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# TANA FRENCH

# THE HUNTER

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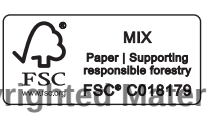
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For David, who now has to be nice to me forever

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# 1

Trey comes over the mountain carrying a broken chair. She carries it on her back, with the legs sticking out round her waist and held over her shoulders. The sky is a blue so hot it looks glazed, and the sun is burning the back of Trey's neck. Even the faint pin-sharp calls of birds, too high up to be seen, vibrate with heat. The woman who owns the chair offered Trey a lift back with it, but Trey has no inclination to let the woman into her business, and neither the inclination nor the ability to make conversation for the length of a car journey over the potholed mountain roads.

Her dog Banjo lollops in wide circles off the path, snuffing and burrowing among the thick heather, which is too brown-edged and heavily scented for July. It makes crisp rattling sounds as he pushes through it. Every few minutes he comes bounding back to tell Trey, with small happy puffs and moans, what he's found. Banjo is a mutt, black and tan, with a beagle's head and body set on the legs of something stubbier, and he's a lot more talkative than Trey is. He got his name from a banjo-shaped patch of white on his belly. Trey wanted something better for him, but her mind doesn't run easily to fancy things, and everything she came up with sounded like what some tosser out of a schoolbook would call a dog. In the end she left it at Banjo. Cal Hooper, the American who lives down near the village, has Banjo's litter-mate and named him Rip, and if a plain name is good enough for Cal's dog, it's good enough for Trey's. Besides, she spends much of her waking time at Cal's place, meaning the two dogs spend much of their time together, and it would sound stupid if they didn't match.

Cal's place is where Trey is taking the chair, later on. Cal and Trey mend furniture for people, or make it, and they buy old wrecked furniture and fix it up to sell at the Saturday market in Kilcarrow town. One time they picked up a side table that to Trey looked

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useless, too little and spindly to hold anything worthwhile, but when Cal went on the internet it turned out to be almost two hundred years old. When they got through with it, they sold it for a hundred and eighty quid. The chair Trey is carrying has two stretchers and one leg in splinters, like someone gave it the kind of kicking that takes time and dedication, but once she and Cal get done with it, no one will be able to tell it was ever broken.

She's going home first, for lunch, because she wants to eat dinner at Cal's – Trey is growing fast enough, this summer, that she marks out her days mainly in terms of food – and her pride shies from turning up on his doorstep looking for two meals in the one day. She watches her boundaries extra hard because, if she had her wish, she'd live there. Cal's place has peace. As far up the mountain as Trey's house is, and as far from any other, it ought to be peaceful enough, but it crowds her. Her oldest brother and sister are gone, but Liam and Alanna are six and five and are mostly yelling for one reason or another, and Maeve is eleven and is mostly complaining and slamming the door of the room she shares with Trey. Even when they accidentally go a few minutes without making a racket, the buzz of them is always there. Their mam is silent, but it's not a silence with peace in it. It takes up space, like some heavy thing made of rusted iron built around her. Lena Dunne, who lives down below the mountains and who gave Trey the dog, says her mam used to be a talker, and a laugher too. Trey doesn't disbelieve her, exactly, but she finds the image inaccessible.

Banjo explodes out of the heather, delighted with himself, carrying something that Trey can smell coming a mile off. 'Drop it,' she orders. Banjo gives her a reproachful look, but he's well trained; he drops the thing, which hits the path with a sodden flop. It's narrow and dark, a young stoat maybe. 'Good dog,' Trey says, taking a hand off the chair to rub his head, but Banjo isn't mollified. Instead of galloping off again, he trudges along beside her, drooping at both ends, to show her his feelings are hurt. Cal calls Banjo a big old baby. Rip is the kind of scrapper who could get a leg chopped off and keep on coming, but Banjo likes people to appreciate his suffering.

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The downward slope gets steep in places, but Trey's legs are accustomed to this mountain, and she keeps her stride. Her runners raise small spurts of dust. She lifts her elbows to let the air dry her armpits, but there's not enough breeze to make a difference. Below her, the fields sprawl out, a mosaic of varying greens in odd-angled shapes that Trey knows as well as the cracks on her bedroom ceiling. The haymaking is underway: tiny baling machines trundle back and forth, deftly tracking the unexplained curves of the stone walls and leaving yellow cylinders in their wake like droppings. The lambs are white scraps skittering across the grass.

She cuts off the path, over a drystone wall tumbledown enough that she doesn't have to help Banjo clamber it, across an expanse of thigh-high gnarled weeds that used to be a field once, and into a thick band of spruce trees. The branches sift and scramble the sunlight into a confusing dazzle, and their shade cools her neck. Above her small birds are drunk on summer, zipping back and forth, all trying to be the loudest. Trey whistles a trill up at them and grins when they freeze into silence, trying to figure her out.

She comes out of the trees to the cleared ground behind her house. The house got a fresh coat of butter-coloured paint and some patches to the roof a couple of years back, but nothing can paper over its air of exhaustion. Its spine sags, and the lines of the window frames splay off-kilter. The yard is weeds and dust, blurring into the mountainside at the edges, scattered with things Liam and Alanna were using for toys. Trey has brought each of her school friends here once, to show she's not ashamed of it, and hasn't asked them again. Her default position is to keep things separate. It's made easy by the fact that none of her friends come from this townland anyway. Trey doesn't hang around with people from Ardnakelty.

As soon as she steps inside the kitchen door, she knows the house is different. The air is taut and focused, with no scattering of movement and noise. Before she has time to do more than register that fact and the smell of cigarette smoke, she hears, from the sitting room, her father's laugh.

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Banjo lets out a preliminary huff of a bark. 'No,' Trey says, low

and fast. He shakes off heather and dirt, his ears flapping, and lunges for his water bowl.

Trey stands still for a minute, in the wide band of sunlight falling through the door onto the worn linoleum. Then she goes into the hall, moving quietly, and stops outside the sitting room. Her father's voice runs clear and merry, tossing out questions that get back an excited babble from Maeve or a mumble from Liam.

Trey thinks about leaving, but she wants to see him, to know for sure. She pushes open the door.

Her dad is sitting smack in the middle of the sofa, leaning back and grinning, with his arms spread wide around Alanna and Maeve. They're grinning too, but uncertainly, like they just got a great big Christmas present that they might not want. Liam is squashed into a corner of the sofa, staring at their dad with his mouth open. Their mam is sitting on the edge of an armchair, with her back straight and her hands flat on her thighs. Even though she's been there all along and their dad hasn't been there in four years, Sheila is the one who looks like she can't feel at home in the room.

'Well, God almighty,' Johnny Reddy says, his eyes twinkling at Trey. 'Would you look at that. Little Theresa's after growing up. What age are you now? Sixteen? Seventeen?'

Trey says, 'Fifteen.' She knows that, if anything, she looks younger.

Johnny shakes his head, marvelling. 'I'll be beating the young lads away from the door with a stick before I know it. Or am I too late? Have you got yourself a fella already? Or two or three?' Maeve giggles sharply, and looks up at his face to check if that's right.

'Nah,' Trey says flatly, when it becomes clear he's waiting for an answer.

Johnny lets out a sigh of relief. 'I've time to find myself a good stick, so.' He tilts his chin at the chair, which Trey has forgotten to put down. 'What's that? Didja bring me a present?'

'Gonna mend it,' Trey says.

'She makes money at it,' Sheila says. Her voice is clearer than usual, and there are high spots of colour on her cheekbones. Trey can't tell whether she's glad or angry about him being back. 'That's what bought the new microwave.'

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Johnny laughs. 'A chip off the old block, hah? Always got a bitta something on the go. That's my girl.' He winks at Trey. Maeve wriggles under his arm, to remind him she's there.

Trey remembered him big, but he's only a middling-sized man, and slight with it. His hair, which is the exact same mousy brown as hers, flops across his forehead like a teenager's. His jeans and his white T-shirt and his black leather jacket are the newest things in the house. The sitting room looks even messier around him.

She says, to her mam, 'Taking this to Cal's.' She turns around and goes out to the kitchen.

Behind her she hears Johnny say, with a laugh in his voice, 'Cal, is it? Is that one of Senan Maguire's young lads?'

Banjo is still at his water bowl, lapping noisily, but when Trey comes in he bounces up, wagging his whole rear end and looking hopefully at his food bowl. 'Nah,' Trey tells him. She puts her face under the tap and rubs at it, stripping off sweat and dust. She rinses her mouth and spits hard into the sink. Then she cups her hand again and drinks for a long time.

She turns quick when she hears a sound behind her, but it's Alanna, holding her limp stuffed rabbit under one armpit and swinging the door back and forth with the other hand. 'Daddy came home,' she says, like it's a question.

Trey says, 'Yeah.'

'He says to come on back inside.'

'Going out,' Trey says. She rummages in the fridge, finds ham slices, and shoves a thick wad of them between two slices of bread. She wraps the sandwich in kitchen roll and crams it into the back pocket of her jeans. Alanna, still swinging the door, watches her as she hoists the chair onto her back, snaps her fingers for Banjo, and heads into the expanse of sunlight.

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Cal is ironing his shirts on the kitchen table and considering shaving his beard off. When he grew it, back in Chicago, his idea of Irish weather was based on tourist websites, which were heavy on lush green fields and happy people in knit sweaters. For his first

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two years here, the climate lived up to the advertising, more or less. This summer appears to have snuck in from an entirely different website, maybe one about Spain. The heat has a brazen, unbudging quality that Cal, who has become accustomed to any given day containing a few scraps of sunshine, numerous degrees of cloud and several varieties of rain, finds slightly unsettling. It's at odds with the landscape, whose beauty is founded on subtlety and flux, and it's pissing off the farmers: it's messed up their schedule for silage and hay, it's making the sheep irritable, and it's threatening the grazing. Among the guys in the pub, it's become the main topic of conversation, pushing aside the upcoming National Sheep Dog Trials, the woman Itchy O'Connor's eldest brought in from Dublin to marry, and the probable bribery involved in the construction of the new leisure centre up in town. One of its minor inconveniences is that Cal's beard has turned into a heat trap. Whenever he goes outside, the lower half of his face feels like it has its own tropical climate.

Cal is fond of the beard, though. It was originally connected, in a hazy way, with his early retirement: he had had enough of being a cop, and of looking like a cop. In terms of the people round Ardnakelty, the beard turned out to be pointless – they had him pegged before he even got unpacked. To him, though, it means something.

Even in the heat, his house is cool. It's an undersized 1930s cottage with nothing noteworthy about it, but the walls are thick and solid, built to do their job. When Cal bought it, it was on the verge of falling apart, but he's brought it back, taking his time, since he doesn't have much else that needs doing. The room he's in, which is mainly living room and a little bit kitchen, has reached the point where it no longer feels like a project; it's turned into simply a good place to be. He's painted it white, with the east wall pale yellow-gold – Trey's idea – to match the sunset light that hits it. Along the way he's acquired furniture, to expand on the previous owners' leftovers: he now has three chairs around the kitchen table, an old desk where Trey does her homework, an armchair, a faded blue sofa that could use reupholstering, and even a standing lamp. He's also acquired a dog. In his corner beside the fireplace,

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Rip is being thorough with a rawhide bone. Rip is small, floppy-eared, and built like a brick shithouse. He's half beagle, with a beagle's sweet face and a beagle's haphazard patches of black and tan and white, but Cal hasn't worked out the other half. He suspects wolverine.

Through the open window comes the exuberant riot of birds, who, unlike the sheep, are glorying in the heat and the abundance of bugs it's brought them. The breeze flows in soft and sweet as cream. A bumblebee blunders in with it and bumps itself against cupboards. Cal gives it a little time to think, and eventually it figures out the window and swerves off into the sunlight.

Outside the back door, there's a scuffle and a burst of happy barking. Rip shoots out of his corner and hurls himself down the hall to plaster his nose against the door firmly enough that Cal won't be able to open it. This happens every time Trey and Banjo arrive, but Rip, who is a sociable creature, gets too overexcited to remember.

'Back,' Cal orders, nudging Rip out of the way with his toe. Rip manages to restrain himself, quivering, long enough that Cal can get the door open. Two young rooks rocket up off the step and head for their oak tree at the bottom of the garden, laughing so hard they tumble in the air.

Rip streaks after them, vowing to tear them apart. 'Well, sonofabitch,' Cal says, amused. He's been trying to build up a relationship with his colony of rooks ever since he arrived. It's working, but the relationship isn't exactly what he had in mind. He had some Disney idea of them bringing him presents and eating out of his hand. The rooks definitely feel he's an asset to the neighbourhood, but mainly because he leaves them leftovers and because they like fucking with him. When they get bored, they yell down his chimney, drop rocks into his fireplace, or bang on his windows. The barking is new.

Almost at the tree, Rip does a 180 and tears off around the house towards the road. Cal knows what that means. He heads back into the house, to unplug the iron.

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Trey comes in the door alone. Rip and Banjo are playing tag

around the yard, or hassling the rooks, or rooting out whatever they can find in the hedges. The dogs know the boundaries of Cal's land, which is ten acres, more than enough to keep them occupied. They're not going to go chasing sheep and getting themselves shot.

'Went and got this,' Trey says, swinging the chair off her back. 'Your woman over the mountain.'

'Good job,' Cal says. 'You need lunch?'

'Nah. Had it.'

Having grown up dirt-poor himself, Cal understands Trey's prickly relationship with offers. 'Cookies in the jar, if you need to top up,' he says. Trey heads for the cupboard.

Cal puts his last shirt on a hanger and leaves the iron on the kitchen counter to cool off. 'Thinking of getting rid of this,' he says, giving his beard a tug. 'What do you figure?'

Trey stops with a cookie in her hand and gives him a stare like he suggested walking naked down what passes for the main street in Ardnakelty. 'Nah,' she says, with finality.

The look on her face makes Cal grin. 'Nah? Why not?'

'You'd look stupid.'

'Thanks, kid.'

Trey shrugs. Cal is well versed in the full range of Trey's shrugs. This one means that, having said her piece, she no longer considers this her problem. She shoves the rest of her cookie in her mouth and takes the chair into the smaller bedroom, which has turned into their workshop.

The kid's conversational skills being what they are, Cal relies on the timing and quality of her silences to communicate anything he ought to know. Normally she wouldn't have dropped the subject that fast, not without giving him more shit about what he would look like clean-shaven. Something is on her mind.

He puts his shirts in his bedroom and joins Trey in the workshop. It's small and sunny, painted with the leftovers from the rest of the house, and it smells of sawdust, varnish, and beeswax. Clutter is everywhere, but it's ordered. When Cal realised they were getting serious about carpentry, he and Trey built a sturdy shelving unit for boxes of nails, dowels, screws, rags, pencils, clamps, waxes, wood

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stains, wood oils, drawer knobs, and everything else. Pegboards on the walls hold rows of tools, each one with its shape traced in its proper place. Cal started off with his granddaddy's toolbox and has since accumulated just about every carpentry tool in existence, and a few that don't officially exist but that he and Trey have improvised to suit their needs. There's a worktable, a lathe bench, and a stack of mixed scrap wood in a corner for repairs. In another corner is a dilapidated cartwheel that Trey found somewhere, which they're keeping on the grounds that you never know.

Trey is kicking a drop cloth into place on the floor, to stand the chair on. The chair has good bones. It was handmade, long enough ago to have a dip worn into the seat by many rear ends, and another worn into the front stretcher by many feet. The back and the legs are delicate turned spindles, ringed and beaded here and there for decoration. It's spent much of its life near cooking or burning, though: smoke, grease and layers of polish have left it covered in a dark, tacky film.

'Nice chair,' Cal says. 'Gonna have to clean it up before we do anything else.'

'I told her that. She said good. Her granddad made it.'

Cal tilts the chair to inspect the damage. 'On the phone she said the cat knocked it over.'

Trey makes a sceptical *pfft* noise. 'Yeah,' Cal says.

'Her Jayden's in my school,' Trey tells him. 'He's a prick. Hits little kids.'

'Who knows,' Cal says. 'All these are gonna need replacing. What wood do you figure?'

Trey examines the seat, which all those rear ends have kept clean enough to show the grain, and the insides of the breaks. 'Oak. White.'

'Yeah, me too. See if we've got a piece thick enough to turn. Don't worry about matching the colour; we're gonna have to stain it anyway. Just get the grain as close as you can.'

Trey squats by the assortment of scrap wood and starts poking around. Cal goes out to the kitchen and mixes white vinegar and warm water in an old jug. Then he dusts off the chair with a soft

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cloth, leaving space for the kid to talk into if she feels like it, and watches her.

She's grown. Two years ago, when she first showed up in his back yard, she was a scrawny, silent kid with a self-inflicted buzz cut and a half-grown bobcat's urge towards both flight and fight. Now she's up past his shoulder, the buzz cut has relaxed into a rough crop, her features are getting a new clarity, and she rummages and sprawls around his house like she lives there. She even has entire conversations, or at least most days she does. She's got none of the polish and artifice that some teenagers start developing, but she's a teenager all the same, both her mind and her life getting more intricate every day. The things she says, just about school and her friends and whatever, have new layers underneath them. Cal is having more trouble with it than she seems to be. These days, every time he picks up a whiff of something on her mind, the bloom of terror inside him spreads wider and darker. Too many things can happen, at fifteen, and do too much damage. Trey seems solid as hardwood, in her own way, but she's taken too many knocks in her life not to have cracks in there somewhere.

Cal finds a clean rag and starts rubbing down the chair with the vinegar mix. The sticky coating comes away well, leaving long brown streaks on the rag. Outside the window, blackbirds' rambling songs carry from far across the fields, and bees revel in the clover that's commandeered Cal's back yard. The dogs have found a stick to play tug-of-war with.

Trey, holding two pieces of wood side by side to compare them, says, 'My dad came home.'

Everything in Cal comes to a dead stop. Of all the fears that were milling inside him, this wasn't one.

He says, after what seems to be a long time, 'When?' The question is a dumb one, but it's all that comes into his head.

'This morning. While I was getting the chair.'

'Right,' Cal says. 'Well. He here for good? Or just for a while?'

Trey shrugs extravagantly: no idea.

Cal wishes he could see her face. He says, 'How're you feeling about it?'

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Trey says flatly, 'He can fuck off.'

'OK,' Cal says. 'That's fair.' Maybe he ought to be giving the kid some bullshit speech that includes the words 'but he's your daddy', but Cal makes it his practice never to bullshit Trey, and his feelings on Johnny Reddy happen to coincide with hers.

Trey says, 'Can I stay here tonight?'

Cal's mind stops again. He goes back to rubbing down the chair, keeping his rhythm even. After a moment he says, 'You worried about something your dad might do?'

Trey snorts. 'Nah.'

She sounds like she's telling the truth. Cal relaxes a little bit. 'Then what?'

Trey says, 'He can't just walk back in.'

She has her back to Cal, rummaging among the wood, but her whole spine has a taut, angry hunch. 'Right,' Cal says. 'I'd probably feel the same way.'

'Can I stay, so?'

'No,' Cal says. 'Not a good idea.'

'Why not?'

'Well,' Cal says. 'Your dad might not be happy about you taking off the minute he's back in town. And I figure I'd best not start out by pissing him off. If he's gonna stick around, I'd rather he didn't have a problem with you hanging out over here.' He leaves it at that. She's old enough to understand some, at least, of the other reasons why not. 'I'll call Miss Lena, see if you can spend the night there.'

The kid starts to argue, but she changes her mind and rolls her eyes instead. Cal finds, to his surprise, that he feels shaken, like he just fell off something high and he needs to sit down. He props his ass on the worktable and pulls out his phone.

On reflection, he texts Lena rather than calling her. *Could Trey stay at your place tonight? Don't know if you heard but her dad just came home. She doesn't feel like hanging out with him.*

He sits still, watching the sunlight shift across Trey's thin shoulders as she pulls out lengths of wood and discards them, until Lena texts back. *Fuck's sake. I don't blame her. Yeah she can stay no problem.*

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*Thanks,* Cal texts. *I'll send her over after dinner.* 'She says you're welcome to stay,' he tells Trey, pocketing his phone. 'You gotta tell your mama where you are, though. Or ask Miss Lena to.'

Trey rolls her eyes harder. 'Here,' she says, thrusting an old oak sleeper at him. 'This?'

'Yeah,' Cal says. He goes back to the chair. 'That's good.'

Trey marks the end of the sleeper with a swipe of black Sharpie and puts it back in the corner. 'That stuff coming off?' she asks.

'Yeah,' Cal says. 'It's fine. Easy as pie.'

Trey finds a clean rag, dips it in the vinegar mix and wrings it out hard. She says, 'What if he's not OK with me coming here?'

'You reckon he'll have a problem?'

Trey considers this. 'He never gave a shite where we went before.'

'Well then,' Cal says. 'Most likely he won't give a shit about this, either. If he does, we'll deal with it then.'

Trey throws a quick glance up at him. Cal says, 'We'll deal with it.'

Trey nods, one decisive jerk, and starts in on the chair. The fact that his word can reassure her makes Cal want to sit down all over again.

Reassured or not, she's still not feeling talkative, even by her own standards. After a while, Rip and Banjo get thirsty and come in the open front door, take a long noisy drink from their bowls, and bounce into the workshop for some attention. Trey squats to make a fuss over them, even laughing when Rip nudges her under the chin hard enough that she falls on her backside. Then the dogs flop down for a rest in their corner, and Trey picks up her rag again and gets back to work.

Cal doesn't feel much like talking either. He never for a minute expected Trey's father to come home. Even made up entirely of anecdotes, Johnny Reddy has always struck Cal as a type he's encountered before: the guy who operates by sauntering into a new place, announcing himself as whatever seems likely to come in handy, and seeing how much he can get out of that costume before it wears too thin to cover him up any longer. Cal can't think

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of a good reason why he might want to come back here, the one place where he can't announce himself as anything other than what he is.

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Lena is hanging her washing on the line. She takes an unreasonable amount of private pleasure in this job. It makes her keenly aware of the air around her, warm and sweet with cut hay, of the generous sunlight covering her, and of the fact that she stands where generations of women have stood, doing the same task against the greens of the fields and the faraway outline of the mountains. When her husband died, five years back, she learned the skill of taking every scrap of happiness where she could find it. A fresh bed or a perfectly buttered piece of toast could lighten the weight enough to let her catch a breath or two. A small breeze swells the sheets on the line, and Lena sings to herself, low fragments of songs she picked up off the radio.

'Well, would you ever look at that,' a voice says behind her. 'Lena Dunne. Large as life and twice as gorgeous.'

When Lena turns around, it's Johnny Reddy, leaning on her back gate and looking her up and down. Johnny always did have a way of inspecting you like he was remembering, with approval, what you were like in bed. Since he was never in Lena's bed and isn't going to be, she has no time for this.

'Johnny,' she says, looking him up and down right back. 'I heard you were home, all right.'

Johnny laughs. 'God almighty, word still travels fast around here. The place hasn't changed a bit.' He gives her an affectionate smile. 'Neither have you.'

'I have,' Lena says. 'Thank God. You haven't.' It's true. Apart from the first smattering of grey, Johnny looks the same as he did when he used to throw pebbles against her window and bring her and half a dozen others to the disco in town, all of them piled on top of each other in his dad's rickety Ford Cortina, speeding through the dark and shrieking at every pothole. He even stands

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the same, easy and light as a young lad. He confirms Lena's observation that the men who age best are the feckless ones.

He grins, running a hand over his head. 'I've still got the hair, anyway. That's the main thing. How've you been getting on?'

'Grand,' Lena says. 'How's yourself?'

'Never better. It's great to be home.'

'Lovely,' Lena says. 'That's nice for you.'

'I was in London,' Johnny tells her.

'I know, yeah. Off making your fortune. Did you?'

She's expecting a flourish-laden story about how he was within touching distance of millions when some villain swooped in and robbed the chance from under his nose, which would at least make his visit interesting enough to be halfway worthwhile. Instead, Johnny gives the side of his nose a mischievous tap. 'Ah, now, that'd be telling. It's under construction. Authorised personnel only.'

'Ah, shite,' Lena says. 'I forgot my hard hat.' She goes back to her washing, feeling that Johnny could at least have waited until she was done enjoying it.

'Will I give you a hand with that?' he asks.

'No need,' Lena says. 'It's done.'

'Brilliant.' Johnny opens her gate wide and sweeps a hand towards it. 'You can come for a walk with me, so.'

'This isn't the only thing I've to do today.'

'The rest'll keep. You deserve a bit of a break. When was the last time you skived off for the day? You used to be great at that.'

Lena looks at him. He still has that smile, the wide impish crinkle that woke your reckless side and lured you into thinking the stakes were low. Lena kept them that way, except for that speeding Cortina. She had a laugh with Johnny, but even though he was the finest thing and the biggest charmer within miles of Ardnakelty, he never stirred enough in her to get him beyond the outside of her bra. He had no substance; there was nothing in him to hold her. But Sheila Brady, who was Lena's friend back then, kept believing the stakes were low and the substance was in there somewhere, till she came up pregnant. From there the momentum just kept on rolling her downhill.

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Sheila was big enough and smart enough to make her own decisions, but Johnny's momentum took their kids along too. Lena has got fonder of Trey Reddy than she is of just about any other human being.

'You know who'd only love to skive off for the day?' she says. 'Sheila. She used to be great at it, too.'

'She's at home with the kiddies, sure. Theresa went off somewhere – she's a chip off the old block, that one, got itchy feet. The rest are too small to mind each other.'

'Then away you go and mind them, and Sheila can go for a walk.'

Johnny laughs. He's not putting it on; he's genuinely not shamed, or even annoyed. This was one of the things that stopped Lena from ever getting drawn in by Johnny: you could see right through him, and let him know you had, and he wouldn't be one bit bothered. If you didn't fall for his shite, there were plenty of others who would.

'Sheila must be sick of the sight of these fields. I'm the one that's been missing them for years. Come on and help me enjoy them.' He waggles the gate invitingly. 'You can tell me what you've been at all this time, and I'll tell you how I got on in London. The aul' lad upstairs from me was from the Philippines, and he had a parrot that could swear in their lingo. You wouldn't get that in Ardnakelty. I'll teach you how to call anyone that annoys you a son of a grasshopper.'

'I've sold that land you're standing on to Ciaran Maloney,' Lena says, 'is what I've been at. If he sees you there, he'll run you off it. You can call him a son of a grasshopper.' She picks up her wash basket and goes inside.

She watches from her kitchen window, staying well back, as Johnny moseys off across the field to find someone else to smile at. His accent hasn't changed, anyway; she has to give him that. She'd have bet on him coming back talking like Guy Ritchie, but he still sounds like a mountain lad.

Something that was nudging at her mind has made it to the surface, now that her anger is fading and leaving room. Johnny always

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liked to make a fine entrance. When he turned up outside her window, he came smelling of expensive aftershave – robbed, probably – with his jeans ironed, every hair in place, and the Cortina waxed to a sparkle. He was the only fella Lena knew who never had broken fingernails. Today, his clothes are shiny-new right down to the shoes, and not cheap shite either, but his hair is straggling over his ears and flopping in his eyes. He's tried to slick it into place, but it's too overgrown to behave. If Johnny Reddy has come home in too much of a hurry to get a haircut, it's because he's got trouble following close behind.

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By the time Trey and Banjo head to Lena's, it's gone ten o'clock, and the long summer evening has run itself out. In the vast stretch of darkness, moths and bats are whirling; as Trey passes between fields, she can hear the slow shifting of cows settling themselves to sleep. The air still has the day's heat left in it, coming up off the earth. The sky is clear, packed with stars: tomorrow is going to be another hot one.

Trey is going over the things she remembers about her dad. She hasn't used up a lot of thought on him since he left, so it takes her a while to find things to go over. He liked to distract their mam, grab her when she was scrubbing the cooker and dance her around the kitchen floor. Occasionally, when he had drink taken and something had gone wrong, he hit them. Other times he would play with them like another kid. He and Trey's big brother, Brendan, would take the little ones on their backs to be cowboys and chase Trey and Maeve around the yard, trying to capture them. He liked to promise them things; he loved to see their faces light up when he said he'd bring them to the circus in Galway, or buy them a toy car that climbed up walls. He didn't seem to feel any need to follow through on his promises; in fact, he always seemed a little bit surprised and aggrieved when they asked. After a while Trey stopped playing the cowboy games.

Lena's house is lit, three small clean rectangles of yellow against the great black fields. Her dogs, Nellie and Daisy, let her know

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Trey and Banjo are coming; before they're in the gate, she opens the door and stands waiting in the light. The sight of her loosens Trey's muscles a little. Lena is tall and built strong, with deep curves, wide cheekbones and a wide mouth, heavy fair hair and very blue eyes. Everything about her has a heft to it; nothing is half there. Cal is the same: he's the tallest man Trey knows and one of the broadest, with thick brown hair and a thick brown beard, and hands the size of shovels. Trey herself is constructed for agility and inconspicuousness, and has no issue with this, but she takes a deep pleasure in Cal's and Lena's solidity.

'Thanks for having me,' she says on the doorstep, handing Lena a Ziploc bag full of meat. 'Rabbit.'

'Thanks very much,' Lena says. Her dogs swivel between Trey, Banjo, and the bag. Lena palms their noses away from it. 'Did you get it yourself?'

'Yeah,' Trey says, following Lena inside. Cal has a hunting rifle, and a warren on his land. The rabbit was his idea: according to him, it's mannerly to bring your hostess a gift. Trey approves of this. She dislikes the thought of being indebted, even to Lena. 'Fresh tonight. Hasta go in the fridge for a day, or else it'll be tough. Then you can put it in the freezer.'

'I might eat it tomorrow. It's been a while since I had rabbit. What's that way you and Cal fry it up?'

'Garlic and stuff. And then tomatoes and peppers in with it.'

'Ah,' Lena says. 'I've no tomatoes. I'd have to get them off Noreen, and then she'd want to know what I was cooking, and where I got the rabbit, and what you were doing over here. Even if I told her nothing, she'd smell it off me.' Lena's sister Noreen runs the village shop, and the rest of the village while she's at it.

'Probably she knows already,' Trey says. 'About my dad.'

'I wouldn't put it past her,' Lena says. 'No need to give her a leg up, though. Let her work for it.' She puts the rabbit away in the fridge.

They make up a bed for Trey in the spare room, which is big and airy, painted white. The bed is a broad solid thing with knobbed bedposts, seventy or eighty years old by Trey's guess, made of

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battered oak. Lena pulls off the patchwork quilt and folds it up. 'You won't be wanting that in this heat,' she says.

'Who else stays here?' Trey asks.

'No one, these days. Sean and I used to have friends down from Dublin for weekends. After he died, there was a while when I'd no wish to see anyone. I never got back into the habit.' Lena dumps the quilt into a chest at the foot of the bed. 'Your dad called round this afternoon,' she says.

'Didja tell him I'd be coming here?' Trey demands.

'I did not. I texted your mam, though.'

'What'd she say?'

' "Grand." ' Lena takes a sheet from a pile on a chair and shakes it out. 'I had these out on the line for a while; they should be aired enough. What do you reckon about your dad coming home?'

Trey shrugs. She catches two corners of the sheet when Lena flips them to her, and starts stretching it over the mattress.

'My mam coulda told him to fuck off,' she says.

'She'd have had every right to,' Lena agrees. 'I wouldn't say he gave her a chance, but. I'd say he showed up on the doorstep with a big smile and a big kiss, and waltzed inside before she could get her bearings. By the time she'd her head together, it was too late.'

Trey considers this. It seems likely. 'She could do it tomorrow,' she says.

'She might,' Lena says, 'or she might not. Marriage is an odd thing.'

'I'm never gonna get married,' Trey says. Trey has a bone-deep mistrust of marriage or anything resembling it. She knows that Lena sometimes stays the night at Cal's place, but Lena also has a place of her own, which she can go back to whenever she wants, and where no one else has any say or any right of entry. To Trey, this seems like the only possible arrangement with any sense to it.

Lena shrugs, tucking a corner in more tightly. 'Some people would tell you you'll change your mind. Who knows. Marriage suits some people, for some of their lives, anyway. It's not for everyone.'

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Trey asks abruptly, 'Are you gonna marry Cal?'

'No,' Lena says. 'I loved being married, mostly, but I'm done with it. I'm happy as I am.'

Trey nods. This comes as a relief. The question has been on her mind for a while. She approves of Cal and Lena being together – if one of them went out with someone else, it would complicate matters – but she likes things the way they are, with them in two separate places.

'I've had offers, mind you,' Lena adds, snapping the top sheet out across the bed. 'Bobby Feeney came down here a coupla years back, all spruced up in his Sunday best and carrying a bunch of carnations, to explain why he'd make a fine second husband.'

Trey lets out a crack of laughter before she knows it's coming. 'Ah, now,' Lena says reprovingly, 'he was dead serious. He'd it all thought out. He said I'd be handy with the sheep, since I know my way around livestock, and he's great at mending things, so I'd never have to worry if a fuse went or a handle came off the door. Since I was getting too old for babies, I wouldn't be expecting him to be a daddy; and he's no spring chicken himself, so he wouldn't be always at me. And most evenings he's down the pub or else up the mountains looking for UFOs, so he wouldn't be under my feet. His only worry was that his mam didn't approve, but he was certain we'd get round her in the end, specially if I could make a good rice pudding. Mrs Feeney's a martyr to the aul' rice pudding, apparently.'

Trey can't stop grinning. 'What'd you say?'

'Bobby's all right,' Lena says. 'He's an awful eejit, but I can't hold that against him; he's been that way since we were in nappies. I said he'd made a lot of good points, but I'd got too settled in my ways to go making changes. Then I gave him a jar of my blackberry jam, for his mam to put on her rice pudding, and sent him on his way. I'd say the jam made him a lot happier than I would've.' She tosses Trey a pillowcase. 'You can have Banjo in with you, if you want him.'

'He'll get up on the bed.'

'That's grand. As long as he doesn't wet it.'

Trey says, 'How long can I stay?'

Lena looks at her. 'Go home tomorrow,' she says. 'See what

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you're dealing with, for a day or two or three. Then we'll take it as it comes.'

Trey doesn't bother arguing. Lena is hard to budge. 'Then can I come back?'

'Probably, if you want. Wait and see.'

'I'll wax this,' Trey says, nodding at the bed. 'Needs a fresh coat.'

Lena smiles. 'It could do with one, all right,' she says. 'Go on and get some sleep now. I'll get you a T-shirt.'

The T-shirt smells of sun-drying and of Lena's washing powder, which is different from Trey's mam's. Trey lies awake for a while, listening to the muffled bumps and rustles of Lena getting ready for bed in the next room. She likes the width of the bed, and not having Maeve a few feet away, snuffling and kicking out and having irritable conversations with herself. Even in her sleep, Maeve is discontented about most things.

The night sounds different down here. Up the mountain, there's always a bullying wind shoving at the loose windowpanes and making an uneasy mutter in the trees, smudging any other noises. Here Trey can hear things clearly: the crisp snap of a twig, an owl on the hunt, young foxes squabbling far off across the fields. Banjo turns over, on the foot of the bed, and lets out a deep luxurious sigh.

In spite of the bed and the peace, Trey can't sleep. She feels like she needs to be ready, just in case. The feeling is familiar and strange at the same time. Trey is good at noticing things outside herself but uninterested in noticing things inside, so it takes her a while to recognise that this is the way she felt most of the time, up until a couple of years ago and Cal and Lena. It faded away so gradually that she forgot it, till now.

Trey is very clear on what she likes and doesn't like, and she liked her life a lot better the way it was this morning. She lies still in the bed, listening to creatures moving outside the window and to the night wind making its way down from the mountain.

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# 2

The next day is the same as the last, dew burning off quickly under a blue empty sky. Cal checks in with Lena, who reports that Trey is grand and eating everything in the house bar the dog food, and then spends the morning up in his back field, where he has a vegetable patch. Last year the vegetables more or less grew themselves; about all Cal had to do was keep the rooks, the slugs and the rabbits off them, which he did with a combination of beer traps, chicken wire, Rip, and a scarecrow. The scarecrow went through various phases. Cal and Trey originally made it out of an old shirt and jeans of Cal's. Then Lena dug out a bunch of old scarves to give it some extra flutter, but then Mart, Cal's nearest neighbour, objected that it looked like it was doing the dance of the seven veils and it would distract all the old bachelors around, leading to crop failures and neglected sheep. He averted disaster by coming up with what looked like a genuine priest robe, which he put on the scarecrow. A couple of weeks later Cal got home from the store to find that someone, still unidentified, had given the priest inflatable armbands and a My Little Pony swim ring with a pink unicorn head. Regardless of costume changes, by the end of summer the rooks had cottoned on to the scarecrow, and made this clear by using it as a combined play structure and toilet. This spring, when the early lettuce started coming up, Cal and Trey got creative and rebuilt the scarecrow using a plastic zombie that Cal found online. It's motion-activated; whenever anything comes close, its eyes flash red, its teeth chatter, and it waves its arms and makes growling noises. So far it scares the shit out of the rooks. Cal expects them to take a well-constructed and elaborate revenge when they finally figure it out.

This year the growing is different, with the heat. The plants need endless watering and a considerable amount more weeding, which is what Cal is doing this morning. The earth is different from last

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summer, too, less rich and restful; it pours between his fingers instead of sticking to them, and it has a harsher, almost feverish smell. Cal knows from the internet that this weather is going to mess with the flavour of his parsnips, but the tomatoes are thriving on it. Some of them are the size of cooking apples, and reddening already.

Rip, who has been snuffling along rabbit trails, suddenly lets out a bark that belongs on a St Bernard. Rip has never come to terms with his size. In his mind, he's something that chases down escaped prisoners and eats them whole.

'Whatcha got?' Cal asks, turning.

He's expecting a fledgling or a field mouse, but Rip's head is up. He's pointing and quivering at a man strolling across the field.

'Stay,' Cal says. He straightens up and waits while the man comes towards them. The sun is overhead; his shadow is a small black thing puddling and flickering around his feet. The heat blurs his edges.

'That's a beauty of a dog you've got there,' the man says, when he gets close enough.

'He's a good dog,' Cal says. He knows this guy has to be around his own age, touching fifty, but he looks younger. He has a wistful, fine-boned face that makes him seem like something more than a hardscrabble guy from the back end of Ireland. In a movie, he'd be the wronged gentleman who deserves his title back and the prettiest girl to marry. Cal is startlingly, savagely glad that he looks nothing like Trey.

'Johnny Reddy,' the man says, offering Cal his hand.

Cal holds up his own palms, which are thick with dirt. 'Cal Hooper,' he says.

Johnny grins. 'I know, sure. You're the biggest news in Ardnakelty since PJ Fallon's ewe dropped the lamb with two heads. How's the place treating you?'

'Got no complaints,' Cal says.

'Ireland of the welcomes,' Johnny says, giving him a boyish smile. Cal doesn't trust grown men with boyish smiles. 'I hear I've to thank you. The missus says you've been awful good to our Theresa.'

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'No thanks needed,' Cal says. 'I wouldn't've got this place fixed up half as quick without her help.'

'Ah, that's great to hear. I wouldn't want her being a nuisance to you.'

'She's no trouble,' Cal says. 'She's turning into a pretty handy carpenter.'

'I saw that coffee table the two of ye made for the missus. Lovely delicate legs on it. I wouldn't mind seeing legs that good on a young one.' Johnny's grin widens.

'All the kid's work,' Cal says. 'I didn't lay a finger on it.'

'I don't know where she gets it from, at all,' Johnny says, switching tack nimbly when he doesn't get the man-to-man guffaw he was angling for. 'If I tried, I'd land myself in hospital. The last time I did any woodworking was back in school. All I got outa that was ten stitches.' He holds up a thumb to show Cal the scar. 'And a slap across the head off the teacher, for bleeding on school property.'

'Well,' Cal says. 'We can't all have the same gifts.' Johnny gives him the urge to pat him down and ask him where he's headed. There are guys like that, who flunk the sniff test just going to the store; it's a good cop's job to work out whether they're actually doing something hinky, or whether it's just that they will be sooner or later, probably sooner. Cal reminds himself, which he hasn't needed to do in a long time, that hinkiness, imminent or otherwise, is no longer his problem. He motions to release Rip, who's twitching to investigate. Rip circles Johnny at a distance, deciding whether he needs destroying.

'And now here's Theresa making coffee tables,' Johnny says, offering Rip a hand to smell. He shakes his head, marvelling. 'When I was a young fella, people woulda broke their hearts laughing at that. They'd have said you were wasting your time teaching a girl, when she oughta be learning to cook a roast dinner.'

'That so?' Cal inquires politely. Rip, who is a creature of sense, has taken one sniff of Johnny and decided that nibbling his own ass for fleas is a better use of his time.

'Ah, yeah, man. Do the lads not slag you for it, down the pub?'

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'Not that I know of,' Cal says. 'Mostly they just like getting their furniture fixed.'

'We've come a long way,' Johnny says, promptly switching tack again. Cal knows what he's doing: testing, aiming to get a handle on what kind of man Cal is. Cal has done it himself, plenty of times. He doesn't feel any need to do it now; he's learning plenty about Johnny as it is. 'It's great for Theresa, having the opportunity. There's always room for a good carpenter; she can go anywhere in the world with that. Is that what you did yourself, before you came here?'

There is not a chance in hell that Johnny doesn't know what Cal used to do. 'Nope,' Cal says. 'I was a police officer.'

Johnny raises his eyebrows, impressed. 'Fair play to you. That's a job that takes guts.'

'It's a job that pays the mortgage,' Cal says.

'A policeman's a great thing to have handy, in an outa-the-way place like this. Sure, if you'd an emergency, you'd be waiting hours for them eejits up in town to get to you – and that's if they bothered getting up off their arses at all, for anything less than murder. There was a fella I knew one time – naming no names – he took a bit too much of a bad batch of poteen and went mental altogether. He got lost on the way home, ended up on the wrong farm. He was roaring at the woman of the house, wanting to know what she'd done with his missus and his sofa. Smashing all round him.'

Cal does his part and laughs along. It's easier than it should be. Johnny tells a story well, with the air of a man with a pint in his hand and a night of good company ahead.

'In the end he hid under the kitchen table. He was waving the salt shaker at her, yelling that if she or any other demon came near him, he'd sprinkle them all to death. She locked herself in the jacks and rang the Guards. Three o'clock in the morning, that was. It was afternoon before they were arsed sending anyone out. By that time the fella had slept it off on her kitchen floor, and he was busy begging the poor woman to forgive him.'

'Did she?' Cal asks.

'Ah, she did, o' course. Sure, she'd known him since they were

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babas. But she never forgave the Guards up in town. I'd say the townland's over the moon to have you.'

Neither is there a chance in hell that Johnny believes Ardnakelty was over the moon about a cop moving in. Like most nowhere places, Ardnakelty is opposed to cops on general principle, regardless of whether anyone is currently doing anything that a cop might take an interest in. It allows Cal, but that's in spite of his job, not because of it. 'I'm not much good to them in that department,' Cal says. 'I'm retired.'

'Ah, now,' Johnny says, smiling roguishly. 'Once a policeman, always a policeman.'

'So I've been told,' Cal says. 'Myself, I don't police unless I'm getting paid for it. You hiring?'

Johnny laughs plenty at that. When Cal doesn't join in this time, he settles down and turns serious. 'Well,' he says, 'I suppose that's good news for me. I'd rather Theresa got a taste for carpentry than for policing. No harm to the job, I've a great respect for anyone who does it, but it's got its risks – sure, who am I telling? I wouldn't want her putting herself in harm's way.'

Cal knows he needs to make nice with Johnny, but this plan is undermined somewhat by his urge to kick the guy's ass. He's not going to do it, obviously, but just allowing himself to picture it gives him some satisfaction. Cal is six foot four and built to match, and after spending the last two years fixing up his place and helping out on various neighbours' farms, he's in better shape than he's been since he was twenty, even if he still has a certain amount of belly going on. Johnny, meanwhile, is a weedy little runt who looks like his main fighting skill is convincing other people to do it for him. Cal reckons if he got a running start and angled his toe just right, he could punt this little shit straight over the tomato patch.

'I'll try and make sure she doesn't saw off a thumb,' he says. 'No guarantees, though.'

'Ah, I know,' Johnny says, ducking his head a little sheepishly. 'I'm feeling a wee bit protective, is all. Trying to make up for being away so long, I suppose. Have you children of your own?'

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'One,' Cal says. 'She's grown. Lives back in the States, but she comes over to visit me every Christmas.' He doesn't like talking about Alyssa to this guy, but he wants Johnny to know that she hasn't cut him off or anything. The main thing he needs to get across, in this conversation, is harmlessness.

'It's a fine place to visit,' Johnny says. 'Most people'd find it a bit quiet-like to live in. Do you not find that?'

'Nope,' Cal says. 'I'll take all the peace and quiet I can get.'

There's a shout from across Cal's back field. Mart Lavin is stumping towards them, leaning on his crook. Mart is little, wiry, and gap-toothed, with a fluff of grey hair. He was sixty when Cal arrived, and he hasn't aged a day since. Cal has come to suspect that he's one of those guys who looked sixty at forty, and will still look sixty at eighty. Rip shoots off to exchange smells with Kojak, Mart's black-and-white sheepdog.

'Holy God,' Johnny says, squinting. 'Is that Mart Lavin?'

'Looks like,' Cal says. At the start, Mart used to stop by Cal's place every time he got bored, but he doesn't come around as much any more. Cal knows what brought him today, when he's supposed to be worming the lambs. He caught sight of Johnny Reddy and dropped everything.

'I shoulda known he'd still be around,' Johnny says, pleased. 'You couldn't kill that aul' divil with a Sherman tank.' He waves an arm, and Mart waves back.

Mart has acquired a new hat from somewhere. His favourite summer headgear, a bucket hat in orange and khaki camouflage, disappeared from the pub a few weeks ago. Mart's suspicions fell on Senan Maguire, who had been the loudest about saying that the hat looked like a rotting pumpkin, brought shame on the whole village, and belonged on a bonfire. Mart put this down to jealousy. He believes adamantly that Senan succumbed to temptation, took the hat, and is sneaking around his farm in it. The pub arguments have been ongoing and passionate ever since, occasionally coming close to getting physical, so Cal hopes the new hat will defuse the situation a little bit. It's a broad-brimmed straw thing that, to Cal, looks like it should have holes in it for a donkey's ears.

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'Well, God almighty,' Mart says, as he reaches them. 'Look what the fairies left on the doorstep.'

'Mart Lavin,' Johnny says, breaking into a grin and holding out a hand. 'The man himself. How's the form?'

'Fine as frog hair,' Mart says, shaking hands. 'You're looking in great nick yourself, but you always were a dapper fella. Put the rest of us to shame.'

'Ah, will you stop. I couldn't compete with that Easter bonnet.'

'This yoke's only a decoy,' Mart informs him. 'Senan Maguire robbed my old one on me. I want him thinking I've moved on, so he'll drop his guard. You couldn't watch that fella. How long are you gone now?'

'Too long, man,' Johnny says, shaking his head. 'Too long. Four years, near enough.'

'I heard you were over the water,' Mart says. 'Did them Brits not appreciate you well enough over there?'

Johnny laughs. 'Ah, they did, all right. London's great, man; the finest city in the world. You'd see more in an afternoon there than you would in a lifetime in this place. You should take a wee jaunt there yourself, someday.'

'I should, o' course,' Mart agrees. 'The sheep can look after themselves, sure. Then what brought a cosmopolitan fella like yourself back from the finest city in the world to the arse end of nowhere?'

Johnny sighs. 'This place, man,' he says, tilting his head back becomingly to look out over the fields at the long tawny hunch of the mountains. 'There's no place like it. Doesn't matter how great the big city is; in the end, a man gets a fierce longing on him for home.'

'That's what the songs say,' Mart agrees. Cal knows Mart has despised Johnny Reddy for most of his life, but he's watching him with lively appreciation just the same. Mart's personal boogeyman is boredom. As he's explained to Cal at length, he considers it to be a farmer's greatest danger, well ahead of the likes of tractors and slurry pits. Boredom makes a man's mind restless, and then he tries to cure the restlessness by doing foolish shite. Whatever Mart

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may think of Johnny Reddy, his return is likely to relieve boredom.

'There's truth in the old songs,' Johnny says, still gazing. 'You don't see it till you're gone.' He adds, as an afterthought, 'And I'd left the family on their own long enough.' Cal finds himself disliking Johnny Reddy more by the minute. He reminds himself that he was primed to do that, no matter what the man turned out to be like.

'C'mere till I tell you who died while you were off gallivanting,' Mart says. 'D'you remember Dumbo Gannon? The little fella with the big ears?'

'I do, o' course,' Johnny says, coming back from the wide open spaces to give this the full attention it deserves. 'Are you telling me he's gone?'

'Took a heart attack,' Mart says. 'Massive one. He was sat on the sofa, having a bit of a rest and a smoke after his Sunday dinner. His missus only went out to get the washing off the line, and when she came back in, he was sitting there stone dead. The aul' Marlboro still burning away in his hand. If she'd been a bit longer with that washing, he coulda taken the whole house with him.'

'Ah, that's sad news,' Johnny says. 'God rest his soul. He was a fine man.' He has his face composed in the appropriate mixture of gravity and sympathy. If he had a hat, he'd be holding it to his chest.

'Dumbo ran you off his land once,' Mart says, fixing Johnny with a reminiscent gaze. 'Bellowing and roaring out of him, so he was. What was the story there, bucko? Did you ride his missus, or what did you do at all?'

'Ah, now,' Johnny says, winking at Mart. 'Don't be giving me a bad name. This fella here might believe you.'

'He will if he's wise,' Mart says, with dignity.

They're both looking at Cal, for the first time in a while. 'Too wise to fall for your guff,' Johnny says. This time he winks at Cal. Cal keeps gazing at him with mild interest till he blinks.

'Mr Hooper always takes me at my word,' Mart says. 'Don't you, Sunny Jim?'

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'I'm just a trusting kinda guy,' Cal says, which gets a grin out of Mart at least.

'There's a few of the lads coming up to my place tomorrow night,' Johnny says casually, to Mart and not Cal. 'I've a coupla bottles in.'

Mart watches him, bright-eyed. 'That'll be nice,' he says. 'A lovely homecoming party.'

'Ah, just an aul' chat and a catch-up. I've a bit of an idea going.'

Mart's eyebrows jump. 'Have you, now?'

'I have. Something that could do this place a bitta good.'

'Ah, that's great,' Mart says, smiling at him. 'That's what this townland needs: a few ideas brought in. We were getting stuck in the mud altogether, till you came back to rescue us.'

'Ah, now, I wouldn't go that far,' Johnny says, smiling back. 'But a good idea never hurts. Let you come up to my place tomorrow, and you'll hear all about it.'

'D'you know what you oughta do?' Mart asks, struck by a thought.

'What's that?'

Mart points his crook at the mountains. 'D'you see that aul' lump of rock there? I'm fed up to the back teeth driving them roads every time I wanta get over that mountain. The potholes'd rattle the eyeballs right outa your head. What we need is one of them underground pneumatic railways. London had one right back in aul' Victoria's time, sure. A tunnel with a train carriage in it, just like the Tube, only they'd a big fan at each end. One would blow and the other would suck, and that carriage'd fly straight through the tunnel like a pea out of a peashooter. Twenty-five mile an hour, it went. Sure, you'd be through that mountain and out the other side in no time at all. You put your mind to it and get us one of those. If the Brits can do it, so can we.'

Johnny is laughing. 'Mart Lavin,' he says, shaking his head affectionately. 'You're the same as ever.'

'Theirs went wrong in the end, though,' Mart informs him. 'One day they shut it down, just like that; sealed off the tunnel, no word of an explanation. Fifty or a hundred years later, an explorer

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found the tunnel again, deep down under London. The carriage was still sealed up inside. A dozen men and women still sitting in their seats, in their top hats and hoop skirts and pocket watches, every one of them nothing but bones.' He smiles at Johnny. 'But, sure, yours wouldn't go wrong. We've all the finest technology these days. Yours'd be only great. You get onto that, now.'

After a moment Johnny laughs again. 'You oughta be the ideas man, not me,' he says. 'Come on up to my place and you'll hear it all. See you tomorrow night.' To Cal, he says, 'Good to meet you.'

'You too,' Cal says. 'See you round.' He has no desire to be invited over to drink to Johnny's return, under a roof he fixed himself, but he does have an ingrained dislike for rudeness.

Johnny nods to him, touches his temple to Mart, and heads off towards the road. He walks like a city boy, picking his way around anything that might dirty his shoes.

'Worthless little fecker,' Mart says. 'The best part of that fella ran down his mammy's leg. What did he want from you?'

'Check out the guy who's hanging out with his kid, I guess,' Cal says. 'Don't blame him.'

Mart snorts. 'If he gave a damn about that child, he wouldn'ta run off on her. That fella never did anything in his life unless he was after a few bob or a ride, and you're not his type. If he dragged his lazy arse down here, he wanted something.'

'He didn't ask for anything,' Cal says. 'Yet, anyway. You going to his place tomorrow night, get in on his big idea?'

'I wouldn't have one of Johnny Reddy's ideas if it was wrapped in solid gold and delivered by Claudia Schiffer in the nip,' Mart says. 'I only came down here to let him know not to be trying to get his hooks into you. If he wants to mooch, he can mooch offa someone else.'

'He can try all he wants,' Cal says. He doesn't want any favours from Mart. 'Did he hook up with Mrs Dumbo?'

'He did his best. That lad'd get up on a cracked plate. Don't you be letting him around your Lena.'

Cal lets that go. Mart finds his tobacco pouch, pulls out a skimpy rollie, and lights it. 'I might go on up to his place tomorrow night,'

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he says reflectively, picking a shred of tobacco off his tongue. 'Whatever he's at, there's some eejits around here that'd fall for it. I might as well have a good view of the action.'

'Bring your popcorn,' Cal says.

'I'll bring a bottle of Jameson, is what I'll bring. I wouldn't trust him to have anything dacent in, and if I've to listen to that gobshite, I'd want to be well marinated.'

'I figure I'll stick with ignoring him,' Cal says. 'Save myself the booze money.'

Mart giggles. 'Ah, now. Where's the entertainment in that?'

'You and me got different ideas of entertainment,' Cal says.

Mart draws on his rollie. His face, creased against the sun, is suddenly grim. 'I'm always in favour of paying heed to the sly fuckers,' he says. 'Even when it's an inconvenience. You never know when there might be something you can't afford to miss.'

He nudges one of Cal's tomatoes with the point of his crook. 'Them tomatoes is coming along great,' he says. 'If you have a few going spare, you know where to find me.' Then he whistles for Kojak and starts off back towards his own land. When he crosses Johnny Reddy's trail, he spits on it.

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Ignoring Johnny turns out to be harder than Cal expected. That evening, when Lena has sent Trey home and come over to his place, he can't settle. Mostly his and Lena's evenings are long, calm ones. They sit on his back porch drinking bourbon and listening to music and talking, or playing cards, or they lie on the grass and watch the expanse of stars turn dizzyingly above them. When the weather is being too Irish, they sit on his sofa and do most of the same things, with rain padding peacefully and endlessly on the roof, and the fire making the room smell of turf smoke. Cal is aware that this puts them firmly in boring-old-fart territory, but he has no problem with that. This is one of the many areas where he and Mart don't see eye to eye: being boring is among Cal's main goals. For most of his life, one or more elements always insisted on being interesting, to the point where

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dullness took on an unattainable end-of-the-rainbow glow. Ever since he finally got his hands on it, he's savoured every second.

Johnny Reddy is, just like Mart spotted from all the way over on his own land, a threat to the boringness. Cal knows there's nothing he can do about the guy, who has more right to be in Ardnakelty than he has, but he wants to do it anyway, and quick, before Johnny starts in fucking things up. Lena is drinking her bourbon and ginger ale, comfortable in the back-porch rocking chair that Cal made for her birthday, but Cal can't sit. He's throwing a stick for Rip and Nellie, who are surprised by this departure from routine but not about to turn down the opportunity. Daisy, Rip's mama, who doesn't have a sociable nature, has ignored the stick and gone to sleep beside Lena's chair. The fields have sunk into darkness, although the sky still has a flush of turquoise above the treeline in the west. The evening is still, with no breeze to take away the day's leftover heat.

'You fed her dinner, right?' he asks for the second time.

'Enough to fill a grown man,' Lena says. 'And if she needs more, I'd say Sheila might have the odd bitta food lying around the house. D'you reckon?'

'And she knows she can come back to your place if she needs to.'

'She does, yeah. And she can find her way in the dark. Or in a snowstorm, if one comes up.'

'Maybe you should go home tonight,' Cal says. 'In case she comes back and you're not there.'

'Then she'll know where to look for me,' Lena points out. Lena spends maybe two nights a week at Cal's place, which naturally the entire village has known since the day it began and probably before. At the start he suggested tentatively that she might walk, or he could walk to hers, to avoid people seeing her car and making her a target of gossip, but Lena just laughed at him.

Rip and Nellie are having a ferocious tug-of-war with the stick. Rip wins and gallops triumphantly over to drop it at Cal's feet. Cal hurls it back into the darkness of the yard, and they disappear again.

'He was nice to me,' Cal says. 'What was he nice to me for?'

'Johnny is nice,' Lena says. 'He's got plenty of faults, but no one could say he's not nice.'

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'If Alyssa was hanging around some middle-aged guy when she was that age, I wouldn't've been nice to him. I'da punched his lights out.'

'Did you want Johnny to punch your lights out?' Lena inquires. 'Because I could ask him for you, but it's not really his style.'

'He used to hit them,' Cal says. 'Not often, from what the kid's said, and not too bad. But he hit them.'

'And if he tried it now, she'd have somewhere else to go. But he won't. Johnny's in great form. He's the talk of the town, he's buying the whole pub drinks and telling them all the adventures he had over in London, and he's loving it. When the world's being good to Johnny, he's good to everyone.'

This fits with Cal's assessment of Johnny. Except on the most immediate level, he isn't reassured.

'He told Angela Maguire he was at a party with Kate Winslet,' Lena says, 'and someone spilt a drink down the back of her dress, so he gave her his jacket to cover up the stain, and she gave him her scarf in exchange. He's showing the scarf all around town. I wouldn't say Kate Winslet would go near that yoke for love nor money, but it makes a good story either way.'

'He told Mart he had an idea,' Cal says, also for the second time. 'What kind of idea does a guy like that come up with?'

'You'll know day after tomorrow,' Lena says. 'Mart Lavin'll be straight down here to spill the beans. That fella loves being first with a bitta gossip.'

'Something that'd be good for this place, he said. What the hell would that guy reckon would be good for a place? A casino? An escort agency? A monorail?'

'I wouldn't worry about it,' Lena says. Daisy whimpers and twitches in her dream, and Lena reaches down to stroke her head till she settles. 'Whatever it is, it won't get far.'

'I don't want the kid around a guy like that,' Cal says, knowing he sounds absurd. He's aware that gradually, over the past two years, he's come to think of Trey as his. Not his in the same way as Alyssa, of course, but his in a specific, singular way that has no relation to anything else. He sees it in the same terms as the

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drystone walls that define the fields around here: they were hand-made rock by rock as the need arose, they look haphazard and they have gaps you could stick a fist through, but somehow they have the cohesion to stand solid through weather and time. He hasn't seen this as a bad thing; it's done no one any harm. He can't tell whether he would have done anything differently if he had expected Johnny to come home, bringing with him the fact that Trey is not, in reality, Cal's in any way that carries any weight at all.

'That child's no fool,' Lena says. 'She's got a good head on her shoulders. Whatever Johnny's at, she won't go getting sucked into it.'

'She's a good kid,' Cal says. 'It's not that.' He can't find a way to express, even to himself, what it is. Trey is a good kid, a great kid, on track to make herself a good life. But all of that seems so vastly against the odds that to Cal it has an aura of terrifying fragility, something incredible that shouldn't be disturbed until the glue has set hard. Trey is still too little for anything to have set hard.

Lena drinks her bourbon and watches him hurl the stick with all his force. Normally Cal has the innate calm of a big man or a big dog, who can afford to let things alone for a while and see how they play out. Regardless of the situation, a part of her welcomes seeing this different side of him. It lets her know him better.

She could settle his mind, temporarily at least, by bringing him to bed, but she decided right from the beginning that she wasn't going to make Cal's moods her responsibility – not that he has many, but Sean, her husband, was a moody man, and she made the mistake of believing that was her problem to fix. The fact that Cal never expects her to do that is one of the many things she values in him. She has no intention of wrecking it.

'Mart says all Johnny's ever looking for is women and cash,' Cal says. 'I could give him cash.'

'To leave, like?'

'Yeah.'

'No,' Lena says.

'I know,' Cal says. There are far too many ways Johnny Reddy could misread that, or make use of it, or both.

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