said.

it was awkward telling Father and Maura that she didn't need any money to entertain Emmet in Dublin. Kit would've liked to have bought them presents too with her unexpected windfall. But she thought it would cause too much trouble if she explained it. She waved and he saw her. 'Come on, we'll get the bus back. Quick, to the front seat,' she said taking his hand and they ran together to board the bus for the city centre. 'Imagine you knowing Dublin so well.' He seemed wistful. 'Well I will too next year, won't you?' 'Yes. His voice sounded a bit down. But perhaps he was just tired after the journey. 'I'll show you my flat first,' Kit said, determined she wouldn't

start looking for problems where none existed. Emmet said he thought it was great. Imagine all this whole place of her very own. Kit was touched by that. It was so small even her bedroom in Lough Glass was bigger than the area where she slept, sat, ate, studied and washed at a sink. But it was very central, there were no bus fares, she was even so near one of the cinemas that she

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could look out of her window and see whether the queues were lessening. 'We could go to a dance, seeing it's Friday night said. 'And I'd be happy to bring you to one of the Places go, but they're very hot and sweaty. And honestly, as it is, your first night I thought we might go somewhere I... noisy.' 'That would be nice,' he said. He did sound flat. Kit was not imagining it. 'What do you think of an Indian restaurant?' he suggested. 'There's one up in Leeson Street. It's great, and I've been there a couple of times so I know what to order. And then we'll meet Philip and he'll take you home.' He said it sounded great. They walked together through O'Connell Street, past crowds of people. 'I've never been here at night,' Emmet said. 'No. It's changed completely.' They stopped and looked at the Liffey flowing under O'Connell Bridge. 'It's not smelly,' Emmet said. 'People are always in it.' It is a bit, to be honest, in the summer time, but not now,' Kit agreed. They went past Trinity College, and Kit pointed out students coming and going through the main gate. 'Are they very posh? English and upper class?' Emmet asked. 'I don't think so. I used

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to think that, but apparently it's just lots of foreigners and people who aren't Catholics ... but ordinary just the same.' 'It's cracked, Catholics not being allowed to go there. Brother Healy says it's right, he says that for years when we wanted to they wouldn't let us in.' They walked up Grafton Street and looked at all the expensive things in the windows. They went by St Stephen's Green all dark and shadowy now at night and then up to Leeson Street. 'There's a student pub here on the corner. This is where we'll meet Philip afterwards,' Kit explained.

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,I'm glad he's not coming to dinner with us,' Emmet said, 'expectedly. Well he has improved, but not so much as you'd

I I is parents are so „ant ~im round al the time. It's just hi 2wt ul it rubs off on him, you know.' They went into the Indian restaurant and Kit picked a corner table. She advised Emmet about the menu. „suppose you have the mutton and I have the Kofta Curry - that's meat balls.' He nodded. His eyes were fixed on the menu as if he were trying to summon up the courage to say something. „Th1s Is quite dear, Kit. Are you sure we can afford it?' he asked. 'No Problem,' she said. 'But all this and the pictures tomorrow and the tattoo parlour.' 'That won't cost any money. Honestly Emmet, don't worry.' She put her hand to pat his as reassurance and, to her horror, his eyes filled with tears. 'Oh Emmet, what's wrong?' she cried. 'Kit, I want you to do me a big favour. Will you do something for me, it's a huge thing?' 'What is it?' 'Promise first.' 'I can't promise until I know. That's not fair. I'll try, you know I will., 'You have to promise . . 'What I'S it)' 'It's Anna. She's keen on Stevie Sullivan and he's taking her out. They're doing a line. She doesn't want me any more.' :It's only a crush. She'll get over him.' No, they meet all the time, she's crazy about him.' He's too old for her. Much too old.' 'I know, but that makes him more interesting than ever.' 'But he can't feel the same about her, can he?' 'Yes, he's crazy about her, too.' 'What about Doctor and Mrs Kelly? I bet they're furious.,

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'Yes, but all this makes it even more ... I don't kn,, ... dramatic.' 'What can I do ... tell me what kind Of favour could I possibly do you? Hypnotise her? Kidnap Stevie Sullivan,, Kit looked at him mystified to know what role he co ld for her in all this. 'You're not bad-looking, Kit. Fellows are always saying that you look terrific. Could you sort of set yourself at'him and get him. Distract him from Anna ... then she'd come back to me.' Her first instinct was to laugh. Kit McMahon, a Mata Hari who could attract the desire of any man away from a little blonde beauty like Anna Kelly! Then she saw his face and she didn't laugh. Emmet was near breaking point. And he really believed she could do it. Poor, poor Emmet. Imagine feeling so strongly as this, Kit had never loved anyone to the extent that she would admit it so openly, so wretchedly. She didn't know anyone who could, except in books. Then, with a shock, she realised the only other person who

had loved so foolishly and recklessly that she didn't consider anyone else was Helen McMahon. Their mother. She looked at her brother, stricken. 'Will you do it for me, please, Kit?' he begged. 'I'll try,' she said. The least she could do for him was to try.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

dd Barry apologised profusely. The man he had p a~ y in prison had been released. cen going to visit and over. ,It was very bad luck,' he said over ~Good luck for him, 1 suppose,' Kit had said. yes, but bad for your brother.' ,1 don't mind ' Emmet said. 'Is the tattooist still there?' 'Emmet boy, he is Paddy's cheerful freckled face lit up. 1

still there and we're going to meet him this morning. 'There's no question of any of us getting things done on ed Paddy with some awe and our arms, is there?' Kit regard ho could trick Fingers O'Conno r into

anxiety. Anyone w . to be reckoned with. such craven submission was a force [one myself ... I'll see,' 'I might have a very small anchor ~ Paddy said. 'No obligation on the rest of you, Of Course.' 'Does it hurt?' Ernmet asked. 'Excruciating, 1 believe,' Paddy said. The tattooist was a very small man with an anxious face. 'Any friends of Mr Barry's are welcome here,' he said it and Emmet. looking doubtfully at Ki was triumphant. 'See, 1 told you.' Paddy, It had never been clear what particular service Paddy Barry had done for the tattooist. Kit didn't really want to know. She felt it may not have been on the right side of the law that he was learning to uphold. it had something to do with giving him a warning about smuggled cigarettes fron, sailors. Whatever it had been, it had been a matter deserving great gratitude. ttoo*st offered, and 'Would you all like tea)' the ta 1 Provided it out of grimy enamel mugs.

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He showed the needles and the fluids and a book 01 designs, as well as letters from satisfied clients. KI I it looked at Emmet. This had been a brilliant idea She co i uld hardly recognise the troubled face that had sat opposite her last night in the Indian restaurant as Ertirne, toyed with his

food and begged her support. They had agreed that Kit would give it her best. But in her own time and in her own way. Emmet must not keep enquiring how it was going, he must make no efforts to help. They had shaken hands on it and he had cheered up in time to meet Philip in the pub. Philip had wanted to come to the tattooist as well, but Kit had said that the thing was sufficiently like a circus already ... they didn't want to have to sell tickets for the visit. What about lunch, Philip had wondered. That was no use either. Emmet and Kit were meeting Rita and her boyfriend. 'Rita who worked for you?' Philip said. 'The very same.' 'What would you have to say to each other?' he asked. It was uncanny the way he sounded like his mother. You really could hear Mildred O'Brien in some of the things he said. 'We have lots to say to each other,' Kit explained. 'Rita brought us up.' Philip had felt the reproof and regretted his attitude, but it was too late. He wouldn't be able to see Kit and Emmet until the evening when they would meet for the pictures. Kit brought her mind back to the conversation taking place in the tattoo parlour. Emmet seemed to be costing a small heart with a four letter word inside it. 'Don't consider it for two seconds, Emmet,' she said. 'It would be discreet,' the tattooist said. 'And a sign of how much I cared,' Emmet said. 'You wouldn't want to commit yourself to one name at too early a stage, though.' Paddy Barry was wise in the ways of the world.

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„I never want any other name,' Emmet said in a voice that chilled Kit to hear.

~This is my friend Timothy,' Rita said, and I introduced the „In from the car-hire man.

Rita looked well. She had her hair cut smartly and she „as wearing make-up. She wore a bright uniform jacket, as Timothy * They worked Saturdays so were only free for did c in a short lun h hour. Rita asked Kit all about the people Lough GI ~ss and Timothy told Emmet about the cars. 'Not a sign of his stammer. Isn't it wonderful?' Rita said when she knew she couldn't be overheard by Emmet. 'It comes and goes when he's upset,' Kit said. 'Well, it's probably not too often that happens. And Maura's running the house all right with Peggy?' 'Nothing to the way you did,' Kit laughed. They both knew that was only a politeness. Maura McMahon managed their home

magnificently. 'Is this the real thing?' Kit jerked her head towards Timothy. 'I hope so, Kit, he's very good to me. He's mentioned marriage several times.' Rita looked pleased and proud. 'Can I come to the wedding?' Kit whispered. 'Of course you can, but it may not be for a while. We have to save a bit first.' 'Perhaps I'll be at yours before then.' 'I doubt it,' Kit said. 'I'm not great with the fellows at all.' 'Too choosy more like it, you have them all admiring you.' Kit hoped this -was true. if she could just get Stevie Sullivan to admire her for a bit, that would honour her promise to Emmet. She wondered would it involve going the whole way. Kit swallowed nervously at the thought of it. Surely nobody could be expected to do that just for a childish promise to a brother? 'I often meet Clio on a Sunday,' Kit said to Emmet. 'Would you like that or not?'

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His eyes lit up. Even the thought Of being close to Anna's sister was a delight. 'And don't forget, her fanllv know nothing of her meeting Stevie . . 'So why don't we let her get caught, make more tro b for her? Clio would help with that.' 'No, you don't understand.' Emmet's face had the tight, tense look again. 'She came and told me honestly, sh~ made me Promise as a friend that I'd not tell tales on her. 'And you promrsed?' 'I did, of course,' Emmet said. 'Heigh Ho,'said Kit.

'I hope my mother doesn't hear you've had Emmet up here for a weekend,' Clio grumbled on the phone when Kit rang. I ing in 'You can be sure she will. They hear everythi Lough Glass,' Kit said. 'She'll think I should be having the dreadful Anna.' 'Well, why not? It would be nice for her.' Kit was being very cunning. Perhaps it was an opportunity to get Anna away from Lough Glass and Stevie. 'We've always said that she and Emmet are two different species. Are they still in love with each other, by the way , "' 'Hard to say,' Kit lied. 'You know boys don't talk much about that sort of thing.' 'Anyway, she's working very hard. Horrible little sneak that she is, she'll get much more honours: in her Leaving than I did. Apparently she's off studying all the time.' Kit nodded glumly. She knew about all this studying and what form it took.

Clio couldn't stay long, she said as soon as she arrived. She was going to Michael O'Connor's house. It was his sister's birthday and there was a family lunch party for them.

10 'They're very family-conscious,' she said proudly to Kit. Cho loved being included in the O'Connor rituals. 'Mary Paula is allowed to choose what she wants for lunch and it's made in one of the hotels and then served in the house.'

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'Umm, will there be champagne?' Emmet wanted to bring Cho home to Anna when he saw her as a friend. 'No~ I don't think so . . . Mr O'Connor has probably had to make a few economies recently. He had to pay out unexpected sums of money.' i

Clio glared at Kit, who giggled. It was as far as Clio would go; she would not risk the story getting home. It would reflect no credit on the beloved O'Connor family.

Philip and Kit said that Emmet would have to be on the train in good time. It got crowded early and there were a lot of people going home after spending a Sunday in Dublin. They went to have chips in a cafe first. The girl at the cash desk in a bright-green, tent-like dress looked familiar. All three of them looked at her with interest and then they spoke at the same time. 'It's Deirdre,' said Kit. 'Deirdre Hanley,' said Philip. 'And she's pregnant,' said Emmet. Deirdre was delighted to see them. 'Imagine you lot being old enough to go out on your own,' she said. 'I'll get them to give you bigger helpings.' She called to the man in the white apron, 'Gianni, these are friends of mine, huge helpings.' 'Molto grande,' Gianni cried enthusiastically. 'That's my Gianni,' she said proudly to Kit. 'He owns the place.' 'He's very nice-looking,' Kit said admiringly. 'Yes, he's not bad,' Deirdre said. 'Emmet came up for the weekend. Philip and I are doing hotel Management.' Kit felt that Deirdre might not be up to date with all the details of their lives. 'You're in Patsy's year, Emmet, aren't you?' Deirdre said. Patsy was the entirely different younger sister. All the mistakes that Mrs Hanley considered she had made with her eldest were being righted in her second daughter. Patsy 'as watched like a hawk. 'That's right, I often see her,' Emmet said. He hardly

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noticed Patsy Hanley if the truth were told, but he being polite. 'When did you and Gianni get married?' Kit asked- it was something she had never heard at home, and Hanley was great with news and information. Surely the 'eventual settling down of her troublesome daughter',,th an Italian who ran his own restaurant was worthy'(f mention. 'We idn't actually get marn ied,' Deirdre said, 'You see, there's this business ... Glanni has a first marriage which has to be annulled. It will, of course, but it all takes time.' 'I know, I know,' Kit nodded sympathetically. She hed she hadn t mentioned the word. But Deirdre didn't seem at all put out. 'So the barnbino may well be able to come to the wedding,' she laughed. Emmet and Philip were amazed at the fast conversation that was taking place. Gianni came to shake hands with them. 'Deirdre tells me everyone in Lough Glass is old and old-fashioned,'he said stroking the bump on her stomach 'but this is not so.' 'Not at all,' gasped Philip. As they went to the station Kit said to Emmet, 'Maybe you shouldn't necessarily mention . . .' 'About Deirdre? I wasn't going to,' he said. 'No, indeed. Wiser not,' Philip said. But Kit knew that Mildred and Dan O'Brien would be told.

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'Isn't Slough a funny word?' Lena said to Louis, shuffling some papers around. Normally she took very little work home; he hated to see her working. 'Why is it funny. 'I thought it was pronounced sluff, you know, Ilk' enough, like to slough something off . . .'

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:And what made You think of it?' i have to go there on Saturday to talk to a couple of schools-' 'Dawn going with you?'

,No, she left. Remember?' ,oh that's right.' He hadn't remembered. But at least it ineant that Dawn hadn't contacted him and said that she had been fired because of her past. Dawn had more style than that, Lena thought regretfullv. The girl was a loss to them. They were grooming jen~jfer, but she didn't have the same appeal. ,I'rn going on my own ... but you're off that day ... why don't you come with me?' 'Much as I'd love to wander round a few girls' schools, I don't think it's really my scene.' 'No, it's only a couple of hours for me ... then we could go and stay somewhere.' 'It's all buses and

trams,' he grumbled. He would love to have had a car. 'There must be nice places ... we deserve a bit of a treat, a night out, a night away. The two of us.' 'All right, I'll look into it. I'll ask James, he knows everywhere and everything.' Louis sounded a little restless these days. She had hoped that the mention of a change in their routine would brighten him up, but it seemed just another wearying chore. She wished that her location had been somewhere more glamorous than Slough.

She had forgotten how unpredictable Louis was. Next day he telephoned the office. 'James knows the perfect place. He's lending us the car, it will be a great weekend.' 'Where are you off to?' Grace asked. 'I don't know. Louis found a hotel. We're spending tonight there and tomorrow.' 'A real holiday,' Grace said admiringly. 'The nearest we get,' Lena said. 'Why don't you go abroad?' Grace wanted to know.

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'Too many complications.' 'Still, Buckinghamshire is nice.' 'I hope so.' Lena sounded a little unsure of herself. 'And you look lovely as always.' 'Ah Grace . . .' Lena caught her eye in the mirror. 'Look at yourself, woman.' Grace was impatient. 'You're not only as beautiful as the day you were born ... gorgeous. But

'Sound advice, Miss West,' Lena said laughing, a red laugh and banishing all the strain from her eyes.

They had dinner at the elegant country hotel where James Williams had got them a fifty per cent reduction on bed and breakfast. A wine-bucket came to the table as soon as they sat down. 'We haven't ordered anything yet,' Louis said. 'It has been ordered for you,' said the waiter. James Williams had wanted them to have a good weekend. There was a small dance floor; a pianist and a saxophone player made music for the diners. Sometimes there were only two or three couples dancing. Louis and Lena held each other and danced to the music. They were a handsome couple. Anyone looking at them would have thought it might be an anniversary or an illicit weekend. They didn't look like an ordinary married couple having a night out. Lena was tired and aching next morning after a long night of love. She would have liked nothing better than to have lain on in their hotel bedroom and enjoyed a luxurious breakfast served in bed, but she had work to do. She slipped out quietly so as not to wake Louis. He lay with his arm behind his

head, his long lashes casting a shadow on his face. He was so handsome and she loved him so very much. Nothing he had done or might have done could ever change that. When she got back to the hotel by taxi after two exhausting but hopefully profitable sessions he was waiting in the coffee lounge. 'You should have told me,' he said. 'I'd have driven you

M8

The car was for both of us, but I had no idea where your schools were.' Of course if he had really wanted to know he could have phoned Millar's. 'Come on,' he said. 'We're off, I've planned a trip.' They drove through the English countryside past farms and villages. Louis and Lena never compared the English

English countryside to the places they knew back home. It meant too much of a journey into what was over, what was best forgotten. 'Where are we going?' she asked. 'You'll see,' he said and he placed his hand on her knee. He looked so right driving James Williams' car. Louis Gray was a man born to style and gracious living, no matter what his original circumstances had been. She saw the name of the village of Stoke Poges. 'But isn't this where. . . ?' she began. 'Yes ... I wanted you to see the family's pride and joy.' 'What?' 'The curfew tolls the knell of parting day ... er ... Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard, by my ancestor Thomas Gray,' he said and parked outside the gate of an absurdly picturesque churchyard. 'But you're not a relation of that Gray half believing he might be. 'Of course I am.' 'You never said.' 'You never asked me.' 'But not seriously!' 'We are who we say. I'm upset you don't believe me,' he said. 'But Louis, you're not from these parts. . . you're from Wicklow you're not from Buckinghamshire in England.' She knew scant details of his background. His father had died when he was young ... he had older brothers and sisters who had all left home ... gone abroad to work. They had not stayed in touch, he had not sought them out. Because Lena had no family herself she always thought that ...' she laughed,

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people would rate a family highly. Not Loui Fie spoke 1 1 1 nor harked back little of h's childhood, he neither blamed it to it. It was now that mattered, he said. Now, not the past They walked to the poet's tomb, they stroked the fla*t top of his grave. They read the poem to each other remembering little bits of it from what they had 1 by heart at school.

1

Lena.

and leaves the world to

earned off

darkness and to me,' read

'That's it, Uncle Thomas,' Louis said. 'He wasn't a relative really?' 'We are what we think w~ are,' Louis said.

'I love you, Lena,' Louis said later that night. He had woken up and found her sitting in her dressing gown by the window smoking and looking out into the night. 'Why do you say that to me?' she asked. 'Because *it's true. And sometimes you look sad, as if you had forgotten that it's true.'

Stevie Sullivan's mother, Kathleen, was discharged from hospital and came back to Lough Glass. 'Don't end up getting her cups of tea, Maura,' Peter Kelly advised his sister-in-law. 'They can well afford to get a woman in to do it.' 'Who knows better than I what they can afford?' Maura answered. She did the books and knew exactly how well the motor business was working for the Sullivans, thanks entirely to the flair and hard work of Stevie. If he gave his full mind to it she didn't dare to think how successful he would be. He toured farms and explained to farmers that might be slow in making decisions the wisdom of improvi farm machinery and their pick-up trucks before they had been run into the ground. Then he did up their original vehicles and sold them on to others. Nowhere did he break

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,he law or indeed break faith in his clients. His success came from knowing how to suggest, rather than waiting for business to fall into his lap. 'Do You think we should arrange for someone to come ~n and look after your mother?' she asked Stevie. 'Oh I don't know, Maura. She mightn't want it. You know she'd say she's the class that should be serving people rather than having people serve her.' ,You've changed all that, you're in a different set-

up now. 'Yes, I know that you know it, my mother might not.' 'Let her benefit from it. I know a friend of Peggy's that could come in.' 'Set it up, Maura. That is, if you haven't already.' She smiled at him. They liked each other. 'No word yet on who did it?' Maura knew that Stevie had been talking to Sergeant O'Connor earlier on that day. 'No, they seem to have gone off in a flying saucer, whoever they were. Maybe it's for the best, Sean says. He says it might make her worse than she is already if she had to identify them ... Pretty relaxed attitude to detecting crime, if you ask me.' 'Very human attitude as well,' Maura said. 'He may be kind but he's not a fool, Sean O'Connor.' 'I know that, he gets inspired about lots of things. I know nobody gave him a hint.' Stevie stared hard at Maura, as if trying to get her to admit that she had ratted on his being with Orla Dillon. 'He knew chapter and verse, Stevie. I wouldn't have told him but he knew already, and where to find you.' 'He knew how to frighten the wits out of me, too,' Stevie said ruefully. 'Yes, well,' Maura pursed her lips. 'But by amazing chance, Orla's mother came up with the same argument at the same time. Beware the mountain men. Orla's so afraid of the troop of brothers-in-law coming for her with scythes and hatchets she won't raise her eyes to greet me. So that little episode is over.' He

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looked for a moment like a small boy who has been told he 't play football that afternoon. His lower lip stuck out mutinously. 'I'm sure you'll find other distractions,' Maura said unsympathetically. 'I suppose so,' Stevie said. There was no reason to tell Maura McMahon that her sister's daughter, her own little niece, Anna Kelly, had proved to be a very great distraction indeed.

'You can't stay here for ever, Francis,' Sister Madeleine said. He sat shivering by her fire. With damp sacking hung ineffectually around it, the tree-house was no protection to the start of a wet winter in Lough Glass. 'Where would I go, Sister?' he asked. His face was thin and white. He had a hacking cough. She had asked young Emmet McMahon for a cough bottle from his father; and, to her irritation, Martin McMahon had sent back a message saying that it was going to be a harsh winter and he would very

much prefer if Sister Madeleine went to visit Dr Kelly and had herself and her chest looked at and listened to. She had got lozenges, but still Francis coughed and barked and looked like a man that should really be in a hospital bed. 'Sleep in my bed, Francis,' she said. 'But you, Sister?' 'I'll steep by the fire.' 'I can't. I'm too dirty and shabby and bad. Your bed is snow white.' But he craved a night in the warmth and She knew that. 'I'll give you some hot water to wash ' 'No, you often do that. But there's too much of me. 'Suppose I put a kind of cloth on the bed, in it even, like that you could wrap yourself in.' 'And something for under my head, Sister.' She found an old bedspread which she warmed by the fire, and put some tea towels on her immaculate pillow~v

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was asleep in minutes, breathing coarsely and was a lion. She sat gleaming as would a man with a chest infected, with a gurgling, watching him for a long time. Francis at the open door I)(avier Byrne, somebody's son. A man not right in the

man like the wild head, he should be allowed some freedom I I animals. He should not be chained up and fenced in. He couldn't do any harm here, and he was learning to trust

11 'gain. Soon, when he was better, she would give him his bus fare and he would go far away. Back from, aEhleen Sullivan was better now, they said. Back at the hospital with a woman going in and out to look after her. Surely he wouldn't want to work out any revenge that man sleeping there in his fitful turning and coughing as he tossed in her bed. He to work something out about the bag of possessions, as he called it. Normally he never left it out of his hand. Tonight it was laid casually in her simple wooden chair. He was learning to trust; he couldn't be handed over Surely a loving. Good, poor Francis, sleep, shivering and She would have now. She would make it clear that he would have to return whatever money he stole from Sullivan's garage. She would be responsible for doing it herself

'What did you eat at the Indian restaurant?' Maura asked Ernest. 'I'm sorry.' 'I can't remember, Maura' 'Was it fish or meat ... or what?' 'I don't know. meat, I think.' 'Lord, and that girl saving her money to take you to a special

meal.' Maura shook her head in mock despair. 'We had Knickerbocker Glory in California,' he said - if he had been appreciative.

desperate to sound a 'Good, at least we Maura laughed. 'It's just we were talking rather a lot and I ate without thinking.' 'I know, I know.' She was sympathetic. There was something bothering McMahon but she wasn't going to find it out.

know what remains in the mind,'

Emmet

42.3

She thought it might be the absence of Anna Kelly, but later, close, they were just friends. So he kept his hands in his pockets. Instead of reaching out for her. And he looked yet Emmet went out as soon as meals were over, so perhaps she said in a small he was meeting her then. She hoped they weren't going to, away. get too serious, and debated whether she should discuss it. She laid her hand on his arm. 'Emmet? with her sister, Lilian. But Lilian had a poor track record as a voice. 'Yes?', She had been going to ask him a favour; he knew regards coping with either of her daughters' emotional voice. But her eyes met his and something in that tone of voice. adventures. Maura thought that, as so often in life, the best mind told her this was not the time to ask a thing to say was nothing. Anna Kelly's 'Hello, Emmet.' Anna Kelly had never looked so lovely. She wore a green coat with a white angora scarf around her neck. She was flushed and excited looking, her blonde hair held up by a green clip in a ponytail. She looked like a film star. Yet here she was in Lough Glass. Anna Kelly, who only a few weeks ago had been happy to kiss him and let him stroke her. Now she said that this couldn't go on any more, but that she wanted very much to be friends. She didn't know how very very hard that was for him. But it would gain him nothing if he were to sulk. 'Hello, Anna, how are things?' he said cheerfully. 'Awful ... it's like living in a German prisoner-of-war camp,' Anna grumbled. 'Oh, why's that?' 'Where am I going, what am I doing, where will I be, who am I meeting, what time will I be back?' Anna groaned. 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph it would make you want to throw yourself

into the lake.' There was a silence. 'Oh Emmet, I'm so sorry,' Anna said. 'Sorry for what?' He was cold. 'What I said ... like your mother and everything.' 'My mother drowned in a boating accident on the lake, she didn't throw herself in because people kept asking her questions,' he said. Her face was dark red. He longed to reach out and hold her close to him, tell her that of course he knew that was what people had said and that he understood her embarrassment and that it didn't matter one little bit. But he had been told they were no

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favour. nothi gat all.' 'Nothing, in then. I'll see you, I expect.' His heart ached [0 Vell, okay thet would always be here, whatever she

tell her that he uld be wrong. Anna hated people who wanted. But it wo were weak, she had told him that. She liked the strong things about him. So he had to be strong now. He saw Kevin Wall and shouted to him. Kevin was pleased to see him-'What about your one?'he saidjerkng his head back to where Anna stood forlorn on the road. 'Oh Anna, she and I were just having a chat.' 'I thought you were soft on her.' 'Don't be mad, Kevin. She's only a friend,' said Emmet

McMahon, and walked off with his school mate without a backward glance.

ct Kit was doing her pra ical work in a Dublin hotel where they took a serious interest in the trainees. One week she was on the reception desk, and the next in the bar. Then she could be waiting tables, or supervising chambermaids. It wasn't easy, but she knew that it wouldn't be from the outset. 'You must be mad, day, 'You say that about every single thing I do.' 'Why be different this time?' Clio was sitting up at a high Stool at the bar. 'Do I get free drinks for knowing the bar Woman~' she asked hopefully. 'Not a chance,' Kit said.

1 Clio said when she came to call one

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'Okay, I'll buy one then. Can I have a gin and lerne?', 'Gin! Clio, you're not serious.' 'Why not! Are you an apostle of Temperance ma, querading as a barmaid?' 'No, it's Just that we don't drink gin.' 'You don't. I do.' 'As you

wish. The customer is always right.' Kit turned and filled the optic measure. In the mirror she saw (:Ilo,, face. Clio was biting her lip; she looked very unhapp\ . Kit carefully put the ice lumps in with her silver tongs and pushed the lime bottle and the jug of water toward her friend. 'Help yourself . . .' she said with a smile. 'Will you have one too?' Clio asked. 'Thanks, Clio. I'll have a Club Orange.' They drank companionably for a few moments. 'Aunt Maura is becoming a bit nosy,' Clio said eventually, 'Ah, she's only making conversation, asking us what we're domg,' Kit defended her stepmother. 'I think she knows about me and Michael.' 'Well of course she does, you never stop talking about him.' 'No, I mean about the other bit, about sleeping with him and everything.' 'How could she know that?' 'I don't know.' Clio bit her lip again. 'Well, stop looking at me. I didn't tell her.' 'No, I know that.' Clio did know that much. 'What makes you think she knows?' 'She says things like ... oh, I don't know, awful cautionary tales about lack of respect, and girls not needing to do more than they want to ... to keep men.' 'Well, you're not doing more than you want to,' Kit said briskly. 'According to yourself you're only doing what you love doing.' 'Yes, that's true, but it's not something you'd say to Aunt Maura ... and apparently she knew Michael's father.' 'Well, isn't that good? They love knowing people and who people are.'

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,I g,t the feeling she didn't like him.'

,oh?' as - n Michael's house, Mr O'Connor said ,And when I w I I I he sort of remembered her.'

,But not enthusiastically?' know what I mean.'

'No) kind of furtively, if you ,Maybe they had a romance.' doubt it. Michael's mother and father have been married for ever.' ,I,m sure you're imagining it,' Kit said, trying to console her. ,I wish we were young again. Things were easier then.' 'You're not even twenty. A lot of people think that's still voting. 11 'No, you know what I mean. It's easy for you, Kit. It &ays has been. You'll marry Philip O'Brien and run the Central and boot awful old Mildred and Dan down into some kind of cottage and be the real queen bee of everything.' 'As long as I remember you you've been saying

that and I've been saying I won't. Why won't you believe me?' 'Because we all do the same as our parents in the end.

Your mother was glamorous and could have gone anywhere and done anything and yet she married your nice, safe father and came to live in a one-horse town like Lough Glass for security; you'll do the same.' 'And what about you? Do you love Michael, Clio?' 'I don't know. I honestly don't know. What's love?' 'I wish I knew that too,' Kit spoke absently. She wondered was there any truth in what Clio said, that people did what their mothers did. If so, there was a stormy future ahead of Kit.

Kevin O'Connor brought some friends into the bar of the hotel where Kit was working. As she served them one of his companions put a familiar hand on her bottom. Kit tensed up immediately and looked him straight in the eye. 'Remove your hand,' she said, in a staccato voice like shots from a gun.

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The boy dropped his arm immediately. Kevin O'Connor looked at her, horrified. 'Kit, I'm sorry, I swear ... I mean ... I swear ... Matthew, don't you fuck off out of here if you can't treat a woman with respect.' Matthew, the offender, looked at his friend Kevin in open amazement. This was not the response he had expected. 'I was only being friendly,' he blustered. 'Leave the company,' Kevin O'Connor ordered. 'Jesus, O'Connor, you're an ignorant bollocks,' he said, aggrieved. 'If there is one more word of that language, nobody will be served,' Kit said. She was confident and secure. Not only did Kevin respect her but he made sure that his loud, mouthed and ignorant friends did so too. 'Sorry, Kit,' he said to her sheepishly, as a bewildered Matthew left the hotel. 'That's all right, Kevin. Thank you.' She gave him a warm smile, and he looked pleased. She felt cheap, practising on him this way, but she had to do something to rehearse for Stevie Sullivan.

Dear Kit, Your card about working in a bar was most entertaining. I found this book on cocktails to send you in case there might be anything in it that would be of use. It does seem a very odd thing to send you. I suppose in other circumstances someone in my position would be warning you of the evils of drink rather than sending you a book detailing ways to make even

stronger concoctions. But then these are very unusual circumstances by any standards and I want to thank you for everything. It makes a huge difference. Love Lena

Kit read the letter that came with the cocktail book a dozen times. She wondered what exactly Lena was thanking her for. For not blowing the whole situation wide open? But that was in Kit's interest, in her father's and for peace it,

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-) Her mother, literal. Why did it make a huge difference. She could have chosen another life. What difference did the odd card from Kit? A carefree corset roaster to get too missed the happy

ably Lena passed it wrote as friends, Kit responded when she and Kit things she would miss it. There were so many certainly intended to be the friend have written to Lena, had she continued, he had once been. And not the mother who had tied to her.

Stevie) it's Kit McMahon-' She had rung deliberately when she knew Maura would have gone across the road to have lunch with Father. 'Oh sorry, Kit, you just missed two. 'No, it was you I wanted.' 'Great. You've saved enough to get a car. him

'No, not work. Pleasure, I'm afraid.' She could see him smiling lazily and leaning against something as he held the phone with his shoulder raised and looked for his packet. Would you like to come to the party of cigarettes at the same time as a dance in Dublin next Saturday?' she asked. 'Say that again.' him, if she had waited in panic. If she had been keen on it, she would have been able to do it. For his reaction, she would never find it just right. But because she was so casual she was playing. 'What kind of dance?' 'Aren't you choosy -y phoned you out of the "Wouldn't you be if somebody blue with a notion like this?' he was laughing, and playing for time. 'Yes, I would be.

her. She'll be back at

Kit was being fair. It was one of those dances where we all pay for our own ticket in the Gresham on a Saturday night, tables you know, and a great band.' of those,' Stevie said. 'I've not been to one

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'No, neither have I, and we got up a party but we're a couple of fellows short and I was wondering. . . , 'Why don't you ask Philip O'Brien? He'd go like a shot.' 'If I asked him he'd think I fancied him.' 'And what about me? What might I think?' 'Oh God, Stevie, you've known me long enough to, say yes or no. 'Would I like it?' 'You might love it. Loads of great girls, music, drink even. Wouldn't you love it?' 'And I'd be getting you out of a problem.' 'Not just that. I think you'd like the people going. think they'd like you too, you're great fun.' She tried to remember whether he was or not, He always seemed so jaded and cynical and eyeing people up and down. But he did have a kind of laughing way with him. 'Okay, it's a deal,' he said. 'Thanks, Stevie.' She told him where they were going to meet and how much it was going to cost. 'And do I say anything about this to your stepmother or not?' 'I leave this entirely to you whether you do or not.' 'May I put this another way, do you intend to tell her?' 'I'll probably mention sooner or later that we organised a party, but I don't believe in burdening people with every detail of life, do you?' 'I get your drift,' he said. Kit hung up and let out a breath of relief. 'Well, Emmet. Your old sister is beginning to deliver the promise for you,' she said to herself. This at least would mean that the awful little Anna Kelly would be at a loose end for Saturday night. But she wouldn't tell Emmet yet, she didn't want him rushing in too early and ruining it all. Stevie Sullivan hung up and looked at the phone, in surprise. That McMahon girl was remarkably attractive nowadays. Imagine her asking him to make up a party.

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He had always wanted to go to one of those Dublin affairs. it would mean telling Anna Kelly that dressy-up ly and she'd the Pictures were off. But he'd tell her nice

didn't sound very understanding. 'I just got my parents to go into the big town for) the hell a whole group of us were going. understand Anna Kelly did permission from pictures. I told her. I have to go to Dublin for work,' Stevie Vell, go then

go it, I waste an outing I could have had with you, don't I understand? you. Why didn't? He gave her his lopsided grin, but I Well, I'm sorry too. it didn't work. she pleaded. Stevie, you couldn't change it, I Suppose) looked impatient, and Anna caught the mood. 'No, I'm being silly, of course you can't. Okay, another night, right? if you were 'led. it was easy in the end 'Right,' Stevie smiled just nice to girls. That's what lots of people didn't understand.

'I could go to the pictures with you this weekend if you liked, Emmet . - .'
'Thanks, Anna, but no. 'Are you sulking?' You Absolutely not. Remember I said I wouldn't sulk said you and I were to be friends, that's what I'm doing.' His smile was bright. pictures,' Anna complained. 'Well, friends go to the ut you said no, it would 'That's what I said to You, b interfere with what there was between you and Stevie.'

Again his glance was innocent. t going to be here this 'Yes, but as it happens Stevie is no, business.' weekend. He's got to go to Dublin on I Emmet smiled warmly. Kit had begun to do her stuff for him. 'But he'll be back of course,' he said in false

consolation. 'But I 'Yes, of course he'll be back,' Anna snapped. thought that since ... I

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'You weren't asking me to come)ust because you were at a loose end suddenly?' Emmet shook his head in disbeliev, 'We're friends, you and I. That wouldn't be the action of friend. just using somebody.' She turned and walked away very fast.

'I could get all the things in that bag back to the garage for you, Francis.' Sister Madelaine was being helpful. 'I don't want to give them back, Sister.' He clutched his bag tightly. 'But it would be for the best.' Her voice was gentle. 'They're mine now. They're all I have to help me get away and make a new life.' 'If we gave them back then they might stop looking for you, and you wouldn't have to live up in the treehouse . - .her voice trailed away. She knew when she was talking to someone who wasn't listening. 'It's all I have,' he said again, and held the bag close to him. 'What are we going to do with you?' she asked the air around her. 'You said you'd look after me.' He was plaintive now. 'I know I did, and I will.' Sister Madeleine felt less confident

than she usually did. It had always been right to do the things she had done in the past. There had not been a moment of doubt about any of these. But recently ... perhaps she had not been right to save the little blind kitten that everyone else said should have been put to sleep painlessly. Had its life been worth it? Certainly its slow painful death made her think not. Had she been right to keep this mentally ill man here for so long living in her tree-house? Should she have just tended his arm that first night and sent a message so that he could be taken into custody? But for Sister Madelaine any uncertainty was impossible. She had to believe in what she was doing and that it was for the best, otherwise her life had no centre.

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obviously,' she said. 'I won't force you, but you still be nice to me.' He had the mind of a child. 'Yes, of course I will.' She dipped a metal mug in

'Yes and gave him soup - will you want to go out over the fire now?' she asked him. 'And look around ... for a moment, yes I will, soon,' he said. 'Make you look. Perhaps I should cut your hair for you, in the word "more" Sister Madelaine paused. What was it for? Normal? Non-criminal? she was looking at him. 'Please Sister, that would be good.' But he nodded eagerly. 'Yes.' She tied a cloth around his neck as if she were running a barber's shop and trimmed his hair, his eyebrows and his, far more ordinary, beard. He looked far less frightening? nearly normal in fact. '... if they see you with that bag "When you go out, Francis gether.' they still might put two and two to 'I could leave it here, Sister, for a bit.' 'You'll be back then?' 'Well, I will. I'll come back and tell you when I get settled. I think I'll just take the money.' 'Francis, might you not be better to ... ?, I I 'I'll trust you, Sister, like you trusted me. You were never afraid of me, I'd not be afraid of you either.' She gave a troubled, 'That's right Francis, you can trust me. In a world full of people you don't know about, you can rely on me.' And she was rewarded by the big and foolish smile of a slow child. A child in a big, strong, man's body.

y

him her hand even though her heart was

'I wish we had a car,' Louis grumbled as they were getting dressed. 'Let's get one then.' 'Easy to say.' He spent a time fixing his tie. 'Easy to do. We

haven't bought a house, we've no Mortgage, no children. What are we saying for?'

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'We're not saving much,' he said. Which in Louis' case was true. But he didn't know how, carefully Lena put away money. How her account in the Building Society was mounting, how shares in Millar's were increasing every year. 'Well, let's see how much you could afford a month,' Lena began. 'Not much.' 'I'll see if I can raise a deposit. You know, get it a bit as a perk from my work.' 'Could you?' Lou's looked at her, his eyes were alight. For a man so clever at deceiving, at attracting people, and knowing what a customer in a hotel might want, he was remarkably innocent and naive about other things. It didn't even occur to him to enquire why Mr Millar might give her a car allowance since she lived five minutes away from her job and went there on foot every morning, 'Yes, it's a possibility, isn't it?' he agreed. 'So this is the last time we head out for the home counties by train,' she laughed. 'I love you, Lena,' he said and came across to kiss her as she sat at a smaller mirror in a poorer light fixing her earrings. He hadn't noticed that there was new colour in her hair, but he did think she looked well. Grace's salon had come up trumps again. The tax' driver at the station said he knew the road. 'That's where the nobs live,' he said. 'Great,' Louis said. 'We wouldn't want to be going anywhere downmarket.' He had such an infectious way with him. The driver, in his shabby coat and his nicotine-stained fingers, who would never be allowed inside the gates of these houses unless he was driving a taxi, seemed pleased and enthusiastic. That was Louis all over: he made other people glad that he was around. James Williams was divorced, Lena knew. But he had a friend, a lady who had great designs on being the next Mrs Williams, Louis had said.

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,will she?' Lena had wanted to know. 'No, I think he's too clever for that,' Louis had smiled. Lena smiled too. How Innocent of Louis to admit to her that a clever man avoided marriage, commitment of any kind. As if she didn't know already that this was his view. James Williams was delighted to see them. A kiss on

each cheek for Lena. 'You look younger every day.' 'You're too kind.' 'No, I mean it. Come in, come in and meet everyone ... Laura, come here and meet Lena Gray.' Laura was hard as nails. Shiny red lipstick, shiny metallic black hair, a satin blouse with a sheen and a tight black shiny skirt. Her shoes were patent leather high heels. She looked as if she had been polished and burnished, 'The famous Mrs Gray,' she said, looking Lena up and down. 'Ah no, . t's my husband who's the famous one in the hotel business.' 'James always brings your name into the conversation . if I didn't know better I'd think he fancied you . . James Williams had turned to welcome Louis. Lena looked at Laura long and hard. 'But you know better.' 'Oh, I know better.' She paused. Her eyes flickered over towards Louis and away again. Lena thought she was going to say that she realised Lena had a very fanciable man of her own. But she wasn't looking at it from that point of view. 'I know better, because if James had fancied you he'd have done something about it.' 'And what's your second name, Laura?' 'Why on earth do you ask?' Laura looked at her as if Lena had committed the greatest social faux pas of all time. But Lena had not been idle in her years of dealing with People through Millar's Agency. She was not easily put down. 'Because it wasn't given to me,' she said, in the coolest tones possible. Their eyes held each other. 'Evans,' she said eventually. Did James Williams sense the mood? Or was it by pure

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coincidence that he turned and placed an arm on each of their shoulders. 'Now let me take my two favourite ladies' to meet the rest of the guests.' Lena didn't look at Laura, but she knew that in this unexpected and unimportant battle that had suddenly flared up, she, Lena, had most definitely won.

They had never been to a party like this before, but Una knew how it was going to turn out. She could see from the outset the two women who would vie for Louis' attention, and she knew now that Angela would win. Let them fight it out. Let him ply one with plates of tiny cocktail sausages on coloured sticks, let him fill the other's glass. Let him laugh, delighted, into both their eager faces. That was part of the fun. This was probably the only fun, Lena pretended the party was a conference. She told the stockbrokers

and their wives that she worked in an employment agency. She refused to give business cards; it was a party in someone's house. But she did say the name Millar's so often that nobody would have forgotten it. She advised them about their daughters, their mature, unmarried, own hopeless office staff, none of whom could spell 'sincerely' or 'faithfully' so all letters had to end simply 'yours'. And as she moved, talking animatedly but not stridently, she knew people were interested in her. A groomed, handsome woman, in charge of her own life, unaware or possibly indifferent to the fact that her handsome husband was being overtly flirtatious with two of the other guests. And Lena knew that the eyes of James Williams were on her all night. And that Laura Evans, who might never be Laura Williams, was drinking far too much and far too quickly. Already there was a stain down the shiny cream satin blouse, a stain that looked ugly and out of character with the elegant woman who should have been acting as a hostess for James tonight. It was only when everyone had gone that Laura seemed

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remember any hostess duties. 'Better clear up all this

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e " " she grumbled, staggering towards a table with -less ,,,,ses on, it. Leave it Laura. It'll all be done.' ,j d(ri't mind. I do stay here. I don't want the place ,,,king like bedlam.' She looked at Lena to make sure the

,arE about staying here wasn't lost. 'Yes well. Everyone's staying here James was 'Let's have a last drink and a post mortem. But Laura was having none of it. She lurched towards

,,~e glasses and missed her footing⁵ then fell, spilling dregs of wine and splintering some of the glasses on the floor. 'Now will You leave it, Laura?' James was exasperated, ~s you might be with a small child, but not angry ,1111 pick them up, let me.' 'Maybe it'd be better to wait for the daylight,' Lena suggested mildly. 'Easier to see all the little bits of glass then, than in the artificial light.' *d and fell, cutting J can see perfectly well,' Laura sat herself on both palms on the broken glass. Lena took her to the kitchen and silently picked the particles of glass from Laura's hands. Then she dabbed the

cuts with TCP- 'There, you're fine now,' she said eventually. 'Stop being so bloody patronizing,' Laura said. 'She means, thank you very much,' James said. 'I meant stop being so bloody patronizing,' Laura said. 'Those took very slight, but they can sting a lot,' Lena said, referring to the marks on Laura's hands. 'You're a proper pain in the arse,' Laura said, flouncing to the door. 'No wonder he never made a move on you, Lena Gray. You were too po-faced. You'd have frozen him out of it.' 'Good night, Laura,' James Williams said coldly. They sat by the fire, the three of them. They talked about the party, the neighbours, the things people had said about Room at the Top. Some had thought it very vulgar, others had said it was realistic about England at last. They

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talked about Cliff Richard and Yves St Laurent. 'Would many of the guests have met either of them?' Louis asked his boss respectfully. Nobody visiting this house had ever been within an ass' reach of either Cliff Richard, or Yves St Laurent, who had shortened skirts again. But she said nothing. It was part of Louis' charm to look innocent and vulnerable when it mattered. What she found a little uneasy making was the way James Williams caught her eye. It was as if he understood not only the crassness of Laura Evans who would, after tonight, never become Mrs Laura Williams, but also the naivety of Louis Gray, who would never in a million years be as smart as his wife, Lena. It was an awkward moment. Lena let her glance fall to the floor. 'Well, do you think ...?' Louis suggested. 'You must be exhausted, James . . . how lovely to have met all your friends,' Lena said. He showed them up the stairs to the room, the big guest room with a bathroom of its own adjoining. It was more elegant than anywhere they had ever stayed. The sound of snoring came from an open door, and a glance showed Laura Evans asleep on a bed, one shoe on the floor, the other dangling. It was unlikely that James Williams would sleep beside her. When the door was closed, Louis reached for Lena as she had known he would. There was nothing that excited him so much as knowing that two women had left that party unwillingly. Both of them would have given anything to have been with Louis Gray that night. Lena knew that this would make Louis desire

her very much indeed. 'You're beautiful,' he whispered into her ear. 'I love you,' she said truthfully. 'You're a queen among the women here tonight,' he said. Lena closed her eyes. Well at least she wasn't lying drunk and snoring like Laura Evans, the woman who had hopes of the host, and she hadn't gone home to her own

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ive. house as had done the ladies Louis had found attract' ber and not looking her forty-five years. She vvas here, so . I yes, she was certainly queen for the night.

,I vas wondering, that is we were wondering, If you'd do us the honour of being a witness.' 'in a case, a court case?' 'In a registry office, you dolt. I'm asking you to be my

bridesmaid.' 'You're getting married?' Lena looked at her, astounded. vell, I did all the things you told me to.' 'Oh, ivy, I'm so happy for you. When did you decide this?' 'Last night.' 'And is Ernest all delighted tooF 'of course he's not, let's not ask for the moon. But he says it's what we should do. And it's most certainly what I want to do. Always wanted to do.' Her eyes were very bright. V Lena hugged her tight and over her 'Isn't that great. friend's shoulder, as she saw the walls with all their postcards, clippings, cutting and little pictures, she thought how much Ivy deserved good luck and happiness.

re, Mona.' Martin M 'There you a cMahon handed her bottle of tablets across the counter. Mona Fitz from the post office was on a mild blood pressure medication. Martin could have prescribed for almost everyone in the town even if Peter wasn't here, he knew the' r complaints and symptoms so intimately.

t 'These keep me alive, Martin.' Mona was very dramatic. 'Indeed they do,' he nodded gravely. That's the way she liked to play it. No point in telling her how slight their strength and how unimportant it would be if one or indeed several days were missed. Tablet-taking

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and spooning from a bottle had almost magic powers. one knew this better than the local pharmacist. 'Tommy's cut heal up all right?' he enquired about the postman who had ordered a lot of bandages and sticking plaster, as well as disinfectant. 'I didn't know he had one,' Mona said. Martin McMahon often wished he hadn't made some harmless remark. It could lead to endless speculation. He could see Mona Fitz looking puzzled. 'He could have hurt his leg but he never said a word. I might be wrong, I'm often wrong about things.' He looked apologetic. But Mona was having none of it. 'Of course you're not, Martin. Would we all be able to take our pills and bottles from you if you were wrong about things?' Her tone was most reproving indeed. And she went off puzzling why Tommy Bennet would have needed to buy bandages.

The house seemed oddly empty when Francis Ryan had left. Sister Madeleine felt no need to build up the fire that evening. When she went out of her door there was no cause to look up and over at the tree-house with a friendly wave. When people brought a cake of bread she knew that this time she would have to walk over to the travellers to make sure that it got a proper home. Francis Xavier Ryan could eat an entire loaf of bread from which she had cut one slice for herself. In a bizarre way, even though he was disturbing and a worry, he was company for her. The nights strangely now seemed very long. She prayed that he would make his way all right. That he would come back in some months for the rest of his things. To tell her that he was well settled now, under another name, working for a farmer. Or maybe as a chopper of wood in a big monastery where the monks would be kind to him. Better, he might write and say that she could give back the bag of items taken from Sullivan's garage. He couldn't write, of course. But someone would do a letter for him 440

Some kind person who was looking after him now as she had looked after him.

Philip had come home for the night; he had brought all his things with him on the bus. 'Ki 'you like Dick Whitt' on, 't had said. 'Don't you bring your washing home or you most certainly do not, I wash it myself: 'you're a woman.' if I were a man I would too.'

'That's very true, but even , You only say that because you're not,' Philip said. 'Not true.' 'Or to fight with me,' he said glumly. 'Now that's certainly not true.' She laid her hand on his arm. 'I think you're terrific. You got rid of all this lovey-dovey bit and we've been great friends, you and I, haven't we?' 'I only got rid of the lovey-dovey bit on the outside,' Philip said sadly. For a moment he reminded her of her brother Emmet and the way he talked about Anna Kelly. Wouldn't it be extraordinary to feel so strongly about someone as that? She was brisk with Philip. 'Nonsense. it's gone totally,' she said like a tired Kit. It's there and aches a lot of the time, she said, nagging toothache; it keeps asking me questions. 'What does it ask?' She couldn't be harsh or flippant with him. He was far too like Emmet. * , that's 'Things like ... why didn't you ask me to join I group for the dance you're setting up for Saturday? His disappointment was naked. 'I'm not really setting it up, it's other people too.' 'If you wanted me there you'd have asked.' 'Well, you're going home.' She was anxious not to have him hurt. 'I'm only going home so as not to be around. If you asked me to the dance I'd not be going home.'

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She wanted desperately not to disappoint him* But she knew she couldn't have him there while she was away, play for Stevie Sullivan, that would be even worse. 'It'll all work out all right in the end, Philip,' she said. 'It better had,' Philip said. 'It sure as anything isn't working out well now.' It was dark when Philip got off the bus in Lough Glass. He didn't know why he had come home. His mother was bound to complain that they saw so little of him. His father was going to tell him that he had chosen the world's worst trade, that the hotel business was over. Kit was in Dublin organising a gathering of her friends of which he apparently wasn't one. The porter in the hotel welcomed him in a half-hearted way. Philip knew that was the way Jimmy would greet anyone. The boss's son, a regular customer, a new American visitor; the half shrug and grunt and weary sigh would be your welcome to O'Brien's Central Hotel. 'I'll leave my things here for a bit and go down and have a walk by the lake,' Philip said, a heavy unwillingness to

go into his family home coming on him suddenly. 'Suit yourself,' said Jimmy. Philip went down the lane to the lakeside. He looked back up at the hotel. One of the best frontages in Ireland, they should be doing much much more than they were. He sighed, and walked along moodily by the shore, watching the winds whip up the lake into what looked like waves. He often thought about Kit's mother, dying here alone that night. He had tried to mention it to Kit to show he understood, that he wasn't just an insensitive hulk like so many men. But she never wanted to talk about it. Without realising it, Philip's walk had taken him towards Sister Madeleine's cottage. He knew the hermit, of course, like everyone did. But he had not been one to go in and give her his confidences. He was about to turn away when he saw her standing at the door. She clutched a shawl around her thin shoulders, and there was something about the way she hugged herself to make Philip think she was in distress.

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debated slipping away. After all she had not seen
She had chosen to live this strange hermit existence. There was probably nothing wrong at all, just his imagination. But something made him call out. 'Are you all right,

ster Madeleine. She squinted out into the dark. 'Who is that? It's so dark.'
,Philip O'Brien,' he called back, 'Isn't that grand, the very person,' she said.
Philip's

heart sank, she wanted him to do some errand. 'Would you Ae a cup of tea? It hardly seems worth making one for myself.' it was an odd thing to say. She lived by herself. For heaven's sake, she must always be making cups of tea on her own. Still, it would be welcome; he was stiff and tired after the journey. He followed her in. 'How's the kitten, the little blind one?' he asked. He remembered Kit had told him that the hermit had insisted she could give it a good life. 'It died. Drowned there in three inches of water outside my door.' Her voice was curiously flat and dead. 'Oh, I'm sorry.' 'It should have died the first day 'Maybe it had a nice life.'

7 the vet was right.'

'No, it had a stupi life, hia v its oor little head on id things.' Philip had no idea how to contribute to the conversation, so he said nothing, just settled himself on the threelegged stool to await tea. She cut him a slice of currant bread and spread it with butter. 'You're an earnest fellow, Philip. it's the kind of thing that will stand to you in the future.' , I hope something will stand to me in the future.'He was morose. 'So life isn't good?' 'I want to marry Kit MacMahon,' he said suddenly. 'Not now, but in a couple of years' time maybe. And I've always known that. I've known it since way back the night her mother died, and that~s years ago.'

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'Yes,' Sister Madeleine said looking into the fire. 'But being patient 'isn't enough. She must like som,,,,, else and she hasn't told me.' 'Why do you think that?' The old nun's voice vvas gentle. He explained about the dance. If there hadn't he,, someone else special she wouldn't have kept Philip olt ,, deliberately. 'I just don't know who it is,' he said, his face sad and resigned. 'There might be nobody.' 'No, her mind's very caught up with somebody: 'I'm going to tell you something ... I know Kit does have problems on her mind ... and something which takes up a lot of her attention, but I as * sure you it's not another boy. You have no rival. She's just not ready to think about men yet.' Her eyes were very bright and very blue. They almost bored through him. He believed her and he trusted her. His heart felt light. 'Go on back to the hotel, Philip. Your mother and father will be looking out for you.' 'They know I'm back, I left my stuff with Jimmy. Bundle of fun, Jimmy. A hundred thousand welcomes to Lough Glass written in his face.' 'If you had Jimmy's life yo u might have a few less welcomes written in your face too.' She spoke in general tones. He would never know what she had learned of Jimmy's life, but it made him feel a small wave of sympathy. It can have been no picnic working for the O'Briens, chopping wood, filling coal scuttles in rain and heat. 'You're very good for people, you know,' he said as he left. 'I used to think so, Philip. Nowadays I'm not so sure.' She shivered although she was in no draught. 'Goodbye and thank you . . thank you again.' She made no reply. She was sitting looking into the fire. He

pulled the door after him and fastened the latch. He walked back along the lake shore with a smarter step. Kit

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j,j,,t love anyone else. She would have told the hermit, the, were great friends altogether. This was very good news, very good news indeed. or, that Saturday in November Martin McMahon told his ,--fe Maura that they were going to get a new car. He had

it with Stevie Sulli an but it was a surprise been discussing I iv I until now. ,That's the one the great spit-and-polish job was being 3one on.' Maura was delighted. 'I can tell you we're not getting anything half te looked at. Stevi was under the bonnet ind lying under the chassis examining every inch of it. ,You're the best husband that ever lived,' she said. 'I wasn't always a good husband.' There was a shadow on i his face. She could see him almost physically struggling. She laid her hand on his arm. 'Wherever Helen's soul is today it's at peace, Martin. We've told each other that so often . . . and we believe it. None of us can look back on any year, any hour even, and not wish that we had done something differently. But remember, we worked all this out. Time spent regretting is time wasted.' He nodded. She could see the shadow beginning to lessen.

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Lena Gray was explaining to Jim and Jessie Millar that she would be buying the car through the firm. 'But of course you can have a car,' Mr Millar said. 'Haven't I asked you a dozen times to take something out of this firm that you built up to be what it is.' 'I won't use it, Jim. it's for my husband, so I waritto pay for it.' 'No, the principle is still the same.' 'You don't take things out of the firm for your own personal use. I will not either.'

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Kit arranged that they should have a little party in Frankie's flat. The girls would provide some wine, and cheese on biscuits. Later on at the hotel the

boys would pay for drinks, so this sort of evened it out. 'They're not coming back for coffee,' Frankie explained very firmly. 'The landlady here has her hand on the phone to all of our mothers if a fellow comes into the house after ten o'clock.' The others agreed. Bringing guys back to a flat afterwards was asking for it. It was cheap. Clio heard about the party and came down to challenge Kit. 'Why was I excluded?' she asked. 'You weren't included, that's a totally different thing. This is just friends to do with catering.' 'Kevin O'Connor is going,' Clio said. 'Yes. It may have escaped your notice and probably everyone else's but he is meant to be in catering, you know.' 'Well, it may have escaped your notice that I happen to be going out with his brother,' Clio said. 'C110, you and Michael can afford to go to the Gresham to a dance every night they have one,' Kit said. 'I wish I knew what you were planning to do with your life, Kit McMahon,' Clio said. 'So do I,' Kit agreed fervently.

The Blue Lagoon was showing in the town. It would have been great to go with Anna, but Emmet knew he mustn't weaken. He saw Patsy Hanley walking disconsolately down the main street of Lough Glass, 'Would you like to go to the pictures tonight?' he said quickly before he could change his mind. Patsy blushed with pleasure. 'Me? just me, like a date?' 'Sure.' 'I'd love that,' she said and scampered home to get organised.

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Anna Kelly had intended to go to The Blue Lagoon with some of the girls from her class, but fortunately for her she heard that Patsy Hanley was going to go with Emmet. They would all be on the same bus. She wouldn't let anyone see her being a wallflower. She would stay at home. In fact, she would stay at home alone because her mother and father would be having dinner at a golf club. Anna felt this was a very bad way of spending a Saturday night.

Philip sat with his father and mother in the dining room. The walls were a mournful brown; the table cloths were stained with the memory of too many sauce bottles. The lighting was poor, and the service was slow. Philip knew that this was not a hotel that would tempt anyone to make a return visit; it was not the place that would invite a business traveller to come back with his

family. It was going to be a long uphill road to transform it. He had hoped he would have had Kit McMahon at his side. And perhaps that hope was not so farfetched. Sister Madeleine had been very confident and sure when she spoke. She had extraordinary piercing eyes; you believed everything they said, and she had assured him that Ki I I it McMahon had no other love. Philip sat trying to work out what other problems Kit might have that took up her time and attention. His parents looked at him without much pleasure. 'You're gone for weeks on end and then not a word out of you when you come home,' his mother complained. 'You know, son, if you're ever going to make any kind of a fist out of the hotel business you're going to have to be outgoing, I greet people,' said Phdip's father Dan O'Brien, who had never been known to begin any Conversation except with a list of moans and complaints. 'You're right,' he said agreeably. 'I'm luckier than a lot of the others, I have a hotel in my family where I can learn.'

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They looked at him suspiciously, in case he was rnak,n. fun of them, but could see no sign of it. Philip nailed a smi I ile to his face and wondered whethe, any Other young man of his age was having such ar, appalling Saturday night.

'Who'll be first?' Frankie wondered as they admired the table. It looked very festive with its coloured candles and paper napkins, and plates of food. They had speared an orange with little cocktail sticks, each one bearing a cube of cheese and a portion of pineapple. They had stuffed hard-boiled eggs, where the yolks had been taken out, mixed with mayonnaise, and put back. There were bottles of beer and glasses of red and white wine. 'I bet you it'll be that Kevin O'Connor,' Kit grumbled. 'I don't think he's all that bad,' Frankie said. 'You have him actually crawling on the ground he's so afraid of you, and still you won't be civil to him.' 'He has been very uncivil to me indeed in the past,' Kit said. 'It's hard to forget that sort of thing.' 'You have to forget,' Frankie shrugged. She almost shrugged herself out of her strapless taffeta dress and made a note not to raise her shoulders again. 'Do you, though?' Kit was wondering. 'Do you what?' 'Do you have to forget?' 'Jesus, Kit, of course you do, otherwise wars would be going on for ever

'My God, Kit. McMahon, don't you have Dublin brought down to size,' Stevie said admiringly 'Ah you don't know the half ' Of it, Stevie.' She turned, arm companionably in his and brooked her ought him a, urlidting inhtarosdhuecewhaisrn. alone in her admiration. Stevie opened it) 'tShe saw from the looks that he was Sullivan dressed up and in a place like this was a knock-out. Far too

good for Clio's horrible little sister. Suddenly Kit remembered the purpose of the whole evening. She must distract him from Anna, so that Anna would go back humbly to Emmet. She must dazzle the eyes out of him at this dance. It mightn't work but she was certainly going to try.

Evening it lie,

It was the usual Saturday night in the golf club and the Kellys and the McMahons were finishing their dinner as they did so many weekends. It seemed things were.

believe that about the children. Clio was impossible to say she had not always been the way that studying that much, they knew. When she came home for visits it was always to sleep. 'I don't think she sleeps at all in Dublin.' Lilian worried about her elder daughter. Maura McMahon worried about where Clio slept, but this was not the time nor the place to bring up such a subject. 'Apparently Kit is going to a dance tonight,' Peter Kelly said. 'Clio was on the phone full of envy about it all.' 'That's right. They were having a party in some girls' flat first. I think it was the College of Catering people.' Martin was always a peacemaker. 'Oh, I'm sure. Anyway, Clio said that if she could get a lift home she'd come tonight.' 'That would be nice,' Maura said, a little insincerely. She found her niece trying and unrestful. There was always some hidden tension there.

'I left a plate of sandwiches out for her,' Lilian said fussing. 'Anna's not going to eat ever again she says; she

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this belief that she's as fat as a pig. Lord they can be cope with sometimes.' hard to

see young Philip's home,' Martin said. 'They could ,a,e come down together for the company.' , oh she's full of some boy with a posh car. He might I've 'Lilian sounded worried. ~r, her. I I will he want to stay)' Peter asked. 'That wasn't mentioned. And you know Clio, she'd ,nap your head off if you asked a question. We'll have to wait and see. I did leave out some clean sheets and pillow cases in case. Maura said nothing. She knew the boy in the posh car was the son of Fingers O'Connor. Francis Fingleton O'Connor was a legendary hotelier 1 1 who Q made a fortune through his four strategically placed hotels in Ireland. But he was even more legendary for his belief that he was attractive to all women, and that all a woman needed to make her feel feminine and desired was a grope and a feel, and a few suggestive remarks. ,Maura had met him on more than one occasion through her work, and had disliked him intensely. She had kept her hostility until she was sure she was not observed and then had told him that his attentions were unwelcome, in such a firm tone that even Fingers O'Connor understood. But about this, as about so many things, she kept her own counsel. Kit had mentioned that a son of his, Kevin, was in Cathal Brugha Street with her. An unpleasant lot, Kit had said. Maura told no tales, but was glad to hear it. Clio, on the other hand, seemed very involved with the boy's brother. Maura felt sure it was the lure of the car and the lifestyle. She brought up the subject of Emmet; there would be no dissension here surely. 'He's gone to the pictures tonight. Aren't they all getting very grown up, all four of them with their own lives to live,' Maura said admiringly. She thought that the Kellys didn't seem particularly confident that their daughters were leading their own lives very well. One was coming back discontentedly from

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Dublin to sleep for hour after hour. The other was sitting at a kitchen table on her own refusing to go to the pictures or to eat. And both of them such beautiful girls, Maura thought. For the first time for a long time she thought of Helen McMahon. Her beauty had brought her nothing but tragedy. 'They're too old to get married,' Louis said about Ivy and Ernest. His tone was dismissive. 'Why not if they want to?' Lena knew that Louis would take

this line. She had prepared herself for it, and was determined not to sound defensive. 'Ah come on, it's ridiculous. Everyone knows they've been at it for years, why doesn't he move in or she move in, not all this Love, Honour and Obey bit?' 'It's a sign, that's all.' She knew she was short. 'It's a sign of nothing. : 'Not to people like us, she said as if it was obvious. 'We don't need things like that, you and I ... because I think we know, but other people often do need them. You're usually so tolerant of the things people do that we don't understand ... Why can't you be glad for Ivy and Ernest that they're making a bit of a thing out of it?' It was exactly the right tone. 'Well yes, when you look at it like that. . .' It was as if he felt a burden, a threat, lifted from him. 'Hey, let's buy them a bottle and go down straight. Make a bit of a party of it, remind them that it's their last Saturday as free people.' He was all smiles now. He would charm them to bits. Lena was right. Louis was the life and soul of the party. He had invited all the tenants to come in and wish the happy couple well. Each one had brought a little gift, Ernest and Ivy were overcome with the emotion of it all. 'How did you know?' Ivy whispered to one of the New Zealanders.

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,Mr Gray told us. He wanted it to be a bit of a celebration,' she said. ,you've got a good man there,' Ivy said to Lena.

,Yes,' Lena said. -ep down he's full of heart,' Ivy looked at her sharply. 'De ivy insisted. ivy, who knew how unfaithful he was, how hard she tried to entertain him. Ivy, who alone knew that t married, could be fooled by this little gesture they were no I

Of goodwill. Lena felt that life was all an act. 'I know,' she said, in a voice that had no life in it. She felt that she had stepped outside herself and that she was watching this whole scene without being a part of it. It was she who had thought of having a celebration to mark Ivy's happiness. She had swallowed her own feelings of jealousy and envy at Ivy's sudden rush of luck in the security of her man. Ivy deserved this, and Lena was glad for her neighbour and friend's moment of happiness. Louis had felt it was meaningless and foolish for people of this age to marry and that as an empty symbol it was laughable. But once Lena had been able to rid him of any residual guilt he changed and turned it into a triumphal party. watched

the others looking at Louis, animated, handsome and the centre of attention. He was a sham, she thought angrily, he was a fraud and a con trick. Why had she wasted her life on him? Why was she not back in Lough Glass where she belonged with her family, with her children who needed her? What was she doing in this ridiculous house in London, working her guts out for an employment agency up the road, drinking a toast to Ivy and Ernest in a roomful of people she hardly knew? This was a Saturday night, she should be at home in Lough Glass. A terrible emptiness took hold of her. At home in Lough Glass doing what?

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Michael O'Connor and Clio drove through the night,,,, Lough Glass. 'You do know we can't sleep together at home,' Clio,, said. 'So you keep saying.' 'No, so I keep insisting. I wouldn't have to if you didn,, just take it as a joke.' 'Peace, peace. We start the night in separate places and then you creep along to me. Right?' 'No, Michael, not right. This is the house that I was born in and grew up in. My parents are there with ears sharpened waiting for every creak of the floorboards.' 'We'll find a way around them.' NoP She sounded very angry. He pulled the car into the side of the road. 'What's this, what are we fighting about?' he asked. 'About the fact that I did say to you before we left Dublin that this wasn't on. I didn't want you to be under any false impression.' She looked very troubled and very young. Her blonde curls looked babyish and her lower lip was trembling like any toddler's. He softened. 'Okay, okay. I take your point.' 'But will you take it when you're in the spare room, Michael?' she asked. 'I don't know. It depends on how eager I feel.' Unless you know that it doesn't matter how eager you feel, we're not going any further. We stop right here,' she said. 'Oh, really, and what would you do in the middle of nowhere?' 'I'd either get out and hitch or I'd come back to Dublin with you.' She sounded more confident than she felt. 'Aw to hell, we're halfway there. I'll drive you to Loughwhamit and then go back to civilisation.' 'It's too much to ask.' The lady must be obeyed.' Honestly, Michael.' 'No, I want to see your place anyway. I have to report

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. If I'm all equal.' She assumed, 'I don't know whether my girl friend is or isn't.' I was joking and laughed. I'm deadly serious,' Michael of a girl Maura said, 'my father keeps asking me what class you are, yes, your niece is. I think your aunt was quite a goer.

'Aunt Maura? You have to be joking.' I said 'That's what he says, or sort of doesn't say. A real

girl, I mean is that good or bad? a party girl, full of fun.' He gave her the thumbs up. Great. Like you, I think this was not the best squeeze and then reminded himself that it was the only place or time. 'No point in getting myself going and especially I'm ahead for me.' If nothing lovely I know Irish countryside, through they drove through the dark; with lights in the small villages, and past farmhouses' edges. windows, Past herds of cattle looking at them over the top of the hills. They shrines to our Lady of Lourdes. But I past wayside of these things they passed. They had little spoke of no conversation, Clio realised, it was not a life that involved much sitting down together and chatting about the way of the world - something much more important, But then they had Most people weren't. I mean love life. they had a very Pass" lucky enough to have at. Ever. Clio knew now how hard it was to define love in poems or in paintings or in music. It was all about - - -. well, closeness, being intimate. That kind of thing was impossible to describe. Clio said. She looked at Michael's face as he drove. She was he thinking something on the same lines. She placed her hand on his leg. 'Isn't we?' Clio said. there 'We're very lucky, a lot ... your parents are 'No we're bloody waiting like grizzly bears to catch us.' golf club,' 'They're not at home yet, they'll be up in the Clio said. Michael's face brightened. Maybe we'd have time before they got back, , he said.

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Clio looked at her watch. It was ten o'clock, they were half an hour from Lough Glass, but her mother and father rarely left the golf club before

midnight. 'Drive faster,' she id, and was rewarded by Michael's whoop of delight. sai

Sister Madeleine was restless. Yet again the evening seemed long and lonely to her. This was something she must not allow to happen. She had craved to be away from the ceaseless chatter and business of other people's lives. She had always been proud to live comfortably with her own thoughts. But maybe that was in the days when she had faith in her own thoughts. Recently she was less and less sure of everything, and when the certainty had gone a lot of other things went too. The shadows of evening over the lake seemed a little menacing now: the creaks and sounds in the trees around, the rustle in the undergrowth. She could see the limits of the travellers' camp in the woods. They had a fire and they would make her welcome but she would cast a quietness on them. She would change their mood. She looked through the trees up at Lough Glass, and saw the lights of the one long street. In those houses were settled people, not travellers, not hermits like herself. She knew most of their stories, their secrets. There was hardly a home where they wouldn't reach out a hand and pull her warmly into the house. But there was something holding Sister Madeleine back, If she went calling, if she gave up this life of independetice, she would be lost. She told herself that she was being full of fancies. She tried to imagine that she was one of the many who filed to her little cottage for advice. What would she have said? 'The great trouble with most of us is that we think too much about ourselves, that's what makes our problems seem so much more important than they are. Now if you were to think about someone else . . .' Very good advice, but the only person she could think of was poor Francis with his scattered wits wandering somewhere in the night. 456 wished she could believe he was settled and safe. He [or three days. She shivered as she tried to bad been gone iniagi~e where he was laying his head this Saturday night. She wished it was still on the settle bed beside the open fire ,,, her little cottage.

There was a buzz of conversation in Frankie's flat. The party was go ng well. Frankie and Kit looked at each other in

delight. I it was working better than they had hoped. it would be magic when they got to the ballroom. Kevin O'Connor was standing beside

Matthew, the one-time foul-mouthed friend, as if he were a bodyguard. Kit had to stifle i her amusement. Boys were so young really compared to girls. Those two were behaving as if they were Emmet's age. Thinking about Emmet she realised she had been neglecting the nightps mission. it wasn't enough to lure Stevie to Dublin for just one Saturday night, she must try and let him think she was interested in him so that he would 1 ions on her. forget Anna and concentrate all his attenti Really, those Kelly girls were very tiresome. Kit said to herself. Clio had behaved like a wounded deer just because she wasn't included, but it would have been impossible to have her. The whole of Lough Glass would know that Kit McMahon had behaved disgracefully with Stevie Sullivan, which was what she was now about to do. She smeared a little Vaseline over her lipstick to make her mouth look shinier and moved over to where he was standing talking cars, relaxed, at ease, as if he spent every Saturday night in the company of people in evening dresses and dinner jackets. He was far more comfortable there than some of the guests. Kit decided that he might not be as rough a diamond as she had thought, or perhaps he was just a very good actor. 'We're thinking about who'll go in whose car down to the Gresham,' she said. tDo you have room for a few in yours?'

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'Sure,' he smiled easily. Kevin was beside her blustering. 'I'll take You, Kit. I've got the Morris tonight, plenty of room, we can get four in the back.' 'I have to help Frankie as hostess and sort of be in charge' Kit srr~lecl at him sweetly. Kevin beamed back idiotically. fi, seemed to have been forgiven, welcomed back to the fold. She laid her hand on Kevin's arm. 'Why don't you be a sweetheart and get Matthew in the front seat where you can keep an eye on him and take those four girls over there Kevin was delighted to oblige. Kit did rapid mental arithmetic and saw to it that Stevie was driving her and her alone. When they locked the door of the flat behind them,

Paddy and Frankie had been installed in one of the other cars, Stevie and Kit were left together. 'So nobody wanted to come with us?' He looked at her playfully. 'That's the way it turned out,' she said. He opened the door of a very smart car indeed. 'What is it?' she asked 'I wonder. It's an E-type,' said Stevie casually. 'Well now, if they'd seen this we'd have been killed in the rush,' she said. 'No good, Kit, if they just want you for the car. They have to want you for yourself,' he said. He was easy company, semi-flirting, more admiring really. She found it easy to play her role. 'Ah, I'd say you have no trouble in that department,' she said. 'What department?' 'The department where they want you for yourself. Queuing up from what I hear.' 'Come on out of that, you're the girl next door, remember. You never saw any queues form at the garage.' 'I saw enough,' Kit laughed. He looked at her and she smiled quite deliberately, like people did in films. It felt corny inside but he liked it. 'You've certainly changed since those days,' he said.

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, 'Have I? I feel almost the same.' 'No you don't. You were a Silly giggling schoolgirl with Clio. You laughed at everything and everyone.' 'And now I'm all morose, is that it?' Again she looked up

at him from under her eyelashes. Kit wondered was she overdoing this. He must know what she was trying. Stevie wasn't a fool, by no means. 'That's a nice one, and despise her. But apparently you have,' he said. 'Yes ... that's the crowd of friends* (tit) There's a chance to meet great things about Dublin, isn't it? .. is the big blond guy so many more people than at home your boyfriend?' He was very direct. 'Why do you ask?' She had raised her eyebrows. Surely he'd tell her to stop play-acting. He seemed very attentive.' 'g College.' He's in my year at the Caterin 'is he that O'Connor, of the hotels?' How quick he was. He had learned Kevin's name and put two and two together. 'That's it,' she said. She had an urge to tell him that Kevin O'Connor was a great ignorant loudmouth who had told all his friends that he had slept with her, and paid dearly for it. That he was afraid - of his life of her now. That he would probably run one at least, if not all, of his father's hotels into the ground by the time he had finished with them. She wanted to tell him about Matthew and how he had been allowed in only if

he kept his hands to himself
and a clean tongue in his mouth. But that wasn't part of the game. The game
had to do with making him just a little jealous. Letting him think she was
rushed off her feet. So she said none of these interesting facts about Kevin.
But then, going out with a fellow like Stevie wasn't like going out with a
friend. 'So he's 'Frankie's brother, the law student? No just a pal but as it
well.' you said, he s attentive. I think that descri 'And young Philip O'Brien
from the hotel attentive as well! Lord, you , re notching them up, Kit
McMahon.'

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'Oh no. Philip's just a friend.' 'And why wasn't he at tonight' do?' 'I think he
had to s go home,' Kit lied. She felt sure he could see through her like glass.
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sai'dWSete11v,ie'mHgel wung the car around and parked in a place I sad
you asked me. I'm that looked as if it were reserved for visiting ceold time'
ebrities. marter car, Hardly anyone visiting tonight would have a s so a
Judicious discussion with a porter made sure that it wa~ all organised.
Then, with his hand under her elbow, Stevie Sullivan led Kit into the hotel
where the others in their party were gathered, looking open-mouthed at the
car that Stevie had parked so casually. 'That's some motor,' Kevin O'Connor
said, the envy oozing from his every pore. 'Oh, I don't know they're a bit
flash. I think you'rejust paying for all that c~rome. You say you have a
Morris? I thing they're the best thing on the road these days, fast too if you
need it.' Kevin was appeased. 'Yeah, sure. That's what I thought. , They
came nearer to the ballroom and they heard the music of the band. 'Kit, can
I book you for the first dance?' Kevin said. It was loud rock and roll. It
wasn't a seducing number. Nothing she would need to concentrate on with
Stevie. 'That would be great, Kevin,' she said in a low breathy voice. Kevin
straightened his bow tie and led her by the hand onto the floor. Men are
such idiots, Kit said to herself. And for some reason a vision of her mother
flashed in front of her.

'Are these the bright lights of Lough Glass coming up ahead?' Michael
O'Connor asked C110'You're not going to make me defensive about my

home town,' she laughed at him.

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'No, it must be very deep and important coming from a place of the size of this,' said Michael O'Connor. 'Okay, so you were born in Dublin, but your father wasn't, nor your mother. Everyone came from a place like this, it's just a question of when,' Clio said.

11 love you when you're angry, Miss Kelly.' 'I'm not angry,' Clio said. 'Good, so you're going to be real nice to me . . 'Yes, but we'll have to be quick.' They parked the car in the drive. As she had expected, her parents' car was not there. They would be another hour at the golf club. She opened the door and saw Michael O'Connor's eyes take in the house. It was comfortable and she felt no sense that it was not worthy of them. Her mother spent a lot of time and money choosing furnishing fabrics. The hall had an antique mirror and two old tables of elegant design. There was a light in the kitchen. Clio saw the glum figure of her younger sister sitting reading at the kitchen table. 'Oh shit,' said Clio. 'It's Anna.' 'What does that mean?' Michael asked, peering over her shoulder. 'What you've guessed it means,' said Clio with her mouth a hard line. Anna looked up from her book. 'Oh hello,' she said. 'I thought it was them, back from tombstone city a bit early.' 'Why aren't you out?' Clio snapped. 'It's a Saturday night.' 'Why aren't you out?' Anna retorted. Michael just stood there. 'I am out,' Clio said foolishly. 'I'm out from Dublin.' 'Great.' Anna went back to her book. 'Anna, this is Michael O'Connor, a friend of mine from Dublin. This is my younger sister, Anna, who's at school.' 'But not at the moment,' Anna said. 'At the moment I'm committing what is apparently the worst crime in the book, I'm in my own house sitting here reading my own

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book, and for some reason I have offended my big sis,, greatly by doing this.' 'Oh shut up Anna. You're a pain in the arse,' said Clio, 'Well, I think I should be - . .' Michael was anxious to be far away from this kitchen. 'No, heavens, you must have a drink, a coffee or something. You can't drive me all this way and just. _' 'Well it looks as if I have driven you all this way and

then just . . .' he said. And there was a look of real annoyance on his face. 'Perhaps, Anna, if I could ask you to go to your own room and read, Michael and I could ... um ... talk here with more comfort' Clio didn't hold out much hope. 'There are six chairs.' Anna looked around as if to reassure herself. 'And there's the drawing room and the dining room. I don't remember anyone saying that when I read a book I had to be confined to my own room.' 'Jesus,' Clio said to her, with a look that would have weakened a lesser sister. 'It's been great,' said Michael icily. 'Listen, come back. I'm sorry.' 'Come back for what exactly? For repartee in the kitchen? No, I'll just drive back to Dublin. It's what I love to do on a Saturday, drive to the middle of nowhere and back.' She heard the bang of the car door and he was gone. With a look of murder in her eyes Clio returned to the kitchen. Emmet had thought *The Blue Lagoon* a bit soppy and sentimental, but Patsy Hanley had liked it. She giggled a lot when she talked about it afterwards and said 'you know' and 'I forgot what I was going to say' a lot. Maybe she was shy and that was why she talked so much. Emmet knew how hard it was to mean to say one thing and have another come out. But really Patsy was hard going, If it had been Anna ... If only it had been Anna. They could have talked about

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... Anna was so bright, she had such property and went everywhere. ... imagination. Her mind Patsy, who was prattling on As he sat on the bus beside him about the film, he thought of Anna. She wasn't going out with that greasy Stevie, that was good. But had he been the chance of taking her out tonight? Was it right to pass up wise to take Patsy and make her jealous ~ Why did life have to be such a series of games?

When the bus stopped outside Paddles' bar, Emmet and Patsy walked together along the street in Lough Glass. 'Wouldn't it be great if there was a place to go for coffee or ice cream here, Patsy?' Patsy said. 'Yeah.' Emmet didn't think he could take any more of Patsy and was quite relieved that there wasn't anywhere to go. They passed the Central Hotel and looked at it without enthusiasm. 'It's a real mausoleum isn't it?' said Emmet. 'A what?' Patsy asked. Emmet dug his hands into his pockets. 'Were you at the

pictures?' called Philip O'Brien. 'It was terrific, The Blue Lagoon,' said Patsy. Philip was always nice to Emmet McMahon. One day Emmet would be his brother-in-law; he wanted them to have a story of being friends. 'Anna Kelly not with you?' had he asked conversationally. He thought Emmet would be pleased to know that he, Philip, a much older man, would even know who his friends were. He was unprepared for the glower he got from Emmet. 'No, she's not,' he said with his stammer returning. He struggled out the words that people were free to come and go as they wanted to and then marched off with a red face. Patsy Hanley shrugged at Philip and followed. She didn't know what was wrong either. 'Well, I'm home,' Emmet said gruffly as they got to McMahon's pharmacy. 'Aren't you going to escort me home?' Patsy said. 'You did ask me to the pictures.' Emmet had opened the door, but he realised that it was just pure annoyance and bad temper on his part to dart into

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his house. Of course he should have walked her across town, her house over Hanley's drapery. 'Sorry,' he muttered. They walked through the quiet town. There was new, much sound coming from Foley's bar up at this end; all the activity seemed to be down at Paddles' place. Mrs Hanley was waiting. 'I thought the bus should be in about now,' she said. She had no mention of allowing her second daughter follow the path of Deirdre and be regarded as an easy conquest. 'Come on in, Emmet. I'll give you a cup of drinking chocolate,' she said. 'No, really, thanks, Mrs Hanley.' 'Ah come on up, can't you. I've chocolate biscuits.' Emmet went up. There would be nobody at home. His father and Maura were at the golf club and he didn't want to be alone thinking about Anna. This was more companionable, Kit discovered that Stevie was a great dancer. She wanted to ask him where he had learned. She had learned at special lessons, an optional class provided by Mother Bernard on Friday afternoons up at the convent. They had mocked the teacher at the time but always looked back in gratitude. But Stevie now. All his life spent in overalls, tinkering with engines. Living

with that awful moaning mother of his and a wild young brother. Where had he found time and interest to make himself so smart and so skilled? When they danced to 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes' he laid his cheek against hers. Kit moved slightly away but only very slightly, so that he could follow. 'Do you know something?' Stevie said. 'No. What?' Kit was giggly and coy. It seemed to be working. 'The words of that song are utterly ridiculous. It's about some guy who had laughing friends deride him ... listen ...' They listened to the words. it was as he said. 'What kind of a shower of friends would they be?' Stevie asked. Kit agreed with him. She was about to give her views

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then she remembered her role. She was here to make him err. What that involved was not having views. He had to entertain but talking entirely about the boy. 'Do you have friends?' she asked looking up at him. 'You know bloody well I don't have friends. Haven't

you known me all my life? What time have I for friends? Where would I find them?' He sounded bitter. 'I don't know you all my life,' she came back with spirit. 'I hardly know you at all. You're a different man tonight, a person I don't know at all. For all I know you could have friends in Hollywood or the South of France. You look the Part. She realised she sounded angry. But he took it as admiration. 'Thank you,' he said. She longed to talk to him. But there was no time. 'And have you many friends?' he asked as they stood on the dance floor. They didn't even bother returning to the table where the wine and the others were, they knew they would be dancing again. 'Not all that many really. Kit was 9 10 with Siamese twins. 'I thought you and Claire still in example.' 'No, not at all. She's not here tonight, for example. 'Anna says you're as thick as thieves.' 'Anna!' There was the word. This is what she must get back to - outsmarting Anna. 'Anna knows nothing.' She put all the scorn in the world into her voice. 'She's brighter than you think, she's got a mind of her own,' he defended her. Kit knew that this was true. Anna was bright and imaginative. She remembered that from when Emmet had been so sick and she had come to mind him. She mustn't protest too much. 'She's pretty, mind you,' Kit said in a

coquettish way that felt horribly alien. 'I can see that people would think she was a little attractive, but bright - I don't think so.' 'She's only pretty in a schoolgirl way,' Stevie said. Then the band began to play 'A Fool Such As I' and he held her close to him for the slow swaying number. He held himself back from her to look at her face, flushed, eyes sparkling.

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'Now you, Kit McMahon, you are seriously gorgeous-looking,' he said. She understood in those seconds why people had found him so sexy and attractive, why even married women had gone off with him and taken terrible risks. But of course, she would be a ridiculous person to fall for, Kit told herself. Thank heavens she was only doing this ludicrous charade as a favour for her little brother. She reminded herself of this again as his arms tightened around her when they danced.

'You behaved like a spoiled brat,' Clio said to Anna. 'I want you to know that I will never forgive you for this as long as I live.' 'Did I spoil your plans?' Anna asked. 'You were extremely discourteous to a friend who kindly drove me the whole way from Dublin.' 'And was about to drive you upstairs to bed if only little sister hadn't been here to guard your reputation.' 'Don't you dare even suggest such a thing.' Clio was white with rage. 'I think we're quits,' Anna said calmly. 'You don't mention my bad manners, I don't mention your intentions.' She went back to her book. Clio saw it was *Wuthering Heights*. 'Poseur, affected show off ... pretending you read books like that for pleasure ...' 'But I do,' Anna said. 'There's real passion in this book, not just gropes and feels in motor cars. And anyway, aren't you the one studying English for a degree? I thought you would read a book a day, a classic I mean, for pleasure.' 'I could stab you with the bread knife and pretend it was an intruder that did it,' Clio said. 'Yes, but it wouldn't be worth it,' Anna said, going back to her reading.

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McMahon was annoyed when they got home. The garage door was very careless of Ernest, he door was open. 'Leaving a door swinging open on the street,' he's just gone upstairs,' Maura said. 'Maybe it's.'

Martin always feared that Let me check the che someone might break in, in search of his medicines and drugs. N4aura went up the stairs without him. There didn't

seem to be any sign of Emmet, but the light was on in the kitchen, so Maura went in there. she But it wasn't Emmet who sat there. it was a tramp, thought first, a man with a torn coat that had been wet th h they had let in water and he roug s~ s shoes looked as.i was unen, and wild-looking even though he was asleep with his head lolling to one side. G d" she said Maura's hand flew

to her throat. Un my m I before she could stop herself. Her voice woke the man and 1 that his eyes were wild and she clutched her throat in terror. 'Please,' she s i 'Please ' he leapt to h's feet. Maura saw aid. The man stood up unsteadily. He looked around him for something that would serve as a weapon. Maura knew with relief that the knives were at the very back of a drawer. He wouldn't find one easily. She was surprised at how rationally her mind was able to work. She prayed that Martin would come up the stairs, and then she prayed at the same time that he wouldn't. The man was like a wild animal who would see himself trapped by two people and flail even rnore dangerously. 'I won't hurt you,' she said. He gave a strangled cry, a sound that wasn't any words. But at the same time he picked up one of the kitchen chairs and lunged at Maura. She moved away from him leaving him the doorway free to make his exit. Please, please God, may Martin not be coming up the stairs. 'Go now. Run away, I'll say nothing,' she said in a voice a bit above a whisper. He looked at her, confused, and seemed to come after her again, She fell on her knees trying to avoid him.

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When Martin came in and stood frozen it, sho~ blocking the doorway, he saw the tableau of his v~. kneeling, cowering 'in terror from a wild man ab ut~, batter her with a chair. 'Get off, get off her,' roared zrt flinging himself

on the man with the wild eyes. The man raised the chair and beat Martin with it. Maura dragged herself to her feet to come and pull him off. Only the sound of Emmet's voice as he ran up the stairs shouting, 'What's wrong, what's wrong, what's happening?' broke the remorseless series of blows. Now that there were three of them, the man with the wet coat, the straggly hair and wild, mad eyes realised he might be outnumbered. Grabbing up a soaking wet bag, he pushed his way past Emmet and down the stairs. 'Daddy, Daddy,' Emmet stuttered out the words in his grief. 'Get Peter,' Maura said. 'Phone him this minute.' Then she ran out the door and down the stairs. 'Maura, come back,' Emmet cried. 'He's not going to get away ... he's not going to do this to Martin and get away.' In seconds she was at the door and looking out on the dark quiet street of Lough Glass. 'Help!' she called. 'Help! Get help, there's a man running down the road. Stop him, stop him. He's attacked Martin.' Almost at once lights went on, doors opened. Maura saw young Michael Sullivan come out of the garage across the road, and the Walls in the hardware shop followed. 'Which way?' called Mr Wall. 'He's gone down towards the Brothers.' The Walls started to shout too and roused the Hickeys over their meat shop and by the time the noise came to Foley's pub there were people out in the street running after the figure they saw staggering and stumbling away. When Sergeant Sean O'Connor arrived on the scene the man with the wild eyes and the words that were hard to understand was firmly held. Held, it had to be said, by the after-hours drinkers from Foley's bar and some who had crossed the street from after-hours drinking at Paddles'

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niaCC. But such niceties as the lice ----- ~ 1 ere
un rs always the iin,P~"Int now, knackers, bloody tinkc It s one of the lion
from the newsagent's shop. She said Mrs Di in years as to witness the

k.lown such excitement ;~dn't 1 ide her door. . lure of a criminal just Outs'
j?1t,s not,' said Paddles. different as to who the sergeant Scan O,Connor
was in i roved him firmly into the Garda car u was with .in was. He m ,he
efficient arm lock of the young garda who The sergeant was giving the

impression that the fun yOu11 all be on your way home now,' he said was over. used premises mildly, looking at the two open lice beckoning warmly if illegally in the night. people shuffled around noncommittally. n O'Brien j McMalion all right?' asked Da 'IS Martin to see the cause of the who had run from the hotel conirnotation. ,The doctor is with him now, he won't want a flood Of people in on top of him. So I won't detain any of YOu from your beds,' said Sean O'Connor, taking his prisoner into custody- Peter Kelly knelt on the 'It's not very deep, Maura.' floor beside his friend Martin. -ious., 'But he's unconsc alling down 'That's because'he hit his head f 'Has he concussion)' 'I don't know- We'il get him to hospital.' 'My God, Peter, what'll we do) I will kill that madman . if Martin's badly hurt.' with rny own bare hands 'No, his pulse is fine. He's going to be fine.' 'Do you mean that) Or is it iust to make me feel better?' 'Maura he'll be grand.' 'Can he hear rne?' she asked. ow. But he'll come 0, 1 wouldn't think so. No, not n around, he'll be fine.' e him and kissed his just in case maura knelt besid

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bloodstained face. 'You're going to be fine, Martin. 1,, seen Peter's eyes, he means it. And I love you, I jo,, Y., with all my heart. You make me sing with happln,,,,, Emmet McMahon and Peter Kelly exchanged glances They weren't mean to hear such a declaration was ivery private and neither of them would ever refer to it again.

it was a long night in the cell. Sean O'Connor got d clothes for the dirty and shivering man in his charg(2 even gave him a cup of tea, though his heart wasn't in it. He had seen the blood on the floor of McMahon's kitchen and was still awaiting news from the hospital about Martin's condition. The man was deranged and made little sense. He spoke a lot about his sister. Or was it his sister? She'd want to know where he was and what had happened to him. Mostly he rambled and moved from sentence to sentence without finishing the first. His words were confused. He needed to be in a psychiatric home, Sean O'Connor guessed. Perhaps he had even come from one. As he left the cell he saw the man curl up to sleep on the bench-style

bed. He was mumbling names over and over. None of them made any sense to Sergeant O'Connor.

Lilian was still up when Peter Kelly got back from the hospital. 'It's all right,' he reassured her from the door. 'It's all right. He's regained consciousness, they're testing him for concussion, and he's had a lot of X-rays. No, 1., 11 fine.' Lilian let out her breath in relief. 'And Maura?' 'Insisted on staying in there in the hospital with him. Brought Emmet with her. They found them beds.' 'Was it necessary?' 'It was what she wanted to do,' Peter said, pouring himself a brandy. 'I had some tea ready.'

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t tea Peter said. He sat down at the kitchen ,in pas I . ,,,,,,The girls in) Did Clio come home?' lid cut the ,yes both of them like vipers. You cotw as still ;:njosphere I . I ney had some huge row which ,nmenrig w)' Peter sounded weary. -What else 1 is 11L one of the tinkers?' ~Vhoit%Os he? Was it

't atically blame wasn . Why do people autom hat was he ,_--ause they're different, that's why. W

:hen?' some tramp who came 'God knows ... ,There aren't any tramps in Lough Glass. Anyway, how

4'd he get in?' Ernmet left the door open. The poor lad is nearly dead ,ith grief, He inks it was all his fault. That's why Maura

brought him with her.' They were silent. Lilian was thinking that Maura seemed et on much better with her.two stepchildren than she, ~iCian, did with her natural c--- dren. She looked at Peter and wondered had he anything of the same thoughts running through his mind.

Kevin O'Connor danced with Kit. 'Eventually I was able you aw ay from the lounge lizard,' he said. 'Whatever cise he - 11- On't that,' Kit said.

'Oh really? He looks as if he'd stepped straight f rom, the pages of a glossy magazine ... with all the shine intact. Years of escorting ladies through crowded dance floors. I

'No, years of working long hours ge ting rust out Of cars, tuning engines, selling tractors ... ,How do you know all that?' 'He's the boy next door, he's from Lough Glass.'

'Jesus, half of Dublin seems to be from that one-horse town. Clio as well Well, it sure breeds fine-looking women.' His arms tightened a little around her. Kit was about to pull away when she saw Stevie Sullivan looking at her over Frankie's shoulder. She didn't pull

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I I away, instead she smiled up at Kevin. 'Any tighter and put my knee up with a sudden jerk,' she said, still smiling, sweetly. 'You'll what ... She looked alarmed. 'You won't be able to walk for a week,' Kit said, her face, never changing. She could see Stevie watching them with interest, but with no idea of what was being said. It wasn't all that difficult to get men to fancy you if you tried, Kit decided. The dance was over at midnight. All Saturday night dances in Dublin had to end then; it was so that they wouldn't go on into the Sabbath Day. The National Anthem was played and they went for their coats. Kevin O'Connor and his friend Matthew wondered casually if people might like to come around to their flat for a beer or a coffee. And to play records. Matthew managed to put such a leer of suggestiveness into the words play records that nobody was in any doubt about what he meant. 'I'll drive you back to the hostel,' Stevie suggested to Kit. 'It's not a hostel actually, it's a bedsit,' Kit said. 'Well, if I'd have known that, then I might have had somewhere to lay my weary head,' he smiled at her. 'Oh no, no weary heads, only my own,' Kit was relaxed. This was surely going well. 'I might have tried to persuade you,' he smiled. 'I wouldn't have counted on it. No, better to have made your own arrangements.' 'Mine are simple, I drive back to the ranch, now.' 'Now, at this time?' 'No rest for the self-employed.' 'But tomorrow's Sunday.' 'What other day do I have of meeting farmers, what, they come in to Mass, telling them all about new equipment?' 'You're really determined to make that place a success, aren't you?' 'Well, it would make a nice change from the way it was

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I can tell you that. His voice sounded big and firm to M. 'Second letter K-)r u ,your mother must be very proud of you ,you know my mother, she's proud of nothing ... oh God that reminds me ... could you hang on till I make a ring out of the hotel door phone call.' They were just about headed to the

but he searched his pockets for change none He turned back to say, 'I totally forgot that my 11 - 7 . r ... and I'm meant to be ,nother s staying with her siste responsible for that young hooligan, Michael.' ,How can you be responsible for him from herO' 'A good question. But I said I'd phone him at midnight

to check that he was home and I'd kick the arse off him if he wasn't.' Kit laughed. He didn't have to tell her who he was phoning, but somehow it was a relief. Stevie Sullivan must have had a lot of telephone numbers that he could call. Even this late on a Saturday night. She watched the dancers leaving and the hotel wind down. Kit thought that it had been about -as successful as it could possibly have been. She had definitely taken his mind off that baby-faced Anna. Anna would go back to Emmet for consolation. it was all going according to the

plan. Stevie was walking over to her, but there was something different about his face, 'Hey, let's sit down for a minute.'

He indicated a group of chairs. 'But aren't we going to go) They're cleaning up. 'It'll only take a minute - - - ,something had 'Was Michael not thereF She knew happened * 'No, he was there all right, but 'But whatF 'But he said that there had been an accident, that your father had got hurt.' 'Oh my God, a car crash, the new car. They weren't used to IC 'No, nothing like that, an intruder. ut

B he's fine, your

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father. He's in hospital, but he'll be out in a day or t,,(, truly.' Kit thought of scatty young Michael Sullivan and didn,t put very much faith in his judgement. Kit's face was whi lte with anxiety, she felt lightheaded, as if she were going to faint. Father in an accident with an intruder ... what did it mean? , Please, I tell you, it's going to be all right.' She didn't even have to say it; Stevie had realised. 'No, I didn't take Michael's word for it, I went back through the exchange to Mona Fitz in the post office. There was some kind of madman, they caught him. He hit your father but it's goin to be all right . . . ' 'It might have been the same people who hit your mother.' 'Yes, it might.' 'I feel sick.' Kit said. 'It's all right, go home and get on a nice warm coat and I'll drive you back to him.' 'Will you?' She looked at him trustingly.

All flirtatious behaviour was long forgotten now. He put his arm around her shoulder and walked her to the car. 'Maybe I'm only delaying you. I'll go like this,' she said. 'No, you can't go like that, not into a hospital. You'll frighten the wits out of them.' Yes, he was right, 'And another thing, I couldn't drive all those miles beside you dressed in that get up. It would be more than flesh and blood could bear to keep my hands off you.' 'Then I'll get changed,' she said, her tone was muted. And he seemed sorry to have made the remark. Kit was worried about her father, it had been a coarse sort of thing to say. 'I'm sorry, Kit,' he said simply. 'Sometimes I feel very rough, I disgust myself.' 'No, it doesn't matter,' she said. They were talking like friends, real friends who knew each other very well. He sat in the car while she went in to change. She hung up the dress that had worked such wonders and looked at her pale face in the mirror. It all seemed very

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and unimportant now. She wished she knew more of what had happened. Wasn't it lucky that Stevie had never known that he was the kind of home-fellow who would actually mind his younger brother.

There were a lot of things she hadn't known about him
the towns and the fields, the woods, the crossroads and the farmhouses slipped past in the night. Kit felt it was all
so unreal. 'Try to sleep,' Stevie said. 'There's a rug there, you could put it under your head like a cushion.' She sat, still and -necked sweater and her black, rightened in her black polo and red skirt. She had taken a jacket and a warm woolly scarf too but she didn't need them. The luxurious car was very warm. 'Did Mona Fitz say any more?' she asked. 'No, I didn't keep her on the phone, I thought better just to head out there.' 'Much better,' she said. Her voice was small. 'You'll be fine,' Stevie said. 'I know.' 'These things don't happen,' he said. She looked at him. His face was very handsome in the moonlight. 'What things?' 'There's some fairness in the world,' Stevie Sullivan said. 'I mean, they wouldn't let you lose your mother and your father. He's got to be all right.'

Sergeant Sean o,Connor woke with a start. it was seventhirty in the morning. He had suddenly made sense of all the jumble of names, and of the man talking about his sister. He went in to the cell, kicked the bed, md the man

sat up, alarmed.he said. 'Tell me about Sister,' 'What, what?' you hurt her? Did you 6Y a hand ,sister Madeleine. Did

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on her? If you touched her I'll have you beaten to death,,, this station and then give myself up.' 'No, no.'The man was frightened. 'I'm going down to her house this minute, and YOu'd better pray to your God that you didn't harm her. Th,t woman is a living saint.' 'No, no.' The man was like an animal crouched and frightened. 'She was good to me. I stayed with her. She h'd me, you see. She hid me in her house, first up a tree in the tree-house, and then in her own cottage. I wouldn't hurt Sister Madeleine, she's the only person -I, to me.' w as ever good

He parked the Garda car outside Paddles' bar and walked down the narrow path to the hermit's cottage. He stopped outside the window and peered In. The small bent figure was lifting her heavy black kettle from the hook over the fire. That was at least was good timing. They could talk over tea. She was pleased to see him. 'This is a real treat for me now. I was thinking wouldn't I love a friendly soul to come in and have something to eat and drink with me. Not to be doing it on my own.' 'But don't you choose to live on your own? Aren't you a solitary person?'His eyes were narrow as he looked at her. 'Ah, there's solitude and solitude.'A silence fell between them. Eventually the hermit said, 'Is there anything troubling you, Sean?' 'Is there anything troubling you, Sister Madeleine?' Her eyes seemed to see through him, right across the corner of the lake and up to the prison cell where the frightened madman had lain on his bunk bed babbling her name. 'You found Francis, Sean, is that it?'

'I don't know what his bloody name is, but he said he'd stayed here, that you looked after him.' 'I did what I had to.' 'Shelter a lunatic?' 'Well, I couldn't let him off on his own, he was wounded. And anyway he was frightened.'

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What was he frightened of?' ,That you'd catch him, and punish him.' ' r 'But he hadn't done anything yet, had he?' The garage, Kathleen Sullivan ... you know all this,

~ean.' And suddenly it all clicked together in Sean O'Connor's ,iead. 'You knew he had beaten that woman and stil l you "d him hi . You harboured a criminal.' 'That's being too harsh.' 'For God's sake, he's put two people in the county nospital. What do you call that, peace and light?' 'Two people?' 'Yeah. He beat Martin McMahon senseless last night.' Sister Madeleine's hands went up over her face, her shoulders shook. 'The poor man,' she said. 'The poor, poor man.' Sergeant Sean O'Connor sat there, grim-faced. He would like to have believed that the poor man she was feeling such sympathy for was Martin McMahon, coming innocently up his own stairs into his kitchen and seeing his wife being attacked. But he feared it was the disturbed mind of the prisoner in hi s cell, the man she called Francis. 'Tell me about Francis,' he said wear ly. 'You won t hurt him?' 'No. We'll get him looked after.' 'You promise?' Sean gave a wave of impatience. Why did he have to do deals with people over something as basic as this? 'Did he tell you where he came from, Sister?' he said slowly and deliberately. 'He said he'd come back when he got settled. Come back for his things.' 'How long has he been gone?' 'Only three days.' 'Well, he didn't get far, up to the main street of the town, it seems. Into the kitchen of the McMahons to beat them all with a chair.'

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'I can't believe it,' she said. 'Where did you think he was going?' 'I didn't know. He said he wanted to be free.'She looked very upset. Sean O'Connor forced himself to lower his tone and ~e gentle. 'And how long was he here altogether, would yo,, say?' I suppose about six weeks ... who can tell? Time has no meaning.' 'Immediately after the garage, and Kathleen being taken to hospital, would it?' 'I expect It must have been.' Her voice was very flat. 'And you never thought of telling us he was here?' 'Never.' 'You have a strange sense of responsibility to the community, if I may say so, Sister Madeleine.' 'I felt he couldn't do any harm while he was here.' Her eyes

were clear in their sincerity. 'True, but he sure did the very moment he left You.' 'I didn't know.' There was another long silence. 'I'll get you his things,' Sister Madeleine said. She produced a blue carrier bag with money, cheques, motor registration books and the few cheap ornaments he had taken from the office in Sullivan Motors. Sean O'Connor looked through them in disbelief, 'We've had half the country searching for all this.' She said nothing. 'How did you hide him? People come in and out. I've been in and out myself, for God's sake!' 'He lived in the tree-house during the day,' she said simply, as if it were a perfectly natural thing to do. 'Me sergeant stood up. 'It wasn't the right thing to do, Sister. He's not a fox or a rabbit, or a poor little duck with a broken wing. He's a man, a disturbed man who injured people badly, who could have killed them. You did him no service by giving him this Alice in Wonderland place to live.' 'He was happy here,' she said. Sean O'Connor didn't trust himself to speak. He was afraid he would lose his temper and say something he would regret. 'Sean?'

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,yes, Sister. d see h*r~ Up in the station?' There was a ,Can 1 come an 1 long Pause, It couldn't do any harm, it might possibly do good.' sullivan had left Kit at the door of the hospital. 'Aren't You coming in. 'No, I'd be in the way. He's all right, 1 tell you. 1

wouldn't leave you to face things if he weren't.' 'Thank you very very much, Stevic. You've been wonderful to me.' 'Glad 1 was there,' he said. She didn't want him to leave. And she felt he didn't want her to go. 1,11 see you later in the day,' he said. 'When you've talked the Mass-goers into buying tractors,' she said with an attempt at a watery smile~ 'That's the girl,' he said, and drove the E-type out of the hospital grounds in a flourish. 'Your mother and brother are with him. He's talking now,' the nurse said. Kit got a shock for a moment. The wild idea that Lena had flown over from London to be at his side crossed her mind. Then she realised. 'He's going to be all right?' she said, searching the nurse's face. 'Oh, definitely,' the nurse said. 'Conic on and I'll bring you up there.' Maura and Ernmet jumped up with shock and delight to see her. She went straight to her father. He was on a drip; there was a lot of bruising and bandaging

around his head. 'I look worse than I am Kit,' he said. 'You look grand to me,' she said and put her head on his bed and burst into tears. 'They knew that he was in no danger but they wanted to stay nearby. The hospital provided beds for them all. Kit lay under her rug and tried to sleep. Her mind was too full of images. There was the dance. The shock of Father's face with the bruises and cuts. There was Eminent crying that it was his fault, if only he had closed the door. There was

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Maura holding Father's hand with such love,,
that Kit almost had to look away. In her And there was Stevie Sullivan's handsome face leaned Out of the car, still, In his dinner jacket but his
sahidrt opateenr atittheendeacyk. 'I'll see is W You later in the day,, he
Finally she fell into a sort of sleep. 'When they got back to Lough Glass, they all hesitated before going up the stairs to the scene of all the violence that night before.

Sergeant O'Connor had said that the place would be tidied up a bit for them. And so it was. The broken chair had been removed. Someone had washed the blood from

the sisal floor covering. There was a dark damp stain but at least it didn't look like blood. The Place seemed grey and empty. Maura opened a note that had been left through the door. 'That's very kind,' she exclaimed. Philip O'Brien from the hotel had invited them to come and have breakfast when they returned. They wouldn't be in the mood to cook anything for themselves. Emmet and Kit. 'Will we do that?' she asked 'It would give us energy to face the day.' They knew she wanted to, SO they agreed Philip hadn't expected Kit to be home. He was delighted to see her, 'You missed the dance then " he said with barely hidden delight. 'No, I heard afterwards,' Kit said. 'And how did you get down P 'You're very good to ask us to* breakfast, Philip,' Kit said quickly. Maura was agreeing, and soon the smell of bacon and sausage, came from the kitchen. They sat by the window.

Morning had come up and the lake looked very beautiful. 'Don't you have a Wonderful view?' Kit said to keep the conversation going and away from both her father's injuries and how she had got back from Dublin. 'Yes ... I suppose like everyone here we get used to it.

It's only because you and I have been in Dublin we appreciate it.' Philip was trying to find a common bond with her, something which marked the two of them out as sharing something special. Even if it was something as ordinary as both living in Dublin.

'That's right, Philip,' she said kindly. 'In fact, if you were to cut down some of those bushes over there it would be really terrific, like a kind of panorama.' He had been suggesting that to his parents for over six months, but as always they resisted change. He smiled at Kit a warm smile of recognition. They were indeed kindred spirits. And perhaps he had been right to believe Sister Madeleine that she was not taken up with anyone else. After all, the party or dance or whatever it was couldn't have been that special if she had been able to leave it so quickly. 'I'll leave you to get on with your breakfast without having to make conversation all the time,' he said to them all, and Kit flashed him a grateful look. As he left he heard Kit say to Maura, 'Philip is the kindest man at any crisis. I always remember that.' If Maura realised what previous crisis Kit might be thinking of she said nothing. 'I promised your father that we'd go on as normal, but this isn't exactly normal, is it? A real hotel breakfast with lashings of everything.' They heard the sound of relief and happiness in her voice, the delight that their father would soon be well and home to them.

Sister Madeleine walked quietly along the lake shore. She did not come up by Paddles' bar, nor by O'Brien's hotel. She waited until she had passed the Garda station. This way she would meet fewer people. The small grey figure stood humbly by the desk. She had a packet. 'He likes a bit of soda bread, Sean,' she said diffidently. 'I'll make a note of it,' he said flatly. 'Maybe we could both have a cup of tea and I could serve it to him. It would be like old times.'

ing the cell with him 0 You're not goi I 'Connor was appalled. 'Whatever way he was w,,eSeaji 1, ri he was with you, he's like a caged animal now, he hits Out at everyone.' 'I'll be all right,' she said. buttered breHe handed her two mugs of tea and put bv his name. ad on a tray. He had never called the man the 'Listen, you,' he called into the cell. 'I've brought a friend of yours. She wants to come in and sit with you, the Lord knows why. If you touch her, you'll get such a pasting you'll have to be scraped off the walls.' The man seemed not to understand, then he saw Sister Madeleine. His eyes filled with tears. 'You came to take me horne,' he said. 'I came to bring you breakfast,' she said. They sat in the cell, the nun and the wild man, sipping tea and eating thick slices of buttered bread. Sean O'Connor watched them from a distance. They talked about the trees by the lake, and the way a bit of the treehouse had fallen down in the wind. Sister Madeleine spoke about the birds going away for the winter, and how they would be back next year. They always came back, too. She called him by his name. She said the word Francis so gently and with such respect that Sean felt ashamed of having called him You. Francis replied, coherently now; you could understand his words. He asked about ihe old dog, he asked did she have trouble getting wood for the fire. He said he had got very wet and had wanted to sit by a fire. 'And did you go far when you left me?' Her voice was low and interested. There wasn't a trace of hectoring him or doing an investigation, but she knew that the sergeant was listening. 'I slept in the fields, Sister. It was cold and wet. couldn't find anywhere, I got a pain in my head.' 'And why didn't you come back to me? There was always a home for you with me.' 'I'll go back now,' he said eagerly. Like a child.

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,Arid at night did You have to sleep in the ram?' q found a barn one night, but there were animals in it Ind I was afraid. And another night I was under a tree. I didn't go far. I was tired of walking.' 'But you found a kitchen and a range to sit at in the town, didn't You? In a house?' 'He hung i

'Yes. his head. 'And why did you hit the good people ... they wouldn't have hurt you.' :They were going to get me locked up again,' he said. You hurt Mr McMahon. He's a very good man. He's the one who got you the bandage and the throat sweets and you hurt him.' 'I was frightened,' he said. 'Poor

Francis, don't be frightened.' She held his hand. 'Fright is only *in our heads.' 'Is it, Sister), 'Yes, it is. I know that, I feel it in my own head.' 'Am I not coming home with you?' 'No, you'll be taken where people can look after your head and take a lot of the fright out of it. I wasn't good at doing that.' She stood up. 'Don't go,' he pleaded. 'I must. I have a lot of things to do.' 'My bag of things, it's in your house.' 'Sergeant O'Connor has it. He found it when he came to tell me you were here.' It was a slight bending of the truth, Sean O'Connor observed. He hadn't found it, the hermit had gone to find it for him, but he understood. She had to leave Francis with the belief that she had been faithful to him. 'Will you come to see me?' he asked. 'I'll be thinking about you, and praying for you. I'll think about you every single day, Francis Xavier Byrne, so I will. Wherever I am.' 'You'll be in your cottage, won't you? For when I get better.' 'I'll be thinking of you wherever I am,' she said.

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After Mass everyone crowded around the McMahons. the whole place had heard The good wishes to Martin were overpowering night before' ng. Through the crowd Kit caught sight of Stevie Sulli van. Dressed now in his brown belted coat and wearing a tweed cap, he looked a different person. He was talking to a group of men. It was a few minutes to opening time. They would walk together down Church Road and turn into the main street, then they would move to Foley's bar or O'Shea's, or even Paddles', to do the kind of deals that he had told her about. He wouldn't appreciate her coming over to join him now. Their eyes met. She smiled and waved but made no move to join him. He excused himself for a minute from his group and moved over to her. 'He was fine?' 'Exactly as you said. Go on back to business, no rest for the self-employed! And thanks again, Stevie. I'll never forget.' She could feel his eyes still on her as she moved back to Maura. There was a hooting of a car horn. Peter and Lilian Kelly had come to take them to lunch. 'I wanted to go back in to see Martin,' Maura protested. 'I've been on to the hospital. He's having a doze, better let him rest. You can go in during the afternoon. Come on, all of you pile in.' 'Seven of us in one car?' Maura laughed at the idea. 'Why do you think doctors have station wagons?' Emmet and Anna looked at each other in a guarded way. 'Did you like the

pictures, Emmet?' Anna asked finally. 'Yes, but it's rather gone out of my mind now with everything that happened since,' Emmet said. Anna was instantly sympathetic. 'Yes, that was stupid of me. It must have been an awful shock. Were you frightened?' There was a lot of warmth in her voice. Kit could see Emmet responding. Stevie Sullivan had been right about one thing. Anna Kelly was a bright little thing, not just a pretty face under a mop of blonde curls.

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After lunch at the Kellys, Kit went up to Clio's room. What's wrong, Clio?'she asked. 'What do you mean? Don't come this nanny bit with me. What should be wrong?' ,You look very fed up.' 'Well, I am fed up. My best friend doesn't invite me to her party. Then Michael gave me a lift home last night and bloody Anna was down there behaving like some kind of

dervish spitting fire at US, and he had to go back to Dublin without ... well, you know, without coming up here.' 'Jesus, Clio. You were never going to go to bed with him in your own house.' 'There would have been time before the others came home from the golf club.' 'You must have been off your head. Thank God Anna was there. You must be losing your marbles.' 'I've probably lost my boyfriend.' 'Well, he can't be much of a loss if he's only staying round because of the pouncing.' 'It's not just pouncing. He could pounce on anyone in Ireland. It's me he likes, and also pouncing on me.' Clio seemed very aggrieved. 'Well then, he'll wait until you're free to pounce, which would appear to be most of the time.' 'God, you sound like Mother Bernard.' 'No, I'm not. I'm just hoping you don't get caught. Honestly, I'm out for your good,' Kit said spiritedly. Clio was a little reassured. 'Yes well, maybe you are. I don't know, Kit. I don't. It's so bloody confused. Do I ring him and say sorry about this little hiccup, or does that look pleading and pathetic? Would it be better to say nothing and hope he'll come back?' 'Lord, isn't that the question!' Kit had been pondering exactly the same problem about Stevie Sullivan. She must leave the next move to him, but suppose he didn't make one? What then? 'Remember in the old days we used always to go down to Sister Madeleine and ask her about things like this.'

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..I 'Not exactly like this,' Kit said. 'No, but she always had some sort of answer,' Clio said. It was an idea. Kit decided that when Maura went to set Father this afternoon she would go down on her own and talk to the hermit. There was something different about the place. A lot of the old boxes that had held various animals in their different degrees of convalescence were gathered in front of the door. Inside the house had changed too. Almost all the few possessions that Sister Madeleine had were laid out on her kitchen table. An old kettle, the three cups, the tin that held biscuits or cake. The little can that she had scalded to keep the milk in was there, a few plates, one or two little boxes. Sister Madeleine was in the bedroom looking around. 'Are you all right, Sister?' Kit called. 'Who is that?' The voice sounded flat and dead, not like the usual enthusiasm that greeted any caller. 'Kit McMahon.' 'I'm so sorry, Kit.' Sister Madeleine stretched out both her hands. 'To the end of my life I'll pray for you and your family that you'll get over this, and understand.' 'But he's going to be fine, Sister Madeleine. I saw him last night and this morning. He'll be out of hospital in two days.' 'That's good, surely. That's good.' The whole place had changed. Sister Madeleine looked unbelievably as if she were packing, as if she were closing up her cottage and going to move somewhere else. 'He was a poor man out of his mind, you know. He should have been in a mental hospital. They'll put him back in one.' 'I know, I know. Clio's father told us.' 'He didn't know what he was doing. It doesn't make it better on your poor father, or poor Kathleen Sullivan . - but that's the only way we can look at it. His mind wasn't right.' 'Was it the same man who hit Mrs Sullivan and stole the things from the garage?'

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,yes! didn't Sergeant O'Connor tell you?' 'No, no. He told us nothing - ii-fe will, everyone will know.' nths 'But where was he between? That was ages ago, mo

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ago. e was here, Kit. Here in your tree-house.' 1H I I

'What?) Kit couldn't believe it. I minded him because he was sick, you know. just like the poor Gerald there with his broken wing.' She indicated a bird that normally lived a box but was struggling to walk outside. 'He was here all the time)' Kit asked. 'That's what I'm so sorry about.' Sister Madeleine's eyes were full of tears. 'While he was here he was safe, he couldn't harm anyone or come to any harm himself. But he wanted to go, and I never keep anyone if they want to go.' She looked up at the sky, remembering birds that had flown off when their time had come. 'Oh, Sister Madeleine.'

1 hi'And if I hadn't kept him, minded him, been good to m, then things would have been different. He wouldn't have hurt your father, he would have been in a hospital now, the Sullivans would have had their money back ... why did I have to interfere?' She sounded many years older and much more frail. She wasn't sure of herself any more ... there was a long pause. 'You did what you thought was right,' Kit said. 'Even though it meant your father ending up in hospital. Suppose he had killed him. Suppose your poor father was dead. It would all have been my fault.' 'It didn't happen.' 'You have no hatred for me for playing God? For thinking I knew better than everyone else?' 'None. I could never hate you. Look at all you did for me - for all of us.' 'I used to have good judgement. Not any more.' 'You don't usually talk about yourself ... I 'There was no need to when things were going well.

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Now I must stop this life. I knew it really when that lit~ kitten drowned a slow painful death. I caused that ... n~', wish to know better.' Her once piercing eyes seemed dim. 'What are you going to do?' Kit spoke in a whisper. 'I'm going away. To somewhere where people will lo(~, after me, where I can be safe and obey rules and not L allowed all the freedom to make wrong decisions.' 'Where will that be?' 'A convent. I know a place where they take in people like me. I could clean floors and help in the garden or th(kitchen, and have my meals and a little cell.' 'But you said you hated being with people and living to rules.' 'That was then, this is now.' 'How will you make arrangements, will you ring them or write to them?' 'No, Kit. I'll just go on the bus.' 'You can't go away, Sister Madeleine.'

People love you here.' 'Not after this, they won't. The person who sheltered the villain who attacked Kathleen and said not a word, then let him loose to attack Martin McMahon. Love turns to scorn very quickly.' 'Please don't go.' 'I have to go, Kit. I'm just so glad you came in to say goodbye.' 'But there'd be a procession of people coming to say goodbye if they really thought you were going. In fact, they wouldn't let you go.' Kit's eyes were blazing. 'If you want to be my friend, Kit, you won't tell them.' 'Have you any money, any cash to tide you over?' 'Yes, your mother sends me English five pound notes from time to time. She doesn't say it's from her, but I know. It just says For Emergencies and this is an emergency.' 'People will be so hurt, Sister. They've come down here time after time, they've told you their life stories and you leave without saying goodbye.'

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,It,s the best.' Emmet? You taught him to, No, it,s not. What about to love poetry - What about Rita, when she ,Peak, to read, o see yOmes back to Lough Glass and comes tc know Maura thinks the itid an empty cottage ..,world of you, she wouldn't ~lame you for what happened d I heard awful Mrs Dillon, who never said a ,o Father. An saying you should be canonised

lice word about anyone, I lk out on everyone. you can t wa . 'When are you going, But Kit's words were in vain. Sister?' she asked. 'clock bus. I have a lot to do, ix 0 This evening, on the siuide you.' She paused and Kit. May God bless you, and g mother find peace and then spoke again. May your a good lifO' fulfilment in the'life she has. Is it 'Only sort of, Kit said. wanted.' Sister Madeleine's ,It must have been what she eyes were still misty- e story if you stayed Kit ,I could tell you all th pleaded. pie 'No, I don't want to hear a Story of someone else. Peo should tell their own story. God go with you always, Kit mcMahon , 'She turned away. tears. She ran by the lakeside Kit ran out of the cottage inby the hotel. until she came to the path that went up ens of the

Looking into the neglected grounds and gard Central Hotel she saw Philip sitting in the old summerhouse. it was rotting and needed great repairs and a coat of III it must have been a paint. He wore his thick coat, but st cold place to sit and read. Can I come and join you)' she asked. is book. She saw it was one of their text He closed h' gh?' He was kind, out for books. Will

you be warm enou her good. That bonehead Kevin ,Imagine you reading this. O'Connor hasn't even opened it.' Is" Philip said. tHe doesn't need to with his hote 'No. Life's not fair, is it?'

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'Were you down with Sister Madeleine?' 'Yes, how did you know?' 'Well, you came in the side way. Where else would you have been walking on a Sunday afternoon?' 'She's leaving,' Kit said. And she told him the whole story.

There was a wide bit of road outside Paddles' bar. The bus came in about ten to six. The small figure of Sister Madeleine came up the lane. She carried a bag, a torn bag held together with twine. Somebody must have brought it to her once as a way of carrying something. It was one of the few things she had not been able to pass on to anyone else. A lot of people stood around, many many more than would have been travelling on the bus. Or indeed going into Paddles bar. Or knocking on the back door of Mrs Dillon's to ask her to give them a tin of beans or a packet of Gold Flake on the quiet. They had come to see if it was true that the hermit was leaving. Clio was there, and Anna. Michael Sullivan, Patsy Hanley, Kevin Wall standing beside Emmet, Patsy Hanley eyed them speculatively as she sucked her finger, and tried to take in all that was going on. There were some older people too, Tommy Bennet the postman, and Jimmy the porter from the hotel. They stood silently shuffling as waiting for someone to say something. Something that would stop the hermit from leaving town. Sister Madeleine seemed to be unaware of the people standing around. Tommy Bennet stepped forward. 'Where are you going to, Sister? I'd be glad to pay the fare.' 'It's nine shillings, Tommy,' Sister Madeleine said in a low voice. She didn't want the name of the place she was heading for to be said aloud. 'But you'll be back, Sister,' he said, paying the fare and accepting the ticket for the hermit. Shadowy forms in the background meant that other people were there too to see the departure.

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with the money that came from can pay Y" ' van's garage, someone called. And there was a half in disbelief. These were the , h Kit looked around her * ine. How could they have "" "*" who loved Sister Madele Pc"~,de on her like this? turne who was not from around this part of the

The driver, 'rig heworld, shivered. There was something happeni . ous he didn't like it. He saw vari 1,e didn't understand, butf the small woman ,Ourigsters come and shake the hand o of others hang who was most

probably a nun. He saw a lot of things a play. back, and ~look at the scene as if they were waiting at Just before they heard the Angelus begin to ring out six o'clock the conductor was in the bus, and had the driver ready to move. He looked hastily up and down the long, high Glass. He didn't want to miss any main street of Longly, but he felt a wish to be stragglers by leaving too early gone. The bus went down the dark street. And nobody at all waved goodbye.

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CHAPTER NINE

James Williams had been debating for a long time, whether he should invite Mrs Gray to lunch. if he

telephoned to make an arrangement she would certainly say no. He could hardly run into her casually again. He decided to call at the agency. To say that he had been passing. He would say that he had found himself in the area and wondered if he could tear her away from her work for an hour. If she said no, then he would find another opportunity. He wanted to talk to her very much and lunch seemed the right time to do it. The place was much bigger and smarter than he had been led to believe. Why did Louis live in a run-down street in Earl's Court if his wife ran a place as prestigious as this? And run it she did, there was no doubt about it. She was well guarded from the casual passerby. He was offered an appointment. If he could wait for half an hour, Mrs Millar might be free. There wouldn't be a chance of seeing Mrs Gray he was told. Several times. 'But it's only for a moment,' he begged, putting on a mock despairing face. 'In what connection?' the receptionist said. 'I am so anxious to take Mrs Gray out to lunch,' he said with his practised charm. 'I wonder could I ask you to go in and intercede on my behalf.' 'Does she know you, Mr Williams?' 'Ah yes, she does. But that alone might not make her say yes.' He looked suitably humble and hopeful, and sat in the blue and gold waiting room admiring the

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professionalism that had been brought to bear on this

appointment, it was a credit to Lena. Millar had made nothing of it for years, and there was no other explanation for its success since Lena's arrival. Lena came through the door. 'James, what a surprise,' she said, both hands out to

meet him. He thought she looked thinner than when he had seen her last. And a little ale, Perha ~s it was the dark red outfit that took the colour from her face. She was very smart in a red check dress and jacket, her shoes were black and red ... she was the role model for every young office worker. If they could look as good and confident as this at Mrs Gray's age ... then life would have been very satisfactory. 'It's twelve forty-five, I was passing the door . .

'You never pass doors,' Lena said, laughing at him. 'I'd never pass yours. Say yes, a little lunch, I'll have you back well before two.' 'I should think so too. We don't take long lunch breaks at Millar's, not like your world, James.' She hadn't revealed what his world was; neither did he. They made small talk, polite banter. Each accusing the other of knowing much more about wines than they claimed. Then the fish had been ordered, and the chat was over. A little silence fell between them. 'Have you any idea why I wanted to see you?' James asked. Lena was thoughtful. He had lost his air of mock gallantry now, he seemed more serious. She decided not to be flippant. 'Something about Louis, I imagine.' 'Yes. It's not easy. Do you have any idea what it is?' No. Has he been unreliable? Not turning up? Her eyes were troubled. 'No, no. On the contrary, he has been working almost too many hours. Surely you must have noticed that.' 'Well, he's away from home many hours, that's true certainly.' She spoke without bitterness, with a sort of resignation.

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'And has he said anything at all to you about a new post?', 'No, nothing at all.' She looked up at him, bewildered. Louis always discussed work with her - his wilder ideas from which she had to turn him so gently and tactfully that he thought it was he who had made the decision; his disputes and indignations with fellow workers . . . they had talked them through, often late into the night. Lena would bring about a situation where Louis would see that confrontation would be a loser's game. Diplomacy meant playing at being careful. But what new position could there be? He was manager of the Dryden. It must be somewhere else. There was no higher he could go

where he was. God, had he entered into negotiations without telling her? Was there some plan afoot to go to Scotland? Had he decided not to consult her in case she threw obstacles in his path? She looked at James Williams' face and tried to read it. He could read hers easily. It was absolute ignorance of any new position, and the huge hurt that went with being left out in the cold. But James Williams had a face that was hard to understand. A gently flirtatious smile seemed to be coming back to play about his lips. The admiring, distant stance that he always had with her had replaced what looked like being a serious discussion. 'Well, I suppose he's absolutely right not to drag boring old hotel politics home with him . . .' His smile was broad. But Lena thought he had deliberately decided to change the direction of the conversation. 'What post exactly?' 'In hotels there are always debates, discussions, worrying about this post and that . . . it obsesses us, surprising we have any time to look after clients . . .' Lena looked at him with respect. James Williams was very smooth. Look at how effortlessly he moved away from the topic once he realised that Lena knew nothing of any new position. She would play the same game and help him to change the subject. 'Tell me about Laura Evans, that friend of yours we met

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,hen we came to "'Y-' Lena said. She heard the question almost echoing in her ears, and could hardly believe she had asked it. Well-bred disbelief that she should 'Laura?' he said, in which she had brought the name up. She did not let her glance drop from his. 'That's right.' She was bright, eager, interested. In her for some time, 'Oh, I think she's fine. I haven't seen her for some time,' 'Oh, I think she's fine. I haven't seen her for some time,' he said.

'I see,' said Lena. 'It's a long time.' 'It's a long time,' he said. 'How do you mean?' 'You could have met someone like me, I could have met someone like you.' Now Lena decided to be the one who changed the direction. 'Ah, but the world is very small. We did meet eventually. Now, let's pay great attention to this very decorated dish of plaice I see coming towards us.' Her eyes were bright in her face, which he realised was indeed thinner and more drawn than before. James Williams wondered what it would be like to be loved so passionately and uncomplainingly by a woman like Lena Gray. The afternoon seemed very

long, which was rare. Normally the time flew by. 'I told you twice already we went to

Julio's and I had

Plaice Florentine. Now, can you get on with your work and let me get on with mine.' She rarely snapped at people. Jennifer, her secretary, looked up startled. 'Was it bad news, Mrs Gray?' she asked. 'Why on earth do you think it was bad news) Now, might I add that at Millar's we actually publish guidelines for our clients. We advise office workers not to interrogate their employers about their private lives, especially having been advised to get on with their work.' She knew she had behaved badly. Why could she not have spent two minutes saying that Mr Williams was a

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friend of hers and her husband's outside work, and said that they had a delicious lunch in a place where the waiters called you Signora? That way Jennifer, who was on being friendly, would have gone happily back to her desk. Why could Lena not have pretended to be calm as she did so often? Because she didn't feel bloody calm, that was why.

'I won't be having lunch with you on Saturday, I'm a witness at Ivy's marriage,' Lena told Jim and Jessie Miller. 'That's nice, a wedding's great,' Jessie said, looking back affectionately at her own wedding day. Lena shuddered, remembering. 'You're looking tired,' Jim Millar said. 'Perhaps we're working you too hard, Take a few days off for your friend's wedding.' 'No, Jim. I'm better working,' Lena said. 'You are tired, I said only the other day you were, and Jessie was saying it too.' Tired meant old. People didn't know that's what they were saying but that was it all the same, Well, she was in her forties, well into her forties. What could she expect to look but old. This wedding was probably the last time she would dress up and put on the style. After this she would wear sedate clothes, dove greys, navy with a little touch of white. Mother of the bride outfits. With a lurch she realised she would not be there at Kit's wedding, no matter what kind of outfit she wore. Plump, generous, spirited Maura Hayes would go to Dublin with her sister Lilian and buy something suitable, something that would see her

through other social events during the years that followed. Unexpected tears came to her eyes. 'Are you all right, Lena?' Jessie was concerned. 'I'm fine, never better,' Lena said with a smile that was much too bright.

'What'll we give Ivy and Ernest?' Louis asked. He was home just for an hour. It was all go at the Dryden these

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3ays. They had a function again tonight, he needed to be ,,ere to oversee it. ,you shouldn't have come all the way back,' Lena said,

;oticitous that he was rushing too much. u, say hello, anyway. wanted to see yo I 'Welt, will it be a late do?' 'Makes no sense my coming back, darling. I won't be out of it until four, and then start again at eight. No, better that I sleep there.' The old familiar dull thud came in her heart. 'Sure,' she said brightly. Louis stood there smiling at her. He had taken his shirt off and he patted his stomach. 'Terrible middle-aged spread ... I'm pathetic,' he said.

'Come on, flat as a board ... you'd think you were playing tennis all day, you're so fit.' She loved to praise

him, and see the light dance back into his eyes. 'Oh, I don't know, I don't think I'd cut much of a figure on the beach . . .' 'Let's go to a beach somewhere for our holidays next year,' she said suddenly. He looked caught unawares. 'Who knows where we'll be next year?' he said. 'Exactly. We could go somewhere smashing. I'll start looking up brochures.' 'Yeah, well, we'll talk about that later. Now let's think what we'll give love's young dream downstairs.' She wished he didn't make such fun of their ages. When she and Louis got married some day they too would be old. When they got married. He was fastening his clean shirt and looking critically at his face in the mirror. She knew with a certainty that they would never marry. Why had she kept this foolish notion, like a child's toy, in her mind? She also knew that he was

about to start an adventure tonight. Or perhaps he was in the middle of one. She knew the signs by now: 'I thought we'd get them a mirror, a nice antique

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mirror,' she said. She heard her voice as if it went down a tunnel. Louis smiled at her. 'Would there be room for it on wall, with all Ivy's rubbish?' 'Oh yes. They're doing the place up, haven't noticed?' 'No, I didn't see any difference.' He hadn't been in it, Ivy's since the night he had taken over her little celebration for them. 'I think they'd like it.' 'Sure, get it then, as long as it's not too dear.' He wouldn't pay a penny towards it, nor would he ever know that her real present to Ivy had been an outfit, a maroon velvet suit, and a hat to match. She had arranged a facial and a hair do at Grace's salon. She had spent maybe ten times the cost of the mirror already. Was Louis mean? He had always seemed the very spirit of generosity. When he had hardly sixpence left he would spend the coins he had on a bunch of violets. She couldn't bear to think of Louis as mean. Anything else but that. 'And you're all clear to come to the wedding on Saturday?' she said. 'Yes, I wouldn't miss a good feed and booze up. Funny he's not having it in his own pub.' 'No, that wouldn't be good for the people who remembered Charlotte, or for his sons ... more tactful to have it elsewhere.' 'But a bloody railway station! Really, Lena.' He was so scornful, so full of ridicule. And yet she knew he wouldn't say anything of the sort. He would tell Ivy and Ernest that it had been an inspired thing to have a party in a pub by one of the big railway stations and then leave for a honeymoon. His pity and ridicule wouldn't be seen publicly. The public Louis was a man you couldn't fault. 'We have to be at the registry office at twelve,' she said. 'I know, I know. I'll be there. I've arranged a split shift.' 'You mean you have to go back to work after it?' 'Some of us have to work,' he said, hurt.

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When he worked she remembered James Williams, I met James almost too hard. She felt very uneasy. 'Williams today,' she said suddenly - 'And what was it her imagination or did he look like he had to report?' 'fish conversation, Not much, mainly wine conversation, lion. The fact that Laura Evans has gone the route of all other ladies before her, and probably after her.'

'She was a drunken tramp,' Louis said. 'I can't think why a man like that bothered with her.' 'Perhaps he was lonely.' 'With all that money I saw his house. How could he

be lonely?' Lena didn't leaving, she didn't want an atmosphere, a something that mattered not at all. , about fish and wine anyway. 'Why was James talking t me to lunch, he 'We were in a restaurant. He brough was passing by.')assing by?' 'When was James ever f 'Funny, that's just what I said to him.' 'So what was it then?' He really did took ill at ease. But she was light.,Well, that's what I'd like to know. He going to tell me something, and then he looked as *if he were seemed to decide against it.' 'What kind of thing?' 'I haven't an idea. Maybe he has a new Laura Evans nstalled. Who knows? He went back to talking about fish and wine and all.' - of you talk about me at all?' His voice 'And did nelthei was light, but he was poised. She could sense it. 'Only to tell me that you work all the hours God sends.' He came over and put both hands on her shoulders. He ki sed her on the forehead. It was a solem of thi),to do, like a ceremony, or someone acting in a play -'See you at the wedding tomorrow,' he said. 'Try to get some sleep, , she said to his back as he ran lightly down the stairs.agree at all. But he was on ' the point of slily row over

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She went into Ivy as she had promised. 'Is he out or in?' Ivy asked. 'Out.' tbeCwiOnde-coblave you for longer then.'Again Iv Y took out blessed h oured velvet suit. Again she thanked and You, none of th s would have happened. None of it,' she said in a choke'd voice. 'Give over, you'll have me crying now.' 'Ernest's out with some of the er 90OU friend Lena. 'Without lads, we can have a drink, you and V Lenalaughed. Don't tell me you're still meant to be on the wagon', 'Ah yes, but wait till I get my lines, as they say. Wher, I'm a Mrs again, then I'll introduce alcohol slowly back into our lives.' They raised a glass to the future. 'And what are your plans, Lena? You who sort out everyone else's lives.'

'I don't know. Louis and I were talking about going tc the seaside for a holiday next year.' 'Imagine. That would be gread' Ivy was very impressed. 'It's not definite yet, of course.' 'No, of course.' Lena longed to cry on her

friend's shoulder, to tell her that she thought there was something serious afoot, Something which James Williams was about to tell her and had chickened out at the last moment. Something she had read in Louis' eyes when she had spoken of the holiday next year. And when he had shouldered. w c aria put Ills hands on her She couldn't think what it might be. What over the yweo r e could be arse? Bthuatnththisewafalstithehne ht hefO en from her ighadb dr Ivy's wedding. This was no time to sit and drink and cry that there ain't no good in men. I in 'Do you think t's s Ily hav g the few drinks near the station?' Ivy asked.

'No, I think it's brilliant. You said Ernest doesn't want a

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,,, formal sit-d"n thing. This way it's a nice familiar setthat we all know and like. I've been in and arranged the ,ndwiches.' She had also arranged a small wedding cake ,at that was to be a surprise. . 'When I married Ron,' Ivy said, 'I had a girl called Elsie ~s iny bridesmaid. I haven't an idea where she is. I don't ,tiow what happened to her.' 'I don't know what's become of my bridesmaid first time ~ound either,' Lena said. 'I suppose she came to my :uneral. I forgot to check.' Her smile was a little watery. Ivy always felt uneasy when she joked about the events)f long ago. To her it was unfathomable that someone ~hould have to pretend to be dead instead of getting ~ivorced properly. 'But I'll never forget you, Lena. I mean :t. You're truer than any friend I ever had.' 'I think this port is making you weepy,' Lena said. 'I think I'm going to have to side with your husband and keep you off it altogether.' 'My husband,' Ivy said in wonder. 'Imagine, tomorrow I'll be Ernest's wife.' 'It's all you deserve,' said Lena. Her heart felt like a cold, heavy stone.

The letter from Kit was three pages long. Lena's first reaction was anxiety. Why was she saying so much, was there something that had to be told ... but as she skimmed it quickly it seemed to carry no terrible message. Kit wrote about the man called Francis Xavier Byrne who had been the one responsible for the events in Sullivan's Garage and how Sister Madeleine had harboured him as if he was a runaway fox. She wrote very simply about how her father had been beaten but had recovered well.

I know you'd be glad to hear Maura looked after him so well that he's as good as new again, and back making jokes and laughing like always.

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I tell you this because if you just read about It 11 paper that you get you might think it was worse d was. it's strange that you read news of Lough Glass,, 1, 1;, I don't know what kind of things to tell you about .h, place. The Hickeys have extended their shop. Mr Hi _e~ has taken the pledge and Mrs Hickey says that 6is means with the money they save they'll own a fleet of butchers' shops all over the country. Sister Madeleine's house stands empty, the door swinging open. I went to see it last week. There were rabbits inside and a couple of very tame-looking birds. I expect they thought she was coming back to feed them. The worst thing is that people say she was never any good, that she was more superstitious than saintly. I always liked her anyway and I'm not going to change. Clio feels the same. I don't see a great deal of Clio these days. She's very much 'in love' as she says with an awful fellow called Michael O'Connor, whose father owns a lot of hotels. He's very rich. His brother is in out class at Cathal Brugha Street and is even worse. I'm not 'in love' with anyone yet. Stevie Sullivan in the garage turned out to be much better than he looked as if he was going to be. His brother is still a monster though. Some things haven, t changed. Father Baily is the same, and Mother Bernard and Brother Healy. They were always like that I suppose and always will be. Farouk is the same, he doesn't mind Dad and Maura's dog, he just ignores it and walks loftily out of the room if the dog comes in. I don't know why I'm telling you all these things. I suppose I thought if you go every week to buy the newspaper you must still care about what's going on. All the very best to you. Kit

Kit was pleased that she had written. She didn't know why

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curt little notes' it ust be lonely e rl"Oure tof.1ler "s. h t ray m had charll en if she' It to write a few lines. W~5 as eh

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't cost Inu it didn't uch 1 love to know w nat, s goin.g 1 ,n,t tell you how rn c time and energy to write 'S on. mything YOU hay jIng thi, a short note so g., deliberately M2k ening You down With ~lteresting.,,, not think 1 am burd that YOU W thinking that correspondence. in And you were quite quite right ' after Would be glad to hear how well Maura looked ad indeed to hear that and to know father. 1 was very %, of his recovery. Love f rom Lena vo a.m. she was .1d., awake than Lena did not sleep. At t' She got up and made she often was in the middle of the dayi e had read that you it didn't work.ing silver. That herself some tea* flat was tidy. ' physical work like clean should do son' didn't have any silver.The say one was easy *3 they . mmaculate so that he would never she always kept it 1 ' wandered around, restless, they lived in a Pokey Place - Sh They were all tidy. opening cupboards and drawers. cars ago when she had it reminded her of the time those y . Ould to leave Lough Glass. -ything so that it w been about . ' ever ,rig leaving ispose of 'her she had spent SO l' ..a to be able to d' he perfect She wanted R1t Sot all her shoes nlended so ad even know that dothes for her. She h, ' was she to enawaY. Ho dlat they could be giv ead? Why had `Kit taken it into they would think she was d burn the letter. S clothes were her head to he where 1-0111 1 :)ked at the wardro g, She 01 hadbOu p for him, kept They hung there, the jackets She week, ' irts that she took to the Chinese laundry each the ~hey shone. 'Oh nonsense, . sh lished until 1 flrst time he protested, the shoes thatshe P? chadsaidthe yin doing rnyo'n5 Sh !n. and he hadn't protested aga luchforhirm.Butifshchad of course she had done too

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done any less it would have ended long ago. Long befoc now. She felt a chill. Why did she thinki !nding no.? The phone was on the landing, the public telephone that any of the tenants could use. If she spoke in a low voiceno one would hear her. No one would know her shame. she dialled the Dryden Hotel. A voice answered. She knew t was the night porter. 'I 'ust

wanted to enquire about tonight's function,' she said. 'I beg your pardon?' 'Just a quick question. What time do you expect it to be over?' she asked. 'I'm sorry, Madam. There's no function tonight, the voice said. 'Thank you, thank you very much,' she said. She saw the dawn come over the city. She knew how to do small miracles with make-up, but not major miracles. Nothing would hide black hollows in her face, nothing that would give a shine and sparkle to haunted eyes. She remembered hearing a coal miner, who had managed to hack his way out of a pit disaster, saying on the radio: 'I tried to think of something else, not the big thing. I wouldn't allow myself to believe that I might be dead, so I thought about the garden shed I was building, and I went through all the wood I'd need and the nails and the roofing. It saw me through.' That's what she would do, Lena decided. She would throw herself so much into Ivy's wedding that there would be no time to think that her own life might be about to end. She made a pot of tea, and toast with honey and brought it down to Ivy. 'I don't believe you.' Ivy's delight was so great she didn't notice the hollows and lines in the face of her bridesmaid. And on a wedding day people only look at the bride. 'You're going to have every single thing you want today)' Lena said, her smile so wide it made her face ache. She walked up to the Grace West Beauty Salon and handed Ivy over to their care. 'I'll be back for you at tea thirty,' she promised.

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think Louis Gray will be glad to see me off your hands. taking up so much of your time,' Ivy said. 'I don't mind about Louis.'

Grace gave Lena a sharp look. 'Do you want anything? bit of a C'n'b out, eyeshadow, ' she asked Lena quietly. Her voice to Grace was 'No, it goes deeper than that. -~eak. 1, re before and back,

' Grace S-dd.

you've been to c [ot this time.' They had moved away from WYS

Caring. ou, I'd bet you five to one.' 'I don't believe y ' Leria's voice was flat.

,I'm not a gambling woman ... hat man of yours.' 'Oh yes you are, you

gambled on t ,If I did I lost.' Grace said nothing. 'd. 'By the way, ivy doesn't

know,' Lena said ' 'Nobody knows,' Grace said. 'You're)Ust overtired,

imagining things.' 'Yes, sure.'sed. She made no telephone call She went

home and dress had been a split to the Dryden to discover whether they shift or not. She put the film in her camera, she prepared four envelopes of rice to throw it as well. She emptied the wastepaper baskets into a paper bag so that she could bring it down and put it in it to the dustbin. There she found a printed paper with the times and prices of flights to Ireland. It was crumpled up and thrown away. But it was not something she had ever had. So many times she had thought of flying there, but she had never gone so far as getting a brochure with the times of the plane departures. Louis couldn't have been thinking of going to Ireland without letting her know. It couldn't possibly mean that his latest fling might be someone from Ireland. That would be too hurtful to imagine. Or someone that he was taking to Ireland on a magic trip. Some girl that he was going to ways in the Emerald Isle. She left impressed with his fairytale in case other people might like to

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it in the basket, just where it was, and straightened up ~, back. This day was going to be very long and very 66 And now It was almost time to go and collect five Ernest was nervous too, and his friend Sammy was helping. just a stream of jokes in rapid fire delivery - Nothing reassuring. Nothing to calm the nervous Ernest down and tell him that It was a few words said at whatever volume he wished to say them. 'I feel such a fool in front of all these people,' Ernest complained. Lena wanted to smack him very hard. There were going to be sixteen people there altogether. All friends who wished them well. His two sons had accepted that Ivy would now be his wife. They would be there. He had nothing to do, nothing to organise, all he had to do was be bloody grateful that Ivy saw fit to marry him. Lena wondered was she becoming very anti-men. But that was not so. Mr Millar was an angel. James Williams was a gentleman. Martin had been a sort of saint. Peter Kelly had been a good and loyal friend. There was so many around her who were giving. And Ernest wasn't all that bad, he was gruff and inarticulate, he didn't have the silver tongue of Louis Gray. Louis, who would come and join them and lie his way into their hearts. When the day was over they would remember him and the lovely mirror he had given and the jokes he had told and how he had made people happy. She saw that

Sammy was perspiring heavily: the man really was nervous. These were timid people, she remembered; people who feared ritual and occasion. They didn't realise that they controlled it, and they could run it. They thought it controlled them, 'Well, are we ready for the road?' she asked the two men. 'The taxi is outside the door.' She had arranged that too and paid for it in advance. Otherwise they might have been searching the streets of London for one when they were all assembled.

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if he had only just thought of it' Sammy said, as if the essential part of the undertaking. He was as anxious as she'll come out when we're all set to go, is in the bedroom. She was absolutely lovely", and then she went to fetch her. 'You look said. you never ever looked better. Her face was lit up with pleasure. Her cream and maroon scarf was tied jauntily. She smiled, her eyes

looked years younger, the kind of lady you might find coming out of the Ritz Hotel. That was Lena's Ernest and Sammy looked at her in surprise and delight that their reward, the pure undisguised surprise that they had smartened up so well. And the slight fear that might not look her equal. He had 'Where's Louis?' Ivy said. As almost anyone would ever met Louis always said. specially.' She 'He'll meet us there, he has to get away Caxton linked Ivy's arm and escorted her out to the taxi. 'Please, please,' she said at the top of her voice, so that nobody could be in any doubt where they were heading. Beside Lena just before the ceremony. Louis slipped in beside her, they could have easily smelled of lavender soap. of course lavender soap at the Dryden. He smiled at her warmly. 'You look gorgeous,' he said appreciatively. The tan and cream outfit had cost a lot, but she could wear it for giving lectures, for meeting important new clients. For the many work engagements that stretched ahead of her as her future. 'Sweet little hat,' he whispered. And he might The function might have been cancelled. And it seemed have had to stay and work on late anyway so that it was a waste of time to come home. Don't ask, Lena herself. Leave yourself that escape route. you can always think it. If you ask then you will know. 'How was the function?' she asked before she could stop

herself. 'Don't ask,' he sighed rolling his eyes to heaven. 'Interminable, I suppose that's the best way to sum it UP.' 'What was it, a conference, a golden wedding or what?' 'A crowd of salesmen on the piss.' 'Still, it's good for the hotel.'

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1 ,I'm getting a bit sick of doing things so that th will make money.' hc)te~ She looked at him. This was her cue to So h persuade him to stay, tell hi~i what a good - ~t hirn, how highly they thought of him .pos""O.", It v~-as be to make any move. - . how unwise I t wOuld' This time she did it differently. 'Well, You should Louis., 'What?' They were whispering waiting for the little goup assemble , itself. Lena shoild be up beside Ivy. 'Don,t to them use you, take advantage of you, th let new posi - ere must be some seriously I . t , ions coming up. You should think about them He was staggered. 'But I thought you would . Never assume you know what I'm going to do or think ... which reminds me, I'm meant to be a witness here.' With perfect timing, at the arrival of the registrar she went i to stand beside Ivy and Ernest and Sammy, and take k part in a ceremony which felt a million miles away. Li 'e, little pinpoint down there on earth. Far below where her mind had gone to try and take in the whole situation.

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Lbeitnwatahsoouvgehrt, tEhrantetshteacnodupSIaemrnmigyhrtenlaexved ir honeymoon. The pints were bought, the brandies and gingers. Plates of sandwiches circulated in the corner of the pub that hid been reserved for them. Passers-by came to wish them luck and were offered a sandwich and even a drink for their trouble. Then the little cake came in and Lena photographed them cutting it.' She took some time to pose this picture. It would be the one on the wall. She straightened Ivy's hat and Ernest's tie. She even got them to put their hands together on the knife so that it looked like a real wedding picture. 'I'm surprised you didn't have her in white with half a dozen trainbearers,' Louis said under his breath. Lena flashed him a smile as if he had said something

and encouraging instead of sneering. Ivy was very "on the uptake"; she would notice if Lena glowered. Then they asked the barman to take a group picture, and

The bride and groom ran in a shower of rice across the station. They were going to spend three nights in a town thirty miles and one hour from London. Their friends waved them goodbye from the platform. The pubs were closed now, the little group wandered back through the barrier. The goodbyes were lengthy, Sammy wanted everyone to come to a drinking club he knew down in the City, but their heart wasn't in it. Lena knew that she could have invited them back to the flat, a couple of bottles of wine would have kept the party going until opening time. But she had no intention of doing it. Not for Ernest's two eldest sons, not for Sammy and the handful of people who couldn't organise anything for themselves. With huge regret she said she had to go back to work and she dragged Louis away with her. 'You don't really have to go back to work?' he said. but you do. I wanted to get you out of it without having the lot of them descend on the Dryden.'

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'I don't have to go back to work,' he said. 'You said you had a split shift, didn't you?' He looked at her searchingly to see was he being tested. 'My God, of course I did.' He hit his forehead. 'Well now, who's a good secretary to you then?' She was playful. 'I work too hard, Lena,' he said. 'I know you do.' She was insincere but he wouldn't know it. 'Maybe you're right. Maybe I should leave the place.' 'Not in the middle of a Saturday split shift. Wait till there's something better on offer, You could do any job.' They had walked as far as a tube station by now. 'Where are you going?' he asked. 'Well, if you have to go to work, so will I. It's no fun without you at home.'

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'Do you really think that?' He looked troubled. 'Come on, handsome, you know I do.' She kissed him, on the nose and looked around once to find him standing at the top of the steps looking after her as if the words were things to be said but he hadn't said them. Lena picked up the post. It always seemed a

luxury, to her to have a postal delivery on a Saturday. Imagine if there had been such a thing in Lough Glass. Mona Fitz and poor Tommy Bennet would have had a fit if anyone had suggested it. She divided it up expertly, marvelling as she often did at the way the business had blossomed. When she came here first the mail was hardly worth talking about and there had been only Jessie sitting bewildered and confused with overstuffed drawers full of papers that would take hours to sort out. If she had done nothing else in the years of life in London then at least she had built this monument to working women, their needs and hopes and chances. She made herself a cup of tea, took off her wedding hat with its little tan feather, and her shoes. She sat back in her office chair and wondered what she would like to do now. She decided she would like to write to Kit. She must be careful, she thought. It was fragile, the peace between them; she must not rush the fences and destroy it again. But this was the first time today that she had asked herself what she, Lena, would like to do. And she was going to do it. After hours of encouraging Ivy, calming Ernest, making conversation to Ernest's sons, taking pictures, throwing rice, smiling at everyone, telling Louis that she knew he had to go back to work, she bloody deserved to do what she wanted to do. She wrote to her daughter about the wedding she had just come from. About how well Ivy had looked and how nervous the groom had been, about the people in the pub who had all joined in and the passers-by who had waved as the happy couple got on to the train. She wrote light-heartedly and read through it many times to make sure that there was no tell-tale sign of bitterness or self pity.

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here in the three closely typed pages had she men't O'wd Louis Gray. gone 11 was as if he did not exist,

,Hello, Maura, it's Kit.' , your father's just gone down to 'Oh, Yit. I'm so sorry with Peter. He'll be so sorry you wasted your paddles' money on the phone.'

,Will you come on out of that, wicked stepmother. I didn't waste my money. Didn't I get to talk to you. 'We're all fine here, he's back to his old self again. And Ernest's cheerful too) head down studying hard. You won't know this house when you get back at Christmas.'

'Is Ernmet there, Maura?' 'No, love, you've missed him too. He's gone to the pictures with Anna. They seem to be pals again, r i eally, they're as bad as you and Clio used to be. How,s Clio, by the way?' 'I don't see her that much, Maura, but she's fine.' 'Ask her to ring home a bit. more, will You? I feel ashamed telling Lilian that you ring twice a week, it's like I'm boasting.' 'So you should, You're much nicer than Lilian,' Kit said. 'Stop that. Do you want me to give them any messages?' 'Yes. Tell Father that his only daughter was distraught to hear he was out drinking his skull off, 'Ind tell Emmet I'm keeping my promise-' C., 'I don't suppose I'm going to be told what promis 'No, but he'll know.' 'You're a great girl, Kit.' 'And you're not the worst either.'

,Clio, will we go out for chips?' you have to phone me as a 'Lord, who stood you up that last resort?'

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don't seek. It,s just an ultimatum. We expect you 'Did you go to special classes in how to be charm' They I ristmas and New Year, Clio, I ing,,). home to did you 'ust read a book?' , ~ to come . us for Ch. ' family would do.' Her face 'Sorry j , I'm in bad form.' rly nice girl from any nice 'Would chips help?' 'When did they not?' 'This is Philip. Kit, I was wondering would you like to g, to the pictures. Normally like, you know the way peopl, often go together.' 'I know the way people go to the pictures, Philip. But I can't, I've just said I'd meet Clio for chips.' 'Oh.' He sounded very disappointed. 'Come with us if you like,' she offered. 'Won't you want to giggle and laugh?' 'No, we're too old for that now. Come with us.'

'It would make life so much easier if you fancied Kevin O'Connor,' Clio said. 'I told you what I felt about him, I even told him by solicitor's letter, for God's sake. There's no use going after that particular fantasy.' 'A person can wish,' Clio said. 'I told Philip O'Brien he could join us, he seemed a bit at a loose end.' 'Of course he's at a loose end until he can take you to the Happy Ring House and buy you a miserable small diamond and chain you to his side.' Kit laughed. 'Where on earth is Michael? What has he done to bring on all this fit of the miseries?' 'He wants me to go to England with

him for Christmas and New Year. His sister's having a big party or something.' 'Well, isn't that great.' 'They're not letting me go.' 'Oh ask them nicely, Cho.' 'No, it's a brick wall. And Aunt Maura is in it too, up to her eyes in it.' 'But you're grown up. They'll have to see that.'

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like a full of tragedy. VWas I Kit consoled her. ,He Won t take anyone else,' 1 time he does see ,But it makes me such a fool. The one i nsults ot that mongrel Anna sitting hissing i ,Ly home it's 9 he hears that they're such

at him in the kitchen. Now gaolers they w~n,t let me accept a perfectly reasonable generous invitation to a friend's house.' owed go?' ,I have you told him that you're not all, to be sick or 'No, I'm too ashamed. I I'll pretend something, or I may just go. well enough to ,you won't do that.' Kit knew Clio 'his way realise that she wouldn't defy her family t 'No, I want to have some kind of family left to present

him with when we get engaged the Happy Ri g House and 'You really wilt get engaged,

in

all?' Kit was surprised. 'Oh eventually, not yet. Not the Happy Ring House.' Philip came in. 'We're talking about the future,' Kit said. 'Shut up,' Clio said. . gle about,' Philip said 'I knew you'd have things to 919 defensively. 11 , Giggle?' Clio said. haven't giggled in years. Will we have double chips?' 'Yes, and cappucino,' Kit said. 'I want your advice.' Philip had never asked their advice

before, he had always offered it. They leaned forward, interested. 'The floor in the golf club is banjaxed,' he said

eventually. Clio and Kit looked at each other mystified. 'Banjaxed completely,' he confirmied. So you see, they won't be able to have their New Year's Eve Dinner Dance there, and I thought ... well I thought I'd try to have it in our hotel. In the Central.'n such disbelief that 'In the Central ~' cried Clio and Kit I Philip felt defensive.

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'At least the floor. isn't subsiding,' he said, hurt. 'No of course it isn't.' Kit felt they should look less astounded. 'But a dance, a dinner dance.' 'The dining room is very big,' Philip said. It was indeed a great gloomy barn of a place. Kit had only eaten there once, the day Philip had invited them for breakfast. Despite all Maura's praise it had seemed a cheerless kind of room. 'And the band could be up in the bay window. \ve could have the curtains pulled back and if there was a moor, the lake would look great.' 'They might all freeze to death watching it though,' Clio said. , Philip would get proper heating,' Kit said. He gave her a grateful look. 'Yes, but I've only a few weeks. We'll have to tell the committee in the Golf Club that it can be done, and that it will be right . . .' 'They might take a bit of convincing,' Clio said. 'It's your father, Clio and yours, Kit. They're kind of the ones who could make it happen.' The girls were silent. In neither home had much good ever been spoken of the Central Hotel. 'And there's no floor, remember that.' 'They might mend their floor rather than go somewhere different,' Clio said. 'No, there's going to be a court case and all about their floor. The fellows that put it in gave them a guarantee and now it's failing to bits . . .' 'What do your parents say?' Kit cut through all the messentials. 'They don't know yet.' 'They'll say no,' Clio said. 'Well, they will atfirst, but they might say yes later. 'Six weeks after the dance is over.' Clio saw no good in anything or anyone in Lough Glass. 'So we must make them see it would be a great thing,' Philip said. 'Who's this we?' Kit asked suspiciously. 're 'Well, you, Kit. You could help me, I mean you nearly qualified too, and you got such good marks ... and

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hear You saying it could be done they,d believe you I Ir t wou d 'just me. No one ever thinks thei than t ey ,wn children grow up. was a danger of being drawn Kit was thoughtful. There orned from the start. Who something which was do Into orns with Mr and Mrs O'Brien)

wanted to lock h I philip looked I so full of hope. ful if it worked? A real And wouldn't it be wonde, dance where she and ,littering dance on their doorstep. A rid together under ~tevie Sullivan could whirl aroul ~et together with i h his gloomY , loured 119 ts. Where Emmet could ,knria

Kelly again. Where Philip could show the ideas of parents that he was indeed a grown-up man with his own. to let out his breath. 'Well?' he said, hardly daring of very small stones,' Clio, I can hear the tinkle of trays murmured to her. 'Idea, Philip,' cried Kit. 'And this will I think it's a great idea Clio.' solve all our problems too, 'How's that?' Clio was suspicious-R be helping at, a 'If there was a great dance that we'd a' L great smashing gala affair . . . then you could ask Ille magnificent Michael to come to that instead of you going to England . . . , I, It wouldn't work ... rmed to the idea. 'And I'd ask 'Yes, it would,' Kit would make a party the awful dreadful Kevin too just to 'hilip. You know I e like that, I it. Oh, stop looking at m d make it can , t stand Kevin, it's only to be sociable and good for Cho.' see the possibilities. 'Where Clio was beginning to would they stay -she asked 'At the hotel , , Kit said. 'I'm not sure if they'd think - , Kit insisted. 'The hotel will be terrific - - 'It's only a few weeks,' Philip said in a panic. 'Then we've got to work very hard. On everybody.' 'Everybody?' 515

'Yes, Clio's got to tell her parents and I've got to tel mine, and we'll get your father enthusiastic and awful Mr: Hickey, she's a great organiser.' 'She's not in the golf club though, is she?' Clio found,, flaw. 'No, but she'd love to be in that crowd so she'll wor~ like the devil.' 'When will we start?' Philip's eyes were shining now. 'This weekend. We'll all go home on the train on Friday night. They won't know what's hit them.' 'I don't think Dan would be able to take on the golf club dinner dance,' Kit's father said. 'Haven't you always said yourself that the place smells of stale gravy?' 'We've got a few weeks to get that smell out of the place,' Kit said. 'Oh go on, Father, be enthusiastic. It's people like you and Clio's father we need to push it that way.' 'I'm not the leading social light in the town . . . , 'No, but you could bring all the golf club crowd with you . . . otherwise it'll all be in the big town, in some well-known place and the poor old Central will never get a chance to show what it can do.' 'You've always said that the best thing it could do was fall to the ground.' Martin was shaking his head at the complete change of attitude. 'But I've grown up a bit. I want something

that will be good for Lough Glass. And for Philip. He's been my friend for years.' Maura intervened, 'It would be much handier, Martin, if it could be here ... and wouldn't it be lovely if we were all there. Emmet's keen to go, and Clio and Anna ... it would be a family outing for us rather than just the four oldies up in the club.' 'And you can't be in the club anyway, because of the floor,' Kit said. 'Well, I'd be very glad to give Dan and Mildred the turn . but do they want to ... ? I mean they never want to do anything new.'

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,If they thought that all you lot were coming ... the quality they'd agree.'

,We're not the quality,' Martin said. ,No, but we're as near as it gets in Lough Glass,' Kit sighed.

,will we help them, Philip, Kit and Cho?' Emmet asked Anna. . I'll take part in 'I don't want to do anything to help Clio all,' Anna said.

anything at all that might lead to her downf 'You don't mean that.' 10h but I do. just because you get on with Kit doesn't mean it's the normal thing to do.' 'I know.' Emmet did know. Very few people had a sister as marvellous as Kit. Someone who promised to help h i im

and did. She had been very successful indeed at distracting Stevie Sullivan's attention away from Anna Kelly. Emmet thought that Kit was reasonably good-looking. Of course, being her brother it was hard to look at things objectively; but he couldn't understand why Stevie would feel drawn to her instead of the beautiful Anna. But whatever Kit was doing it was working. 'I hope it's not an awful bore for you,' he had said to Kit. . . it 'No,' Kit had assured him. 'I'm quite enjoying actually. But don't assume it's working totally. I wouldn't

rush in there to Anna, you know.' 'You're right,'he said sagely. And he had been cautious. He could see that Anna was still hanging around hoping that Stevie would be available, but he always seemed to be in Dublin these days, she grumbled. 'Never mind, I'm sure he'll be around at Christmas,' Emmet was encouraging. 'Yes? Well, I hope so.' 'So you'll help in the dance ... it's a place you could go

with him.' Anna hadn't thought of that. it was indeed a heaven-sent opportunity, a glittering dance on their doorstep. She began to think of what she would wear. 'You're very kind,

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Emmet. I really appreciate it, what with you fancying and all that.' 'That's all right,' Emmet was courteous. 'After all, ~,ou fancied me too for a while. Maybe we might get back to't~e way we were, but I understand that's not the situation at Present.' 'You deserve someone terrific,' Anna said. 'Someone much more worthy of you than Patsy Hanley.' 'Patsy's quite nice to talk to when you know her,' Emmet hed. Clio knew)ust how to play it. She wouldn't plead with her

I parents to support the Central's bid to get into the big time in terms of entertainment. Instead, she put on the look of an early Christian martyr. 'Clio, sweetheart, please cheer up. We were looking forward to your coming home, now you just sit there as if the world were coming to an end.' 'It is as far as I'm concerned, Daddy.' 'We can't leave you off there to England wl%k don't know.' . p P ewe 'So You said. I gave in, you've won. But I'm not expected to be happy about it., 'We all have a life to live, clio. Your mother ry upset 1 is ve by you. 'A d i, Dn m very upset by her and by you. These are facts, addy.' 'You'll have a good Christmas here.' 'Sure.' 'And perhaps your friend Michael would come here and see you, see us all.' 'I can't invite him here; nothing ever happens in Lou Glass. You'd have to give a person a reason for drivingh from Dublin.' That night in Paddles' Peter Kelly heard about the plans that were afoot. 'I suppose we should support them,' Martin McMahon said. sis

'God, this might be the direct answer from God that we were looking for.' Dr Kelly seemed very pleased. 'Count as it, Martin, and if this doesn't put a smile on Clio's face nothing will.' Clio didn't sound enthusiastic. 'I thought you'd be pleased,' her father said, disappointed. Yes but it probably won't happen. You know all the old club fuddy duddies won't think the Central is good enough for their precious party on New Year's Eve.' 'It's not, it's a terrible hotel ... you and Kit have always been to the forefront of saying what a desperate place it is.' He was bewildered now. 'Things will always be desperate while old people don't make any move to change them,' Clio said. 'Yes, I know that's your view. We've ruined everything for you, but what are you lot doing? Tell me that, except sitting around complaining and sulking.' 'I'd help Philip get the hotel into good shape if his awful old parents and everyone else's awful old parents didn't go round shaking their shaggy locks and saying that things should just stay as they were, I Peter Kelly ran his hand over his rapidly balding head. 'It's very nice of you to refer to my shaggy locks,' he said, hoping to coax a smile out of her. Clio gave a watery smile. 'You're not the worst, Daddy.' 'And you all would like us to have the dinner dance there . even though we're crumbling old geriatrics . . 'Yes. The rest of us would be normal,' she said. 'I hope you have a daughter yourself one day and you'll know how much you'd love her to praise you instead of always finding fault,' he said, in a rare mood of admitting his affection for her. Normally they had a jokey, sparring relationship. 'I'm sure I'll be a terrific mother when the time comes,' Clio said. But she spoke with a slightly hollow note. She was five days late with her period; she fervently hoped the time to be a mother hadn't come yet.

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'They won't come here,' Philip's father said, sniffing. 'They've had many a year when they could come, but they preferred their great ugly concrete barn of a golf club,' Mildred said. Philip gritted his teeth. He would not lose his temper. Part of a hotelier's training was to remain outwardly calm when inwardly seething. They had been told that often enough. He had to practise it often enough in the various establishments where he had done his practical work. 'They have nowhere else to go,' he said. 'And we'd put ourselves out for one year, then they'd go back next year to their old shed

out there.' His mother felt very keenly the fact that she was not part of the Lough Glass golfing set. The fact that she didn't play the game seemed to her irrelevant. 'It could be such a success that they'd want it here next time, and so would other people.' 'How would they know?' Dan O'Brien asked. 'That it had been a success, if it was a success?) 'We'd take photographs, Send them to the papers, magazines even.' 'You'd be off back to Dublin and we'd be left with the work of it.' 'No. I'd come back, every weekend, and I'll be home for the Christmas holidays.' 'And what would you know. . .' his father began. Philip sounded weary but he knew that Kit and Clio were having similar arguments in their families. 'I don't know everything, but we're hoteliers, Father. All three of us, isn't that right, Mother? And if we're ever going to get a chance to do something different, a bit exciting ... isn't this one being handed to us on a plate?' He didn't know why, or what words he had used, but it worked. They looked at each other, a flicker of life and enthusiasm in their eyes. You would have to be quick to see it, but it was there. 'How will we heat the place?' his father asked, and Philip knew the battle had been won.

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They had ~ little committee, and they met in the hotel. Kit A the minutes of the meeting in a big notebook; then she tohe notes up afterwards and give everyone a ".ould type t ,opy so that t . hey would all know what they had agreed to ' io They sat in the freezing cold breakfast room, a square unattractive place only marginally touched by the small

~rnoky fire that sent all its heat up the chimney. They were very businesslike, even though dressed in duffel their outdoor clothes to keep warm: Kit in her naN ~oat and white angora scarf; Clio in her grey flannel coat with its peach-coloured blouse showing at the neck - she had read that p each gave a good glow to the face - Anna in her tartan jacket; Patsy Hanley belted into her navy gaberdine coat that was too small for her and also not smart enough. She made a resolve to tell her mother that there was no point in being the daughter of the drapery if you ended up the least well-dressed girl in Lough Glass. Emmet in his thick

wool polo-neck sweater and belted brown jacket. Michael Sullivan with his long dark hair below the collar of his grey overcoat. Not as good-looking as his elder brother, but one day, when the pimples were gone and his face and shoulders filled out, he might well turn into the same kind of heartbreaker. The young people of Lough Glass determined that their New Year's Eve would be the kind of success they saw in the pictures that when they went to the pictures. The kind other people had and that they would have to create themselves if it were to come to Lough Glass. Philip decided that he had to wear indoor clothes as some kind of act of faith in his hotel, it might be seen as letting the side down if he too were dressed in a kind of lifeboatman's outfit that would make the place tolerable. He was doing quite well as chairman ... he seemed to know at the outset that he should never think of it as his hotel or his dinner dance, but as theirs. 'Have any of us ever been to anything up in the golf club?' he asked.

521 Nobody had. That was the first priority; they were to find out what aspects of the place had been good, and what needed improvements. Everyone had a specific job to do. Even Patsy Hanley, whose mother wouldn't have it, there - Philip was able to find her a responsibility. Patsy was to discover what kind of facilities they had in the ladies cloakroom: were there mirrors, how many, lavatories, did they hang their coats on a rail or did they have a lady who gave them cloakroom tickets? Would it be better to use one of the hotel bedrooms for this purpose? Patsy was to come back with her report on Sunday afternoon, 'How will I find it all out?' she asked. 'Research,' Philip said. 'You'd be in the way of asking people things. You're good at chatting to people,' Emmet said. He noticed Anna Kelly perk up her head as he did so. Then Emmet himself would be in charge of what the gentlemen would require. He would ask his father and Dr Kelly and Father Baily and anyone who went to the Golf Club. Clio was going to come back with her ideas on decoration. It was very important, the first look of a place. Her ideas would be put to the group and they would vote on what they could do and what might be beyond them, Clio was flattered that people thought her ideas might be beyond them. She made up her mind to look at magazines and study the thing properly. Michael Sullivan and Kevin Wall were deputed to find out how the front of the hotel could be altered so that it looked more splendid. Michael, because the garage had improved its appearance and secured troughs of plants and flowers to smarten it up; Kevin because his brother

was a jobbing builder, and the materials would naturally be bought from Wall's. They were to come back with an estimate. Anna Kelly was to concentrate on curtains and lighting. Hers were to be practical suggestions, the matter of image was left to Clio. 'How will I know what we should do with

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designer has it. I know what the artistic director wants for the whole hotel)' Anna was being heavily undermined for the sarcastic. it. 'Ah, but that's the hard Philip didn't appear to see it. up will have to be sheer part, Anna. Whatever you come to this, there's no question of there being any money to

anything else. . you're on your own to coordinate anything with any Anna seemed pleased by this. own., Zip with admiration. He did seem to Kit looked at Philip. I have the thing under control, and he was far more diplomatic than she would ever have believed. 'What will I do?' she heard herself asking, almost too eagerly. After all, she had been the moving force behind it. 'Will I just keep the notes?' 'Kit and I will do the food,' Philip said. 'We are the trained folk, after all, and we want them to have a meal they'll never forget.' 'They'll never forget the night, anyway,' Kevin Wall said. 'Most of them will be taken to the county hospital with frostbite.' 'My father's going to tell us by Sunday just how much he can afford to spend on storage heaters and radiators.' Philip was unperturbed. 'Will we meet here at three o'clock?' And they went their ways, each with a dream. Clio, With great relief that motherhood did not seem imminent, was in high good humour. She thought about the New Year's Eve dance. She would see that at least one of the Central's terrifyingly plain rooms would be properly done up, one that would be away from prying eyes. Patsy Hanley left happy. Emmet McMahon had much of her in front of that stuck-up Anna Kelly. Kevin Wall and Michael Sullivan wouldn't have admitted it to anyone, but they were flattered to be part of something new. It hadn't been long ago since they were regarded as the young thugs that would have to be kept away from any function rather than invited in to help run it.

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Philip was pleased with how it had gone. They were ~. offering to help. If it failed it would be a group failure, and, Kit in particular would be at his side, win or lose. Emmet McMahon knew that this dance would be the great opportunity to let Anna Kelly come back to him on his terms in his own town. Kit McMahon and Anna Kelly looked over at the garage where Stevie was talking to a client. Neither of them would interrupt him during working hours. Both of them had huge hopes of him when the dance came to town on New Year's Eve.

Lena did not know how she had managed to survive the days after Ivy's wedding. How had she gone on acting normally to everyone? Someone had told her that chickens did this; if you cut off their heads they still ran around for a while, just as if they still had a head and everything was normal. Nobody said what happened then. They probably just fell over and died. There had been so many discoveries in the past week, Things she had not set out to discover. And did not want to know. She knew that he must be about to leave the Dryden. That he was going to leave her and go far away. Sometimes she suspected that he was going to Ireland. He came in so rarely, often to pick up mail which had suddenly started arriving at the flat rather than at the hotel. She never remembered him getting any letters at home before. There were references to Ireland in the conversation. Not the Ireland of long ago that they knew ... but today's Ireland. He never stayed the night. She never asked for details of functions or late shifts. It was as if they were both waiting. Waiting for the day when he would tell her. Lena felt very frail, the thread that was holding her together was so fragile it could easily break. When she saw the envelope from Kit so soon after she had writteng her heart turned over with fear. Please may her daughter

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not say anything scathing 1, 1to her. Not just now, not at this P0 at P ease may Kit not write dismissively about her long now much regretted letter describing ivy's weddi d I Ing. Suppose Kit were to sav that she did not wish to hear t1tle-tattle about these people she didn't know. Suppose Kit wrote to say that she wanted no more letters, that she ,vanted to snap the lifeline that was all Lena had. Please, God . . . Lena said as she opened the envelope. She realised it was a long time since she had asked a God for something. Why should it work now?

Dear Lena, That sounds a great wedding. It was like seeing a film, I could imagine everyone, especially the terrible Best Man. I realise how much I have missed your letters from the time when you were just Lena, my mother's friend. And I missed writing to you, though these days there's hardly time to breathe, let alone write. You'll never believe what we're going to do, sit down before you read this we're going to try and have a glittering fabulous New Year's Gala at O'Brien's hotel ... Hardly daring to believe her luck Lena, read with shining eyes the tale of the hotel's transformation and the committee hard at work. Even Clio is taking part, Kit wrote, it's only because these terrible O'Connors that she is so taken with are going to be there. She thought they were going to be in London and miss it but once the almighty Michael said he was going to be present then it all had Clio's blessing. Lena hugged herself and laughed aloud to read this. She could hear Kit's voice ... just as she had been at nine, ten, eleven, twelve ... always complaining about Clairs and graces, and yet always involved with her as well. with life and enthusiasm. in the last The letter sparkled paragraph it changed its tone,

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You didn't mention that Louis was at the wedding. Don't feel that he can't be mentioned or anything, I wouldn't want you to think that he has to be cut out of what you tell me.

It ended, 'Warmest wishes always, Kit,'

She couldn't tell Kit about Louis. All she had left in the world was Kit, and Lena was going to be some kind of person in the girl's eyes, not a worn-out, thrown-aside fool, which was actually what she was. She read over and over and over her daughter's plans for the hotel. Some of them ludicrous, some of them well within anyone's power. She wondered how much money she had: she would love to have invested it there and then in a refurbishment programme for the Central Hotel, Lough Glass. After all, hotels were doing very well in Ireland, Their time was coming. Lena had reason to know this very well.

'We'll have to come home again next weekend,' Kit told Philip. 'I can't ask you all to do that.' 'It's only Clio and myself. The others are there already.'

They sat companionably in the summer-house which they had agreed to paint and surround with fairy lights for the occasion. 'Well, it's taking you away from whatever keeps you both in Dublin.' He was a bit different. He was so much nicer than when he had assumed that they were like foreign princes and princesses, promised to each other from birth, 'Oh, better for Cho to come home, let me tell you. That eejit she is stuck on values her much more when she makes a move out of Dublin instead of waiting on his every move.' 'And what about you?'

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,j told you. I have no romances. ..Othing to keep me in Dublin.' , Sullivan was home And she spoke the truth. Stevie ,ing his business every weekend. She made no move to ,~n "Ontact him, but she.was there like a sentinel in case he glight make any step in the direction of Anna Kelly. 1'be O'Connor hotels all had a Christmas programme. It was becoming quite a smart thing for a family to go and stay in one of their hotels. Everything done for You,

wonderful atmosphere, people said. Those who said it didn't have the real spirit of Christmas were almost always those who didn't have the money to afford it. 'Will you be helping out at one of them?' Kit asked Kevin O'Connor. 'Jesus, no. I ha~e enough work to do all term wittaking that lot on in my holidays,' he said. boys could have been Again Kit wondered how two have no brought up in such a way that they seemed to the'

interest at all in what was after all going to be ir inheritance. 'So where will it be then" llow, a fianc6 I think 'My sister in England has a new fe t I gather the ring's . Oh heavy, heavy secrecy ... bu there.' being bought and we're all to go over is he English?' -rhe O'Connors knew very 'I don't know. I Suppose Solittle of each other's business. rove)' 'Do your father -and mother app 'I'd say they're so relieved that Mary Paula's getting hitched they don't care ... 'I'm sure that's not so ... n the tooth.' 'But it is. She's getting very long i 'How old exactly? '\Vait till I see. it's always a grey area, but she must be nearly thirty. We're the two youngest by a lot, Michael and I., 'Uttle afterthoughts ... how sweet,' Kit said. Hand on heart, there's

'Do you have a big family?' 'Just one brother.' Kit had told him before but he hadn't remembered. 'Oh, very posh. Like Protestants, small families,' 'Clio has only two in her family also.' 'Yea, Michael told me there's a really frightful sister. She is a bit of a pain all right,' Kit agreed. 'Good. looking though. Do you like Mary Paula, the one in England?' 'I hardly remember her,' said Kevin O'Connor. 'She was okay, she always had friends round the place. I think she thought we were dead boring. She's only keen on us going over to England for this party so that she can field a team.' 'You're not all mad keen to go then, are you?' 'No. I'm not particularly. Why? Are you arranging another party?' He moved closer to her. 'In a way I am. It's going to be fabulous, we've taken over Philip's hotel. Everyone will stay there.' 'But that's in the arse end of the world.' His enthusiasm died. 'It's In my home town, and Clio's, and Stevie's and Phil's. It's a beautiful old Georgian house, not a big ugly modern concrete block. We're going to have a fantastic New Year there. I was going to ask you, but if you're so unnuessive ... 'I'm not dismissive. . . 'He was full of contrition now. 'Yes well, maybe it's too late . . . ' 'Will Michael be going ... will there be a crowd from Dublin?' 'I . . - no idea whether Michael will be going or not; presumably if he answers Clio the way you answered me, he won't. But don't worry, we'll have plenty who will.' 'No, you got the wrong end of the stick. . . ' 'Listen, our New Year's Eve dinner dance can well do without the O'Connor brothers ... just know that. . . ' He blustered for a while then went away to make a phone call. Kit smiled to herself. She didn't even need to listen to know who he was calling and with what advice.

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here. Did Clio say anything to Helen, Michael. Kevin still says placidly about a big dance in this godforsaken place they live it won't _No) Well, ask her. And for God's sake be nice about it ,~,~,~,ou do want to go. We'll be staying in a hotel, 'Mary Paula won't give a like last time He paused. ,rnn. we'll stay for Christmas, that will be enough .knyway, this will be a lot of fun.'

'We must get Spot Prizes,' Philip said to Kit. 'Of course we must. Let's ask Anna to collect them.'

'Why Anna?' of charming- People 'She's good-looking, she's kind, don't say no to her.' they wouldn't say no to you, 'You're good-looking, either,' he said. 'Jesus Christ, Philip, I've got enough to do ... let Anna loose on them. Anyway she's there the whole time, I'm not, say it out loud, Make it a point of honour that she gets a in front of everyone that she'll have a hard job extracting them. She'll kill herself.' 'You don't like her, do you?' in thoughtfully - She must be careful not Kit looked at him in inclined to think of her to let anyone get this idea. 'I'm still I as Clio's awful little sister at times. But usually I think she's terrific, that's why I suggested she'd be a good one to wheedle the prizes out of people.' 'Yes,' Philip said. 'Stevie Sullivan thinks she's the bee's knee.' 'Silly.' 'Go on, he's years older than she is.' 'That's what I hear, anyway,' Philip said. He looked like his mother when he spoke like that: prissy, mouth pursed, a real village gossip. 'I hear Stevie Sullivan fancies everything that moves,' she said. 'But let that not detain us. We have a banquet to organise.' She took his arm companionably, and Philip straightened up with pride. Everything was going his way at last. He thought had been right to take things slowly and not rush in foolishly. Here he was in Dublin with Kit's arm in his,

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making plans for his hotel, their hotel. It was exactly as he had hoped. 'The O'Connor boys will be coming down to stay, oh, New Year, I gather.' Maura spoke in the very over-casual voice she used when she was anxious about something. She was standing at the door of Kit's bedroom. 'That's right, they're going to stay in the hotel. Quite, few from Dublin are coming: Philip's giving us a special price. 'He should give it to you free after all you're doing.' Maura had seen the frenzied activity. 'It'll be great, everyone's really putting their hearts into it,' Kit said. 'The O'Connors?' Maura said. 'Yes?' 'Clio's going out with one of them, isn't she?' 'Oh you know Clio, half of Dublin admires her.' 'It's not just idle curiosity, Kit. I never ask you about your friends or cho's.' 'You do ask about the O'Connors, though,' Kit said. 'Yes, that's perfectly true, I do. And I'll tell you why.' Maura's face had got a little pink. She stood in the doorway slightly at a loss. 'Oh come on in,

Maura, sit down.' Kit moved her notes and folders from a chair to make room. 'In the olden days I used to know their father, and I never liked him, but that's not the reason. Poor Mildred O'Brien is like a wet week and look at how well Philip's turned out.' 'Yes, I know.' Kit waited. 'Well, I was in Dublin last week. 'You didn't tell me . . . ' 'I just went for an examination, tests . . 'Oh Maura!' Kit was stricken. 'No, please Kit. This is why I didn't tell you. I'm a middle-aged woman, all kinds of bits and parts of me aren't working any more. I thought it best to go quietly. . .'

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,Xnd what did they find F ly hi yet and prob ,,rhey didn't find anyt ing ., , .1 at all ... let me finish ,,d anything ,\What were they looking for ... may have to have a ,They were looking at mv womb; I 4vsterectOMY- Apparently it, a great operation; you feel ever felt after it, but it's a long way down ~tter than you a tell you any of this, I haven't

je road. I didn't inten to cven told your father.' our family.' ,you must let us share, we're y,! grateful for the ,I know, and I was ever anyone mor(s nofamily they got than I am. But believe me that ve wormed all this Out of me. was going to say ... you Now can I tell you what I wanted to?' 'Yes, go on . - - ,s iust overnight you as In Vincent's, it wa 'When I w is O'Connor, the father of know, who did I meet but Franc the twins.' ital?' 'Fingers.?.Was he in hosp yway, he was the last 'Or visiting someone ... An person 1 wanted to meet, I can tell you. And he was full Of chat and wanting to take me off to the Shelbourne for coffee.' . you get up to from your sick'Well, look at the anbed in Dublin.' ay from him but he insisted that we sit 'I tried to get aw and have a chat over old times ... 'And?' Kit waited. vulgar man, he always was and 'And Kit - - . he's a very ' 'd well he as good as said, he always will be . , . but he sal , ember his words implied Kit waited. I can't rem exactly, I suppose I sort of deliberately didn't want to remember them, Or to be talking to him at all, I had MY own worries ...) She paused. ically. 'Poor Maura,' Kit said sympatheti -a' d 'And he sort Of said3 he as ~:d s' V, ;a uSa'a 'Oh come on, what did he y something it did the trick. it shocked Maura into saying ab, may not

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1 at last. 'He said h's two sons were having their way ,ith you and Clio, and they'd been invited down her, fo, week for more of it after Christmas, and he's very annOV,d because he wanted them all to go to England to one of 1 hi other children who's just got engaged to someone, and',', coming home to run one of his hotels 'He said what?'

Kit's face was white with rage, 'Now, Maura. I'm goin g to tell you something that will cheer you up greatly. I am a virgin, I have never been to bed with anybody, but if the survival of the human race depended on it I wouldn't go to bed with that great misshapen oaf, Kevin O'Connor.' Maura was startled by the strength of Kit's reaction. 'I wish I hadn't said anything. . .' she began. 'Oh, but I'm glad you did, very glad.' Kit's eyes flashed with anger. 'Perhaps we should leave it . . .' Maura knew she had opened floodgates. 'No, I can't leave it. They made an undertaking, those disgusting creepy O'Connors. They signed a legal document pron . . to tell any more of these lies, and now they've bloody broken it.' 'They signed a what?' Maura was horrified. 'I sent Kevin O'Connor a solicitor's letter because he imputed unchastity to a woman, and he apologised and his father did and they paid me compensation for the slight on my reputation, and for casting aspersions on my virtue and possibly minimising my marriage chances.' Maura's eyes were wide in disbelief. 'Kit, you're making this up.' 'I'll show you the letter from Fingers,' she said smiling broadly. 'A solicitor's letter! You consulted a law firm?' Maura felt weak at the shock. 'Yes, well, to be strictly honest, it was Paddy Barry -YOU know Frankie's brother - but it was on real solicitor's paper and it looked legal . . . anyway it frightened them to death and they paid up.' Kit grinned with pleasure remembering it.

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,You got a friend ... a student . . th ,,,,laces from the o,Connors. ;ng this.'
to demand money can't believe I'm
hear said ... look what Kevin O'Connor

'Look what he I that I'd do it with anyone and said I He said I was anyone's,
1,j done it with him. He told his brother, he told , Philip O'Brien, he could

have taken an advertisement in the Evening Herald for all I know ... and I'm meant to ignore it, just his little way of having fun.'

and she said she'd seen Kit so angry. 'No, of course not Maura had never ... but - - .' Is 'But nothing Maura ... there are no buts in this ... her father who paid out good money obviously thinks it's a tale worth telling and trots it out to my stepmother ... after all his undertakings . . .' She looked very determined. 'What are you going to do?' Maura asked anxiously. 'I may ask my lawyer to remind him of his obligations,' Kit sounded lousy. 'You and your lawyer will get caught,' Maura warned. 'Right. I think you are right actually. I tell him I'm approaching him personally before placing it all in the hands of solicitors again.' Kit smiled at the challenge Her enthusiasm and sense of outrage was ahead. infectious. Maura began to share it. 'I agree it is appalling that he should be allowed to say such things about you and Clio.'

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Maura's eyes were fixed on Kit's for a long moment. 'I'm fighting my own battles on this one Ma said. 'Clio can fight her!.' - to be told that her And Maura knew without having . . . any solicitor's sister's daughter would not be sending letters.

She marked the envelope Strictly Confidential

Dear Mr O'Connor, My solicitor would probably disapprove of MY contacting you personally but I am doing so because of

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family connections. You will remember the letter you sent to me (copy enclosed) and the undertaking It contains. Unfortunately grave news has reached me that you spoke in the very terms that caused my having to seek legal redress in the first place, and you addressed these remarks to my stepmother, Mrs Maura McMahon (née Hayes). I demand that you write a letter to my stepmother at once retracting every word that you said in this regard) and that you also give me your assurance that I do not have to have recourse to further legal action. Normally I would have taken such action, but my friend Cliona Kelly is friendly with your son Michael, and I would

not wish to make trouble between the families. I look forward to hearing from you tomorrow, Yours faithfully, Mary Katherine McMahon
'Kevin?' 'Is that you, Pa?' 'Turn off that bloody rock and roll and you'd know who's on the phone. Do you do any work or do you just fill your head with that jungle music?' 'You don't often ring me, Pa,' Kevin said uneasily. 'No, is it any wonder? You know this girl Mary Katherine ...?', 'Who?' 'The McMahon girl from Lough Glass.' 'Kit, yes. What about her?' 'What about her, what about her? Didn't I have to pay out good money to shut her up when you said you'd ridden her more often than Roy Rogers rode Trigger ...?', 'Yes, but that's all over now, Pa. You know I told you there was a misunderstanding.' 'I tell you there was a misunderstanding ... is she cracked, off her head or something ...?', 'No, she's not, she's terrific. Why do you ask?' 'There

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silence. 'What is it, Pa? We apologise, well, I apologise and you paid and Kit accepted it and that was April, hat. And we're quite friendly now ...', yes. Right.' Fingers O'Connor saw that the blame must be entirely his. He had thought it would make that nice plump Maura Hayes more pliable. What a mistake it had been. 'And this girl and her friend ... are they the halfwits you're going to cancel the whole arrangements for

Christmas to go and see, down in Bally-mac-flash or whatever it's called?' 'Lough Glass, and it's only for the New Year. Ma told you. We'll be in London for Christmas.' 'I can't wait,' said his father and hung up. 'Kit, it's Maura. I can't talk long, I'm ringing from work.' 'Hello, Maura. Tell Stevie that the labourer is worthy of her hire, you're entitled to the odd phone call.' 'He's out of the office. Kit, I got the most extraordinary letter from Fingers O'Connor.' Kit giggled. 'I thought you would. I got one too.' 'Kit you didn't, you didn't. . . ' 'That's it, Maura, I didn't. And I'm damned if that madman of a son of his is going to say I did . . . ,
'Clio?' 'Hello, Michael.' 'Can I come round and see you?' 'No, I've got loads to do. I'm trying to work out a plan for decorating a big barn of a room.' 'Is this down in the hotel in Lough Glass?' 'Yes, how did you know?' She had said nothing to Michael about it yet, she wanted to be sure it was going to work before she began to persuade him. 'Kevin told me, and my dad.'

'Yeah, it should be great.' 'Why didn't you ask me?' Michael was aggrieved. 'You're going to be away in England, staying with Mary Paula, remember?'
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'I don't have to, Kevin's not going.' 'Well, then.' 'Well, what? Why didn't you ask me?' 'You didn't seem to rate Lough Glass very highly when you were there last.' 'That's because everything went wrong and your sister was behaving like an Alsatian with distemper.' Clio laughed. 'That's good. I'll remember that.' 'Can I come then? To Lough Glass?' 'I'd love it if you would. I didn't want you to be bored, that's all.' 'And Clio, another thing ... you know Kit?' 'Of course I do. I've known her since I was six months old.' 'I might not have been right about her and Kevin being at it like knives.' 'I know you weren't right.' 'Maybe we'd better not say that she was, you know?' 'I never said she was. Jesus, you didn't say it, did you?' 'This is becoming more like a police state,' ~ said Michael.

Peter Kelly and Martin were in Paddles' bar. 'I see that Fingers O'Connor has bought a new hotel that'll be his fifth,' Dr Kelly said. 'I wonder how he got a name like that.' Martin McMahon was thoughtful. 'It's not a good one for a businessman, sounds as if he's into shady deals.' 'But these names stick. Do you remember Arse Armstrong?' They laughed like boys. 'Where is he now? Didn't he join the priesthood?' 'Oh I think Arse is a bishop or something out in Africa. Maybe he wears a long white frock. You wouldn't know the reason for the nickname.' 'Well, however Fingers got the name, it seems that everything he touches turns to gold. Our Clio seems very friendly with his son. We haven't met him yet, but

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apparently he's coming down here for all the Versailles Ball activity up in Dan O'Brien's.' Martin McMahon smiled. 'Isn't it great that they all come home and seem so wrapped up in it? Our house is ~rped high and low in recipes and table decorations . . .', 'You're lucky, we have branches of trees in ours,' said Peter Kelly. God, what's that for?' ~d Clio uses. Still, I'm happy Search me. Decor is the worst I see she's not gone gallivanting with young O'Connor. Maura

always gives me the impression that the father was a bit wild and his sons could be the same.' 'Ah, Clio's well able to look after herself,' said Martin NUMahon. 'I hope so. God, it's one thing I couldn't bear, some fellow taking advantage of one of my girls. I'd kill them, you know, not that I'm a violent man.'

U, KitF 'When am I going to see yo 1 . 'Well, Stevie aren't you looking at me now 'I am for two minutes, then you'll be off down to your committee meeting in Dan O'Brien's mausoleum.' 'Never to be called that again ... all is changed, changed utterly.' 'That's not fair, I haven't read Yeats.' 'At least you knew it was Yeats.' 'So where'll we go and when?' 'You could take me out to dinner in the Castle Hotel.' 'You're joking' 'I'll pay for myself.' 'It's not the money. What would we want to go to the Castle Hotel for?' 'To see what competition we have.' 'But that's ludicrous. It's an ordinary Saturday night, it's not a New Year's Eve Ball, you'll not be comparing like with like.' 'I'd consider it research, Stevie ... 'Oh yeah?'

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'And great fun . . .' She smiled up at him. 'I'll ne,er forget how well you looked that night in Dublin,' 'You don't want me to put on a monkey suit?' 'No, but you're super when you're dressed up.' 'Will you dress up too ? 1 haven't forgotten that nice backless number.' 'No, 1 haven't got any backless things down here, and anyway we don't want. . .' she paused. 'You're right, we don't want ... but let's go there anyway. It's research, remember . . 'If we're caught. . .' Kit said. 'Yes, and we don't need to be.' They both recognised the need for their outings to be secret.

The committee meeting on Sunday went well. Everyone had brought news of some sort. Kevin Wall and Michael Sullivan had technical details to blind everyone, but the estimates about the cost of labour were depressing. 'We can't afford that,' Philip said firmly. 'It's a pity, though, the front would look very well if we had all these shrubs in containers and a new sign painted.' Clio was keen that the place should not look like a hick town when the guests approached. 'We could plant things ourselves, I suppose,' Michael Sullivan suggested. 'In what?' they asked. They were not dismissive, they wanted to know. 'Barrels,' Michael Sullivan said. And that was agreed. Everyone would get at least two barrels. They divided up the public houses

between them so that the same people would not be asked over and over. This was regarded as men's work. They would dig shrubs and greenery from the lakeside. 'Are we allowed to?' Anna Kelly asked. 'We'll ask later,' Emmet said. Clio had a friend who went to the College of Art: she could do a new sign. She would have to be paid for the

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materials. Kevin Wall said they could get the paint from the I No one asked in too great detail how this hard",are SnOp. tiated with his father. They agreed that would be nego Kevin would deliver the paint to Cl'o's house and the friend would come down and paint it before Christmas. Anna Kelly had drawings of the curtains. They would be looped back from the window and ti ed with red and white ri-bons. Huge bunches of holly would be pinned to the r'bbons. Anna said that the frames needed to be painted

white. She would organise a painting team if there were whintees. She had ideas for the lighting too, wine bottles with candies in them. They must be high on the mantelpiecesin places where they couldn't be knocked over. Each bottle would have a spray of holly attached to"t. The main centre lights should not be on at all; in fact, Philip should have the bulbs taken out of them in case they should be switched on accidentally. Everyone was pleased with Anna's industry. Kit watched her accept the praise. She was strikingly pretty, much more glamorous than Clio. Kit must remember the way she looked at people, itwas minx-like. She half looked d then looked away. It made her seem shy and vulnerable when in fact she was nothing of the sort. Kit noted every glance and filed it for further use. Patsy Hanley had none of those skills but she read eagerly from her notebook that in a gathering where there might be sixty or more ladies, they would need at least five lavatories. This caused some gloom. 'You see, they'll all want to go at the same time,' Patsy explained, 'That's what I found out.' Why can't they go like everyone else, when it's time. complained Kevin Wall. . 'Because you can't have them hopping about holding on, it would spoil the atmosphere,' Patsy said. We're going to have to get new facilities some time, Philip said. 'Leave that with me.' 'You'll never get your father to agree to five toilets in the next few weeks.' Kit was concerned.

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'No, but that's my problem. Patsy's done the research, we're grateful for it.' Emmet gave the good news that men were much less fussy. Two cabinets and a urinal would be fine. He also had learned that men loved a place where there could be pints as well, so maybe the bar would broaden itself out a bit for the night, and have a couple of extra barmen on there to serve ... the money would be taken in pints ... otherwise Emmet had learned they might all be slipping out to Paddles' or across to O'Shea's. 'They don't do that up in the club,' Clio said. 'No, that's because the club is as deserted as the bog of Allen,' Emmet said. Anna Kelly looked at him admiringly. Emmet noticed and reddened with pleasure. Clio spoke about the hotel's image. She was glad that the new sign had been agreed, and thought that some money might be diverted to have a light which would illuminate it. 'But doesn't everyone know where it is? It's not as if anyone would be looking for the Central,' Kevin said. Philip agreed with Clio. 'It's a statement, isn't that what you mean?' he said. 'That's exactly what I mean.' Clio was mollified, She thought that a lot of the sombre, dark brown pictures in the halls should be replaced with garlands of ivy. There were miles of it by the lake, nothing would make a better decoration. And that the guests should be greeted in the vestibule with a glass of warmed wine with cinnamon in it. Something to make them feel welcome. 'I hope I'm not venturing into Kit's territory here,' she said tentatively. 'I know you're in charge of food and drink ... but it is part of the image. The statement.' 'Perfect,' said Kit with gritted teeth. And it was a good idea. In one stroke Clio had managed to conquer the very-.worst bits of the hotel, the ugly entrance way, the hideous sepia pictures in their ugly frames, and also give an illusion of warmth by offering a warm drink.

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,And now the food.' Philip pointed at Kit. She drew a deep breath. Her idea was to have a buffet. She knew it would meet with huge resistance from the diners and wanted to try it out on the audience here. It ,ould be self-service where you could come back to the have seconds or even third helpings. She table again and ss than for a showed them her costings. it would be le

traditional sit-down supper. For one thing you would save
 ed you wouldn't need as many experienc: on waitresses people to attend
 tables, and serve. Anyone could clear. 'Kids from the convent could clear,'
 she explained. 'or from the Brothers,' Kevin Wall said. 'Yes, possibly.' Kit
 had her doubts. She said that at a formal meat there would be soup or
 melon, and then always chicken and ham. There would have to be potatoes,
 gravy and two other vegetables, it would be a lot more work than preparing
 a buffet. 'But will they think they've had a dinner)' Emmet wanted to know.
 'They'll have had three helpings, some of them,' Kit assured him. 'But
 suppose everything gets finished, suppose they all eat the chicken in wine
 sauce and no one eats the cold tongue, what then?' Patsy Hanley spoke with
 the intensity
 of someone who would never have eaten cold tongue but feared with her
 luck it might be all that was left on when her turn came. Patiently Kit
 pleaded her case. As she had suspected they all objected. 'But that's what all
 the places in Dublin are be~itnmniing to do, , she said. I g ht be too
 Dublinish for people round here,' Anna said. The others nodded; they were
 much more conservative around here than up in the capital city. 'They have
 it in the Castle Hotel,' Kit said. 'Are you sure)' Philip would be convinced
 by anything they did in the Castle Hotel. 'Yes, I was there last night,' she
 said. if she claimed to

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have visited the planet Mars they wouldn't have been more surprised. 'You
 never were.' Clio was green with envy. 'Yes, and they find it works very
 well, I was watching, it actually looked much more lavish than it is, if you
 know what I mean. . .'She was anxious to define how the buff,t would work
 for them but they were looking at her open-mouthed. You went to dinner
 out in the Castle Hotel!'Philip said. Yes, to look,' Kit feigned surprise. 'We
 said we'd do research, didn't we?' 'Yes, but the cost of 11twasn'ttoobad.1di
 n't have anything to drink, that's
 id where they make the profit. Oh, and coffee's extra. I didn't have any of
 that. They serve it in their drawing room, you see, to get you out of the

place so that they can clear up.' 'You never went in by yourself and sat down to have dinner in the Castle Hotel.' Anna Kelly's eyes were narrow with suspicion. Kit smiled at her. 'But look at all you've done, Anna. All those spot prizes you've been promised and all the bottles with the holly and candles.' Kit looked admiringly at the chianti bottle decorated as an example of how things could be done. 'How did you get out there?' Philip asked. Kit caught Emmet's eye. He was even quicker than she had hoped. 'The point is, were they the kind of people who'd be coming here or were they lords and ladies and things?' 'They weren't lords and ladies. I talked to the waitresses. They were kind of middle-class people like the ones who'd be coming to our do.' Philip was so pleased with her calling it Our Do that he forgot to worry about who had driven her the fifteen miles to the Castle Hotel. 'Let's make a list of their possible objections. Come on, everyone say what they think's wrong with a buffet and we'll see does it sound reasonable.'

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~gan their list Ki As they be t glanced over at Emmet again He was looking at her with awe. Things must be really n1ovIng if Kit and Stevie Sullivan ha gone to the Castle a look-in. She yiotel. Soon Anna wasn't going to ave would come back to him and everything would be the way

it was.

,How are you, Martin?' 'Oh come in, Stevie.' n, has Kit gone back 'No) I won't, I'm rushing. Liste yet?' 'No, she's going down on the six o'clock bus. Why, did you want to see her?' ,It's just that I have to take a car to Dublin, so I wondered did she want a lift.' 'Well, I'm sure she'd love it, you'll have a full car. Clio and Philip are going back too. , 'It's only a sports car, a two-seater. I thought I'd ask Kit since she was a neighbour's child,' His smile was winning. Maura was at the top of the stairs. ' I think they all travel as a team, Stevie. They re all so . , I involved in this dinner dance they're organising. His eyes met Maura's. She knew exactly what he was offering. And on Kit's behalf she was refusing it. He was going to have to get Maura McMahon on his side. It was a long journey back to Dublin. The bus to the town, the train to Kingsbridge station and then a bus back to O'Connell Bridge. 'Will we go and have chips?' Philip said hopefully. 'I'm too tired,

Philip.' Kit looked tired and pale. 'Wouldn't it be great if we had a car?' he said. 'You will, one day. Wait till we make your hotel into the In Place in all of Ireland.' He hated her calling it his hotel. It had been their place and their do earlier on. But he knew better than to give any hint of it. 'Kevin O'Connor's father's bought another place.' his daughter's getting married. He's 'That's because le
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bought a hotel for her husband. It's like a game for her; they're not people we want to be like.' Philip waved her goodbye as he got his bus one way, and Kit ran lightly down O'Connell Street in the other direction, Stevie Sullivan was parked outside her door in a small red sports car. 'I don't believe you,' she said. 'I got an urge for a Chinese meal. Come on, get in.' She got into the car and they drove to a restaurant. 'Aren't you very fussy about your food. Imagine a good ham sandwich in Lough Glass wouldn't do you.' 'Not a bit, I fancied sweet and sour chicken, and it you've been out with the lovely Kit McMahon in the Castle Hotel one night, you somehow want more of the same the next night.' The Chinese restaurant was fairly basic and simple. Kit looked around her. 'Better not let them know in the Castle Hotel that you think this is more of the same,' she said. 'I want you, Kit,' he said. 'You can't have me, it's as simple as that.' 'That's very harsh.' 'The way you put it is harsh, and demanding also.' She realised she was speaking to him as a real person, there was no simpering and playacting involved. 'What way should it have been put?' He was being serious also. Not falsely flirtatious. Not the Stevie Sullivan she had watched for years around her home town. 'Well, it's a question of people wanting each other, isn't it? One doesn't say I want you implying I mean to have you, as if you were a cowboy taking your head of cattle, or your ranch, or your woman from the saloon. . . that's not the way things should be done.' 'Okay, but I don't believe in a lot of fancy phrases either. I drove all the way up here to tell you that I want you, I want to be with you. I want to be with you properly, not just kissing and stroking each other in a car like last night.' 'Was it only last night? it seems ages ago.' She looked at him with surprise.

'Yes, it seems a lot longer to me too,' he said. she lifted her eyes and looked at him. His face was absolutely sincere. She could see that. But then this was the whole secret of Stevie Sullivan's charm. Everyone thought he was utterly sincere. Anna Kelly, Deirdre Hanley, Orla Dillon, dozens and dozens more that she could name,

hundreds that she had never heard of. He probably was sincere at the time. He just wasn't exclusive. That was his winning streak. He meant it, he meant it with everybody. 'I didn't mean to feel this way,' he said to her. 'No,' she agreed. 'It isn't at all what I thought would happen.' 'No, indeed.' 'Kit, stop yessing and noing and three bags fulling. Do you feel the same or don't you?' He was angry. 'I'm very fond of you . . .' she began. 'Fond!' he snorted. 'I was going to say unless I was very fond of you I wouldn't have been so warm and loving to you last night. . 'I don't believe this,' he said. 'What don't you believe?' 'I don't believe you're sitting here cool as a cucumber explaining your behaviour, explaining it as if I were someone who had demanded an explanation. We held on to each other last night because we wanted to, and wanted to do a lot more. Why can't you be honest enough to admit 0' His eyes were hurt and his face very upset. But then this must be new for him. Everyone else, including that little baby-face Anna still in her gym slip, had probably gone along with his line of persuasion so easily. It must be strange if you were the great Stevie Sullivan. It must be strange and unpleasant to find yourself refused. Especially if you have just driven up from Lough Glass to Dublin, overtaking the bus and the train and then to be refused. But refuse she would. 'Why are we fighting?' she asked him.

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'Because you are being so prissy and dishonest.' 'Prissy maybe, it's just the dishonest, no.'

way the words 'Ome out, but

'You sit there and say I mean nothing to you., 'I didn't say that.' 'I've told you what I feel. I need you.' 'No, you don't.' 'Don't bloody tell me what I

need and what I don't need.' 'I'm trying to say, without being cheap and vulgar, that anyone, just anyone would do.' 'And I'm trying not to sound cheap and vulgar either that you are a right prick tease.' Her coat was on the back of her chair, Kit began to put her arms back into it. 'I'll go now, and let you finish your meal.' Her face was white. She was shaking with anger. At the words he had used, at the fact that she had let Emmet down - he would be back to Anna Kelly within twentyfour hours. And at the fact that she wanted him so much. She did need him. She would like nothing more than for him to go back with her to her little bedsitter tonight. How had it all gone so terribly wrong? He put his head in his hands. 'Don't go,' he mumbled. 'I'd better.' Her voice was shaky now and he looked up. He saw her lip trembling and reached out his hand for hers. 'I'm very, very sorry. I wish more than anything I could have the last minute back so that I wouldn't say that. I'm so sorry.' 'It's all right, I know. I know.' 'No you don't know, Kit,' he said, and she saw he had tears in his eyes. 'You don't know. I've never felt like this before: I want you so much I can't bear it.' She looked at him, distressed. 'Listen. This is the worst thing that could have happened. I just meant to go to a dance with you, to have a little fling if you felt like it. I didn't mean all this.' 'All what?' She marvelled at how calm her voice was. 'All the way I feel. I suppose it's love, I haven't ever loved anyone before ... but I'm so eager to see you and to

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know what you'll say ... and to touch you and see you 1 1 laugh. 'his words came tumbling out. 'Is that it, do you think?' he asked her. 'Is that what?' 'Is that love? I didn't love anyone up to now, so it's hard to recognise.'

'I don't know,' she said truthfully. 'If that's truly the way you feel then it might be.' 'And you?' She had forgotten her coat now; now they talked as equals. 'I suppose it's the same, I didn't mean this to happen either. I thought, I thought . . . ' 'What did you think? You started it, you asked me to the dance.' 'I know.' She was guilt-ridden. She could never tell him why she had done that. They were much too far in for that ever to come to the surface. 'So what did you hope? What did you think would happen?' 'That you'd be a nice man to join our party . . . which you certainly were ... but I didn't expect that I'd get so close to you, so involved.' 'You won't say love.'

'I haven't loved anybody either,' she said. 'So I don't know.' 'Aren't we a real pair of cold zombies. Most people of our age have loved dozens of people.' 'Or what they say is love,' Kit said. 'Or what they think is love,' Stevie said. There was a silence. 'I'm sorry for what I said.' He spoke eventually. 'And I'm sorry for saying anyone would do; that was coarse.' She was apologetic. 'I'm not hungry any more.' He pushed his plate away. 'Me neither.' He was cheery and apologetic to the Chinese waiter, who seemed impassive about the whole business. 'They must be mystified by us, coming from as far away as they do,' Kit said.

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'Anyone would be mystified by us,' Stevie said, - (He Lena always organised the office party. That way she IN It would be dangerous to leave it helped her into the tiny, low car. could keep control Of itier 'ter. They He dropped her at the door and leaned over to ki he, to one of the younger, giddy . girls or even Jenni cheek. 'I'll see you again during the week, I hope., Hewould pick an entirely unsuitable place with a wrong looked at her, his face a question. atrnosphere. 'I'd love that if you're going to be up here again.' Lena always found a restaurant w th atmosphere, some'I'll be here tomorrow night, for example.'where that Italian, Greek or Spanish waiters could *oin in s'll, Her voice was still shaky; she didn't know whether to the fun but where there would be no i iness. She had heard make a little joke or not. 'Lord, you 11 have the road worn She had seen office parties go so wrong. perfectly out with all that travelling up and down.'stories from the girls who had moved on from 'I'm not going back tonight, I'll wait until tomorrowsatisfactory posts only because they had been compronight.' mised or done the wrong thing at the annual office party. 'And who'll mind the little shop?' "Lord, I'm so sensible,' Lena said to Grace. ible.' Lena looked at 'Your stepmother. And we'll start with a clean slate You look too good to be sens e m rror. They had been friends for tomorrow. He looked like an eager nervous schoolboy. Grace's reflection in th He reminded her of her brother Emmet when he wastoo long to let Grace lie without being caught. The took of struggling and hoping that the right words would comereproach was en i ough. Grace began to backtrack. 'Too thin out. Not like the great Stevie Sullivan.of course, too t red, but sti ll good-' 'A shiny clean slate,' she

said. 'I'm a scrawny old turkey, Grace. I used to see them 'I love you, Kit,' he said, and turned the car round was gone. Lough Glass - they were survivors. They looked so Kit lay awake all night. There was a church clock that would be gone and bedraggled at Christmas no one would kill struck every quarter of an hour. She wondered why it then. They escaped the oven year after year.' hadn't driven her mad before. She got up and made herself So will you,' Grace said tenderly. some tea. She looked around the room: small, untidy, but Not this year. No, the time comes for every old turkey, full of character, her good dresses hanging on hooks on the wall even if the bones only make soup.' wall because the wardrobe wasn't big enough. Shelves of books, a little home-made desk with a small red lamp. She had blue and white pillow cases. It would have been a 'Will you and Louis join us for Christmas dinner?' Ivy lovely warm friendly place to have brought Stevie Sullivan asked her on the stairs. back for the night. 'You're very good, Ivy.' to her shrewdly. As the clock chimed on and Kit sat hugging her knees, 'That means no.' Ivy looked at she wondered why she had been so adamant, It wasn't such 'Why do you say that?' a big deal. She had been the one making it so. Look at Clio, 'Because I know you so well.' the skies hadn't fallen on her. She sat there, confused and 'It doesn't mean no, it means I don't know.' There was a lonely. She wondered could she ever tell Lena about it. She silence. 'it sounds very rude.' might. Lena had been through all this kind of thing, she 'No, love, it sounds very sad.' would know what it felt like. 'That's exactly what it is, Ivy, very sad.' Lena walked up the stairs with a heavy tread. 548 549

Jessie Millar was spending the evening with her mother. Every Thursday she went around to Mrs Park while Jim went to the Rotary Club. Every weekend they took her mother out to Sunday lunch. Jessie's life had changed in so many ways for the better the day that Lena Gray had walked in her door. She would do anything to help Lena through what obviously some huge crisis. But Lena was so private she would freeze you out if you dared suggest that anything was wrong. 'I suppose it's her husband,' Jessie said to her mother. 'It usually is,' Mrs Park nodded sagely. 'I have to do something. I have to tell her that I'd do anything.' 'Well, if it is her husband, what could you do, Jessica? Go and meet him and say "You're upsetting Mrs Gray,

desist this minute-F 'No, but I could give her some comfort.' Mrs Park shook her head. 'You could only tell her you were sorry for her. She's a proud, confident woman, she wouldn't want that.' 'She comes to see you from time to time, do you get any hint of anything ... F The old woman was thoughtful. It was true that Lena Gray found time to call and see her at least once a month. She always brought some small useful gift, an airtight biscuit tin, a foot cushion, a cover for the Radi - Times. It was amazing that such a busy career woman as Lena should make the time to visit her. But then Mrs Park remembered that when she was young they used to say if you want something done ask a busy man. Woman, in this case. 'She never talks about herself at all,' Mrs Park said eventually. 'I know, but what do you think?' 'I think she has children, grown up children of her own from a previous marriage.' 'Oh, that couldn't be possible,' Jessie said.

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hy not?' I V Veil, if she has, where are they) No normal woman ld have children and leave them.'

j wish it was an office lunch, not a dinner,' Jennifer complained. .he lunch would go on all day .'Jessie said.

'Yes, I know. Wouldn't it be marvellous, everyone going mad, and we'd get to know other tables having

lunch - - .' exactly what Lena had been trying to avoid, T hat was Jessie realised. At least at a dinner there wa some end to the evening. People had to go for trains and buses. They weren't left high and dry and drunk at five o'clock waiting for the pubs to open and to carry on the foolishness. 'We're lucky we don't have to pay for our party,' squeaked the new receptionist. 'in the last place we all had to contribute.' 'Lena set that up years ago when she first came. She was

always making little savings on this and that in a tin called Office Party.' Jessie remembered it with affection. 'Has she been here for years and years?' asked the ec t onist, r Tlightor nine

P t years , that's all. But of course I can hardly remember wha it was like before she came.')Jennifer 'So you never knew her when she was young. said. 'Not really young, no., Jessie shifted on her feet, annoyed by the

dismissive ways of YOut i h. 'She must have 'I'd say she was a stunner,' Jennifer said. been to get that dream boat she married.' Jessie felt they were on dangerous ground now and wanted to move. 'Yes, I'm sure she had the pick of the.bunch,'she said, in a tone that was bringing the conversation to an end.

'We can't persuade you to change your mind, Louis?' James Williams said.
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'No, James. Many, many thank i for everything. here with nothing nearly a decade ago and I have the I came at my feet now.' world 'The Dryden didn't give you that. You built it We'll be very sorry to lose you., YOurself. 'Well, you know I'll see you (,e, the season. I won,t be off until we've New Year's Eve well over us.' 'That's good of you, that's certainly a relief.' 'Come on, I wouldn't do that to you.' 'And I imagine Lena is delighted to back to Ireland ... I think her heart was always behegroeingsp great success here. de ite her ' The enquiry was made with a'bland face and innocent eyes. Louis Gray took a deep breath. 'Ah James, now there's something I have to tell you about that . . . '

For weeks she had taken work home and listened for his key in the door. At the sound she would slip off her glasses, which made her older than ever, and sweep away the paperwo 1 rk from evidence. She would get up to greet him, fresh and fragrant as she always was. Sometimes she would suggest he had a bath and that she'd bring him a drink. She never asked where he had been or why he was so late. She knew that he would tell her one evening. Some warning had told her it would be tonight. Habits die hard. She put on her best cream blouse and her pencil slim red skirt. She put a red glass necklace around her throat and then replaced it with a red scarf. The scarf hid more of the lines, and anyway, the red necklace had been bought in Brighton when he had said that one day he would buy her rubies. She sat at her table for three hours. But her eyes were too tired and her head too heavy to concentrate on any of the work she had brought home. Instead she waited and waited for the und of his step on the stair. She had a bottle of wine in the fridge, and she had coffee at the ready. This was going to be a long night, they would need both.

when he came in she stood up. Her feet seemed stuck to the ground, she didn't go towards him as she normally did. Instead her hand flew to her throat and fiddled with the red scarf.

'I'm sorry I'm late,' he said. It had become an automatic greeting. Usually she said, 'well it's great to see you now.' Tonight she said nothing. She just looked at him. She knew her eyes were wide and staring as if she had never seen him before. She tried to relax the muscles of her face, but nothing would obey her. 'Lena,' he said. She still looked. 'Lena, I have something to tell you.'

Ivy and Ernest were looking at television downstairs, but Ivy's glance always went to her net-curtained door to see who went in and out. It was a habit that she could not give up, even nowadays when her tenants were respectable settled people who would not do a moonlight flit. She saw Louis Gray come home, late as usual. But tonight he had paused on the stairs, where he thought he was unobserved. She saw him take deep breaths like someone gasping for oxygen. Then, as if he were still unable to catch enough air, he sat down on the step and let his head drop down to his feet. He must be feeling faint, she thought. Her instinct was to go out to see what was wrong. Perhaps he had been taken ill. But then she remembered the cold, dead look in Lena's face earlier in the day. This was the end of the road for them, Ivy knew it now. Eventually Louis recovered himself and went on up the stairs. Ernest was happily looking at the television set. 'I'll get you a cup of tea,' Ivy said. She was restless now; she couldn't concentrate. 'God, it's great to be spoiled,' Ernest said. It only seemed such a short time since Ivy had envied the young couple upstairs, the handsome young husband and wife who couldn't wait to get their hands on each other. She felt life had passed her by, and she felt foolish and dull.

in the light of their passion and love. Now she ached to give Lena, who had been such a good friend, a share of the peace and security she had with

the man she had always loved.

She sat at the table. He had guided her there with his arms on her shoulders. She fought the urge to hold on to him and plead, assure him that it didn't matter, he could have this other woman, whoever she was. Even if she was Irish and he had been looking at a hotel in Ireland with her. He could continue seeing her as much as he liked just as long as he didn't leave home, didn't leave Lena, his wife. Because she was his wife. He had said so over and over. In everyone's eyes they were man and wife. So that is what they were. But the words didn't come. She sat and waited. 'I never wanted this to happen, Lena,' he said. She smiled at him, a vague half-smile, like the one she used when she was at work. All it involved was a small readjustment of the muscles. She wondered why people didn't teach it at school. It made you look such a good listener, alert, interested, receptive. 'We have always been utterly honest with each other.' He reached for her hand. Her hand was cold, but so was his. It must be taking something from him too. 'Yes, of course,' she said. What did she mean by this? Honest with each other, of course they hadn't. He had betrayed her with who knew how many women. He had told her lie after lie about his activities. She had lied to him about Kit and the lifeline she had established to her daughter and the life of Lough Glass. And yet they sat in a flat in west London and pretended that they had always been honest with each other. 'So, because of that I have to tell you ... that I've found somebody else. Somebody I really love.' 'But you really love me,' she said in a small voice. 'I know, I know. Lena, what I have for you is something special that will never change.' 'We've loved each other all our lives,' she said. It was not argumentative, or defensive. She was just stating a fact.

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'That's what I'm saying. Nobody could or indeed will replace what you and I had. It was strong and good and important.' She looked at him. These were mere lines he had learned for a play. 'But ...' she said, helping him on to the next bit. 'But ... I've met this girl . - .' The silence must have only been for a few seconds. But after what seemed a long

time he said ' . . . I didn't want it to happen, I wanted us to go on the way we were ... but you don't know when these things happen, you don't invite them in, they just . . . ' He was at a loss for words. 'Happen, suggested Lena. She was not being ironic. She just wanted it to get to the bit where he said he was leaving. All the rest of it was unnecessary torture. 'Happen . . . ' he repeated, unaware he had used the word so often himself. 'And in the beginning it was just a bit of fun ... you know. harmless ... and then we knew . we knew that this was meant to be.' 'Meant to be . . . 'she repeated his words again, without any intonation except that of someone trying to grasp their importance. 'Yes, she never really loved anyone before . . . and she I took some time to realise that it was ...) 'And you, Louis?' 'Well, I had and did so it was both easier for me and more difficult, if you know what I mean She nodded dumbly. 'SoF said Lena. 'So, it developed, and we got further into it and it got to the stage where it was too late to go back . . 'Too late?' 'Yes, we both know now that this is what we want ... and what we must take. She had no one to tell but her parents ... I have to tell you.' She looked at his face, sad to be causing such hurt to another. His handsome, loved face. And suddenly she knew why he was telling her, why he wasn't just rushing

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off and coming back to be forgiven when it didn't work out. The realisation went right through her body causing her to shake. 'She's pregnant, isn't she?' 'Well, this was something ... something that we are both very glad about now.' His chin was up, he was defiant. He was challenging her to say anything that might diminish his love. 'You're glad?' She was holding her throat. 'We're very proud and happy. I always wanted a child ... Lena, you've had children. You know what it's like to have been there, seen a young person who is part of you ... a new generation. I'm getting old, I want a son . . . or a daughter. I want to settle down, be someone in my own land instead of always on the run, You know that. You and I always felt that.' Her head felt very clear suddenly, like a fog lifting. She looked at him in disbelief. What was she meant to know, what were he and she meant to be agreeing?

That she had left her husband and children for him, her children who she loved and missed every day of those years. She had been pregnant with his child and lost it. She had wanted another child: Louis had said the time was wrong. Now that her childbearing years were over he had discovered that he wanted to be a father. And he expected her to understand all this. Possibly even be glad for him. Louis Gray must be a man without any sensitivity at all. He must be lacking in any real brain as well. Perhaps he was a bit simple. Maybe that lopsided smile and those deep eyes were empty, meaningless things, not an indication of a loving soul. Could it be true that he was only a shell and she hadn't seen it until now?' 'Say something please, Lena, say something.' His voice seemed very far away. 'What would you like me to say?' 'I suppose, impossible though it is, I'd like you to say that you understand.'

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1 ,That I understand?' I ,Ana that you forgive me, even. d the very odd is strange clearness, an I she still telt th ig at him through the wrong ion that she was lookit Is ~Irisat that he was miles away, and that end of -a telescope, as far off well,' she said.

'What?' „rhat's what I'll say.' ,you'll say what?' say. I understand what has 'What you'd like me to , happened, and I forgive you. You don't really, you're only ,But you don't mean that. ,ayin; what I asked you to't have everything. How do we ,Come now, you can ou know what people mean? You said this morning as Y were leaving, "Love you". you said that to me this morning. And you didn't mean it.' She was quite calm. 'But I did in a way.' i so maybe I mean this in a Yes, in a way he had meant it.

I way. ia you do realise it's over between us? I mean, 'But, Lei , tonight. We're told Mary Paula, I told her I was telling you getting married in the New Year.' 'Married?' she said. dom, 'Yes, here in London. I've had to get a letter of free would you believe, from a priest.' I I of freedo F

A etter to say that I haven't been married to anyone 'You know, else.' 'Imagine, she said. 'Are you all right, Lena. yes. What did you say her name was 'Mary, Paula O'Connor. Her father's.a. hotelier. They re , to manage it.'

opening a new place in Ireland. I'm 901119 Paula O'Connor? Daughter of
Fingers 'Mary O'Connor?' 'Yes, I didn't think you'd have heard of him.'
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'And will his family all be coming o'They're coming this Christmas.' He was
at perfect " eas(telling her these facts of his new life. Was he mad, clinicall,
mad? That he didn't realise that he was speaking of th'c ruined splinters of
her life. 'And are you going tonight?' 'Once we've talked.' 'We've talked,
haven't we?' She was polite and distant. 'But 1 won't be back. You know
sometimes in the past 1 went and came back. . . 'Did you?' 'You know I did.
1 want it to be clear now how sad 1 an, to stand here and tell you this ...
you've been so good, so understanding, and in many ways you gave up so
much for

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We gave up things for each other, didn't we?' She was bright and helpful.
'Yes we did, that's true.' It was not true, Lena wanted to roar at him. Louis
Gray had given up nothing. He had come to her when he was
I I penniless, alone in the world, and had run through all his other options.
How dare he end what they had in this weltez of invention. 'So I suppose
you'd better pack.' 'I don't think . . 'Or would you prefer to come back
tomorrow and take things when I'm at work?' 'Wouldn't that be better ...
then you could sort of . 'Sort of what?' 'Well, Jay out what you want rid of
and what you want to keep.' 'Well, I would imagine you'll take your clothes
and things. I mean I wouldn't want those.' 'I leave all the things we got
together, like pictures and books and bits of furniture.' 'Yes, I don't imagine
you'd want those.' 'And of course I'll leave you the car.' 'No, I gave you the
car as a present, Louis.'

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:It,s an office car.' No, I bought it for you.' There were tears in his eyes. 'You
must keep it.' 'No, truly. I walk to work.' There was a silence. 'And I'll leave
the key here,' he said. When I'm goin '

:Or) - - - - 9*leave it with Ivy.' No, that would mean explaining.' 'Well,
someone will have to explain to Ivy. She'd like to say goodbye, she's very

fond of you.' 'I think it would be best if I left it on the mantelpiece.' 'Well, you must do what you think. . 'I can't just go like this.' 'Why not?' 'We haven't talked anything out ... explained.' 'We have.' He was about to say more, she knew his face so well. He wanted to ask her to reassure him, tell him that she didn't think too badly of him, say that it had been great while it lasted, that she had found someone she loved too, that she was going to move to a new city, a new life ... But he said nothing. 'I hope you'll be . . . 'he stopped. 'I hope so too,' she said, agreeing with him. He walked out the door. She stared in front of her for a long time. What she hoped was that she would be dead by the time that Louis Gray married Mary Paula O'Connor, the girlfriend who was going to have his son.

Ivy saw Louis Gray leaving. His face was white and stained with tears. She didn't sleep well, thinking of the woman upstairs. No matter how many times she told herself that she should go up to Lena she always answered herself with the fact that Lena Gray had survived on being able to put a brave face on things. It was up to Lena, and only her, when she let that face drop.

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There was a letter from Kit next day, Ivy was pleased. This meant she had an excuse to intercept Lena on the way out. The woman's face shocked her. It was as if someone had reached in and taken the life out of it. 'Thanks, Ivy.' Lena put the letter in her handbag. Even her voice was dead. 'You know where I am,' Ivy said. 'Indeed I do.' Ivy stood at the door and watched her go up the street, There was no life in her step. She stopped at the traffic lights and leaned her head against the lamp post.

In the office there was the usual excitement on the day of the office party. People had brought in clothes to dress up in after work. 'I'm going to have a big lunch this time,' Jennifer confided. 'There was that year I got a bit tiddly and silly. This time I'm going to lay down a base for all that wine.' 'Good idea,' Lena nodded approvingly. 'A Mr James Williams left a message asking you to ring him, Mrs Gray.' 'Thank you,' said Lena. 'My mother sent you her love, I was there last night,' Jessie said. 'That's very kind of her. Is she keeping well?' All the answers were adequate, but they were lifeless. By

lunchtime everyone in the office had decided that Mrs Gray was sickening for flu. There had been a lot of it going about. 'It would be a shame if she missed the party,' Jennirer said. Last year Lou's Gray had turned up to collect her. He had only stayed five minutes, but long enough to make everyone feel they wished they knew him better. She worked alone all morning, wanting no calls, no interruptions.

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ptionist came into her office. 'Mr Williams The rec honed again. I told him that I had given you the message. as that rightY tely. Thank you, dear.' it was a pleasant remark, `111olu , dismi sin; her. is u '11, Mrs Gray,' the girl said They're wondering are yo 1

suddenly. bope not, thank you for asking.' Her 11 don't know. I 5,nile was strained. 11 from Ivy. There were some Then there was a phone ca's Gray; this was one. nmes that always got through to Mrt thought I'd ,Leni, it's only Ivy. Sorry to interrupt, but jus tea you that Mr Tyrone has been and gone, in case you wanted to rest your weary head or anything.' - I've got a 10h, thank you, Ivy. You must be psychic load of stuff to finish up here, but I rmg~t well do that in the mid-afternoon.' 'Give you a bit of energy for your office party.' 'I think I'm coming down with a flu thing. I might have to cry off that.' 'I'll put a hot water bottle in your bed around four o'clock.' 'Bless you, Ivy.' 'And you, dear Lena.' She sent out for some Beechams Powders and asked for a mug of tea and a lemon drink. 'Anything to eat at all)'Jennifer was very sympathet C. 'No, but be a dear and try and keep people away from me. I'm trying hard to get through all this in case I have to take a couple of days off with flu.' Jennifer seemed relieved that there was some physical explanation. She had looked at Lena several times that day and thought that her face was so drawn and abstracted that Mrs Gray might be about to have some kind of mental breakdown. It was great to think it might only be flu. She was very methodical. In her clear handwriting she attached a note to every one of the files that had to b i e dealt with, Here she suggested a letter offering a sizeable

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reduction in consultancy fees to one client who was a go,~ friend of the agency; there she suggested no allowances , all to another who was a late payer. She arranged that the%' cancelled every one of her own public appearances a,~ lectures for the next two months. There were remind,,~ and notes from her own diary. Bills that should be paid Christmas gifts that had been given in the past and woul~ be expected now. Then she dictated a long memo to Jessie incorporating a lot of what she had done. About three o'clock she came and told them that she had been trying to fight it but she had to give in now to what seemed like a bad flu germ. 'I'll keep away from you all in the hopes of not spreading it any further,' she said, 'They all tut-tutted and said she looked dreadful. 'Will I come round and see you'll be all right?' Jessie asked. 'No, no. I'll be well looked after.' They saw the elegant Mrs Gray, whose eyes were blurred and hollowed. None of them had ever remembered her taking a day off work in all their time there. It was such a pity that she would miss the party. Lena was well known in the bank. 'Sorry for leaving it towards closing time,' she said to the young manager. 'Good customers like you are allowed all kinds of leniencies,' he said. 'Right, I'd like to take up a little of your time. You see, I'm going away for a few weeks, I need to withdraw quite an amount of cash from my own account for myself 'There's no problem there, Mrs Gray.' 'And I want to leave instructions that I won't be countersigning cheques for the office for the next few weeks.' 'Mr and Mrs Millar will be the only signatories needed! 'I have typed you a letter to that effect.' 'Always efficient,' he murmured admiringly. 'Yes, I hope so, but on this occasion I haven't yet informed Mr and Mrs Millar of my intention to take some

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le off because I do till n't know how much time it might take me ... to get well 'Are you going to have an operation. 'No, no. just an illness I have to shake off, So I want ,,everything to go smoothly in my absence.' 'Certainly ... I quite understand.' He didn't understand anything at all, but he knew the woman who had been running that agency almost single-handed was giving him some kind of message. She was trying to tell him that

she would be back at the helm sometime, and that he 1~wasn't to give the Millars their head to run the agency into the ground. A very complicated

request for a banker. it was good to see women doing so well but they were, no matter what anyone said, hard to understand.

'I suppose you're not In a drinking mood.' Ivy looked hopeful. 'Not a chance, Ivy. But come up and talk to me for a bit, will you?' They went into the flat and Lena looked at the mantelpiece. There was the key in a little glass dish. The dish was new. it was good too, cut glass, probably one of the only presents he had ever bought for her. Beside it was a card. A plain white card with the words Thank you written on it. She tore the card in two, and gave the dish to Ivy. 'Would you like that?' 'I can't take that.' 'It's you or the dustbin.' 'Well, it's a nice thing, sure I'll have it. I'll leave it downstairs till you want it back.' 'That'll be a time,' Lena said. She opened the wardrobe and took out her two suitcases. 'Lena, no. Not you too,' Ivy cried. 'Just for a while. I'll be back, Louis won't.' 'Of course he will. He always comes back,' 'No.' 'Don't go. Where are you going anyway just before

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I Christlawayasereou haven't any friends anywhere, me', Stay v,1, I'll be back, I swear.' 'I need you at Christmas. Ernest and I need you., 'No, you're Just afraid I'll kill myself. I did think of 1 last night, but I'm through that now. I won't.' 'One day you'll look back on this . - .' Ivy began. 'I know.' She was folding her clothes neatly and Putting her shoes into bags Years of taking short trips to give talks and lectures had made packing second nature. 'Where are you going?' 'I don't know.' 'You wouldn't let me walk out saying I didn't know where I was going. Come on, be fair, why should I let you?' 'I'll ring you.' 'When? Tonight?' 'No, in a few days.' 'I'm not letting you go.' 'Ivy, you mean well, but. . 'Don't but Ivy me ... See how bloody good I am! I'm not asking you one question about your private life, I didn't come upstairs last night after he left, even though I saw him go. You'll never have such a friend as me anywhere, don't throw it back in my face.' 'I'll ring you tonight.' 'And give me an answer about where you're staying?' 'I swear.' 'All right, you can go then.' 'Why aren't you begging me to stay?' 'You need to be out of these four walls ... they still have Louis' memory written over them. If I knew when you were coming back I'd repaper the rooms.' Lena managed a weak

smile. 'No need to go that far.' 'I would if I thought he really wasn't coming back. I don't want him to come and put his imprint on a whole new set of wallpaper.' 'No. Truly, he's getting married.'

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1,-y didn't dare to meet Lena's eyes. She looked at the floor. 'Right, then,' she sort of mumbled. 'New wallpaper. A small print, do you think, or maybe regency stripes)' 'Stripes,' Lena said remembering the huge sunflowers

and birds of paradise on Ivy's own walls. 'Tonight before midnight. All right?' 'Yes, Mother,' Lena said. She went to Victoria Station. She couldn't think why. It was that or Euston. Euston would take her to Ireland. She knew it would be dangerous to go, she must only go to Ireland when she was calm, prepared, ready for whatever might happen. She saw the destinations of the trains. In half an hour there was a train to Brighton, that's where she would go. She would walk along that pier, and the beach and the promenade. She would feel the rain in her face and she would remember their plans and hopes when she was carrying his child. And maybe she might make some sense out of what had happened and plan what to do with the rest of her life. For so many of the girls who had gone through Millar's she had been the crossroad, she had made them face decisions, take control of their lives, create a destiny for themselves. Now the legendary Mrs Gray would take herself in hand. She sat in a café and watched the pre-Christmas crowds swelling around. There were people on their way to and from office parties. There were shoppers up from the country for the day. There were businessmen going home after a day's work. Every one of them had a life to lead, a life with hopes and disappointments. When she opened her handbag to get her purse and pay for her coffee she saw with a shock Kit's letter to her, unopened. Never before had her daughter written a letter which had not been enjoyed as soon as she could find the time. But today had been a day like no other. It would not have been possible to lose herself in Kit's world until she had escaped from her own. Here in the anonymity of this huge railway station, this was the right place to read it.

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My dear Lena, I didn't think I would be sad to read about Louis, that you think it's over and that he may go away. Once this was the news I wanted to hear. I wanted you to be punished, and for him to leave you alone like you left us. But I don't feel that any more. I would much much prefer to think that he was there and that you had a good life together. Perhaps it's not true that he's thinking of going away. It's very hard to know what men are thinking. Not that I'm any kind of authority but I do know that hours and hours are spent in Frankie's flat, in cafés and after lectures talking about men and what they are thinking and what they're planning ... and it seems to turn out in the end that they're not thinking about anything or planning anything. I just tell you that in case it's some comfort.

Lena sat in the station café as the world moved about its business on either side of her . . . tears fell down her face, she didn't even wipe them away, she just read on. Kit wrote of the dance, the endless difficulties put in their way by Dan and Mildred O'Brien, the fear that the guests would all spend so long in Paddles' before they arrived that there would be no bar business for the Central and that everyone would be drunk and disorderly. And Kit wrote about Stevie Sullivan, about his childhood, what it had been like to have no shoes because his father had drunk the money that had been set aside to buy them. Stevie Sullivan wore the best of leather shoes now and always would. Stevie didn't drink alcohol, he didn't gamble, he worked hard and of course, as everyone knew, had been a bit foolish in the past. But one of the terrible things about a small Irish town was the way your past hung around for ever. No one was allowed to make a fresh start. People still said he was old Billy Sullivan's boy, a drunkard's son. They said he was a wild boy who had been with all the girls in the parish,

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ange that they couldn't see how he had changed? and as Lena read she

heard the echo loud and clear. Kit

thought of Stevie Sullivan in exactly the same protective and excusing way as he had thought of Louis Gray. She y criticism of him. She was her mother's

was blind to an I daughter and she was about to follow exactly the same path. Lena sat for a long time in the caf~ and then with heavy ~imbs got up and took a train to the south coast of England.

UY), 'Where are you, Lena?' 'In a nice plac: - in Brighton. Quiet, warm. e 'What's its telephone number?'

'Now listen . - - 't ring you, 'ust tell me for me, not for 'Just tell me. I won you. She read it from the wall beside the phone, 'I had a Mr James Williams round here looking for you.

'You didn't tell h i im?' most specially that if 'What do you think? But he said you were in touch to say he was very lonely forand he would love it if you could . - . ' 700d., 'Right Ivy ... you're very g 'Have you anyone to talk to?' 'I don't need anyone. rm so tired.' 'All right. When will you ring me again?'She fixed a day, three days ahead. 'And this James Williams - - -)~ 'Will have to find someone else to play Santa Claus for him., 'He looked very n 'Goodnight, Ivy.' 'Goodnight, pet. I wish you were upstairs. ice,' Ivy said.

'Louis, a minute.' Louts looked up from all his plans of the O'Connot visit. They were being a very troublesome group,
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constantly changing their plans. Firstly there wthen five for be five of them, then four and now two, and ere going t. Christmas and only three for New Year. It had played hell with the booking schedules, as if he weren't nervous enough meeting Mr O'Connor. He hadn't yet been filled in about the forthcoming even , t. He might not be overjoyed to meet his future son-in-law for the second time and hear such news. But Mary Paula had assured him that she lived her own life. She was very much her own person, and had been for years, She was twenty-eight years of age, a grown-up. Louis wished that things were different, that he was nearer to her age than to her father's, that he had been able to prove himself at the new hotel before he proved himself able to father a child. Still, he would believe Mary Paula that it would sort itself out. 'Sorry, James,' he said. 'I seem to be pulled in a hundred ways today.' James Williams looked stern and unsmiling. 'Lena's not at work today.' 'I beg your pardon?' 'And she's not at home, I went round to ask the landlady.' 'James, I don't understand . . 'Where is she, Louis?' 'I

have no idea. I spoke to her last night, I told her everything, I went round this morning, took my things, left my key as we arranged.' 'What did she say?' 'I don't think it's any of your business, actually.' 'I think it is if my manager decides to take another Job and move to another country, and then says oops, I forgot to tell her when I ask how his wife is taking it.' 'She's not my wife, I told you yesterday.' 'She bloody is your wife, if you lived with her for years and told everyone she was.' 'I 'You don't know the story. Lena wasn't free to marry, 'Wasn't she lucky, the way things turned out.'

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'Look, I don't know what's brought all this on.' '1,11 tell you what's brought it on - the behaviour of a ,nan who has acted like a selfish bastard. You've thought of nobody but yourself, Louis, all the time ... self, self, self.' 'I'm not going to stay here and listen to this.' 'No, you're bloody right you're not. You can take your cards and leave today.' 'On what grounds?' 'On the grounds that I couldn't look at your face while you worked out your notice.'

'You can't be serious, James.' 'Never more so.' 'You'd let your personal feelings and the fact that you have always been attracted to Lena stand in the way of normal business behaviour?' 'You've had your reference, Louis, you've had the build-up that got you the new job, and made you an acceptable son-in-law for this Irish tycoon, now get out of here.' Louis' handsome face was very hard and cold. 'It won't do you any good, all this posturing. Lena won't think any better of you. She thinks you're a cold, dull fish already, now she'll think you're just a petty one.' 'By this afternoon, Louis.' James Williams turned and left. It took a lot of time and ingenuity but Louis Gray had many contacts and friends in the hotel business. He found a suite in another hotel, somewhere he could entertain the O'Connors in style. He would turn the whole business to his advantage, say that he had left the Dryden to concentrate on them properly. Now of course he would have to organise a whole Christmas and New Year programme for them. He must think what to do. For a wild moment he thought of asking Lena, she was always great about ideas and thinking up the right thing for the right occasion. Wasn't it absurd that she had come to his mind just like that? But it was only natural, they had been together for so

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long it was obvious that they should still automatically think of consulting each other. He wondered whether James Williams was right about her having disappeared from work and from the flat in Earl's Court. It was improbable; Lena had seemed so calm. As if she had known this was all inevitable. And the one sure and certain thing was that in any time of crisis you'd find Lena at her desk in that bloody agency. She was more married to Millar's than she ever would be to a man.

All the shops in Brighton were full of Christmas gifts. Lena looked in the windows at things she would like to have bought for her daughter. She had a handbag full of money. earrings set in She could have bought the necklace and little musical box. She could have got her that smart coat which would have done so much for her colour. The manicure set in the genuine leather case. The overnight case with the smart two-tone trim - it would be ideal for going up and down between Dublin and Lough Glass. But why was she torturing herself? She would not send anything to her daughter. This was a Christmas when she would give no presents and get none. When she would have to stay far from a Church lest the sound of carols make her weep. She must not listen to the radio in case the programmes of goodwill and celebration pointed out too clearly what she had lost. The waves were high and crashing on to the big beach. Was this the beach she had walked with Louis when she was expecting his child? It seemed like a different age, and two different people. When she was here that time she had been waiting for the letter of abuse, and the torrent of rage and blame from Martin. She didn't know that they were dragging the lake in Lough Glass looking for her. If she had the time all over again ... ? But it was an empty speculation. She wouldn't have the time all over again. It was useless to work out what she would have done. She must think what to do now. She walked, the spray and salt air in her face, her hair wet and

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curling in the damp. She didn't see anyone glance at her and wonder why a handsome woman should walk so ceaselessly, hands deep in pockets, unaware of the world around her, the weather, the season of the year. Then she found a shelter and sat down to write to Kit. She wrote on pages of a notebook. Not her usual style of

letter. And she didn't read it over as she normally would have done. Back at the guest house she got an envelope and stamp and went out to find a pillar box. She felt a little better as if she had spoken to a good friend.

Kit's heart gave a jump when she saw the envelope with her mother's writing on it laid on the hall table upstairs. Surely her father had recognised it. That was the way Mother had always written. But apparently not. It was the day before Christmas Eve. Kit and Philip had just come back from Dublin. Maura had decorated the house. It wasn't the same as Mother used to do. Mother would have had all leaves and ivy and holly. Maura had bought paper decorations and tinsel. The house looked very festive. There were lots of Christmas cards on the mantelpiece and around the mirror. Maura sent and received many more than Helen McMahon had ever known. Kit felt a rush of anxiety. Why had her mother been so rash as to write here? She was anxious to be alone to read the letter, but they were welcoming her home. Emmet had carried up her luggage, including the dress box with the extravagant new dress bought on the compensation money. She had spent a fortune on it, and didn't want anyone to see it before the dance in case there might be question of it being somewhat revealing. She had told Clio that it was a bargain, marked down in a pre-Christmas sale. 'There are no pre-Christmas sales,' Cho had said sagely. 'You are turning into a mysterious and very sinister liar.'

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Maura was offering soup to take the chill off her, her father was eager to tell her all the news and how the golf club committee had thrown themselves behind the great New Year's Eve dance. But Kit couldn't wait to be away from them. Eventually she decided that the bathroom, was her only hope of peace and quiet. Sitting on the side of the bath she read

My dear Kit,

Christmas this year and they've all wished you a very happy Christmas. I was so pleased with the letter you wrote to me read it in a railway station. All around there were people, each living their own lives, making journeys to

see people or escape from people and I just sat there and read your letter over and over.

It's good to know that Stevic was able to rise above his childhood and triumph over all the bad things that happened to him in his youth. It must have made him very strong. Of course the same goes for you. You had a lot happen to you in your youth that shouldn't have happened and you coped with it. You coped with the death of a mother, and the rumours about that death. You thought your mother had committed suicide and was in hell. You met a ghost. You survived that. In many ways I think you are well suited for each other. Of course like every mother I worry for you. But perhaps I don't have the right to have those feelings. Maybe they were forfeited a long time ago. It was kind of you to say that perhaps Louis was not thinking of going. But in fact he has gone. He is going to get married to someone else. Somebody much younger and they will have a child. So that part of my life is over now. I just wanted to reassure you that I will make no more trouble for all the people I have hurt so much already. You may worry that since Louis has left me I might become like a ship without a rudder. So I wanted you to

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set your heart at ease. I will disturb nothing that has been done. I tell you this because I know it will cross your mind and also because I have an ache, a yearning to go back to Lough Glass and to see the dance that you have all been preparing. I had this feeling I could watch from the

outside. So in a way I am writing this to tell myself that I must not go. May it be a great success for you all. Peace, Kit. Peace and goodwill. Isn't that what we are all looking for when all is said and done? Your loving mother, Lena

Kit sat in the bathroom looking at the letter in disbelief. That wasn't the kind of letter Lena wrote. The sentences were all wrong. Short 'erky phrases, ramblings about sitting in railway stations. Lena had addressed this letter to the pharmacy, she had signed it your loving mother. Louis had left her, he was getting married to another woman. Lena was not able to cope.

Kit behaved normally. She was sure that nobody knew there was a thing wrong. She wrapped gifts, she delivered Christmas cards by hand, she spent

hours in the Central Hotel, she kept her voice and smile polite for Philip's parents, she made fists and timetables. She listened to Clio's ramblings and complaints about Anna, about her parents, about Aunt Maura, about Michael not ringing to say goodbye before he left for London. Her only hope was to work as hard as she could. When it was all over she would think what she could do to help Lena. But now there was nothing she could say or do or write that would help. She felt very much alone. On Christmas Eve she lay awake for a long time and wondered about her mother lying in bed alone in that flat in London. She wished she could telephone her. But it would be easier to contact the planet Mars than to make a phone call from Lough Glass at Christmas-time to someone in London.

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And suppose Lena were so disturbed that she let everything be revealed. Suppose the phone call unhinged her and that she told Maura and Father that she was alive ... suppose Emmet were to hear. Kit lay in her bed and wished she could tell someone, The only person she could tell was Stevie Sullivan. But it wasn't her secret to tell.

The feeling of anxiety remained with her on Christmas Day and for no reason Kit found herself crying just at the wrong time. They were all getting ready to go up to Kellys' for a sherry and present-giving. Everyone wanted to go, Maura to see her sister, Father to see his friend Peter, Emmet to see the beloved Anna... only Kit didn't want to go. But go she must. 'I'll follow you up there,' she called as she heard them getting ready to leave. She needed just a little time to compose herself, get herself ready for the Kellys. She splashed cold water on her face and left the house. Her heart was like lead on this Christmas morning. 'Hey, wait for me.' Stevie Sullivan had seen Kit leaving her house and he ran after her. She turned around to look at him. His smile was broad, his delight to see her was written all over his face. 'You didn't call to say happy Christmas,' he accused her. 'I thought I'd see you at Mass.' 'Oh, I was at the back of the church, humble you know, not putting myself forward.' 'Talking, doing deals I imagine,' she mocked him.

He looked at her closely. 'You've been crying,' he said. 'Does it show? I couldn't bear the third degree from Clio.' 'Only to me, I know every little bit of your face. Why were you crying, Kit?' 'I can't tell you.'

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,Is there anything I can do?' ,No thank you, Stevie. No.' ,Will you ever tell me?' ,I might some day.'

,You'll have forgotten.' y I'm crying today.'

'No, I'll never forget wh

,Michael and Kevin are having the time of Reilly over in London,' Clio said. 'He rang last night.' Clio was pleased at this. 'What's she like, the sister?' Kit asked. 'I don't know, I only met her the once.' . ?I 'And the fellow she's marrying, 'Oh, he's as old as the hills apparently. Michael says he could be her father.' 'But nice?' 'Apparently.' 'is he a sugar daddy sort?'

'No, the total reverse, he hasn't a penny, according to Michael.' 'But he's going to be admitted to the ranks?' 'Yes, apparently he's a dynamo in the hotel industry over in London.' 'Why isn't he rich then?' Kit wondered.

'Search me,' Clio said. 'But she's very stuck on him. Michael thinks that she might be pregnant.' 'NoV Kit's eyes were round with excitement. 'Well, the marriage is very speedy than one would have thought.'

apparently, speedier

'What's his name ?' Kit didn't care very much but anything was better than answering Clio's questions. 1 1 'Louis. There, isn't that romantic? Louis Gray.'

On the day after Christmas, Kit asked Stevie to drive her into the big town. 'Nothing will be open,' he said, puzzled. 'That doesn't matter.' 'Of course it matters. What's the point of going into

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Tombstone City in the rain? Why don't we stay here in the rain?' 'Please Stevie, I don't ask much.' He considered this. It was true, she didn't ask him favours. 'Okay, fine,' he said. He didn't ask her why she wanted all the

change to make a phone call from a hotel in the town. He sat and had a pint in the hotel bar and looked at her from a distance as she stood in the phone booth at the far end of the hall. Kit McMahon was running her hand through her hair and talking earnestly. Stevie realised the point of the journey through the rain was so that she could phone someone whom would have been impossible to phone from home. She could have used the phone in the Central Hotel but it would still have meant going through Mona Fitz. He wouldn't ask her. She would tell him when she was ready. 'Ivy Brown?' 'Yes, yes, who is this?' 'Mrs Brown, I'm Kit McMahon. I met you once, do you know who I am?' 'Yes, yes, of course I do.' Ivy sounded worried. 'Is anything wrong?' 'Could I talk to Lena do you think... ? I got the number from Directory Enquiries. . . ' 'But love, she's not here . . . ' Ivy said. 'Look, Ivy, I have to talk to her, I have to. I have some terrible news I want to give her.' 'I think she'd had all the bad news she can take.' 'I know who he's marrying, he's marrying someone else, the bastard. The bastard out of hell.' 'Kit, stop . . . ' 'I won't stop. I've no money, Ivy. I can't leave here, we have a huge thing I'm up to my neck in. I can't walk out on it, but I have to talk to Lena. You must tell me where she is.' 'She was in Brighton, but she rang me from a coin box in London. She said she'd be away for a few days and she'd ring me on New Year's Day.'

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:Where?' She wouldn't say.

They had bookings for one hundred and fifty-eight people. The most the golf club had ever catered for was eight-six. Philip O'Brien told Kit that he hadn't slept since Christmas Eve, not more than two hours at a time. 'It'll be great,' Kit said. 'You're not sure, you're only encouraging me, you're only being nice.'

'Jesus, Philip, you really piss me off at times. I'm saying what I mean, why do you accuse me of just being nice.'

'Because your mind is miles away,' he said. 'Since Christmas Day you've been thinking of something else entirely.' Kit was silent. 'Isn't that right?' Philip asked. 'I have a lot on my mind, that's true, but I do think the dinner will be great.' 'Will you tell me what's worrying you, Why), , I might be able to help,' Philip said. 'I don't know,' she hesitated. 'I don't know if I'll tell

you.' Why did she feel that she might be able to tell wild Stevie Sullivan all about her mother and the tragedies of her life, but that she wouldn't be able to explain them to good loyal Philip O'Brien? 'I'll always be here,' he said. 'You're a great and good friend,' she said truthfully. 'Tell me again it won't be a disaster,' he said. 'Philip, it'll have them talking about it for a year. Now, back to business.' She took out her clipboard and got back to the countdown. They agreed that they would have big tables, set for an thing from sixteen to twenty. And even though there
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y brothers, would be guests from Dublin, the O'Connor Mauttiew (who was going to be watched by Kevin," 'Connor all night in case anything untoward happened)' O 1 Frankie, and more, the committee would all have to keep hawk-like eyes out in case anything went wrong.

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Kit was to be charge of the food and training the group of girls from the convent in their waitress duties. Philip was responsible for the entire drink side of things, the opening and pouring of wine, the pulling of pints, the trays of alcohol being brought with speed to tables. Emmet was in charge of furniture. They had identified this as a possible problem, chairs and tables too close together, not leaving access for waiters, people wanting to join up with other tables. Emmet would appear miraculously when people started heaving and dragging things. Anna was in charge of decoration. If bits of holly separated themselves from curtains, from the wine bottles holding candies, it was Anna who must replace them. She was to be forever vigilant and move around from table to table. Anna liked this. Stevie Sullivan was not going to be sitting at their table. This would give her a chance to mingle. Patsy was to keep an eye on the ladies' room, make sure there were tissues and clean soaps. One of the downstairs rooms had been transformed with pink drapes and pink and white striped regency-style coverings on the furniture and artistic floral sprays. The two new lavatories that had been badly needed for the hotel were installed and functioning. The job had been done by Kevin Wall's brother, who had worked even on Christmas Eve to get everything finished. Philip's parents had severe doubts about the

expenditure, but they were so pleased by the attention the hotel was getting from Lough Glass and the entire surrounding countryside they didn't protest too much. 'It's about time that people took us seriously as a hotel,' Mildred sniffed, when she heard more and more bookings coming in from landowners whose patronage they had never known before. 'I always said that this place would be recognised for what it was in the end,' Dan O'Brien assured her, giving absolutely no credit to his son and his son's friends who had made the whole thing possible.

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Cho had no specific responsibility: it was generally agreed that she should look after the guests from Dublin, keep g smoothly at the table, and cover for the fact everything goin that the others would be coming and going all night. ve won't Just dance with people at our own table, will we? Anna asked. Kit couldn't bear to see the look on Emmet's face. 'No, I think it should be open plan,' Kit said. Of course it was

going to be open plan. Stevie Sullivan had . booked a table ior some of his customers. There were going to be more men than women in the party. in the afternoon Kit and Philip looked around. 'We've done it,' she said. The tables were so festive, and the walls draped in greenery looked as if the whole place was out of doors. They would light the candles just before the people arrived. The convent school girls had come to show their uniform, every single one of them in white blouses and navy skirts and each wearing an embroidered badge with the letters CHL for Central Hotel Lough Glass. Kit had hose with hair flopping overtheir faces wore seen to it that t hair slides or ribbons. She had rehearsed over and over what to do in the case of accidents. if somebody let -a plate fall there was to be no giggling and no fussing; dustpans and brushes were under some tables hidden by the long tablecloths. She asked them all to repeat the names of the dishes and drummed it into them - Hors d'oeuvres - say each one of you. 'What are these starters called?' 'Hors d'oeuvres.' 'That's much better.' 'Go home now,' Philip said. 'You all look terrific and be back here looking just like that at 6-30-' They were giggling as they left. Kit shouted at them suddenly. 'What are the starters called?' it after me, no, say it again,

another.'

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'Hors doeuvres,' the six girls chanted. 'And what are the main courses?' w'ne.' 'Chicken with tarragon, or beef in red I 'Great. What are the desserts?' 'Sherry trifle or apple tart and ice cream.' 'Can people come back to the tables as often as they like?' 'Yes, as much as they want.' , Don't giggle as you say that,' Kit said. 'They want to feel welcome, they don't want to feel stupid., The girls looked at her respectfully. 'Philip and I spend all our time at college learning this kind of thing.' Kit wanted to take some of the harm out of her direction. 'You're getting it all for free,' Philip added. The girls smiled from one to the other. He would never be able to thank Kit for all her support over this. 'I got you a little corsage,' he said. 'It's in the fridge to keep it nice and fresh. Just to thank you, from one friend to 'You're a dear good friend,' she said, and put her arms around his neck to hug him. He felt her breasts against him and it was all he could do not to hold her to him tightly and kiss her on the lips. 'So are you,' he said In a vo *cc that struggled to be casual.

The Dublin contingent came in three cars around o'clock. The bar was bright and welcoming. Philip had thx first round of mulled wine ready for them to sample. 'If it lays you lot out then we'll know not to serve it to the real people,' he said. Kevin O'Connor looked at him with interest. This wasn't the mousy Philip he knew at college. This hotel was certainly not the dump Michael had said it was when he drove past it before. It was an elegant, creeper-covered building, with a lot of attractive greenery in barrels around the entrance. The decorations for the New Year's Eve celebrations were stylish. Their rooms were much more comfortable than he had

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been led to believe. Kevin was sharing a room with his friend Matthew. He had promised to watch Matthew's behaviour. And anyway there was no point in sharing with his twin; Michael O'Connor would be entertaining Clio Kelly as the night went on. Kevin wondered how his brother had got so lucky with the Lough Glass girl he had

chosen. 'Hell of a nice place this, Philip,' Kevin said. The others agreed. 'Thank you.' Philip seemed confident. He had kept his parents off the scene, saying that they should be there to greet guests in the bar at seven thirty when it all began. But not before. He felt a surge of excitement like he had never known before. It was all going to happen. Tonight his career and his long-term plan of marrying Kit McMahon were all taking off. Kit had asked her father and Maura to be among the early arrivals. 'I was hoping I might have a pint in Paddles' with Peter,' Martin said. 'No, have it in the bar.' 'It's a bit of a gloomy place . . .' he began. 'Wait until you see it tonight,' Kit promised. Maura looked very well: she had on a black dress with black chiffon sleeves. 'I hate wearing my coat over it but I suppose I'd freeze walking down without it . . .' 'It's only a few yards,' Kit said. 'You look so nice it's a pity to spoil it.' 'Put on your coat, Maura, like a good woman, and don't be catching pneumonia.' 'Lilian's wearing a stole, but I always look like a washerwoman in one.' Maura's face seemed disappointed. 'Father, can I ask you something?' Martin looked a little surprised. 'Do you remember the little fur stole that Mother had, it was like a little cape?' 'Yes, I think I do, why?' 'You probably don't remember because she hardly ever wore it. It's in my wardrobe in a box, in case I'd ever wear

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it. I don't think it suits me. Why don't we give it to Maura to wear?' It was a risk, she knew this. They had never mentioned anything of Mother's before. 'That's very nice of you, Kit but I really don't think . . . Let me get it ... I can, can't I, Father?' 'Child, it's yours and I'd be delighted if Maura would like it. Delighted.' Kit was back in a moment. It was in tissue paper in a box. There was a faint whiff of mothballs. The little cape had a fastener in the front. It was old-fashioned, dated almost, but it might look smart on Maura. Kit draped it around her stepmother's shoulders and stepped back to look at the effect. 'It's lovely on you ... come and look in a mirror: It was indeed splendid. It could have been made for Maura around the shoulders but the fastener didn't meet. This needs to be held together with some black ribbon,' Kit said quick as a flash. 'I have some in a drawer.' When she came back her father and Maura were holding hands, and there were tears in

Maura's eyes. She hoped nothing had gone wrong. 'I was just saying that, perhaps I shouldn't wear it. Someone might remember Helen wearing it on some other occasion . . .' 'I never saw Helen wear it, not in all my life.' 'Did you buy it for her, Father?' 'I don't remember that I did. No, she must have had it already, but I can't ever recall seeing it on her anywhere. I'd love you to wear it, Maura dear.' 'It might have been special to her.' Maura was still doubtful.

'No, it couldn't have been or else she'd have . . .' Kit stopped, horrified. She nearly said she would have taken it with her to London. 'Or else ... ?' Maura looked at her. 'Or else we'd have seen her wear it ... Here, let me thread this ribbon in, you're the belle of the ball.' 'When are you going to put on your dress?' 'I have it down at the hotel, I didn't want to put it on until I'm through in the kitchen.'

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,Does the chef not mind you taking over?' . 11 don't think by any stretch of the imagination you could call Con Daly a chef ... a cook * s even 1 stretching it a bit. He's so relieved that we're all there, he's nearly licking our shoes with gratitude.' Emmet came wanting his bowtie tied. 'A girlfriend should be doing this for you,' Maura said as she tied it

expertly. 'Oh, I've no time to be interested in girls for a few years yet,' Emmet said. Kit caught his eye and smiled. 'Very sensible,' Martin McMahon said. 'The country would be in a better state if everyone thought the same.' 'I'll see you down there.' Kit ran off - . indow. 'Will Stevie Sullivan knocked from an upstairs w yu me on up here and help me dress?' Sadly, no,' she called back. I'm on duty five minutes 0~ co ago, and the battle orders are very strict. I made most of them myself.' 'You're not exactly gussied up yourself,' he said, disappointed. She was wearing her duffel coat and her hair, still in big loose rollers, was under a headscarf. 'Gussied up a marvellous phrase ... see you later.' He watched from the window as she ran into the hotel: you wouldn't recognise the Central with its smart bartels of greenery, its trimmed creeper, its glittering new sign, perfectly illuminated by some fixture which also showed the old oak tree to its best. Funny that Kit didn't see the naked longing in Philip O'Brien's face. She was not an unkind girl, she wouldn't

play games with him. She simply didn't see that the young son of the hotel was head over heels in love with her. Kit slipped into the kitchen. She didn't want to join the loud voices that were coming from the bar, she could hear Matthew booming away. She must remember to warn Kevin that very strict control should be exercised over Matthew.

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The kitchen was too hot: she opened a draught blew things from a shelf, 'Hold open with a chair.' she ordered. 'I'll do it, that's the very thing,' said Con Daly in his spotless whites, There had been a time when Con, always of thirty~ looked as if somebody had spilled the contents of five dinner plates over him. The young waitresses were standing in a little group giggling with excitement. Kit frowned. How many times had she tried to tell them ... but then when she and Clio were young they did nothing but laugh and giggle for about three years, Suppose they had been asked to help the O'Briens. Help in 'Listen,' she said to the girls. 'I know you think we're all quite old and probably mad, but I want to tell you what we're doing. We're trying to show that we can be as good and better than the grown-ups. And the grown-ups think we're still children ... so we need to look desperately polished. We need to be able to pronounce starters.' 'Hors d'oeuvres.' 'We need to know what tarragon is . . . 'It's a herb in the sauce,' they said. 'But most of all we want them to think you are real waitresses, not schoolgirls. For some reason laughing and enjoying yourselves makes you look amateur, I don't know why, so I can't let you do it. We can all laugh our heads off when it's over. And Phil . has said that if there's no laughing there's going to be an extra four shillings each for all of you.' This was serious money. They looked at each other in disbelief. 'But that's everyone. One giggler and nobody gets the four shillings extra. May)' They nodded, faces solemn, afraid to meet each other's eyes. 'Great,' Kit said. 'Now, what else was I going to do?' 'Get dressed, I think,' said one of the girls. The others reddened but managed not to laugh. Kit had them well frightened into earning their extra wage. She took the scarlet dress from its hanger. Philip had told her to go out the back door

her she could change in his room. He had tidied it and left around it all kinds of things that would make her think better of him. Books he hadn't read, clean towels and a kind of soap that he never used but was expensive. The dress fitted perfectly, It was an off the shoulder

model so there would be no bra. But again it was so perfectly moulded that there would be no need. As she stood in her half slip and washed herself at Philip's handbasin, Kit studied her face in the mirror. Her heart was not in tonight's festivities. If only she had been able to ring Lena and talk to her. She was tired from all the work involved. She looked pale, she thought. She must be sure not to waste tonight's opportunities. That's what it had been about. She mustn't grant an inch to poisonous little Anna Kelly who had bought a lime-coloured dress in Brown Thomas. Reports were that it looked a knockout. Kit hadn't kiUed herself getting this hotel off the ground just so that Philip's parents could sit back and take all the credit. She had wanted an arena, a pubkc place to allow Stevie Sullivan to be seen to fall for her. She needed to wipe the two mean little eyes of Anna Kelly and make her flee sobbing back to poor innocent Emmet, who would of course take her. Kit had made a promise that she was going to deliver. But now it was much more than that, it was something she wanted so much and so badly that it nearly hurt. There was a sizeable crowd by the time that Kit made her entrance but Stevie and his clients had not arrived. Her eyes raked the room for them, but she couldn't see them. She went to where her father and Maura were standing with the Kellys. Maura was still wearing the little cape. Lilian had admired it. 'Very smart indeed,' she had said, slightly enviously, Maura thought. 'Yes, I think I'll leave it on for a bit. I can't imagine the O'Briens having the place warm enough,' Maura whispered. 'I haven't seen you wearing it before.'

'Not much cause really,' Maura said. She had decided not to tell her sister that it had once belonged to Helen. And it was obvious that Lilian had never seen it before. What a strange woman Helen McMahon must have been to

have had a lovely thing like this and never worn it. 'I wouldn't have believed the place, Kit.' Her father looked around him in amazement. 'I'll have to let You in the pharmacy next.' 'Fine, as long as you don't object to holes

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in the walls every two minutes like Mildred O'Brien did,' Kit whispered. 'Her bloody walls were falling down and great wedges of damp like lumps of penicillin and she says not too many nails in the wall.' Mildred was standing like royalty near the fireplace accepting compliments from everyone. 'Well, the old place does have its charm,' she was saying modestly, as if it had looked like this all the time. Then Kit joined Clio and the O'Connors. Clio wore a cream dress with a neckline of rosebuds. It was attractive but it wasn't startling. You wouldn't pick Clio out in the crowd like you would Kit in her scarlet dress. Or Anna in her bright lime colour. Clio seemed to sense that and the corners of her mouth turned down. 'Welcome to Lough Glass,' Kit said to the group. 'You look terrific,' Frankie Barry said. 'Thanks, it's very startling, anyway. If I were in London you'd think I was a pillar box.' 'Or a bus,' Clio said. Everyone looked at her, surprised. 'They're red too,' Clio said lamely. 'Yes, of course,' Kit said. 'Tell me, how was your trip to London?' she asked the O'Connor twins. 'Fabulous . . . ' Michael said. 'XJ-1000' said Kevin. 'I was the one there to hold a candle to you, Kit,' Kevin said. 'I cooked crosser than ever. But Kit appeared not to notice. sister's fiancé. Did he turn out to be okay?' 'Tell me about your trip to London,' Clio wished she had thought to ask. Kit was winning

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everybody there. She didn't even remotely like Kevin O'Connor, and yet he was hanging on her every word. 'He was okay,' Kevin said. ' . . . like old and everything, but an all right fellow. You could see why she likes him. He drove us all round London in his car ... down the docks, to Covent Garden ... he was like a guide ... in a way.' 'Did he not have to go to work?' Kit asked. 'Well, it was Christmas.' 'But isn't that the terrible thing about hotel

Work, we have to work at Christmas?' Kevin looked at Michael that's true. I suppose he had time off.' 'I think he's left his hotel, you know, already. And they're getting married very soon. Real soon, wink, wink,' Michael said, nudging Clio. Clio looked annoyed, but Kit was interested. 'And will you all be going over for the wedding again?' 'No, they're coming over here. It'll be in Dublin.' Kit wanted to ask had they met his family, what had he been doing up to now. She wanted to get the two stupid, bone-headed O'Connor boys up against a wall and beat the answers out of them. Then she wanted to tell them that Mary Paula had got herself hooked to a liar and deceiver in the international league. She wanted to say that she could tell them a story about their future brother-in-law and his deceptions that would make their pale greasy hair stand on end, 'Clio, is that a new watch?' she asked. Clio had been displaying her wrist in a way that simply called out for attention. 'Yes, Michael gave it to me.' There was a little simper. 'It's lovely,' Kit said and they all admired it. Next year it would be the engagement ring. That's the way the mating dance worked. The watch was a preliminary. Kit looked at Clio with new eyes as if she had never seen her before. Clio was going to marry Michael O'Connor. She would soon be a sister-in-law of Louis Gray.

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Mrs Hanley was loud in her praise of how well the young people had done. 'My Patsy was involved in it all,' she told Mrs Dillon from the newsagency. 'I'm surprised your Orla wasn't in on it from the start.' 'Well, of course Orla has her own life to lead, what with being married and living so far out in the country.' 'She won't be here tonight, will she?' Mrs Hanley asked. 'One never knows,' said Mrs Dillon distantly and moved away. She had told her daughter Orla that there was no question of her turning up alone at the golf club dance. She either came with her husband and a family party or she didn't come at all. 'That crowd wouldn't know what a dance was,' Orla had said. 'And I'll go on my own if I like, there'll be plenty who'll dance with me.' Mrs Dillon, who feared greatly that Stevie Sullivan might dance only too much with her, had her mouth set in a grim line. The buzz of conversation had become almost a roar when Philip and Kit decided that Bobby Boylan and his Band should begin to play. They hadn't wanted them to start until the noise level was already high. 'Something gentle without too

many rat-tat-tats to start,' Philip had suggested. 'What does he mean - rat-tat-tats?' Bobby Boylan asked indignantly. 'I think he means reverberating drum sounds,' Kit said apologetically. 'He's got an odd way of putting things, your fellow.' 'He's not my fellow.' Kit didn't want even someone like Bobby Boylan, whom she might mercifully never see again, to go away with the wrong impression. It was a five-piece band. They wore pale pink jackets, all of which must have been bought when the players were slimmer men, or else they had been borrowed from a skinnier band. ' "Red Sails in the Sunset" gentle enough, do you think?' Billy Boylan asked. He hated hotel dinners. He would like to have been in a big dance hall on New Year's ~88

Eve, but times weren't what they used to be. These days it stening to children in jackets giving orders. was li I I fie sighed and waved his baton at the band that bore his name. 'How soon should we bring them in for the meal?' Philip asked Kit. 'They're all enjoying this bit, there's no one looking at their watches,' Kit said. 'Did C110 show you her watch?'

'She did. I thought she might want Bobby Boylan to call for a roll of drums and have it carried round the room.' Philip laughed. 'It's good to know you can be bitchy like everyone else.' 'What, me? I'm hardly ever any other way. Let's wait another ten minutes anyway.' She had noticed that Stevie Sullivan and his party hadn't turned up yet. She didn't want to begin until the main star was there. Anna broke off in the middle of a conversation. 'Excuse me, there's something I must do,' she said, Kit's eyes followed her. Surely the decorations hadn't fallen to bits yet. But no, Anna Kelly had seen Stevie Sullivan arrive. She wanted to be there to greet him. Kit looked at Anna's perfect skin, her blonde hair in curls down her back, little ribbons of precisely the same lime green as the dress threaded through her hair. She was like a vision. Maybe Kit looked hard and tough by comparison. Perhaps scarlet had not been a good colour. Too fast. Too sh,2~F for Lough Glass. Stevie Sullivan and his friends had been in Paddles'. They were all in very good form. 'By God, I wouldn't know this place,' said one of the car dealers. 'Used to be a place you'd be afraid to talk to anyone in case they keeled over and died at your feet.' 'And would you listen to the band, Stevie? You've got great class getting us into a place like this.' They were red-faced men, bachelors maybe, people who had given big orders for tractors and vans and lorries over

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the year~ ~ey even bought i a lot of their other farm
hr machine hrough young Stevie Sulli n, who acted as a broker but always got them a good Iva I deal and stood over whatever was delivered. They were flattered that they should be Invited to something with a name as fancy as the Lough Glass golf club dinner dance. It would not have been a place where they might normally have been nvited. Kit made a mental note to put extra warmed dinner rolls on their table. These were fellows who might eat the decorations if the food wasn't served quickly enough. The names of the guests were In big writing on the tables. They didn't have to peer and fumble. Not a full seating plan, but just McMahon or Wall ... the groups arranged their distribution with a maximum of fuss and confusion. Emmet stood about watchfully; he was in charge of chairs. He would run for extra ones if they were needed or ease people into corners. The baskets

of warmed rolls were on the tables, served by the solemn girls from the convent, each one looking earnest with eyes cast down. Kit had forgotten that if she ordered no giggling she also seemed to have bought no smiling. She would know another time. They had rehearsed so many times how the line would begin. Kit would urge those sitting at tables furthest from the buffet to come up first. It worked like a dream. Soon the entire company had got the picture on how it would work out. And also the huge reassurance that there was going to be enough food. 'Please return as often as you like,' the sepulchral-looking girls in their white blouses urged. Con Daly, the cook who was normally never seen anywhere in polite society, stood beaming at the door of the kitchen in his white outfit and chef's hat, as if he had been responsible for everything, rather than taking the most simple and basic directions from Kit and Philip. Out of the corner of her eye Kit saw Orla Dillon - or Orla Reilly as she was now - arrive at the door. She looked

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small and shabby as she had been in the rain for a while if deciding whether or not to go in. Her dress looked limp, her hair lank. Years back they had all thought Orla a wild success, and had huge experience with men. Tonight she looked pathetic. She was not on Mrs Dillon's table, that was obvious. There were six people there who didn't look at all as if they

might be welcoming the wild girl who had left her family home in the mountains for a night of fun. Kit moved over to her. 'Hello, Kit.' Her eyes looked dull. 'There you are, Orla. Are you with any particular group?' 'That's a gorgeous dress, did you get it in Dublin?' 'Yes.' Kit looked anxious. 'I'd love to go to Dublin. To work even.' She smelled of drink. This was going to be awkward, Kit realised. She couldn't throw Orla out. But where was she going to seat her? She knew only too well of Orla's fling with Stevie Sullivan. That's probably why she was here. That was why she had come in from the back of beyonds, to have a little New Year's Eve magic. 'Well now, Orla, where did you plan to sit for dinner?' 'I heard it was a table where you went and helped yourself.' 'Well, yes, of course it is.' 'So what does it matter where I sit?' 'I wouldn't want you to be without a place to sit

down. 'Don't get your knickers in a twist over it. I'll find somewhere.' This was all they needed, Kit thought. A drunk exgirlfriend of Stevie's turning up. And for all they knew pursued by all her lowbred in-laws with hatchets. Philip was at her side as Orla, flounced off towards the food table. 'What's the problem?' 'Plastered,' Kit said succinctly. 'Jesus, what'll we do with her?'
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'We could feed her more drink and she'd pass out and we could put her in a cupboard or something.' He looked at her in gratitude; she wasn't making a drama out of it. 'Or we could give her to her mother, you know, that old saying, "To every cow its calf . . ." ' 'It's not a saying Mrs Dillon might feel any way enthusiastic about. No, I think the thing is to see where she weaves and sort of settle her there. Emmet will get her a chair.' They saw her weaving with a plate of food piled perilously high towards Stevie Sullivan's table. Emmet approached with an extra chair and hovered until he was waved forward. 'Well, at least she's sitting down,' Kit said. She was so cross that this bit of Stevie's past had come back to haunt him. Yet she was nothing to be jealous of, poor Orla with the pinched face and the slurred speech. Except of course Orla had known Stevie in a much different way. Orla hadn't been Miss Prissy like Kit was being, she had been all the way. 'It's not fair on poor Stevie to let her land in on top of all his party,' Philip said. 'He's so decent, look at the crowd he brought.' Kit felt a wave of guilt flood over her. If things went according to plan when the dancing began, she would be in Stevie's arms all night. Philip would not be referring to him as poor Stevie. She saw S & vie go over to the table where all their own gang sat. She saw him speak to his brother Michael and hand him some car keys. Michael was nodding earnestly and bursting with importance. Then Stevie was back at his own table. The band played numbers that wouldn't disturb the digestive juices, the heavier dance beat would come later. Bobby Boylan and his band would have a recess later and be fed in another room. 'Philip, it's all fine,' Kit said. 'It's even better than we had hoped.' 'The first of many.'

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They stood there -isn't that what I said from the word go?' proudly and watched. The unsmiling waitresses were beginning to clear the tables. As instructed, they did not scrape the plates there and then but piled

them neatly and brought them to the kitchen. The desserts were being arranged on the long table. There would be no panic, everyone could see that bowl after bowl of trifle was lined up in readiness. soon it would be time for the ladies to

powder their noses, and the dancing to begin. She told herself not to worry about Orla Dillon. Stevie Sullivan would cope with the sudden and unwelcome entrance of his past. He would know how to avoid a scene. Stevie Sullivan could cope with anything. Michael Sullivan came across Kit. 'I know I'm meant to

do

and

Kit

was helping clear the dance floor space, but something's come up. 'What exactly?' somewhere. 'Stevie wants me to drive someone. Apparently she feels a bit sick.' 'And will he not be driving her himself?' 'No, I'm to say he will but he won't, if you know what I

mean. Kit said, pleased. 'I know exactly what you mean, It was done very cleverly. Stevie guided a weaving Orla to the door and whispered something in her ear. She went like a lamb out to his car, where his brother Michael followed.

'Where's she Stevie?' Orla slurred. 'I'm to drive you there, it's more discreet apparently, and he'll meet you there.' 'Where's she there?' 'We'll be off now, Orla.' said Michael Sullivan, and drove through the moonlit night over the roads with their

great view of the lake. He came Reilly's land and then He drove eleven miles until sounds of a sing-song house where Orla lived. There were none in her kitchen. 'Orla said. 'Hey, this isn't where I want to go

'This is what Stevie says is best. You're to say you went into town and bought a bottle of whiskey for the night that's in it.' 'But I didn't. I haven't got one.' Orla was frightened now. 'You did. Stevie's got one for you. I'm to wait, in case they think you were with Stevie or anything.' 'But they'll know you're his brother.' 'No they won't. I'm only a child in their eyes. I'm only a schoolboy, you wouldn't be with a schoolboy.' 'I don't know.' Orla looked at him. She got out of the car and walked unsteadily to the door. He prayed she wouldn't drop the bottle of whiskey. One of the men opened the door. Michael could hear rough voices. 'Who have you out in the car?' the man said pushing past her. 'A child,' Orla said unsteadily. The man came out to investigate. 'Good evening Mr Reilly,' Michael said nervously. 'The missus was getting you all a bottle of whiskey as a present and she had no lift back, so Paddles asked me to drop her out this way.' 'Why you?' the man said. 'I'm known to Mrs Dillon, the lady's mother,' said Michael. 'All right so, thanks.' The man was gruff. 'Happy New Year,' Michael called as he turned the car to get back on the road. 'And to you, young fellow,' he said. Michael drove back to the party. Things were great. He had told Stevie he would do him the favour if and only if Stevie got him a car of his own, even the cheapest of things. Stevie had been desperate. By the time Michael got back the dancing was in full swing. 'Did I miss anything?' he asked Emmet. 'Only lots of dragging tables and chairs out of the way. And the windows were opened to let out the smell of the people for a bit.'

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'Did it?' Michael asked with interest. 'I hope so because it blew out all the candles which had to be lit again.'

Bobby Boylan asked everyone to come onto the floor for 'Carolina Moon'. 'Will you dance, Kit?' Philip asked. 'Worked together it was the least she could do. They had so happily over the weeks, and now it was a triumph. Already she had heard people saying that it would never

leave the Central. She had been told by Kevin Wall's father that there was going to be a big dinner in which he was involved; they had written to the Castle Hotel for quotations but he could say categorically now that it would be held in the Central. Dan O'Brien had shaken her hand and said that he felt she might have had some part in the organising of it all and he would

like it to be known that he was not ungrateful. Through the convoluted speech with all its double negatives Kit could see that he was so pleased he hardly trusted himself to speak. Orla's mother had clutched her in the ladies' room and said that she was a girl of great worth, and that her tact over poor Orla not feeling well would not be forgotten. 'It will not be forgotten,' Mrs Dillon said several times. Kit was mystified. She felt she had handled Orla's arrival very poorly, but it did appear that the girl had been driven back to her mountain men by Stevie's brother and that all was well. Stevie. When would he speak to her? As Bobby Boylan's band began to urge the Carolina Moon to keep shining, Kit and Philip took to the floor, an to dance their They were the first out and as they beg table stood up and cheered. 'Well done, Philip,' they called. 'Well done, Kit.' Everyone else clapped. The pretty girl in the scarlet dress and the son of the house. Kit was stricken. Suppose Stevie thought she was doing it on purpose, looking for attention,

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spelling it out that she was with Philip. But there was nothing she could do except smile and acknowledge the cheers. Outside the windows the moon had come from behind the clouds. It was making a long narrow silver trian I the take. 'Look at it, Philip. Isn't it like magic . . In a way she pointed because it meant she could take her arms away from him. She knew Stevie was watching her. She didn't want to pull away from Philip too hurtfully. He looked. It was as they had hoped. 'Haven't you the most beautiful view in the world?' Kit exclaimed. 'We do,' he said simply. 'I'm so proud of Lough Glass tonight,' Kit said. 'I could shout it from the roofs. Usually I have to get ready for people to say Where? when I say Fin from here.' 'There's someone from the Castle Hotel ... they came to report apparently.' 'Well, they'll have a lot to tell.' Kit managed to get them back to talking as the friends they were rather than being draped around each other. 'He was interested in the summer-house ... said it was a real feature ... apparently they just knocked one down over there ... weren't we clever?' Philip said. They looked down from the big picture windows at the floodlit summer-house and the lake stretching away beyond it. 'You couldn't wish for a better setting to see in the New Year,' Philip said. Kit looked at the clock, it was a

quarter to eleven. She had seventy-five minutes to get Stevie Sullivan out on the floor kissing her and wishing her Happy New Year in front of the town. She could barely wait. Maura and Martin danced to the music of 'On the Street Where You Live'. 'This must be the only place in the world where almost everybody does live on the same street, Martin said. 'Didn't they do a great job? It's much better than up at the club, twenty times better.'

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, You look lovely tonight, Maura.' 'And so do you, young and handsome.' 'No no, that's going too far,' he laughed at her. 'It's what I see.' Maura was transparently honest. He held her a little closer. Nearby, Peter and Lilian danced, stiffly and a little bit away from each other. It had all the hallmarks of a duty dance. Peter would go to the bar shortly.

Philip O'Brien was dancing with his mother. He was a boy who knew how to do things right, Martin thought. Then he looked around for his beautiful daughter in her eye-catching scarlet dress. As he looked he saw her take the hand of Stevie Sullivan from the garage. Stevie looked like a film star, dark and brooding. As they began to dance Martin thought they looked very much as if they had been dancing together for a long time. Which was of course ridiculous; they hardly knew each other, those two. 'Not now, Emmet. I have to do the decorations,' Anna Kelly snapped at him. 'Absolutely.' He appeared not to see her rudeness. 'I just wanted to make sure I danced with everyone at our table. Patsy,' he raised his voice. '... will you do me the honour?' Patsy Hanley's face lit up. She had a very presentable taffeta dress with a big broad sash. Her mother beamed proudly from another table as she saw her daughter walk to the floor with handsome young Emmet McMahon from the pharmacy. This was a night Lough Glass would remember for ever. Kevin O'Connor was dancing with Frankie Barry. 'This is a great place, isn't it?' he said. 'Would you look at the view,' Frankie said. 'Philip O'Brien will be the biggest catch in Ireland with a hotel like this under his belt.' 'Play your cards right then, Frankie,' Kevin said laughing. 'No, I think he only has eyes for Miss McMahon ... like the rest of you.' 'He'd want to be careful with Miss McMahon ... she's

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the kind that could deal you a very sharp blow if you got out of order.'

'Yeah, well, that guy she calls the boy nextdoor isn't getting kicked too far away is he?' asked Frankie. i And they looked at Kit McMahon and Stevie Sullivan, dancing as if there were no other people in the room, and no one had existed at any other time.

'You look great, Clio,' Michael said. 'Why did you say that)' 'Because you do.' 'And?' 'And because you're looking very glum., 'And?', 'Because I want you to come up to the room with me now: 'Now, in front of everyone? You must be mad!' 'This may come as a severe shock to you Cho, my dream girl, but nobody in this room is looking at us, or thinking aboutus ... they've all got their own concern s.' That was probably true. Clio looked at the dance floor. Kit must have gone quite mad. She was holding on to Stevie Sullivan as if she never wanted to let him go. Stev e Sullivan, who had been with everyone in th' he must have lost her mind. e parish. S 'I'll go first as if I'm going to the Ladi ' You wait for three minutes. Okay?' es . 'Sure.'Michael had thought it would be more difficult. Anna Kelly came back to the table at that moment. 'Would you like to dance?'she asked Michael. 'Later, okay?' he said. He saw her face flush a dark red. 'Not if you were the only man in the room with his own legs would I dance with you, Michael,' she said. Michael watched her flounce over to a table where a lot of men sat. 'I'm a great dancer,' he heard her say. She was also a great-looking girl in that lime green colour. He wasn't surprised that about five of them rose unsteadily to their feet to compete for the honour. At least it had distracted her.

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Michael slipped out of the room and upstairs. ,I've put on the electric fire,' Clio said. She was already in the bed, her dress hanging carefully on the back of a chair. He was about to follow her with speed. 'Lock the door, for God's sake,' she whispered * 'You're very experienced at this sort of thing,' Michael said in admiration. Clio looked at him, alarmed. 'You know I'm not. There's never been anyone but you.' 'Aha, so you say.'

'You know that's true, don't you?' 'Whatever you say, lady.' He had his arms around her. Clio's eyes were troubled. Suppose Michael really thought she

might have been with other people, then that stopped her being special. 'I love you, Michael,' she said. 'Yes, and I love you too.' He spoke automatically, as people respond to a greeting. Wasn't it impossible to know if people really meant what they said.

The man dancing with Anna Kelly was a Ford dealer. He covered a big area and Stevie Sullivan was one of his best customers. The boy had a genius for knowing where the business was. He was definitely going places. Joe Murphy was delighted to be invited to this do tonight. Stevie had asked him did he want to bring his wife ... but Joe thought no, there was no point in complicating things. Now with this little angel in his arms he was even more pleased he hadn't. There would have been great trouble getting someone to mind the children, and anyway Carmel was shy. She wouldn't mix well. 'You're a terrific dancer,' Anna said to him. He held her tightly to him. This was a great place altogether. And to think that only this morning he had begun to think he was getting a bit old and fat, past the first excitement of youth. It had all been in his Mind. 'Let me dance you off your feet,' he said to Anna as he did a tricky, showy sidestep. It was true what they always said about large men being light on their feet. She seemed delighted with him.

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'Don't move away from me,' Stevie said. 'I think the music has stopped,' Kit told him. 'Well, that's only temporary.' 'I love you,' she said. 'People can lipread phrases like that.' 'So you're afraid of what people may hear or read on your lips?' 'No, I'm not afraid. I love you, Kit McMahon. I love you until my heart aches. I can't bear any time without you. You're my woman ... and I don't mean that in some awful possessive way ... I mean I'm your man. That's what I mean.' He smiled at her, a lovely crooked smile. They were near a window. The music had begun again. There hadn't been a question of their separating. 'Look at that moon,' Kit said. 'It's as if we had arranged it with some electrician.' 'The lake looks lovely. walk down there later .

Maybe we might go and have a . you know, run down by the summer-house and on to the shore.' 'I think I I the, world.' *t's probably the worst idea in

'Yes,' he agreed. 'It is ... I'd love to live down there, just beside the edge of the water . . 'Like Sister Madeleine used to.' 'Yes, we might have a little cottage, you and I, one day.' 'We'll not be together in a little cottage by the lake.' 'Why do you go and say that?' He looked genuinely upset. 'Because we, in 're only fooli g ourselves. But listen, enough of that.' 'A little cottage where the birds would come, where you could hear the water, like Sister Madeleine did.' 'I miss her,' Kit said. 'So do U They were the two people in Lough Glass who might have been expected to resent the hermit. She had harboured the man who had injured their families. But they both knew it had been from a good heart. 'I wonder where she is tonight.'

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,oh, well tucked up in her bed in St Brigid's,' Stevie said. IS) You ow where she is? , Nobody else ,St Brigid . kn

~,ew. Her departure and her destination had always been a ,-,vstery. 'Yes, I've seen her, met her there.' Kit could have fallen to the ground with astonishment. 'I jon't believe it.' 'True. I was up there trying to persuade the Reverend qother that if they bought a station-wagon for the old gardener to drive instead of a truck he could take them in to .he station and do a whole rake of things. And I saw her, ,ust standing there, the eyes as blue and strange as ever.' 'And did you speak to her?' 'Of course I did.' 'Stevie, you amaze me.' 'I'll bring you out there to see her one day, she'd love that.' 'Maybe she's hiding from people.' 'She may be, but not from us.' She felt a shiver of pleasure the way he said us. And the dances went on and on, Bobby Boylan and his band fuelling themselves with the pints that Philip thoughtfully provided at regular intervals. The clearing up had been a dream of efficiency. Kit and Philip had insisted that the kitchen be scrubbed, that utensils be seen to have been cleaned by being turned upside down to prove that even the bottoms had been scoured. Dish-cloths and towels were hanging on a line. Food was either covered and put in the fridge or if it was for dogs or pigs it was in buckets out in a scullery, each one covered and labelled. Philip wanted to make sure that a few people were casually allowed to see the kitchen after the event, something that would never have been considered remotely likely up to now in the Central. A certain level of democracy had been allowed. Con Daly, the cook, and the

rest of the staff had been allowed to join the revellers. An extra table had been added for them near the kitchen door. In between serving drinks and

cleaning tables the solemn waitresses and the more gleeful waiters would come and sit, to enjoy the first and finest dance they had ever seen. 'Could I have the next dance?' Kevin O'Connor approached Anna Kelly. She was really a beautiful girl. He, didn't know why his brother referred to her as some kind of monster or a savage dog. 'I beg your pardon,' she said as if he had made the most incredibly obscene suggestion. 'I was just asking you to dance.' 'And what made you think I might dance with you?' Anna asked. She was still seething with indignation about Michael having refused her. His twin brother was equally horrible. 'Well, we are at a dance.' Kevin was uncertain of himself. 'I meant no offence,' he said humbly. 'I'm glad to hear it,' Anna Kelly said sternly and walked away. Joe Murphy had been an unwise partner to have picked. He had let his hands roam around her in a very intimate way and even suggested that they go to his car, which was a brand new model he said, and there were only five of them in Ireland. She had found it necessary to lose him rather speedily. But Stevie had seen her dance with him. She made sure Stevie saw her all the time. What was he doing with Kit, for heaven's sake. A duty dance was a duty dance, but this was ridiculous. She looked around for her sister. Clio had been gone for ages. Then Anna's intelligent eyes noticed that Michael O'Connor wasn't there either. First she went to look for them in the summer-house. They had all said during preparations that it would be an ideal place for courting couples; only the outside was lit up. Nobody could see what was going on inside. There was a long bench there with a long cushion. It would have been cold of course - - But Anna tiptoed around to peer in. There was no sign of her sister and Michael O'Connor. She paused to look out

at the lake. It had never been more beautiful. Why was she taking so long to recognise that she was Stevie Sullivan and waiting for him? He there, all dressed up, grown up, a could be standing out in the moonlight with her now. Or in the summerhouse. She was just about to move onto the path when she saw a

shape. There were so many shadows here that she thought it was part of the hedge, but she realised now it was somebody crouching there. The shape stood up, it was a woman. A woman in a long woollen skirt and a cloak, a cloak that she pulled up over her face and head when she saw Anna could see her. Then she ran away, down the path that went towards the lake. Anna got such a fright that she couldn't even find a voice to scream with. Her breath was gone. This woman must have been there for about five minutes, and would have been just beside her in said nothing, shown no presence until Anna had gone back to the path. Who was she, and what was she looking at? Probably one of the travellers. They were always stealing things, no matter what her father said. They might have come to see could they get at people's valuables. Fur coats and the like. Anna had thought Kit and Clio were stupid to insist that there be a proper cloakroom with someone to mind it. But now she realised that Tinkers, travellers, whatever you wanted to call them, they weren't the same as other people. imagine crouching in a garden instead of getting on with your life. Her heart still pounding. Anna went back into the hotel. joined the dance. Stevie was right in her path as she joined. 'Don't you look lovely,' he said admiringly. 'Thank you Stevie, and you look very handsome. I've never seen you dressed up before.' Recognition for her. 'Little Anna.' He was full of admiration. 'Not so little,' she was cross. And you brought an , interesting party with you,' she said. He said 'Yeah, watch out for Joe Murphy though. He has a wit and family.' She was furious. Instead of being jealous he was just giving her a friendly warning.

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'I'm sure he has, God help them.' Anna said loftily, 'I'm going to the bar to rescue some of my flock,' Stevie said. 'Otherwise I'd invite you to dance, but I have to make sure they're not disgracing me in there.' 'I don't have a free dance as it happens,' Anna said. 'Well then, isn't it all for the best,' Stevie said. She wanted to pick up a nearby chair and hammer him to death with it. In the bar Stevie found his cronies ordering large brandies and regaling Peter Kelly and Martin McMahon with their life stories. Joe Murphy was

telling them about the car he had of which there were only five in Ireland. Harry Armstrong was telling them that he had been on a trip to Africa. It was the most interesting thing he had ever done in his life. He kept stabbing Martin McMahon's chest. 'Have you ever been to Africa?' he asked. And no matter how many times Martin said no, the furthest he had ever been was England and Belgium, Harry Armstrong didn't seem to have received this information. 'Africa is the place,' he said over and over. 'What were you doing there?' Peter Kelly asked, hoping to lift the needle from the groove. It was a complicated story, an opportunity that was meant to exist and hadn't turned out, a fellow who had a contact that hadn't materialised. Harry Armstrong hadn't given a fiddler's damn, he had enjoyed Africa, the whole fact of being there. And when he was down on his uppers he had gone and stayed with his Uncle Jack, who was a priest out there, nay, more than a priest, a bishop would you believe. 'That was a great thing, to be Bishop Armstrong in Africa.' 'Arse Armstrong?' cried Peter Kelly and Martin McMahon in one voice. 'You met Arse?' 'What? What?' 'You're a nephew of Arse?' 'I don't understand.' Harry Armstrong did understand

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oinething: that these two men who weren't at all interested in him and his travels before, were now fascinated by him. 'Large brandy for the nephew of Arse Armstrong,' Dr Kelly shouted. Stevie shook his head in confusion. This seemed to be going fine for some reason that nobody could fathom, except perhaps it might have had something to do with the

strength of the drinks being served. Clio and Michael were still not at the table. Anna had now looked everywhere, they were not in the bar where her father seemed to be getting progressively drunker with some of Stevie's awful friends, they were not in the lounge where some couples were sitting talking. Clio wasn't in the ladies' room, she wasn't in the gleaming kitchen. Anna Kelly, who should have been the belle of the ball in the dress that had cost a fortune in Brown Thomas, felt very sorry for herself. Stevie Sullivan had no eyes for her at all. Nobody else at the table had been in any way gallant. Her only conquest had been a fat married man with groping fingers. She had been frightened to death by one of the tinkers. She felt like having a good cry. But not in the newly refurbished ladies' room where everyone

would see her. There was a sofa up on one of the landings. She would go up there and sit for a while in the dark. Nobody would see her. Anna sat and sobbed over the unfairness of life, the fickleness of men, the hopelessness of living in goldfish bowl like Lough Glass where everyone knew everything about you, the vulgarity and cheap common red dress that Kit McMahon was wearing and how much everyone seemed to like it. Nearby she heard a door lock open and her heart again. This place was full of strange sounds and shapes and noises. Then through the light she saw her sister start to creep out. Anna gave a gasp. Clio had been in Michael O'Connor's room. They really had been doing it. Making

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love. My God. Her gasp must have been audible, because Clio went straight back into the room again. Anna cracked the door. ept
'There's someone out there, I tell You,' she was saying in a panic-stricken tone. in
'Don't be ridiculous, who could it be?' 'I don't know. It could be anyone.'
'Who's the worst person it could be?' Michael asked. His voice was shaky too. I'MY mother I suppose, or Mrs O'Brien. Mrs O'Brien, 1
though; because she'd sue my mother and she'd tell every one that,
Michael, what'll we do?' Anna giggled to herself for a moment, then she rattled the door imperiously and called out at the top of her voice: 'Open this door at once, This is Mildred O'Brien here, open this door or I'm sending for Sergeant O'Connor.' The door opened and they stood there. Anna had to put her hand in her mouth she laughed so much. She went into the room and threw herself on the bed with mirth. Eventually she blew her nose and wiped her eyes and looked to see if the others were laughing. They were not. But they had relaxed a little. Bad and all as it was being discovered by Anna there were worse things that could have happened. 'Very droll,' Clio said eventually. 'Wonderful to meet someone with such a sense of humour.' Michael had barely been able to recover his breath. 'If the performance is over perhaps we could go downstairs.' 'Oh, I've finished,' Anna said looking from one to the other. 'Have you though?' Then she got another fit of uncontrollable mirth. They eventually managed to walk down the stairs, the three of them. There was safety in numbers. And they

needed it. Mrs O'Brien was at the foot of the stairs. 'And where have we A been, might I ask?' J was showing a few people the lovely view from the corridor upstairs,' Anna said, cool as anything.

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it is, a fine old place,' Mrs O'Brien said. 'Not everyone ,ppreciated it but still we've always known.'

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They were beginning to gather everyone together for the -Auld Lang Syne'. ,15 it that time already?' Stevie said. 'I hope to God the place ran itself for the last few hours, I did nothing I was supposed to do,' Kit said. 'You did everything you were supposed to do,' Stevie said. Bobby Boylan and the boys were giving little warning toots to tell people it was time to make the circle. The doors were opened so that they could hear the bells of the church ring out. Someone had the radio on to count down to twelve o'clock. Stevie and Kit stood side by side as if they always had. Maura saw and her heart was heavy. Anna saw and knew she had lost the battle but maybe not the war. Clio saw and thought again that Kit needed her head examined. Frankie saw and decided that Kit had always fancied this guy since the world began and it had really taken off at that party in Dublin. Philip saw and knew that for him it was over. And then they were all linking arms and crying out Happy New Year, the balloons were falling from the ceiling, the band was playing, the people were going out into the garden to call Happy New Year over the lake. They could see the fires of the travellers over in the distance, across the lake. The place had never looked more beautiful. Stevie Sullivan kissed Kit McMahon as if they were the only people on the earth. They stood in the garden of the Central Hotel with the lake in front of them and the path of moonlight which stretched out to the low hills and woods of the neighbouring county. This was their place and their time only. They didn't see anyone else in the garden. Everyone was inside where Bobby Boylan had started a conga line snaking in and out of all the downstairs rooms. It was headed by Con Daly, the cook, who was being hailed as a chef of the century.

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And as Stevie and Kit clung to each other Igh have heard the sound of the lake lapp bu they didn't hear the tears fall from the them. The figure in the darkness who night. a Anna saw the way they looked at each other. It was lik, a knife. That's what it was, as if someone had put a sharp knife in under her ribs where her dress was at its tightest and most uncomfortable. She looked very woebegone. is time, Everyone Emmet was watching. This might be hi I ivan as in the town had seen how Kit had taken Stevie Sulli I Maura would be her own. He knew that his father and cluck-clucki I ing about it. He would never be able to thank Kit enough. If he couldn't make Anna come back to him now he never would. 'Do you know what I'd like to do?' he asked Anna. 'No.' She was ungracious, she was sure it would be to dance, to drink, to neck. She wanted none of these things, not with the broken heart. 'I'm tired of this, I'd love to go and sit inthe summerhouse.' 'And kiss and cuddle and take my dress off, I suppose.' 'Certainly not,' Emmet sounded shocked. 'Hey, you and I made a bargain. You love someone else but that will never stop us from being friends.' 'I don't think he loves me, I think your bloody sister managed to interfere there.' 'Well, that had nothing to do with me, or with you,' Emmet lied smoothly. 'We're friends, you and I, and I wondered would we go and read some poetry in the summer-house, like we used to do. Nobody reads poetry .[L other they M ing below them - Q figure that watch d had sat watching 11 like you do, Anna.' 'Would you like that?' She was suspicious. 'I would, very much.' 'And when we get there it won't be all, now we're here we . . . ' 'No, it's poetry, and I went and got a book in case.' TheY stood and looked at each other.

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,Yes, let's do that,' Anna said. Anything would be better

than witnessing the sickening failure of an evening that had gone so wrong. Emmet had thought of everything. He had brought a rug ,o that they wouldn't be cold, he had a flask of drinking chocolate. 'Hey, this is nice,' Anna said, feeling good for the first ume for hours. They had a poetry book but they didn't open it. They listened to the music thump out of the

windows and across the lake. 'I just thought I'd say, speaking as a friend ... that you took very beautiful,' Emmet said. 'Thank you.' Anna looked at him suspiciously. 'Not as a person about to make a lunge at you ... just as an ordinary person ... and the kind of thing a girl might say ... the dress, it's just gorgeous. You look much better than a film star.' 'Well, that's very nice of you, I must say.' 'It would be a poor kind of friendship if I couldn't- say what was in my mind,' he said eagerly. Anna looked at him. There were tears in her eyes. 'You know what I mean,' Emmet said foolishly. 'Oh Emmet,' Anna Kelly cried. 'Emmet, I love you. I'm so blind and stupid, thank you for waiting for me, for understanding.' And they held each other and kissed in the summerhouse. Watched a few yards away by a woman with a cloak over her head. A woman who cried too. Kevin O'Connor and Frankie had discovered more about each other than they had ever known on this New Year Night. They looked at each other with new eyes. They went walking together by the lake shore, pausing for a bit of this and that. That's how they told it, And when they were down near the boats they saw this Woman, a woman with dark hair and a white blouse, sitting with her head in her hands crying as if her heart would break. It had been nobody who was at the dance.

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Neither of them had ever seen anyone so upset. A great dark cloak lay beside her on the ground. When they came near her and spoke she picked up the cloak and flung it around her and ran, leaping over the mooring ropes of the boats. She ran away into the dark. They told this to the others when they were back at the hotel. The older people were leaving, the young had gathered in the lounge unwilling to end the night. Kevin and Frankie were obviously startled by the encounter; it had been eerie. 'I saw her earlier,' Anna said. 'It was one of the tinkers. She ran in that direction when she left. She was crouching in the garden looking at the hotel, spying, seeing what she could see.' Emmet moved near her protectively as she shivered over the incident. 'No, it wasn't a traveller.' Frankie was very definite. 'No, I saw her face,' Kevin added. 'She had a different face.' 'And expensive clothes,' Frankie said. 'Did she say anything?' Kit asked, a nervous knot beginning to form in her stomach. 'No, nothing at all.' 'Would it be that ghost? Do you

remember the woman years ago who was meant to have drowned herself in the lake and kept crying out . . .'Clio began. Then she saw the eyes fixed on her, Stevie's, Emmet's, Anna's, Kevin Wall's, Patsy Hanley's, all the children of Lough Glass who remembered who else had drowned in the lake. didn't mean. . .' Clio began. But Kit had broken away. She had run out the door down the path towards the lake. 'Lena,' she was calling, 'Lena, come back, Lena. Don't go again. Lena, come back, it's Kit.' The others stood at the door and watched in horror as Kit ran into the dark night, shouting through her tears. 'Come back, Lena, come back.'

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CHAPTER TEN

They talked about the dance for ages. There were so many things to tell. Of the bold strap Orla Reilly and how she had been sent back where she belonged. Of the amount of food there was on the table - a banquet was all it could be called. The marvellous spot prizes - crates of brandy, whiskey and sherry seemed to have been donated, a turkey, legs of lamb, sides of beef, boxes of chocolates, tins of biscuits, fancy soaps, gents' scarfs, ladies' blouses (can be changed if

size is inappropriate). Nobody in the town had held back when asked to contribute. 'Do you remember the moment the balloons came down?' people said. 'And Bobby Boylan's band playing like the pied piper as they all went through the kitchen. And wasn't the kitchen shining, it would put you to shame over your own place.' And the fur cape that Maura McMahon wore, she was like royalty. And the great crowd of hard men that were guests of the garage, who slept in their cars and started drinking all over again in Paddles' the following morning. And the moonlight on the lake. And Stevie Sullivan and Kit. The way they danced all night. And how she ran out of there when someone told a silly story of seeing a ghost at the lake, and she thought it was her mother's ghost. Poor girl, and she went out calling don't leave me, or something. Nobody could hear. And how she had run out in the cold in her red dress and stood down by the lake until Stevie carried her home. There were so many things to tell.

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'You know, Maura, you can leave Stevie in the room. I swear we won't take off our clothes and get it started immediately.' 'I didn't think you would.' Maura was indignant. She had brought chicken broth for two days to a shivering Kit, without a word of remonstrance about the strange way the night had ended. She had cleaned the mud off the red dress, waiting until it dried so that she could brush it properly. She had been uneasy when Stevie Sullivan called so often to see the patient. She had found excuse after excuse to come back into the room. Kit reached out and held her hand. 'Maura, of course that's what you think. Hasn't Stevie been known for it with everyone in the county?' 'Well,' Maura reddened. 'But we've had plenty of places far more discreet and secluded than this, and if I didn't then I'm unlikely to succumb in my own house. Come on, isn't that true?' 'I don't want you to get hurt.' 'I won't, I swear.' Maura put her hand on Kit's forehead. 'I was given my orders by Peter to keep your temperature down. I think it's normal, but Stevie Sullivan's not going to be much of a help in that department.' 'I'd be worse without him, Maura.' Kit spoke as an equal. Maura felt touched by this. 'I'll talk to your father.' 'He wouldn't understand unless you said it properly. I mean, I couldn't say to Father that Stevie and I haven't done it yet, and won't start under this roof.' 'I'll try to explain the situation a bit more diplomatically,' Maura said. Nobody had asked Kit about her strange upset. Even Dr Kelly had said that it wasn't important. The story that the stupid girl from Dublin had told must have reminded Kit of the night her own mother disappeared. Nobody had told Dr Kelly that it was his own daughter Clio who had brought the whole thing to a head. She lay there when there was nobody in with her, her

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hands gripping the sheets, her brain racing. It must have been Lena. Who else would have come and watched? She

must have seen her son in the summerhouse with Anna

Lyell. She must have seen her daughter locked in Stevie's arms as they stood on the grass in the moonlight. She may have seen Maura Hayes wearing her little fur cape. She saw a town lit up with life and banners and balloons and flowers. A town which had been grey and oppressive

when she lived here. She knew that among the revellers were „it[that Louis the O'Connor boys, young brothers of the g would marry. A crowd of nearly two hundred people having a wonderful time while her own heart was broken. Standing on the edge of a place that believed her dead. Now Kit was a prisoner here. She had caught a chill and she was ordered to stay in bed. There was never a time when people would leave the house, a time when she could ring Ivy to know had Lena returned. Ivy would know. But how could she get to talk to her? u all. right, Kit' Tell me Emmet sat on her bed. 'Are yo the truth.' 'Yes, I am. Didn't the dance go so well?' 'But afterwards)' r, I got a fright. I was all nervous 'After-wards I got upsei ad nothing to eat with the fuss and tied up inside and I had h of it all.' 'You were wonderful ... it all worked so well.' 'Yes.' 'I'll never be able to th ank you.' 'I know a way,' she said. What? I'll do anything.' rer to help, foolishly happy She looked at him, his face eag in love or what he thought of as the love of that dreadful Anna Kelly. In many ways he was still a child. She just couldn't ask him to ring Ivy. i She couldn't tell him everything. That his mother was alive~ that sl~ie had come to look at them all, that she had run away again, run again towards the lake.

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Clio came to visit. 'I could have kicked myself. I'm so thoughtless, why did I mention people In lakes, ghosts. I,m Just so thick,' she said. 'No, it doesn't matter. I was nervous, I'd had three drinks, no food . . .' 'This would be her excuse. 'Will you ever forgive me?' 'Of course.' 'You must be very seriously sick if you say that. Normally you never forgive me.' 'Oh, I forgive you this time,' Kit smiled wanly. 'It was terrific, the dance, wasn't it?' 'You didn't get caught?' Kit asked. 'No, only by Anna. Who, by the way, asked me to come and spy out the lie of the land here ... She wants me to find out all I can about you and Stevie Sullivan.' Clio giggled as she spoke. 'And she asked you to do it diplomatically?' 'Yes, she said I was to be discreet.' 'Oh, but you are,' Kit agreed. 'I don't want to give that ghastly Anna one scrap of information. But this is for me ... this is for myself . - , Kit, what in the name of God Almighty were you doing? Were you really drunk?' 'Yes,

probably, a bit.' 'You never saw anything like it. You were wrapped around him. All night.' 'I know,' Kit remembered. 'Listen, it's not the end of the world. They'll forget it, eventually.' 'Oh) I don't think so,' Kit said. 'They will, they'll know it was just part of the madness of the night.' 'Not when they see me glued to him for the rest of my life they won't.' Clio's eyes and mouth were round. 'Kit, you're crazy. Stevie Sullivan, of all the people in the world.' 'Yes, of all the people in the world.'

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'No Kit, he has a girl everywhere. He doesn't care who they are, married or single, fat or thin, you know what he's like.' , I do. I love him.' 'You're still fevered, that's what it is.' 'You asked me, you wanted to find out the lie of the land. Now you've found it out.' 'Why did you tell me this ... ? It can't be for real.' 'Because you're my friend. You tell me you love Michael

O'Connor and you've been to bed with him and that you love it. We're friends, we tell each other things.' Her voice sounded a bit hysterical, Kit realised this as she spoke. 'But loving Michael is different, it's ... well, it's what you'd expect. You can't love the fellow in the garage who's slept with every maid in the parish.' 'His past isn't important,' Kit said loftily. ' Ah don't be ridiculous, it's not his past. Didn't you see Orla Reilly turn up at the dance looking like a mad woman just wanting more of it with Stevie?' 'Didn't you see him sending her home?' 'You're serious,' Clio said in shock. 'You're the one who always said I was unnatural because I didn't love anyone. Now I do and that's wrong too . . .' 'Look, I'm going home ... you're not well enough for visitors.' 'Okay, and tell Anna what I told you, that I'm crazy about him, and I won't rest until I get him.' 'I'll tell her nothing of the sort, I'll say you were so pissed drunk you don't remember dancing with him.' 'I'll tell her different and that'll get you into trouble for doing your jobs so badly.' 'I'll ignore you, you're quite mad. I came down to ask was there anything I could do for you, post letters, get you messages ... but now I think I should get you a psychiatrist.' 'Thanks, Clio. You're a real pal.' Kit realised that though she had known Clio as long as she could remember, it was an odd friendship. If Clio was

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the last person on earth she wouldn't ask her to ring ivy and give a simple message. She couldn't say, Clio please ring this woman in England and ask her is Lena all right No questions, just do it. Clio would want every detail and' the whole country would know every detail.

'Are you too tired? I won't stay long: 'No Philip, it's fine. It's great to see you. Wasn't best dance in the world?' t the 'Oh yes. I'll never be able to thank you.' 'For what, Philip? For making an eejit of myself. I just got upset when they started talking about ghosts.' 'Oh that,' Philip said. 'Sure, what did you think I meant?' Kit looked at him long and hard. 'How are your parents?' she said eventually. 'Oh, throwing out a new wing here and a new wing there. They think it was all their idea, can't understand why I never saw the potential of the place.' His face was different. There was less dog-like devotion there now. It was as if the dance had managed to convince him that there would be no future for them together. She could trust him to the end of the earth. But could she trust him to ring Ivy for her?

When Stevie arrived she was sitting up flushed and eager. 'Leave the door open,, she whispered. 'Why?' 'I want them to know we're not at it like knives on the bed.' 'Why did you suggest that? I'm just about able to control myself, if I think it's out of the question. Don't even Joke about it.' His smile was broad. 'And I want to ask you something.' 'Anything.' 'I have it written down. I want you to do something, to make a call, but no one is to hear you.' 'Where is it to?'

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'To London.' 'Sure.' Would Mona listen In on the exchange, do you think?' 'Not to me, I have too many boring calls to Dagenham and Cowley and places like that.' 'Not when Maura's there.' 'Understood.' 'It's the most important thing in my whole life. Could

you do it now?' 'Straight away.' 'I've written it down for you.' 'Right.' 'No, it's not just an ordinary message, wait till you go through it ... 'Only Ivy, not her husband Ernest. Say you're my boyfriend, and that I've been sick and

can't get to a phone . . . say I think I saw Lena here in Lough Glass on New Year's Eve. I want to know if Ivy's heard from her since then.' Tears began to fall down Kit's cheeks. Stevie took a handkerchief and wiped them away tenderly. 'Will she tell me?' 'She might be worried, but you could say I trust you to ask the question but that you don't know anything else. You don't know the full story.' He nodded as if he understood. He was so dear to her, his long dark hair on the collar of his scarlet jersey. She knew he had washed and changed his shirt just to cross the road and visit her. That made her feel so touched she could have cried again. 'I'll be back soon,' he said. 'Drink your soup, it's going cold.' 'Thanks, Stevie.' He had gone, he would do it, he had asked nothing. Kit closed her eyes. She was absolutely certain she had done the right thing.

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'How did you get home?' Ivy asked, taking the st-nall bag from Lena's hand and removing the wet coat from hCr shoulders. 'Home?' Lena's face was blank. 'Well, back here to London?' 'I came by boat and train. It was easier. No talking to people, no booking ... no giving your name. You just get on.' The voice was flat and dead. 'You came by boat and train from Brighton?' 'I wasn't in Brighton.' 'Yes you were, Lena. I rang you there.' 'Oh then? Yes, that's right.' 'So where were you since?' 'Ireland.' 'Ireland?' 'Lough Glass. I went to see them.' 'I don't believe you.' 'Yes.' 'What did they say?' 'They didn't see me.' 'They threw you out?' 'No, they didn't know I was there.' 'Look, Lena, could I ask you have you had anything to eat ... ?, 'I don't know..' 'Suppose I were to make you something now ... what would you like? I won't offer you turkey. . . ' 'I don't mind, I haven't had any turkey this year.' A very wan little smile, but It was better than nothing. 'Well, soup and a turkey sandwich?' 'A very small one, Ivy.' The phone rang. 'Wouldn't you know,' Ivy said. 'The operator said it was a call from Ireland.' 'Kit,' Lena leaped up. 'Give it to me.' 'No, we don't know . . . ' Ivy tried to take the phone back. 'Hello,' a man's voice said. 'Could I speak to Ivy please? This is Stevie Sullivan, I'm Kit McMahon's boyfriend.'

'This is Ivy,' Lena said. 'Well, it's about Lena. Kit wants to know is Lena all right? Has she phoned you?' ,Why isn't she phoning herself?' Lena wanted to know. ,she's sick and she's in bed.' ,is she bad, too bad to phone?'t to be

'No, I think it's a kind of secret and she's not mean I I heard phoning from home.' 'What do you mean you think? You must know if you're -everything.' phoning. You must know e ,

'Ivy' the man said. 'I'm Kit's friend, she asked me to do this for her. She's distraught over someone called Lena. I don't know, truthfully I don't. But I want to go back across the street now and tell her if Lena's all right. Is she?' 'Yes,' Lena said slowly. 'Tell her she is.' 'Excuse me, but could I give her just a bit more information than that. I don't want to know who Lena is, but Kit was very ill and distressed the other night and she kept calling for Lena. I don't know what it is, but it's important.' 'Yes,' Lena said in a flat voice. 'It is important.' 'So?' he waited. 'So if you could say that Lena got home fine, by boat and train and that ... and that she's fine now and will write soon, a long long letter.' 'She's very upset, is there anything you could say that would sort of prove I've spoken to you?' He was going to do this right, he wouldn't go back to Kit unless he had a message to convince her. Lena paused for a moment. 'I'd tell her that 'You could tell her ... I suppose you saw the hotel and the whole dance was a credit to her, that nobody could have believed the Central Hotel could look so well. 'And , 'Yes, that would prove I think 'that I talked to you?'

There was another pause before Lena spoke. 'You really don't know what it's about?' Lena asked,

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'No.' 'Thank you,' she said. 'Thank you too, Ivy,' he said and hung up. He ran across the road to tell Kit. He repeated the message word by word. When he told her about the praise for the Central Hotel she looked at him with two eyes as big as dinner plates. 'Say it again.' He did. 'You weren't talking to Ivy. You were talking to Lena.' She burst into tears. Ivy helped Lena back to the table. 'Well now ... wasn't that timing? Suppose he had rung half an hour ago, wouldn't have had anything to tell him.' 'Oh

God,' Lena said. 'What do you mean?' 'She's confiding in him. She'll tell him and then she'll be in his power for ever.' 'What do you mean?' 'Stevie Sullivan will know her secret. He'll have total power over her from now on. He'll make her do whatever he wants with her. And however badly he treats her she'll have to put up with it, because she can never escape. He knows her secret, he'll always be able to hold that over her.' 'Why do you hate him so much?' 'I saw him, Ivy. I was as near to them as I am to you. I saw them kissing, I saw her eyes as she looked at him . - .' 'She's going to fall in love ... you don't want her to be a nun?' 'No, but I saw him, Ivy.' 'And what's wrong?' 'He was Louis all over again. He could have been Louis' son. Or his younger brother. She's going to do what I did. Look at the legacy I've given the child. To love someone who's going to break your heart.'

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Jim, there's a letter from Lena,' said Jess,,. 'Oh, thank God. I thought she'd abandoned us totally. What does she say?' 'That she's suffering from stress and her nerves, and that the doctor says it's overwork. And advised her to take some weeks off. She says she'll be back at the end of January.' 'Well, that's a relief that she goes to a doctor anyway.' 'And she does work too hard,' Jessie said. 'We've tried to stop her, get her to take time off.' Jim had, many times.

'She says she might go to Ireland for a while.' Jessie was studying the letter. 'That would be good. It's more restful over there. That's where they're from so they probably have friends and family.' 'She doesn't say anything about him.' 'Well, he'll probably go too.' 'She just says I all the time ... there's no We mentioned at all.'

Clio was having lunch with Michael O'Connor's family. They seemed to be very taken with her, accepting her into their number. 'You will come to Mary Paula's wedding?' Michael's mother asked Clio. 'Yes, I'd love to, Mrs O'Connor.' Things were going very well since New Year. Huge praise had been lavished on the festivities at the CHL, as it was now known between them all. The Central Hotel Lough Glass had done a great job. Fingers O'Connor had been interested in every detail. 'And how did your stepmother enjoy the dance? Maura Hayes?' 'She's my aunt, actually,' Cho said. 'She's

Kit's stepmother,' Kevin O'Connor said. 'And Kit is ... ?, 'Kit's the one I used to fancy,' Kevin explained helpfully.

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'Apparently the lovely Louis hasn't any family ... or any fit to field at a wedding.' Clio sounded so snobby Kit hated her for a moment. Then she remembered who she really hated. 'So how are they going to do it then?' I 'Not one of their own hotels. Marriage in University Church and sixteen people to lunch in a private room in the Russell. just along St Stephen's Green.' 'The Russell! Lord, how posh.' 'I know. I don't know what I'm going to wear. You wouldn't tell me where you keep getting these gorgeous outfits.' 'You want to wear an off-the-shoulder scarlet evening dress to a lunch in the Russell?' 'Oh all right. I'll never know. There's so much I'll never

'Well, how is she?' Fingers was persistent. 'I think she's losing her marbles actually. She's involved with the local rake.' 'Maura Hayes?' cried Fingers in disbelief. 'No, Kit,' they all said. Fingers was going to get no more information about that nice plump woman he had always had such hopes of having a dalliance with.

Kit was back in Dublin. By an unspoken agreement Stevie Sullivan was not mentioned when she met Clio. 'Tell me about Mary Paula's wedding. Is It going to be a big one?' 'No, dead quiet.' 'That doesn't sound like the O'Connors.'

know about you, Kit.' 'And me about you. Aren't we women of mystery?' 'You look very pale. Are you better from whatever it was?' 'Yes, I'm just a bit tired.' In fact she was awake all night waiting for the letter that Lena had promised to send. A letter explaining everything. But which hadn't arrived yet.

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'Aunt Maura, it's Clio. Do you remember that lovely little fur cape you wore at the dance?' 'Hello, Clio. How nice to hear from you. All the way from Dublin.' 'Yes. Yes, well I can't talk long. But I was going to ask you a great favour.' 'What's that?' 'I was wondering would you lend it to me for a wedding I'm going to. I really want to look terrific and I think it

would be smashing over my cream-coloured suit.' 'You're very young for furs, Clio. They're really for older women like me.' 'I know what you mean, but your one was particularly nice. it was really more suitable for a younger person altogether.' 'Oh, really,' Maura said. Clio tried to retrieve it. 'What I meant was it looked so smart on you.' 'Good, I'm glad you liked it.' 'So I was wondering . . .' Maura let the pause rest between them. 'I was wondering if you'd lend it to me. I'd be so careful of it - . .' 'No, I'm sorry.' Maura's voice was cool. 'I'd love to be able to help, but that's a very special gift and I don't want to leave it out of my hands.'

Stevie came to Dublin four nights a week, and on every one of those nights he and Kit went out together. They agreed that they meet out. The temptations of the bedroom, the quiet little bedsit where no one would notice who came into the building and who left, had too many dangers. Stevie wanted to be true to his promise. If staying with Kit meant staying out of bed with her he said that was the deal; he wanted to be with her. They sat in chip shops and held hands. They took the bus to Dun Laoghaire and walked along the pier in the

623 wind and rain. They went to the pictures in the big cinemas in O'Connell Street. They met no other people. They didn't need anyone. And who would they meet? Philip, whose face would break both their hearts. Clio, who thought that Kit was throwing her life away. Frankie, who was so wrapped up in Kevin O'Connor that she had time for no one else. But they never tired of talking and touching and laughing. If anyone had asked her what they talked about, Kit thought one night, she couldn't tell. The time had flown, but she didn't know what they had spoken of. They didn't talk about his past. Or his wish to love her in a different way. As they never mentioned the woman that he had spoken to that day on the phone. The woman who remained a secret that he never wanted to know. One day Kit would tell him it was her mother, but not yet.

My dearest Kit, I have tried so many times. There's a wastepaper basket full of pages torn up, screwed into little balls. I think I had a sort of breakdown. That's all I can say. I hope it's over. But it won't be over really until Louis marries. It's on 26 January in Dublin. When it's all over and done with then I think I'll be back to normal again. Please believe me, Kit. Forgive me in this as you have in so many other things. Tell me you are well and strong.

I talked to Stevie. He thought it was Ivy but you know it wasn't. He sounded very concerned about you. As if he loved you a lot. I'm saying this because I know you want to hear it. And also because I think it's true. This doesn't mean it's all for the best. I love you so much Kit. Whatever happens remember that. Your loving mother, Lena

That you are back at work

Kit was very worried. Lena had used the word mother again in a letter. Did she really have a breakdown? What was her warning about Stevie? And most of all why was she

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warning her to remember that Lena loved her whatever happened? What could happen that hadn't happened already?

Do you know what I'd love you to do?

'No, I dread to think.' Kit said. Clio's eyes were too bright. 'Could you pinch Maura's cape for me to wear, she'll not notice it's gone. I'd pay your fare down to take it back after the wedding.' 'Are you out of your mind?' Kit asked. That's my fine to you. You're the one who's mad, not me. You're the one whose name is up with Stevie Sullivan all over the place. My mother was asking me what you were up to.' 'I don't give a damn what your mother thinks, asks, or says. 'You've been saying that as long as I remember,' Clio said. 'I must have had some reason. You always quote her as if she knows everything and the rest of us know nothing.' 'Why are we fighting?' Cho asked. 'Because you were very rude and hurtful to me, as you almost always are.' 'I'm sorry.' 'No you're not, you just want Maura's cape.' 'For a loan. Look at the way we lend each other everything, shoes, bags, lipsticks . . . ' 'But those were ours, not someone else's.' 'She won't know.' Kit paused. Imagine the irony that she was being asked to lend someone Lena's cape for Louis' wedding. Maybe Louis had given that cape to Mother. Years and years ago. Father didn't remember buying it. You'd remember buying a fur coat, for heaven's sake. Should she let Clio wear it? Startle Louis at his wedding with the memory of the gift he had given to Lena. But men were so hopeless. They remembered nothing. Suppose he remembered it, he'd just think Clio had another one like it.

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Clio watched her during the pause. It was as if Kit was deliberating. Deciding whether to give it or not. 'No,' Kit said eventually. 'Sorry for all the silly fighting and everything, but it's just not possible.' 'I wish the bloody wedding was over,' Clio said, 'Everyone's very tense about it. Except the bridegroom apparently. He's invited four people, and he's as happy as Larry. He's a real smasher, by the way, for an old man.' 'When did you meet him?' 'Oh he's here. They were having drinks at Michael's father's the other night. He holds your hand in a way that you think if things were different he might fancy You. Oh, and she's definitely preggers. You'd know by the way she stands.'

'Would we go to the North, you and I, next weekend?' Stevie asked her. 'No,' Kit said. 'I have to be in Dublin.' 'What for? I thought you'd like a nice drive. I've got a business meeting that will take about twenty-five minutes and then we could go and see a banned movie 'To drive me mad with lust ...', 'No, just for fun, and we might drive up the Antrim Coast Road. It's meant to be gorgeous, like Kerry.' 'But we'd never do all that in a day.' 'We could stay the night. In separate rooms. Hand on heart, I swear.' 'No I can't Stevie, not this Saturday. I want to stay in Dublin really.' 'Why?' 'I'll tell you,' she said. 'I want to go to the church and watch Michael O'Connor's sister getting married to this man Louis Gray.' Stevie looked at her. 'I was about to say what on earth for ... but I won't ask you.' 'Thank you,' she said. 'But I am going to volunteer that if you're not going to

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come with me to the North, I'll be back that evening and maybe we'll go out.' 'I hope so.' Her face was serious. 'so will we?' 'Could you call round to the flat if I'm there I'm there.' 'That's not much to drag a man a hundred and eighty

miles back over long dark roads from the North on a cold January night,' he said. 'It's just that ... well it's just that I'm worried about something. I'm afraid something might go wrong.'

'Would you like me to stay case?' She was tempted for a moment. But eventually she decided against it. This trip to the North might be the

beginning of big business. And anyway she was probably didn't really be thinking of coming to Lou's mad. Lena's wedding.

with you, be here just in

Louis Gray felt his years. He had spent too many evenings with the young members of the O'Connor clan trying to prove himself a satisfactory brother-in-law. Their capacity for pints was endless. His turn to buy came up with startling speed. Mary Paula had severe morning sickness and was in no mood to console him.

He had to be

particularly consolatory to her, in one of the which was difficult since he was staying

in O'Connor hotels and she was in her father's and mother's house. He spent a lot of his time familiarising himself with the regime of the business he was about to join. The staff were extremely respectful, but Louis knew that this was because he was the prospective son-in-law of the

chairman, and the heir apparent. These were not waiters, porters, desk clerks who would lavish such attention on the general public. He found Fingers O'Connor, his future father-in-law, and his wife a tiresome fusspot. There were difficult men, many aspects of these crowded days which he found confusing. Like Mary Paula's brothers, two loutish lads;

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they seemed to be deeply hurried home from London to the Glass of all places. They had been in the affairs of Loughborough to attend some function there in something like 11

CHL. 9 added the

On Louis' many previous secret visits to Loughborough there had been no such hotel, only a rundown fly-by-night place that you would be afraid to go into.

But then

O'Connor boys were saying that its Georgian frontage and old style charm might be the very thing that visitors to Ireland needed and looked for, rather than modern purpose-built blocks. It sounded utterly right to Louis, who couldn't of course agree with this since his future was tied up in a very plain functional modern hotel block, the management of which was going to be his wedding present from Fingers O'Connor. Louis had looked up old acquaintances in Dublin. He was always able to parry questions about himself, usually he used a rueful laugh. 'Ah, you don't want to be hearing all the mistakes I made, tell me about you now. Things going well?', He had

found a best man with no trouble. A man he knew in the retail business years ago. Presentable and unimaginative. Harry Nolan - a man who would think it reasonable that Louis Gray return to Ireland because he had managed to seduce the twenty-eight-year-old daughter of a wealthy hotelier and get a key management contract as a reward for making an honest woman of her. Harry had many social skills, and like Louis was a better listener than talker. He was married but explained to Louis that his wife would not be a social addition to the scene so let the ceremony pass without involving her.

Ireland had changed, Harry assured his friend Louis. Business was business, people took chances where they could. Look at them both. They had been selling ladies' underwear once, now Louis was made, a hotelier of the future, Harry himself was the manager of a very important Grafton Street store and a man who moved in society.

Harry had been a perfect choice. The night before the
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wedding Louis and Harry had two drinks. Neither of them felt they could be confident of looking well after a batter, so the night was a moderate one. Louis looked out over the Dublin roofs from his hotei

room. He wished he could stop thinking about Lena, and where she was tonight. She had assured him she understood. Why was it so disturbing that she hadn't been seen at work or at home since? He made one more call to Ivy. He disguised his voice and changed his name but he always felt she saw through him. 'I was wondering where Mrs Gray is? I've made many attempts to contact her at work,' he said. 'She's gone away,' Ivy's sepulchral voice replied. 'Nobody knows where or why. So I'm afraid I cannot help you.'

It was cold but fine. There was a thin winter sunlight when Harry Nolan and Louis Gray arrived at University Church in St Stephen's Green. The Saturday traffic passed by, people craning out of buses to see who was assembling at the smart church where wealthier people married. 'An hour from now the job will be done and we'll be in the Russell getting stuck into the gins and tonics,' said Harry. Louis peered into the distance. He was jittery today. Everything seemed to have a resonance of some kind. It turned

out that Mary Paula's brother Michael had every intention of marrying that pretty Cho, the doctor's daughter from Lough Glass. Someone that Lena probably knew well. He reminded himself that they all thought Helen McMahon was dead. Nobody would ever believe him if it were brought up that he had lived with her for so many years. Then, as he stood there in the sunlight, he saw a woman across the road, a woman in dark glasses who reminded him so much of Lena that it made him feel weak. 'I don't suppose you brought any kind of sustenance,' he asked Harry.

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III

'Yes, hip flask of brandy. Let's get inside the vestry before you attack it,' Harry said. 1* Fingers O'Connor helped his daughter out of the large limousine. The others had gone into the church ahead. I hope he'll be 'You look lovely, Mary Paula,' he said. good to you.' 'He's what I want, Daddy,' she said. 'Well then! He sounded not entirely convinced. 'I don't look fat, do I? 'No, of course you don't. Look at the people all admiring you.' A small crowd of passers by had stopped to smile at the bride. Some of them even went into the back of the church to watch the ceremony from a discreet distance. Kit had her head in her hands as if she were praying. She wore a belted raincoat and a check headscarf. She was sure that none of the wedding party would see her. They were so far behind the action ... those who had come to look on. But she wasn't praying; she was peering through her fingers. There were elderly people with their rosary beads talking silently but earnestly to God and His mother. There were a couple of students who were obviously killing time before lunch in Grafton Street. There were a couple of down and outs, a man in a sacking coat and a woman with five carrier bags. She couldn't see Lena. And then she saw a figure beside a confession box. A woman in a long dark woollen skirt, and a very smart military-style jacket. She had been wearing a headscarf and dark glasses, but she removed these and Kit saw her putting on a smart hat, a hat with a feather, a hat that had cost more than any headgear at this stylish but small wedding. The woman straightened herself up and prepared to join the body of the guests. She was going to sit on the groom's side. Lena had done what Kit had hoped and prayed she would not do. She had come to Dublin and

was going to break up Louis Gray's marriage day. She was going to lose anything she had left. Her dignity, her honor and
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possibly her freedom. She might well be about to attack the groom or the bride. Lena's eyes were wild, Kit saw. She could not be held responsible for what she did. She might spend the night and a great deal of life in prison. The bride had gone up the church with her father and had been handed over to Louis, who stood there beaming. Kit

it had only seen him once, but she remembered his smile. She even remembered how Clio had said that Louis Gray made you feel special. He made you feel that if things were different he might fancy you. She saw him there in front of everyone, like a handsome actor about to say his lines, and she realised that is all he had ever been and would ever be. Her wonderful mother could not, must not, lose anything over anyone as worthless as this. Kit almost threw herself from one side of the church to the other. Nobody saw them, they were far too far behind the main action for anyone except the regular rosary sayers or scattered minds to notice them. She caught Lena's arm before Lena had time to get more than a few steps up the aisle. 'What!' Lena wheeled on her. 'Take me with you,' Kit hissed. 'Get out of here,' Lena said. 'Whatever you do, Mother, I'm going with you,' Kit said. 'If you drag yourself down by this you'll drag me too.' 'Kit, leave me, leave me. This has nothing to do with you.' They struggled in the shadowy part of the church, Unnoticed by the congregation near the altar rails who had their backs to them. 'I mean it,' Kit said. 'If you have a knife or a gun I'm going with you, they can arrest me too.' 'Don't be ridiculous, I haven't anything like that.' 'Well, whatever trouble you're going to make I'll stand there too.' By this stage the sacristan and two of the altar boys had noticed some fracas and strained to look, but none of the guests turned. 'Believe me, I mean it,' Kit said.

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'What are you doing to your life?' Lena said, her eyes wild with panic. 'I'm doing nothing to it, you're the one destroying it,' Kit said. It was a moment

that went on for ever. Kit felt the arm loosen, the resolve go. 'Come out with me, come now.' Lena stood there. 'Mother, come with me.' 'Don't call me that,' Lena said. Kit felt she was breathing normally. Things were back as they were. If Lena was prepared to retreat into the cover story again the crisis might be over. Kit propelled her mother out into the open where it was crisp and cold. A wind blew along the street raising little bits of litter from the gutters. Soon the bride and groom would come out and people would throw confetti. They must be long gone by then. Lena said nothing. Not a word. 'Are you tired, Lena?' Kit asked her. 'So tired I could lie down here on the road and sleep.' 'Come on, we'll go to the corner, there are taxis over there on a rank.' Lena didn't ask where the taxi would take them. As they turned the corner a woman cried, 'Kit.' They both turned to see a smart woman in a swagger coat. It was Rita. Kit and Rita hugged each other. 'This is a friend of mine, Lena Gray, from England.' 'How do you do,' Rita said. 'Hello Rita.' There was too much warmth and pleasure in Lena's voice. Rita's head snapped recognised the greeting. 'Lena's been a great friend of mine and given me lots of good advice. She runs an employment agency,' Kit said desperately. Rita was calm. 'Of course, and what a good business to be in these days. Young people need all the advice they can get. You must get a lot of satisfaction in your work.' Lena said nothing. 'We've got to rush now,' Kit said.

up to look at her again as if she

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'Great to see you, Kit.' Her eyes stayed long on Lena. 'And you too, Mrs . . . Mrs Gray,' she said. 'She knew,' Lena said when they were around the corner. 'Of course she didn't,' said Kit. 'But let's get you away really quickly in case we meet anyone else. It could be

Mona Fitz's day for a shopping excursion.' The first taxi man looked at them expectantly. 'Where to, ladies?' he asked. Lena looked blank. 'Will we go first and collect your case?' Kit asked. 'Case?' 'Suitcase, luggage, wherever you left it.' Kit tried to sound casual. 'I have no luggage,' Lena said. Kit shivered. She might never know what her mother had intended to do at the wedding of Mary Paula O'Connor and Louis Gray. Lena had come

to Dublin with no possessions, no plans of where she would stay at night. It was as if she had not expected to be a free agent by the time night fell. 'Will you come home and stay in my flat, rest now and stay the night?' Kit said. 'I've always wanted to have you to stay. And there's a nightie for you and a hot water bottle . . .' 'And will we fit in the bed?' 'I'll sleep on cushions on the floor.' There was a pause. 'I'd love you to come, Lena.' Another pause. 'I don't ask for much,' Kit said. 'It's very true, you don't,' Lena said. Kit gave the taximan her address. They climbed the stairs slowly. Lena said nothing when Kit opened the door. 'Well, say you like it. Say it's nice - . . it's got character . . .' Kit was desperate. 'Say it's got possibilities even.' Lena smiled at her. 'I've dreamed so often what this place would be like. I thought the window was on the other side,' she said.

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'And what did you dream you might be offered for lunc when you came here?' Kit asked. Lena saw on the little table beside the gas ring that the, were four tomatoes and a loaf of bread. 'in my dreams I always had tomato sandwiches and tea, she said. After that it was all right. The talked to each other a friends. And then finally, worn out, Lena went to sleep in the little single bed. It was only four o'clock in the afternoon. But Kit felt her mother might not have slept for many a night before now. Kit sat in a chair and looked out the window. She felt very empty. She wished that Stevie would come. The darkness came but she didn't put on a light. About eight o'clock she saw Stevie's car. He paused to look up at her window. He had never been in this room. What a different way for him to see it from the way she had planned. With her mother lying in her bed. She tiptoed to the door and beckoned him in. She pulled another chair to the window, a finger on her lips. 'She needs her sleep, don't wake her.' she said. 'It's Lena.' 'I know.' They sat in silence. He had brought her a box of

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chocolate sweets that were only on sale north of the border. Things always seemed more exotic when YOU couldn't get them here. He stroked her hand. 'Was the trip okay?' she asked. 'Tinng,' he said. 'And the wedding?' 'Uneventful,' she said. 'That's what you wanted, wasn't it?' He looked at her,

she could see his face in the street light. She nodded. 'I'll tell you some time. I swear.' 'So do you want me to go now?' he asked. Never had she seen such disappointment on a face. He had driven in the cold and rain all the way back and she was going to * ask him to leave because of Lena, an unexplained woman in the bed.

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,No, I'll write her a note, tell her we've gone to the
riese, if that suits You t and sour pork since q was thinking about swee
rogheda,' he said. 'if she wakens up she might join us. But she'll know I'm

.orning back cCan you see to v~ritel' He stroked her hair as she bent yer the
table to write the note. Lena, you were sleeping so peacefully I didn't want
to

wake you. It's eight-fifteenpow, Stevie and I have gone to the Chinese
restaurant. I ve left its little card to show
you where it is. Please come and join us there. if not, I'll be back by
midnight and will sleep on the cushions ... but I truly, truly would love you
to come and follow us

there. Love always, Kit

Then they left them.

the room on tip toe, pulling the door behind

Lena sat up when they were gone. She read the note and stood at the
window watching thern walk along the road, er. This boy did care for Kit,
arms draped around each othew nothing of and cared a great deal. She
agreed that he kn d her circumstances, only that she was an unexplaine
friend, Lena from London. ad every characteristic of Louis And she also f
elt that he h d mean it at the time. But the Gray. When he loved he woul .
ven place. if only she time would not last very long in any 91 could protect
her girl from this. Kit came back alone . She read the note 1 did wake up,
but forgive me, 1 didn't I.iave. the energy to come out and join You. 1 had
some biscuits here and now 1,m going backto sleep. Bless you dearest Kit,
and

see you in the morning. r. She felt certain Kit lay on the cushion and rugs on
the floo en somehow. It that her mother's breathing was too ey

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didn't sound like the breath of a woman getting her firs., deep sleep in weeks.

'Let me take you round Dublm,' Kit offered. 'No, I'd better go back to London. The holl iday 's over.' Kit hated the way she grimaced when she said the word holiday. She decided she would grasp it. 'Not much of a holiday, Brighton on your own, two quick visits here.' 'No, well. I'll organise it better another time.' 'I wish you'd meet Stevie. I want you to.' 'No.' 'You think he's unreliable.' 'He was only a child when I left, I rely on you for a definition of how he is.' 'I've told you everything about him, every single thing ... if you're going to get so buttoned up on me and purse-lipped I'll have to stop telling you things.' 'I think you're just on the verge of stopping telling me things about him.' 'You mean that we're going to be lovers?'. 'Believe me, I'm not criticising,' Lena said. 'So why don't you approve?' 'I think he'll break your heart.' 'So? It'll mend agam.' 'If they're badly broken they don't.' 'Lena, I know you see ... well, let's say some similarities . . .' 'If you see them then is it possible they might be there?' 'No, it's not.' Kit's chin stuck out defensively. Lena pleaded with her. 'I know what's going through your head ... you're going to say if only Lena had met Stevie a few months ago. . . suppose all this had happened when Louis was around ... then she would have approved, understood, said you must follow your star.' 'And so you would,' Kit cried. 'I might not. I told you that it had been worth it. I mean, what would have been the point of anything if I hadn't believed I did the right thing? It would have meant I

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Diessed everyone's lives up for nothing, which is what I &d. Every one, all because of me.' 'No, that's not so.' Kit was gentle. 'It is. I look around me and I see it.' 'But Father's all right, and Maura. And Emmet is happy, and I'm in love. And you and Louis ... well, what you had was very bright, you told me that once ... that it was better to burn brightly ... it was very good . . .' Lena looked very lost. 'In a way you're saying I didn't

mess up people's lives, that everyone survived fine, including Louis. Only my own. I destroyed my own as surely as if I had drowned that day.' 'I

certainly did not say that. Stop putting words into my mouth ... I'm just saying don't feel so guilty. You've 9ways been good for people, helping them, giving ... not destructive.' 'If you hadn't been there . . Kit would not allow them down this road. 'Tell me, what did you love most about Louis?' 'His face lighting up to see me, it was as if someone had turned on a switch . . .' It was a funny phrase, Kit thought, especially when she had seen through Louis at his wedding ceremony, an actor reading lines. Of course he could turn on a switch. 'And what was worst about him?' 'The way he thought I believed his lies. It made us both so stupid.' 'And why do you think it didn't last) What you and he had?' She was gentle but probing. She felt Lena wanted to answer. To think it out. 'I don't know . . .' Lena said thoughtfully. 'You tell me, what do you think it was?' 'Maybe it was about not having children. If you had ever been pregnant . . .' 'I was,' Lena said. 'I was more pregnant than Mary Paula O'Connor. That's why I left you and Emmet and Lough Glass and Ireland. Of course I was pregnant.' 'And what happened?' Kit asked.

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'I lost the baby. I lost it all over the train from B righton and all over V1 I I I ictoria Station and in Earl's Court. That's where our baby is. Louis' and my child.' Kit held her hand. 'And could you not have ... did you never try ... ?, 'He didn't want a child. He didn't want a child until I was too old to have one, but by then he wanted one with someone else.' Her face was in a hard white line. Kit McMahon felt more troubled than she had ever been in her life. They didn't speak of what had brought her to Dublin. Of what she might have done if Kit had not rescued her and taken her away in the nick of time. There would be another day when that could be talked about. Lena was getting stronger by the hour. She was like a plant that needed water. Something was giving her back energy and hope and purpose. She was rapidly becoming the old Lena, full of plans and moving quickly. She had run to a phone box and found the times of planes. She had telephoned Ivy. To say she'd be back that night, And Jessie Millar to say she'd be at work next day. 'I'll come to the airport with you,' Kit said. 'No, we could meet a dozen more people we know.' 'I don't care. I'm coming.' 'What about Stevie? Suppose he turns up here?' 'I'll leave a note on the door for him.' Lena

looked at her thoughtfully. 'He doesn't have a key?' 'You know he doesn't.' 'Yes, I only meant maybe he should have. 'But I thought you said . . .' 'I know you love him.' For Lena it was simple. Love was something that happened, you had no control of it. it took over. Kit was bewildered. 'But what about everything you told me of all that happened to you, and how you didn't want it to happen again.' 'It's too late.' Lena was matter of fact. 'The only thing

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you must learn from me is not to take the safe option. Not to run away and marry a good kind man just because he is good and kind. That's not the solution.' Kit thought of Philip. 'I don't think I'd do that,' she said slowly. 'You mightn't now, but if you were lonely you might. And it would be very wrong. Well, you can see how much

hurt and wrong came out of it.' Kit went back to what she had said earlier. 'You think I should give Stevie a key to ... here?' 'I think you should ask yourself why you are putting off something you want so much.' They looked at each other in amazement. 'The only mother in Ireland today taking this side in the age-old argument . . .' Lena said, and they collapsed in laughter. Whatever madness had taken Lena over seemed to have gone, or to have been replaced with a different one. Stevie knocked at the door. 'I'll only stay a moment,' he said. 'Come in and meet Lena. . .' Kit opened the door. 'How do you do.' She shook his hand firmly. 'I'm very sorry for messing all your plans up this weekend. Kit has been very good to me.' 'No, heaven, no.' His smile was warm. He was not awkward or ill at ease, which was remarkable, Lena thought, when he was in the middle of a situation he didn't even begin to understand. 'Anyway, the good news is that I'm off to the airport now. I'm trying to persuade Kit not to come ... so you're the ideal excuse. Perhaps we could all walk down to Busaras where I could catch the airport bus.' Before Kit could speak Stevie said: 'I have a car at the door. It would be my pleasure to drive you out there and I'll sort of circle a bit while you say goodbye.' Lena accepted. Stevie looked around for her suitcase but didn't seem put out when he realised there wasn't one. Lena sat in the front of the car and Kit leaned on the back of the seat between them.

She pointed out landmarks. 'I can't remember - was Liberty Hall there in your time?' 'Not in my time as such.' 'Look, do you see this house on the corner? Frankie's grandfather lives there. He's as rich as anything and all the family keep calling on him and asking about his health. ImagineV 'Does Frankie call on him?' Lena enquired. 'No, she's got more sense.' 'He'll probably leave her everything just to spite them,' Stevie said. Lena looked at him with interest. Louis would have said that there was no harm in being nice to the old fellow, and you never knew the day nor the hour. She would have thought that Stevie Sullivan would have gone that route also. He talked about things that could cause no frisson. He asked her nothing about where she had come from or why she was there. Instead he told her about planes and how he'd love to fly one. It must be great to soar up there and swoop and have miles of sky at your disposal, not just a straight road. He had never been on a plane as it turned out. 'Real country hick, Lena,' he said with a grin. It was hard to believe that the son of dreary Kathleen Sullivan and her insane drunken husband could turn out like this. Handsome and confident, but not pushy. Her fingers tightened on her handbag. She knew that her daughter had lost her soul to this man. Nothing she could say in terms of warning would do any good. All she could do now was hope and pray. He was as good as his word about circling around. He said his goodbyes as he dropped her off. 'Come back and see us sometime,' he said, all warmth and invitation. Lena responded in the same way. 'Or you two conle over and see me. At least it would get you on a plane.' Kit looked at her in delight. Stevie had been accepted. She could see that. Lena really did like him. She was

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oyerjoyed. As soon as he was out of hearing she clutched Lena's arm. 'I knew you'd like him,' she said excitedly. 'of course I do. Who wouldn't like him?' Lena said. She got out her wallet and paid for her ticket. She must have bought no return flight. What had she intended to do if, Ireland, or had she not thought at all) She looked perfectly well now. . th her. Kit walked to the departure gate wi ry soon, you'll come?' Lena's eyes looked deep 'Soon, ve

into hers. 'Yes, as soon as you're settled back and settled in again. Of course I'll come.' 'Thank you, Kit. Thank you for everything.' Kit didn't know what she was being thanked for. She had no idea what she had prevented. She was too choked to say goodbye so she just clung on to Lena for a long time and then ran back to the exit. In the car she blew her nose loudly. 'Now, that's better,' Stevie said approvingly, as if he were talking to a toddler. 'It was very kind of you to drive her out.' 'Nonsense.' 'And thanks too for not asking and everything. Some time I'll tell you, but it's too complicated.' .), 'Sure. Would you like to go up the mountains. 'Where?' 'You know, out in the Wicklow Mountains. We could just go where you'd see no houses or people or anything, sort of empty your mind a bit.' 'That would be lovely.' They sat companionably, saying nothing but feeling no need of chat until they were beyond Glendalough, up in the Wicklow Gap. Then they parked the car and walked in the cold clear air past the gorse bushes and over the springy turf and rocky crags. Stevie was right, it was as if the whole population had left. There was nothing to look at except what had been there when the earth began, trees and mountains and a river.

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Kit felt her mind emptying. She took deep long breaths They sat on a great b' I the valley below. ig rock like a shelf and looked down 'It's a very long story,' she began. 'She's your mother,' Stevie said. Ivy was overjoyed to see her. 'Come upstairs at once and see your new walipaper,'sh said. The room looked totally different. Pink and whit stripes from ceiling down to floor. A little stool at th dressing table covered with matching material. Th position of the bed had been changed slightly and there wa a pink eiderdown with a trim of the striped fabric. 'It's beautiful, it's utterly gorgeous,' Lena cried. She could see the hours 4 time and work invested in thi by Ivy. She could never thank her. But she knew that fo Ivy to see her well again was reward enough. 'At least it's different,' Ivy said gruffly. 'It's very different. It doesn't look like the same place 'That's what I

hoped.' Ivy was grim. 'No, it's all right. I'm fine now, I promise.' 'What were you doing in Ireland then?' Ivy wanted to know. 'I just went and saw it happen, saw with my own eyes that he married someone else. Now it's over.' 'You went to the wedding?' 'Just in the church, not as a guest . . .' she laughed lightly. 'You amaze me,' Ivy said. 'And do you want to talk about it or about him, or is it better if we don't.' 'I think it's better not. That way I get on with my life. Ivy seemed pleased. 'I'm sure that's the right way,' she said. 'Now, I suppose this means you might be able to eat again. Because I've got some steaks for the three of us.'

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'A big rare steak ... that's exactly what I was hoping ou'd have,' Lena said. ivy trotted happily downstairs to tell Ernest that Lena was cured. 'Ah, women get over these things,' he said with the air of man who understood the world. Lena stood alone in the room where she had lived with

Louis. She would speak of him no more, she would talk of him to nobody. But most of all she would think about him as little as was humanly possible. She had seen him marry another woman. He had gone from her life. She was glad she had seen that, and been to the wedding. It finalised everything somehow. It was a bit of a blur how she had got there and what she had intended to do. But that didn't matter, she had been and seen it. She had been so close to Kit and seen how she loved Stevie. Once this had frightened her. But now she felt there was no point in trying to fight it. It was just inevitable.

At work they were so pleased to see Mrs Gray back. There had been a few problems, naturally they hadn't wanted to interrupt her on her sick leave, but it was great to see her back. 'The Christmas party was n't the same without you,' they said. 'The Christmas party!' How long ago that seemed now. She had forgotten she hadn't been there. 'Oh, I'm sure you managed,' she said. 'Not all that well. There was no spirit in it somehow ... Did you have a nice Christmas or were you still poorly?' , I was still poorly, but thank heavens I'm better now.' Her smile was bright, her air was busy and

let's get down to work. 'I'll be having a meeting tomorrow, when I've caught up with everything ... I am so sorry for leaving you all in the lurch but these things happen ... so I'll want you to let me know by the end of today any areas in your control where you feel any anxiety.'

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Millar's gave a collective sigh of relief. Mrs Gray was back, all was well.

'James?' 'Is that you, Lena?'

'Yes, I was wondering if you were free for lunch am, day?' 'Any day is exactly when I'm free. Today, tomorrow, every day in the year' 'Very gallant indeed, James. Could we say tomorrow, same place as last time, one o'clock?' 'I, m looking forward to it very much,' he said. Lena went through the papers, she saw where opportunities had been missed, contracts lost, unsuitable people given too much time. The normal monthly search through papers and publications trawling for possibilities had been poorly done. Even the office did not look q noticed them. uite as smart as er baskets not fully emptied, rings usuTahl.erTehweyerewewraestoenplayPsmall things but she from cups left on desks, calendars not changed, flower water left to gather a little scum on it. She would have to be very I diplomatic about all these things, make it ap ear that the staff had noticed them rather than she hersel And also, she must smarten herself up as well as the office. She went to the salon after work. There were no questions from Grace West. But she was owed an explanation. 'He married a young girl who was pregnant. Her brothers are friends of my daughter. That's what Louis did next,' she said. 'Married? He got a quick divorce didn't he?' Grace said. 'No need, not an official marriage between us.' 'I'm glad you have a daughter,' Grace said simply.

James Williams was waiting at the table. 'You look so well,' he said. 'I feel well now,' she said.

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'And I was SO worried about you, I tried to get in touch.' 'I know,' she said. 'But why didn't you return any of my calls?' 'I wasn't well then, but I am now. So here we are.' Her face was bright and cheerful. 'A glass of wine?' he suggested.

'Yes, I need it.' 'I fired Louis,' he said. 'Did you know?' 'No, I didn't know that. I thought he stayed there until last week.' 'No, I couldn't bear to look at him after what he did to you.' She was perfectly composed and calm. 'I don't know what I should say, I suppose I should thank you because you did it on my behalf ... but the reason I asked you to lunch was to tell you that Louis has gone now out of my life. I won't be talking about him, thinking about him, or referring back any more . . . ' 'Good,' he said approvingly. 'Yes, I went four days ago ... that's all it was, and watched him get married. It's all gone now.' 'It won't last, you know. He'll cheat on her too.' 'You mean very well, James. But it's no consolation or help to me to know how well rid of him I am. These things only come from within.' 'I think you're perfectly right,' he said. 'His name will not be spoken between us again, but . . . ' 'Yes?' 'I hope we'll be able to speak of other things like perhaps your coming to the theatre with me or to see an art exhibition or just to go out anywhere.' She looked at him thoughtfully. 'From time to time I would love to go out with you as any friend, but that would be it. I don't want to anticipate anything on your part but I've learned that it's better to, should there be any misunderstandings . . . ' 'Indeed,' he murmured. 'I mean it, James. I've had two marriages as I call them,

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i two long relationships. I haven't an intention in the world of getting involved again. 'I quite understand ... 'Not even a casual involvement. SO if you'd like to be my friend and that we could buy each other the occasional lunch . . . ' 'And dinner?' he said. 'And theatre ticket.' She entered into the spirit of the thing. 'And one could always live in hope?' he said. 'But an intelligent man like you would know that to live in an unrealistic hope is a very foolish way to spend a life.' She spoke with a steely edge to her voice. As if she knew that only too well. He raised the glass to her. 'To our friendship,' he said.

Ivy watched her like a hawk. Often she dropped in on her landlady. They had enlarged the room by knocking down a wall. Now Ernest sat looking at the television a distance away, shielded by a big screen. It was a screen that Lena had found for them, in a secondhand shop, she said. In fact it was an antique. It was exactly right for the room. It also meant she could sit and talk to Ivy undisturbed. Sometimes she had coffee, often Ivy persuaded her to take a sandwich. She was looking better, Ivy said approvingly. Her skin was firm and young again, she had put on those few pounds that made her look less anxious, less drawn. Kit's letters still came to Ivy even though there was no need. It was as if she sensed that Ivy liked being postman. Sometimes Lena read her little extracts.

We went to see Sister Madeleine. She's exactly the same in many ways. She works in the kitchen and in the yard. She has a pigeon with a false leg that she made herself. She has a hare, a poor old hare that sleeps in a box all day

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and eats cornflakes. It got hit on the head running away from something apparently and doesn't know where it is. She was so pleased to see me. She didn't ask about you by name of course and not in front of Stevie. But she did want to know if everything was fine over in London, and I told her it was. It's as if she were always there. If I tell her about people like Tommy, people she liked, she

sort of looks vaguely away as if they were people she dreamed about once. I wonder was she ever married. Remember I told you that tale she told Clio and myself years ago, and we kept it as such a secret? I asked Clio the other day what did she think. Clio said she'd forgotten it. I can't believe she's forgotten. It was the biggest secret we ever had when we were young. But then Clio has her own secrets and problems these days. This time she's almost definite that she's pregnant. And she's terrified to tell Michael. 'Isn't it wonderful that she can tell you all these things?' Ivy marvelled. Lena agreed. No mother could talk like this to a daughter. But there was something, she wasn't sure what it was, something about Stevie, that Kit wasn't telling. But she wasn't going to worry. She would tell one day ... if it was important.

'I'm going to throw myself on your mercy,' Clio said to Kit. 'Don't do that. You'll only regret it.' They were in Kit's flat. Clio had called unexpectedly. 'I need help desperately.' 'You're sure then, you've had a test?' 'Yes, I sent a sample of urine into Holles Street under a false name.' 'And you still haven't told Michael?' 'I can't, Kit. it's too much for his father and mother. Two shotgun weddings in a few months.'

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'But they won't have to pay for your one, your mother and father will.' Jesus, I know. Why do you think I'm so afraid? I have to tell them too.' 'Well, get it over with as quick as possible. Tell Michael today and I'll go home with you to Lough Glass and help you tell your parents. Now, will that do?' Kit looked at Clio expecting to be thanked. She was being very generous. Clio had been nothing but dismissive and downright hostile about Stevie. Kit felt saintly to be returning such good for evil. 'No, that's not the favour I want.' 'What else can I do?' Kit asked. 'I want to get an abortion.' 'You're not serious?' 'It's the only way.' 'You must be mad. Don't you want to marry him? Don't you keep saying that from morning to night? Now you have to. He has to.' 'He mightn't.' 'Of course he will. Anyway, you can't think of the other.' 'Lots of people do. If we only knew where to go ... wanted you to ask around.' 'Well, I'm asking nothing of the sort. Get a hold of yourself, Clio. This is the opportunity of a lifetime.' Clio was sobbing. 'You don't understand. You don't know how awful it's going to be. You don't know what it's like.' Kit put her hand on Clio's shoulder. 'Remember when we were younger we used to count the good points about things . . .' 'Did we?' 'Yes. Now let's see what are the phrases. He's respectable, your parents can't go berserk altogether as if it were someone like Stevie Sullivan.' 'That's true,' Clio said sniffing. 'You love him and you think he loves you.'

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'I think he does, yes.' 'His family can cope with shotgun weddings. They've been through it, they know the sky doesn't fall on you.' 'Yes, yes, I'll do it for you. She's ... You can ask Maura to help you, it's terrific about heading off rows, I've watched her

would shO I get i the feeling she's gone off me.' 'I'll ask her to,' Kit said. 'But suppose, suppose 'And Maura could suggest You live in her flat, it's a great place. Michael could buy it from her, she was thinking of selling it. it,s got a garden, it would be nice for a baby.'

'Babyl' wailed Clio. it explained. Suppose 'That's what you're having,' y 'And will you be my bridesmaid' Clio asked.

it all worked out?' hank you,' Kit said soothingly. 'Yes, yes, of course. T ~st a few of us ... we could have 'And it needn't be big. Ju ily to come down, it in the Central. just Michael's farn Mary Paula and Louis and. - .' Lis Gray couldn't come to Kit's blood went cold. Lovast. I don't know if it's Lough Glass. She must think very f the way half the a good idea tolhave it at home* You know town will be offended if they're not asked.' S small s daughter and we it, I 11 be offended, the doctor' Y still how they are we t asked ... you know 'But where else?' he place Maura got married? That 'Do you remember t atttered if you asked her to try was nice ... and she'd be fl and set that up- I hould have been an , re very devious, You ' 'Kit, You Clio said in admiration. international SPY,' The Central Hotel, Lough Glass got four more booki gs as a direct result of the New Year's Eve dinner dance. Philip began to panic. ve can't have Christmas candles all over the place.'

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'No, your parents are going to have to bite the bullet and get the place decorated. We can't disguise the walls for ever. And suppose you had to have a lunch, something the light of day might shine on ... then they'd see what it's really like.' 'Will you help me tell them?' he pleaded. 'Why me?' She felt she was involved with too much on too many levels. 'Because you sound business-like and calm, and you don't sound all up In a heap like the rest of us,' he said. 'Okay.' The huge refurbishment of the Central Hotel began almost at once. Even if Dr Kelly and his wife had wanted to hold the reception there they would not have been able. They were greatly helped over the whole distressing business by Maura. 'She's been so good to Clio,' Lilian said over and over. 'And I always thought that there was a bit of

friction between them of late.' 'Goes to show how wrong we are,' Peter Kelly said. He was surprised at how strongly he felt about the news of his daughter's pregnancy. And at how casually it was being taken by Michael O'Connor, the young man responsible, and by Clio herself. They all seemed to think that because Maura was selling them her flat that everything was falling into place. There was no mention of all the illicit sex that had led to this. Dr Kelly came from the generation where there was no sexual activity until you married. How had everything changed in his own family without his being aware of it? 'I'm sure you knew, Daddy. You must have known I was pregnant,' Clio asked him. 'No, no. I assure you it came as a very great shock to me. 'But doctors often know,' she persisted. 'Not this one.' For no reason at all there came to his mind a memory, a

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memory of the night a long time ago when he had seen n McMahan and realised she was pregnant. And then Hele I she had thrown herself in the lake. At least the world had changed in some respects for the better he thought to . himself, and patted his daughter's arm. hi I

'I'll tell you about what you'll wear as the bridesmaid,' Clio said. 'I'm going to talk to Mary Paula about it tonight,

and we'll choose what everyone will wear.' 'No, that's not the way round it at all. I'll tell you what I'm wearing as your bridesmaid,' Kit said. 'What?'

'I'm wearing a cream linen dress with a jacket to match

and depending on what you want, I'll either wear a big picture hat or some concoction of flowers and ribbons in my hair. It's three-quarters length. I am not wearing an evening dress to parade up an icy cold church, and I'm not dressing up in fancy dress outfits for whatever colour scheme you and Mary Paula think up ... 'I, I don't believe you,' Clio gasped. 'You'd better believe me, that's what you're going to

get, or else change your bridesmaid.' 'I might easily do that.' 'It's your privilege, Clio. And please understand me that I don't mind at all if you do - There'll be no falling out.' In

many ways it would be marvellous if they could fall out. go to a family gathering and Then she wouldn't have to I meet Louis. Mother's Louis. But a serious falling out would cloud the day for too many people. Kit sighed. 'I

don't know what you're sighing about,' Clio said. 'I'm the one putting up with all this. I'm the bride, for God's sake. People are meant to be nice to me.' 'I am nice to you,' Kit hissed at her. 'I told you the clown would marry you, I told you about Maura as a middleman, about her flat, about the hotel in Dublin. Jesus, Mary and Holy Saint Joseph, how much bloody nicer could I have been?'

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9 'You win,' said Clio. 'I'll tell Mary Paula I've a mad bridesmaid. just another cross to bear.'

Her violent outburst made them both laugh

Would you and Stevie come over to London - there's a special Car and Motor Show? Lena wrote. He'd love that and it would mean you and I could catch up on chat. Let me know if it's a good idea, and here's the fare anyway. I'm not paying for Stevie so that he'll have his pride, and he might use that as a real chance to see new cars and meet people. Let me know what you think.

Kit rang Lena. 'I opened it five minutes ago. We'd love to come to London. Now, how about that for being eager.' 'And Stevie? He'd love it too?' Lena's voice was light and happy that they were going to accept. 'He doesn't know yet but he's going to be thrilled. When I tell him.' 'You sound very sure of him,' Lena said. 'I'm very sure he'd like this,' Kit said. 'Where are you? Let me imagine where you are now.' 'I'm in the phone box outside my flat.' 'I remember, I can see you there now.' 'Well, you should see the big smile on my face.' 'I can imagine it. I can nearly see it,' Lena said.

Philip was walking along the road. 'You look very cheerful,' he said accusingly. It was so like something his mother would say. She wondered did she have some of the same expressions as her mother. Perhaps everyone did. Take Clio - she said the same snobby things that Mrs Kelly did, and Frankie Barry was shruggy and couldn't-care-less like her mother. Perhaps I really am going to live the same kind of life as my mother, Kit thought with a shock. She looked at Philip as if she had never seen him before.

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'Hey Kit, take it easy ... cheerfui,' he said. 'What?'
I mean It,s good to look

-e you awake yet? You're like someone sleep'Listen, at walking,' Philip grumbled.hey talked about things She linked his arm to College. T that they were not thinking about. Philip was wondering if Stevie Sullivan and Kit had gone all the way. Kit was wondering what Philip and all the O'Briens would say if she told them she was cheerful because her long dead mother had just invited her over to London. I've booked you in a guest house near here. Two single rooms. You're my guests, you can make your own arrangements about the beds, Lena wrote. No need for any arrangements, I told you I'd tell you

if there is any i of that, Kit wrote. Ian on hold for a 'I've friends coming over ... I'll put the p e Saturday couple of weeks,' Lena told the Millars at th lunch. MTancehirestpeiranThweays htc, establish a branch of Millar's in for them. Peggy Foad found the perfect woman to run it bes was busy training with them in London. All that was needed was the right premises, the suitable staff and a big launch. There were so many applications from the North of England that it made sense to have a presence there. Peggy was a Lancashire woman herself - if all went well, and they were sure it would, they would make her a partner soon.

'I can't bear that you've been on a plane before me,' Stevie said as they checked in their bags in Dublin Airport. 'Oh, you've done a lot of things I've never done. Far too many in fact.' He hugged her there and then. 'None of them were important,' he said. 'I know that,' Kit said loftily. It wasn't a barrier between them, his wicked past and her

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virginity, It would sort itself out. Kit knew that Stevie had hopes it would sort itself out on this visit to London. 'Will you tell her I know?' he asked. 'Yes, I will. Though I think she probably guesses. We can read what isn't there when we write to each other. it's uncanny.' 'I won't try to please her, to impress her and pretend I'm good enough for you.' He spoke quite seriously.

'No, she'd see through you straight away,' Kit said as they walked through the Duty Free shop. 'I wonder what I'll get her.' He stopped and looked at the shelves of drink and cigarettes. He paused in front of the champagne. 'It doesn't matter whether she likes it or not. It's festive. It's celebration, that's what it is,' he said. From everything Lena had told her, this is exactly what Louis Gray would have said and done. Lena was there to meet them. Stevie marvelled at how well she looked. Her face had been gaunt two months ago, but now she was glowing with health and enthusiasm. 'I have a friend who insisted on driving me to meet you,' she said. 'We've got to meet him outside.' 'I know you'll be tied up with cars but if you've any time at all I'd be very happy to show you my neck of the woods . . . ' James said. 'It's not that far out of town, and I'd love you all to come and stay in darkest Surrey.' Kit saw Lena frown. 'Maybe on another visit, James,' she said. 'They don't have all that much time.' He was relaxed. 'Certainly, but the offer's there. I'd love to show you. There are rolling green fields and parkland in England as well as Ireland.' 'Probably much nicer here,' Stevie said. 'Not covered in broken farm machinery and failing down cottages.' They had a meal in Earl's Court and then James said goodbye. He was driving home tonight. 'All that way?' Stevie asked. 'It's about as far from here to there as Lough Glass to Dublin,' Lena said.

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and I often drive that far four 'Oh well, that's not too b -)ndly on Kit. times a week, and back.' His eyes rested fc K, said. 'Isn , t it known that you're a canonised saint?' it ie took their luggage and said he'd leave them to talk. Stev oms ,1,11 put them in t he right ro ,, then 1,11 come back for u ' he said, - Kil yo. 5 e ~eld hands Kit and Lena, after he went i

h(mother's eyes. Everything loldy with delight' into her would be all right. she said. I didn't tell him, he iust 'Lena, he knows,' knew.' very much. Of ,He's a bright boy, and he loves you Id have realised.' course he knows, we shou 'It change.' ,It doesn't matter, nothing w, 'I know.' s) ivy does, Stevie does, in a sort I mean it. Who know - else F Kit looked of a way Sister Madeleine knows - Anyone at her mother. I 'No, jarnes doesn't know. o do anything that 'And none of these people are going t will upset us)) s. Glad for you, 'No, of course not. I'm glad Stevie know er face was

because it's a strain having to keep a secret.' H thoughtful. years Lena had kept secrets. The Kit realised that for letters first, and then the meeting, it must - have been hard ameone you loved o kiss not to share that With sl em she stood UP t When he came back to collect th you here in London, Stevie. Now him. It's great to have take us both to our homes, will You to Trafalgar The weekend was magical. They went Square and were- photographed with the pigeons. ,vouldn hereV Kit said. kwith ,t S ster Madeleine go w, ~ 'She'd have to hire a transporter to get them all bac her, she'd be afraid they didn't like traffic or the petrol fumes.' and wandered hand They went to the N.ational Gallery. , to have to learn in hand around the pictures. 'I'm going

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about an artist a month as well as reading a book a month,, Stevie said. 'I don't want you to be married to an ignoramus.' It was the first time he had said married. She looked at him sharply. 'Some day,' he said with his heartbreaking grin. Stevie went and looked at cars a lot. He took Ernest with him one day and James another. Both of them said he was a knowledgeable fellow. There was nothing about the engine or chassis of a car he didn't understand. Lena took Kit into her office. It was much larger and more splendid than Kit would have thought. And Lena was obviously the king pin. 'A friend of mine from Ireland' was the introduction. People seemed interested. Lena Gray brought so little of her private life into the office with her. Her handsome husband had not been seen or heard of for a long time. But nobody had asked straight out. 'And this is my own little broom cupboard,' Lena laughed as she closed the door behind them. Kit looked around her in amazement. The big carved desk, the pictures and certificates on the wall, the framed tributes and newspaper cuttings, the fresh flowers in a blue and gold vase. Kit seemed at a loss for words. 'What are you thinking?' Lena asked gently. 'Well, oddly enough I was thinking that it's a great pity that people at home didn't know and will never know how well you did.' There was a catch in her voice. 'Sometimes I think that it's a great pity that nobody here will ever know how well I did in a different way. they'll ne I know that you are my daughter.' ~hrey were

speaking seriously now. It was a different mood. 'Did you keep Louis very much apart from your work too?' 'Yes. Some kind of protection I suppose. I had to have an area I could control. Not that it always worked. One of the best girls we ever had working here was one of Louis'

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lengthy list of lady friends, turned out. Dawn, Dawn

I Jones. I still miss her.' 'What happened to her?' 'I sacked her ... I couldn't sit and look at part of Louis' past every day,' Lena said. I 'Half the country is part of Stevie s past,' Kit said ruefully. 'I'm having to put up with that.'

different,' Lena said. 'Past past is one 'Ah, but that's i thing, but when it's meant to be the present and these kind of people turn up, then that's not a good thing.' 'No, that's true. I wouldn't like that,' Kit said. She was biting her lip, Lena noticed. 'My mistake was that I looked the other way,' Lena told her. 'I think to be utterly unquestioning and forgetful about the past as I was, that's right. But I should have let him know that I knew about the present ... I think that was my mistake. I let him get away with everything just to keep him, or to keep some aspect of him.' Kit's mind was far away. it was with Clio saying that S still running after girls. That if everyone knew Stevie wa I Kit wouldn't go to bed with him then he wasn't going to be short of people who would. it was a worrying thought. The airport terminal was just down the road from them in Cromwell Road. Lena came to see them off. 'James would have driven us, but you know - - - , 'You don't want to be too beholden to him,' Kit suggested. 'Exactly. What a wonderful word.' 'I have to keep a dictionary beside me to keep up with her,' Stevie said. 'No you don't, Stevie. You don't fool me.' 'I'm not trying to sell you a car either, but why don't you have one? Kit said you had.' 'She's right. I gave it to Louis. Actually I bought it for him so I let him take it, that's a more honest way of describing it.' She spoke of Louis so casually to Stevie Kit was warmed by the sense of intimacy.

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Clio grumbled about the hotel. It wasn't smart enough. 'You wanted it small,' Kit said. 'No, you wanted it small,' Clio said. 'Is Michael happy about the baby?' 'Please don't talk about the baby,' Clio hushed her. The wedding

breakfast 'Look, I'm not going to get up at th and make a speech about it, but I was just asking you if your future husband is pleased about fatherhood.' 'Well, he's not like Louis, if that's what you mean. Loui never has h' so is hand off Mary Paula's stomach. He's boring about it, he thinks it's kicking or twitching or something.' 'Yours is smaller, younger, it's not doing that.' 'Oh, shut up about mme,' Clio said. 'It's the honeymoon that's the problem now. Mr O'Connor thinks that Michael should do this kind of intensive course in book-keeping so that he can put him into one of the hotels.' 'Yes, well, that makes sense. He's not trained as an hotelier, he'll need somejob.' 'We wanted to go to the South of compla ned. She looked like a four-year-ol France,' Cho d whose dolly has been taken away.

I so well on you 'Will you wear that fur cape that looked would be a nice thing for Clio's wedding,' Martin askedit 'No love, if you don't mind. I have a different outfit planned.' :It really did look smart on you,' Martin said. I'll keep it and wear it at Kit's wedding,' Maura said. 'Don't tell me that's going to be imminent.' Martin McMahan looked alartned. 'No, of course not,' Maura laughed. 'But she will marry one day and with luck you and I will be here for it.' 'She's very taken with Stevie.' He sounded worried. 'I know. I was alarmed in the beginning but he's a reformed boy. None of the lassies ringing him up. The only one he rushes out of the office to see is Kit.'

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'I suppose there are men who can be reformed by a woman.' Martm McMahan was doubtful. 'Well, it's part of history certainly.' Maura was reassuring, hoping he wouldn't ask her what part of history. All she could think of was Helen of Troy or Cleopatra or

Kittie O'Shea who had brought Parnell down, all of them troublemakers. She couldn't think of a single woman apart from in a wild western movie who had reformed a man.

It was curiously dispiriting, Clio Kelly's wedding day. Any appearance of jollity and papering over pregnancy problems that the O'Connors had been able to muster had been used up. Fingers O'Connor had grasped Maura McMahan by the arm as soon as he saw her. 'Bad business this, bad business,' he said. Maura removed his hand very deliberately. 'Perhaps if

you had shown your sons some better example in the way to behave it might not have happened,' she said primly. Lilian Kelly certainly never expected her first daughter's wedding to take place under such a cloud. Many times in her mind she had planned it. Always seeing it taking place in her own home town, with the reception in The Castle Hotel. This anonymous Dublin church and the same hotel as poor Maura had chosen all seemed very second rate. Clio wore a white dress but Kit looked extremely casual in that outfit. The girl was pretty there was no gainsaying that, and her big soft white hat with the long ribbons was elegant. It was some scant consolation to Lilian Kelly to know that Kit's disgrace was even greater than Clio's. All right, so everyone might suspect that Clio's wedding had been somewhat rushed, but at least she was marrying into the O'Connor family. Kit was hanging around with that Teddy Boy, the boy with the terrible reputation, son of poor old Kathleen and her mad drunken husband. That was a seriously unacceptable thing to do. Stevie was a great addition to the wedding party, as Kit had known he would be. He talked to Michael's aunt about

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I Belfast, told her of his visits there on motor related business, promised to look out for a good second hand Morris Minor the next time he was up there. He asked Mr O'Connor educated questions about the hotel business, promised Father Baily about the possibility of getting a car for a raffle. He spoke to Maura in such clear terms about the visit to London that she was reassured that there had been different rooms in the guest house. 'How did you find it?' she asked innocently. 'Oh, in this business you're always finding fellows who know places,' he said. He spoke to Kevin about the great night on New Year's Eve. He told Martin McMahon about his plans to expand the garage. 'I don't want to be ruining life for all my good neighbours if I do get more business ... I'll move down the town to more open space,' he said, allaying a worry Martin had been keeping to himself for some time. And then he approached Mary Paula and Louis. Louis was so warm and easy-going Stevie felt a lump in his throat. It was for this man that Kit's mother left home, allowed a drowning to be believed. She had lived with him and

with his betrayals for so long until it had almost cost her her mind. Louis spoke of his own car, a Triumph Herald he got in London. He had it a while now but it still looked good and was no trouble. No, he had bought it new. The bile rose in Stevie's throat as he heard the story unfold. How Mary Paula had first met him when he was driving it to a seminar. She had admired the man in the white Triumph. 'I said to him, "That's a nice car," he said to me, "Let's take it on a test drive then," ' and neither of them had gone to the seminar at all. 'Don't tell that to my father-in-law, though,' Louis whispered. 'He might think I was unreliable.' Mary Paula giggled. 'And you're not?' Stevie said stonily.

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'No.' Louis looked alarmed. The boy was looking at him oddly. - -kly. Kit had been watching. Stevie moved away very quick 'Please,' she whispered in his ear, Please, for her sake, we must say nothing. For Father, for N4aura.' She looked across at Louis, her eyes full of hate.

Was he a moron that he di dn't know who.they all were?

I He knew that Lena was married to Martin McMahon, pharmacist from Lough Glass. He knew that Clio was from Lough Glass. Did he just not care~ Was his life with Lena so much in the past that it didn't matter that her husband and daughter turned up at a festivity where he was with his pregnant wife? of course, he thought that they all thought Helen McMahon was dead, drowned in the lake and buried in the churchyard. But surely it must have cost him something to face these people, Lena had never mentioned his name to Father. That much Kit knew. She had always said that she had loved another man. She had never pronounced his name because it made it too real. She had written it of course in the letter. But that was the letter Martin had never got. There would be no sing-song, no extended drinking in the bar of this quiet hotel , The proceedings would end earlier than most enthusiastic Irish wedding guests would have expected. Clio went to change 'That was wonderful,' Kit lied as she helped her friend out of the dress. 'It was diabolical,' said Cho. 'You're wrong, wait till you see the pictures. 'Wait till I forget the look in everyone's eyes that's more like. Jesus, isn't Mrs O'Connor a pill. Her own daughter's pregnant and

there's not a word about it. But I'm the one who led her son astray, it's written all over her.' 'Stop now. it was great,' K.it soothed her. 'Stevie certainly behaved himself.' 'Good,' said Kit in a clipped tone.

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'He sort Of moved round and talked to people as If he's used to it.' 'He probably is, in the car business.' Kit kept herself in control with dignity, 'No, I meant used to people like who were here.' There would be no throwing the bouquet. just a few more minutes showing off her going away costume and then Clio and Michael would leave. The rest would follow soon after. Louis came over to join Kit, as she knew he would. He knew she was the daughter of Lena but he had no idea that she knew of any connection at all. She wanted to be as far as possible from him, but it would be rude not to return his warm smile. 'Great day, isn't it.' 'Yes Indeed.' 'But nothing between you and the best man? This won't be the making of another wedding, I'm not going to get another lovely sister-in-law?' 'No, no, Kevin's going out with my friend Frankie.' The words came out slowly, she felt very uneasy. She Moved away. Slightly at a loss, Louis turned to talk to someone else. Young women didn't normally walk away from him like that. Stevie had been watching; he saw the way Louis had laid his hand on Kit's arm with his easy familiar charm. It had made Stevie rage inside. The crowd were gathering near the door to wave goodbye to the bride and groom. Louis and Stevie were on the edge of the crowd. 'You're from Lough Glass too, Clio tells me. It sounds a good place, we must go there sometime,' he said. Stevie put his face very near him. In a slow and deliberate voice he said: 'You've been to Lough Glass.' There was a pause. And then with a heavy menace he said: 'And if you know what's good for you I wouldn't go again.' Then he moved away. Louis had gone white. What did the fellow mean? He

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saw Stevie put his arm around Kit's shoulder and she held Kit McMahon, Lena's daughter. And her his hand tightly. I h boyfriend. But they didn't know, for God's sake. None of them knew.

Lena was in Manchester, she wrote. The people were so friendly and they seemed to have more time for each other than in London, they weren't always rushing off. And

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you met someone you were likely to meet them again.

More like Dublin really, though of course one met too many people in Dublin. Lena only vaguely remembered meeting Rita, but she knew Kit must have handled it. She wondered had she had a blackout or had she gone mad for a time. It didn't matter now. All that mattered was that she be there for her daughter as much as Kit needed her. She had realised that she had to give up on Emmet. She lost too much of his life to see him now. She had left when he was a child - a real child. Now he was old enough to hold a girl in his arms and tell her he loved her. There was no way she could come back into his life. She was finished with fantasy ... there would be none of that any more. She was even going to get herself a small flat in Manchester. Peggy Forbes lived with her mother and anyway it would not be a good idea to share a flat with someone from work. Peggy was divorced, fortyish, wonderful with people. When next Stevie and Kit came to England they should come to Manchester. Peggy would show them all what life in the North was like.

Sometimes Kit showed parts of the letters to Stevie. 'I don't like reading what she's written to you, it's meant to be private.' 'I only show you bits, I keep the private bits.' 'Are they about me?' 'Sometimes.'

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'Warnings like don't follow her down the primroses

path?' He looked at her anxiously. He really wanted to know. 'They used to be. Not now.' 'When did she change?' 'When she met you.'

Clio and Michael moved into Maura's flat almost immediately after the wedding. The price had been arranged very quickly. Fingers had written the cheque without haggling. 'But Pa, I'm sure that's just the asking price,' Michael said. 'She'd probably come down a couple of hundred if you start to

bargain.' 'We'll pay what's asked.' Fingers had had enough reproofs from Maura Hayes and her stepdaughter Kit to do him for a long time. There would be no haggling and drawing their wrath on him. 'You must come round and see A,' Clio said. 'You can even bring Stevie if you want to.' 'No thanks. I'll come round some evening he's not in Dublin.' 'Are there many of those?' Clio asked. 'Well, he does live and work in a place two hours journey away from here.' She knew she sounded defensive and sarcastic. Only Clio brought this out in her.

Clio was in very grumpy form the evening she did go around to the flat. 'Have you had your tea?' she asked ungraciously. 'Well, no. But I'm not hungry,' said Kit. 'I didn't think . . . ' 'It doesn't matter.' Kit wondered how you wouldn't think, if you asked someone to visit you at six o'clock. Most people had something to eat in the evening. Kit admired the place and the wedding presents. Some of them still not unpacked stood around in boxes. 'I think I'm getting prenatal depression,' Clio said. 'Did you ever hear of that?' 666

'No,' said Kit truthfully - 'I heard you were meant to be excited and thrilled and knitting things and getting dinner for your husband and your friends.' Clio burst into tears. 'Tell me, tell me,' Kit said. She knew she was going to hear some story of woes. Should Clio be shaken until her teeth rattled? Should this have been done years ago? Dr

Kelly and his wife had always let her get away with murder. 'Everything's absolutely terrible. Michael was out all night on Wednesday, there was a party up in the hotel where he's working and none of them got home. Louis didn't even go back to the house that he lives in beside the hotel. And Mary Paula's absolutely furious even though Louis gives her flowers every day. Michael's given me no flowers, he just says I'm a nag. Already! I'm only a few weeks married and I'm a nag.' 'Shush, shush. He doesn't mean it,' Kit said. 'And Daddy's no help, nor Mummy. I said I'd like to go down and stay a few days there and they said no. All this about making my bed and having to lie in it. And I hate this place, it has Aunt Maura written all over it ... Everyone's in such bad tempers, Kit.' 'I'm not.' 'That's because you're being screwed silly by Stevie Sullivan and you can't think of anything else.' 'I'm not as it happens.' 'Well, maybe you should be.' 'Clio, you're the one who's

upset. Talk to me. Let's look at the good points. Michael only stayed out one night and he was with ... your brother-in-law, so you don't think he was up to no good.' 'I don't know,' Clio said darkly. 'Mary Paula told me there were other girls there, fast girls.' Kit wondered wildly whether Mary Paula and Clio, who had both been pregnant brides in recent months, were actually in a position to be calling other girls fast. But she let it pass.

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'What other good points are there?' Kit continued doggedly. 'You have a lovely home, Michael's got a job. You're going to have a baby.' 'Which means I can't have a job,' Clio complained. 'You didn't want a job. You said you were going to college to get a husband. Now you've got one.' 'Nothing's the same as it was,' Clio wept. 'No, it's different, but we've got to change too. I suppose that's it.' 'I wish we were young again, going to Sister Madeleine, coming home for tea.' 'Well, we're the ones who have to make tea nowadays, Will I go out and get some things?' 'Would you? I feel so awful and waddly, I can't move.' 'You're as bad as Mary Paula. When's her baby due?' 'This week, that's why it's all so awful about Louis and everything. And Michael's father has had a row with Louis about money. Apparently he just pockets his salary every month and didn't know he was meant to pay bills with it. There was an awful scene up there the other night.' 'Talking of money, I don't have much, if I'm to buy things for supper . . . ' said Kit. 'Oh, there's a fiver under the clock.' Clio waved at it. The phone rang. 'Will you answer it Kit, please?' It was Louis. 'That's not Cho,' he said. 'No, it's Kit McMahan. What can I do for you?' 'My wife's been taken into hospital and she's gone into labour.' 'Congratulations,' Kit said in a dull voice. 'No, wait. I was hoping Clio could ring her father-in-law and tell him.' 'Why don't you ring him yourself?' 'Well to be perfectly frank, I've had some words with him. I think he'd prefer to be told by another member of his family. I can't find Michael or Kevin anywhere.' 'Yes, I heard there was a problem with your father-in-law, all right.' Kit didn't know why she had said this. It

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was just the thought of the freeloader Louis sponging off everyone that made her feel sick. n you heard? H i s voi ce had changed. 'What do you

Inea I I Where did you hear this?' 'From Cli who heard it from your wife.' She was 101 brazen now. 'And is it any of your business?' 'No, none at all,' she agreed.

'So can you put me on to Clio?' 'She's not here.' 'Well, all right then.' 'Do you want me to ring Fingers?' 'What?' 'Fingers O'Connor. That's his name, isn't it?' 'That's an offensive nickname certainly. His name is Mr O'Connor.' 'Do you want me to ring him and tell him Mary Paula's in the labour ward? That you didn't want to tell him yourself?' Louis hung up. out), Cl-o,s mouth was open in 'What was that ab astonishment. 'That creep Louis Gray, afraid to talk to your father-in law.' 'Why were you so rude to him?' q hate him. , ,Why on earth do you hate him?' . S YOU get an 'I don't know, Irrational. Sometime irrational dislike.' 'Well, they're my bloody in-laws Kit. Don't work out your own hatreds on them just because things aren't going well with Stevie.' 'Who said things weren't going well with Stevie?' 'They can't be or else he wouldn't have been at that party I Mi hael were. The one on up in the hotel w here Lou's and ic Wednesday night.'el,ef. Stevie was thereV Kit looked at her in disb 'Yes, didn't he tell You

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'You know he didn't tell me.' Wednesday last ... he had told her that he had to 90 to a 1 1 1 function in Athlone. God damn him and all other conniving handsome men to the pit of hell. Kit put on her jacket and went to the door. 'Kit, the fiver,' Clio pointed to the mantelpiece. 'Get your own tea, Clio,' Kit said and banged the door behind her.

She longed to write to Lena to tell her that Louis' marriage was In trouble only five months after it had taken place. She ached to put her arms around her mother and cry. To ask her should she tackle Stevie, ask him straight out had he been there? Should she check if the function in Athlone had existed? Wasn't this the road her mother had gone down and lived to regret, the constant checking and then deciding to ignore it? She walked along looking at the other people whose lives were not in ruins, going about their

business. Men coming home from work, wives opening doors, children playing in gardens in the June evening sunshine. She must not tell Lena the news of Louis' fall from grace. Lena said her only peace was to know nothing of him. There was always the danger even at this late stage that Lena would take him back, Forget, forgive so much. After all what was a wife and baby to forgive when she had put up with so much?

Lena and Peggy Forbes were having supper in an Indian restaurant in Manchester after the official opening. Peggy was forty-three, blonde, well groomed. She had married very young and very foolishly, she said. A man who should have married a bookie. She had met him at the races, which should have given her some inkling but it hadn't. She had been divorced at the age of twenty-seven, after six years of a very unsatisfactory marriage. She began to work then, very hard. She got a great deal of pleasure from it, she said. Not the money itself, she

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didn't regard wealth as a goal. She liked the people she met enjoyed urging them on. She also liked the fact that she and 1 1 had some security and didn't need to fear that some man 11 the dining table and chairs as had was going to see I happened to her on her twenty-fifth birthday. Peggy said she didn't usually tell her whole life story to

someone but since Lena was putting such faith in her she wanted to know the background. 'I have a very confused background myself,' Lena said. 'I was married to two men, but neither marriage worked. I don't say anything at work about either marriage, in fact most people at work know nothing about my first marriage and think my second one is still in existence.' Peggy nodded. 'It's better that way,' she said. 'The only reason I'm telling you,' explained Lena, 'is that I don't want to respond to your frankness with a blank brick wall.' 'I wouldn't have been upset.' 'That's because you're a practical woman, and you realise I'm the boss, but I would also like to be your friend.' 'I'm sure we'll be that.' 'And it would be very nice if we could go out sometimes here in Manchester, to the pictures or for a meal. Maybe I could visit your mother. But I'm not one for clubs or that kind of evening out.' 'The younger girls I work with 'Nor am I,' Peggy said pity me, and

they're always trying to get me out for what they call a good time.' 'I have that too,' Lena sympathised.

'The only thing I'm sorry about is that I didn't have children. I'd have liked a daughter, wouldn't you. Lena hesitated . , I have a daughter, as it happens.

But

that's not known.' id, and 'Don't worry, I won't talk about it,' Peggy sai smiled a broad friendly smile. 'We're going to make this agency as big as the one in London,' Lena promised.

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'We'll be calling you our junior Branch in five years time,' said Peggy.

'I really think we made a great choice.' Lena was talking to Jim and Jessie Millar back in the London office. They were amused to hear they would soon be the Junior Branch. 'That's the spirit we need,' said Jim. Lena smiled to herself thinking about how cautious he had always been at the start, and how every change no matter how minor had to be negotiated past him with care. The receptionist came in. 'I'm so sorry Mrs Gray, but you know what you said about using your initiative?' 'Yes, Karen. Who is 0' 'It's Mr Gray? He says it's an emergency and he has to talk to you.' 'Use this room,' Jim Millar said, and he and Jessie got up to leave. But Lena wouldn't hear of it. 'Take his number, Karen, and tell him I'll ring back in five minutes.' She went to her office and looked at herself in the mirror. She was alive and well. She was sane. He would not upset her. There was no emergency in his life that could touch

her. She telephoned the Dublin number and they answered with the name of an hotel. Louis was ringing her from work. What else was new? 'It's Lena,' she said. 'Thanks for ringing back. I should have known you would, you were always so reliable.' 'That's true. What can I do for you?' Her voice was calm. 'Are you alone?' 'As alone as any of us are on these kind of lines. Why?' 'I'm in great trouble and so are you.' 'Why am I in trouble?' 'They know.' 'Who knows?' 'Everyone in Lough Glass knows.'

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'What do they know, Louis?' Rey know about you.' 1 doubt that. Unless you told

them.' 'I swear to God I haven't opened my mouth. Not to anyone. Up to now I haven't said a word.' It was there, the threat. The blackmail in his tone. Up to now. 'And who in particular seems to know things?' she

asked. 'A fellow called Sullivan. Do you know him?' 'I remember him. His people own a garage.' 'And Kit ... Kit knows. She was so rude to me 'just yesterday. She bit the head off me.' 'I doubt that.' 'She did. She said she heard rumours of my having a fight with my father-in-law.' 'I'm sorry to hear you've fallen out with your relations.' Her voice was so hard she could hardly recognise it herself. 'Lena, cut this out. I'm in trouble too.' She waited. 'They expected me to have more cash than I have.' 'Yes?' 'And I was reading in the papers how you've opened a new office in Manchester ... reading about the agency in the financial pages no less.' 'Yes. Aren't the Millars doing well?' J looked it up, Lena. 'What?' J got someone to go to Companies House. You're a director.' 'So, Louis?' 'So you're a part of it. You're in a position to help me. I never begged in my life, I'm begging you now.' 'No, indeed, that's not what you're doing, you're trying to blackmail me.' J thought you were saying this might be an open fine.' 'It's probably not at my end, who knows about yours.' There was a silence. 'We parted friends, Lena, can we not remain friends?' 'We didn't part friends.'

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'Yes we did. I remember the night.' 'We parted without a fight or a scene. I certainly wasn't your friend then, nor am I now.' There was a silence. Lena spoke again. 'So if that's all, may I wish you well. And hope you get over this problem with your father-in-law. I'm sure you will, you're a man of great charm.' 'One payment, Lena. You'll never hear me asking again.' 'No, I hope you won't telephone me again. If you do, I shall ask the staff not to put your call through.' 'You're not going to get away with this high and mighty attitude. You don't know who you're dealing with,' he cried. 'A man who owes his father-in-law money, it would appear.' 'Not in any sense like borrowing or stealing. It's just he expects me to have private means.' 'Or to put your hand in your pocket sometimes.' That was exactly the phrase

Fingers had used. Louis had tied to him, he had said he was saving for the birth of his baby. 'I have a son,' he said. 'That's wonderful,' Lena said.

4

'No, I need some money to start a savings account for him. That's what I said I was doing, saving towards an account.' 'Goodbye, Louis.' 'You'll be sorry.' 'What can you do to me?' 'I can bring you down. Tell these country plodders, Martin and Maura and Peter and all, that you're not dead. You're living the high life of a director of companies over in England. By God, that'll get the fur flying down there in Lough Glass. Bigamous marriage, Maura a woman of easy virtue ... Kit and her brother abandoned by their feckless mother.' He didn't even know Emmet's name, Lena realised. 'Do that, Louis, and you go down further than you ever thought you could go down.'

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'Easy threats,' he laughed. telephoning 'No, not at all. You made a great mistake by me today with this news. If you had sold your blood Pint by pint to the blood bank, or done a smash and grab raid at a Jewellers in Grafton Street, you'd have got your money quicker.'

'Lena. . .'he said. But the line was dead.

She dialled Sullivan's garage. Maura McMahon answered the phone. Lena considered hanging up but time was of the essence. She disguised her voice in a poor imitation of a I I I cockney accent. She asked to speak to Stevie. 'I'm afraid he's not available at the moment. Can you tell me who's calling?' She had forgotten Maura's accent. The courteous tones, the soft voice. She felt even more determined than ever that this woman should not be disturbed in the even tenor of her life. Her happiness with Martin McMahon must not be overturned. 'It's really quite urgent. This is a guest house in London where he was staying.' 'Oh yes?' Maura sounded anxious now, alert ... 'And you're sure he can't come to the phone?' 'Was there a t)roblem with the bill or anything?' 'No, no. NAing like that,' Lena knew her accent was all over the place but it was the best she could do. 'Well, can he return your call when he comes back?' 'When will that be?' 'Tomorrow. He's in Dublin.' 'Is there any way of contacting him there?' 'I'm afraid not. But if I could

have your name and number. . .' She gave Maura Ivy's name and telephone number. And then she put her head in her hands. Stevie was her only hope. Kit rang home that , 1 night and spoke to Maura.

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'I hear Clio's an auntle-in-law,' Maura said. 'Oh, is that right?' Kit said. 'Yes, a little boy, so Lilian was telling me.' 'Super,' Kit said. 'So you've had another row with Clio?' 'This is the last one.' 'Glad to hear that.' 'No, I mean the friendship's over.' 'Kit, you're too old to think that. Friendships are never over. 'If they weren't real they could be,' said Kit. 'Let's go on to happier subjects,' Maura said. 'Are you seeing Stevie tonight?' 'I don't know,' Kit said truthfully. The arrangement had been that if he was able to he would call to the flat at eight. She didn't know whether she wanted to see him or not. 'Well, if you do, will you give him a message?' 'Hold on.' Kit got out a notebook. 'Fire ahead, Maura.' 'He's to ring this guest house in London . . 'What?' 'No, it's not about a bill, I asked. But the woman was tight as anything, she wouldn't tell me. She wants him to ring her at this number . . 'I think I have the number,' Kit said. 'Let me give it to you anyway. It's Ivy Brown, and this is the London number.' Ivy. Kit leaned against the side of the phone box. There must be something wrong with Lena. And it must be very bad if they asked Stevie to ring. Kit felt very weak indeed. What could have happened? Wouldn't it be great to have enough money to make a call to London from a phone box just like that. Instead of keeping the coins aside for a-couple of days to ring Lough Glass. She couldn't wait until eight o'clock, it was only six-fifteen now. She would go and borrow the money from someone. As she left the phone box she saw Stevie's car pull up. He opened the boot and took out his good jacket. He often

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rove n d I his old one, he said for comfort. Imagine he still wanted to look good for her. 'Vain peacock,' she said, remembering the stories of Louis Gray's jackets hanging in Lena's cupboard. But she needed him now. She went over to him before he had put his old jacket away. 'You caught me,' he said. 'That's not something you'd mind being caught at surely?'

'What's wrong?' 'What do you mean?' 'You sound as if there was a list of other crimes I would mind being caught at,' he said. 'Aren't there?' she asked. 'No there aren't as it happens. What's wrong? You're white as a sheet.' She told him about the call. 'It must be a message, a code,, 'I'll ring,' he said. 'Do you want to come into the box?' 'No.' She drew away from him. She didn't want the intimacy of the phone box, both of them pressed up together. 'All right so.' She saw him talking on the phone for a while then hanging up and being phoned back. Whatever it was it must be serious. She walked around by the box, but his face didn't look shocked or distressed as it would if it was the news of an illness or an accident. He seemed very angry. She opened the door of the phone box tentatively. She heard him say '... no, no. I won't tell her until it's sorted out. I quite understand. Yes, you can trust me. I'll ring you tomorrow. Goodbye.' Then he came out. 'What is it?' she asked. 'You're mother's fine. I was talking to her, she's in perfect health and sounds very calm. She had something she wants me to sort out for her and I'm going to do it. But it's not something she wants you involved in.'

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'I don't believe you.' 'Well, that's odd. If you told me something like that I'd believe you.' 'I can't trust you an inch,' she shouted at him. 'This is some other devious thing. You've used my mother in some awful way to give yourself a cover story.' 'Kit, you're going mad,' he said in a matter of fact way. 'You gave me the message, I rang the number, this is the way it's turned out. I don't know what you're talking about.' 'Yes you do, it's about last Wednesday. You want her to cover over for you.' 'Wednesday?' He seemed genuinely bewildered. 'Wednesday. Someone's told you the story was blown so you're hatching some deal with her because you think she likes you.' 'She does like me, I hope. And she certainly trusts me.' 'Stevie, you're a liar.' 'No,' he said quite simply, 'I'm not.' They stood for a long time looking at each other. 'Now, I'm not going to walk off on you over some misunderstanding. But I think you're too angry to explain it to me ... so what will we do, where would you like us to go?' 'I'd like you to go to hell,' Kit said. 'Why, why do you say that?' 'Because I'm my mother's daughter certainly, but I'm not going to put up with all she put up with in her life.'

And it's better you understand this now, than years down the line.' 'I have to go and do something now. Do something for your mother. I'd like to come back and talk to you.' 'You'll come back to a locked door,' Kit said. 'She particularly asked me to keep You out of it, but if you want to check up on me and add further grief and problems to her you can always telephone her yourself and check I'm telling you the truth. But then, what's the point?' 'What indeed?' Kit asked.

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'I mean, if you don't believe me and have to check up on me you probably won't believe her, so save your money.' He got into his car and drove off very fast indeed. She was awake for a very long time but he didn't come to the flat. He left no note, no message. She was red-eyed when the morning came at last. She met Philip in the college. 'Have You a cold, Kit? How are you?' 'A bit of a one, how are you?' 'Fine. Overworked. We have six tours booked in this

summer. Kit, you wouldn't come and work in the hotel, would you? Have you a placement yet?' 'I don't know, Philip. This isn't a good day to ask.' 'I'll have to know some day soon,' he said. 'End of the week,' she promised. 'Oh, and Kit, Clio was looking for you.' 'When?' 'Just before I left my flat. She said if I saw you to ask you to ring her. It was very urgent.' 'It always is with her,' Kit said. 'She probably wants someone to pass her a handkerchief.' At noon she came out of a lecture room and saw Clio sitting in the hall. 'Aren't you afraid you'll get germs coming so far from your part of fashionable Dublin?' Kit said. Clio was snow white. 'It was all my fault, Kit. I just said that to get even with you.' 'Said what?' 'About Stevie being at the party. He wasn't. I just made it up because you looked so smug.' 'So all right. Thanks for telling me now anyway.' Kit's eyes danced, her heart was high. She should have known all the time that it was Clio's mean spirit. That Stevie wasn't telling her lies. Then she thought of last night's conversation at the phone box and shivered. Clio was still looking at her. 'You needn't have come the whole way just to tell me,' Kit said. 'But I had to. After what happened.'

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'What happened?' 'Stevie. He went up to the hotel and beat the living daylight out of Louis. He's lost three teeth and he has a broken jaw,' 'What?' 'He's In hospital. Mary Paula is nearly out of her mind. The christening is next week and Louis looks like something you'd pick up on the docks after closing time.' 'But why did Stevie do that?' 'I suppose he thought it was Louis that told you he was at the party.' 'I never mentioned the party to Stevie.' 'Well, someone else must have told him that Louis said It. Why else would he have gone to beat him up? Jesus, I'm so sorry, Kit. What awful things are happening these days.'

She had a lot to sort out. There was a message from Manchester. They hadn't known that there was an escort agency upstairs. People were getting the two agencies confused. It needed someone with huge diplomacy and even the cash to resettle the escort agency somewhere else and take over its premises. Lena said she would come up and see to it herself. In the afternoon Louis rang. 'I see you haven't put my name on the blacklist yet. I got straight through.' 'What's happened to your voice, Louis? You sound different. ~ 'As if you didn't know. You sent a thug to beat me up.' 'No, I didn't. I sent a friend to reas,)n with you.' 'He broke my jaw, I have a black eye and three teeth knocked out. I'm going to look a sight at the christening.' 'That's hard luck.' 'No, it's not hard luck, it's bad news for you. I'm going to sue him, and I'm going to explain in an open court why I'm doing it. The fellow has plenty of money, and of course you'll cough up if the award is bigger than we think.' Lena laughed. 'You'd never do that. Throw away all you've got) A cushy job, a young wife and baby ... You

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won't let them know you've been shackled up with someone who ran away from her husband and children. No, I know you well enough to know you're bluffing.' 'I might have been until you sent the prize fighter in. Now everything's gone already. I've nothing to lose. Any credibility I have is gone. I am going down, but I'm taking you with me. I just wanted you to know that, in case you're having the luxury of sleeping well.' 'I don't believe you, and from now on you are on the blacklist. You'll never make a call to me again.'

'No, but you'll sure hear about me and what I've done to you, Helen McMahon.'

'Don't go tonight,' Jessie said. 'You've had a long day.' 'No, the sooner I'm there the better it'll be.' 'Take the train then, you can sleep on it.' 'I'll need the car when I'm there.' Lena had bought a Volkswagen Beetle on Stevie's advice. It had never let her down and she found it invaluable. 'I quite like being wrapped up in the car on my own, it's a little world that's different. I can think things out.' 'Don't think too hard,' Jessie said, 'and do pull in if you're tired. Manchester's a long way.'

'Oh, go in the morning,' Ivy said. 'Nonsense. Lovely long nights. It'll be daylight most of the way,' Lena said. 'Take a flask of coffee. I'll make it in two minutes while you're packing your overnight bag.' 'Right. Wait'll I get a little flat of my own there, and I won't have to pack a bag.' 'Talk about the jet set,' said Ivy.

She was well out on the A6 when she got that feeling, the one she had that time after New Year, when nothing felt real, and the floor seemed very far away and sounds were distorted. It went with a tightness in the chest, a fear she was going to faint or fall.

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But this was idiotic. Here she was in her car, going at a perfectly normal speed. Should she pull in? She saw a place that was suitable and drew in to the side of the road. She sipped her coffee and then got out to stretch her legs. But that odd sensation returned of the ground being at a peculiar angle. She held the car to steady herself. Louis' face was everywhere around her, and his voice. 'I've got nothing to lose. I'll bring you down with me, Helen McMahon.' She couldn't drive like this, But she couldn't stay here either. She should get back into the car. The seat and steering wheel would support her and it was just her mind playing tricks on her. After a while she moved out into the stream of cars heading north. She forced herself to think about the premises in Manchester. How had they not checked the other offices? Perhaps it was called something so respectable that no one would ever have known until the situation became apparent. People had their lights on now. The road was shiny, it must have been wet, must have been raining here. Louis' face was coming back again. She couldn't imagine it as it was now,

bruised, injured, teeth missing. She had asked Stevie to threaten him. Not to hit him. Perhaps she had not explained properly. But there it was again. His face, handsome, petulant, impatient, the way he was when he didn't get what he wanted. , Get out of here, Louts,' she said aloud. 'I've nothing to lose now,' Louis said. 'I'll bring you down with me, you'll be sorry you didn't listen to me. I've nothing to lose.' There was a huge truck. The lights of a truck and a terrible shattering of glass and ... Then there was nothing. Peggy Forbes expected a call as soon as Lena checked into the hotel. It would be eleven p.m. at the latest. By midnight she was worried. The hotel was also annoyed. 'We could have given her room away several times,' they said.

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'I think the main thing is to find out whether Mrs Gray has had an accident rather than occupancy,' Peggy Forbes said. They were very apologetic. concentrating on room

It was ivy who heard at two a.m. A young policeman came to her door. 'I wonder if I could come in,'he said. dead.'

'Ernest,' she called. 'Ernest, come quickly. Lena's it was instantaneous, they told Ivy. She had crossed the road, into the oncoming traffic, She may have fallen asleep or lost concentration. The driver of the truck was not to be consoled. He was crying like a baby on the side of the road, said he'd never forget it to his dying day. He would like to tell her family how he couldn't have avoided it in a million Years. Her car was out of control. But that was probably no consolation to her family, he said then. 'She has no family,' Ivy told the policeman. 'Her work and me, that's all she has. We're her family and I'll tell her work in the morning.' 'These are the only addresses given in her diary and wallet apparently,' the policeman said. 'Our people on the spot said that only you and Millar's were there as contacts, so I suppose that's in order then.' 'That's in order then,' Ivy said. 'Thank you officer, that's in orden'

Ivy went to Millar's at nine a.m. She dressed carefully in t of things she would discuss with Jessie black. She had a lis Millar. The police formalities and what they would involve, the undertakers, the funeral, the

announcement in the papers. Jessie Millar was griefstricken in a way that Ivy would never have believed possible. This wasn't a colleague, this was a true friend. When the weeping was over they settled everything. 'The question of Mr Gray is a delicate one, perhaps I could handle that,' Ivy suggested.

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'Please, please. Come in and sit at her desk. Make whatever calls you like. Use the place as your own.' Ivy had never sat in a posh office like this. She would have loved to talk to Lena about it, but instead she was sitting there arranging Lena's funeral with the undertaker. She would deal with Mr Gray next. She remembered the name of the hotel where he worked. She was unprepared for the violence of his response. 'This is some cheap, dirty trick, Ivy,' he said. 'Would to God that it were.' Ivy's voice was shaking. 'If she thinks she can get out of it by saying this, she has another trick coming.' 'The funeral's next Thursday, Louis. It would be best if you were here.' 'Funeral! Don't make me laugh,' he said. She gave him the name and phone number of the undertakers. She said she would confirm it in writing to him and mark the envelope personal. Again she said in a level voice, 'It would be best if you were there.' Then she rang Stevie Sullivan. She spoke to the woman, who must be Martin McMahon's second wife. 'This is Ivy,' she said. 'Oh we spoke before, you're from the guest house.' Maura was pleasant. Ivy remembered the ruse. Imagine it was only a couple of days ago and Lena had been alive and well. 'Can I speak to him?' she asked. 'Certainly.' Maura was puzzled. This woman Ivy sounded totally different this time round. 'I have to go to Dublin, Maura,' Stevie said, throwing some papers into a briefcase and taking the keys of a car. 'It's sudden and important and I'll be gone a few days.' 'You have appointments, people to meet . . . 'Cancel them if you would.' 'Any excuse?' 'No, not one I can give now. But you make one.' 'Can you tell me any more? Please, Stevie. I'm a little anxious, these calls from London . . . '

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Stevie looked at her. 'Yes, I'm going to London actually. I'm stopping to pick up Kit. A friend of ours died.' 'But what friend ...?', 'Please Maura ... I know you're worried but please.

ie This is a bad time.' 'Her father will want to know what she's doing dashing off . . . , 'No, it's not dashing off. Now, I know you don't think I'm the most reliable man in the world but I'd die rather

than let any harm happen to Kit. I think you know that. I haven't seduced her, I won't try ... eventually in years and years from now I hope she'll marry me, but she may not. I can't tell you straighter than this.' 'Go and pack your things, Stevie,' she said. 'I'll sort it out.'

He took Kit from class. He held out both his hands to her. 'This is the second time someone has had to tell you this news, Kit,' he said. And she put her head on his shoulder and cried.

The body was released from the hospital and came to a funeral parlour in London. Stevie held Kit's hand as they

went in. They stood together beside the casket. Lena looked as if she were asleep. Whatever discolouring and wounding there was in her forehead was hidden by her hair. Neither of them cried. They just stood there and looked for a long time. Ivy asked them to stay in Lena's flat. 'That's where she'd want you to be,' she said. 'I've left it ready for you.' They went upstairs, limbs moving slowly as if in a dream. 'You've changed the wallpaper, she told me,' Kit said. 'After he left, to get the memory of him out of the place. I think it worked for a bit.' 'It sure did,' Stevie said. 'She had all her living ahead of her,' Ivy said, her face puckering. She turned away I'll leave you here and come down if you need anything.'

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'It's only got one bed,' said Stevie. 'We can survive that,' Kit said. She took off her dress, and her open-toed shoes. She stood in her slip at the handbasin where Mother must have stood so often and washed her face and arms and neck. Then she lay down on one side of the bed. Stevie lay on the other side, their hands held. And eventually he realised that she had gone to sleep.

'He won't come to the funeral,' Ivy said. 'Yes, he will,' Kit said. She was pale but calm. 'Maybe we're better without him. He caused all that upset,' Ernest said. 'I won't have her laid to rest without that bastard standing there

watching,' Kit said. 'She deserves that much. She deserves him standing there with a black tie at her funeral.' 'But if he won't come?' 'I'll make him,' Kit said.

Louis Gray would not take a call from London from Kit McMahon. A secretary said she had instructions not to put Miss McMahon through. 'Give him a message from me please.' 'Certainly.' 'There's a certain gathering that he is expected at here in London, and I will need to know whether or not he plans to attend.' 'Hold on and I'll enquire.' She came back, 'I'm sorry the answer is regrettably no.' 'Then could you tell him that regrettably I shall have to come and collect him.' Kit hung up. At the office she borrowed a hundred pounds from Jessie. She said it was for funeral arrangements. It was given willingly. Then she left a note for Stevie and went straight to the airport. The flight took an hour, the taxi to Louis' hotel another hour. She was calm when she asked to see him. He was in a meeting, they said, with Mr O'Connor senior and some of the board members.

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'I have a taxi waiting Kit said, 'so I'd better go in and speak to him.' Before the receptionist could stop her, Kit was in the board room. 'I do beg your pardon for this, but it's an emergency,' she said. Fingers recognised the girl who could and did cause so much trouble. 'Leave this minute,' Louis said. 'Louis, listen to her,' Fingers ordered. Louis' hand was at his throat. 'I'm afraid that a great friend of ours in London has died

and we all need you at the funeral. I wouldn't make such a drama out of it, but your presence is very much needed.' 'Who was this friend?' Fingers O'Connor asked, since Louis seemed to have lost his voice. Very clearly Kit said: 'His name was Leonard Williams, a brother of James Williams, your previous employer. The family are most insistent that you come. , She looked directly at Louis as she spoke. She was telling him that she'd keep the secret, she would drop him in nothing if he came. 'That James Williams we met at the Dryden the first time?' Fingers asked. 'Yes, that Mr Williams. Can I say you'll be with me? I have a taxi outside.' 'They can't expect me to come now,' Louis gasped. 'It's a matter of being there as soon as possible.' Their eyes were still locked. Louis knew that Kit would go the distance. That he had no option. 'I have to be back for the christening,' he said. 'In the

midst of life we are in death,' Kit said. 'Christenings mercifully can be delayed but sudden death and funerals can't.' 'I'll go later tonight,' he said. 'You know where to go, to the house in West London. All the details are there.' 'Yes, Yes. I know.' 'What's your involvement in this?' Fingers looked suspicious.

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'The deceased was very very good to me, and good to all of us. That's why the people who were 1 1 important in the deceased's life must be at the funeral,' she said. The others in the room who didn't know what was happening, looked at each other in mystification. First, Louis Gray, the new hot-shot manager, was beaten up like someone after a bar-room brawl, now there were all these heavily loaded signals from some youngster to whom Fingers was listening with an uncharacteristic respect. Louis Gray and his father-in-law left the room together and watched Kit getting back into her taxi. 'Better go, Louis,' Fingers said. 'If she has you by the balls like the rest of us, then we're all sunk.'

The day was too sunny for a funeral. London looked too well to be hosting something sad like this. Kit wore a plain black cotton dress and one of Lena's own hats. She carried a small black bag she had found in Lena's dressing-table drawer. Ivy, Jessie, Grace West, old Mrs Park in her wheelchair, Peggy Forbes heartbroken from Manchester, came. The entire staff of Millar's, James Williams, all the tenants in the house, clients of the Agency, waiters from the local restaurants, clerks from the bank. There was a very large crowd in the Catholic church that Kit had found for the funeral mass. As the priest read out the prayer about this night being in heaven and may the angels come to meet her, Kit held Stevie's hand very tight. They had both been in the parish church in Lough Glass when Father Baily had read this prayer for Lena before. But in those days the angels were being asked to meet Helen McMahon. The priest had asked earlier if there was any particular hymn they would like. Kit couldn't think of any hymn. Not one. Something she might have sung at school, the priest prompted. 'Hail Queen of Heaven,' Kit had said. It had not been a good choice. The organist began twice

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but the congregation, most of them Church of England, did not know this hymn to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Kit was not going to let it falter. She would sing it if nobody else did. Hall Queen of Heaven, she began, and Stevie joined in. The ocean star, Guide of the wanderer here below. Thrown on life's surge, we claim thy care Save us from peril and from woe.

And then another voice joined in and they saw it was Louis Gray in his dark coat with his black tie, his face bruised and at an angle, his eye blackened. Most people thought he had been in the accident with her. He had a good strong voice and he helped Stevie and Kit along.

Mother of Christ, star of the sea, Pray for the wanderer, pray for me. The organist, pleased that someone had sung, struck up a second verse. They sang what had been sung already, all three of them. By the time it came to Pray for the wanderer Pray for me, everyone in the church had joined in. Kit and Stevie looked at each other. They had done Lena proud in London.

only a few people went to the crematorium' that's what Ivy and Kit suggested. » , Louis looked pathetically at Kit. 'Am I to go.' 'Yes,' she said. It was so alien to anything that Kit had ever known; no coffin going into the earth, no sounds of spades and clay falling, just curtains Parting and closing. It seemed unreal. They stood outside the little chapel in the crematorium. 'When did you find out?' he asked Kit. 'I always knew,' she said. 'That's rubbish. The first Christmas she nearly died of grief because she couldn't ring you.' 'She wrote soon after,' Kit said.

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'I don't believe you.' 'Suit yourself. I was the secret you didn't know about, you had many many that she didn't know about. Let's call it quits.' 'All right,' Louis said. He looked old and tired. That was Kit's revenge. They had to talk to a solicitor. Lena's entire estate had been left to Mary Katherine McMahon of Lough Glass. Apart from bequests to Ivy and Grace West, her quarter share of Millar's Agency now belonged to Kit. 'How will I arrange for it to be transferred to you after probate? We're talking about

forty or fifty thousand pounds, the solicitor said. 'I'll write to you about it later,' said Kit.

They hired a car, drove home through England. Through fields and woods and small towns, and then up through Wales. They would come back, they said, back to London to see friends like Ivy and Ernest and Grace and Jessit. But now they wanted to go home. 'What'll I do with the money? I can't say I've been given fifty thousand pounds.' 'No,' Stevie was thoughtful. 'So what will I do? She wants me to have it ... but I have to do it right. It would be terrible to blow the whole story at this stage.' 'You could give it to me,' Stevie said. 'What?' 'You could invest it in my business.' 'Are you mad?' 'No, I could transform the whole place, and when you marry me it'll all be yours anyway. Meanwhile I'll just look after it for you.' 'Why should I trust you?' 'Lena did.' 'That's true. But this would be sheer madness.' 'No it wouldn't. We could get a lawyer and do it legally.'

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You could be a sleeping partner, Well, in that sense anyway. I don't know, Stevie.' 'Think of a better idea,' he said and they drove along the roads of Wales. They stayed the night in Anglesey. it was a lovely little guest house with a woman who had a sing-song accent. I have a beautiful room for you,' she said. 'A four-poster bed and You can nearly see Ireland from there.'

They were too tired to talk to her about the situation, or they each thought the other would. And anyway, they had slept blamelessly side by side in Lena's bed in London. They went upstairs and lay down. He looked so beautiful in the moonlight, with his long dark hair on the pillow, Kit reached out to him. 'If I'm going to be a sleeping partner she said, 'I suppose I'd better practise it properly.' They stayed three days in Anglesey. And three nights. And then they went home.

There were a lot of explanations but they didn't care. Kit agreed to work in the Central Hotel for the summer. Stevie told Maura that he might have an of money or the garage. 'I know where you got that money,' Maura said suddenly. 'Jesus, do you?' said Stevie. 'Yes, it was the greyhounds,' Maura said triumphantly. 'Was it? Tell me.' 'It was something like that,' Stevie said looking shamefaced. 'And you think I should regard you as reliable?' 'But you do, don't you?' 'Yes. Oddly, that day before you went off on your jaunt I

knew you were telling me the truth about not seducing Kit,' Maura said. Stevie hoped she wouldn't ask him again.

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It was the shortest night of the year. They rowed out on the lake, Stevie and Kit. Everyone was used to seeing them together now, wandering hand in hand by the lake. People didn't bother to gossip any more. Like Anna Kelly and Emmet, they had been together for as long as people could remember. And Philip O'Brien and the marvellous bossy girl who had come to work as a pharmacy student in McMahan's. Her name was Barbara and she was exactly the kind of girl Philip O'Brien was looking for all his life people said, and hadn't known it. People had forgotten Sister Madeleine, and Orla Reilly rarely came to town. Paddles' was full at night. Mona Fitz was in the sanatorium. Life went on. And it was quite usual to see young people taking a boat out over the quiet water of the lake in Lough Glass at night. Stevie and Kit took the little box of ashes and sprinkled it in the water. The moon was high in the sky and they didn't feel sad. It wasn't really a funeral. All that was over, in London and years ago ... the first time. This wasn't a sad thing, it was just the right thing to do. As having a honeymoon in Wales had seemed the right thing to do. In years to come when people would look back on the history of the place and talk about the people who lived here, they might mention Helen McMahan who died in the lake. This way it would be true, her body was in the lake now, like so many who had gone before, but it had gone there peacefully. It was strange this shorthand which meant that you didn't have to say things like that to each other. Stevie knew and Kit knew it. As they knew they would live on the lakeshore some day. Some day when they were old enough to settle down.

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