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Written by Catherine O'Flynn

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Mr Lynch's Holiday

CATHERINE O'FLYNN

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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

Written for Peter and Edie
Dedicated to the memory of Donal and Ellen

I

2008

He arrived on a cloudless day. As he stepped on to the tarmac, he looked up at the sky and saw nothing but blue and the traces left by other planes.

The terminal was deserted. He wandered along polished floors with a handful of other passengers. Music was playing somewhere. An old tune, he couldn't remember the name. It was not how he'd imagined airports. It seemed more like a ballroom to him. Something grand and sad about the place.

Walking through a sliding door he found himself in the arrivals hall, confronted by a crowd of people crushed up against the rail waving pieces of paper and looking at him expectantly. Scanning the faces and signs, he smiled apologetically for not being their man. He looked beyond them to others who hung back and leaned against walls, but saw no trace of Eamonn. He had never assumed that he would be able to meet him. It wasn't always possible to just drop what you were doing.

Eamonn wasn't sure how long he'd been awake, or if what had passed before had been sleep. He seemed to have been conscious for hours, lying inert in a kind of trance. He rolled on to Laura's empty side of the bed and picked up the barely there

scent of her perfume, citric and uncertain. He sat on the edge of the bed for a moment, waiting to recover.

He sidled over to the window, opening the shutters an inch before slamming them closed again. He tried once more, pulling back slowly, keeping his gaze downcast, watching colour flood the floor tiles. His feet retained their mortuary hue, luminously pale on the terracotta slabs.

When he thought his eyes could stand it, he looked out of the window. It was just as he'd known. Another day, dazzling and merciless.

He found the payphones and pulled an address book out of his bag. The book was ancient, a faded lady with a parasol on the cover, the Sellotape holding it together dried out and yellow. The pages bulged with various additions and amendments on old letters, birthday cards and torn scraps of tea-bag box. Looking for Eamonn's details he came across the phone numbers of various friends and family long dead or forgotten. It was strange to think that by pressing a few buttons he might hear some of their voices again. The book contained his and Kathleen's entire life, and the information it held was almost all obsolete.

When he found the number he realized he'd need coins and suddenly it was all too much bother and messing about when he could be off and on the road already. He was happy to make his own way. He thought there were few places you couldn't reach with a decent map and public transport.

He found the buses easily enough at the airport. He boarded one with the name of what looked a fairly large town, in the general direction of Eamonn's place. The woman driver gave a small nod when he attempted his pronunciation of the place. Receiving change was the first thing that really struck him as

foreign. He wondered if she appreciated how much aggro she avoided by not insisting on exact fares.

Eamonn was hungry. He rooted listlessly in the kitchen cupboards, conscious that he had done the same thing the previous day, and maybe the day before that too. He found the madeleine cake hitherto rejected for the dark stain of mould on its underside. He cut away the exterior, leaving a cubic inch of untainted yellow sponge, which he put on a plate and took out on to the balcony along with a cup of stale mint tea.

He sat on the terrace, looking over at the shared swimming pool. It had been empty for almost a year, the chlorinated water replaced with a thin layer of pine needles. He noticed that a family of cats had moved in overnight, locating themselves in the deep end on a discarded Cheetos box. Lomaverde had proven to be a popular destination for hardworking cats and their families. The legion of them snaking in the shadows around the bins had steadily grown. It was hard to tell if fresh residents were continuing to flood in or if the original settlers were simply reproducing rapidly in the promised land.

He was startled by the door buzzer – a strange skip to his heart as he pressed the button, thinking: 'I have become a dog.' He was greeted with the klaxon voice of the postwoman. She made occasional trips out to the development, seemingly as and when she felt it worth her while. He didn't know what happened to the mail between being sent and being delivered, if it languished in a sorting office somewhere or if the postwoman herself kept it all in her flat. He imagined her rooms filled with crates of mail, sacks of other people's special offers and exclusive opportunities stuffed under her bed.

There was never anything much in the post that he wanted anyway. He shuffled down to the lobby for something to do and collected the pile from his mailbox, dropping each envelope after a cursory glance: Vodafone bill, Endesa bill, Santander statement, and then he stopped. He examined the pale blue envelope closely before opening it.

Dear Eamonn,

How are you? I hope well. All is fine here. Anne came over last week to help clear the last of your mother's things. I'm glad now that it's done, I'd been putting it off for too long.

You're no doubt wondering what spirit has moved me to write, so I will get down to brass tacks. I'm not getting any younger and I have to accept that I could follow your mother any day now and it's high time I crossed off some of those things on the 'to do' list.

I don't know if you remember John Nolan (son of Eugene), but he works in Harp Travel now and has sorted out flights and tickets for me. I'll be arriving at the airport in Almería at nine in the morning on 7 June.

Please don't be going to any bother on my account, I'm well used to taking care of myself. I'm looking forward to seeing you and Laura and getting my first taste of 'abroad'.

Best wishes,

Your dad

The bright sun on the pale paper was blinding. His father's looping blue words floated up off the page into the air around him like dust motes. He moved away from the window and read it again. He found himself fixing on irrelevancies like who John Nolan might be, or how Harp Travel could still be in business. He would phone his father later and tell him to cancel the trip. He started thinking of gentle excuses.

Dermot sat near the front of the bus and studied the passing landscape. Near the airport everything was huge. He saw elevated advertising hoardings and vast storage facilities, all on the scale of the airport itself, as if aeroplanes, not cars, might be passing along the road. Further on, the landscape broke down into a cluttered mishmash that he found hard to process. Small, scrappy agricultural plots with shacks made of plastic crates and tarpaulin huddled in the shadow of mirrored-glass buildings and their empty car parks. He looked at the graffiti under every flyover – colourful images as complicated and jumbled as the landscape around them – huge letters with teeth and eyes spelling strange words and names. He saw the same poster for a circus over and over again and later passed the circus itself in the middle of a parched field. The word 'Alegría' was written in lights above the entrance.

At the terminus he asked if the driver spoke English and she said a little. Eamonn's place was unmarked on the map. A new town. Purpose built. There was just a small cross in biro that Eamonn had made for his mother before he left. Dermot tried the name of it anyway on the driver and when she looked blank he was unsure if it was his pronunciation or the obscurity of the place. He pointed on the map to where he was heading and she shook her head and blew air as if trying to whistle. She opened her window and called to the driver of a bus parked across the street. She turned back to Dermot.

'Is very far. Difficult.'

'Right.'

'Bus T-237 to here.' She indicated a point on the map a little distance from Eamonn's cross. '*Después . . .*' she blew air through her lips again and shrugged. 'Taxi?'

'Right. Thank you very much.' He hesitated and then said,

'*Gracias*.' The driver smiled and showed him where to get the bus.

He took his time walking through the town, looking in the windows of the shops he passed. He saw one that seemed to sell only slippers and another one just pyjamas. At the baker's he paused and studied the display before deciding to enter. Inside he found he was a good foot and a half taller than any of the other customers. Some of the women turned to look at him and he gave each a brief nod of his head. There was no queue that he could discern, but the two women behind the counter seemed to know in which order to serve everyone. When it came to his turn, he pointed at a stick of bread filled with ham and cheese, and bought some kind of milkshake as well. He took them out into the street and ate them waiting for the bus, enjoying the warmth of the sun seeping through his clothes.

Time: 43:08; Moves: 579. Two kings were trapped behind the seven of clubs. He shifted cards from the ace piles and back again, treading water while the clock ticked on. Just visible on the screen, above the top-right corner of the simulated green baize, a folder of students' work sat unmarked. He glanced at it periodically and then back at the cards. There were different ways to traverse the vast floes of time.

He found himself staring at the blinking cursor, unsure how long he had been doing so. His body had become synced with the cursor's rhythm: the ebb and flow of his blood, the throb of his heart, the pulse of his headache. When his eyes finally refocused, it was upon the date display. He stared at it for some time, finding it distantly familiar, before reaching for his father's letter.

He stood up quickly, feeling dizzy, thrashing about in search of the car keys before running into the street. The hot breath

of the Toyota threatened to suffocate him as he climbed inside. He turned the key and the engine clicked. He did it again and again, as if the act of turning the key could somehow recharge the battery. He got out to breathe and kick the car like a child and then he was still.

On the second leg of the journey the landscape was unvaried. He saw nothing for miles but great expanses of polytunnels, the entire countryside hidden behind wrapping. Occasionally he'd glimpse a field apparently abandoned, its plastic covering ripped open and hanging in sheets as if the crops inside had escaped during the night. For a long time he could detect no evidence of humanity, but gradually his eyes adjusted to the rhythm of the landscape and he began to spot makeshift shacks huddled next to the vast plastic tunnels, T-shirts and jeans hanging from washing lines, plastic garden furniture, a solitary young black man crouching in the shade.

The bus dropped him near the junction to the road that led to Eamonn's village. From the map it looked to be about four miles by that road, but he saw there was a more direct route over the hills. He had always been a walker, often finding himself walking his bus routes on days off, investigating more closely things he had been able only to glimpse from the driver's cab. As he climbed the main slope now, even with the footing a little tricky in parts, he realized how much he had missed decent hills like these and the feeling of his blood moving quickly around his body.

Eamonn's apartment was in the upper reaches of Lomaverde, at the rear of the development, or the 'urbanization', as some of the other expats called it in a strange mangling of the

Spanish. His block was at the end of the street; beyond its sidewall lay nothing but steep-rising, bare scrubland, optimistically described as 'impressive mountain scenery' in the sales particulars. Now, leaning against the car, paralysed by indecision, he glimpsed something in the distance on the hillside. He looked again and saw that it was a human figure. Nobody approached Lomaverde from the hill. Visitors, such as they were, came along the winding road from the town. The burglaries had stopped but they all remained suspicious of strangers. He shielded his eyes with his hands and looked up towards the black shape.

Dermot had grown used to the sparseness of the landscape on the climb: slopes of arid, white soil, broken up with wild rosemary. When he reached the top he saw the broad expanse of the Mediterranean stretched out before him. The deep blue seemed to rinse his eyes of the grittiness they'd had since boarding the plane that morning. The water appeared completely still and he stood, equally still, his breathing slowing, fully absorbed by the colour below him. He thought of the spray as you walked along the promenade in Lahinch and remembered, for the first time in many years, the taste of seaweed from a bag.

It was only now that he noticed the development below, between him and the sea. He wasn't sure at first what it was. The gleaming white cubes looked somehow scientific in purpose, a collection of laboratories or observatories perhaps. It was a few moments before he realized that what he was looking at was Eamonn's village. The neat, white boxes, curving black roads and lush green lawns stood out sharply against the dusty ridge. From where he stood, the sun bouncing off the

sea, a heat haze shimmering around its edges, Lomaverde looked like a mirage.

The man was carrying something and shouting. All Eamonn could catch was a single repeated word that sounded like '*Llover*' and he wondered if this was some strange, wandering weatherman come to warn them all of rain. It was Eamonn's legs that recognized him first. They started moving, seemingly independent of his will, up the slope, his ears finally unscrambling the words correctly:

'Hello there! Eamonn!'

He had just a moment to register the incongruity of his father's presence there on the blazing hillside, dressed in a light woollen jacket, carrying his Aston Villa holdall, before they were standing facing each other, Dermot smiling shyly and saying, as if it were the most normal thing in the world:

'And how are you, son?'

2

He lurked in the kitchen, making coffee, peering through the serving hatch at his father, still in his jacket, drinking water, the glass tiny in his hand. Dermot only ever looked in scale with his surroundings when sat in the driver's cab of a bus, the enormous steering wheel a perfect fit for his outsize paws. He was six foot four, with a lantern jaw and an epic chest. Reminiscent, Eamonn often thought as a child, of popular cartoon rooster Foghorn Leghorn. Eamonn had inherited his father's eyes, almost all of his height and about half of his width.

'I'm sorry if I gave you a shock,' Dermot called through to the kitchen. 'I thought you'd have got the letter sooner. I didn't know now the post was so bad.'

Eamonn saw that the arrival had a certain inevitability about it, being just the latest in a long line of unheralded appearances. There were the annual holidays to Ireland where his father would, on a whim, call in on some childhood friend. Though always delighted, those long-ago acquaintances would nevertheless take some time to recover from the sudden appearance at their window of someone they'd last set eyes on forty years previously.

There was a well-worn family anecdote related by his Uncle Joe at any opportunity. Not long after Dermot had moved to England, he took a train up to Liverpool to visit his older brother. Joe's lot had a flat above a shop back then and he, Tessie and the kids were gathered around the telly when they heard a gentle tapping at the window. Joe drew back the curtain, expecting a bird or a twig, and instead came face to

face with his brother. Dermot had tried knocking downstairs, but on getting no answer had gone off scouting for a ladder in nearby entries and back gardens. Tessie had screamed and screamed, even when she saw it was just Dermot. It took several measures of Jameson's before they could calm her.

Eamonn brought the coffee through to the lounge and sat on a hard chair facing his father.

'Journey OK, was it?'

'It was.'

There followed a few minutes' silence.

'No hold-ups?'

'No. Nothing like that.'

Eamonn nodded. 'That's good.' He wanted nothing more than to crawl back into his bed, to finally fall asleep and on waking discover that his father's arrival had been an unsettling dream. 'So . . .' he was still nodding, 'is this a holiday, then?'

Dermot seemed surprised at the notion. 'Maybe it is. I'm not sure. I just thought I'd get away for a while.'

This said as if it were something he had often done. As if he were the type of man who regularly skipped off for foreign mini-breaks.

'In your letter, you didn't mention . . . I mean, you're welcome to stay as long as you like, but I was just wondering . . .'

'What?'

'The return flight.'

'What about it?'

Eamonn rubbed the side of his face. 'When are you going back?'

'Oh. A fortnight. I thought that was long enough.'

Eamonn let this sink in.

'I never imagined you travelling abroad.'

Dermot nodded as if agreeing and then said, 'Spain's a

fascinating place. The different regions and cultures, the separate histories, even separate languages. Of course the Generalisimo tried to do away with all that.' He paused to take a drink before adding: ' "Extremadura – Home of the Conquistadores." '

Eamonn looked at him, waiting to see if there was to be any expansion on this chapter heading, but his father had fallen silent again.

He found his gaze returning to the Aston Villa holdall on the floor between them. Its provenance was mysterious given that his father had no interest at all in football and yet Eamonn had no memory of life before the bag. It had travelled with Dermot every day to the garage, filled with a Thermos of tea, sandwiches, a jumper and whatever library book he happened to be reading. In latter years, when his mother's health had grown too bad, it had served as his father's shopping bag. Somehow, despite its many years of service, it was in pristine condition. It was his father's emblem, the essence of him distilled.

'And Laura? How's she now?'

'She's OK.'

'At the shops, is she?'

'She's gone away for a few days. A research trip.'

'Oh. She'll be back before I leave though, will she?'

'Maybe. Depends on how the research is going, I suppose.'

'What is it she's studying?'

'Oh . . . no . . . she's not studying. She's writing. A novel. Historical fiction.'

This last he said in a voice not quite his own, as if he were uncomfortable with the words.

'A novel! Well that's something, isn't it? Why not? They're all at it. Look at that one. She's done well out of it, hasn't she?'

Eamonn nodded, waiting for the inevitable.

'J. K. Potter, is it? I'd say she has a bob or two by now.'

'Yes.'

Dermot smiled. 'You know, your mother used to think you might be a writer? Some idea she had in her head, back when you were young, like. Wrote some story about a dog, I think it was, do you remember?'

'No.'

'Ah, you do. A dog that could talk. What was he called?'

'I've no idea.'

'Patch or Spark. Something like that.'

Eamonn closed his eyes. 'Flash.'

'Flash! That was it. Flash the talking dog. The teacher said you had talent too. Your mother thought you'd be the next big thing.'

Eamonn said nothing. He noticed Dermot looking at the array of unwashed dishes lined up along the floor by the patio door. 'Don't mind those.' He stood and started piling them up. 'Just about to clear up when you came. You know how it is.'

Dermot leaned slightly to the left to see how far the dirty plates extended. 'Will she mind me being here? You didn't have any warning.'

'Laura?' He dumped the plates on the hatch. 'She won't mind at all.' And it was true, he knew she'd have been delighted to see Dermot.

There was a long silence before his father spoke again.

'I like to have eggs in the fridge. Your mother liked an egg every day and I can't eat them like that, but I like to have them handy for the odd occasion when I fancy one. I can go weeks between them.'

Eamonn felt something settle upon him: the discomfiting notion that he was now responsible for his father. Given Dermot's conversational halts and leaps Eamonn wondered how he could ever hope to distinguish between oblique verbal gambits and full-blown dementia.

'The thing is, they have the dates, don't they?'

'Sorry?'

'The expiry. So the box will sit there with five eggs in for weeks and then one morning I'll notice that I have two days left to eat the lot of them and I do it. Scrambled, poached, fried, whatever you like. I get through them all!'

Eamonn thought the sermon on the egg had come to an end, but after a few moments' silence Dermot turned to him and concluded:

'The expiry dates. They're great things.'

3

He looked back at Eamonn's block, identical to all the others around it. 'Do you have many there in the maisonette with you?'

'It's not a maisonette. It's not Castle Vale.'

'What do you call it, then?'

'I don't know. Apartment block. It doesn't matter.'

He remembered this habit of Eamonn's: correcting what you said, but irritated when you asked for the right way to say it. 'So, are there many others in there with you?'

Eamonn mumbled an answer he couldn't catch.

As they walked down the road he thought that Lomaverde didn't in fact look that different to the low-rise parts of the Castle Vale estate. Or at least Castle Vale when it first went up in the 60s. All very spick and span and modern. Eamonn, he was sure, wouldn't appreciate the comparison. He could be very grand at times. After university he'd come back to live with them for a few months, rising at eleven, taking a good hour over his breakfast, his newspaper spread out all over the table, the radio switched from Jimmy Young to Radio 4. Kathleen would wait on him attentively, spending a fortune on the inedible-looking muesli he favoured. 'The English Gentleman,' Dermot would say to Kathleen. 'To the manor born.'

They walked in silence, keeping to the pavement, though there were no cars to be seen or heard. Junk mail was visible sticking out from every letter box, flyers for mobile phones and estate agents lay inert, here and there, on the street, unhurried by any breeze. He stopped to appreciate the heat of the day.

He stretched out his fingers as if in the bath. It was bad for you apparently. That was the latest thing. Even the sun. He considered taking his jacket off.

He cast a sideways glance at Eamonn. A ghost in a cap. An unearthly glow around him where the sunlight bounced off his white skin. He'd inherited the pallor from his mother, a soft, milky tone apparently impervious to the strongest sun. Dermot's own skin was a complex mottling of red and brown. He had a flash of his hand, dark and covered in hair, resting on Kathleen's white brow. He heard again the muted pipe music, felt the carpeted hush of the funeral parlour all around him and turned his thoughts to something else.

'Work going well, is it?'

'Yeah . . . OK . . . you know. Up and down.'

Dermot couldn't ask more without revealing that he couldn't remember, or possibly never really knew, exactly what it was Eamonn did. It was enough anyway.

They followed the road as it wound its way down through the development, zigzagging lazily back and forth in wide swathes. He was used to the confusion and noise of Birmingham streets: UPVC porches, leaded plastic windows, swaying buddleia, stone cladding, paint-daubed wheelie bins, gnarled pigeons, dead cars, decorative pampas, monkey puzzles and feral privet.

Here all was hushed, planned, discreet. His eyes took time to adjust, to identify the basic features. It was a good ten minutes before he noticed that every window and door was shuttered. He thought at first that it was a way to block out the sun, but gradually he picked up on the general air of desertion. It put him in mind of the old Sunday-afternoon matinees on the telly, cowboys riding into empty Mexican towns. He and Eamonn used to watch them together. Squat men with big moustaches asleep under their sombreros, church bells

clanging in the distance, heat haze blurring a stranger's approach.

Slowly he started to discern a difference between the houses that had never been occupied and the handful that had but were currently empty. A dead potted plant on a patio here and there, an occasional nameplate under the buzzer. He noticed that the ones showing some evidence of habitation also had signs on their gates or on their shutters. The signs were in different colours, but always the same two words. *'En Venta,'* he said aloud. He guessed at its meaning. He wondered if Eamonn had a destination in mind.

From a distance everything had looked pristine and controlled, but now, as they walked, he began to spot instances of disrepair and chaos. Cracks in pavements and fault lines along the road. An electric cable snaking along the street. Lawned verges overgrown and weeds at their perimeters. He saw the empty swimming pool, strewn with grit and pine needles, a stray cat curled up in the corner. He had already noticed plenty of jobs he could do at Eamonn's place. He thought again of Castle Vale. It had taken longer for the cracks to show there.

He knew something of the workings of places. The daily rhythms, the ebbs and flows. He was familiar with the different heartbeats of the suburbs, the inner ring, the outer ring, the windblown regeneration zones. All with their separate pulse points: the Asda, the job centre, the bookies, the daycare, the mosque, the cemetery, the school. Lomaverde appeared to have no such places. Neither had it, as far as Dermot could see, any people wishing to get to or from anywhere. Given the absence of passengers and destinations, the lack of bus stops at least seemed less surprising.

Towards the lower part of Lomaverde the development became more ragged. Six dwellings stood half completed. He took in the abandoned cement mixers, piles of breeze blocks

and sacks of sand. The road continued down past them for a hundred or so yards before coming to an abrupt end. Beyond the final kerb the land reverted back to scrub, the hillside dropping away to the sea. They walked to the furthest point on the road and stood together, gazing out at the horizon.

It was a while before Eamonn spoke. 'So there you go. Lomaverde in all its glory.'

Dermot nodded. He got the picture. He'd read about places like it in Ireland. 'How many of you are there?'

He waited while Eamonn counted in his head. 'Fifteen. Permanently. All foreigners like us. Maybe another twenty or so Spanish owners. Second homes. They don't come much, only to dust and air them for potential buyers.'

'Are there any of those?'

'Not so many, I suppose.'

Dermot looked around at the half-finished houses. 'What's happening with these?'

'Hmmm . . .' Eamonn seemed intrigued by the question, as if he had never considered it himself. 'I'm not really sure.'

'Well, is any work being done on them?'

'No, not now. Not for a while really.'

'A while.' Dermot nodded. 'How long would that be, then?'

'I suppose . . . it must be about nine months. Last September – that's when we heard the developers had gone bust. And vanished.'

'Right.'

'Not really been much in the way of maintenance since then either. I hear the sprinklers at night sometimes still. I suppose someone forgot to turn them off. Sorry. You're not really seeing it at its best, been a while since anyone cut the grass. It used to be . . . you know . . . short. All that.'

'Is there any prospect of it ever being finished?'

'Well . . . I think . . . not currently, no.'

Dermot rubbed his face with his hand. 'Can I ask how much are you in for now?'

Eamonn screwed up his face. 'Pfffffff – hard to say really.'

'Roughly, like.'

'Roughly . . . roughly – I'd say the mortgage is somewhere in the region of a hundred and two thousand euros now. We put down a big deposit.'

'Right.'

They were silent again for a while before Eamonn turned to Dermot and gave him a small smile. 'Ours was the third property to be bought. We got in early. Before the rush.' He paused. 'Mom always thought I was cleverer than I was.'

Dermot said nothing.

Eamonn kicked a stone out over the hillside. 'Still, it's not so bad. I mean, it's a nice place. Quiet. Plenty of time to think.'

Dermot looked back out at the horizon. A distant ship was heading towards Africa. He remembered something in his pocket and reached for it. He held a small paper bag out to Eamonn. 'Do you still like these fellas?'

Eamonn didn't seem to hear him.

'Coca-Cola bottles? Is that right? Do you still eat them?'

Eamonn turned slowly. 'Cola bottles?'

'That's right.'

He peered cautiously into the bag as if it contained spiders. 'I haven't eaten them since I was about ten.'

'Seemed to remember you eating them sometimes when you came out on the buses. Devil to find now, they are. Can't get them round the corner any more. I found these over in a place in Shard End the other day. Thought maybe you were missing them.' Eamonn just stared at him. 'Maybe you've gone off them. You don't have to have them if you don't like them any more.'

Eamonn reached out and took one. He held it up to examine it. 'No sugar on it.'

'No, had an idea you preferred the ones without the sugar on.'

Eamonn brought the sweet slowly to his lips. 'I do.'

Dermot nodded. 'Good. I'm glad I got them, then. That's something I got right.'

4

It was a large flat, not much furniture, tiled floors. The sound of his father busying himself had been filtering through his bedroom door for the past two hours. Footsteps this way and that, washing up, kitchen cupboards opening and closing. Before that he had heard him go to the toilet at midnight and again at three. Eamonn must have slept briefly, then, as he'd thought it was Laura in the bathroom, and he'd experienced a moment of peace before he woke fully and his thoughts became jagged and unmanageable once more.

He had dreamed he was holding a baby with shining eyes. The baby had spoken and he had called to Laura in amazement, but she had not come, and he could not tear his eyes away from the face of the infant to look for her. Awake he felt the ache of the baby's absence but now he saw that it had not been a baby in the dream at all, but a fluffy kitten, and the banality seemed only to compound the loss.

He had been willing himself for the past hour to get up and attend to any one of the things that needed attending to. The folder of unmarked work, the lack of food, the piles of laundry, his father. He turned in bed and tried to imagine once more that it was Laura, not his father, on the other side of the bedroom door. He pictured her clutter on the side table. The oversize and now filthy teddy-bear key ring, bought to help locate keys in her cavernous bag, staring up at him with an unjustified expression of self-satisfaction.

He had told his father a partial truth. Laura had gone away for a few days to research the novel. What he'd omitted to say

was that she had returned from the trip five days before Dermot arrived. He'd omitted to say this because it was as yet unsayable. It was as yet unthinkable. It had happened, that was undeniable, but it had not yet resolved itself into any kind of comprehensible action. He had found her in the bedroom, moving from rucksack to wardrobe. She was wearing a top he hadn't recognized. There was a time when they'd known all of each other's clothes, had shopped together, had sought each other's advice and approval. He wasn't sure when that had stopped. As he watched her, he had tried to imagine what he would think if he was seeing her for the first time, walking towards him along the street. What would he make of her hair? Those sandals? That vest? And what might she make of him? He imagined them passing each other by. The thought of it made him want to touch her gently, to lay a hand on her arm. It was only then he noticed that she was putting clothes in – not taking them out of – the rucksack.

He had not seen it coming. He found himself repeating that phrase. Laura had disputed it. She said he was deceiving himself. If that was true, he'd told her, he was doing a good job of it. He felt that if he had seen it coming he might have said the right things. But he had not.

She needed time to think, she had said. She needed to get away from him. She was going back to her parents in England. She would be in touch. But she didn't answer her phone. She didn't reply to his emails or his texts. After eight years she had left him alone in a terrible, featureless limbo.

He wasn't sure if it was the lack of sleep, the lack of food or simply the lack of Laura that was causing the hallucinations. Several times since she had gone, lying in his bed, apparently awake, he had heard strange sounds at night. A heavy vehicle – a lorry or truck – chugging past on the road outside in the early

hours. Such a vehicle would have a purpose and therefore no place on such a purposeless road. He wondered at the symbolism of it. What clumsy metaphor was his subconscious trying to deliver? One night he thought he heard footsteps and voices beneath his window, but when he looked there was nobody there. In the days since Laura's departure he'd been keenly aware of his isolation, the only occupant in an otherwise empty block, in an otherwise empty street.

A knock at the door made him jump.

'Eamonn?'

He closed his eyes tight.

'Eamonn. Are you awake yet?'

He said nothing.

'Would you like a cup of tea?'

A long pause. 'Yes. Please.'

'Right. There's no milk I'm afraid . . . or tea bags. Except some that smell like toothpaste.'

He lay still.

'I thought I'd walk down to the town and get a few things. You don't seem to have much in the way of food. I'm not sure what you normally have for your breakfast but all you have in is a jar of gherkins and a tin of grapes.' There was a pause. 'I didn't even know you could get grapes in a tin.'

Eamonn ran his hand over his face. 'You can't walk to the town, it's over four miles away. I need to get the car battery recharged.'

'I can walk that right enough.'

'Are you sure?' He sensed a reprieve. His father had always been a great walker. He'd enjoy it.

'I am, yes.'

'OK,' he called from beneath the cover, 'well, maybe I'll stay here. I can get on with some stuff while you're out.' He closed his eyes, but waiting for him behind his eyelids was an

unwelcome vision of an elderly man in inappropriate clothing, struggling with bags of shopping in the blistering heat.

'Right-o. I'll be off, so.'

He saw him losing his footing on the hillside, collapsed by the roadside, snapping a bone.

'Bye.'

He listened to his father's footsteps move away from the bedroom and heard the jangle of keys in the front door, then silence. He threw the sheet off and ran.

'Dad!' He saw the front door close. There was a pause, then the sound of the key turning again, before his father's head poked back in.

'What is it, son?'

'Wait. I'll come with you.'

Dermot nodded. 'Good man. The air'll do you good.'