

Dinosaurs On Other Planets

From the fence behind the house, Kate could see her husband up at the old forestry hut where mottled scrubland gave way to dense lines of trees. ‘Colman!’ she called, but he didn’t hear. She watched him swing the axe in a clean arc and thought, from this distance, he could be any age. Lately, she’d found herself wondering what he’d been like as a very young man, a man of twenty. She hadn’t known him then, he had already turned forty when they met.

It was early April, the fields and ditches coming green again after winter. Grass verges crept outwards, thickening the arteries of narrow lanes. ‘There’s nothing wrong,’ she shouted when she was still some yards off. He was in his shirtsleeves, his coat discarded on the grass beside him. ‘Emer rang from London, she’s coming home.’

He put down the axe. ‘Home for a visit, or home for good?’ He had dismantled the front of the hut and one of the side walls. The frame of the old awning lay on the grass, remnants of green canvas still wound around a metal pole. On the floor inside, if floor was the word, she saw empty beer cans, blankets, a ball of blackened tinfoil.

‘Just for a few days. A friend from college has an exhibition. I wasn’t given much detail, you know Emer.’

‘Yes,’ he said, and frowned. ‘When is she arriving?’

‘Tomorrow evening and she’s bringing Oisín.’

‘Tomorrow? And she’s only after ringing now?’

‘It’ll be good to have them stay. Oisín has started school since we last saw him.’ She waited to see if he might mention the room, but he picked up the axe, as if impatient to get back to work.

‘What will we do if the Forestry Service come round?’ she said.

‘They haven’t come round this past year. They don’t come round when we ring about the drinking or the fires.’ He swung the axe at a timber beam supporting what was left of the roof. There was a loud splintering but the beam stood firm, and he drew back the axe, prepared to strike again.

She turned and walked back towards the house. The Dennehy’s, their nearest neighbours, had earlier that week sown maize, and a crow hung from a pole, strung up by a piece of twine. It lifted in the wind as she walked past, coming to rest again a few feet from the ground, above the height of foxes. When they first moved here, she hadn’t understood that the crows were real, shot specially for the purpose, and had asked Mrs Dennehy what cloth she sewed them from, while the Dennehy’s two sons, then just young boys, sniggered behind their mother’s back.

After supper, she took the duvet cover with the blue teddy bears from the hot press and spread it out on the kitchen table. The cat roused itself from the rug by the stove, and went over to investigate. It bounded in one quick movement onto a chair and watched, its head to one side, as she smoothed out creases. There were matching pillowcases, and a yellow pyjama holder in the shape of a rabbit. Colman was at the other side of the kitchen, making a mug of Bovril.

‘What do you think?’ she said. ‘Lovely.’

‘You couldn’t possibly see from that distance,’ she said.

‘It’s the same one as before, isn’t it?’

‘Well, yes,’ she said, ‘but it’s a while since they visited. I’m wondering is it a bit babyish?’

‘You’re not going to find another between now and tomorrow,’ he said, and she felt the flutter in her eyelid start up, the one that usually preceded a headache. She had hoped the sight of the duvet cover might have prompted an offer to move his stuff, or at least an offer to vacate the room so that she could move it. ‘It’ll be an improvement on that brown eiderdown, anyway,’ she said, ‘John

was still at school when we bought that,' but he just drank back his Bovril and rinsed the mug, setting it upside-down on the draining board. 'Goodnight,' he said, and went upstairs. The cat jumped down from the chair, and padded back across the kitchen to resume its position on the rug.

Next morning, she started with his suits. She waited until he'd gone outside, then carried them from John's old room to their bedroom across the landing. The wardrobe had held everything once, but now when she pushed her coats and dresses along the rail, they resisted, swung back at her, jostling and shouldering, as if they'd been breeding and fattening this past year. For an hour she went back and forth between the rooms with clothes, shoes, books. The winter before last, Colman had brought the lathe—a retirement gift from the staff at the Co-op—in from the shed and had set it up in their son's room. He would turn wood late into the night and often, when she put her head around the door in the morning, she would find him, still in his clothes, asleep on John's old single bed. There began then the gradual migration of his belongings. He appeared to have lost interest in the lathe—he no longer presented her with lamps or bowls—but for the best part of a year, he had not slept in their bedroom at all.

Colman had allowed junk to accumulate—magazines, spent batteries, a cracked mug on the window sill—and she got a sack and went around the room, picking things up. The lathe and woodturning tools—chisels, gouges, knives—were on a desk in the corner, and she packed them away in a box. She put aside Colman's pyjamas, and dressed the bed with fresh linen, the blue teddy bears jolly on the duvet, the rabbit propped on a chair alongside. Standing back to admire it, she noticed Colman in the doorway. He had his hands on his hips and was staring at the sack.

'I haven't thrown anything out,' she said.

‘Why can’t the child sleep in the other room?’ He went over to the sack, dipped a hand in, and took out a battery.

‘Emer’s room? Because Emer will be sleeping there.’

‘Can’t he sleep there too?’

She watched him drop the battery back into the sack and root around, a look of expectancy on his face, like a boy playing lucky dip. He brought out the cracked mug, polished it on his trousers, and then, to her exasperation, put it back on the window sill.

‘He’s six,’ she said. ‘He’s not a baby anymore. I want things to be special; we see so little of him.’ It was true, she thought, it was not a lie. And then, because he was staring at her, she said, ‘and I don’t want Emer asking about...’ She paused, spread her arms wide to encompass the room. ‘About this...’ For a moment he looked as if he was going to challenge her. It would be like him, she thought, to decide to have this conversation today, today of all days, when he wouldn’t have it all year. But he picked up his pyjamas and a pair of shoes she had missed beneath the bed and, saying nothing, headed off across the landing. Later, she found his pyjamas folded neatly on the pillow on his side of the bed, where he always used to keep them.

Colman was on the phone in the hall when the car pulled up in front of the house. Kate hurried out to greet them and was surprised to see a man in the driver’s seat. Emer was in the passenger seat, her hair blacker and shorter than Kate remembered. ‘Hi Mam,’ she said, getting out and kissing her mother. She wore a red tunic, the bosom laced up with ribbon like a folk costume, and black trousers tucked into red boots. She opened the back door of the car and the child jumped out. He was small for six, pale and sandy haired, blinking, though the day was not particularly bright.

‘Say hi to your Granny,’ Emer said, and she pushed him forward.

Kate felt tears coming, and she hugged the child close and shut her eyes, so as not to confuse him. ‘Goodness,’ she said, stepping back to get a better look, ‘you’re getting more and more like your Uncle John.’ The boy stared at her blankly with huge grey-green eyes. She ruffled his hair. ‘You wouldn’t remember him,’ she said, ‘he lives in Japan now. You were very small when you met him, just a baby.’

The driver’s door opened and the man got out. He was slight and sallow-skinned, in a navy sports jacket and round, dark-rimmed glasses. One foot dragged slightly as he came round the side of the car, ploughing a shallow furrow in the gravel. Kate had been harbouring a hope that he was the driver, that at any moment Emer would take out her purse and pay him, but he put a hand on her daughter’s shoulder and she watched Emer turn her head to nuzzle his fingers. He was not quite twice her daughter’s age, but he was close, late forties, she guessed. The cat had accompanied her outside and now it rubbed against her legs, its back arched, its tail working to and fro. Kate waited for her daughter to make the introductions, but Emer had turned her attention to Oisín who was struggling with the zip of his hoodie. ‘Pavel,’ the man said and, stepping forward, he shook her hand. Then he opened the boot and took out two suitcases.

‘I’ll give you a hand with those,’ Colman said, appearing at the front door. He wrested both cases from Pavel, and carried them into the house, striding halfway down the hall before coming to a halt. He put the suitcases down beside the telephone table, and stood with his hands in his pockets. The others stopped too, formed a tentative circle at the bottom of the stairs.

‘Oisín,’ Emer said, ‘say hello to your Grandad. He’s going to take you hunting in the forest.’

The boy’s eyes widened. ‘Bears?’ he said.

‘No bears,’ Colman said, ‘but we might get a fox or two.’

Pavel shuffled his feet on the carpet. ‘Oh, Daddy,’ Emer said, as if she’d just remembered, ‘this is Pavel.’ Pavel held out a hand and Colman delayed for a second before taking it. ‘Pleased to meet you,’ he said, and he lifted the cases again. ‘I’ll show you to your rooms.’

Kate remained in the hall and watched them climb the stairs, Colman in front, his steps long and rangy, the others following behind. Pavel was new, she thought; the child was shy with him, sticking close to his mother, one hand clutching the skirt of her tunic. Colman set a suitcase down outside Emer’s bedroom. He pushed open the door, and from the foot of the stairs, Kate watched her daughter and grandson disappear into the garish, cluttered room, its walls hung with canvasses Emer had painted during her Goth phase. Colman carried the other suitcase to John’s room. ‘And this is your room,’ she heard him say to Pavel, as she went into the kitchen to make tea.

‘How long is he on the scene?’ Colman said, when he came back downstairs.

‘Don’t look at me like that,’ she said, ‘I don’t know any more than you do.’

He sat at the table, drumming his fingers on the oil-cloth. ‘What class of a name is Pavel, anyway?’ he said. ‘Is it Eastern European or what? Is it Lithuanian? What is it?’

She debated taking out the china, but deciding it was old fashioned, went for the pottery mugs instead. ‘I expect we’ll hear later,’ she said, arranging biscuits on a plate.

‘She shouldn’t have landed him in on top of us like this, with no warning.’

‘No,’ she said, ‘she shouldn’t have.’

She found the plastic beaker she’d bought for their last visit. It was two Christmases ago and the mug was decorated with puffy-chested robins and snowflakes. She polished it with a tea towel and put it on the table. ‘Everytime I see Oisín,’ she said, ‘he

reminds me of John. Even when he was a small baby in his pram he looked like John. I must get down the photo album and show Emer.'

Colman wasn't listening. 'Are we supposed to ask about the other fellow at all now?' he said. 'Or are we supposed to say nothing?'

Her eyelid was fluttering so fiercely she had to press her palm flat against her eye in an effort to still it. 'If you mean Oisín's father,' she said, 'don't mention him, unless Emer mentions him first.' She took her hand away from her face and saw her grandson standing in the doorway. 'Oisín!' she said, and she went over, laid a hand on his soft, fine hair. 'Come and have a biscuit.' She offered the plate, and watched him survey the contents, his fingers hovering above the biscuits but not quite touching. He finally selected a chocolate one shaped like a star. He took a small, careful bite and chewed slowly, eyeing her the way he had eyed the biscuits, making an assessment. She smiled. 'Why don't you sit here and tell us all about the airplane?' She pulled out two chairs, one for the child, one for herself, but the boy went around the other side of the table and sat next to Colman.

He had finished the biscuit, and Colman pushed the plate closer to him. 'Have another,' he said. The boy chose again, more quickly this time. 'Tell me,' Colman said, 'where's Pavel from?'

'Chelsea.'

'What does he do?'

The boy shrugged, took another bite of biscuit.

'Colman,' Kate said sharply, 'would you see if there's some lemonade in the fridge?'

He looked at her the way the cat sometimes looked at her when she caught it sleeping on the sofa, a look at once both guilty and defiant, but he got up without saying anything and fetched the lemonade.

They heard footsteps on the stairs, and laughter, and Emer came into the kitchen with Pavel in tow. Opening the fridge, she took out a litre of milk and drank straight from the carton. She wiped her mouth with her hand and put the milk back. Pavel nodded to Kate and Colman—an easy, relaxed nod—but he didn't join them at the table. Instead, he went over to a window that looked out on the garden and the scrubland and forest beyond. 'They're like gods, aren't they?' he said, pointing to the three wind turbines rotating slowly on the mountain. 'I feel I should take them a few dead chickens—kill a he-goat or something.'

His voice reminded Kate of a man who used to present a history programme on the BBC, but with the barest hint of something else, something melodic, a slight lengthening of vowels. 'Don't mention the war,' she said. 'Those things have caused no end of trouble.'

'Perhaps not enough goats?' he said.

She smiled and was about to offer him tea, but Emer linked his arm. 'We're going to the pub,' she said, 'just for the one, we won't be long.' She blew Oisín a kiss. 'Be good for your Granny and Grandad,' she said as they went out the door.

The boy sat quietly at the table, working his way through the biscuits. Kate remembered the board game she had found that morning and had left on the chair in the spare room. She thought about fetching it, but Pavel might notice it gone, would know she had been in the room in his absence. Oisín reached for another biscuit. 'We could see if there are cartoons on television?' she said, 'would you like that?'

Colman glared at her as if she had suggested sending the child down a mine. 'Television will rot his brain,' he said. He leaned in to the boy. 'Tell you what,' he said, 'why don't you and I go hunt those foxes?'

Immediately, the boy was climbing down off his chair, the biscuits and lemonade forgotten. ‘What will we do with the foxes when we catch them?’ he said.

‘We’ll worry about that when it happens,’ Colman said. He turned to Kate. ‘You didn’t want to come, did you?’

‘No,’ she said, ‘it’s okay, I’d better make a start on dinner.’ She walked with them to the back porch, watched them go down the garden and scale the fence at the end. The boy’s hair snagged as he squeezed beneath the barbed wire, and she knew if she went to the fence now she would find silky white strands left behind, like the locks of wool left by lambs. Dropping into the field on the other side, they made their way across the scrub, through grass and briars and wild saplings, Colman in front, the boy behind, almost running to keep up. The grass was in the first rush of spring growth. Come summer, it would be higher, higher than the boy’s head and blonder, as it turned, unharvested, to hay. They reached the pile of timber that used to be the hut, and Colman stopped, bent to take something from the ground. He held it in the air with one hand, gesticulating with the other, then gave it to the boy. Goodness knows what he was showing the child, she thought, what rubbish they were picking up. Whatever the thing was, she saw the boy discard it in the grass, and then they went onwards, getting smaller and smaller, until they disappeared into the forest. She moved about the kitchen, preparing dinner, watering the geraniums in their pots on the window. She rinsed the plastic tumbler at the sink, and watched the sky change above the Dennehy’s sheds, the familiar shiftings of light that marked the passing of the day.

An hour later her husband and grandson returned, clattering into the kitchen. Oisín’s shoes and the ends of his trousers were covered in mud. He was carrying something, cradling it to his chest, and when she went to help him off with his shoes, she saw it

was an animal skull. Colman went out to the utility room and rummaged around in the presses, knocking over pans and brushes, banging doors. ‘What are you looking for?’ she said, but he disappeared outside to the yard. The boy remained in the kitchen, stroking the skull as if it were a kitten. It was yellowy-white and long-nosed with a broad forehead.

Colman returned with a plastic bucket and a five gallon drum of bleach. He took the skull from the boy and placed it in the bucket, poured the bleach on top until it reached the rim. The boy looked on in awe. ‘Now,’ Colman said, ‘that’ll clean up nicely. Leave it a couple of days and you’ll see how white it is.’

‘Look,’ the boy said, grabbing Kate’s hand and dragging her over, ‘we found a dinosaur skull.’

‘A sheep, more likely,’ his grandfather said, ‘a sheep that got caught in wire. The dinosaurs were killed by a meteorite millions of years ago.’

Kate peered into the bucket. Little black things, flies perhaps, had already detached themselves from the skull and were floating loose. There was green around the eye sockets, and veins of mud grained deep in the bone.

‘What’s a meteorite?’ the boy said.

The front door opened and they heard Emer and Pavel coming down the hall. ‘The child doesn’t know what a meteorite is,’ Colman said, when they entered the kitchen.

Emer rolled her eyes at her mother. She sniffed, and wrinkled her nose. ‘It smells like a hospital in here,’ she said.

Pavel dropped to his haunches beside the bucket. ‘What’s this?’ he said.

‘It’s a dinosaur skull,’ Oisín said.

‘So it is,’ Pavel said.

Kate waited for her husband to contradict him, but Colman had settled into an armchair in the corner, holding a newspaper, chest height, in front of him. She looked down at the top of Pavel’s

head, noticed how his hair had the faintest suggestion of a curl, how a tuft went its own way at the back. The scent of his shampoo was sharp and sweet and spiced, like an orange pomander. She looked away, out to the garden, and saw that the evening was fading. 'I'm going to get some herbs,' she said, 'before it's too dark,' and taking a scissors and a basket, she went outside. She cut parsley first, then thyme, brushing away small insects that crept over her hands, scolding the cat when it thrust its head in the basket. Inside the house, someone switched on the lights. From the dusk of the garden, she watched figures move about the kitchen, a series of family tableaux framed by floral-curtained windows: now Colman and Oisín, now Oisín and Emer, sometimes Emer and Pavel. Every so often, she heard a sudden burst of laughter.

Back inside, she found Colman, Oisín and Pavel gathered around a box on the table, an old cardboard Tayto box from beneath the stairs. She put the herbs in a colander by the sink and went over to the table. Overhead, water rattled through the house's antiquated pipes: the sound of Emer running a bath. From the box, Colman took dusty school reports, a metal truck with its front wheels missing, a tin of toy soldiers. 'Aha!' he said, 'I knew we kept it.' He lifted out a long cylinder of paper and tapped it playfully against the top of Oisín's head. 'I'm going to show you what a meteorite looks like,' he said.

She watched as Colman unfurled the paper and laid it flat on the table. It curled back into itself, and he reached for a couple of books from a nearby shelf, positioning them at the top and bottom to hold it in place. It was a poster, four feet long and two feet wide. 'This here,' Colman said, 'is the asteroid belt.' He traced a circular pattern in the middle of the poster and when he took away his hand, his fingertips were grey with dust.

Pavel moved aside to allow Kate a better view. She peered over her husband's shoulder into the vastness of space, a dazzling galaxy of stars and moons and dust. It was dizzying, the sheer

scale of it: the unimaginable expanses of space and time, the vast, spinning universe. We are there, she thought, if only we could see ourselves, we are there, and so are the Dennehys, so is John in Japan. The poster had once hung in her son's bedroom. It was wrinkled, torn at the edges, but intact. She looked at the planets, pictured them spinning and turning all those years beneath the stairs, their moons in quiet orbit. She was reminded of a music box from childhood that she had happened upon years later in her mother's attic. She had undone the catch, lifted the lid and, miraculously, the little ballerina had begun to turn, the netting of her skirt torn and yellowed, but her arms moving in time to the music nonetheless.

'This is our man,' Colman said, pointing to the top lefthand corner. 'This is the fellow that did for the dinosaurs.' The boy was on tiptoe, gazing in wonder at the poster. He touched a finger to the thing Colman had indicated, a flaming ball of rock trailing dust and comets. 'Did it only hit planet Earth?'

'Yes,' his grandfather said. 'Wasn't that enough?'

'So there could still be dinosaurs on other planets?'

'No,' Colman said, at exactly the same time Pavel said, 'Very likely.'

The boy turned to Pavel. 'Really?'

'I don't see why not,' Pavel said. 'There are millions of other galaxies and billions of other planets. I bet there are lots of other dinosaurs. Maybe lots of other people too.' 'Like aliens?' the boy said.

'Yes, aliens, if you want to call them that,' Pavel said, 'although they might be very like us.'

Colman lifted the books from the ends of the poster, and it rolled back into itself with a slap of dust. He handed it to Oisín, then returned the rest of the things to the box, closing down the cardboard flaps. 'Okay, sonny,' he said, 'let's put this back under

the stairs,' and the boy followed him out of the kitchen, the poster tucked under his arm like a musket.

After dinner that evening, Kate refused all offers of help. She sent everyone to the sitting room to play cards while she cleared the table and took the dishes to the sink. Three red lights shone down from the mountain, the night-time lights of the wind turbines, a warning to aircraft. She filled the sink with soapy water and watched the bubbles form psychedelic honeycombs, millions and millions of tiny domes, glittering on the dirty plates.

That night, their first to share a bed in almost a year, Colman undressed in front of her as if she wasn't there. He matter-of-factly removed his shirt and trousers, folded them on a chair, and put on his pyjamas. She found herself appraising his body as she might a stranger's. Here, without the backdrop of forest and mountain, without the axe in his hand, she saw that he was old, saw the way the muscles of his legs had wasted, and the grey of his chest hair, but she was not repulsed by any of these things, she simply noted them. She got her nightdress from under her pillow and began to unbutton her blouse. On the third button, she found she could go no further and went out to the bathroom to undress there. Her figure had not entirely deserted her. Her breasts when she cupped them were shrunken, but she was slim, and her legs, which she'd always been proud of, were still shapely. Thus far, age had not delivered its estrangement of skin from bone; her thighs and stomach were firm, with none of the sagginess, the falling away, that sometimes happened. She had not suffered the collapse that befell other women, rendering them unrecognisable as the girls they had been in their youth; though perhaps that was yet to come, for she was still only fifty-two.

When she returned to the bedroom, Colman was reading a newspaper. She peeled back the duvet on her side and got into bed. He glanced in her direction, but continued to read. It was quiet in

the room, only the rattle of the newspaper, a dog barking somewhere on the mountain. She read a few pages of a novel but couldn't concentrate.

'I thought I might take the boy fishing tomorrow,' he said.

She put down her book. 'I don't know if that's a good idea,' she said. 'He's had a busy day today. I was thinking of driving to town, taking him to the cinema.'

'He can go to the cinema in London.'

'We'll see tomorrow,' she said, and took up her book again.

Colman put away the newspaper and switched off the lamp on his side. He settled his head on the pillow, but immediately sat up again, plumping the pillow, turning it over, until he had it to his liking. She switched off the other lamp, lay there in the dark, careful where she placed her legs, her arms, readjusting to the space available to her. A door opened and closed, she heard footsteps on the landing, then another door, opening, closing. After a while she heard small, muffled noises, then a repetitive thudding, a headboard against a wall. The sound would be heard too in Emer's old bedroom, where the boy was now alone. She thought of him waking in the night among those peculiar paintings, dozens of ravens with elongated necks, strange hybrid creatures, half-bird, half-human. She imagined specks of paint coming loose, falling in a black ash upon the boy as he slept. Colman was curled away from her, facing the wall. She looked at him as the thudding grew louder. He was utterly quiet, so quiet she could barely discern the sound of his breathing, and she knew immediately he was awake, for throughout their marriage he had always been a noisy sleeper.

As soon as she reached the bottom of the stairs the next morning, she knew she was not the first up. It was as if someone else had cut through this air before her, had broken the invisible membrane that formed during the night. From the utility room, she heard the high, excited babble of the boy. He was in his pyjamas, crouched beside

the bucket of bleach, and beside him, in jeans and a shirt, his hair still wet from the shower, was Pavel. Oisín pointed excitedly to something in the bucket. In the pool of an eye socket, something was floating, something small and white and chubby.

Kate bent to take a look. Her arm brushed against Pavel's shoulder, but he did not move away, or shift position, and they remained like that, barely touching, staring into the bucket. The white thing was a maggot, its ridged belly white and bloated. Oisín looked from Pavel to Kate. 'Can I pick it up?' he said.

'No!' they both said in unison, and Kate laughed. She felt her face redden and she straightened up, took a step back from the bucket. Pavel stood up too, ran a hand through his wet hair. The boy continued to watch the maggot, mesmerised. He was so close that his breath created ripples, his fringe flopping forward over his face, almost trailing in the bleach. 'Okay,' Kate said, 'that's enough,' and taking him by the elbow, she lifted him gently to his feet.

'Can I take the skull out?' he said.

Pavel shrugged, and glanced at Kate. He seemed downcast this morning, she thought, quieter in himself. She looked down at the skull, and at the debris that had floated free of it, and something about it, the emptiness, the lifelessness, appalled her, and suddenly she couldn't bear the idea of the boy's small hands touching it. 'No,' she said, 'it's not ready yet. Maybe tomorrow.'

Emer didn't appear for breakfast and when finally she arrived downstairs, it was clear that there had been a row.

She made a mug of coffee and, draping one of her father's coats around her shoulders, went outside to drink it. She sat on the metal bench at the edge of the garden, smoking and talking on her phone. Every so often, she'd jump to her feet and pace up and down past the kitchen window, the phone to her ear, talking loudly. When she came back in, she didn't go into the kitchen, but called from the hall: 'Get your coat, Oisín. We're going in the car.'

Oisín and Pavel were at the table, playing with the contents of the Tayto box. The two-wheeled truck had been commandeered for a war effort involving the soldiers and a tower built from jigsaw pieces stacked one on top of the other. 'I thought Oisín was staying with us,' Kate said.

Emer shook her head. 'Nope,' she said, 'he's coming with me. He likes galleries.'

'I'll drive you,' Pavel said quietly, getting up from the table.

'No, thank you, I can manage.'

'You're not used to that car,' he said. 'I don't have to meet your friends, I can drop you off and collect you later.' 'I'd rather walk,' Emer said.

'Listen to her,' Colman said, to no one in particular, 'the great walker.' He had a screwdriver and was taking apart a broken toaster, setting the pieces out on the floor beside his armchair. He put down the screwdriver, sighed and stood up. 'We'll go in my car,' he said. He nodded to Oisín, 'Come on, sonny,' and without saying more he left the kitchen. The boy immediately abandoned his game and trotted down the hall after his grandfather. Already he had adopted his walk, a comically exaggerated stride, his hands stuck deep in his pockets. Emer gave her mother a perfunctory kiss and followed them.

After they left, Pavel excused himself, saying he had work to do. 'I'm afraid I'm poor company,' he said. He went upstairs, and Kate busied herself with everyday jobs, feeding the cat, folding laundry, though she didn't vacuum in case she disturbed him. She wondered what he did for a living and imagined him first as an architect then as an engineer of some sort. She put on her gardening gloves and took the waste outside for composting. The garden was a mess. Winter had left behind broken branches, pine cones and other storm wreckage, the forest's creeping advance. She remembered how years ago a man had come selling aerial photographs door to door. He had shown her a photo of their house

and, next to it, the forest. And she had been astonished to see that, from the air, the forest was a perfect rectangle, as if it had been drawn with a set square, all sharp angles and clean lines.

Noon passed and the day moved into early afternoon. She listened for the sound of him moving about the room overhead, but everything was quiet. Eventually, she went upstairs to see if he would like some lunch. She knocked and heard the creak of bed springs, then footsteps crossing the floor. When he opened the door, she saw papers spread across the bed, black-and-white streetscapes with sections hatched in blue ink, and thought, Yes, an architect after all. ‘You could have used the dining room table,’ she said, ‘I didn’t think.’

‘It’s fine,’ he said, ‘I can work anywhere. I’m finished now anyway.’

She had intended asking if she could bring him up a sandwich, but instead heard herself say, ‘I’m going for a walk if you’d like to join me.’ ‘I’d love to,’ he said.

She put on her own boots and found a pair for him in the shed. They didn’t take the short cut through the field, but crossed the road at the end of the driveway, and followed an old forestry path that skirted the scrub. Passing the pyre of timber that was once the hut, he said: ‘I saw your husband chopping firewood this morning. He’s a remarkably fit man for his age.’

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘he was always strong.’

‘You must have been very young when you married.’

‘I was 23,’ she said, ‘hardly a child bride, but young by today’s reckoning, I suppose.’

They arrived at an opening into the forest. A sign forbidding guns and fires was nailed to a tree, half of the letters missing. He hesitated, and she walked on ahead, down a grassy path littered with pine needles. She slowed to allow him catch up and they walked side by side, their boots sinking into the ground, soft from recent rain. Ducking now and again to avoid branches, they kept to

the centre path, looking left and right down long tunnels of trees. They stopped at a sack of household waste—nappies, eggshells, foil cartons, spilling over the forest floor.

‘Who would do such a thing?’ Pavel said.

‘A local, most likely,’ she said, ‘they come here at night when they know they won’t be seen.’ Pavel tried to gather the rubbish back into the bag, a hopelessly ineffective gesture, like a surgeon attempting to heap intestines back into a ruptured abdomen. When he stood up, his hands were covered in dirt and pine needles. She took a handkerchief from her coat pocket and handed it to him.

‘Does it happen a lot?’ he said.

‘Only close to the entrance,’ she said, ‘people are lazy.’ He had finished with the handkerchief and seemed unsure what to do with it. ‘I don’t want it back,’ she said, and grinning, he put it in his own pocket.

It was quieter the farther in they went, fewer birds, the occasional rustle of an unseen animal in the undergrowth. He talked about London and about his work, and she talked about moving from the city, the years when the children were young, John in Japan. She noticed his limp becoming more pronounced and slowed her pace.

‘Thanks for going to such trouble with the room,’ he said.

‘It was no trouble.’

‘I was touched by it,’ he said, ‘especially the bear duvet and the rabbit.’

She glanced at him, and saw that he was teasing. She laughed.

‘She didn’t tell you I was coming, did she?’ he said.

‘No, but it doesn’t matter.’

‘I’m sorry it caused awkwardness,’ he said. ‘I know your husband is annoyed.’

‘He’s annoyed with Emer,’ she said, ‘not with you. Anyway, it doesn’t matter.’

She sensed he was tiring and when they came to a fallen tree, she sat on the trunk and he sat beside her. She tilted her head back and looked up. Here there was no sky, but there was light, and as it travelled down through the trees, it seemed to absorb hues of yellow and green. She saw the undersides of leaves, illuminated from above, and their tapestries of green and white veins. A colony of toadstools, brown puff-balls, sprouted from the grass by her feet. Pavel nudged them with his boot. They released a cloud of pungent spores and, fascinated, he bent and prodded them with his finger until they released more. He got out his phone and took a photograph.

‘I’ve seen Oisín three times in the last four years,’ she said. ‘Emer will take him back to London tomorrow and I can’t bear it.’

He put the phone away and, reaching out, he took her hand. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I don’t understand why Emer would live anywhere else when she could live here. But then I guess I don’t understand Emer.’

‘I’m a stranger to him,’ she said. ‘I’m his grandmother and I’m a stranger. He’ll grow up not knowing who I am.’

‘He already knows who you are. He’ll remember.’

‘He’ll remember that bloody skull in the bucket,’ she said bitterly.

Very softly, he began to stroke her palm with his thumb. She pulled her hand away and got up, stood with her back to him. Still facing away, she pointed to a dark corridor of trees that ran perpendicular to the main path. ‘That’s a short cut,’ she said. ‘It leads back down to the roadway. I remember it from years ago when the children were small.’

This route was less used by walkers, tangled and overgrown, obstructed here and there by trees that leaned in a slant across the path, not quite fallen, resting against other trees. Ferns grew tall and curling and the moss was inches thick on the tree trunks. In the quiet, she imagined she could hear the spines of leaves snapping as

her boots pressed them into the mud. They walked with their hands by their sides, so close that if they hadn't been careful, they might have touched. The path brought them to an exit by the main road, and they walked back to the house in silence, arriving just as Colman's car pulled into the driveway.

They were all back: Colman, Emer, Oisín. Emer's mood had changed. Now she was full of the frenetic energy that often seized her, opening the drawers of the cabinet in the sitting room and spreading the contents all over the carpet, searching for a catalogue from an old college exhibition. Oisín had a new toy truck his grandfather had bought him. It was almost identical to the truck from beneath the stairs, except this one had all its wheels. He sat on the kitchen floor and drove it back and forth over the tiles, making revving noises. Colman was subdued. He made a pot of tea, not his usual kind, but the lemon and ginger that Kate liked, and they sat together at the table.

'How did you get on with Captain Kirk?' he said.

'Fine,' she said.

Emer came in from the sitting room, having found what she was looking for. She poured tea from the pot and stood looking out the window as she drank it. Pavel was at the end of the garden, taking photographs of the wind turbines. 'Know what they remind me of?' Emer said, 'those bumble bees John used to catch in jars. He'd put one end of a stick through their bellies and the other end in the ground, and we'd watch their wings going like crazy.'

'Emer!' Kate said, 'they were always dead when he did that.'

Emer turned from the window, gave a sharp little laugh. 'I forgot,' she said, 'Saint John, the Chosen One.' She emptied what was left of her tea down the sink. 'Trust me,' she said, 'the bees were alive. Or at least they were when he started.'

Oisín got up from the floor and went over to his mother, the new truck in his hand. 'If I don't take my laser gun, can I take this instead?' he said.

‘Yes, yes,’ Emer said, ‘now go see if you can find my lighter in the sitting room, will you?’ She made shooing gestures with her hand.

The child stopped where he was, considering the truck. ‘Or maybe I’ll take the gun and I won’t take my Lego,’ he said, ‘they probably have loads of Lego in Australia.’

‘Australia?’ Kate said. She looked across the table at Colman, but he was staring into his cup, swirling dregs of tea around the bottom.

Emer sighed. ‘Sorry, Mam,’ she said, ‘I was going to tell you. It’s not for ages anyway, not until summer.’

In bed that night, she began to cry. Colman switched on the lamp and rolled onto his side to face her. ‘You know what that girl’s like,’ he said, ‘she’s never lasted at anything yet. Australia will be no different.’

‘But how do you know?’ she said, when she could manage to get the words out, ‘maybe they’ll stay there forever.’

She buried her face in his shoulder. The smell of him, the feel of him, the way her body slotted around his, was as she remembered. She climbed onto him so that they lay length to length and, opening the buttons of his pyjamas, she rested her head on the wiry hair of his chest. He patted her back awkwardly through her nightdress as she continued to cry. She kissed him, on his mouth, on his neck, and, undoing the remainder of the buttons, she stroked his stomach. He didn’t respond but neither did he object, and she slid her hand lower, under the waistband of his pyjama bottoms. He stopped patting her back. Taking her gently by the wrist, he removed her hand and placed it by her side. Then he eased himself out from under her, and turned away towards the wall.

Her nightdress had slid up around her tummy and she tugged it down over her knees. She edged back across the mattress and lay very still, staring at the ceiling. The house was quiet, none of the

sounds of the previous night. She could hear Colman fumbling at his clothing, and when she glanced sideways, saw he was doing up his buttons. He switched off the lamp, and, after a while, perhaps half an hour, she heard snoring. She knew she should try to sleep too, but couldn't. Tomorrow, they would return to London: Oisín, Emer and Pavel. Oisín would probably want to take the skull with him. She pictured him waking early again, sneaking down to the bucket at first light. Swinging her legs over the side of the bed, she went downstairs in her bare feet.

A lamp on the telephone table, one of Colman's wooden lamps with a red shade, threw a rose-coloured light over the hall. The cat rushed her ankles, mewling and rubbing against her. 'What are you doing up?' she said, stooping to run her hand along its back, 'why aren't you in bed?' The door of the sitting room, where they kept the cat's basket, was partly open. She listened, and thought she heard something stirring. The cat had been winding itself in and out around her legs and now it made a quick foray into the room, came running out again, voicing small noises of complaint. She went to the door and, in the light filtering in from the hall, saw a shape on the sofa. It was Pavel with a rug over him, using one of the cushions as a pillow.

He sat up and reached for his glasses from the coffee table. He appeared confused, as if he had just woken, but she noticed how his expression changed when he realised it was her. 'Kate,' he said, and she was conscious, even in the semidarkness, of his eyes moving over the thin cotton of her nightdress. The house was completely still and the cat had quietened, settling itself on the carpet by her feet. Pavel stared at her but said nothing more. They stayed like that, neither of them moving, and she understood that he was waiting, allowing her to decide. After a moment, she turned and walked down the hall to the kitchen, the cat padding after her.

In the utility room, she put on a pair of rubber gloves and, dipping her hand into the bucket, lifted out the skull. It dripped

bleach onto the floor and she got a towel and dried it off, wiping the rims of its eye sockets, the crevices of the jaws. She sat it on top of the washing machine and looked at it, and it returned her gaze with empty, cavernous eyes. Not bothering with a coat, she slipped her feet into Colman's wellingtons and carried the bucket of bleach outside.

It was cold, hinting at late frost, and she shivered in her nightdress. In the field behind the house, the pile of newlychopped wood appeared almost white in the moonlight, and moonlight glinted on the galvanised roof of the Dennehy's shed and silvered the tops of the trees in the forest. She tipped the bucket over, spilling the bleach onto the ground. For a second it lay upon the surface, before gradually seeping away until only a flotsam of dead insects speckled the stones. Putting down the bucket, she gazed up at the night sky. There were stars, millions of them, the familiar constellations she had known since childhood. From this distance, they appeared cold and still and beautiful, but she had read somewhere that they were always moving, held together only by their own gravity. They were white-hot clouds of dust and gas, and the light, if you got close, would blind you.

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