

'A powerful story ... Walsh shows an innate understanding of people's lives, and the emotional truths that underpin them.'

Kathleen MacMahon

ALL THAT I LEAVE BEHIND

What makes a mother abandon her children?

alison
WALSH



Alison Walsh works in book publishing and literary journalism. She is the author of the bestselling memoir *In My Mother's Shoes*. *All That I Leave Behind* is her first novel.

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HACHETTE
BOOKS
IRELAND

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'It made me decide there's no clear boundary between experience and imagination'

Norman Mailer, *Paris Review*

Michelle

There's no bougainvillea where I come from. There are no snakes or lizards, no sun that sits high in the sky, a hot orange ball; there's none of the dry red earth that coats my toes, that gets into every crevice, the fine lines around my eyes. Sometimes, I've found it in my underwear when I've taken my bra or knickers off to wash. After thirty years in this place, I think it must be inside me, lining my insides, a thin layer around my heart.

Where I come from, the earth is a thick, rich brown, the grass a vivid green and the barley a silvery grey, swaying in the fields, and everywhere there is water, rushing over pebbles in a stream, pushing slowly between the reeds in the long bluey-brown of the canal that stretches on into the horizon. There are no mud huts, but two-storey farmhouses which have seen better days or modern bungalows with PVC windows, neat baskets of flowers hanging up outside the porch.

There's a house by the canal that I always wanted, from the moment I saw it, when I first came to Monasterard. I'd point it out to John-Joe when we went on one of our long walks, the way we always did at the beginning, when we had nothing else to distract us, when the life we'd chosen hadn't begun to pull us apart, the dog sniffing around ahead of us, rooting in the grass at the edge of a field for the sniff of a pheasant.

'That's the one I want,' I said to him as we both stood on the bank and peered over the hedge at its collapsing roof, the grey whitewash almost worn away from the pebble-dashed front, a raggy lace curtain hanging in one of the windows.

'You must be cracked.' He laughed, scratching his head, his eyes scanning the rusting tractor sinking down into the mud in the front yard. He had that country suspicion of 'home' as an affectation – of doing places up, extending them, rummaging through bric-a-brac stalls in markets in search of treasure. Homes were where you slept and ate and watched television, as far as John-Joe was concerned. But he indulged my daydream, placing a heavy arm on my shoulder as we both gazed at the house, his handsome face alert, amused. 'Anything for you, my love.' He smiled and, shaking his head, urged the dog on with a whistle.

Anything for me. How funny it seemed later – 'funny odd, not funny ha-ha', as Mary-Pat used to say – that there was a point when John-Joe would have done anything for me, for the girl he loved. Before what happened happened.

How often I think of it these days, that house, that place. When I first came here, months passed when I hardly thought of it at all. I pushed it out of my mind because I had other things to think about, things that made me feel as if my heart was being pulled out through my ribs. But then that was my punishment: to have left them – Mary-Pat, June, Pius and my little Rosie – and yet brought them with me in my heart, where I could never let them go.

Now, after I use the small amount of water that remains at the bottom of the tin bowl to splash the blessed dust off my face, grumbling to myself because I can still feel the dry grit of it on my skin, after I lie down on the hard, narrow bed like an old nun, I can see it in my mind's eye: the way the roof sags, the faded green paint on the front door. Why does the house call me back? Why does it haunt my dreams? I rail against it, knowing all the time why. Because it's everything I once wanted for my husband and family, the life I had planned for myself. The life that I never really had.

And then, because I can do nothing else, I pull the tattered paperback copy of *Gone with the Wind* out from under my pillow, the one that I bought in a flea market in Bray because it had a still from the film on it, Vivien Leigh's feline, pixie face staring out at me, unknowable; it fascinates me, that face, the idea that it can be a mask, can betray nothing of what's inside. If only I could have been more like Vivien Leigh. I turn to page 547, to where Scarlett comes back after the battle of Atlanta, and I think about Junie and wonder if she's reading my mother's copy, the huge, heavy hardback that I used to love to read. I wonder if she's found it in the place where I left it for her, and where I left the other things: my plan for the French garden for Pius, because I know how much he loves the garden – he belongs there, just as I do. For Mary-Pat, I left a shell – a perfect whorl of silver and black. We found it on the beach that day we went to Carnsore, that day when my whole life just fell away from me. She made me promise that we'd go back, but we never did. I wonder if she has? For Rosie, I left my ring with the purple stone, the one that John-Joe's friend had made for me, a thick band of silver with a lump of amethyst set into it, rough, but beautiful, a symbol of everything I thought we meant to each other. I hope it brings her better luck than it did me.

I tucked them into a battered trunk that I'd found in the attic, a huge black thing with big bands of wood set into it that, when I opened it, released a scent of mothballs and foreign travel. The kids used to like rummaging around in the attic, amongst all the debris that John-Joe's brother had left behind: the stuffed trout mounted on a mahogany frame, the box of racing programmes from Cheltenham, the collection of men's hats stored in a battered suitcase, which the girls used to make Pius try on, marching him around the attic, giving each other orders, their footsteps hammering on the ceiling above me as I lay on the bed, my head propped up on a pillow so that I could see the silver ribbon of the canal from my window, could feel that I was part of it, not inside in the prison I'd made for myself. I left them there, because I hoped that, sooner or later, the children would come across them, and because it's the one place where John-Joe never strayed.

I didn't leave a note, because no note would explain to them why I'd left them. No words could ever cover it. Maybe I was fooling myself a little, too, telling myself that, sure, I'd be seeing them again before they'd even have time to miss me. They'd all climb onto the train in Mullingar, piling the old suitcases and bags around them, and when they got off in Heuston Station, they'd stand on the platform for a minute, lost, until they'd catch sight of me, arms open, and they'd run towards me.

How many times have I replayed that scene in my head over the years. Even though, deep down, I probably knew that it would never happen. It just took time for me to understand, and when I did, the pain was so terrible I thought it would kill me. But even though what I did that day cost me everything, I knew that I had no other choice.

I pick up the paperback and open it and that's when the photo falls out. And every time I see it, it's as if it is for the first time. The feeling is physical, like a punch to the stomach, making me wheeze and short of breath. I clutch my hand to my throat and feel the tears hot beneath my eyelids.

They are sitting in line on an old ladder, which Pius has transformed into a boat, paddling with a sweeping brush and a mop at either end. Mary-Pat first, her hair in ringlets, her thighs dimpling under her tartan dress: my happy, plump little girl, with her tea sets and her dolls. Then June, in Mary-Pat's hand-me-down jeans, that watchful look on her face, the one that made me feel that she knew more than she should. Pius is at the end, a half-mad grin on his face, a gap where his two front teeth should be. He'd either done, or was about to do, something naughty. It used to drive John-Joe mad, and the madder he got, the more poor Pius misbehaved. My poor, bold Pius.

Rosie is tucked in front of him, the way she always was, a little doll in a crochet dress, her thumb in her mouth, her hair a vivid flame of red. How I loved my Rosie. It just shows you, family is family, n

matter what. I shouldn't have loved her as much as I did. I should have nursed that chip of ice in my heart: the rage against her father should, by rights, have been hers to carry. But instead I loved her more – in truth, more than the others. That's a mother's secret, isn't it? We say we love them all equally, but there's always one, isn't there? To me, it was Rosie, because I needed her. Because she, of all people, could save me from John-Joe and what we were doing to each other.

I run my hand over their faces, their hair, and I kiss them, one by one, kiss them goodnight, as I'm tucking them up in bed again, that tattered Ladybird copy of Rapunzel in my hand, their noses peeking above the blankets of Mammy and Daddy's bed, where they always had their night-time stories. I don't kiss the adults they will have since become, because to me they are forever children. I kiss them and I pray for them in my own way, and then I go to sleep and they are in my dreams.

Part One

Summer 2012

Rosie stood at the door for a few moments, the summer breeze coming in through the open window, lifting her hair around her face, tendrils of bright red wafting across her eyes. The breeze was warm and on it she could hear the constant caw-caw of the rooks in the trees near the Protestant church. She'd forgotten how loud they were, the rooks. She used to pass them every day on her way to school, ducking underneath the oak tree and running so that one of them wouldn't crap on her, hands over her ears so that the sudden crack of the bird-scarer wouldn't make her jump out of her skin, terrified that one of the birds would fix her with a beady eye and swoop, like in *The Birds*.

She closed her eyes for a second, clutching her handbag to her, feeling the red leather slick from her sweaty hand. She looked down at her feet and wondered if the espadrilles were a bit disrespectful in a place like this, as if she were dressed for the beach? But then she shook her head. For God's sake it wasn't Mass, and Daddy wouldn't give a shit about what she wore. He'd consider it highly entertaining that she was fretting about dress codes, she who had hardly worn a stitch of clothing for the first five years of her life. Mary-Pat had had to threaten to take away her collection of stag beetle figurines before she agreed to wear the scratchy jumper and skirt that was her school uniform. 'But I'm a free spirit,' she'd protested, as her sister had shoved her arms into the horrible blue nylon-wool mini-skirt. 'Daddy said so.'

'Daddy doesn't have to go to school,' Mary-Pat had barked. 'Daddy doesn't have to do anything he doesn't want to, for that matter. It's easy for some of us to be free spirits. Now, shut up and get dressed, will you, and give me a break?'

A free spirit. That's who I used to be, Rosie thought as she tiptoed into the room, inhaling the smell of disinfectant and something else sickly sweet. Her stomach churned and she remembered that she hadn't eaten since they'd landed six hours ago, a greasy fry under the hot lights of the airport café. She felt her chest tighten again. She reached into her handbag and pulled out her inhaler, taking two deep puffs, clutching it in her hand as she walked over to the bed.

'Daddy?' The man in the bed didn't respond because he was fast asleep, his mouth open, revealing an expanse of pink gum. Oh, she thought, it's not him. It's not Daddy. This man looked like a mummy, shrunken and wizened, his cheeks hollow because they'd taken his teeth out: they were floating in a glass by the side of the bed. Daddy didn't have false teeth, she was sure of it.

'Daddy?' she said again. She went to the end of the bed and saw the medical chart clipped to the frame. She lifted the chart up and examined the name on the top line, a scrawl in blue biro. John-John O'Connor. Daddy's date of birth. She swallowed hard then looked at the man in the bed again. His cheeks had collapsed, making his nose even more prominent. She knew that nose, the bump on the bridge of it from when he'd broken it playing football. And she knew the mole on his right cheek. His hair was fully white now, but it still curled around his ears, one of which had a hole in it for a piercing but no silver earring. He wouldn't like that, she thought, being without his lucky earring.

He gave a little snore, a short one, followed by a long silence, and for a second Rosie thought he'd stopped breathing, but then he exhaled loudly. She suppressed the scream which had risen to her throat and instead lifted the inhaler to her mouth and took another long breath in, holding it for a few seconds and then breathing out. She turned around, as if checking to see if there was anyone nearby, and then she tried, 'Daddy, it's me, Rosie.' Silence. 'Ehm, I'm sorry I haven't been to see you in a while. I was away, but you know that, of course.' She blushed as she heard her silly words in the

silence. 'Away.' As if that could sum up all those years and all those miles she'd put between herself and this place, her home. If Pius hadn't written to her about Daddy, she knew that she would probably never have returned. It was a mistake – she'd been here five minutes, and she already knew that. But she'd had to come home, because if she never saw Daddy again before - well, she'd never forgive herself.

She pulled up a big red chair and sat right on the edge of it, feeling the plastic stick to the back of her thighs. She pushed her legs underneath, wincing as her calf bashed against the hard commode below the seat. 'How are you, Daddy?' she tried, feeling even more foolish. Then she reached out and took one of his hands in hers and gave it a little squeeze. 'It's good to see you.' She turned his hand over in hers, those long, slender hands with the lovely fingers that he'd used to play the piano at the Wigmore Hall, not dig big bushels of spuds in the arse end of nowhere. When she saw his nails, she swore out loud. 'For God's sake, Daddy.' They were filthy, the cuticles ragged. 'It's a good job you're asleep,' she said, 'that way you can't see the state of your hands.' He'd always been so careful about his appearance. He'd been delighted to discover V05 hair gel, which he'd nicked from Pius, smoothing down his silvery-black curls in the bathroom mirror, smacking his lips and baring his beautiful white teeth, which no amount of smoking and drinking seemed to have dulled. Then he'd take his brown-leather manicure case out of the drawer in the medicine cabinet and begin his work of filing and shaping. That must be where June got it, that love of making herself look nice. June would have exactly the same expression on her face when she looked into the mirror, one of total absorption mixed with a fair bit of self-admiration. Rosie wondered what June would look like now. She'd be forty-one and Rosie couldn't imagine her growing older. Maybe she'd have Botox or fillers. June would have made for that kind of stuff. The thought made her giggle, before she covered her mouth with her hand.

Still holding Daddy's hand in one of hers, with the other, trembling, Rosie opened the cabinet beside the bed, hoping that she'd spot it now. Sure enough, it was in a blue washbag, sure to have been packed by Mary-Pat, along with a bottle of Blue Stratos, a bar of soap, a toothbrush and a packet of cigarettes, a cheap plastic lighter shoved into a corner of the packet. 'I thought you'd given up the fags,' Rosie said out loud as she opened the manicure set. 'God, I'd kill for a fag, do you know that? But I gave them up, Daddy, would you believe? Yep. Two years and six months ago, but who's counting?' And anyway, she thought now as she looked longingly at the cigarettes, Craig would smack it off her breath. He was like a bloodhound when it came to that kind of thing, could sniff out cigarette smoke and alcohol at a hundred yards. He wouldn't say a word, she knew, but a look would be enough. She'd seen that look once, and she never wanted to see it again.

She extracted a tiny silver nail file from the case and, turning his left hand gently in hers, began to clean under the nails, paring away all the dirt, which she wiped onto a tissue which she'd spread on the bed. She filed away for a bit and then she said, 'Do you remember what you used to say to me at the school gate, Daddy?' rubbing a little of the hand cream she'd found at the bottom of his washbag into his hands, smoothing the cream along his fingers, once slender, now distorted by arthritis, which had made his joints swell. "'Don't let the bastards grind you down.'" Handy.' She smiled as she turned his other hand and rubbed cream over the palm, which was cracked. 'You knew what they could be like. Small minds,' she continued. 'Small minds.' She could see him then as she stood at the school gate, tipping his invisible hat and announcing, 'Time to head to the office, Doodlebug. See you after school,' and then he'd be gone, a little saunter up over the bridge, Colleen the dog trying to keep up, before the two of them would make a quick right turn, as if Daddy had only just thought of it and not planned it out carefully, into Prendergast's. There, Daddy would drink one pint of Guinness and smoke one cigarette and read the *Irish Independent*. He never drank more than one pint in the morning and one in the

afternoon: the benders, he kept for Friday and Saturday nights. He regarded it as a sign that he was man of discipline. Could control himself. Just like any other man, he'd use routine to structure his day, except instead of car and office and home for dinner, his was pub and bookies and only then home to do a few jobs around the house.

Of course, she hadn't seen it then, that this routine wasn't quite like other fathers', wasn't something to be proud of, she supposed. She'd heard it more than once, the slightly-too-loud comment from one of the teachers or one of the girls in the minimarket about 'that fellow, dossing around the town. Sure he's a good for nothing, so he is.' Rosie's cheeks would burn, but with indignation, not shame. How dare they say things like that about her daddy. She knew her daddy. And he was always there for her. Always. How she'd missed him, even though he'd never once written. 'Ah, sure, I'm not good at that kind of thing,' he'd said when she'd pushed him once. 'I'm hopeless with words, you know that, Rosie-boo.' Instead, he'd made a 'trunk call' as he still called it, every second Sunday, never forgetting to reverse the charges, the roar of the punters at Prendergast's in the background, the clink of pint glasses as he brought her up to date with the going at Kempton Park, the favourite for the 3.45 at Leopardstown racecourse – never anything personal, just '*ráiméis*', as he called it. He probably felt safe with that, with nonsense, and she did too – the two of them carefully skirting any difficult subjects.

Rosie had made sure to hide the phone bills from Craig, paying them every month from her credit card. He was very careful about expenditure. And then, just after Christmas this year, the calls had stopped, and when she'd rung Pi, he'd told her that Daddy was 'tired', and then he was 'in for a few tests'. Why had she not guessed? Maybe all the wedding stuff had distracted her, made her forget what was really important. 'You're here now,' Pi had said to her earlier, but that didn't make her feel any less guilty.

'I didn't know Prendergast's had closed,' she said now. 'Although I suppose you haven't had cause to go there for a while anyway. Pi tells me that Blazers on the Dublin Road is the place now. Might try it some time.' She grinned. 'Sounds like my kind of place. Not.' She paused. 'Not now that I'm reformed character anyway. You'll be glad to know that I don't drink any more, can you believe it? I'm very well behaved, Daddy. I know I led you all a merry dance, didn't I? Mary-Pat used to say she had her heart broken. That's why she pushed me onto that bus to Dublin. I suppose I can't really blame her.'

She could see herself still, looking out the window of the bus, in that big hairy coat she'd found on the back of Daddy's wardrobe, the one that smelled godawful but that she wore to annoy Mary-Pat because her sister had taken one look at her the first time she'd appeared in it and had screamed, 'Take that bloody thing off, or I will personally rip it off your back, do you hear me?' It had been an invitation: Rosie had made a point of wearing it to breakfast, dinner and tea, ignoring her sister's look of disgust, because she was so pleased to have rubbed her up the wrong way. That was her mission in life then: to cause Mary-Pat as much hassle as she possibly could, because she knew she could get away with it. Because she thought her sister would love her anyway, no matter what she did. She had been wrong about that.

Which was why she'd said not one word to her about coming home. The only person she'd told was Pius, because she knew he'd keep his mouth shut. To his credit, he'd said he wouldn't breathe a word even though he'd written that her two sisters would be 'surprised'. That was one word for it. 'They'll be thrilled to see you,' he'd added at the bottom of the postcard he'd sent her of St Munchin's Cistercian Abbey. He sent a postcard every week, often with nothing more than a scribbled line in his spidery handwriting, or some silly quote from the local newspaper that had caught his eye, but now

he'd written a full paragraph, ending with: 'They miss you, Rosie.' Rosie knew that her brother was just being kind. If they missed her that much, why had neither of them visited, even once? Pi, she could understand, what with his ... illness, but Mary-Pat and June? Apart from the polite letters at Christmas and on her birthday, she'd heard hardly a word from either of them. But then, she hadn't left them on the best of terms, had she?

She could still remember that June had pulled her aside during one of her sister's visits home. Rosie had been wearing the coat for a few weeks, and Mary-Pat had more or less stopped speaking to her. She'd said gently, 'Rosie, love, will you take the coat off? It's upsetting everyone.'

'Why?' Rosie's chin had jutted out stubbornly, her hand on her hips. Truthfully, she was only dying to get rid of the awful coat – it made her itch like mad – but she wasn't about to give in to Mary-Pat.

'It was Mammy's,' June explained patiently. 'It makes people remember her, you see, every time they see you in it. It's ... awkward,' she finished.

Rosie had wanted to pull the coat off then and hurl it as far away from her as she possibly could, but because she was young and stubborn, she continued to wear it, shuffling in and out of the sitting room, making sure that she walked in front of the TV when Mary-Pat was trying to watch *Coronation Street*, making a point of brushing her teeth in the bathroom at night in her T-shirt and shorts and the coat, even though it made her feel sick to wear it. Sick and sorry and embarrassed. But she wouldn't give in, she'd decided, no matter how much it cost.

Rosie blushed as she remembered what she'd been like, the rage that had propelled her forward, out of Monasterard forever, or so she'd thought. 'You needn't fucking bother waiting,' she'd spat at Mary-Pat as she'd pulled her bags out of the Pajero, 'unless you want to make sure I'm going.'

'Sure, there's no need for that, no need at all,' PJ had said, hopping down from the driver's seat and gently taking a bag from her, his big, red face a picture of sorrow. Poor PJ, stuck in the middle of it all, announcing loudly that he was taking the babies for a walk every time herself and Mary-Pat kicked off. John-Patrick and Melissa must be fifteen or sixteen by now.

'It's none of your fucking business,' she'd yelled, yanking the bag out of his hand and turning on her heel. She'd caught a glimpse of Mary-Pat then, sitting bolt upright in the passenger seat, tears streaming down her face. 'What the hell are you crying about?' she'd screamed. 'Haven't you got what you wanted? Haven't you been trying to get rid of me all this time? Well, guess what? It's your lucky day,' and she'd stomped up the steps of the bus, ignoring the muttered tuts of Mrs Delaney. She could just hear her: 'There go the O'Connors again, lowering themselves, but, sure, what else could you expect.'

She'd stomped onto the bus, throwing the money at Paudy, who had driven the 6.15 to Dublin ever since she could remember, barely muttering a 'thanks' and thinking that Mary-Pat would have killed her if she could see her. She'd thrown herself into her seat and glared out the window, her arms folded tightly across her chest. She'd looked at the square, at the monument to the war dead, at the little Celtic well which had had 'Up the 'RA' graffitied on it – by Jim Prendergast, because she'd seen him do it – at the little row of shops: the chipper, at Moran's, with the lovely window displays that spoke to the genteel ladies of the county, at Maggie's general stores, with all the holy statues in the windows and she'd wanted to spit on them, to spit on the whole damn place. And then she saw the Jeep roar up the road towards the house, a belch of smoke coming from the exhaust, and she'd wanted to hurt herself tight and give in to the big, ugly sobs that she knew were waiting. But she didn't. She gritted her teeth and pushed them down, because she wouldn't give into them, she just wouldn't. That would be saying that it was all her fault somehow, when she knew it wasn't.

Of course, she'd had an attack then, a squeezing in her chest, her breathing so tight she thought she'd suffocate. She needed her inhaler, she'd thought, beginning to panic. Where was it? She rummaged at the top of the backpack and found it in her washbag, in a special compartment, along with a travel toothbrush and a miniature-size toothpaste and soap. A note had been wrapped around the two inhalers, one brown and one blue, in shaky green biro: 'TAKE TWO PUFFS X 2 TIMES PER DAY, MORE IF NEEDED.' She hadn't packed the washbag, she thought, pulling the inhaler out with shaking hands and sucking on it twice. Mary-Pat must have done it. She'd weakened then, just for a moment, before reminding herself that she hated her sister, really, truly hated her, and that she hoped she'd never see her again as long as she lived.

And then the bus rumbled into life, and the doors of the baggage hold were banged shut, and she found her gaze pulled to the window and down the main street. She kept looking, in case she might see him. He'd come, she was sure of it. It was the least he could do. And if he came, she'd stay. Even though she hated the place and everyone in it, hated what had happened there, she'd stay for him.

She'd kept hoping until the bus pulled away, slowly, past the Protestant church and over the bridge with the water falling glassy underneath. And then it was too late.

Rosie closed her eyes, and the dappled sunlight flickered across her eyelids. She didn't want to think about him now. It was bad enough that she was stirring up everything else after all this time, but not to think about him. Not Mark.

'I'm sorry, Daddy,' she said, holding his hand, which was now slippery with cream. 'I'm sorry for everything.' As she gripped his fingers, the light caught the single solitaire on the platinum band on her finger. It was too big, and it slid around, the diamond jabbing the soft skin on the inside of her fingers, which were milky-white and covered in freckles. 'I'm getting married, did I tell you that? Can you believe it?' And then she continued, as if he'd spoken, 'Oh, I know you think it's all a load of rubbish, but I suppose I had to grow up some time and a wedding is as good a way as any, isn't it? I know, it doesn't sound very romantic, but it's all good, honestly.' As she said the words, she wondered quite why she felt she needed to tell Daddy this, why she needed to justify herself. She loved Craig and he made her happy – it was as simple as that. 'But don't tell the others, will you? I'll have to break the news to them myself and I haven't seen any of them yet. I wanted you to be the first to know.'

She paused for a second, twiddling the ring on her finger before pulling it off, feeling her fingers lighten as she did so. God, that stone weighed a ton. She'd told Craig that she didn't want a big, silly diamond that made her look like a footballer's wife, but he'd insisted. 'What kind of a guy does that make me, if I can't buy my wife-to-be a proper engagement ring?' And so Rosie had found herself being carried along with the whole exercise, visiting a blingy out-of-town jewellers with Craig and her mum, full of fawning staff, obsequious because they knew serious money was going to be spent.

She'd swallowed her protests because she knew how much it mattered to Craig, and as she oohed and aahed over the outsize stone, she tried not to think of the red piece of string she'd worn on her ring finger for one whole summer, years before. They'd been nine years old and got married in the ornate gazebo in the garden, with Colleen and Morecambe and Wise, the two goats, in attendance, and she thought that it was impossible to be any happier than she was right then, on that hot summer's day. She'd been heartbroken when she'd lost that piece of string – she hadn't even known how; she'd just looked down at her finger one morning and it was gone.

That wasn't why she'd come back, she thought now: to dig it all up, to let it all come spilling out

after all these years. Not when she'd worked so hard to forget that angry girl on the bus, to make herself into the kind of woman who'd wear a huge solitaire, who'd come back to Monasterard on the arm of her husband to be, to get married 'in the old country', as Craig called it. His grandparents had come from some little village in Donegal and, to him, her home was a mythical, mystical place where you could have the kind of fairy-tale wedding he wanted. He'd spent months planning it all, looking at photos of country piles, co-opting her oldest friend Daphne into helping out. It was funny how romantic he was about the whole thing, how much of a production he wanted to make of it all – he was out in the car now on his phone, busy hunting down a Norman castle for the wedding photos – when she'd just as soon have gone to the register office downtown in Rivertown and then to Marty's Steakhouse, or the Little Chapel of Elvis in Vegas. She'd tried to put him off, 'forgetting' to send the forms for the posting of the banns home, only to discover that he'd found them under the sofa and send them off himself. 'Honey, don't you think you're a bit ... forgetful sometimes? Honestly, you'd think you didn't want to get married,' he'd chuckled.

If only he knew. She'd never dared tell him, but she wasn't bothered about marriage. She hadn't exactly had a shining example in her parents, but she also knew that she'd do it to please him. She'd do anything to keep him happy, because he'd saved her and, frankly, it was the least she could do. So what if, some days, she woke up and wondered who on earth she was and how she'd fallen into this life. It was a small price to pay, she reckoned, for a quiet life, a peaceful life.

She leaned over and rested her head on Daddy's chest, feeling the bones of his ribs digging into her cheek. His heartbeat was steady, a solid thump-thump, and it made her feel better somehow that a part of him was still strong, even though he couldn't put his arms around her and give her one of his famous bear hugs that would squeeze the life out of her. She was able to draw strength from his strength that she knew she'd need when she saw her sisters.

She thought she could stay like that for a long time, just resting with Daddy, the picture of the Sacred Heart looking regretfully down at her, until a noise behind her made her jump.

The nurse was Filipina, dressed in a pink candy-stripe top and black trousers. 'Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know there was anyone here,' she said.

'It's OK, I was just leaving.' Rosie quickly pulled her bag onto her shoulder and stood up. She had no idea why, but she felt as if she'd been caught doing something she shouldn't. Flustered, she dropped her inhaler on the floor and had to scabble under the bed to find it.

The nurse held out a hand, as if to steady Rosie. 'There's no need ...' But Rosie leaned over and pecked Daddy on the cheek. 'I'll be back soon, Daddy,' and then she was gone, bolting for the door and then half-running up the corridor and out into the warm air of the summer and the lovely shade of the huge copper beech.

She felt dazed as she walked over to the shiny new hire car parked under a tree, as if the ground was sloping away from her as she walked. She could see Craig inside, programming the sat nav. He insisted on doing that, even though she'd told him that she knew perfectly well how to find her way around. 'It's my home,' she'd told him. 'I know where I'm going.'

She took a deep breath and opened the car door, getting in and slumping down onto the passenger seat.

'Everything OK?' Craig's blue eyes caught hers, then slipped away to the screen of the sat nav. When she didn't reply, she could feel him still beside her, waiting. She leaned her head back against the headrest and closed her eyes for a second, seeing herself and Daddy in that room, feeling the warmth of his hand, looking at the rise and fall of his chest. Why had nobody told her, she thought. Why had no one said it was that bad?

And then she felt Craig's hand on hers, the briefest of touches. 'Honey?'

She shook her head and pushed his hand away, her eyes filling with tears.

'You shoulda let me come in with you.' He looked at her, his pale blue eyes flicking over her nervously, before looking away. He didn't like emotion, Craig, because he didn't know how to respond to it. It was too messy for him. Too alarming. He cared, Rosie told herself. He just didn't know how to show it.

'I'm fine. I just needed a moment with him. I'll introduce you the next time when he's better.' There would be a next time.

'Where to next?' His finger was poised over the sat nav to programme it, and she hesitated for a moment. It's not too late, she thought. I can just call the whole thing off and the only person who will know is Daddy. Daddy and Craig. But then she thought of Daphne, who'd thrown herself into the planning, the organising of food and flowers, the booking of the church, with such enthusiasm, it was as if she were getting married herself. Craig and Daphne had been like two old women, clucking and tutting on Skype over place settings and name cards and favours, insisting on creating a Facebook page, so that the whole town now knew about the wedding, and was inviting itself along to the festivities. Maybe it was too late after all.

The more people that knew, the harder it would be.

'Rosie?' He was getting impatient now.

'Sorry. Mary-Pat's,' she said, the words coming out in a big rush.

'Right then, what's her address?' He was all business now, pressing buttons on that bloody machine and looking at her expectantly.

'46 Landscape Villas.' The words came out of her mouth and she knew that things would just happen now, whether she liked it or not. It was too late. He tapped in the code, humming under his breath as he did so. The polite English tones of the sat nav announced that they had to turn right and then right again. As if she didn't know. As if she didn't know this place like the back of her hand, even after ten long years.

'It's kinda cute,' Craig said as they drove towards Main Street. 'All those little houses, and the pub and that old kinda stone bridge. You didn't tell me it was this nice. It's very ... picturesque,' he decided, slowing down as they drove past the Angler's Rest, which used to be blue and was now painted a bright pink, with its thatched roof golden in the sunshine.

They drove down Main Street then, which was now festooned with bunting, a big sign announcing that Monasterard was the winner of the Tidy Towns 2011, past Nancy O'Beirne's, which used to be filled with knick-knacks, china country cottages, Belleek teapots, snow globes with 'A Souvenir from the Capital of Ireland's Waterways', a blue-painted strip of river with a tiny boat on it. Mary-Pat hated Nancy O'Beirne. She'd said Nancy was a witch and Rosie was never to darken the door of her shop. 'She thinks we're knackers,' had been her only explanation, 'but we have more class than that bitch ever will.'

Maggie O'Dwyer's little general stores had gone, where Rosie'd bought her Flying Saucers and Love Hearts when she'd been able to cadge money off Pi, and was now a 99-cent shop, with a bright green plastic sign and a lurid window display. Maggie would have hated that, that her tidy little shop had been replaced by a place that just sold tat. The chipper was still there, although it was called Borza's now, not Aprile's, and the red-and-yellow plastic chicken beside the name had long gone.

As they reached the end of the street, she told herself that she didn't want to see it, the bamboo blinds of the Chinese takeaway, the jade lucky charm in the window. She didn't want to see if it had changed, but then she found the word coming out of her mouth, 'Stop.' Craig slammed on the brake

so that they both pitched forward, Rosie putting out her hands to stop herself, before falling back onto the seat.

‘What the heck?’ Craig said.

‘Sorry, I just thought I saw someone ...’ Rosie improvised. Craig gave a small tut and was about to drive off when the door of the restaurant opened, and he walked out, a large black bin-bag in his hand. He was wearing chef’s whites and his hair, underneath the small blue hat, was cropped close to his head. He must have heard the car because he looked up, and the bin-bag dropped to the street with a thump. He peered at the car, with its Dublin reg, and then scratched his head before turning around and going back inside.

She couldn’t help it, she felt her chest tighten, and she had to reach into her handbag and rummage around for her inhaler, hands shaking. She pulled it out and took two quick puffs, before shoving it back into her bag.

‘Who’s that?’ Craig’s voice broke the silence.

‘Oh, no one ... just someone I used to know.’

Craig didn’t say anything, putting the car into gear, looking quickly behind him as he pulled out onto the main street. Neither of them said a word as they drove in silence past the Protestant church and the gateway to Monasterard House, where Rosie reached out and switched off the sat nav. ‘Sorry, it’s driving me crazy. I’ll give you directions.’

Craig didn’t need to say that he was unhappy. Rosie had learned to read the signs. The set of his jaw, the way his shoulders tensed and his hands gripped the steering wheel. ‘Left here.’

‘Here?’ Craig slowed down and nodded towards the little lane that hardly seemed big enough to fit a car.

Rosie nodded. ‘It’s a shortcut.’ Or at least it used to be, she thought as they eased down the little road, an arc of green stretching above their heads, hawthorn branches brushing off the car. The lane was a long ribbon of road, stretching off towards the bog and the forest, where they’d used to go on picnics on their bikes in the summertime, the two of them stopping every five minutes because he’d cracked some joke that made her laugh so much she had to stop to catch her breath, or she’d spotted a newt or a tiny lizard slinking into the undergrowth.

Stop it, will you, she thought to herself. Don’t bring it all up again.

Craig insisted on getting out of the car with her when they pulled up outside Mary-Pat’s, a new terraced house with a riot of knick-knacks in the garden. She’d moved there a year after Rosie had left, leaving Pius to moulder away alone in the old house. ‘You’ll need back-up.’ He smiled and made his hands into the shape of two pistols, aiming them at the house. She had told him as little as she could get away with about her family, but Mary-Pat had figured more than once – she was like that, Mary-Pat. You could hardly ignore her. ‘She sounds a real character,’ Craig had said, which was one way of putting it.

He was trying to be funny, because he thought it would buoy her up, but Rosie just couldn’t smile. ‘Hey.’ He reached out and gave her hand a squeeze. ‘It’ll be OK.’

Rosie found herself gripping his hand tightly as she led him up the little crazy-paving front path, picking her way around an ornamental wishing well and a gnome clutching a shamrock. He squeezed her back as she went to knock on the door and noticed that it was ajar. Mary-Pat never did lock the front door, she thought as she pushed it gently open. ‘Hello?’ Silence, apart from a hum of chat from a radio somewhere in the house. She could feel Craig behind her, his keys jingling in his pocket.

The two of them stepped inside the cool hall, which was immaculately clean and smelled of Jeyes Fluid. Rosie stepped forward, then a huge brown-and-white-spotted dog came out of a doorway and

stood in front of them.

Rosie froze on the spot, but Craig pushed her gently to one side. 'Honey, it's a dog,' he said reproachfully, 'not a wild animal.' He bent down to the dog. 'Hey, buddy,' Craig exclaimed. 'Aren't you a handsome boy?' The dog turned its head from side to side as Craig spoke, as if trying to catch his words, then licked his hand. 'Yes, you are,' he murmured. 'You sure are a handsome guy.' And then he turned to Rosie, a smile on his face, as if to say, 'See? Nothing to be afraid of.' That's easy for you to say, she thought. You're a vet. If you didn't like animals, there'd be something wrong with you.

The dog turned and walked down the hallway, as if leading the way. Rosie swallowed to try to push the lump in her throat down, before following him.

She could see her sister's shape through the opaque glass of the kitchen door, a blur of blue and white. She was cleaning something under the running tap, the sound of splashing water and squeaking glass mingling with her singing. It was Frank Sinatra, Rosie knew. She'd always loved Frank Sinatra.

She pushed the handle on the door and it swung open, and then the dog nudged past her, its nails clicking off the kitchen tiles as it walked over to Mary-Pat, nudging her with its nose. Mary-Pat looked down at the dog and said, 'Duke, you big eejit. You'd better not be looking for food,' and she fondled his ears, her face splitting into a big beam. She looked the same and yet different, Rosie thought. Her hair was dyed blonde and she could see a line of grey along the roots, and her face, which had always been pink with health, now had a ruddy look to it, a patch of broken veins on her cheek. Mary-Pat was big on top, her arms and breasts heavy, her legs short and slim.

Rosie cleared her throat then. 'Mary-Pat?'

Her sister turned around, still with a half-smile on her face, and it took a second for the features to change, for her eyes to open wide and for her to give a little scream, as she dropped the glass in her hand. It rolled away over the kitchen tiles but didn't break. All Rosie could think to say was, 'You never did lock the front door.'

It had been the Yank's idea to have the wedding in the garden at the old house. He'd fallen in love with it as soon as he'd seen it, Rosie said. Fellow must have been blind, Pius thought. But that was the Yanks for you – thought a pile of old bricks and a sagging roof was 'history'. Depends on what kind of history you had in mind.

Mary-Pat said the whole idea made her feel sick to her stomach, and it was typical of Rosie to spring it on them like this, but if Pius was OK with it, she'd have to go along with it. Pius felt as if she'd cast him adrift, left him on his own somehow. And he wasn't really sure that he *was* OK with it – it wasn't the practical side of things, the tidying and painting that would need to be done in three weeks flat, to make it look even halfway decent, and after the weekend he'd spent clearing out the spare bedroom for the two of them. Mary-Pat had sent John-Patrick up to him in the van with a bucket of cleaning stuff and a Hoover that looked like a spacecraft to do the job. Pius could have taken offence, but he knew his sister had a point. No human could have stayed in the spare room, even if he'd had to shove all those unread newspapers under his own bed. He'd get around to reading them eventually.

No, it wasn't that, it was the fact that the whole thing made him feel uneasy, the way he sometimes did before a thunderstorm, standing at the front door, watching the clouds roll in across the fields. But he'd smiled and said, of course, he thought it was a great idea, just great, and had pretended to be pleased when Rosie threw her arms around him in thanks. He wasn't sure if she was pleased for her husband-to-be or herself – it was hard to tell.

Pius found that if he just concentrated on the present, if he didn't let anything else push its way in, just kept the darkness back at the edge of his mind, he could relax to the point where his unease began to fade into the background, to become just a vague nagging doubt that would surface every so often and which he'd dismiss. 'For God's sake, you're being paranoid,' he'd tell himself whenever he'd wonder about herself and that Yank and how they didn't quite look right for each other, or why there was still that awkwardness between herself and Mary-Pat after all this time. Or if it had really been such a good idea, writing to Rosie about Daddy even though Mary-Pat had told him she'd wring his neck if he breathed a word about it. All that kind of thing distressed him because it made him realise just how bad he was at it. At subtexts.

He could read that she was surprised at the state of him, though, Rosie. There was no subtext there. It was the beard, he supposed, long and grey and bushy, and his hair, like a tangled rosebush on top of his head, the only remnant of his youthful dark colour in his beetle-black brows above a pair of almost-black eyes. Daddy's eyes, so help him. And Daddy's sallow colouring and his high cheekbones. Pius supposed that his clothes could probably have done with some ... updating. He didn't shop much: he didn't like it, only firing up the Volkswagen Beetle to trundle into Mullingar for essential supplies. He couldn't take Dublin at all – he'd get into a panic at all the crowds and forget what he came for. Instead, he allowed Mary-Pat to supply him with PJ's cast-off shirts and jumpers even though he was three times the size of Pius, and he wore Daddy's old corduroy flares, even though they had great big worn patches on the behind. It didn't bother him, the way he looked, anyway. It wasn't as if he had anyone to impress, after all.

Mary-Pat's son John-Patrick called him 'The Missing Beach Boy'. He'd had to explain to Pius that one of the band had spirited himself away to a remote beach in the middle of nowhere to escape fan

and everything that went with it and had emerged ten years later with hair down to his ankles and small animals living in his beard. Pius had found the description oddly hurtful: he lived in the world didn't he? So what if it was the 'arse end of the universe', as his nephew put it. He was happy with it.

But he'd registered the look on Rosie's face that first time, when she'd stood at the door and looked at him and at the house, crumbling around him, and he'd thought, 'That bad, eh?' And there was something about that look, from someone who hadn't seen him in ten years, that had made him go up to his bedroom – Mammy and Daddy's old bedroom – later that afternoon and stand in front of the mirror and look at himself in a way he hadn't done in a long time. Maybe he did look a bit ... well, he'd thought, combing his hair with his fingers and tutting in irritation as it stood up even more, tugging the end of PJ's old GAA shirt, bright white with a green St Brigid's cross on it, Cill Dara marked out in dark green letters. He could do with a pair of trousers, he'd supposed, examining the way Daddy's trousers bagged around his knees. He'd stroked his beard again, and the man in the mirror, whom Pius didn't quite recognise, had stroked his beard too. And then it suddenly dawned on him. 'I look shit,' he'd said out loud. 'I really look shit.'

It was funny, thought Pius now, as he bent his head low through the henhouse door, scanning the little space as the hens scattered, squawking and clucking furiously. Maybe it took a visit from someone who hadn't seen you in a while to shift things; pennies could drop and you'd realise something that you'd been hiding from yourself for so long. He pinched his nose at the smell – god, he hated the smell of chicken shit – and looked for Bessie. She hadn't been laying in a while and he wanted to have a closer look at her. She was outraged, of course, puffing up her feathers and giving him what he supposed was an angry look, only relaxing when he lifted her out of the henhouse into the sunshine, stroking her and cooing gently in her henny ear.

He could see Rosie and the Yank marking out spaces for the tables in the garden, the pair of them standing together, hands in their back pockets, examining their handiwork, a look of utter seriousness on both their faces. The way they stood was oddly similar, Pius thought, as he felt Bessie relax in his arms, like they were siblings, not lovers. They seemed to get on well, he had to give them that, and yet there was something ... He was hardly an expert, Pius thought, but there wasn't much electricity – that was it. Surely you needed that in a relationship?

Mammy and Daddy had had electricity, that was for sure, enough to power the national grid, and he'd look where that had got them. The trouble was, theirs was the kind that would give you a nasty shock; it had a too-vivid quality to it, like a flash of blue from faulty wiring. And it was the kind of love that damaged – themselves and others. Maybe Rosie and the Yank had the right idea. Steady as she goes. And she hadn't said she wasn't happy, had she?

He tilted his head back and felt the hot sun on his face. The sky was the palest blue, like a pheasant's egg. The sun felt good after all those months of rain. It warmed his aching bones. The pain had been getting worse lately, a dull ache in his joints that refused to go away. Maybe he should start smoking some of his own weed, he thought. But that was strictly business, a few plants in the outhouse at the back of the vegetable patch to pay for food and the odd bit of petrol. Wasn't cannabis medicinal anyway? But he was careful not to touch the stuff any more; that's what had got him in trouble before, smoking too much of it. He'd thought it was helping, draping a thick blanket over all the things he didn't want to think about, but, in fact, it had made it all worse. Paranoia: he could write a book about it.

He closed his eyes for a few seconds, and the smell was back in his nostrils, the disinfectant that they spread so liberally around the ward. That bloody smell had clung to his clothes, so pungent that he'd had to get rid of them all once he came out. He'd burned them in a barrel in the back garden

He'd never been able to tolerate it since. Had had to ask Mary-Pat if she minded not using it any more around the house. 'I'm allergic to it,' he'd said, by way of explanation. She hadn't said a word, but the next time he'd dropped in, the kitchen floor had smelled of lemons. She might be a dragon, but she'd take care, Pius knew that. And he couldn't have managed without her. 'That's what families are for,' she'd told him all those years ago as they'd sat in that miserable waiting room, waiting to see the on-duty doctor, squeezing his hand tight. 'That's what they do.'

'Pi, you there?' Rosie's voice came from around the back of the house.

'Here!' He jumped up, Bessie still under his arm, and walked around past the lean-to and Daddy's shed to the back of the house, where the Yank and Rosie were standing, looking at something. Pius couldn't make it out because he was short-sighted but could never find his glasses. 'Wouldn't that be swell for the vows?' the Yank was saying.

'Oh, yeah,' Rosie turned as Pius came towards them. 'It's beautiful,' she said to Craig. 'What do you think, Pi?' and she waved an arm at the old gazebo. Her hair tied up in an old yellow scarf that looked vaguely familiar, her hands in the pockets of her tiny blue jeans, a puzzled look on her face as if she was trying to unravel some mystery – she looked like a little doll, he thought, that if you twisted her limbs too much she'd break. She'd always been tiny, Rosie, but she'd had spirit, a fire inside her. Now, he wasn't so sure. But maybe that's what happened when you grew up. And she'd sure grown up.

She was nodding her head in the direction of the gazebo and it was all Pius could do not to blush bright, hot red. 'Al fresco,' Katy had called it that time. She'd taken him by the hand and led him towards it, her naked skin almost blue in the moonlight. She'd made him take off all his clothes. He'd asked if he could leave on his underpants, but she'd been adamant. 'No clothes. You need to really feel what it's like, the night air on your skin.' He wasn't bothered about that – after all, he'd spent most of his childhood naked: Mammy had been a big fan of it. But this was hardly the nakedness of a seven-year-old, he'd thought, as he'd felt the cold air on his erect penis, so swollen it was painful to walk. He'd had to half scuttle, like a crab, his cheeks reddening with a mixture of self-consciousness and lust.

'Isn't this amazing?' she'd said, as they'd stood there in the tangle of vines and old buddleia, the canopy of dark green around them. In fact, it hadn't been that amazing, he remembered. The floor was filthy and they hadn't been able to lie down and he'd been in too much of a hurry, coming as soon as he'd slipped inside her. It had all been a bit uncomfortable, but memorable nonetheless. That was Katy – she made you do things you never thought you would. Maybe that's why he hadn't done anything unexpected in about twenty years.

'It's perfect,' the Yank said, pulling Rosie towards him and kissing her tenderly on the cheek, his hand in the back pocket of her jeans. She nodded but didn't reply, and the expression on her face was hard to read. But that was the new Rosie. It was hard to be sure how she felt about anything. In the couple of weeks since she'd been back, he hadn't seen a flicker of the old Rosie. She seemed so composed, that was the word.

'I'll give it a lick of paint,' Pius said then. 'White all right? I have some in the shed, I think.'

'Thanks, Pi.' Rosie leaned towards him and planted a kiss on his cheek. He tried to catch her eye but she looked over his shoulder towards the water. 'We'll clear all the ivy off first and sand it down.'

He nodded and turned around, the hen still under his arm, so they couldn't see that he'd nearly cried on them, burst into tears, like a small child, at the way he'd started to remember. God almighty Rosie, he thought. Why did you ever have to come back?

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