

Dead Money

They will never understand. They push, butt, suck me with their everlasting need. I should be let go. If I stay, it is no victory for them. There they are, my captors, watching me lie here under an unpleasantly grey counterpane, my hands spread over the scratchy coverlet. They smile indulgently, avoiding touching, their open faces plastered with that dreadful emotion, care. It has gone on for far too long.

It is two weeks after the last time I found a room where I could escape. This time was easy; by now I knew where to look. The rules are few, but strictly applied. Any chosen town must not be too memorable. A dormitory village, or suburb, or some holding in the midlands – bordered by dank fields, possessing a church of no historical significance – all these are excellent candidates.

That is the first hurdle of elimination. The next one: I must have no connection with the area whatsoever. You'd be surprised how many places that stricture eliminates. One town about ten miles from Athlone, which I thought would be perfect, threw up a neighbour's son. His face was about to compose itself into recognition, until my quick glance froze his smile at his throat. When I am disturbed, my glance is so fearsome that only the coarsest will dare continue their approach.

Given both those rules, it was odd that I found a flat in Galway. Surely at least one person would know me there? But at thirty-six I had rarely been to the city, not having been sociable, or interested in travel. My parents, with whom I lived in Wicklow until the age of twenty-five, inflicted the obligatory, rain-sodden fortnight in Connemara on me almost every summer when I was a child, but Galway itself was somewhere passed through. I remembered the docklands, shut and grim, as my father drove towards Salthill, taking “the long way round” to Clifden. Galway, the so-called graveyard of ambition, where people of indeterminate age gathered like flotsam and jetsam, inflicting half-imagined novels and broken marriages on the unsuspecting bystander who would swear, three years later, he’d just come in for a cup of coffee on Quay Street... Needless to say I had always avoided the place in the manner of an obsessive compulsive’s avoiding getting his hands dirty.

But my list was running low, and thankfully there are parts of Galway as forgettable as anywhere else. My new “home” was on the built-up west side, near a shopping centre built in the mid-Eighties, all low-lying concrete painted red and festooned with plastic logos. The flat was on the first floor, above a pharmacy and a clothes shop called Miss World Fashions. A door beside the latter establishment opened onto a flight of poorly-lit, half-carpeted stairs. There was a small landing with two doors and mine, no. 2, faced front. In estate agent language, it was a studio apartment with kitchen/dinette and bathroom. Plain English: one large room with a brown carpet, sagging sofa, a single bed in the corner; a row of cooking

utilities at the other end with gas rings that wound like spirals, and an oven covered with black grease. That only left the bathroom to describe: windowless, shower droplets cracking away at the paint on the walls, the enamel stained yellow where sink and toilet water had marked their way down the pipe.

I breathed in and out, observing the movement of my belly as if it were not part of me. Once again, a perfect home.

I walked to the window, switching off the light, keeping watch. The road was quite busy. Cars plugged away, their headlights framing and receding the wall behind me as they moved past my little room. Their impersonal roar was a friendly one. I always like to think of being shut away somewhere as drivers go by in their solitary, moving boxes, en route somewhere, indifferent to me as I am to them. In my mind's eye, they are surveying the blank wall outside briefly as they pass. Anonymous, unremarked, I sit inside, comfortable in my drabness.

I switched on the light again, closed the green calico curtains and prepared for bed. Eight o'clock: early enough even for winter, but there was nothing more to be done. The television was small and faulty and only had local news – also, I didn't like to think of *them* watching it too – so I watched nothing. Instead, I examined the bedding materials: worn, odourless, clean. I approved and began. First the fitted sheet, pulled over the corners of the fusty-smelling mattress, then the cover sheet, tucked under and pulled up neatly, then the coverlet, soft enough without being too indulging. Then, off to the paltry little bathroom to brush my teeth and wash my face with soap and water: I had brought no cleansers, no make

up. All that lay behind me now. Slipping into my new bed, lights switched off and door Yale-locked, I knew, very surely, that no love had been made there before me.

That was my last thought before I gladly fell into a deep sleep.

*

I never wanted a mortgage. He wanted it, or they did. Whoever “they” are, I could feel them hold sway over me. Nothing else mattered, as long as I bought the house – chant it rhythmically, in dactylic trimeter, asLONGasyouBUYtheHOUSE, and you will soon recognise the idle-dee, didle-dee dance. They made me relinquish a lot of money, made it seem like my own choice, coming over all Irish, all insistent and poky. “Renting is dead money, dead money, dead money,” they chant still, ecstatic and hysterical as the ancient landlord-fear grips their greedy little hearts. All this agony, just to pay back the bailiffs who drove people to the workhouse in the nineteenth century! That is not who I am. I am a person without history, defiantly without property. But it does not matter who you are: *they* prevail.

And so half that thirty-five year debt became mine. What can I do but prise onto what is left of my freedom with a child’s bunched fists? Ah, I miss myself as a child: strange, precocious, the apple of my parents’ eye. Now I am just the same as everyone else and the world around me is grey with their houses – and mine. Only the rooms, the ones in Galway and the other places where I used to rent,

rooms without beauty or history or memory, can banish the present. Such a choice is no longer open to me. I know whom to thank for that.

*

In Galway, I woke at half-past six. It was a dull day, the first, spittle-filled gust of the morning slapping at the windows. I watched the fallen raindrops impassively from my bed: they spoiled the windowpane like a child's mess. The same dribble presumably fell on what was left of South Connemara, those wretchedly poor stone walls being bulldozed down for house after house. And beyond, to places not marred or stained because they were too poor or beautiful even for us to violate. Places like the surface of the moon, but covered in grass and furze, not a tree in sight for miles. Nothing to shelter you from the wind. That is what I love, long for.

There were few cars outside; the work rush hadn't started yet. I do not work at present, but I like working. Not because of the work done, more because of the structure, the early rising, washing, taking care of the house before locking the door and leaving. Then the evening return to a place unchanged by your absence. I always associate working with peace. They talked me into stopping working and everything became messy then.

But the shabby flat held order and quiet in its arms. Treading barefoot in my dressing gown to the small, noisy fridge, I took out the couple of things I bought in the Spar the night before. They made up a plain breakfast: an oat mix

cereal with a topping of mixed nuts, raisins and full milk. A cup of instant coffee, tasting sweeter than any of those he made for me with the plunger, because this time I could enjoy it in peace, nobody beseeching my praise for the creation of the eighth wonder of the world in a mug. And no soggy cornflakes on the table, no smell of dried milk, no “waahhhh” from morning till noon till evening till next morning. No fraying at my Schopenhauer-inspired will to live, until a private collapse into tears at the kitchen table at midnight had to be brushed away, fingers rubbing eyes, before I went up to join my still-wakeful husband.

I tried to explain, but the women wouldn’t listen. “Sure, no-one asked you to have children,” they said. No, nobody asked me, they just silently, encroachingly, expected me to have them. You think expectations don’t weigh a leering ton? Try not mortgaging, not marrying after a certain time, not having children. Then you’ll see how much expectations can weigh on you.

The sisters had cheered me all the way, you see, cheered my swelling belly and swelling debt. I wasn’t working long. They never openly *disapproved* of childcare, just edged me away from the idea with words angled like gentle elbows, except that these gentle elbows were forever nudging and nudging into the soft flesh, gathering a host of bleeding bruises. I gave in and stayed home. My parents would have said, don’t listen to them, but my father was getting feeble. *They* easily got the better of him too. He sold our home in the end, to the developers. It

was bulldozed flat. I felt as if I had been bulldozed myself. He and my mother are dead now; I think it killed them both.

As for my husband, it took him a while to find me this time. But that mean urgency which the world calls concern spurred him on. Concern! I wish they would mind their own bloody business. The women only encourage him. Why should they not? I am lawfully his wife and he has not mistreated me. Surely, they said, I must be having a nervous breakdown, to leave him and my lovely house and children? Again?

Evidently, the authorities agreed, and now, here I am.

*

But let me cast my mind back, enjoy those last days in the flat in Galway, sometimes rising early to tramp along by Spanish Arch, shivering in the wind off the Claddagh, speaking occasionally to people lost in middle age, yet still hopeful of a new start. And I, alone, almost having a life. I cherish these memories.

I do not cherish those linked to me by blood and by the State. Their need tires me. It's no longer my business. They are careful not to touch. They are aware now, I suspect, of my revulsion towards them, though they feign smiles.

Madness. It's a social construction. I am the sanest woman you could hope to meet. Actually I feel holy, like that saint who lived up the top of a pole and never came down. Have you allowed yourself that holiness? Do you know that

lottery ad: “it could be you”? Well, I could be you, I *am* you. Me, here. You, complete with your certainty, your application forms, your chant of deadmoneydeadmoney to an unhearing god! Oh listen, listen, today they’re going to take me back to wherever the hell I live, that miserly slab of a semi on narrow, tarmacadamed roads, the air still thick with builder’s dust. There will be no more flats. No dreams of quiet rooms. And no chance that you will find me. Because in the end, we all look the same in the city light; nobody can distinguish us. All owners, all unfree, faces full of dead money. Not worth bothering with. Amen, let it go now, let go.