Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Kiss the Bullet

Written by Katherine Deveney

Published by Old Street Publishing

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Kiss the Bullet

Catherine
Deveney



First published in 2011 by Old Street Publishing Ltd
Yowlestone House, Puddington, Tiverton
www.oldstreetpublishing.co.uk

ISBN: 978-1-906964-63-4

Copyright © Catherine Deveney 2011

The right of Catherine Deveney to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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

Typeset by Martin Worthington
Printed and bound in Great Britain.

Dedication TK

PROLOGUE

THE DOCUMENT

> I write this for my daughter Niamh Mary O'Brien, for my grandchildren Johnny and Pat O'Brien, and my grandchildren's children, that future generations may know what has passed, and may understand their place in the long struggle for Ireland. Lodged with William K. Prentice, of Prentice and Turner Solicitors, this 16th day of May 1966, with the instruction that it should be passed to my family after my death.
>
> Mary Seonaid O'Connor

I became a bride as a copper sun set in bands of burnished gold over Kilmainham jail; a widow before it rose again. Every bride tends her groom's body on their wedding night, but in my case it was to gently dab the mud and courtyard dust from the cheek Michael grazed against the flagstones as he fell to his death, to comb the stray strands of hair that flopped soft and spineless against the hard grey pallor of his immobile face. I touched him slowly, tenderly, with all the contained passion of a lifetime never to be lived, while a prison guard watched the corridor furtively and urged speed. I hurried not, my finger lingering on his cheek like a quivering, soft winged butterfly, come to rest on sculpted stone. I looked at him, lifeless, and I loved him still. I did not cry.

"Time," the guard said, his voice low and urgent. "Time."

He kept his eyes averted, as though embarrassed by the intimacy he witnessed. He risked much for me. But he had his own reasons. The year was 1916. The guard was married to a cousin of John MacNeill, who was with Michael in the O'Connell Street Post office on Easter Monday, who read the declaration of a free Ireland to his comrades and died days later at the hands of soldiers who squashed him like a moth on a burning light. Michael did not know John MacNeill, but they were brothers in their cause and the guard had some respect for that. Both help and opposition have come from the strangest places.

Michael rose from his sick bed to go to O'Connell street that day. His face was waxy, the whistle in his chest unabated despite several winter months in the heat of Italy. He would not hear of shirking the task, of leaving it for those who were stronger. There was a greater sickness abroad in Ireland he said, than the sickness in Michael O'Connor's lungs, and a sickness that was in greater need of remedy. I knew, in my heart, that he spoke the truth; that while his body was weak, there was no man stronger than he in honour and conviction.

When he was imprisoned in Kilmainham for the part he played in the rising, there were those who said the sentence of death imposed on him was the second Michael O'Connor had received in his life, one from God and one from man, that he would never, in any case, have lived past another winter. I like to think they were wrong. The greatest medicine a man can receive is a cause to live and Michael had two: Ireland and me.

My brother Padraig introduced us. They taught school together and were united in a love of Ireland and a loyalty to the Republican cause. Michael had the head of an academic and the soul of a poet. The first time he came to our house he was in a group of teachers Padraig brought home to sample my mother's soda scones and tea. I was darning socks, using an orange stuffed in the toe to keep the shape, the way my mother had showed me.

I listened quietly as the talk turned to the freedom of the Irish people, but every so often my eyes were drawn back to Michael.

He was not, in the conventional way of things, a handsome man. He was too pale and slight for that, a thin, almost wolfish face with sharp cheekbones that seemed to push through thin, translucent skin like rocks through paper, and blue eyes that glittered with the intensity of a hunger I could only guess at. I thought later that men who fear their lives will be short, live it with a ferocity and urgency the healthy have no need of.

"Is it worth it?" cried Joseph Connerty, pouring a spoonful of honey onto a scone that was crammed thick with peel and currants. "We are small and poor and no match for an English army."

"An English army that is already at war elsewhere," Padraig pointed out.

Michael was lifted by soldiers two weeks after Easter Monday. When word came that he had been granted permission to marry before his execution, it was a moment of triumphant sorrow. My wedding dress hung, covered in an old knotted sheet, in my bedroom cupboard. It had hung there three months; our wedding postponed twice through Michael's ill-health. It was a delicate dress of ivory silk and chiffon, and a crown of apricot flowers with a short embroidered veil. There was only one thing I did not have ready.

I hurried along the side of Stephen's Green and down Grafton street just as the shops were closing. It was a chill evening for the time of year, the cold air sharp in my lungs as I ran. I headed for

Connerty's Jewellers, the light from inside the shop a warm, orange glow against a grey, ominous sky. James Connerty stood outside at the windows; I heard the rattle of the shutters as he pulled the grills down over the glass. He glanced up as I hurried past, a nod of recognition. I did not stop to speak, but hurried inside.

The shop was warm, discreet, a soft, thick carpet beneath my feet deadening any noise. My breathing, ragged and uneven,

sounded harsh in the stillness and I felt momentarily embarrassed at my inability to speak. I tried to still my gasps with big deep breaths.

"Madam?" said the young woman behind the counter, looking up in surprise.

"A wedding ring," I said, with as much composure as I could muster. "I have come to buy a wedding ring."

She gawped at me but I heard a voice at my back, felt a tiny, comforting touch of a hand on my spine.

"I will deal with this, thank you Mairi."

James Connerty passed round my back and disappeared behind the counter reaching into his waistcoat pocket for a key. He knew, from his brother I suppose, what the situation was with Michael. He unlocked a slim drawer full of gold rings and slipped it out on to the counter top. Then he unrolled a length of red velour, his long slender white fingers spreading it deftly over the glass top before placing a few rings on it.

"You may go home now," he said to his assistant, and she did not wait to be told twice. It struck me, as she moved so swiftly to put on her coat and hat, that this would be a normal evening for her - and oh, how I envied her that.

"Perhaps this?" said James Connerty quietly. "Or this?"

I looked at the rings blankly, unable to truly see them. Should I simply buy the cheapest? It was true the marriage would be short, and after all, a ring was only an earthly symbol. But what it represented, the feeling inside, would last forever. I would wear this ring for the rest of my life. Slowly I picked up a beautiful slim band, engraved with orange blossom and stared at it.

"How much is this one?" I asked.

He did not reply, but merely wrapped the ring in a box and put it inside a bag and handed it to me silently.

"I must pay," I said and he replied that I was paying more than most, which brought tears to my eyes. I thanked him, hurried from the shop and went to prepare. I wish I could tell you more

about the ceremony but the chapel of Kilmainham jail has all but faded in my mind, though I do recall how tiny it was. I have only been in it once after all, and that for scarcely half an hour. I do recall, though, kneeling at the arched altar, staring up at the cross on the white washed wall and having a powerful sense that I fully understood the crucifixion, the nature of suffering, for the first time in my life.

Just when it felt that it was more than I could endure, I felt Michael's hand in mine. I looked up at him and he mouthed quietly, "Do not break. For me, do not break." And he smiled and squeezed my fingers. I smiled back, determined that I would seize the joy of these brief moments of union, live them for what they were and not for what they would never become. When we were pronounced man and wife, Michael leant forward to kiss my cheek.

"Mo chuisle mo chroi," he murmured. Pulse of my heart.

Afterwards, we were given just ten minutes before he was taken for execution by firing squad. Ten minutes during which the guards never left our sides. There will come a time, surely, when such barbarity will not be believed. I write this now in truth, in testimony that these events occurred. At first we were so overwhelmed by so many words to speak in such a short time that we fell silent and merely held one another. Then Michael said,

"While there is breath left in you, fight for what we believe. For justice and for Ireland." I clung to him and when the guards said time, he repeated quietly in my ear his words from the chapel.

"Do not break. For my sake, do not break." I did not.

I heard the shots from the courtyard, felt them pulse in my own chest. In the morning, I quietly watched the sun rise, the sky pink and streaked, and I felt him then, felt him everywhere around me. It was as if he was beyond the universe, bleeding into the world, into that pink sky, his dripping wounds staining this dawn and every new Irish dawn that was to come.

***

His words shone for me like stars in a deep, passionate sky. They switched the world on, made me feel I could see the universe better. What he was, guided them, what he felt, breathed power into them. His poetry was everything. Rebellion whispered through it like a breeze rippling gently through long grass. And pride and love and ferocity and hunger and ambition. Ireland, his Ireland. I fell in love with his poems and then I fell in love with him.

I fell for the best of him, I am certain of that. I fell for what was inside him, the thoughts that lined his head. Maybe I saw that his body was disintegrating already, perhaps I looked for the smooth stone of eternity in the physical rubble. I only know that I found it, whatever it was I had been looking for, that the vague feeling of discontent that I had always carried melted magically away. I used to think I had too many questions without knowing the answers. But Michael was the answer to a question I didn't even know I had posed.

I lusted after his mind and he encouraged me to satiate myself with him. And everything else followed. Somehow he knew without being told that the key to my body was my mind. He had both. Forgive my bluntness. When you, my family, read this, I will no longer be able to feel embarrassment. But right now, I must tell you that in any case I feel none. As I came to discover, there were many who wanted me to wear my relationship with Michael like a badge of shame, the mark of the whore. I would not, and will not, do so. All these years later, I carry every part of him with me, including his glorious defiance.

Let me tell also tell you that Michael was a religious man. He attended mass every day he was well enough. When my time comes, I too, will stand before God and answer to him without fear. No, I will not be meek about what happened. I will waste no time on regret or disingenuous remorse. My tribute to Michael is that he liberated my mind, that he freed me from convention. I

am an old woman now and I have seen so many changes – my "revelation" is tame indeed by the standards of many now.

I lay with no man before Michael. My mother was uneasy about the free and easy nature of our time together, the way we roamed the hills all day and talked politics all night. Politics was not for women, my mother said. Dear mother. When I tried once, tentatively, to tell her that I had fallen in love with Michael's poetry and his mind she raised her eyes and muttered, "Oh my God, girl. You'll pay a heavy price for your dreams." I was young; I did not understand her cynicism. Not then. Then she attacked the floor with a scrubbing brush. She could not fathom the equality that Michael and I shared. No man should countenance it, my mother thought; no woman should desire it.

The day we took the picnic to the hills was at the height of summer, a day when the sun beat hot but was rivalled by a stiff warm breeze that cooled the sweat on our brows as we climbed. Michael rolled his sleeves up and I moved more slowly when I heard the soft whistle in his chest. I took off the primrose yellow cardigan mother had knitted to go with my summer dress, felt the rays of sunshine hit the pallor of my bare forearms. There was that special silence up there, the silence that is only broken by the sound of the breeze and the far off bleat of sheep. When we spread the blanket, we felt like we were on the edge of the world looking down.

It was two weeks before the Easter weekend that was to become the Easter rising of 1916. Planning a wedding was unthinkable in those weeks, though we spoke often about our marriage and what it would be. That day we talked of how we longed to reach a time where we would be answerable to no one but ourselves, when we would go home to each other at the end of every day. We looked down over the hillside as if looking over the precipice into another world. Pretend, I said, pretend that the world is ours to own, to hold in our hands and spin. Will it spin into infinity, he asked, spin through darkness and light? Yes,

I said, and I lay back on the blanket and let the sun soak into my face, felt the heat on my closed eyelids. I believed in infinity then. I still do. Will you be with me, he whispered, his mouth next to mine, so close I felt the vibration of his speech on my lips.

"Will you be with me for all eternity?

I opened my eyes.

"I will."

He kissed me then, and the breeze carried the smell of burgeoning greenery to me as we lay, and it was translated into a bracken stained kiss, full of sun and promise and summer growth. When his fingers found the buttons of my dress, I did not demur. I knew this was a transition; a transition and a promise and a declaration. For my part, I have kept the vows that I made that day on the hill in the presence of God and Michael. And later, when the fire was still in my cheeks and he held me to him gently and whispered against my hair, "No regrets?" I answered honestly, none.

A month later he was dead and I was pregnant. The knowledge took my breath away, left me gasping like a netted fish. I hugged the secret to me, let it grow inside me with the child in my womb. Then one day I was with my mother, chatting to her in the kitchen while she baked, making her tea. I went to the cupboard to get sugar and I saw her look up casually from putting floured scones onto a baking tray, then her eyes whiplashed back to me. I was standing sideways on to her and her eyes bore into my stomach. I looked at her and she glanced up at me, horrified.

"Sit down mother," I said quietly.

She hesitated wiping a floured hand down her cheek.

"Are you….?" she said, her eyes fearful, willing me to deny it.

I said nothing but nodded.

"Oh mother of God," she said, and sat down suddenly at the kitchen table. "Mother of GOD," she repeated and she began to

rock gently back and forth, wiping her floured hands on her apron.

Her reaction made me fearful but I tried to keep calm.

"Mother," I said, sitting beside her, "I'll have a piece of him, a piece of him left, all of my own. D'you see? He won't have left. It's like he's made sure I won't be alone."

"Ah Mary," she said irritably, despairingly, shaking her head and raising her eyes to the ceiling, "Mary, Mary, Mary, what are ye sayin' girl? Not alone? You're about to find out just how alone alone can be. Have you have any idea…have you any IDEA…..what ….." and then she caught sight of me, the fear rigid in my eyes, my facial muscles turned to stone.

"Come and sit down," she said more gently, pulling out a chair beside her.

"You'll have to go away," she said. "Y'undertsand? Away from here to have the baby before it's adopted. Folks round here know about Michael, Mary. They know you weren't together after your marriage. There's a convent, takes girls in your position, I'll….

"I'm keepin' it."

She stopped.

"Mary," she said softly. "You have no idea. No idea."

"He was my husband."

"People are sorry for you right now. But believe me their pity will turn to something else when they hear this. I know. Believe me, I KNOW what they're like."

"I'm not ashamed," I said. My voice trembled.

My mother reached out a hand to my face.

"A high price," she said, running a finger over my cheek. "I always said you'd pay a high price."

The tenderness of her touch cut me in a way her anger never could have.

"I loved him mother. I loved him….." I felt the tears spilling now, my nerve gone.

"I know you did," my mother whispered. She reached out to hold me and I lay my head on her shoulder like a child.

"Don't tell your father," she said, her voice calmer now. "I'll deal with him. Y'hear me, Mary?"

I lifted my head and nodded, reaching out to hold her hand, and the two of us sat in the kitchen that was warmed by the oven, crying silently together, the tears running a salt track through the flour on her cheeks.

***

My father would not look me in the eye after my mother told him. He would leave the room when I entered and I'd hear the bang of the kitchen door, see his head bobbing past the window on his way to dig the land. I'd look up and mother would pull a wry face at me, as if to say, "Ignore him, silly auld fool that he is."

I wondered had she ever felt about my father as I did about Michael? He was not a poet, my father. Mountainous shoulders , like a range stretching across his upper body. Hand like shovels, calloused, nails ingrained with soil. Mother was his translator. Your father thinks…she would say, when no one had heard him utter a word. I remember though, the day there was talk between my brothers about a young local woman, and how beautiful she had grown, and my father said gruffly, sure there was never any woman more beautiful round these parts than mother had been. And mother with a sink full of washing had simply smiled quietly and when she looked up at him they exchanged a glance like they had a secret that nobody else knew. So maybe she did. Feel about him the way I did Michael.

He never mentioned the coming baby once. One of my brothers, Seamus, was furious when he heard, told me I was no better than a whore, and my father looked up sharply and said that was enough of that. And the room fell quiet and we said nothing more, though Seamus refused to look at me. Seamus

was always a prig. He had notions of the priesthood and it was the best place for him, a place where his principles wouldn't get dirty.

I wanted a boy. I wanted Michael. I was certain the baby I carried was a boy. I even carried him low they way they say male babies are carried. When the pain started I rode it, waves of it, thinking of Michael, and then it intensified, becoming so unthinkingly vicious, so remorseless, that nature felt malevolent, until eventually it clutched at my belly like a screw tightening beyond its own possibilities, and I was frightened then, beyond any fear I'd ever known.

"Sweet Jesus…." I shouted, clutching the back of a chair.

"Mother….." and I saw the compassion in her eyes as I looked desperately at her, willing her to help me, to take it away.

She helped me to the bedroom and sent the men folk outside. I heard her speak quietly to my father on their way, telling him to fetch the doctor. Then another wave of pain winded me and I felt the heat flood my cheeks and the sweat break out on my body. The doctor when he came wanted to examine me but I kept panicking at each wave of pain and begged him not to come near me. I sensed his exasperation with a pain he neither empathised with nor approved of (I had made my bed and must, quite literally, lie on it), and he stood stiffly while I groaned. When he leaned over me, I saw the line of dirt round the crisp whiteness of his collar.

When he finally examined me, he turned dismissively to my mother.

"It will be some hours before the child comes. I will look back in the evening."

I whimpered into the pillow in despair.

"No," I said. " No…mother…."

She leaned over me and smoothed back my hair.

"Hush, darlin'," she said, and then she looked rather coldly at the doctor and said stiffly, "I will show you out."

The night was dark outside the windows by the time he returned, the stars hammered solidly like nail heads into the inky blackness. I told my mother not to close the curtains because there was no one to see in, and because I wanted to see the world as my baby entered it. I was so frightened, and everything was so out of control, that it felt like the universe was some kind of monster out there and I wanted to keep in touch with the familiar. I wanted to keep in touch with the spirit of Michael that had drifted into it.

By the time the baby was born, the terror was tinged with horror and exhaustion and deep, deep grief, and relief and love and hate, and I was drowning, drowning in an experience that was beyond me, that made me see the world in a new way that could never be rubbed out, however much I tried. I saw for the first time and I wanted to forget what I saw, to be the person I was before, and I cried for the new order of the world and the girl I lost somewhere in the darkness of the old.

The baby was placed, bloodied and blue, on my stomach and I felt the life in it slipping and wriggling like a stranded fish, and in the shock I didn't know how to hold it or what to do. Then I heard my mother say, a beautiful little girl Mary, and I looked at her and whispered, no, in horror. I saw her face freeze in a kind of distress when I said, a boy, it's a boy, mother. She tried to smile at me and she said, a little frantically, no a girl, a beautiful girl, look at her, how perfect she is.

"Take it," I said and my mother lifted her and wrapped her in a sheet, but I turned my face to the wall when she offered her to me. My mother held her close and crooned to her and I stared at the wall until my eyes hurt. I felt the soft, slack belt of skin round my stomach and the trickle of blood and an ache inside that I wasn't sure was physical.

"You'll need to put her to the breast quickly," the doctor advised and my mother nodded.

For the next few days I fed her and handed her back to my mother, refusing to hold her to me. The shock of the birth and the

crushing disappointment overwhelmed me. Michael had left me. For good now, he had gone. And the irony was that only my father brought me to my own beautiful daughter, Niamh. He tiptoed in one night and I looked at him, my eyes burning, and he said nothing but laid a hand on my head and pushed the hair back, then peered at the baby as my mother held her. They both smiled.

I watched him from the bed, saying nothing, and I saw the big shovel hands reach out to my mother, and she placed the baby in them lengthways, Niamh's tiny body cupped against his palms, and I felt it, the mountainous tenderness of him, vast as his hulking body, and the damn inside me broke.

***

My mother was right. There were those who turned against me and my baby. There are none so righteous as the religious self righteous, and none so religiously self righteous as the Irish. I knew what I had to do the morning I took Niamh to the corner shop and a woman spat at me as I walked past. A middle aged woman with a squashed face like crumpled cushions, and thin lips without a trace of lipstick. And the best of it was that she carried on her way into the church for morning mass without a backward glance.

I looked at the thin circle of foaming spittle on the pavement and knew that I would leave. My mother was heart sore when she heard my decision and my father seemed to shrink a little at the idea of Niamh being taken from him. She was his pride and his joy. I took my daughter to Donegal to remove myself from the tight smiles, and he sneering disapproval, and the barely disguised hostility. But as Niamh later came to know, I had other reasons too.

The Easter declaration Michael read in 1916 called for equality between men and women. No matter that De Valera refused , against the orders of Pearse and Connolly, to allow women fighters in the Boland Mill Garrison that day. They fought else-

where and I came to believe I, too, should play my part. When Michael gave his life, I wanted to continue his struggle so that he did not die in vain. But by then, of course, I knew what loss was, and I could not impose the possibility of such loss twice on my daughter. I joined the women's league, Cumann na Mban, for a time, but impressed as I was with the fighting spirit of Maragaretta Keogh, who was shot dead outside the south Dublin union, I knew that as a lone parent with a small baby to care for, my part must be a different one.

I gave in whatever ways I could: allowing the cellar of my house to be used as an arms store, providing a safe house for volunteers of the IRA, taking in the wounded who were brought to me. I could do no less, for my whole life was spent trying to create a reason why I had to lose Michael. I wept the day the Free State treaty was ratified. It was signed with the blood of the dead, stained with the tears of the bereaved. Michael did not die for half a cause, for half a solution. I knew then that the blood of Ireland would continue to flow, that the children and grandchildren who I hoped would be free, would, by necessity, in their turn be part of the struggle.

My part is nearly over. I have a sense of anticipation, of excitement, that I will see Michael again. He was taken before he had a chance to make his mark in your lives and it is up to me to try to stamp an impression of him on you. Never forget him. Honour his memory. Fight on, that his death might have meaning.

Niamh, these few lines are for you alone. You were my father's pride and joy but you were also mine. If I was too deeply entangled in the fronds of my loss, if my living was badly tainted by your father's dying, forgive me. Never be in any doubt that the reason I put my feet on the floor each morning was for you. And later, when your eldest son was born, when I held Johnny in my arms for the first time, I knew your father had returned in a new generation. I saw him reflected in Johnny's eyes and I wept for the shadow that I saw there. Our fight now is yours.

Eirinn go Brach.

CHAPTER ONE

BELFAST, NOVEMBER 2010

The music is thumping loud in her chest like a tribal drum and she looks at the man and thinks there's nothing in the world like a good intro. Those pregnant opening notes when anticipation shimmers out of the sound like a heat haze. The sexy, bluesy, bordello quiver of, 'Honky Tonky Women', say. Or this, Marvin Gaye's, 'Heard it Through the Grapevine'. The beat of the drum is the beat of her heart. She can't tell the rhythms apart. And then the rattle of the tambourine, shimmying out of that ominous pulse like a serpent from a snakecharmer's basket, slithering dangerously across the room towards her. "Ooh, I bet you're wondering how I knew…."

Danni can feel the heavy, lumpen outline of the gun against her leg. She should be frightened but she isn't. It doesn't matter if there's an accident, if she rains blood into the atmosphere. Her…or him… Does it matter which? Inside her pocket, she slides a single finger along the metal in rough caress, her tongue simultaneously running against her lips. She knows nothing about guns. She wonders if she tilts the gun up inside the pocket, if she simply blasts through the material at an upward angle, where it will hit him, and if the release of blood will be violent. Will it seep or cascade?

The music thumps still. The floor vibrates. She feels like she could choke on her own tongue, the way it swells in her throat

like a sponge soaking up water. An inner tide of nausea rises in her gut. This is it.

He is looking at her. Looking at her quietly, like he's waiting. As if he's in no hurry. She watches him cross the room, his injured knee crumpling inwards slightly as he walks. He turns the music up, up, up, to full volume and when he turns, he sees that she has taken the gun out. He takes the seat opposite her. She resents his calmness. The fact that he doesn't seem to care. It's like he not only knows about the gun but is deliberately providing her with a mask of music. She could blast him right now and nobody would hear the shot, could distinguish it from the thump of that drum. She could walk right out of here, out of Belfast, and go home. He's making it easy for her. Unless he's taunting her. He sees her hand move but does not flinch. His eyes don't leave her face.

The man is waiting for her verdict. She is still exploring her limits, her possibilities.

"Oh I heard it through the grapevine

I'm just about to lose my mind.

Honey , honey…"

Black as coaldust, she thinks, watching his hair flop forward so familiarly now, long, fine strands falling into his eyes. Perhaps a stray grey or two. The sleeves of his pale blue shirt are folded back neatly, revealing surprisingly muscular forearms considering his slenderness. Behind his chair, a bookcase stuffed full, piles of books turned on their side and stacked one on top of another. History books. Literary books. Irish writers, mainly: James Joyce, Roddy Doyle, Yeats. Black folders full of the small, neat, intense writing she has come to recognise at a glance. She sees what he was, and she sees what he is, and she feels confused. She wishes she could classify him simply, like a book. Small beads of sweat prickle on her back.

Fear makes her angry. She despises her own hesitation. In the last few weeks her hatred, her determination, have rushed

together like a river in spate at times, then at others dwindled to a pathetic trickle. It's time for the indecision to end. Her finger curls round the trigger. Someone in the flat below is thumping on the ceiling with a broom handle.

He looks down at the vibrating floor but he does not move. He does not turn the music down. He looks at her and then he leans his head back against the curve of his chair, closes his eyes and waits. There's nothing like a good intro, it's true. But it's not where you begin that matters most. It's where you end up.