

Stolen

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The blackthorn hedges on the fairy fort have finally bloomed, curbed by a mean spring that refuses warmth, despite lengthening days. But winds have calmed, sky is clear. Every morning after waking, he watches first light seeping through a dense weave of thin branches in the next field, the dew-gripped stems, haloed in mist. There is something oddly arousing about that view, Karl finds, as he touches himself beneath the sheets.

He has already experienced eight months of horizontal winds roaring across the fields from Galway bay. He has rented this place, some ten miles distant, partly to avoid the proximity of constant celebration and the diddle-di-dye sounds that rise permanently within the city and pervade student life at Galway University.

He gets along fine with the others in his writing group on the MA programme, and likes most of the tutors too, although he wonders about the blonde—the ‘multi-genre writer’ according to the bio on her website—who keeps foisting some of her own library titles on him, books she believes will stretch him *in new reading directions*. Right so. Whatever you say.

It's true he's not widely read. Even so, he was accepted onto the course as a mature student on the creative writing course. The tutor's face had held its expression in a polite but frozen way when he announced in class that he hadn't read many women writers apart from a few pages of his ex-wife's Anne Tyler (which brought stifled titters in the group), informing her that his favourite writers told solid stories with a beginning, a middle and an end. They were all men, he shrugged, not realising that nowadays this is a faux pas in the world of lit crit. He apologised for the omission in his reading, and the tutor smiled grimly and said *sure we'll get you into the loop Karl, no worries, I'll have you reading all kinds of material before the year's out*. Then, a slight toss of her head and the merest, disquieting, hint of a wink.

Apart from the course, being in the rented house is another new pleasure. Anyone in ordinary life can avail of pleasure, something he'd forgotten. He loves returning in the evening with his groceries: fish, lentils, spinach, eggs, milk, spuds. He's trying out a life that involves a foray towards vegetarianism (but he allows himself the fish), and feels the better for it. That, and walking miles around the streets of Galway after the seminars, along the banks of the raging Corrib, and later on, venturing out into the vast space and beckoning of the fields and narrow roads around his new home. The house is set in its own wilderness, on a road off a road off the M6.

Whether his sense of expansion derives from simply being away from Leinster for a year, feeling uncommitted and by himself, or whether it's because of the change of diet, remains to be seen. He doesn't believe in lifestyle solutions. At forty-nine, he has incipient man-breasts, thin legs and no buttocks to speak of. He's not one of those guys who drift around with a sheaf of poems sticking out of the jacket pocket, or who carries a Boxer pup as a babe magnet. At least, he consoles himself, he has hair. Abundantly.

The sense of renewal might also be due to the stimulation of the course, and the constant anxiety about turning in new fiction every single week to Blondie. The thing that

bothers him is the struggle to write out of what she calls the *in-between spaces of experience*, or *'liminality'*, another word that's bandied around a lot.

One of the other tutors is renowned for his verbal public flayings of students whose non-fiction memoir isn't up to scratch, and creates a terrifying presence in the classroom. A broad-shouldered, brown-haired, long-eared chap whose essays appear frequently in a big-wig journal called *Granta*, nothing the students write can meet a standard so high Karl thinks it must give the tutor altitude sickness. Karl, who hasn't read *Granta* before, doesn't know what all the fuss is about, or even if *Granta* is any bloody good. Unlike Blondie, Long Ears doesn't believe in praising the positive and not over-emphasising the negative. They are all eejits and incompetents, with no hope of making it in the world of writing. Apparently that means prizes. Recognition. Publishing wars. In the presence of Long Ears, some of the younger guys sweat. The women seem more able for him. He's pretty free with his language too. *Wanker. That fuck. Oh for fuck's sake.* Dropped from his mouth as a matter of course, although Karl too has begun to use similar language as he moves around the house, sometimes knocking into things when he's drunk too much, even more so when he has to re-draft his work.

Even so, he has discovered oxygen blowing into him after ten years in the planning offices. There was safety, yes. Collegiality yes. Regular salary. Chats around the water cooler. Green plants shivering beneath the AC system in summer as he and the others worked through the applications, assessing, budgeting, meeting. Some planning applications made the cut, it went without saying. But even so, the magisterial nature of decision-making had begun to drain him and he felt the ancient pull of wanting distance. Urgently. He knows that as a 7th century man, he'd have taken off from the community, the village, and joined up with a new tribe to fight in their battles. Or back further, in Stone Age subsistence, he'd head off to find a few Neanderthals to hunt down, but only after mating with their women. It has been a quest for great plains, something new to pit himself against, especially since the break-up.

If in crisis, do a post-graduate degree.

The rental house with its pastiche half door is so far removed from everything he'd known before. The one he lived in before his marriage went pear-shaped and Anna announced that she was bisexual and had met someone else was very different. *You mean you're gay*, was his bald, stunned response. *No, I mean I'm bisexual, Karl. Bisexual? If you can take that on board.* That really raised his hackles, apart from the shock of it. Splitting hairs, trying to have it every way. She was leaving him for another woman, so how the fuck did that make her bisexual? Was she leaving the door open, in case she changed her mind and wanted to get back with him, or be with another man?

Their home had been neat and modern. Dining-room linking to sitting-room on the left. Small office to the right. Downstairs loo he could hardly stand up in while he pissed. Three bedrooms, another bathroom. En suite off their room. White walls everywhere and neutral furnishings with the odd flash of a tangerine or turquoise cushion, 'jewel' colours from interiors magazines. The usual kitchen island—that oversized lump of granite, a prerequisite in every Irish kitchen when someone decided that food preparation could no longer occur on worktops facing a wall, but must be performed on a space perched at a measured ratio to cooker and sink. A postage-stamp sized back garden with a wooden shed for tools and lawnmower, none of which he cared very much to use. He'd always wanted to move away from Leinster, with its Dublin-defined attitudes, its constant aspiring and *garden-trimming-coordinated-fucking-furniture-leaving-cert-child-buggering-dinner-party-ambition*, have a

larger house, live more cheaply. But Anna wouldn't budge from her commuter route to the city. And then she met Henni, from Finland.

It wasn't like the old days when you stuck it out and put up with one another until the man died and the wife entered a new phase of coming and going as she pleased, of bridge, *hiking* (that made him laugh, thinking of all the under-exercised flesh trailing up and down the Sugar Loaf), evening courses and weekend breaks to Kerry with 'the girls'. Neither of them was into endurance. Even so, the stomach-sickening, pile-driving shock of discovering that she loves—absolutely *loves*—a woman, pretty much in the way she'd once loved him, took some digesting. He developed irritable bowel syndrome, his doctor suggested, found himself dashing desperately to the bathroom to shit his guts out, all because of heartbreak. Now he was truly emptied, and that heart was just—just—beginning to grow numb, scab over. To *heal*, in therapy-speak. Since taking up with Henni, and implicit in this, while recovering from life with *him*, Anna has been having monthly therapy, adding that he should try it too.

But for now, a house in the west. This is his therapy. A refurbished two-hundred-year old cottage extended to three times its original length, the original thatch replaced by a cobalt slate roof, catching every loop of light when clouds break and sunlight flashes through. The sash windows are small, with bright red frames. On the kitchen window-ledge, an ornamental cock perches, comb bright, black and white tail-feathers curling high. The owner of the house, Patrick Tuomey, has set the bird's feet on a base of concrete, to protect it from the gales. He keeps specimen hens and cocks himself, he tells Karl, bringing him one evening to see them. They cross the yard from Tuomey's house, a mile away. The white outbuildings which house the fowl are low-lying, with metal grills running from top to bottom.

We have to watch out for our old friend Reynard, Patrick had said. When Karl looked blank, he added *An sionnach?* Still no response. Finally, exasperated, *the friggin' fox?*

Karl leant to inspect the huge, fluff-legged ruddy-feathered cocks with trembling red combs and fierce eyes that burned at him in an apparently irritated way. Patrick said strangers upset them, and it was true, judging by the rumpus and squawking up and down the separate coops. A giant black and white fellow paused, one leg drawn up hesitantly beneath, and eyed Karl before dropping a generous shite. His favourite was the massive red-feathered specimen with loosely bobbing blue-green plumes on its tail. It strutted around, ignoring both him and the owner, comb wobbling in a way he found slightly repulsive. The bird also reminded him of a judge entering court, disregarding the minions, certain of his position. *If he was mine I'd call him Judge*, Karl said absently. *His name is Seamus*, Patrick replied softly, opening the pen and reaching in to fondle the bird. Karl marvelled at the life of a man who could choose to dote on such fowl, who owned a second home for renting out, and who was over two hundred miles from Dublin.

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Karl's long bedroom is at the west wing of the cottage, and from the bed he can watch the evening light and the fairy fort in the field. It is ringed by wind-bent, gnomish blackthorn trees that claw perpetually eastwards, and in the middle, an ancient oak-tree thrusts gnarled branches over the blackthorn. Patrick had warned him the previous autumn that he might see people coming and going to the fairy fort. *They won't ever set foot on it*, he said, *they're just leaving offerings*. There were two reasons, he went on. Stillborn babies, buried long ago, their souls stolen by the fairies before birth, but also the presence of the Little

People themselves, the *Sidhe*, or fairies. *Arra, it's a local thing. No man will plough that fort.* It isn't done. Occasionally he brought a few folklorists to the site.

Some evenings as he sits at the kitchen table, laptop open, struggling to grasp Julia Kristeva's theories on identity politics—which he can make neither head nor tail of, and Roland Barthes—whom he does understand, especially that essay called “Steak”, and who doesn't use that cussed word *liminality*—he raises his head only to see two or three people walk past the house. Women, mostly, though not entirely. They bear bunches of daffodils. He finds it incredible, this carapace that resists modernity, the laying of votive items, scraps of ribbon on branches, licking tongues of colour in the breeze, all for the sake of maintaining diplomatic relations with the fairies. *The fairies. For fuck's sake.*

He never treads on the fort. Whether it's instinct, or respect for Patrick Tuomey, he strides along the periphery of the field from time to time, sticks to the hawthorn and ash surrounds. Occasionally he approaches the mound. It reminds him of one in a book his sister had when they were children, which showed the Little People trooping back inside their special kingdom. Another picture illustrated marvellous times within the fort, with handsome, adult fairies dancing together in an eternal state of joyous youth, while their pretty child fairies pranced in circles of their own. The place is beautiful, he admits; he feels mostly safe and warm, but occasionally uneasy, and his imagination roams sufficiently to consider that perhaps there are fairies looking over him. Laughable. He scoffs out loud. Suddenly, a face-drenching wave of self-pity sweeps through him as he recalls the trials of the past two years, knowing himself to have been abandoned by his wife.

But it's the final week of semester. There are poems to hand in—twelve, to be exact, no more and no less, together with a critical essay—and twenty-five pages of non-fiction memoir. Kiki, a Greek lesbian in the memoir group has taken him in hand—lesbians! Everywhere!—and advised him to focus on one primary incident, such as his feelings about his wife leaving him (she knew about that, because it had tumbled out in an awkward moment of sweat-inducing revelation during one seminar, the theme of which was female identity, which garnered him unasked-for sympathy, empathy and all shades of feeling in between). He has taken her advice, and written freely. His vocabulary might not be the most scholarly, but by now he is sick of the challenge to heteronormative values, and has something to say.

It hasn't been easy. Truth-telling. Remembering one particular party, an after-work thing of Anna's which he'd been invited to back in Dublin. To think he'd been there, on the very night she'd met this Henni girl. (Reminder to self: *Woman*. He must call her a woman, not a girl). And that is what he writes about. Blindness (his). Unknowingness (his). The sounds of a Harcourt Street summer evening, of trams rumbling along outside, and within the pub, the voices of Anna's female office colleagues. Writing this piece of personal revelation causes him to weep again, but in the end, he submits the essay, Student ID at the top of the document. Times New Roman. 12 point. Double-line spacing or else that tyrant Long Ears won't so much as read it.

After submitting two of his three papers, relief flows. Kiki has just completed hers, so has a student called Paolo, from Brazil. They retreat for a coffee to the student café, *Bialann* in Irish, fling their bags to the floor, relax. He has adjusted to this seething world of youthful bodies, the huge restaurant with its bright vegetarian section, and understands the relative ease of being largely invisible. There's freedom in that. And Kiki and Paolo, and an Irish girl with a speech impediment, are gentle, good-humoured company. The Irish girl writes sensitive lyric

poetry which, when she reads it, emerges from her mouth in a rock-fall of strangulated language. She too is alone, he senses, disenchanted, if her poetry is anything to go by. He wouldn't mind making a play for her but knows she would consider him a fatherly fossil.

He sips his coffee and lets the chit-chat wash softly over him. Occasionally, he chips in with a riposte or a comment. Paolo is dismissing various theories about gender, flinging his arms in the air. *What about male identity*, he demands in comic tones, which sets Kiki off and an argument ensues.

That afternoon, he drives home slowly. With a month to work on his final manuscript, he has already half-assembled three short stories. A month gives enough time to invent and draw another down from the clouds.

He drops the car keys on the kitchen table and decides to have a lie-down. At forty-nine, he's not exactly old, but even so, the luxury of acting on occasional tiredness is new. The afternoon is warm, the sun flings light across the unmade bed, where he lies down on the tangled duvet, legs spread-eagled, arms akimbo. He scrabbles on the floor with one hand, then drapes an old sock across his eyes to block out the light. His last thought is to wonder what Anna would think if she could see him now. Would she be happy to see him like this, towards the end of the course? Would she give a damn?

He awakens about half an hour later, judging by the passage of the sun across the bed. His right leg is now in shade, while his left, with its dark denim, absorbs the heat. Something is amiss. A sound when there should be none. Has he left the radio on? He hardly listens to radio outside the morning news headlines on his phone. It sounds like a party in full swing, right in the house, or perhaps the garden. Has Patrick Tuomey walked in with a group of curious folklorists? He doesn't think so. It's one of those conversation parties, where people aren't drunk, with music in the background. Very merry music too. Music you could dance to, jig to, whirl around to. Heart thudding with anxiety, he jumps from the bed and flings the door wide, racing down the hall to the front door. He slips back the latch and listens. But there is no sound beyond chirping sparrows and a lone blackbird on the telegraph pole out on the road. The wind has dropped too.

On the way through the kitchen, all is equally silent. He rips open the back door. Silence. This is a waking dream, he thinks, returning to the bedroom. Even before he has shut the door, waves of sound return, like a radio being turned up. He leaves the room again. The sound disappears. He re-enters it, and it returns.

He realises he is now out of his fucking mind. He has gone native, or entered some bizarre cultural time-space warp. At the same time, he feels no fear. He wouldn't mind being at this party, wherever it is, where everybody is enjoying themselves and nobody, male or female, is trying to leave a marriage or make off with another man's wife. And the music! Wild, it is. Benign too. It beckons him. Once more, to be certain, he opens the bedroom door and places a foot in the hallway. Already, the music is dying. He re-enters the room. There. He's caught it again, a party in full flow. He can no longer restrain himself. Now, in the centre of the room, he raises arms above head, finger-tips almost touching. He takes a step, then another to the side, keeping to the rhythm while staring out the window at the fort, which is sun-dappled, its dandelions still, bluebells scarcely nodding. He shuts his eyes, follows the elemental fiddles that have played their way into this room, and moves, roused now, with an ease and grace he never knew he had, towards what he cannot see but only hears. It's the ease and grace which Anna and Henni found after Henni stole Anna, but even in his aloneness, it has come to him also. A gift.

Happily he dances, turning again towards the fairy fort, wanting to be witnessed, himself and him alone, to be taken at last, wanted, ravished perhaps, and returning it. He unbuckles his belt, drops his trousers, steps out of his underpants and rips off his t-shirt. His erection is a red bolt that quivers as he dances. He has been invited and included in something, after all, finally understanding what that word means. And he is taking part. He is among the shades of the earth, dancing, touching, willingly stolen, brought within, the blood dancing in his cock.