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# A Love Picture

*Belfast 1940*

She set the egg in its eggcup. No sooner had she sat down than she had to get up and go to the kitchen for a spoon. There was a step down, which she took in her stride. The small apostle spoon she used for eating an egg from its shell was in the cutlery drawer and she rattled around until she found it.

She was not the slightest bit interested in food but knew she should eat. To keep herself going. Since it happened, there was a strange feeling in her stomach all the time. Frank. It was the crying – its volume filling her insides. Her only son. Great gulps of air inflating her. Other times she felt wrung out – emptied of everything.

She didn't set the table. Just put things on a folded tablecloth to deaden the sound. Of plates, cutlery. The teapot had its own cork mat to avoid bleaching the wood. She sat and sliced the top off her egg. If the wireless was anything to go by, eggs too would be rationed soon enough.

It was the sheer relentlessness of the thoughts. There was nothing between them. End to end, thinking of the same thing. Adding a little each time. Rarely subtracting from it. Enlarging the tragedy in her mind. Adding the incidentals. Little things. What shirt had he been wearing? Had she ironed it? There was one had seen better days – gone to threads. But he'd had a fondness for it and she mended it in such a way he'd get another year out of it. He'd only been away three days when it happened.

Tapping the salt cellar with her finger, she put a little salt on her egg and took a spoonful. Then more salt when the yolk showed. She realised she was crying again. Thinking about Frank's shirts. She thought she'd cried every last drop out of her. Between times, she'd tried not to think. But it was difficult not to think. It was like trying not to see when your eyes were open. The thoughts came and came. Were unstoppable. She closed her eyes and shuddered.

She had gone through grief many years before, when her husband Paddy had died. He'd been from a seafaring Belfast family and after the First War he was involved in shipping troops here, there and everywhere. He died in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Of a heart attack. It might as well be the other side of the world. It *was* the other side of the world. That was when she gave up praying. She went to church occasionally, but inside herself she was no longer present. A woman doesn't recover from something like that, being widowed in her mid-thirties.

She took a handkerchief from her sleeve and blew her nose. Taking control. She scraped a little egg white from the inside of the shell and put it in her mouth. It tasted of nothing. When things did not taste, there seemed little point

in eating. She toasted bread at the fire on the end of a wire fork. Her brother had made it. Said it was telescopic. If the fire was too hot, you lengthened the fork and your hand didn't get scorched. The bread browned and filled the room with its smell. She was about to force herself to toast another bit when she heard the front door open. It was Letty. It's only me, she always said, halfway up the hall.

'It's only me.'

'It's yourself.'

'You're late at your tea tonight,' said Letty. Despite being dressed in her hat and overcoat, the younger woman sat down in the armchair by the fire. She was small but seemed to fill the chair with the orb of her pregnancy.

'I fell asleep earlier.'

'Aw, Aunt Gracie...'

'I get precious little sleep these nights – and what I do get is filled with such awful dreams – then you're dozing all day. Trying to make up for it.'

Letty nodded.

'Can the doctor not give you something? Barbiturates?'

'What do you think I am – a movie star?' said the older woman. 'I'd be afraid of getting hooked.'

'It'd only be for a short while. To get you through.'

'To get me through what? Lost at sea is for ever.'

Both sat silent for a while. Then Gracie spoke again.

'Barbiturates,' she said, 'they're better than the gas oven.'

'Aunt Gracie, don't you dare talk like that.'

'I'm sorry, love. I'm only kidding. I don't know what I'm saying these days.'

Gracie offered to toast her a slice of bread but Letty refused.

'I met Anne on the road today and she's coming with me. Instead of you.'

'That's nice. She's a good girl,' said Gracie.

'You don't mind me going?'

'Not at all, love. Why wouldn't you? Your friend Anne can do my job.'

'What?'

'Keep you awake. With her elbow.'

'I be that tired. And the place is so comfy.'

'Who's minding the wains?'

'Tommy. While he reads the paper.'

Both the women smiled. Gracie set the apostle spoon down.

'I find it hard to finish an egg these days.' She shook her head in exasperation. 'What's on?'

'Sure I never know what's on. It's my night out, that's enough.'

'Is it a love picture?'

'I've no idea,' Letty said. 'I think Cary Grant's in it.'

'Aw – that'll definitely be a love picture.'

Letty smiled. Too much of a smile. She joined her fingers across her stomach.

'What?' said the older woman. Letty continued to smile and drummed her fingers on her tummy.

'In Hollywood all it takes to have a baby is just the one kiss. Am I right?'

'Aye – they were real love stories. Where's it on?'

'The Capitol.'

'I hate that oul Lyceum,' said Gracie. 'There's just something about it. A smell. Overdoing the disinfectant. I like the Capitol better. Except for the double seats. I like those lover seats at the back in the Lyceum.'

Letty was agreeing and smiling.

‘Are you sure... are you sure you won’t come? Cary Grant?’

‘Naw, love. It wouldn’t feel right.’

Letty nodded.

‘Any word?’

‘No. Not a thing.’

Letty stood. She crossed from her chair and patted Gracie on the shoulder.

‘Wrap up warm,’ said her aunt.

When Letty had gone Gracie washed the dishes, not that there was much to wash. If she left them, they just accumulated in her mind. Sooner or later they had to be done. She was trying to maintain a regime of working as much as possible. To keep herself in the present. To be doing rather than thinking. The sounds of her work – clinking, running water, from both the tap and emptying from the sink. The little apostle spoon with the eggcup, upended to drain. Her teacup the same. She dried her hands on the roller towel on the back of the door and went upstairs to the bathroom. She had not been since lunchtime. The sound of running water always put her in the notion.

Afterwards she went into the bedroom and pulled the blackout curtains. There was enough light to see the grey patterns of frost on the inside of the windows. She checked by touching with her fingers. A cold sandpaper roughness. When the blinds met precisely, she turned on the light and looked at herself in the dressing-table mirror. It had helped stop her crying in the past – seeing herself from



three different angles. The main mirror and the two narrow side mirrors. Like church windows.

She wondered about going into mourning. Somehow a black armband didn't seem enough. The things she had in her wardrobe were not at all suitable. When she opened the wardrobe doors there was a smell of mothballs. Difficult to judge the strength needed – between tainting her clothes and keeping the moths at bay. It was wool they were after. Like in her stone-coloured overcoat. Her only good suit was navy. White blouses. Comfy cardigans for warmth. And yet... and yet a black armband might be the answer. She stood looking around. Some day she would love to have a complete bedroom suite. Her chest of drawers and dressing table didn't match. For the first months of her baby's life, the top drawer of the dressing table had been slid out and used as a crib, padded with soft things – snug. For months it left a dark square hole in the dressing table – until she got a Moses basket. She felt the tears start again but this time they did not come.

She looked at herself. Too pale or was she just cold? Her hand touched the atomiser sitting on a doily on the dressing table. What about perfume? Was it right to wear perfume while in mourning? She imagined queuing in a shop somewhere. A woman, maybe that awful Mrs Quinn, behind her smelling the air, distinguishing the aroma from cheese smells, different tea leaves, buttermilk, soaps. The men serving with fresh cotton aprons. Maybe naphthalene faintly from herself. Mrs Quinn knowing the situation about her son. Sniffing the scents. Looking away from her. How dare she wear such stuff. Like a Jezebel. Her mouth tightening.

She was in for the night. By herself. She pushed up the sleeve of her cardigan and squeezed the atomiser bulb a couple of times. At first it gave little dry gasps. Then it exhaled extra coldness onto her bare wrist. As the perfume evaporated, it became cooler still. She raised her arm and turned her wrist upwards to smell it, took in the scent and closed her eyes. It was the best he could afford. He'd been at home a couple of Christmases ago and had been flush. And bought her this Chanel.

'For you, Mother, only the best.'

'I'll use it sparingly.'

This last time he'd been home he'd seemed on edge. When he was reading the paper, she'd catch him not moving his eyes, or staring up at the window in a kind of daze as if unable to make sense of what he'd just read. She'd asked him what ailed him. In order to avoid the truth, he'd told her how he hated standing out at sea when he was at sea. If it was rough, the regular whop of the bow into the waves. If the weather was better, the corrugated sea. At dawn the different bands of grey. Sea and sky, sometimes a horizon, sometimes no horizon. And when she asked him what he'd be looking out for, he hesitated. She worried away at him and, against his better judgement, he had said he'd be watching for any change that would indicate a submarine, or worse still a torpedo. An attack. A flick of white. Or if the sea was calm, the propeller sound of its approach. He told her of nights when nothing happened – all night long, seeing nothing but the dark Atlantic. The fear of falling asleep on his feet. Of letting everybody down. And before he knew where he was, he was talking to her about what he had

been trying to *avoid* talking about. Voicing his fears to his mother. Baffling her with worry. And when he realised this, he backtracked. They were in convoys now for protection. ‘Safety in numbers,’ he said. ‘That lengthens the odds a bit.’ Evasive action could be taken. And nowadays destroyer escorts were routine – and they frightened most of the wolf packs away.

Not enough of them, it seemed. She’d got the news in a roundabout fashion. It was only a week since the doorbell rang. She was surprised because people usually just opened the door, came in and declared themselves.

She was making leftover soup at the time and the house was full of the smell of it. She’d answered the door and was surprised to see Father McBride. Her immediate thought was about the unwashed overall she was wearing. He raised his hat to her.

‘Could I have a word?’ he said. He was far too young to be a priest. Far too young to be wearing a hat.

She brought him into the sitting room and, when they were settled, he said that he just wanted to confirm something. He’d been talking to her son, Frank, the last time he was home. After Mass. In the course of the conversation Frank had happened to mention the name of the ship he was about to sail on – *Silverbirch*. Gracie confirmed it by nodding as if to say, yes, yes, that’s the one. But she kept her mouth closed. Her insides were shaking. Ever since the *Athenia* had gone down on the first day of the war, only hours after war had been declared, she was uneasy. She’d been visiting a friend when the reports had come through on the wireless. Her friend shushed her and they both listened. The man kept saying the wrong word. He

constantly talked about a German ‘sumberine’ and she knew that was not the right word. The German sumberine-this and the German sumberine-that. And the torpedoes. And all those people dead.

The priest cleared his throat, then produced a newspaper clipping from his pocket. Gracie said that her glasses were in the other room. She stood and her knees were like water. Father McBride followed her into the kitchen and extended his arm, offering her the clipping. She lifted her glasses from the mantelpiece and put them on, tilting the bit of paper to the window light. At first she was silent as she read – then she gasped and spoke out words that were not words at all, cries more like. The gist of the thing was that the *Silverbirch had been torpedoed and sunk 200 miles off the coast of Ireland. All twenty-five crew were missing, presumed dead.*

Father McBride said he was so sorry to be the bearer of such tidings. He was too shy a priest to hold onto her, too inexperienced to comfort her. He asked her if she knew anybody nearby she could call upon to be with her, and she was able to tell him about her niece, Letty, who lived just across the street. The priest went for her and, when he returned, Gracie was still in exactly the same position as when he had left. Letty, who by this time was crying herself, put her arms around her aunt and lowered her into the chair beside the fire. After a while Letty went into the kitchen and turned off the soup. Then offered to make tea. But the young priest looked flustered and opted out, saying he had a funeral to prepare for that evening. All he could think to do was to give a blessing to Gracie as she sat looking up at the light from the kitchen window.

Mumbling the text. Making the outlines of a cross with his right hand.

She remembered the words that had come out of her mouth earlier. 'Lost at sea is for ever.' Lacking a place to go, she had walked the dark house each night since she'd heard. At this time of year all her vases were empty. Sometimes she said things out loud in the different rooms but was unaware of what she was saying. 'Where have you gone, son? Where can I go to mourn you?' She had to keep a space for him inside her. Where he came from in the beginning. In place of a graveyard. He would be everywhere with her. And nowhere.

She went downstairs in time for the news at nine. Past her son's bicycle in the hall. Once she'd met him when she was coming back from the shops. He dismounted and walked beside her down the street – steering his bike from the back by simply holding the saddle. When they crossed a junction he bounced the front wheel up onto the pavement. She remarked on the deft way he had done it.

'My steed knows the way,' he said.

He loved westerns, that was another thing about him. He had told her once that horses had strange eyes – with horizontal pupils. Movies never showed that. Goats had them too, like black letter boxes. God knows where he got his information. When he was home on leave, or between jobs, he was never far away from the public library.

She switched on the wireless and sat down. It was habit. The only reason for listening had now gone. The worst had happened. Frank was lost. To be a grieving mother

with no place to stand, no place to lay flowers. She could be knocked down and killed by a motor car and, the way she was feeling, that would be a blessing.

There was a distinct hiss on the Home Service and she adjusted the station by going past it, then back to it, with small twists until it was clearer. The talk was still about Mister Churchill. Always bloody Churchill. And about the bravery of the King and Queen. The voices on the BBC spoke about the dangers being faced by sailors and the valiant war they were fighting at sea. Too late for our Frank. Towards the end of the bulletin the talk was of the cold weather – its extremes.

She switched off. The fire was low but she couldn't be bothered doing anything about it. She sat staring down. Her mother and father had always talked about what they saw in the fire. They tried to make her see. 'Pictures of all sorts. There's a wee dog. On its hind legs.' Often they would resort to pointing with the tip of the poker. 'There – do you not see it?'

She heaved herself to her feet and went to the coalhouse in the yard. Her hand found the handle of the shovel. She knew the way, where to avoid the mangle, head high in the dark. The biggest mangle in the street. People had come looking to use it for eiderdowns, quilts, that kind of thing. She'd even made some friends out of it. When the handle was cranked, the rollers made a rumbling sound. It could even be adjusted for different thicknesses of material. Modern gadgets made things all so easy.

The fire sizzled when the coal was shovelled on. A mixture of smoke and steam rose into the chimney. She raked the ashes and tried to create a draught to introduce

flame back into the grate. Then she stopped. She thought she'd heard the front door. She listened, not moving. The kitchen door opened almost immediately.

'It's only me.' Letty stood there, not knowing what to say. And visibly shaking.

It was cold. Bitterly so. Gracie put her head down, hiding as best she could beneath the felt hat she'd snatched from the hallstand on the way out. She tucked her chin into her scarf and made the best speed she could through the black streets and out onto the main road. Her toe caught on a flagstone and she nearly went down.

'Jesus.'

A couple of staggered steps righted her before she recovered her stride. There were trees on both sides of the road, and their roots had made mayhem of the pavements. Each foot she put out had to be an instant feeler. Between trees it was not so bad. She could increase her pace. It was like a night version of hopscotch. Then she heard a motor engine. She looked over her shoulder and watched a car come crawling past her. Its headlights had blackout covers so that the light could be faintly seen through the horizontal slits. Like horse pupils. Like goat eyes. But just enough illumination to see her own breath.

The car slowly pulled away, edging towards the Antrim Road until its sound was absorbed completely, leaving her listening to the sound of her own shoes on the pavement. It could snow, it was so cold. She was glad of her gloves.

Her mind was racing. Letty had talked of an early-evening performance. Would there be another one? Would the Capitol be closed? She couldn't believe, couldn't slow

down her thoughts to examine them, to make any sense of what was happening. There was a shortcut down the steps to the park and along by Alexandra Gardens. The tippety motion of her feet descending at speed, then her stride lengthening as she passed the park railings. Left up the slope. Looking for the Capitol sign. Of course, fool that she was, the Capitol would have no lights on. Its sign had been doused. She was used to the sight of it before the war. Across the water some of the picture houses had closed when the war started, but they soon opened again because everyone created such a fuss. People needed romance. The bulk of the building sharpened as she approached it. She passed a hedge and saw that the car park was empty and her heart sank. She didn't turn on her heel, but went on in the hope that there might be some secretary there. Or cleaners. There was a complete absence of a plan in her head. She crossed the car park. In the wide-open space it was beginning to freeze. There was a crisp sound to her footsteps but she did not look down. Her eyes were on the building looming above her. It still looked new and fresh – that creamy colour – with modern rounded corners. It had a canopy over its front double doors and she saw a movement. Like an animal's eyes. Aware of movement, before she knew what had caused the movement. It was a man. In his overcoat, stepping outside the cinema doors and stooping to lock them. She gasped aloud – then called.

'Excuse me.'

He stopped what he was doing and switched on a torch and shone it on her face. Seeing a woman, he lowered the beam.



‘Can I help you?’

‘I was hoping there’d be another showing.’

‘I’m sorry, Missus – the place is closed.’ His voice sounded matter-of-fact. He switched off the torch and slid it into his raincoat pocket. ‘As you can see, I’m locking up. That’s it for the night.’

She didn’t know what to say. The man was wearing a navy raincoat and hat. She turned on her heel and began to retrace her steps through the car park. Walking slowly because she didn’t know what to do. The man standing on the veranda looked after her. He spoke aloud.

‘If you’re really keen, there’s an afternoon show tomorrow. Starts at half two.’

This made her turn. She stood watching him, her arms straight by her sides. The man shrugged and lifted his hat to her.

‘Goodnight.’

She put her hands in her pockets and walked deliberately towards him. He seemed a little unnerved by this, as if she was going to produce a weapon of some sort.

‘It’s a great picture, right enough,’ he said. ‘You can always rely on Cary Grant.’

‘It wasn’t the big picture I wanted to see. It was the News.’

‘Why – what was on?’

Gracie could not find the words to explain. The porch was terrazzo and the sound of her shoes became louder as she stepped up.

‘It’s been a long day,’ said the man. He pocketed his keys, readjusted the fedora on his head and moved to step down from the veranda. Gracie remained where she was.

She began to weep, or to make the noises of weeping. The man took out his torch again and shone it in her face. There were definitely tears.

‘Are you all right?’ he said.

Not trusting her voice, she shook her head from side to side vigorously. No, I am not all right. The man switched off and pocketed the torch. He reached out and touched her sleeve.

She began to shake. He steadied her, holding her arm firmly through her coat. Again he said, ‘Are you sure you’re okay?’

The man stood looking at her, wondering.

‘Maybe we should get you inside,’ he said, almost to himself. He took out his keys again and unlocked the glass doors.

‘I’m far from all right,’ said Gracie. ‘But I’m not mad in the head.’

‘Glad to hear it. What’s wrong?’

Again she shook her head, unable to explain.

The man sighed.

‘Come in and sit down for a minute,’ he said. He led her into the porch, held the inner doors open for her. ‘Over here – this way.’ He shone the torch at her feet crossing the plush red carpet – as if he was an usherette. ‘In here.’ He unlocked the office door and switched on the light. She saw he was about the same age as herself. Late forties or fifty. He took off his hat and dropped it on the desk. Gracie noticed that he glanced up at the wall to see the time. It was just after half past ten. How awful to be keeping this man out of his bed. She seemed reluctant to sit down. But he insisted.

'I'm sorry,' she said. She discovered her handkerchief in her pocket and tried to clean up her face. 'I'm so sorry.' Then she took off her gloves and stuffed them into her pockets.

'Is there anyone I can contact for you?' There was a telephone on the desk.

'No,' she said. 'You're very kind.'

He hesitated. Then moved round the desk and sat down.

'I'm Johnny – the manager here. Johnny Canavan. Always the last man out.' He smiled. 'What are we going to do with you?'

'I'm in a bit of a state, right enough.'

'We get all sorts here. Guys singing. Going round with the cap. Probably make as much as me. They can't afford an instrument, so they do Bing Crosby or Nelson Eddy – maybe both at the same time.'

He laughed at his own joke. She blew her nose again and looked up at him. 'I'm Gracie. From Baltic Avenue.'

'Gracie who?'

'O'Brien.' She said, 'I don't know where to start.'

'At the beginning.'

There was a long silence. She made several intakes of breath before she spoke.

'I lost my son – Frank – a week ago. At sea. His ship was torpedoed. In mid-Atlantic.'

'I'm so sorry to hear that.'

'And because... I like to go to the pictures with my niece... Letty's her name. But given the circumstances... I didn't want to come out tonight.'

'I understand.'

'She always falls asleep when the warm air hits her. She went with a friend tonight. Anne. And Anne wakens Letty

up in the middle of the Pathé News. She said she was still half asleep, but she saw them landing people at Galway. And she thought one of them was him. But she says she couldn't be sure. The man was in no fit state...'

'Yes, I've seen that newsreel this week. What age is your niece?'

'A grown woman – mother of two and another one on the way.'

'So she's no whippersnapper.'

'She says she thought it was our Frank.' Gracie said, 'But she says it was only the slightest glimpse. And she only saw it once.'

Johnny raised his eyebrows and looked at her.

'The friend she was with – did she get a look...?'

'Anne? She doesn't even know our Frank. Never met him.'

Johnny pulled a face. She could see he was trying to work out if she was out of her mind. It was something to do with the length of the pauses she was taking. Trying to size her up. And why not? She had landed on his doorstep in tears in the middle of the night with a garbled story. Grief could do this to people.

'I want to see for myself,' said Gracie. 'Would that be a terrible thing to ask? I don't know what it involves.'

'My projectionist is away home.'

Gracie put her head in her hands and stayed like that for some time.

'Where does he live?' she said without looking up.

'I don't even know if he'd be at home. Hughie likes a drink after work.'

Gracie leaned back in her chair and looked into the air to stop herself crying again.

‘Is there *any* way I could see it?’

Johnny smiled and shook his head. He looked again at the clock.

‘I’m not much of a projectionist,’ he said. ‘I *used* to know how. Been a long time.’ He stood. ‘But you don’t forget – like riding a bicycle. Only thing is you can tear the film. In the machine, if you haven’t the knack. They don’t like you doing that. Films get shorter, the older they are.’

‘Sorry.’

‘The more they’re shown, the more damaged they get. It chews them up.’

He went to a wooden cupboard on the wall by the door and selected a bunch of keys.

‘Would you like to follow me?’

She rose and walked to the door. Her fists were clenched, her pockets full of gloves. Johnny stood with his hand on the light switch. When the light went out, she stood still in the dark lobby. The torch clicked on and its circle of light around her feet led her to the staircase. Their enlarged shadows moved on the stuccoed walls.

‘Do you mind if I call you Gracie?’

‘It’s my name.’

He switched on the staircase lights. She so loved this carpet and its wooden banisters, its opulence. The only sound was the padding of their feet in the deep pile of the carpet.

‘It might take a bit of time to set up,’ Johnny said. ‘I don’t want to leave you on your own. So – ’ he indicated a direction with his hand. Upstairs, they walked a corridor of the same carpet. The walls were covered with framed posters for previous films.