THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

'A stunningly talented writer'
SOPHIE HANNAH

'Masterly'
SEBASTIAN BARRY

LYING IN WAIT



LIZ NUGENT

PRAISE FOR *LYING IN WAIT*

'Taut, crisp, clear, a storm-warning of a book. It has the eeriness of *The Turn of the Screw* but as these screws turn, a mighty tension takes hold. Masterly' Sebastian Barry

'An unputdownable psychological thriller with an ending that lingers in the mind long after turning the final page' *Irish Times*

'An extraordinary novel. *Lying in Wait* crackles and snaps like a bonfire on a winter's night; you shudder even as you draw closer to it. Spellbinding' A. J. Finn

'A whydunit, not a whodunit, and the real meat lies in Nugent's exploration of motherhood, mental illness, and what could drive a person to murder . . . a page-turner chock full of lies and betrayals, and a very creepy mother-son relationship' *Kirkus Reviews*

'Devastating . . . Lydia is the most intriguing puzzle; equal parts victim and villain, she simultaneously inspires pity, outrage and horror . . . an exquisitely uncomfortable, utterly captivating reading experience' *Publishers Weekly*

'I just couldn't bear the suspense. I absolutely loved it' Amanda Redman

Copyrighted Material

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Before becoming a full-time writer, Liz Nugent worked in film, theatre and television. Her five novels – *Unravelling Oliver*, *Lying in Wait*, *Skin Deep*, *Our Little Cruelties* and *Strange Sally Diamond* – have each been number one bestsellers and she has won five Irish Book Awards, as well as the James Joyce Medal for Literature. She lives in Dublin.

Copyrighted Material

Lying in Wait

LIZ NUGENT



PENGUIN BOOKS
Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand |South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published by Penguin Ireland 2016
Published in Penguin Books 2017
Reissued in this edition 2024
001

Copyright © Liz Nugent, 2016

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Set in 12.5/14.75 pt Garamond MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

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

ISBN : 978–0–241–97406–3

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material

For Richard, with all my love

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

The cold earth slept below,
Above the cold sky shone;
And all around, with a chilling sound,
From caves of ice and fields of snow,
The breath of night like death did flow
Beneath the sinking moon.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

PART I

1980

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

1. Lydia

My husband did not mean to kill Annie Doyle, but the lying tramp deserved it. After we had overcome the initial shock, I tried to stop him speaking of her. I did not allow it unless to confirm alibis or to discuss covering up any possible evidence. It upset him too much and I thought it best to move on as if nothing had happened. Even though we did not talk about it, I couldn't help going over the events of the night in my mind, each time wishing that some aspect, some detail, could be different, but facts are facts and we must get used to them.

It was the 14th of November 1980. It had all been arranged. Not her death, just the meeting to see if she was genuine, and if not, to get our money back. I walked the strand for twenty minutes to ensure that there was nobody around, but I needn't have worried. The beach was deserted on that particularly bitter night. When I was satisfied that I was alone, I went to the bench and waited. A cruel wind rushed in with the waves and I pulled my cashmere coat around me and turned up the collar. Andrew arrived promptly and parked not far from where I was seated, as instructed. I watched from thirty yards away. I had told him to confront her. And I wanted to see her for myself, to assess her suitability. They were supposed to get out of the car and walk past me. But they didn't. After waiting ten minutes, I got up and walked towards the car, wondering

Copyrighted Material

what was taking so long. As I got closer, I could hear raised voices. And then I saw them fighting. The passenger door swung open and she tried to get out. But he pulled her back towards him. I could see his hands around her throat. I watched her struggle, mesmerized momentarily, wondering if I could be imagining things, and then I came back to myself, snapped out of my confusion and ran to the car.

'Stop! Andrew! What are you doing?' My voice was shrill to my own ears, and her eyes swivelled towards me in shock and terror before they rolled back upwards into her head.

He released her immediately and she fell backwards, gurgling. She was almost but not quite dead, so I grabbed the crook lock from the footwell at her feet and smashed it down on to her skull, just once. There was blood and a little twitching and then absolute stillness.

I'm not sure why I did that. Instinct?

She looked younger than her twenty-two years. I could see past the lurid make-up, the dyed black hair, almost navy. There was a jagged white scar running from a deformed top lip to the septum of her nose. I wondered that Andrew had never thought to mention that. Her jacket had been pulled off one arm during the struggle and I saw bloodied scabs in the crook of her elbow. There was a sarcastic expression on her face, a smirk that death could not erase. I like to think I did the girl a kindness, like putting an injured bird out of its misery. She did not deserve such consideration.

Andrew has always had a short fuse, blowing up at small, insignificant things and then, almost immediately,

Copyrighted Material

remorseful and calm. This time, however, he was hysterical, crying and screaming fit to wake the dead.

'Oh Christ! Oh Jesus!' he kept saying, as if the Son of God could fix anything. 'What have we done?'

'We?' I was aghast. 'You killed her!'

'She laughed at me! You were right about her. She said I was an easy touch. That she'd go to the press. She was going to blackmail me. I lost my temper. But you . . . you finished it, she might have been all right . . .'

'Don't even . . . don't say that, you fool, you idiot!'

His face was wretched, tormented. I felt sympathy for him. I told him to pull himself together. We needed to get home before Laurence. I ordered him to help me get the body into the boot. Through his tears, he carried out my instructions. Infuriatingly, his golf clubs were in there, unused for the last year, taking up most of the space, but luckily the corpse was as slight and slim as I had suspected, and still flexible, so we managed to stuff her in.

'What are we going to do with her?'

'I don't know. We have to calm down. We'll figure it out tomorrow. We need to go home now. What do you know about her? Does she have family? Who will be looking for her?'

'I don't know . . . she . . . I think she might have mentioned a sister?'

'Right now, nobody knows she is dead. Nobody knows she is missing. We need to keep it like that.'

When we got home to Avalon at quarter past midnight, I could see by the shadow from his window that the

Copyrighted Material

bedside light was on in Laurence's bedroom. I had really wanted to be there when he got home, to hear how his evening had been. I told Andrew to pour us a brandy while I went to check on our son. He was sprawled across the bed and didn't stir when I ruffled his hair and kissed his forehead. 'Goodnight, Laurence,' I whispered, but he was fast asleep. I turned out his lamp, closed his bedroom door and went to the bathroom cabinet for a Valium before I went downstairs. I needed to be calm.

Andrew was trembling all over. 'Jesus, Lydia, we're in serious trouble. Maybe we should call the guards.'

I topped up his glass and drained the bottle into my own. He was in shock.

'And ruin Laurence's life for ever? Tomorrow is a new day. We'll deal with it then, but we must remember Laurence, whatever happens. He mustn't know anything.'

'Laurence? What has it to do with him? What about Annie? Oh God, we killed her, we murdered her. We're going to prison.'

I was not going to prison. Who would look after Laurence? I stroked Andrew's arm in an effort to comfort him. 'We will figure it out tomorrow. Nobody saw us. Nobody can connect us with the girl. She would have been too ashamed to tell anyone what she was up to. We just have to figure out where to put her body.'

'You're sure nobody saw us?'

'There wasn't a soul on the strand. I walked the length of it to make sure. Go to bed, love. Things will be better tomorrow.'

He looked at me as if I were insane.

I stared him down. 'I'm not the one who strangled her.'

Copyrighted Material

Tears poured from his cheeks. 'But maybe if you hadn't hit her . . .'

'What? She would have died more slowly? Or been permanently brain-damaged?'

'We could have said that we'd found her like that!'

'Do *you* want to drive back there now and dump her, ring an ambulance from the phone box and explain what you are doing there on the strand at one o'clock in the morning?'

He looked into the bottom of his glass.

'But what are we going to do?'

'Go to bed.'

As we ascended the stairs, I heard the whirr of the washing machine. I wondered why Laurence had decided to do laundry on a Friday night. It was most unlike him. But it reminded me that my clothes and Andrew's really needed to be washed too. We both stripped and I set aside the pile of laundry for the morning. I washed the sand off our shoes and swept the floors we had passed over. I deposited the sand from the dustpan in the back garden, on the raised patch of lawn beyond the kitchen window. I studied the ground for a moment. I had always thought of having a flower bed planted there.

When I slipped into bed later, I put my arms around Andrew's trembling form, and he turned to me and we made love, clawing at and clinging to each other like survivors of a terrible calamity.

Andrew had been a very good husband until just a year previously. For twenty-one years, our marriage had been solid. Daddy had been very impressed with him. On his

Copyrighted Material

deathbed, Daddy had said he was relieved to be leaving me in good hands. Andrew had been Daddy's apprentice in Hyland & Goldblatt. He had taken Andrew under his wing and made him his protégé. One day, when I was about twenty-six, Daddy had telephoned me at home and told me that we were having a special guest for dinner and that I should cook something nice and get my hair done. 'No lipstick,' he said. Daddy had a thing about make-up. 'I can't stand those painted trollops!' he would say about American film stars. Daddy's views could be extreme. 'You are my beautiful daughter. No point in gilding a lily.'

I was curious about this visitor and why I should dress up for him. I should have guessed, of course, that Daddy was intent on matchmaking. He needn't have worried. Andrew adored me right away. He went to enormous lengths to charm me. He said that he would do anything for me. 'I can't stop looking at you,' he said. And indeed, his eyes followed me everywhere. He always called me his prize, his precious jewel. I loved him too. My father always knew what was best for me.

Our courtship was short and very sweet. Andrew came from a good family. His late father had been a consultant paediatrician, and though I found his mother a little contrary, she raised no objections to our relationship. After all, when Andrew married me, he would get Avalon too – a six-bedroom detached Georgian house on an acre of land in Cabinteely, south County Dublin. Andrew wanted us to get a house of our own when we got married, but Daddy put his foot down. 'You'll move in here. This is Lydia's home. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth.'

So Andrew moved in with us, and Daddy gave up the

Copyrighted Material

master bedroom and moved to the large bedroom on the other side of the corridor. Andrew grumbled a little to me. 'But, darling, don't you see how awkward it is? I'm living with my boss!' And I admit that Daddy did order Andrew around quite a lot, but Andrew got used to it quickly. I think he knew how lucky he was.

Andrew did not mind that I did not want to host parties or socialize with other couples. He said he was quite happy to keep me to himself. He was kind and generous and considerate. He usually backed away from confrontation, so we did not have many arguments. In a heated moment, he might kick or throw inanimate objects, but I think everyone does that from time to time. And he was always terribly contrite afterwards.

Andrew worked his way up through the ranks until finally all his time on the golf course paid off and three years ago he was appointed as a judge in the Criminal Courts. He was a respected member of society. People listened to him when he spoke, and quoted him in the newspapers. He was widely regarded as having the voice of reason on matters legal and judicial.

But last year, Paddy Carey, his old pal, accountant and golfing partner, had left the country with our money. I thought that, at the very least, Andrew would be careful with our finances. That was the husband's job, to be a provider and to look after the economic well-being of the household. But he had trusted Paddy Carey with everything and Paddy had fooled us all. We were left with nothing but debts and liabilities, and Andrew's generous salary barely covered our expenditure.

Had I married badly after all? My role was to be

Copyrighted Material

presentable, beautiful, charming – a homemaker, a companion, a good cook, lover and a mother. A mother.

Andrew suggested selling some land to developers to raise capital. I was horrified at the suggestion. Nobody of our status would do such a thing. I had spent my whole life in Avalon. My father had inherited it from his father, and it was the house in which I was born. And the house in which my sister died. I was not going to compromise on selling any part of Avalon. Nor was I going to compromise on the money we needed to pay the girl.

But we had to take Laurence out of the hideously expensive Carmichael Abbey and send him to St Martin's instead. It broke my heart. I knew he was unhappy there. I knew he was victimized because of his class and accent, but the money simply wasn't there. Andrew quietly sold some of the family silver to pay our debts, and we kept the wolf at bay. He could not risk being declared bankrupt, as he would have been forced to resign from the bench. We had never lived extravagantly, but the few luxuries that were normal to us began to disappear. He gave up his golf club membership but insisted that he could still pay my store account at Switzers and Brown Thomas. He always hated to disappoint me.

But now, this? A dead girl in the boot of the car in the garage. I was sorry she was dead, but I can't honestly say I wouldn't or couldn't have strangled her myself under the circumstances. We just wanted our money back. I couldn't stop thinking about the scars on the girl's inner arm. I had seen a documentary about heroin addicts on the BBC, and reports of a heroin epidemic were in our newspapers. It seemed obvious that she had injected our money

Copyrighted Material

into her bloodstream, as if our needs and wants hadn't mattered.

As Andrew slept fitfully, whimpering and crying out occasionally, I made plans.

The next morning, a Saturday, Laurence slept late. I warned Andrew to say as little as possible. He readily agreed. He was hollow-eyed, and there was a tremor in his voice that never quite went away after that night. He and Laurence had always had a fraught relationship, so they were not inclined to be conversational. I planned to get Laurence out of the house for the day, send him into town on some errand or other while Andrew buried the girl in our garden. Andrew was shocked that we would bury her here, but I made him see that, this way, she could not be discovered. We were in control of our own property. Nobody had access without our permission. Our large rear garden was not overlooked. I knew exactly the spot where she could be buried. In my childhood there had been an ornamental pond under the plane tree beyond the kitchen window, but Daddy had filled it in after my sister's death. Its stone borders, which had lain under the soil for almost forty years, were conveniently grave-like.

After Andrew had buried the body, he could clean out and hoover the car until there would be no trace of fibres or fingerprints. I was determined to take all precautions. Andrew knew from his job the kind of thing that could incriminate a person. Nobody had seen us on the strand, but one can never be too sure of anything.

*

Copyrighted Material

When Laurence arrived at the breakfast table, he had a noticeable limp. I tried to be cheerful. 'So how are you today, sweetie?' Andrew stayed behind his *Irish Times*, but I could see his knuckles gripped it tightly to stop it from shaking.

'My ankle hurts. I tripped going upstairs last night.'

I examined his ankle quickly. It was very swollen and probably sprained. This scuppered my plans to send him into town. But I could still contain my boy, confine him to quarters so to speak. I strapped his ankle and instructed him to stay on the sofa all day. That way, I could keep an eye on him, keep him away from the rear of the house where the burial was to take place. Laurence was not an active boy, so lying on the sofa watching television all day and having food delivered to him on a tray was no hardship to him at all.

As dusk fell, when everything had been done, Andrew lit a bonfire. I don't know what he was burning, but I had impressed upon him the need to get rid of all evidence. 'Think of it as one of your court cases – what kind of things betray the lie? Be thorough!' To give him his due, he was thorough.

However, Laurence is a smart boy. He is intuitive, like me, and he noted his father's dark mood. Andrew was snappy about wanting to see the television news, terrified, I suppose, that the girl would feature. She did not. He claimed he had the flu and went to bed early. When I went upstairs later, he was throwing things into a suitcase.

'What are you doing?'

'I can't bear it. I have to get away.'

'Where? Where are you going to go? We can't change anything now. It's too late.'

Copyrighted Material

He turned on me then for the first time, spitting with anger.

'It's all your fault! I'd never have met her if it wasn't for you. I should never have started this. It was a crazy idea to begin with, but you wouldn't stop, you were obsessed! You put too much pressure on me. I'm not the type of man to . . .' He trailed off because he was exactly the type of man to strangle a girl, as it happens. He just didn't know it until now. Also, my plan had been perfect. He was the one who ruined it.

'I told you to pick a healthy girl. Didn't you see the marks on her arms? She was a *heroin addict*. Don't you remember that documentary? You must have noticed her arms.'

He broke down into sobs and collapsed on the bed, and I cradled his head to muffle the sound. Laurence mustn't hear. When the heaving of his shoulders had subsided, I upended the contents of the suitcase and put it back on top of the wardrobe.

'Put your things away. We are not going anywhere. We will carry on as normal. This is our home and we are a family. Laurence, you and I.'

Copyrighted Material

2. Karen

The last time I saw Annie was in her bedsit in Hanbury Street on Thursday the 13th of November 1980. I remember that, as usual, the place was immaculately clean. No matter how disordered her life was, Annie was always madly tidy since her time in St Joseph's. The blankets were folded neatly at the end of her bed, and the window was wide open, letting the freezing air into the room.

'Would you not close the window, Annie?'

'When I finish my smoke.'

She lay back on the bed, smoking her short, untipped cigarette, while I made a pot of tea. The mugs were lined up neatly on the shelf, upside down, handles facing front. I poured two scoops of tea leaves from the caddy into the scalded pot and poured on the boiling water. She looked at her watch.

'Two minutes. You have to let it sit for two minutes.'

'I know how to make a cup of tea.'

'Nobody knows how to make it right.'

That's the kind of thing that always drove me mad about Annie. She was so stubborn. There was her way, or the wrong way.

'It's freezing.' She wrapped her long cardigan tightly around her, the sleeves dangling below her hands. When the two minutes were up, she gave the nod and I was allowed to pour. I handed her a mug of tea and she

Copyrighted Material

emptied her ashtray into a plastic bag which she carefully folded over before placing it in the bin.

'Are you sure it's sealed?' I was being sarcastic.

'It's sealed.' She was serious. She reached over and closed the window and then sprayed the room with one of those rotten air freshener cans that filled the room with a smell that would choke you.

'How's Ma?' she asked.

'She's worried about you. So is Da.'

'Yeah, right,' she said, her lip curling sideways.

'You didn't stay long on Sunday. You're always rushing off somewhere. He does worry about you.'

'Sure.'

My sister and me were always very different. I like to think I was a good child, but maybe that was just in comparison to Annie. I was quick at school, but things have always been easier for me. If we were in a shop together, the assistants would ignore her completely and serve me. People want to help me and do things for me. Annie always said it was because I'm pretty, but she never said it in a jealous way. We looked alike to a certain extent. As children, we were referred to as 'the carrot tops' on account of our flaming red hair, but we were different in one obvious way. Annie was born with a harelip. She had a botched operation when she was a baby, and her top lip was stretched and flattened at the front. She had a scar stretching down from her nose to her mouth. My mouth turns upwards at the sides, so I look kind of smiley. I think that's why everyone says I'm pretty. I'm not really. I look in the mirror and I just see carrot-top Karen.

Copyrighted Material

When we were small children, Annie regularly went missing. We'd be playing with the neighbours out the front of our house, and Ma would come out and say 'Where's Annie?' and we'd all be sent off to look for her. She'd be in a street beyond the patch we were allowed to play in, and once, she'd hopped on a bus into town and Mrs Kelly who lived in number 42 had spotted her and brought her home. Annie was just curious, I think. She wanted to know what was around every corner. Back then, Da and her were close. She used to climb up on his shoulders and he'd piggyback her around the house and she would scream with laughter, but I was smaller and afraid to go up that high. By the time she was a teenager, though, Da and Annie were at war.

My sister had a reputation. Ma said she kicked her way out of the womb feet first and she hadn't stopped kicking since. In secondary school, Annie was in trouble all the time for giving cheek to the teachers, stealing, vandalism, mitching, and beating up other girls. She was smart for sure, but couldn't settle to learning. She was slow to read and slower to write. I am three years younger, but by the time I was seven my reading and writing were better than hers. I tried really hard to help her, but she said the letters didn't always make sense to her. Even if I wrote down a sentence and asked her to copy it, the words would come out as a jumble. She'd been moved to two different schools by the time she left at fourteen. She could just about write, but her main hobbies by then were smoking and drinking. Ma tried reason, talking to her, bargaining with her, but when that didn't work, Da tried violence. He beat her and locked her in our room, and I know it killed him to do it.

Copyrighted Material

'Jesus, Annie, look what you have me doing!' and he'd go quiet and not speak for a few days. But that didn't work either, and eventually the worst thing that could happen in a family back then happened. We didn't know until she was four months gone.

All hell broke loose. She was only sixteen. The father was a boy her own age who, of course, denied all responsibility and said the baby could be anyone's. He and his family moved away shortly after that. Da called the parish priest, and he and a guard took Annie away to St Joseph's in a black car. I didn't see her again for nearly two years.

When she returned, she was completely altered. That was where all her tics and cleaning obsessions started. She had never been like that before. Her appearance was a shock. Her fiery red hair was gone because her head had been shaved. She was painfully thin. On her first night back, in the room we shared, I asked her to tell me what it was like to be locked up in a mother and baby home, and she said it was a living hell that she wanted to forget. She told me about the day the baby was born. It was the 1st of August. She called her Marnie. 'She was perfect,' she said, 'even her mouth was perfect.' When I asked what happened to the baby, she turned her face to the wall and cried. For the first two months after her return, she used to hide food under her bed. She jumped at the slightest noise. Neither Annie nor my parents ever mentioned the baby. We tried to be normal and Annie tried to settle. Da got her a job cleaning in the bakery he worked in. Her hair grew back, but she dyed it black. A really harsh blue-black. It was her rebel statement.

Copyrighted Material

A few months later, on the 1st of August, I bought Annie a gift in the Dandelion Market, an identity bracelet. I had the bracelet engraved with the name 'Marnie'. I'd been saving up for a while, but it wasn't real silver so it tarnished quickly. She never took it off after that, though. Da commented on it one day.

'What's that thing you have on?'

She stuck her wrist in his face, but he couldn't make out the word on the bracelet.

'It says "Marnie",' she said, 'your granddaughter's name if you must know.'

Gradually, Annie went back to her old ways. She was fired from the bakery by Da's boss because her work was shoddy. After that, the frostiness between her and Da was unbearable and she moved out of the house. I admit that I was glad when she moved out.

Though she was always a rebel, when it came to my schooling, Annie leaned hard on me to do my homework and stay out of trouble.

'You've got brains *and* beauty, Karen,' she said. 'You need to use both of them.'

I am clever enough, I suppose, and I liked school, but I worked hard to remove the stigma she had tainted me with. My teachers recognized this. 'You and your sister, chalk and cheese!' said Miss Donnelly one day, scoring me a B in an English test. When I meant to leave school at fifteen and try for work in the Lemons factory, Miss Donnelly spoke to Ma and Da and told them that I could stay on to do the Leaving Certificate. Nobody in our family had ever done the Leaving Certificate. My parents were

Copyrighted Material

thrilled and Annie was over the moon. 'You'll take the bad look off me!' she said.

I wasn't a natural genius, but I studied hard to justify Ma and Da's pride. Then, when I got reasonably good results, there was talk about going to university. I knew that keeping me in school had been a strain on my parents when I should have been out earning, and I could probably work my way through college, but I couldn't decide what I would study. English and Art were my best subjects, but if I studied English in college, I would have to do a three-year arts degree and then a year's HDip just to be a teacher, and if I did Art I'd have to go to an art college and Ma said there were no jobs for artists. Anyway, I had the wrong accent for university.

Ma thought I should do a secretarial course. There were still some jobs for typists, though they were few and far between. I liked the idea of that a lot better, and AnCO were running six-week courses for girls who had got good Leaving Certificate results. Annie was disappointed in me. 'You could have gone to college, you could have got a grant.' She didn't understand my reluctance. I was not curious like she was. She loved that I had stayed in school, but when she was drunk, she mocked me when I used big words that she didn't understand.

Annie got bits and pieces of cleaning work here and there, but most of the time she was on the dole, living in a bedsit not too far away. Ma gave her money sometimes on the sly. On her Sunday visits, Da would try and pretend he was glad to see her, but I think he was ashamed of her, though he denied it later. He couldn't understand why she was so different to the rest of us. Ma and Da and

Copyrighted Material

me all worked hard for what we got. We were quiet and tried to avoid trouble. Annie went looking for it.

After I did the course, I got a job in a dry-cleaning company, typing up invoices and doing a bit of bookkeeping as well. I can't say I loved it, but I met Dessie Fenlon there. Some of the men I dealt with were sleazy, passing comments on my figure or making smutty remarks, but Dessie was different. Just respectful, like. One day, I saw him giving one of the young lads a clip around the ear for the way he'd talked to me. Dessie was one of the van drivers. He was quite shy, and it was six months before he got up the courage to ask me out. I think he thought the age difference was too much. He was twenty-six, almost nine years older than me. The best part of the job was when he'd come in to do pick-ups or drop-offs, because we'd be giggling and flirting like mad. We started going out properly then. He said he couldn't believe his luck that I'd said yes to a date. When it was clear to everyone else in the shop that Dessie Fenlon and I were an item, the comments stopped. Dessie was quiet, but he could be fierce too if you crossed him. He had a reputation as a scrapper and had thrown a few punches in his time.

The job was dull and I was bored most of the time, but I was earning enough to move out of home too. I said to Annie that we could get a flat together, but she wasn't too keen on the idea. I was disappointed. I mentioned it to Ma, who told Da. He said, 'Don't move in with Annie, she'll drag you down to her level.' I wonder whether, if I had moved in with Annie, things would have been different. I wonder if Da remembers saying that. If it haunts him. I don't want to remind him. He's already suffering. We all are.

Copyrighted Material

On that last day I saw her, she was agitated but excited about something. She said she was going to buy me a proper painting set because she knew that I still loved sketching and painting. I should have been excited about the promise of a gift like that, but I knew Annie too well. She was annoyed that I wasn't jumping up and down with happiness, but Annie was always swearing to buy me things or to do things with me, and they rarely ever happened.

'A proper set. I saw it in Clark's window, paints in tubes in a big wooden box with all kinds of brushes. All watercolours and inks, not oils. You see? I remember everything you told me about your art stuff – I know you don't like oils. It's gorgeous. The box is really old-fashioned-looking, but it's brand new and there's loads of things in it. I'm buying it for you on Saturday morning. I really am. I promise. Come round on Saturday, in the afternoon.'

'Where will you get the money for that?'

'Never you mind, I'll have the money.'

'Yeah.'

'I *will*. Do you not believe me, Karen?'

It was easier to play along, but I knew it was never going to happen. Like the time she said we'd go for dinner in Sheries in Abbey Street a few weeks before that, and I'd waited half an hour outside in the cold but she never showed up, and when I rang her about it, she'd said she was busy and we'd go another time.

Despite all this, I loved Annie. She wanted the best for me, wanted me to learn from her mistakes. She warned me off fellas, told me I was too good for the lads round our way

Copyrighted Material

and that I should keep myself for someone special. I didn't always obey her. Nobody could make me laugh like she could, and although her time in the mother and baby home turned down her brightness, the old spark was beginning to re-emerge by the time she vanished into thin air.

'Promise, you'll call on Saturday? About three, yeah? I can't wait to see your face when you open it.' So I promised, not daring to hope that she'd keep her word but never imagining that I wouldn't see her again.

'Sure,' I said. 'I'll bring Dessie.'

Her face clouded over. They'd got on well to begin with, though he thought she was a bit wild. He didn't like how drunk she'd get and, like Da, he didn't like me spending too much time with her. When I told him about Annie's pregnancy and her time in St Joseph's, his attitude to her worsened.

'She's one of them slappers?' he said. 'Who was the father, or did she even know?'

I was disgusted by his reaction. I ignored him for weeks then and avoided talking to him in work, but he didn't give up and eventually he won me over again with a bunch of flowers and a written apology. He said that he shouldn't have called my sister names. But if Dessie, who was basically good and kind, thought that way about Annie, so did everyone else. He was never comfortable in her company after that, and Annie wasn't stupid.

'What's wrong with your fella?' she said once in the Viking. 'He's always in such a hurry to leave.'

'He just doesn't like this pub much,' I said, which was true. The Viking was a rough enough spot, in a semi-derelict part of town. Teenage glue-sniffers hung around

Copyrighted Material

the area. Dessie had often given out about the fact that we had to meet her there, but Annie was a creature of habit. 'It's full of alcos,' he said, but I pointed out that could be said about most pubs in Ireland. Annie was clearly a popular character in the bar and was one of the youngest regulars. Late in the night, a sing-song would start and Annie, worse for wear, would sing 'Do Ya Think I'm Sexy' or 'I Will Survive' in a loud voice. Dessie hated that. 'She's making a show of herself,' he'd say, and though sometimes I agreed, she could still carry a tune and had full recall of the lyrics. I wasn't going to stop her enjoying herself.

When I called to her flat on Saturday, I'd decided not to bring Dessie along. I wasn't all that surprised when she wasn't there. That evening I rang her, and the girl who answered the phone in the hall said she'd take a message.

At Ma and Da's on Sunday, Annie didn't show up. Lunch after twelve-thirty Mass was the only family ritual we held on to, and Annie still turned up most of the time.

'Did she ring you, Ma, to say she wasn't coming?'

'She did not, the strap,' said my da, who took her feckless behaviour as a personal insult. I played it down.

'She might have the flu – the flat was freezing when I saw her on Thursday.'

'Did she not have the gas fire on?'

'She did, but you know she always opens the window when she smokes.'

'She gets the smoking from you,' my mother said to Da.

'That's all she got from me, Pauline, I can tell you.'

Copyrighted Material

I changed the subject, asked Da if he was going to the greyhounds on Thursday.

The next day, Monday, I called round again with Dessie and there was no answer from her flat but I caught another girl on her way out. There were three bedsits in the two-storey house with a shared bathroom. I asked her if she'd seen Annie. 'Not since Thursday or Friday, now that you mention it. I thought she was away. It's usually her radio that wakes me.'

That was the first time I felt a bit worried. Annie wouldn't have gone away without telling me. Besides, where would she have gone?

'With some fella?' Dessie suggested, but clammed up again when I gave him a sharp look.

We'd usually be in touch twice or three times a week, but on Wednesday I still hadn't heard from her. I called to Ma's, but she hadn't heard from her either.

'Did she say anything to you about going away?'

'Not a thing. It's weird.'

I was still there when Da got home from the bakery.

'She's probably off on the piss somewhere. She'll turn up.'

'She's never disappeared for so long before. It's been nearly a week.'

'When last did you see her?'

'Last Thursday. She told me to call round on Saturday. She promised me she'd be there.' I didn't tell him about the painting set. There was no point.

'She promised, did she?' he said sarcastically.

*

Copyrighted Material

On Friday when we still couldn't contact her, we all knew something was wrong. Da and me went to her flat together while Ma rang round her friends and some of the girls she used to work with. At Annie's flat, one of the other tenants said she hadn't been there all week. We called the landlord from the phone in the hall and he came round, a large sweating man with a big nose, complaining about being disturbed after 6 p.m. He let us into her bedsit with his enormous set of keys. Everything was as neat as a pin as usual, but all the clothes I knew she had were still in the wardrobe, except her grey herringbone coat, the woollen sleeveless dress Ma had bought her for her birthday and the knee-high purple boots. I didn't want to go rifling through all her stuff, but a quick glance told me she hadn't gone on a trip. Her long holdall bag was still under the dresser. A single mug sat in the sink with a spot of mould in the bottom of it.

'She'd never have left that there, Da, if she knew she was going away. Maybe for a few hours, but that's got to have been there for days.'

The landlord said, 'Her rent is due next week you know. I won't be left out of pocket.'

'Would ya shut up!' said my da, and inside I cheered because he was standing up for Annie and it was a very long time since I'd heard him do that. The landlord told us to leave, and said that if he didn't get his rent the next week, he'd be putting Annie's stuff in a bag on the doorstep.

When we got home with our news, Ma was worried sick. None of Annie's friends had seen her in over a week, and said she hadn't turned up for two cleaning jobs in the city centre. That alone would not have rung alarm bells,

Copyrighted Material

but my timid mother had bravely gone into the Viking after dark. The regulars there all knew Annie, but they said she hadn't been in for over a week.

'Do you think she got herself knocked up again and went back to St Joseph's?' said Da, a tone of concern creeping into his voice.

'She'd never go back there, Da, not in a million years. I know she wouldn't.' Ma agreed with me. 'And even if she was pregnant, why would she go anywhere without her clothes, or a bag?'

'I'm ringing the guards,' said Da on Friday the 21st of November 1980.

Copyrighted Material