

THE WATCHERS

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Also by A.M. Shine

The Watchers

The Creepers

THE WATCHERS

A. M. SHINE



An Aries Book

First published in the UK in 2021 by Head of Zeus Ltd
This paperback edition published in the UK in 2022 by Head of Zeus Ltd,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

ISBN (PB): 9781801102148

ISBN (E): 9781801102155

Typeset by Divaddict Publishing Solutions Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



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5-8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

Prologue

John

The forest was dark on the brightest day. It was as though its ancient trees hid some terrible secret from the sun, and so weaved their branches together, casting a black gauze over the sky. The light broke through here and there in thin, hazy pillars but these were too rare to ever bring warmth. Any light was better than no light. It told John all that he needed to know, that there was still hope. There was every reason to keep on running. It was an unnatural place where the shadows never lifted, like a bleak lens forced over the eyes. He yearned for colour and light to guide his way, but amidst the trees there were neither. Hours had passed in that never-ending limbo, where John's every panicked breath was all that broke the silence. The end was still nowhere in sight. And those golden threads of light were beginning to fade.

He had left the shelter at daybreak, under the first cracks in the black above. John had rested for two days and nights, healing his muscles and conserving whatever he had left in his body to save all that he had left in life. So many failed

attempts lay behind him. But he knew in his heart that he had been close. Just a few more feet. The man had drawn a compass in the earth, gauging its north as best he could from those rare fissures of sky. He had tested every direction, treating it like a clock, completing its cycle, combing the forest for some way out. But he could only run so far in order to make it back before nightfall. And it was never far enough. John retraced the markers he had left behind him, finding his way back to his wife's arms, sometimes with mere minutes of daylight to spare; always cutting it closer and closer.

In the time before, he used to bring presents home to his wife. Ciara always had a soft spot for surprises, no matter how silly, cheap or childish they might have been. There were the stuffed toys he picked up by the petrol station checkout. They now lived on the bed in their spare room, all glassy eyes set towards the window as Ciara thought they'd enjoy the view. Chocolates, flowers, even a punnet of plump strawberries bought off the side of the road; if John thought it would make his wife smile, then it was hers. And now, he returned to her, weary and defeated, and always empty-handed. He couldn't even give her false hope without the guilt of lying to her. They were never getting home. There was no way out. And he hadn't the heart to tell her.

John blamed himself. He never told Ciara this. He didn't think he had to. It was certainly nobody else's fault but his own, and he hardly had the strength to speak, never mind state the obvious. He had pushed the idea, even though he knew she would have preferred to stay home and laze about like she loved to on a Sunday, never stepping outside, as though for that one day in the week their new home was

the whole world. She was like a child with her dream doll's house, still disbelieving that it was really hers. There wasn't a lone chair or lamp that she hadn't doted on. It was all she ever wanted, and just another thing she had lost.

Their last hot meal was an old-fashioned fry-up – John's one and only speciality – with fat slices of sourdough that looked crooked no matter how he cut them. He remembered it all so clearly. He had botched up the egg yolks again, not surprisingly. Ciara's fingers played a little drumroll on the table every time he stood up to the pan. The probability of good eggs hadn't improved since they met, but it added some excitement to their Sundays. He should have savoured every mouthful, but instead he ate as though breakfast was a daily given, never to be lost, as common as sunlight, fresh air and all those things taken for granted. He had been standing by the window over the kitchen sink, rinsing a mug long after it was clean, listening to its squeak under the warm water. The distant fields' long grasses were like eyelashes winking at him, shimmering under that summer blue.

That's when the notion of taking a Sunday drive seeded itself in his mind. John imagined it blooming into a perfect day; one that their shared memories would keep from ever wilting. If only he had known the horrors such seeds could grow.

Ciara was sunken in the corner of the couch, with her toes curled under her in those fleecy socks that were a Sunday staple. She was smiling like she used to when he peered around the door, humming to herself, flicking through the channels, most likely looking for a movie that he would enjoy. It was never about her. She would cuddle in under his

arm, and he wouldn't know if her eyes were open or closed. That was their perfect Sunday, and for a long time it never changed. Not until John had to ruin everything.

'Come on,' he announced, slapping his hands, 'let's go on an adventure!'

She looked to him, lips lolling open, sharing that beautifully bemused expression she always did when he surprised her. Ciara's thumb ceased clicking. Her eyes glanced back at the television, almost sadly. She didn't want this. John knew that. Their day had found its natural rhythm like all those Sundays gone before it, and Ciara had mapped out the coming hours like a captain sailing a familiar sea. But she chose to play along, content to do whatever he wanted so long as they were together.

'Where will we go?' she asked, sitting forward, feigning the excitement that John eagerly lapped up like the real deal.

'Connemara,' he replied. 'It's so close to us, and we've only skirted around the main roads since we moved out here. Let's go deeper and see what we can find. Blue skies and hills, and sheep!'

'Sheep?'

'They're everywhere.' He laughed, casting his arms around him. 'There's nothing for miles but sheep.'

'Okay, handsome,' she said, peeling herself off the couch and plodding stiff-legged into his arms, 'I'll go wherever you want—' she stood up on her toes to kiss him '—and you had me at *sheep*.'

'There's nothing else out there,' he replied with a smile before planting a kiss on her forehead. 'You can pick out your favourite one and we'll bundle it in the back of the car.'

There, holding his wife in a home, not a prison of concrete and glass; that's the moment he could have saved them. John wished he had just held Ciara a little longer. If only he had asked her what she really wanted to do, not that he didn't already know. She had probably already picked out half a dozen movies for him. Ciara would read the blurbs aloud in her deepest theatrical voice and he would decide the winner. Maybe a better husband wouldn't have been so selfish. A day on the couch sure sounded good to him now.

John had to stop. He palmed the sweat from his face, gulping for air that seeped like mould into his lungs. The seasons held no sway over the woodland. An eternal coldness was trapped there, rising as mist by the deeper pits. It was a cemetery of trees whose black earth sank soft without need for rain, and the feeling of death and rot haunted it like the residue of some horrible dream. The stillness there was unnerving. John's clumsy steps were imitated from every angle, their dizzying echoes leading his senses astray. He had to keep his course. Ciara's life depended on him not losing his way.

But the forest's murky depths were wild and misleading. Like a maze of mirrors, it teased the eyes, goading John into doubting himself. Too many times he had stopped, comparing the path just travelled to what lay ahead, and marking no difference. He imagined a crow circling above the forest – if ever an animal was brave enough – watching John orbit the same claustrophobic tract of hell, lost like a rat in a maze.

He couldn't recall from what direction the car had come to stop at the forest's edge. Those serpentine roads had twisted and turned so often, moulting his bearings with

every mile. If only he had followed the map like Ciara had wanted to. If only he had done a lot of things differently.

‘It won’t be an adventure if we know where we’re going,’ he had said, turning his head subtly to wink at her as she rooted through the glove compartment.

‘Okay.’ She’d giggled, sitting back like a child on a school bus, nervously excited about her first day. ‘No maps! You had better make sure you remember how to get us home, okay?’

‘Don’t you worry, I promise to get you home in one piece.’

John had never broken a promise to his wife before. And at that moment in time, he thought he never would. They talked and laughed the entire way, admiring the sun-soaked world around them, following any road that took their fancy, opting in every case for the one less travelled, where the car bobbed side to side as though it sailed through a storm. Stone hills were marbled in light, and even the drabest of meadow waved primaries like coloured ribbon. Soon there were no houses, no other cars, and not another sheep to be seen for miles. Eventually, even the birds grew scarcer. Wherever their adventure was taking them, it was a dead place that even the animals knew to avoid.

‘Should we turn back?’ Ciara had asked him, stifling a yawn.

‘Let’s just go on a little further,’ he had replied, squeezing her thigh. ‘There has to be something at the finish line.’

John had so many opportunities to prevent what was coming. But how could he have known? He had played out the memories of that drive so many times, like a movie reel on a loop. John pictured himself in the back seat, roaring at himself to stop, to turn around, to keep his wife

safe from whatever the hell was in that woodland. But his past self couldn't hear him. The ignorant bastard just kept on driving.

After the car broke down, Ciara had wanted to wait it out. Somebody was bound to come that way eventually. But they had no phone battery and no clue as to where John had brought them. He had fidgeted with the engine, eyeing it up like a mechanic who genuinely knew what he was doing. But the truth was that he hadn't a clue. It was strange – even his wristwatch had stopped. Miles of lifeless road lay behind them, and without enough food or water, how long would they last? The nights were as dark as they were cold, and Ciara – despite her youth – was in no shape to make such a journey. John saw only one option, and she trusted him enough not to argue against it. They entered the woodland where the road faded to black earth and stone, and shadows sealed the way behind them like a trapdoor vanishing, never to be found again.

He had watched Ciara weaken over the months. Her tired eyes never opened for long, as though the air itself was an opiate, dulling and draining them. There was never enough food to feed all four mouths. Their appetites had swallowed themselves whole. Even the sensation of a blackberry slipping down the throat was nauseating. Water was divvied between them, leaving no thirst quenched. Ciara's skin, once so soft like white silk, became dry to the touch, and mottled with stains that she couldn't wipe clean. The toils of survival were ageing them with a cruel, unstoppable urgency.

A wiser man might have waited for the winter to pass. Its days were too short, and its dark nights too long. But the

cold December had proven itself lethal. Sickness and injury were inevitable. Theirs was a slow death, and it broke his heart to watch his wife languish before his very eyes, wilting like a rose denied the sun.

He dreaded the thought of leaving Ciara alone with that woman. But she knew how to survive. She had long discarded the baggage of kindness and optimism, leaving only the essentials. These traits were Ciara's standards, and John sensed that the woman considered them a weakness. Somehow, his wife still smiled. Her green eyes still sparkled, with or without tears. At night, they would sit together. She would burrow into him and he would hold her close, caressing her hair until her breathing slowed to a restless sleep, just like they used to every Sunday; all those days cherished like a past never to be repeated.

The woodland was darkening, and still John forced his body through its snarled tangles of leaf and vine. His skin was torn. His palms bronzed from blood. There had to be a break soon. Those trees seemed to stretch around the world, growing faster than he could ever hope to outrun. Ciara would never have made it this far, John knew. He would happily trade his life for hers, if only fate would give him the option and stand true to its word. He kept on going. He wouldn't stop until those things found him, and of that there was no uncertain doubt. Deadwood cracked beneath his feet like brittle bones as he searched for any way out of that accursed place.

John had yet to see them. Even the woman who had been in the shelter when they happened upon it spun only vague riddles as to their appearance. She knew nothing, but her ignorance didn't disturb her like it did John. The woman

was content to survive, to live a life with no future unlike the present, divested of the simplest joy and comfort.

She saw them all as burdens, the boy especially. John's gambit to find help was dismissed by her as suicide. Their pits are everywhere, she had said. Hidden across the forest floor and stretching far beyond it. And come nightfall, the door to their shelter was staying shut. They were the rules. That was how she had survived.

John fell to his knees; sapped of air and strength, head spinning, coloured freckles dancing across his vision, all the brighter in the last light of day as shadows flooded the forest, concealing the myriad roots that lined the earth like booby traps. His arms were crossed tight over his ribcage, trying to contain the pain that eviscerated every nervous fibre and tortured organ inside him. There was no end in sight. The darkness made quite sure of that. Any minute now, John imagined them swarming around their pits, waiting for the sun's fatal, final sliver to slip over the unseen horizon. What his mind conceived was influenced only by the sounds behind the mirror, where they watched them night after night for reasons unknown, as a child stares into a fishbowl, tapping its glass.

Suddenly, their shrieks filled the night. He was out of time. John had never heard them out in the open, far from the shelter whose concrete shell had kept them safe for all those months. He clawed his way forward, though now the darkness hid the way. Their voices were so close, so ear-splittingly loud that John expected them to fall upon him at any second. But how could that be? The shelter was a day's trek behind him. Had he become lost? Without daylight and a compass to hold his line, there was no knowing what

wayward course had led him there, where the leaves now shivered from the thunder of their bodies, tracking his scent and all those footprints sunken into the black mud.

Those last nights, when John held his wife in his arms, he had dreamt of surprising her, not with more teddy bears. The spare bed was already teeming with them. He imagined Christmas together in their perfect home. If he could just find a way out, they could be back for her favourite time of year, and that heart-melting look of unbridled bemusement would return, and she would laugh and smile again, and stand on her toes to kiss him. And everything would be like it once was.

These were John's last thoughts as the watchers gathered around him.

DECEMBER

I

Mina

The dashboard darkened just before the engine died. Its red dials had been the only colour since nightfall. All else was black or white, or something in between; the ashen hue of moonlight. The headlamps didn't fade or flicker. The night swallowed the road ahead in one impatient gulp and the car sailed to a stop, its tyres scrunching over frosted stone. Then there was only that lightless silence and Mina straining to make sense of it.

'This is your fault,' she whispered to the parrot on the back seat; its cage was propped up between two coats. But Mina knew that the bird wasn't to blame.

'Just follow one of those country roads,' Peter had said in that husky smoker's voice that always made Mina consider quitting. 'They all lead the same way, and it won't take you more than a few hours, and the bird will give you no trouble. Tim told me that he only acts up when he's hungry.'

Peter had never driven in his life. He had drunk every

day for fifty years and still he was thirsty. He looked like a man who had seen it all. A sage and a seer who kept secrets others could only dream of. Maybe it was the eyes that squinted out from beneath those bushy eyebrows, or the silvered beard that glistened all the brighter when his mouth of dark, yellowing teeth was nattering away about nothing. The fact was that Peter had seen nothing except the bottom of a thousand pint glasses, and the drink had aged him terribly.

Mina had been sitting outside the pub before the black clouds rolled in from the bay, bringing the big rain. The cobbles were uneven, and puddles already spread like sores across every street. The rain never bothered her, and it certainly never came as any surprise. She could read the sky like a face and knew when it was welling up long before the tears came. This was a far cry from autumn's much-lauded epoch. Gone were the leaves – coiled and russet – that dragged the poet's pen to paper. This was the tail end of the year. These were the sombre, leafless days of December, and the first Christmas that Mina would spend without her mum. Never had a gloomy sky felt so fitting.

People-watching was her distraction of choice, and that's what led her back to the pub that afternoon. Of all her haunts, Quay Street was her dearest. Here there was coffee, ashtrays on tables, and always a barman in earshot to upgrade to something stronger. The street's upper reaches were festooned with bright bunting that changed colour with the festivals, always overnight and never with any witnesses. As picturesque as a postcard with its quaint shopfronts and restaurants, crowds were drawn there like

gulls to the open ocean. The pub's furniture was set behind windbreakers that sometimes fell in a gale, but they kept Mina apart from the people, separating the artist from her subjects – those who, unlike her, probably had places to be or friends to meet. Mina kept reminding herself that she was doing all right on her own, and some day soon she was bound to start believing it.

Her coffee was cold, and bitter as it was black. Mina scanned both ends of the street, searching for that *one* perfect face. All the while the pencil fanned through her fingers, hovering over the page like a kestrel waiting to strike. Winter squalls complicated matters. People kept their heads down and never stood still. The cold days were worse as their scarves crept up from their necks, leaving only the eyes on show.

For months Mina had been collecting her *strangers*, as she called them. She only had to glance at a face to perceive its subtleties, to fasten it to her memory. And her sketchbook was full of them; page after page after rain-speckled, coffee-stained page. The paper was organic. Faces grew on it easily. And they diverted her thoughts just long enough to enjoy a moment's peace.

There was the middle-aged homeless man with the jolly, bearded face, and kind eyes. His button nose made his hairy cheeks seem all the larger, like a stray Persian cat. There wasn't a thread on top, but his eyebrows, too, were untamed. They curled skyward in a style that reminded Mina of French filigree. Whenever she passed him, he would say good morning or good afternoon or good evening, as though he was forever watching the sun. Sometimes she threw him a few coins. Other times she just smiled. It never

seemed like he was begging. He would just sit there, waiting for his luck to change, or for the sun to sink out of sight; whichever came first.

Then there was the moustachioed older gent. His every feature was bruised from the drink, as though he couldn't sweat it out, and so it gathered beneath the skin, bubbling up on the nose and cheeks. His eyes were marinated in the stuff. When eventually he dies no one will wonder why, and the blemishes will fade from his skin like an assassin escaping into the shadows.

Next was *the android*, as Mina had come to call her. The face was flawless; sharp and symmetrical, with alabaster skin so smooth that it had to be synthetic. Every detail was deliberately selected to maximise her beauty, probably by a scientist in a white coat. She was uncommonly tall; a multi-purpose robot with the athletic prowess to complement the looks. Science fiction writers had fantasised about this woman for decades.

Three times Mina had drawn her, and on each page her face was the same. She had never seen someone so sad, or so versed in hiding it. Suppressing a smile isn't easy. The happiness always creeps out somehow. But sadness can be stashed under the skin like a dark secret. It doesn't need tears to make its presence felt, and this woman's face was devoid of even the slightest expression. Wherever she had come from and wherever she was going, she was flanked between a past and future that kept her lips from ever creasing into a smile.

Then the pages settled on *that* sketch – the self-portrait that Mina had drawn after one too many glasses. Beside a hungry ashtray and two bottles of wine she had stared at

her reflection until it seemed to smile back at her. Ironic really, all things considered.

This was her realised by her own hand with just enough honesty and disdain to make it matter. Mina had considered ripping the page out the following morning, but maybe that's where she belonged, lost amidst a crowd of strangers. No better, no different, just another face judged in that moment on her expression alone. Immortalised in that sad, pathetic second when life's seams were starting to fray.

The eyes looked close to tears. Even the eyeliner couldn't hide it. All that black only accentuated the sadness. They didn't stare at Mina. Instead, they looked right through her with a disinterest bordering on rejection. The lips didn't work, like moulding clay left in the air for too long. Smiling had become uncomfortable. Even talking now felt like a chore. The nose was neat and dead straight. It was boring. The cheekbones were high, and her whole face was this hackneyed heart shape. Everything else was uninspired. Small ears, tidy chin. Even the teeth, though you couldn't see them, were straight and orderly.

The hair was jet black, and the jaggedly chopped bob seemed like a good idea at the time. So did the fringe, but now Mina wasn't so sure. No matter what she did to bluff some individuality, she might as well have been made on a factory line. Her beauty was the generic sort, and where was the beauty in that?

If she had seen this face on the street, she wouldn't have drawn it. She would have kept on looking. *Here we go again.* Mina took a deep breath, slammed the book shut, and slid it back into her bag. She hated when she got like

this: all sullen and melodramatic, as her sister would say. Besides, the night before had been one of her better ones. Her black dress had kept everyone's concentration off their cards. The bills would be paid, and the rent would be met. Wasn't that enough to imitate a smile?

The first bombs of rain began to fall; slow and sloppy warning shots. The main strike was approaching and no siren was necessary to clear the streets. Mina returned inside, taking her cold coffee with her, and there was Peter by the bar, swaying like a broken mast after too many storms. It was still early enough in the day to make sense of him, but late enough that you might not want to. His face always lit up whenever Mina landed through the door of the pub. He was old and ugly. She was all the opposites.

'There's a collector of rare birds and parrots and whatnot up in Connemara,' he told her. 'And I've this parrot. Well actually, it's not mine. It's Tim's. But we're selling it together. It's called a golden conure, and he's worth a pretty penny. That's a *golden conure*,' he repeated slowly, emphasising every syllable.

Mina hadn't heard of Tim before that day. It was strange to think that Peter had friends stashed somewhere away from the pub. She threw a glance towards the barman, Anthony, who leaned on the Guinness tap, listening in with a smirk on his face. The man's thirty-odd years were splashed in silver across the sides of his black hair. He was classically good-looking, like an early James Bond portrait, but lacked the charisma to realise the likeness.

'What was the bird's name again?' he asked, goading Peter into saying it for what felt like the millionth time.

'*Gol-den-con-yure*,' he repeated, to which Anthony just

laughed and walked away, leaving Mina with a man who may have already drunk more than she had suspected.

A pint of Guinness waited to be topped off, waves of bistro rippling above the black. Cups and saucers chinked. Stools were dragged across the floor. Everything was wooden and warm, and no voice was too loud. Anthony worked by the coffee machine, hammering out the old and pressing in the new. The steam gurgled the milk, burning it nearly every time. The register rang open and snapped closed, and there was music, all weaved together into a comfort blanket of familiar sounds. The pub was a safe place. Timeless until the lights flashed, and the last orders drew down the taps.

The windows were fogged up. Voices and breaths, toasties and soup – this hot, wholesome, almost nauseating air was trapped in an airlock, and only when the door opened did it explode outside, much to the dismay of those who distrusted the draught. It stole lives once upon a time, and now it stole the heat.

‘You want me to drive this bird to Connemara?’ she asked, both hands cradled around the hot whiskey poised just below her nose.

‘That’s right. A day’s drive, no more and no less, and you can keep two hundred of the euro. Mind you, that’ll have to cover the petrol cost. If you don’t want the job, then I’ll ask someone else. But listen, Mina,’ he whispered with toxic breath, leaning in closer, ‘this is easy money, and you’d be doing myself a favour.’

Peter was more tuned in than people gave him credit for. Or it was possible that Mina was so scattered that they shared the same social static. Some weeks earlier she had

posted an advert online for him. It was for a beat-up cello that looked as though he'd found it in a second-hand charity shop. But it had sold for five hundred euro, of which Peter had slipped Mina an easy hundred. A few more friends like him and she wouldn't have to treat every bill like the enveloped equivalent of Pandora's box.

'Where in Connemara would you be sending me?' she said. 'It's a big place.'

'I've a map,' he replied with a wink and nod. 'Your man, the buyer, he told me where he lives, and sure you can't get lost these days.'

'And when does he want this...?' Mina asked, forgetting.

'*Gol-den-con-yure*,' he said, even slower this time. 'I told him that he'd have it tomorrow.'

'Jesus.' Mina laughed. 'That was nice of you.'

The rain against the window was reason enough to let her decision linger. Mina had worn her leather jacket; the short one that barely reached down her back. Loose threads marked where the buttons used to cling, and its elbows and shoulders had faded to grey. A few badges were pinned around its lapels. Her sweater was woollen white with black stripes, so long that its sleeves stretched down to her fingers. At least she had the good mind not to wear a skirt. The jeans slipped snugly inside her ankle boots, scuffed from too many winters and not enough polish.

Mina had yet to touch the canvas in her studio. Its blankness had bothered her since she agreed to the job, like an unwanted pet constantly crying out for attention. Commissioned work paid well, but she hated it more than counting out her change to afford a cup of coffee. The client was in control, and it always felt like homework. As if there

was a right and a wrong answer to art. The cards had been kind. She had won enough to tide her over for a while. But luck like that was rare. Two hundred euro was a lot. Besides, the drive might clear her head. Amazing it was how after all those hot whiskeys the delivery of the bird seemed like a perfectly good idea.

‘I knew I could count on you,’ Peter said as he signalled for another round to celebrate. ‘Easiest money you’ll ever make, and that’s the truth.’

The alcohol-fuelled optimism of that evening felt like a false memory as Mina unfurled the map across the windshield. In hindsight, she probably should have inspected it sooner, but there had been plenty of signposts when the roads still held some tarmac. Its paper stank of Peter’s wax jacket and was so tattered that it must have lived in his pocket since he bought it a decade earlier. Mina had to wrench her seat back just to wrap her head around what she was looking at. When eventually she found the dog-eared section where she was supposedly parked with two wheels in the ditch, she saw that Peter had drawn a circle in blue biro, seemingly at random. Its circumference swallowed up most of the page. But never mind where she was supposed to be going, Mina didn’t even know where she was.

‘For fuck’s sake, Peter,’ she whispered to herself. ‘If ever a map was more useless.’

The roads had narrowed. Their uneven walls had long fallen to rubble, and a matted spine of grass brushed under the car as it trudged forward, its wheels plunging into pits of crackling ice. Any variety to keep the eyes entertained died with the sun, and soon a chill mist swept softly over

the surrounding bogs. Mina searched the horizon eagerly for any signs of life – the light of a distant house or the last vestiges of some backwoods people, but there was nothing. Even those bastard sheep that ambled down from the hillsides had abandoned her. Every animal was burrowed out of sight, demoralised by a day too short to make a difference. Silent and uncertain was the winter, and in Connemara it was never so bleak.

Every station on the radio had fizzled to static, and so Mina listened instead to the car's weary rattle and the thrum of her fingers on the steering wheel, waiting patiently for an answer to the question she kept asking herself – *where the fuck am I?* Her headlamps had been the only light as far as the eye could see – like a fallen star on a dead planet – and for the first time in a long time her loneliness was starting to trouble her. She should have arrived at the buyer's house hours ago. Peter's map was splayed on the passenger's seat beside her. Now and again, she'd frown at it from the corner of her eye. Every *móinín* and crooked stretch of road seemed to lead her back to nowhere. And the headlights only revealed so much – the same scraggy strip of muck and stone.

'Any ideas?' she asked her passenger on the back seat. 'No? I didn't think so.'

Even a call from Jennifer would be a welcome break from the parrot's stale company. But conversations with her sister always left Mina exhausted. Jennifer would talk at length about her new husband and their new home, barely stopping to catch a breath. This was routinely followed by a few anecdotes from the weekend just gone. These involved hills or hiking, or anything that produced fifty photographs

to share with the world. All filtered so that the sky resembled a cheap watercolour. *You had to be there*, Jennifer would then say. Mina could think of nothing worse.

Jennifer had rung two days earlier, after lunchtime and then again in the evening. Both times Mina had stared at her sister's name as it vibrated hostilely on the table; one hand reaching to answer and the other holding it back. The longer they went without talking, the guiltier she felt. The second missed call had left a voicemail behind it like a stain that Mina hadn't removed yet. Now seemed as good a time as any.

'You ready for this?' she said to the parrot as she unlocked her phone. 'This is my sister. You'll get to hear the shit that I've to deal with now.'

Not surprisingly, the voicemail began with a long sigh of frustration. 'Why don't you answer your phone? I'm only calling to see how you are. I don't understand why you want to make this so difficult. I get it, you're an *artist* and you need time to, whatever, do your art. But it's time to get your life on track, you know? You can't muddle on like this, selling the odd painting or, I don't know. Listen, I'm not going to call you again, okay? I'll leave it up to you. Mum wouldn't have wanted this, Meens.'

That's what Mina's mum had rechristened her. Jennifer began using the name after she had passed away, as if *Meens* was a responsibility passed down through the family, like a broken heirloom they couldn't fix. Mina's mum was the only one who held her together, and the cracks glistened all the brighter beside the light of Jennifer's perfect life. *Selling the odd painting?* She shouldn't have listened to that. Her sister's voice had only made a bad situation worse. *Eyes on*

the road. Don't think about it. There had to be a light in the dark soon.

'Keep it together, Meens,' she said to herself. '*All paths lead somewhere,*' just like her mum used to remind her whenever life took an unexpected turn.

It was then that the dashboard's instruments disappeared, like a pilot's cockpit losing power over uncharted lands. In the blink of an eye the world was drained of light and sound. There was only the moon, like a bulb in muddy water. Mina's hand had jiggled with the keys in the ignition, and when that failed, she fumbled around for her phone. She held down its power button like a paramedic searching for a pulse, but still the darkness remained unbroken. Mina dipped her hands blindly into her bag and rummaged around for a lighter. Her fingers found keys, lipstick, a pack of playing cards, lipstick again, and then she felt it. *Click. Click.* She took a deep breath. Nobody could be this unlucky. *Click.* There was light. No more than a single, heroic flame. But it was enough to help Mina find her tobacco pouch without further foraging. She always kept one pre-rolled for emergencies. This was definitely such an occasion.

Her breathing seemed louder in the absence of all else. She pined for the engine's warm purr; the companionship of something as simple as sound. Mina's hands were trembling now. They wouldn't stay still, as though they belonged to somebody else; someone whose nerves had clearly got the better of them. She smoked quickly, with the cigarette suspended by her mouth, staring at nothing, because there was nothing to see. The bird thrashed its wings against the

cage, making Mina jolt from her seat. How was everything suddenly so loud? The clang of its thin, iron bars was deafening.

'Take it easy,' she said, rolling the window down and waving the smoke outside with her hand. 'Jesus, you're worse than my sister.'

Mina took her thumb off the lighter. There was no telling how much gas remained, and she knew better than to waste any. The ember of the cigarette would have to light the way for now. The bird calmed itself as the cold air crept inside. Soon the only sound was Mina's pursed lips drawing in smoke, and the tired exhalation that followed. She sat with her arm stretched out the window, her head arched to the side so that she could see the stars. It was eerily quiet. She closed her eyes and thought of all the places that she would rather be – anywhere but the middle of nowhere.

She would wait until sunrise, and then she would decide what to do. Mina had driven for so long that there had to be someone nearby who could help. The daylight would reveal some distant cottage, or maybe a tribute as trifling as a signpost. There was always the chance that the car would miraculously start back to life. As financially harried as she was, she would happily retrace the way she had come and let Peter have his bird back, free of charge, and his fucking map.

'Well, this wasn't one of my better ideas,' she muttered. 'I guess I'll just add it to the list.'

Too attuned had Mina become to the din of her city apartment. There was always some busker warbling on

the street below. The same songs, the same awkward chord changes. The pigeons tap-danced on the roof slates during the intervals, and by night the gulls glided inland to tear open the bins with their beaks like hooked swords. The silence now felt unnatural. But it was nothing like what was to come, when that shriek sounded through the night like a siren, pinning Mina back into her seat and dashing the cigarette from her fingers.

It was unlike anything she had ever heard; so savage and shrill. It wasn't human. It couldn't possibly have been. And she hadn't seen an animal for hours. Its voice was so clear that the stars themselves must have shivered from its force. Mina drew her arm back inside and screwed the window up.

'What the fuck was *that*?' she said, shrinking behind the steering wheel.

Mina locked all the doors, feeling suddenly exposed. If there *was* something out there, then she sure as shit couldn't see it. Her car was met on all sides by an impenetrable blackness, as though she had sunk to the ocean's deepest trench, where old things live without time or light, in secrecy and in darkness. She clambered into the back seat and shifted the parrot's cage over to the side. There she huddled under the coats in the hope that they would keep secret her presence in a place where she no longer felt safe.

'Don't make a sound,' she whispered, curling her legs up beneath her. 'Something's out there.'

There was no crack of ice, no soft crunch of frost. The windows eventually fogged and whitened from the night's breath but there wasn't a sound to be heard, however

delicate or innocent. Even the parrot knew to hold its beak. There was only the memory of that scream stalking Mina's thoughts with pounding steps. Her arms were cradled around her shoulders, holding in whatever warmth they could, listening, and waiting for that unearthly voice to return.