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The Dead Hour

Written by Denise Mina

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THE DEAD HOUR

Denise Mina



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1

Not Like Us

1984

1

Paddy Meehan was comfortable in the back of the car. The white noise from the police radio filled the wordless space between herself and Billy, her driver. She had only just warmed up after a bitter half-hour standing in sheet rain at a car accident and didn't want to step out into the cold February night, but a handsome man with an expensive striped shirt and a ten-quid haircut was standing in the doorway of the elegant villa, holding the door shut behind him. There was a story here. No doubt about it.

They were in Bearsden, a wealthy suburb to the north of the city, all leafy roads and large houses with grass moats to keep the neighbours distant. After five months on the nightly calls-car shift it was only the second incident Paddy had been called to in the area, the other being when a night bus had staved a roundabout and burst a wheel.

The address was off a side road of old houses behind high hedges. Driving past two granite gateposts, Billy followed the gravel driveway up a sharp bit of hill. A police car was badly parked in front of the house, hogging the space. Billy pulled the car hard over to the lawn, the front wheel dipping into the carved canal between grass and gravel.

They looked up to the door. A policeman had his back

to them but Paddy still recognized him. The dead-of-night shift was a small community. Dan McGregor was standing under a stone porchway, jotting notes as he questioned the householder. The man was in his office shirt, his sleeves carefully folded up to his elbows. He must have been cold. He kept his hand on the door knob behind his back, holding the door closed as he smiled patiently at the ground, arguing for the police officer to go away.

Cursing the cold and the night and the feckless man, Paddy opened the car door and stepped out on to the gravel, conscious that the glorious warmth in the cabin was being diluted with cold. She shut the door quickly and pulled the collar of her green leather up against the rain.

Back inside the car Billy reached for the cigarette packet on the dashboard. Paddy and Billy spent five hours a night together, five nights a week, and she knew his every gesture. Now he'd flick his finger on the backside of the disposable lighter tucked into the cellophane wrapper, pull it out and, in a single gesture, flip the carton lid up, take a cigarette out and light it. Paddy paused long enough to see the burst of warm orange flame at his window, wishing herself back inside as she turned towards the house.

Across the slippery, rain-logged lawn the Victorian villa had a pleasing symmetry. Large bay windows on either side of the front door were dressed in old-fashioned frilly net curtains and heavy chintz curtains, still open. The window on the right of the door was dark but the left-hand window was bright, light spilling out on to the gravel, harsh as the ugly lights in the dying half hour of a disco.

Paddy smiled when she saw Tam Gourlay, the other police officer, hanging around by the squad car, blowing on his hands and stamping his feet. When they were called to the rough estates on the outskirts of town one of the officers always stayed back to guard the patrol car from angry resi-

dents, but it was hardly necessary here. Paddy imagined an unruly gang of doctors running up the driveway, ripping the wing mirrors off and tanning the windshield. She giggled aloud and caught herself. She was acting odd again. Night shift was getting to her.

Long-term sleep deprivation. It was like a fever, shifting the turn of her eye, moving everything slightly sideways. The bizarre nature of the stories the shift threw up appealed to her but the news editors didn't want surprising, surreal vignettes. They wanted flat, dull news stories, the who, what and when, rarely the why or the guess-what. Her exhaustion coloured everything. She found herself a foot in the wrong direction to meet anyone's eye, her own lonely heart alone in the universe, a beat out of step with everyone else.

She caught Tam's eye as she approached the panda car.

'Meehan,' he said.

'All right, Tam? Is that you back from your holidays?'

'Aye.'

'Nice time?'

'Two weeks with the wife and a six-month-old wean,' sneered Tam. 'You work it out.'

He was the same age as Paddy, in his early twenties, but monkeyed the genuine melancholy of the older officers.

'So.' She took her notebook out of her pocket. 'What brought you out here?' She'd heard the call on the police radio in the car: the neighbours were complaining about a disturbance. It wasn't a neighbourhood that would tolerate much night life.

Tam rolled his eyes. 'Noise complaint: cars screeching, front door slamming, shouting.'

Paddy raised her eyebrows. Noise complaints took two minutes: the householder opened the door, promised to keep it down and everyone went home.

Tam glanced at the door. 'There's a woman inside with blood on her face.'

'Did he hit her?'

'I suppose. Either that or she's been punching herself in the mouth.' Tam chuckled at his joke, but Paddy had the feeling he'd made it before. Or heard it from someone else. She didn't smile back.

'Not really the right neighbourhood for a noisy party on a Monday night.'

Tam huffed. 'Seen the motors?' He nodded to two shiny BMWs parked in the shadows around the back of the tall house. One was big and imposing, the other a sports car, but they matched somehow, like his-and-hers wedding rings. Paddy didn't know much about cars but she knew that the price of one of them would pay her family's rent for three years.

Together they looked at the man. 'Is Dan going to lift him?'

'Nah,' said Tam. 'The woman wants us to leave it. Vhari Burnett. She's a lawyer. One of us.'

Paddy was surprised. 'She's prosecution?'

'Aye.' He pointed at the police officer at the door. 'Dan knows her from the high court. Says she's decent. But, you know, why doesn't she want him prosecuted?'

Paddy thought it was pretty obvious why a woman wouldn't want to bring a criminal prosecution against any man who had a key to her front door. Her oldest sister, Caroline, regularly turned up at home with big bruises on her arms and went mad when anyone mentioned them. The family were Catholic; leaving wasn't an option. Paddy could have put Tam straight, but it was two a.m. and she heard the same lazy, simple-minded shit from officers attending domestic incidents every night. She depended on them for stories and couldn't call them on it. Despite her courting

and never contradicting them, the night-shift guys still sensed her distance and went behind her back, feeding the best stories to other journalists, guys they watched football or drank with. Banishing thoughts of her fading career, Paddy turned towards the house.

The first thing she noticed about the dark-haired man was his mouth-watering figure: tall with long legs and slim hips. He stood with his weight on one foot, hips to one side, tolerating Dan's chat. His lashes were long and dark and he kept his eyes a little shut, as though the weight of his lashes forced him to look languid. The conservative white shirt had a thin salmon-pink stripe. Over it he wore black braces with shiny steel buckles, and he had expensive black shoes and suit trousers. It looked like a work uniform. His face was calm and smiling, although his fingers fidgeted nervously on the door handle behind him. He was beautiful.

Paddy sauntered slowly over to the door, keeping in the shadows at the side of the house. Dan was nodding at his notebook as the man spoke.

'. . . Dan, it won't happen again.' He seemed quite casual and Paddy could see that Dan had no intention of taking him in, not even just to lock him in the cells for a couple of hours and teach him a lesson about being a snotty shite. She had seen Dan and Tam at many midnight disturbances and they weren't known for their tolerance. Dan was a fit man, for all he was thin and older. She'd seen him being cheeked up, and using his wiry frame to introduce a couple of faces to the side of his squad car.

Dan scratched something into his pad with a stubby pencil. Thinking himself unobserved, the man dropped his guard and Paddy saw a twitch of excitement as his hand tensed over the handle.

'OK,' said Dan. 'You'll need to keep it down. If we get

another call we'll have no option but to take some sort of action.'

'Sure. Don't worry about it.'

Dan shut his notebook and backed off the step. 'Maybe you should get her seen to.'

'Definitely.' He seemed to relax for a moment. Paddy stepped into the circle of yellow light in front of the door. 'Hello. I'm Paddy Meehan from the *Scottish Daily News*. Could I talk to you about the police being called here?'

The man glared at Dan, who shrugged and backed away to the panda car. Up close his eyes were Paul Newman blue and his lips pink, fleshy. She wanted to touch them with her fingertips. His eyes read Paddy's second-hand green leather coat, the spiky dark hair, beige suede pixie boots and large gold hoops. She saw him notice the red enamel thumb ring on her right hand. It was cheap, bought from a hippy shop, and the blue speckles of enamel were crumbling and falling out.

'Like your look,' he smiled, but she could tell he was lying.

'Thanks. Your look's a bit "business", isn't it?'

He swept his shirt front straight and tucked a thumb under his braces. 'Like it?' He shifted his weight, drawing her attention to his hips. It was a bit too explicit, too overt to be casually flirtatious. She didn't like it.

'So, have you been beating your wife?'

'Excuse me . . .' He held his left hand up and showed her his bare third finger in defence. He wasn't married.

'Do you know Dan?'

He looked her square in the face, eyes clouded over. 'I don't know Dan.'

She frowned and raised a sceptical eyebrow. '*Dan?*' The familiarity of the first name gave more away about their relationship than his manner towards the policeman.

He shrugged as if he didn't care whether she believed him or not, and ran his fingers through his black hair. She could hear the crisp crumple of the fine starched linen of his shirt sleeve.

The door fell open a foot behind him. Paddy saw an imposing Victorian hall stand, dark oak with hooks for hats, a stand on the arm for umbrellas and walking sticks. In the middle of the dark wood frame was a large mirror, and reflected in the glass she saw a woman's frightened face.

The pretty blonde was standing in the door that led to the living room, listening. Slim necked and fine featured, the tips of her bob were stained pink with blood. As she watched Paddy in the mirror her slender fingers cartwheeled the curtain of hair behind her ear, revealing a bloody jaw. A thin slash of scarlet ran from the side of her mouth to her chin, down her neck and over her collarbone, soaking into the wide Lady Di lace ruff on her white blouse.

For a sliver of a moment their eyes met and Paddy saw the vacant expression she'd seen many times at car crashes and fights, a look saturated with shock and pain. She raised her eyebrows at the blonde, asking if she wanted help, but the woman gave a half shake of the head and broke off eye contact, sliding backwards in the doorway and out of the mirror.

The man saw Paddy looking and pulled the door closed at his back. 'We're fine, really.' He smiled warmly and nodded, as if thanking Paddy for coming to a party. The porchway light was weak and yellow but she saw it suddenly: blood on his own neck, in among the short black hairs. They were spots, flecks from spray. He smiled at her. She could see the glint of flint in his eyes.

'Have you beaten her before?'

He was getting irritated, but only a little bit. He glanced over at Tam and Dan by the squad car and Paddy followed

his gaze. Dan shook his head, giving the man an answer, sending a signal Paddy didn't understand. He took a tired breath. 'Won't you wait for a moment, please?'

Opening the door less than half a foot, he slipped inside. For a moment, as the door fell towards the jamb, Paddy thought he had done the sensible thing and shut her out, but he came back smiling a second later.

He leaned forward and put something in Paddy's hand. 'I can't stress enough how important it is that this doesn't get in the paper.' It was a fifty-pound note. 'Please?'

The note was damp and pink with blood.

Paddy glanced around. Both officers were standing by their panda car with their backs to her. The windows in the house across the nearest hedge were black and blank and empty. Her cold fingers closed over the note.

'Good night.' He slipped back into the house and shut the door firmly but quietly.

Paddy looked at the grain of the oak door, worn yellow where habitual hands had felt for the handle or fitted a key. The large brass handle was smeared with blood. She had fifty quid in her hand. She squeezed it just to be sure it was there and the wetness of the blood chilled her. A little excited, she crammed her fist into her coat pocket, turning stiffly and crunching back down the perfect driveway. The wind ruffled her hair. Somewhere in the far distance a car rumbled down a road, pausing to change gear.

At the police car, Tam shrugged. 'It's important to them. She's a lawyer,' he said, inadvertently letting her know that they'd been paid off too.

Dan slapped the back of Tam's head and tutted. As she passed she overheard Tam defend himself in an undertone. 'It's only wee Meehan.' They climbed into the police car and started the engine, Dan backing carefully out of the driveway, reversing past Paddy at the side of the calls car.

As she opened the passenger door she glanced back at the brightly lit window of the big house. For an instant she saw a movement behind the net curtains, a swirl of light and motion. She blinked and when she looked back the room was still.

Billy watched her fall into the back seat in the rear-view mirror and took a draw on his cigarette. He had seen her take the money, she was sure of it. She could have offered to share it but she didn't know what the etiquette was, she'd never been bribed before. Besides, fifty quid could solve a host of problems.

Billy reversed out of the drive but Paddy's eyes lingered on the house. In the coming weeks and months she would recall the skirl of light she had witnessed at the window, how glad she had been to be back in the warm car and how thrilling the note had felt in her pocket. And she would burn with shame when she remembered her absolute conviction that the bloodied woman in the mirror was nothing whatever to do with her.

II

Billy drove in silence down the black glistening road towards the city, listening to the pip and crackle of the police radio. Paddy could hardly look at him in the mirror.

Even if Billy had seen her take the money she knew he wouldn't ask her about it. They were careful what they asked each other because the truth was difficult. Injudicious questions had told her that Billy and his wife were fighting all the time, that he didn't like his son much since he had become a teenager. She had told him that she felt disgusting and fat, that her unemployed family resented living off her wages and the unnatural power it gave her in the house.

Billy and Paddy had never developed a workmates'

rapport of comforting lies. The police radio was on all the time, forming a wall of static that stopped them talking in anything more than staccato bursts. They never spoke long enough to let Billy hint that his son was basically a genius who hadn't found his niche, or for Paddy to suggest that her weight was a bit hormonal. All that lay between them was a raw stretch of truth. At least they were kind to each other. It would have been unbearable otherwise.

'Hey, you'll like this one.' Billy turned the radio down for a second. 'What's a domestic altercation?'

'I don't know, Billy, what is a domestic altercation?'

'A fight in a hoose in Bearsden.' He turned the radio back up and smiled at her in the mirror, telling her it was OK.

She looked sadly down at her hand as it uncurled in her lap. Her palm had blood on it. 'You're right, Billy, I do like that one.'

She needed the money. Her father had been unemployed for two years. There were four children living at home and she was the only one bringing in a wage. She was the youngest and now the major earner. It gave her an unspoken veto in family decisions; her mother told her how much every item in the shopping cost and emphasized her frugality with food. It left Paddy with nothing for herself and she couldn't fathom how to rectify the power imbalance at home. Still, the Meehans were relatively well off: one in three adults were unemployed in many parts of the city. Her mother wouldn't notice the blood on the note as long as she left it to dry and brown.

'Was it a couple?' Billy wound his window down an inch, dropping the end of his cigarette out of the crack. It bounced off the sill, giving off a burst of red sparks, before disappearing over the edge.

'She had blood on her. I don't know if we should have left her there.'

'Don't feel too bad. They're not like us, rich people.'

'Aye.'

'She could leave him if she wanted.'

'So I suppose.'

The domestics they usually saw were in tiny flats on sink estates, of necessity public events because the couples had to go out into the street to get a good swing at each other. Husbands and wives could languish on the council list for years while they waited for separate houses to come up, festering in small rooms. Blow-ups were inevitable.

Billy caught her eye again. 'We gonnae phone that story in then or just leave it?'

If she didn't think Billy had seen her take the money, she would have moved on to the next call and the next incident, but she didn't want him to think badly of her.

'OK,' she said. 'Let's find a phone box.'

'Then we could try up at Easterhouse,' suggested Billy, letting her know that he doubted the story would make it to print. 'There's been a lot of swordplay in Barrowfield as well.'

All over the city nutters and gangsters were getting hold of machetes and swords and claymores and attacking each other. Sword fights had been going on for years and the moral panic they generated had been mined to death. It was a tired story, but it was still a story.

'Aye, some bastard must be killing somebody somewhere,' said Paddy, hating her job and all the places it took her to.

2
Living on His Knees

1

When Paddy left work the sun still wasn't due to rise for three hours. The few early-morning commuters on the street scurried along, heads to chests, keeping warm and keeping going, determined as clockwork mice. She was the only person sauntering through the icy city centre, head up, the only person watching. She had discovered that in the mornings, particularly when it was dark, no one looked up – they scurried along with their minds elsewhere, rehashing fights or rehearsing their day ahead, sometimes talking to themselves. She alone was present in the street, alone in the fleeting moment.

She walked slowly. She didn't want to get to Sean's too early or she'd have to sit while his mum walked around in her slip and skirt and ate her breakfast, passing on stories, most of them malicious rumours about women in the parish.

Taking a long, wandering way down to the station, Paddy doubled back up Albion Street and crossed the Siberian expanse of George Square. She was warm in her green leather. It was a knee-length fifties coat with a round collar and three big green buttons. It was a jumble-sale buy, bought for a pound, made of buttery calfskin. Best of all it

hung straight at the back with no waisting at all and disguised her bum a bit. It was roomy enough to allow for a jumper underneath. She slowed to a stop, pulling her red scarf up from the back of her neck to cup her head, covering her ears to stop the icy wind giving her earache.

A man in a green boiler suit and heavy work boots hurried across her path. As she watched him make his way towards the City Chambers it occurred to her why she liked green so much: it was because of Betty Carson and Paddy Meehan's prison release day. She hadn't made the association before. Maybe that was why she'd been so drawn to the green sleeve on the rack at the jumble sale.

Patrick Meehan's story was through her like weft through a weave. Telling details came to mind at the most unlikely times, bubbling up from her subconscious just when she was least expecting them.

Paddy Connelly Meehan was a career criminal, a small-time safe-blower who had spent more of his life in prison than out of it. If he wasn't cooking gelignite in frying pans in deserted tenements he was boasting about his exploits in the Tapp Inn. He had been found guilty of a high-profile murder when Paddy was just a child and the accident of their names meant that she followed the story all through her childhood, hearing before most people in the city that he was innocent, that the real villain had tried to sell his story to the Sunday papers, that a famous journalist was writing a book about the case. Growing up faithless in an obsessively Catholic family, Paddy had looked to the outside world for models on how to behave, and somehow she'd replaced the New Testament with Meehan's story. It wasn't that unusual a thing to do, she realized: many failed Catholics became Marxists because of the perfect fit of mental infrastructure. Both had a single text and their own saints and fallen heroes. Both demanded time and money and

evangelizing and both looked forward to a future when justice would abound and the meek would inherit the earth.

She had become obsessed with the Meehan story, finding bravery and dignity there, nobility and perseverance, integrity and loyalty. The only detail spoiling it for her now was Paddy Meehan himself: after his pardon he had stayed in Glasgow, hanging around the pubs and telling his story to anyone who'd listen, falling out with journalists and barmen and everyone. He had lived past his moment of glory and couldn't stay a hero in the workaday mess of getting by.

He was the reason she became a journalist, why she wanted the crime desk and saw glory and dignity in a job most would see as a career compromise.

A green coat.

In Paddy's imagination Betty Carson's flame-red hair was brilliant against the cream wall, her skin as pale as white bread. Betty and Patrick Meehan were both eighteen, both taking shelter in the same dark close, waiting for the rain to go off. They spoke for a while and he walked her to the bus stop, waiting with her, watching her wave from the retreating tram with his heart beating loudly in his throat.

Betty was from good people. Her staunchly Protestant family were surprised when she came home a few months later and announced that she was married, but, in a bigoted city, they were open minded and accepting of the young Catholic man. They gave Meehan every chance to do the right thing. Each time he came home from prison they welcomed him, expecting it would be different this time because he said so.

Prison release day. According to his own account, Betty met him outside the gates at the end of every single prison sentence. Every time she would be outside, standing in rain

or wind or in the biting dark of a long Scottish winter. And she'd be wearing a new green coat or dress or suit, green for new beginnings, green to set off her red hair.

Meehan and Betty kissed, Paddy imagined – kissed and wrapped their arms around each other, squeezing a little, delighted to be together, and they'd set off, arms linked, walking calmly as she did through the early-morning rush of people hurrying to work, head-down people talking to themselves and hurrying through a grey morning. On release day Betty floated through the town with her man, taking him home to a hearty breakfast.

Betty, a happy fleck of festive green and red in the great grey city.

II

Paddy stepped off the train on to the windy Rutherglen station platform, bleary eyed, with dry powdery baked potato coating her teeth. Her head was too scrambled to stick to the High Fibre Diet, but she was still trying and always kept a cold baked potato in her bag. She had put on weight in the last few years, on her hips and her chest. Any faith that she could stick to a disciplined regime had deserted her, so she ended up applying the principles in a half-arsed way, supplementing meals with baked potatoes or cold beans eaten straight from the tin, feeling tired and guilty all the time and shamefully scuttling off to corners to pass stinking wind.

As she climbed the long flight of stairs from the platform to the street, compound tiredness made her back curl over, her hands slapping on the steps in front of her. She needed a big starchy sugar lift and knew there would be porridge and honey at the Ogilvys'. As she walked down Rutherglen Main Street, passing the commuters spilling out of the bus

shelter, she swithered over the promise of porridge. Being fat was holding her back at work. She didn't have the confidence to put herself forward or take the initiative and apply for better jobs in London. If she was thinner she could do it. She was just twenty pounds away from the life she should have been living.

On the other hand, she wasn't at work this morning and she was tired and sorry for herself. She could give in and gorge herself on warm porridge and mugs of milky tea.

Rutherglen Main Street was in the calm lull between the morning rush to work and the gathering of old people and young mothers for ten o'clock Mass at St Columkille's. They would be making their way there slowly, coming through the shopping arcade and heading downhill from the small housing schemes dotted around the Main Street. All her elderly relatives would be coming. Her sister Mary Ann would be walking the straight road from Eastfield. Paddy kept her head down and hurried through the back streets to Sean's house in Gallowflat Street. She'd hide at Sean's until well after the Mass came out, or suffer a hundred inquiries after her mother, father, brothers and sisters as she tried to make her way to her warm bed and a long, creamy sleep.

The Ogilvys' kitchen window was steamed up, the living room dark. The light would be on if Sean was up – he liked to watch the school programmes while he ate his breakfast. Paddy turned into the close, almost bumping into a young woman with a screaming baby in an old-fashioned Silver Cross pram.

'Fiona O'Conner, how ye doing?' said Paddy, though she had never liked her at school and vaguely remembered being insulted by her. 'Is this your wee one?'

Fiona raised red smarting eyes. 'Oh, yeah, hi. Help us down with the pram.'

Paddy took the front axle of the pram and lifted it down the two steps to the street. Fiona looked annoyed. 'I thought Sean was going out with Elaine McCarron now.'

Paddy winced a little at the mention of Elaine and wondered why she did. 'Aye, they've been together for a year now. Seem to be getting on well.'

'Oh, right,' said Fiona slyly. 'You're always here, but, eh?'

Paddy gave her a stiff smile and slipped past Fiona into the close.

She could have been married to Sean by now, they might have had a family and a house of their own. She had chosen instead to continue working at the *News* and hope for a career, to dream one day of a house of her own that didn't smell continually of soup and potatoes. Making the difficult choice wasn't enough. She was still at home, her family of five reliant on her wages. Her clothes were cheap, came from What Every's and lasted no more than two washes. A place of her own was a long way off.

She had started going with Sean at school. They were close and both came from big families so neither of them bothered with other friends. It was too late now – the lifelong friendships that trail on after school, that made for best men and holiday companions, were out of reach for them now. They found themselves stuck together, not engaged or even dating, just hanging around during the day watching *County Court* on TV, or grainy pirate videos of the three films his brother owned: *Airplane, Evil Dead* and *The Exorcist*, or else going for pointless walks up the Brae.

Mimi Ogilvy was pulling on her coat as she opened the door. 'Come in, Paddy, wee hen, good of you to come.'

Paddy stepped into the hallway, into the warmth and the homely smell of toast and strong tea. The holy-water font

inside Mimi's door was large enough for a small chapel: a Disney-ish Our Lady gazing lovingly down at a fat baby Jesus who was holding a pink oyster shell full of holy water. Paddy dipped two fingers of her right hand and dabbed her head, her breastbone and both shoulders as she crossed the threshold. It was an old habit she couldn't shake. She had no faith but knew the gesture soothed her mother's fears about her. Every time she did it she felt like a hypocrite, but a hypocrite with a calm mother.

She noticed a new set of leaflets stacked under the telephone table. Black text on red paper this time, proclaiming Callum Ogilvy's innocence. It cost a lot of money to print them – she wondered where the hell Sean was getting it from. But just then Mimi ambled out of the kitchen, peeling two pound notes from her purse, and laid them on the telephone table, answering her question.

'That's for his ciggies and a pint at teatime. And,' she pulled out a fiver and three more pound notes, 'he's got his last driving lesson later.'

It was meant as a compliment that she did it in front of Paddy, a mark of acceptance. Paddy looked away. Mimi had paid for so many lessons that Sean had his test in a few days. Sean didn't need to drive – he wouldn't be able to afford a car. And anyway, no one was paying for her driving lessons.

Mimi glanced at the clock on the far wall of the galley kitchen and stepped past Paddy to the door. 'There's porridge in the pot for ye and the honey's in the cupboard next to the fridge.'

She was gone, leaving Paddy in the hall listening to her ex-fiancé snoring and trying to resist the pull of warm porridge after a long night shift. Sean didn't take porridge for his breakfast. Poor Mimi had gone to all that trouble just for her. It would be unkind to leave it.

III

He was awake. His breathing had become lighter, but he was still facing the wall and keeping his eyes shut, curled up to hide his morning glory.

She rapped on the open bedroom door once more. 'Get up.'

Sean stretched out under the blankets, savouring the hazy sleep in his limbs. He was wearing his brown pyjamas with the yellow trim on the pocket. He looked like a six-foot-two ten-year-old.

'Hey, smelly boy, wake up. Come on, you need to sign on.'

'Yeah, yeah.' He clasped his hands in front of himself and gave a luxurious stretch, smiling at her standing in the doorway, his eyes puffy with sleep, his lashes pressed this way and that by the pillow.

Paddy felt a burst of righteous anger. Both she and his mother were working hard at thankless jobs and cooking and caring for him. She knew his brothers gave him money on the fly as well, two quid here, a packet of fags there. One of them had bought him a season ticket to Celtic Park so that they could all go together. Paddy came straight over from work every two weeks to make sure he got up and went to claim his Supplementary Benefit. He couldn't even do that himself.

'You're a lazy bastard. You want to get on your bike and look for work.'

They locked eyes and grinned at each other across the soft darkness of the bedroom, a look that lingered too long. Ambushed by the sudden moment of tender connection, their smiles slid gently into awkward until Sean stretched his arms behind his head and broke it off. 'Anyway, milk and five sugars, love.'

'Fuck you.' It was a little too angry for a play fight and he was surprised into looking at her. She wasn't angry at Sean, she was angry at herself for eating the porridge and then going back for more porridge with more honey and then standing, watching old ladies with string grocery bags passing by the kitchen window, picking at the papery skirt of dried porridge around the rim of the pot, eating it and wondering why she was doing it. It didn't taste of anything. It didn't even have a pleasant texture. But while she was eating all she thought about was eating. She didn't worry about work or her family or her weight. Even unpleasant food made her feel happy. Except cottage cheese with pineapple. She could hardly look at it now, after a reckless week-long attempt to eat nothing else.

Sean kept her eye and rolled away from her, farting lightly in her general direction. She tried not to smile.

'Saw this in the hall.' She held up the Callum Ogilvy pamphlet.

'Yeah, a woman took one from Elaine's salon yesterday.' He propped himself up on an elbow. 'She's a reporter from the *Reformer*, said she was interested. It could be the start of something.'

Paddy grunted. *The Rutherglen Reformer* was an advertising paper. They covered local swimming galas and wheelie-bin controversies. They wouldn't touch a story like Callum's but Sean was trying to worry her, make her write about his campaign for the *Daily News* before someone else scooped the story.

Callum was eleven when he and another boy were convicted of killing a three-year-old they had taken from outside his front door. Looking back, it seemed bizarre that Paddy alone was convinced that there must have been an adult hand in the killing. The rest of the city settled happily on the two boys as lone culprits.

Paddy had found the man behind the killing – she still had the mental scars to prove it – but even she knew that Callum had killed the wee boy. He might have been driven to the spot and terrorized into doing it, but Callum Ogilvy was still guilty. He'd had blood on him from the baby, his hair was found at the scene and Callum had more or less confessed.

Only Sean wouldn't accept it. Callum's innocence had become an article of faith with him and she thought he had half convinced Callum now too. The Ogilvys had abandoned the wee cousin to his fate once, leaving him to be raised by an unstable mother, and Sean wasn't going to betray him again. The adamancy of his conviction and the sincerity with which he wrote letter after letter to MPs and journalists and anyone who might be able to help were starting to have an impact.

'Sean,' she spoke with forced patience, 'there's no new evidence—'

'The old evidence could be made up.'

'Mrs Thatcher could be an evil robot, but she isn't. Just because something's plausible doesn't make it possible.'

They looked at each other again. All it would take, she thought, was for one of the animals at work to see a career boost in the story and Sean would be eaten alive.

'You'd be better off dropping it. No one wants to keep this story going but you.'

'Pad,' he used the fond diminutive of her nickname but sounded serious, 'it's not just a story to me. I won't side with the world against that wee guy. I'm all he's got.'

'Couldn't you be all he's got and still accept that he did it? Does he have to be innocent for you to like him? He was ten years old when he did it. Who knows anything at ten?'

'Don't start that.'

Resigned, Paddy nodded. 'Come on anyway, get up.'

Sean stretched back. 'Put the kettle on, eh? And a couple of slices.'

'*Playschool*'s on in a minute.' She backed out of the room and hesitated at the doorway between the living room and the kitchen. She had come here straight from a night shift, but she drew the line at cooking his breakfast. She chose the living-room door, fell on to the settee and looked around the room.

The Ogilvys were good little soldiers of the Church, just like her own family. Their furniture was nice enough, built to be hard-wearing but not to look nice or feel modern. All the pictures on the walls were either religious or sacrament-related triumphs of the various family members: Sean's parents at their silver wedding anniversary, the ordination of a distant cousin, one brother's small wedding to a pretty girl from Hamilton and the subsequent christenings of their four children, all outside the same ugly little chapel during different seasons. Paddy and Sean had been engaged for two of the christenings and she was pictured in the family group, although, in her only expression of annoyance at Paddy breaking the engagement off, Mimi had framed one of them so that she was sliced in half by the edge of the frame.

Paddy took a copy of the *Daily News* out of her pale leather backpack, frowning heavily to stop herself grinning at the second page. Her insert was printed there: Police were called to a party at 17 Drymen Road, Bearsden, after neighbours complained of the noise. A woman was found to be injured but police made no arrests. It was her first piece of copy in four night shifts.

Putting down the paper, she listened for noises from the hall. Nothing. 'Sean,' she shouted, irritated. 'They won't let you off with it any more.'

'I'm eating a fry-up in the shower.'

She could tell by his voice that he was still lying down. If he was late again they wouldn't process his giro cheque until later in the afternoon, which meant the cheque would arrive in three days instead of two. They did it to punish latecomers and Mimi needed the money.

'Your mum's behind on all her catalogues. Mr McKay'll come and repo all your underpants.'

She heard the clip-clop of high-heels in the close and a key rasping into the front door. She hoped it was Mimi, but knew it wasn't. Guilty, as if she had been caught skiving school, she tucked her hands between her knees and sat up straight on the settee.

Elaine McCarron stepped into the hallway, mac on over her blue work pinny, smiling to herself. Elaine had been two years below them at school, slim, slight and fine featured. She hated Paddy but was too dainty to ask Sean to stop hanging about with his ex the whole time. A junior hairdresser, she worked hard on her feet during the long afternoons that Paddy and Sean spent watching telly or wandering around Woolworths eating pick and mix and playing with the toys.

Paddy let herself be known by a stage cough. Elaine spun round, infuriated, and Paddy tried a smile.

'I wouldn't have come,' she whispered. 'Only Mimi asked me.'

Elaine pursed her lips hard, draining the blood from them, and looked away to Sean's bedroom door. She pulled her pinny straight, composing herself before knocking prettily.

Paddy sat sheepishly back on the settee. She couldn't leave immediately. It would look as if she had done something wrong. She felt a familiar hollow sense of guilt, as if she had eaten the flake out of Elaine's ice cream and no one knew it but the two of them. She could blame Mimi all she

liked, she could deny it to everyone, but Paddy knew that she was clinging to Sean because he was the only person she felt completely comfortable with. She needed him even more now because she missed her sister, Mary Ann, so much.

From across the hall she heard Elaine give a sexy giggle, louder than she needed to – for Paddy's benefit, she was sure. She stood up suddenly and turned the telly on to the news. Unemployment was running at one in ten. The Scott Lithgow shipyard was threatening to close with six and a half thousand redundancies. Boy George was pictured arriving in Paris, Charles de Gaulle with his Japanese girlfriend. Then the local news.

Mist rose from a lawn. In the distance was a Victorian villa with serious policemen in front of it, their frosted breath silver in the brittle morning air. It was the house she had stopped at last night. The home owner, Vhari Burnett, had been found this morning by a colleague who had come to give her a lift to work. They showed a grainy photo of the woman Paddy had seen in the mirror. Her hair was shorter in the picture and she was outside, her blonde hair wind-ruffled, smiling crescent eyes.

Paddy sat upright: the good-looking man had killed her. She remembered the flurry of light at the Bearsden window and it seemed to her now that an arm swung in a punch, a machete strike, a death blow. She recalled the night cold on her cheeks, the wind brushing her hair back, and saw again the fingers clench the door handle, holding the door closed, keeping the woman inside.

Burnett had been a prominent member of the fiscal's office, unmarried and a political activist. In the wide shot Paddy noticed that both BMWs were gone from the side of the house.

As Paddy sat on the settee, slack and horrified, vaguely

aware of the sound of voices out in the hall, she shifted and felt the fifty quid crumple in her pocket. She should phone the police and tell them about it. It could be important – not many people had the odd fifty-quid note sitting about in their hall. But the police would gossip about it. Her first and only bribe would become public knowledge.

The front door clicked shut and Sean said something. She'd be known as corrupt and the note would end up in some policeman's pocket. Evidence was misplaced all the time, generally money or other valuables – it never seemed to happen to mouldy jam sandwiches or hats with holes in them.

'Did ye not make tea?' said Sean, repeating himself. He was standing at the door of the living room.

Paddy pointed at the telly. 'He killed her.'

'Who?'

'I was at the door of that house last night and they've just said a woman was murdered after we left. I spoke to the guy who did it.'

Sean glanced at the television. 'Creepy.'

Paddy drew a long breath, balancing the news of the fifty-quid note on the tip of her tongue, unsure if she wanted to commit herself to doing the right thing. She looked at Sean's face and gave in. 'He gave me money, a fifty-pound note, to go away.'

'Fucking hell.'

Paddy cringed. 'Shit loads, isn't it? Mum'd have a field day with a note that big.'

Sean's eyes widened, thinking of all the things he could do with fifty quid. It was five weeks' worth of benefit for him. He could send his mum to Rome on pilgrimage. Buy shoes that fitted him. Get new carpet for the threadbare hall.

'Ye need to hand it in to the police though, Pad.'

'Aye,' she agreed quickly, as if that was what she had been going to do all along. 'Aye, I know.'

'You'll get it back, I'm sure.'

'Oh, aye.' She turned back to face the telly and nodded, a little too vigorously. 'I'll get it back.'