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Creature of the Night

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Extract

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1

I told my ma I wouldn't stay there. I told her when she first came up with the idea and I told her again when she tried to bribe me with the new Xbox. I said it to her all the way down on the bus. Every time she opened her mouth to talk to me I said it:

'I'm not staying down there. You can't make me.'

So after a while she stopped trying to talk to me and she just talked to Dennis, showing him cows and sheep and tractors out the window of the bus. He liked the tractors but he didn't know what to make of the cows and sheep. He stared at them like they were something out of another world.

Which they were.

Our new landlord met us at the bus station in Ennis. His name was PJ Dooley. When he seen how much stuff we had with us he made a joke and said he should have brought the trailer.

I said, 'Ha ha,' and my ma gave me a savage look.

'It's mostly theirs,' I said to him. 'I'm not staying.'

PJ Dooley looked at me and then at my ma, and Dennis said, 'Can we go in the car?' and everyone started piling in the suitcases and plastic bags and backpacks. There wasn't much room left by the time me and Dennis tried to squash into the back.

'Take him on your knee,' my ma said, but I didn't want him on my knee and I shoved him over on top of a big bag of duvets and pillows. He laughed and wriggled himself comfortable and said: 'We going in the car!'

My ma didn't have a car. She said there was no need for one where we lived because we could go everywhere on the bus, so Dennis had hardly ever been in a car before. I was in cars all the time, though. Most weekends and some week nights as well, me and the lads would get hold of one. Sometimes we robbed two and raced them against each other out on the ring road or around the estates. That was class. It was what I lived for, the cars, and the Saturdays in the town centre, and what we bought with the money we got.

That was why my ma wanted to move out of Dublin. She told me it was only for the summer, to see how we liked it, but I didn't believe her. We'd given up the flat for one thing, and if we wanted to get one again we'd be right back at the bottom of the housing list. So I knew she had no intention of going back. She was moving for good to get me away from my bad-influence friends.

I thought that was her reason, anyway, and maybe it was part of it. But she had another reason for getting away from Dublin as well. I should have guessed it, I suppose, but I didn't. If I had I'd have told her it wouldn't work. Those people would be bound to find her in the end, wherever she went.

2

There was an old Skoda parked in the drive in front of the house.

'I'll be moving that,' PJ said. 'The last tenant left it behind him when he went. I don't suppose it's worth much.'

I nearly told him not to bother moving it because I would move it for him, all the way to Dublin. I could see it had no alarm in it, and I knew you could hot-wire those old ones. Beetle would know how to do it. I couldn't believe my luck. A ready-made escape sitting on my doorstep. If I could get money for petrol I was sorted already.

The house was a kind of cottage with an upstairs tacked on. It looked OK from outside, if you like that sort of thing. A big thick green hedge. Flowers in old buckets. But the front door was swollen into its frame from the damp and PJ had to put his hip against it to open it. Inside it was more like a shed than a house. It was no warmer than it was outside and the air was so damp you could nearly drink it. There was a little porch with mould growing on the walls and a bathroom opening off one side of it, right opposite the front door. Then two more doors opened off it, one into a sitting room and the other into the kitchen. There was a big old range

in there, and stairs running straight up out of the room, and the back door at the bottom of them. Behind the chimney pipe the wall was covered in black streaks.

PJ said, 'It's soot. These old houses. Nothing you can do about it.'

Upstairs was much newer. There was a landing and three bedrooms, all with wooden walls, painted the colour of pus in a scab. The beds were old and knackered, and there were chests with sticking drawers and wobbly lockers and a dressing table with a swivel mirror that stared up at the ceiling.

In the biggest bedroom my ma said to me: 'You can have this one, Robert. We can set you up a desk in here.'

'A desk?' I said. 'What would I want with a desk?'

'For your schoolbooks,' PJ said, all innocent. 'For your homework and all. I'll find you a desk, leave it to me.'

'Homework?' I said. 'You said we were only staying for the summer.'

Behind his back my ma shook her fist at me.

'And anyway,' I said. 'I told you. I'm not staying.'

My ma made a vicious face. We followed PJ into the middle-sized bedroom and she said: 'I'll have this one. I like the view.'

The smallest one was just like a short corridor with a sloping roof as one wall. My ma said to Dennis: 'And this can be your bedroom. What do you

think of that?'

'No!' Dennis wailed and clung to my ma's leg. 'Don't want a bedroom. I want to go home!'

He was still bawling when we followed PJ back downstairs, and my ma had to carry him and shout over his head.

'It's fine, honest. It's gorgeous. We love it.'

PJ opened the cupboard under the stairs. It was crammed full of boxes and bin bags.

He said, 'I hope you don't mind. There's some stuff here belonging to the last fella.'

Dennis said, 'Don't want a bedroom!'

PJ said, 'Only I didn't know what to do with it. I didn't like to throw it out. He might come back for it some day, you never know.'

My ma looked alarmed.

'Oh, there's no need to worry,' PJ said. 'He's an awful nice fella. A real gentleman. Lars, his name is. Swedish. But he left a bit sudden, like . . .'

'Why?' my ma said.

PJ shrugged. 'No one knows. He just disappeared one day.'

My ma looked even more alarmed, but PJ said: 'It's nothing to worry about. The police were here and they had a look around, but there was nothing suspicious. He took his passport and his driving licence and all, so he must have had a plan. It was just a bit sudden, that's all.'

'Did he owe you rent?' I said.

'He did,' PJ said, 'but not much. I wouldn't say that had anything to do with it.'

'Well we do, too,' my ma said. 'I should give you the deposit.'

She tried to put Dennis down but he turned up the volume. Normally he wouldn't dare. My ma would knock six kinds of shite out of him for that kind of carry-on, but he knew she wouldn't do it in front of a stranger. She had to pick him up again.

'No bother, no bother,' PJ said. 'Some other day will do fine. You settle yourselves in now and get unpacked.' He pointed out the window. There were two big meadows on the side of the hill, and above them a couple of houses and loads of sheds – a real farmyard from the looks of it.

'That's my house there, the two-storey one. If you need anything just call up. Anything at all.'

He gave me the keys. We'd all been following him since we got off the bus and we followed him now, when he went outside. At the door of his car he stopped and turned back to us.

'I'll send Colman down to you some day,' he said to me. 'He's about your age.' Then he looked at my ma and said, 'You might get a visit from my mother as well. She likes to know what's going on. She comes out with some strange things sometimes, but don't mind her. She's getting on.'

He got into the car and drove away. My ma waved after him, then took Dennis's hand and waved it as well.

He had shut up now that his protection was gone.

'Can you believe that?' she said to me. 'No deposit, no rent, nothing. We could do anything. We could rob the place. We could set fire to it.'

'Don't be putting ideas in my head,' I said. But I was as surprised as my ma, really. I don't think either of us had ever been trusted by anyone before.

3

It was June and the weather was warm but the house felt cold because of the damp and my ma set about lighting the fire. I put on the kettle and went out the back door. My ma heard me go out.

'Where you going?' she called after me.

'Back to Dublin,' I said.

'You are not!' she screeched at me. 'Come back here!'

'You can't watch me every minute of the day,' I said, and closed the door behind me.

I went round the front and had a look at the Skoda. One of the back tyres was low on air and there was green moss growing on the rubber round the door frames, but apart from that it looked OK. I wondered how long it had been sitting there waiting for the mystery man to come home. I wondered whether there was any charge left in the battery. The drive had a bit of a slope and the road did, too, if you turned left. I would probably be able to get up enough speed to jump-start it, once I'd got in and got the wiring sorted. I'd have to pick my moment, though; some time when my ma wouldn't miss me for a while. I hoped PJ wouldn't be in too much of a hurry to move the car.

Beside the house was a small grassy kind of yard with a hayshed and a block of little stone sheds. Behind

them, on the other side of the fence, was the first of the two big meadows between our house and the two up at PJ's. They were the only houses in sight. In every other direction there was nothing but boring farmland.

I lit a fag behind the hayshed, out of sight of the house. My ma smoked herself so she never got the smell of it off me. I sometimes wondered why I bothered to hide it from her. It didn't bother me when she went ballistic. Not any more, anyway. I just ignored her. But I couldn't handle it when she got upset and cried. That happened a lot. It made me want to break things. Sometimes it made me want to break her.

The cattle in the far field lifted their heads to look at something, and I seen someone coming over. She was a long way off but I could see grey hair, a brown dress and wellies. I had a good idea who she was. I stepped into the shadow of a big green bush and took out my phone.

how do u hotwire a skoda

I sent the text to Beetle, then finished my fag and went back into the house.

My ma was in a rage. She had unpacked the bag of groceries we brought with us and all the eggs were broken. Now she had the sausages on the pan but she couldn't get the gas to light.

'I can't find a meter or anything,' she said. 'You look, will you?'

I looked at all the walls and then I leaned over the cooker and looked behind it.

'It's not going to be down there, is it?' she said.

It wasn't, but there was an orange pipe that disappeared into the wall. I went outside and found a gas bottle there and flicked the switch on top of it. The fat old woman was crossing the near meadow now, and I could see she had a dog with her.

'It's working!' my ma said. She was cheered up now. 'What did you do?'

'Turned it on,' I said. 'And we're getting a visitor.'

'Who?'

'Mrs Dandy, I suppose.'

'Mrs Dandy?'

'PJ's ma.'

'Dooley,' she said. 'It's not Dandy, it's Dooley.'

'Yankee Dooley Doodle Doody Dandy,' I said. 'Who gives a fuck?'

She laughed and I turned away so she wouldn't see the smile on my face. I wasn't ready to forgive her yet for dragging me down here.