



No matter how far you run, you can't escape your past

DECLAN HUGHES

All the Things
You Are

"A brilliant creation...great fun"
Booklist on City of Lost Girls

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ALL THE THINGS YOU ARE

Declan Hughes



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Out of Nowhere

Sunday, October 23

Danny Brogan burned his future wife's family to death when he was eleven years old. Whether by accident or design, he's not entirely sure, or at least that's what he's always told himself. It was probably no great surprise that as a result he should develop a morbid fear of fire, nor that this fear should stay with him throughout his life. Fear is a man's best friend, or so the song goes, and Danny carried his fear of fire, just as he carried his fear of the friends that were with him that night, until sometimes looked like the twin burdens might overwhelm him.

No one really knew what he had done except his friends Dave and Gene and Ralph, and even they differed on the details, and while they had all promised never to tell, there was always the fear that they might. Not at first, not in the immediate aftermath, the whole city in shock, the church services and processions of mourning, the burial of the dead, the tiny white coffins. Not in the following weeks and months, the surviving child placed in foster care and then with adoptive parents miles away, the burnt-out house demolished and rebuilt until you'd never know there'd been a fire there at all. Not the years after that, as junior high gave way to the high-school riot of sports and studies and hormones, Brains, Emotions and Muscles vying daily for supremacy, like in the old comic book advertisement. No one ever said a word. It was as if it had never happened, as if their *childhoods* had never happened, as if memory was no longer necessary. The future was the only game in town: the next exam, the next football game, the next pretty girl. Who cared what happened when they were kids?

It was only later, when they had kids themselves, that things changed. You relive your own childhood when you have children, Danny came to understand. Danny's elder daughter, Barbara, was the same age now as Danny had been when the fire took place. And once the kids had started coming that was when the memories began, that was when the questions started, that was when the past became present. And for Danny, that was when the fear took renewed, *redoubled* hold. That the guys who had all drifted apart was perhaps inevitable. After all, how many eleven-year-olds remain friends for the rest of their lives? But it increasingly seemed (even if it was never spoken of) as if the fire at the Bradberry place was the only thing they had left in common.

But Danny Brogan refused to let his fears overwhelm him. He met his fear of fire head on, spouting and sputtering from the gas burners in the kitchen of the bar and grill he owned and ran. And when the season was right and his family clamored for barbecue, Danny met his fear there also, even though the reek of burning charcoal and seared meat sometimes infused his brain with visions and sensory memories all the more insidious for being imaginary (for Danny was out cold before the Bradberry fire took hold and had little real recollection of it). They didn't cook out nearly as often as other families, Danny's excuse being that it was too much like bringing his work home with him. But the family barbecue can't be avoided altogether.

And here it is, the last of the season, on a clear and bright October day, the leaves turning, the air still mild but with a bite, a cold admonitory finger warning of frost, and more, to come. Halloween just a week away now. The lanterns have been lit and the pumpkins carved. In the windows hanging curtains of black net, watermarked with spiders and skulls and witches in flight. And everyone's her

in the rolling backyard, vampires, werewolves, spooks and ghouls, and their kids, and their dogs. Everyone's here. The turn of the year. The harsh Wisconsin winter looming, but for now, the air still mild, just, as fall's cold blaze flickers along the apple trees heavy with fruit at the foot of the garden and out across the wall and spreads like, yes, like wild fire through the forests of the neighboring Arboretum.

As the afternoon wears on, and the beers take hold (cocktails for Danny and his noisier friends, brandy Old Fashioneds, the local favorite), as the flames twist and turn, wrestling with the shimmering light, as the charcoal smoke stains the haze inky black, reality seems momentarily suspended. Talk gets heated, wild and reckless, painted cheeks flush and masked eyes glitter, and fleetingly, anything seems possible: someone else's wife, someone else's life! All are called to the masquerade! Louder music, wilder women, stronger wine!

And speaking of wilder women, there goes Karen Cassidy, Danny's indispensable chief bartender teetering about on six-inch heels, part of a customized Catwoman costume that sees her blonde hair lacquered and coiffed into two pointy kitty ears, the heels-and-ears combination hauling her five feet in height perilously close to six. Day-to-day, Karen (apart from dressing like a finalist in a Dolores Parton lookalike contest) is dependably level-headed and smart, not to mention hard as nails, but once she's had a drink, or in this case, five brandy Old Fashioneds and half a bottle of chardonnay, well, there she goes! Danny once had to shut himself in the janitor's closet at a staff party because Karen wouldn't take no for an answer (she never remembers anything the following day, and woe betide anyone who challenges her).

Karen demands that eleven-year-old Barbara put 'Highway to Hell' by AC/DC on the sound system at full volume, that it be turned up to eleven, and that everyone dance to it out on the deck, no stonks or dissenters. Having had her eye for a good hour or more on one of Claire's theater friends, Simon, who is dapper and handsome and charming and dressed in a (big clue this) sailor suit, there she goes, big time, her Catwoman tail shaking, her arms around his neck, his face snug in her cleavage, and there they go together, stumbling off the deck and toppling into the herb garden, and there they lie, thrashing among bushes and low trees, bruised in thyme and sage and bay. 'That's what I call *bouquet garni*,' Simon's boyfriend, Todd, says.

It's then that Danny sees it. Flames have erupted suddenly from the barbecue, hot fat crackles and spits, and Danny has turned away from the commotion, away from the house. As he rakes the embers and banks down the fire, it's then that Danny sees – through the smoke, through the apple trees, through the wrought-iron bars of the old garden gate that leads to the Arboretum – the unmistakable figure of Death. The Angel of Death in his black cowl, faceless and strange, scythe in one hand, the other raised in greeting, or rebuke, and then lowered to try the handle of the gate. For a split second through the smoke, through the trees, Danny thinks it *is* Death, come to claim him. Then he sees the letter *P* scrawled on Death's chest – *P* for Pestilence, *P* for Plague – and he realizes it must be one of his old friends: Dave Ricks, or Gene Peterson, or Ralph Cowley. The Four Horsemen, that's what they were, or at least, that's what they became, the Halloween they were eleven years old, the Halloween that changed everything. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

It's then that Danny leaves the party and walks down past the apple trees to the gate, to his old friend, unseen, he thinks, by everyone. He's only gone a couple of steps when he stops and turns back to the fire. Through the haze he sees his wife, Claire, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes as Simon struggles vainly to free himself from Karen's horizontal attentions, and Barbara, pulling cartoon faces to indicate her embarrassment and disbelief, but unable quite to hide her excitement, and eight-year-old Irene, who is making her own fun, rolling around on the lawn with Mr Smith, the Brogan

springer spaniel. He sees his family. This is what is at stake, he thinks, this is what he could not be to lose, and he stows the eight-inch Sabatier knife he used to carve the meat deep in the pocket of his butcher's apron. He turns and walks down through the drifting smoke, through the falling light beneath the aching branches of the apple trees to the old gate, unobserved, or so he thinks, and out into the Arboretum to meet the Angel of Death, who knows everything Danny wishes he could forget.

PART ONE

The Night Before

I'll Be Seeing You

Sunday, October 30

Walking through Madison Airport always makes Claire feel like she has stepped back in time. It's partly the compact scale of the terminal building and partly the absence of crowds, but mostly it's the muzak: delirious, string-drenched arrangements of melancholy old standards that seep into her brain and make her mysteriously nostalgic for the time before she was born: 'Laura' and 'Autumn Leaves' and now 'I'll Be Seeing You.' *In all the old familiar places*, she thinks, the lyrics second nature to her. Outside, she almost expects to see the old familiar places as they had been in the early sixties: cars with tail fins and women wearing swing skirts and men in trilbies and those narrow-labeled FBI suits. Meanwhile, her perfect sitcom family awaits, just like in *The Dick Van Dyke Show* or *I Love Lucy*. Hello honey, I'm home!

She feels this way each time, and each time it almost makes her laugh. Almost, but not quite because deep down she knows the suburban life she is living with her husband and children and dog is not too different from what she supposes it must have been like for her parents. Sure, she has a job teaching drama a dozen or so hours a week, but that's not what she *does*. Day to day, Danny goes off to work and Claire ferries the girls to school and to soccer practice, to ophthalmologist and orthodontist, to swim meet and sleepover; she buys the groceries and cooks the meals; she makes sure the carpets are clean and the linen is fresh and there are flowers in the hall and a fire in the grate. Or at least, that the heating is on. Like the wife in the Mary Chapin Carpenter song, she drives all day. When she was in sixth grade she remembers scoffing in homeroom when her friends were sharing their plans for the future and Pattie Greer said she wanted to be a housewife. No way was Claire Taylor ever going to settle for that. Now Pattie Greer is Patricia Price of Butler Price and Stone, and Claire Taylor is Claire Taylor, homemaker. She has kept her name, but in pretty much every other respect, has she settled?

Well, maybe, but, you know, *whatever*, she thinks, almost *says*; she certainly rolls her eyes, and she actually manages an audible laugh, which she quickly stifles, as she is standing alone by the baggage carousel and doesn't want to look like a crazy lady. Or does she? Maybe she doesn't care what she looks like today. (Which is probably just as well, since the accumulator hangover she is running after a week of late nights and tequila shooters and other stuff she doesn't even want to think about has brought her skin out in blotches and crimped her hair to an attractive straw-like consistency.)

A week ago, flying out to Chicago, she cared. A week ago, the muzak was just another nail in her mid-life coffin, 'All The Things You Are' at check-in an ironic requiem for the life she had once planned for herself: a life on the stage, a life in the theater, a life devoted to creativity and self-expression (she had used exactly those words in the painfully earnest journal she kept at university). *All The Things She's Not*.

She had given that life a shot. In her twenties, she auditioned for every theater company in Chicago, graduating from walk-ons to one- and two-line speaking parts to small but significant character roles. Then she formed her own company with Paul Casey, her director boyfriend, so she could play the leads she wasn't being offered. She even directed some of the plays herself, working for peanuts at waiting tables and tending bar when she wasn't handing out flyers and designing posters. She had

worked at it. And not without success. One year, their company was tipped to be the next Steppenwolf. Not, admittedly, in the *Tribune* or the *Sun-Times* was this brave opinion ventured, but in the kind of entertainment free-sheet drinkers use as a supplementary beer mat or bar towel. Still, it was said. And they always got good reviews in the press, or at least, if not always, they got reviewed as if they were just as good as anyone else. If not quite as good as Steppenwolf.

Yes, she had worked at it. Tugging her bag towards the exit doors and out to a waiting line of taxis she allows herself a rueful smile that maybe aims for justified pride and lands on woulda-shoulda-coulda. 'Oh, you must wear your rue with a difference,' she murmurs to herself, not that she ever played Ophelia. Too old now, and when you get older, rue is rue and regret is regret, and it doesn't make a damn bit of difference how you wear it. You've just got to fight every day to make sure it doesn't end up wearing *you*.

She had worked at it. It hadn't worked out. Or maybe she hadn't tried hard enough, hadn't given her best shot. Maybe she didn't have a best shot to give. No, that wasn't true. Easier sometimes if it had been, if she simply hadn't been good enough. But she had the talent, everyone agreed, if not quite the luck. She had been beaten to the punch so many times for the bigger parts – down to the last two for Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* at the Goodman and Viola in *Twelfth Night* at the Shakespeare, and two callbacks for Mary in *Juno and the Paycock* at Steppenwolf itself. There was a cartoon in the *New Yorker* where an actor hangs up the phone and says to his friends, 'My agent says it's down to two of me and the guy they're going to give it to.' Paul Casey got it framed and gave it to her as a birthday present. Halfway through the second bottle of wine, she stopped seeing the funny side and broke over his head and they ended up in the emergency room. That had been a big night. The relationship and the company – didn't last much longer.

Oh yes, she had worked at it all right. She just hadn't stuck with it. The theater was like a marriage and you had to honor it in good times and in bad, for better or worse, in sickness and health all the way. dada-da-da. There were so many fine actors who'd only started to get the breaks in their thirties, even their forties. So many in Chicago, and more than a few of them took the time to tell her they'd noticed her and admired her work, made a point of encouraging her to keep her nerve. To stick with it.

But she was tired of coming second best, tired of blaming it all on luck. She was tired of dive bars and damp apartments and nothing on the horizon but hope. She was tired of smiling tightly as her friends with careers in law or medicine or finance began to settle down and have children and buy property when she still found making the rent a monthly roller coaster. The limit came when the boy wonder director of a new *Uncle Vanya* told her they'd be looking to cast Sonya a little younger for the production. She was a week past twenty-eight. That night, she called Danny Brogan and cried down the phone. And Danny said, 'You know I'm here. I've been waiting. Come home.'

Home meaning Madison, Wisconsin. Madtown itself: 'Sixty square miles surrounded by reality.' They had met at UW, the University of Wisconsin, on their first day as undergraduates. Got drunk on their second night. Going together within the week. They were the kind of couple who held hands in lectures, the kind of couple that united a class of freshmen, hitherto strangers, in the sweet complicity of eye-rolling revulsion. They even inspired a headline in the fledgling *Onion* newspaper, and game-posed for a photograph, playing up the lovestruck sap factor: *Death Penalty to be Reintroduced for Icky Undergraduate Romances: Area Man says, 'I'll flick the switch myself.'* They bonded over a love of thirties and forties retro. They drank cocktails and listened to swing and bebop and dressed in thrift store duds and generally carried on like they were starring in their own black-and-white movie, which they kind of were. They both acted in the University Theater, Danny for the fun of it, Claire with increasing dedication, and together, memorably, in their penultimate year, as the lovers in Congreve

restoration comedy *The Way of the World*, given a screwball comedy/Art Deco treatment (Claire idea).

That was the show that changed everything. Word spread about a brilliant production of a rarely staged play, and about Claire, and People From Chicago came down to see it, people from Steppenwolf and the Goodman and Second City, and they gave Claire their cards and their numbers and told her she had a future on the stage, and any lingering doubts Claire may have had about her talent or her path were set aside. Danny got a few cards and numbers as well, but if he used them at all, it was only to fire up another joint. And that was the way things would go. In their graduation year Claire worked and dreamed of the life to come, acting and directing and visiting Chicago at weekends inhabiting the world of the theater as if she were already a part of it, while Danny took a sidetrack in an all-male world of beer and brats and bongos, of Badgers games and all-night Playstation marathons.

Had he already been preparing himself for the bust-up? She had tried to talk to him about the future but he refused to engage. It wasn't that she didn't love him, but she didn't want to get married at twenty-one, and she didn't want to stay in Madison, and she didn't want him in Chicago while she was trying to make a go of things. Had he known all along that she was pulling away? Was dwindling income a stoner and a slacker simply a way of protecting himself? After all, his future was mapped out: his father was already a sick man, and Brogan's Bar was Danny's to manage whenever he was ready, or when his dad dropped dead, whichever came first. Sometimes he had spoken of other plans, but only half-heartedly: deep down, she knew that's what he was going to do and so did he. He was older than her by eight years, and had learned the ropes at Brogan's before he went to UW, and he would run the bar when he left: it was just the way things were. When the time came, they made love one last time, and she cried, and so did he, and he saw her off at the bus stop by the Union. On the bus to Chicago, she felt like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders, and then guilty for feeling that way, and finally relieved at the lightness – the lightness, even in fear, when the past is past and the future all there is.

They're passing through downtown now, heading west, the houses and storefronts festooned with Halloween pumpkins and lanterns, witches and ghosts and ghouls. Stopped at the lights on Gorham State, she sees students queuing in the brightly lit Jamba Juice on the corner, and more ambling along the street. Used to be, in her early thirties, Claire liked living in a college town, liked the sense of energy. She looked young for her age then, even after the kids, still got carded in bars. She may have identified with the students, as if passing for one meant somehow she was going to beat the clock. Now she was in her fortieth year, and felt the opposite: their presence was a sting and a reproach, a constant reminder that she was headed in one direction only, and that a lot of the things she'd hoped for in life – all that creativity and self-expression, to take one small example – simply hadn't happened, and almost certainly weren't going to, and all she was doing now was running out of time.

She looks at the students. Almost everyone is wearing at least one plaid item, mostly red plaid, the boys shirts and coats, the girls scarves and skirts. Is plaid just always in fashion these days? Or is it a Mid-West thing, a Madison thing? The red is a Wisconsin thing, of course, a sports thing, for the Badgers. Everyone wore plaid twenty years ago as well, although rarely did they wear skirts that short. Claire did though, when she tired of retro chic: a tiny red tartan kilt, punk-rock style, with torn black hose and motorcycle boots. Claire wants to wear a skirt that short now. She still has the legs. Women her age wear them. But they look wrong. They look, not quite desperate, but kind of angry, defying you to criticize them, to tell them they're not twenty-two any more, when it's obvious they aren't. They look nuts. Good luck to them. But she can't do it. She can't do it, but she can't rest easy about not permitting herself to do it. Looking at these girls heading up State Street, she knows she should be thinking of Barbara and Irene, and how in no time at all they will be at university, that this will be

them in a mere few years. She knows that's where her focus should be, that you have children cushion the blow of aging in so many different ways. She knows how she should feel. But she doesn't feel that way. She looks at the girl with the long legs and the red plaid mini-skirt and thinks, *that's still me*, and knows it isn't, and wants to scream. As the cab crosses State, the college kids stroll on the street, the illuminated Capitol dome seeming to hover above them, splashes of red shimmering in the falling darkness, like the flashes she gets behind her eyes when sleep won't come.

Barbara and Irene, Barbara and Irene, Barbara and Irene. They'll be waiting for her – not quite the way they waited when they were six and four, say, but still. She hasn't even spoken to them for a week, nor to Danny; they agreed, no phone contact. Or at least, she agreed with herself, and he agreed to agree with her. He had her hotel number in case of emergencies, a Kimpton in the Loop, the name of something or other, Allegro? She wants to call the girls now, but her cell ran out of juice on the Tuesday and she didn't bring her charger. She goes into the Macy's bag she has their stuff in, dresses and tops and accessories, some J. Crew, some A & F, vampire costumes she got in a Halloween store. Too much, really, but it's been a week and she wants to spoil them. Checking now to see if it's a card there, her hand closes on a card and she pulls it out, thinking it's a receipt and wanting to put it in her bag in case anything needs to be returned.

It's not a receipt.

On the envelope is her name, Claire Taylor.

In Paul Casey's handwriting.

Paul Casey, her ex.

Whom she had not intended to meet, had not contacted, but who showed up on the first night in the Old Town Ale House with all the old crowd. Just like she kind of knew he would.

What she didn't know was that he'd be divorced. No kids. And a little quieter, a little more somber, as if life had dealt him a setback or two. A little silver through that dark hair, a few lines creasing the pale milky skin, a couple shadows in those vivid blue eyes. Haunted, that's how he had always looked, or so she remembered, like an English romantic poet who would die young; haunted even more now, with a melancholy that finally seemed earned.

She can feel the heat in her face now. What if Danny had found the card? Or one of the girls? What would she have said? She hadn't planned to mention even seeing Paul to Danny. She was trying to avoid mentioning it to herself.

When had Paul put that in there? In the bar, after Macy's?

Or later, in the ... or later?

She can't look at it now. She stuffs it inside her purse and tries to bring her breathing back inside the range appropriate to a wife heading home to her family. The calm, steady, deliberate breathing of a woman who has settled, and is happy with her choices. A week ago, the way she saw it, no question she had settled. Whether she was happy or not, she didn't want to say. Maybe it would have been foolish to ask.

She doesn't see it that way any more. The way she sees it now, she's been given, not an actual second chance, but maybe the glimpse of one. Is she going to take it? She doesn't know. She doesn't know what she's going to do. She doesn't know what to think. But she thinks she knows what she feels. It's been a long time since she felt it. That stirring in her stomach, the flutter in her heart, the sudden bursts of laughter and exhalations of breath and random idiotic announcements, at what? At nothing? Not nothing, no. At a feeling. What she feels is suspiciously like happiness. The kind of happiness she didn't think she'd ever feel again.

A Cottage for Sale

The cab driver has long gray hair in a plait and silver sleeper rings in both ears, a classic Willy Street sixties survivor, or casualty, take your pick. He's already asked for extra directions, as if Madison is some sprawling metropolis and not a city of under a quarter million people, and he's made his ritual little dig about the upscale West Side, as if it's all Beverly Hills and Rodeo Drive over here and not the American Mid-West 101. Although Claire doesn't exactly live in the 101 tract, but on a sparsely inhabited tree-lined road in the heart of the UW Arboretum. The car pulls up outside the black iron gates of the old house. Claire doesn't have her remote with her, so she gets out of the cab to open the gates by hand. The driver gets out too.

'There's a chain around it,' he says.

The approach light clicks on. She's never seen the heavy link chain before. A haunted house game from the girls were playing, maybe. There's no padlock, and it's easily removed. She can see the lights of the house up the drive. The night air is crisp and refreshing after a day of hotels and flights and taxis, and the walk will do her good. She pays the driver and he gets her bag out of the trunk, then looks up and down the narrow, deserted road, the inky darkness almost glossy, like paint, a fragment of moonlight glowing dull, as if behind a veil.

'You sure about this?' he says.

'Sure about what? You think I don't know where I live?' Claire points up the drive. 'Look, the house lights are on.'

'I didn't know there were houses out here.'

'Just little old us.'

The driver shrugs and smiles.

'Well, you know where you're going. No need to worry.'

'That's right,' Claire says, smiling herself, suddenly glad to be safe home. And as she walks up the drive towards the welcoming lights of her hundred-year-old Queen Anne house, her fairytale house with its turrets and towers, she shakes her head a couple of times and actually says 'No!' out loud followed by 'Nothing!' and 'No problem!' and 'Fine, thank you!' – not at the prospect before her but to banish what has just been, whatever it was, whatever Paul put in that damn card. It's like she slipped and fell in the street and found her feet immediately and is marching on undaunted, daring anyone to question or commiserate, trying hard not to stumble again. Whatever happened in Chicago stays in Chicago. That's the official version now. Happiness? Jesus. She's not a teenager any more. She feels guilty. That's her problem; don't make it Danny's, let alone the girls'. She's nothing to feel guilty about anyway, not really. Not *really*. No problem, no problem!

The first glimmer she has is Mr Smith doesn't bark when she turns her key. Normally, he brings the house down at the merest hint of a visitor, not angrily but with excitement. He should have started when he heard her footfall on the porch, or when she started talking to herself. But there isn't a sound, not a scratch of his paws.

'Hey, honey, I'm home!' she says, with sitcom brightness, as she pushes the door open. If she had known that nothing would ever be the same again from this moment on, maybe she would have chosen her words with less irony. But change so often comes without warning, like the secret policeman at dawn knock, and we rarely have our faces fixed or our stories straight to greet it.

The extent of what has happened is not so apparent in the hall, apart from the marks on the wallpaper where all the paintings have been removed, and the fact that the long red Ikea table that ran along one wall is gone. It's when she leaves her bag down and moves into the living room – she remembers later feeling as if she was on castors, so involuntarily, so inexorably was she drawn in search of what's no longer there. No battered old brown leather three-piece suite that they know is past its best but can't bear to get rid of for sentimental reasons. No TV, no books, no bookshelves, no rug on the floor, no art on the walls. Through to the dining room, and it's as bare: the heavy-legged mahogany Chippendale table and matching chairs Danny insisted on keeping from his grandfather's time are gone, as is everything else. Up the stairs, and yes, there it is, whatever it is, gone: the bed, the closets emptied, the girls' toys and books and games, the rugs, the linen, gone, all gone, the *lampshades*.

She's standing on the landing, empty rooms on either side of her, exposed gables above, the arched entrance to the tower ahead. She's never seen the house like this. When they moved in, Danny's sister Donna had been living here; before that, it was the family home, back through Danny's grandfather. Sure, they – *she* – redecorated, stripped walls and polished floorboards and flung out dumpster loads of trash, but one room at a time. How hard she had fought to make their mark on it all, replacing heavy drapes with blinds, bulky old Victorian furniture with contemporary pieces, little by little working it open up and modernize, to lay the ancestral ghosts and make it theirs, make it *hers*. Now it's bare throughout, as if she has never lived here at all, as if no one has. In Chicago a day, mere *hours* ago, she found herself daring to wonder what it might be like to break free of what held her. Now it feels as if she made a wish, and it's come true, and all she wants is what she has lost.

In the bathroom, the empty bathroom, she sits at the edge of the tub, breathing deeply, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus Christ, over and over again. Claire is a lapsed Catholic, which means she isn't really religious or hasn't been for some time, but Jesus Christ Almighty, what the fuck is going on? She leans a hand on the mirrored door of a cabinet mounted above the bath, and it snaps open, and Claire almost cries with relief to see it full of stuff, *their* stuff, tins and tubs of talcum powder and Vaseline and calamine lotion and athlete's foot spray – proof, precious proof, that she hasn't been sucked into some parallel universe. And then, when she sees the Sponge Bob Band-Aids and the Colgate Smiles toothpaste and the Sure Girl deodorant Barbara suddenly, urgently needed about six months ago when her body started to change, Claire does cry. Where is Danny? Where has he taken her girls? Why is the house cleaned out?

Minutes pass; she doesn't know how many. She wipes her eyes, mascara and eyeshadow mackerel staining the backs of her hands. She's shivering. She needs to call someone: Danny, her friend Debra, the cops. She goes back into her bedroom. No phone. No phone downstairs in the hall either. They took the phones. Who would take the phones? *They took the phones*. That's a line from something. Don't think like that, not everything is a line from something. Back upstairs, she opens the study at the base of the tower. Her cell-phone charger should be in the desk drawer. Should be, and would be, if there was still a desk there, Jesus. She casts around the bare room, the floorboards dusted with dead bugs and plaster crumbs where cables were ripped from the wall, the walls seamed with bookcase shadows, the spiral staircase ascending to the upper level.

Finally her eye lands on something, on the mantelpiece and above it, two actual objects, waiting to be seen closely now. The first thing is a picture, a photograph, of her and Danny in thirties evening clothes from *The Way of the World*. They played the leads, Mirabell and Millamant, and the photo was taken during their love scene, when, having agreed to marry, they make promises to and demands of each other for the future. The second thing is a porcelain statuette of two lovers in old-fashioned costume in some

kind of pastoral setting, maybe a shepherd and shepherdess, they've never been sure, Danny got made to resemble the one in *The Palm Beach Story*, one of their favorite movies. How it worked in the film was Claudette Colbert, who is looking to snare a rich husband, tells Joel McCrea, the husband whom she still loves but who can't seem to make enough money to keep her, that as long as the ornament stands intact on the mantelpiece, he'll have nothing to reproach her with. She won't have strayed. Everything will be as it was.

Claire slides down the wall and comes to rest on the dusty boards by a phone socket. They took the phones. *Glengarry, Glen Ross*, that's what it's from – shut up Claire. Can't she for once feel a thing directly, without reference to anything else, especially not a quotation from a play? 'Shakespeare is full of quotations.' Shut up shut up shut up. She needs to think, needs to *do* something ... but she just sits there on the floor in the tower and stares at the porcelain lovers, and slowly, steadily, starts to feel calmer. Whatever has happened – and evidently it involves a removals firm packing up the entire contents of their home and taking them away, and her husband and daughters disappearing – Danny is letting her know it's all right. There's nothing to worry about. He's always been able to make her feel like this. She knows that's part of why she married him: because a life based on chance and uncertainty had spooked her, she craved security, and she felt safe in Danny's arms. *Danny is letting her know it's all right*. But why in such a cryptic way? There must be something else, some kind of message. Her laptop. She remembers him saying, 'Take your laptop, restaurant reservations, flight tickets, the weather,' but she didn't want to. 'I can do it all on my phone,' she said. And then deliberately left her charger behind. She wanted to be out of reach. She wanted – didn't she – to be in situations where her husband simply couldn't get in touch. Now her phone is dead and her laptop is gone and she can't get in touch with her husband.

She lets her eyes follow the wood and steel spiral staircase up to where it disappears through the trapdoor. Up above is her nook, her refuge, her sanctuary, fast at the top of the tower. A room of her own. It's where she keeps all her treasures: old photos, letters from boyfriends past, theatre programmes. She doesn't feel ready to climb up now and find them all gone.

She goes downstairs and out through the kitchen and crosses the yard to the garage, not even sure what she is looking for any more but in a hurry to find it. But the garage, at least, is untouched: tools still on the wall, screws and bolts in their airtight plastic containers, hose pipe and electrical cable coils. More to the point, both cars, her bashed-up Chrysler Pacifica and Danny's old Karmann Ghia are there. She has the keys to both, and pops each trunk just in case, nightmare images flashing through her mind, but no one has been stowed there. Nothing but spare wheels and Mr Smith's smell, old rugs. Did Mr Smith go with? Who else would take him? How did Danny travel anyway? On the plus side, there's a phone charger in the glove box of the Chrysler. That's at least one of the things she's looking for. She turns the engine on and sits in and plugs the lead in the cigarette lighter socket and waits for her phone to fire up sufficiently for her to use it to call her husband and ever so politely ask him what the fuck is going on.

Maybe he followed me to Chicago, Claire thinks, flushing in fast-acting hangover panic, her head sparking on her scalp, a sharp ache of anxiety creasing her belly. If he went through her computer ... had she said anything in an email to Dee? No, she wouldn't be that stupid, or indiscreet. Besides, she hadn't had any plans in that direction, or at least none that she had admitted, even to herself, let alone to other people. On the other hand ... Dee. God, Dee and her dirty mind. Dee checks out every guy they see when they're out together, flirts compulsively with the waiter, the bartender, the cab driver for God's sake. Had Dee speculated on what Claire might get up to in Chicago? Had she put it in an email? She could well have; it's got so Claire screens out most of what Dee says; it's all talk anyway.

At least, she thinks it is. Still. Maybe Danny was uneasy after being out of touch, or simply decided he wanted to surprise her, do something romantic and spontaneous, just like she complains he never does any more, and parked the girls for a sleepover with his sister, Donna, and arrived at the Allegro and no, no, *no*. He had left the signs deliberately, the photo and the statuette of the lovers, to reassure her. Hadn't he?

Her phone should have enough juice now. She pops the switch and waits and up flashes the screensaver photo of the girls among the apple trees, taken two years back but still her favorite. When they're grown and have kids of their own, this is still the image she'll keep in her mind's eye. They are her girls. Stop, stop, the tears are welling again. Keep moving, Claire, that's the trick, don't stop still. She grabs the phone and steps out and slams the car door and locks the garage and heads down through the backyard towards the trees. The sensor light doesn't come on. Maybe it's broken. There's a faint spill from the half moon now, the veil blown aside. She's wearing flat white rhinestone studded sandals, the grass damp between her toes. The wet grass, beneath the apple trees.

Her phone chimes out its message alert. *Do not ask for whom the bell tolls*. Three voice mails, two from drama students who can't make it to class this week and one from Dee checking to see if she's home yet and demanding chapter and verse on what she got up to. Seven text messages, four from students, two from teachers at the school, one from Dee. Nothing from Danny. Nothing from the girls even – they sometimes leave messages when she's away for longer than they expected. What has Danny done? She thinks of those newspaper reports where some guy is going bankrupt, or finds his wife is cheating, and kills the entire family. That's crazy talk – Danny would never raise a hand against her, or the girls. But isn't that the profile those guys have too? The quiet, ordered family man who suddenly explodes? She calls his cell, but it goes straight to message.

'Danny, I'm home. Where are you?'

She swallows, more a gulp than a swallow. Finding she can't continue to speak, she ends the call. *Where are you?*

She feels a mounting panic now, her breath coming in short gasps. Her feet are wetter than they should be, as if she's stepped in muddy ground, or apples that have started to rot. She moves her feet and one of her sandals comes loose, and her bare foot plunges into something marshy, sticky even, not apples, not grass. Twigs there, maybe, twigs and straw, and something thicker, like resin, like sap. She looks down, using the face of her phone for light. First she sees red, on her foot, on the ground, not flashes behind her eyes, red stains, and not on the ground; she's standing on fur, on flesh; she's standing on the torn-apart carcass of a dog, a springer spaniel, *her* springer spaniel, her beautiful Mr Smith. His body has been gutted, eviscerated, spatchcocked, his poor head half severed but still attached, still intact. *Make it not be, make it not be, make it not be*, she prays, the prayer that is never answered. Claire falls to her knees and holds the dog's heavy head in her hands, his wide snout, his beautiful, beseeching eyes staring into nothing. She opens her mouth to howl, to scream, but nothing comes except a high-pitched keening sound, and then the tears, a child's brimming, boiling tears, tears overflowing until she can barely breathe, wracking sobs that convulse her until she can cry no more and then a whimpering sound not unlike the sound Mr Smith used to make when he wanted a treat, a walk, or to nestle in her arms. She brings her wet face down to Mr Smith's head, still warm, her fingers chucking his chin, her lips, her nose, deep in his hair, just as she had every single day of his life, and breathes in his precious musky scent for as long as she can bear.

Where Are You?

Claire is five miles on the road to Cambridge before she even knows she's in motion. A quick call to Donna first, but the phone goes straight to voicemail. Seconds later Claire's in the car; minutes after she's on the Beltline, the lakes to either side like dark glass, like black mirrors, opaque, implacable. Claire feels a bit like a row with a boyfriend, back in her drinking days, when rage would overtake her and she'd up-end a bar table and be halfway down the street, her body doing the thinking for her overloaded brain. Look at her now, frightened, shaking, blinking back tears, blazing down the 12-1 highway trying to get ninety out of the Pacifica without the old heap collapsing in steel ribbons all over the highway.

Barbara and Irene, Barbara and Irene, Barbara and Irene. As soon as she saw poor Mr Smith's body, any solace she found in the signs she thought Danny had left was swept away. Something bad had happened. Please let it not have happened to the girls. If they're not at Donna's, then God knows where they are. Neither Danny nor Claire have any other family in the area, and Donna is their only steady babysitter. Claire can't think of anywhere else Danny might have stowed the girls before taking off. Unless he's taken them with him. Either choice works better than the alternative: that they've been taken against their will.

Not for the first time, Claire's hand hovers over her cell, ready to call 911. Not for the first time she tries to talk herself down. Danny ran out with the girls, knowing the bad guy or guys – meaning whoever killed Mr Smith – were on their way. That's as much as Claire can cling to for the time being. Never mind that the entire house had been stripped of furniture and belongings, suggesting a certain amount of forward planning. Never mind the question of why bad guys could possibly be after her husband, a suburban bar and grill owner with no criminal record or major gambling or drug addictions. The girls were with their father, and he would never let anything bad happen to them. Don't think about their coming to harm.

Forget about bad guys. Kids probably killed Mr Smith, some kind of horrible Halloween prank. Vicious kids; spoilt, decadent rich kids, high on drugs, too impatient for Freakfest tomorrow night, goading each other into cruelty and wickedness. Just kids.

Approaching the house, she tries Donna's number again, with the same result as before. She parks the Pacifica outside the big wrought-iron gates and hits the buzzer once, twice, three times. The house is not visible from here, and there's no sign of light in the garden. Maybe they're all on the lake side. Maybe they've all gone to bed. She buzzes a fourth, fifth time, and leans on it. Nothing.

Maybe Donna's away. If so, Claire doesn't have a clue where she might be. She doesn't really know very much about her sister-in-law, and doesn't want to know any more than she knows. There was a time when they might have made friends. Claire can see that, despite her sharp tongue and fearson temper, Donna is funny and smart and a good aunt to the girls – strict but fair, like an old-style teacher, in fact, which is what she would probably have been in another age, an age before drugs and biker gangs and serial monogamy. When Claire and Danny married, she could have done with a strict but-fair presence to help her settle, an older sister who could have given her familial advice and whose know-it-all bossiness she would have enjoyed resenting. But Donna was either indifferent or actively unpleasant, more like Danny's ex-wife than his sister. It's not impossible to dislike someone at first and later become her friend – she flashes on the title of Barbara's first Beacon Street Girls book

Worst Enemies/Best Friends – and Claire certainly feels she gave it a good shot with Donna, above and beyond. But there's a point you reach with someone where you realize that even if you wanted to forgive her, you're no longer capable. The nerve endings are trashed, the synapses have been burned away, the affection cannot be restored. It's good that the girls have an aunt, have any family at all beyond her and Danny, and it's clear that Donna is trustworthy and responsible. And that's the end of it.

No one home, Claire says aloud into the crisp night air. She shivers, releases the buzzer and sits back in the car. She tries Danny's cell again, redials half a dozen times, hangs up without leaving a message. There's no one else to call. There's nowhere else to go except home. But nobody's home, no home. *Where are you?*

'So which is it, sweetheart: you want to call the cops, you don't want to call the cops, or you're not sure either way? Because a decision always brings relief. Unless, of course, it doesn't. Tell you what while you're deliberating, have another drink.'

Dee is here, at least. When Claire got back, she hoped the whole thing might have been, if not quite a dream, at least a mistake; there'd be a removals truck in the drive, Danny and the kids in the house and an explanation for everything. But everything was just as mysterious and empty as it had been and that's when she cracked and called Dee, her best friend, who joins her now on the couch because Claire is not so much crying again as leaking a little, and instead of giving her a shoulder, goes for the upward-palms-cupping-the-elbows, gently-rocking, come-on-now, grief-coach approach.

The couch is upstairs in the tower. At first Claire figured the removals guys didn't take it because they would have had to come out the window by winch, since that's the way it came in, the spiral staircase barely wide enough for one person not being nearly wide enough for a couch. But then she saw that everything else was here as well: her theater posters and photos and mementoes, all her plays and unbound playscripts, everything from Chicago, and before. All the things she used to be.

Once she had called Dee, she'd made her way out to the apple trees and hunkered down by Mr Smith's body for a spell. What kind of savages would do something like this? She felt she should bury him, but if the cops were summoned, they'd need to see what had been done to the poor dog. She settled for getting one of his old blankets from the car trunk and covering him with it where he lay.

Fearing she was going to lose it again, she made herself walk the yard, breathing the cold night air, trying to recover her nerve, her focus, her clarity. She established a route, her sandals crunching on the frosty grass. She found that if she got close enough to the rear of the house, the sensor light finally came on and flooded the yard. She walked in a broad oval between Mr Smith's body and the house and then down towards the gate that leads out to the Arboretum. That's about as far as she could get before the light cut out. Each time she completed the route, she felt a little more self-possessed, a little less panicked. The ground was bumpy underfoot – she had wanted a wild country garden, not a manicured suburban lawn – and she thought of Katharine Hepburn in *Bringing Up Baby* when she loses a heel, chanting 'I was born on the side of a hill.' She didn't feel much like chanting though, not when she remembered that the dog who played George in *Bringing Up Baby* also played Mr Smith in *The Awful Truth*, which is where they got the idea for the name. Danny had wanted to call him Asta, the role he took in *The Thin Man*, but Claire had won out. She didn't feel like chanting, but she wasn't going to curl up and die. So when she finally saw the wolf's head stuck on the bough of an old apple tree, she was not only able to process the sight without screaming, she also realized almost instantly that it was no wolf's head but a werewolf mask. The sensor light cut out, but she approached the tree and examined the mask by the light of her phone. It was a full face job with fake fur and vulcanized rubber

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