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The Jigsaw Maker

Adrienne Dines

Rathshannan

2006

Usually when she opened the shop on a Monday morning a whoosh of quiet greeted her – a sort of gentle acceptance that because it was five to nine, Lizzie Flynn would be turning her key in the door. And because she took precautions, there were never surprises: no opportunist burglar broke in; no errant sparks set off a fire; nobody else got there first. Unlike today.

On the table that served as a counter there was a large cardboard box, its tissue-wrapped contents spilling out. Some of them Lizzie recognised. She stood holding the door open, unsure whether she should go for help or stay and investigate. She left the key in the lock and inched into the shop. Whoever it was, was still there. She could hear shuffling in the cupboard at the back of the shop and, as she came nearer the box, marvelled at her intruder's cheek. Scattered round the table, broken bits of Lizzie's dried flower arrangements were swept into little piles, other items had been packed already - items that should have been on the shelves behind, where they always were. Bloody hell! Not only was he stealing her stock, he was packing it first. She bristled. Picking up a paperweight she crept to the cupboard.

'Good morning, Lizzie. What are you doing here so early?'

Lizzie started, amazed, as her sister backed out, arms laden. She looked dishevelled, long greying hair swept up in a careless bunch tied with a flowery scarf and her glasses askew.

'What am I doing here?' Lizzie glared at the mess in the shop. 'I'm not anywhere I shouldn't be at this time on a Monday.' She pointed at the table. 'This is where I come to start my week's work but it looks like I won't be able to do that today, will I? Because I can't. Because my table is covered in muck and I won't be able to do a thing till you clear it.' She stormed to the door and pulling the key out, slammed it shut.

'What are you doing here anyway?'

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Published by Transita

Anne dropped the boxes in a heap onto the table and pushed stray hair off her face. Then she stood, hands on hips and apparently unmoved by Lizzie's anger, skimmed the shop, pausing momentarily to frown at something she saw. 'I dunno, Liz,' she said eventually. 'This place is a heap. You really must do something with it.'

Lizzie looked around the shop in amazement. What on earth was Anne talking about? Apart from the mess on the table and the spillage beneath it, the shop was as it had always been, as it was supposed to be. She started to say that but Anne was already moving towards the soap display.

'I mean, look at this!' She picked up a bar of Lily of the Valley soap and held it out, her face wrinkled as if she found it offensive. 'Who'd want to buy this? Or this?' The soap was dropped and a small tin of talc proffered.

Lizzie shrugged. 'It's talc. Lots of people buy talc.'

Anne smiled. 'They do indeed. But nobody's bought this particular talc have they?'

Her smile turned to a laugh. 'It must have been on that shelf for twenty years!'

Lizzie took the tin from her angrily. 'No, it hasn't. I don't stock out of date items and you know it.' She turned the tin upside down and searched for a 'use by' date on its base. There wasn't one. Anything that had been printed there was long faded. Lizzie felt the colour rise in her cheeks. It wasn't old, it just wasn't required at the moment. She pushed the tin back into its place on the display. 'I don't know what you're on about anyway. What does it matter to you? I stock quality items - everyone knows that.'

Anne leaned her head to one side and regarded Lizzie. There was an expression on her face that looked dangerously like sympathy. Lizzie could feel herself bristle. She hated when Anne did the big sister bit, the I-know-better-than-you bit. Eventually Anne sighed. 'That's the problem, Lizzie. You stock the best, you just don't sell any of it.' She pointed to the box on the table. 'This stuff has been here so long it's lost its edge and these - ' she pulled some postcards from the rack. The ones at the front were faded where they had been exposed. 'Who's going to buy these, for God's sake?'

In the harsh early morning light the cards did look a bit colourless but if she reduced the price, they'd be sure to sell quickly. Or maybe if she moved some of the others from the back. Lizzie crossed her arms defensively in front of her. 'It's not your business.'

Anne stuck the cards back onto the rack. 'You're quite right,' she said. 'It's not my business, it's yours.' When she turned round again her face was set. 'I am merely the supplier of home-made confectionery - which is definitely fresh and which you have not any stock of at the moment because unlike nearly everything else,' she swept the shop disdainfully, 'it sells.' She went over to the table and started to take the packed items out of the box. 'And if this is the sort of tat you want to spend your life and waste your livelihood surrounded by, go ahead. You have yourself in a rut, you've

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been moping about for weeks. I was only trying to help.'

As she unpacked each arrangement and placed it back on the shelf, Lizzie watched her miserably. She tried to think what to say, how to unsay, but no words came. When Anne finished, she swept the last of the dried stems into her palm and looked around. Lizzie pointed to the bin.

'Over there.'

'Thank you.'

'Anne - '

Anne turned to face her, 'Well?'

Lizzie shrugged. She looked at the arrangements back where they should be, looking neat. And faded. 'Maybe you're right.' She pointed to the shelf. 'I suppose they're looking a bit, well, dull.' She could see Anne's shoulders relax. 'Maybe I could think about replacing some of them.'

Anne shook her head. 'Lizzie, this place is like a mausoleum. You have stuff here since the year dot. You have to have a clear out and brighten the place up. Move with the times.' She held her arms out. 'It's the twenty-first century for God's sake! The Celtic tiger is up and roaring and the tourists are flocking to hear him. And here you are.' She dropped her arms as if defeated. 'Owner of the quaintest knick-knack shop in Kilkenny and not a thing in it anyone would like to buy. It's rubbish - throw it out!'

The cheek of her! A glorified fudge maker and to listen you'd think she was marketing magnate of the century. Lizzie pulled her coat off and flinging it on the chair, brushed past her sister angrily. The coat stayed for a minute then slid traitorously to the floor. Anne picked it up.

'Lizzie,' she said gently, as she laid the coat across the chair back. 'You know I'm right. I supply sweets to every tourist trap in the county and most of them are raking it in. They're tapping into the boom and you're living in the past.'

Enough already! 'And what's wrong with that? You got a problem with the past?'

The words were out before she had a chance to stop them. As the sisters glared at each other the air in the room froze and Lizzie could feel it on her forehead, pushing back her hair and making her scalp tingle. She held Anne's eyes as long as she could before she turned away and lifted the empty box onto the floor. Then she took a key from her pocket and unlocking the drawer of her desk, pulled out her accounts book and opened it. As she made a show of running her fingers down the column she heard Anne cross the room and open the door quietly. As she shut it behind her the air shifted and rustled the dried flowers on the shelf. They scratched against each other and for a moment Lizzie could have sworn they were whispering together.

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Whispering about her. She kept her head down and tried to focus on the figures on the page in front.

Suddenly, the shop door was flung open and Lizzie braced herself for Anne's retaliatory tirade. She took a deep breath and lifted her head to face the music. A man was standing in the doorway. With the light behind him she couldn't see his face - just the silhouette of a tall, thin figure with a greatcoat. As he bent his head to come into the shop, the hairs on the back of her head stood on end. So familiar. But his face as he came towards her was a stranger's. She put her pen down. When he reached the table he swung a leather satchel off his shoulder and laid it carefully on the floor beside him.

'Are you Lizzie Flynn?'

'I am.'

His face cleared and he smiled broadly. 'Thank goodness! Then I'm in the right place.' He held his hand out to her. 'I've been looking for you. I'm Jim Nealon. I'm the Jigsaw Maker.'

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Lizzie's first inclination was to shake the proffered hand politely, explain that she did not do business with peddlers and then send him on his way. She didn't want to have him there if Anne came back. She couldn't afford to lose the moment. Anne wasn't fiery like her - Anne simmered. And she could sulk for Ireland if given the opportunity. But he didn't give her the chance. He picked up his satchel and laid it on the table as if he feared whatever was inside might break. He undid the buckles and started to unpack some boxes. They were brick sized and covered in brown paper, thick and flecked with lighter colours, tied with raffia.

'They don't look like jigsaws,' Lizzie said. 'Where are the pictures?' She picked one up and turned it over. 'How do you know how it's supposed to turn out?'

Jim smiled. 'We never do.'

She put the box back on the table. 'How very cryptic. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm not really in the market for new stock.'

He put the box he was holding down and looked around the shop. 'That's a pity,' he said. 'I thought this was perfect for you - something new, something different.'

For goodness sake, what's with the need to ring changes all of a sudden? She opened her mouth to tell him that she had no intention of buying anything from him, new or not, when the flash of Anne's green Polo passed the window. Inside she caught a glimpse her sister, leaning forward on the steering wheel as she always did, singing to herself. Not a care in the world. Lizzie bit her lip.

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'Are you all right?' His voice was gentle. 'If you're too busy, I'll pack up and go away.'

She turned back to see him pick up one of the boxes and start to re-pack.

'No,' she said. 'I'm not busy. Let me see.'

He handed it to her.

Lizzie untied the raffia and one end of the box eased open. She tipped the contents onto a space on the table and spread them out. The pieces were beautiful, tiny, intricately shaped. The backs of them were wood, in this case beech, finely cut so that they were more like buttons than jigsaw pieces and on the fronts varying shades from black to white. Lizzie held one out to him, puzzled. 'What is it?'

Jim took the piece from her and turned it over. 'This side's beech - I didn't plunder it.' He showed her the other side. 'And this is where the beech is from.' He smiled at her confusion. 'Look here.' From the envelope he took some papers. One was a photograph and the other hand-written sheets. He handed the photograph to her.

'It's lovely, where is it?' She took it over to the window to have a better look. It was a black and white picture of an old house, once fine but now rundown, the ivy and roses overgrown. 'It must have been wonderful in its day.'

'It was - here, read this.' He handed her the other pieces of paper.

Lizzie read. 'Balmullen House, Kildangan, Co Kildare, once the residence of...oh, the full history. What a nice touch. So you provide the picture and the background and...'

'No, read on.'

Lizzie scanned the rest of the page. The handwriting was slanted and old-fashioned.

After the initial introduction, the writer identified herself as Mel Sheedy, the daughter of the last housekeeper to have served in the house. For paragraph after paragraph she told of her childhood, the parties, the work and the hardship. It was like being there.

'It's not just a history,' Jim said. 'It's real life. You don't just know what it looks like now; you get a feel for what it was like in its heyday. It's a personal memory.'

'I see. I like that.' Lizzie looked at the picture again. 'But why black and white?

That makes it so much harder to put together.'

Jim picked up a few pieces and rolled them in his palms. 'Yes, but so much more rewarding. He held them out. 'What colour are your memories, Lizzie?'

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She wasn't expecting that question. It hit her like a wet slap and she could feel it shatter and drip onto her shoulder where it spread and dried in purple stains. She shook her head to clear the image. 'I don't know. Multi-coloured, I suppose.' She could hear her voice, hard.

Jim didn't seem to notice. 'Okay, so look at the photograph and then shut your eyes and imagine that you're Mel. Describe the house, the front of it.'

Lizzie did as she was told and to her surprise the picture sprang into her mind almost straight away. She could see the long drive up to the front and she could hear the sound of carriage wheels on gravel as they slowed to a halt. She saw herself getting out and standing at the front door. There was a breeze and the air was full of the smell of the roses on the trellis to one side and the steady hum of bees.

'You can feel it, can't you?' Jim whispered.

Lizzie nodded.

'Ha!' Jim dropped the pieces back onto the table. 'There you are then! It's personal.' He started to scoop them back into the box. 'I took the photograph, you know. It was a beautiful summer's day and the air was clear and all the colours vivid. But they were just the colours of that day. If I had gone the following day, the sky would have been overcast and grey and it would have been a different picture altogether.' He turned and looked at her. 'You see? A coloured picture would have pinned it down, made it particular to one moment in time.' He folded the letter and slid it back into the envelope. 'But this house doesn't belong to one particular day. When you read Mel's memories they're of lots of days - happy, busy, dull - real life days.' He tied the package up again. 'That's what I hope to do in Rathshannan.'

Lizzie sat down and shook her head. 'Well, I think they're beautiful, I really do. But I can't for the life of me see why you'd want to make jigsaws of Rathshannan. It's probably the least exciting village in the whole of County Kilkenny. Nothing ever happens here.' There was a heat in her cheeks. She held up her hand. 'Honestly. In almost every other place there's something to visit. We're not like that. We're just a place to rest your head en route from one exciting day out to another.'

Jim leaned forward on the table, and placed his palms on either side of the jigsaw he had just repackaged. 'And is that what people want who come to visit a place, do you think? Do you think they want excitement?'

Lizzie shrugged. 'I suppose so.'

Jim shook his head. 'No, they don't, they go to theme parks for that. In country places like this they want memories. They want to understand about a place, feel part of it, even identify with it. Why do you think so many Americans come to Ireland summer after summer? They're looking for their roots, that's why. They don't just want to see the grand buildings, the churches and castles - that's other people's history. They want to see the other places too, the hidden places, the places they might have lived in.' He pushed the box towards her. 'They want to read stories like Mel's and make

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those memories their own. And then, after they've gone home, they want to sit by the fire, or at the kitchen table and put the pieces of their memories together. And they don't want those memories confined to one particular day either. I give them the outline in black and white and they make whatever colour of it they please.' He looked so intense. 'Don't you see? They want to colour it for themselves - in their own heads. That makes it theirs.' He sat back and was silent.

For a minute Lizzie wasn't quite sure what to say to him. He was deadly serious.

'I see. And are they all on wood... your puzzles?'

Jim was businesslike again. He pulled another couple of boxes out. 'Yep, look here.' He turned the boxes on their ends and showed her some tiny writing in the corner of each. On the one she had seen was written Balmullen on Beech. Another said Clary Bridge on Rowan. 'I didn't plunder the wood. I wasn't joking about that. It's one of the conditions of the puzzle. It has to be cut from a piece of wood local to the particular scene. In the case of Balmullen, there had been a storm a couple of years before I went there and some of the trees on the grounds were damaged. I managed to salvage some bigger branches and turned the wood till I had pieces suitable.'

'So all the wood is native to the memory?'

'Yes, and that's what I hope to do here. This village may not be exciting in the usual sense but it's old and friendly and has lots of wonderful buildings full of memories that people could share - and lots of trees to work on.' He smiled. 'And you, of course.'

'What do I come under - living memory or dead wood?'

Jim laughed. 'I'm told there isn't a thing about Rathshannan, past or present, you don't know. Definitely living memory.'

Lizzie pointed to the boxes. There were rowans, oaks, yew and sycamore but there was mostly beech. 'And all of it native, you say. Don't you ever cheat?'

'Sometimes.' He smoothed the paper on the box he was holding. 'But I much prefer to get it right.' He smiled at her.

Lizzie smiled back. Even back in their boxes, the wooden jigsaw pieces gave off a smell. It pervaded the usual scents of candles, soap and talc. Old soap, unsold talc. The wood smelt fresh and clean. Lizzie looked at the rows of dried herb arrangements on the counter above the desk. Then she reached over.

'Do you know what, Jim? It's a great idea and I think we might be in business.'

She took his hand and shook it warmly. 'Welcome to Rathshannan, Jigsaw Man.'

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By eleven o'clock that morning the day's excitement was over. A strong wind brought grey clouds that hovered for a while then unleashed a drizzle that stayed all day.

Lizzie watched the deserted street and sighed. If there was a good downpour people would wait till it was over then come out in the air afterwards to celebrate its end, potter around and maybe buy themselves something to celebrate their release. Or else they'd don macs and grab umbrellas and go for it, armed with a sense of purpose and a certain opening to any conversation they might get the opportunity to start. Dreadful weather, isn't it?

Drizzle was a different matter. Nobody ventured out in drizzle, it was too insidious, 'wettin' rain'. By two in the afternoon she gave up all hope of a customer and, fuelled with thoughts of the morning's conversations, made up her mind. While Anne was not completely right about the state of her shop, there was a hint of truth in her observations and it wouldn't harm anyone if she were to make a few alterations. She would move the seasonal stock into the window and clear a few shelves behind the counter for the new. She wracked her brain trying to recall Jim's definition of his jigsaws - harnessing one person's memories so that another could feel part of them - something like that. And her role was to write the history of the scene. That should be easy. She smiled as she predicted the places he would choose to photograph. One was bound to be the old church in Kilfane, Norman built, with its tombstones engraved with effigies of knights. No American tourist would have anything like that at home. Neither could she imagine the water fountain at the crossroads being in their experience. It was so old nobody knew when it was built or who had built it though there were legends that stretched back hundreds of years.

Thinking about it, Lizzie could feel a tingle of excitement. Writing about these ancient places, with their lore and mysteries, would be the perfect task for her and a bonus that she would get commission on each sold. As she packed and sealed the boxes to store in the cupboard against the time they might be fashionable again, she determined to stay a step ahead of her intriguing new friend. If the rain didn't let up, she'd close early and go home and make some notes in preparation. He would definitely be impressed.

Lizzie stopped. Oh, you foolish old woman! Without realising it, she had paused and was running her fingers through her hair as if to release curls she never had. She almost laughed aloud. What has gotten into you, Lizzie Flynn? You haven't taken a notion of the Jigsaw Maker, have you? For a start he's at least a decade too young and while that mightn't be an issue if the decade in question was between twenty and thirty, Lizzie was getting on for fifty. Skinny busy Lizzie, spinster of the parish, with her out-of-date shop with its out-of-date stock.

'Well that's fine,' she said aloud to the empty shelves above her counter.

'Someone has to keep all the pieces together, keep things ticking over so that it doesn't all come apart. Someone had to take responsibility.'

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In the quiet of the shop with the pattering of drizzle on the windows, Lizzie's voice distorted and came back to her ears sounding different. It sounded like her mother berating her. Someone has to take responsibility. She looked at Anne's empty basket and flushed with shame. Anne was trying to help and if she hadn't, then maybe Lizzie wouldn't have been so receptive to the propositions of a perfect stranger and wouldn't now be looking forward to a new venture.

Jigsaws.

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It was two weeks before the Jigsaw Maker reappeared. Lizzie surprised herself by not worrying about his absence in the slightest. Usually, if a delivery was supposed to be there at nine, and didn't arrive till ten past, the delivery man got short shrift – heavy traffic on the Kilkenny road or not. And if someone, by dint of a comment made, led her to believe that he would turn up in a week and didn't, he'd suffer for expectations created. Lizzie Flynn did not tolerate unpredictability.

Jim Nealon was so enthusiastic, Lizzie expected him to turn up by the end of the week. The weather cleared by Wednesday and there were blue skies. The light was good for taking photographs. Every day as she sat at her table scouring catalogues she watched the door out of the corner of her eye, waiting for an unkempt figure with a leather satchel to appear.

And now he hadn't returned and Lizzie didn't mind at all. Even if he never did, his initial visit, coming so soon after her conflict with Anne sparked something off in her. Together and separately, both had pinpointed a rut she'd let herself slide into. Life was uneventful, humdrum, and that was such a safe place to be. With her fiftieth in view, Lizzie could feel the burden of safety grow heavy and stifling. Wouldn't it be nice to break out a bit, take a risk for once in her adult life? As she turned the pages of the catalogues, bizarre items, the ones she usually ignored, were the ones to which she paid most attention. Maybe she should fill her shelves with them, have a refit, even close up for a while and reopen with a whole new look.

'Hello.'

She hadn't even heard the door open. Some cards were knocked off the display as Jim came into the shop; knocking things with his satchel as he passed.

'Sorry, I was always clumsy.'

Lizzie raised an eyebrow. 'That doesn't seem likely - your jigsaw pieces are so precise.'

'Ah yes, but have you tried putting them together?' The corners of his eyes creased with merriment as he took an A4 sized envelope out of his bag. He laid the envelope on the table. 'They mightn't fit.'

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Lizzie took the envelope and opened the flap. 'Great,' she said, 'now he tells me. A jigsaw maker whose pieces don't fit - that should be popular.' She motioned him to sit down. 'You look very pleased with yourself.'

Jim was still smiling. 'To tell you the truth, I'm delighted. This village of yours is a treasure trove of the most beautiful, evocative places. You can walk around a corner and there it is, living history, humming with atmosphere.'

Lizzie sniffed. 'History, yes; living, no; humming; maybe.' She pulled some photographs out of the envelope and laid them on the table without looking at them closely. 'I bet I can guess what these are.'

He smiled but said nothing.

Lizzie slid her reading glasses onto her nose and picked up the first picture. For a minute she stared at it then slid the next one from behind and laid it on top, then the next. She didn't say a word until she had digested every detail then handed them back to him and exhaled slowly.

'I don't understand,' she said eventually.

'Understand what?'

'These,' she gestured at the photos. 'I don't understand what these are.'

He spread the three pictures out and leaned over them. 'Rathshannan,' he said.

'These are, to my mind, some of the most evocative images of this village. Anyone could look at one of these and recognise it. Take this,' he picked up the top picture. Itwas of the village school - or rather the old village school which had shut its doors to pupils two seasons ago. Talk was that some developer had it now and was planning to turn it into apartments - posh weekend retreats for city-weary high earners. 'How many National Schools in the country look like this?'

'Most of them probably. The old ones anyway.'

'Exactly. They were everywhere once but now they're an endangered species. Soon they'll be ripped down, soaped up, changed. And what good will they be to us then?'

Lizzie felt cross. Whether at being wrong in her predictions or because she couldn't see what he was getting at, she wasn't sure. 'Jim,' she said, 'I don't see what good they are to us now. I thought you were going to come back with the old church on the Thomastown road or the fountain at the crossroads. They're unique.'

'You can get photographs with those places on, everyone goes there. But nobody belongs. It's just history. This is different; this is personal. If the people who buy our jigsaws haven't been to one of these schools themselves, their fathers and mothers will have. They'll have walked up a path like that,' he prodded the path on the

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photograph, 'rushed in a door like that. It'll be a part of their past in a way that old Norman effigies never could.'

Lizzie picked up the picture and looked at it. 'You're right, of course, but I don't see what you want me to do for you. I can tell you when the school was founded, how many pupils went there, who were the nuns who ran the place and when it closed, but apart from that, nothing exciting happened there at all.'

Jim shrugged. 'Depends on what you call exciting. For someone looking to confirm their identity - as so many of our tourists are - it's the most ordinary things that are the most exciting. Being part of the everyday humdrum is the goal.'

Lizzie yawned and stretched. 'Oh dear. Well, you've got your expert there. Humdrum is my middle name.' She picked up the other pictures as well and fanned them out in her hands. 'Go on then. Tell me exactly what I am to do.'

Jim took the first picture from her. 'You were a pupil here, circa...?'

Lizzie felt herself blush. 'The sixties, if you must know.'

'Perfect.' He turned the picture over and pulled a pen from his pocket. 'So let's imagine that Lizzie Flynn is back in Rathshannan National School in... say 1969, and that's where you start.' He wrote some notes on the back of the photo. 'Take this home with you and look at it, think about it for a few days, really get into the scene and then write me up all you can recall about that particular year in that school. Everything, the big events, the outings, the ordinary. I want to be able to read it afterwards and really feel that I was there.' He pointed to the other two photos. 'Maybe we should leave these for the time being. They might be distracting.'

Lizzie held on to them. 'No, let me have these too.' She looked at them again and smiled. 'Funny you should have picked 1969.' She could hear the shake in her voice and hoped that he couldn't. 'That was quite an eventful year.'

He sat watching her, saying nothing.

'Really,' she said. 'I spent eight years in that school and the only year anything happened was that one. The only year, in fact that everything happened.' She was silent then and he sat watching her. 'So, 1969, Rathshannan National School. I can't think where to begin.'

Jim took one of the jigsaws from his satchel. 'When Mel wrote the story of Balmullen House, she told me she just shut her eyes and let the years pass away. And when she opened them again, she wrote without stopping as if what she was writing was what she was seeing in front of her. Maybe that might work for you.'

'It might.'

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'Great!' Jim stood up and slung the bag over his shoulder. 'I'll leave you to it so and get to work on superimposing this image onto wood. I've got the most beautiful pieces to work on.'

'Really? Sourced, cut and turned to perfection in a fortnight? You are a quick worker, Jim Nealon.'

Jim grinned. 'And you're a sharp one, Lizzie Flynn.' And then he was gone.

Watching as he walked past the window and on up the street, Lizzie shivered then berated herself. Honestly, she was practically flirting! In the distance, she could see him climb into an old Land Rover, like himself unkempt and bordering on scruffy.

She waited till it disappeared from view. It wasn't even as if she found him attractive - he wasn't - he was just relaxed, like someone you'd known forever and from whom there'd be no point in keeping secrets. Not that she had any secrets to keep. She looked at the picture. Not from the Rathshannan National School in 1969 anyway.

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