
Opening Extract from...

Solace

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For Aengus

'. . . for all the men of the world could not help us till we have gone through our time . . .'

From 'The Fate of The Children of Lir',
translated by Lady Gregory.

Prologue

It had been years since Tom's son had spent so long at home. He stayed almost the whole summer, working the farm every day and sleeping in his old room, with the child's crib at the foot of the bed. The child, Tom thought, seemed content in her new surroundings. He saw in her no signs of lonesomeness, no signs that she was pining for what she could no longer have. That she could not yet speak, that she could not name names and call for them, that she could not tell them what she had seen; for all of this, Tom was grateful, and he carried the child about with him often, her wordlessness resting between them like a veil.

In August the weather turned. The mornings came blue and sun-dazed, a haze wrinkling the sky over the fields. When the forecast promised it would stay that way for days to come, red bands of high pressure stoking the country from the south, Tom and Mark readied to save the hay. Mark knocked three meadows the first warm evening, and Tom followed after him with the turner, whipping up the long blades of grass, setting them down neat as potato drills. As Mark began to bale two mornings later, Tom took the child to the edge of the meadow and showed to her the way it was done: the lines of grass, the huge yellow bales lurching out of the red machine, and the shape of her father in the tractor cab, a hand on the steering-wheel, his head turned to watch the progress of the baler hitched behind.

'Wave at your daddy,' Tom said.

The child sighed in his arms and crushed her hands into her eyes. She was only half awake, and the sun's brightness was beating down on her. The sheepdog, the only thing certain to interest her and to set her pointing and smiling, was out of sight somewhere in the meadow. She had woken crying early that morning, early as she woke every morning, and, like all the other mornings, her father and her grandfather had been awake before her, watching the day as it came in over the bog.

As with all the other mornings, Tom had heard Mark moving around in the bedroom well before dawn; had heard the scuffling, the coughing, the opening and closing of the door across the landing, the slow tread down the stairs, the water drumming hard into the kettle, the feeble ravings of the radio. That morning when Tom joined him in the kitchen there had been more to talk about than usual, more things to plan, and although the timetable of a haymaking day was known to each of them so innately that there had been little need for them to speak at all, still Tom went with the chance while he had it. He mapped out all the parts of the day, the jobs to be done, the potential pitfalls and the safeguards to be laid in place. Mark answered him, and agreed with him, and talked along with him, and when at last the child awoke, crying from the bedroom above their heads as indignantly as though she had been tricked or struck, Tom thought he had seen flicker across Mark's face an instant of the same regret he felt himself at the breaking of their peace. But too much flickered across Mark's face these days for Tom to understand him. Too much went on with him, whether in silence or in the hiding-places behind talk, for Tom to keep pace with or pretend to know.

Now the tractor had stopped and Mark was standing,

leaning out of the cab. He would need more twine, he shouted. Tom would have to go to Keogh's to buy it. This was not something they had talked about that morning; this was not something that, together, they had foreseen. Tom cursed as he turned and crossed the yard to where his mud-streaked jeep was parked. The child squirmed. She wanted to be down on the concrete, where she saw her tricycle with the red plastic wheels, where she had left scattered, the previous evening, a bucketful of her wooden bricks. But Tom kept her firmly on his hip. In the jeep, he buckled her fast into the baby seat he had fixed into the passenger side.

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'That's a beautiful child.'

The girl in Keogh's looked at the child the way every woman looked at her now. The same sad eyes, the head to one side, the same carefully held half-smile. The hand out to touch the child's curls, to stroke the soft face, to clasp the chubby fingers as though they been offered for a shake. Tom knew it well by now, the rush to sympathize in that overdone way of women; the tears quick to spring and quicker still to dry, to be replaced with a high laugh and a story about nothing.

'What's this her name is again?'

'Aoife.'

'Aoife.' The usual sad wince. 'Hello, Aoife. Are you having a good time with your granddaddy?'

Tom sat the child on the shop counter. She grabbed at a stand of chocolate bars, and he let her grab. He nodded to the girl. 'Would you be able to keep an eye on her for a few minutes while I go out the yard to your father?'

The laugh, high as a fountain, there it was. 'Oh, now. He's not my father. I'm a good bit older than any of the Keogh

girls.' She shrugged, and Tom knew by the way she looked at him that he had pleased her. Down his elbows, shooting through his hands, he felt the burn of impatience. What did he care how old or how young she was? She was a girl: the arms out, the eyes wide – the blouse more buttoned up, he saw now, than either of the Keogh girls would likely have worn theirs – but it wasn't his concern to know such differences.

'We'll have a great time, Aoife and me,' she was saying, nearly singing, as he went out the door.

*

Tar was soft underfoot in Keogh's yard. One dog slept between the bars of an upturned cattle feeder. Another sat alert on a stack of fertilizer bags. Keogh, his everyday white shirt untucked as a concession to the weather, was standing in the shade of the supplies shed, a huge, barn-like structure full of the things he sold to the farmers of the area: the feedstuffs for cattle and sheep, the seeds and grain, the bales of twine and the drums of oil. Fencing posts of different lengths and shades stood against the back wall. Tyres and hubcaps and old engine parts, culled from worn-out tractors and jeeps, were piled and hung and pegged in corners.

He watched as Tom approached, not moving or speaking until a few feet separated them. Keogh was a rich man. The half-rusted carburettors and planks of timber had made him more money, over the years, than had the bags of grain and the gallons of petrol and the shop and the bar all put together, but of this he showed no sign. The white shirt was the same shirt the whole week long: grubby by Tuesday, filthy by Thursday. The van he drove was years old, a Transit like a tinker's, deeply dented along one side. The house over the shop had changed little in the thirty-five years since he had

bought it: no extension, rarely a new paint job, the old net curtains in the window, and the wife inside cooking his breakfasts and his teas. Tom's wife Maura had said that Breda Keogh was driven half simple by her husband's meanness, that she had stopped asking for anything a long time ago, but that the daughters knew how to turn the pockets out on him, how to get their new clothes and their money for drinking and their two jelly-coloured cars. There were twin sons, too, as tight-fisted as Keogh himself, living in the house with him still and counting coins behind the bar, waiting for the day when they could split the place between them and watch it splintering to the ground. Keogh never mentioned them, never seemed to speak to them on the nights he ran the bar with them, never seemed to want for them in the yard or under the bonnet of a machine.

He was stepping away from the shed now, exhaling long and loudly as he frowned up at the sky. He stretched his hand out to Tom. 'Fierce fuckin' heat, Tom,' he said, as they shook. There was sweat sitting slick on his palm. He had what looked like axle oil smeared under one eye. He must have been up to a meadow with a part or a wheel already that morning. 'How's all up in Dorvaragh?'

'Have you twine left?' Tom asked.

Keogh laughed at the question. 'Have I twine, Tom? Plenty of twine. Too fuckin' much of the stuff. That's what I have.'

Tom moved past him into the shed. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom he saw another dog move between tractor tyres.

Keogh came up close behind him. 'Got in too much twine, Tom, and hardly a one about the place lookin' for it the summer. Sure they're all hirin' them contractors from up at Granard this weather. Sure them lads brings their own twine. Fuckers.'

'Give us a couple, so.'

'You're in a hurry, Tom?'

Keogh was looking for news. He was hungry for a complaint. Tom glanced at the rafters of the shed and shrugged out the beginning of a laugh. 'I'm under orders, Paddy.'

Keogh nodded. 'Ah, you have Mark at it above.'

'Aye,' said Tom. He did not turn.

'Very good, very good.' Keogh pulled a bale of twine from a pile. It thudded to the ground. Before the dust had settled, Keogh knocked a second bale.

'You're keepin' on at things anyway,' he said. 'Here, take a hoult of this one, you, and I'll bring the other.'

The gate out of the yard was still broken, its top hinge sagging low. As they passed through it, Tom glanced at Keogh over his shoulder. 'You never thought of getting that gate fixed.'

'I thought about it all right, Tom.'

Keogh pushed out a short laugh, as if by way of apology. It was a laugh almost like the girl's, a laugh high and fearful of how best to land. Hearing it, Tom felt something in his stomach turn. Not you, too, he wanted to say. Not you, too, still at this shit like the rest of them. It had been three months. He was not an invalid. Not a child. Keogh had always been the dirtiest of them all, always the first to notice, the quickest to remark, and now here he was like the rest of them, swerving his words off on to harmless ground. Keogh would have known full well why Tom had remarked on the gate; to gibe at Keogh's laziness, his tightness. Before, Keogh would have fought back with a dig about the farm or the cattle or, most likely, about Mark; with a question, all innocence, about how long Mark would be around this time, with a sigh about how short a stay that was, with a shake of the head about how badly Mark must be needed up in Dublin, for him to have to leave again so soon. There was no

sincerity in such comments, but if he could hear them now he would draw succour from them, would lean into them and come up stronger, surer, stocked with grit enough to steer him through the day. Faced with this silence that was Keogh's kindness, he felt only light and bloodless, emptied of himself and of everything that fixed him to his standing. He needed something to shoulder against, something at which to pitch himself, muscled with the old fury, with the old contempt. But there was nothing. There was only this air struck with summer, and even that was a thing that seemed to set everyone around the place smiling like a fool.

'That's you ready to go now,' said Keogh, slamming shut the back door of the jeep after he had stowed the twine.

Tom stood with his back to the other man, his eyes fixed on the faded green wood of the shopfront, the stickers and notices pasted inside the window pane, the woman's bicycle against the sill. The briquette stand was empty. Through the window, he could see the girl holding the child, talking to an older woman who held another child, a boy. He knew the older woman, not to talk to, but to see. She and the boy held ice-cream cones. As Tom watched, both women glanced his way at the same time. From him they both looked down to the counter, from there to each other, and from there to the child on the shopgirl's hip. It was as familiar to him by now as the sight of his own eyes in the bathroom mirror, the look that he had caught on their faces: fear and thrill and greed and pure excitement; a glimpse right into the wreckage on the side of the road.

'Who's is the babby she has?' Keogh said. He was watching the same scene over Tom's shoulder. He snorted and prodded Tom in the arm. 'Jasus, if it's hers I surely missed that happening.'

'That's Mark's,' Tom said. 'I asked that lassie to hold on

to her for me for a minute.' Inside, the girl was coming around the counter. Tom put his hand up to signal to her not to bring the child out to him yet. She nodded, smiling, and took the child over to the other woman and child in a quick, light dance.

'I saw the child's seat 'ithin in the jeep, all right,' Keogh said quietly. 'Ah, she's a nice little one, isn't she.'

Tom said nothing.

'Lovely little one,' Keogh said.

In the shop, the two women were pushing the children up close to each other; they seemed to be encouraging them to kiss. The boy stared, sullen, at Aoife as his tongue kept a steady stroke on his cone. As the shopgirl moved closer to him, he slowly and carefully moved the ice-cream out of Aoife's reach, almost above his head, his gaze still dull on her face. Aoife, throwing her head back and twisting herself, caught sight of Tom. Her cry came as a long moan of protest; she flung one arm towards him and, screaming now, arched her back higher still. The boy stared. The women's faces crinkled with sorry-eyed smiles.

'Here.' Tom rummaged in his pocket and drew out the notes he knew to be there. He handed them to Keogh. 'Fifteen a bale, isn't it?'

'Spot on.' If it had been too little he would have been told. Nothing made it all right to give Keogh too little.

'Yous are great to be doing so well with her,' the girl said, as she came outside with the child. 'She's a real little pet.'

Aoife, sobbing now and sticky-faced with snot and tears, her yellow dress driven high over the fat plastic of her nappy, looked ready to thrash her way out of the shopgirl's arms. She pushed sharply into Tom as he took her.

'She's her granddaddy's girl,' Keogh said, and as he

reached out a hand to Aoife she howled and buried her face in Tom's chest. Keogh laughed. 'She knows well where she wants to be.'

'Good luck,' said Tom, and he walked away from them. As he settled Aoife in her seat she quietened and began to reach towards the radio knobs. When he had the key turned in the ignition he clicked through the stations for her, watching her eyes following his moving hand, her wet fingers reaching out for his. He stopped at a music station and backed the car out between the petrol pumps, keeping one eye on Keogh and the girl in the rear-view mirror. They were talking and nodding and shaking their heads. They were putting the whole world to rights. Beside him, the child shouted with happiness at the music so close to her hands.

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The tractor was stopped on the crest of the hill when Tom turned into the lane for home. As he drew nearer, he could see that the cab was empty.

'What's your daddy at?' he said to the child.

She ignored him, her steady chatter all for herself, her attention now on the toy set of keys she gripped and shook with one fist. From her lips hung a heavy thread of drool. He reached over to wipe at it; she jerked her head away, her babble pooling into a squeal. But he got it, caught its glooping wetness on his cuff, wiped it into the thigh of his trousers as he turned in for the house. Aoife whined and banged the toy against the side of her seat. As Tom carried her in he gave her his keys to play with as well as her own.

Through the glass of the hall door he could see Mark sitting at the kitchen table, chewing, a thick-sliced sandwich in his hand. His eyes were on the child as Tom brought her

into the room. The neighbour girl who had come that morning to mind her was on the couch, a magazine open on her lap.

'Well,' Mark said, through a mouthful of bread.

'Well.'

'You got the twine all right?'

'All yours,' Tom said to the neighbour girl, as he placed Aoife on the couch beside her. The girl looked at him with wide eyes.

'Well?' Mark said, staring at him, holding a mug in mid-air. There was a cut across his knuckles, Tom noticed. He must have skinned himself somehow.

'I got it, I got it, of course I got it,' Tom said, walking up to the table and putting his palm to the belly of the teapot. It was still warm. He poured a mug, heaped in two sugars and slopped milk in from the carton. He leaned against the sink to drink it down. It was sharp, almost bitter, and only warm. Mark must have been at the table a good twenty minutes. Regardless, Tom drained the mug. He had no desire to make another pot, and the girl was busy with Aoife. He laughed a short laugh, just loud enough for Mark to look at him, and gestured out towards the jeep. 'Keogh's a fierce fuckin' nuisance, all the same.'

Mark took another bite of his sandwich and chewed slowly. 'Why's that?' he said eventually, vaguely, the question hardly in his words at all. He pulled with finger and thumb at his earlobe. He'd had that ear pierced, Tom remembered; he'd worn a small silver ring in it through the pus and the swelling that came on after he'd had the hole made, and for days his mother had left the room every time he walked in. The ear would heal around it, Tom had warned him, but he would not listen; he kept on wearing the ring through the redness and the crusts. After a while, it had disappeared. The

hole was no longer visible. Though maybe he was looking at the wrong ear.

'Ah,' he said, laying a hand down heavily on the edge of the sink. 'You know yourself. Full of questions. He's a bloody plague.'

Gathering his plate and his mug, Mark came to the sink. He said nothing as Tom stood aside, but ran the cold tap and bent to splash his face, rubbing the water up over the back of his neck. The skin there was brown as a saddle. The cut on his knuckle was matted with dust from the field. He pulled away from the sink, still gripping it, and exhaled hard.

'Don't bring Aoife off again without telling Miriam,' he said.

Tom stared. Mark was running cold water into a mug now, the same mug he had drunk his tea from, his eyes straight ahead on the window to the yard. His jaw was tight. He was letting the tap run on even though the mug was full, letting the water spill over on to his hand, his cut hand.

'Don't bring her away without telling me,' he said, and he shut off the tap.

Tom wanted to laugh. 'Sure you knew I had her,' he said. 'Sure you saw me taking her with me when I went to get the twine.' As he spoke he was admiring the sense that ran through his words, the straightness of what he was saying; he was basking in it, barely even ready for the possibility of a reply, when Mark lifted the mug a hand's height and landed it on the bottom of the sink with a bang. Water went everywhere. Out of the corner of his eye, Tom saw the girl rise from the couch with the child and move quickly into the next room.

'Miriam didn't see you taking her with you,' Mark said, swinging an arm towards where the girl had been. 'Miriam came running down the fields, crying that she'd put Aoife up

in her cot this morning at eleven and that she'd gone up to check on her twenty minutes later and that she wasn't in the cot any more, and did I know where she was, or did you?' He drew breath. 'Because Miriam thought the two of us were out at the hay with the tractors, me and you, and that someone was after coming into the house while she was out with the washing, and that someone was after taking the fucking child.'

Now Tom's laugh came, and it came like something hocked up. 'For fuck's sake. You're not going to listen to that sort of giddy rubbish from her, are you? What does she think this is, the television?'

Mark faced him. 'What did you take her out of the cot for?' He turned the tap on again. 'Miriam puts her to bed and you go up there without telling anybody and you take her down again. She was meant to be sleeping. She was meant to be on her nap. What did you do that for? Ha?'

His lips were pulled back from his teeth with anger. His fists were clenched on the counter. This was how it was getting with him: further and further from reason every day. He wanted to argue over everything, he wanted to agree over nothing, he wanted to pick and bicker and drag everything out past its natural end. Or else he was silent, going out to the fields in the mornings almost without saying a word, never stopping to ask Tom what needed to be done, never listening to Tom's thoughts on how to do things – even that morning, Tom had to admit to himself now, he himself had done all of the talking, and all of the listening too. Mark would just sit there, waiting for the child to waken, and for the girl from over the road to arrive, and then as soon as the work outside was done he would be back in to the child, and then gone for the rest of the day, off in the car to Longford or Carrick or Cavan. What he did there he never said. At

night was when they spoke, when the child was upstairs and they were in front of the television; at night Tom tried with him, tried the small things of the day on him, tried the weather, tried the neighbours, tried the jobs yet to be faced into that summer. Everything was simple. Everything was straightforward. But everything sent Mark further and further into himself. He never spoke about his mother. He never spoke about Joanne. Tom tried with him; he could, he supposed, have tried harder, but it was hard for him to know where to start talking about them himself. The best he could do was try to talk to him about the child, and even that much Mark seemed to resent.

'The child was awake,' Tom said. 'She was roaring. I went upstairs and brought her down with me, and there was no sign of anyone to look after her. So I took her out with me. And then she was happy enough. What did you expect me to do? Leave her in there, screaming down the walls?'

'But you knew Miriam was here with her. You knew Miriam had come down this morning to mind her.'

Tom shook his head. 'I saw no sign of anyone. The dishes were in the sink and the child's clothes were all over the floor and there was music on the radio there going full blast. Wasn't much sign of anyone doing any minding as far as I could see.'

'Jesus Christ.' In three long strides, Mark was at the back door. 'You're great, aren't you?'

'Sure, for Jesus' sake, the girl hardly thought someone had come in to take the child? For Christ's sake, you can't be blaming me because she let her mind run away with itself? Who in fuck's name is going to come in here and take the bloody child? Ha?'

'Watch your mouth.'

'Sammy Stewart? Jimmy Flynn, racing up the stairs and

snatching her off to live with him?' He snorted. 'Get a hold of yourself, would you? You're as big a havril as the little girl.'

'You should have let Miriam know you were taking her. You should have let me know you'd taken her up without Miriam knowing.'

'Well, I'm telling you now.'

Standing on the step into the back kitchen, Mark ground with his foot at the floor. 'Just leave her,' he said. 'Leave her be. She needs her routine. She needs things to be like normal.'

He walked off into the yard. From the next room, Tom could hear the girl talking to Aoife in a low voice, the child's woozy laughter, the sound of some complicated toy plucking high notes above neighbours' engines on the day's hot air.

PART ONE

Chapter One

Everything was plastic in the beer garden. Plastic chairs. Plastic tables. Plastic pint glasses. The barbecue food tasted plastic – as, Mark noticed, did the beer. It was his second pint, or his third; he couldn't remember. It didn't matter. It was a rare hot Saturday in a summer that was already halfway through, and there was no point in complaining.

The place was mobbed. Teenagers from the flats. Pillheads still going from the night before. The rugby fans, spilling in after the match. The weekend crowd: groups of couples gabbing at each other around big tables, and guys in short-sleeved shirts and bootcut jeans, and women with shopping bags flapping at their sides like huge broken wings.

Mark was here because he had not been able to force himself to be where he was meant to be, which was in his carrel in the college library, finishing the chapter that was due on his thesis supervisor's desk on Monday morning. He had a chapter title – 'Patronizing the Place' – and he knew he wanted to do something on Edgeworth and her relationship to the local people she wrote about, but that, and a clutch of increasingly frenzied notes, was pretty much all he had. This was to be his second chapter. His introduction he had written during the first months of the PhD, in a white heat of interest he could now hardly believe he had ever achieved, and his first chapter he had wrenched out painfully, piecemeal, over the course of the following two years. Even by

then he had begun to wonder about the wisdom of the idea: a thesis on Maria Edgeworth, the nineteenth-century novelist who had lived most of her life in the manor just ten minutes away from his childhood home. Even by then he had questioned his ability to see the thing through. By now he was almost in despair about the thesis, prone to moments of wishing that Edgeworth had actually thrown herself out of the upstairs window on which she had perched, at the age of five, telling the maid who pulled her back in how very unhappy she was; there were days, now, when Mark thought he knew how she had felt.

He spent his time trudging through the books on education Edgeworth had written with her father, or trying to decipher her wiry, cross-hatched handwriting on yellowed pages in the National Library. Or looking for his theories in her fiction. Scouring the novels and the tales for proof of the argument he had once so firmly believed he could make. He could see, now, only naïveté in the conviction with which he had chosen Edgeworth as his subject, in his confidence that a local connection would somehow give his research some edge, some particular authority. Because what did it add, to know Edgeworthstown as a real town, as something more than a placename in a biography? So what if he had walked its main street – its only street – a thousand times, if, as a kid, he had parked his bike against the walls of the old coach house where she had once taught; if, as a teenager, he had gone knacker drinking in the graveyard where she and her family had their tomb? So he knew how the old house looked inside: what of it? It was no longer the old house in any case, had not been for decades; the Sisters of Mercy had long since gutted it and turned it into the hospital where Mark's mother had been a nurse before he and his sister were born, and once again when they were settled at school. They

were no use to his thesis, Mark's memories of those evenings driving up to the manor with his father to collect his mother after her shift, waiting for her in the high-ceilinged hall. And anyway, he remembered little: the phlegmy splutters of the old people doddering in the shadows; the nuns, in their thick-soled shoes, moving noiselessly across the parquet floors. The sound of a cry, sometimes, that maybe was only someone caught up in a dream.

None of this, Mark had quickly discovered, was valuable at all. It was nothing better than local gossip, and it could not help him get to the core of his central argument, if he could even remember what his central argument was. 'Promising': that was how his supervisor, McCarthy, had described it at first; later, 'promising' was downgraded to 'interesting', and later still 'interesting' became 'tentative', and Mark was not eager to know what McCarthy's current assessment was. But he had to get him the chapter; without the chapter, he risked losing his funding, that complicated marriage of university, departmental and government money, which, put together, allowed him to live a little more comfortably than he suspected a graduate student in Anglo-Irish literature should. Getting it for another year depended on getting McCarthy's signature on the renewal form – which could only happen, McCarthy had warned Mark, if the second chapter arrived before McCarthy left for his annual month in West Cork. And as Mark watched his housemate, Mossy, return from the bar with yet another round, he knew the chances of securing McCarthy's autograph were fading fast.

Walking with Mossy was Niall Nagle. Mark had known him when they were undergrads in Trinity – he was the guy who was always sitting, yammering, on the desk of some female business student in the library – but he had barely seen him since, and he was surprised to see him now, and to

hear that he and Mossy were deep in conversation about the rugby. Nagle must have just come from the match: he was wearing the polo shirt with a bank's name plastered across the chest – a chest that was looking, these days, almost as generous as those of the girls whose desks he had haunted in the Lecky. With a paunch to match. He was telling Mossy something about backs, how hard they had to work, how much brainpower had to go into every move. 'Contrary to popular impression,' he said, and took a swig from his bottle of Miller. He had always been like that in college: a vocabulary like a radio pundit. How did Mossy still know this guy? How had they stayed in touch? And since when did Mossy care anything for rugby? He had always, like Mark, been contentedly indifferent to sports. It might matter to him fiercely whenever Clare reached an All-Ireland final, but everything else he ignored. Mark, meanwhile, came from a county where the teams barely lasted a month into the season, so it was a rare Sunday that Micheál Ó Muircheartaigh's commentary – like a cattle auctioneer let loose in Croke Park – became part of the soundtrack. But now here was Mossy, talking about this match as intensely as though he had been in the dug-out in Lansdowne Road.

To Mark, it was a mystery. But then, so much about Mossy was, even after six years of sharing a place with him. The people in Mossy's life were a mixed bag, seduced and snuck and stolen from the many lives Mossy seemed, already, to have passed through. A year ago he had been writing a master's thesis on de Valera, quickly abandoned; a year before that he had been temping in a borrowed suit at the Stock Exchange on Anglesea Street; a few years before that, he had been backpacking in an Argentina where money was suddenly worth nothing. And now he was working in a self-proclaimed arthouse DVD store on George's Street, shelving cases and

calling in late returns and coming home with subtitled films and stories of the customers he dealt with: the widows and widowers in need of something to get them through the day; the new couples trying to impress each other; the Indian guys looking for Ben Affleck films; the porn addicts, some of them showing up twice or three times in the same day; the foreigners, looking for relief from the English language; the junkies, looking for a hidden corner.

'I'm surprised to see you here on a day like this, Casey,' Nagle shouted from across the table. He was smirking, lighting himself a cigarette. 'Don't you have hay to make or something like that?' he said. 'Cows to milk, turf to stack, whatever it is you do down the sticks when the summer finally cops itself the fuck on?'

This was how Nagle had always addressed him back in Trinity; the same loud amusement at the idea of someone his own age, in his own college, choosing to spend so many of his weekends on a farm. There were rugby matches to go to. Rugby bars to cram into. Rugby birds to pursue. What was Mark doing, driving tractors and testing cattle and shovelling shit-caked straw out of sheds? Nagle never understood, but he never seemed to tire of asking, either.

'Not this weekend,' Mark said now, but he knew it would not be enough for Nagle.

'Jesus, Casey, even when it's lashing rain you seem to be down there fucking around at some animal or other. Sun's splitting the stones today, and yet here you are, up to your balls in beer. What, did you finally get them off your back? What, did your old lad die?'

Beside Nagle, Mossy shook his head in laughing disapproval. 'Nagle, you bollocks.'

Nagle affected a wide-eyed look, the only effect of which was to accentuate his jowls. 'What? It's a fair assumption.

Isn't it, Casey? I mean, Jesus, I'm basically not sure if I've ever seen you in the sunshine before.'

'Right, right,' Mark said, as drolly as he could.

'I mean, for a while there, back in college, I was starting to look for fangs on this guy,' Nagle said to Mossy. 'No joke.'

'You're some tool,' said Mossy, reaching for one of Nagle's cigarettes. Mark could see Nagle noting this move as he inhaled, deciding to let it go as he blew the smoke out in a formless cloud.

'You ready for another?' Mark nodded to Mossy's glass. It was only half empty, but he wanted to get away. He took a long gulp of his own pint as though to justify the question.

Mossy nodded. 'I'll go with you,' he said. 'I need smokes.'

'Fucking right you do, Flanagan,' Nagle said, snatching up his pack of Marlboro and turning his attention to the girls at the next table. 'Beautiful day, ladies,' he said, to the back of one sleekly ponytailed head.

'Arsehole,' said Mossy, as they entered the cool darkness of the inside bar. In here, the place looked as it would at this time on any day, in any month of the year, a hard-chaw bar on a hard-chaw street in inner-city Dublin, full of life-pocked locals, all scowls and silences and sagging midriffs, all watching – they all seemed to be watching – as Mark and Mossy came in through the back door. But glancing up, Mark saw what they were actually watching: highlights of the rugby match on a huge television high on the wall. On the screen, a player was panting and pawing at his gumshield.

'When did everyone in this country start giving such a shit about rugby?'

Mossy shrugged. 'Civilized times, man.'

The barman signalled to say he'd be over in a moment.

'I didn't realize you still knew Nagle,' Mark said to Mossy,

with more accusation in his tone than he'd intended. He cleared his throat. 'What's he up to, these days?'

'Over in one of the big banks on Stephen's Green. Doing well for himself. Doing something suss with other people's money. The usual.'

'See much of him?'

'The odd time,' Mossy said. 'Think whoever brought him in here today did a legger on him. He came up to me there at the bar like I was a brother of his back from the dead. Pure relief to see someone he could talk to.'

Mark looked around the bar. 'Probably afraid one of this crowd would go at him with a dirty syringe.'

'No harm,' Mossy said. 'Though they'd have a job ramming it into that neck.'

The barman came to them, and Mark ordered the drinks. 'He's still as obsessed with my old lad's farm as he ever was.' He shook his head. 'Prick.'

'Yeah,' Mossy said. 'Though I have to say I was wondering the same thing myself.'

'Wondering what?'

'Well, y'know. This good weather. I mean, I was sure you'd be heading down home. I thought I'd be getting up to an empty house this morning.'

'I have work on,' Mark said, without looking at Mossy. 'This deadline for McCarthy.'

'Decent of them to leave you at it for a change.'

'Five missed calls since yesterday evening.'

'Fuck.' Mossy whistled.

'Yeah.'

'Ah, man, that's a hard old buzz. You didn't chat them at all, no?'

'Ah, yeah,' Mark shook his head. 'I mean, I talked to my

mother this morning. Told her the score. She understood. I said I'd be down Tuesday.'

'Good stuff.'

'Good stuff as long as this weather holds,' Mark said.

'Well,' Mossy said, with a wince, and then gestured apologetically over to the cigarette machine, as though it were an obligation he could not escape, as though he would much have preferred to stay at the bar with Mark, reassuring him about the weather, about his chapter, about parents and the things they expected their sons to do. But, then, Mossy's parents did not expect their son to do things. Mossy's parents were busy with their own lives, with the friends they had, with the trips they took, with the visits from their children that they sweetly encouraged but would never demand.

'I'll just get these,' Mossy said, and he was gone.

Mark settled closer in to the bar. The irritation he had felt at Nagle's goading had faded, but still he was not keen to return to the beer garden, and to be alone with Nagle, even for the length of time it would take for Mossy to return from buying his cigarettes. What he wanted, he realized, was for Mossy to go out there alone and start up a conversation with Nagle, a conversation about anything, and for Mark to return to find the two of them absorbed in that subject, and to come in on it, and take part in it, mindlessly, for the rest of the evening, until the beer started to really take hold, until it no longer mattered what anyone said, because nothing could get at you.

On the phone that morning, his mother had spoken in the vague, terse sentences that meant, he knew, that his father was in the room. His father had never been one to talk on the phone, but that did not mean he relinquished his determination to know – and, as though by a sort of hypnosis, to control – what was being said and what was being

agreed to at the other end of the line. Mark had seen it countless times: his mother, standing at the kitchen counter where the phone was kept, trying to get the conversation over with, while his father sat nearby, his chin pushed into his knuckles, his eyes roving the floor as he followed and weighed and dismantled every word – the words he could hear and the words at which he could only guess. It was a harmless charade, really, comical half of the time, because half of the time his father got it all arseways: the imagined details, the assumed scenarios. He was bored, Mark knew; he craved news, craved some new narrative to add to his day, and if, eavesdropping on Mark's mother's phone calls, he couldn't glean that thing ready-made, he would invent it for himself.

And his father would long since have invented his own reasons for Mark's decision to stay in Dublin that weekend despite the unfolding, on the farm, of the exact science they both knew so well: this was the second day with clear skies and temperatures above the mid-twenties, the second day in what was forecast to be a five-day spell, and it was a July day, so the meadows would be at their readiest, the ground would be baked firm. It was the day to cut, and tomorrow was the day to bale, and the next day was the day to gather, and without Mark, none of this could be done quickly or easily. And yet Mark was staying away. And as the explanation for that fact, his father would either settle on something depressingly wrong – that it was something to do with a woman – or depressingly right: that he was up shit creek with his college work. Though his father would add to the actual problem an extra dimension of crisis: Mark, he would decide, was on the verge of losing not just his funding, but his place on the programme, his right to continue with his thesis, to walk through Front Arch and set foot on campus at all. He

would be thrown out. He would be disgraced in the eyes of Dublin. And the eyes of Dublin would be nothing compared to the eyes of home.

Mark knew that his PhD work, and any mention of it, held a power over both his parents; a power that was often very convenient for him. In the face of what his father insisted on calling Mark's 'studies', they became as quiet and uneasy as though they had opened a solicitor's letter or answered the door to a guard. It was to them something alien, unfathomable, something utterly intimidating, a degree beyond a degree, an essay that would take years of their son's life, that would turn him, at the end of all, into something just as alien and unfathomable: a university lecturer, a writer of books without storylines, papers without news.

The fact of his mother's having nursed at the manor house had formed a thread of delighted connection between them, for a while. That first year of his thesis work, when he was still in love with the idea of writing about Edgeworth, his mother had talked to him about the old house every weekend he came home; she had taken him to see the place, arranged for the caretaker to show him the parts that had been least changed since the Edgeworths had sold it in the thirties. But there were hardly any such parts left, in truth. A surviving cornice, high in the men's ward, high over the hooped backs and the spittled mouths. A section of tiles in a little washroom off the maternity ward where, for years, the local women had screamed their babies into being. In the room that had once been the library, the high columns still remained, but nothing else bore any resemblance to the old drawings of the room; it was now where the patients watched television, gathered around the screen in their dressing-gowns.

Mark was disturbed by how thoroughly the traces of the

Edgeworths had been knocked out of the place. Edgeworth had written all her books there; she had collaborated with her father there on all their projects; she had helped, there, to raise and to educate her twenty-one siblings; she had learned, there, to get along with each of her father's four wives. Walter Scott had come to stay there, taking Edgeworth off with him on a tour of Killarney, and a few years later, Wordsworth had come to visit, in all his 'slow, slimy, circumspect tiresome *lengthiness'*, as Edgeworth had written in a letter to her aunt. It had been that place, and now it was just one more maze of wards and stairwells and hallways humming with the unmistakable smells of a hospital run by a religious order: disinfectant and candlewax, gravy and soap and starch.

For a while, he kept telling his mother how his thesis was going, and sharing with her any stories he had managed to turn up about the old house, and in these even his father took an interest, but eventually Mark ran out of such stories. Eventually, it was just him and Edgeworth's writing and the theories he needed, now, to apply to it, and when his parents asked him whether he had found out anything new about the house or the history of the town, he had replied regretfully at first, and eventually irritably, until, it seemed, they learned no longer to ask.

He did not need to be around Edgeworthstown any more to do his research. He needed to be in the library; he needed to be in his carrel. And his carrel was a long way from Edgeworthstown, and from his father's farm.

Mark's father did not expect him to come and live at home. He did not expect him to gradually take over the running of the farm. In the first place, his father had no intention of handing control of the farm to anybody – it was his life, and its daily rituals and its daily difficulties were like

oxygen to him, much as he might complain of them. Nor, Mark knew, did his father honestly think that farming offered any kind of future. Especially on the small scale on which he farmed, it was impossible to make a living from it. Yet none of this kept his father from thinking that Mark should do more of what he called taking an interest; that Mark should be around more often, there for the larger jobs, there to advise his father on whether to expand the yard or to buy a new piece of machinery – or, at least, there to express approval at the decisions his father had already made on these things. He did not want an heir, Mark's father. He wanted a partner. And a life in Dublin that required Mark to be physically present in the city for only two hours a week – for the undergrad class he taught, and for the office hour he was obliged to hold afterwards – seemed to Mark's father no barrier to the kind of partnership he had in mind.

Mark was the only son. He had an older sister, Nuala, who had lived in England for years. His father had neighbours, but he would not ask them for help. He had brothers-in-law, but they lived in the town, played bridge, went with their wives to Tesco and Supervalu to do the weekly shop. They did not drive tractors. They did not haul bales. They did not talk traneens and wet clumps and oil filters and phone calls to the Met Office. And there were no brothers. His father had not been born an only child, but he was as good as one now. And he knew how to turn the tricks of an only child when there was something he wanted.

But with Mark – with Mark and the farm – those tricks were not turning, at least not as Tom expected them to turn. Mark knew this. He had seen it on his father's face so many times, on so many of those evenings when it was time for him to return to Dublin after a weekend at home. It was not anger, it was not disappointment; it was, instead, a sort of

uncomprehending surprise. How could he be leaving, when things had been running so smoothly with both of their shoulders to the wheel, when there were still jobs to be done and to be discussed? How could he have failed to hear his father's many pleas for his continued presence, delivered in the guise of casual conversation since the minute he had arrived from the railway station? How could he be going when the fact of what he needed to be doing was laid out all around them in acres and herd numbers and ear tags and calendar markings for tests and marts and dehornings and cows that were due to calve?

'Jesus, I didn't think you were going so soon. And you have to be back up there?'

It was the same from his father every time. The same words. The same tone – the tone other fathers might have used upon discovering that their sons had just been redeployed to Iraq. Mark always managed, always succeeded with his tactic of being at once firm and vague, but he always knew, too, that in a week, or in a fortnight, or in a month, he would be back again, having a conversation that felt like an ulcer, making himself late for the Sunday evening train.

It was a small farm. A hundred acres, meadows around the farmyard and a stretch of bog at the far end of the lane; thirty cows or so spending their year in those meadows and in that bog instead of in the slatted shed that, Mark knew, his father wanted his help to build. A slatted shed, somehow, was the sign of a real farm, and it was essential if you wanted to get at the really good grants, but Mark scarcely knew what to say any time his father hinted at the need for one, because Mark barely knew how to build a fire, let alone a slatted shed. Was he supposed to come down one weekend and suddenly take on the skills of a builder, a carpenter, an engineer of the flow and storage of bovine sewage? You built the shed over a

pit of some sort, that he knew, and you put slats over the pit, and then you kept cattle in the shed for long periods, and you fed them there, and in the pit beneath the slats you collected their shit, and at the end of the season you had a shedful of saleable animals and a pitful of pedigree manure, and the grant cheque came in the post and you went to the bank to lodge it with all the other proper farmers. And then you did something with the money – invested it back in the farm somehow, made some strategic decisions about the way the next year was going to go. You sold your animals, and you bought new ones, and you bought new machinery, and maybe you bought new land, and you expanded, you extended, you excelled, and all the other farmers and all the other farmers' sons welcomed you to the club.

But Mark was writing a doctorate on a nineteenth-century novelist, and when he finished it, he wanted to do the things that you did after you finished a doctorate on a nineteenth-century novelist: maybe write a book about a nineteenth-century novelist, maybe teach a course or two on nineteenth-century novelists, or maybe run the hell as far away from nineteenth-century novelists as he could. He didn't know. He had to get his thesis finished first, and he had to publish many more papers, and present at many more conferences, and he had to ingratiate himself with the English departments of various universities, which was something he kept meaning to get around to but had not yet quite achieved. As a teacher – or, more accurately, as a teaching assistant – he suspected he was terrible; he had recognized, in his students' eyes, the same slow dawn of scorn and incredulity of which he had been a master in his own undergraduate years. He suspected, too, that he was writing an appalling excuse for a thesis, but still he felt sure that he wanted to have a career as an academic, to spend his days

reading and researching and writing, figuring things out and pinning things down. What those things were, he no longer felt sure, but they were the things he wanted to do; he knew. And he knew that what he did not want to do was to live in Dorvaragh, even half of the time, even a quarter of the time, and farm with his father, and fight with his father, and watch himself becoming more and more the image of his father every day. But still he could not turn his back on him. He could not refuse him. He tried to be honest with him – he told him, over and over, that his life would be in Dublin, and that his trips to the farm would be occasional, but they would be as often as he could manage, and that that was the most and the best he could do. He knew that, with his father, the words were not taking. But he could not find in that fact justification to stay away, justification for anything like a final break. And, besides, a final break was not something that he even knew how to want.

In all of this, Mark's mother was sympathetic. She told him to do what he had to do, to concentrate on his own work, to take with a pinch of salt his father's air of being winded by his leaving, confused by his inability to stay. And yet, after a couple of weeks had passed, she would be on the phone again, wondering when he would be coming down. In the spaces between her words he felt he could almost hear his father's breath.

'Monday,' his mother had said on the phone that morning, when he had explained to her about the deadline. 'Monday, you'll be finished? Monday we'll see you, so?'

He had said yes. Or he had made some noise that sounded like it. Then he had said goodbye and, looking to the clock radio beside his bed, he had discovered that there were technically three more hours left in the morning, despite the sharpness of the sunlight splaying itself through the blinds.

He had slipped back into a heavy, dream-crazed sleep, and when he had gone down to the kitchen more than three hours later, Mossy had cooked breakfast and had planned for them both what he called a knockout of a day.

And this was the knockout. A back yard in the Liberties, barely bigger than the sitting room of their flat, heaving with the sun-blistered bodies of strangers and skangers and shits like Nagle, and a bar that looked populated entirely by jailbirds and jailbait, with a few pissed grandmothers and breastfeeding infants thrown into the mix. He knew he was kidding himself to think he'd get anything done now if he went back to the flat, back to his bedroom, where he'd set up an old kitchen table as his desk, across which his notes and books and printouts lay in the kind of neat and careful order that, in truth, only meant that he wasn't working, that he hadn't been working for some time. Because there was on that desk no sign of the scuffling and flittering and leafing and scrambling it took to really get through a piece of academic work, with its footnotes and its quotations and its weavings in and out of elements from every scrap of paper touched and filed and vanished over the course of long months and years. It would be useless, Mark thought, but he would be better off there, so he drained his pint and went to say goodbye to Mossy, pushing his way through the crowd, elbows and tummies and tits and arses and pint glasses raised and pint glasses slopping.

And talking to Mossy was a girl who made Mark decide, the instant he saw her, that he was staying where he was.