



YEATS IS DEAD!

A Mystery by Fifteen Irish Writers


A K N O P F  B O O K

YEATS IS DEAD!

A Mystery by Fifteen Irish Writers

Roddy Doyle
Conor McPherson
Gene Kerrigan
Gina Moxley
Marian Keyes
Anthony Cronin
Owen O'Neill
Hugo Hamilton
Joseph O'Connor
Tom Humphries
Pauline McLynn
Charlie O'Neill
Donal O'Kelly
Gerard Stembridge
Frank McCourt

Edited by Joseph O'Connor

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They left St. Gerand on 14 December 1940 at 3 o'clock in the morning, and made their way slowly but without incident to Zurich, where they arrived on 17 December.

In Zurich Joyce stayed at a pension and lived quietly. He walked about with his grandson and told him stories; he made a few notes which unfortunately do not indicate with what sort of book he would next have boarded English literature.

On 13 January 1941, at 2:15 in the morning, Joyce died.

Richard Ellmann,

from the introductory notes to the final chapter

of his *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, 1975

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The Writers.

The Team.

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YEATS IS DEAD!

CHAPTER ONE

“I think he was dead before I shot him.”

“I beg your pardon?” said Roberts.

“I think he was dead,” said Nestor. “Already. Before . . . you know.”

Roberts looked down at the dead man.

“He was *talking* to me,” Roberts said. “He was right in the middle of a fucking sentence.”

“But.”

“ ‘Tell her I’ll have it by . . .’ if I recall it correctly.”

“But.”

“And now,” said Roberts, “we’ll never know what he was going to say. Tonight? Christmas? The light of the silvery moon? Holy *Jesus*, what a mess.”

“But,” said Nestor.

“Yes?” snapped Roberts.

“He went really pale, like, and he”—Nestor grabbed his left tit—“Well, he . . .”

“Clutched?” Roberts offered.

“Yeah,” said Nestor. “He clutched his chest.”

“He had a heart attack. Is that what you’re telling me?”

“Yeah,” said Nestor. “He looked terrible. His face. I’ve seen it before. I’ve a cousin.”

“Who had a heart attack.”

“Yeah.”

“And he looked just like that.”

“Yeah.”

“And he’s still alive.”

“Yeah.”

“Oh good,” said Roberts. “Maybe our friend here will stand up in a minute and shake himself. But hang on, though. You didn’t shoot your cousin, sure you didn’t?”

“Well no.”

“And why would you have?” said Roberts. “Sure, he’s your cousin.”

“ . . . I,” said Nestor.

And then Roberts hit him. Hard.

“What’ll I do with you?” Roberts said.

And he hit him again, another almost friendly whack across the ear, harmless but for the car keys clasped between his fingers.

Nestor ducked away to a corner. He knocked over a pouffe and the mug of tea perched on it, placed there by the dead man four, five minutes before, just as Roberts had knocked on his door and walked in with Nestor.

“That’ll stain,” said Roberts.

The rug, the shaggy fleece of a synthetic sheep, was already soaking up the tea. Roberts took the centre pages from the *Daily Mirror* beside the pouffe and placed them gently over the stain. He patted the paper.

“So,” he said.

Nestor was examining his ear. His right hand was still holding the gun. He drew back his head and nuzzled the wall. It clanged.

The dead man’s home was made of tin. In a field near Courtown or Skerries it would have been a mobile home. Here, in the filthy backyard of a ruined cottage on the edge of the very edge of Dublin, it was a shack. Four tin walls; a tin roof that was snowing rust. The caravan was lopsided, up on assorted bricks and one flat wheel, surrounded, almost invaded by nettles and weeds that swayed and stank. Hardly a thing inside, only a few stacks of mouldy old newspapers, a grimy crumpled poster of James Joyce on the wall.

Roberts owned a house in Rathmines. With the help of his sister’s husband, he’d converted it into thirteen bedsits. He looked around him now; a few bits of chipboard, a couple of extra beds and he could have squeezed in four students, even six, no problem—the dead body wouldn’t have been

noticed in the middle of their filth and parties. The place had potential. He'd find out who owned it.

He felt it wobble when he stood upright.

"So," he said.

Nestor had a handkerchief to his ear.

"She won't be happy," said Roberts. "She won't be happy at all at all." He was talking about Mrs. Bloom.

"She told us to worry him," said Roberts. "Does he look worried to you?"

"No," said Nestor.

"No," Roberts agreed. "I don't think I've ever seen a less worried-looking man."

"He had a heart attack," said Nestor.

"That would account for the hole in his chest," said Roberts.

"It was an accident."

"You really think I'm gonna go back and tell her that, do you?"

"He clutched his chest."

"I'll clutch your bollocks with a pliers if you ever mention his chest or his heart again. Say after me: shot him."

"But I didn't mean to."

"Say it."

"I shot him."

"Good. Fine. Now we're getting somewhere. You shot him. He had something she wanted. We were to worry him. A few slaps, a little glimpse at the gun there. A straightforward enough job of work. But you went and shot the poor chap. Didn't you?"

"It went off."

"Yes," said Roberts. "I noticed."

"It was the gloves."

"What?"

“They’re new.”

“They’re nice.”

“They’re a bit . . .”

“Stiff?”

“Yeah,” said Nestor.

“I know the way,” said Roberts.

He toed the dead man’s foot.

“It was the gloves did it, mister,” he told the body. Then he looked at Nestor again.

“What am I going to say to her?”

Nestor said nothing.

“Well?”

“I don’t know.”

“And does that worry you at all?”

“Yeah.”

“Good,” said Roberts. “Because it worries me too. It worries me a lot. And I need the company.”

Mrs. Bloom wasn’t exactly their boss. Neither of them was financially dependent on her. They both had day jobs, permanent and pensionable, well away from Mrs. Bloom. In addition Roberts had his bedsits, and two or three other pots on the Baby Belling. He had a share in a kissogram service. He owned the ’87 Lancia that ferried the French maids and naughty nurses and television continuity announcers—a Roberts invention, and a hit—out and around the city, from sad to sadder bastard, seven days a week. He held the croissant and baguette franchise in a twenty-four-hour shop around the corner from his bedsits.

“If you gave shite a nice smell you’d find plenty of people willing to buy it at four in the morning,” he told Dymphna (the nun, schoolgirl and continuity announcer).

“I know,” said Dymphna, as she cleared the steam off the passenger window and looked out for the right address.

“Talk dirty to me,” said Roberts.

“Again?”

“Go on.”

“The Flood Tribunal.”

He had a bit of set-aside near his brother’s farm, down home. He had a team of twenty-three boys and girls on the road throughout the year, selling guaranteed Irish Christmas cards, made in the Philippines, for spina bifida, Bosnian hospitals and Roberts. And he had one or two other things going as well. This and that. He saw possibilities everywhere. He clicked awake at five every morning, ideas already pinging around him before he had his feet in his slippers. An entrepreneur. That was what Roberts was. “You have to be born one,” a woman sitting beside him at a Department of Industry training seminar had once said. And Roberts had agreed with her. He had been born one.

“That bollocks still has his communion money,” it was often said of Roberts. About most people that was never meant literally, but in Roberts’s case it was true, literally. Roberts’s communion money, a £3 13s. 8d. of it in shiny old coins he had lovingly polished, was in a tobacco tin one foot under the sod, five paces—adult paces; ten on his communion day—to the right of the hinged gate of the field that was now his set-aside. Now the EU paid him money for doing nothing with the field. He wasn’t even allowed to walk into it. There was a satellite keeping an eye on all the empty fields in Ireland, making sure that they stayed empty. But one of these cloudy nights he was going to sneak into his field, dig up the tobacco tin—Condor—and bring the gleaming contents to a coin dealer on Aughrim Street, a member of the International Association of Professional Numismatists and a subscriber to a Latvian porn magazine that Roberts distributed by hand to thirteen Dublin addresses on the first Friday of the month, between half-five and seven in the morning, before going to work. He would do just to find out how much the coins were worth. Then he’d bury them again. In a new place.

Entrepreneur. He loved the word.

“What’s that French word that means businessman?” he’d once asked his wife as he sat up to the fire pretending to do the *Independent* crossword.

“Entrepreneur,” said Patsy.

“What?” said Roberts.

“Entrepreneur.”

“Spell it for me,” said Roberts.

Nestor wasn’t an entrepreneur. Along with leprosy and a ride against a train station wall, an idea was something that Nestor had never had. But still he made a reasonable living. He had the day job, of course, not that it brought in much. So four nights a week, in black bomber jacket and wired for sound he stood at the entrance of Major Disaster’s, a pub in the basement of Little Los Angeles, a carpark

and total shopping experience at the top of Grafton Street, Europe's sexiest retail sewer. He let young couples and gangs of girls go past him but stopped lone men and British stag parties, if they were wearing either kilts or co-ordinated T-shirts.

"It's the national costume of Scawtland!"

"It's a dress," said Nestor's colleague, Rattigan.

Nestor rarely spoke. He was never violent, always polite; he went to the toilet only during his breaks. He never drank, didn't smoke, never pawed drunk women. He stood in front or stood aside and, when called upon to do so by the voice in his ear, went inside and escorted people out. Rattigan, who drank, smoked and often went to the toilet against the Telecom building across the street, hated him.

"You're perfect, aren't you?"

"No," said Nestor.

"You are, yeh cunt."

"I'm not," said Nestor.

"Look at you," said Rattigan. "Mister Perfect. This one coming up now. In the red. Would you ride her? Would you?"

Nestor didn't answer him.

"No, you wouldn't. You wouldn't even dream of it, sure you wouldn't? She's dripping for it, look at her. Look. *Look*. And the other one with her. The two of them together. The arse on the other one, lookit."

Nestor suffered in silence. He was, in fact, gay. He admitted the women of Rattigan's crumby dreams while his heart went quietly pitter-patter for the men they kept out, the stag lads and loners, the men in kilts and co-ordinated T-shirts.

Roberts kicked the dead man's foot again.

"You're a terrible man," he said to Nestor.

"Sorry," said Nestor. "Will I clean it up?"

"It?" said Roberts.

The gun was an Israeli Desert Eagle, a large and powerful pistol designed for long-range shooting. Nestor had fired it three feet away from the dead man's chest.

"It?" said Roberts. "Have you a week?"

The back wall was drenched with bloody globules of the dead man's interior.

“ ‘Good boys, O yes,’ ” Roberts said. He was imitating Mrs. Bloom's voice now. “ ‘You cleaned up after you, did you? Good boys.’ I don't think we'll be hearing *that* when we go back to her, do you? I don't think we'll fucking bother!”

He moved two careful steps to the left and pushed the dead man's Superser gas heater. As he'd expected, it refused to move. Roberts owned thirteen Supersers, one in each bedsit, and not one of them moved freely on its castors.

“Will this fit in the boot, d'you think?”

“No,” said Nestor.

“On its side?”

“Maybe.”

“We might take it with us. Come here and help me.”

This was the type of thing Roberts and Nestor often did for Mrs. Bloom, walking in on people they'd never met and pointing guns or fingers at them. Four times out of five when she summoned Roberts on the batphone, it was to give him a name and address and a brief instruction. “Worry him, O yes.” Or “Hit him, yes, twice, and tell him I was asking for him.” A simple message—sometimes a simple action—was usually all that was required. They never had to wait around for answers or merchandise. Someone else, Roberts supposed, came along later to do that; he didn't know and he didn't care. What he did know was that he was a small cog in Mrs. Bloom's machinery. A tiny, minor, insignificant cog that could be whipped out and replaced any time she felt the inclination. Just like that. In a flash. He knew it. The knowledge frightened him and made him love her even more.

“We better get out of here,” said Roberts. “You'll have to take your top off.”

“Why?” said Nestor.

He was wearing Manchester United's latest away jersey.

“It'll be remembered if we're seen leaving,” said Roberts.

“Half the men and boys in Dublin wear Man United jerseys,” said Nestor.

“Yes,” said Roberts. “But not with their names on the back.”

“Oh,” said Nestor.

“Oh,” said Roberts. “Is there a Batty Nestor playing at number 10 for Manchester United?”

“No,” said Nestor sheepishly. “Teddy Sheringham.”

“Good for Teddy.”

“What’ll I wear instead?”

“Something of his,” said Roberts, nodding at the dead man.

“But . . . it’s covered in blood,” said Nestor.

“Not that particular shirt,” said Roberts. “It’s not your colour. Something else.”

He nodded at the door behind the dead man’s head.

“In there.”

Nestor planned a route around the shattered corpse.

“Chop chop,” said Roberts.

Nestor pushed open the door and walked in. Roberts, alone now except for the dead man, really started to dread facing Mrs. Bloom.

She was an extraordinary woman. She lived in a small, terraced house on the northside.

“It’s handy for the airport.”

But she’d never travelled in a plane herself, had never been further from her home than Dollymount Strand. She didn’t even have a passport. The first time Roberts saw her, after he’d been led through the house from the front door by Mrs. Blixen, she’d been sitting in the back garden, on a papal throne with a copybook in her lap and a biro in her hand. As he’d walked across the little patio he’d heard the roar of a plane flying low over them, a noise that increased, then slowly receded and faded away to silence as he watched her. She took a strapless watch from the pocket of her mauve duffel-coat—it was a wild, cold day, a very odd day to be sitting out in the garden—and she looked at it. Then he heard her speak for the first time; to herself, or so he thought.

“EI 603 from Schiphol, O yes.”

She opened the copybook and wrote something down. Roberts knew immediately: he was in the presence of a genius. She controlled a global empire from the back garden of a corporation house, bang in the middle of the Celtic Tiger’s litter tray. She made a red mark beside a column of numbers, closed the copybook, put it away.

“You come to me recommended,” she said, without looking at him.

“Can I ask by who?”

“That doesn’t matter.”

He looked at her profile. Her eyes were fixed on the back wall and the three scrawny rosebushes that lined it. But he could tell that her ears were still trained on the sky. And what ears. The lug he could

see had the curve and almost the size of a baby's arse. The wind pushed great healthy folds of grey hair in front of her face. She hooked the hair back behind the arse. Still staring at the wall, she spoke again.

"You are greedy, O cruel and discreet. Is that right?"

"Yes," said Roberts.

"We'll see," said Mrs. Bloom. "O yes."

That was three years ago. Since then, two or three times a week, Roberts and Nestor had delivered messages for Mrs. Bloom, worried and hounded for Mrs. Bloom. They'd kicked down doors, broken windows, pulled hair, shoved gun barrels into mouths, held throats, spat in faces, set fire to pets for Mrs. Bloom. All plain, undemanding stuff.

"She's some woman," Roberts once said to Nestor, as they got back into the car after collecting a name and address from Mrs. Bloom. "Isn't she?"

Nestor concentrated on his seat belt.

"Isn't she?"

"She's all right," said Nestor.

"All right? *All right?*"

"She's nice."

"Nice!"

"Leave me alone, will you. She's old."

"Ah," said Roberts. "It's the mother thing, is it?"

Nestor wanted to close down the conversation.

"Yeah," said Nestor.

"You don't want to admit that you'd like to ride your mother. Is that it?"

"Yeah," said Nestor.

"Fair enough," said Roberts. And gave him a knowing wink.

Actually, it was hard to put an age on Mrs. Bloom. Her hair was grey, but fantastically so; it was alive and full. It was hair to dive into and roll around in, hair to hibernate in, even die in.

Roberts picked up the empty box: Loving Care. His wife was bent over the side of the bath, wearing plastic bags on her hands and squirting black goo into the clumps of wet hair at the back of her head.

“Why do you use this awful stuff?” he said.

“To hide the grey,” said Patsy.

“You don’t have to do that,” said Roberts. “I like it.”

“Shut the door on your way out,” said Patsy.

Mrs. Bloom’s face was lived-in but unlined, the face of a woman who’d rolled with life’s knocks. And she had the eyes of a woman who’d become used to handing out the knocks. When she turned them on Roberts the first time, he’d wanted to run. To run at her and to run far away. They were deep, blue and fierce. They drew him in and repelled him, ordered him to come here and warned him to stay well clear.

“We’ll see, O yes.”

And he’d fallen in love, as helplessly as an entrepreneur could let himself fall. He’d wanted to get down and sit at her feet. Three years later, he still had to tell his knees to hold him up when he was standing beside Mrs. Bloom.

She was some woman; she really was. She had the whole world in her bag; there was no stopping her. As a teenager she’d made her money robbing shoplifters. Before that, she’d forced the other boys and girls in Mixed Infants to buy their own lunches off her. As the woman at the Department of Industry seminar had said to Roberts, you had to be born one, and as far as Roberts was concerned, Mrs. Bloom had been born the biggest one of the lot.

Entrepreneur.

She’d tried her hand at most things, but drew the line at honesty. She robbed everything, as a matter of principle. Every mouthful she ate, every stitch she possessed, every one of the thousands of books that walled and shrank every room in the house, everything that wasn’t already free she had stolen or ordered stolen on her behalf. Even the way she breathed made it look like she was stealing the air, gulping it down before someone else could use it. Security and technological improvements were puffing along behind her; she could crack any code or system. She’d discovered that you could open Fiats with Mini wipers, that you could decode car stereos by putting them overnight in the freezer. She owned chunks of the Cayman Islands before she stole the atlas to find out where they were. She was selling stolen heroin in Leitrim before it was ever heard of in Dublin. All without budging from the papal throne in her back garden (stolen O yes, during the Offertory of the Pope’s mass in the Phoenix Park in 1979).

Roberts was mad about her.

“It suits you,” he told Dymphna, as she tried to keep the wig from sliding over her face.

“It’s horrible,” said Dymphna. “Who’d want grey hair?”

“Shush,” said Roberts. “Keep it on. For me.”

“It’s makin’ me head sweat.”

“Go on. I’ll get you a Magnum at the next garage.”

“A cone?”

“Okay, okay,” said Roberts. “O yes.”

There was no Mr. Bloom, as far as Roberts knew; he was dead or eaten, he presumed. Maybe buried under the rosebushes. As for kiddy Blooms, there were none of those either; no photographs in the hall or kitchen, no toys or evidence of grandchildren. There was just her magnificent self. And Mrs. Blixen.

Roberts couldn’t figure out Mrs. Blixen. At first, he’d thought she must be the maid. The first time he had visited, Mrs. Blixen had brought him through the house and out to the garden and left himself and Mrs. Bloom alone. But a maid in a corporation house? Roberts had never seen a maid in any sort of house, except once in a brothel in Kinnegad. Then he decided that they might be sisters. It made more sense, except for the facts that they weren’t at all alike to look at and they called each other by their surnames.

“And yes Mrs. Blixen has brought O the tea.”

And there was Mrs. Blixen’s accent. It was funny, foreignish. On the second visit, on the way through the kitchen, Roberts had asked her where she’d lived before she came to Ireland.

“I had a farm in Aw-frica,” she’d said.

“Very nice.”

“At the foot of the Ngong hills.”

“Lovely,” said Roberts. “And how much of that was set-aside?”

Then he’d thought that they might be lovers.

“What d’you think?” he’d asked Nestor.

“No,” said Nestor.

“What makes you so sure?” said Roberts.

“They wear cardigans,” said Nestor.

“Good point,” said Roberts. “But does that mean that all women who don’t wear cardigans *are* lesbians?”

Nestor didn’t answer.

“Am I confusing you?” said Roberts.

“Yes,” said Nestor.

“Can you imagine them doing it together?”

“No,” said Nestor.

“I want you to try,” said Roberts. “Close your eyes.”

“No.”

“Go on,” said Roberts. “Close them.”

Nestor did what he was told.

“Now,” said Roberts. “Can you imagine them?”

“No,” said Nestor.

“No,” Roberts agreed. “I can’t either. You can open them now.”

Which pleased Nestor; he was driving.

There was nothing going on between Mrs. Bloom and Mrs. Blixen. There *was* something odd about them, though. He couldn’t put his finger on it. Something to do with all those books lying around the house, but he wasn’t sure. He sometimes thought they were playing with him. But it didn’t matter. The idea of being the plaything of those two broads kept Roberts awake and giddy, right up to getting-up time, and he didn’t mind even one little bit.

Nestor was taking his time choosing a shirt.

“Hurry up,” said Roberts.

“I’m looking for something that fits me.”

“Hurry up!”

“Can I not just wear the jersey inside out?”

“*No!*”

Roberts was trying to hold back his anxiety, but it wasn't easy. He'd never messed up before. He'd always done a good job and, to be fair, so had Nestor. He really didn't know what was going to happen when he walked through Mrs. Bloom's house and told her they'd shot the dead man. He'd blame Nestor, of course, and reasonably so; it'd been his finger on the trigger, after all. But he didn't know that would be enough. And he didn't particularly want Nestor to suffer. He liked Nestor. He was a decent kid. A bit thick, granted, but very reliable. And good to his mammy.

He looked at the dead man again. He knew damn-all about him. His name: Reynolds. His address: behind the derelict cottage, O yes. The message: you have something and Mrs. Bloom wants it.

That was the lot. What it was that Mrs. Bloom had wanted, he had no idea; money, drugs, information—it could have been anything. Heroin, advice, his wife, shoes—there was no point searching the caravan. Whatever it was, Roberts knew it wasn't there.

You have something and Mrs. Bloom wants it.

Worry the man.

Look him sternly in the eye.

Grab his lapel, if he has one.

Push his face against the wall.

Give him a dig.

Let him see the gun.

The usual.

He couldn't say what was going to happen now. He knew nothing about the dead man. Nothing at all. And he suddenly realised that he knew nothing about Mrs. Bloom either, nothing that was going to be useful to him. He knew no one else in her organisation. "You come to me recommended," she'd said, but to this day he didn't know by whom. He wished now that he'd been more curious.

Another thought crept up behind Roberts and whacked him. He almost dropped on to the rug beside the dead man. What if Mrs. Bloom was just *another cog in the machine*? What if she was simply another deliverer of messages? As ignorant and as unimportant as Roberts? And just as expendable.

He couldn't believe he'd never considered that before. The stupidity, the laziness. God almighty, he'd let himself down.

Roberts had great faith in the power of his personality. He was a good-looking man; he'd been told that quite frequently, more often than not, by women he hadn't paid to say it. But it wasn't just about being handsome; what hushed a room when he walked into it was his personality. He'd become sure of that over the years.

“It’s not just my looks, sure it’s not?”

“No,” said Dymphna.

“No,” Roberts agreed. “It’s something more, isn’t it? And I’ll tell you, Dymper. If you could bottle it you’d make a fortune.”

It probably came from the same place as his entrepreneurial stuff; he’d been born with it, whatever it was. And, whatever it was, he had it in spades.

“Strong personality. Eight letters. Begins with C.”

“Charisma,” said Patsy.

“Thanks.”

Roberts had been opening doors and legs with charisma for years. It had very rarely let him down. In the soft, cosy place at the back of his head had rested the belief that, if the worst ever came to the worst, he could always charm his way out of any trouble with Mrs. Bloom; it would be hard work, granted, prising her ears and eyes from the flight-paths, but he was sure he could do it. But what if it didn’t matter? What if he was lassoing the wrong pony?

“Hurry up!”

“I’m coming!”

Roberts kicked the dead man.

“Could you not have ducked?” he hissed at him.

He drew his foot back to kick again, but changed his mind. The first kick had calmed him, and he was wearing his good shoes. And anyway, his faith in Mrs. Bloom had come back. She had no boss but herself. He was certain of it.

Nestor came out from behind the curtain, wearing a once-white T-shirt, CHOOSE LIFE in black, across the chest.

“Very nice,” said Roberts.

He was feeling a bit better.

Nestor had his jersey rolled up in his hand.

“Tuck that into your trousers and give me a hand with this thing,” said Roberts as he gave the Supers another experimental push.

Nestor grabbed a handful of old newspaper from the stack in the corner and went to wrap up his jersey in it. But then he stopped. Looking startled. And began reefing through the pile of newsprint.

“This paper’s blank,” he said. “All of it. All the paper in this pile is completely blank.”

“So is your brain,” said Roberts.

“Should we not go before the police come?” said Nestor.

“We are the police,” said Garda Sergeant Roberts. “But I know what you mean. The good guys. Come on.”

He opened the door.

“Cheerio,” he said to the dead man. “Keep in touch.”

The caravan wobbled as they stepped down from it. Garda Nestor shut the door after them.

CHAPTER TWO

On the surface Gary Reynolds was being very decent.

The first day off work he had ever taken and here he was mowing the lawn. What's more, the lawnmower would hardly move. It was an old push-mower he'd found in the shed when they moved in. It needed oil and general maintenance but Gary was useless at anything remotely practical. Of course he could have bought a new mower. He could have gone out right there and then, like an adult permitted to spend money and buy things in the real world, and bought a new mower. But men in hardware shops frightened him. Most people frightened him. Bank clerks, builders, doctors and nurses, barmen. They knew what they were talking about. They had his number. They were grown up and organised whereas Gary felt about nine or ten.

He was in fact thirty-two and five stone overweight. Weighing yourself was something grown-ups did. If you knew how much you weighed you might have to diet, and such decisions meant you were in charge of circumstances. You'd taken hold of your life by the scruff. And the prospect of doing that frightened Gary.

Nothing is wrong. That was his attitude. If it's not broken don't give it a belt of a hammer. Pondering your shortcomings was the type of reflection that could unsettle you. Something might *really* turn out to be wrong. And you'd have to do a right load of worrying then.

So here he was pushing a blunt mower for all he was worth. He'd been at it for about twenty minutes by now. At this rate it'd take another hour and three-quarters to finish. Not that it was a big garden: it wasn't. But it seemed like every bit he did he had to redo. The grass was all . . . tangled or something. Every so often the sun came out and baked him. He stopped and wheezed a bit. He was sweating very hard. But he was thinking about what Madelene would say when she saw that he'd done it.

He wasn't doing it for her. He was doing it so she'd have to say thanks. Force a response out of her. They were fighting again. These little wars Gary could handle. They were safe enough; he knew the territory.

They were fighting about one of the usual subjects. The way he'd spoken to her mother, at Madelene's sister's wedding on Saturday. He never really meant to be mean, but increasingly he was beginning to snap at Madelene's relations. A few pints, and the niggling insecurities he felt talking to people—waitresses, telephone operators, staff at the cash-and-carry—these would all vanish and he'd take the opportunity to assert himself. A couple of drinks and he even began not to mind his appearance. He'd be giving himself the eye in mirrors in pubs. The other night he'd mimed playing guitar to an Eagles song, checking himself out in the glass door of the china cabinet, until Madelene banged on the bedroom floor with a slipper or something and he sheepishly lowered the music.

He often sang along with whatever Larry Gogan was playing on the radio as he drove around the country. Sometimes he'd bang the steering wheel too. At moments like that he reminded himself of Harrison Ford, banging the roof of the car in *Witness* when the Sam Cooke song comes on.

His business was providing toilet blocks for the gents' urinals in pubs. They stank up the van. They stank up his clothes. People always knew that Gary had arrived without having to look around.

He also had an undefined supportive role at the local Spar supermarket which Madelene ran. He paid visits to the cash-and-carry for Madelene, but never for perishables—everything that had a ride in the van ended up smelling of cheap air freshener. The toilet business had been passed on to Gary by his Uncle Peter. Starting a business on his own would have been far too adult. His clients were the same ones his uncle had had. He had never tried expanding or taking on help. If a business dropped off, he let it go.

There was one pub on the outskirts of Clonmel he hated going into. It was a big barn of a place with nothing doing in the daytime, just video games chirping and grunting in the desolation. The barman and regulars were Gary's classic fear. People who might—just might—be talking about him. Whenever he came in, the same four beefy old guys would be sitting at the counter and mumbling, sometimes breaking into a cackle. Gary had simply stopped going there. He was driving along one day and he just went right on past. Kept going. Didn't even look back. He felt guilty and ashamed but not for long. "*Everything's just fine*" was hammering away in his head, getting faster and faster until it was like a shrieking alarm and he had to stop the van and have a cigarette.

Thus his life revolved around the safety of soup and sandwiches in provincial hotels, and trips to the cash-and-carry in sprawling suburbia. And to Gary these held all the dark nervousness of a terrible adventure.

Sometimes the Clonmel thing still bothered him. Made him feel like less of a man. Whenever that happened he drank himself into a state where his anger was directed at absolutely everything. At Madelene's sister's wedding, Madelene's mother had watched him collapse slowly into a table during an elaborate guitar solo in "Sweet Home Alabama."

"Garret Reynolds, you're drunk," she said with triumphant satisfaction as guests rallied round, heaving him out of the piles of roast beef and potatoes.

"Mrs. Fenit," he managed to blurt, "I don't give a flying shite what you think. I'm a . . ."—he tried to think of something profound and perhaps a touch heroic—"I'm a man! I'm a *person!* I'm a sad man and *I need some respect!*"

But he continued to lurch sideways into the back of a bridesmaid until he landed on his formidable backside with a loud fart. Of course, he did give a flying shite what Mrs. Fenit thought. He gave several flying shites what everybody thought. Most of the time he wished he was invisible.

Still, he had no intention of apologising to Madelene, never mind her mother, or anyone else. Saying sorry would mean there was something wrong. And how can something be wrong when everything's fine all the time?

So here he was, leaning into an old mower, sweat pouring down his back. Making it all okay again. In

truth he had taken the day off as part of a campaign to confuse Madelene. He wanted her to say, “~~Why aren’t you getting up?~~” And when she said that, he’d be unresponsive and mysterious. She’d be unsettled and go, “Gary? Are you all right?” And he’d say yes, and that’d be it. He’d be all right and she’d be all right and it would be as though the row had never happened. But to his annoyance it hadn’t gone like that. It hadn’t gone like that at all.

She’d got up. He’d lain there. He listened to her potter about for half an hour. And then he heard the front door. He bounded to the window to see her pull away in her Opel Kadett. He’d considered banging on the window but instead he sat on the edge of the bed with his hands on his knees.

Now that he’d taken the day off—and there was nothing wrong with that—there was no point in hitting the road. He sat in the kitchen eating a bowl of Frosties and watching *Sky News*. As the hour progressed and the news was repeated, he idly scratched himself for a bit, then sighed, got dressed and wandered into the garden where he’d had the idea about cutting the grass.

All the houses around him. All empty because everybody had something to do. But he had something to do as well. He was tending his garden. What could be nicer? *I am a man in my garden mowing my lawn*. Safe and serene. Busy. Useful.

He was about to take a break and have a Cup-a-Soup when he heard the distant sound of the doorbell. He immediately assumed it was somebody selling something and he wasn’t in the mood (ever) to feel like someone wanted something from him. He strolled in through the patio doors, the anticipation of human encounter troubling his stomach. He put one knee on the couch in the front lounge and leaned forward into the window for a peek. He got such a fright he actually belched.

It was two cops! A man and a woman. Their Ford Sierra was outside his gate.

His head felt as though it was filling up with air.

The dead man on the slab was definitely his father. He was smaller than Gary remembered and his mouth looked funny.

They hadn’t seen each other since Gary’s mother Betty’s funeral eight years before. Gary had tried for a while to stay in touch, but whenever he’d taken him out for a drink, his father seemed withdrawn and uneasy, bewildered by the events of his own life.

Tommy had taken voluntary redundancy when Gary was ten and his sister, Margaret, was seven, saying he wanted to set up his own company. He’d risen in the pharmaceutical industry as the public became aware of vitamin and mineral supplements, as the local pharmacy became a shop like any other. There was a commercial boom in the medicine market and Tommy was there at the very beginning. He’d been part of a highly successful research team providing ever more attractive dietary aids and wonder tonics.

Gary wasn’t sure just what Tommy had hit upon that made him want to strike out on his own, but in the dim corners of his memory he thought it was something to do with anti-ageing—stopping people getting old. He left the company with a nice wad of money, some of which Gary’s mother made him

invest in a safe venture. That venture was Peter's detergent-supplying business, Gary's little inheritance from his uncle.

Gary remembered his father as a man in control. He wasn't a headcase; he seemed at peace in those days. A bit like Val Doonican with his sweaters and his slippers. A man who stood proudly, feet apart smoking a cigar on Christmas morning as Gary and Margaret opened the mound of presents they always got.

He had approached several companies with his business idea, even going over to England a few times. But whatever it was, no one wanted to develop it. He was treated like a bit of a hare-brain, a quack. People told him he should cop himself on, go back to the lucrative and steady employment he'd always enjoyed until now.

But instead he brooded. Those were dark days. Gary remembered his father mooching around the house, going for long walks up on Howth Head, sometimes getting snappy at Betty. He'd taken a knock. That much was clear. And he might have felt like a bit of a moron. Ironically the investment he'd made in Peter's company had added to the mess. Cheques were coming in, money wasn't a problem, so Tommy didn't really have to get up off his arse and get a job. He'd always liked a drink and was considered good fun on a night out—but now he began to spend almost every waking hour in a local pub, the Blind Beggar.

Gary could guess at the comfort Tommy found there; the same faces, no one entitled to judge the other because most had given up trying to achieve anything. And it was there on the rainy afternoons of the winter that he'd met Patricia Purefoy, a separated woman in her forties, who had just returned to Ireland from Zurich or France or somewhere. Belgium maybe. And in the murky underwater of a three-day drunk he had kissed her on the lips. He had given up.

They'd staggered together, hand in hand, to Tommy's house where Margaret was playing Lego in the hall. Patricia had accidentally stood on a little Lego house while Tommy slurred his last belligerent apology to Betty. They had walked out into the rain and Betty had wiped her hands over and over, before running down the street after them, pulling at Tommy and begging him to come home and sober up. Tommy had wrenched himself out of her grip and Betty had slipped on a grass verge, spraining her ankle.

She'd limped home, gone upstairs and cried for three days. Her next-door neighbour had brought food in for Gary and Margaret. They'd watched telly all day long. At night Gary could hear his mother crying. He'd get down under the bed and press his forehead against the cool skirting board. One morning it was getting bright when he felt Margaret crawl in behind him, her chest gasping. The first dawn he could remember.

In time Betty had recovered a little. They had great neighbours and her family supported her. But Tommy Reynolds never came back. The longer he left it, the more shameful the local scandal was and the harder it must have been to return. He moved into a holiday cottage Patricia had been left by her parents. It was in a desolate spot outside Kiltiernan; on the Dublin-Wicklow border. Tommy wandered in the woods, scraping specimens of moss, bark and stone. He spent time in the local library and the pub. Anyone who spoke to him remembered strange conversations about standing stones, burial mounds, things in the countryside that were organic, natural, ancient. Everybody felt a bit sorry for him. He lived with Patricia until her liver gave way. After her death, her family took pity on Tommy

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