I

In the next town over, a man had killed his family. He'd nailed the doors shut so they couldn't get out; the neighbours heard them running through the rooms, screaming for mercy. When he had finished he turned the gun on himself.

Everyone was talking about it – about what kind of man could do such a thing, about the secrets he must have had. Rumours swirled about affairs, addiction, hidden files on his computer.

Elaine just said she was surprised it didn't happen more often. She thrust her thumbs through the belt loops of her jeans and looked down the dreary main street of their town. I mean, she said, it's something to *do*.

Cass and Elaine first met in Chemistry class, when Elaine poured iodine on Cass's eczema during an experiment. It was an accident; she'd cried more than Cass did, and insisted on going with her to the nurse. They'd been friends ever since. Every morning Cass called to Elaine's house and they walked to school together. At lunchtime, they rolled up their long skirts and wandered around the supermarket, listening to music from Elaine's phone, eating croissants from the bakery section that were gone by the time they got to the checkout. In the evening, they went to each other's houses to study.

Cass felt she'd known Elaine for ever; it made no sense that they had not always been friends. Their lives were so similar it was almost eerie. Both girls came from well-known families in the town: Cass's father, Dickie, owned the local Volkswagen dealership, while Elaine's dad, Big Mike, was a businessman and cattle farmer. Both girls were of slightly

Copyrighted Material

above-average height; both were bright, in fact they were consistently at the top of their class. Both intended to leave here some day and never come back.

Elaine had golden hair, green eyes, a perfect figure. When she bought clothes online, they always fitted perfectly, as if they'd been made with her in mind. Writing about her in her journal, Cass used words like *grace* and *style*. She had what the French called *je ne sais quoi*. Even when she was clipping her toenails, she looked like she was eating a peach.

When Cass came round to Elaine's house, they would sit in her bedroom with the carousel lamp on and look at the Miss Universe Ireland website. Elaine was thinking seriously about entering, though not for the title itself so much as the opportunities it might offer. The previous year's winner was now brand ambassador for a juice company.

Cass thought Elaine was prettier than any of the contestants pictured online. But it was tricky. Each of the girls competing to be Miss Universe Ireland, and from there to be Miss Universe for the world/universe overall, had an adversity they had overcome. One had been a refugee from a war in Africa. Another had needed surgery when she was a small girl. A very thin contestant had once been very fat. The adversity had to be something bad, like a learning disability, but not really bad, like being chained up in a basement for ten years by a paedophile. Cass's eczema would be a perfect adversity; they wondered, if she held her skin up against Elaine's long enough, whether she could pass it on to her. But it didn't seem to work. Elaine said the adversity requirement was unfair. When you think about it, it's almost like a kind of discrimination, she said.

The housekeeper knocked on the door to say it was time for Elaine's swimming lesson. Elaine rolled her eyes. The swimming pool was always full of Band-Aids and old people. Coming from *here*, she said. If that isn't an adversity, I don't know what is.

Elaine hated their town. Everyone knew everyone, everybody knew your business; when you walked down the street people would slow their cars to see who you were so they could wave at you. There were no

Copyrighted Material

proper shops; instead of McDonald's and Starbucks, they had Binchy Burgers and Mangan's Café, where the owners worked behind the counter and asked after your parents. You can't even buy a sausage roll without having to tell someone your life story, she complained.

The smallness wouldn't have been so bad if the townsfolk had had a little more sophistication. But their only interest, besides farming and the well-being of the microchip factory, was Gaelic games. Football, hurling, camogie, the county, the Cup, the under-21s – that was all anyone ever talked about. Elaine hated GAA. She was bad at sports, in spite of her grace. She was always the last up the rope in gym class; in games, she confined herself to the sidelines, where she scowled, flicked her hair, and wafted reluctantly back and forth with the general direction of play, like a lovely frond at the bottom of a noisy, grunting ocean.

The Tidy Towns Committee, of which Cass's mother was a member, was always shiteing on about the natural beauty of the area, but Elaine did not accept this. Nature in her eyes was almost as bad as sports. The way it kept *growing*? The way things, like crops or whatever, would die and then next year they *came back*? Did no one else get how creepy that was?

I'm not being negative, she said. I just want to live somewhere I can get good coffee and not have to see nature and everyone doesn't look like they were made out of mashed potato.

Cass didn't care for GAA either, and she agreed about the general lack of *je ne sais quoi*. For her, though, the presence of Elaine was enough to cancel out the town's faults.

She had never felt so connected to someone. When they messaged each other at night – sometimes they'd stay up till two in the morning – they got so in synch it was almost like they were the same person. If Elaine texted Cass to say WTF was up with that jumper today, she would know immediately whose jumper she was talking about; a single, unexplained word, *bagatelle* or *lickout*, could make her laugh so loud that her dad would hear from across the landing and come in and tell her to go to sleep. In some ways, that was the best time of all – better even than

Copyrighted Material

being together. As she lay in bed, messages flying back and forth between them, Cass would feel like she was flying too, far above the town, in a pure space that belonged completely to her and her best friend.

Most days they went to Elaine's after school, but sometimes, for a change of scene, Elaine would want to come to Cass's instead. She liked to hang out in the kitchen talking to Imelda – that's what she called Cass's mother, 'Imelda', so casually and naturally that after a while Cass started doing it too. You are so working those jeggings, Imelda, she'd say. Oh, you think so? Cass's mam/'Imelda' would say, and she'd lean over with impossible willow-like grace to examine the back of her own thighs. I wasn't sure about the stripes. The stripes are what make it, Elaine would say conclusively, and Imelda would look happy.

Cass's mother was a famous beauty. She too had blonde hair and green eyes. It's so weird that she's your mam, Elaine said. Doesn't it make more sense that I should be her daughter?

Then we'd be sisters! Cass said.

No, I mean, instead of you, Elaine said.

Cass wasn't sure what to do with that. But the fact remained that Elaine got on better with her mother than she did. Imelda liked to give Elaine face creams to try out; they traded beauty secrets and product advice. Cass was a bystander in these conversations. Nothing works on her skin, Imelda said, because of the eczema. It's a real adversity, Elaine agreed.

Once, Imelda had taken the girls with her to Dublin for the pre-sales. The discounts hadn't been put on the price tags yet; only platinum customers knew about them. This secret elevation over the other shoppers had made Elaine visibly giddy; she watched Imelda stalk the clothes-rails, whipping pitilessly through the garments like an empress at the slave market, as if she could see the difference, like an aura around her, a platinum glow.

Cass did not totally get the Imelda-worship. In her view, Elaine was much prettier than her mother. Yeah, but your mam's got to be at least, like, thirty-four, Elaine said. I mean, she's really kept her looks.

Copyrighted Material

Elaine felt that her own mother hadn't aged well, and had once confessed her 'greatest fear' was that her looks too would be transitory, and that she would spend the rest of her life as one of the lumpen potato-people she saw shuttling their shopping trolleys through the Lidl car park.

It was true: even now, as a mother of two, Imelda had an electrifying effect on people. When she walked down the street women would cock their heads and gaze at her adoringly, as if at some dazzling athletic display. Men would stop, and stammer, their pupils dilating and their mouths quivering in half-formed O's, as if trying to push out some ineffable word.

Cass's own effect was not electrifying, and when she told people that Imelda was her mother, they would stare at her a moment as if trying to solve a puzzle, then pat her hand sympathetically, and say, It's after your father you take, so.

Elaine said it wasn't just about looks. Imelda also had mystique, magnetism.

I can't believe she married your dad, she said candidly.

Cass too sometimes had trouble believing it – that her dad, who was so thoughtful, so sensitive, had fallen for Imelda's 100 per cent superficial allure like every other chump. She didn't want to devalue her mother in Elaine's eyes. At the same time, she didn't know how Elaine could think Imelda had mystique. To spend time with her mother was to get a running commentary on the contents of her mind – an incessant barrage of thoughts and sub-thoughts and random observations, each in itself insignificant but cumulatively overwhelming. I must book you in for electrolysis for that little moustache you're getting, she'd say; and then while you were still reeling, Are those tulips or begonias? There's Marie Devlin, do you know she has no sense of style, none whatsoever. Is that man an Arab? This place is filling up with Arabs. Where's this I saw they had that nice chutney? Kay Connor told me Anne Smith's lost weight but the doctor said it was the wrong kind. I thought it was supposed to be sunny today, that's not one bit sunny. Who invented chutney, was it

Copyrighted Material

Gorbachev? And on, and on – listening to her was like walking through a blizzard, a storm of frenzied white nothings that left you snow-blind.

Frankly, she would have preferred that Elaine stayed away from her house altogether, that after school they only went to Elaine's, where Elaine's housekeeper, Augustina, would make them iced coffees, and they'd sit in Elaine's bedroom looking at the Miss Universe Ireland website, swapping sex tips they had never used, ranking the best-looking boys from the secondary school down the road.

At the same time, she knew she should be thankful for her mother's undeniable glamour – thankful to have something in her life that her friend envied, especially now.

The fact was that their lives were not so similar as Elaine imagined. Yes, they had the same tennis racket, the same terry hoody in peach melba. But though Elaine hadn't seemed to realize it yet, some of the other things they had in common were actually things they *used* to have in common. Both families had Brazilian housekeepers. But Marianna had been away 'visiting her family' for almost a year now, and Cass knew she was never coming back. Cass could say where the best shops were in New York City, and the best beaches on the Cap d'Antibes; but Elaine's arms still bore the tan-fade from her holidays, while if she looked at her own arms, which she tried not to, Cass would see that between the patches of eczema they were clammy white, almost indistinguishable from the fabric of the ugly school blouse.

When she first became aware that business was 'slowing down', as her dad had put it, she thought it might not be a bad thing. Elaine had confided recently that, before they became friends, she'd thought Cass and her family were stuck-up. Not just me, she hastened to explain. It's what most people think.

Cass had been horrified. She knew her family was well off, but she had never behaved like this made her special. Maybe it wouldn't hurt if they were brought down to earth a little; then Elaine would know she wasn't trying to act superior or compete for the limelight.

But the slowdown quickly became more of a freefall. An air of dread

Copyrighted Material

gathered over the showroom. And she used to love to visit it! From the wings she would gaze at the dazzling bodywork, the gleaming newness that was almost overwhelming. Then she would sit in the display models in turn, imagining a different life to go with each: princess, explorer, scientist, fairy. Now she couldn't bear it. The unloved, unbought cars, still dazzling desperately, reminded her of stray dogs in the pound, waiting to be put down.

Dad did his best to comfort her. Things will pick up, he said. It's all cyclical. But that only tightened the knot in her stomach.

Dickie Barnes was not a natural salesman. Often, when Cass called in to the showroom, he would be sitting in his office, reading a book. If he did happen to be on the shop floor, that was almost worse. Someone would come in looking for a new car, and he would steer them towards a used one. If they wanted a used one, he'd push them in the direction of a smaller, cheaper model. More than once she'd heard him talk people out of buying cars altogether.

When this was put to him, Dickie liked to quote his father, Cass's granddad, who had said that the key to the business was not selling cars, but building relationships. Once the customer trusts you, he's with you for life, he said. And by way of proof, he'd point out to the street, where you could see the Maurice Barnes Motors sticker in the back window of every third car that went by.

But now the customers had stopped coming.

It wasn't Dad's fault. There had been a *crash*. That was the word they used on the news: it made Cass think of something sudden and explosive, a car hitting a wall. But this crash was slow – in fact it had been going on for years – and nothing had exploded. Nothing had happened at all that you could see, yet somehow, because of this crash, there was no more money. Even the banks were out of money. Last year the microchip factory had let a hundred people go; half the shops on Main Street had an A4 page in the window, thanking customers for their many years of loyalty. Everyone was in the same boat.

And yet some people were in a different boat.

Copyrighted Material

Elaine's dad had 'gone in' with a developer on a small estate of houses, carved out of the woods behind Cass's family's land. Now the developer had gone bust, and the unfinished houses were mouldering away; Elaine told her Big Mike was spending three days a week up in Dublin now, arguing with lawyers. But somehow as well as summer holidays in France, he had taken his family skiing in the autumn midterm break; they still had a standing order of lobster at the delicatessen, and every Sunday at Mass they sat up at the very front.

That man is nothing but a crook, her mother said. She couldn't stand Big Mike, with his smirk, and his investments, and his Gucci cowboy boots. And him only a yahoo, that grew up on handouts from the Lions!

But he knew how to use his loaf, which was more than she could say for some people.

Cass's mother was not handling the downturn well. She had always been an assiduous shopper. She knew every delivery man in town by name; her walk-in wardrobe was a secret paradise of unworn sweaters and shawls, boots that crowded the shoe-rails like giddy dancers, waiting to pour onto the stage. Now, with things the way they were, she couldn't even shop in the sales. For Imelda, this was like a death sentence. Other than Tidy Towns meetings, which took place in the back room of the Olivia Smythe boutique on Main Street, she had largely stopped going out.

At home, with no one to look at her, she fell into black, ugly moods. She'd lie on the couch with a magazine propped against her crossed legs, snapping the pages so loud Cass could hear it from upstairs. Then with a hiss of dissatisfaction she'd toss it aside, and go stalking from room to room, clicking her fingers – 'active', but with nothing to do, like a grounded teenager, or a supercharged pensioner in an old folks' home – before deciding on something guaranteed to make her angry, like attempting to bake a soufflé, or knitting socks.

Imelda did not listen to the news. She didn't want to hear a whole load of blather about global this and economic that. When it came to the failing business, she knew where to put the blame.

Copyrighted Material

Imelda had long held that Cass and Dickie were 'in cahoots'. They liked books, clever talk. They had a bond, she felt, that excluded her. Now she believed Cass had 'turned' her father against the garage. Last year Cass had done a project for Geography class about climate change. With your parents' help you had to calculate how their work contributed to global warming. Dickie had thrown himself into this; he loved homework. They sat in the kitchen and made a list of all the cars the garage sold, estimated how much CO_2 it had taken to make them and ship here, worked out on average roughly how much greenhouse gas they would release over their lifetime. At the end they added the numbers up.

Cass could remember that moment very clearly. It had all been fun until then. Flippin' hell, Dad said. He looked from the picture Cass had taken of Maurice Barnes Motors to the images of sodden Bangladeshi refugees after their village went underwater. That can't be right, he said, checking the final total again.

According to Imelda, he was never the same after that. He'd started making vegetarian meals and cycling to work. Lunacy! Imelda said. What does it look like, a car dealer riding a bike to work?

Maurice himself, Cass's grandfather, had had to fly back from Portugal to talk him out of expanding the fleet to sell more electric cars. We're not selling to Björn and Agneta the Swedish architects, Dickie! he told him. People here want diesel! *Now you're suckin' diesel*, that's the bumper sticker! Not, now you're suckin' bloody soy beans.

But the damage was done, Imelda said. He never put his back into it again. And all because his golden girl made a song-and-dance. I hope you're happy, miss.

Cass couldn't deny it: she had been disturbed by the project. It wasn't just the garage; she was up to her neck in climate change too. Looking at Instagram, eating an ice cream, switching on a light: her most casual act left a toxic trace behind – as if she had a marauding shadow-self that choked the very world she lived in. For weeks she had moped around, paralysed by the inescapability of her own evil. She would stand on the

Copyrighted Material

threshold of the back garden, looking at the flowers and grass and the trees in the distance, imagining everything turning black, the birds and the insects falling out of the sky. Even on good days, like when Elaine gave her a bracelet she had two of, she would remember suddenly all of the animals that were going extinct and how the earth was going to flood and everything was doomed – because of the Barnes family.

Still, she was old enough now to realize that the international car trade had not been brought to a halt by her Transition Year Geography class. It's happening all over the world, Mam, she told her. It's not Dad's fault. It's a global phenomenon.

A global phenomenon and a work-shy attitude, Imelda said.

That was why it made Cass so nervous when Elaine came over. Her mother's moods swung like a ship's lantern in a storm. Who knew what she might say? It was quite possible that she would start complaining about Dickie in front of Elaine and give the game away. And what then? What would Elaine do? Would she think less of Cass? Would she still be her friend, now that their lives were no longer the same?

She tried to dissuade Elaine from visiting; she subtly undermined her mother when she could. But – although she had recently run out of toner and complained that her face felt like it had been tarmacked – Imelda was as beautiful as ever, and Elaine remained obsessed.

It was Elaine who noticed the wedding photos.

They were in the good room, where strictly speaking they shouldn't have been; Cass and PJ were only allowed in there when there were visitors, that was the rule. But Elaine wanted to look at Uncle Frank, who she thought was hot, even though he was dead; anyway, she said, technically she was a visitor.

The good room had the artificial feeling of the roped-off section of a guided tour. There was an enormous couch of turquoise velvet, a crystal chandelier, lots of little tables crowded with china ornaments. The mantelpiece was covered with pictures of the family through the years. Maurice and Peggy in sunglasses, on the deck of a yacht; Dickie and

Copyrighted Material

Frank as toddlers in matching dungarees; Frank in his football gear (That's how hot he is, Elaine said, he even looks good in a GAA jersey); Cass's First Holy Communion, PJ's First Holy Communion; Dickie, Imelda and the kids on holidays past, in Malaga, in Chamonix, in Disneyland, in Marrakesh, skiing, snorkelling, sunbathing, riding donkeys.

But no wedding photos, Elaine pointed out.

Cass was sure she was wrong; there must be something tucked away somewhere. But she looked and there wasn't.

Mysterious, Elaine said, and this time Cass couldn't disagree. Having her picture taken was literally her mother's favourite thing in the world. The house was full of free newspapers and glossy magazines, in the back pages of which Imelda appeared, glowing, at the town Talent Show, or the Lions Christmas Lunch, or the new Hermès store at Brown Thomas, or the relaunch of Coady's pub, with the Mayor or the PR or one of her friends from the Tidy Towns Committee looking wan or orange or cellulitey beside her. For her mother to pass up a photo op like her own wedding was not so much baffling as genuinely shocking.

They spent the afternoon in Cass's bedroom, coming up with conspiracy theories, but nothing explained it. That night, Cass sat down on the couch beside her father while he was watching TV. Hey, Dad? Do you have any photos of you guys's wedding?

She had rehearsed this line in front of her mirror for maximum casualness.

Her dad didn't reply at first. Instead, he stroked his chin, keeping his eyes fixed on the screen, so she wasn't even sure if he'd heard. Then, just as she was debating whether to repeat the question, There are some somewhere, all right, he said at last. I must see can I dig them out. And he turned and looked at her with the same smile as when he was telling her business was cyclical.

What the fuck? Elaine said when Cass relayed this to her.

I know, Cass said.

Until then, in her heart of hearts, Cass had suspected that the answer

Copyrighted Material

to the riddle was something mundane – that the pictures had got lost when they moved house, or PJ had spilled paste on them, or there was some olden-days type mishap with the negatives or whatever. Now she wondered if there genuinely was a secret conspiracy.

You have to ask your mam, Elaine said.

Yes, Cass said.

I can do it if you don't want to, Elaine said.

I'll ask her, Cass said.

That was the answer. Imelda was no good at lying. If Cass timed it right, she was bound to blurt out the truth.

Right now, though, Cass was trying to steer clear of her mother, who was in a particularly bad mood. Last week Dickie had sold her car. She'd parked it at the dealership, as was her habit, and went off to do her messages; while she was gone, Big Mike had come in, looking for a car for Augustina, the housekeeper. He told Dickie he only wanted a banger; then his eyes fell on the Touareg.

It wasn't – as Cass's dad had repeatedly and vainly pointed out – *actually* her car; he'd been trying to shift it for almost a year. If he'd sold it to anyone else, maybe she wouldn't have been quite so angry. But she was convinced Big Mike had bought it out of malice. He's rubbing our faces in it – that's what she kept yelling at Dickie. Until she calmed down, Cass thought it best to avoid any provocative questions, and keep Elaine out of her way.

Elaine, however, didn't like to wait. That Sunday she ran up to Cass after Mass in a state of great excitement to say that her father had been at Dickie and Imelda's wedding, seventeen years previously, and had told her what had happened.

Something happened? Cass said.

Elaine couldn't tell her right now because she had ballet. I'll come over to you later, she promised.

Is it bad? Cass said.

But Elaine was already climbing into her dad's car.

Copyrighted Material

When her friend rang the doorbell Cass made sure she was the one who answered it; she hustled Elaine upstairs before Imelda could see her. She'd come directly from her dance class, wearing a hoody over her leotard. She sat herself on the duvet with her legs crossed. But for a moment she didn't speak.

Cass had been a little offended that Elaine had gone ahead and uncovered a secret that rightfully belonged to her. Now she felt a sudden sting of dread. Maybe her parents had never got married at all! Maybe they weren't even her real parents! So? she said.

Elaine goggled at her with glassy eyes. Then she said, There was a bee.

What?

There was a bee, Elaine repeated.

I don't understand, Cass said.

Elaine, keeping her face very stiff, explained that as Imelda's father was driving his daughter to the church, a bee had flown in the window of the car and got trapped in her veil. She started freaking out, Elaine said. But her dad thought she just didn't want to marry Dickie.

When at last he realized what was happening, he'd pulled over, and tried to get the veil off her. But it had got caught in the seat belt, and he couldn't get it free. So he jumps out of the car, and he runs around to the passenger side, Elaine said. But just as he finally untangles it, he hears this scream.

It stung her? Cass said.

Right on the eye, Elaine said, with a certain amount of relish.

Imelda's father had tried to find a pharmacy on the way to church, but the best he could do was a little pub, where he'd bought her a Twister to hold against the swelling till they arrived. It didn't help, and Imelda had kept the veil over her face as she walked down the aisle, as she stood at the altar, as they exchanged their vows, even when Dickie went to kiss the bride. She didn't take it off right through the reception, Elaine said. And she wouldn't tell anybody what happened. Everyone just thought she'd lost the plot.

Copyrighted Material

Jesus, Cass said.

Yeah, Elaine said.

So that was why no pictures? Cass said. The sting was that bad?

My dad said it looked like she had a pig bladder stuck to her face, Elaine told her.

God, Cass said reflectively.

A moment passed in silence; then, at exactly the same time, they caught each other's eye. Once they'd started laughing it was impossible to stop. Before long, they were rolling around on the floor: Cass laughed so hard that she thought she might throw up.

A bee stuck in her mother's veil! A literal bee in her bonnet! It was too hilarious, too perfect. And that she had never told her children about it, even though the whole town knew – that was the icing on the cake. Imelda was so vain, she couldn't bear to be the punchline of a joke.

That evening after she went home Elaine sent her a close-up picture of a bee with the message **Will you bee mine Cass?** Cass sent one back of a bee superimposed onto a wedding dress that said **Bee my honey Elaine.** They stayed up half the night sending each other random pictures of bees. Each one was as funny as the one before it. Putting the phone down at last, she felt exhausted, in a good way, as if she'd climbed a mountain.

When she turned out the lights, though, the scene came back to her. This time she seemed to witness it through her own eyes, as if she were seated in a pew near the back of the church. She watched her mother push through the door and make her way up the aisle, and though she was veiled Cass could see her humiliation, her confusion – and Dickie's confusion too, gaping at the mysterious figure (who was under there?) he was about to wed. They were not much older than she was now; she felt sorry for them, stranded on the altar of the church she knew so well, while everyone stared, making their judgements.

She felt sorry for the bee too. Bees were dying everywhere, all around the world: PJ was always talking about it. Nobody knew the cause, but it was bad because the bees brought pollen from plant to plant and

Copyrighted Material

without them, Nature itself would die. This particular bee had been humming along, minding its own business, when it was swept without warning through the car window and into her mother's world. Enveloped by her veil, by her cries, it must have thought it was lost in some vast, labyrinthine flower. All points of reference had been stripped away; there was only the veil and her mother's huge, beautiful face. It seemed she could feel the bee's panic, its desperation to escape; she could see her mother's hands pummelling the air, then, as the creature made its last suicidal effort to defend itself, the sting pulsating on her skin, pumping its futile poison. She felt the bee's life ebb away. Nature was dying, the world was ending. As she fell asleep, it was her body on the floor by her mother's silk wedding shoes, already turning to dust.

After that, Elaine's interest in Imelda seemed to wane. Cass supposed the bee story detracted from her mystique. She did worry that, without Imelda's glamour, Elaine might lose interest in her too. But that didn't happen; and before long the girls had a new obsession.

There were many things to hate about their school – the ankle-length skirts, the hospital smell, the desiccated principal, the prayers, the sports, the boredom. Their English teacher, Ms Ogle, however, was more to be pitied than despised. Also known as 'the Last Nun', she was a spinster who had stayed at home to take care of her mother. The mother had been on her deathbed for thirty years without ever actually dying. The two of them lived in a grim little cottage off Main Street; Ms Ogle's teacher's bag was full of wallpaper samples and paint colour charts that she would never use.

She was a tragic figure, but she didn't seem to see it. She had a grandiose manner, and was fond of using long, exotic words – *bagatelle*, *mellifluous, distinctive* – like weird drapey silks you might find in a box in your grandmother's attic. Her actual clothes, however, were not drapey; she wore a combination of dungarees and frilly blouses, a look that Elaine called 'Victorian petrol station'.

The girls mocked Ms Ogle unceasingly. Sometimes it felt like there

Copyrighted Material

weren't enough hours in the day for all the mocking. Everything about her was funny – even her name, because who would want to ogle her? But they also discussed her seriously as a cautionary tale, the danger of staying in the town and 'getting stuck' looking after a relative.

Ms Ogle wasn't aware of this either. She adored Cass and Elaine, her best students. 'My girls,' she called them.

Then one day Ms Ogle wasn't in class. She was very sick, they heard; so sick that her dying mother had risen from her bed for the first time in a decade in order to take care of her.

Was this ironic? Was it funny? On Sunday they saw Ms Ogle at Mass – waxy-pale, her eyes bulging out of her head as if it had shrunk. My girls, she said to them emotionally, reaching to hug them from her wheelchair. It was so tragic that they had to bite their lips to keep from cracking up. But they also had an obscure sense that it was their fault – that the mockery they poured on her so regularly had brought her to collapse.

They forgot about that as soon as Miss Grehan appeared; they forgot Ms Ogle existed. She walked through the door in a white trouser suit that set off her long, magnificent red hair, went straight to the blackboard and wrote, in capitals, LADY POETS.

It seemed clear just from looking at her that Miss Grehan was neither a spinster nor tragic. When they found her social media that night, their opinion was confirmed. Her relationship status was 'It's complicated . . .' In the accompanying pictures, her life looked like one continuous party, shifting from one city to another, like a James Bond film. Here she was at a club in Barcelona. Now she posed on the battlements of a castle in Prague. On the seashore in California, a sunset swirled around her like an emanation of her glorious red hair. In Dublin, she sat barefoot before an open fire. Everyone she knew was good-looking. Even the old people, Elaine said.

What on earth was she doing here? Grehan, Grehan . . . Cass's dad mused when she brought it up at dinner. I sold a Passat to a Grehan a few years back. Wait – by was it a Fabia? Hold on now till I think.

Copyrighted Material

It's that long since he sold a car he can't even remember, Imelda commented tartly.

Oh Jesus, don't start, Dickie said.

Miss Grehan may have had some connection to the man with the Passat or Fabia; they never found out. In the classroom she didn't talk about her past, or indeed her present, with the castles and the sunsets. What she talked about was lady poets.

The lady poets had glamorous, impassioned lives, or torturous, wretched lives. Sometimes they had both. She told them about Anna Akhmatova, a Russian who when she was young looked like a movie star and wrote about all of her love affairs, but when she was old was banned by the government, and they shot her husband and threw her son in prison and took her pen and paper so she couldn't write. She told them about Anne Sexton and Elizabeth Bishop, two women who had been gifted, misunderstood and suicidally depressed, and whose wonderfully terrible lives seemed themselves like poems of sorts, reproofs to the world so undeserving of them. She told them about Sappho, an olden-days poet from the island of Lesbos, and when there were a few snickers at this she began to recite a poem where Sappho is jealous when she sees the woman she loves laughing with a man, and she can't speak and fire ripples under her skin and her ears are filled with roaring.

People imagined poems were wispy things, she said, frilly things, like lace doilies. But in fact they were like claws, like the metal spikes mountaineers use to find purchase on the sheer face of a glacier. By writing a poem, the lady poets could break through the slippery, nothingy surface of the life they were enclosed in, to the passionate reality that beat beneath it. Instead of falling down the sheer face, they could haul themselves up, line by line, until at last they stood on top of the mountain. And then maybe, just maybe, they might for an instant see the world as it really is.

She is incredible, Elaine said when the bell rang for the end of class.

She *was* incredible. It was hard to imagine anyone so glamorous and sophisticated could come from anywhere near their school. On the one

Copyrighted Material

hand, it gave them hope that they, too, might escape, and start their lives anew; on the other, it made escape seem all the more urgent, as they saw their town as it must appear to Miss Grehan, so dull-witted and unpoetic. At home, Cass looked at her parents with new eyes: Dickie losing his hair, doughy around the mouth, stooped under the weight of the failing business; Imelda caked in make-up though she had been home all day, her face like a mask she held slightly away from herself. Yes, it was easy to imagine they were falling, falling down the side of a mountain, into a crevasse.

Tonight at dinner they had had a fight about her mother's 'extravagances'. Dad had wanted Mam to move to a different, cheaper phone plan. Mam said Dad had a cheek telling anyone about plans. Now they sat in different rooms – Dad drinking a beer in front of the TV, Mam typing at her phone, her long, curved nails going click, click, click against the glass. When the doorbell rang, neither of them even seemed to notice, which was good because it was Elaine.

Her face was flushed. I found something, she said.

Cass wasn't sure she wanted Elaine here if there was going to be more fighting, but her friend had already pushed her way past her. I had to show you this in person, she said. Cass followed her up to her bedroom, where Elaine opened the laptop, then stood back for Cass to see. Cass leaned down and stared into the screen and gasped. Oh my God, she said. Yes, Elaine said. It's her? Cass asked. Elaine scrolled down the page – and there she was, wearing the white trouser suit and a mysterious smile, her red hair falling around her shoulders like inverted flames. 'Julie Grehan has a Master's from Trinity College,' it said beneath. 'She has lived in Paris and New York City.'

Cass stepped back from Elaine's laptop in a daze. Miss Grehan *herself* was a lady poet! She had written a book – an entire book! – of poems, called *Salt: A Chapbook*. It was unbelievable. At the same time, it made perfect sense. Suddenly it was impossible to imagine her *not* being a lady poet.

Copyrighted Material

Salt: A Chapbook was available for €18.99. We have to get it! Elaine said. Yes! Cass said. Like, right now! Elaine said.

Elaine had her own bank card, but it was at home and she couldn't remember the number. Ask your dad to get it for you, she said to Cass. Tell him it's for school. Right, Cass said. Go and ask him now, Elaine said. OK, Cass said. She stood up. In her head was the word *extravagances*. I'll just go and ask him, she said casually.

Downstairs, a woman in a blazer was talking about the financial crisis on the RTÉ news. A giant CGI number, 3.7%, loomed behind her in the studio, and she spoke of it in terms of dread, as if the 3.7% was itself on the loose in the city, like a serial killer. The light from the screen had painted Dickie's profile a deathly blue-white. As he watched, he twisted his wedding ring around and around on his finger.

She stood in the doorway, waiting for him to notice her. If he speaks to me, I will ask him, she told herself. But his eyes stayed fixed on the screen, so she slipped quietly back out and went to the kitchen. Imelda still frequently bought things out of defiance or force of habit, and hid them from Dickie. It might make more sense to ask her.

Her mother wasn't in the kitchen, just PJ, sitting at the breakfast bar with a book.

Where's Mam? Cass asked.

Tidy Towns, PJ said. Listen to this, he said, and read from the book, *Your body sheds twenty pounds of skin every year. Just in the time it takes to read this sentence, your body has lost two thousand skin cells.*

That's disgusting, Cass said.

While you were saying that, you probably lost about eight hundred skin cells, PJ said. While I was saying that, I probably lost about two and a half thousand skin cells.

Elaine appeared in the doorway. Did you ask him? she said.

Ask me what? PJ said.

Shut up for a second, Cass said. She felt ashamed and confused, as if she were surrounded by tiny dead fragments of her body.

Copyrighted Material