



Provided by the author(s) and University of Galway in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite the published version when available.

Title	Silent noise: A textual study of John McGahern's <i>The Dark</i> and a novel: Copybook
Author(s)	Keaveney, Martin
Publication Date	2019-09-13
Publisher	NUI Galway
Item record	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10379/15436">http://hdl.handle.net/10379/15436</a>

Downloaded 2024-04-17T14:43:41Z

Some rights reserved. For more information, please see the item record link above.







**Silent Noise: A Textual Study of John McGahern's *The Dark***

**&**

**A Novel: Copybook**

**Martin Keaveney, B.A., M.A.**

**Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the award of a PhD.**

**at Dept. of English, NUIG.**

**Supervisor: Dr John Kenny.**

**NUIG**



## Contents

Abstract .....	11
General Introduction .....	13

### *Section One*

#### Silent Noise: A Textual Study of John McGahern's *The Dark*

Introduction .....	31
1.A Sudden Pause .....	44
i .....	46
ii .....	48
iii .....	53
iv .....	57
v .....	60
2.Production v Reflection .....	62
i .....	66
ii .....	71
iii .....	76
iv .....	84
3.The End of Adolescence .....	86
i .....	90
ii .....	94
iii .....	100
iv .....	107
Conclusion .....	109

### *Section Two*

#### 'Copybook': a draft novel

'Copybook' .....	119
Bibliography .....	337



## Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the patience of my family as they waited for the completion of this project: my wife Bernie, sons Brendan and Michael, daughters Rachel and Melissa. I acknowledge the support of my mother, Bernadette. Thanks to the staff at NUIG special collections, including archivist Kieran Hoare. I would also like to acknowledge the supervision and editorial support of Dr John Kenny.





To Michael D. Keaveney



## ABSTRACT

The following submission represents the work of four years as a PhD Practice and Research student at NUIG in the department of English. The General Introduction describes the process from conception to application and execution of both larger sections. It engages with the advantages and obstacles which can emerge while practicing creative and critical work in tandem. The Critical Section applies a textual study to John McGahern's second novel *The Dark* by utilising tools of narratology and stylistics. The technique of the work's text is explored through the thematic frames of absence/presence. By treating the material in a narratological and stylistic frame of reference, the thesis argues for a move away from the privileged context approach to John McGahern's body of work. The findings develop previous scholarship on *The Dark* by concluding that the 'traumatised self', and not the impediments of mother, father and the world, is the chief obstacle which ultimately ends the boy's dream university career. This journey is particularly progressed by the transcension of boy beyond father, as I will discuss in the Critical Section. The Creative Section is a novel draft titled 'Copybook'. It narrates the life of Tommy O'Toole from age 13 to 17 in the contemporary world as he tries to navigate adolescence in difficult domestic circumstances, in a broadly similar context to the protagonist of *The Dark*. The gifted artist descends into sophisticated juvenile crime as his mother fades in a nursing home and his wayward father becomes embroiled in a local robbery. The project draws the experience of adolescence through the filters of the theoretical and practical text and collectively illuminates the physical, mental and spiritual regulating factor of parental presence.



## General Introduction

The following submission represents four years of work in both creative and critical writing, completed as a part of a doctoral program at NUIG. The critical work analyses how adolescence is treated in a novel with reference to narrative strategy and stylistic embellishment. The creative work narrates a contemporary journey from childhood to adulthood.

In many ways, a PhD is similar to the adolescent experience, with its initial overwhelming enthusiasm, idealised ideas about the future, the gradual erosion of this unsupported pride, the grim sweat toward the final stages, be it a Leaving Certificate examination or a *viva voce*. However, the PhD student has a better chance of possessing a maturity, perhaps born from previous education and certainly life experience, to persist with the process down blind alleys of research and critical writing, to find a resilience to see the project through. The adolescent does not have this maturity: he or she is raw and exposed, not just to the academic challenges at second level, but the significant physical, emotional and spiritual adjustments of puberty as well. While the PhD student knows they are one of the fortunate few that get the opportunity to spend three to four years pursuing one specialised area and have a good chance of publishing a significant contribution, the adolescent may not and perhaps does not want to know that the years of around thirteen to seventeen are fundamental to their next potential five decades. If the PhD student may appreciate regular meetings with a supervisor, the adolescent craves the essential guidance of the parent. These are generalisations, of course, and there are examples of teenagers who come good later despite the absence of a strong parental upbringing, as there are of PhDs with an ideal level of supervision who, dare I say, do not.

After I completed a B.A. in English and Italian in 2013, I resumed writing fiction. The shackles of academic assignments removed, I rigorously engaged my ‘fictional’ drive, with

little planning. The result was a mammoth manuscript of 300,000 words, narrating a range of lives. One of these was a 40,000-word story of a country schoolboy. When I appraised it some time later, it did seem like a form of *Bildungsroman*. Yet like John McGahern's *The Dark*, it was more a 'collapse' than a 'coming-of-age'. The McGahern critic Richard Robinson argues *The Dark* is more a 'falling back' than 'falling down', writing that when the boy leaves at the end of the novel for Dublin he 'is still unable to complete the path of self-determination which the artist's *Bildung* requires' (61-62). My schoolboy story was the foundation for the fiction section of this PhD project: to write an adolescent narrative, but not in the traditional *Bildungsroman* model. The protagonist of 'Schoolboy' would fail to come of age in the same way as Young Mahoney's path constitutes a form of regression, as Robinson detects. For this reason, my fiction project and *The Dark* seemed like a good marriage to pursue a practice and research PhD. It allowed me to develop my primary artistic aims but also, perhaps like Young Mahoney appeases his father by harvesting potatoes when he needs to study, provided me with the academic focus necessary for a conventional career path. It is not an apology to any academics who happen to read this to say that I have enjoyed the critical side of the process. The study and analysis of McGahern's textual technique has been rewarding and, while I would not concede it will ever help in my process, I would say it gives me a much better artisan knowledge of the area I am pursuing, provides me with essential subject grounding for professional teaching ability and offers an academic publishing route, perhaps when the artistic work is in the 'percolation' stage.

The process of critical writing in tandem with creative work is precarious, and acclimatisation takes some time. For a long period, I worked alternately, writing my fiction for some months and then turning attention to the criticism. Yet this was not a satisfactory method. The best analogy I can think of is sport. If one trains for the Olympics in pole-vaulting and decides to opt in for the long jump while at the stadium, the athlete may suffer like the creative-

critical practitioner. The practices are in the same stadium, but they are fundamentally not the same. The processes of fiction and academic writing require different sensibilities and energies. A long absence from either means there is loss of confidence and rhythm. A highly focused critical paper over a summer may lead to a winter wrestling with a well-structured but painfully bland first draft of a novel. In the same way, to tackle serious academic study in the spring, having just spent months on a brutal crime drama, makes the Easter critical review obscure rather than clinical. At least that has been my experience. I have found the most ‘productive’ (if that is the right word) way of proceeding is to do both almost simultaneously, perhaps like an athlete will practice both long jump and pole-vault as part of the daily training regime. I ‘write’ fiction every day; I ‘write’ critically every day. Of course, I emphasise the verb because as any creative or critical writer will know, stories of ‘2000’ words per day, such as those purported by Stephen King, are dubious (149). Simply put, there is so much researching, editing, reading, restructuring and preliminary proofing for both creative and critical work that an accurate quantification of progress per day looks to me to be somewhat spurious. I do have a set level of words in fiction when drafting. It may serve as motivation, during those hours of ‘building a house in the dark’, as the novelist Mike McCormack puts it, but in reality serves as little else (McCormack).

The academic and novelist Elleke Boehmer has noted that with creative writing ‘there is more of a demand to keep the writing concentrated in whatever centre of consciousness, of the character or the narrator, that you as a writer are dealing with’, while with critical writing ‘the push is to stand a little to the side of the material and analyse’ (Pickles). Writing creatively calls for a spiritual engagement – the mind is in the scenes with the characters – while academic work calls for more detachment. While Boehmer pursues both, it is not something every writer can or might wish to do. A practice and research PhD allows a candidate to explore both. For myself, I intend to continue in both fields like Boehmer.



If I am working on fiction, I write with a pencil for the first draft. The idea is perhaps psychological more than practical. This is a straw house I am building and not a concrete one; hence, like the walls of McCormack's house in the dark, it can then be moved around and the pencil lead can be easily scribbled out. I progress to a pen and eventually type something that might look like the final submission. Critical writing calls for a more methodical engagement; you probe the material perhaps like a pathologist, a metaphor which fits nicely with McGahern's comment that stories are dead for the writer once he publishes.<sup>1</sup> Critical writing is often typed from the outset in my practice, although sometimes quotes will be written by hand and integrated later. The act of structuring criticism is much less intense than fiction, as perhaps there is something to 'go on', an established template of introduction, declaration of critical aim with clear end foretold, analysis and conclusion. In creative work, the answer is typically at the end (if indeed it ever arrives). Tzvetan Todorov wonderfully explores obscurities in the act of narration in his discussion of Henry James in *The Poetics of Prose*, one of the major texts of my critical practice now (143-178).

The present project is incomplete, in other words, and it may take some years to refine the comparisons of creative and critical process for my practice. I sometimes envy the academic who probes and analyses, and the novelist who lives purely in the poetic sphere. However, the combination of both has its advantages. The clarity required in critical writing is very effective in creative passages. Many obscure sentences in my novel have been untangled by utilising the critical editor skills developed through research and academic writing. The creative impulse was the key factor in the final manifestation of the thesis to follow. By writing the new draft of

---

<sup>1</sup> Eamon Maher wrote in *The Irish Times* that 'McGahern liked to paraphrase Joyce's comment that the piano is the coffin of music, by saying that a book is the coffin of words. He explained this to me in an interview: "The book, in fact, doesn't live again until it finds a reader and you get as many versions of the book as the number of readers it finds."' Maher, Eamon. 'John McGahern explored in erudite yet accessible study.' Rev. of *Touchstones: John McGahern's Classical Style* by Frank Shovlin. *The Irish Times*, 30 March, 2017. Web. 4 Nov. 2017.

my study of McGahern's *The Dark* in pencil as I had done with my novel, I was able to discard my critical editor's voice sufficiently so that I found the real root of my narratological and stylistic examination of the novel. I uncovered what it was that I wanted to write critically about McGahern and his oeuvre through my experience as a writer of fiction. By experiencing challenges in my practice, I became sensitive to the potential hurdles McGahern needed to pass in his process. I wanted to isolate these obstacles as clearly as I could by applying theories of fiction to his work.

This process eventually led to my evaluation of the technical accomplishment of McGahern's prose rather than the surrounding context. The study of McGahern's use of language and its relationship to narrative and stylistics has not been a scholarly priority up to now. There has certainly been extensive scholarship on McGahern's writing since he began his career with *The Barracks* in 1963. Denis Sampson was the first to complete a long-form publication in *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern* in 1992. He followed this with *Young John McGahern* in 2012. The first of these devoted chapters to all five novels published at that point and the three short story collections, developing critical insights to the texts, while the later work focused on McGahern's formative years as a writer. He argues that 'understanding [...] his intellectual and artistic formation will add to an increased appreciation of the work of a lifetime' (*Young John McGahern*, x). By treating young Mahoney's development and its connection to the non-fiction, this important question raised by Sampson. James Whyte published *History, Myth and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern: Strategies of Transcendence* in 2002. Whyte assesses McGahern's attempt to find a literary form for the social world he uses as source material. Dermot McCarthy (2006) treats McGahern's use of memory in his creative practice, while David Malcolm (2009) provides a close reading of each book. Eamon Maher has written extensively on McGahern. *John McGahern: From the Local to The Universal* is conversant with McGahern's often quoted phrase, 'Let us make one (little)

room an everywhere' as its subject,<sup>2</sup> while Maher's 2011 text, *The Church and Its Spire: John McGahern and the Catholic Question*, engages with McGahern's relationship to Catholicism, a subject which is pertinent in much of his work. Stanley van der Ziel's *John McGahern and the Imagination of Tradition* (2016) and Frank Shovlin's *Touchstones: John McGahern's Classical Style* (2017) focus in detail on the influences that directed McGahern in his work. *John McGahern – Critical Essays* (2014), edited by Jonathan Mullen, Adam Bargroff and Jennifer Mullen treats nature, habit, ecology, existentialism amongst other contextual themes in the novels and short stories, with the aim of updating scholarship in the decade since McGahern's death. *John McGahern: Authority and Vision* (2017), edited by Zeljka Doljanin and Maire Doyle brings together a group of scholars, journalists and artists and provides a mix of academic scholarship with memories and anecdotes about the Co. Leitrim writer. Richard Robinson's *John McGahern and Modernism* (2017) is possibly the closest to my critical aim here and perhaps adds to my ultimate argument for further textual readings of McGahern, as Robinson juxtaposes McGahern's work with the concepts of modernism and postmodernism. There are also many journal articles, reviews and essays by these scholars and others, with a growing interest in McGahern's career and ideas about writing. Many of these can be found in the bibliography of my present critical study. None specifically approach McGahern at the level of language dynamic to communicate theme, at least not to the extent that I will demonstrate in this study.

The bibliography itself raises the issue of a subdued formalisation of the criticism of McGahern's text, irrespective of his socio-politic, economic, theological, allusive or domestic threads, which are often the focus of these shorter studies on McGahern. The narratological and stylistic crystallisation of just what works artistically and, if anything, does not, is the

---

<sup>2</sup> Donne, John (Ed. Booth, Roy). 'The Good Morrow'. *The Collected Poems of John Donne*. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994. 1.

cavity in McGahern studies that the critical study aims to address by focussing on *The Dark*.<sup>3</sup> Without sensitive application of criticism to McGahern's use of language, much of his contribution to literature is overlooked.

With my creative practice segment firmly focused on the adolescent, this naturally informed my choice of *The Dark* as the source material for an academic study. The novel traces the boy's journey from approximately twelve to seventeen. The protagonist is unnamed, identified as 'Young Mahoney' for my study, as is the convention in scholarship. He lives in a rural farmhouse with his two sisters and his widower father, known only as Mahoney. The mother has died at some point prior to the outset of the novel. McGahern progresses the setting from the dysfunctional home of the first seven chapters to Father Gerald's parochial house while Young Mahoney considers a vocation to the church, and later to the university, which the boy ultimately deserts for what is framed as an unstimulating clerkship with the E.S.B. None of the alternative positions are any improvement to the family home. As I critically surveyed the novel, it emerged that McGahern had created a work of mirrored sequences reflecting 'present absences'. When I pursued this line of enquiry, I found it was continuous throughout the book. It also emerged that the stylisation of the language was relative to this 'present absence' theme and could quite easily be traced onto the immediate concepts of father, mother and the existential inner and outer space of the developing teenager, creating the overall dysfunctional world which makes the already challenging experience of adolescence even worse. As an achievement in literary technique, it seemed worthwhile to pursue the 'Text' rigorously. I found that other scholars, perhaps diverted by alternative theoretical pursuits, had

---

<sup>3</sup> To support this undertaking, I have engaged briefly through readings in philosophy and more rigorously in theoretical studies of narrative and style in fiction. I consulted Aristotle's discussion, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 'X', treating 'contemplation' and 'production' as an axle for much of my critical discussion on Young Mahoney and his deliberations about work on the farm and the school/church. Literary theory and its application to the 'Text' are always linked with its critical context. I consulted books by Tzvetan Todorov (1968) and Didier Coste (1989) to ground my evaluation of *The Dark* from this new perspective.

not uncovered this to the same degree, although there were often hints of it such as in Robinson and Sampson. Further critical currency was opened up by earlier versions of *X* magazine, in drafts at the NUIG archive, in comments by McGahern in his late quasi-autobiography *Memoir* (2005), in his non-fiction essays on writing collected in the posthumous *Love of the World* (2009), and in integrating the critical groundwork of many of the scholars of the Co. Leitrim writer.

When analysed in this way, the novel's achievement in the 'Text' became clearer. My result is a narratively and stylistically centred analysis of the novel which suggests a lack of rigorous investigations of the 'Text' in McGahern's other works. While the critical study primarily investigates the 'falling down' of the adolescent in opposition to the traditional *Bildungsroman*, enshrined in a dysfunctional home of a physically absent mother, spiritually absent father and a main character whose own self-belief diminishes as the novel unfolds, its findings simultaneously argue for a more textually anchored reading of all of McGahern's work in the future.

A key requirement for every creative writer is to read as much as they write. It is in the reading the writer will become intuitive about the care and power of words. For the purposes of this project, the role of the parent in a study of adolescence is treated by many novels. Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857) situates the adolescent in a boarding school far from his home. He is 'reared' by teachers, and the challenges of this in the mid-nineteenth century are illuminated through the evil Flashman. In Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Huck gets into many scrapes while under the care of an unrelated woman and her sister. Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) spends much of the novel *sans* parents in a boarding school. Holden Caulfield, another boarder, recalls a 'lousy childhood' (5) in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in The Rye* (1951). Alex's parents are indifferent to his antics and eventually humiliate him by showing

more affection to a lodger in Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1961). Francis Brady's home is highly dysfunctional in Pat McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* (1990). Harry Potter's parents are dead before the first line of J.K. Rowling's series, and he is reared by a despicable surrogate family until he moves to Hogwarts (1997). Eimear McBride's nameless narrator is sexually abused by an uncle while her widowed mother provides little support in *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (2013), while Sarah Bannon's Caroline comes from a broken family home in *Weightless* (2015).

In varying degrees, these novels treat the effect of the parental void on their characters, which suggests a narrative model of positive and negative, relative to the self of the teenager. Tom Brown, Huck Finn, Holden Caulfield and Alex can all essentially be placed in the category of *Bildungsroman*, in that these characters are in a spiritually, morally and intellectually more positive light at the end of their narrative than at the outset, relating a negative-positive model.<sup>4</sup> Harry Potter's framing in a narrative under the restrictions of being suitable for all ages determines his positioning in the positive-positive model. Joyce is predictably uncategorizable; Stephen's trajectory is open to more interpretations than can be accommodated here. Jacqueline Belanger describes it in her introduction as a '*Künstlerroman*,' which takes as its focus the spiritual and emotional formation of the artist' (viii).<sup>5</sup> McBride and Bannon's teenagers are doomed and play out a negative-negative thread. *The Dark* is unusual in that it is neither negative-positive nor negative-negative. It is a narrative of the death of positive self, which leaves a traumatised self behind. This emerges as the less common form: positive-negative, which *The Butcher Boy* also arguably follows: John Scaggs describes Francie Brady's progression as a 'retreat into fantasy' (51). While McGahern's Young Mahoney would hardly

---

<sup>4</sup> Alex's tale can be accepted as a *Bildungsroman* if the original version of *A Clockwork Orange* is considered and not the truncated US edition which was the basis for Stanley Kubrick's film.

<sup>5</sup> Note Belanger's introduction to the 2001 re-issue of Joyce's novel. Joyce, James. *A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1992 (re-issued 2001).

be called optimistic at the outset, a happier time in his world prior to the outset of the novel can be seen in flashback. Furthermore, while he later succeeds in winning a scholarship, he ultimately falls to settle for the unstimulating life of an E.S.B. clerk, pointing toward a similar life of dissatisfaction as that which his father lived.

Many other examples demonstrating the erosion of positive self and analysis of its causes will be investigated in the critical study to follow. McGahern's novel provides an extremely subtle version of this template, which essentially translates to a reductive enactment of the Fall of Satan. That event is, indeed, explicitly referred to in *The Dark*: "“Even Up Above there was trouble.”" (19) Mahoney sarcastically supposes the satanic sin of pride leads his son to spend his time ‘up in the sky’, where he has ‘conversations with God’ (130). Pride and its relation to Satan are described in the Old Testament as ‘Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness: I will cast thee to the ground, I will lay thee before kings, that they may behold thee’ (Ezekiel 28:17), while the Fall is recorded in the New Testament: ‘And he said unto them, I beheld Satan as lightning fall from Heaven’ (Luke 10:18). The casting of the satanic fall to texts is a device of enduring literature such as *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, but also of contemporary popular culture as in Vince Gilligan's TV drama *Breaking Bad*. Robert Louis Stevenson literally splits one man into two parts: good and evil.

Both Jekyll and Gilligan's Walter White, a feeble, underachieving chemistry teacher who reacts to a life-threatening crisis by becoming a satanically ruthless criminal, fall from Heaven to Hell. For McGahern's novel, this developed theme of positive-negative relative to the adolescent uncovers the absent elements of mother, father and the self. In other words, the theme of the Fall in the context of adolescence is successfully electrified through the positive-negative model. This is revealed to be constructed through a total lack of parental contribution,

leading to the erosion of positive self, leaving a traumatised self behind, specifically suggested in *The Dark* by the semantics of present absence.<sup>6</sup>

Some of these elements may be found in my draft novel, but qualification is necessary before conceding to the dubious ground of self-analysis of one's fiction, a task perhaps in the same category as trying to be objective about one's child or one's earliest childhood bully. In Wlad Godzich's introduction to *Narrative as Communication* by Coste, he discusses the Aristotelian term of *prohairesis*. He writes that the philosopher 'invoked it in the context of deliberate discourse to denote the future projection of a course of action' (Coste xi). Applied to narratology, 'the analyst reads backward as it were and discards those elements that will prove unproductive, keeping only those that will contribute to the general result' (xi). This represents an informed re-appraisal of material once the entire work is present in the critical conscious and Godzich argues that this procedure 'makes a mockery of the claim that the determination of the result is a rational one' (xi). In this way, the creative act of fiction naturally obliterates the editor. If one was to write with the editor nagging at every twist and turn, he or she would retire before writing the first word. So it is that as a critic we can only observe retrospectively. For example, I do not propose that John McGahern set out to insert the many links and mirrored sequences I isolate in my critical piece. Rather, they are artistic artefacts, and it is irrelevant whether their insertion was a conscious act in the writing. It is certainly arguable that McGahern crafted them afterwards as he finalised the novel. This is an area of McGahern studies which has been somewhat overlooked due to privileging of contextual concerns.

---

<sup>6</sup> Timothy J. Owens treats the positive and negative self of the adolescent in detail. Owens, Timothy J. 'Two Dimensions of Self-Esteem: Reciprocal Effects of Positive Self-Worth and Self-Deprecation on Adolescent Problems'. *American Sociological Review*. 59.3 (June, 1994). 391-407. Jstor. Web. 30 Jun. 2017.



I will not claim to have started my draft novel with any absolutes, nor stuck resolutely to any preconceived notions. This assertion must be qualified by a short reference to the project's gestation. 'Schoolboy' was re-written in the first year of the PhD course and submitted for discussion to my supervisor. It narrates five years of secondary school for an unnamed adolescent and attempts the positive-negative narrative model in the context of adolescence, rather than a *Bildungsroman*. While the episodic structure of the project was satisfactory in areas, its overall 'communicated narrative', to quote Coste, was not a sufficient execution of the 'idea'. This was a discovery I was to come to some months after the completion of the 'first draft'.<sup>7</sup> My schoolboy's parents were suitably absent, engineered by the novel being almost completely based in the school, yet the boy's development or 'anti-development' was not completely realised. At some point, I recalled advice allegedly given to Mario Puzo, author of *The Godfather* (1969).<sup>8</sup> Al Ruddy, the producer of the film adaptation (1971), claimed that 'everyone' who had read Puzo's novel *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1964) told him there was one character in the book he should expand (*The Real Story Behind The Making Of The Godfather Mafia Epic Masterpiece*). The character, an ageing don, was the outline for crime boss Vito Corleone, the mainstay of *The Godfather*. While I am not suggesting my fiction is going to be ultimately as successful as Puzo's,<sup>9</sup> there were also two very minor characters in 'Schoolboy', who draw the boy into a robbery and almost cause him to be arrested. Their only other major scene involves the boy ultimately gaining revenge. After a winter trying to solve the 'missing

---

<sup>7</sup> The term 'first draft' is used here for coherence. In reality, it was not the first draft; it was a first shared version as there had been many prior drafts.

<sup>8</sup> Puzo's epic is also clearly cast in the 'positive-negative' model. It is established first in Vito, who arrives in America as a non-ambitious restaurant worker and ultimately murders a local don which leads to him becoming the head of a large organised crime family. His son Michael is a decorated army veteran at the outset of his narrative, before executing a corrupt police captain. Michael eventually replaces Vito at the head of the organisation.

<sup>9</sup> Although for a writer this is always the unfortunate, inexcusably egotistical, and perhaps delusional belief. McGahern once quoted Anton Chekhov: "The minute the writer takes up a pen he accuses himself of unanswerable egotism and all he can do with any decency after that is to bow". (Chekhov qt. In McGahern 'The Solitary Reader' 94). McGahern, John. (Ed. van der Ziel, Stanley). 'The Solitary Reader'. *Love of the World*. London: Faber & Faber, 2009. 87-95. Print.

links' in 'Schoolboy', I decided on Christmas Day 2015 to take one of these minor characters, O'Toole, as the main focus for a new novel, and use the second character, Marley, as a reflective device. The action was also moved temporally from the 1990s to 2010s, which meant the characters were the next generation of the original characters in 'Schoolboy'. A somewhat similar process is reported by McGahern who wrote that he enjoyed interest from Faber on the basis of his first publication in *X* but refused to send them the full manuscript, instead developing it into two works which would become *The Barracks* and *The Dark* (*Memoir* 244). This process with 'Schoolboy' was the genesis for the creation of the economically challenged Tommy O'Toole, an optimistic and intelligent thirteen-year-old about to start secondary school, and his affluent but roguish associate, Jake Marley, which launched the draft here: 'Copybook'. In keeping with Wodzich's assertion, the novel is much clearer to me in retrospect.

I will concede that many of the links and mirrors which I find in McGahern as narrative and stylistic technique were not, if they are present at all, consciously implanted by me during the initial composition of 'Copybook'. It is not a process I would recommend to students through my teaching of fiction. I would find it very stifling. Rather, I entered the narrative of the boy Tommy with a skeletal plot, something along the lines of scene headings, the 'positive-negative' model and little more than that. The decision was made at the outset that Tommy would have a dysfunctional background. Editorial feedback on 'Schoolboy' included a comment that 'He's not coming through', indicating the schoolboy's family life was not clear (Kenny). I had focused on the school as the 'family' of my character but my early reader was unconvinced. As I appraised the work with some distance from the act of creation, I could not disagree. For 'Copybook', I tried to address this by focalising early chapters on Tommy's erratic father and his ill mother. In this distant time from the embryonic period, I see the father as being clearly congruent with Mahoney. Tommy's mother Sheila, who is incapacitated in a

nursing home, is also relatable to the boy's deceased but ghostly present mother in *The Dark*. Even the space of Tommy's secondary school in the first section is as coarsely agriculturalised as Mahoney's brute level of sensitivity. Rather than sinking into the paralysing self-analysis amongst the claustrophobic rural home, cold parochial house and overpowering university of his counterpart in *The Dark*, Tommy barely avoids being sunk head first into a toilet on day one, and soon becomes embroiled in Marley's whimsical defiance of the system. Father Gerald is framed in *The Dark* as an unsatisfactory surrogate 'father', and this is reflected by Tommy's unscrupulous uncle, Midnight. While Father Gerald invasively questions the hopeful priest-in-waiting on his sexual experience, Midnight leads the vulnerable and as yet redeemable teenager Tommy into a criminal operation: the theft of heating oil.

Certainly, it is possible I subconsciously crafted narrative and stylistic embellishment, and instinctively fine-tuned these in the editing phase, but I can only report that my conscious use of these was minimal. Rather I completed the novel with an aim to remain 'true', as McGahern would have it (*Love of the World* 272), to realise Tommy's experience in the most effective way, to use advice I was given by *The Stinging Fly* founder Declan Meade to 'handle the material' in the best way possible, rather than concerning myself with narrative and stylistic elements which would be appealing to critics seeking to detect hidden meanings (Meade). Meade outlined how he published work which attended truthfully to its subject, rather than putting work he simply liked into print (Meade).<sup>10</sup> Yet, by reading my work retrospectively along with McGahern's, I can certainly contend that the treatment of the adolescent experience, nuanced by the positive-negative model via the broken triangle of parenthood outlined earlier, is most effectively constructed in McGahern's oeuvre by *The Dark* and by the eventual selected familial dynamics and narrative strategy of my draft of 'Copybook'.

---

<sup>10</sup> Declan Meade is the publisher of *The Stinging Fly*, an Irish magazine of fiction and poetry which publishes new writers. It was launched in 1997.

While the PhD Student can recalibrate his or her efforts again and again, the raw adolescent goes astray without clear guidance, a component in every dysfunctionalised home. Young Mahoney never expresses his internal anguish, becoming lost in an existential swamp of self-analysis, and my character Tommy never seeks help after his father is gone and resorts instead to crime and loses his liberty. Sometimes these additional obstacles to the adolescent's progress are absent, or more present in their absence, such as the mothers of Young Mahoney and Tommy O'Toole. At other times, they are absent even in their presence, as with the fathers: Joe O'Toole and Mahoney. All of the novels mentioned in this introduction deal with parental responsibility for the adolescent in one form or another. While the benefits of working artistically for the past four years were a great gift and the preparation of a thesis with which to form publishable articles on one of Ireland's most celebrated writers was a tremendous experience, it is this evocation and exploration of the critical period of adolescence and how fiction can electrify the crisis in a dysfunctional setting which I have found the most rewarding academically and artistically. The material which follows is my best contribution at this juncture to these areas of literary criticism and literature.



SECTION ONE

SILENT NOISE: A TEXTUAL STUDY OF JOHN MCGAHERN'S *THE DARK*



## Introduction

During a 1992 interview with James Whyte, John McGahern noted that ‘[A]bsence, if it’s conscious, can be as powerful as presence’ (228). His second novel, *The Dark*, electrifies the adolescent experience through a clear narrative and stylistic strategy evoking the presence of absences. These absences are located in the construct of the main character’s life, isolated at early, middle and late teenage years. They are formed by his recently deceased mother, his immature father and the space around these factors. As the novel is unpacked narratively and stylistically, the erosion of a positive self in the main character becomes clearer, leaving a traumatised self behind. The boy’s unbroken self is presented as only being present in the time of his mother, while in life with his father, his character’s traumatised self becomes dominant. This is the root of much confusion about the conclusion of the novel, particularly its lack of a positive *Bildungsroman* redemption. It would be difficult to argue any other main character of McGahern’s novels are as disassembled as Young Mahoney.

The boy’s existential struggle is communicated as the demands of adult life begin to loom on the horizon, embellished in the text by the transcension of the boy beyond his father. The boy’s dilemma reflects the human crisis of ‘Production’ versus ‘Reflection’ as untangled by Aristotle.<sup>11</sup> The philosophy is explained by J.D. Ackrill. He firstly quotes Aristotle from the *Book of Nicomachean Ethics*:

Yet we must not – as some advise – think just of human things because we are human, and of mortal things because we are mortal. Rather we must, as far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and we must do everything possible to live in accordance with the best thing in us [*nous*] [...]. For men, therefore, the life of reason is the best and

---

<sup>11</sup> In W.D. Ross’ translation, Aristotle uses the term ‘Contemplation’.



pleasantest (since reason more than anything else is man) – and consequently the happiest also.

(qtd.in Ackrill 139)

Ackrill teases out the implications of this which can be seen to propel *The Dark* from beginning to end: ‘One tempting (commonsense) idea would be: first meet the needs of the moral life [Production] and thereafter concentrate on *theoria* [Reflection]. But are the claims of morality so limited that one can meet them to the full and still have time left over?’ (140). Young Mahoney’s choices in *The Dark* amount to a life of morally reassuring ‘Production’, where he helps his father for the rest of his working life in the farm, and later the clerkship of the E.S.B. where he will, as he notes ‘be earning money straightaway’(184) versus his first dream of Priesthood, the choice of Reflection, where, as Ackrill explains the Aristotelian position, man identifies himself ‘with a divine element or power [...], as far as possible to pursue an activity that is not in fact peculiar to man, but shared with God’ (139), and later the University, again defined as the concentration on a ‘private, intellectual life’ (139). This philosophical conundrum of whether to choose one or the other represents the tension which drives *The Dark*. Isolation of precisely how McGahern achieves this results in a clearer understanding of his manipulation of narratological and stylistic devices.

This interpretation develops the considerable body of scholarship on the novel since its publication in 1965. Early studies of *The Dark* were not wholly positive. F.C. Molloy supported John Cronin’s argument that *The Dark*’s lack of flashback weakened it in comparison to *The Barracks* (1963) (427), by critiquing the confessional form, alternating perspective and the ‘hostile but unreal’ environment (16). Molloy argues that McGahern is ‘determined to force his bleak world on the reader’ (16) and that the ‘presentation of Young Mahoney’s character in the second half is narrow and incomplete’ (18). Molloy was also

dissatisfied with McGahern's focus on the adolescent at the expense of a broader portrayal of the Mahoneys and the contrast of their origins with the city life of the university as a potential obstacle for the boy's progression, finding these more expansive elements much better achieved in the debut novel *The Barracks* and *The Leavetaking* (1974, rev. 1984) (18). He did allow for 'the enriching of the prose with symbols and the exploration of [Young] Mahoney's rejection of the priesthood' (19).

Paul Devine's 1979 reading of the novel was more positive, specifically identifying the novel's textual qualities:

At first glance, it appears to be a starkly told, chronologically presented account of an Irish adolescence, but the structural care with which McGahern arranges his materials, the shifts in narrative point of view he makes in order to maintain the reader's objectivity toward them, and the pairing of characters and events by which he brings the materials into relief add exceptional depth to the novel, making it a stylistically sophisticated presentation of the growth into manhood of a rural Irish boy.

(58)

The majority of McGahern criticism treats his work adjacent to cultural developments in Ireland. Scholarship on this broader subject is particularly rich and notable contributors are Terence Brown, Declan Kiberd, Luke Gibbons and Clair Wills. This area is not specifically relevant to my ongoing engagement with the novel; however, it is useful in a broader discussion of McGahern and his oeuvre.

The dynamic between Mahoney and his son which underpins *The Dark* reasonably suggests the cultural foundations for the Ireland which Kiberd describes in the introduction to his 2017 book *After Ireland: Writing the Nation from Beckett to the Present*:

It was bleakness rather than the exhilaration of freedom which struck most writers in the 1920s and 1930s. The lyric phase of nation building was over. Writers, who had felt themselves key inventors of Ireland, now found themselves among its first victims, as the limitless dreams of a nation took on the rather compromised form of an inherited, shop-soiled stage.

(5)

The writers, who Kiberd argues felt they were the inventors of Ireland, were now victims. Indeed, Mahoney has a deep suspicion of reading and learning: ‘We have to work. We can’t be plonked over a book. We have to work’ (McGahern, *The Dark* 122). Early in the novel, Mahoney sees his son’s future as solely “wear[ing] out his bones on the few acres round this house and be buried at the end of the road” (25). Wills notes in her book *The Best Are Leaving: Emigration and Post-War Irish Culture* that in the post-war period, ‘[...] there were plenty that argued [...] it was better not to equip the Irish poorer classes other than those that would fit them for life in agricultural society’ (6). There is an initial sense that, in the eyes of his father, the only option open to Young Mahoney is the farm.

Yet, as Father Gerald shortly after this argues “There are opening and opportunities today that never were before” (25). Brown’s opening chapter in *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-2002* on the development of Ireland post-famine notes that ‘The Irish church was also successful because in spite of its ultramonatist tendencies, it was a national church in the sense that it drew its bishops from its priesthood and its priesthood in the main from its people. It therefore offered opportunities in the late nineteenth and twentieth century for preferment and power in a society that had hitherto had little chance to avail itself of the one or to exercise the other’ (20). One of the most ubiquitous elements in the novel is the priesthood, with Young Mahoney, a humble farm boy, spending the first half of the novel dreaming of taking the

vocation like his cousin Father Gerald which would elevate him in society. But even after the boy has abandoned this route, the church dominates the book, depicting much of Brown's perspective on the development and attraction of the church as a seat of power in Ireland, to the extent, as I will discuss in more detail later, that Mahoney imagines himself being his son's housekeeper and emphasising the power of ordination: 'I could open the door for those calling and find out what they wanted and not have them annoying you about everything' (45).

These aspects of *The Dark* are extremely relevant to a cultural narratological analysis of the novel. Yet, rather than framing the study through these reference points, the treatment of *The Dark* here privileges the sequencing of episodes and manipulation of language which may well also enlighten aspects of the context as identified by these and other cultural historians.

By detecting the narratological 'pairing of characters and events' and the stylistic 'sophisticated presentation', meaning the application of micro-effects within the text, isolated early on by Devine, absences are found to be made into presences created amid a sparse style which resists over-embellishing and emotionalism in character and dialogue.<sup>12</sup> This demonstrates the adolescent experience is hampered by a dysfunctional home but reveals the boy's handicap is within himself, rather than in any of the obstacles set up throughout the novel. Through analysis of the narratological strategies of structure and stylistic applications of word choice and dialogue tone in key sections of *The Dark*, a recurring theme of 'present absence' emerges. For example, the noise of silence is exemplified at the end of the high-tension Chapter 4: 'Even he had to tire and stop sometime and when he did the uneasiness grew if anything deeper in the silence where they listened to the overflow from the tar barrels spill out on the

---

<sup>12</sup> Dan Shen's essay investigates the difference between 'Discourse' and 'Style' which usefully defines terms for this approach to *The Dark*. Shen, Dan. (Eds. Phelan, James & Rabinowitz, Peter J.) 'What Narratology and Stylistics Can Do For Each Other'. *A Companion to Narrative Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005 (Paperback 2008). 136-149. Print.

flagstones of the street' (29). Silence here has a sound, listened to by the characters, and this passage is symptomatic of a work which creates the effect within the character's experience of presence from the phenomenon of absence. In the same way, time is utilised as a frozen entity, which draws attention to its stillness, as demonstrated in the invasive Chapter 3: 'A sudden pause instead of him pulling back the sheets, he was fumbling through the heap of clothes on the floor' (18).

The immediate absence at the outset of the novel is the boy's mother. She has died at some point before Chapter 1, long enough for the house to have settled into a rhythm of sorts without her. She is only once mentioned in open conversation: "It might have been better if your mother had to live" (191). This late sentence from the older Mahoney frames the novel's maternal void at the endpoint in the book. The boy's mother makes contributions only in flashback, and always through the boy's mind. These aspects depict less gloomy times for boy and mother, where he dreams of 'the dead days with her in June' (17) and privilege her wedding photo (33). Clues to the formation of this present absence theme can be isolated in McGahern's 2005 autobiography *Memoir*. In the same way as Young Mahoney's mother dies at some point before the onset of adolescence, McGahern's mother Susan died when McGahern was not quite ten years old. He describes the aftermath of her death thus: 'A terrible new life was beginning, a life without her, this evening and tomorrow and the next day and the next' (135). The finality of the mother's departure is enhanced with a poetic syntax, a rhythm echoed in the novel the day before the Leaving Cert: "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow," (140), which is of course, as the boy notes, itself an echo of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (V,v).<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Stanley van der Ziel's 2016 book examines McGahern's various literary references, arguing for connections with writers from Shakespeare to Samuel Beckett. van der Ziel, Stanley. *John McGahern and the Imagination of Tradition*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2015. Print.

Denis Sampson writes on the mother connection: ‘In her life and in her death, Susan McGahern provided her son with an image of trust in a universal and transcending knowledge, and his participation in church rituals and ceremonies were for him, he repeated many times, a source of sensual pleasure and delight’ (*Young John McGahern* 12). It is not surprising then that the boy dreaming of becoming a priest up until page 94 of *The Dark*, driven by the promise he would celebrate mass for her: ‘On the road as I came with her from town loaded with parcels and the smell of tar in the heat I’d promised her that one day I’d say Mass for her’ (33). He pursues this dream to the extent of spending time with his mother’s cousin, Father Gerald, a period which takes up Chapter 11-16 of *The Dark*. Ultimately his dream is thwarted; his urges drive him toward sex, which is an activity denied to Catholic priests. The mother’s absence, then directs the boy’s actions throughout the novel; she is an element in every chapter regardless of her actual presence.

The dialogue in the novel is pared back and reveals a presence of absence. Exchanges are often restrained, even during episodes of conflict, and interspersed with the boy’s inner thoughts and feelings. Lively dialogue is rare, appearing when the children lampoon their father in his absence and when Mahoney becomes agitated about affairs in the house, or when he reaches states of wild excitement, occurring when he imagines the possible social benefits to his son’s academic talent after his son wins a scholarship: “‘They have the money but not the brains. This’ll be a shake-up for them,’” he boasted between the shops’ (154). In contrast to the rich, textured passage around these lines, the novel opens in the mainly skeletal way it will primarily unfold, with the stripped words “‘Say what you said, because I know.’” (7). A comparison to the first line of McGahern’s debut novel *The Barracks* crystallises the rawness of such an opening: ‘Mrs Reegan darned an old woollen sock as the February night came on, her head bent, catching the threads on the needle by the light of the fire, the daylight gone without her noticing’ (7).

*The Dark* stylishly enters immediately into the present conflict; there is no delicate setting of time and place, no descriptions of characters, their clothes or demeanour, no itemised illumination of objects or the light. “Say what you said, because I know” drives the action of Chapter 1, which is Mahoney’s threat to punish the boy for swearing by beating him naked in front of his younger sisters with a leather belt. The motif of the book is immediately declared: characters will not ‘say’ what they said; there will often be an absence of speech or response. As Mahoney confirms later: “It’s not what people say that counts, it’s what they think. If you ever want to get on in the world don’t heed what they say but find out what’s going on in their numbskulls. That’s what’ll get you on” (52). Not only are people’s actions inherently false, but a constant campaign of assessment must also be adhered to if one is to ‘get [you] on’. In Mahoney’s view, it is in the silences that the true meanings will be transmitted. The word the boy is accused of using is present in its absence, spelt out rather than spoken. It is present only for the reader and never enunciated throughout the novel. Not only is it never used, but it is untypical of the boy’s character to use such a word as the narrative unfolds. Nonetheless, the boy animates its signification through frequent phases of masturbation which become an integral part of this overall struggle.

Richard Robinson finds this highly symbolic: ‘*The Dark* spells out but does not write ‘F.U.C.K.’: in a sly communication with the censor, the word is there and not there – a fragmented signifier’ (56). The spelt word foreshadows a novel that will only partly narrate its tale in prose and dialogue. Robinson notes the successful limiting of the authorial presence in *The Barracks*: ‘The terror and freedom of thoughts certainly come ceaselessly to Elizabeth and are represented without an overseeing authorial presence to “correct” the prose’ (36-7). The technique of the author not instinctively ‘correcting’ the prose displayed in the first book is extended to another level in *The Dark* as dialogue is repressed and shortened to expose the raw absences which shape the material. Robinson also draws attention to the critical esteem this

approach was received with: ‘In an early review, Vivian Mercier argued that by the last chapter, which is mainly rendered in dialogue and whose person is indeterminate, “complete objectivity has been achieved” and that it is “this objectivity-in-the-subjective, constantly growing throughout the book, that sets this novel of adolescence somewhat on a par with Joyce”’ (45). This ‘objective’ in the ‘subjective’ framing of the novel invites a reading of a teenager’s sparse world illuminated by its absence of positive self. Robinson develops this possibility by noting the alternating perspective of the novel which varies between first, second and third person within the text. The device has been written on by van der Ziel, Devine and Molloy (45-60). Robinson argues ‘it views impersonality not in the classically Flaubertian-Joycean, proto-modernist sense but from the other end of the telescope, at or beyond mid-century generic exhaustion, emerging from the post-Trilogy [a reference to Samuel Beckett’s trilogy: *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnameable*], *nouveau roman* period in which selfhood has been evacuated and subjectivity erased’ (46). For Robinson, rather than reanimating 19<sup>th</sup> century style, *The Dark* circles the sparse dialogue with post-Beckett innovations of perspective. This is reflective of a self absent of self, an impersonality rather than personality revealed through language. The evacuation of the ‘positive self’ leaves the ‘traumatised self’ behind, illuminating the adolescence experience in a dysfunctional home.

The physical world of the novel is also heavily restricted, which can be translated as a focalisation on Mahoney’s utter failure to guide his son. This is particularly evident in the first eight chapters, when Mahoney progresses from being a dominant aggressive and menacing figure to a clownish dreamer; but even when the shackles of the claustrophobic family home begin to crumble, the larger stages the boy embarks on of priest’s house, exam study hall and university are also constraining in their way. In contrast to the richness of Mrs Reegan’s home in *The Barracks*, with its ‘bright golds and scarlets of the religious pictures’, ‘warm rug on the sofa’, ‘the lamplight so soft and yellow’, *The Dark* presents barren scenes, a bedroom so empty



only the ceiling and moonlight seem to be present, a lonely lavatory, a windswept and bare potato field (7,9). The book's broadening scope from Chapter 8 onwards only serves to increase the boy's growing isolation as his father fades. The embellishment of the lavatory, where the boy goes to seek refuge at the end of the humiliations of Chapter 1, is shaded in with withering elements: '[T]he old bolted refuge of the lavatory, with the breeze blowing in its one air hole. There they all rushed hours as these to sit in the comforting darkness and reek of Jeyes Fluid to weep and grope their way in hatred and self-pity back to some sort of calm' (10). The only refuge for the children from Mahoney, even though the novel only ever narrates the boy using it, is a bolted toilet, where air supply is minimised, and comfort is found in its darkness and 'reek' of chemicals. McGahern once wrote on his admiration for writing that could avoid the overuse of descriptions and treated the topic carefully in 'What is My Language': 'In a famous but not quite accurate remark, Borges argues that a proof of the authenticity of the Koran is that you can find no camels in its pages; they were so taken for granted that there was no need for them to be mentioned' (*Love of the World* 264). For work to be authentic, according to Borges and by extension McGahern, the need for physical embellishment is minimised particularly when the overall theme of a work is absence, as it is in *The Dark*. McGahern proceeds in the same essay to use the example of Tomas O'Críomhthain who ignores the presence of donkeys in his autobiography *The Islandman* (1928, trans. ed. 1934) except when they affect the actions of a scene. For McGahern this is authenticity crystallised: 'I have dwelt on this work [*The Islandman*] written in Irish because I believe it to be a true work' (*Love of the World* 272).

Despite what Sampson calls 'discontinuous scenes', Chapters 1-7 of the novel presents a structure of sorts, which accentuates the absence that exhausts the boy in his negotiating of the changes he is going through (*Outstaring Nature's Eye* 68). The significance of this section is demonstrated by McGahern's decision to select some of these early episodes as his

submission to the early 1960s magazine *X*, edited by his friend Patrick Swift.<sup>14</sup> These pieces were McGahern's first published material, and they indicate, by their selection and by the alterations that were made to them from their appearance in 1961 to their insertion into the complete novel in 1965, the use of absences as a device to communicate the progression of the boy. Chapter 3 of the novel, as it appears in *X*, narrates the boy at his most submissive and the father at his most powerful. Mahoney is in complete control, outlined as father menaces and abuses son while they share the bed recently vacated by the boy's absent mother. The following chapter in the novel depicts the beginning of the erosion of Mahoney's power as Father Gerald is introduced while the father becomes essentially absent. Chapter 8, the third of the four mini episodes which appeared in *X*, narrates a short conversation after confessions, where the boy's joy at absolution is diluted by his father's incessant speculations on his son's future career.<sup>15</sup> Mahoney's presence is merely physical, he does not communicate with the boy in any natural way and is therefore absent in this area. The magazine pieces portray a more self-pitying, 'fearful' character, while the novel version is pared down and suggests the absence of love and understanding in the world of *The Dark*, and this adjustment tells much of McGahern's aims with the novel, which appear to lie in bringing into artistic relief his experience with his father (*X* 153). Many of the earlier drafts focus on elements which can be matched with McGahern's life, for example, the death of a mother at a young age, a young country boy moving to England for work (*The John McGahern Papers*).

The transcending of the son beyond the father is the key change in the novel even though this change is ultimately completely reversed and has confused many critics, including those as committed as Sampson (*Outstaring Nature's Eye* 62). This changing of positions

---

<sup>14</sup> *X* was a London arts review magazine in circulation from 1958-1962. It included writers such as Samuel Beckett, Ezra Pound and Patrick Kavanagh. McGahern's friendship with Swift and his family led to him submitting a section of his first, ultimately unpublished novel, 'The End or the Beginning of Love' (Sampson, *Young John McGahern* 136).

<sup>15</sup> The fourth episode is an earlier version of Chapter 9.

between father and son is also alluded to in the much later *Memoir*, which presents scenes symmetrical with episodes of *The Dark*. After a conflict with his father is described in *Memoir* in a way identical to Chapter 6 of *The Dark*, McGahern notes: ‘He and I knew that an extraordinary change had taken place’ (191). The catalyst for the boy’s onward journey through his dalliance with becoming a priest, his preparations and completion of the Leaving Cert and his brief experience at University, stem from his transcending the shadow of his father, a process which draws attention to the absence of love, guidance and maturity in Mahoney, a dynamic developed from the *X* version to the chapters in the novel.

An analysis of *The Dark* in its treatment of adolescence through the presence of absence brings critical discourse closer toward identifying McGahern’s use of devices of narratology and stylistics. McGahern’s non-fiction writings have not been seen as useful in previous efforts at this, despite their explicit pronouncements on the writing craft. Sampson argues that *Memoir* is not a portrait of the artist, but a family memoir, one which contextualises the social world in which McGahern grew up (*Young John McGahern* ix). But it does not provide any indication of McGahern’s process:

Apart for his discovery in adolescence of the magical experience of reading, it says little that might offer insight into how he discovered and nurtured his talent or how his distinctive vision and style came to be so mature in his mid-twenties when he wrote *The Barracks*.

(*Young John McGahern* ix)

Sampson argues that ‘understanding [...] his intellectual and artistic formation will add to an increased appreciation of the work of a lifetime (*Young John McGahern*, x). By treating young Mahoney’s development and its connection to the non-fiction, we can develop this important question raised by Sampson. Robinson also analyses McGahern’s handling of

language to an extent. Other critics such as Maher and Shovlin are focussed outside the text, toward areas of theology, intertextuality and other concerns external to McGahern's process. My present study investigates the fabrication of McGahern's artistic vision and posits the use of present absences in *The Dark* as a starting point, in terms of the adolescent experience. From the raw frame of *Memoir*, this can be divided into the categories of father, mother and space. In *Memoir* McGahern writes: 'My father's world went inwards to darkness and violence, lies and suppressions: the school, the library, the river, the Church, all went outwards, to light and understanding, freedom and joy' (203); of his mother, Susan: 'When I went back to school in September [after Susan's death], I was so blinded by change and grief that a young woman teacher substituting for Mrs Finan, who was having another baby, sent for my father to ask if I was retarded' (155); and the childhood space:

Since my mother's death I slept with my father in the big iron bed with the broken brass bells, at the head of the stairs, directly across from the large room where the barrack orderly's bedclothes and the office supplies and the one typewriter were stored. In the next room along the landing, my five sisters and one brother slept. At the end of the landing was the maid's small room.

(187-8)

While, as Sampson notes, McGahern may not engage with his actual artistic development, these allusions to his absent mother, father and the space he occupied, manifested in *The Dark* as a spare and measured prose, illuminate McGahern's adolescence. It is his handling of the boy's adolescent experience of present absences based on this trinity and the erosion of the 'positive self' in *The Dark* which is the measure of his literary accomplishment.

## 1. A Sudden Pause

Mahoney in the bedroom is at his most powerful. He engineers the entire scene, from triggering the action when he finally arrives in the bedroom after the boy has been waiting torturously, to shutting the light off at the end, appropriately plunging father and son back to darkness. The chapter shapes the dysfunctional relationship between father and son as they share the former marital bed. This is the catalyst for the onward transcension of boy beyond father. In the early part of the novel, despite Mahoney assumes the position of father/mother, while his son is presented in Chapter 3 as a surrogate wife.

As Young Mahoney waits, he idly amuses himself/herself with unstimulating observations. He counts ceiling boards, the quantity of which he already knows, and observes the moonlight on the broken brass bells. The boy feigns sleep when Mahoney finally arrives. This is a futile attempt at gaining some power, one which is rapidly obliterated by Mahoney's struck match.

Mahoney dominates the conversation which ensues, and it is the boy's pronounced compliance that will define his later defiance as so many presences imply absences in the book. The boy is then subjected to invasive physical handling, which causes him acute mental disturbance, during which Mahoney asks/tells the boy "“You like that?”" (20). The natural sexual confusion of the adolescent is utilised for the treatment of the adolescent experience by McGahern, but it is made even more complex by this distinctly unsavoury interference and dialogue. The massage recalls the now dead husband-wife relationship. In the same way, the later blood bonding reanimates the consummation of the marriage, which led to the conception of the boy. Mahoney's reigning tyranny continues as he torments the fleas, crushing them with his nail 'till [they were] dead or exhausted' (22).

The boy is involuntarily ‘mixed’ with his father intravenously, a feat orchestrated by a minute invisible insect. Mahoney is all-powerful; his persona in Chapter 3 is omniscient and Godlike. Mahoney’s use of the match as a sacred, all-powerful light is a priestly action; and his pointed questioning will be echoed by two episodes with priests later in a far more measured but similarly invasive way (41, 72-73). Paradoxically, Mahoney is also demon-like, defying rest or comfort, stimulating restlessness and agitation. The father’s presence, then, in the absence of Mrs Mahoney is magnified to an unbearable level for the boy. Mahoney’s attitude to his son is dismissive at best, even when providing what he sees as comfort. Mahoney’s stature suffocates the boy until he is reduced to an afterthought on the far side of the bed, humiliated and stripped in a more degrading way than even the later agonies of Chapter 12 in the guest bedroom at Fr Gerald’s house. In the sparse bedroom, the characters that are animated in the narrative space are actually objects, such as the ceiling boards and the broken brass bells. The importance of these visual aids and their connection of Young Mahoney and John McGahern is made very clear in *Memoir*: ‘When there was a clear moon over Oakport, it lit the whole row of brass bells along the iron railings at the foot of the bed. Many times I counted in different lights the thirty-two tongued-and-grooved boards of the ceiling when I couldn’t sleep’ (188). This brings into focus Chapter 3 and its anchoring in McGahern’s life.

In contrast to the animated effect of the bed and the ceiling, the boy and father are motionless, statuesque figures. But the real ‘life’ in the room is the ghost of Mrs Mahoney. The textually achieved presence of her absence as the rightful holder of the place the boy now inhabits forms her spirit. Instead of the son being spiritually cleansed, he is driven to transcend his father as the dysfunction builds within him, a process that will unfold in the other key chapters. This is a trajectory he will follow through the rest of the novel.

i

The atmosphere of the bedroom is treated by McGahern with a range of effects which exploit the torment of the adolescent and distil McGahern's narrative and stylistic strategy: physical, visual, aural, and fantastical. To begin with the former, Young Mahoney is in the marital bed with his father presumably because he is too old to sleep with his sisters. Yet, if his mother were still alive, a bed for him would have been made available. The logistical reasons for the boy not taking a room, which is made available to him later when he is preparing for exams, are not dealt with. If the home of the Mahoneys is partly based on the barracks where McGahern spent the second half of his childhood, the spare room was earlier occupied by the maid, judging by the description of the bedrooms given in *Memoir* (187-8). But the narrative choice by McGahern to place the boy in the marital bed is that he will absorb the pure guilt at taking his mother's place in her absence, adopting the role of surrogate 'wife', and this also enables him to accept the behaviour of Mahoney. The ceiling, which is such a focal point of the boy's childhood in *Memoir*, is a precursor to the visual distractions Young Mahoney will court during the novel, whether it be fantasising over a newspaper photo of a young woman, or longingly gazing at the 'unattainable' crowned heads of female students (177). These female-centred scenes further suggest an absence of physical and emotional contact for the boy, which provokes his need to create fantasies.

McGahern frames the visual engagement with the ceiling through the process of counting: 'counting and losing the count of the thirty-two boards across the ceiling, trying to pick out the darker circles of the knots beneath the varnish' (17). He counts to try and absent himself from the 'nights [Mahoney] wanted love' (17). The futility of counting is solidified in the boy's knowledge of the final number. But the absence of logic does not deter him. The counting soothes him, suggested much later in his preparations for the Leaving Cert by an appreciation for symmetry: '[T]he delight of solving the maths problems, putting order on their

enclosed world, proving that numbers real and imaginary had relationships with each other' (146). Numbers, whether real or imaginary, have relationships, perhaps superior to those around the boy. Sampson notes here a 'pleasure of abstract reasoning' which he sees may be representative of a calling to be a 'mathematician' (*Young John McGahern* 9). This love of symmetry is also reflected in the boy's temporary parent figure in the middle of the novel, Father Gerald, who notes his displeasure at the way the housekeeper John has prepared the house when the priest and Young Mahoney arrives at the parochial house: "He must have dusted the mantelpiece and look how he's arranged the things, absolutely no sense of placing" (64). However, the darker circles of the knots in the ceiling are selected by McGahern to stylistically connect the reader to the unease within Young Mahoney. He craves escape from the 'worst' that is to come (17). He tries to visualise the outside, but this is only done in reflection: 'Watch the moon on the broken brass bells at the foot of the bed' (17). The moon is a visual escape but even it is absent and, like the mother, is only present in another form.

The aural devices used do not bring escape but draw the boy back to the present. His listening is interspersed with his physical positioning: 'Turn and listen and turn' (17). He tries to turn away from the routine of the night but is forced back to it by the sounds: '[T]he noise of the hall door opening, feet on the cement, his habitual noises as he drank barley water over the dying fire, and at last the stockinged feet on the stairs' (17). The boy cannot see the father's movements but can clearly discern his activities. He must listen and imagine, as in the masturbatory scene of Chapter 5 he must watch and imagine: the picture is inanimate, the boy must view and simultaneously employ his imagination to process toward ejaculation (30-31). In the waiting, the boy can clearly discern all of the activities through sound: the door being opened, the drinking of Barley water, the walking. Effectively, McGahern uses sound effects as a visual aid.



The boy launches into fantasy: ‘Go over the day that was gone, what was done or left undone, or dream of the dead days with her in June’ (17). This is the first reference in the novel to the mother and implies that the novel commences less than a year after her death: ‘June’ being identified in a way which may denote ‘[last] June’. As with his masturbatory sessions, there is a need for fantasy in the bedroom, to go megalomaniacally into a dream world. These fantastic and visual effects were combined in an earlier draft of the opening to Chapter 3:

There were things to do - count the 32 boards across the ceiling and the confusion of knots under the varnish, [?] your eyes on the gleaming of the broken brass bells at the foot of the bed, think of the day that was gone and the things you did or didn’t do, dream [?] all your life on the day you gathered strawberries for her in June - or just vomit.

(P71/31/1)

In this handwritten draft from the NUIG special collections, all of the effects McGahern will separate are spilt out in one long sentence. This is evidence of the rush of creation and the later clinical revisions to find the final chilling effect of Chapter 3. The more systemised execution of these elements portray the isolation of the waiting pre-teenage boy.

ii

McGahern manipulates the lighting and integrates double meanings and sarcasm to construct an environment absent of truth in the space of Chapter 3. By using a match, applying false dialogue to the characters and strong levels of sarcasm through Mahoney, McGahern progresses the erosion of positive self in the boy and triggers his transcension beyond his father.

Tension rises in the boy's thought processes as he realises his father is on his way: 'He was coming and there was nothing to do but wait and grow hard as stone and lie' (17). The boy is disturbed enough that his 'lie' is a pun on the simultaneous need to conceal the actuality of his wakefulness, which is repeated shortly after: "'Are you sleeping?'" The one thing was to keep the eyes shut no matter what and to lie stiff as a board' (18). The crafting of this double effect can be established by its stylised alteration from the *X* magazine version:

"Are you asleep, Francie?" he called. The boy lay rigid in the bed. It took all his resolution not to answer. One word and he would no longer have to lie there, apprehensive and afraid. But he could not bear to talk with his father.

(*X* 154)

The embellishments of 'rigid' is converted to 'grow hard as stone' which is a subtle foreshadowing pun on the father's forthcoming abuse. 'Resolution', 'Apprehensive' and 'Afraid' are deemed superfluous in the sparse language appropriate to the novel. The unbearable imminent conversation is ultimately rendered into the pun. The built-up torment is illustrated through: 'It was such breathing relief to hear the soft plump of his clothes being let fall on the floor' (18). Mahoney's next move, the winding of the clock, is another finely tuned colloquial pun – a 'wind-up' is a phrase representing agitation in a fun way – yet this setting is far from fun for either party. The boy's 'breathing relief' indicates his belief that the deception of sleep is successful. The introduction of the clock also reflects the timeless waiting process the boy has just painfully navigated. Mahoney is unconvinced the boy is asleep and proceeds to probe by striking a match and applying it to within millimetres of the boy's face: 'A sudden pause instead of him pulling back the sheets, he was fumbling through the clothes on the floor. A match struck and flared in the dark' (18). After the prolonged waiting was amplified in the short section at the beginning of the chapter, a 'sudden pause' – an action of

inaction being immediately noticeable, in the same way as other absences become present in *The Dark* – creates further tensions. The lighting of the match provides the unwanted presence of ‘heat on his face’ and light through the ‘blood-soaked curtains’ of his eyelids (18). The application of light and heat – usually desirable – is in this case paradoxically invasive and unpleasant. The boy craves darkness and cold.

When the boy relents and admits his wakefulness, the ‘flame had burned down the black char of matchwood to Mahoney’s fingers and his face was ugly with suspicion’ (18). Instead of the normal purpose of a match, to light a fire or a candlewick, it is used here as a tool of menace. The light of the match can also be representative of the church, a constant element in the novel. As the match hovers below Mahoney, it recalls the local custom of the red light at the base of a portrait of the Catholic Sacred Heart. This common feature is also absent from the house of the Mahoneys; the exclusion of its description alludes to Mahoney’s underhand defiance of the local religious tradition. But the image of the struck match reflects its spiritual presence. The figure of the Sacred Heart is here replaced in the bedroom by the ghoulish figure of Mahoney, his face ‘ugly with suspicion’ (18). The light has become the dark: ‘A match struck and flared in the dark’ (18). The novel’s title appears in the prose at the most acute point of intimidation, just as the match is struck. This contradictory image of light and dark amalgamates the conflicting messages of religion which will torment the boy as he grows up. Mahoney is not impressed by the boy’s behaviour, but, in typical circuitous fashion, he does not openly challenge this indiscretion: ““You were quick to wake?”” (18). The sarcasm is effective in stripping the boy’s defences, prolonging the illusion, which they both know is false. But Mahoney is also subtextually informing his son that a serious crime of concealment has been committed. The ‘lie’ of the boy’s sleep is not being accosted. Instead, Mahoney makes a declaration devoid of any remote belief: ““You’re asleep so?”” (18). Both father and son play roles absent of love in this strangely lit confrontation. The boy tries to defend his actions: ““I

was sleeping. I felt something” (18). The match flame at this point burns out, plunging the room back into darkness. ““You didn't seem to be sleeping much to me?”” Mahoney persists (18). While Devine describes *The Dark's* dialogue as ‘realistic and idiomatic’, which it is in other sections, this lifeless and cardboard-like dialogue engineers a surreal intensity, through father and son’s controlled restraint (55). They perform in the space rather than participate, first in the dark, then in the light, then returning to the dark, which McGahern noted echoes life itself: ‘We come from darkness into light and grow in the light until at death we return to that original darkness’ (*Memoir* 36).

The situation is concealed through the empty exchanges, scaffolded by sarcasm and dead-weight sentences such as ““I was sleeping. I got frightened”” (18). This is in complete contrast to Mahoney’s cartoonish nagging elsewhere: ““No care for your shoes. Wear away. And this old fool can sit on his arse all day and fix them, O God, O God,”” (32) and his breathless fantasising: ““If you kept passing the exams you’d get more scholarships. You could be a specialist or surgeon then. You could wind up in Harley Street. That’s what’d be a big shake-up for some around here – if you wound up in Harley Street!”” (124-125). In contrast, the boy rarely becomes openly animated in the novel, only developing a rhythm in his inner monologues, relating to his mother or fantasising about young women. His dialogue with others is mostly lifeless, except when he jokes with his sisters (28) and through a brief existential outburst, also with a sibling (105).

At this point in Chapter 3, the boy attempts to challenge his father: ‘Hatred took the place of fear, and it brought the mastery of not caring much more. No one had right to bring a match burning close to his face in the night to see if he was sleeping or not’ (18). For the careful reader, the inner thoughts provide subtitles to the external conversation the boy has with Mahoney, and the excision of truth in the live conversation is isolated. The words the boy does use are devoid of emotional tautening: ““I was sleeping and you frightened me with the match.

Did you want me for anything that you cracked the match?” (18). Despite the absence of heated comment, the repetition of the words underpins the underlying motif. The noun ‘match’ is repeated, reflective of the mismatch of father and son in the bed together and demonstrates the sparsity yet effectiveness of the language. But the response also accentuates a presence of defiance in the boy as established through these words.

Mahoney dismisses the boy’s quasi-confrontation in the bedroom, reminding his son of his admission of fear: “No. I just wanted to see if you were asleep and alright. I didn’t mean to frighten you” (18). This is another false statement, as the use of the match was specifically designed to intimidate the boy into responding, in the way it is narratively structured by McGahern. The pun on ‘wind-up’ is used a second time: ‘At the window, he wound the green clock, the key twisting in the silence, he pulled back the clothes, and awkwardly got into bed. The feet were cold as clay as they touched on the way down’ (18). As ‘silence’ is again ‘present’ in the ‘noise’ of the twisting key, the clock has been wound for a second time, even though twenty-fours have not passed. Time is also devoid of progress. The awkwardness of Mahoney suggests the loveless relationship: warmth evaporates with the touch of ‘cold as clay’ feet. Robinson has detected ‘a self-conscious objective scrupulosity for the novel’ (45). The distancing objective scrupulosity of the dialogue and action here within the peculiar environment of the bedroom defines the falsity and coldness of the father and boy’s relationship. A setting for a similar real-life incident is also reported in *Memoir* as an event, but with little detail: ‘When my father came late to bed and enquired as he took off his clothes if I was awake, I nearly always feigned sleep’ (188). The incident with the match in Chapter 3 brings into relief the distance between father and son and disturbs the boy as he reaches adolescence. The dark and light space of the bedroom bears witness to a false, theatrical performance.

iii

Subtle physical and intellectual bullying become techniques of a narrative which communicates a lack of adolescent guidance in the space of the bedroom in Chapter 3, and this is later reprised in Chapter 12. The scene of massage which follows the incident of the match in Chapter 3 commences with a loveless kiss. Mahoney tries to frame the scenario as an act of affection: “‘Don’t you know I love you no matter what happens?’” (19). He continues: “‘You’ll give your father a kiss so?’” (20). Father and son kiss but the description could hardly be more devoid of affection: ‘The old horror as hands were put about him and the other face closed on his, the sharp stubble grown since the morning and the nose and the kiss, the thread of the half-dried mucus coming away from the other lips in the kiss’ (20). While the noun ‘kiss’ is repeated twice, the adjectives ‘horror’, ‘sharp’ and ‘half-dried [mucus]’ ensure absence of any warmth. The kiss is not one of love but one of possession. Instead of a wholesome connection of father and son, the passage is laced with objectification: ‘Hands [are] put about him’; ‘The other face closed on his’. As the boy is reduced to an object, so too are his father’s hands and face detached from the being within that directs them, in the same way as the wife/ mother is absent.

Through the strange itemisation of hands and face, Mahoney is also spiritually dislocated from the event and enters his fantasy for his ghost wife, personified through his son: ‘[The] hands drew him closer’ (20). The lifeless kiss is symbolic of a dead romance outside of the novel’s narrative breadth and indicates the dominance of Mahoney during the marriage. The boy even responds with a matrimonial ‘I do’ when Mahoney questions whether the boy appreciates the massage (20). This is a phrase which will be echoed at the book’s finale (191). The father abuses the boy’s private physical space by massaging the boy’s stomach and thighs. The intimacy of kiss and massage may direct the narrative toward igniting the spiritual presence of wife and mother, but also primarily privileges the absence of communicated love from the

father. The father and son relationship is not a loving one, but a physical and mental nightmare, a ‘horror’, where it was ‘better not to think or care’ (20).

McGahern outlined similar regular episodes such as this in *Memoir* which demonstrate, in this case, that the scene is quite close to the source material:

He [Frank McGahern] never interfered with me in an obviously sexual way, but he frequently massaged my belly and thighs. As in all other things connected with the family, he asserted he was doing this for my good: it relaxed taut muscles, eased wind and helped bring on sleep. In these years, despite my increasing doctrinal knowledge of what was sinful, I had only the vaguest knowledge of sex or sexual functions, and took him at his word, but as soon as it was safe to do so, I turned away on some pretext or other, such as sudden sleepiness. Looking back, and remembering his tone of voice and the rhythmic movement of his hand, I suspect he was masturbating.

(188)

The presence of masturbation is indicated in earlier drafts of Chapter 3, for example: ‘As the lips met, his body stiffened. Thick liquid was pumping on his belly and thighs [...] His father quickly turned his body away, put one hand down to his own body. No more liquid was pumping on the boy now’ (P71/31/6). McGahern reprises the same scene later in the novel, when Young Mahoney goes to stay with Father Gerald as he considers taking a vocation in the priesthood. On the boy’s first night in the parochial house, he is joined unexpectedly in his bedroom by the priest. In the same way as Chapter 3, Father Gerald’s arrival is preceded by a period of waiting, even though in this case the priest is not expected. The boy’s thoughts here, in the absence of the moonlight on the broken brass bells or the comforts of counting the boards on the tongued-and-grooved ceiling, are existential meanderings about life and death: ‘The moment of death was the one real moment in life; everything took its proper position there, and

was fixed for ever, whether to live in joy or hell for all eternity, or had your life been the haphazard flicker between nothingness and nothingness' (69).

Without any visual distractions, the terror of the waiting early adolescent in Chapter 3 is here developed and translated into a more advanced crisis of life and death. Again, aural effects are used, in this case drawing attention to the previous pages of unreal ponderings: 'Real noises came. A door opened down the landing, it was not shut. Feet padded on the boards, the whisper of clothes brushing' (70). The opening question of the Chapter 3 episode is reversed with the priest's arrival: "'You're not asleep?'" (70). The boy is again joined under the blankets. The initial physical contact echoes the end of the earlier scene: 'feet touching you as they went down' (70). This is even more intimate as, instead of the space of the marital mattress, 'bodies lay side by side in the single bed' (70). The physicality of Mahoney's massage is replaced by Father Gerald introducing the subject of becoming a priest, which he quickly develops into a one-sided conversation on desire. He asks Young Mahoney "'Have you ever kissed a girl?'" (72). The boy's embarrassment is styled as 'the shock of a blow' (72). The boy admits masturbating, and similarly to the itemised confessional scene of Chapter 7, the actions are quantified:

"How many times a week?"

"Seven or eight sometimes, Father."

(72)

This scene does not contain a massage, but an even more effective humiliation. When the priest allows that the boy could be 'good enough' to become a priest, if he fights the 'sin' of masturbation, Young Mahoney is encouraged: 'Joy rose, the world was beautiful again, all was beautiful' (73). He asks Father Gerald "'Had you ever to fight that sin when you were my



age, Father?’” The priest does not reply and the boy is tormented: ‘There was such silence that you winced’ (73). Silences that are free of noise are sometimes stylistically pronounced, for example: ‘Afterwards, even in the very pitch of the coughing and shuffling, there were remote areas of pure silence to pray and wander in eternally’ (43). In the university, the silence is devoid of life, when the lecturer enters the boy’s first physics class: ‘In a second dead silence fell’ (179). The absence of the priest sharing his adolescent experience enrages the boy: ‘What right had he to come and lie with you in bed, his body hot against yours, his arm about your shoulders’ (74). He even recalls the scene of Chapter 3: ‘Almost as the cursed nights when your father used stroke your thighs. You remembered the blue scars on the stomach by your side’ (74). By this point in the novel, Chapter 12, the boy has transcended the father, but here he finds a replacement with superior techniques of questioning. The space of the parochial house bedroom becomes a quasi-confessional, but not one that delivers the joys of Chapter 8.

In Episode III of the *X* magazine publication, part of which would become Chapter 8, McGahern writes on the ideals of confession: ‘[T]he real need is to confess sensually to another man, a need as old as original sin, as emotionally intimate as the act of hatred or of love. It is the effort required to make confession and a sense of the priest’s understanding of the individual guilt that satisfies’ (158). However, this does not manifest itself in Chapter 12. The sensual confession is not reciprocated by the priest; he does not provide the boy with understanding. Father Gerald diverts the question by focussing on the boy in a critical way: “‘The only thing I see wrong with you is that you take things far too serious, and bottle them up, and brood’” (74). The boy notes: ‘[H]e completely ignored the question’ (74). Ultimately, the priest’s only offering is a veiled admission, again absent of clear sincerity: “‘Most of those in my youth who became priests were gay. They kicked football, they went to dances in the holidays, flirted with girls, even sometimes saw them home from the dances. They made good normal priests’” (74). McGahern’s choice of the adjective ‘gay’ is significant. The Oxford

Dictionary posits the emergence of the term as denoting homosexuality in the 1960s when McGahern was composing the novel. While Father Gerald is no doubt using the ‘centuries-old’ sense of the word, McGahern exploits the ‘sense of double entendre’ it provokes ‘Gay’. While the noun ‘dances’ is repeated, emphasising the priest’s history, which particularises his distant teenage experimentation, the boy still identifies this as concealment. He ‘barely’ listens, ‘resentment [rising] close to hatred’: ‘hatred’ emerging again here as in Chapter 3 (74). Both the massage of Chapter 3 and the dialogue of Chapter 12 present Mahoney and Father Gerald as flawed father figures in the boy’s life, similarly devoid of parental skills. The boy’s tolerance of this behaviour, because of his complete inability to verbalise his discomfort in either scene, leads to an oppression of his will. This is borne out in *The Dark* as a defect enacted through his reliance on the sexual fantasies for girls and melancholic reflections on his mother, as opposed to a frank dealing with the issues which torment him.

iv

The space of the bedroom ultimately becomes a sacrificial altar, where Young Mahoney’s very blood is combined with his father’s through the operation of an invisible flea, as visually absent in its physical presence as the wife/mother is spiritually present in her physical absence through Chapter 3 and these aspects propel the boy toward adulthood. This scene suggests a reading framed by lines of John Donne’s poem ‘The Flea’: ‘It sucked me first, and now sucks thee/And in this flea our two bloods mingled be’ (26, 1.3,4). The lines of ‘sucked me first, and now sucks thee’ and ‘mingled’ blood are certainly suggestive of what develops at the end of Chapter 3. However, the poem is one of love and emotional connection, and the way McGahern narrates and stylises the scene suggests an absence of these elements.

The blood-mixing, as it is conveyed in 'The Flea', is incongruent rather than collaborative with Chapter 3. In the aftermath of the massage, the boy cannot sleep, while his father is, by contrast, completely relaxed: 'There was no hope of sleep, though soon the heavy breathing told that Mahoney had moved almost immediately into sleep' (21). The echoed verb 'sleep' juxtaposes the boy's wakefulness with Mahoney's carefree slumber. Unlike the love of Donne's poem, the pair could hardly be more separate, and this is drawn into focus in the contradictory clauses of 'no hope of sleep' with 'moved almost immediately into sleep'. The 'strange, powerful and ambiguous relationship' of son and father described by the publishers can be isolated here ('The Dark'). Initially, Young Mahoney recoils from his father, lying 'far out on the bed's edge', but eventually he has to comply (21). Even his temper is subdued: '[L]oathing had soon to perish in the cold' (21).

The boy tries to take some of the blankets having been stripped a second time, in the same way as he was humiliated in Chapter 1. There is no comfort, only an eiderdown which is a poor substitute. Young Mahoney in his role of wife does not even warrant the masculinity of a blanket. His agitation is quickly reanimated: 'Lunatic hatred rose choking against the restless sleeping bulk in the ball of blankets, the stupid bulk that had no care for anything except itself' (21). Young Mahoney craves light and heat now, these the very qualities which tormented him during the menacing episode: '[H]e'd give anything he had for one more blanket or the morning yet' (21). Young Mahoney craves the light of the morning to escape the dark of his father's night. It is in this scene, in the context of *The Dark's* narrative structure, that McGahern allows the boy to abandon the helplessness of his childhood and progress to the more intense but less exposed period of adolescence.

The bats' continual 'screeching' (21), which has been described by van der Ziel as a 'rather clunky mock-gothic description' which lampoons the Victorian descriptive tendencies, proclaims this 'silence' (*Imagination of Tradition* 125). However, there is more to the use of

bats than plain alluding to the genre styles of the nineteenth century. Bats stay awake during the dark of night, and in their upside-down position are more comfortable than Young Mahoney at this point (Langley, 'Bat'). As morning approaches 'the fleas were biting' (21). One feeds on the boy's shoulder which he 'tries to crush blindly', but this effort is 'no use' (22). The boy fails even to defend himself against a minute, invisible flea: his effort at crushing is devoid of both sight and strength.

Eventually, Mahoney is roused. He repeats his question "'Are you sleeping?'" (21). Here, the boy begins his journey toward adulthood, by gaining a measure of superiority in enjoying Mahoney's discomfort: '[H]e was able to keep the laugh back' (22). The narrative control is evidenced here. At the opening of a potential comic scene, McGahern abruptly absents humour in exchange for the dead dialogue typical of this bedroom. Mahoney sets about massacring the fleas, his activity described in the careful detail of realism: 'Each flea he found he kept it pressed under his hand till it was dead or exhausted. He'd catch it between both thumb-nails then, where it cracked utterly out of life, a red speck of skin and blood crushed on the nail' (22). McGahern's choice to repeat the noun 'nail' is a recall to the nail which held a leather strap hanging on the first page of the novel: 'He took the heavy leather strap he used for sharpening his razor from its nail on the side of the press' (7). This links the opening humiliation, appropriately in the space of the girls' bedroom, to the bedroom space of father and son.

The first verse of 'The Flea' concludes: 'And pampered swells with one blood made of two/And this, alas, is more than we would do' (27, l.8,9 ). Mahoney translates these words into the phrase "'Your blood and mine'" (23). This refrain, which will be chorused, is 'more than [father and son] would do' alone and connects boy and man in the novel's harsh way, in contrast to the romantic theme of 'The Flea'. Blood streams have been joined by the invisible insect, suggesting the absent/present wife/mother which joins them both. The flea episode narrates a

dormant bond, present due to biology rather than love, which is exhumed to a dead life on a physical and mental plane by the mixture of a vital fluid. The inanimate marital bed is converted to an altar in a transcendental illumination of Mahoney depicting the Catholic priest consecrating wine into blood. In the space of the late-night bedroom, the boy's blood is consecrated into man's blood by the all-powerful Mahoney.

v

At the close of the events in the bedroom, appropriately a kind of closeness is reached: 'There was no repulsion as their flesh touched deep down in the clothes. There was no care of anything anymore' (23). Sampson interprets this as a refuge for Young Mahoney: 'This intimacy results from the surrender of all sense of consciousness of self, of "right" not to be intruded on and seems to gain for the boy a temporary freedom from hatred and loathing' (*Outstaring Nature's Eye* 67). But while Sampson sees this as a freedom from hatred by unifying of father and son, the end of Chapter 3 appears conversely to separate the characters. Young Mahoney takes the position of parent while Mahoney behaves childishly as the novel progresses, firstly in Chapter 6 in the clash over Joan (34-38) and later when he asks his son for advice on a gift for the Brothers (advice he refuses) (119-120). Sampson focuses on the intimacy inferred from the feet touching: 'Self-esteem and individual autonomy are sacrificed in this scene because of the bond of "blood" and in recognition of a necessary compromise with the facts of the boy's circumstances' (*Outstaring Nature's Eye* 67). Sampson sees the characters are becoming joined at the cost of the self, which is arguably true in the context of the boy's lack of self-belief, a trait mirrored by his father. The boy is said to 'compromise' his self, which may be seen as his adaptation to the current situation in which he finds himself. Yet, as the novel unfolds, it is clear the boy is left guideless; the parental figures are found to be false and as clueless about

the world as he is. Young Mahoney fails ultimately to sufficiently direct himself, as encapsulated in the final chapter, which may explain the lack of a definite narratorial presence, described by Robinson as a ‘voiceless chapter, formally distinct from the multipersonal refractions of the preceding episodes, [...] [It is a] kind of adjunct of impersonal, belatedly modernist narrative’ (62).

Sampson’s analysis is highly effective too if it is framed within a reading of progress for Young Mahoney. The boy reaches the point at the conclusion of Chapter 3 where, in the ‘facts’ of his ‘circumstances’, he will have to ‘sacrifice’ something of himself to proceed toward adulthood, which is appropriate to Robinson’s ‘belatedly modernist narrative’. This also foreshadows his final decision to abandon university where he will sacrifice his real desire, because of lack of confidence, in favour of what is presented as a tedious clerkship. The space of the bedroom is the subject of a narrative strategy that implies the absence of belief and the presence of menace, abuse and ultimately confusion of the self, where the boy is compelled to sacrifice something of himself as he progresses toward adulthood. This confused self will ultimately be the obstacle to a fulfilled future. The empty waiting and idle passing of time bring together the use of realistic devices such as the ceiling, the brass bells and the moon, with a stylised metaphysical darkness and silence which manifests itself with a strange pleasure in counting. The demonised Sacred Heart of Mahoney crushes the boy to his most submissive, through a despicable massage. In the final joining together, a narrative soundtrack of screeching bats is followed by the striking vision of fleas feeding. McGahern constructs a measured scene in Chapter 3 which conveys the absence of the mother, the use of space and the employment of a range of narratological and stylistic techniques.

## 2. PRODUCTION V REFLECTION

The enormities of choice which face the boy in early to mid-adolescence through Chapters 4 to 7 result in the obliteration of positive self in the clash between Production and Reflection. Sampson argues the title of the novel is an allusion to a poem by W.B. Yeats titled 'The Choice': 'Although the presences of Joyce, Camus, Beckett and other writers may be detected in the novel, McGahern seems to have turned to Yeats for the book's title and its central image' (*Outstaring Nature's Eye* 64). Yeats is noted by Shovlin as McGahern's 'most important and most enduring influence' (10). Sampson quotes the lines 'The Intellect of man is forced to choose/Perfection of the life, or of the work/And if it take the second must refuse/A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark' (130, 1-4), which he leads into a juxtaposition of 'heavenly mansion' representing the perfection of work, while 'raging in the dark' reflects the artistic vision (*Outstaring Nature's Eye* 64). This interpretation is temporally situated in the middle of the novel, as ultimately *The Dark* leaves the boy pursuing the 'heavenly mansion' in the shape of the E.S.B. clerkship. But 'The Choice' is very applicable to the crisis of choice that faces Young Mahoney in Chapter 4. The options are a lifetime of farming, a university education, or a commitment to the spiritual life as a priest. The dilemma reflects the artistic question of pursuing a passion and abandoning economic security rather than settling for a steady wage and unstimulating work. It could be argued that another poem of Yeats' is equally relevant: 'The Mask', with its face of 'burning gold' and 'emerald eyes' (43, 1.1-2) and by extension Yeats' own connections with an 'assumed personality through which art is expressed', an aspect of the poet investigated by Margaret Mills Harper and which, she argues, Yeats wore throughout his career (57). It becomes early in *The Dark* that Young Mahoney will also have to wear a Yeatsian mask, one such as that stunningly described in 'The Mask', if he wishes to escape the farm.

Mahoney, whose power in the narrative is quickly disappearing in Chapter 4, takes the position of undermining education, at least early in the book: ““Exams,”” he says derisively at one point: ““By the columns of names these days in the *Independent* it appears that half the country will have passed an exam for something or other soon. Passed to ate one another if you ask me, for where’ll the jobs come outa? Only the ones with the pull will get the jobs. I know what I’m talking about”” (45). For Mahoney, academic endeavours are, to use a McGahern phrase, a ‘shaky venture’.<sup>16</sup> The father does not see the benefits of university training, noting the large number of qualified and unemployed people, and this suspicion of education will niggle at the boy throughout the novel. McGahern’s own position on education is contradictory. Sampson writes that ‘In and out of educational institutions, as a student and then, from 1955 on, as a teacher, McGahern was deeply sceptical of the value of formal education, for in his own case far more important were the development of his own spiritual life and the individuating power of knowledge’ (*Young John McGahern* 3). However, Stanley van der Ziel notes that in a speech delivered at a ceremony in his alma mater, St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra, Co. Dublin, which was first published in *Love of the World* posthumously, McGahern ‘dutifully emphasised the importance of education’ (*Imagination of Tradition* 2). Although there are limitations to the admissibility of McGahern’s words in the context of him receiving an honorary award, he does plainly state: ‘Any nation or society which does not place education in the very forefront of its values will soon have no sense of itself, apart from what Freud calls “narcissistic illusion”’.<sup>17</sup> Without knowledge we can have no sense of tradition,

---

<sup>16</sup> This was a phrase McGahern was keen to use as a metaphor for life. It appears in his novel *The Pornographer* (McGahern, John. *The Pornographer*. London: Harper & Row, 1979. 247), he mentions it to Mike Murphy (Murphy, Mike. (Ed. Clíodhna Ní Anluain). ‘John McGahern’. *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2000. 138), and also during the documentary *A Private World (John McGahern – A Private World)*. –Dir. Pat Collins. Harvest Films, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> McGahern’s quotation of Sigmund Freud appears to derive from a 1914 paper Freud published, although the exact terms do not come through in James Strachey’s 1957 translation. Freud, Sigmund. (Trans. Strachey, James). ‘On Narcissism: An Introduction’. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol 14. London: The Hogarth Press, 1957.



which must be continually renewed; and tradition is civilisation' (*Love of the World* 116). These conflicting positions may be marginalised by the common denominator of 'knowledge'. It is knowledge which the boy craves, of himself, of the world, of even his father. In *Memoir*, McGahern writes that he had never understood his father (226). In Chapters 4-7, access to the 'knowledge' becomes a conduit by which the son might escape the claustrophobia of living with Mahoney. Yet it is security, representing 'Production', which is privileged over the education which represents 'Reflection'. Father Gerald admits much later to the boy "Security, that's what everyone's after, security" (102), and the Reverend Bull Reegan is said to shout annually "Security. Security. Security. Everyone's looking for security" (136). This is particularly framed in Chapter 29. A faceless voice discussing a career in dentistry announces: "[Y]ou can get interested in anything if you're at it long enough and if you've enough money it can compensate for a lot. If you have to be scraping all the time for money see how long you'll be happy" (172). The questions put to the voice which probe the realities of this choice are not presented by McGahern as open dialogue: 'Why?', 'Will teeth absorb your life?' (172). This suggests an absent/present non-communicating consciousness, reflective of Young Mahoney's awkwardness socially, even though the voice's responses are punctuated and imply a connected discourse. The chance of a life being 'absorbed' by a career in teeth is dismissed, but the economic gains are promised through the romanticised mood. This communicates the difficulty the boy has throughout the novel communicating with people other than his sisters. He listens but does not speak, he is both absent and present, and it is the view of the voice which will persuade him toward the unstimulating career path. His response comes internally: 'And money was dream enough to soldier on too. Choice of car and golf club and suburban house, grade A hotels by any sea in summer, brandy and well-dressed flesh' (172-3).

In the boy's meditation on whether to pursue 'Production' or 'Reflection', he converts the voice's declaration of '[I]f you've enough money...' into material objects like a car, a

house, membership of a golf club. He notes the accessibility to further pleasures such as holidays, alcohol and a prime choice of mate. McGahern chooses to stylise this itemisation with a short presenting sentence followed by a listing of benefits to the material with a similar quantification method to that of the confessional. It is suggested as a military dream, soldiering on into a fantasy, the dream implying that the reality of this future will be much different to that imagined by the voice of Chapter 29. In Chapter 4, the choice which emerges is whether to apply energy to the 'Production' of a good or service, or to commit to a life of 'Reflection' on life's mysteries. The vocation to the church is a choice of 'Reflection', while the dentist who supplies a service and the farmer through his sale of goods and stock represent 'Production'. This question, which will plague the boy as he proceeds toward adulthood, begins to take shape in Chapter 4. Ironically, 'Production' and 'Reflection' can only be meditated on by absenting oneself from 'Production' and engaging in 'Reflection'. The reflective possibilities open to the boy are presented through Father Gerald who simultaneously dilutes Mahoney's presence. As Mahoney becomes steadily more absent, the priest's presence increases as it will do into the centre of the novel. Father Gerald provides the sole voice of positivity: "There are openings and opportunities today that never were before" (25). Young Mahoney can only dream about his mother and at times hates his father, but now a new figure brings 'good news'. This maintains the boy as he navigates the next period of adolescence. It provides him with an impetus for school, one which will lead to conflict in the potato field.

Mahoney loses control of the family home. Young Mahoney is no longer in his father's shadow as Chapter 4 progresses, yet still there is no escape. In Chapter 5, the boy will seek alone the pleasures of the flesh. His urge to become a priest does not disappear, but it becomes steadily more difficult to reconcile with his sexual appetite. This suggests a conflict of 'Production' and 'Reflection' in the absence of parental guidance. This is embellished through the boy's lack of a sexual partner. He can only masturbate to a newspaper, the same title which

Mahoney later uses to ridicule educations and exams.<sup>18</sup> The boy finds no solace either in Chapter 7's confessional, where the priest, absent of compassion, probes him with a series of pointed questions, demanding precision in outlining transgressions. The dialogue plays like a telephone exchange query rather than the spiritual absolutionary experience it purports to be.

Between these incidents, the boy reacts to a violent attack on one of his sisters by Mahoney. The absent mother is initially reflected on when Mahoney's agriculturalised sensitivities are exposed as Joan enters puberty. The father is then presented as devoid of maturity in the ensuing conflict with his son and speaks in a more juvenile way than any of his children, which is also highly influenced with his agricultural approach: "The whole lot of you are pigs, a vicious litter of pigs"; "Come on, try it, hit your father, the pup is stronger than the dog"; "A fine young cuckoo they'll have then" (37). Chapter 4 to 7 crystallises the absence of Mrs Mahoney as the key propagator of the house's inherent growing dysfunction. While the lack of maternal guidance for Joan in Chapter 6 is highly prevalent, the sexual behaviour of Chapter 5 and mechanised confessions, devoid of compassion, in Chapter 7 also problematise maternal absence in the male adolescent's world.

i

The problematisation of 'Production' versus 'Reflection' is measured in Chapter 4 by reference to the proximity of 'truth' within the opening scene. The pursuit of a career of 'Production', simply to survive, rather than because it is one's passion, is critiqued in *The Dark* as being 'untrue'. It is a performance, essentially a lie to oneself, even if it is an unavoidable one in the

---

<sup>18</sup> James M. Cahalan notes that McGahern confirmed the choice of the *Independent* was due to its conservatism at the time, evidenced by its popularity in convents (63). Cahalan, James M. 'Female and Male Perspectives on Growing Up Irish in Edna O'Brien, John McGahern and Brian Moore. *Colby Quarterly*.31.1. (March 1995). Print.

need to progress economically. In Chapter 4, the ‘Production’ versus ‘Reflection’ conundrum is filtered through public-persona falseness. The application of one’s life to an activity that is abhorrent but necessary is related by the hypocritical socialisation of the characters.

During the visit of Father Gerald at the outset of Chapter 4, honest feelings must be hidden as Mahoney only gives the ‘appearance of welcome’ (24). This is a guiding point for the progressing adolescent; there must be an absence of truth for survival, which increases his torment, and accentuates his longing for the simpler times of childhood with his mother. Along with the natural confusion of choice, the boy must also navigate the distancing false language used by Mahoney to succeed. Mahoney’s ‘appearance’ of a welcome to the priest is worse than no welcome at all, in the same way the ghost of Mrs Mahoney is more a torment than a comfort to father and son. The steel edge gilding the preparations is demarcated by McGahern’s use of heavily toned passive clauses: ‘A hen was killed’ and ‘cooked for cold chicken’ as ‘the cloth [is] bleached in the frost white’ (24). In this setting, the room remains ‘lifeless’ (24). Appropriately, early in the chapter, Mahoney isolates the hypocrisy of funerals, and remarks: “‘It’s some comfort to know that if you’re not buried for love’s sake, you’ll be buried for the stink’s sake at any rate’” (25). Father Gerald moves toward his temporary position as surrogate father by asking Young Mahoney directly: “‘What do you want to be in the world?’ [...] as the evening wore’ (24). Mahoney suggests: “‘He’ll wear out his bones on the few acres round this house and be buried at the end of the road’” (25). The ‘wearing’ of both the evening and the bones is a suggestive echo of the false persona that people adopt in society, and also a subtle pun on how those cloaks of falsity eventually erode the ‘positive’ self in the same way as unstimulating work would diminish the individual’s personal goals. This is another itemised depiction of the lack of ‘truth’. The boy’s response to the priest’s question is passive, appropriate to his juvenile need for guidance: “‘I don’t know, Father. Whatever I’m let be, I suppose’” (24).

Despite what has been revealed about the boy's inner discomfort in his situation, he presents the same false persona to the world, accepting orders to be whatever he is allowed to be, or as Sampson puts it: '[McGahern's] characters, much like Hamlet, ask themselves "To be or not to be" and the fiction represents the struggle to find answers to that conundrum' (*Young John McGahern* 11).

In Chapter 4, Father Gerald offers the boy the hope of "'openings and opportunities'" (25). This remark is interpreted by the boy as an invitation to pursue the priesthood. The chapter divides the paths open to the boy as the 'productive' value of the farm or industry versus the 'reflective' and spiritual qualities of a vocation to the church. The fire and the cold chicken illuminate the choices: the warmth of 'openings and opportunities' and the cold prophecy of Young Mahoney 'wear[ing] out his bones' on the farm (25). Despite his passiveness in open conversation, the boy thinks he would 'not be like his father'; he would 'be a priest if he got the chance', he would 'go free in God's name' (25). With this passage, 'desire' is linked to 'reflection'. Sampson analyses the formative philosophy of McGahern in this light: 'While this image [McGahern reading as a boy in a neighbour's large private library] of a boy on his own world may convey a sense of how he escaped from his father's aggression or began to develop a confident sense of self in adolescence, his capacity for concentration and pleasure is key to the formation of a distinctive self' (*Young John McGahern* 5). The qualities of concentration and pleasure are commingled. It is in this devotion McGahern will navigate adolescence, as Young Mahoney does by achieving success in education. The challenge of pursuing this concentrated 'Reflective' pleasure in an environment essentially of 'Production' is quantified later as the boy rages internally while preparing for his Leaving Cert in Chapter 18: "'Can the man not keep quiet? Can he not sit? How can I go on? I must be going crazy," you cursed, a night in late October, the kitchen hot and crowded, Mahoney's hammer going ring-cling-cling

on the rim of the bucket, the books useless on the table' (112). While the passage can be read as comic, it also foreshadows the late teenage crisis.

Although the boy is intrigued by the vocation toward the close of the priest's visit, it is unsatisfying in its open-endedness: "“Work at your books and we’ll see what happens” the priest said as he shook hands at the gate’ (25). This depiction of temporary hope, and then the vanishing of the provider of that hope, suggests the boy’s short life experience with his mother: the joys of being in her company, perhaps his only experience of ‘truth’ in a close human relationship up to this point, which is followed by those joys being obliterated forever.

Young Mahoney is left to ponder on the religious dream, reflecting on a life of reflection, in the absence of any concrete guarantees. Although Mahoney would propagate the farm’s ‘Productive’ qualities, it is a vocation of sorts for the father, one which offers its periodic qualities of ‘Reflection’: ““This is the way to live”” he says at one point during a fishing expedition in Chapter 2, an outing which is absent of joy for the children who become increasingly tense as they warily assess Mahoney's unpredictable moods (14). After Father Gerald has left, Mahoney, who will later demonstrate a bizarre respect for the church, jeers the advice given to the boy: ““Work at your books,” the father mimicked as his car left. “They’re free with plans for other people's money not their own. There he goes. Christmas comes but once a year”” (25). Mahoney is undermined by the priest’s special words of advice to the boy and he attempts to destabilise Father Gerald by calling out the lack of economic awareness in the visit, suggesting the productive agenda favoured by Mahoney on the farm and also the ‘once a year’ token gesture of Christmas, another period coloured by falseness in terms of hypocritical annual visits and gift-giving followed and preceded by a long year of absence. This will be later symmetrically revisited in Chapter 19. At Christmas, Mahoney decides he wants to give Brother Benedict a present of potatoes for educating his son in a scene rich in false manners:

“We wanted to show our appreciation,” Mahoney said and tried to escape this unaccustomed burden of politeness by joking, “The old potato helps to keep the wind out of all our stomachs, doesn’t it?”

“It does indeed,” it seemed from Benedict’s smile and ironic agreement that he was dangling Mahoney’s words before his face in the cold, was sniffing them with the most exquisite nostrils, as he would a dead field-mouse.

(121)

The lingering doubts are never resolved in the scene with Father Gerald, and the chapter makes a sudden temporal leap. After two pages have been devoted to the short visit, three lines narrate a full year: ‘He worked through the winter as hard as he was able and in summer won a scholarship to the Brothers’ College’ (25). McGahern’s decision to gloss over an entire year suggests a narrative technique reflecting the sudden adolescent speed of physical growth but also accentuates the absence of deliberation on the boy’s future, which creates the conflict that arises around the potato harvest.

When Young Mahoney wins a scholarship, Mahoney is devoid of specific guidance: “‘Take it if you want and don’t take it if you don’t want. It’s your decision’” (26). This is a remarkable conversion toward passivity from the earlier chapters of absolute control. Mahoney shifts the burden of choice onto the boy. Yet Young Mahoney has the perceptiveness to interpret this as a psychological ploy: ‘He knew Mahoney wanted him to stay away from school and work in the fields’ (26). It is the boy’s persistence with the school, his choosing of ‘Reflection’, which will ignite the furore of his father in the potato fields. The absence of the ‘truth’ then, like Chapter 3, also permeates this first section of Chapter 4.

ii

As the boy has commenced serious study a year after the priest's visit, the second scene of Chapter 4 presents a clash of vocation with practicalities. The stylisation of food and language and the narrativization of mirrored sequences illuminates the fears of the boy. As Mahoney plays out his 'vocation' as a farmer, his path toward satisfaction is blocked through the persistence toward 'Reflection' of his son and the weather. But the actual work in the field, the harvesting of the potato crop, is also carefully chosen. Jose Lanters treats McGahern's use of food in his early novels, integrating into his discussion what he describes as one of McGahern's chief influences, Patrick Kavanagh, and the poem 'The Great Hunger', by arguing that lines from the poem relate to a fear of starvation neutralises sexual frustration (31). The object of Kavanagh's poem, Patrick Maguire, "made a field his bride" and "lived that his little fields may stay fertile" while his starving spirit becomes "a wet sack flapping about the knees of time" (35, 1.57-59). The choice of 'Production' over 'Reflection' can be clearly related to the choice of work over marriage which emerges in 'The Great Hunger'. Lanters maintains that through an extensive analysis of the use of food in *The Dark*, the meals 'mainly make up for sexual frustrations' (35). However, the selection of the potato and use of food throughout the novel is more than simply a reflection of sexual appetite. It is also a sophisticated stylistic choice. It suggests the shortage of food during the indigenous tragic history of the area. The vegetable was struck with blight repeatedly in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland, which caused widespread famine (Kinealy, 'Beyond Revisionism' 28, 32). In handwritten drafts of the scene in Chapter 4, the crop harvested was oats, also highly relevant to the period (P71/31/3). But it is potatoes that Mahoney gifts Brother Benedict in Chapter 19. Young Mahoney awkwardly points out "It's cigarettes or whiskey that's usually given" (120). In a scene which becomes painfully hilarious if the boy's absurd sense of self-importance is recognised, he eventually agrees "I suppose you better give the Golden Wonders so," there was nothing else to say' (120). It is



notable that by this point in the novel the boy advises Mahoney. During the scene, the epidemic is also explicitly referred to by Mahoney when he responds to a musing by Brother Benedict that a study of the nation would unavoidably involve the potato: ““There was the famine the once it failed”” (121).

Food also becomes relevant when Joan returns home in Chapter 17. Mahoney tries to neutralise the awkwardness of the scene by providing a porridge of Indian Meal, also a food imported during the famine (Mokyr & O Grada 342). However, in this scene, only Mahoney ‘seemed delighted’ and ‘took delight’ in the apples for dessert (107). Early in the novel, Chapter 2’s fishing expedition is reflective of a survival option for those maritime counties affected, a food which would have been less available elsewhere. With fish, apples and Indian meal in Ireland as alternatives to the absent potato, *The Dark* meditates on the conundrum that one million people still died due to a potato blight. Kinealy writes that in the 1840s ‘disease and starvation existed side-by-side with a substantial commercial sector (‘Food Exports from Ireland 1846-47’ 34). In the same way as hypocritical manners were present in the absence of truth in the first scene of Chapter 4, in the second, the narrative framing is relevant to an underlying double standard reflecting the most significant epidemic in the history of the island.

Mahoney warns the boy his prolonged absence from farm duties will be his ‘own funeral’. This choice of phrase is relevant to the theme of growing existential crisis (26), also present in Mahoney’s outburst in the field: ““Nothing right. Nothing right. Nothing even done right. All lost in this pissin mess”” (27). Initially, the boy succeeds in balancing the responsibility of his schoolwork and the farm, but eventually conflict arrives. Despite the determinedly sparse prose, the naturalistic setting breaks through: ‘It came stormy, the sky a turmoil of black shifting cloud, and the wind so strong on the open parts of the road that not even stepping on the pedals could force the bike much faster than walking pace’ (26). Amongst the thin scaffolding, a rich and thematically resonant passage ‘forces’ its way onto the page,

reflecting the absent/present themes, drawing thunderous clouds as the father seethes in the potato field. Another measure of naturalistic heightening rises: ‘Between the lone ash trees, their stripped branches pale as human limbs in the rain, Mahoney worked’ (27). When it is clear Mahoney’s efforts are futile, he becomes crazed. He strikes ‘savagely with the spade’ and comes ‘blundering across the muddy ridges’ (27). His ‘savagery’ directs his ‘blunder’; the stylisation of Mahoney’s unHINGING reflects the animalistic lack of reason, and this pointlessness in the world is the greatest fear for his son. The father loses his temper, a characteristic paradoxically more human than animal. The church, already textually foreshadowed in the ‘candle-yellow’ of the rain-washed potatoes, is integrated in a subtle colloquialism: “‘Give me the bucket in the name of Jesus’” (27). As he realises “‘I’ll get me death out of this,’” he turns to the rain, as though the answer may lie in the nature which opened the scene. The paralysing of the boy by Mahoney, which has been an aspect of his father earlier, in his orchestration of the humiliation in Chapter 1, his gauging of the entire mood of the fishing expedition of Chapter 2 and his methodical use of mental, physical and even spiritual abuse of Chapter 3, is eroded further. This time, it is through the father’s loss of control and abandonment of the children and the field in driving rain and fading light. The children, not without reason, are devoid of sympathy. The father’s departure is coldly followed with “‘That itself is one good riddance’” (28). Even though the comment made in Mahoney’s absence might be supposed to come from his son, it is not attributed to any one of the children, but is, also neutrally, soberly criticised as a ‘harsh farewell’ (28). The children immediately dismantle the power of Mahoney, reducing him to a figure of fun in his wake: “‘God O God O God’” they started to mimic. It was an old game between them, it brought relief’ (28). McGahern’s sequencing establishes a rhythmic mirroring: as Mahoney mimicked the priest to undermine his power, the children echo this response with their father as the subject. This is the sole point in the novel where Young Mahoney engages in outward animation. The gush of emotion

brought on by the fellowship he finds with his sisters eases the boy: ““There is no need to be afraid”” he reassures Mona (28). When he adds ““[T]hey’re only bloody spuds when all is said”” (28), the boy and McGahern are demoting the concept and practicalities of ‘Production’ over ‘Reflection’, a position which will be further stabilised very near the end of the novel when the boy reflects:

One day, one day, you’d come perhaps to more real authority than all this, an authority that had need of neither vast buildings nor professorial chairs or robes nor solemn organ tones, an authority that was simply a state of mind, a calmness even in the turmoil of your own passing.

(188)

At the point of this passage, even the concept of education is no longer the ‘real authority’, inferring something even higher, a ‘calmness’ far from the scene in Chapter 4. In the potato field, the boy cannot appease his own adolescent sense of unease, dysfunctionalised by his father’s actions: ‘But why had things to happen as they did, why could there not be some happiness, it’d be as easy’ (28). The ‘happen’ mirrors ‘happiness’ which is lost. Ironically, the children then try to ‘produce’ joy with simplistic jokes:

“As I was going to the fair of Athy I met nine men and their nine wives, how many were going to the fair of Athy?”

“Only the one, the rest were coming.”

“Aren’t you clever now of the County Roscommon?” and they were beginning to laugh.

(28)

The tragicomedy of the potato field concludes with the lampoonery of the absent father and juvenile sketches as the children seek ways to understand his bizarre behaviour. The adjusted situation is defined at the conclusion of Chapter 4, when the boy returns having been unsuccessful in completing the potato harvesting. Again, the theme of food without contentment rings through. Mahoney sits beside ‘traces of his eaten meal’ (29). But this food has not brought him too much comfort: ‘[He] was more tired than angry, but he felt he had to squash the accusation of them standing there in dripping clothes’ (29). Even though Mahoney has just eaten and sits beside a blazing fire, neither food, light nor heat can settle his unnerved feelings, similar to the way light and heat tormented his son in the previous chapter. The boy bluntly tells Mahoney the picking was not completed. Mahoney notes: “‘They’ll be in a grand state if the frost comes’”. The boy responds patronisingly “‘I never saw frost and rain together’” (29). This is a subtle slight by the boy implying that in his short life he has gained a greater understanding of meteorological processes than his father, who has decades of farming behind him. Mahoney, however, is quite capable of responding: “‘Did you not now? You’re bound to know all about it too, aren’t you and you going to college too’” (29). But this retort is unsatisfactory: it becomes little more than an adolescent jeer. At this point father has become son, and son has become father. When the boy tries to modify the potato issue by noting they covered the picked crop, Mahoney continues to embarrass himself with another teenage-esque swipe: “‘I suppose you’ll be expecting a leather medal for that much’” he jeered’ (29). Even the award Mahoney would present would be devoid of precious metal. The use of ‘leather’ here is also a final attempt by Mahoney for superiority, recalling the ‘leather’ of the strap he had used to humiliate the boy in Chapter 1.

The chapter concludes by recalling McGahern’s aural strategies of Chapter 3, where silence itself is devoid of silence: ‘[T]he uneasiness grew if anything deeper in the silence where they listened to the overflow from the tar barrels spill out on the flagstones of the street’

(29). The unease that grows deeper in the ‘silence’ is paradoxically underwritten by the noise of overflow. This suggests the urine which ‘flowed from him over the leather of the seat’ in Chapter 1, while the chair covering is yet another connection to the ‘medal’ Mahoney had imagined shortly before (9). The second scene is a meditation on the clash of practicalities with vocation, one of the issues which lives in the boy’s mind and is enhanced by McGahern’s choice of the potato field as backdrop to the action and noun and adjective selection. The chapter in a total sense critiques rhetorical method in practical situations, encompassing as it does the fake welcomes, the ‘dangled’ hope, and the off-stage humiliation of the ‘leadership’ of the farmer Mahoney.

iii

The remaining first third of *The Dark* treats the adolescent experience after the boy’s realisation of transcension beyond parental supremacy by escapes to sexual fantasy, a heated conflict resulting from the new order of father and son and the rigid formality of the confessional. These highly charged events are also each devoid of vital parts: sex without a partner, parenting without disciplined reason, and confession without compassion. In the aftermath of the potato harvest drama, the boy takes refuge in his bedroom, where his indulgences are carefully recorded, foreshadowing Chapter 7’s confessional dialogue: ‘Five sins already today, filthiness spilling five times, but what did it matter, the first sin was as damning as a hundred and one, but five sins a day made thirty-five in a week, they’d not be easy to confess’ (31). The boy has no empathy for his physical longings; there is total lack of compassion for the self as the scene is narrated by McGahern. The guilt felt is visceral: it is as real as the one-dimensional image he masturbates to is false. The artificiality of the photo is suggested: ‘An ad. torn from the *Independent*’ (30). The image is ‘torn’, reducing its qualification as a stimulus, absent of any

real human presence. Further imagined passion from the woman in the photo is deflated: '[B]lack lips open in a yawn' (30). Even the image is an apathetic one. The masturbating self is itself dislocated from its host 'The eyes devour the tattered piece of newspaper as hotness grows. Touch the black hair with the lips, salt of sweat same as my own, let them rove along the rises of the breast. Press the mouth on the black bursting lips, slip the tongue through her teeth' (30). The 'host' is presented as operating organs of eyes, fingers and mouth as though they are somehow external controls, suggesting the adolescent body's natural desire to escape the surge of hormones; only the expelled sweat is attached to the personal pronoun. The self-defilement quantifies animal 'Production' *sans* the human 'Reflective' capacities of love, meaningful interaction and emotional pain. Essentially, the boy in the bedroom tries to control his fantasy via a 'Productive' use of his sexual organs, as in Chapter 3 his father used him as a surrogate wife. The boy is dysfunctionalised by the earlier abuse of Chapter 3, but also by the passive treatment of father and priest in Chapter 4 when critical life directional choices were being discussed. At the end of the chapter, the need for a female connection is linked with another inanimate image, a falling memorial card, literally recalling his mother's death:

A Memorial card slipped out of the first book. A black tassel hung from its centre, miniature of her wedding photo glued to the cardboard. Her small face was beautiful, the mass of chestnut hair. The white wedding dress drooped away from her throat. She was smiling.

(33)

Afterwards, the boy recalls his promise to his mother that 'One day I'd say mass for her' and then notes 'And all I did for her now was listen to Mahoney's nagging and carry on private orgies of abuse' (33). Mahoney's boot repairs draw out his animated dialogue: "'It was sprigs I wanted; not tacks, you fool,'" he tells Joan, and the boy thinks 'the one thing worth

waiting for was to see the hammer come down on his thumb and watch him dance and suck' (32). As Young Mahoney is 'torn' between the choice of 'Production' or 'Reflection', he struggles with his sexual development, ghosted by his mother, and finds recourse in observing the diminishing character of his father. McGahern significantly employs the verbs 'dancing' and 'sucking', relative to the female imagery during the episode of masturbation and the more romantic echoing of 'wedding' which is rich in the chosen photo on the memorial card, a wedding photo from which Mahoney is appropriately absent. Chapter 5 is effective in its delivering of the growing themes of *The Dark*, in its narratological strategy and stylistic verb choices, which reflect the adolescent crisis of absence.

This is followed in Chapter 6 by the final serious clash of father and son, which is an example of parenting without mature reason, another dysfunctionalisation of the adolescent experience into something even more challenging. Mahoney at this point is losing control of his house. His children are growing, becoming stronger and more wilful. His shortcomings are exposed in his non-navigation of an episode of adolescent menstruation involving Joan: 'There has only been one heavy beating in the year, a time over a shocking absurdity with cotton wool and a corset far too tight for Joan when her first flow of blood came to her' (34). Nature then has become 'absurd' in the dysfunction of the Mahoney home. In retaliation for this, Mahoney is 'frozen out', a strategy foreshadowed in Chapter 2, when the children wouldn't play cards with him. Mahoney is left alone at the card table also in Chapter 6, and 'as he felt his power go in the house he took fits of brute assertion, carried away by rage and suspicions' (34). The omniscient narrator in the chapter notes Mahoney coming in 'crazy to do someone after tripping over a bucket he'd left carelessly behind him in the darkness', a vision linked to Mahoney's antics with the bucket of Chapter 4 (34). Mahoney's perspective is quite different from the narrator's, accusing the children of "'throwing buckets out of [their] hand[s] for people to kill themselves across'" (35). He continues to contradict himself, presenting the only

adult voice in the house as unstable: ‘crazy to do someone,’ ‘crazy with frustration’ (34, 35). He targets one of the girls, swinging her by the hair as he criticises the hypocrisy of which he was guilty earlier after Father Gerald left: “‘I’ll teach you to lie. Talk about people behind their backs. I’ll teach you to lie’” (35). Mahoney’s double standards are further emphasised by the subtle arrangement of the echoed sentence, iterating the irony of him promising to teach Joan to conceal the truth from him.

Mahoney will later joke about his being a teacher in much lighter times as he keeps score during a card game: “‘Do you know, I’m like a professor now,” he laughed, emphatically mispronouncing, as he rakishly dealt the cards, a pencil behind his ear, the sheet of foolscap on which he kept the scores by his elbow on the table’ (107). The actuality is that Mahoney is unable to ‘teach’, hence his mispronunciation. For most of the novel his directions to the children are childish and underpinned by anger. It is only toward the final pages that Mahoney reaches a kind of maturity when the boy is clueless as to his future: “‘Well, we’ll have to think about it, a rash decision now could cause your whole life to regret it. We’ll have to discuss it, get advice about it, only fools rush rashly’” (183).

In Chapter 6, Young Mahoney is outraged by the violence toward his sister, his adolescent tension coming to present itself: ‘[H]atred rising with every word and move he made’ (35). The boy takes on Mahoney, receiving a palm across the face for his troubles, the only physical blow in a novel depicting ‘violent rule’ according to Siobhan Holland (190). In this carefully constructed scene, the high tension is washed out by the sluggish dialogue, absent of emotion:

[boy] “Get up Joan,” [...].

[boy] “Get her a drink of water,” [...].



[father] “You’d hit your father?”

[boy] “You wouldn’t swing a pig like that.”

[father] “I’d swing anyone that way, you too. [...]”.

[boy] “You’ll give no one the whip,” [...].

[father] “So you’ll stop it. [...]”.

[boy] “No, I’ll not hit.”

[father] “But you would hit.””

(37)

The boy is ‘drained and sick of it all’, while his hatred has ‘drained everything empty’ (37). The boy’s youthful enthusiasm is being ‘drained’ away by this conflict, like the dialogue is drained of animation. Mahoney continues his descension to childishness by comments such as: “‘You’d lift a hand to your father only for you’re too yellow, that’s all that’s keeping you back. And you’re the one that goes to school too, the makings of the priest. A fine young cuckoo they’ll have then. A priest, no less, and saying Mass and everything,” he laughed’ (37). This juvenile attempt at undermining the boy is partly successful, as the boy notes: ‘The violence had been easier far than the jeering and mockery’ (37). The space of the home becomes too much and as in Chapter 1, the boy retreats to the outdoor lavatory to settle.

Chapter 7 brings the treatment of ‘Production’ and ‘Reflection’ to an even greater intensity. It opens in an untypically rich way:

About the confession boxes the queues waited, dark in their corners, the centre of the church the one place lighted, red glow of the lamp high before the tabernacle and the candles in their sockets burning above the gleaming brass of the shrine.

(39)

The darkness surrounds the light in the church. The inference toward the Sacred Heart is again present in the ‘red glow’, reflecting the presence of the mother in the adolescent’s life. Following the careful detail of the church, there is a marked contrast in the illumination of the human presence:

Beads rattles, bodies eased their positions. Feet came in down at the door, step after step tolling on the stones as they neared the rails to genuflect before the tabernacle and turn to the boxes in the dark corners, eyes on them till they were recognised in the tabernacle light. All waited for forgiveness, in the listless performance of habit and duty or torturing and turning over their sins and lives, time now to judge themselves and beg, on the final day there would be neither time nor choice.

(39)

The ‘inanimate’ features of the church are ‘animated’ by the ‘dark in their corners’, the ‘burning’ in the sockets, the ‘gleaming’ of the brass, while the ‘animate’ worshippers are restricted in their animation, dislocated from their bodies, and active only through the non-demonstrative verbs of easing, coming and waiting. This surreal absent/present portrayal of ‘animate’ within ‘inanimate’ and vice-versa foreshadows the cold receipt of sins and business-like processing in the confessional, where the boy expects sanctity in a place of absolution:

“Confess then, my child. You needn’t be afraid.”

“I had impure thoughts and did impure actions.”

“Were these impure actions with yourself or someone else?”

“With myself, father.”

“You deliberately excited yourself?”

“Yes, father.”

“Did you cause seed to come?”

“Yes, father.”

“How many times?”

“Sometimes seven or eight times a day and other times none at all, father.”

“Could you put a number on them?”

“More than two hundred times.”

“And the thoughts?”

“More times than the actions, father,” it was all out now, one pouring river of relief.

(41/2)

The methods of hearing and absolving sins are reminiscent of a ‘Production’ line, rather than emphasising ‘Reflection’ on the transgressions. However, the boy does find the reporting ‘one pouring river of relief’ (42). The priest tells the boy he must do better, fight the habit, attend confessions every week, and make up his mind “to break that sin once and all now, tonight. Confession is worthless if you're not firmly decided on that” (42).

McGahern's choice of ‘worthless’ to convey the consequence of not ‘break[ing] that sin’ is highly significant. As the boy will later fail to desist from masturbation, even when he stays with Father Gerald, his feelings of low self-worth will be reinforced, and this contributes to the ultimate destruction of the boy’s university career. In the confessional, the priest does

not offer the boy sufficient compassion. There is no ‘sense of the priest’s understanding,’ as McGahern described the ideal of confession in the early *X* version of the scene. The priest too is relevant in his particular mechanical performance, indicative of his apathy with the sacrament. He merely executes his role without compassion: ‘Producing’ penance and absolutions, rather than encouraging ‘Reflection’. He encourages firm, finite ‘decisions’, rather than mature consideration of any potential blocks to self-development persistent masturbation might cause. Neither priest figure in this sequence of the novel is found to be compassionate. Father Gerald is passive and the priest in the confessional coldly formal. Young Mahoney will later move to Father Gerald’s parochial house for an extended period to consider becoming a priest. Despite the priest’s distant absolution, it is true that the boy does feel a sense of forgiveness as he leaves the confessional and briefly glows in joy: ‘O God, how beautiful the world was’ (42).

Once he feels he is completely cleansed, he is shocked at the absence of love for his father when he next encounters him: ‘in a moment one wave of violent hatred came choking over prayer and silence.’ (43) The ‘violent hatred’ brings noise which again comes over the ‘silence’. The noise can be quantified here as the noise of ‘Production’, particularly when Mahoney tabulates the boy’s penance as being short: “‘You can’t be long more’” (43). Mahoney reignites the presence of ‘Production’ while the boy is in the process of ‘Reflection’, a neat hybrid scene over the entire events of Chapter 4 to 7. This interruption infuriates the boy: ‘What did he know whether you’d be long or short, you might pray all night yet’ (43). He notes his thoughts are ‘without reason’ and remembers he is ‘supposed to love everyone’ (43). In a subtle move back toward a ‘Productive’ rather than ‘Reflective’ philosophy, the boy ‘mechanically’ rises (43). Sex without a partner, parenting without maturity, and confession without compassion, develop the mid-teen crisis through these three chapters. The boy is now beyond the father’s shadow, which was the absolute desire of the first three chapters; but he

has found by Chapter 8 that succeeding in this ambition does not provide release from the additional pressures in his adolescent experience.

iv

Chapters 4-7 are significant in their problematization of the range of choices that open up to the boy as his father diminishes and becomes almost absent in the novel until the final stages of *The Dark*. This enormity of choice is detrimental to the boy's well-being in the dysfunctional world he inhabits. By the opening of Chapter 4, the boy is consciously in what McGahern once described as the universal 'fix' of life (*Love of the World* 90). He is primed for support, and this is why he is so receptive to the words of Father Gerald. The boy has surpassed his father by the conflict of Chapter 6, and now sees him as 'absurd' (34), 'crazy' (34, 35) and 'foolish' (46). Yet his own position is still unhinged, and he will shortly seek another 'father' in the priest. Sampson writes: 'Young Mahoney's traumatizing efforts to make specific decisions about matters of major import – what to do about his violently abusive father, his vocation to the priesthood, his school examinations, and his choice of career – are the subject of a continuing reflection on the nature of choice itself' (*Outstaring Nature's Eye* 63-64).

The boy is traumatised by these experiences, and it is unsurprising that he will shortly race to the church as the possible answer in the absence of guidance. Samson interprets this period of decision-making and the book as a whole as a meditation on choice, but these chapters also underpin the trauma of the adolescent in the vital developmental phase from childhood to adulthood and the utter failure of Mahoney to provide adequate guidance. Mahoney is, in fact, 'absent' in his 'presence' in the home, no more than a manifestation of childish bickering during this period. The consequences of this ignite a mature sarcasm in the boy, not unlike the juvenile version of his father, and it could well be imagined that the son will become the father

in the track the novel leaves him on, eventually bitter and frustrated by unstimulating years of working as an E.S.B. clerk, in the same way as Mahoney is ‘crazy with frustration’ in his situation (35). Similarly, the mother Mrs Mahoney is also present/absent in the boy’s need for female company, sexualised at the outset of Chapter 5, and then romanticised at the conclusion of the same chapter. These chapters, like the rest of the novel, are mostly sparsely drawn, yet the embellishments of the weather in the potato field and in the church effectively stylise the narrative. The absence of these descriptive passages elsewhere increases their power, and their careful structuring is also linked to the thematic actualities of the scenes they inhabit. This is the use of visual tools, rather than visual aids. Instead of merely representing the backdrop, they quantify the absent-present themes of the novel. They invert black and white, or dark and light, so that the missing pieces of *The Dark* jigsaw (wife/mother and girlfriend/satisfaction) are all made flesh, as it were, by their non-appearance, in the same way as Mahoney’s ‘welcome’ is a false appearance, and his presence as an authority figure in the home is actually an absence.

The process of ‘Reflection’ is noted by Sampson as being ‘explicit in the consciousness of Young Mahoney and implicit in the dramatic conflicts that are basic to the structure of the narrative; it is through the symbolism and style of the narrative, however, that the reflection on choice is definitively pursued’ (*Outstaring Nature’s Eye* 64). This process, then, is narrated by these ‘basic dramatic conflicts’, but it is the semantic manipulation through this section of adolescent choices in the absence of direction which conveys the total erosion of ‘positive’ self in Young Mahoney. Robinson also notes this: ‘The violence of *The Dark* is not just in its represented scenes of beating or psychological bullying, but also connected to this annulment and mortification of individuated selfhood in narrative’ (48). All that remains is a ‘traumatised’ shadow self, which ironically blocks the boy from progressing at the novel’s conclusion. The

individual becomes obliterated in his tormented quest for direction through this narrative and stylistic strategy.

### 3. THE END OF ADOLESCENCE

The final two-thirds of *The Dark* narratively and stylistically expand the theme of absence and presence within the adolescent experience of Young Mahoney to larger stages. The delusion of childhood is ultimately destroyed, resulting in the ultimate triumph of 'Production' over 'Reflection'. The claustrophobia of Mahoney's farm dissolves and the narrative moves to Father Gerald's house, scene of brief hope for the boy, then to the 'grind of study' for the examination hall, and eventually the failed experiment of the University (110). These wider settings amplify the narrativised empty world of the novel while retaining the stylised action which McGahern used with sophisticated manipulation in the first seven chapters. This brings into clarity the boy's total underdevelopment and his eventual retreat to the safety of his father's direction. Sampson argues '*The Dark* is less a *bildungsroman* or a portrait of the artist as a young man (although it has elements of both) than an existential study of a consciousness in an indeterminate state' (*Outstaring Nature's Eye* 63). While this 'consciousness' was potted in the montage of events in the first third, it now becomes further exposed in its indeterminacy through the extended scenes in the priest's house, the study and the university. It emerges that once the boy is outside of the control of his father, he does not know what to do. His hopes in the priest's house are crushed, as they will be after the Leaving Cert when his joy is dampened even on receipt of the scholarship, and when his frozen personality deters him from settling into the university. In the eight chapter, Mahoney still attempts to control his son. However,

instead of dictating to him, he now takes a different approach, symbolically placing ‘his hand on the shoulder that was now almost tall as his own’ (46). The silent relay of feelings is perhaps tortuous to both parties. But McGahern never yields to emotive exchanges, always being stylistically sensitive to the restrained and oppressed thought in a natural way.

The ‘Joy’ that Young Mahoney feels as he exits the confessional is quickly quashed by the mere presence of Mahoney. Joy is for the boy a private emotion: any happiness he feels throughout the novel is within himself, unless it is demonstrated through the lively exchanges with his sisters. Mahoney’s interruption as the boy basks in the post-confessional bliss suggests an unauthorised ‘filling’ of the sacred emptiness of the boy’s silent reflection. The boy craves the void, clear from the babble of the house and demands of his mind; hence his regular ‘refuge’ in the outdoor lavatory (10, 38). Young Mahoney is temporarily freed from his constant guilt after the absolution of the confessional, and when Mahoney interrupts this, the discomfort is rendered into guilt as the boy turns pain onto himself. He recalls he is ‘supposed to love everyone’ (43). The need to love causes guilt rather than joy. ‘Love’ then reverts to ‘hate’ and arguably ‘fear’. This paradox suggests the confusion of Young Mahoney: in the absence of direction, he is narratively positioned as lost between a delusional father and an absent mother, animated by the ‘empty’ style of the novel. In this void, he becomes terrified as to the eventual outcome of his life.

After Mahoney has self-humiliated, imagining his future role as a lowly housekeeper to the boy’s eventual grandiosity as the parish priest, Father Gerald will become the father figure of the novel. Mahoney remains little more than a sideshow until his sudden and unexpected maturation in Chapter 30. It is the priest that takes precedence when he has a conversation with the boy in Chapter 9. Father Gerald is there on the pretext of collecting Joan to start work in Ryan’s drapery. Mahoney will soon be stripped of two of his children, as the boy had been doubly stripped during Chapters 1 and 3.



The section of Chapter 11 to Chapter 16 leaves Mahoney's house dismantled; only he and Mona reside there. Despite this, there may be an allusion to the real memories of McGahern's much larger family of six siblings, when the composition of Mona and Young Mahoney is strangely described as an 'army of children' (106). Devine reads this as indicative of a much larger family: 'We know the names of only two of the sisters' (52). However, the evidence over the course of the novel argues for a family composed of just a boy and two girls. Joan's disastrous experience in the shop also reflects the boy's failed adventure into the religious world. Chapter 12 recalls the abuse of Chapter 3, narrating Father Gerald's inappropriate late-night visit to the boy's bedroom in the parochial house. The reaction from Father Gerald when he learns about Ryan's sexual abuse of Joan is far from satisfactory for the boy, amplified as the job came from the priest's recommendation. Father Gerald's priority is limiting public awareness, not confronting Ryan. The very figure the boy put his trust in is found to be also devoid of the expected high morality.

Chapters 17 to 23 narrate the preparation for the Leaving Cert. The boy is now disillusioned with the church and transfers all his energies to the classroom. But this too becomes a disappointing experience, despite his ultimate emphatic success. He works through 'nights of slavery', noting that most of what he learns is 'useless rubbish' (146). The formal educational institution is critiqued here. The process does not provide him with joy, achievement or contentment; rather, he sees it as a box-ticking exercise toward conventionality. It is simply another escape from Mahoney and the farm. The conflict in the house has diminished completely, with the exception of a comical argument about the offering of prayers for the boy's studies, which obliquely invokes the themes of 'Production' versus 'Reflection', this time contextualising them within the existential anguish now becoming prevalent in the novel. After the boy has strenuously denied the validity of offering prayers, Mahoney is appalled. He concludes a furious retort:

“Such rubbish,” he went on complaining. “And in front of the children too. Puffed up and crazy, it’d choke you to live same as other people, wouldn’t it? You don’t even need God now? You wouldn’t ever have to do such a mean thing as clean your arse, would you, these days? Maybe it’s up in the sky you spend your time these days, having conversations with God, and not down here with the likes of us. And I reared you and let you to school for that. As if there could be luck in a house with the likes of you in it”.

(130)

Within this outburst, Mahoney is infuriated at the boy’s choice of ‘Reflection’, which is not the ‘same as other people’. He notes his son ignoring the ‘mean thing’ of ‘Reality’, involving such activities as ‘clean[ing] [his] arse’, and instead having conversations with God. To choose ‘Production’ would ‘choke’ the boy, perhaps in the way it ‘chokes’ his father. While the scene of Chapter 20 can be read as farcical, it also stylises the overall narrative of the last two-thirds of the novel, in its encapsulation of the boy’s persistence with choosing the reflective life of ‘education’, outside the church (contrary to Mahoney’s speculation), which is implied to have the consequence of existential fear in the dysfunctional guideless adolescent. Mahoney certainly distrusts education: ‘atavistic fear was in the eyes that looked on the quiet books on the table in the lamplight’ (125). Even the stylisation of this sentence is richly complex in its semantic tautology: ‘eyes’ which ‘look’, voiceless books which are ‘quiet’, set around the primitive blindness of Mahoney to the value of knowledge, even in the ‘lamplight’. Mahoney’s perspective is finally privileged over the entire educational system as the boy turns to his father for help and reassurance that he is right in abandoning university at the conclusion of the novel. In a further late contradiction from his distrust of the church in the first chapters, Mahoney will seek advice from the clergy – in fact, anyone ‘as long as it’s some priest’ (46).

The last two-thirds of *The Dark* widen the scope of the novel but remain focalised on the themes of present absences in the adolescent experience, as the main character teeters on the brink of adulthood and makes formative experiences. Answers are never found in the church, or the exam hall; even the gruelling experience of studying and the hard-fought award is ultimately derived from ‘rubbish’ (114). The boy comes to the realisation that the need for spiritual fulfilment may come from a ‘real authority’ (188). This ‘real authority’ is represented as indigenous to the original home, perhaps in the ghost of Mrs Mahoney, which, in the absence of her voice or memory from Chapter 5 on, may be the memory the boy tried to escape from, with some success evident by her disappearance from the text. The connection to the home is textually recognised by McGahern in his use of Mahoney’s partial return to controlling the boy.

i

The word ‘Joy’ is not easy to apply to the narrative of *The Dark*. It is described at one point, in perhaps a Beckettian aside, as ‘[T] he unnameable heaven’ (25). In the same way as other absent presences, it is conspicuous by its scarcity. Potential joyous occasions, such as the fishing expedition or the exceptional results gained in the Leaving Cert, remain strained. Happiness does not happen, and this withdrawal of joy is clear as the boy leaves the confessional at the beginning of Chapter 8. The absolution of his sins is a strictly private affair, another ‘dream’, like the scenes with his mother. Sampson notes the boy’s capacity for fantasy: ‘It is as if the author wants to indicate that the boy’s dream of separating his own consciousness from the father’s shadow is a vain and self-indulgent fantasy, that his desire to escape his fate is an understandable but unrealizable yearning’ (*Outstaring Nature’s Eye* 67). Young Mahoney’s attempt to separate his worldview from that of his father is ‘vain’ and ‘self-indulgent’, his need to escape ‘understandable’ but ‘unrealizable’ and he can only attempt it by

living in his private world. However, Young Mahoney also suffers from a typically adolescent degree of unqualified self-importance, and it is his absence of maturity that now becomes relevant for the rest of the novel. Mahoney's 'Joy', emerging through his 'laughing', is only 'by way of greeting' (44). Stylistically, the 'Joy' is quantified as something to be utilised rather than analysed; it is not meditated on but manipulated for social transaction.

Mahoney calls the post-confessional experience a 'great feeling', yet instead of reciprocating, Young Mahoney is said to 'loath' the words (44). His 'own joy' is fragile, in the same way the adolescent experience is fragile (44), and he doesn't want it 'confused in the generality of another's confession' (44). His lack of social skills is already beginning to emerge, and it will be fully depicted in the late chapters, for example, through his dealings with O'Donnell in Chapter 28, where he is 'fearful of betraying [his] ignorance' (169). His ongoing difficulty in communicating with Mahoney is here narrated in the contamination of his private 'Joy' by someone with whom 'There never had been understanding or anything' (44). The adolescent is alone, even with his father, in this ideal spiritual world of a church after confession. 'Joy' is in fact converted to 'hate' qualified as 'fear', as Mahoney makes 'every advance or contact' (45). The joy is fleeting and too fragile to be satisfactory, just like the short-lived presence of the mother in the boy's life. His physical growth portrayed by the shoulder that was 'almost tall as [Mahoney's] own' does not either benefit him (46). The emergence from his father's shadow paradoxically opens the boy's mind to the new 'horror' of existential quandaries that will plague him for the rest of the novel, such as his confusion at the hatred he feels in the face of being 'commanded to love' (44-5). The 'Joy' of the post-confessional is found to be unsuited to the 'real world'. This is perhaps why the landscape of *The Dark* is so determinedly sparse. The 'Joy' the boy feels is devoid of genuine long-lasting contentment or growth. Its hollowness is illuminated by the ease with which Mahoney's touch destroys it. The

boy is immediately plunged into despair and he has no outlet to vent his fury, other than to ignore his father in a calculated humiliation as Mahoney talks outside the church.

The failure of the confessional is idealised in the earlier version of Chapter 8 in *X* where it is narrated as being more successful: '[I]n some measure Francie and his father walked in the joy of this beginning' (*X* 158). In this version, the 'Joy' is present for the whole scene, but it will be truncated by McGahern in *The Dark*, as the pair leave the church. The isolation of the boy is not eradicated by his father's presence. Ironically, it is increased: the boy still loathes Mahoney, his love is 'commanded', not innate or naturally developed (44). Mahoney takes on the role of waiting which the boy performed in Chapter 3. Instead of counting ceiling boards, Mahoney stands at the church gate and amuses himself 'pacing about in the cold, examining the lost things that hung from the spikes' (44). The adjectives 'lost' and 'cold', the verb 'hung' and the noun 'spikes' are careful stylisations to suggest the isolation of the boy's feelings as he meets his father and begins to search for answers in the world. The spirit of the post-confessional period is not present in the empty silences of the pair walking home: 'breaking time to avoid the pot-holes filled with water' (44). This device has been described by Stanley van der Ziel as a homage to Anton Chekhov, and he argues it is 'not only a parody of the realist aims of Stendhal and Frank O'Connor to place a mirror in the roadway. It also puts into practice Chekhov's advice about the most effective way of suggesting a moonlit night, as the starlight reflected in the water of the potholes in that sentence in *The Dark* precisely replicates Chekhov's "bright little star" flashing on a fragment of glass on a mill dam' (*Imagination of Tradition* 132). Yet it is still more than this. Even the lowly pot-holes are more abundant now than the boy's spiritual state. The boy's emotional void is pronounced in the 'loathing' and 'troubled intensity' which evokes his particular existential crisis. He is in the 'fix' and his father provokes hatred as he speaks. The benefits of the confessional are eradicated.

Mahoney reanimates the children's earlier lively exchanges with comments about his neighbours and tackles his son with probing material questions: "Have you ever decided what you'll be when you grow up?" (45). Mahoney swiftly crushes the 'Joy' from absolution. Mahoney cannot absorb the 'great feeling' any longer than his son, directing their conversation into the boy's future as soon as possible, progressing from the 'Unreal' of post-confessional 'Joy' to the 'Real' of the material future (44). Joy and material is a false partnership, one that cannot mix, like father and son in the novel, exemplified through the way their blood was artificially joined by a flea in Chapter 3, in the same way 'Production' and 'Reflection' are an incongruous pair, as narrated through Mahoney's antipathy to the priest in Chapter 4. The boy responds passively to the father's questions: "It depends on the exams mostly. Whatever I get. There's not much use in thinking" (45). This is another irony and demonstrates the exact point where the boy realises the parameters of adult life as he moves toward late adolescence. He becomes aware of the need to adopt a 'falseness', to 'wear' the diplomatic cloak of adulthood, one devoid of honesty, as of course the boy is constantly thinking about his situation. Mahoney is not convinced by the mention of exams, noting "that half the country will have passed an exam for something or other soon" (45). But these exams may not secure work: "Only the ones with the pull will get the jobs" (45). Suitably, Mahoney is now tardily 'educating' the boy in the rhetoric his son has just used. The boy is already aware of the absence of truth in the world of employment. This is later crystallised when the boy defends the choice of taking the E.S.B. over the University by explicitly referring to his manipulation of language: "With the E.S.B., I'd be earning money straight away," you'd learned long ago the kind of reasons to present, no use giving your own reasons, but reasons closest to where it touched Mahoney' (184). In Chapter 8, Mahoney quickly dismisses any economic benefits to exams, even though he will later contradict this by gushing over the possibility of his son becoming a "Harley

Street” surgeon (124). While Young Mahoney can clearly appreciate the nuances of political machinations, he argues that ‘pull’ doesn’t count with some opportunities.

Mahoney becomes childishly tired of this thread of discussion and returns to the spiritual, beginning to imagine his son as a priest. This time, the spiritual world is managed on Mahoney’s megalomaniacal terms. The ‘spirit’ in fact does not direct son or father here. Both have received absolution for their sins from the priest, and ideally ‘go free in God’s name’, but as McGahern engineers it, neither can embrace the world on any conditions but their own (25). The opening paragraphs of Chapter 8 draw *The Dark*’s first section to a close. From the claustrophobia of the house, the bedroom and the confessional, to the boy and father’s staged exchange, the reader is directed toward the themes of the remainder of the novel, a triangulation of forces: church, education and convention. Each of these opportunities are speculated on in Chapter 8. The boy’s careful responses recall the humouring at the end of Chapter 4. His words “‘It depends’” implies an adult, maturely weighing up his options, in contrast to the heated enthusiasm rising quickly in Mahoney. At this point, Mahoney is devoid of power, clarified by his asking the boy what his plans are, in contrast to Chapter 4’s: “‘It’s not what you want to be, it’s what you’ll be let be’” (25). The spiritual loss of ‘positive’ self overtaking the boy becomes tangible in the narratorial context and language through the obliteration of post-confessional ‘Joy’.

ii

The aspect of fantasy in the boy’s meanderings is exaggerated narratively by McGahern through an absurd projection by Mahoney for their future selves as father and son walk away from the church in Chapter 8, which is a translated measurement of the boy’s impossible promise to his mother to some future day say mass for her. Young Mahoney is probed by his

father on his plans, a conversation which develops into one of bizarre imagination. During this, Mahoney's voice is described as 'gentle enough for once' (45). The boy feels a 'temptation to be easy, not to keep him always outside' (45). Despite his initial joy after leaving the confession, he still craves 'to confide' (45). He is primed to engage with his father here; 'the world' on his own, he notes, is a 'cold place' (45). The boy admits his consideration of the priesthood: 'I often think I might, if I could be good enough' (45). Mahoney pounces on this immediately, constructing a clearly realised dream:

"You'd be all reared then and I could sell the old land and come and live with you. I could open the door for those calling and find out what they wanted and not have them annoying you about everything. I could fool around the garden, and the bit of orchard at the back. We could bring the old tarred boat and go fishing in the summer."

(45-6)

Once the boy encourages a vision of him as a priest, Mahoney becomes uncontrollably excited, breathlessly propelling himself out of the current moment. His voice becomes untypically gentle. The boy too wishes to reciprocate in this fantasy; the cold world he lives in could be improved by joining his father in the dream. However, its unreality is soon evident. Mahoney completes his movement from 'husband' and 'father' to 'son' and 'wife' by making the outrageous suggestion he could be the boy's housekeeper, a servile assistant, in total contrast to his dictatorial presence in the early chapters. Mahoney goes to the extent of carefully defining the fantasy, visualising an orchard, fishing expeditions, him 'fool[ing]' around the garden.

McGahern's skill as a narrator of mirroring events is demonstrated when this 'Unreal' vision is reanimated in a 'Real' memory later. Father Gerald mentions he was 'driven crazy' by an 'old harridan of a priest's housekeeper who was trying at the time to run me and the



parish as well as the house' (64) and Young Mahoney meets the priest's replacement 'John', whose character is even more wooden than the boy (86-7).

The 'foolish' framing of Mahoney in Chapter 8 defines his flaws as a father. The boy cannot confide in him in this situation, remaining in the 'cold place' of the world. The parameters of Mahoney's reality are unstable and crumbling, as the walls of security will collapse for the boy in the remainder of *The Dark*. The sober foundations of his father's hopes are absent. Instead of his son finding a wise counsel as they walk from the church, he is subjected to fantastical and absurd projections. This is Mahoney's dream but there is no response: 'He'd be given nothing. The dream was not the other's dream. Perhaps too much had happened or lives were never meant to meet' (46). In an extraordinary comment by the boy, his lack of connection with his father is such that he muses he may have been better never to have even met him, that he is baffled that they are related. But their commonality lies in this bafflement: as the father does not understand the boy, the boy is devoid of an understanding of the world. The boy will not engage in Mahoney's projections toward the end of Chapter 8. Mahoney grows 'aware of his own voice' and stops talking (46). After the 'eagerness' has left his walk, he is 'let seem foolish to himself, and broken' (46). This 'eagerness' attached to Mahoney has been absent for all of the previous chapters. But it too is quickly dismantled, suggesting the demolition of the boy's enthusiasm in the novel, a process launched in the textually absent emitting of a swear word, which occurred at the precise point prior to the opening of the novel, where the last of Young Mahoney's youthful hope was present. Now Mahoney is being crushed in the same way, hence the inverted progress of man and boy: man being crushed eight chapters after boy.

The boy humiliates his father by ignoring him, even when Mahoney makes the effort of putting his hand on the boy's shoulder. Here, physical contact is appropriate, in contrast to the behaviours of Chapter 3. In the absence of intellectual sense, the father finds physical sense.

In the sequencing McGahern presents, it is as though Mahoney could only attempt to parent the boy when his son was no longer a child. A similar event occurs at the end of the boy's visit to Father Gerald. After the isolation of the hypocritical world the boy faces, the priest's 'hand rested a split second on your shoulder in reassurance' (102). By the time the boy really sees himself as a priest it is too late:

That you were going home today was a shock. With Joan, before evening, you'd face your father. Now that it was lost, this house with the priest and John seemed a world where you could have stayed. You wished you could tell Father Gerald that you wanted to stay here for the rest of the holidays. You wished you could tell him you were on your way to be a priest. You'd stay here in the long summers from Maynooth. But that was changed, it was lost, and there was a horror of attraction about it now that it was lost, your dream had strayed about it now, and you felt the pain as you poured milk over the cornflakes and tried to eat.

(103)

At the end of Chapter 8, the boy is in the midst of his dysfunctional realm and, with a sophistication developed since Chapter 4, he coldly ignores his father's final musings. Mahoney asks for approval for his dream: "[W]e'd have good times that way, wouldn't we?" (46). This recalls the confessional need for 'understanding' which is something the boy is unable to provide, and more than his father can reciprocate. This crisis of humanity is elsewhere isolated by McGahern through Luigi Pirandello, from whom he quotes:

"But don't you see the whole trouble lies here in words, words. Each one of us has within him a whole world of things, each one of us his own special world. And how can we ever come to an understanding if I put in the words I utter the sense and value

of things as I see them; while you who listen to me must inevitably translate them according to the conception of things each one of you has within himself. We think we understand each other, but we never really do.”

(Pirandello qtd.in *Love of the World* 261)

While McGahern uses the quote to ‘show the awareness and the presence of the older language in our literature in English’ in his essay ‘What is My Language?’, it is telling in its selection by the writer when projected against this confusion of Young Mahoney and his father (*Love of the World* 261). Neither understands the other. According to the father character in Pirandello’s play *Six Characters in Search of An Author*, this is true of all humans and suggests the source of much of the existential anguish in the adolescent, further hampered by the amplified misunderstanding of his parent. The boy will not engage in Mahoney’s projections. The fantasy has been exposed for what it is: the ‘Unreal’. Mahoney grows ‘aware of his own voice’ and stops talking (46). Mahoney’s broken fantasy of the ‘Unreal’ is now reflected toward himself.

The boy eventually responds to Mahoney’s imaginings in a lifeless way: ““We would. We’d have good times”” (46). This is a tone a parent might use to ‘humour’ a simple-minded child. There is no connection here: understanding is absent, reflecting the ultimate failure of the confessional. The boy cannot voice his concerns; his thoughts are drowned out by Mahoney’s incessant fantasising. Eventually, Mahoney returns to the moment: ““What do you think the chances are that you’ll go on?”” The boy is non-committal: ““I don’t know. It’s too hard to know. It depends on too many things”” (46). McGahern stylises this sentence by echoing the verb ‘to know’: in the ironic absence of knowledge. The emptiness of the page after this line, without explicit narrative closure, suggests Mahoney’s utter failure to adapt to the world following his wife’s death, much less prepare his son for the demands of adult life.

Chapter 8 crystallises the contradictions and ironies of *The Dark*. Mahoney criticises the priest after he leaves in Chapter 4, yet he dreams of his son joining the church in Chapter 8. Mahoney's softening toward a vocation is indicative of his ego: the pleasure he would take in his son's powerful future position in society. The loss of his son as the natural inheritor of the farm is compensated for by the vision of Young Mahoney donning the alb of the priest. Now Mahoney imagines he will eventually abandon his farm, his tunnel vision identifying his future role as the boy's housekeeper. But while this is only a service position, Mahoney paradoxically adds elements of some power, in turning away parishioners. Mahoney is still hungry for control and even begins to erode the role of the priest in his dream by inventing some of his own influence. Mahoney moves from the later servile 'John' to the 'old harridan' version of housekeepers, and finds a way to imagine his importance, massaging his ego as he places himself as keeper of his son's house, replicating the role he has attempted on the farm. It is the likely advancement of Mahoney's position which constitutes the sole interest he has in his son's future.

The boy does not explicitly engage in Mahoney's fantasy. He never reciprocates the dream, preferring to voice caution and pointing to variables, the many things which his future depends on. Yet the dependence, or powerlessness that the boy notes is no longer based on the clownish pondering of his father. At this point, there is no clear replacement, only the white space that finalises the chapter after the son has spoken. The spiritual joy, material pursuits and fantastical projections of Chapter 8 encapsulate the mid-adolescent's deep hurt as he lives spiritually alone, motherless and the son of a tormented idealist. Mahoney is devoid of reason: as the focalisation shifts from his character he remains in the background, parenting the rest of the family in the same way. Yet it is appropriate that the absence of Mahoney in many of the remaining chapters still increases his contribution when present in the narrative. The spirit of the mother is not present in Chapter 8; the boy is unlinked from her influence at this point.

iii

The remainder of the novel narrates the boy's pursuit of escape and ultimately his lack of self-belief reunites him with his father in 'Reflection'. The narrativization and stylisation continue to relate back to the opening themes of the presence of absence in the world of the adolescent, this time focalising on the late teen period. Chapter 9 opens with rich naturalism, in contrast to the earlier plunging directly into action, suggesting the boy's hesitant growth and his future in deliberate poetic metaphor: 'The line of black cattle trailed all that winter round the fields in search of grass, only small patches in the shelter; always a funeral of little winter birds in their wake in the hope that the rocking hooves would loosen the frozen earth down to the worms' (47). There will be a line of 'black', a 'search', a 'funeral', a 'wake', all relating to the boy's intense existential craving for answers, in the same way the cattle crave grass all winter in the patchy field. Like the winter birds hoping for worms, Young Mahoney follows the 'black' of the church after the 'funeral' of his childhood. The noun 'hooves' is a subtle reference to the devil in the boy's eventual moving away from the church, perhaps due to the same pride of Satan. Devine also notes the link of Mahoney's pre-massage words in Chapter 3 ("Even Up Above there was trouble" (19)) to the Satanic fall (56). The workmanlike 'rocking' of the hooves denotes masturbation: the hidden worms wrestling beneath the frozen surface are reflective of his urges, which struggle beneath the rigid, lifeless character he presents to the world. In Chapter 9, Father Gerald begins to take the role of surrogate father. His calling to collect Joan is a narrative pretext for another more serious discussion on the boy joining the church:

"Do you still think of the priesthood?"

"Yes Father, if I could be good enough."

(48)

The boy doubts he would be 'good enough': an odd turn of phrase which suggests the priest being more 'good' than everyone else. Yet his qualities are a minor issue as the priest soon explains. The priest notes the very 'pull' which Mahoney isolated earlier as the currency of success rather than exams: "Doors open under the right pressures. We are cousins. And if we cannot help our own who can we help!" (49). Instead of being 'good enough' it is, in fact, a matter of 'doors' opening under certain 'pressures'. Success is quantified here in McGahern's work as having less to do with the presence of talent than with the presence of political power in its many forms. This conversation foreshadows the boy's visit to the priest's house the following year, where he will serve Mass, observe the business of the parochial house and prepare to become a priest. Mahoney, in his more restricted role, absents himself during the visit from the conversation between his son and Father Gerald: "We'll leave the lad and yourself together, Father. You might have things to talk about, school and that, together" (48). The echoed togetherness of priest and boy is another irony. Mahoney is outside of the pair; they are now a unified bond in Mahoney's view.

Holland has noted Mahoney's preparations for this visit in wearing his new boots (51) 'as a symbol of his complex relationship with the patriarchal hierarchy which legitimises his violent rule within the home' (190). The father imagines his son is becoming elevated to what he concedes at this point, but could not concede in Chapter 4, to be the higher position of the church. Holland argues this is an institution Mahoney draws on to justify his actions (190). Mahoney's contribution is limited to a comic observation when he learns the priest wants to discuss the boy's vocation only after the exams: "He meant he'd buy the calf when it was reared a bullock" (51). This is suggestive of Mahoney's ability to parent his child only when the child reaches maturity.

By Chapter 10, Mahoney's power is further diminished, as he doesn't 'seem to care so much, mostly complaining or absorbed in tired introspection' (53). Mahoney now is ironically moving towards a 'Reflective' mode. At the priest's house in Chapter 13, Young Mahoney too becomes explicitly reflective: 'Why are you here?'; 'To think about being a priest' (82). The boy imagines the consequences of joining the church, the sacrifices it would mean for his life, and speculates on the experience of marriage through McGahern's sudden stylistic expansion:

Dream of peace and loveliness, charm of security: picture of one woman, the sound of *wife*, a house with a garden and trees near the bend of a river. She your love waiting at a wooden gate in the evening, her black hair brushed high, a mustard-coloured dress of corduroy or whipcord low from the throat, a boy and a girl, the girl with a blue ribbon in her hair, playing on the grass. You'd lift and kiss them, girl and boy. Then softly kiss her, your wife and love, secrets in eyes. Picnics down the river Sunday afternoons, playing and laughing on the river-bank, a white cloth spread on the grass. Winter evenings with slippers and a book, in the firelight she is playing the piano. In the mirror you'd watch her comb her black hair, so long, the even brush strokes. The long nights together, making love so gently it lingered for hours, your lips kissing, "I love you. I love you, my darling. I am so happy".

(82-3)

McGahern's use of a future tense ('You'd lift and kiss them', 'you'd watch her comb her black hair'), present tense ('[S]he is playing the piano'), and progressive tense ('[Y]our lips kissing') in this passage relates the uncertainty of the vision's manifestation. The tone is one of wistfulness, something that might, but probably never will, happen. It is imagined with such precision, including the nagging religious connotations of 'white' cloth, that it recalls the specificity of Mahoney's dream after the confessional in Chapter 8, and it is critiqued in this

way as being equally unlikely. This dream, like Mahoney's, soon dissolves, for the boy now finds himself within another claustrophobic space, an existentialist philosophy which cripples the adolescent: 'You'd have to give up that to be a priest, but it would come to nothing on its own anyhow, the moments couldn't be for long escaped. Death would come. Everything riveted into that' (83). The presence of mortality is unavoidable no matter the colour of the dream.

The paradox which McGahern attempts to untangle in this novel is the very presence of mortality made absent by the world and its contents, whether that is by people's personalities or the activities they pursue, and how this becomes prescient to the mind of the developing adolescent, particularly one who resides amongst the added dysfunctions of the Mahoney house. The inexplicability of life and death is a presence which is bizarrely absent from common 'Reflection' in the everyday life of people's 'Production'. When the boy's torment by Mahoney has disintegrated, he finds himself even more distraught as he wrestles these impossible questions: he teeters on a life which becomes increasingly uncertain and unbearably fragile. The boy integrates religion into the dream of the future: 'How would the innocent afternoons on the river look from hell?' (83). The choice of a family is implied here as condemning his soul to an afterlife of damnation as a punishment for turning down his vocation.

At the end of Chapter 14, the boy begins to crave home: 'At least in your own house there was life, no matter what else' (88). The abuse of Joan by the shopkeeper Ryan is used as an opportunity for Young Mahoney to abandon his visit to Father Gerald's and decide to also give up on the vocation. It does not interest him anymore, and this is stylistically portrayed by his vision of the parochial house: 'This utter sense of decrepitude and dust over the house – the clocks, the bulldogs, the mahogany case of books, the black leather armchairs; the unlived in room' (88). The lifeless space contains a number of clocks, contrasting with the singular green



one in Mahoney's bedroom, the many black leather armchairs also reanimating the single leather seat of Chapter 1's humiliation. The furnishings of Father Gerald's house magnify it beyond the farm the boy has left; this space is even worse than home, increasing the antipathy the boy feels for the church. Father Gerald ultimately admits in strict confidence the hypocrisy of the adult world. In what Devine describes as an 'extraordinary confession' (51), the priest tells Young Mahoney 'If you are a good priest you have to walk a dangerous plank between committees on one hand and Truth or Justice on the other. I often don't know. I often don't know' (100). The priest foreshadows Mahoney's about-turn to reason at the end of the novel, by honestly itemising the conflict of 'Truth and Justice' and 'committees' (100). The boy returns to Mahoney shortly afterwards.

The vocation abandoned, Young Mahoney applies himself resolutely to education in 'One long grind of study' (110). The 'absent' background noise that he had missed in the middle section is now a 'present' hindrance to his study. He brings his books to a bedroom he has been provided with and finds the work soothes him, absenting himself from his thoughts: 'The only way to get release was to work' (113). Yet, his existential conundrums are never far away: 'Death was all that mattered, it gave quickness, that was one accent you'd never lose' (113). In contrast, 'Life was the attraction, every instinct straining its way, and it was whether to be blind and follow, and work was a way out' (113). Life then, is qualified as a 'blindness', an ignorance, while death embraces 'quickness'. The only way 'to live' is to ignore the realities of 'death'. The boy's application to his work is the sole route to escape these thoughts. But this too becomes a disappointing experience, despite his ultimate emphatic success. He works through 'nights of slavery', noting that most of what he learns is 'useless rubbish' (146). The formal educational institution is critiqued here, with the absence of 'Real' logic in the energies of 'Real' learning. The process does not provide him with 'Joy', achievement or contentment;

rather he sees it as a box-ticking exercise toward conventionality. It is simply another escape from Mahoney and the farm.

Young Mahoney succeeds in winning the scholarship to university, but as is the established pattern now in the narrative, the joy is short-lived. The boy is greatly embarrassed by his father's insistence on drawing attention to the success to everyone they meet while having a celebratory dinner in the Royal Hotel, a feast at which the two sisters are significantly not present. The priority for Mahoney is the social signposting of his son's brilliance, rather than a unified family celebration.

When Young Mahoney reaches university, he is still isolated, his association with the student O'Donnell is limited, the girls he craves are 'unattainable' (177). Education does not satisfy him any more than the church. His agony is crowned by being ejected from a physics class, absented from a lecture which is focused on physical presences, ironically for the crime of smiling. He immediately telegrams his father, indicating a desire to take the clerkship with the E.S.B. This position is much less stimulating, but, as he noted during his preparation for the Leaving Cert, it is easier to work than think. The boy has ultimately turned to 'Production' over 'Reflection'. To facilitate his 'Real' choice, the boy explicitly refers to his manipulation of 'Unreal' language as he explains his motives for the decision to his father: "“With the E.S.B., I'd be earning money straight away,” you'd learned long ago the kind of reasons to present, no use giving your own reasons, but reasons closest to where it touched Mahoney' (184).

Mahoney's return to the action in Chapter 30 and response to the boy's desire to abandon university for the E.S.B. is marked by unexpected sagesness: "“[O]nly fools rush rashly”" (183). Mahoney has found the patience in life that at the outset of *The Dark* he could find only in a card game. This rationality would have been inconceivable in the first seven chapters. At this point, Mahoney extends the family support the boy has craved through the

novel. Despite the boy's canvass for 'earning money straight away', his father appears to be no longer as hungry materially: "We'll have to take everything into consideration" (184).

After Mahoney seeks counsel from some restaurant customers who, by majority, support the productive choice of E.S.B., the pair again share a bed. In these final scenes, Mahoney returns to religion for an answer to the quandary: "[T]he best thing we could do is get a priest's advice" (185). Mahoney is attracted to the Franciscans' 'gentle' manner (185). They meet the Dean who reasons out the boy's thoughts:

"You're afraid of failing?"

"I am, Father."

"You'd not have to worry about that in the E.S.B," [...].

"No, I'd not have to worry."

(187)

Young Mahoney cannot make the final decision between 'Production' or 'Reflection' but is forced into a choice, engineered by the Dean and quantified by the minimisation of worry. This recalls Mahoney's final advice before the Leaving Cert: "Don't worry, not to worry is the important thing" (140). After the boy meditates on 'a real authority', he realises only a spiritual solution will fill the void which has dogged him in *The Dark* (188). His father summarises all the calamities that have passed, by introducing Mrs Mahoney for the first time in open dialogue:

"It might have been better if your mother had to live. A father doesn't know much in a house. But you know that no matter what happened your father loves you. And that no matter what happens in the future he'll love you still."

“And I’ll always love you too. You know that.”

“I do.”

(191)

In a strange turn of phrase, Mahoney appears to doubt whether it would have been better if his wife ‘had to live’, which also relates to the prevalent existential thinking about the difficulty of living. The scene concludes with a matrimonial ‘I do’ echoed from Chapter 3. The spiritual unification of the pair is complete, absent of relation to farm, church or education. Despite the eventual victory of ‘Production’, father and son are finally joined in ‘love’ through ‘Reflection’.

iv

Chapters 9-31 of *The Dark*’s narrate an extended existential meditation as the surrounds of the family home are dismantled, which similarly deconstructs larger social protections of church and education, attempts to reconcile all in spirituality, but eventually concedes to ‘Production’ over ‘Reflection’. This is framed through the post-confessional discussion of father and son. The projections of Mahoney toward their future selves creates uncertainty in his son, as he cannot take Mahoney’s dreams seriously, something detected by Sampson’s connection of McGahern’s characters to *Hamlet* (*Young John McGahern* 11). This struggle is most exemplified as the book nears its conclusion and it focuses on that quandary as it manifests itself in the late teenage mind. Sampson writes that for McGahern the solution to this was in his reading:

The increasing knowledge of a distinct selfhood appears to reflect a stage of questioning in adolescence, although when McGahern speaks of discarding received understanding

or “tenets” (a word that appears to be shorthand for religious beliefs), he does not introduce any sense of intellectual or emotional crisis. Rather, this stage of “recognition and discovery” is linked to joy, as if the imaginative pleasure of reading and intellectual enlargement are continuous, as if for him the “adventure” of learning and knowledge expanded awareness in a way that he welcomed and was not disruptive or alienating in its erosion of given truths.

(*Young John McGahern* 15-16)

The use of reading for McGahern as a method to cope is not available to the boy. If there is a notable flaw in *The Dark*, it is the narrative framing of Young Mahoney in the world of John McGahern and then the merciless withdrawing of the one bright light of ‘reading’ which sustained the author in his real life; hence perhaps another argument for the book’s title. This is possibly the reason critics such as John Cronin, F.C. Molloy and Michael J. Toolan have been highly critical of the novel’s conclusion, contrary as it is to the presumed *Bildungsroman* finale, a point noted by Sampson (*Outstaring Nature’s Eye* 62-3). Sampson’s use of the word ‘joy’ in his analysis of McGahern’s early reading is telling, as it is something the boy finds so briefly in Chapter 8 and which he craves at many points in the novel. The novel brings this absence of ‘joy’ to an intensified textual level; an absence which McGahern addressed by reading fiction in his adolescent life. In the last two-thirds of *The Dark*, the absence is filtered through voids of spirituality, of reason and physical presence in the adolescent experience on the larger stages, until the fantasy of childhood is completely destroyed. Ironically, it is a ‘Productive’ policeman who is the only restaurant customer to recommend the boy stay on at the ‘Reflective’ University. Young Mahoney instantly guesses the man is ‘obviously dissatisfied with his own position’ (185).<sup>19</sup> The path to convention is at

---

<sup>19</sup> Perhaps a reference to McGahern’s garda Sergeant father Frank McGahern. It is also relative to Sergeant Reegan in *The Barracks* who finds himself ‘stuck in a lowly position in the police force’ (Whyte 174). Whyte,

this point already clear to the boy as being unsatisfying, yet he still ironically chooses it, executing a final narrative device of major triumph for ‘Production’ over ‘Reflection’.

## CONCLUSION

A measurement of the narratological and stylistic strategies of *The Dark* illuminates the critical human experience of adolescence in a dysfunctional domestic situation which John McGahern amplifies by the specific use of absence as a presence. The book achieves this through its meditation on the adolescent’s sudden awareness of a need to know the self, normally answered by the reflective personalities of father, mother and the world. But this need to know is found in the novel to be dysfunctionally seeking outward. By the conclusion, the collapse of the boy’s independence crushes the positive and leaves behind the traumatised self, indicating the direction should actually have been inward.

Despite this endpoint of *The Dark*, McGahern’s persistence with the external rather than the internal is implied in a late interview with Hermione Lee: “I think that the only true journey to the self, the only true knowledge of the self, is through others and the knowledge of the world. Otherwise one is looking at the pool of Narcissus” (1).

This is perhaps evident in McGahern’s comment about perennially seeking outward for an answer which lies within, and the making of this haunting is a constant theme in the early novel. This aspect is interesting if it is brought alongside Joe Cleary’s discussion of the novel. Cleary calls *The Dark* ‘a bewildered, blighted *Bildungsroman* in which the generic impulse to

---

James. *History, Myth and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern: Strategies of Transcendence*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2002. Print.

development is stymied by a sense that while the enclosure of the family maims and brutalizes, the world beyond its confines is a Sahara of indifference and alienation' (160). In the context of McGahern's comments on looking without, Cleary's assessment of *The Dark* as a *Bildungsroman* finds its flawed coming-of-age as suggestive of the uncertainty of the outside world. The blighted version represents the best coming-of-age that can be achieved in the particular situation of *The Dark*. Furthermore, Mahoney and his hot kitchen are the better devil to know than the distant cities and towns.

Gregory Castle describes the *Bildungsroman* as having 'a biographical narrative, problems of socialization, the influence of mentors and "instrumental" woman, the problems of vocation – even when such rudiments are pared down to their essence, then to their absence' (4). *The Dark* can be said to fit with this template. It has these aspects to varying degrees: the narrative of adolescence, young Mahoney's awkwardness with girls like Mary Moran and later with O'Donnell at University. He is strongly influenced by Father Gerald and his father. The "Instrumental women" are absent and yet also direct the boy, in his fantasies and in the memory of his deceased mother.

In Franco Moretti's examination of the genre, he writes that 'the classic *bildungsroman* always conclude[s] with marriages' (22). He argues 'It is not only the foundation of the family that is at stake, but that "pact" between the individual and the world, that reciprocal "consent" which finds in the double "I do" of the wedding ritual an unsurpassed symbolic condensation' (22). While there is no marriage in *The Dark*, there is plenty of related imagery, including the wedding photo of Mrs Mahoney and the "I do" refrain at key points in the novel (20, 191). Moretti also maps out the main themes of the genre as happiness, education and living itself which are often the key desires of young Mahoney's thought process (Moretti 32-38).

Moretti's investigation into the late 19<sup>th</sup> century/early 20<sup>th</sup> century *Bildungsroman* concludes that '[N]arratives could concentrate either on kernels or on satellites: the late *Bildungsroman* chose the former, and modernism the latter' (234). *The Dark* responds to this in both aspects, as it particularizes the growth of adolescence while also formalising a wider theme on the growth of the new state.

The narcissistic reference, of course, is still an external view, the reflection in the pool portraying only the outer shell of the self and not looking truly within ('Narcissus'). This demonstrates that the critical narrative neatness of fiction can never be safely attributed to its author, as McGahern noted in the same interview: "Life has never to be believable and a great deal of it isn't" (7). This does not imply there are not many similarities with Young Mahoney and McGahern. However, while '[t]he pleasure and satisfactions of knowledge first came to John McGahern in his mid-teens, and the desire to pursue them arose from his own innate ability', *The Dark* presents a character where reading is not a pleasure that is prevalent. Young Mahoney does not have that 'innate ability' and he seeks this knowledge through the 'normal' parental conduits (Sampson, *Young John McGahern* 1). He is restricted in his family home by the dominant Mahoney, then massively disappointed in his experience with the surrogate father of the priest, while the joys of his Leaving Certificate success and experience in University are short-lived.

The ghost of Mrs Mahoney is sparingly imagined, her life narrated through the dreams of the boy and once-off mention by Mahoney. Her absent/presence manifestation is a constant in the space around the boy, even if her actual mentions are restricted to the first five chapters and once at the novel's conclusion. The absence of the mother from the natural triangle of parents and child is an additional burden in the adolescent experience. Her void is animated by the landscape in *The Dark*. The 'spirit' of the mother may be present, but the 'spirit' of hope that she represented during her life is absent in the way McGahern portrays this space. Mary



Ann Melfi colourfully describes the Mahoneys' house as 'a nuanced and powerfully shocking depiction of spiritual defeat where the darkness of "home" is demonstrated to be a portable and chronically inhibiting emotional property' (110). Melfi argues the absorption of the home is 'portable', a fact clear from Young Mahoney's onward paralysis to the bedroom of Chapter 12 with the priest, where he is unable to voice his discomfort. The 'chronically inhibiting' effect on the boy can most be observed in his failure to capitalise on a meeting with the desirable Mary Moran, which is his only scene with a female other than his sisters. The boy initially makes a reasonable effort at conversation ("How are you, Mary?"), but the hope of romance disappears shortly after and, in true adolescent form, he delves comically toward fantasy once more: 'She was gone and dream took over, Mary and you together, and married' (57). Yet this too is laced with guilt: 'But you couldn't even hold her pure, you took her into your mind a wet Saturday, excited her, put foul abuse in her mouth' (57). While the home lives on through Father Gerald's parochial house, the practical absence of the mother is electrified in the short example of the boy's paralysis around females. In McGahern's vision of the boy's space without the mother, there is also a constant sense of things needing repair, the boots, the potholes, Mahoney's hammering on the bucket (32, 44, 112). The novel's backdrop is continuously at odds with the boy, even his gazing at the ceiling over his mother's place in the marital bed is tainted by the menace of his father's late-night ritual. This continues into the wider scope of the novel, the cold, anonymous worshippers, the exam hall devoid of character, the faceless voices in the university.

McGahern's mother Susan, absented from the family through illness and ultimately death, is naturally a constant thread in *Memoir*: 'In the beginning was my mother' (203). His privileging of mother over father in *Memoir* is reflected in *The Dark*, written over forty years before and implies a deep and still living world, where the ghost of Susan McGahern never left her son.

The boy's essential early adolescent formation thus warped, he is not in the ideal frame of mind when faced with the choice of 'Production' and 'Reflection': that is, in his case, whether to continue tradition by working on Mahoney's farm or pursue his desire of a vocation to the church. These choices may change materially as the chapters progress, but they essentially still reduce to 'Production', the passing of time in the employment of a productive 'useful' activity, or 'Reflection', a reflection on life and the providing of the fruits of that reflection for the 'benefit' of others. McGahern links his own decision to his mother:

Without the promise that one day I'd say Mass for her I doubt if I would have been able to resist my father when he wanted to take me out of school. I did, in the end, answer to a different call than the one she wished for me, and followed it the whole of my life. When I reflect on those rare moments when I stumble without warning into that extraordinary sense of security, that deep peace, I know that consciously and unconsciously she has been with me all my life.

*(Memoir 272)*

It is not surprising then that the mother's absence segues into a choice for Young Mahoney into 'Production' versus 'Reflection'. McGahern argues that if it hadn't been for his promise to pursue a vocation, a vocation which would later change from the church to that of being a writer, he would have worked on the farm with his father. McGahern may not have said mass for his mother, but it is certainly arguable that for her he wrote many books. His comment that he believes she has been with him all his life was likely prescient during the composition of *The Dark*, its narratorial structure and stylisation bringing her ghostly presence to every step of the novel. The conclusion of the argument of 'Production' versus 'Contemplation' is never answered by Aristotle. However, Ackrill does offer:

The suggestion is that the very aim of moralist [Production] is the promotion of *theoria* [Reflection], that what makes a type of action count as good is precisely its tendency to promote *theoria*. On this view the ultimate justification for requiring and praising the sorts of acts and attitudes characteristic of the good man is that general adherence to the rules and standards he subscribes to would – in the long run and over all – maximise the amount of *theoria* possible in the community.

(140)

To perform morally (Production) will ultimately enable *theoria* (Reflection). However, in the anti-*Bildungsroman* context of *The Dark*, the boy's choices (Production) are hardly framed as promoting his *theoria* (Reflection).

The final two-thirds of the novel are situated in an existential bog of torment which is a conduit to the boy's absent father. Mahoney is not spiritually present in the first seven chapters; rather he is animated by his dysfunction. The father is wounded from his wife's death, the responsibilities of rearing three children and the pressure of farm life in an unforgiving climate. The narrative strategy of Chapters 1-7 present everything that is wrong with Mahoney. It is after this that the father is seen in a more forgiving light, foolish and pitifully out of touch for most of the book, but almost wise at the conclusion. McGahern isolates his early sympathetic psychological measurement of his father:

So completely had the normal world been subverted that some years later I told a priest who knew the family well, "We owe our father a great debt since he made so many sacrifices in order to bring us up." I spoke in all sincerity. My father had repeated this so many times I had come to believe it. The priest was amazed. "On the contrary, you owe him nothing, and you should tell him that. You didn't ask him to bring you into the world. He brought you into the world of his own free will, and in doing so incurred

responsibility for you all before God and the world.” Not surprisingly, I refrained from informing my father of this reversal of his view, but I began to look at him and us from that day forward in a new, changed light.

(*Memoir* 156)

This passage has many discussion points. Firstly, it reports a conversation of some forty years earlier and it can be argued it is not verbatim. Therefore, the echoed language of bringing ‘into the world’ can be considered stylised. McGahern, at this writing, may blame his father for his ‘existence’, and bitterness can be detected as he outlines his father’s antics as a policeman and attempts to ‘teach’ his children: ‘Did he know that what he was doing was wrong, or care?’ (*Memoir* 197). However, in the same way as the relationship with Mahoney and his son is contradictory, McGahern also confuses the issue with other comments in *Memoir*, this statement being narratively positioned prior to the mother’s death: ‘My father and I were still getting on wonderfully well. At times he made the two of us appear like a small opposition party of men in a house and government of women’ (101). The priest’s statement also places some blame on the church for the aperture which opened between John and Frank McGahern. One of his last pieces in *Memoir* brings the relationship of father and son into more neutral territory:

I knew him better by then [late in Frank McGahern’s life] than I knew any living person, and yet I had never felt I understood him, so changeable was he, so violent, so self-absorbed, so many-faced. If it is impossible to know oneself, since we cannot see ourselves as we are seen, then it may be almost as difficult to understand those close to us, whether that closeness be of enmity or love or their fluctuating tides. We may have an enormous store of experience and knowledge, psychological and otherwise, but we cannot see fully because we are too close, still too involved. There was also something

dark or forbidding in his personality that made people reluctant to speak about him, and he himself never offered any explanation for anything he ever did.

(226)

McGahern declares he knew his father better than anyone, yet could never inherently 'know' his father's psyche, and thus the underlying theme of knowledge as related by Pirandello and through McGahern's relationship with education emerges again. In the same way, *The Dark* exemplifies narratively and stylistically an absence of knowledge of son for father and of father for son. This is the root of the existential crisis which torments Young Mahoney. Rather than finding help from his father until very late in the novel, he is actually forced to become the parent through McGahern's narrative construct, replacing Mahoney. This is foreshadowed in the Chapter 6 conflict: "Get her a drink of water," you asked and one of the girls obeyed as decisively as if you were Mahoney and you didn't care or know' (37). This status is problematised much later when he becomes agitated by his sisters distracting him from study and he demands peace: 'You were their tyrant in place of Mahoney now, and you'd be too disturbed after to be able to concentrate again' (111). Some of the young McGahern's respect for his father as outlined to the priest is maintained in Young Mahoney: "You are marvellous, my father" (160). This, as McGahern would prefer, remains 'true' to the source of his work. In the late passage in *Memoir*, there remains a sense of craving for unity with the father. Indeed, it might be said this existential anguish is not only as a result of the absent mother but also because of distance from the father as it is narrated and stylised in the adolescent experience of presence/absence in *The Dark*.

## SECTION TWO

'COPYBOOK': A DRAFT NOVEL



Through the Perspex I saw Ash. He lay on the edge of the road behind the jeep. The red ball he'd been chasing had rolled across to the hawthorn ditch. His head lifted a little, the eyes darted, the body couldn't match the movement, the breath was tiny puffs in the air. It took me a couple of seconds to react, like I was on pause, a framed still in a nightmare. I turned, knocking over the neat green pile of my new first year copybooks. 'Dad! Ash has been hit!'

The image of the laptop screen was reflected in the window behind the far sofa bed. Human-like creatures walked along a dusty road amongst crumbled buildings and abandoned cars. They were like suspended puppets, with sections of stomachs, limbs missing, yet they kept walking. Dad paused the stream and looked up.

Outside, the evening was cool, summer fading, it was darkening at half eight. There was a short patch of ground between the mobile home and the road. I ran across in my bare



feet, green and yellow weeds spiking my heels, dad following. The jeep engine had died, the driver's door opened, sand-boots pressed into the ground. Midnight stepped out. He puffed on a King Edward.

'I'm after hitting a dog,' Midnight said to the phone at his ear. He reached into the jeep and pulled out a six-pack of Dutch Gold. 'No, a dog...I'll see you at half three so, Paddy.' He put the phone into his jacket pocket and looked at me. 'He came out of nowhere. I nearly went into the ditch.'

'He was after the poxy ball,' dad said, as he came close. 'He's blind in one eye. Shouldn't be on the phone anyway, should you, Midnight?' Ash had been half-blind when we got him, born like that, the people at the pound reckoned. We'd got him a few weeks after mam went away. He was a kind of replacement, there was definitely more life in the dog. Dad looked up through The Mackon village street and then left, out the road to the bog. 'We better get him in.'

Ash's head was still now, the eyelids blinked, he stared down the field, to the collapsed cottage at the end, hidden with ivy.

'Should you move him before the vet gets here though?' I said. Dad stared at me.

'I've no credit. I don't suppose you have, Tommy. Midnight?' Midnight handed dad his phone.

'Go easy. Not much on her either, Joe.'

Dad took the phone and rubbed his thumb on the screen. 'Sixty for a call out. You'll cover that will ya, Mid?'

'Fuck it, I got hammered this evening. Canter at Newhaven. Fixed, it had to be.'

‘I thought that was how your system worked?’ Dad stood back from my uncle. ‘Jesus, smell of porter! Where were ya?’

‘Down in The Tree. I only had a few. Waiting for Pock to ring. I didn’t want to be talking about it at home with her there. She came early on, going on about a turkey dinner.’

‘Ah, the loins, the loins...how are you cleaned out again already, it was only the twenty-fifth last week?’

‘Pock and the young lad just got the yoke on a truck,’ Midnight said. ‘Young lad got a van as well, but he was mad—’

‘Will you keep your voice down! I told ya, I don’t want to hear about it! I don’t trust that bastard.’

A white Ford Fiesta van, 1992, passed by at twenty miles an hour, the driver’s window down, local radio blaring. Tuohy sucked on a lollipop, stared at Ash as he drove. The van turned right at the breen just at the end of The Mackon village street.

‘Prick. You’d think he’d keep his eyes on the road,’ Dad said.

‘He knows the way home so well, he could do it blindfold,’ Midnight said.

‘More cheapo stakes in the back, did ya clock that? He has us tormented with his cattle breaking in—’

‘Joe, why don’t you do this job instead of that young fella. I’m going up at one tonight. Pock won’t care—’

‘Will you shut your mouth, alright?’

‘Dad, the vet?’ Dad looked at Ash, the black fur with specks of grey getting matted now with blood. He took a deep breath, then handed the phone back to Midnight. I was confused.

‘Dad! He could be running out of time! What’s going on? What about the vet?’

‘I think it’s a bit late for the vet now, son.’

‘But he’s still alive, he’s breathing?’ Dad knelt, gathering Ash up. The dog whined.

‘Are you sure you can move him like that?’

‘We need to get him off the road.’

‘Are you bringing him inside, dad?’ Dad walked toward the mobile. There was a large blood stain left on the road.

‘Come on son.’ Midnight took my shoulder. Dad had turned and gone around the side of the mobile with Ash. I ran toward him, catching my breath.

‘Dad? Where are you bringing him?’ Dad had lain the dog on the ground in front of what was to have been our sitting room window, but for some years now had remained just a windowsill. There were two lines of blocks either side through which Tuohy’s wandering cattle sometimes looked out, plastic damp course flapped at the edges, moss and green water stains coated the walls. I stopped at the gas cylinder. ‘Dad? The vet? Come on!’ Midnight was at the corner, running his cigar hand through grey curls. The ground was soft here, opened for the new house, it was less settled than the field beyond. I realised then it was the easiest place for digging. ‘Dad? What are you doing?’

Dad stood back from Ash, leant against the windowsill. He pulled out a squashed box of Major, lit up, instantly the stink of nicotine hit the air. ‘It’s a bit of a problem, Tommy.’

‘What problem?’

‘Sixty euro for a call out. That problem. The vet won’t even look at Ash for less.’

‘You could pay him later. He wouldn’t just let him die. He’s a vet, they care more about animals than money. Midnight, what about Ann, can you ring her, maybe she’d help us?’

‘Hmm. She’s not too happy with me at the moment, I’d say. I was meant to be back for that dinner a long time ago.’ Midnight scratched his jaw.

‘He’s only goin’ to put him down anyway, Tommy. We don’t have poxy pet insurance for painkillers, leg ops and all that jazz. Do you know the cost of morphine and anti-whatever they’re called?’

‘Dad, you don’t know what he’ll do. You want to just leave him there to die, is that it?’

‘No son, I’m won’t do that...’. As he spoke, I saw what was going to happen. I ran around the mobile, past Midnight. ‘Tommy!’

Inside, I pulled at the press door over the cooker. I looked on the counter, the table, around dad’s double bed. The keyring rattled as he came in.

‘No dad, please!’ I stood between him and the press.

‘Settle down son. The dog is in pain out there.’ Always willing to please, Ash whined into the night.

‘You can’t do this, it’s inhumane!’

‘Come out of my way!’

‘No!’

Dad took me by the shoulder, fingers gripping my bones, pushed me with power onto the near sofa bed, my leg rammed the corner of the table, pain spread. Dad slickly slid in the

small key, the door clicked open. He pulled out the parts: barrel, block, butt, levers, springs, the magazine.

‘No dad, please.’ I was shaking now, standing at the table.

‘I need to get this done, isn’t the animal in pain!’ He already had the rifle assembled.

I stood at the door. I could smell his meaty breath, the thick underarm sweat, the faint hint of piss where he’d dribbled. He slid a round into the mag. and clicked it on the underside of the barrel.

‘It’s time.’ He drew back the bolt.

‘No, daddy!’ Dad towered over me, a foot and a half at least, hair knotted over his thick arms, the shirt partly buttoned, grey chest curls spilling out, his head shining in the yellow ceiling.

‘Come out of my way!’ He was sick of this, I could tell.

‘Please!’ It had started raining, a fine drizzle you could hardly see, but I could hear the tiny pin pricks landing on the roof. It always made me feel safe in the middle of the night. Dad pushed past me. As he went outside, dark stains grew on his white t-shirt. When I followed him, the large blob of my uncle got in the way.

‘Come back in, Tommy,’ Midnight said. Dad disappeared with the rifle around the back.

‘No!’ I shouted after him.

‘There’s nothing you can do.’

‘Let me see him before...’. My vision was glassy. It was really going to happen, dad was going to shoot my dog. I couldn’t get any more words out. I pushed forward, but Midnight’s grip tightened, he was too strong. ‘It’s easier this way, lad.’

My nose was blocked, my eyes stung as Midnight pulled me back in. Inside, I could still hear dad moving around the back. Midnight sat across from me, opened a can. Through the Perspex, I could see the outline of dad standing over Ash in the dusk. The thin end of the weapon was pointed at my dog’s head.

‘Now, don’t be looking at that.’ Midnight pulled the smoke-blackened blind down, he took out the yellow cigar box and unwrapped another smoke. He found his Zippo in a jeans pocket. As he sparked up an orange flame, the shot rang out.

I lay down, turned to the pillow, wishing I was somewhere else, unable to kill off the image of the bronze hollow point round smashing through Ash’s skull.

‘We’ll get you another one, lad,’ Midnight said, as he took his can up. ‘It’s a short life for a dog, and yer man was getting on anyway.’

Now I heard the spade being picked up off the concrete subfloor in the new house where dad had flung it in a temper weeks ago. The digging began, sharp slices in the earth, levering up the clay. The rain had gotten heavier, the pin pricks on the roof had become a blanket of dull drilling. I could hear the jerking out of loose stones, heaving of the dirt as it was tossed in a pile. ‘Maybe you want a cup of tea?’ I heard Midnight fill the saucepan, light the gas. ‘Where are all the cups?’ I turned around, saw him root through the press. He definitely wasn’t going to wash any of the mugs piled high in the sink. Eventually he came over with a steaming beaker, the lid of my Roughneck flask from sixth class. When he put the tea beside me, he looked at

the folded clothes at the end of the bed, light blue shirt and navy jumper, grey trousers. ‘Starting school?’

‘Tomorrow.’ He looked at the crest. ‘You’re going to Ballincalty Secondary? Why didn’t he send you to Cloonloch?’

‘I’d have needed a bus ticket.’

‘If he was organised he could have got one. Ballincalty is a bit...’.

‘Rough. I heard.’

‘Go in by the football pitch in the morning. That’s what we used to do to keep out of the Wet Room.’

‘The what?’ The noise out the back had changed, fresh clay being returned to the hole, over Ash’s remains, back in the same place, but not in the same way.

‘That’ll take your mind off the little dog.’

‘What will? The “Wet House”?’

‘“Wet Room”. No, no, going to school. Sure, it doesn’t matter which one it is anyway, you’ll do well. All these books you have. You did good in the village school. You take after your mother. She had brains that one. See all them?’ He nodded at a pile of volumes on anatomy under dad’s bed. ‘They were hers, when she went to college for a while that time.’

‘Does she not still have them?’

‘What?’

‘Brains?’

‘Oh, she does, she does. Not like me. I could barely spell me name at school. But Sheila was bright. I remember her packing up all them books for college. Getting the bus down the country. She loved it, she’d be on about lectures, debates and all that.’

‘Why did she leave?’

‘Ah, she lost her way. I was in there this evening. An awful sight—’

‘Can you turn off the big light?’

I pulled the blanket over my head, Midnight slurped his can, dad raked the clay level, the rain still hitting the roof above. I woke once, I thought one of the other textbooks in the pyramids had slid off the table, but it might have been the gunshot going off again in my dreams.



I put some stones around Ash's grave. He was already breaking down underneath the scraws. I wondered had the earwigs and beetles got to him yet. I knelt and said a prayer. Images came of Ash running through the boggy acres of heather and marsh around The Mackon. I saw him race across the hawthorn ditches, finding a shady spot in the site on a summer's day, in the cool under the mobile during a downpour, or nosing through gaps in the stones underneath the ivy at the collapsed cottage.

I saw Ash eating dried pellets in the purple doggy bowl with white paws dad had lifted from Tesco one quiet Sunday. I saw him snoozing under the table as I tried to sleep, Midnight and dad playing cards until dawn, my uncle slurping cans of Dutch Gold and chewing King Edwards as he went on about his heroics out in 'The Leb', dad puffing Majors and sipping coke. Then I saw Ash trusting his one good eye as he tracked the red ball that cost him his life.

Some clay had gotten stuck on my school trousers. I tried to wipe it off. I'd woke early before seven. There were cans on the table, the ashtrays overflowed. Midnight's jeep was gone, and there was no sign of him or dad. I found sixty cents in change on the far sofa bed, slid the textbooks in my schoolbag, tidied my new light blue shirt.

At eight o'clock, it was time to start walking. I took one of dad's Cokes from the fridge and drank it as I left. I walked by the blood stain on the side of the road, the red ball was still in the ditch. I passed Tuohy's boreen. I could see his white Fiesta parked at the cottage. I went up through The Mackon village, by Sweeney's bar and shop on the left, the windows and doors boarded up with faded ply for as long as I could remember. Further on, dying summer weeds had grown in the playground at the back of our national school. Even Kilroy's garage looked abandoned, although I knew the mechanic would arrive soon in overalls. There were lines of stripped cars on the oil-stained gravel. At the front, dad's Avensis had been parked for months — it was still 'waiting for parts'. Only the church at the end, where the road turned for Ballincalty town, looked alive, with its mown grass, tarmac and rows of pine.

'Death Notices' played somewhere on local radio, a purple Micra came from Ballincalty. The car stopped beside me, the driver's window rolled down. 'Tommy!' Ann looked out at me, large ring earrings dangling. 'What are you doing out here? Your dad texted me. He and Jeremy got word of some security work late last night. I'm to bring you to school.' She smiled as I got in the passenger side. 'You have everything with you? First day, isn't it?'

Ann controlled the steering wheel by edging her thumbs around the base, her e-fag lit up as she dragged, little puffs of artificial smoke floated out. Rosary beads hung around the rear-view mirror, a statue of Our Lady was stuck to the dash. Some of the glue had spilt, ran down the front, it had hardened into a permanent stain. Part of the figure had come loose, and Our Lady tapped her right foot as we drove along the bog road to town. 'I had a lovely bit of

Goulash for Jeremy yesterday evening, but he never came home at all after he went to visit your poor mother. Not a call nor anything. What do you think of that carry-on, Tommy?’

It took about five minutes to get to Ballincalty. The terraced housing on the single street gave it the look of a town. We pulled in at O’Malley’s service station, beside the gates to the school avenue. I filled a tenner unleaded into the Micra. In the shop, students of all shapes and sizes pushed around. They were all familiar with each other as far as I could see. The rest of sixth class from The Mackon village school had gotten the school bus to Cloonloch College, six miles further on. I knew no one. Most of the people who could afford it avoided Ballincalty Secondary. Down at the deli counter, a blonde lad in an apron arranged paninis, gourmet sandwiches, Cornish pasties under a glass display.

‘Can I get a small sausage roll?’ I said.

The lad looked at me. ‘A mini roll? That’s all? One mini roll?’

‘Maurice! Maurice!’ The youth looked across the shop to the tills. O’Malley himself glared back, purple-skinned, squeezed into a shirt. ‘The scones! Get them out of the oven! Now!’ Maurice tossed my sausage roll into a paper bag, slapped a sticker on it and left it on the glass. Someone bumped against me. I turned around. A boy of my height slipped a Kellogg’s breakfast bar into his pocket as he turned the aisle.

At the counter, a queue had formed. O’Malley and two women wearing green shop jumpers took orders of breakfast rolls, biros, multicoloured foolscaps, chocolate biscuits, soft drinks. There was a girl with long blonde hair at the counter. She looked like a first year, she was buying chewing gum. O’Malley served her, smiling as he handed her the change. ‘Have a great first day, Rebecca!’

The Kellogg's bar lad was next. I couldn't hear what he ordered. 'Johnny Marley's son?' O'Malley said. 'And does he know you're in here buying tobacco? What are you, twelve? I'll give you "Twenty B & H", go on, get out of my sight, or you'll have a taste of me boot!' O'Malley spoke himself into a roar, spit flying across the counter. Marley made a 'cool it' sign with his fingers as he left, O'Malley's head was shaking.

We drove up the avenue lined with poplars. At the top, on the left, there was a tall square building, roughcast with small windows and green battered doors. 'That used to be the convent, before Mr Sherlock and the school took over,' Ann said, as we rounded an island of more poplar trees and came into the front carpark, which was full of buses and wandering students. 'Have a good first day, Tommy. I hope your father is back this evening. You look very smart in your uniform. You have everything? Your lunch and that?' I nodded and got out.

I walked toward the entrance, through groups of teenagers, most of them taller than me, they shouted and laughed over my head. There was a large group of girls at the front of the bus by the entrance doors. They weren't moving, they just stood chatting and blocking the way. I went down the end of the bus to get past them. There was a shout behind me. Marley came running. Two tall boys followed, one was Maurice without his apron, but there was still deli flour on his hands. Marley went around the bus and dived behind a bush at the wall.

'Where'd he go?' Maurice said to me, at the corner of the bus. I looked down the side of the building.

'In there,' I pointed at a green door.

'Good man!' Maurice and the other lad ran toward the door, the bush moved a little.

'Hey Mo!' A voice came from the poplar island. Another tall student came out of the greenery, tossing a fag butt on the tarmac. He nodded at the bush. Maurice turned, reached in

and grabbed Marley by the neck. An arm came around my head suddenly. ‘Another smart cunt!’

Before I could even turn, we were inside the green door. It was a long musty hall, cracked vinyl tiles, high ceilings, peeling wallpaper, coving crumbling. I struggled but the grip was too tight.

‘Let me go!’ I heard Marley. There was laughter.

We came through another doorway into a courtyard-type space, surrounded with walls, doors, three stories above with balconies. There were rusting gates tossed on the ground, worn and upended cobbles, scattered scraps of wood, some stacked window frames.

‘You can’t do this anymore, it’s illegal,’ Marley said.

‘Shut it!’ A palm smacked off Marley’s skull. We stopped at another doorway.

‘You’ll be locked up for this!’

‘Like you should be, you little thief.’ It was Maurice. ‘You think I didn’t see you all summer coming into our shop lifting things?’

‘What are you on about? You’ve no proof!’ Maurice pulled Marley straight up, pushed his hand into Marley’s pocket, the Kellogg’s bar slipped out. Maurice smiled.

‘There’s my proof. Do you think we are buying this stuff so you can come and take it for free? You little snake!’ Maurice made a clearing throat sound, then spat a ball of phlegm, which landed across Marley’s freckles. Someone clicked a phone cam.

‘Let’s get them inside.’ They pulled us through a doorway. It was an ancient gents’ toilet, a blackened channel ran along the wall. The washbasin had been ripped out, only rusting

pipework remained. There was a dirty bowl in a cubicle to one side. Part of the door was still attached to the hinges.

‘Welcome to the Wet Room, girls!’ Maurice opened his fly, pulled his lad out and filled the toilet bowl.

‘Are you sure about this, Maurice? His ol’ man being a lawyer and all?’

‘You wouldn’t be stupid enough to tell daddy about this now, would you, Jacqueline? You know we have all your thefts on camera.’

Marley struggled. ‘That’s not legal proof.’

‘Shut it!’ Another smack across the skull.

‘That was a bit dry in there, but it’s ready now.’ Maurice nodded happily, zipping himself up. ‘Go on lads, stick his fucking head in it!’

‘No!’ Marley was squealing as they dragged him over the rim. I cringed as they pushed his head deep. They let him up after a couple of seconds, piss dripping from his jaw.

‘Your ol’ man might be able to pull a few strings for thieving scumbags like you in a court, but there’s nothing he can do for you in Ballincalty Secondary,’ Maurice said. ‘Didn’t think of that, did you, Jacqueline? Daddy should have sent you on the buseo to Cloonloch with all his money, but he was too tight.’

Tears rolled down Marley’s face, mixing with the yellow beads on his cheeks and the remains of Maurice’s phlegm on his nose, drops of the mixture clung to his hair. Someone took another picture. ‘Remember Jacqueline, any word of this little party and this pic. goes public on Facebook!’

‘You’ll never get the ride in your life after!’

‘I wouldn’t say this fairy would be fit for that type of work anyway.’

‘Let him go!’ I said in a burst. Maurice looked at me.

‘Don’t worry, young lad, you’ll get a go too. Bring him over here, lads.’ They tossed Marley to the wall, one of them pinning him there with a boot firmly in the chest, while the others dragged me to the cubicle.

‘Who is this?’ Maurice said.

‘What’s your name, fag?’ One of the others stared at me, his face almost touching mine.

‘O’Toole.’

‘Oh, I know this fella.’ Another of the Leaving Certs nodded behind. ‘He lives in a caravan out in the bog. In The Mackon. The ghost village. The father is a pure sponger.’

‘What are you living in a caravan for? Dad too fucking lazy to work?’

‘Knack-a-lacks, are ye?’

‘It’s a mobile home, not a caravan.’

‘Oh, a “mobile home”, sorry. Something against the Travellers, have ya?’

‘Racist type cunt, is he?’

‘Wait’ll the McDonaghs in fourth year hear about this.’

‘They won’t be too happy, Mo.’

‘They will not. You think the Wet Room is bad?’

‘It’ll be a funfair compared to what they’ll do to ya, scan.’

‘Fuck this! Get him in the pot!’ They pulled me over to the rim, pushed my head toward the white bubbles, the piss smell was so strong, I thought I’d puke. I closed my eyes.

‘Hey!’ It was a voice from the courtyard. ‘That calf is from The Mackon. What did he do?’

‘Covered for this snake lawyer’s son. New first year.’

‘Looks like he’s had enough.’

Grips were released. I looked out the doorway to the light. I barely recognised Gerry Sweeney from the closed down shop in The Mackon. He’d been one of the ‘big lads’ in the village school when I was in Baby Room.

Me and Marley were tossed out a side door into a path near a football pitch. I took out my phone as Marley found an outside tap and washed his face. It was twenty past ten, we’d already missed three classes and we hadn’t a clue where to go. We didn’t even know how to get back inside the school. ‘Dirty bastards,’ Marley said, as he dried his face with his sleeve. ‘They’ll pay for that. They will pay.’

We followed the path along the old convent wall and came into a thick area of poplars, hawthorns, gorse and beech trees. Eventually we reached a wire fenced area, tennis courts with the nets all removed. Down steps beyond, there were double doors leading inside.

‘What happened with Maurice?’ I said, as we walked.

‘Just because I took the odd bar. Mean bastards. O’Malley himself is in bankrupt shite. The ol’ lad came across him a few times up in the High Court. It probably didn’t help.’



We went through the double doors into a square area with a red floor, walled benches, doors to classrooms amongst the blockwork, the end of a stairs.

‘Your ol’ lad is a lawyer?’

‘Solicitor. He has a practice in town.’

‘Ye must be loaded so. What do you need to steal for?’

‘I don’t need to. Did ya never lift anything?’

‘No. What—’

‘What is going on here?’ It was McDermott, the Vice-Principal. He stood at the foot of the stairs, holding a folder.

‘We got lost, sir,’ Marley said.

‘Got lost? And where are your name badges?’

McDermott got our badges from the secretary’s office and lectured us about the ‘importance of organisation’ as he led us to the French room. ‘Sorry to interrupt, Mrs Petit,’ the V.P. said, as he opened the door into a large classroom. The teacher turned around from the whiteboard. She’d just written ‘Bonjour’. ‘I found these boys wandering around the Resource Area. According to their timetable, they are part of this class.’

‘Thank you, Vice-Principal.’ The blonde girl from the shop, Rebecca, smiled in the front row. Me and Marley went down to the back of the room.

We followed the class around all morning until someone gave us a timetable. Most of the group seemed to know each other well, but the other Ballincalty kids didn’t seem too fond of Marley.

He sat beside me as we all had lunch in the Resource Area. I'd finished my cold sausage roll and was taking out my new books to have a look, when Marley pulled me by the arm. 'Come on for a fag, Tommy.'

'I don't smoke.'

'Come for the craic anyway.'

Marley led me out the double doors, up the steps through the tennis courts, where the Leaving Certs played soccer. Maurice sat watching in a corner, smoking a fag which was carefully hidden behind curled fingers. My phone rang as we got to the wood. The number was withheld.

'Hello?'

'Howya lad!'

'Hi dad.'

'Started school alright? Ann brought ya?'

'Yeah.'

'Fair play to her. We got a bit of security work. Up the country. Just got word late last night. You were fast asleep. There's a good few quid in the job. I'll be able to get the Avensis sorted out from the garage.'

'Oh. That's good.' Marley led me through the dirt path amongst the poplars. We passed groups of students hidden behind greenery, watching the double doors as they sucked on fags. 'Will you be back this evening, dad?'

‘Don’t know. It depends on what the boss man says, son. I’ll get Ann to collect you if I have to.’

‘Where are you working anyway?’

‘I’ve to go, Tommy. Credit’s out. Good luck.’

Marley had found a vacant gorse bush which had fairly good cover from the doors. He pushed into the middle of it, opened his fly and pulled out a box of Purple Silk Cut. ‘I’ve only a few left. That ol’ wank O’Malley stopped play this morning.’ Marley handed me one. It felt strange in my hand. I’d watched dad smoke them for years. I’d always hated the smell of nicotine. I’d been proud of my clean lungs as dad coughed, Midnight choked on filthy cigars. I’ll never smoke, I’d always said, yet here I was lighting one of the things. It tasted awful. I coughed out the smoke, it took a few pulls to get it to go down my throat. It was like I was trying to write with my weak hand. In my chest the smoke felt heavy.

‘They’re rotten,’ I said.

‘Don’t worry,’ Marley blew out a blue smoke ring. ‘They get better quick.’

I saw a flash of blonde through the wire netting. Rebecca walked with two girls from our class, one with tight brown curly hair, the other wore huge heavy-rimmed glasses under an orange candyfloss cloud. Marley followed my gaze.

‘Who do ya fancy? The blondie one, I suppose. Everyone’s after her. Don’t waste your time with that mug on ya. You should try them dogs with her, Karen and Suzanne. They’re more in your line, scan.’

At four o'clock I stood at the entrance waiting for Ann or dad. I watched Marley run down the avenue, Maurice and others chasing him. My head still stung from the sharp slap the Deli King had served up on the way out. The Principal, Sherlock, came out of the Assembly Hall. He was shorter than the V.P., but with his bullet head and dark eyes, he looked fiercer. He glanced at the name badge the V.P. had given me.

'Ah, Mr O'Toole. What happened this morning?'

'Got lost, sir.'

'With Mr Marley?'

'Yes sir.'

'Are you waiting for someone?'

'I...yes.'

'Perhaps you need a lift? Out to The Mackon? My car is here.' Sherlock nodded at an 07 Avensis parked right at the door.

'No thanks, sir. I'd say my dad will be here soon.'

'Very well.' He turned inside and then looked back at me. 'Mr Marley is not the best guide around these parts. See to it you place yourself in alternative company.'

'Yes sir.'

Sherlock went off toward the Resource Area, oncoming students careful to keep the far side of the corridor. I watched the country kids pile onto buses, the last of the townies hurry out the avenue. Someone stopped behind me. It was Rebecca. As I turned around, she glanced up, her brown eyes on me. I froze for a second, I couldn't breathe.

‘Find your way round yet, Tommy?’

I made myself smile. ‘Ha-ha. Waiting for a lift?’

‘Mum’s late for everything. Probably the same here too.’

There was a pause. Even though I wanted to keep talking, I also wanted to escape, the tension was awful, what if I said something really stupid, would she tell all her friends? She scrolled on her phone.

‘You on Facebook?’ I said.

‘Of course.’ She looked up, like she was going to say something else. A 12 Audi swung around the poplar island, a blonde woman driving, wearing sunglasses. Rebecca slid away her phone, pulled her schoolbag up on her shoulder.

‘See you tomorrow, Tommy.’

‘See ya.’ She was gone again. It was like someone had turned off all the lights in the world. Maybe I could message her later about homework, I thought then, as I saw Ann’s Micra come through the avenue gates.

St. Michael's Nursing Home was on the outskirts of Cloonloch. It was a converted national school. The tall Georgian windows and high ceilings reminded me of The Mackon village school classrooms every time we went there. There was a long hall of curling lino with wards to one side.

Someone pulled my arm as we came into mam's unit. I could smell strong perfume. 'Gerald? Gerald?' Nora let go of my arm. The woman that slept in the first bed stared at me. 'I'm going home this evening. I thought you were my son.' She straightened her red dress and left down the handle of a green suitcase.

I leant against the radiator at the window by mam's bed. Ann put Lucozade on the bedside locker, sat on the visitor's chair. When I'd started going to St. Michael's first, it had

seemed like a lunatic asylum, the figures grinning in the hall, twisting dishcloths in clawlike grips, others feeling their way by the radiator. The noise was the worst, yells every few minutes, the low hum of country and western music, rattling trolleys, slamming doors. There was a smell of floor cleaner everywhere. But mostly I didn't notice these things anymore, only the sudden beat of an industrial washing machine on spin cycle, or an aluminium plate cover crashing would break through. Everything else had melted into the background, like the paint and the tiles. Just like the residents often faded away, one week tugging at a blanket, fumbling with a beaker of cold tea and mashed up biscuit, the next nothing left there only a mattress, or no bed at all, locker, iron wardrobe swept away in a flash. When I was younger, dad said these vanishing patients had been moved to another ward, with a better view of the garden, or maybe they wanted to hear another radio station. There were only three residents in mam's ward, mam down the very end, Nora always standing by the door, waiting for Gerald to collect her, the third parked at the window across from us. She groaned every few minutes, staring at the ceiling, blanket tucked around her chin.

'So there's no news from The Mackon really,' Ann was saying. 'Joe and Jeremy are gone up the country doing a bit of work for a few days, some man they worked for before. I cooked a lovely Goulash for us on Sunday evening and Jeremy never came back at all.'

Mam sniffed in the seat at the window. She wore a white cardigan, grey skirt and slippers. Her hands were together on her lap, there was an ID band clipped to her wrist. 'Pat?' she said, her voice croaking.

'I don't know how he served in the army, he has no discipline.' Ann puffed on her e-fag. 'Doesn't Tommy look very handsome in his uniform?' Mam looked at her hands. 'I said I'd bring him in to see you, first day at the school and all.'

'Pat?' Mam said, looking to the hall, as though she'd seen something there.

Ann heated some beef casserole she'd made for me back at the mobile. I took out my homework diary, looked at my new timetable.

'Did you get much homework?' She brought the steaming bowl over to the table.

'No. First day.'

'When the lessons start, you want to keep on top of it, Tommy. Glass of milk?'

'Thanks. When's dad coming back?'

'Tomorrow, I think. Now, I need to go and get my own home in order. You'll be alright to wash up, won't you? If I don't hear from Joe, I'll be over at eight in the morning to bring you, okay?'

'Thanks, Ann.'

As Ann drove off, I tossed the plate in the sink. I took out my books. We hadn't done a lot at school, just looked through the courses really. The words were exciting: 'modules', 'syllabus', 'texts', even 'Christmas Exams'. The geography teacher had given us a short exercise. We had to write a paragraph on what we knew about the Earth's layers. I opened my copybook, wrote a sentence. I took out my phone, clicked on Facebook. A first-year group had been set up by the prefects. I'd gotten an invitation. I accepted and quickly found Rebecca. I clicked on her page. There was a great photo of her. DOB – 9 June 1999. Music – Taylor Swift, Adele. Favourite place – France. There were just a couple of other photos, one with her mother, them sitting on two deckchairs, a tray of drinks between them at a beach. Rebecca had only joined up a few months earlier, her timeline gave little more away. I clicked on the message icon. The cursor blinked. 'How are you?' seemed way too boggy, too The Mackon. 'Doing



your homework?’ was old-fashioned. ‘Hey’ probably too friendly. I tried out a few versions. My finger slid on the screen too quick and I sent her a message by accident. It read ‘Sxxx’.

I woke to groaning cattle. One of their huge heads banged against the Perspex, breath blowing up steam clouds. I pulled on my trousers and shoes, ran out. I shoed the cattle through the site, down the field, one ran in the doorway. There was a splash as his hole spat out a thick wave of green shite all over the floor of what was to have been our sitting room. I got them down to the end, some tried to get around the ivy, into the cottage ruin, but I turned them back through the gap they had tramped. Two of Tuohy’s cheapo stakes were on the ground. I pulled up one of the strands of tangled barbed wire, hooked it on a branch as a temporary block and hurried across Tuohy’s fields to his cottage. It was no wonder the cattle wanted to feast on our grass, Tuohy’s was all chewed to the butt. Dad always went over to tell him, otherwise he reckoned Tuohy would think we didn’t mind.

The cottage was mostly hidden by a rough box hedge around front and back. I climbed over a stone wall along the side of the field and came into the breen. Tuohy’s Fiesta van was parked down at the end. I went to his gate, but it was covered with the hedge. Tuohy had torn out a tyre sized hole for access. The path inside was cracked and moss-eaten, the green paint on the front door was peeling. I was thinking about whether to shout from the road or climb through the hedge, go up and knock, when I heard the jingle of the ‘Death Notices’ on the bog road. By the time I got back to the mobile, Ann was parked outside, window down, she drew on her e-fag.

Our Lady tapped the dash as Ann turned and drove up through The Mackon. ‘What were you doing in the field?’

‘Tuohy’s cattle broke in again.’

‘Oh dear. Did you get your homework done?’

‘We didn’t get any, the first day.’

‘Hit the ground running, Tommy. Do your work right. Don’t do what I did, leave school early and be a skivvy all your life. All those books in the mobile, under the sofas. They’re yours, aren’t they?’

‘They were mam’s. When she started studying medicine.’

‘Ah, of course.’ Ann tapped her e-fag over the ashtray, even though there were no ashes to tap.

I knew something was wrong as soon as we got into town. The bread man’s van was parked across the road at The Olde Tree. He was out on the kerb, on his phone, looking across at O’Malley’s. The shop was blocked off with blue garda tape, a wall of white plastic blanked the petrol pumps area. Pupils lined the cordon. Gardaí and squad cars were everywhere, two suited men stood talking at the side of the shop.

‘Oh Lord, not someone murdered,’ Ann said, blessing herself and touching the statue of Our Lady.

I was in the smoking woods at lunchtime, starving without my mini roll, before we knew any more about O’Malley’s. Another first year, Lally, joined us.

‘ATM Job.’ He looked at his phone. “‘Gardaí believe the unit was removed by a digger: probably a JCB or rubber duck Hymac’”.

‘Nice one.’ Marley was nodding. I saw Rebecca pass through the tennis courts. She hadn’t answered my message. I wasn’t surprised. A hand wrapped around Marley’s head.

‘Howyee girls,’ Maurice said, smiling as we were surrounded by Leaving Certs. Lally ran off. I was cornered at the gorse. I dropped my fag. ‘Hope that wasn’t you last night, Marley.’

‘If it was, we want a share!’

‘Wouldn’t have the balls, would ya, ya faggot!’ Maurice pulled Marley’s fags off him and started offering them around.

‘You shouldn’t have, Jake!’

‘Ah, but he insists!’ Someone knocked Marley’s phone out of his hands.

‘You want to watch your phone, scan.’

‘No worries, daddy’ll buy him another.’

‘I bought that myself.’ Marley was glaring.

‘With stolen money, you little knacker!’ Someone whacked Marley on the head, this time he kept his head facing the ground. I stared.

‘Hey fucko, what are you looking at?’ Fingers gripped and violently twisted my right nipple. When they let go, the pain came in waves. Then they were gone.

‘If you’re getting Maurice back, you might want to hurry it up,’ I said, trying to rub the pain away. Marley picked up his phone, found the crumpled fag box in the dead leaves. There were two broken cigarettes left inside.

‘Tomorrow after lunch, Tommy. I’ll need a bit of a hand though. We’ll have to toss a few classes, alright?’

The day passed quickly, everything was different to the village school, classrooms, teachers, voices, it was faster and louder. Rebecca was at the entrance door before me at home time.

‘Sorry about that message,’ I said, as I reached her. ‘I pressed the wrong buttons.’

‘It’s cool.’

‘Have you—’

Marley banged into me. ‘Tommy, did you see this?’ He shoved his phone in front of me. On the first year Facebook group, a link had been posted: ‘ATM RAID IN BALLINCALTY - WATCH LIVE!!!!’ The YouTube logo was below the message. ‘It’s got the whole thing, I— oh shit!’

Marley ran toward the avenue. I looked back down the corridor and saw Maurice and company coming from the Resource Area. When I turned around Marley was already at the poplar island. Rebecca was getting into her mother’s Audi. The Assembly Hall door opened, and Sherlock came out. Maurice and friends walked slowly past me and out toward the avenue. Marley was nearly at the gates. Before Sherlock offered me another lift, I decided to leave.

At the end of the avenue, a shiny 12 BMW swung in and stopped beside me. Top of the range model, huge spoiler, chrome alloys. The window rolled down.

‘Howya laddo!’ dad grinned at me. ‘Get in!’

I opened the door and got in. There was smell of leather and it had a walnut dash with computerised screens.

‘Did ya win the lotto?’

‘Boss man gave me the loan of it. He’s sound. Loaded, the bastard. I’m in love with her. If I get enough of this security work, I’ll buy it off him.’ Dad swung the car around and out the gates. ‘How’s the schoolin’ going? Getting all the lessons done, are ya?’

‘It’s only the first few days, dad.’

‘I know, son. But start as you mean to go on. Will we get a steak across the road?’

The Olde Tree was quiet on a Tuesday evening. One pensioner sat at the counter. Two Junior Cert lads played pool. Jimmy the barman sat on a stool behind the counter, watching Sky News.

‘Turn that off, all the action is in this town, Jimmy!’ dad said, as we came into the bar.

Jimmy looked over. ‘Ah Joe, hello!’ We sat at a table beside the unlit fireplace. ‘Do ye want menus?’

‘Just throw us out two steaks, Jimmy. Onions, mushrooms, peppered sauce and a couple of Cokes.’ Jimmy nodded and went out the back. Dad pulled in to the table, his leg jumping. ‘Fair play to Ann for bringing ya. We got a bit held up. One of Midnight’s army buds never showed, we had a couple of extra shifts. But it’s handy money. Working for lads that is loaded. Music guys.’

Maybe they were famous. Maybe dad could get me tickets. I could bring Rebecca to a concert, get backstage passes. That’d make up for that stupid message. ‘Who are the band, dad?’

‘I don’t know their name, Tommy. Something weird — thank you!’ Jimmy’s son, another Junior Cert, brought over the cokes, cutlery, napkins. ‘I just do their security, you

know. I don't get involved in any of that stuff. Pots of money in it. If I get enough hours, we'll be flying.'

'Any more news on that job across the road?' dad said, when Jimmy came back out. I could hear the steaks sizzling in the kitchen.

'They came with a JCB or something. Took the whole thing away. O'Malley is gone bananas.'

'Sure what does he care, it's the bank's loss,' dad said. 'And they don't give a hoot either. The only loser is the insurance companies, the snakes. They're worse than the bookies. Do you know how much me brother-in-law has tossed on horses? Them lot have his Army pension on direct debit every month. Got all his lump sum too.'

Jimmy looked out across the street. 'I'd be doubting O'Malley has cover at all. He was in some tangle a few years ago with the Revenue and insolvency. Up in the High Court. He has to do that forecourt perfect or the shop franchise'll pull out and go down the road to Corcoran's. I don't know he'll manage it.'

'He's not short, he'll cover it.'

'It was only filled Monday. There could have been a couple a hundred grand in it. Sharp men, whoever they were. Pros.'

Dad looked up, smiled. 'City knackers.' He swigged the coke. 'Comin' down here to the country bumpkins, terrorising the place. Bastards. I suppose the cops haven't a clue.'

'Couple of detectives came in here earlier.'

'Columbo types?' Dad laughed.

‘They seemed slick enough. But they knew nothing. Asking did we hear anything last night, when this side of the street is nearly all commercial. No one living here now, only a few foreigners renting down the end. Steaks will be just a couple of minutes, lads.’

‘The foreigners.’ Dad nodded. ‘You wouldn’t know, Jimmy. They could have been involved. Them fellas have different values.’

Tuohy’s cattle were gone when we got back to the mobile. At the end of the field, I saw he had just moved the same stakes to different positions. It was drizzling, the morning muck in the sitting room had turned back to liquid and was pouring out the half-built front doorway in a steady green stream. I got a text as I started my homework. It was Marley: ‘What ya think of video?’ I looked around for the laptop, but dad had already taken it, he was stretched on the far sofa bed swigging Coke, he’d launched his zombie series. He saw me looking over.

‘Get a couple of episodes down before that fool comes calling tonight. You’ve lessons for doing?’

‘Just a few things,’ I said, sliding my phone back in the pocket. The geography teacher had been happy with my paragraph on the Ozone. Now we had to write out a list of definitions. I got stuck into my work. After a few minutes, I could have been anywhere, even with the soundtrack of groans and tearing skin in the background.

‘Ugh!’ dad said after a while, someone was screaming in agony. ‘You should give this a go, Tommy!’

‘Can’t stand zombies. Can you turn it down a bit?’

‘It’ll be no good without the sound!’

‘Do you not have headphones?’ Dad’s phone vibrated. I got back into my paragraph on global warming.

‘Fuck!’ dad said, reading from the phone. He clicked on the laptop. The audio played on, but in the Perspex I could see he’d minimised the stream. He was on YouTube. Just before he went full screen, I saw the video title: ‘ATM RAID IN BALLINCALTY – WATCH LIVE!!!!’



The video wasn't a security cam, that was clear straight away, with the flash of curtain, the slight shake, and it was in colour. Dad left the volume muted. The groans from trapped humans became the soundtrack. O'Malley's Service Station looked weird in the semi-darkness. I'd only ever seen it in the daytime, buzzing with people filling petrol, getting briquettes, children munching crisps at the entrance, O'Malley scowling on his phone as he zigzagged the gas cylinders. I moved my copybook around so I could get the scene into view.

A truck had pulled up to the side of the street in front of O'Malley's. It was a large flatbed, twelve-wheeler, there was a JCB on the back and a steel container. Two figures got out real quick. I guessed they were male by their build, one tall, the other wide and short. They both wore black clothes and balaclavas. The tall man leapt up on the flatbed, got into the JCB. There was a pause and then a puff of smoke from its long exhaust pipe. The other raider moved

a lot slower, rubbing his back as he pulled down two ramps at the end of the flatbed. The JCB rolled off onto the forecourt. It sped across by the petrol pumps, smoke streaming, reached the entrance and the alcove that housed the ATM. The unit was sunk into the wall, steel cladding all around it. Above, there was a small window, with a flower box on the sill.

The bucket of the JCB lifted high, there was another burst of smoke as the metal teeth crashed against the brickwork over the hood, you could hear skin being ripped away by the zombies, blood spilling everywhere, as the bucket pulled away part of the wall. The sill above fell, the flower box hit the bucket on the way down, smashing against the tarmac, compost and flowers scattered everywhere. The bucket chewed the metal surrounds. Part of the cladding was attached to iron brackets, the JCB tugged each one out. The smaller figure looked on from the petrol pumps, turning to the street every couple of seconds. The unit came out of the wall, silver sheets of insulation slid around it. The JCB jerked. The unit was caught in something, one of the brackets, smoke rolled in thick clouds from the exhaust. The driver waved across, the other figure hurried to the steel container on the flatbed, opened the lid. He pulled out what looked like a consaw. He carried it over to the unit, bending under the weight. The driver pointed at the bracket. The smaller figure pulled the consaw cord a few times, smoke rose. He began cutting the bracket, sparks flew up into the night.

Dad's episode was now just one constant sound of low groaning. The show had the record for the least dialogue in broadcasting history. I glanced over, his eyes were locked on the screen. I could have snorted cocaine and he wouldn't have noticed.

The bucket pulled the unit away. The consaw operator dragged the tool back to the flatbed, stopping halfway to adjust his grip, rubbing his back after he returned the tool to the box. The JCB bucket now scooped up the unit, wires dragging underneath, some of the tarmac coming away with it, the whole thing jerked across the forecourt, the bucket then dropped the

unit on the flatbed, with bits of tarmac and a few bricks. The JCB moved around to the ramps and rolled back up on the platform. The driver jumped out, hurried off the flatbed, tossed up the ramps. The other raider was already in the cab. The flatbed turned on the road and went up through the town, lights off, towards Cloonloch. The next video started loading: 'WHEN ATM JOBS GO WRONG!!!!'

Dad reached for his Majors. I took out my phone, clicked on YouTube, turned the volume down, careful it didn't reflect in the Perspex. That's the trouble with living in a mobile home, it's like a world of mirrors, everyone can see what you're doing all the time.

Again, I watched the JCB come off the ramps, the consaw firing sparks, the unit full of cash dropped on the flatbed. The whole thing took less than four and a half minutes. Dad had closed the laptop, he was gone outside, on the phone. I could just see his silhouette at the road and the red-hot end of his fag.

Dad was moody next morning. I always knew when he was off. Usually he'd be saying 'Let's go lad,' or 'All right, Tommy?' or 'Where are me poxy fags?' But this morning all I got was grunting. Midnight hadn't come at his usual nine o'clock for their six hours of card playing. But I didn't think that was why dad was in bad form. He never even turned the music centre on as we left The Mackon, although the BMW was still a massive novelty, the smell of plastic, the purr of the engine. In Ballincalty, the forecourt was still cordoned off, but the shop was open. Dad gave me €2 as we stopped just where the truck had during the raid. 'You don't have to wait, I can walk up the avenue, dad.'

‘I might not be able to collect you this evening. Could have a job on. Midnight too. I’ll give Ann a ring, but I think she has some yoga shite of a Wednesday, he does be raving about having to cook.’

‘Midnight has to cook?’

‘He has to heat up his dinner in the microwave. One of the bogger lads’ll give you a lift. There’s a pizza in the freezer.’

I got out of the car. ‘I don’t really know them lads.’

‘Don’t be thick.’

‘Dad, I—’

‘Haven’t you a poxy tongue in your head? Ask one of them, will ya? And keep at them books!’ He drove away without waiting for a reply.

At the shop entrance, I could see in behind the white plastic. One of the suited men from the morning before, the tall bald one, I guessed he was one of the detectives, stood around the hole left by the unit. He looked up as I passed. The usual crowd were swarming inside, the two ladies and O’Malley clicking things through, the owner getting confused with every second order.

‘No, three fifty...it’s a breakfast roll...this is just a bacon roll? Why does it say breakfast roll then? ... Maurice! Maurice!’ O’Malley shouted across. ‘Is this a bacon roll? ... Then why did you put “breakfast roll” on the sticker, huh?’

I went down the aisle to the deli counter. ‘Two mini rolls, please.’

‘Two? Jesus, Tommy, you’re splashing out! You must have stole the ATM, huh?’

Where's that slag today?' Maurice forked out two mini rolls, tossed them in a paper bag.

'Maurice!' O'Malley shouted across. 'The Brioche!'

We had a double of Art first thing. Mr Coyne walked around the square of chairs and tables, he wore a woollen polo neck, his moustache creased as he spoke, his hands were deep in his corduroy pockets.

'So children, let us begin by asking the question: "What is art?"' Everyone looked around dumbly. I liked the Art & Crafts Room straight away, the different lay out of the class, the smell of paint, the large windows, the abstract shapes in the corner made from cardboard, the overall unusualness of the place. I'd managed to squeeze in beside Rebecca although I couldn't shake off Marley, who jumped in the other side.

'You boy?'

'Sir?' It was Lally.

'What is art?'

'Eh...pictures?'

'Pictures.' Mr Coyne scratched his moustache. 'You mean paintings? Yes. Can you tell me more, though? This girl?' It was Candy Floss Karen.

'It can be sculptures. Or...'. She looked at the pottery wheel. 'Pots...or...maybe, I don't know...films?'

‘Very good, yes. So, it comes in different forms, are we agreed?’ Everyone nodded slowly. ‘But do we only find art in galleries, museums or cinemas? Hmm?’ Mr Coyne looked out the windows. ‘That scene out there. Those fields, that hill, those trees. Is that art?’

‘No,’ someone said.

‘Who said no?’ Mr Coyne looked at Marley. ‘You boy? Name?’

‘Jake.’

‘Why not, Mr Jake?’

‘They’re just trees. How’d they be art, sir?’

‘Interesting.’ Mr Coyne sucked in air and walked back up to the top of the room. He sat behind his desk and leant his jaw on his hands. ‘What we must take note of now, children, are the three stages of Art. These are the elements of process. That is, the first being “Absorption”. You soak up the atmosphere around you. Number 2 is “Meditation”. You begin to consider how to project that atmosphere into the way it appears to you.’ Someone yawned. Mr Coyne looked around and made a little grimace. ‘Before anyone dozes off, let’s try and prove Mr Jake wrong, eh class?’ Marley scowled. ‘We will do some sketches of that scene out there, alright? Doesn’t have to be exactly as it is, just whatever way seems right to you. Pencils, sheets at the far window. One sheet at a time please. And only take the 2b pencils, thank you!’

As we started sketching, I angled myself so I could see Rebecca’s work. She’d started with just a leaf, so I did the same, we could compare notes after. Suzanne and Karen were giggling the whole time on the other side. I saw they’d just started drawing cocks and balls. Marley had his ruler out, he was making a triangle.

‘What the hell is that, Marley?’ I said.

‘How else am I supposed to get the side of it straight?’

‘It’s a hill, not one of the Pyramids. Anyway, you don’t need to draw anything, we’re all proving you wrong, remember?’

‘Piss off.’

Rebecca had a leaf sketched.

‘Not bad,’ I risked. She looked at me, brown eyes hypnotic.

‘It’s like a duck’s foot, Tommy.’

‘No, it’s good, really.’

‘Now, that’s good,’ she was looking at mine. ‘Do you do a lot of drawing?’

‘Not really.’ She looked at her sheet.

‘I can’t get it the way I see it in my mind. How do you do it?’

‘I just kind of go with it.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Don’t know. Just let it draw itself or something.’ I felt myself going red. One of the children from town had their hands up. Mr Coyne lifted his head from his hands.

‘Yes?’

‘What’s the third one, sir?’

‘What’s that boy?’

‘The third stage. You said there was three...things of process.’

‘Good, this is what we are doing now,’ Mr Coyne said. ‘The final application of the creative idea in the way you see fit. I call this stage “Execution.”’

Marley looked over my shoulder. ‘That a ball of phlegm, Tommy?’ he said. He pulled me back from the table. ‘Don’t forget that job today,’ he was whispering.

‘What job?’

‘Operation Maurice.’

We smoked at the gorse bush at first break. Lally was focussed on the double doors for Sherlock, while me and Marley scanned the tennis courts and the football pitch behind for any incoming viruses of Maurice and friends.

‘That video was class.’

‘Ballincalty crime world exposed!’

‘I heard them city detectives are using it to trace them now.’

‘Where’d ya hear that, Lally? Are you on the Garda Pulse system?’

‘Ol’ man met O’Malley in the Tree last night.’

‘How can they track it?’

‘Some numbers they found on the truck. Whoever filmed that has really screwed them boys.’

‘Who’d be out at that time though?’ I said.



‘Watch it!’ Marley said, dropping the fag. I saw the bullet head of Sherlock pan around the tennis courts. We hurried deeper into the greenery, other smokers noticed us and flashes of blue began to retreat from the bushes toward the football pitch, hundreds of dying fag butts tossed quickly to the withering leaves.

We had got into a routine of going to the Resource Area at lunchtime. We sat along the walled line of seats, chewing on sandwiches, crisps and drinking minerals. The town kids were allowed go home, or to the shops. Rebecca and some other girls sat across from us. I swallowed the last of my mini roll as Marley got up, tossing his schoolbag to one side.

‘Come on for a smoke, Tommy,’ he said, mayonnaise on his chin.

‘I’m still sick after that couple at first break.’

‘You’re no good. Lally?’ Lally got up sleepily. ‘Meet me here at five to two, alright?’ Marley said, turning for the doors.

‘What about history?’ I said.

‘You don’t go to it, scan.’

I watched them go past the V.P., through the exit and up the steps to the tennis courts. I balled up the shop packet and tossed it at the bin. It bounced off the lid, rolled over to a pair of feet. Rebecca’s.

‘Oops. Sorry,’ I said as she looked up from her phone. For once Carrot Head Suzanne or Candy Floss Karen weren’t chewing her ear off.

‘That bin isn’t for recycling, Tommy.’

‘Is it not?’

‘You have to use the one upstairs.’ She went back to her phone.

‘Where’s that? What difference does it make?’ I went over and picked up the paper. She looked up.

‘It’s the environment.’

‘But I don’t know where the bin is?’ She groaned and got up.

‘Follow me.’ I walked up the stairs after her. We got to the entrance doors.

‘Right there,’ she nodded at a green bin. I tossed the paper in. She walked back toward the Resource Area.

‘Do you want to take a run down the shops?’ I called after her. ‘Sherry Trifle doesn’t know who the townies are yet.’

‘Huh?’ she stopped at the stairs, turned, blonde strands swinging. ‘I’d say he knows you’re not one of them. But okay.’

I couldn’t believe it, we walked out together through the front parking area, around the poplar island with the other town kids. I was happy, but the gaps of silence were awful.

‘Got your history done?’ I managed. It was a bit of an own goal though, as her response was so detailed, and I hadn’t a clue what she was on about. I’d been so excited after watching the ATM video the night before, I couldn’t settle at homework and started looking at fast cars online. As she talked about visiting local archaeological sites, a bird landed just ahead of us on the avenue, poking its beak at a piece of tossed crust.

‘Isn’t he lovely? Very tame,’ Rebecca said and smiled at me. The bird was mostly black feathered, but I didn’t think it was a crow, it had flecks of grey and white. It picked up tiny pieces of the bread with the beak. I gazed at the narrow orange legs holding up the body. ‘Can you draw wildlife, Tommy?’

‘Don’t know.’

‘Could you draw him?’

‘I’d say it’d be hard.’

‘Give it a go next class.’

Our hands brushed as we neared the gates. A few fourth years came the opposite way, made kissy noises as they passed. Rebecca made no reaction and neither did I. It was a relief to get to the street, keeping conversation up was harder than endless laps of the football pitch.

There was a dirty red van parked in O’Malley’s forecourt. All the Garda tape and sheets had been taken away. A heavy man squeezed into a check shirt and jeans, measuring tape hooked at his waist, tapped a trowel against the side of the hole left by the unit. A younger man wheeled out a small cement mixer. A pile of sand had been tipped beside some bricks.

‘Do you want an ice cream, Rebecca?’

‘You’re gonna buy me an ice cream, Tommy?’

‘Why not?’ I said. She laughed. This was a good sign. The shop was busy, the townies queued up at the deli counter, deep fat fryers were sizzling, kids got plastic trays of curry chips, chicken burgers, sausages. O’Malley had moved across the shop, he too wore an apron now. He stood next to Maurice, their foreheads damp with sweat.

‘The sausages, Maurice, the sausages! Will you get them out of the oven? Now! Wake up, will ya!’ One of O’Malley’s staff served me two 99s. I paid with the fiver Ann had given me. We sat on the brick wall outside the pumps and ate our ice-creams, right where the raiders had parked.

‘You’re as mad as a brush, Tommy O’Toole.’

‘You got some on your chin there.’ She looked at me. I felt heat on my face. She pulled out her phone, clicked on ‘Mirror’, wiped it off with a tissue she had pulled from somewhere. I could have sat forever watching the traffic zoom by, people tied up in the busyness of the day. I’d never want to be any of them, or the staff in the shop, or the other kids, or the teachers in the school or anyone, anywhere else, there was nowhere I’d rather have been than on that wall, just the two of us, chilling.

Rebecca finished off her cone. ‘So you heard about the lunchtime disco Friday?’

‘A disco? At lunchtime?’

‘Everyone is going. It’s going to be—’

‘The lovebirds!’ Marley and his cheese and onion breath dived between us. ‘Does Sherry Trifle know Mr and Mrs O’Toole are out on the town?’ Rebecca made a face. Maybe she just didn’t like the surname ‘O’Toole’. ‘It’s only us city slickers allowed through the gate for lunch privies! Move over there, boss!’ Marley pushed between us and sat down. ‘Tommy buy you an ice cream? And all the fags I’m givin’ him?’

Rebecca had stood up. ‘It’s nearly two, we’d want to be getting back.’ She took up her schoolbag, swung it around her shoulder. I got up and followed her. Marley kept talking to me, but all I could hear was the humming cement mixer being filled with shovelfuls of sand behind us on the forecourt.

As we got to the avenue gates, Marley pulled my arm toward one of the pillars. Rebecca walked ahead of us, her blonde strands bouncing gently on her shoulders. ‘Let her off, scan.’

‘Why?’

‘Don’t want her seeing where we’re going.’

‘And where is that? She was just asking me about the disco when you came.’

‘Asking you what? It’s just a school lunchtime thing. Pure shite. Teachers’ll be everywhere. There. Now you know all about it.’

‘She was asking me.’

‘But you didn’t know anything, did ya?’

I took a deep breath. ‘I thought we were meeting up in the Resource Area?’

‘This saves time. We’re going down here.’ I looked beyond his arm.

‘Jake, that’s a fence. And that’s a field.’

‘It’s a shortcut to the Golf Club.’

‘What are you on about?’

‘Come on, time is ticking.’

We climbed the fence, ran across the field, behind O’Malley’s, a few large houses along the street, then the town square. Despite everything, it was exciting, out of bounds during school hours. We scaled a cut stone wall, came onto a winding gravel drive. Up at the end, there was a carpark and a clubhouse. Marley took out a key and opened the glass entrance door. He led me down a shiny wooden floored hall. We passed glass displays of silver cups and shields, photos of smiling golfers, some in school uniforms. We came into a large cream kitchen. ‘Do you play golf?’

‘Ol’ lad goes the odd time. They have him cleaned out with green fees every year for all he comes. Cup of tea?’ He opened one of the presses, took out two mugs stamped with the club emblem.

‘Marley, what are we doing here?’

‘Waiting.’

‘Waiting for what?’

‘For the guy. He said he’d be here between two and three and not to be late.’

‘What guy is this?’

‘You’ll see.’

We had a cup of golf clubhouse tea and went outside for a couple of smokes. I didn’t inhale all the time, they were making me dizzy. Marley kept talking about stuff he’d seen on the internet, he watched things all night by the sound of it, reality beheadings, live torture, porn of course, all sorts of crazy shit. At about quarter to three, a 12 Vectra came up the drive fast. It stopped in front of us. The window rolled down. The driver was in a black t-shirt, he had curly dark hair and a goatee.

‘Ho-aye, scan?’ Marley said, real casual. The man looked out the window.

‘What the fuck’s this?’ We heard him reach for his door handle.

‘We just want to—’

‘I’ll break your legs!’

‘Hang on, boss,’ Marley pulled out a yellow two hundred euro note, his hand was shaking. The man sat back in his seat, glaring.

‘Roll that up, you tit!’

Marley squeezed the money in his fist.

‘What do yiz girls want all that for?’

‘Party.’

‘If I hear stuff is moving outside of me you’re fucking dead!’

‘No way. Nothing like that.’

‘Get over here.’ I couldn’t see the exchange. The car wheels spun as the Vectra moved off, down the drive toward the street.

‘What a personality.’

‘You’re not going smoking that?’

‘Not likely. Let’s get out of here.’ Marley pushed the fag-box-sized package into his boxers and we went back over the stone wall, across the large field, turned up parallel with the avenue and went around by the old convent building. At the back, we could hear voices from the football pitch.

‘There must be training,’ I said. I saw flashes of players, heard the bounce of a ball.

‘I’m banking on it. Leaving Cert team. Maurice plays in midfield.’

‘How d’ya know?’

‘I did my homework. Now we need to get in there. Do you think we’re still covered by that line of trees along the path?’ I looked at the green door where Maurice and company had flung us out.

‘Why?’

‘We’re going down to the changing rooms.’

‘You’re not going planting all that stuff on him, are you? He’ll get sent off to one of those detention centres or something. Jail if he’s eighteen.’

‘Ten out of ten.’

‘The father’ll go bananas. He’ll have a heart attack at the shop counter.’

‘Exactamundo. Sale and supply. I know the law, scan. Come on.’



We crept down along the old convent wall, still in the cover of the trees. We went in the side door and ran along the flaking corridors, the memory of being hauled through still fresh. We came out in the courtyard, passed the Wet Room and down another hallway.

‘You know your way around here.’

‘I scoped the place early this morning.’

‘Must have been early.’

‘Six bells. I told you I’m an insomniac. Ol’ lad as well. Two of us up watching shite on our laptops the whole night.’

‘You’re keen to get him.’

‘He spat in my face and then he stuck my head in a pot of his own piss. Kind of encourages you.’

‘What if someone comes?’

‘Why would anyone?’

‘Lally reckons Sherlock is lurking all over the school during the day looking for smokers.’ Marley opened the changing room door.

‘Fuck Lally! Ah, shit. It’s all lockers.’ We stood inside. Lockers lined the walls, there were benches across the middle. Everyone’s stuff was safe behind small golden padlocks. There was a smell of sweat, socks, chlorine from the showers beyond.

‘Didn’t check this?’

‘The changing rooms were locked.’

‘Let’s get out of here, Jake.’

‘That hall leads out to a door to the pitch and up to the Resource Area. You stand down at the corner and watch for Sherry.’ Marley had a short piece of coat hanger wire out.

‘What’s that for?’

‘I’m gonna open them and find Maurice’s.’

‘Where’d you learn how to do that?’

‘Are you mad? Wikihow, where else?’ There were footsteps out in the hall. Distant, but approaching.

‘Sherlock,’ I whispered.

‘Behind the lockers.’

‘No, he’ll check that. The showers.’

Two first years getting caught in the changing rooms during Leaving Cert practice would not go down well with the Principal. The Leaving Certs might not be too impressed either. There was also the large amount of hash in Marley’s boxers, although it wasn’t likely that Sherlock would want a look in there. We went into the communal wash room. It was a large tiled area of showers. There was nowhere to hide. We’d have been better off behind the lockers. The footsteps came closer, near the changing room door. We stood against the tiled wall. I was afraid my breathing could be heard. The footsteps stopped, the handle turned. The door opened, the footsteps entered the changing room. Leather shoes. The door closed. Silence.

‘He’s gone.’ It was like a dream, we’d escaped.

‘Hold on.’ I pulled Marley’s arm. ‘How do you know he doesn’t stall out there in the hall until the lads come back? We’ll walk straight into him!’ Marley looked across at a line of small rectangular windows.

‘Let’s try them.’

We spent ten minutes painfully squeezing out through the frames. I scraped my hip on the catches. The screen of trees was riskily thin this far down the path. As I landed, I heard a whistle blown, training was over. We crept back to the field. The whole time I expected someone who’d spotted us through the trees to shout up from the pitch. I breathed deeply as we got to the trees along the avenue.

‘We’ll get the bastard tomorrow morning,’ Marley said, lighting up.

‘Give us one. How?’

‘At the deli counter. He always brings his schoolbag to work.’

‘In the shop? But I thought you were barred?’

‘Don’t worry about that,’ Marley said. ‘We need to get off-site right now. You can come back to mine until four if you want.’

‘Nah, I’ll cross here over to the bog road. I’ve no lift, I better start walking.’

‘I think your man in the Vectra was going out to the bog, Tommy. You could have asked him for a lift!’

The road to The Mackon was dead silent. I liked the quietness. Part of me didn’t want anyone to come. I could just stand at the ditch, looking out across the field, beyond the chewing cattle, sheep tearing tiny bundles of grass, to the specks of houses, the mountains. There was a rattle. Tuohy’s van had stopped at least two hundred yards before it reached me. I’d probably have been quicker walking, but I got in anyway. Local radio blared, there was a smell of calf nuts and cow shite. A picture of Padre Pio was glued to the dash. Tuohy stared at me as I looked

around for the seatbelt. He wore a spattered Champion top, a peaked cap with 'Boston Crowbars' across the front.

'Howya Jack. Nice day.' He sucked on a chupa-chup as he clutched with a huge green wellington, the gears crushed and we moved off.

Dad's BMW was parked at the mobile. As I got inside, I heard the shower running. There was a strange perfume. On my sofa bed, a slender woman wearing only heels scrolled on her phone. She was maybe in her twenties, with light brown skin. I stared at her nipples, then at the floor. She looked up. I turned to her again, tried to focus on her face, dark curls over her shoulders.

'Hi honey!' she said, in a foreign accent, as she reached for my blanket, covering her breasts.

'Who's that?' dad shouted from the shower. My face was hot. I turned and went back out, shut the door. I sat in the back seat of the BMW and started my homework.

Rats raced across the cracked vinyl tiles. Dad was in the back garden. His face was strained as he shoved connected chimney sweep pipes up the sewer drain. Turds floated around in our toilet bowl. Me and mam sat at the long kitchen table looking at new house plans. Birds landed in front of us. They were black with flecks of grey and white, with real thin legs. They pecked at the plans, tearing bits off in their tiny beaks.

I threw off the blanket, sweat all over me. Midnight lay across on the far sofa bed, his socked foot hanging out over the end, sand boots tossed on the floor. There were playing cards, empty cans of Dutch Gold and Coke, fag and cigar butts scattered all over the table. Dad slept in his double bed beyond the cooker. There was a noise, it seemed like outside movement. It could have been heavy footsteps. I got up, leant across Midnight, looked out through the

Perspex. The panel was damp, but it had stopped raining. I wiped away the condensation. Moonlight gave a blue hue to everything. The noises weren't Tuohy's cattle out late for a stroll, the field was empty. I pulled on my jeans and runners, went outside. I took out one of the loose fags Marley had given me, lit up, coughed. I walked around the back of the mobile. Something was crossing the fence at the end of the field, but I couldn't see if it was a fox or a person. The grass was soaked, blades dropped water inside my runners. The stones around Ash's grave were like a perfect smile. The clouds moved, killing the moonlight. The smile melted into the darkness.

Dad stood in his boxers, turning sausages with a fork, a cigarette in his mouth, ashes falling in cubes onto the scalding cooking oil, spattering in the pan. 'Let's go, Tommy! Midnight! Come on!'

Midnight groaned. 'For the love of God, is it morning already?' His nose was blocked, I could tell by his voice.

'It is and we need to get moving. We're meeting him at half nine.' He looked at me as I buttoned up my shirt. 'No uniform today, Tommy. I'll give you a pass. Meself and Mid need a hand.'

'Yeah, good idea, Joe, my back is giving out.'

'Your back can give out all it wants. Tommy is a lookout, that's it. Pock is stripping and I'm cutting. You're on the barrow and drag, Private.'

'If I end up on me end—'

‘You can pick yourself up out of the muck!’ Dad brought over three plates of sausages and sat beside me on the sofa bed.

The block layers had most of the ATM hole built up. One of them scraped his trowel along the mortar joints in the top line of bricks. Another filled sand into the turning mixer drum.

‘O’Malley is not wasting any time,’ Midnight said, as we passed.

‘He has no choice according to Jimmy in the Tree. Franchises are onto him. If he doesn’t get it back in shape quick, they’ll pull out. I’ll get them boys to come and price my place.’

‘You goin’ at it again?’

‘I want it roofed by Christmas. We’ll be out of that sardine can by Paddy’s day.’

‘That a good idea, Joe, so quick? I mean with the car an’ all?’

‘It’s this security stuff, Midnight, this security work that we’re getting. It’ll cover it, alright?’

‘Oh yeah, yeah.’

It was exciting to think of our house finally being built. I knew all the rooms marked out by the stub walls, the kitchen-diner, the sitting room, front hall, master bedroom, my own room. I’d often imagined how it would look, where I’d put all my books and stuff, if I’d have a desk for doing homework.

I saw Marley come up through the town. There was a bounce to his walk, he was going in for the kill, but he’d have to wait another day at least, unless he went on a solo run. I sent him a text: ‘Held up with my dad’. He didn’t answer.

A little way out the Cloonloch road we turned off onto a one-lane track, which ran for miles up a gradual hill. We passed through a woody valley and along sparse hilly ground, we were coming back into bog land. We came to the boreen which led up to The Castle. It was no more than a three-bed bungalow, but locals called it The Castle due to its views of Ballincalty, The Mackon and the landscape for many miles. We passed by two cracked pillars at the gateless entrance. We parked at the side of the house. Around the back, there were a few whitewashed outhouses, with asbestos roofs and galvanised double doors. A 13 Audi was parked at one. The driver sank low in his seat, his round head set deep in his shoulders, owl-like eyes over a thick ginger moustache. He was staring at The Castle. Dad's family home burnt down in the early 1980s when he was seven or eight. My grandparents suffocated during the blaze. Dad managed to escape. Only the four walls remained, greenery had all but covered the soot. 'What are we doing here, dad?'

We hadn't been out there for years. I'd heard dad tell Midnight he didn't even own The Castle anymore, something to do with the bank. 'Just taking apart a bit of industrial shite, lad. Old air conditioning units, stuff like that. Dumping them into the swamp. The fella is giving us a few quid, saves him a lot. That's our security boss, over there. Midnight's old quartermaster.'

'So he's Pock—'

'Jesus Christ, Paddy, Paddy is his name,' Midnight said, bursting into a bout of coughing. He pulled out a roll of toilet paper, blew his nose. 'Fuckin' hell. If he hears you calling him that he'll shoot me. Pure head case.'

Dad turned to me. 'Give me your phone and take mine, Tommy. There's credit on it. Go down to them pillars. If you see anyone coming, give me a ring, alright?'

'Who'd be coming?'



‘Eco-warriors, son. Green men. If they see us, they’ll cause shite. Fines and all sorts, you know? But here you’ll be able to see them coming for miles.’ They got out and went over to Pock. I turned and walked down toward the pillars. I sat on a flat part of the ditch. I logged onto dad’s internet. Rebecca had sent me a Facebook message: ‘Going to Lunch Disco tomorrow?’

Result!

As I typed ‘Deffo!’, a small engine throbbed from behind The Castle. Then the consaw roared. There was hammering. After a few minutes, sparks flew around the gable. The galvanised doors swung open.

Soon, a black cloud rose to the sky. I saw Midnight slowly dragging pieces of scrap metal to the deep bog swamp at the back of The Castle. I played fruit games for a while. Then, when I got bored scrolling through endless Facebook posts, I went on National Geographic and read a bit about global warming. The geography teacher would have been proud of me. Dad brought down a can of Coke and a Mars bar to me at twelve.

‘Nearly there, son. Just tidying up.’

I tore into the goodies and went back to global erosion issues. It was almost three when they were finished. There was a smell of oil and burning rubber. The Audi passed by first, Pock ignored me as he zoomed down the road. Midnight’s jeep was followed by dad. He was covered in rust and oil. My phone buzzed as I got in the BMW. A text had finally come from Marley: ‘Shop early’.

The country and western music was louder than usual as we walked up the corridor at St. Michael's. I knew most of the staff to see, they smiled at me and nodded as I passed them. Nora grabbed my arm as we went into the ward.

'Gerald? Gerald?' She looked at me, smiling.

'Sorry...eh...'

'I'm going home today.' Her smile faded. 'You're not Gerald, are you?'

'He's not and you're not,' dad said in a growl, as we went down to the end of the ward. I pulled my arm away. The other woman lay across from mam in her bed, the blanket still pulled up around her chin, her eyes tightly shut. I wondered had she moved at all since the last time I was there. Mam was sitting by the window. Dad sunk into the visitor's chair. I leant against the radiator.

'Hi, mam.'

'You alright, Sheila?'

'Pat?' Nobody said anything for a good few minutes. The music had been turned down. You could hear the wipe of a mop out in the corridor, smell Flash.

'I'm going home this evening,' Nora said from the other side of the ward, she had sat down again.

'Pat?' Mam tightened her hands on her lap. Dad's knees were hopping. He tapped the side of the bed. He felt around in his jacket, took out his Majors.

'I'm going out for a fag. We'll go then, Tommy. You probably have lessons for doing.'

Not really, as I hadn't been at school, but I nodded. I watched him ignore Nora's question as he went out. I looked out the window for a while, at the neatly cut green areas, the yellowing leaves of the trees. Mam made a little groan.

'Who's Pat, mam?' I said it without thinking and straight away wished I hadn't. It was like I was being cheeky, as if I was asking a magician how he did his tricks. I looked at mam, she met my eyes for a moment. I thought then it would have been great, if for once she got clear, if she knew what I asked, what was real and what wasn't. Like if she really knew there was no one she knew called Pat, or maybe she could tell me who she meant by Pat. I wanted to understand what she was saying, what she wanted me to know. I hated that, that I couldn't, that nobody seemed to be able to understand her and she couldn't understand anyone and she was alone.

She looked at me, sort of smiled. There was a splash on the floor. A pool grew under mam's chair.

'Mam, no, don't do that!' I went to the double doors, brushed past Nora's outstretched arm. One of the carers I'd met on the way in was still in the hall doing something at a trolley. 'Eh, miss?

'What is it, sweetheart?' She came to the door.

'It's my mother, she...'. The carer went in.

'Sheila, what are you doing?' I went out to find dad in the gazebo.

I was in the big kitchen. There was a hole in the window. Wind blew in. A butcher's calendar hung crookedly on the wallpapered wall. There was a pool of water on the vinyl tiles. Footsteps

moved around overhead. Mam stood at the range. She mashed potatoes in a little pot. I could smell smoke. I heard the tapping of a hammer. Mam stopped mashing and looked at the chimney. I saw a ladder outside the window. My Ben 10 toy fell over on the floor. The tapping on the roof got louder.

I opened my eyes. Midnight lay across from me, mouth wide open, can in one hand, he was snoring. It was half four on my phone. The tapping noise continued. It was something outside. I got up, leant across my uncle, wiped the Perspex. I could just see the toothy smile of stones around Ash's grave. There was a chill, the door of the mobile wasn't fully closed. I looked over at dad's bed. It was empty.

Dad kept hopping channels on the music centre as we drove to Ballincalty next morning. There'd be a minute of current affairs, then rap music, a clip of classical and back to the politics. Eventually he shut it off and we got to town in silence. He pulled up at the short wall outside O'Malley's. The ATM hole was all bricked up. The new unit was going to be in-store. Dad waved over at the block layers as they wheeled their mixer and barrows into the red van. I saw Marley coming down the street. 'I'll get a price off these fellas,' dad said, pulling the handbrake.

‘I’ll get out here for a sausage roll. Do you have €2, dad?’ Dad handed me the coin and grabbed my arm as I got up.

‘Things are gonna change for us now, Tommy. I’ll get these lads to finish off the block laying. We’ll be out of that poxy mobile home by Paddy’s day, you’ll see. You’ll have your own room, and your own desk for doing all your lessons, alright? The fella was fair happy with us getting rid of all that scrap for him. He’s giving us a ton of security hours.’ Dad got out and went into the forecourt. Marley had stopped at the short wall.

‘What happened yesterday?’

‘I had to help dad and my uncle get rid of some rubbish.’

‘We’d some rubbish here needed getting rid of an’ all. Me and Lally got jumped again in the woods at lunchtime.’

‘Shit.’

‘It’s past time to get this done.’

‘So I distract Maurice asking something about the sausage rolls, while you put the stuff in his bag?’

‘No. I was thinking about it last night. If O’Malley sees me in the shop, he’s goin’ to start quacking straight away. It’ll be better if I cause the disruption. Everyone’ll be watching me, while you plant the gear.’

‘Me? Me plant it?’

‘Look, it’s easy, scan.’ Marley turned to the window. ‘See in there at the meat slicing yoke. That’s Maurice’s bag hanging up. It’s got one of them pencil pouch yokes no one ever uses. Just stick it in there. It’ll be on him then. I’ll get the cops onto it, and he’ll be screwed.’

‘I don’t know, Jake. It sounds like you’re going a bit too far.’

‘Wet Room too far, you mean? Didn’t stop them pricks, did it?’ Marley took out a bag of Hunky Dorys. ‘Slip the stuff out of this when you get around the display.’ Inside the crisp bag, I could see the packet, tightly wrapped up.

‘But what if he sees me? They’ll probably do me for selling it. It’s a lot of stuff, you said so yourself.’ Marley looked around, the shop was getting busy with pupils. I just wanted to get my sausage roll and get up to double art at nine o’clock.

‘Chillax, will ya. No one’ll see you. They’ll all be watching me. I’ll make sure of it.’

‘This is stupid. Why don’t you just go up and tell Sherlock about all this shite in the woods and the Wet Room. Isn’t that what he’s there for? I’m sure he’d do something about it.’

‘You’re not...’. Marley looked appalled. ‘You’re not telling me to squeal, are you, Tommy? I can fight my own battles. I don’t need the Sherry Trifle to step in.’

‘Are you not going to the cops, though?’

‘Anonymously.’

‘What’s the difference?’

‘Big difference.’ Marley grabbed the crisp bag. ‘If you don’t want to do it, fine. I’ll get Lally, fuck ya. His ears are still red from yesterday.’ Marley took out his phone. I saw it all playing out. Marley distracting O’Malley and Maurice, Lally planting the dope with ease, the celebrations of suffering first years as Maurice was handcuffed and shoved into the back of a squad car in front of the whole school, me looking on at the back of the crowd.

‘Give it to me.’ I pulled the bag back. ‘I’ll do it.’

The block layers and dad had driven off. We went in the sliding doors. Marley turned right, passed by a long queue at the tills.

‘You’re barred, Marley!’ I heard O’Malley, as I went across to the far aisle, down by the dairy fridges and toward the deli counter. Marley had stopped opposite Maurice. He held two doughnuts up to his ears. He squeezed them, jam dripped on the floor. Maurice glared.

‘Hey Mo, these might work?’

‘You’re barred, you little prick.’

‘You don’t have a brain under that yellow cock of hay? But one of these jammy doughnuts might do the trick? Just stick them in your earhole! Or is your brain down in your arse? You know what to do so!’ Maurice came around the counter. Marley waved at him, backing quickly up the aisle, tossing the doughnuts on the floor. It would not be good for Marley if his plan didn’t work out. O’Malley tried to get across the shop, but there was now a crowd in his way. I looked around, everyone was watching the show. I went by the deli counter, pulled the stuff out of the crisp bag. At the back of the ham slicer, I found the schoolbag. I flicked open the lapel of the pencil pouch, pushed the gear deep into it, flicked the lapel back on. I kept my eyes on the tiles as I went back by the dairy fridges.

I tried to make the underside of the bird look as if it was breathing in as it landed on a bed of leaves. There was a buzz from it, I didn’t really know why, making action appear on a blank sheet. ‘That’s quite competent, Tommy,’ Mr Coyne said, from over my shoulder. ‘Have you done much drawing before first year?’

‘Not really, sir.’



‘Hmm. You’ve managed a fair representation of movement there. Good lad. Keep it up.’

Rebecca looked over when Mr Coyne was gone. The seating arrangements in the Art Room had worked in my favour. Everyone had kept positions from the first class. In all the other rooms, Rebecca was up the top, me and Marley down the back. She wore a different perfume today, or maybe it was her shampoo, she chewed gum.

‘Cool Tommy. It’s like that bird we saw the last day.’

‘That’s what I was trying. I thought about making it pick up a bit of bread with its beak. Bit tricky though.’

‘Next time, maybe. How’d you get the feathers so detailed?’

‘Kind of outlined them a good bit first. Light with the pencil. If it’s not too dark, it’s easy change it around if you need to, once you know where you are.’

‘God, I thought it was enough to draw it once. Sounds too much like hard work. You going to the disco at lunch?’

‘Deffo.’ For once, Marley hadn’t dived in between us. He scanned his phone every time Mr Coyne was busy. I guessed he was searching for any news of a schoolboy arrested for drug dealing.

Yellow, red and green lights sprayed everywhere in the Assembly Hall. The blinds had been drawn. The maths teacher was on supervision, he scrolled on his phone at the door. As I walked in, I could see flashes of teenage faces on the floor, blue collars looked silver, I saw snatches of golden glitter, banned purple eyeshadow, earrings. I could smell deodorant and afternoon

sweat. The prefects had organised a DJ, who had set up on the stage. He jerked, his hands on huge Sony headphones.

‘Let’s puuump it uuup!’ The first years were in the far corner. I pushed through dancers. Maurice stood over me, a huge dark shape.

‘It’s Gerry Sweeney’s rent boy!’ He twisted my nipple, someone else smacked me across the head. Marley was lying low, refusing to go to the disco, with the Deli King still roaming freely. I got away from them in the crowds of dancers. At the other end of the hall, I found Rebecca. She was leaning against a radiator between Candy Floss Karen and Carrot Head Suzanne.

‘Hi! Good disco!’ I shouted, my head still stinging. She smiled, then said something I couldn’t hear. Her friends backed away a little. I was getting excited by the music, the lights. ‘Goin’ dancing?’ I risked. We were on the floor, our fingers touched. I don’t know if it was by accident. Her skin was very soft. We found a space and danced for a few minutes. She was a bit taller than me. I could feel the eyes of her friends on us. She must have too and she guided me by arm towards the end of the hall, to the space under the balcony. Table tennis matches were usually played here at lunchtime, but the tables had been folded away. The Leaving Cert prefects had lined the area with chairs.

‘Let’s get everyone puuumping!’ The DJ leapt around the stage like he was possessed. We sat near some other kids. I saw a crack of light around the blinds. I realised in a panic the disco would soon be over. We would go back out into the blinding daylight, down to double science in the cold lab, where I sat miles away from Rebecca. As we moved on our seats, her hand brushed against my elbow. I wondered if we were now a couple. It was dark, I could only see her face in the flashes of disco colours. The horror of the national anthem arrived. Everyone else stood, hands behind their backs, even the DJ was still.

Rebecca turned to me, just as I started to get up. She pulled my arm, reached over and kissed me on the lips. It was nice, a touch, like she felt I was worth kissing, worth knowing, worth the time we'd spent together.

Seconds later we were separated in the crowd as we moved across to the exit.

I stood at the entrance door. The fingers of my left hand were curled in between Rebecca's. We were definitely a couple. Marley was outside, frowning as he looked down the avenue through his phone. 'Are you recording?' I said.

'Course. It'll be online straight after. It'll be perfect for a meme this. I told them four would be a good time. That's probably the hold-up.' The carpark was jammed with cars and buses. I kept an eye on the Resource Area stairs for Maurice. 'There's your old lad, Tommy, in that snazzy motor,' Marley said. I looked down the avenue, saw Dad's BMW sweeping up through the poplars. Rebecca pecked me on the cheek.

'Facebook me later,' she whispered.

'Young love,' I heard Maurice, as a fist connected with my ribs. He and his friends had come out of the Assembly Hall. Sherlock was never around when you needed him. Marley had already disappeared behind the Principal's Vectra, parked as usual right at the entrance.

'Is that the Guards?' Rebecca said, as I rubbed my side. A squad car was coming up the avenue, blue lights flashing. It was happening. Maurice was going down. I looked at him, he twitched his leg as he tried to get through a crowd of country kids trying to get on their bus. Dad's car swung round the poplar island and pulled up. I acted like I didn't see him. I wanted to watch what happened next with Maurice and the cops. The squad car stopped at the buses. Four guards got out.

‘Tommy, let’s go,’ dad shouted from the driver’s window, as he lit a fag. Only now he looked back at the squad car. Maurice had stopped at the end of the bus crowd, the guards came toward him. Marley stood at Sherlock’s car. I saw he’d zoomed in on Maurice and the four cops, his tongue almost hanging out.

When I looked down again, the cops had passed by Maurice. He turned, watching, maybe as puzzled as I was. The guards stopped at dad’s BMW.

‘Step out of the car, please,’ the first one said at the driver’s window. Dad stared at him. The guard opened the door, another was getting in the passenger side. The guard behind looked in the back, I saw sergeant stripes on his sleeve.

‘Let’s go, Joe,’ the sergeant said.

‘What’s all this?’

‘Your own town, Joe, your own town.’

‘Fuck you lot!’ Dad tried to pull his door closed, but the guard in the passenger seat shoved him out. Dad disappeared for a second under the blue uniforms. Then there was a flash of handcuffs, they clicked on dad’s wrists. He was pushed to the ground, face against tar, eyes darting. The cigarette had rolled to the concrete kerb, still burning.

The place had gone quiet, the only sounds were the Audi ticking over, dad struggling on the ground, the clink of handcuffs. A door closed behind me then, there were footsteps. I saw in the corner of my eye Sherlock stepping outside. But I didn’t look around. I just focussed on the glint of silver on dad’s wrists until they disappeared into the back of the squad car. Rebecca’s mother had stopped behind the squad car. Rebecca let go of my hand. I wondered if she was blushing, if Marley was still filming. I swung my bag on my back and, head down, hurried past the poplar roundabout and out the avenue.

The block layers had taped a quotation to the door of the mobile. I heated a tin of beans, grilled some bread. I turned on the gas heater, it was colder now in the evenings. I took out my *Text & Tests 1*, started my weekend homework. My phone was beeping, there were several text messages, Facebook notifications. I turned the phone off. After I'd done a couple of maths exercises, I pulled out my homework diary. The list was long: geography, English, history, business studies. But I couldn't think straight and soon I tossed the diary onto the far sofa bed.

I turned on the laptop, launched a game Marley had pirated for me. You could create your own town, set out the streets as you wanted, plan municipal buildings, shopping centres, schools. You could even knock forests, drop in houses, choose brick or plaster walls, slate or tile roofs. At some stage, I heard something outside. I looked out through the Perspex. The field was clear of Tuohy's cattle, his latest fencing effort looked to be holding up for the moment. A fox or something had burrowed around Ash's grave. I went out, found the spade in the site. I levelled off the clay, made sure all the stones were back in position.

On the way back inside, I tore the quote off the door, tossed it in the bin. I restarted the game. I finished off a large convenience store in my suburb. I scrolled to aerial view. The place looked detailed, expensive, organised. I attached a sign to the shopfront and saved it.



The waiter polished wine glasses at the dark walnut unit. The glass made a soft dull sound as he twisted the rolled-up cloth around the bulb. Classical music played. Tables were neatly laid with silver cutlery and glasses, pressed white cloth and red napkins, shiny brass candlesticks in the centre. Most of the candles were lit. Flames tossed shadows against orange wallpaper. The dining area was decorated with paintings of rural Italian landscapes, fogged glass panels and diamond-shaped pigeon holes of wine bottles.

‘My man! Some more peppered sauce over here.’ A speck of mash fell from Marley’s lip as he clicked his fingers at the waiter. ‘How’s that goin’ down, Tommy? Steak cooked alright?’

‘Are you sure that yoke is okay out there?’

‘Will you stop asking me that?’ Marley swigged his wine. He coughed. ‘The plates,’ he said, lowering his voice.

‘Yeah, but...if they check them. Run them through that Pulse system—’

‘Ah, stop on about your poxy Pulse system, will ya?’

‘They’ll see they don’t exist. Or that they belong to a school bus or something.’

‘Why would they bother checking our number plates?’

‘What if we meet a checkpoint?’

‘Saturday night. Nine o’clock. No checkpoints. Ever. I’ve done the research. The clever bird catches the worm.’

‘It’s early.’

‘What?’

‘The early bird catches the worm.’ The waiter was back at the table with a steaming silver jug. ‘Some fresh peppercorn sauce, sir.’

‘Lovely. Lash her on there, scan. Get me some more of this vino, will ya?’

‘Certainly, sir. Was it a Sauvignon Blanc or Chardonnay?’

‘It was white, scan.’

‘Chardonnay, I think he got,’ I said.

‘Ho-aye, scan,’ Marley squirted a speck of peppered sauce across the table. ‘Do you hear the connoisseur? Far from poxy Chardonnay you were reared, hah?’ The waiter went to the wine press.



‘I tell ya, Tommy,’ Marley dabbed his mouth with the tablecloth. ‘We’re in with the right boys now. Take out my start-up money, we’ve made a nice whack since the start of the summer.’

‘Pity we haven’t any of it left.’

‘Easy come easy go. We won’t bother goin’ into the city after this time. Fuck them dirty casinos and tit clubs. The pimple on that one’s arse the last night!’ He shook his head. ‘We’ll just get the night bus straight. Alright?’

‘Makes sense.’

‘We’ll be millionaires before we’re eighteen.’

‘We might be collared before we’re sixteen.’

‘I am sixteen, smart lad.’ The waiter filled Marley’s glass. Marley downed half it.

‘Where’s he gone?’ He looked around a few minutes later. ‘He’s obsessed with polishing them glasses!’

‘What the hell do you want now?’

‘Dessert menu.’

‘Dessert? Do you not think we’d want to be going? We’ve another hour and a half to drive?’

‘Chillax, scan.’ Marley smiled and waved at the waiter.

We zoomed toward the city at a hundred and twenty K on the big road. The yellow of the motorway lights mixed with the blue hue of the moon made the place weird, like a dream. I opened the window a little, cool air chilled my forehead.

‘Smooth...’, Marley said, running his hand along the walnut veneer fascia. ‘Becky this smooth?’

‘Fuck you.’

‘What? She shave, no?’

‘Piss off.’

‘Still with that Peter French dick, is she?’

‘As far as I know.’

‘Must be love. Bad form though, that time in first year. Jumping ship on ya just cause your ol’ lad got canned.’

‘I’d break off with him if I could.’

‘Still go up there to see him every week?’

I nodded.

‘When’s he getting out?’

‘Years.’

‘Rough. He never told them where the few quid was put?’

‘Don’t think so. I wasn’t at the court.’

‘Did he—’

‘No, he didn’t tell me where he put it.’

‘Alright, scan. Only askin’. You could be sleeping on it, Tommy.’ Marley opened and closed the glove compartment. ‘All that dough. It might be in your mattress! Never looked around for it?’

‘I don’t need it.’

‘Not with this game! Maybe he gave it to your uncle?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Bad shit though, Tommy. Some bastard setting up your ol’ lad like that. Never got the fella’s name, no?’

‘Underage witness. He’s protected.’

‘Wankers. It’s some maze a shite, the law. I see it with the ol’ lad every week— ah fuck!’

The blue sign, luminous jackets, torches flashing, came into view just beyond an overpass. It was too late to veer off.

‘Let me out!’ Marley grabbed the door handle, but the car automatically central locked during motion.

‘What’s wrong with ya?’

‘Let’s ditch it to fuck!’

‘Jesus, do you want them on to us? Relax, you dickhead. Give me the permit. And put on your belt.’ Marley dug into his jacket, he took out a green card and handed it to me, his hand

shaking. A Fiat was parked on the hard shoulder. One guard spoke to the driver, the other was at the centre of the road, waving us on, looking back at the Fiat.

‘She’s telling you to keep going, thank fuck. They’re busy with that Fiat.’

‘She?’ But the garda changed her signal at the last minute to a flat outstretched palm as we reached her. She waved for me to pull in behind the Fiat.

‘Ah bollocks, she’s pulling you over.’

The garda came across the front of the car, flashed her torch at the tax and insurance discs. Everything was in order, it was the first check we did. As she came around, I lowered the window.

‘Hee-lo Constabulary,’ I said, tongue pushed between my teeth.

‘Good evening. Licence please.’ I handed her the green card. Her eyes narrowed. ‘What is this?’

‘Is licence.’ I smiled all the time, nodding my head, a technique to get people to believe you. I’d read about it on *StumbleUpon*. ‘Of my country.’

The garda shone the torch on the card. ‘Rory?’

‘Yury, please.’

‘You are Russian? What is your business here?’

‘Holidays, please.’ The ban garda pointed the torch at me. I guessed she was wondering about the lack of stubble around my jaw. She looked at the car, a 151 Mercedes CLS 300.

The garda squinted again at the card. I could barely pronounce the name printed. The only thing familiar was the greyscale photo, photoshopped before I’d sent it off to age me a

few years. The licence had cost €400 online. Along with the key code scanner, and the dummy transponder key, Marley reckoned he had invested over a grand in our business of luxury car ‘re-appropriation’, as he called it. There was a noise from the Fiat, the driver was shouting, waving his hands. I saw the other guard reach for his handcuffs.

‘Fiona!’

The garda looked back. ‘Drive safe.’ She handed me the card.

‘Tank you much.’

I drove slowly away. ‘What about that, Jakey boy! Cool as fuck, hah?’ I turned to Marley. I wanted to ruffle his hair or something. It was electric. I was buzzing. But he was watching the wing mirror.

‘Stop jerking around, she’ll see ya. Just as well she didn’t run the loaded plates.’

‘Worried about Pulse now, are ya? “Father sell oil.” How did ya like that? Imagine if she’d spoke Russian?’ I wanted to keep talking, it was like I couldn’t say everything quick enough. ‘How many cops speak Russian though in fairness? Maybe I’ll say I’m from Belarus next time. Don’t think they speak Russian there, do they? So much for Saturday nights, no checkpoints, clever bird.’

Marley looked out the window at the endless steel railing along the hard shoulder.

‘The Oligarch son is fair convincing though, huh? Worked like a dream there.’

Marley lit a cigarette. ‘Let’s face it, Tommy, if that scan in the Fiat hadn’t been goin’ bananas that could have gone arseways—’

‘What are you always saying? Chillax!’

We kept out of the city centre and off the ring roads and toll booths. I took a side street toward the industrial areas, into estates of towering warehouses, some with huge lettering along the roof, down networks of generic grey mazes, past steel chimneys and massive yards of containers, scrap metal, commercial vehicles. We came out onto a two-lane road that ran for miles north, along the coast. There were detached houses on the left, the calm sea on the right. The houses had window boxes, neat lawns and mostly mid-range 10 or 11 cars. The taste of salt came through. The streetlights drowned out the moon's rays, although we could see a silver track along the water which followed us all the way.

After about half an hour, we arrived at The Marina. It was a long pier. There were some large houses across from the water, mostly they were hidden with thick woods, electric gates, winding drives. You could see the multi-level roofs and balconies on some of them. Along the pier there were lots of yachts. Some were lit up. There were people on deck. I saw musicians, people in suits and flowing dresses drinking wine and cocktails. Down at the end of the pier there was a line of warehouse units, which the yacht owners could rent to store tools or whatever on shore.

Eric stood at the door of one of the units. He looked up under a thick mop of ginger hair, took out a remote, the roller door behind him rose, but he left the light inside off. I drove in. Eric followed me, the roller door came down. He turned on the lights, they were blinding for a second. The shed was large, a few units had been knocked in together, the place was all whitewashed walls, the floor polished concrete. It was jammed with new cars, none of which had plates: BMWs, Mercs, Lexus. There was a Range Rover in the corner. I parked up our Merc.

'Alrigh' lads,' Eric said as he looked around the car. 'Disabled the GPS, yeah?'

‘Course,’ I said. Eric went into a small portakabin at the wall. After a moment, he came out with an envelope and gave it to Marley. Then he led us out through a side door. We got into an 07 Toyota hatchback. He drove around the line of warehouses and along by the water’s edge.

‘What’s going on in there,’ I said from the back, as we passed the yachts.

‘Boat parties. That’s where the real brass is. Bankers, developers. Few politicians probably.’ Eric stopped near the end of the yachts at a really big one. It was in darkness, we could mostly only see the shape. ‘See that?’ Eric’s lights lit up the side. The yacht was labelled ‘Sunseeker 115’. ‘Worth about twenty million.’

‘Did you say million?’ I said.

‘It’s like a luxury house on a boat. Fella that owns it lives in Monaco. Inherited all his dough. Doesn’t know what to do with it. He hasn’t been out here in a couple of years. That’s the sort of work yiz should get into. Bring that to Calais, I could get yiz half a mill.’

‘Probably crazy security on it,’ Marley said.

‘It’s all done online with them yokes now. And if you don’t renew it, you’re left out in the open. He hasn’t renewed his.’

‘How do you know that?’ I said.

‘No flashing green inside. That’s the alarms. He hasn’t bothered. Yachts are hardly ever stolen. Still, it’s big money.’

‘They’re a bit harder than a car to drive,’ I said.

‘It’s all done by computers. Google it. Worth the effort, I’d say.’

‘Let’s go, we’ll miss the night bus,’ Marley said, lighting up.

‘How come you don’t do it yourself?’ I said.

‘What?’

‘Take that yacht.’

‘I know me job. Yiz get it there. I’ll do the rest.’ It was hard to know if Eric was being serious. He drove on, the glow and noise of the yacht parties behind us.

Something hit the Perspex and I woke up. I looked at the window. A large brown head stared at me. I was lying on the near sofa bed, still wearing my clothes. I was going to let Tuohy sort out his cattle this time. I left them chewing the DPC around the windows of the new house, went down the road and up the boreen. I climbed in through the hedge and went up the path.

‘Jack! The cattle are in again! They’re eating shit off our new house!’ I looked back and saw the Fiesta parked in its usual spot. I pushed the door and went inside, came into a kind of hallway, with a big internal window across from the door. I went left to the end, turned right into the big kitchen. Clocks ticked somewhere, but I couldn’t see them. I smelt socks. There was a Stanley range at the fireplace across from me, a long table to the left at the back window. A Sacred Heart hung over the mantelpiece. To the right of the range, a press built into an alcove ran up to the timbered ceiling. Its narrow door was slightly open. All the shelves inside were lined with flattened newspaper. On the bottom, there were folded blankets, the type nobody used anymore because they were so itchy. Mam had them in our cottage. Further up, there were cardboard boxes, jugs, an oil lamp and at the top, a battered USA biscuit tin. Something caught my eye. I went over to the press, pulled the door back a little. I saw under the biscuit tin lid the corner of a fifty euro note. I stood back. There was an almost full bottle of Jameson on the



window board of the internal window. Beside the window, there was another press with glass doors. There was a set of decorated plates tacked to the back behind the glass panels, cups and saucers along the front, thick with dust. We'd had something like that in the house at the end of the field. I found a small thick glass on a lower shelf beside a stack of plates.

'Jack? The cattle?' I half-filled the glass with whiskey. I took a good gulp. It was rotten, but then I got this blast of heat, first in my throat, then in my chest, stomach, arms, legs, down to my toes. I looked up at the biscuit tin. I finished off the glass, tried to find something to stand up on. I heard a wrapper behind me. I turned. Tuohy stood in a doorway in the far corner, in loose pyjamas. He put a chupa-chup in his mouth.

'The cattle, Jack,' I said, caring less about him. 'They need to be sorted out.' I heard a rough gear change. There was a car driving up The Mackon. I looked out the internal window, through the yellowed glass of Tuohy's front door. Something passed by. I could hear the Death Notices theme tune in the distance.

The light blue of Our Lady's shawl blurred into the grey of the sky behind. She tapped and rocked all the way from The Mackon. The radio presenter offered sympathies to the dead from all at the station. The segment finished up with the usual organ music. I was dying for a fag as we came near the avenue. 'Need to get a jambon in the shop.'

'Did you not bring a sandwich, Tommy? Didn't I leave stuff there for you yesterday? Ham and cheese and a loaf?' Ann said.

'Hadn't time to make it this morning.'

'Do you have money?'

‘Yeah.’

‘You’re making it last well. Do you want another fiver?’

‘No thanks.’

‘Are you okay, your eyes look a bit bloodshot?’

‘I’ve a lift to The Mackon with one of the lads this evening, Ann. You don’t need to bother collecting me.’

‘What about your dinner?’

‘I’ll get a pizza.’

‘You’re not going home early again, are you?’ Ann looked at me as she puffed on her e-fag.

‘I’ll see ya later.’ I shut the door before she could say anything else. I went around the short wall to the shop. Maurice was coming from the gas cylinders. He stood in between me and the entrance.

‘Good morning, Tommy. How are you today?’ He was beaming. His tie lifted in the breeze. ‘Don’t forget to check out our special filled doughnuts Marcel baked early this morning. I had one myself, it was absolutely gorgeous, real buttery chocolate sauce and cream in them.’ A woman stopped between us.

‘Maurice dear, how is poor Gerald?’

‘Oh, the same, Mrs Kinneally.’

‘It’s awful. And your granny in St Michael’s as well. How is she?’

‘Oh, she’s much the same too, Mrs Kinneally. But how are you, are you getting your veggies today? We have fresh carrots in there this morning...’. I stepped around them and went in to get my fags.

A headache came on as I smoked and walked up the avenue. I’d had enough of the day already and it was only half eight. Once McDermott came with the register, I could go, but I didn’t know when that would be. That was probably why he never came at the same time. Two first years were dragged in the green door of the convent section by the latest crop of Leaving Certs as I went around by the poplar island. The Wet Room did good business in September, before the first years figured out the shortcuts to avoid attacks. I could still hear the squeals and howls as I neared the entrance. Two more first years were at the doors, watching me. One said something to the other and he ran up, waving a fiver.

‘Can we give it to you? You’re with Mr Marley?’ He held the note out.

‘Marley not in today?’

‘No.’

While Marley had been at less than half of the classes in second year, he’d still been in a lot more than me. He had gotten into the ‘Student Protection League’, organised by some fourth years. Their main activity was getting ‘donations’ from new students. Marley had learned fast and already the first years were queueing up to pay him.

‘I don’t want your money.’ The first year stared at me as I passed.

By lunch, there was still no sign of the V.P. I had a smoke in the woods. It wasn’t the same without Marley and his antics. Lally and the other square heads were just too boring. I

went inside and played cards in the Assembly Hall with a few fourth years. Rebecca and Peter French sat in the stairwell under the balcony. Through the table tennis games going on, I could only see their shapes in the dark shadows, but I guessed they were shifting and maybe even doing a bit of pawing. At two o'clock I couldn't face going down into the French class. I'd given up the last of the honours courses in the summer term and now took pass in everything. It was easy to dream at the back of ordinary level, even though Mr Coyne prodded me now and again with questions about perspective and the 'artistic process'. Sherlock's parking space was empty at the front doors, he was still gone to dinner. I hurried out the avenue. It would be just one more absence.

There was no traffic and I had to walk all the way out to The Mackon. At the mobile, there were visitors. Midnight's jeep and another car were parked outside. I had to check to make sure I wasn't seeing things. It really was Pock's Audi. Midnight had told me that Pock went abroad when dad got arrested, even though dad hadn't told the guards anything. The young squealer they'd got into court had done just enough talking to get dad put away.

They had turned everything upside-down. I decided it was better not to show my face. They'd come when they'd thought I wouldn't be around for some reason and it was hard to know how they'd react if I arrived in the middle of whatever it was they were doing. I edged around by the fence to the site behind. I crept in the back door of the new house. At the half-built sitting room window, I looked in over the sill. They were tidying up. They dropped dad's mattress into place, even making the bed as it had been. Pots and pans were shoved into presses. I could only hear muffled voices. I knew they'd go before four o'clock. I didn't dare smoke, sat into the fireplace and took out my phone, hooked onto our internet. I googled 'Sunseeker 115'.

Stealing a yacht like that wasn't an option. You needed a crew of experts to operate it. Some of the models sold for forty and fifty million, they were like penthouse suites that floated. Theft was rare and complex but could be highly profitable. Maybe it was a future career. For now, online motor ads were my level. I looked up luxury cars for sale in the area, the type suitable for me and Marley to come and 'move on'.

The visitors left about half three. Inside, everything seemed exactly as I'd left it, down to the way my clothes had been tossed on dad's bed. Army discipline. They'd most likely taken photos before they started. I took out a tin of beans, grilled some bread, made scrambled eggs in the pan. I poured a glass of water and sat at the table. As I ate, my eyes traced the outline of the far sofa bed, under the table, the cavity behind the cooker, dad's double bed and mam's old medicine books, down along the shower and toilet.

When I'd eaten, I sat back, lit a fag. Through the furls of smoke, something glinted over the cooker. I got up, went to the press. The key and a keyring in the shape of the Defence Forces logo hung from the lock. Midnight had left it after him. Army discipline. Maybe that was why Midnight had never made it past the rank of Private.

The unit had been locked since dad left it. He must have given Midnight the key. I opened it up. Inside there was a steel flask, a bunch of maps, an elaborate but well-rusted utility penknife, a few rolls of fishing line, reels, flies, hooks and, slid in at the side, two very dusty bottles of Hennessy Cognac. At the back, I saw the rifle in parts, amongst a can of gun oil and a cardboard box of rounds. The gun had been a 30th birthday present for dad. Midnight had used some of his military contacts to get it, around the time mam went away. But I'd never seen dad use it, except the time he'd shot Ash in the head.

I pulled out the barrel with the other parts and brought everything over to the table. I took out one of the bottles of brandy, wiped the dust off the cap and opened it. It smelt like varnish. I half-filled a mug, downed a good gulp. Another belt of heat.

I opened the laptop and googled 'Remington L15 VTR Tactical', which was inscribed on the barrel. It was an older model, but still popular with some game hunters. I downloaded a PDF of the owner's manual. I followed the instructions to assemble the weapon. It took a while as I sipped brandy after each step. I locked the breech block into the butt, slid in the loading bolt and spring, the firing pin, clicked on the breech casing over the top, fitted the telescopic sights. I got out the rounds. You had to push them into the spring-loaded magazine. I clicked the mag. onto the base of the breech.

When I had the gun assembled, I pulled back the bolt and clicked it. This shoved a round up the breech. I finished off the mug of brandy as I read the PDF, the words doubling. There were three modes of operation: 'S' was the safety catch, the gun wouldn't fire. 'R' was for repetition, the gun would expel one round at a time. 'A' stood for automatic. That setting allowed rapid discharge of the magazine.

I aimed at the ceiling, changed the lever for 'A' to 'S'. I got a semi as I turned the gun, fitted my lips around the barrel. My finger was on the trigger. One squeeze and everything would be over.

A car stopped outside. Through the Perspex, I saw a Nissan, two-door hatchback. I slid the rifle and rounds under the sofa bed, put the brandy in the press. I locked it and put the key in my pocket. A woman got out of the car. She looked older, maybe thirties. She wore a grey suit and carried a laptop case.

'Hello!' she smiled, as I opened the door. She had real white teeth. I liked her perfume.

‘Tommy, is it? I’m Margaret O’Dea, from social services. I’m your appointed Juvenile Liaison Officer. Great to finally meet you!’ She pulled an ID card from a little pouch on the front of the case and showed it to me. She looked much younger in her photo. I stood back and Margaret O’Dea came into the mobile.



Margaret O'Dea moved her thick heeled shoes around on the patch of worn carpet under the table, like there wasn't enough room for her. She had the laptop case open. She slid out a MacBook, a foolscap pad, a few pens and some forms. There was a smell of paper and glue. I heard the Apple start-up tone. I saw her looking over at the cooking area. In the sink, a plate stood upended in a small pool of brown water, a patch of gravy skim across it. On the draining board, me and Marley's Sunday night pizza boxes were tossed, beside a fork stuck to a hardened twirl of pasta. Beyond, on dad's bed, there were some busted snack boxes. A rubbish bag was underneath on the floor, a milk carton sticking out the top. There were t-shirts and socks everywhere. I only saw these things when there was someone else in the mobile.

'First of all, Tommy, I want to apologise to you.' Margaret O'Dea smiled faintly. 'I told your uncle when I met him on Friday, but I wanted to reiterate it here. As I'm sure you

know, there was a change of administration around the time your dad went away, an unfortunate coincidence, and a lot of middle management was rotated. The upshot of this was that your file went into the system at a time of reorganisation and I'm afraid it wasn't attended to until now.' Margaret O'Dea clicked the keyboard. 'I'm really sorry about that, Tommy.'

'Do you want a cup of tea?'

'No thank you, good lad, you're very sweet, but I don't drink tea. I'm just here today for a preliminary meeting with yourself, to ask a few questions about your living arrangements. Jeremy signed off on it on Friday. He is actually your legal guardian at present, did you know that?'

'No.'

'Don't worry, this is not an exam or anything like that.' She was smiling again. 'Just a few questions, there are no wrong answers. It's really to make absolutely certain that you are getting all the support you need at this important time in your life, Tommy. You are fifteen...'. She glanced at the MacBook, clicked the screen. 'Sixteen in a few months.' I felt like a cigarette but decided against it. She wrote something on the foolscap, drew a line across. 'To start with, your uncle stays here with you now, isn't that right?'

'Sometimes I stay with him.'

'He was in the army?'

'Yeah, he did a few tours of Lebanon.'

'And tell me Tommy, after your father went to prison, why didn't you move in to your uncle's house in Cloonloch?'

'It's only a one-bed he had. He said there'd be some hassle with the council.'

‘Right.’ She nodded, writing. ‘I see you’re a fan of fast food. That’s not all you eat, is it?’

‘I have other stuff as well...’. I thought for a few seconds. ‘Rashers and eggs and ...potatoes.’

‘Do you cook? Or does Jeremy do that for you?’ I laughed. The idea of Midnight with a frying pan was too funny.

‘Ann does the cooking mostly.’

‘Now, who is Ann?’

‘Ann is...Midnight’s girlfriend. Jeremy’s girlfriend.’

‘I see. How often does Ann cook for you?’

‘She was here on Friday...’. I was getting tired of the questions.

‘A few times a week, is it?’

‘Maybe. Yeah.’ She wrote all of this down.

‘And does Ann do your washing too?’

‘Sometimes...other times she reckons the pots need steeping and tells me to do them after she’s gone.’

‘I see.’ Margaret O’Dea nodded toward the crowded sink. ‘But what I meant by washing was your laundry. I don’t see a washing machine.’

‘Ann takes a bag...every week, I think. Brings back the washed stuff.’

‘Fair play to Ann, eh?’ She wrote ‘Ann’ down in big letters on the page. ‘But you have lots of homework to be getting on with, don’t you, Tommy? Junior Cert this year, isn’t it?’

Margaret O’Dea wanted to know how often I visited mam and dad, if I showered every day, how much time I spent on homework, how much time out at the weekend, where I went and how I got there and a million other nonsense things. I told her any old rubbish after a while. I left out my activities with Marley. An hour or so later, she had pages filled, she was shaking her wrist.

‘Sure you don’t want a coffee?’

‘I don’t drink caffeine at all, Tommy. I’ll have a glass of water, if you have some there.’ I filled her a glass from the five-gallon drum, she took a good gulp. ‘Now, I have to go back to the office and type all this up. I have your phone number, so I’ll be in touch again in a few days. We might have another chat about things then, is that okay?’ She smiled. ‘As I was saying, the social services where I work are responsible for making sure youths like yourself aren’t neglected in a social, emotional or educational sense, just because both parents can’t be present for whatever reason. You see Tommy, it’s very important that all young people are given every chance to achieve their full potential. Sometimes external circumstances, none of which are the youth’s fault can get in the way and it’s our job to offer you help, advice and support and, in some circumstances, intervene when necessary during this period.’

I looked up across the table. ‘Why? What’s going to happen?’

‘Sorry?’

‘You said intervene?’

‘Your case will be assessed by my board now that you’ve given me a fuller picture. I’ll get back to you within a couple of days.’ She was getting up, shaking my hand. The questions

were over, and now she couldn't get out of there quick enough. It felt like I'd been at confessions and I'd made some complaint about mam and dad or Midnight and Ann.

We went up the avenue of Greenwood Prison in Midnight's jeep, past big black gates that looked like they hadn't been closed for years and lines of pine trees either side, small signs of '5' for the speed limit. At the top, there was a grass roundabout in front of the entrance. The building had been converted into a jail in the 1980s from a derelict mental hospital. Along with decorative corner stones and plain reveals, the original white pebble-dashed building still had rusty metal bars on all the windows. Most of the old section was now offices, the prisoners were housed in a group of newer grey buildings out the back. The complex was in the middle of a copse wood, miles from anywhere. Perfect for medium to long-term prisoners, not ideal for visitors. There were no buses or trains. Midnight had to drive me out there every Tuesday evening. We had to go through three checkpoints every time, one where we gave ours and dad's name, another where you handed in the items you were bringing which were put in a tray, a third where you went through a laser beam in a special doorway. The visitors' room was

crowded, one guard stood at the door, scrolling on his phone. We found dad near a window. The tray had got there before us and he was leafing through the local paper. 'That young fella has another big ad. out this week.'

'Who?'

'Young O'Malley.'

'He's making a good job of the place since the ol' fella had the stroke,' Midnight said, as he pulled out the other chair. I stood awkwardly at the table. 'Lovely cream doughnuts in there now. I had a couple the last day I brought Tommy in to school.'

'He'll run it into the ground same as the ol' fella. How are you, lad?'

'Alright.'

'He had a visitor.'

'Who?' Dad folded up the paper.

'Social worker,' I said.

'What did she want?'

'Rake of questions. About living alone, stuff like that.'

'But you're not living alone. Isn't Midnight and Ann looking after you?'

'That's what I told her.'

'Good lad, good lad. Ye are bringing him to school and all that?'

'Course we are, Joe.'

‘Good. Fucking nosy cunt. Tell her you don’t need any poxy help next time she comes. Hey Mid, I heard in here the last day that little bastard squealer is flat out up the country, shifting hot high-end wagons. Did you hear that?’

Midnight coughed deeply, his phlegm bubbling in his throat. After he’d snorted something into a ball of tissue paper he’d pulled from an inside pocket, he said ‘No, no. I didn’t hear any of that. I thought he was lying low?’

‘The neck on him. No word of the other lad?’

‘You mean Pock?’

‘No, I mean Pope John Paul the second.’

‘Not a thing.’

‘Still abroad, is he?’

‘Suppose he must be. I haven’t been talking to him.’

‘Jesus Christ, what’s this about?’ Dad had one of the letters open. I felt hot as I saw Sherlock’s signature at the bottom.

‘I thought you said ye were bringing him to school?’

‘We are, we are, every morning either meself or Ann bring him in—’

‘Then why is this Sherlock going on about him being only at school a couple of days since the new year started? “Last year’s performance cannot be repeated,” he says. He wants to meet you and sort it out.’

Midnight turned to me.

‘Are you not going in after us bringing you all the way to the gates?’



‘Yeah I am.’

‘He must be mitching before the registration Joe, that’s all I can say.’

‘I’m not mitching.’

‘Where the hell are ya then, for the love of God!’

‘Fuck’s sake!’ Dad banged the table with his fist. The prison guard looked up, casually slid the phone into his pocket, came over.

‘Everything alright, Joe?’

‘This fella won’t go in to school.’

‘Ah, the youth!’ the guard said, shaking his head as he returned to his post.

‘You better go in and see him.’

‘I will, I will. Shylock, is it?’

‘Sherlock.’

‘The hearing is gone to pot, the bombs out in The Leb, you see—’

‘And you,’ dad turned to me, glaring. ‘If you don’t go to school, how are you going to learn anything? Do you want to be arsin’ about like me and him for the rest of your days?’

‘I served my country,’ Midnight said.

‘Until you decided it should start serving you. Some of us worked that out a bit quicker, Uncle Jeremy!’

As they went on, I looked beyond dad, through the glass laced with high tensile steel, I could see the thin top branches of the copse, lifting in the wind. I wondered then what it'd be like to live there like the birds, in a nest high up, surrounded by the green of leaves.

Midnight dropped me off at eight. I was starving again and heated up another Dr Oetker. While I was waiting, I went on Done Deal. I found a Mercedes XLS 300 for sale in Cloonloch. Three years old, €17,500 o.n.o. But with Marley's device, it'd come for free. I texted him the link to the site. After, I went out to Ash's grave, pulled a few weeds from around the stones. I went up through The Mackon as the light faded away, to the other side of the village, where the scraggy ground gave way to the bog that surrounded our village. I walked past the tracks where turf had been tossed out by a hopper, turned, footed into little pyramids, bagged and taken away, then unloaded and rooked up in barns around The Mackon. Dad had saved turf out here a few times. I remembered going out with him when I was six or seven, before we moved from mam's cottage to the mobile. The last of the year's cut was scattered on the side of the road.

I climbed over a fence. I walked across the bog land for miles. The ground improved a bit, more grassy and stony as I passed by the school and Ballincalty. Eventually, I came to the boreen which led up to The Castle. The ground got marshy again. I went through the gate, up past the old shell. I climbed a fence behind the barns. I walked along the narrow dirt track and came to the swamp where they'd dumped all the scrap. Some wires, electrical stuff that hadn't sunk, were stuck to a bunch of reeds. There'd been a lot of rain over the past weeks, the boggy muck goo was diluted, it was overflowing at the back into a forestry managed block of pine trees. I tramped into the swamp, over thin brown clumps of bog grass, the ground springy underneath. Water began to seep into my runners. Dad once said it was thirty-foot deep in parts. I stopped, feeling the cold wet. Birds chirped somewhere. I remembered something the

geography teacher had said the week before, her voice was squeaky and loud, I couldn't daydream. Birds came down here from the Antarctic in the winter months. For them our climate was real mild. It was the northern birds that sang around me.

With the water thinning it out, the top of the swamp was pure flat in places, it reminded me of tin foil. I saw mam rolling up sandwiches for my day in Junior Infants down in The Mackon village school. I lifted my leg to step forward. The water came up past my ankles, the movement sent a ripple drifting out towards the centre. I watched as it slowed and then faded, melting into the perfect surface.

At first break, I watched the two detectives from the ATM raid leave Sherlock's office. They both shook hands with the Principal. Outside, I leaned against an Assembly Hall windowsill, looking across through the glass, along the hall, a fag hooked in my fingers. It had been a slow morning. I'd sat at the back of French, English and Business Studies, dreaming as I stared out the windows. No sign of McDermott and unofficial permission to go home. There was still no Marley since the weekend. He wasn't answering any of my texts or Facebook messages. Another bunch of worried first years had hassled me about who they should be giving their 'donations' to. I scrolled down and sent him another poke. I wanted to plan the Friday night operation.

The V.P. came during the first class of double Science. Straight after, I skipped out on an emergency toilet break. The school was calm, this was my favourite time to wander the

halls. All I could hear was the low drone of teachers behind closed doors, a hum of a heating fan somewhere in the ceilings. I sat in the cubicle on the toilet lid, hands together. The door in front of me was scribbled all over in black and blue marker: 'Meet here 9 on Mondays for a good time', 'Willie Downes sucks cock'. There were drawings of dicks, tits, swastikas, machine guns of varying skill. I wondered what the girls drew on their doors.

I put my head down between my legs. The bell rang. Noises came then, tables, chairs dragging, sneakers padding the rubber floor covering. My class would be moving on to History. My schoolbag was left at my stool in the Lab., across from Rebecca and Peter French, but I didn't much care. I'd already been marked present. I decided I'd just walk home. I rang Midnight. For once, he answered the phone.

'Yeah?' There was a bout of coughing.

'You don't need to come this evening. I've a lift.'

'Are ya sure?' Midnight managed eventually. 'We're going to the Home later. I'll be there at six so. Ann is coming to do a bit of tidy-up she says...'. He was still coughing as I hung up. I went down through the Resource Area, some of my class were already on the way to the History room. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rebecca and Peter French hold hands.

The late morning lull had hit the town. Maurice was in the forecourt, filling petrol for someone, he smiled at me as I passed. I went across the road and into The Olde Tree. The place was empty. Sky News was on low behind the counter. I could smell porter, lemon floor cleaner in the toilets. I sat at the end of the bar, fidgeted with a beer mat. It was getting on for noon. There were noises in the pot room. Jimmy came out with his son, their backs to me.

'Now take your time and you'll be grand. Listen to the orders and get them to repeat them if you have to. Check the change twice before you give it out, alright? The barrels are all

full or near it, so you should be fine. Give me a bell if you've any problems. Good man.' Jimmy went out the back. The son picked up a cloth and then saw me. He came down to the end of the counter.

'Pint of Guinness,' I said, taking out a fiver. The son looked at me, grey trousers, stained runners, plastic jacket hiding my school crested jumper. He looked around the bar quickly. He shrugged, pulled the pint.

The stout tasted rotten, like all drink, but you didn't buy it for the flavour. On the TV, there was a continuous buzz of presenters and reporters exchanging words, show jingles, adverts. Jimmy's son sat on the stool behind the counter, foam sticking out from the leather covering. He watched the TV, slowly tearing pieces off a beer mat and flicking them to the floor. He picked up his phone every few seconds, scrolled it, then tossed it back to the drip trays at the beer taps. When I'd the pint nearly finished, I played a few games of pool on my own, smoked a fag in the back-garden gazebo, had a few goes on the fruit machine, soon I was broke.

I went back out into the street, the light blinded me. I went across toward O'Malley's and then to the house beside it. It was a two-storey detached. Black wrought iron gates hung on moulded pillars. They led into a tarmacked drive. The lawn to the right was neatly mown, bordered by a trimmed two-foot high box hedge. A stone path ran down the middle, around a polished concrete fountain, where water spilled out of a fish's mouth, dripping into a green-tinted pool below. I went up the drive, around the side of the house, to the back garden, passing pruned pink rosebushes, a coiled mustard water hose, a golden varnished bird feeder.

There was a patio area in front of glass double doors, a wooden table and chairs under a large green umbrella. I looked in through the reflecting windows. I could see the walnut kitchen, granite worktops, marbled floor, red and white splashback tiles.

Marley sat in his boxers at the island in the centre, wearing huge Sony headphones. He stared at the laptop screen. Two naked women rubbed suds on each other in an enormous bathtub. Marley took up a piece of toast.

I thought I should knock on the glass, tell him it was alright for some bastards, sitting at home, wanking half the day while others had to wait around for that red-bearded fool of a vice-principal and his roll book and that it was all a load of bollocks. We'd have tea and toast, and we could slag off Sherlock, have a few fags, then we could plan that operation on Friday night.

Marley clicked the keyboard, the naked women vanished, the school website appeared. He opened 'First Year' and then a PDF. It was something about 20<sup>th</sup>-century history. He chewed as he read.

Nora pulled my arm as I passed her. Her eyes were wide, she was smiling. Her grip on my jacket was tight. There was a smell of damp newspapers off her. 'Gerald? Gerald? It's me?'

'I'm...not your son.'

'Oh.' She let go and sat down. 'I'm going home this evening, you see.'

My mother sat by the window. She looked up as we came to the bed, her eyes unusually bright.

'Tommy! Give your mother a kiss!' First I thought it was a tape recording. She hadn't called me by name in years. I kissed her on the cheek. 'How are you, my boy?'

'Fine.'

‘The uniform suits you so well.’ I was excited, it looked like we might even have a conversation. She gazed then across to the other window bed, where there was only a mattress. Mam stared for a long time. The conversation was over.

‘It’s these new tablets they have her on,’ Midnight said. ‘They seem to be helping her a bit. It’s all a money racket if you ask me. Them drug companies. Releasing cures when it suits them. Never trust money men, that’s what I say. It’s all fixed.’

‘How are you today, Shelia?’ It was the duty nurse, she came to the end of mam’s bed, looked through the file. ‘Are you her son?’ The nurse smiled at me. ‘Good lad. Does her the power of good to have visitors.’

‘We do the best we can,’ Midnight said.

‘Pat! Pat!’ Mam’s eyes opened wide, she shivered as though an electrical charge ran through her. I closed my eyes.

I could hear hot oil spitting in the mobile as we got out of the jeep. Inside, Ann wore an apron of red cherries, her hair was tied back, steam patched the lens of her glasses, she shook the pan around on the blue gas flame, the yellow and white of the eggs bubbled and spat. The mobile was hoovered and polished, everywhere smelt nice. ‘Are you okay, Tommy?’ Ann said as we came in. ‘How is your poor mother?’

‘On new tablets,’ Midnight said, sitting on the far sofa bed. He lay back, put his sand boots up. ‘It’s an awful sight, her zonin’ in and out of it. She was better off the other way, I think meself.’



‘Get your feet off them cushions! Jeremy! Do you hear me?’ Ann took up the sweeping brush, went toward my uncle. ‘I just cleaned them with Febreze!’

‘Ah, for the love of God, woman!’ Midnight sat up, eyeing the brush. He pulled out his cigars as Ann returned to the frying pan.

‘And don’t light up one of them dirty rotten things after me just spraying the place with air freshener for the young lad!’

‘Ah, Jesus!’ Midnight put away the yellow box. ‘Give us one of your fags, so.’

‘Can’t you wait until after your tea now? Anyway, I don’t have any. I don’t use tobacco anymore. I just take the electronic cigarette.’

‘Electronic cigarettes!’ Midnight snorted. ‘What’s the world comin’ to, even the smoke has gone plastic!’ I had my phone out, scrolled down through Facebook.

‘Do you want some fried bread with this, Tommy?’ Ann said, trimming the ends of the eggs.

‘Okay.’

‘How did you get on with your dad yesterday?’

‘Fine.’

‘God help him, stuck in there, day in and day out.’ Ann pressed a slice of bread onto the pan.

‘He’s pool champ of the block, anyhow,’ Midnight said, fumbling around in his jacket, before pulling out a can of Dutch Gold. ‘He went mad over that letter, though.’

‘What letter?’ Ann said.

Midnight opened the can, sipped. 'From Sheridan, the principal of the school.'

'It's Sherlock.' I said.

'I'm surprised you know, the amount of time you're there!'

Rebecca and Peter French had set up a Facebook page called 'Becky and Pete'. There were loads of photos of them together in different places over the summer. They'd just jointly posted something about the basement disco in the Cloonloch Arms Hotel on Friday night, a start of the year thing, most of Junior Cert was going. It reminded me of the job with the CLS 300. I went on to the motor ad. site. The car still hadn't been sold. I saved the mobile number.

'What was the letter about?' Ann said, fish slicing the eggs and bread onto plates, pouring out tea.

'Tommy not going in to school half the time. Yer man wants to see me tomorrow morning.'

'Ah Tommy, what's this about? Aren't we bringing you in every day?' She brought over two plates of eggs and bread.

'It's a mix up with the register,' I said. I looked up from the phone, saw Midnight winking at Ann and shaking his head, the greying curls losing specks of dandruff on the table.

'No, it is. We have a lot of free classes and I do miss the roll call. It happens a lot of people.'

'You must be missing a lot to be getting letters from the Principal, Tommy,' Ann said.

'Ah, the youth,' Midnight said, dipping his bread in egg yolk. 'If you saw the things I saw in Leb, you'd go to school, I tell ya.'

‘Staying here on your own every night, all the same.’ Ann wiped the counter with a dishcloth. ‘It’s not good for a schoolboy. Maybe you could stay with Jeremy in the box room the odd night for the winter.’ Midnight coughed.

‘If the council hear about that—’

‘Ah, be quiet. How long am I staying there with you and my little car parked outside and we had no trouble. If it’s only an odd time, they don’t care. What do you think, Tommy? Do you want to come over tonight? Jeremy could bring you straight to Ballincalty tomorrow if you bring your schoolbag with you?’

‘Nah, I’m fine here.’

‘Now, Tommy—,’ Ann stared at me.

‘Alright, alright.’ I didn’t want to argue with someone who made such a tasty tea of eggs and fried bread.

Midnight’s house was in a council estate on the outskirts of Cloonloch. It was a one-bedroom place, with a tiny box room at the front beside the entrance door where he put ex-military callers up for the night, a bathroom to the right and a kitchen sitter at the back. Ann got me set up in the box room on Midnight’s army camp bed and sleeping bag, some of the many things my uncle had taken as unofficial retirement presents by ‘special arrangement’ with his drinking partner, the quartermaster.

‘Do you want a cup of tea?’ Ann said as I sat on the small couch in the sitting area.

‘Be sure to put at least eight tea bags in the pot,’ Midnight shouted, midstream in the toilet.

‘Do you want to be able to stand on it? Sit there, Tommy, good lad. I have some lovely éclairs in the fridge. I got them today fresh from Rourke’s.’ Midnight sat beside me, lit a King Edward with his zippo.

‘Fresh enough in here and all.’ Midnight shivered. ‘Is the oil gone again?’

‘Did you get some?’ Ann said, arranging an éclair on a small plate at the worktop.

‘I’m a bit strapped until the 25<sup>th</sup>, that’s the problem.’

‘The 25<sup>th</sup>, the 25<sup>th</sup>. That’s the same old tune every month.’ Ann put the éclair and a mug of steaming tea in front of me on a small wooden table. She sat across in an armchair, opened her handbag. ‘Now, it is cold alright. Do you feel it, Tommy?’

‘A bit.’

‘Poor lad.’ Ann took a twenty out and put it on the table.

‘Ah, will you not go down and get it?’ my uncle said, looking at it.

‘Is it not enough I’m buying it? I suppose you would have an old woman lugging around a big can of oil, alright.’ Midnight sat back, puffing on the cigar.

‘Put the telly on there lad, till we see what canter is on.’ I turned on the telly, found Channel 4 racing. The commentator’s tone was relaxed, he outlined the going, the jockeys, each horse’s recent form. Midnight was already sitting up, tapping his knees as he always did at the sight of the colourful jockeys and the flashing feed of odds on a screen. It was the only time I ever saw him excited. The cream in the bun was real fresh, the tea milky and sweet. I felt warm sitting there, much better than back in the mobile, although I wasn’t sure why. Midnight shivered again. He turned to Ann.

‘Will you get the oil, if I go I’ll miss the race?’

‘You can watch it in the fresh air, so.’ Ann filled the cartridge of her e-fag.

‘For the love of God!’ Midnight grabbed the twenty. ‘Come on Tommy. Swallow that beast, you may as well come for the spin.’

We drove out of Midnight’s estate in the jeep, back through the streets of Cloonloch. He passed the service station that sold five-gallon drums of heating oil. On the main street, he stopped outside Ladbrokes. He hurried inside, as quick as his triangular shape would allow.

‘Who’s racing?’ I said, when he came back out a few minutes later, his thick fingers around a yellow slip.

‘The Fairyhouse handicap. A fella in there knows the trainer. Bold Boy at twenty to one. It’s all set up with the other jockeys.’

‘No way. They say that, but it’s not really fixed.’

‘Ah, the youth. Everything is fixed, lad.’ Midnight turned at the top of the street. He passed the service station again on the way out.

‘What about the oil?’

Midnight drove into another estate, this one had a high wall around it, tall pillars at the entrance. All the houses were detached, they had bay windows and tarmacked drives. There were flower boxes on the windowsills, and the curtains were tied back behind the blinds. 151, 152 jeeps and cars were parked at the front doors. None were very lit up, mostly there was just a sitting room or hall light and front door side lamps. One was in complete darkness, there were no cars outside. Here Midnight turned in, stopped right outside the front door.

‘Who lives here?’

‘Come on.’

We got out. The estate was real quiet. I looked across the common ground, neatly mown, to the bay window in the house the other side. Inside there was a big screen TV in the corner, a large white marble fireplace, fire burning. I could see a pair of socked feet out on a cream leather sofa. A small boy ran across the room waving a toy.

Midnight opened the back of the jeep. He pulled out an empty five-gallon drum and an adjustable spanner. He handed me the drum and led me around the side of the house. He opened a wooden gate, and we came into the back garden. There was a stone patio, a pair of swings on a bright green steel tripod, a garden shed in the corner. The dark shape of an oil tank seemed to float beside the shed, the three block pillars underneath hidden in the shadows. Midnight went straight to the tank, twisting the nut on the oil line with the spanner. ‘What if somebody comes?’ I whispered, looking out at the drive. ‘Your jeep will be boxed in.’

‘Did you say your prayers this morning, lad?’

‘Wouldn’t it be better to park out on the street?’

‘Do you want to be hauling a full drum all the way out there, with security cams and toddlers with flip pads or whatever they’re called tapin’ the whole thing?’

‘Yeah, but—’

‘If they block us, we’ll say we work for the council and have to go urgent. They’ll be too spooked to say anything if we keep going. We’ll tell them there’s...there’s a water leak at the hospital.’

‘What hospital?’

‘Ah! You think too much, lad! Come over here with the drum, for the love of God, and stop asking questions. Come on, look lively!’ I took the lid off the drum, held it under the pipe. When Midnight twisted the nut all the way, he pushed the sleeve back. The line came loose. A thick, steely smell rose as oil flowed into the drum. ‘Aisy money,’ Midnight said. I held the container steady as he wandered around the garden, looking in the windows of the house and shed, jerking the swing set, before pissing into the rosebushes.

Some oil splattered on my fingers, the handle of the drum got slippy. I lost concentration for a second, the drum slid out of my grip and fell to the path. It made a deep thump sound, turned on its side, oil flowed everywhere.

‘Ya fuckin’ eejit!’ Midnight growled, zipping his fly up, hopping across. He smacked me on the head, picked the drum up and held it under the disconnected pipe. ‘See that stain! Now the bitches will know I come.’ His phone vibrated in his pocket. ‘Hold this, that text must be the bookies.’ He pulled out the phone. ‘Ah, for the love of God.’ The screen lit up his face. ‘Bold Boy. Not even placed.’

‘I thought it was all fixed,’ I said, the drum weighing me down again.

‘It is. Just I’m not the one fixin’ it.’ When the drum was almost full, Midnight slid back the line into the sleeve, tightened the nut. I screwed on the lid, hauled the drum round to the back of the jeep. He had the motor running as I got in and we drove out of the estate in silence.

Dad had a red knitted cap on as he went out the back door. The white frost coated the stone walls in the fields outside. ‘Pull it down over your ears, Joker, it's freezing today!’ Mam smiled at the table. Dad looked in the window and pulled the wool down.

‘What’s that Shee, I can’t hear ya!’

‘Go on! And don’t be late this evening, I’m making Shepherd’s Pie!’

Mam buttered a piece of toast, dipped the knife in the pot of orange peel marmalade.

I couldn’t breathe, I pulled the top of the army green sleeping bag down and stared out the little box room window to the yellow street light.



We stood at the radiator outside Sherlock's office. Students hurried to first classes, some of them staring at us. Ann searched in her beige handbag.

'Is he usually this late?' She dabbed her face with a folded cloth handkerchief. She was wearing some old type perfume. It reminded me of mam.

'Don't know. Never was waiting for him before.' Not true. Me and Marley had made many trips to the office in second year.

'Let's hope you don't make a habit of it. It's an awful thing to have someone from your family called in to the Principal's office, Tommy. I hope this will make you knuckle down a bit and get on with your work.' Ann meant well, but she could be awful annoying at times. Sherlock came around the corner. He stopped at Ann.

'Thank you for coming. Mrs O'Toole is it?'

‘It’s Miss. Miss Gillhooley.’

‘Ah yes.’ Sherlock shook Ann’s hand weakly. He took a bunch of keys and opened the door. There was a carpet inside, wallpaper, a walnut desk, a soft office chair. There were two hard seats in front. He waved us to sit. ‘It’s good to finally meet some of Tommy’s family.’

‘I’m not strictly related, Principal. I’m standing in. His uncle Jeremy would have come, but he has a bad back. It was playing up this morning. He was a soldier out in Lebanon.’

‘I see.’ Sherlock fidgeted with a pen. ‘I wanted to talk to you today about Tommy’s attendance record as a matter of urgency. As you’ll know, Tommy is doing his Junior Cert next summer, and regular classes are essential for all the coursework. We are still in September and Tommy has already missed eleven days. It’s not as though this is a new situation. He was absent for much of last year too. We never had sick notes or explanations of any kind. I sent several letters over there to The Mackon—,’ Sherlock waved at the window, as though to some far-off land, ‘But there was never any response, until I got by chance Mr Wall’s home address in Cloonloch over the summer.’

Ann glared at me. ‘Tommy! What’s going on?’ She looked at Sherlock. ‘Every morning either me or Jeremy brings the lad in to the school gates, Principal. Sometimes we’re not able to collect him, and he gets home with one of the other village kids. But we always bring him in for nine o’clock, Mr Sharlaton.’

‘Yes. But I’m afraid he does not seem to be making it all the way up the avenue. Now, as I’m sure you’ll appreciate, we have inspectors coming regularly ourselves. We cannot have registered students perennially absent.’

‘I’m disappointed, Tommy,’ Ann said. I didn’t like it at all. It was as though I’d told a joke and no one laughed.

‘Now what I want to establish today is exactly what Tommy wants from Ballincalty Secondary. Even when he does make it into class, he is not participating in any meaningful way. From what the teachers tell me, he is in a world of his own most of the time. Even in the Art Room, where he has shown some promise in the past.’

I’d never been sitting so close to the window in Sherlock’s office, never sitting at all in there actually, and I couldn’t believe the view he had from his desk. He overlooked the Resource Area roof, right across the tennis courts and straight down the paths of the smoking wood. It was no wonder he caught so many puffing.

He went on for another bit about my ‘ability’ and ‘opportunities’. I just nodded at everything he said, it was easier that way.

‘It’s just as well your father isn’t here, Tommy,’ Ann was saying. She had her e-fag out, she was switching it on.

‘I’m afraid we don’t permit electronic cigarettes anywhere in the school or grounds, Mrs Gillyhooley.’

‘But it’s electric, it’s not a real fag, there’s no smoke.’ She waved it in the air.

‘Yes, I’m aware of that. But our smoking ban now extends to electrical devices as well.’ Ann put the e-fag back into her handbag. ‘Given you and Tommy’s appearance here this morning, am I right in assuming that we can expect a vast improvement in attendance and participation for the rest of the year?’ Sherlock’s lip turned a bit, he might even have been smiling.

‘You’re going to work hard now, aren’t you, Tommy?’ Ann said.

‘Yeah. Sure.’

‘I’ll bring him right to the door, Mr Sharlaton. It was the buses around the entrance, you see, that put me off. I was afraid I’d get jammed up.’

‘If you come a little earlier, you shouldn’t have a problem. It was nice to meet you.’

‘Thank you, Principal.’

Sherlock got up, opened the door and waited for us to leave. ‘You can go straight down to French, Tommy.’

Marley chewed onion rings in the Resource Area at first break. He had been on about his sudden illness since the bell went. ‘It was that bug on the telly. I was in the cot the whole time.’

‘I was thinking that.’ I nodded, but I wouldn’t look him in the eye.

‘I didn’t get the phone back online till this morning, and I saw you were in touch, scan. But I knew I’d see ya down here.’

‘Ye going out for a quick one?’ Lally said, coming up to us.

We went out by the V.P., up the concrete stairs, through the tennis courts, around the morning kick about amongst the fourth years, and down to the smoking wood. It was crowded and Lally stopped at the first gorse bush.

‘I wouldn’t stall here,’ I said. ‘Trifle can see right up the path from his office. It’s a miracle more aren’t caught.’

‘Do you hear Tommy the boy with all the moves?’ Marley pulled out twenty Benson & Hedges through his fly. ‘Chillax. There’s no one in the office, blinds are drawn.’ We lit up. Lally saw someone he knew and left us.

‘What’s the story Friday?’ I said, taking the chance. Lally always seemed to be stuck between us these days.

‘Yeah, it’s a nice motor alright.’

‘We should get two grand off Eric for a yoke like that.’

‘Bit close to the barracks, that house?’

‘No closer than the last one.’

‘Is this “America’s Most Wanted” beside me?’

‘I was thinking we draw your man out before the disco. Scan it and pick her up after, late on.’

‘You have her all worked out.’

‘Are you on for it?’ I said. Marley stared at a spot on the ground, slowly tapping the ash of his fag. ‘What is it?’

Marley shook himself. ‘It’s these tabs I’m on for the bug. They have me zonked.’

I stuck it out for the day, sitting at the back, expecting Sherlock to look in and check if I was present, but he never did. Teachers droned on as I doodled on the same first year copy I used for all subjects. Marley reckoned the bug had done something to his hearing and he sat up at the top of the class, near Rebecca. She whispered to Peter French beside her every time the teacher’s back was turned.

I got a lift home with one of the other kids, a second year from The Mackon. Margaret O'Dea's hatchback was parked outside the mobile. She got out as I arrived, waved at the family that dropped me off. 'Hi, Tommy.'

'Hi. Do you know them?'

'No, just being friendly. Doesn't cost anything, you know.' I led her inside. 'I won't keep you too long. I know you'll want to get your dinner. Who's cooking?' She sat across from me on the far sofa bed. She opened her bag and slid out her laptop.

'Ann had something on this evening. I'll probably heat up a Dr Oetker.'

'A what?'

'Pizza.'

'Ah.' Her MacBook hummed as it came on. 'How was school today?'

'Fine. Do you want a cup of tea?'

'No, thank you. I don't take caffeine, remember?' She smiled. 'Since I was talking to you, my board have assessed your current living arrangements, taking into account the last two years since your dad went into prison, our talk here the other day and my meeting with your uncle, Jeremy Wall.' I thought I saw something moving through the Perspex. I tried to see beyond Margaret O'Dea, down the end of the field. I could just make out Tuohy amongst the bushes. His tractor was parked at the corner of the field. He was doing something with the barbed wire at the gap where the cattle kept breaking in. There were some new stakes on the ground. 'I know you had a meeting this morning with Mr Sherlock about your attendance. Your...Ann Gillhooley was present. Is your uncle sick?'

'It's his back. He was in Lebanon.'

‘Your attendance has been very poor since the new year began, hasn’t it?’

‘There were a lot of free classes.’ I was hungry and getting tired of it all now.

‘Right. Now, my board have recommended an application for an emergency court order that will allow for your transfer to foster care until you are at least sixteen.’

‘Transfer? But I’m sixteen in a few months. What’s the point of—?’

‘This is a critical time for you, Tommy. We don’t want to see you slipping away from your schoolwork. Your Junior Cert is coming up next year. What we want to do is move you as soon as possible. We have a lovely family in Cloonloch on our list, the McCourts. I was out there this morning. They have a fine big airy bedroom ready and waiting for you. Nice comfortable study desk and chair, shelves for all your books. They have very fast Wi-Fi and great views of the town. John McCourt is a postman and his wife Wendy works from home as a copy editor. They have a son, Mark. He’s fifteen, same age as yourself.’ Mark: real square head name. ‘You could get on really well. They live in a lovely estate of detached houses on the outskirts. You would have to transfer to Cloonloch College, but it could be a fresh start for you. What do you think?’

Margaret O’Dea had become a problem. I wouldn’t look at her. I stared at dad’s bed. On the duvet, one of mam’s old medicine books was opened, face down: *How we die: Reflections on Life’s Final Chapter*.

‘It’s clear to this office, Tommy, that you are completely neglected in a range of essential areas, in the sense of education, social integration, and domestic supports. And it’s a real shame as Mr Sherlock has informed me that despite your poor attendance, he believes you have high academic potential.’

‘Huh?’

‘Basically Tommy, you have the makings of a very successful student, but you are simply not getting what you need, whether you realise it or not, not right now and not right here in this mobile home, with your father in prison for at least another two years and your mother permanently incapacitated in a nursing home.’

‘But mam is on new tablets, she’s getting better—’

‘You are not attending school or else ducking many classes, you are camped here day and night, without any healthy stimulus. This is not an ideal environment and it could have dire consequences for you in the long term.’

‘But I was in every day this week!’

‘I know how clever you are, Tommy. Popping your head in for the register is not sufficient. The Principal and his V.P. are aware of this strategy amongst students.’ Margaret O’Dea paused. ‘Tommy, can I get a drink of water?’ I poured her a glass from the drum. As I sat, I saw Tuohy at the corner of the field, trouncing the new stakes with a sledge. Margaret O’Dea sipped from the glass. ‘Thank you, Tommy. Don’t get me wrong. This meeting is not about criticising you. The situation you find yourself in at the moment, none of it is your fault. You deserve much better and it’s true that the system has let you down, failing to address your case for a lengthy period after your father went to prison and your uncle became your legal guardian. You’ve been left on your own for too long—’

‘Midnight and Ann—’

‘I spoke to your uncle again yesterday, and he is in complete agreement in this. He has his own issues—,’ I could just imagine Midnight blathering about his back and his chest and his poxy hearing to Margaret O’Dea. ‘He admitted that he and Miss Gillhooley are simply not



capable of supervising you, try as they have. Your uncle has signed the necessary paperwork for the transfer.'

'He's what?'

'We want to move you to the McCourts as soon as possible. It will be on trial until you are sixteen, with a monthly review, of course. But if all parties are happy, it could be extended until you are eighteen. It would be a fresh start for you, Tommy. You'd get all the home supports you need.'

Images were coming through of this alien family in Cloonloch, square heads and triangular eyes, Sunday evenings, all holding hands on a tweed sofa in front of a log fire, watching some rotten talent show, they would tuck me in later, tell me a story with a picture book, because they'd have firewalled the internet out of sight. I thought I was going to vomit all over Margaret O'Dea.

'No, no. I'd be better off here.'

'I know you think that now, Tommy. But in a few years, it'll be clear that this was the right decision.'

'But I don't see the point of it.' Margaret O'Dea looked at me, as if I'd really offended her.

'I know it will be strange at first, a new house, new school, new people around, but believe me, you won't feel settling in. You could have a great time—'

'But why are ye botherin' with this?' I felt cornered.

'The state has a duty to ensure teenagers like you don't get neglected.' I could see there was no point arguing with her. There was only one way out.

‘When did you say I’ll be going?’ I could see the win in her eyes.

‘We could go over on Saturday morning for a visit. Then if everything is alright, which I’m sure it will be, you could move in on Monday. The court order is in process, but we can transfer you in the interim, when circumstances warrant, as they obviously do in this case. This could be a new start for you, Tommy.’ Margaret O’Dea spread a stack of shiny leaflets about foster homes on the table before she left.

I assembled the rifle quickly, enjoying the new skill in my hands, moving from breech to block, block to butt, fitting the telescopic sites, hooking on springs, clicking in casings and loading the magazine. I went outside, around the back, walked through the site, by the useless stumps of walls. Tuohy’s tractor was gone. Two new stakes stood crookedly in the gap. It looked like he’d given up.

I aimed carelessly at the tops of branches in distant trees, then at overhead electric cables. Midnight had once shown me how to hold a weapon. He said the recoil from some guns can bruise all over your arm. It had happened him once in recruit training. There was a way to set it on the ground, like a sniper, legs flat, feet turned out, chest to the ground, and a way to set it standing, butt of rifle tight to shoulder, legs comfortably waist-width apart, left hand supporting the breech. He showed me in the mobile after some cans of Dutch Gold, using the handle of the sweeping brush as the Remington was always locked away. Dad came in during the tutorial and went mad. He said I would never fire a ‘poxy rifle’ or set foot in a ‘dirty old barracks’, fighting for ‘some ol’ prick of a politician’. He told us that my future was college and a job as a ‘Doctor or Lawyer’.

A bird, probably one of the northerners, landed on the electric cables across the road. I found a position, lined the target up in the crosshairs. I anchored the butt at my shoulder, pulled back the bolt, clicked it forward, hearing the metallic rattle as the round slid up the breech. I switched the catch from 'S' to 'R'. I aimed at the bird. I breathed in and out. My finger crept over the trigger. Another bird joined the first one.

There was a bang from behind me. First I thought I was under fire myself and ducked for cover. Another bang, now I heard it like a thump. I went to the utility room, looked out through the crazy 'L' along the back wall.

Tuohy was back in his tractor at the gap. He had the engine running. He pulled levers, oil hissed in the hydraulics. He had finally given up the sledge and bought a shiny new post-driver, powered by the tractor's p.t.o. I watched as the silver bars lifted the next stake and placed it into position at the edge of the ditch. A mechanical hammer whacked the top with a thump. Tuohy pulled the lever, checked the post. I lit a cigarette as he pressed the lever again, the hammer thumped, sinking the end further into the ground.

It looked like I'd have to call it off. It had been over an hour since I'd made the call, told the guy I was on my way. There was still no sign of him. Usually, when Marley rang them and told them he wanted to look at their motor, they'd come straight out to get it ready, whip the good jack from the boot and put a cheapo Aldi one there instead, give the dash an extra polish. But this guy was real casual about cashing in his twenty-grand motor.

Marley had texted me after school: 'Puking up all evening. Can't do it. Bag of tricks in patio.' He'd tossed an old sports bag with the equipment in the garden. I supposed he didn't even want me calling in. I'd been standing inside the door of the Centra across the road, pretending to look at magazines, but I could feel the staff starting to notice me hanging around. My phone buzzed. It was Eric.

'What's wrong with Jake? I texted him a few times, but there was no answer.'

‘He’s sick, he reckons.’

‘Woman. You’ll have to keep the flag flyin’. Story, bud?’

‘Can’t get a read at the moment. So I don’t know if it’s on.’

‘Text me when yiz are at the place, alrigh’?’ The door to Number 10 opened. The guy came down the path, followed by what I guessed was his girlfriend, hauling a Henry Hoover.

‘I’ve to go.’

I ran across the road, slid out the scanner. It was like one of those giant consoles delivery men used. I stopped at the estate entrance, fag in my mouth, acted as if I was looking for a lighter. The guy had the key out, zapped it, the indicators flashed. Sometimes the signal would be blocked by radio waves or phones, but it was programmed to zone in on cars’ infrared central locking. You also had a second chance when the owner locked it.

Marley’s device beeped. It had scanned the code. It was now storing it in the drive. The couple started pulling out boxes from the back seat and putting them in a 151-jeep parked at the front door. The danger was that he’d get nervous about waiting all evening for a buyer that never showed and he’d box the Mercedes in for security. But there was always this problem. Every seller had newer, flashier motors to sit into. I walked into town as the device automatically copied the info to my clone transponder key.

Most of Junior Cert was at the basement disco in the Cloonloch Arms. It was all dry ice, maple floors, blinking colours, a mineral only bar, the music thumping. Lads jumped around in soft hooded tops and sneakers or sand boots, girls with glitter on their cheeks, skirts never below

the knee. There were flashes of heels, shoulders and bellies bare around tight tops. I only had one can of cider in the park with Lally and a few other heads. I wanted to keep clear for later.

Rebecca and Peter French were glued to each other at one of the round tables on the upper level. Karen and Suzanne sat giggling nearby. Rebecca's followers looked better than usual. Karen had toned down her candy floss, stroked it smooth and made it blonder. She wore a pleated mini-skirt, while Suzanne had pure white short shorts with a gold belt, you could see her hip bone. Some big lad bumped into me. He looked down at me, smiling, curly black hair, goatee, brown teeth. It was the guy from the golf clubhouse. He looked a bit old for a teenage disco. 'Alright?' He smiled. 'Want anything?'

I didn't know if he was offering me a fag or a belt in the jaw. 'I'm Billy. Need anything, give us a shout, yeah? On the house for ya tonight, alright friend?' Billy slapped me lightly on the shoulder and went on to a group of girls coming off the dancefloor. I saw Rebecca had gone over to the bar. It was time for a can of Club Lemon.

'Howya Becky!' I said, arriving beside her.

'Hi Tommy!' Her voice was higher pitched than usual. Her lips were crooked, her eyes not fully open. She got two cans of orange.

'How's Pete?' I had to roar as the music had gone up a few notches. She leant forward as I repeated the question, pulled her hair back. It was light brown now, cut to her jawline. I smelt her shampoo, it was lovely. She pulled a miniature vodka from a white leather bag.

'Do you want a taste?' I waved it away. She drank from one of the cans, then topped it with some of the vodka. 'Need a buzz...so me and Peter...yeah...'. She was shouting but I missed out on most of the next sentence or two. It ended with '...not that serious, you know, Tommy.' French arrived behind her, tapped her on the shoulder, she spun around. I was cold.

They shifted. French slid his hand up the back of her top under the bra strap and slowly around the front. I went down to Karen and Suzanne.

‘Didn’t see you two in the park?’ I shouted across the table.

‘Our dads don’t allow us in town before the disco,’ Suzanne said.

‘Oh right. Roasting in here?’ I said, turning to Karen.

‘Steaming.’

‘Do you want to get some air?’

Karen laughed. Suzanne rolled her eyes.

‘I’m going to the bar,’ Suzanne said. Karen got up, we held hands, she led me to the exit door.

It was nice and cool in the hotel carpark, out of the screeching beat of disco music, the lights, the shouting and laughing. There were a few other couples there already, some were just standing around, smoking. I could smell hash. Billy had found a few customers. Others were up against the wall, clamped together, knickers around knees, shirts opened, bodies grinding together, careless of onlookers. I saw some of the smokers filming the action for upload later. We went to the corner of the building, behind a rosebush planted in a bed of pea gravel. Karen lay against the wall, pulled me to her. I tried to shift her, but she kept her lips locked together. When I did manage to squeeze my tongue through, I hit a wall of clenched teeth and breath like Ribena. She drew her head back. I guessed she’d want to go straight back into the disco. I’d buy her a can of Fanta, we’d talk about school, arrange a date on Saturday in the bowling alley in Cloonloch. I wouldn’t mind, I’d be happy to be with her. Karen wasn’t Rebecca, but she was alright.

Karen reached into her lemon wedge handbag, pulled out a small silver package. She zipped down my fly, slickly slipping out my dick. I shivered at her touch, while loving it. I was so stiff I thought I'd burst. Karen laughed then, rolling on the johnny. I tried to act as if none of this was new to me, but I guessed she knew the truth. She'd gone commando.

I began to finger her, but she pulled my hand out of the matted wet hair, guided my lad into her. I reached up under the tiny top, squeezed my hand under the bra strap, but there were no breasts available. I eventually found a flat nipple somewhere, tweaked it as I jerked.

There was fuck all enjoyment. It felt like someone was taping my arse the whole time and it would be on Instagram within minutes. There was her Ribena breath and the way I didn't know her, not really, we had never talked, only classroom slugging, the dull shoving didn't seem to be at all enough.

I felt awful stupid to even think like that. I was getting the ride, every fifteen-year-old boy's dream. I jerked off, did get a buzz from the spill which lasted for three seconds as I filled up the rubber. I wanted to kiss her on the lips, but she shoved me back, the condom fell off, onto the ground with a splat.

Karen angled around me, walked along the hotel wall, to the exit door. The music inside still pounded, she pushed down her skirt, tidied her blouse. I stood at the rosebushes, staring.

The estate across from Centra was silent at two o'clock. The jeep was still tucked in at the front door, the CLS 300 on the edge of the drive. I ran across the common ground, hood up, clone out. I clicked the button. Like magic, the indicator lights flashed. Doors were unlocked. I got in, smooth leather seats, cool walnut fascia. He had been busy polishing her up for me, but



there would be plenty of time later to admire the sheen. I plugged in the transponder clone, pressed the start button.

The engine purred into life. I calmly drove out of the estate, just another zombie head going down to the 24-hour for a packet of wine gums. I clicked on the phone app. to muffle the GPS and switched on the music centre as I took the ring road for the east. Violins, cellos and clarinets took over the car. It was classical, 'Beethoven IX' the file said. I liked it, turned it up, wound down all the windows, the night air blew through, it was electric.

I got to the Marina in two and half hours. Roads were dead as expected. There was no one around the pier. All the yachts were in darkness, just black shapes against the skyline lit with the moon, apart from the tiny flashing green alarm lights.

I stopped at Eric's warehouse and sent a text. There was no answer but that often happened when he was out for the night. Still, I rang him and left a message. The first bus left the city at five and I wanted to be on it with my money.

I got sick of waiting. The tiredness was starting to get to me, the high of the nightclub, Karen, the long drive across the country. I was seeing things moving along the water's edge that weren't there. I got out and walked by the yachts. Just like Eric had said, the only one without the alarm light was the 'Sunseeker 115'. It was a beast of a boat. I climbed over the rails onto the deck. There were three floors clad in glass and white panels. I could smell polished wood and steel.

All the doors were locked. I tried to see inside, my eyes getting used to the darkness. I saw a wall-to-wall sofa in the lounge. In the next section, there was a huge dining room, long

table, cushioned chairs, chandelier overhead. At the end, a kitchen of walnut doors, marble floors, granite worktops.

I climbed up the exterior ladder, to the next level. I found a PVC door unlocked. I came into a double bedroom, king-size thick flowery duvet, golden door handles, patterned wallpaper, glass sidelights. There was a massive tiled ensuite behind with his and hers washbasins. I went up the steel spiral staircase, came into the sky deck. There was a six-man Jacuzzi, dome roof of Perspex above, stars twinkling beyond. The bar counter had a shiny Guinness tap and optics loaded with whiskies I didn't know.

A small door in a lobby area to the front led down steps to the control room. There was a huge panel under the massive windscreen: monitors, dials, buttons, a wheel for steering. I wondered if you could really hot-wire a yacht. Half a million euro in Calais. I knelt, pulled off a panel, lit up the space behind with the phone. I pulled out a thick bunch of wires. I was getting excited, I pared them back with a key. You could just touch them together to ignite the electrics. It probably wouldn't start her, but I didn't care. I did it anyway.

A light came on somewhere, a fan started whirring deep in the bowels of the yacht. There was a thump downstairs. I got up, went back to the sky deck, down the spiral staircase to the first level. As I came into the kitchen, a torch flashed into my face. I could see luminous jackets. Someone called my name.

The detectives had ditched the suits. It was a Saturday, I supposed. The bald one wore a shirt and slacks, the younger, curly-haired one was in chinos and a North Face top. I was in a room of rubber-coated walls, sitting in a plastic chair, an ID band clipped to my wrist. I'd been there for hours but I couldn't tell what time it was. They'd taken my phone away.

'Guess you're tired waiting, Tommy,' the curly-haired one said. 'I know you've had a brief chat with the Port Gardaí and we'll get you processed as soon as we can.' Processed. Sounded like something you did to canned food. 'We're from the Serious Crime Division. I'm Detective Armstrong and this is Detective O'Keefe. We're the investigating officers assigned to your case. We want to talk about what happened last night at the Marina in East Wall.' Armstrong opened one of a pile of folders in front of him. 'The guy who owns that yacht. He

lives in Monaco.’ Eric had been right about the Sunseeker. ‘I’m afraid he is not a happy camper, Tommy. He wants to press full charges.’

‘For what—,’ I was croaking. I’d hardly spoken in hours.

‘You need a drink of water?’ Armstrong got up, left the room. O’Keefe stared at me. Armstrong came back in with three plastic cups of water.

‘Now, one for everyone in the audience!’

‘Thanks.’ It was cold and good. ‘That boat, I was just looking at it.’

‘Right. See the problem with that explanation is you had a bunch of wires out, under the control panel. You had them pared back with a key. The electrics were fired up. That looks to us like a guy trying to get something running.’

‘I was...’.

‘Look,’ Armstrong sat up, leaned on the table. ‘We know it takes an expert, maybe a team of experts to operate a beast like that...’. He looked down at the folder, the sheets he’d leafed through. ‘A Sunseeker 115. But when something is worth twenty odd million, you need to be sure, do you see our point?’

‘I was just looking around.’

‘Legally, you turned the engine. You can guess what happens when someone is caught with twenty million stolen from a bank?’

‘I thought you couldn’t interview a minor without a parent? Isn’t that the law?’

Armstrong sat back. ‘Your da is in prison, your ma is incoherent in a nursing home and your uncle won’t answer his phone. We’ve done everything we can to get someone here for

you. We know the law too, see. Legal aid is on the way. But this isn't an interview. It's a chat. We're trying to help you here.'

Armstrong closed the folder, took up another one. 'Let's forget about the yacht for a second. Now the car that was parked down at the warehouses in the Marina. The CLS 300,' he read from the folder. 'You don't deny stealing that one, do you?' He looked up at me, reaching for his pen on the table. 'That's how you got to East Wall in the first place from Cloonloch, isn't it?'

'I need the solicitor.'

'Right, right. Then there's these.' He dragged other folders to the centre, held together by a rubber band. He puffed as if he was climbing steep stairs. He took up his own water and skulled half it. O'Keefe hadn't touched his, he watched me the whole time. I tried to ignore him, looked at a point on the wall. 'Tommy? You still with us?' Armstrong waved his hand.

'Yeah.'

'Good. I thought you'd faded off there for a second. Been a long night for you. Didn't sleep much in the holding cell, did you?'

'No.'

'Breakfast?'

'Toast, yeah.'

'The staff sergeant will get you a takeaway after this. I'll organise that for ya. Curry chips, burger, coke, alright?'

'Yeah.'

Armstrong put his hands around the stack of folders. ‘There were twenty-nine cars reported stolen in the Cloonloch area since this time last year. Compared to four the previous twelve months. Bit of an upsurge. Twenty-three were found burnt out in various parts of the surrounding countryside. The other six, all stolen since May, have never been recovered. Maybe that’s because they’re all high-end, luxury motors. Two Beemers, a 2012 and a 2013, a 2012 Lexus and three 131 Mercedes, including the one you brought last night to the Marina. Know anything about those other twenty-eight, Tommy? You and your mate stole all of them, didn’t you? We’re agreed on that, yeah?’

‘I’ll talk to my legal aid.’

‘See,’ Armstrong took another sip of his water, ‘You could really do something for yourself here, Tommy. Listen,’ he sat up again, his eyes widening. ‘You watch TV? Or series on the internet, I suppose. Box sets, yeah?’ I looked at the floor. ‘That police drama stuff? Deals, interview techniques, good cop, bad cop, yeah? You know, it’s all shite. None of that crap ever happens in the real world. For us, it’s boring paperwork and computer searches most of the time. We laugh about it, don’t we?’ Armstrong looked over at O’Keefe who still stared at me. Armstrong laughed alone. ‘Yeah, you probably guessed that, Tommy. You’re smart, we know that much about you. But just this time, we could maybe do a bit of the TV stuff. Say if you were to help us resolve—,’ he nodded at the pile of folders, ‘these car thefts I just reminded you of. If you told us who the other guy is that was with you – I suppose you know we have two thieves on lots of street and security cams – and you gave us the devices you used and told us exactly where you got them...well.’

Armstrong put his hands behind his head, stretched himself and sat back. ‘That would help you a bit. Help you a lot. You probably wouldn’t be great friends with the other guy anymore, but friendship is overrated, hey?’ He looked at O’Keefe, then coughed. ‘You know

you won't be going to jail at your age – but the alternative for juveniles – believe me, you don't even want to think about going down to Trimon Halls or Portroyal. I've seen your file. Both Social Services and the school say you're a bright kid, decent mixer, talented at art, a reader. You'll never be the same when you get out of those places. Very few graduates from there have stayed out of trouble after. We see it all the time.' Armstrong leaned across the table. 'Every one of those cars were bought by honest, hard-working people, members of your own community, people who get up every morning and go out to work, raise families, do their best. Then along comes you and your pal—'

'I didn't steal twenty-nine cars. But I know them cars were all insured. They probably got more for them in the pay-out than they were worth.' It was Marley's constant mantra every time we took a motor. 'The only ones suffering here are the rotten insurance bastards, scan. Sure they have my ol' man cleaned out.' The detectives were both scowling at me now.

'You won't get very far with that attitude, I'm afraid, Tommy.' Armstrong opened the folders, turned sheets quickly, looking for something. 'This 05 Avensis here. You took it last January. The 7<sup>th</sup>. Bored after Christmas, were ye? Owned by a woman nine months pregnant. The couple only had one car. What if she'd gone into labour? What if she'd lost the baby waiting for a taxi? You'd have caused that child's death, sonny.' He pulled up another folder. 'Yes, that 2010 Renault Estate, in November. A seventy-year-old pensioner owned it, he had a pacemaker...what if his heart had given in? Another death on you and your mate...and this guy, George Harris, you took his 2011 Honda in April. Did you know his eight-year-old son's appendix burst the same week? Just as well they had a second car, eh?'

Armstrong looked up. 'Yeah, our Super is pretty big on crime impact stats. They help us quite a bit in court. Didn't think of all this, did you, Tommo? When ye put the hoods up and got out the coat hangers? Doesn't look so good when you put it like that, does it?' I felt like I

was going to vomit. 'There is another way out of this mess. You don't even have to squeal on your friend, and if you do take it, I guarantee you'll be going straight home to the bogs,' Armstrong said. 'It really is the best solution for you, Tommy.'

'Who is the fence?' O'Keefe said, leaning forward. His voice was lower than Armstrong's. He took out a pad with the Garda crest on it and a pen and shoved them in front of me. 'Write his name there.'

'We check it's right and you go home to The Mackon,' Armstrong said. 'Simple as. He won't ever know for sure who told us. You'll still go to court. But... a juvenile, no previous, very difficult domestic circumstances, living out in an almost abandoned bog village, alone in a caravan, dad a convicted bank robber in prison long term, mam in a nursing home, incoherent, uncle, a disgraced ex-military simpleton, the suspect a significant help to Gardaí in their investigation into an international luxury car theft and resale organisation. You get the idea.' He pointed to the ceiling. 'Come on, Tommy, see the light here! It's the only thing that makes sense. Either give us the fella you lifted the cars with or give us the fence. The fence is the premium option. It buys you a lot more.'

'Do you think they care about you?' O'Keefe said.

'They don't give a fuck about you,' Armstrong said.

'Think they'll be bothered about you in whatever hellhole you're put in?'

O'Keefe stood up, walked around the table. He was taller than I'd thought. I wondered would he strike me, his fist clenched at the side. He stared at me for ages. 'Just give us the fucking name.'

'I'll wait for my legal aid.'



‘Bad decision, Tommy. Have it your own way,’ Armstrong said. O’Keefe left the room.

I raised my hands.

‘Can I get these cuffs off?’

‘Afraid not, son. Super’s orders. Let’s go.’

A man with a moustache, blue jumper with a badge reading ‘steward’ and a pair of grey trousers led me through a hall. He rattled a huge bunch of keys along the radiators.

‘Awful time of night to be checkin’ in. Why didn’t they keep yiz in the barracks till Monday?’ The steward nodded at a big room. ‘That’s the showers.’ It looked a bit like the Assembly Hall in Ballincalty, with a stage blanked off, tall windows, decorated ceilings. But there was no balcony or alcove at the end. That area had been converted to a large tiled square, lines of showers, with changing benches up front. ‘Better get down here early in the morning, yeah? After half seven, it gets jammers.’ He tugged me along by the elbow.

‘This used to be a boarding school?’

‘I’m not a fuckin’ history teacher. That’s the metal shop arigh?’ I looked in through the toughened glass. Beyond, there were blockwork booths, a line of welders on the polished concrete floor, angle grinders and steel bars tossed around. ‘If yiz are here long term, yiz’ll be in there Monday and Friday mornings, arigh?’ Watch out is my advice. Lots of sharp objects and angry young fellas.’ He looked at his watch. ‘I’m not goin’ all the way down to the canteen now. Yiz’ll have to follow the lads tomorrow. Breakfast is at half eight, yeah?’

At the end of the hall, there was a room with a pool table in the centre and some small desks and chairs. Three lads sat in a corner, they wore baseball caps and trackies with the ends tucked into sports socks.

‘Alrigh’ lads? This is O’Toole. He’s checkin’ in for a while.’ Someone laughed. The steward looked around the door. ‘Masterson, what the fuck are you doin’ down here? You’re not allowed in the Pool Room anymore, now get the fuck up to your bed!’ A tall blonde youth, barefoot, in a white t-shirt and pyjama bottoms, came from the corner. He laughed into the steward’s face.

‘Hi-hu! Tool!’

‘Get out of me mouth, Masterson.’ The tall blonde lad smiled at me and went down the hall. The steward took my arm again. ‘Come on. Upstairs.’

We climbed two flights of a creaking staircase, walked down a green carpet, damp rising on the walls. Big areas here had been subdivided. Room 15 was 12 foot by 6. There was just enough room for a bed and a locker.

‘You can stick your stuff in that press. Do yiz have a phone?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Don’t leave it here. Don’t leave anything here yiz don’t want lifted, alrigh’?’

‘There’s no lock?’

‘No.’

‘What about Wi-Fi?’

‘What do you think this is, the Gresham?’

The steward left me at the door, shaking his head, and rattling his keys again along the radiators.

At half six the next morning, I gave up trying to sleep. I got up, got dressed, brought my bag with me down the stairs. In the shower hall, I stripped on the benches. The water was nice and warm.

As I rinsed, I felt a sharp sting on my leg. I swung around. Through the steaming water, I saw Masterson. He was naked and held a wet towel with a knot on the end of it. A bar of soap slid around in his other hand.

‘Hi-hu! How’s Tool!’ He laughed, then whipped the towel across my thighs, the distance just so the knot razed across with full bite.

‘What do you want?’

Masterson whipped the towel again, this time on my arm. ‘Hi-hu! To do that, Tool!’ Another whip on the stomach.

‘What’s your problem?’

‘Tool!’ Something was ringing, down at the benches. I looked beyond Masterson. It was my phone. I rushed past him, still covered in suds. ‘Hi-Hu!’ Masterson snapped the towel, clipping my ankle, he stepped under the still flowing water.

I found my phone in my jeans. It was dad. ‘Hi.’

‘Howya lad. Did I wake you up? It’s the only time I can use this yoke.’

‘No, I was up.’

‘This is messy, Tommy.’

‘I know.’

‘What the hell were you doing on that yacht?’

‘Just having a look.’

‘Jesus Christ, she’s worth millions! It looked like you were trying to hot-wire it, for fuck’s sake! And the fella that owns it is a right prick!’

‘I know, dad.’

‘What’s your legal aid like? Worse than useless, I suppose.’

‘He looks around my age and I can barely understand his accent.’

‘They’re all just poxy trainees, them free legals. Not worth a wank. That’s why I’m stuck here. If you had someone right, you might be able to get out of this on a technicality. They always make a bollocks of the paperwork somewhere along the line. All ya need is a wrong number on the arrest sheet or something. I was talking to my new brief about it. He’s a good local man, one of the boys here put me on to him, he’s working on me appeal for early release. But I can’t bug him too much. I owe him a pile of cash already and I can’t straighten him till I get out of this place.’ An image came of Pock and Midnight searching the mobile the evening I’d come home early. If they’d found what they were looking for, dad would have no money to pay anyone. ‘But he’ll do me a favour. He’ll send down his P.A. on the train. The young fella will get all the details off ya, what the detectives have been spouting off about, that kind of thing. If they’ve any real evidence. If my man gets all the details laid out in front of him, he might be able to do something. Abusing a juvenile in an interview or some crap like that. You’d have to fire the other fool though. What do you think?’

‘Yeah. Maybe.’

‘My fella is a genius at finding loopholes. He’d have nailed that prick in the van and his stories if he was in the court.’

‘Who was that fella that got you locked up anyway?’

‘Can’t talk about it now, lad. You might know my brief’s son, he goes to Ballincalty.’

‘What’s your solicitor’s name?’

‘Johnny Marley.’

‘Marley? Who’s the P.A.?’

‘He told me he started training up his young fella during the summer. Keep him out of trouble. Maybe you know him?’

‘Jake? Jake is the P.A.? Sure, he’s only sixteen?’

A vision of Marley came then, in a white shirt and grey tie, folder under his arm, sitting in the visitors room, waiting for me. ‘Ho-aye scan! Some maze of shite the law, huh? Now, I’ve been reviewing your case with the ol’ man, and we think...’. Dad was still talking. ‘He’s training him, I don’t know the ins and outs of it, do I? Look, if you did end up there for a year or two, it might not be all bad. Ann reckons you can do the Junior Cert in Trimon. One of the wardens told her. You could do it on your own, get all the books and shite brought in. You need the schooling, lad. You can’t be giving up halfway like me. You weren’t going in half the time on the outside anyways. It might be the best thing that ever happened you. All for luck, you know...’. Another whip of the towel, this time across my head. I swung around. Masterson stood in the doorway, dripping into a pool of water. He scratched his balls, he had an erection.

‘Hi-hu! That your boyfriend, Tool!’ He laughed insanely.

I went to Masterson as dad talked. I smacked the phone across his face. His blocking was shit. ‘Big lads made awkward scrappers’, those were the words that rang around The Mackon schoolyard, busted bloody noses, scratched hands on gravel. I made several solid, steely connections with Masterson’s jaw, tears in my eyes, nose running, breathless, pieces of plastic phone shattered, dad’s voice squealing as a tiny speaker spun through the air. Masterson stared blankly, he tried to move, his feet slipped on the water, he went down, his skull cracked against the tiles. ‘Tommy, what the fuck is going on there?’ dad’s puny words came from somewhere. I jumped across Masterson, blood poured through his smooth blonde strands. I wanted to break him, to do real damage, to silence him for good.



Lights flashed, bodies jerked. Dry ice rolled in huge clouds. I pushed through leaping revellers, sweat and perfume in the air, the beat-beat-beat of music thumping. I sipped on a Bud, my first of the night. I needed a clear head when I was working. I found Karen and Suzanne at the exit door. Karen kissed me on the cheek as she slipped a twenty into my hand. I dropped a tiny plastic package into her black handbag. There were cameras everywhere, inside the pubs and clubs all over Cloonloch, outside on the streets. The film was never watched unless there was an incident, but I was still careful. I avoided obvious places like car parks, the industrial estates, the bowling alley. I hid in plain sight, everyone knew it was the only way I'd do business.

I had covered the basement crowd by around 1. About half the packets were sold, it had been quiet. The summer was over, kids back at school, full-time jobs became part-time or stopped altogether under the pressure of new year studies. Even so, I had still made a profit.



It was time to go, late night business was erratic, buyers became pissed and loud. The last thing you wanted was some fool shouting on the path about value for money or getting back the wrong change. That sort of thing didn't end well. It had happened before.

Once I knew I was finished, I couldn't wait to get out of there, get home, chill out. I rarely bothered with a spliff myself. I didn't like the out of control feeling. I'd have a bottle of lager and an hour of Beethoven, blaring out the door. I hated the discos and late bars, the rubbish music, shite talk, fake hugging.

Rebecca was alone at the main exit. She'd been chatty anytime I'd ran into her during the disco, although she wasn't a customer. She seemed to get enough of a buzz out of the alcopops she sucked on. She'd shaved her head over the summer. There was now just a smooth black sheet of hair around her scalp. It made her brown eyes even bigger. She wore a leather mini-skirt, tight buttoned-up top, she was scrolling on her phone.

I wasn't sure about her new image, but it wasn't her looks I fancied really, once I'd gotten to know her. It was more her way, the way she'd been when we were in first year, outside O'Malley's, having ice-cream, chilling. 'Hey, Beck!'

'Heeeeyyyyy!' Her eyes were droopy. She linked my arm as we went outside, stopped once we got past the herd of bouncers. She pulled a miniature Smirnoff from her white handbag, offered me a taste.

'No thanks, I don't drink that stuff.'

'On the dry are ya?'

'Working.'

'Working? Right, right, Tommy.' She winked at me sloppily.

‘Where’s Peter tonight?’

‘That’s all in the paaast. Fuckin’ dick that fella. Sooo, what sorta night yave, Tommy?’ She swung around on my arm, her breath of raspberry alcopop, her hand slid over my balls, long painted nails. ‘Getting a taxi?’ she whispered.

On the sofa bed, she pulled off my t-shirt, stroked my chest, still bare as the day I was born. None of the creams I’d bought on the internet had encouraged hair to grow. It didn’t bother me this night though, I was finally getting with Rebecca. ‘Soooo...why are you...you know...how did you get into...,’ she raised her hands, made her fingers nod, “‘working”.’

‘Handy money. Lads...you know...in that place I was, it was their mate...’. We kissed in between our words. I opened the buttons of her top, she helped me take it off. I couldn’t help jaw-dropping at the lacy black bra underneath. ‘Yeah, their mate...he was working in Cloonloch...then he went away.’ I unhooked the strap, the tits spilled out. I buried my head between them.

‘Mmm...they trust you, Tommy...so quick?’

I let her nipple slide out of my mouth. ‘Sure they do. I’m trustworthy.’ I smiled. We shifted again. I gave all her teeth a tongue polish.

‘When did you get out?’

‘June.’

‘Sintense.’ I was naked on the sofa bed as I slid off her mini-skirt and knickers all together. ‘You’re a baaad boy, Tommy O’Toole!’ Rebecca laughed as she rolled the condom down on me.

The coughing was deep, pained. There was spitting and moaning. I could smell blood. I went down the hall and pulled the door open.

‘Get out Tommy! Go on up to the kitchen,’ dad said, his shirt open, his hands holding mam’s hair back, she was in pyjamas, her fingers covered in vomit around the rim of the toilet. I ran up to the kitchen, somebody snored beside me.

I opened my eyes. It was awkward on the sofa bed, but I couldn’t be bothered clearing all the books and boxes off dad’s double duvet when we got back to the mobile.

I was facing Rebecca. I watched her chest heave in and out. Her make-up had faded, her breath was sour. She moaned and turned to me, eyes closed, she kissed me open-mouthed. I tried to angle myself over her, her hand slid down my dick. The blanket slid off us onto the floor, a draught passed over my arse. There was a clink of metal behind me. I swung around.

Midnight pulled the end of his ignition key out of an earhole. Pock sat next to him on the sofa bed across, scratching a massive boil red raw on his ankle.

‘Jesus! What the fuck!’ I shouted, sitting up, grabbing my boxers.

‘Not interrupting ye, are we?’ Pock said, taking out a box of Purple Silk Cut. I pulled on my jeans, threw the blanket over Rebecca.

‘How long are ye here?’

‘Don’t worry, we didn’t see anything. The door was open. Your uncle reckoned we’d have to get here early to catch up with ya. Seems like you’re a busy man these days.’

‘We need to talk to ya, Tommy,’ Midnight said, searching his pockets.

‘Could ye go outside for a minute until we get organised?’

Rebecca screamed into my ear, right up the lobe, I felt the drum rattle. She pulled the blanket around her, grabbed her knickers off the middle of the table, skirt and top from the floor and ran down to the toilet, breasts bouncing. Pock stared at her the whole time. Midnight scanned his dirty fingernails. Rebecca banged the toilet door, we heard a splash.

‘What’s this about, Midnight?’

‘You know Paddy here, Paddy Rock...’. Midnight ran his hand through his greying curls, scattering clouds of dandruff everywhere. He had a King Edward out, unwrapped it. ‘We were in Leb. together. He came down last night. He wanted a quick word with ya.’

‘A word about what?’ The toilet door opened. Rebecca had her top and skirt on, but they looked funny. I wasn’t sure why, the skirt might have been back to front. She tossed the blanket to the floor, looked around like she was lost. I found her shoes under the table, handed them to her. ‘You alright, Beck? You’ve gone real pale?’

Rebecca looked at the shoes, like she didn’t recognise them. She ran back into the toilet, we heard her puke into the bowl.

‘Ooooooh,’ Midnight said. ‘Make you want to throw up yourself, that craic! Ugh!’

The toilet flushed again. Rebecca came out. She was slightly bent over, rubbed her stomach, specks of vomit clung to the top.

‘Is there water?’ She sounded hoarse. I pulled the five-litre drum out, half-filled a pint glass. Her fingers shook as she took it, gulped some down. She looked at me. ‘I need my phone...where is my phone, my phone, you know?’

‘Just there on the table.’

‘My mother, I need to call my mother, you know? Right now, you know?’ She went outside with the phone.

‘Livin’ the high life, eh son?’ Pock said, tapping ashes on the floor.

‘There’s an ashtray right there,’ I pointed at the table.

‘I got a call from Joe’s brief yesterday,’ Midnight said. ‘Joe got a date. He’s comin’ home to The Mackon next Friday morning.’

‘Next Friday?’ I didn’t know whether to be happy or sad.

‘Eight o’clock in the morning. He even has a Garda escort.’ Midnight puffed. ‘Look Tommy, things’ll be changing around here when your ol’ fella gets out.’

‘So? Why do ye care?’

‘This stuff you’re at.’

‘What?’

‘If he hears about...’.

‘About Beck? Don’t give a fuck.’

‘Act the bollocks now if you want. I’m not on about your woman.’

‘Look,’ Pock said, sitting up. ‘We haven’t time for this arsin’ about. I didn’t come down here to stop any man from makin’ a few quid. We all have bills to pay. And as for the law, sure that’s the crookedest sham of the lot. Meself and your uncle know that better than anyone. We spent long enough in forty-degree heat, trying to stop fellas from killing each other, keep law and order in the middle of a war zone. And for what? So another bunch of pricks could run it into the ground anyway.’

‘True, true,’ Midnight said, nodding.

‘I’ve no care about your stuff, if you can keep it from your old man when he’s here...’.

Through the Perspex, I saw Rebecca, arms folded, walking around in a circle at the side of the road.

‘It’s a bad game to be in though,’ Midnight said. ‘You should get the hell away from it while you still can. If your poor mother knew ...’.

‘Aye, true that,’ Pock said, nodding. ‘You should listen to your uncle, if you’re wise. It’s one thing whipping a few motors. But that craic...never ends well.’ They both sat back, Pock eventually found the ashtray and stubbed out his fag. ‘Look, we just need a bit of a dig out.’

‘Huh?’ I wondered had they both just gone insane. ‘I have about a grand here,’ I said. ‘Your car out there must be worth at least twenty. If you want, I can tell ye where to cash it in fair quick.’

They both laughed.

‘I bet you can.’ Pock was smiling. ‘No, I’m not looking for a loan off ya.’

‘What then?’

Pock looked at Midnight.

‘Where did Joe stash that money, Tommy?’ my uncle said.

‘What money?’

‘The ATM money, what other money!’

‘How the hell would I know that?’

‘Don’t be a smart cunt, good lad!’ Pock said. The smile was gone and he sounded pissed off now.

‘I don’t know where it is, he never told me.’

‘Come on Tommy, don’t be bullshitting us! How else did you get into selling that stuff? You don’t get the start with them boys without a connection or a big lump,’ Midnight said.

‘What has that got to do with you?’

‘He must have told you, now where is it?’

‘No, he didn’t! Did he not tell you, Midnight?’

Midnight’s face changed from his usual toothache look to a mad frown. He dropped his cigar, dived across the table, grabbed me by the shoulder, growling.

‘No, he didn’t tell me, you little prick!’ Midnight’s grip was real tight. I couldn’t push him off, he was stronger than I’d thought. I hadn’t seen him this mad since I spilt the oil in someone’s backyard two years before. He switched his hold to around my neck, his eyes foggy, mouth shut tight. He was going in for the kill.

‘Jesus Christ, Midnight!’ I heard Pock shout from behind. Midnight’s fingers were around my windpipe. I was choking. Pock swung him away. They waltzed awkwardly toward the door.

‘Come on, come on! We’ll let him stew on it!’ We’ll be back tomorrow morning, son! You don’t want your father hearing about your shit, do ya?’

As they got out to the Audi, Midnight shook off Pock’s grip. He was still panting. He nodded at Pock who got into the car. Rebecca was sitting on the ditch, head between knees, she never looked up. Midnight came slowly back to the door.

‘Tommy?’ I came out.

‘What the fuck is going on?’

‘He said he’d talk to the cops again, tell them I was involved as well if I didn’t help him get it.’ Midnight was whispering.

‘Involved in what? Selling dope?’

‘No, ya cunt! The ATM! I had to bring him out. He landed last night. Joe’s release has put the wind up him to get his cash.’

‘What, sure it’s only dad’s share?’

‘We never split it. Joe has the lot. He kept it the day we were at the Castle putting the truck into the swamp. It was just for the time being, alright? We didn’t know what was goin’ to happen. I thought he’d shoot me last night. I told him you probably knew nothing about it. He reckoned you must have got some of it to get in with them dope crowd.’ He nodded at the Audi. ‘You don’t know what you’re dealing with there. I seen him do things in Leb....’.

‘Tell the cops you were involved...’. I tried to make sense of Midnight’s mutterings. ‘What do you mean “again”? You mean it was Pock set dad up? But why? Wasn’t it some young lad?’ I thought of the Remington right behind me over the cooker. Since I’d got home, I often put it together, fired a few shots into the cottage, took it apart, polished it with gun oil. I’d ordered more rounds off the internet. Midnight patted his forehead with a screwed-up ball of toilet paper he’d pulled from his jacket.

‘He had no choice but to do Joe. It’s a long story. I’ll tell ya again. You were too young that time.’

‘Tell me about it now.’



But Midnight had again stopped listening to me. ‘And then you make him think I know where the money is!’ Midnight’s lip was shivering. I thought he might have a stroke. ‘If that buck out there thinks Joe gave me the ATM money and I wouldn’t tell him...he’s cold, that bastard.’ Pock beeped the horn. ‘Look, Tommy, ring Joe. Tell him you’re under fierce pressure. You need a few quid. We have to get it in the morning. No tellin’ what Pock will do next. It’s not in the mobile or down there in them bits of houses. It’s not out in The Castle either, we were through all that. It must be buried in one of the fields around here. He’d have had no time to put it anywhere else. The cops checked his car, so it’s not there. Get it for him and we’ll sort something out when Joe gets back.’

‘You mean he’s taking the lot? Pock wants to get it all before dad comes home? Nice work, Uncle Jeremy.’

‘What choice do I have?’

‘I thought Pock was gone abroad?’

‘He came back a few months ago. His young fella is playing fuck as well. Just get Joe to tell you where it is, for the love of God, Tommy.’ A car pulled up. I thought it must be Rebecca’s mother, but when I looked at the ditch, she was gone. It was a Nissan hatchback. Pock stared at it blankly. I saw someone within, waving at him. It was Margaret O’Dea.

Margaret O'Dea sat across from me. She looked around, the place was a mess, but I didn't care. She spread out a few leaflets as the MacBook hummed. 'Just some more info on pursuits that might interest you now or later, Tommy.'

'Do you want a cup of tea?'

Margaret O'Dea smiled. 'No thank you, Tommy. The reason I'm here is we got an email yesterday from your dad's lawyer that he is to be released next Friday. You probably already got the news from your uncle.' And a lot more. 'I met with Jeremy yesterday evening and I just wanted to debrief you on the situation. As dad's coming back now and you'll be eighteen in a couple of months, my board are taking you off my list. I only deal with juveniles, you see. You are moving into the adult system. This doesn't mean you can't get in touch, should

you need to. In fact, I hope that you do give me a ring, alright?’ She smiled and slid her card across. ‘So how have things been since last time? Early August, wasn’t it?’

‘Fine.’

‘Mr Sherlock tells me you agreed to start back in Junior Cert?’

‘He told me I had to do it.’

‘It was the right move, I think, Tommy. You might have been under too much undue pressure with the Leaving Cert next summer. It’s not that you aren’t clever enough. But even the brightest people should learn the basics. It’s the truly intelligent that know just how little they know.’ I took out my Majors. Margaret O’Dea nodded. ‘Ah, Majors.’

‘Do you want one?’

‘No, no. I..I gave up three years ago.’

‘Hard?’

‘Awful. Much easier never to start.’ I lit up. Margaret O’Dea fidgeted and looked at books on the table I’d taken out of the library. ‘I see you’re doing some private reading. That’s great. There could be a career path in that.’

‘It’s just stuff my art teacher said to read. For the exam.’

‘Oh yes, I heard you’re doing very well in the Art Room.’

‘It’s not hard when everyone else is two years younger.’

‘Art doesn’t always work like that, I believe.’

After Margaret O’Dea left, I cooked scrambled eggs. As I stirred them around in the pot, my body shook. My mind was racing, the ATM raid, Pock and Midnight — laughing army buddies — dad rotting away in a cell for the past four years because of some young fella somehow connected to the whole thing.

I got hot as I sat down to eat, the more I thought the less I could, it was like I was getting embarrassed or something, like maybe everything wrong in the whole world was somehow my fault. I’d only taken a few forkfuls and I had to throw the rest in the bin, couldn’t look at it. It seemed to me then that everything in the mobile was dirty and sticky, like I couldn’t breathe. I scrubbed the plate clean, then washed all the other plates, cups, knives, forks, spoons, glasses, hacked off the dried in food, broke one plate doing that. I cleaned down the draining board with thick suds. I pulled out a roll of rubbish bags Ann had brought, started filling one with pizza boxes, fag packets, butts from the ashtray, loaf papers, milk cartons, takeaway trays.

Soon, there were three bags of rubbish outside. I filled another sack with dirty washing tossed all around the place, socks, t-shirts, boxers. I tied up the top, left it at the door for Ann to collect. I swept the floor, pulled a can of air freshener from the press under the sink, piped it everywhere.

I sat at the table, lit a fag, my fingers were shaking. My eyes traced the outlines of the sofa bed, across to the cavity behind the cooker and fridge, under dad’s bed, down along by the shower and toilet. I looked up at the press over the cooker. I got out the keys, opened it. I pulled out all the parts of the Remington, the extra boxes of rounds, set everything on the table.

During the cleaning, I’d found the old sports bag Marley had left out for me on the patio the night I’d been canned. The cops had taken the scanner away, but the bag had somehow found its way back into my belongings when I was checking out of Trimon Halls.

I put the parts of the weapon inside the bag. I got down on my knees, reached under the sofa bed. There were two small sandwich boxes taped to the steel frame. One had over a thousand in cash. I took three hundred, everything was in twenties. The other was half full of plastic packets of dope. There were about forty packets, eight hundred's worth: overflow. The guy brought the same amount for the same money every week, even though I often didn't sell everything. I took them all and put them in the bag.

I always met the guy in Groake's pub, an old man's pisshouse on the corner of the main street in Cloonloch. Blinds were drawn down in every window, killing off the daylight. There was a smell of damp and porter, cleaning fluid in the toilets and stale puke. A man with fuzzy grey hair round his ears and a few strands across the top sat on a stool behind the counter scrolling on his smartphone. Three men were perched along the bar, they all looked the wrong side of pension age. I left Marley's bag under my stool at the end, heard the Remington clink.

As I sipped my pint, I played with the beer mat, tearing the bits off it, flicking them on the ground. I tried to do this without the barman noticing, which wasn't difficult. The local radio was on low. The barflies hardly spoke, one leafed through a tabloid, another slowly counted cigarettes, a third stared blankly, sniffing every few seconds. When any of them said something, it seemed like it was important, the way it crashed through the quiet, but it nearly always was no more than another drink order, just a grunt and a nod.

By half six, the guy was very late. It was strange. I rang him as I smoked at the entrance.

'Yeah?'

'It's Cloonloch.'

'Story bud. Meant to ring yiz.'

‘You comin’?’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘Not on, arigh’?’

‘How’s that?’

‘Billy is back. Got a date. Next Friday. I’ve to wait for him is what I was told.’

‘He got a date? To be released?’ The parole board had been busy. ‘But where does that leave me? I thought he was in for another few...hello? Hello?’

I tried ringing him back. No answer. I tried again. Straight to voicemail. There was a snigger and an outbreak of laughter inside. I looked back, one of the three men was pointing at a spot on the wall over a bricked-up fireplace, the other two peered across. ‘It was you did that Paddy, in 07, I’m tellin’ ya!’

‘In me arse!’

The ragged laughter dragged on. I looked down at Marley’s bag. I could go to the toilet with it, assemble the Remington, fill the mag. I could press rounds down onto the spring-loaded panel, change the lever from ‘S’ to ‘R’. I could come back into the bar with the rifle at my shoulder. I wondered what it would be like to shoot a living breathing thing, squeezing the trigger, a round hurtling out, smashing through a skull, shutting down the thinking mind for good.

My phone buzzed: a text. I breathed deeply. It had to be the guy. It was a wind-up and a nasty one at that, of course it was, I saw that now. It was just too much of a coincidence that Billy was getting out the same day as dad. But it was Rebecca.

Her photo was on the screen. It had been taken back when she'd had long blonde hair, when she'd called herself 'Rebecca', when I'd really gotten stuck on her way of talking, of laughing, of being. I stared at it, before dragging to text. 'In town?'

'Yes.'

'Mum will drop me at Arms Lounge. Half nine.' I wondered how she'd managed to swing that one after this morning.

'Sound.'

Smiley face.

I had a steak with peppered sauce and a few more pints in Valentine's, one of the more upmarket pubs in the main street. By nine, when I headed down to the hotel, I was on the way to being well polished.

Many of the town's under-aged drinkers took advantage of recently finished Leaving Certs working behind the counter in the hotel lounge. They could get served in comfort without being hassled for ID cards and then stumble down the steps to the disco at half eleven. It was packed, a local three-piece played on a half-moon stage in the corner. Girls tried to look more grown-up in here, the mature setting and all, shouldered tops, trousers or long skirts, even sandals on some of them. Still they went for the kiddish mint alcopops, served by the black-shirted pimply bar staff zipping around behind chrome-lined counters. I pushed through the flashing lights, around soft shaped figures in collared t-shirts, dark combat trousers and Timberland boots. Lads roared with laughter, patted each other on the back, bits of drunken chat rose to the suspended ceiling panels and aluminium square lights, the topics: sport, school, talent, muffled by the thumping music. I searched for the Ballincalty heads. I was a bit too

woozy. I'd reached my fill, decided to start with sparkling water to dilute myself a bit. I shouldered up Marley's bag.

I spotted Rebecca in a corner with Karen, Suzanne and some other Leaving Cert girls. Rebecca was drinking what looked like orange juice. She'd made a serious effort, maybe she thought she had to after the morning. She wore thigh high black leather boots, laced up, pleated check skirt, and white top, large gold earrings. I thought maybe she just couldn't get a real drink dressed like that. She smiled at me as I neared them.

The noise was brutal. I had to turn my head to hear her. She'd felt 'awful all day', she'd been 'in bed most of it', her mum was 'furious' with her, but Rebecca 'actually agreed', she really did 'have to cop on', she was doing the Leaving Cert this year. It reminded me of the mess I was in at the school, in classes with fifteen-year-olds. I finished the water and shouted for a double brandy.

When the band finally took a break, I could at least hear what the others were saying.

'Were you training?' Karen said.

'In the gym for a while. Joined last week. Came straight out after.'

'Sport's a great idea,' Rebecca said, nodding, sipping her Britvic 55. 'Drinking and smoking lads, they're not great in the long run.' She looked at their bottles of cider, West Coast Cooler, toothpaste coloured hooch. 'I haven't had a fag all day and I'm never drinking again. The way I felt this morning was hell. I'm still dying. This orange is making me feel worse.'

'Really Beck, you're still sick?' Suzanne said.

'Yeah-hah! My head's pounding and my stomach is turning. I'm even shaking. It's awful.'



‘You just need the hair of the dog,’ Karen said and laughed.

‘Jake not out with ya tonight, Tommy?’ Suzanne said.

‘Haven’t seen that man for a couple of weeks.’

‘Yeah, he hasn’t been at school much.’

‘Reckons he’s studying at home.’

‘How’s it going in 3<sup>rd</sup> year?’

‘Just kids most of them.’

‘Tommy is doing a project. Show them Tommy! It’s on his phone.’

‘Stop it, Beck.’

‘Go on.’

‘What is it?’

‘It’s this exhibition they’re putting on next week. Tommy is working on a huge painting since he started back. Mr Coyne wanted him to do it.’

‘Cool.’

‘Show them.’

‘Nah.’ The barman came over to us, acne around his chin.

‘Who ordered six tequilas?’

‘Here Beck,’ Karen said, passing one of the shot glasses to Rebecca. ‘Get that down ya, it’ll sort ya out. That Britvic would kill ya.’

We left the hotel just after eleven. We walked up the street toward the taxi rank, but we kept stopping to shift or wander in and out of pubs in the process of closing their doors. Rebecca bought a naggin of vodka in an off-licence. We drank it and skinned up a doobie in the bowling alley carpark. Back down the street at Valentine's, a taxi pulled up in front of us.

'There's our lift to The Mackon!' I said. The driver got out, left the engine running, he ran into Valentine's.

'Heeeee...hee-hee! Hee's probably collecting someone...'

'Nah, he's gettin' fags, I'd say, come on!' Rebecca got in the back seat. I sat in front. It was a Vectra, like dad's old car. He had the local radio blaring adverts. I switched it off. Rebecca looked up. 'Don't think you're supposed to do that...'

I had my phone out, clicked on 'Beethoven IX', went straight to the 2nd movement.

'Hello Tommy? I think you're in the wrong seat.'

So I was. I put the car in gear and drove. At the end of the street, I swung in through the Tesco car park and came out at the industrial estate.

'What the hellabella are you doing, Tommy O'Toole?' Rebecca said, as I pulled up.

'Can ya drive?'

'Sure I can drive, man, but what about the taxi man guy?'

'We don't have much time. Let's go.'

I assembled the Remington as Rebecca clipped wings and mirrors all across town. 'Turn right here.' I clicked on the loaded mag. Rebecca glanced at the gun.

‘What you got there, Tommy?’

We ran by a red light, swerved around a van. ‘Watch the poxy road!’

I wound the window as the van blew at us. The music boomed into the night. I cocked the rifle, cold air filled the car. ‘Turn left into that estate.’ We turned and passed by small detached houses, a raised green to our right.

‘Tommy? What are you doing with the rifle?’

‘Stop here.’ We were outside Midnight’s. I switched the safety catch to ‘A’, as we hit the kerb. I lined up the spare room in the cross hairs. The light was off.

‘Man, you could hit someone...’.

The chorus of trombones blared as I squeezed the trigger, expelling 24 rounds in 8 seconds. Midnight’s window shattered. Pock was in the doorway watching as we doughnut tracked out of the estate.

The taxi slowly sank into the boggy swamp at the back of The Castle. I sat with Rebecca on a big stone, watching it disappear.

‘Sintense,’ Rebecca said. I took out my phone, cleared my throat.

‘Cloonloch Gardai?’

‘Good evening. This is Jimmy Maloney, from 27 Greenhills Estate...yes...right where the shooting was, that’s why I’m ringing...I don’t see any of your personnel here...how much more of this thuggery do we have to take, sir? What are we paying our taxes for, hmm? Where are your detectives, I don’t see them? Do you know that this town has a very serious drug

problem...do you? I believe there are teenagers selling cannabis in the underage disco! Drive-by shootings, is that what it has come to now, sir? Are we supposed to accept this type of thing? Do you know what I witnessed earlier today? There is a man staying in that house with a simpleton called Wall. This thug is from up the country and drives a big Audi...I actually saw this man put packets of what I believe to be cannabis in broad daylight into the boot of his car. I'm certain they are still there. Hundreds of small packets...do you know I have three small children, is this how you police the area, is it? Do you hear me? Now, what are you going to do about it, hmm? What are you going to do?

Tuohy's jeep skidded, even though he was only doing 20k. The way he'd hammered the brakes made me jerk forward, the tyres rolled up on the footpath. He stared at me, lollipop in mouth as we came to a standstill. 'Takes a while to get used to driving her I suppose,' I said, getting out, the Death Notices finally wrapping up. 'Fine motor, though. Well wear. Thanks for the lift, Jack.'

Maurice straightened his tie and wiped the counter with a J cloth as customers queued up. 'All set for the Leaving, Tommy?' he said, as I paid for a bag of mini rolls.

'I'm doing the Junior.'

'Doing the Junior? How come? Ah, hello Mrs Kinneally, how are you today?'

‘Maurice, so sorry again about Gerald. That was a lovely speech you made in the church.’

‘Ah, thank you, Mrs Kinneally, thank you. You’re trying out some of our fresh store bakery, I see!’

Someone ran up behind me as I walked up the avenue. It was a heavy blonde first year, the type of lad Leaving Certs loved giving a good clatter.

‘Tommy!’ He wheezed as he reached me. He took out an inhaler, and I had to wait until he’d given himself a few puffs and got his breath back. ‘I heard you could fix me up.’

‘Wha?’

‘Good skunk?’

‘Who told you that, you little prick?’ I grabbed him by the shoulders.

‘The...the lads in Junior Cert...ow! They were in the basement of the Arms hotel, Friday night...said you were the man to see...ow!’ I tightened my grip. I couldn’t believe the cheek of him.

‘It’s my birthday, this week, I’m fourteen...’. He pulled out a twenty. ‘We all chipped in.’

‘Put that away, for fuck’s sake!’ I looked up and down the avenue. There didn’t seem to be anyone watching amongst the students on the way up to school. The boy stared at me for a couple of seconds and ran off.

At the poplar island, I veered to the left, as me and Marley had learnt quickly to do in first year. Skip over the fence at the corner of the old convent building, run down by the football pitch, avoid the main corridors, Maurice and his head-slapping, nipple-tweaking friends. But

this morning I pushed in the green door and went through the corridor where we'd been dragged on our first day at Ballincalty Secondary.

I took my time, reading many of the legends scraped into the white washed plaster, probably with the point of a protractor rarely used for geometry: 'LFC', 'CUNT', 'SHERLOCK IS A FAGGOT', 'JIMMY BYRNE WOZ ERE 4-10-93', with 'LIKES BOYS' added later below. Near a switch, I saw familiar names, 'J MARLEY + J OTOOLE OWN THIS HALL YOU OWE TOLL 4-10-89'. There was a splash somewhere, I knew instantly what it was.

The air was fresh in the courtyard. There was some movement in the Wet Room. I stopped at the doorway. Some fourth years stood around the cubicle, one with red hair held a small figure by the neck. The place was just the same, small cracked window, combed texture of filthy grout where tiles had fallen. The floor black with layers of ancient piss as users had gradually backed away from the channel along the wall, nearer the door, until new toilets were built somewhere else.

The fourth years looked around, then smiled. They spread out a little, like they were inviting me into their game. 'Howya Tommy!'

'We have a squealer,' the red-haired boy said. 'Told Sherlock where we were smoking. Three of us suspended for a week. Can't have that, can we?'

'Let him go,' I said. 'This game is over.' The smiles faded.

'Fuck you, O'Toole!'

I smacked the red-haired boy on the jaw, my fingers only partly fisted. He still went down howling, though. He didn't have the wiry, if foggy, resolve of a late-night raver, half

stoned already, arguing over a fiver. A client like that wouldn't even register the first slap. The rest of the fourth years ran out.

'Fuck you pothead!' the red-haired roared, tight along the wall, escaping my reach. But I was glad I hadn't caught him as he ran across the courtyard.

The first year had already been ducked once, his jaws dripped with what I knew was piss. There was a big stain on the fly of his trousers.

'Thanks,' he said, as he got up off his knees.

'Go on, watch your step with them pricks.'

'I will,' he stopped at the door. 'Em...do you sell funny fags?'

'Just get the fuck, will ya?' I stood over the toilet bowl as his footsteps faded down the hall. I wondered how many first years had been shoved into the pot since dad and Marley's ol' lad were charging a tax for first years to use the corridor and avoid the Leaving Cert threat.

The Wet Room hadn't seemed to do Jake much harm. He was serious now about becoming a solicitor. 'Some maze of shite the law, scan, better than any PS4 game.' I was the one thrown into a youth detention centre for nearly two years, and I hadn't been ducked at all, thanks to someone whose name I couldn't even remember.

I rammed my heel against the rim. It rocked slightly. I went back out into the courtyard, found a big lump of windowsill, hacked off by some long-gone vandal. Most of the ceramic mould of the bog came away in pieces as I battered it. I pulled off the bottom of the bowl. Water flowed around the floor, all that was left was the dirty end of a sewer pipe. I tossed the smashed pieces in the courtyard, so everyone would know. The Wet Room was closed.



Most of Junior Cert art class were at their desks, painting A3 posters for a special exhibition at the end of the week. It was the first in a series of school fundraisers to renovate the convent section of the building. Mr Coyne stood beside me, scratching his moustache, as I worked in a corner. ‘That’s almost there, Tommy. It has really come on.’

He’d wanted me to do a piece on a wall panel that could be wheeled up to the Assembly Hall on the day. I was inking the orange matchstick legs of a flock of birds. They were all landing on the school avenue where lots of bread crusts were scattered. I didn’t know what breed they were. I thought they might be northern migrants. They were like crows, black with flecks of grey and white. My original idea had been to paint just one bird landing, but the scene seemed too empty and I’d added twenty more, all hitting the ground at the same time. It had come out fairly well.

‘Really promising. Definitely the centrepiece of the Junior Cert exhibition this one. Did you invite all your family to come, Tommy?’

‘It’s open to the public, sir?’

‘Of course, that’s the whole point. I think they’ll want to see this.’ There was a knock at the door. Sherlock looked in.

‘Mr Coyne, can I take Tommy O’Toole please?’

‘Certainly, Principal. Is it for the two classes?’

‘I would think so, Mr Coyne.’

‘Very well. Tommy, you can tidy this up on Wednesday. There’s not much to do, it’s nearly there. Some of the others will wash your brushes. You better go, you can leave your apron on the chair.’

‘Some gentlemen here to see you,’ Sherlock said, as we walked to his office. I was taller than him now.

O’Keefe and Armstrong stood at the radiator beside Sherlock’s office like many students before, as though they were in trouble. But they weren’t wearing blue uniforms, they were back in their sharp grey suits again. Sherlock pulled out his bunch of keys, opened the door. ‘Sorry Detectives, this is the only space I have available at the moment which is fairly discreet and you won’t be disturbed.’

‘I’m sure it’s fine, Principal,’ Armstrong said, as we followed him in.

‘Take as long as you need.’ Sherlock left, shutting the door behind him. For once I was sorry to see him go.

The detectives walked around the desk, took Sherlock’s leather seat and the swiveller which had been parked beside it. I was left with the hard chair at the front.

‘Sorry to pull you from your studies, Tommy,’ Armstrong said, opening his folder. ‘But we just needed a quick chat... school going well? Glad to be back in “gen. pop.”?’ He laughed metallically. ‘Dad back on Friday?’

‘Is this an interview? Because—’

‘No, that wouldn’t be constitutional, as you know. This is just a friendly chat. We know you, you know us. We won’t keep you too long. The Super just wanted us to put a few things to you.’ Armstrong took up his pen. ‘It’s about what happened at your uncle’s Saturday night.’

I could feel my skin heating up. This was not good. ‘Do ye know who did it?’

‘Not yet. We have one suspect. It was a rotten thing to do. The place is full of children. Any of them could’ve been hit. Anything you want to tell us straight up, Tommy?’

‘Like what?’

‘Where were you on Saturday night?’

‘I didn’t do anything wrong.’

‘No one is saying you did. Where were you?’

‘I was in Cloonloch. In the Arms.’

He wrote this down. ‘Who with?’

‘Few lads from school.’ I named off the few squareheads that were in the Arms, like Peter French. The type I would really enjoy watching being called up to the office and grilled by detectives.

‘Bit young for the Arms, aren’t ye?’

‘Not really.’

‘There all night?’

‘More or less.’

‘From when?’

‘Nineish.’

‘Until?’

‘About half eleven. Everyone else went downstairs to the nightclub.’

‘I see. But you left.’

‘Don’t like discos really.’

‘This would have been about a half hour before the incident.’

‘Was it?’

‘Pity you didn’t go to the disco. Where did you go after you left the hotel?’

‘Home.’

‘Taxi?’

‘Nah, I was broke. Thumbed it. Couple of lifts to Ballincalty. Then I walked out to The Mackon.’

‘Two lifts? Let’s have the car details, please.’ They were really digging in their heels. I was making it up as I went along. It was tricky.

‘I had a few...’. I said. O’Keefe glared at me.

‘Really? You’re seventeen, isn’t it?’ Armstrong said. ‘Tell me about the cars, Tommy.’

‘It was a green Vectra and a...red Corolla.’

‘Number plates?’

‘No. Sorry.’

‘Someone as expert as you are at plates?’ Armstrong smiled weakly. ‘I’m disappointed. Who drove?’

‘Who drove which?’

‘The green corolla.’

‘Red corolla. A woman.’

‘Age?’

‘Couldn’t tell ya. I took no notice.’

‘You sat in the front seat, yeah?’

‘Yeah.’

‘And you have no idea what age she was? Was she nearer to twenty or to seventy?’

‘I don’t know. I was out of it.’

‘Who drove the other car, the red Vectra?’

‘Green Vectra. A man. I don’t know anymore. I was pasted.’

‘Tell me again about the blue Corolla, who did you say was driving?’ He was trying so hard to nail me, it was easy.

‘Red Corolla. A woman, that’s all I know.’

‘This is unfortunate, Tommy. Very unfortunate you don’t have more details on these people. If they could corroborate your story, we could rule you out of the shooting.’

‘You surely don’t think I did that?’

‘You know this Paddy Rock character?’

‘Not really.’

‘But you know of him?’

‘He was in the army with Midnight, yeah.’

‘That’s your uncle, Jeremy Wall?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Mr Rock was in your uncle’s house at the time of the shooting.’

‘So?’

‘What else do you know of Mr Rock?’

‘Nothing.’

‘You mean you don’t know it’s likely he was instrumental in the conviction of your father four years ago?’

‘Was he? I wasn’t in the court. I was too young. They never told me how it all played out. I just know he’s not been around.’

‘The way it played out was Paddy Rock’s son got pulled carrying dope in a van stolen from the same site as the JCB used in the Ballincalty raid. We linked them through a YouTube video someone conveniently made of the robbery. Rock junior told the Gardaí he and your father did the ATM job and they dismantled and dumped the vehicles in a bog swamp at a derelict site known as The Castle, that house once owned by your grandparents. In return, the son got only a suspended sentence and your dad got the bullet. But we’re fairly sure the old man himself did the job with your dad and gave the son this info to keep him out of jail.’

I stared out across the resource area roof, over the tennis courts, down to the smoking wood.

‘I think you know most of that and you found it out fairly recently. Maybe from Mr Rock who landed in Cloonloch the day your father got a release date. Didn’t Rock get his share of the money? Or does he just want your dad’s now as well?’

‘How do I know?’

‘Rock told you to get it for him, didn’t he? That’s why you shot at him.’

‘Don’t know what you’re on about.’

‘Someone claiming to be a resident tipped off the Gardaí Saturday night, shortly after the incident. He said Mr Rock had a supply level of cannabis in his boot. The resident named in the call later firmly denied ringing the Gardaí. But we did find the drugs in Rock’s car. Who’d make a call like that?’

‘No idea.’

‘Someone who don’t like Mr Rock too much, I’d say. You knew the drugs were found?’

‘Ann told me, yeah.’

‘Right. Did you know that as a result of the find in Rock’s boot we were able to get a warrant on some of his registered properties up the country? We made some interesting discoveries. Stolen high-end motors and such. He’s in a lot of bother because of that tip-off. And he is not very happy about it.’

‘No?’

‘Let’s stop the messing, Tommy. You found out about Rock and his son screwing your dad. And then he arrives demanding your dad’s share, or maybe the whole lot, for all we know. You planted the drugs to get rid of him, planning to tip us off later. Then you must have got pissed and decided you’d have a shot at him before he got locked up.’

‘Where did you dump the taxi?’ O’Keefe said suddenly, sitting up.

‘I need the toilet.’

I sent a text as soon as I got out of the office. I took twenty minutes to walk across to the Resource Area toilets, wash my face, stalling a while at the front entrance, looking down the avenue. Back in the office, Armstrong was leafing through the school disciplinary manual. O'Keefe stared out the window.

I was sweating as I sat, not exercise sweat, this was an exam, waiting-for-the-dentist, asking-Rebecca-if-she-wanted-to-go-for-an-ice-cream-when-we-were-in-first-year type of sweat.

'What car did you say brought you home from Ballincalty?' Armstrong said, tossing away the manual.

'I told ye already, it was a red...'. I paused. I'd said something out of place. But I wasn't sure what, my mind blanked. I was tired. I couldn't do much more. They had the truth, the right story was on their side. I was lying and all they had to do was catch me out once.

I felt like just telling them what they wanted, to get them to leave me alone. I knew they wouldn't leave me alone though. They'd handcuff me there in the office, march me into their unmarked car. I'd be back in Trimon before night with the pool room lads who didn't like me anymore, or maybe someplace even worse.

'A red what?' O'Keefe said.

There was a knock at the door. Armstrong opened it. Johnny Marley entered, his tie hanging out over his laptop case.

'Detectives, sorry to interrupt. This young man is my client.' O'Keefe was already standing.

'We're just asking Tommy a few simple questions,' Armstrong said.



‘What can I say, lads, it looks like a non-con interview to me.’

‘Can I have a word outside, Johnny?’ Armstrong said. They all went out into the hall. I couldn’t make out what was said. There were footsteps, Johnny Marley came back.

‘Good man, Tommy, you are keeping everyone busy.’

‘I just texted Jake. I didn’t know what all that was about. I can pay you at the mobile.’ Talking to Johnny Marley then, with the detectives gone, it felt like a long cool drink of ice water on a hot summer’s day.

‘Don’t worry about that. Come on, I’ll bring you home. Your uncle was released without charge this morning. He wants a word with you urgently.’

We drove out to The Mackon in Johnny Marley’s BMW. It had a massive digital dash. It reminded me of dad’s new car, the one he got the week I started secondary school, the one he was in when they arrested him, with its walnut veneer and cool hands-free video phone set up. We hardly spoke as there were lots of calls. I loved the high-flying words from the range of voices: ‘Repeal’, ‘Probate’, ‘Judiciary’, ‘Tribunal’, ‘Case Officer’. They excited me. I was jealous of Jake’s new career. Every so often Johnny Marley would scroll through his iPad, finger files in the laptop bag between us. He smoked Majors constantly, beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. I sent a ‘Cheers’ to Marley. He texted back straight away: ‘Let’s go out. There’s a new gimmick in Cloonloch, “Escape Hatch”. I hear it’s jammed the weekends, maybe this Thursday night?’ It would be our first night out together since I’d been released.

The jeep was parked at the mobile. Inside, Ann sat on the far sofa bed, folding my clothes. Midnight was down at the end beside the toilet, hands in pockets, wearing his usual face of pain.

‘Hello all,’ Johnny Marley said.

‘Thanks Johnny,’ my uncle said.

‘Not a bother. They’re just probing. Tommy’s an obvious choice given his record. They were hoping to squeeze him, get him on the hop when he was at school. One of their cheap tricks. But clever lad, he was able to text my P.A. and we got it sorted out. There’s no evidence he had anything to do with the incident.’

The first thing I needed to do was write down the details of the green Vectra and the red Corolla and their imaginary drivers. But as soon as the solicitor’s BMW was out of sight, Midnight grabbed me by the shoulder.

‘Two nights I was stuck in that barracks!’

‘It wasn’t my fault you were there!’

‘Think you’re funny, do ya? Why did you break my window, huh? Council won’t pay for that! Wind comin’ in has me frozen!’

‘Jeremy, calm down.’ Ann was standing.

‘Get off me!’ I swung Midnight’s big arse around, it rammed into the draining board. A plate fell off and smashed.

‘Tommy!’ Ann came between us. Midnight slipped as he tried to attack me, he fell backwards, ended sitting on the floor at the end of dad’s bed.

‘You young thug!’

‘I didn’t do anything!’

‘Pock saw ya, plain as day! Now, where’s the key for the rifle press?’

‘Stop all this, or I’ll call the guards myself!’ Ann said.

Midnight tried to get up, pulling dad’s blankets for support, a lot of mam’s books slid on to the floor. Midnight grabbed the mattress, levered himself. He sat on the bed, pulled out the familiar yellow box. ‘Young lads.’

He opened the plastic cover, bit the top of the cigar. ‘I’ll tell ya one thing, you haven’t got a clue what you’re dealing with there.’

‘What the hell is that? Spoof talk?’ My hands shook. I was really fed up of Midnight now.

‘Come on, sit over here, Tommy.’ Ann was at the far sofa. ‘Calm yourself down.’

‘Aisy for you woman. You weren’t in my kitchen when them bullets started raining. If I—’

‘Arra, shut up!’ Ann said, ‘You’d think you’d be used to that, being in all them great battles out in the Far East. The way you’re talking, anyone’d think you spent the whole time in the spud house!’ Midnight stared at Ann, his mouth open. ‘Come on Tommy.’ Ann led me to the table. ‘I’ll make us a cup of tea.’ Ann poured water from the plastic drum into the pot, lit the gas. Midnight puffed slowly on his cigar. There was something soothing about the crackling noise of heating water.

‘Ha!’ Midnight said. ‘Cups of *tæ* will be no good to any of us if that bastard gets bailed out.’ Ann brought over cups of tea to the table.

‘We need to get that money, Tommy.’ Midnight stared out the Perspex, through thick smoke. ‘It’s the only thing that’ll quieten him. He’ll never let this pass, you unloading a mag. on his window. He can’t afford to. Everyone will be watching up in the smoke. He has to get satisfaction.’

‘You’re not listening to me as usual, Midnight. I don’t know where dad put the money, alright?’

Midnight stubbed the cigar out on the carpet. ‘I’m going down to the cottage to check in again between the stones in the walls. Say a prayer that I’ll find it.’

Ann watched him walk awkwardly around the site and down the field.

‘Cops checked all that already. They were here for days,’ I said.

Ann started to pack the folded clothes into the sports bag.

‘Am I going on holidays?’

Ann slid a bankcard across the table. ‘The pin is 1976. There’s about 1800 in it. Thumb it now to town. I’ll say you went for a walk to clear your head.’

‘What?’

‘I seen that Paddy Rock in the barracks. He was gone mad. I wouldn’t like anything to happen to you, Tommy.’

‘But he’s inside now?’

‘He has a lot of friends. Better go away for a few days, at least until your father is back.’

The shaver buzzed upstairs. I sat at the granite island in Marley's kitchen. I clicked down through the documents folder on his laptop. I found the PDF of medieval history. 'Got it online when I was doing the Junior. You read that, you won't need to go to any history class all year. Guaranteed,' Marley had advised. I emailed it to myself. I hovered over the videos folder, thinking I might find some dirty stuff, but when I clicked it, there were just a few pirated episodes of the zombie show dad used to love. I'd been watching it nightly since I got back to The Mackon, but Marley reckoned he'd gotten sick of it after the first season.

There was another root folder within, called 'Home'. Inside, I found hundreds of tiny AVI clips, mostly only a few megabytes. I knew they were things he used to post on Facebook, he didn't do that anymore. Scenes of someone throwing up at the Hallowe'en disco, or a couple shifting and pawing on top of a wheelie bin, that kind of slaggin' shite. Just as I was about to

X off, I saw a clip that was last modified 3-9-13. Hard to forget that date, it was the night of the Ballincalty ATM raid.

I opened it up in VLC, clicking the mute. Marley was still shaving, but he'd not be long, for all the beard he had. O'Malley's forecourt came on the screen. The quality was much higher pre-YouTube pixel crushing.

Dad drove the JCB down off the flatbed. I watched the bucket scoop out the unit. I paused the video, zoomed in around the blob of Midnight, you could just see the numbers on the door of the truck.

Those numbers had linked Pock's son with the ATM raid. Marley had recorded the robbery from his bedroom window and put it up on YouTube. It was because of this video dad was in jail.

The shaver had stopped. I clicked off, erased the VLC viewing history as Marley came down the stairs, spraying deodorant. 'Taxi is on its way. Did you get it?'

'What?'

'The PDF?'

'Oh, yeah, yeah.'

'You alright? You look like you just seen a ghost?' I stared blankly at him. 'Tommy?'

The front door opened. It was Johnny Marley.

'Gentlemen,' he said, coming into the kitchen, carrying a newspaper. 'Are we going out on a school night?'

'Friday's a quiet morning, dad. I can study here till eleven.'

‘Yeah, I’ll believe it when I see it.’ Johnny Marley opened a press, took out a foil-wrapped package of Italian coffee. ‘You’re a legal adult now, what can I do about it?’

‘Not a thing!’ They both laughed.

‘So what’s on tonight?’

‘New thing in Cloonloch, “Escape Hatch”.’

‘What’s that?’ Johnny Marley squinted as he set up the percolator.

‘It’s like a warehouse with all these special rooms, you have to find your way out in a certain length of time.’

‘So it’s a maze?’

‘Yeah, but there’s more to it than that. Reviews are high-end.’

‘Ye won’t be late, will ya?’

‘Nah.’

‘Are you alright for money, Jonathan?’

I made a poor effort at hiding a laugh. It was the only time I ever heard Marley called that.

We got to the complex a bit early. There was a small pub next door. Marley decided we’d have a quick one. He was like a kid going to the circus. He scanned the website on his phone as we sat at the counter.

‘You know it’s actually got five different levels and this crazy final challenge!’

‘We pick up Beck on the way home?’ I said.

‘She not coming to town?’

‘Texted her earlier. Couldn’t get away. Mother is laying down the law. She told me to call her when we’re going home, she might sneak out.’

‘Could be your lucky night, Tommy the boy.’

‘Piss off.’

We had a fag at the door. It was like breathing again to get away from the conversation at the counter. Nothing Marley said anymore made sense to me.

Across the street, I saw a hooded figure hanging around one of the boarded-up units. In his baggy trackies, tucked in white sports socks, cheap cloth shoes and aimless circling the footpath as he scanned his phone, he was as near as any self-respecting drug dealer got to a shop window.

‘There’s a fella across there I know. Back in a minute.’

‘Make it snappy, we’re booked in at half seven.’

Billy smiled as I came across. ‘Story, bud?’

‘You know Liam from Trimon?’ His smile faded.

‘Who?’

‘I’m O’Toole.’

‘You what?’

‘I was with Liam and them in Trimon until last May.’



‘You the fella put that prick Masterson in the hospital?’

‘Yeah.’

‘So what do yiz want?’ It was gone cold outside. I shivered.

‘I was here all summer. They said I’d have two years out of this until you came back.’

‘Yiz’re done.’

Two lads from Junior Cert stopped. There was a quick exchange, they’d been my customers the week before. The whole thing would be on street cams, the guy was an awful dickhead.

‘Do yiz want to fuck off?’ the dealer said when the lads had gone.

‘If it wasn’t for me the last while, lads like them would have gone somewhere else. You’d have no trade. I want a split.’

‘Don’t bullshit me. There’s always trade, bud.’ Billy walked up the street to the town square.

I couldn’t see anything, Marley was ahead of me in the darkness. They turned the lights on and off every few minutes, some weak attempt at suspense which didn’t work at all, the glare lit up walls constructed from cheap MDF panels, painted with cell doors and bogus warning signs. They played silly noises in the background, as if you would ever hear chains rattling and chainsaws in real prison.

Even when the lights were off it wasn’t completely black, there was a green glow from the exit doors which kind of ruined the whole illusion. You had to get through each ‘chamber’,

all of them had a prison theme and a puzzle. You had to complete the course in less than sixty minutes. Soon after we started, it looked like we'd be out in fifteen. It wasn't much for a tenner each. We passed through the 'Interview Room', the 'Holding Cell' and the 'High-Risk Unit' without much trouble, the final section was the 'Parole Board'. It was a bit of an anti-climax, with its posters of bookshelves and boardroom style imitation walnut desk, all tacked on more sprayed MDF.

A final test had been set up at the centre with large wooden poles. The challenge was a version of an old matchstick trick I'd seen Midnight do hundreds of times when he was pissed on Dutch Gold in the mobile. He kept forgetting he'd shown it to me and I never bothered stopping him. Marley hadn't seen it before and couldn't solve it. I had to do it for him in the end.

He was almost frothing at the mouth when we got out. 'Savage craic, the real deal!'

We'd 'escaped' in less than twenty minutes. I thought we should ask for our money back, but Marley wouldn't hear of it, he was already typing on his phone. 'I'm gonna put a gold level review on this cat straight away! Great spot!'

We went into Lou's. It was a kind of retro place, 90s themed, football jerseys from the decade were tacked to the dark walls, an electric poker table hummed in the corner, the *Titanic* soundtrack played low on a loop. Thirtysomething couples sat at round tables near the windows, most of them looking in opposite directions or playing on their smartphones. Their drinks were at the same stage down the glass for ages, beer froth sticking dry to the sides. Marley took a large gulp of his pint. 'Ol' man out tomorrow?'

'Eight bells.'

‘Rough what happened your dad, Tommy. Same for you though stuck in that place. Could have been me, easy enough. I’d have looked around that yacht like you did, deffo. I’d have done that dick you were getting hassled with. You never found out who told the cops about the Merc. that time?’

‘No.’

‘You did well to hold off on Eric. You’d have probably been let go if you put him in the soup.’

‘Wouldn’t do that.’

‘Wet Room Trained, hah? No squealing under pressure.’

‘If I did put them on to him, I’d be looking over my shoulder the whole time.’ A bit like I was now. Marley took another drink, stared out the window for a few moments.

‘You know, I never got the scanner off the internet that time.’

‘What?’

‘Eric rang me. I don’t know, it was sometime in April that year. He’d heard from some lads we’d form with the cars. They gave him my number. He offered to set us up.’

‘Why did you say you bought the stuff?’

‘I don’t know. Hard man shite, I suppose. I mean it was some toy to come on, eh?’

‘Top of the range alright.’

‘And he guaranteed to take the cars off us.’

‘I often wondered how you met Eric.’

‘Now you know, scan.’

But this new information hadn't improved a coldness already growing in me towards Jake Marley. I thought again of the video in his laptop. I felt loose inside, like there was a nail somewhere I needed to hammer.

I sat on the toilet lid. Fans whirred above my head behind the ceiling panels. The door in the cubicle was polished, free of marker graffiti. There was a distant mumble of voices in the bar, the door opening, and closing, the spring of the hinge, footsteps, zip, long stream into the urinal, zip again, sprinkling of water, the hand dryer for three or four seconds, footsteps, the door opening, spring hinge, the door banging closed. You didn't get the conversations here like in Lavin's: ‘That fella has enough to retire on’, ‘Where's Peader today?’, ‘I wasn't looking at you at all, calm down!’

I sent Rebecca a text: ‘Probably get a taxi soon. Eleven outside?’ Smiley face came through. I tried Margaret O'Dea, but there was no answer. I didn't bother leaving a message.

I sat for a while, holding my head in my knees. I wanted to stay there for ever, staring at the tiles.

When I got back to the bar, there was something happening. Everyone was looking outside. Lou's had big clear windows across the front, you could see right into the street. Two guards were leading Billy into the back seat of a squad car. Marley was commentating on the episode to one of the couples.

‘Where'd you go Tommy, you're missing all the craic!’ He took his phone out. ‘I just realised that sham is one of the ol' man's clients.’

Near the squad car, another man, in a blue garda jacket with the hood up, was putting something into a plastic garda bag. The cop looked a bit like O'Keefe, but I couldn't be sure. The dealer stared out the window as he was driven away.

'See you later dad.' Marley clicked off. 'He won't be home till God knows. What say we hit the basement, Tommy? Everyone'll be hyper now that Dope Deal is offline.'

'I told Beck we'd call for her around eleven.'

'Keep it under control, man! Tell her you got delayed and chillax!'

The taxi stopped in Ballincalty outside Marley's at half two. Johnny Marley's BMW was missing from its usual spot, probably still outside Cloonloch Garda station.

'Now, my good man, bring these calves to The Mackon.' Marley got out. He handed the driver a fifty. The driver pulled a tenner from somewhere. 'No, keep the change, scan. Tommy? Get to the Tate, that's all I can tell you. Get to the Tate.'

'Shut up you fool, you don't even know what the Tate is.'

'Listen, Tommy, I know as much about the Tate as your uncle knows about the Tote. Now, what do you think about that?'

'I think "Goodbye", and put a pint glass of water by the bed. And probably a bucket.'

'Ah, Tommy, you're some man. Some man, Tommy the boy!'

When we drove off, leaving Marley to collide with his garden wall, I turned to Rebecca. She smelt real good. I tried to shift her but she pushed me back. 'Calm down.'

‘You’re stone cold, that’s the problem. I think Midnight left a few cans of Dutchie after him yesterday.’

‘Cup of tea will be fine.’

‘Jesus, you’re fucking gorgeous, do you know that?’ She blocked my grope.

‘Your dad coming home tomorrow?’

‘Eight bells, ma’am.’

‘And what’s he going to say when he finds me there?’

‘Arra, fuck him! Four years, a lot of things change, you know, sexy?’ I tried to get my hands under her blouse in the darkness as the taxi sped along the road to the bog.

The smell of coffee woke me. Rebecca was putting two mugs on the table as I turned around. She was already in school uniform. ‘Jeez, you came prepared?’

‘You’ve hardly any food here, Tommy. Where’s the cornflakes?’

‘I don’t bother with breakfast. Where the hell are my fags?’

‘It’s the most important meal of the day, you know.’

‘You’re worse than Ann.’ I threw one of the pillows at her. I had a headache and my stomach turned a bit, but it wasn’t the worst hangover I’d ever had. I sipped the coffee, it was good. I found my Majors under the table.

‘How are we getting to school?’ Rebecca said, as she sat across from me.

‘School? I don’t know about that idea. I’m a bit ropey. Let’s go to bed for the day?’

‘You’ve got your exhibition, remember.’

‘True. Tuohy goes to town on Friday mornings.’

‘I hate travelling with him. He stares at me the whole time, Tommy.’

‘He stares at everyone. He’s alright. What time is it now?’

Through the Perspex, I saw a squad car pull up. Dad got out the passenger side, carrying a little red bag and a blue folder. He shut the door a little too firmly and never looked back as the guard drove away. I watched him walking through the green and yellow weeds. I could hear his footsteps as he came closer, the folder swishing through the air.

When he got to the door, I saw his jaw was really white. I’d never seen him so cleanshaven. Even though his eyes darted, his body moved slow. I saw lines on his neck and forehead I’d never noticed before, the cuffs on the prison shirt hung down to his knuckles. He stood at the sink and opened his top collar button. He scanned his bed, then the half-built house and down the field. He put the bag on the draining board, I saw his fingers shake. He turned to us. ‘Tommy the boy.’

Now I looked down at him, but instead of feeling tall, it was more like he had shrunk. For a moment, I thought he was going to hug me. Then he looked at Rebecca.

‘You know Beck?’

‘Course I do. How are you?’ He took a single cigarette from his shirt pocket, lit it and put the folder on the table. ‘Ye going to school?’

‘In a few minutes.’



‘Do you have the phone handy there, Tommy? I’ve to make a call straight away to the poxy social worker. I’m meant to let her know as soon as I’ve landed. It’s one of the parole conditions.’

He took my phone and went outside.

‘Let’s go.’ I stood up, tossing some schoolbooks and copies into Marley’s sports bag.

‘Don’t you want to tell him about the exhibition?’

‘Like he’d want to come to that! Sure he doesn’t even have a car!’

‘He could get a taxi. Maybe he’ll be getting a car today?’

‘Nah.’

Dad came back in, gave me the phone. ‘So ye’re heading off now, yeah?’

We took up our schoolbags. At the door, Rebecca turned to dad. ‘Tommy’s art class have a public exhibition on today in the school . Tommy’s project is meant to be unreal.’

‘It’s just a painting,’ I said.

‘Painting, huh? Bit of a Leonardo, are ya? Don’t tell me you want to be one of them starvin’ artists out in Paris or wherever. Get the schoolin’, that’s the way to go, son.’

‘Bit late for that, dad. I’m two years behind everyone else.’

‘Don’t matter. Lad like you’ll catch up.’

‘You do need to play to your strengths, though,’ Rebecca said.

‘My strengths are to keep me head out of blue light.’ Dad opened the fridge. ‘Don’t tell me you have no sausages?’

‘We better go. Might see you at that thing, dad. It’s at four.’

‘We’ll see, Tommy. I have to get some stuff organised. Get a car and a few block layers out to price the house.’

‘You’re going at the house again?’

‘She’ll be roofed by Christmas. We’ll be out of this poxy sardine can by Paddy’s day. There’s going to be big changes around here.’

We waited for twenty minutes at the end of Tuohy’s boreen until he came out. We watched him awkwardly step through the hole in his hedge and limp toward his jeep.

A taxi passed us, it pulled up at the mobile. A tall woman got out of the passenger’s seat. She had long blonde hair, a yellow mini-skirt, white leather boots. It definitely wasn’t Margaret O’Dea. My social worker had called me back a few times, but I hadn’t bothered answering.

The taxi-driver killed the engine and took up a newspaper as the woman knocked and entered the mobile.

We started setting up for the exhibition around half three in the Assembly Hall. Marley had skipped his last class and gave me a hand carrying up the panel.

‘Mad for the birds, scan,’ he said, examining it, as we adjusted its position. The twenty-one birds were on the avenue, their beaks aimed at the scattered crusts. ‘An artist from The Mackon, who would have seen it?’

Mr Coyne had arranged a zigzag walkway through tables of the A3 pieces, with my painting at the very end. I stood beside it, hands together, watching parents come and admire their children's work.

A few minutes later, I thought I was seeing things at the door. Margaret O'Dea was talking to Mr Coyne outside as she smoked a cigarette. He pointed down toward me.

'Tommy, you really are an artist!' she said, as she walked through the tables. 'Mr Sherlock mentioned the exhibition the last call I had with him. This is great...'. She looked at the birds for a few moments. Then she turned to me. 'I saw you tried to get in contact. Is everything alright? There was no answer when I rang back?'

'Sorry, that was a mistake. I pressed the wrong button.'

'You sure? I am glad I left work early to see this. Well done!'

'Thanks. I see you're back on the cigarettes?'

Margaret O'Dea's face coloured a bit. 'I'm afraid so. It's a stressful job, looking after artists like yourself, Tommy!'

We were just starting to tidy up at five o'clock when Midnight and Ann arrived. It was bizarre to see them in the Assembly Hall. They were so out of place, my uncle squinting at each piece as though they were hurting his eyes. Sherlock was at the door, glaring at Ann as she puffed on her e-fag.

'This is wonderful, Tommy,' Ann said, as they reached me.

Mr Coyne arrived beside them. 'Tommy's parents, is it?'

‘Well—’

‘Yes, Tommy is showing real talent in the Art Room. And I’m not just saying it. He’s...’, Mr Coyne lowered his voice and I could just hear him say to Ann, ‘Quite frankly, he’s in a different league.’ Then he turned back to the painting. ‘Now, what I like about this piece is the genuineness. It’s art but it’s also...’, he looked up at the ceiling, like the answer was there, ‘It’s honest.’ He pointed toward the first bird I’d painted, a little away from the rest. ‘I particularly like this lone one out here. This sets off the entire piece, in my opinion.’

Midnight blew his nose with a scrunched-up ball of toilet paper. ‘Yeah, yeah, now I’m no artist, but could you not have made some of them a different colour?’ he said. ‘A red or a green here and there.’ He ran his hands through his curls, scattering dandruff on a table of blank sheets. ‘Why do they all have to be black?’

We went for some drinks to celebrate the exhibition in The Olde Tree. There was a lot of horseracing on the TV and it took some work to get Midnight to leave, but he wasn’t the only problem. Me and Ann had to link Rebecca into the back of the Micra.

‘We can’t bring her home in that state,’ Ann said. ‘What was in that vodka? She only had a few.’

‘She always gets like that. Can’t seem to handle it at all.’

‘Bring her back to the mobile for an hour. It’s only nine o’clock. Let her sober up a bit and we’ll bring her home then. We can talk to your dad. How is he?’

‘Haven’t seen him since this morning.’

It had been drizzling on the way out and by the time we got to the village, the rain was heavy. Behind the mobile, I saw a huge spotlight had been set up. The door at the front was open.

‘What the hell is Joe at?’ Ann said as she parked.

‘Fuck it! Fuck it!’ Midnight shouted, looking at the Perspex.

‘What’s wrong with ya?’

Midnight tapped his jacket. ‘I left me wallet in The Tree. We have to go back straight away and get it.’

‘Is it not empty?’

‘No, it is not! I collected eighty euros this evening on the 6.10 at Newbury.’

‘First I heard of this big win. We can get oil for the tank so, thank God.’

‘We’ll get no oil if we don’t go straight back and get it.’

‘Can’t you ring him and get him to put it behind the counter?’

‘Yeah, I know what he’ll put behind the counter and what he’ll put in his pocket. All you’ll get back is the empty wallet, he’ll say that’s how he found it.’

‘He’s a businessman. He wouldn’t do that, Jeremy.’

‘They would all do that. Let’s go woman!’

‘What about Rebecca?’

‘She can stay, it’ll be alright,’ I said.

I got out, opened the back door of the Micra, swinging Rebecca's lifeless arm around me.

'Give her a cup of coffee or something,' Ann said. 'It was a good day, Tommy. We were very proud in that school.'

'Let's go, woman!' Midnight's hands were shaking.

We collapsed onto the sofa bed. One of the bottles of Hennessy was open on the table. Zombies groaned as they chased people through a wood on the laptop. The spotlight out the back glared in through the Perspex.

Dad stared at me from the far sofa bed. He was sitting upright. His hands were on his lap like he was ready for take-off. He still wore the prison clothes, although they were now covered in clay.

I straightened Rebecca on the sofa, pulled her shoes off, put the blanket over her. I took up the bottle of brandy. 'Some of this left?'

I got a mug off the draining board and half-filled it. I drank it off the head, feeling the bite down my throat. I felt like shouting or something. I took up dad's Majors, pulled a fag out, lit it. I didn't much care about anything anymore.

'You didn't get to the exhibition in the end?' I looked directly at him as I spoke. I saw now his eyes were glazed. It was like there was some kind of dull filter between those white, grey and black dots and the world. He didn't move, hadn't since I came in.

'Busy with your social worker, I suppose,' I said, smoke smoothly clouding out. 'Fine bit of gear. I'd say—'

Dad leapt across the table, knocking the fag out of my hand, he grabbed me by the shoulders, like the way Midnight had done the day he'd come with Pock, but dad was much fitter and stronger, he lifted me with power, like a wave in the sea, dragged me towards the door.

I shouted but I didn't know what I wanted to say. We were outside, in the pouring rain, it stuck to my shirt, we stumbled backwards around the mobile. He dragged me into the light, the big spot blinded me with its yellow glare. I saw a hole freshly dug, the spade stuck at the edge. I tripped, my face landed on the soggy earth.

I couldn't see anything, only hear dad behind me, hoarse, deeper than usual, 'Where is it, you little prick?'

'Where's wha...?' There was grass and muck in my mouth.

'Don't fuck me around,' dad pulled me up, smacked me on the mouth, blood spilled from my lip. I was dizzy, there was a fist to the ribs, another to the stomach, it sank in, the blows were solid, steely, connecting. I couldn't breathe. I thought to fight back, but something made me lifeless. I just rolled on the ground toward the side of the mobile.

On the sitting room windowsill, I saw the other bottle of Hennessy, half full. Dad took it up, swigged it.

'This is what I get.' He put his other hand on the spade. 'I spend four years rottin' in jail and when I get out, I find my own wank stain has stolen from me.'

Dad stood over me, his shape huge in the spotlight's foreground. 'A slimy cunt of a drug dealer. So that's how you got the start with them. Bought your stake with my cash. I never thought I had to worry about you taking it.'

I was kneeling, my legs sinking into the softened ground, the driving rain stung my eyes. I could have been crying and I wouldn't have known.

'Where is it?' He roared into my ear. The drum rattled like a mega disco beat. 'Get it for me, or I swear I will kill you.' Dad lifted the spade. I got up, he adjusted his angle. 'This is what I get for trying to put manners on you. You come out of that place worse than when you went in.' He came towards me. 'Where is my money?' My mind cleared for a second. I dived for the site doorway.

I heard him shout behind. I tripped over a wet and hardened bag of cement, banged my shin, it was pure agony. I rolled around the back of a wall stump, footsteps passed, heavy breathing, the brandy swishing in the bottle. I ran out the doorway, by the spotlight, my shadow huge on the side panel of the mobile.

Inside, Rebecca was snoring heavily. I pulled the Defence Forces keyring out. I opened the press over the cooker. Dad was still in the new house. Rain hit the Perspex and rolled down to the thin moss around the frames.

I assembled the Remington, fingers steady, clicked on the mag. I pulled the bolt back, released the catch, driving a round up the breech. I went back out, my thoughts dying away.

Dad was at the spotlight, his back to me, a cigarette burning in one hand. He drank the rest of the brandy, flung the bottle against the wall, it smashed to pieces. He swung around.

I pointed the Remington at him. He laughed without humour.

'What, do you think you're on television? Put that away before you shoot someone.'

'You told the cops I was at The Marina?'



Dad looked at the barrel of the rifle as he dragged on the last of his fag and tossed it into the hole. I clicked the lever from 'S' to 'A'. It was so easy to do. 'Put it down, Tommy. You've a lot of drink on board.'

'So have you. How come?'

'Twenty years. Liver is well rested.' He sounded strange, like he had swallowed barbed wire and it was stuck to his voice box.

'I didn't take your rotten money.' I tightened my grip on the rifle.

'I know, I know.' His face had softened, the cheeks had inflated out around the jawline, the eyebrows had risen, the forehead creased. But the eyes were still fogged. 'I had to be sure. Lads like you don't scare easy.' Raindrops rolled down dad's neck.

'You know that Midnight and Pock were out here searching the place?'

'Pricks.' Dad's face hardened again, but the heat was gone out of our words, we had a common enemy. 'Him comin' here for years every night with his cans of cheap lager and his rotten cigars, listening to him talking shite about Lebanon and as soon as me back is turned he shafts me. I never want to see that bollocks again.'

I lowered the rifle. 'How'd you know I was at the Marina?'

'I got a tip-off.' He was casual now.

'From who?'

'Are we getting in out of this rain? Johnny Marley alright?'

'How did he know?'

'He saw a poxy text on the young fella's phone. It was for your own good.'

‘Do you know what Trimon Halls is like?’

‘I didn’t know you were going to try and steal a twenty-million-euro yacht, did I? And what did you do to that young Masters fella? They weren’t going to cut you loose after that.’

From the mobile, I could hear agonised screams. The zombies had caught up with the humans.

I saw Ash’s thin bones in a pile then, gleaming yellow in the rain, on top of the dirt, tossed there like rubbish.

Dad saw me looking. ‘I hadn’t much time. I had to put it somewhere safe. If I dug a hole anywhere else, them detectives would have got it. They were looking everywhere.’

‘I remember, dad.’

Dad looked at me oddly. It was like there were two men standing before me and they swapped places every few seconds. I didn’t know which one was there until he spoke.

‘You took it, didn’t ya? You saw I’d dug up the grave? Who else would notice them stones moved?’ He nodded, a smirk coming on his lips. ‘You did. I knew it.’

Dad took a step forward, put his hand on the spade. ‘Fuckin’ youth! Where is it? Tell me! No cunt is goin’ to con me out of my money!’

I raised the barrel. ‘Stay back.’

‘Gimme that rifle! I’ll kill ya, I swear! Where’s my money!’ Dad came forward, the spade in the air.

‘You shot my dog!’

‘The money!’ He jumped toward me, the spade swinging. I tripped back, finger on the trigger, the Remington jerked as the magazine emptied into dad’s chest. He tripped back with the impact, his mouth opened. He dropped the spade, fell into the hole.

I couldn't breathe. Something squeezed my shoulder, then shook it. My lips were caked with dry scum, nose blocked, eyes stuck together. I pulled my eyelid open.

Midnight stood over me. I was lying on the far sofa bed, facing the road. Rebecca snored gently under the blanket across from me. Ann was at the sink. She rinsed cups, clouds of steam rose around her. 'Y'alright, Tommy? You don't look so good.'

'Hungover.' I sat up, looked around for fags. As I lit the flavourless thing, I looked up at the press over the cooker. The door was closed. I felt the Defence Forces keyring in my pocket.

'Where's Joe?' Midnight had sat beside me.

'He went off early.'

‘Where?’

‘The garage, I think.’

‘Kilroy looked shut when I was passing. What happened last night?’

‘Nothing.’

‘What was the idea of the light out the back?’ Midnight looked straight at me.

‘I don’t know. You’ll have to ask him.’

‘Is that girl alright?’ Ann said. She went across, leant over Rebecca. ‘She’s as white as a sheet. We better get her straight home, Jeremy.’

‘Let’s have that tea you were making first, woman, for the love of God.’

‘Hello? Are you alright, love?’ Ann nudged Rebecca’s shoulder. Rebecca opened her eyes wide, like she was caught in headlights. She got up, went around Ann to the toilet.

‘Ah, the youth.’ Midnight searched in his pockets.

Hangover symptoms began to intensify. My head was throbbing, stomach churning, throat furry. I looked back out through the Perspex, the ground was freshly raked. Ash’s grave stones were in a pile at the mossy block wall. Flashes came into my head, heavy rain, wet clay, the spade, the rifle.

‘Did you get your wallet, Midnight?’ Nothing would have happened as it had if my uncle hadn’t chickened out when he saw the brandy on the table.

‘He found it as soon as we got to town.’

‘It was the funniest thing. It was in the lining of me jacket the whole time. Never happened before.’

‘And even funnier, his eighty euro wasn’t in there either.’

‘For the love of God, I already told you all that! It was a slip to collect eighty euros but a course I forgot I had put the winnings on the 7 o’clock at Newmarket. It’s an accumulator thing.’

‘Didn’t accumulate much, did it?’

‘At five to two, you would think—’

‘Please!’ Ann rose her hand, she was back at the sink. ‘I don’t want to hear any more about it. Your house was so cold last night, I had to go home, that’s all I know. What came over your dad to go drinking, Tommy?’

‘Don’t know.’

‘Was he in a mood?’

There was a deep cough from the toilet, spitting, moaning. Ann looked back at the door. ‘Oh, the poor girl. And so young too.’ Ann brought over the cups of tea, put them on the table. She folded up the blanket, sat across from us. She turned on her e-fag. ‘I hope Joe is alright.’

‘If he’s still at it, it’s the ones that cross his path I’d be worried about.’ Midnight snorted, pulled out a screwed-up ball of toilet paper, blew his nose.

‘Was he that bad, though?’ Ann said. ‘He hasn’t drank for a long time. It mightn’t affect him the same way.’

‘That’s not how it works with his type. Do you not remember? It used be aright at first going out with him, after he met Sheila. He was doing well then at the cattle dealing. He’d been at it since he was fifteen. He’d be rotten with money now if he was still trading. It was just before I signed up to the army. But he wasn’t even twenty and he started hitting the top shelf

near closing time. Shelia'd be conking and he'd always get into a row with some fella. He'd go pure loopy on the spirits. I'd leave them to it. He started calling me "The Midnight Man", because I'd always go after 12. I'd never wait on for late hours with him...'.

'I thought you always said you got that name because you saved some fella's life on night patrol? Out in Lebanon?' I said.

Midnight glared at me. Rebecca came out of the toilet.

'Sit down here love.' Ann waved Rebecca over. 'Take this cup of tea, it'll freshen you up.'

Rebecca shook her head slowly and sat on the sofa bed.

'We'll give you a lift home in a minute.'

Midnight tapped his cigar. 'Yeah, after he got that six months inside for nearly killing the fella with the shovel, he'd only ever take a can of coke after. It's a pity poor old Shelia couldn't do the same.'

There was a noise outside. A lorry had stopped. A man in a t-shirt and jeans covered in rust jumped out, hurried across the grass.

'O'Toole's?' he said, as I opened the door. 'Load for ye. Where do you want it?'

'Load of what? The man himself is not here.'

'Sand, fella!'

'Sand? Where does it usually go?'

'At the front of the site,' Midnight shouted. 'For block layers. He must have ordered it yesterday as soon as he landed.'

‘That’ll do.’ The man nodded and went back to the lorry.

‘He must be going building again,’ Ann said, as I sat down.

‘Reckons it’ll be roofed by Christmas,’ I said, before realising the reality.

‘There’ll be no roof on it, if that man is on the batter,’ Midnight said, getting up. ‘Come on, woman, I need to get back to Cloonloch before twelve.’

Rebecca followed them to the Micra. I hadn’t space in my head to worry why she’d hardly spoken to me. I watched the driver edge the lorry in around the back. He pulled the short bars at the end of the truck. Then he operated the hydraulic lift with levers behind the cab. The back of the load was offered up to the sky. The fine brown sand tumbled out underneath the swinging steel back panel, on to the raked clay and covering Ash’s grave stones

The detectives sat across from me, facing the site. Armstrong sipped his black tea. I’d fallen asleep again after Midnight and Ann had left, lain back on the sofa bed. I wouldn’t have answered except I opened my eyes to find O’Keefe staring in through the Perspex.

‘Having a lazy day, Tommy?’ Armstrong said, as he opened his folder.

‘Sort of.’

‘Sorry to interrupt, but the Super sent us out. We got a report last night of a burst of gun fire around quarter to ten somewhere in The Mackon. The squad took a spin out, there was nothing amiss, but we’re just checking with a few locals as well. You here all night yesterday?’

‘From about nine.’

‘You hear anything?’



‘Nah. Watching that.’ I nodded at the laptop. Zombies stumbled through a forest.

Armstrong smiled. ‘That season 4? Turn it off, I haven’t gotten around to that one yet. What about dad, was he here? Is he gone out this morning?’

I closed up the laptop. ‘Gone to Kilroy’s garage. Yeah, he was here last night.’

‘Must be good to have him back. Did he hear anything?’

‘Doubt it. He was in bed.’ My mind cleared. ‘Maybe it was Tuohy’s crow repellent someone heard. He’s a farmer next door. It goes off every so often. Sounds just like a rifle shot. It keeps birds off his spuds.’

‘Makes sense. Although that wouldn’t be a burst, would it? That’d be a single shot, no?’

‘Is that him down there?’ O’Keefe said, looking beyond me. I turned. Tuohy was at the corner of the field, where the old gap had been. He hammered staples into the top of the chunky new posts he’d installed. He was fitting a new line of barbed wire. ‘I’ll go out and ask him. He might run it for me.’

Armstrong wrote something down and closed the folder. I could hear O’Keefe’s footsteps around the mobile on the gravel and weeds.

‘Likely what it was. People are still high after the incident Saturday night. We already had a few bogus calls.’

I could hear faint voices down the field. It was mainly O’Keefe, with Tuohy probably only grunting responses.

‘Paddy Rock is claiming he saw you driving the stolen taxi that night. And he thinks you planted the cannabis. Why would he say that?’

‘I don’t know, Detective.’

The voices in the field had died. Tuohy had started hammering again. O’Keefe’s footsteps came back on the gravel. He went behind the mobile, near the load of sand. I thought I could hear his shoe crushing a steel casing. The Remington discharges empties through a trap in the breech. But I was fairly sure the sand had covered them all. ‘Maybe Rock is hot because he’s inside now and dad’s out with all that ATM cash? Couple of hundred grand never recovered. Not bad for four years inside?’

The mobile looked a lot different from the far sofa bed. There were no kitchen units on the other side, just the front door, the rectangular outlines of the toilet and shower unit, the Perspex facing the road. ‘If he has it, I wish he’d start spending some of it.’

Armstrong laughed. ‘Maybe that sand is the start.’

O’Keefe was at the door. ‘Let’s go.’

‘Thanks for the tea, Tommy. You’ll be here tomorrow, if we need to ask you any more questions?’

‘Sure.’

I clicked on the laptop as they drove off. Something ground under my feet. I looked down. The carpet was caked with dried-in clay.

The nurse unplugged the drip feed from mam's arm, which now wasn't much more than a bone with loose skin. They'd put mam in a single unit. The room felt empty. I missed Nora pulling at my arm, thinking I was Gerald come to collect her, or the woman that always slept across from us, eyes tightly shut, blankets tucked around her chin.

'Just taking this out for a second, Shelia,' the nurse said, but mam's eyes were tightly shut.

Midnight burst into a bout of coughing, a desperate attempt to drive up the phlegm in his throat.

'Will you go outside and do that, spreading germs in the hospital!' Ann said.

'It's the pipes, woman, I have to clear me pipes!'

The nurse plugged back in the drip.

‘When do you think she’ll be able to go back to St Michael’s, nurse?’ Ann said.

‘That’s up to Dr Karl. Hypoglycaemia has developed as a result of the Wernicke’s.’

‘What’s that?’

‘The consultant will assess her again on Monday, Miss Gillhooley.’

‘An awful sight,’ Midnight said. ‘When we were all going out years ago, never thought it’d end up like this. Ah! I’m going out for a smoke.’

I watched my uncle waddle to the corridor. Ann looked at me. ‘Did you say you were meeting Rebecca this evening?’

‘Yeah. Ye can drop me at the hotel after.’

‘You never took out that money?’

‘Nah. I have the card here—’

‘Keep it for now, love. I’m worried about your father, if he’s drinking. You might change your mind in the next few days. And don’t forget to bring your schoolbag with you. It’s still in my car.’

‘Ah, I’ll leave it there till Monday.’

‘Bring it with you. You might do a bit of study tomorrow.’

Ann opened her handbag and took out a passport. ‘I applied for this a few weeks ago. I thought you might need it.’

‘That an old photo?’

‘I got it off the Principal, and the Garda in my village is very obliging, he stamped it for me.’

‘Thanks.’ I looked at the photo. It had been taken when I was in first year.

‘You haven’t really changed that much at all,’ Ann said, as she closed her handbag.

I stood at the edge of the function room dancefloor. Music boomed from a three-piece on the stage to my right. Lads in suits danced in front of me, collars turned up, ties loosened, bouncing in one messy group, arms over shoulders. I could hear the drunken words ‘We are the lads, lads, lads, we are the lads, lads, lads, hi-hu!’

Amongst them, the bride emerged laughing, a bottle of Britvic 55 in her hand. She hugged every second person she met. As she came off the floor, she caught my eye. ‘Well you! I asked Donal and he doesn’t know you or your friend!’

‘I suppose you got me. But I’m adding to the atmos.!’

‘I’m sure you are! Gatecrash a lot of weddings, do you?’

‘We didn’t make it downstairs to the disco, to be honest.’ I nodded at Rebecca, her head was flat on the tablecloth.

‘What’s wrong with her?’

‘Vodka. Knocks her out every time.’

‘God love ya.’

‘Good luck with everything.’

‘You’re very sweet!’ Someone took her hand and she was gone.

My phone vibrated. Text. 'Outside now.'

I took the sports bag from under the table, slid the cash into an inner compartment and walked around the dancers. Another group had joined the men, heavily make-upped women of thirties or forties, they wore flowery dresses, they were head-banging and playing air guitar.

I went through the double doors, down carpeted stairs. The glass exit doors were open. At the far end of the carpark, an ambulance was parked up on the kerb, the driver's door open, indicator flashing. I stopped and looked around the lobby. There was a noise behind me. I turned, the keyring across my fist.

It was someone from the wedding, tie loose, red-faced. He dribbled as he came to the end of the stairs.

'Ya lost, scan?' He laughed, pushed past me.

The toilet door slammed. I heard roars, the hand-dryer crashed and whirred. I ran out the double doors, I could hear Pock shouting through the window. I dropped the keyring by the ambulance.

There were only a few passengers on the night bus. I sat halfway down. I took out my phone. The number rang for ages. 'Yes?'

'Is this Mann's?'

'Yes?'

'Your daughter, Rebecca—'

'Oh my God, is she alright, oh no—'

‘She’s fine. She just needs to be collected from the function room of the Cloonloch Arms.’

‘Is that you, Tommy?’

I hung up. The digital clock over the driver changed to 00:00. He started the engine. We moved through the streets. Lads tripped over each other on the way to the late bars and clubs. I saw flashes of short skirts, loose shirts, a fella trying to get the ride in an alley, jeans at his ankles. Chip bags, burger wrappers and snack boxes were scattered around the paths. At an open vent somewhere, I could hear bursts of shouting, laughter. Through the glass, it looked like a mad scene in a movie.

A Gardai squad car passed us, the spinning light flashed into the bus for a second. I thought of dad in the mobile, keeping his head out of the blue rays, what Rebecca had said about playing to my strengths.

I checked everything in the sports bag. There was a short pencil rolling around at the bottom beside a crumpled green copybook. I took them out, flicked open the copy. It was multi-purpose, I’d used it for every subject since I came back from Trimon Halls. There were scribbled maths formulas, geography sketches of the Earth’s layers, a piece of writing about some war. It had started life as my first-year English writing copy. I turned to the front. After I’d written a description of myself, there was a short composition about what happened to Ash. The handwriting seemed so young, big boxy letters, curls everywhere, circled dots.

The story had gotten a ‘B+’ and a comment ‘Demonstrates a talent with words. Keep it up!’ I sat back, watched the last of the streets go by, then the industrial estates, with huge yards and rows of trucks, then houses, big gardens lit up, then small windows of cottages, a yellow

beam across a hay shed, a tractor beside a turf stack. The last of the town glow faded into the country dark. I clicked on the overhead light and turned over the page.





## Bibliography

- Aristotle. (Trans. Ross, W.D.) *Nicomachean Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954 (2<sup>nd</sup>. Edition 1974). Print.
- Ackrill, J.L. *Aristotle The Philosopher*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981. Print.
- Bannon, Sarah. *Weightless*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. Print
- ‘Bat’. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Web. 2 Nov. 2017.
- Book of Ezekiel. ‘The Old Testament’. *The Bible*. Authorized King James Version. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. Print.
- Book of Luke. ‘The New Testament’. *The Bible*. Authorized King James Version. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. Print.
- Booth, Wayne C. (Eds. Phelan, James & Rabinowitz, Peter J.). ‘Resurrection of the Implied Author: Why Bother?’. *A Companion to Narrative Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005 (Paperback 2008): 75-88. Print.
- Brown, Terence. *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-2002*. London: Harper Perennial, 2010. Print.
- Burgess, Anthony. *A Clockwork Orange*. London: Heinemann, 1962. Print.
- Cahalan, James M. ‘Female and Male Perspectives on Growing Up Irish in Edna O’Brien, John McGahern and Brian Moore’. *Colby Quarterly*. 31.1 (March 1995): 55-73. *Jstor*. Web. 1 kSeptember 2017.
- Castle, Gregory. *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006. Print.
- Cleary, Joe. *Outrageous Fortune*. Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2007. Print.
- Coste, Didier. *Narrative as Communication*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989. Print.
- Cronin, John. “‘The Dark’ Is Not Light Enough: The Fiction of John McGahern”. *An Irish Quarterly Review*. 58. 232 (Winter, 1969): 427-432. *Jstor*. Web.20 Apr. 2015.
- Crotty, Patrick. “‘All Toppers’: Children in the Fiction of John McGahern”. *Irish University Review*. 35.1 (Spring-Summer, 2005): 42-57. *Jstor*. Web. 24 Apr. 2015.
- Devine, Paul ‘Style and Structure in John McGahern’s *The Dark*’. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. 29.1 (1979): 49-48. *Proquest*. Web. 1 Sep 2017.
- Dockery, Peter. ‘Writing Out of Love: McGahern and the Influence of the Mother’. *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*. 99.394 (Summer, 2010): 205-218. *Jstor*. Web. 16 Sep. 2015.
- Doljanin, Zeljka & Doyle, Maire (Eds.). *John McGahern: Authority and Vision*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017. Print.

Donne, John (Ed. Booth, Roy). 'The Flea'. *The Collected Poems of John Donne*. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994. 26-27. Print.

Donne, John (Ed. Booth, Roy). 'The Good Morrow'. *The Collected Poems of John Donne*. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994.1. Print.

Freud, Sigmund. (Trans. Strachey, James). 'On Narcissism: An Introduction'. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol 14*. London: The Hogarth Press, 1957. Print.

'Gay'. [www.oxforddictionaries.com](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com). Web. 1 Nov. 2017.

Gilligan, Vince et al. *Breaking Bad: The Complete First Season*. Culver City: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2009. Video.

Grennan, Eamon. "'Only What Happens": Mulling over McGahern'. *Irish University Review*. 35.1 (Spring-Summer 2005): 13-27. *Jstor*. Web. 2 Nov. 2015.

Hanna, Adam. 'The Photographic Eye of John McGahern.' *LISA E-journal*. 12.2 (2014). Web. 3 March 2016.

Holland, Siobhan. 'Marvellous Fathers in the Fiction of John McGahern'. *The Yearbook of English Studies*. 35 (2005): 186-198. *Jstor*. Web. 24 Apr. 2015.

Hughes, Thomas (Ed. Sanders, Andrew). *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989 (reissued 1999, 2008). Print.

*John McGahern – A Private World*. Dir. Pat Collins. Harvest Films, 2005. Video.

'John McGahern with Hermione Lee'. Interview by Hermione Lee. [www.lannan.org](http://www.lannan.org). 7 Apr. 2004. Web. 1 Sep. 2016.

Joyce, James. *A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1992 (re-issued 2001). Print.

Kafalenos, Emma (Eds. Phelan, James & Rabinowitz, Peter J.). 'Effects of sequencing, Embedding, and Ekphrasis in Poe's "The Oval Portrait"'. *A Companion to Narrative Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005 (Paperback 2008). 253-268. Print

Kavanagh, Patrick. 'The Great Hunger'. *Collected Poems by Patrick Kavanagh*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1964. I, 1.57-59, p.35. Print.

Kenny, John. Meeting with Martin Keaveney. NUIG, 9 October 2015.

Kiberd, Declan. *After Ireland: Writing the Nation from Beckett to the Present* Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2017. Print.

Kinealy, Christine. 'Beyond Revisionism: Reassessing the Great Irish Famine'. *History Ireland*. 3.4 (Winter, 1995): 28-34. *Jstor*. Web. 3 May 2017.

Kinealy Christine 'Food Exports from Ireland 1846-47'. *History Ireland*. 5.1 (Spring, 1997):32-36. *Jstor*. Web. 10 May 2017.

King, Stephen. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. New York: Scribner, 2001. Print.

- Kulick Don. 'Gay and Lesbian Language'. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 29 (2000): 243-285. *Jstor*. Web. 29 Nov. 2017.
- Langley, Liz. 'Bats and Sloths Don't Get Dizzy Hanging Upside Down—Here's Why'. *National Geographic*. Web. 1 Nov. 2017.
- Lanser, Susan. (Eds. Phelan, James & Rabinowitz, Peter J.). 'The "I" of the Beholder: Equivocal Attachments and the Limits of Structuralist Narratology'. *A Companion to Narrative Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005 (Paperback 2008). 206-219. Print.
- Lanters, Jose. "'It Fills Many a Vacuum": Food and Hunger in the Early Novels of John McGahern'. *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*. 20.1 (Jul. 1994): 30-40. *Jstor*. Web. 24 Apr. 2015.
- Liddy, Brian. 'State and Church: Darkness in the Fiction of John McGahern.' *New Hibernia Review/Iris Eireannach Nua*. 3.2 (Summer, 1999): 106-121. *Jstor*. Web. 19 Nov. 2015.
- Lynch, Gerald. 'A "Fragile Interdependence": John McGahern's "That They May Face the Rising Sun"'. *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*. 36.2 (Fall/Autumn 2010): 160-175. *Jstor*. Web. 23 Nov. 2015.
- Maher, Eamon. *John McGahern: From the Local to The Universal*. Dublin: Liffey, 2003. Print.
- Maher, Eamon. *The Church and Its Spire: John McGahern and the Catholic question*. Blackrock: Columba, 2011. Print.
- Malcolm, David. *Understanding John McGahern*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2007. Print.
- McBride, Eimear. *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*. Norwich: Galley Beggar Press, 2013. Print.
- McCabe, Pat. *The Butcher Boy*. London: Picador, 1992. Print.
- McCarthy, Dermot. *John McGahern and the Art of Memory*. Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2010. Print.
- McCormack, Mike. Meeting with Martin Keaveney. NUIG, 8 September 2017.
- McGahern, John. (Ed. van der Ziel, Stanley). 'The Bird Swift'. *Love of the World*. London: Faber & Faber, 2009. 65-74. Print.
- McGahern, John. (Ed. van der Ziel, Stanley). 'What is My Language?'. *Love of the World*. London: Faber & Faber, 2009. 260-274. Print.
- McGahern, John. (Ed. van der Ziel, Stanley). 'From a Glorious Dream to Wink and Nod'. *Love of the World*. London: Faber & Faber, 2009. 125-127. Print.
- McGahern, John. (Ed. van der Ziel, Stanley). 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing'. *Love of the World*. London: Faber & Faber, 2009. 128-132. Print.
- McGahern, John. (Ed. van der Ziel, Stanley). 'Ni bheidh sibh ar ais: St Patrick's College Drumcondra'. *Love of the World*. London: Faber & Faber, 2009. 115-116. Print.
- McGahern, John. (Ed. van der Ziel, Stanley). 'The Solitary Reader'. *Love of the World*. London: Faber & Faber, 2009. 87-95. Print.

- McGahern, John. (Ed. van der Ziel, Stanley). 'A Poet Who Worked in Prose: Memories of Michael McLaverty'. *Love of the World*. London: Faber & Faber, 2009. 75-78. Print.
- McGahern, John. *Memoir*. London: Faber and Faber, 2005. Print.
- McGahern, John. N.d. *The John McGahern Papers*. NUIG. Print & Handwritten.
- McGahern, John. *Creatures of The Earth*. London: Faber and Faber, 1992 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2006). Print.
- McGahern, John. *The Dark*. London: Faber and Faber, 1965. Print.
- McGahern, John. *The Leavetaking*. London: Faber and Faber, 1974. Print.
- McGahern, John. *The Leavetaking*. Rev. ed. London: Faber and Faber, 1984. Print.
- McGahern, John. *The Pornographer*. London: Harper & Row, 1979. Print.
- McKeon, Belinda. 'Beyond Chronicle: The Deceptive Realism of John McGahern's Fiction'. *American Journal of Irish Studies*. 8 (2011): 77-92. *Jstor*. Web. 16 Sep. 2015.
- Maher, Eamon. 'Catholicism and National Identity in the works of John McGahern'. *An Irish Quarterly Review*. 90.357 (2005): 279-290. *Jstor*. Web. 18 Sep. 2015.
- Maher, Eamon. 'John McGahern and the Commemoration of Traditional Rural Ireland'. *An Irish Quarterly Review*. 95.379 (Autumn 2006): 125-136. *Jstor*. Web. 18 Sep. 2015.
- Maher, Eamon. 'John McGahern and the Imagination of Tradition by Stanley van der Ziel'. Rev. *The Irish Times*. Wednesday, 30 Mar. 2016. Print.
- Maher, Eamon. 'John McGahern explored in erudite yet accessible study.' Rev. of *Touchstones: John McGahern's Classical Style* by Frank Shovlin. *The Irish Times*, 30 March, 2017. Web. 4 Nov. 2017.
- Maher, Eamon. *John McGahern: From the Local to The Universal*. Dublin: Liffey, 2003. Print.
- Maher, Eamon. *The Church and Its Spire: John McGahern and the Catholic question*. Blackrock: Columba, 2011. Print.
- Malcolm, David. *Understanding John McGahern*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2007. Print.
- Meade, Declan. Fiction Workshop. *Cuirt International Festival of Literature*. Galway, 21-27 April, 2015.
- Melfi, Mary Ann. 'The "Fascination of the Abomination": The Always Futile Search for God in The Dark'. *South Atlantic Review*. 74.1 (Winter, 2009): 110-123. *Jstor*. Web. 24 Apr. 2015.
- Mills Harper, Margaret. "'How Else Could the God Have Come to Us?": Yeatsian Masks, Modernity, and the Sacred'. *Nordic Irish Studies*. 6 (2007): 57-72. *Jstor*. Web. 29 Nov. 2017.
- Mokyr, Joel & O'Grada, Cormac. 'What do people die of during famines: The Great Irish Famine in comparative perspective'. *European Review of Economic History*. 6.3 (December, 2002): 339-363. *Jstor*. Web. 11 May 2017.

- Molloy, F.C. 'The Novels of John McGahern'. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. 19.1 (1977). 6-25. *Jstor*. Web. 1 Aug. 2017.
- Mullen, Raymond; Bargroff, Adam & Mullen, Jennifer (Eds). *John McGahern – Critical Essays*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2014. Print.
- Murphy, Mike (Ed. Clíodhna Ní Anluain). 'John McGahern'. *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy*. Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2000. Print.
- 'Narcissus'. *Britannica.com*. Web. 4 Dec. 2017.
- Nolan, Val. "'If it was just th'oul book ...': a history of the McGahern banning controversy". *Irish Studies Review*. 19:3 (2011): 261-279. *Jstor*. Web 5 May 2017.
- O'Hagan, Sean. 'A family touched with madness'. *The Guardian*. [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com). Web. 4 Jul. 2016.
- Owens, Timothy J. 'Two Dimensions of Self-Esteem: Reciprocal Effects of Positive Self-Worth and Self-Deprecation on Adolescent Problems'. *American Sociological Review*. 59.3 (June,1994): 391-407. *Jstor*. Web. 30 Jun. 2017.
- Pickles, Matt. 'Can fiction and academic writing help each other?'. Interview with Elleke Boehmer. *Oxford Arts Blog*. *Ox.ac.uk*. Web. 5 Aug 2015.
- Puzo, Mario & Coppola, Francis Ford. *The Godfather*. Los Angeles: Paramount Home Video, 2001. DVD.
- Puzo, Mario. *The Godfather*. New York: J.P. Putnam's Sons, 1969. Print.
- Robinson, Richard. *John McGahern and Modernism*. London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2017. Print.
- Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone*. London: Bloomsbury, 1997. Print.
- Salinger, J.D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. London: Penguin Books, 1958. Print.
- Sampson, Denis. *Young John McGahern – Becoming a Novelist*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Print.
- Sampson, Denis. *Outstaring Nature's Eye – The Fiction of John McGahern*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1993. Print.
- Sampson, Denis. 'The Lost Image: Some Notes on McGahern and Proust'. *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*. 17.1 (July, 1991): 57-68. *Jstor*. Web 2 Nov. 2016.
- Sampson, Denis. "'Open to the World": A Reading of John McGahern's "That They May Face the Rising Sun"'. *Irish University Review*. 35.1 (Spring-Summer, 2005): 136-146. *Jstor*. Web. 3 Nov. 2015.
- Scaggs, John. 'Who Is Francie Pig? Self-Identity and Narrative Reliability in "The Butcher Boy"'. *Irish University Review*. 30.1 (Spring-Summer, 2000): 51-58. *Jstor*. Web. 4 Nov 2017.
- Schudel, Matt. 'Celebrated Irish Novelist John McGahern, 71'. [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com). 1 Apr. 2006. Web. 10 Oct. 2015.

Shakespeare, William (Ed. Murray, Patrick). *Macbeth*. Dublin: The Educational Company of Ireland, 2001. Print.

Shen, Dan (Eds. Phelan, James & Rabinowitz, Peter J.) 'What Narratology and Stylistics Can Do For Each Other'. *A Companion to Narrative Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005 (Paperback 2008). 136-149. Print.

Shovlin, Frank. *Touchstones: John McGahern's Classical Style*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016. Print.

Smith, Adam. 'From The Archive: The Making of Superman'. *Empireonline*. Web. 3 Dec. 2017.

Stanley, Julia P. 'Homosexual Slang'. *American Speech*. 45.1/2 (Spring - Summer, 1970): 45-59. *Jstor*. Web. 29 Nov. 2017.

Stevenson, Robert Louis (Ed. Luckhurst, Roger). *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.

Todorov, Tzvetan (Trans. Godzich, Wlad). *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984. Print.

Todorov, Tzvetan (Trans. Howard, Richard). *The Poetics of Prose*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977. Print.

Toolan, Michael. 'John McGahern: The Historian and the Pornographer'. *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*. 7.2 (Dec. 1981): 39-55. *Jstor*. Web. 22 Sep. 2015.

'The Dark'. [www.faber.co.uk](http://www.faber.co.uk). Web. 1 Feb. 2015.

'The Real Story Behind The Making Of The Godfather Mafia Epic Masterpiece'. *Youtube*. Web. 2 Dec. 2017.

Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. New York: Bantam Classics, 1981 (reissue 2003). Print.

Whyte, James. *History, Myth and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern: Strategies of Transcendence*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2002. Print.

Wills, Clair. *The Best Are Leaving: Emigration and Post-War Irish Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Print.

Wright, David. *An Anthology from X*. Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1988. Print.

Yeats, W.B. 'The Choice'. *W.B. Yeats: The Major Works*. (Ed. Larrissy, Edward). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2001, reissued 2008). 130. Print.

van der Ziel, Stanley. "'All This Talk and Struggle": John McGahern's "The Dark"'. *Irish University Review*. 35.1 (Spring-Summer 2005):104-120. *Jstor*. Web. 12 May 2015.

van der Ziel, Stanley. *John McGahern and the Imagination of Tradition*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2015. Print.





