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Published by The Conrad Press Ltd. in the United Kingdom 2022

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ISBN 978-1-915494-15-3

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Typesetting and Cover Design by: Charlotte Mouncey, www.bookstyle.co.uk

The Conrad Press logo was designed by Maria Priestley.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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Colin Stewart

We hold these truths to be self-evident…

Prologue

Cathy has a soft spot – asks me how I know him. I tell her I'm writing a book. She pauses, pointing out Pamela Jones as she glides across the hall within, continuing in a whisper: they had a relationship you know…

It isn't true, but I don't correct her.

What about you? I ask.

Me? No… though I've thought about it, she admits, a slow drag sending spirals of smoke sprawling up into the chill night air. I do fancy him, she continues in an undertone, and I think he's an extraordinary person. She holds my eye now, making sure I've heard and understood, before conceding with seeming regret: but I think we're better off as friends.

There were many eulogies that night: some official, delivered from a clearing of chairs at the far end of the room, some only in passing.

When I took a seat next to Pamela Jones, who I didn't yet know by sight, she had almost immediately turned to introduce herself, before asking how I knew Kevin.

I'm writing a book about him, I had replied, smiling despite myself, adding quickly, and you're in it.

There should be a whole chapter on me, she snorted. We went to school together you know…

I did.

Pamela had given her testimonial earlier in the evening, recalling a scene I already knew by heart and had written about, relating – with a laconic drawl – how she had pulled unexpectedly onto the Donnellon drive in her brand new car. Rushing out to investigate, Mrs Donnellon had almost immediately declared that her son would not be driving any time soon.

Kevin would pass his test within a matter of months, Pamela observed, as the room erupted into generous applause – this the sort of reversal they had come to expect of their celebrated friend.

Breathless and red of face, his tongue loosened by the alcohol he had been consuming throughout the day, Mark Holt took to the floor with an unsteady shuffle, before running emotively through the various campaigns they had worked on together over the years. There were tears in his eyes when he detailed his friend's courage, explaining that Kevin had never been one to duck a fight: an inspiration, he averred, despite difficulties he had never made an issue of.

We were here to celebrate Kevin's fiftieth year, the room full of people I had already written about, who I felt I knew despite having never met, refracted as they were by time and perspective.

James Schaer, the nephew, gave a reading next, reciting a poem that Andrew Kavanagh, one of Kevin's oldest friends, had composed for an earlier occasion: forty-eight lines of twenty-four rhyming couplets. I know them both; I have written about them too. The poem was utter doggerel.

As this latest speaker stepped down, I turned my head about the room, only now noticing the photographs affixed at shoulder height to the walls around us. There were others spread across the tables too, like oversized playing cards, each showing Kevin in a different time and place, offering their own florid documentation of his varied life and career thus far: the confidence and exuberance were hard to ignore.

The room is full of thalidomides, all now around fifty years of age, as has to be the case, and – suddenly lost in their incestuous midst – I realise that they will all soon be footnotes, their stories forgotten.

I watch closely as the tributes run on, Kevin's face betraying an increasing, if good-natured, bewilderment at the manner of representation. Those garbled portraits don't seem right, and we both know it, skewering as they do into a reductive parody.

A captive audience, at his own event, volunteering genial bemusement to everything that is said – with smiles and acknowledgements

to the guests who plead his attention – Kevin wonders whether he really belongs, what his life amounts to, whether anybody truly knows him. I wonder, too, as recollections of my own return, scenes I had thought forgotten.

But this isn't about me.

What had been clear, from the moment we started to talk, was the precision of Kevin's memory in picking out those sharp pinpricks of detail, the bright particulars that blazed a fevered course through the space of time that lay between, Kevin bringing each lucidly to life.

My own memory, conversely, is grey and tortuous: an ash that whistles through heavy winds over desert flats – dead ends, lacking substance.

But this isn't about me.

She said, simply, 'It's not going to happen,' and whatever trailed after – contrition, apology, reconciliation – he didn't hear. Stood at the kerb, under a quickly-darkening sky, barely aware of the rain that had just started to fall, a heavy burst starching the shirt he had put on specially for the occasion, there was nothing he could offer in response.

'It's not going to happen.'

Did she repeat the words, or is their meaning still ringing from that single pronouncement?

But this isn't about me.