

*THE GIRL MISSING
FROM THE WINDOW*

Paul O'Reilly



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*But more than anything else, I wished she could hear again
the sound of a piano and tenor voice. Away in the distance at first,
then through the middle of the endless black terror,
the voice might come to soothe her. For it seemed
at this moment that the song was meant for her alone.*

— Mogue Doyle, from *Down a Road All Rebels Run*
(Bantam Press, 2005)

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*For Shelly,
the rock that saved me.*

WHAT ROSE DID

The day before Rose Carney died was a Friday. But I didn't know of her then as I tidied our house, disinfected our toilets, scrubbed our sinks. I hoovered downstairs, the stairs, the landing, the twins' room, our room and, though our Leanne didn't like anyone in hers, I gave her floor a once-over too 'cos she was at school. There was nothing under her bed bar some dust, new cobwebs. Posters of pop stars on her wall were level-straight, her clothes folded away or hung, her desk neatly laid out. There was a chart above it with dates of upcoming exams and deadlines clearly marked in red Xs, the morning and evening study times scheduled for each subject in green, a black strike through days already passed. Her book shelves ordered like a library, her medals and trophies lined up, it occurred to me then that our Leanne is a girl with a time and a place for everything.

After hoovering I dusted. In the twins' room I found two soft chocolate digestives hidden between *Spongebob* and *The Adventures of Spiderman*. I guessed Robbie had put them there, Gary more into Jammie Dodgers at the time, but Robbie had always been more

private, more like me I think, still is today. In Leanne's room I found nothing I didn't expect to. It seemed that girls already stored their thoughts more on computers and smartphones by then, not like when I was growing up. I used to hide my diaries underneath a wardrobe with just enough space to get a small hand in, and, though Leanne had left her laptop on the desk that day, I didn't have the password.

I tried again. Birthdays, her initials, her middle name. The boys' names. Our names. I looked around, typed in the names of pop stars, film stars. I tried all these with CAPS ON, CAPS OFF, a mix of letters, numbers, the first letter of each significant word in uppercase, the rest in lower.

That Friday I didn't pay much heed to the framed photos she kept on her desk and shelves, but I had on other days. One of my favourites used to be the one where they were on the river, kayaking. By their two pale faces I could tell that Leanne and her best friend Emily had felt sick under the yellow helmets, the blue life jackets. Leanne had even said after how shaky it all was. Still, I used to love that picture of the two of them together. But, as it turned out, the girl in the boat behind had been Rose Carney, and, thinking back on it, Rose looked real happy in that photograph, like she hadn't a care in the world. Maybe it was because she was a champion swimmer with the club in town. It was said after that she might've gone further.

Downstairs I prepared dinner. After picking up the twins from school, we stopped off at the shop for bread and milk. At home the boys threw their bags in their room, kicked off their shoes to plonk down in front of the TV 'cos they'd got no homework for the weekend. Gary booted up the Xbox, but after the game started I had to ask them twice to turn it down. After the second time I made a coffee, went out back for a smoke.

Since the turn of February, I was enjoying the stretch in the evenings. I could stare right into the white sun still in the sky on that particular day, it was as if it had been gently sponged into the clouds, like in one of Robbie's paintings. I thought I'd soon get back out to

the garden. The daffodils and primroses were starting to bloom, but leaves hadn't been cleared since November and pots in the glasshouse needed sorting. With each sip of coffee and drag of the cigarette, my mind drifted to the garden centre, to buying fresh compost, tomato plants. I'd ask the man there for advice before buying new herbs, sweetcorn and runner beans again. And it was these thoughts of working outside on bright evenings that eventually took my mind off the kids.

Saturday morning the boys were back playing the game Santa had brought them. I was kneeling in the utility room, sorting clothes by the washing machine. I could hear them arguing and, when it turned nasty, I found them rolling about on the floor, boxing, grabbing at hair, the game over.

Stop, I shouted. Gary, Robbie, back off!

I pulled them apart, pushed them away. Like their father, both of them scrunch up their noses when they're mad, it's one of the few things they all have in common.

He won't leave my buttons alone, shouted Robbie. He keeps pushing 'em.

Gary said nothing.

You can play, I said, as long as there's no fighting. Isn't that what I said? Isn't it?

They didn't say anything but the heads had dropped. I told them to put on their headphones and play like that. They argued it wasn't the same 'cos they couldn't hear what the other was saying.

Either use the headphones or go outside, I said. It's giving me a headache.

They didn't go outside, but when I got back to the clothes, I stepped over them and carried on outside myself to light up. Jay was loading boxes for the shop into the van. In the field next to us sheep and lambs were baaing, though I couldn't see them.

The Girl Missing from the Window

I wonder if there were any foxes last night, I said.

I heard nothing anyway, Jay said.

They gave rain, I told him, looking at the sky, checking the panes of the glasshouse.

Yeah, he said.

I looked down on my pink dressing gown and slippers, thinking they could do with a wash too. Will you be home for lunch?

Yeah, he said on his way over to the shed.

Will you not be busy today then?

He disappeared into the shed, came out carrying a box of bleach. Ah, it's slow enough, he said. Though people seem to be cleaning a lot.

Time of year for it, I suppose.

After he drove off, I stayed outside trying to figure if it was going to rain or not. They gave high winds for the afternoon too, I could've said to Jay. Inside I put the kettle on, bread in the toaster. The boys were quiet bar the odd shout of Kill it, Over there, Stop, Kill it now. First out of bed they'd gotten their own cereal, spilling milk and sugar on the worktop with a trail of Cheerios over to the table, but I said I'd have a bite to eat myself before any more cleaning or sorting. I remember I was standing, looking at the heap of clothes still to be washed, listening to the kettle boil, when the phone rang.

On the way to the hall I thought it was most likely someone looking for the ESB. There was only one digit of a difference between their number and ours. Or maybe it was someone looking for a lift for their kid later on.

Hello, I said.

Tracy.

Oh hi Caroline.

Did you hear about Rose Carney?

Who? I said.

Rose Carney. She was in the year behind Emily and Leanne.

I don't think I know her.

She's one of the Carneys out past The Hill.

I don't know any of them. Why? Something wrong?

She's dead, Tracy.

What?

She's dead.

Jesus. How?

She killed herself. I don't know how. Her mother found her. Imagine that, Tracy. Imagine finding your child like that. Emily's in shock. I can't even get her to talk to me.

Did she know her well?

Seems so. She was never here though I think. And you don't know her either?

No.

Does Leanne know? I can't even get Emily to tell me if she called her or not.

I looked upstairs, said, I don't know. I'll call you back.

I climbed the stairs, stood at her door. Leanne, I said. I waited for her to beckon me in. Leanne. I pushed the handle. Leanne.

She was on the bed, the phone in her hand, her hand resting beside her head on the pillow. In the way she was lying she could've been dead too, God forgive me, but then she blinked. When I saw her stomach move, I looked around her room. I looked at the photos, the posters, the tidy desk, the study chart, her tracksuit from the night before folded neatly on the chair. I took a step, and it only occurred to me after that she was probably staring at the photo of the day on the river.

Leanne, I said, Caroline rang to tell me about Rose Carney. Did Emily call you? There was no reaction. Did you know her? I said.

Sitting on the side of her bed, it brought me back to when I was fifteen or sixteen, when a boy from our street went for a walk down by the tracks and stepped in front of a train. He was my age when he did it, but he was tall and broad, he could fight if he needed to. I'd asked my brother why he'd done it but he couldn't tell. And then I understood, he didn't even want to think about it. Some girls in school

made fun of it. Said he must've thought he was Superman trying to stop the train. They'd stand with one hand on their hip, the other up and out flat like a policeman stopping traffic, shouting, Halt.

I told Leanne the first part of this story, trying to get her to see that this was not the first time it's happened. We all went to his funeral, I told her, and your uncle was in the guard of honour. It was one of the saddest funerals I've ever seen. On the way home he was still crying. It just doesn't make any sense, your grandda said. That kid had it all. And I don't know if Rose had it all or not, Leanne, but sometimes it doesn't matter what people around you think. It's what you think. Inside. It's what you think that can either get you to where you want to be, or it can eat you up.

Outside the wind was gathering speed, the branches of the sycamores down by the road starting to move. Would you like to talk about it? I said.

She barely shook her head before looking over at her phone, like it had all the answers. She looked rested in the face, I thought, like she'd slept well enough, but there was a sadness I'd never seen in her before, though I had probably seen it in my brother. You sure you don't want to talk about it? I said.

She barely shook her head again, and we just stayed like that for a while, me sitting, she lying with her phone, both of us listening to the rising wind, the boys shouting downstairs.

In our room I dressed in jeans, a grey sweatshirt and run-around shoes. Sitting on our bed, feeling the covers, I wondered if Rose Carney had done it early that morning or late the previous night? Had she hung herself or taken pills or slit her wrists? I even thought, had she gone into the river 'cos I didn't know she was a champion swimmer at that point. But, however it was, had she done it the same time me and Jay were making love? I can't be sure what time it was when we did it, as Jay woke me early, but who's to say that when we were quietly doing it

that Rose hadn't been quietly dying at that exact same time.

I heard Leanne lock herself in the bathroom. I snook up to the door, leaned in to listen, hoping they hadn't made some kind of ridiculous pact or something. Only a few weeks previous myself and Jay had watched a documentary about the Heaven's Gate crew, and it was these kinds of weird thoughts that were playing on my mind ever since I'd called Caroline back. She and Dave were all worked up by then 'cos Emily still wasn't talking, and when Caroline started going on about counselling I told her to calm down, that it would all blow over, that I had seen this before with my brother.

Leanne started talking in the bathroom. I thought it was to herself, but it was short. We found out after she left a voicemail for Emily around this time.

Leanne. You okay? Leanne.

I'm on the toilet, she said.

You can leave hockey today if you want, love. It's to rain soon. You can come shopping with me if you want.

Can I stay home? she said before flushing.

I waited before saying, I'd rather you didn't, love. Just in case.

In case what? she said.

I had no answer for her.

She opened the door. In case what?

Nothing, I said.

I'm alright Ma, she said, moving by me in a huff.

Downstairs I got the boys ready for rugby while Leanne sat waiting in the car. Her phone between her legs, as far as I saw or heard she never typed or got one message that whole journey. Since she even slept with her phone under her pillow, I had got used to her typing in mass, during meal times, while I was driving, in the dressing rooms of clothes shops. Before the ban, I wasn't surprised to hear she did it during class.

How well did you know Rose? I said. You never mentioned her before.

The Girl Missing from the Window

Leanne stared ahead.

Did you know her as well as Emily?

Leanne leaned forward to look out at the sky.

She was never in our house was she?

Leanne sat back, checked her phone.

I'll pick up the boys at twelve and then I'll be over for you, okay?
I said. I've to do the shopping. Your father wants a bunch of letters posted and we've no stamps. Are you doing anything this afternoon? We could bring the boys somewhere. What do you think? Maybe to granny's? Though they gave it bad for the afternoon. And you probably have some study you want to do.

And so I talked like this for the rest of the journey, jabbering on until I dropped the boys off at the pitch, Leanne at the sports ground. I talked about normal things, things we did every Saturday, things we didn't have to think about, did on automatic pilot, and I guess I was just trying to put what Rose did out of my mind for a while, out of both our minds.

At the checkout in the supermarket an old woman in a flowery headscarf was giving out to another woman half her age about mass, saying she's not even sure anymore why she bothers going everyday like a nun. She said the priest had preached a sermon about suicide, not mentioning any names from the altar. But after mass he told them outside in the yard that he'd been called to the house early that morning, had given Rose her last rites.

And despite the torment the poor girl must have felt at the time he said, despite the state her poor little mind must have been in he said, she looked so peaceful in the end. At least her parents will have that he said. Like what she looks like will make them feel any better. Easy know he's no children.

Six ninety please, the Polish woman behind the till said.

What?

Six ninety please, she said, a little louder.

As she rooted in her purse I asked the old woman, Did you know her?

What?

Rose Carney, did you know her? I said, louder.

No. Knew her grandfather alright. Used to deliver blocks and coal out our way one time. Here you go.

Thank you, the Polish woman said.

After the old woman stuffed her pockets with the sweets and chocolate bars she'd bought, she made her way to the door, tucking in her headscarf and pushing up her umbrella before stepping outside.

At the dry cleaners I collected Jay's suit. In the queue at the post office they were talking about Rose, about how good a swimmer she'd been. Then one woman said she had heard that Rose had hung herself from the banister in the house. But another man came in, said with certainty that she'd hung herself from the first branch of a tree in their back garden, using rope her father had bought the previous summer to make a tyre swing for the youngest of them.

Rope, I said.

He looked at me, like he was thinking, sure how else would it swing? I wondered if her father had bought the rope in our shop, had she killed herself with the same kind of rope Jay keeps in the shed at home?

Did you know her? I said.

Sort of, he said. A grand girl. A quiet girl. Like her mother.

And she was a champion swimmer then was she, like people say?

Oh she was. She was in training for some championship. She had to be up at all hours, six o'clock or something, and when there was no stir on her this morning, the mother went looking but sure she wasn't in bed. She thought then she must've snook out early and jogged to the pool. She did that too apparently. But then, about half-seven or so, the mother went out to the hens and found her. Hanging there.

Oh my God!

The Girl Missing from the Window

A friend of mine lives up the road. He said the screams of her woke him up. She was like the banshee. The mother, like. The banshee she was like.

I bought three books of stamps for Jay's invoices and on the way back to the car I smoked, thinking I knew of some Carneys growing up, from school maybe, but it wasn't clear. Perhaps if I saw some faces I'd remember. I thought I'd ring my brother later to ask him, in case I'd meet someone I should know at the funeral.

I stopped at the café for an Americano, to wait for noon. In there it was warm and steamy and the smell of ground coffee hit you like you'd already had some. The tiled floor was slippery where I took a stool by the window. I wiped the glass to watch the umbrellas pass, the cars splash by. Outside a boutique across the street was a skip, full with shattered timber, rubble and steel. On top were two bald mannequins, one of them looking at me, the other its face smashed in. The boutique had closed down the day before. I'd been in there during the week looking for the best I could find. I looked away from the dummies, wrapped my hands around the mug to think back again on what the man in the post office had said.

Rope her father had bought. Five of them in it. Rose was the eldest. How will the parents cope after that?

I took a big mouthful of coffee.

Terrible, he had said then, shaking his head. Just terrible.

The boys were mucked to the ears and Leanne was wet to the skin. We got stuck behind a tractor driving home, brown water flying off its tyres, the journey taking twice as long as it should but Leanne never once sighed or gave out.

How was training? I said to her.

She turned up the heating, sat back.

Leanne, I said.

Alright, she said.

Was Emily there?

No.

Robbie and Gary were arguing in the back about who'd scored the most tries.

Did anyone mention Rose? I said.

Leanne looked at me, said, Why? She didn't play hockey.

I just thought that maybe someone knew her. Maybe someone swam with her.

No, she said, looking at the phone in her hands.

At home she took a shower in our en-suite. I stripped the boys, washed them in the bath. Afterwards I packed away the shopping, made ham and cheese sandwiches. Waiting on tomato soup to boil, I emptied the washing machine, hung the clothes along radiators, on two clothes horses. The soup was ready by the time Jay got home but he called me into the sitting room and closed the door. He asked where Leanne was. I asked what was wrong. He said that Dave had come into the shop that morning.

Dave who? I said.

Emily's father Dave, Jay said, before glancing out the window. He said he had something to tell me and wanted to say it to my face in private.

To your face in private?

So I brought him into the office, thinking, Jesus, I hope Leanne's not after breaking Emily's leg now or something.

Emily wasn't at hockey today, I said.

I know, Jay said.

So what did he say then?

Jay sighed, scratched his head and made a face as he looked at the floor.

Jay? I said, taking a step closer.

Jay looked up. He said he thought Leanne and Emily had been ganging up on Rose Carney. You know about Rose Carney. He said Caroline rang to tell you.

She just said she was dead and something about counselling, that's all, I said. What do you mean ganging up on her?

They were sending her messages. Calling her in the middle of the night. Jay looked out the window again.

I followed his stare. What do you mean calling her? I said.

Calling her phone. In the middle of the night.

And you believe him? I said, thinking how Caroline tended to overreact sometimes.

Jay looked at me, sounded like he was convinced already when he said, Well, it's not the kind of thing you make up now and tell a child's father, is it? Jay walked to the picture of Leanne in her communion dress hanging on the wall. It was taken outside the church, the bishop in with us. Jay straightened it, stepped back.

Why does he think Leanne was involved? I said.

Jay was still looking at the picture when he said, He checked Emily's phone. Checked the logs and the messages. He showed them to me.

Showed them to you? I said. What did they say?

Jay faced me, his voice a little shakier as he said, Leanne texted Emily this morning, like at five o'clock or something, to say she'd just texted Rose and would Emily text her as well. She wanted Emily to call her a ...

A what?

To call her a slut.

I felt weak and had to step over to the couch.

Jay cleared his throat. And then there was stuff like, I've just called her a slut now, have you? And Leanne talked about Rose and some boy. About Rose giving him a blowjob. Or was Rose touching herself now thinking of him. I mean, Tracy, a blowjob? At fifteen years of age?

Leanne sent this? I said, and I'm not sure if Jay heard me or not as he picked up the controls for the Xbox from the floor. To Emily? I said. Jay flung the controls past me onto the couch.

But that... that could be just Leanne winding Emily up, I said.

Maybe daring her to do it or something, I said, my voice getting shaky then too.

It didn't read like that to me, Jay said, starting to pace.

It's not Leanne's fault if Emily went and sent the messages, I said.

Jay stopped, scratched his head again. Covering his face he talked through his hands. He showed me a website, Tracy. You can see comments Leanne made. Even this morning.

What sort of comments?

Jay dropped his hands, started pacing again. The same, he said, calling Rose a good thing and asking stuff like, how much was it for a ride? You can see where Emily called her an ugly bitch, and Leanne asking how she got to be such a fat cunt.

My knees went. I dropped to the couch. I watched Jay pace from left to right, right to left, and he seemed to be speeding up until he stopped again.

We need to see her phone, Tracy, he said. I didn't notice him moving close until he was standing right over me, so close I could smell the shop from him. Tracy? he said.

Yes, I said.

Leanne had just finished blowdrying her hair, and after I called her and the boys down to the kitchen, we all sat at the table at more-or-less the same time.

Busy this morning? I asked Jay, as casually as I could.

No, he said, not looking up from his bowl, his hands clenched on either side, a knife in one, a spoon the other.

Da, I scored twenty tries today, said Gary, taking a slice of bread. He did not. He's a liar, said Robbie.

I did. He's a liar.

No you're the liar.

No you are.

Stop, Jay shouted, dropping the knife and spoon, and they all

looked at him since he'd never acted like that before. Leave the table boys, he said.

Jay, I said, thinking this was not the way we agreed to approach it.

Leave the table now boys, Jay said.

But I'm hungry, said Gary, chewing on the dry bread.

You can have it after, Jay said.

The boys looked to me, but, feeling like I did about Leanne, I wanted to get it over with too.

Now, Jay shouted.

Robbie started to cry. They both stood and made for the door. I looked to Leanne who was looking directly at her father like she was trying to remember something important she should've done. She licked her lips, swallowed and went to stand.

Wait, Jay said. You stay.

After the boys left, Jay told Leanne everything he'd told me. I watched Leanne throughout. Watched her go pale. As Jay spoke, as calmly as he could I thought, I remembered a programme I had seen about kids blackmailing other kids in Philadelphia, taking their lunch money or, if they didn't hand it over, posting pictures of them — you wouldn't want posted — on the Internet. I tried to remember how the bullies had looked when they were interviewed, how they had looked when they said sorry to the camera.

Do you know anything about this? I said to Leanne.

She shook her head, her eyes focused on the bowl in front of her.

Give us your phone, Jay said.

Leanne looked up, said, I don't have it.

Where is it? You usually have it on you.

Leanne, I said, Just give us the phone and we'll take it from there. Alright?

It's upstairs, she said.

Are you sure? Jay said, unconvinced, and I was too.

Leanne nodded, but it occurred to me to search her there and then.

Bring it down now, Jay said.

Leanne stood, left the room. I told Jay he shouldn't have talked like that to the boys, that they had done nothing wrong, but Jay said nothing back and when Leanne hadn't come down after two minutes, we stood to follow. She'd locked her bedroom door, something I've never liked her doing.

Open the door, Jay shouted as he banged on it with a white fist, something else he'd never done before. Open the door, he shouted again.

Leanne, I said, just open the door. Please honey.

You know the Guards will have her phone by now, Jay shouted as he wiped his mouth. Leanne? Leanne? I won't have it that some fucker tells me my daughter might've bullied a girl to death. Now how could that happen? Well? How?

Dave didn't say that, did he? I said, feeling weak again, and when Jay looked at me I'm not sure how long we stood there before he said, Only someone who's done something wrong would lock themselves away like this.

We both called her name but there was no answer from the other side. After banging on the door for a minute, Jay grabbed his hair and pulled, the skin rising. Then he said, Fuck it, and kicked Leanne's door as hard as he could but it was solid. When Jay looked at me again, there were tears in his eyes. It seemed he wasn't quite sure anymore where he was. He checked his fist, then his watch, holding his hand like it was hurt.

Fuck, he said, before looking at me. There's a delivery at two.

I can handle her, Jay, I said.

Downstairs, he shooed the boys into the sitting room. I lay in against Leanne's door to listen, but all I heard was the back door slamming, the van starting, speeding off, its tyres skidding on the gravel.

Jay had bought the shop and renamed it *Toole's Hardware Store*, one year before we married and one year after Leanne was born. With Jay working round the clock, I minded Leanne almost 24/7. Changing her. Breastfeeding her. Winding her. Putting her down. Bringing her to mother-toddler groups, to the baby pool, for developmental checks, for her shots, bringing her in the buggy for walks. I say almost 24/7 'cos the odd time mum or Jay's sister had babysat. But I wouldn't be in a restaurant with Jay five minutes and I'd be talking about Leanne. About what she'd done that day, if she was cranky because of teething, what word she'd said for the first time. I'd check my phone, making sure there was coverage, that there were no new messages, and after finishing the starters, I would just have to call home.

At that time I wouldn't have said she was an easy child or that she was a quiet child, but when the twins came along eight years later, they made Leanne seem like the dream baby. She made her communion that same year. She's always liked her hair long, and on that day, with her blonde curls resting on the shoulders of a white satin dress, she'd almost looked like a bride. It was then I first thought my baby is gone.

Since the day she was born I've seen her change—one year looking like me, the next like Jay's sister, one month learning her letters, the next her times-tables, one day sad or embarrassed, the next the life and soul of the house—but in the months before Rose Carney died, I didn't see a change in Leanne like others have said. Of course there were days when she mightn't have even talked to you, times when you'd have to separate her from the boys, but mostly I thought she seemed happy with who she was, and me and Jay just saw her as normal. I'd explained to Jay what it was like for a teenage girl, what was happening to her on the inside, and while he listened, up to before Rose died, he'd been happy to leave it to me to deal with her, whenever anything needed dealing with. He said he couldn't handle babies or hormones, couldn't handle me when I got like that he said, only half-joking. And I understood what he meant. I knew Jay wasn't a good listener when I married him.

Sitting with my back against Leanne's bedroom door, holding my breath every-so-often to see if I could hear her inside, I thought about all this. Then I took a deep breath, wiped my face and swallowed as I pressed my head against the door.

Leanne, I said softly. Leanne. This is probably all just a big misunderstanding, but if you open the door we can talk about it. You know we can work anything through. I listened and thought I heard her shuffling about. I faced the door, kneeling up, but the keyhole was black. Leanne, I said a little louder. Would you like something to eat? We can talk about it then. You'll feel better after eating. You must be starving after hockey.

I stood, still, waiting surely five minutes on the landing. I heard nothing and whenever I felt like crying again I bit my lip. Downstairs the boys had hunted out the biscuit tin and were playing the Xbox in the sitting room with their headphones on. They were quiet as they ate, crumbs all over the mat. With the kettle boiling, a ham sandwich toasting under the grill, I looked out the window at the glasshouse and the garden. There was a smell of fresh clothes, warm bread. You could hear the wind blowing through the vent. I watched the rain hop off the panes of the glasshouse, streaming down its sides and, for some reason, I thought of Leanne playing in the garden on a fine, dry sunny day. The checkered blanket was laid on the grass. Her dollhouse set up. She was on the red swing we used to have until it rusted away and had to be cut down. Jay was pushing her, her legs kicking.

I heard her shift upstairs. She unlocked her door, went across the landing to the bathroom. I spread a touch of mustard on her sandwich, milked her tea, fetched a tray. At the foot of the stairs I heard her lock the bedroom door again. After a time she eventually began answering me, even agreed to open her door but whenever Daddy came home she would lock it again she said. And I agreed. In her room, I left the tray on her desk. The picture of the day on the river was lying on her bed.

Eat up now, I said. You'll feel better after.

I'm not hungry, she said, looking at the tray.

She sat on her bed, her runners off, one leg folded up under the other. Looking around for any sign of her phone, I thought back on how mum had handled my brother after his friend stepped in front of the train. And I'd often wondered about the train driver too, if he was still alive and had he ever gotten over it.

I said, I remember what it can be like in school. I know what girls can say to one another and some girls can find that difficult to deal with. Boys too. Especially boys. Was Emily picking on Rose Carney?

Leanne nodded, began to cry. I stepped over, sat and hugged her. After I did, I cried again too. I waited a while, hoping she'd say something, but when she didn't I whispered in her ear, Did you send those messages to Rose too? You can tell me now. It's okay. I won't tell anyone or get mad like Daddy.

Leanne seemed to go limp, her arms falling away. She stood, walked over to the window. When will Daddy be home? she said, wiping her face.

I don't know, I said, moving my hand up under her pillow. Dinner time I guess.

She brought her hands together and looked down. He won't hurt me, will he? she said.

Of course he won't, I said, feeling around for her phone. He was just upset after Dave. He'll have calmed down later. You'll see. He'll be after thinking it out, and he'll be on your side Leanne. I promise.

What do you mean on my side? she said, turning to face me.

Well, I mean not fighting with you, I said, but it was then I got the impression she hadn't really been crying at all.

You already think I've done something wrong, she said. You only want to take my phone and give it to him.

No, I lied, standing and moving to the desk. It's just your Dad seems so certain Leanne. And why did you lock your door? Maybe we can get this sorted before he comes back. If you want, you can get the phone now and we can look through it together. Just ourselves.

I scanned the desk, the rest of the room again. She seemed to think about what I'd said before asking, And if he's not on my side, then whose side will you be on?

I don't know what you mean, I said.

Whose side? she said, as if something was clicking in. Whose side will you be on then?

Leanne, please, honey, I'm just worried about you, I said, stepping towards her.

Leave me alone, she said, backing away.

Leanne.

Get out of my room, she said, like she was building up to a panic.

Leanne, honey, there's no point putting this off. Please just give me the phone.

I'll kill myself, she said.

Leanne, don't ever say that.

I will. I'll kill myself, like what Rose did.

Leanne made for the door but I lunged to catch her by the sleeve, slamming the door shut. I went to turn the key but it was gone.

Let me out, she shouted, trying to push me away, pulling at my hair, and, when I grabbed the handle to hold it tight, she leaned and bit into my hand.

I screamed. She opened the door, ran downstairs. She'd broken the skin but there was no blood. When I didn't find her phone under the other pillow, I followed, almost falling down the stairs. She'd opened the front door and run outside. I went after her but couldn't see her through the storm. Rain was bouncing off the tarmac. When I looked down along the side of the house, I saw her turning the corner. I hurried after her, calling her name. At the back of the house, the door was open. Wet footprints led me through the kitchen, the hall. I pushed the front door closed on my way upstairs to where her bedroom door was locked again.

Leanne. Let me in. Leanne.

The first thing I thought was, is there anything in there she

could harm herself with? I stepped into the bathroom, gathered all the razors, tablets and detergents I could find. I checked the twins' room, our room, and, along with anything else I thought could be used to hurt yourself with, moved them all to the shed where I saw three boxes of rope Jay kept in supply for the shop. I locked the shed, hiding the key under an empty gas cylinder at the back of the house. The branches of the big oak in the next field were swaying wildly back and forth as the wind and rain swirled down around me.

Inside I dried my hair in a towel, cross at myself, thinking about how much Leanne depended on her phone. Had I let her use it too much? Had I been too lax about where or when she used it? We'd been told by the teacher that new technology was the thing to be in tune with, but now something terrible had come from it all, and it seemed that people will always just find a way to exploit good things for the worst.

Robbie was eating bread at the table.

Will I heat up your soup? I said.

He didn't answer so I didn't ask again. When Gary came back from the toilet, they both went into the sitting room and closed the door. I got the landline to call the shop 'cos I knew Jay would answer that phone.

You need to come home now, I said.

All I could hear was background noise from the shop, people talking, the paint machine mixing.

I'm worried about her, Jay. I'm worried she might do something to herself.

Hold on, he said and I heard him walk to a quieter place. What do you mean?

I dunno, I said. It's just what she said there now.

There were a few seconds before Jay asked, What did she say?

I said the words over in my head, but each time they made no sense.

Tracy?

She said she'd kill herself.

Waiting for Jay, I sat at the top of the stairs. I was dying for a cigarette but couldn't bring myself to leave her door. I talked to Leanne, asked her to let me in again. I asked if she was hungry, if she needed a towel, if she was warm enough. When I heard my phone receive a message downstairs, I checked it. From Leanne it read, *Leave me alone*. The boys never stirred from the sitting room, Leanne never moved in hers. When Jay arrived home I met him in the kitchen, showed him my hand.

Is she still in her room? he said.

Yes.

So what do you want to do?

We need to get in there. We need to be able to see her, to know she's okay.

Jay went upstairs, was gone maybe a minute. I didn't hear him say anything while he was up there. When he came down, he went to the key rack under the stairs, then came in asking where the key to the shed had gone. I told him where it was. After he found it, he got a ring of two-lever door keys from the shed. I stopped him in the kitchen, asked what was he going to do. He said he was going upstairs to open her door, and then stood there, as if waiting for me to give the go-ahead or not.

Okay, I said.

After Jay pushed through Leanne's key, I heard her moving but Jay had the door opened by the time she reached it. Leanne was screaming as she grabbed her phone from the bed. Jay dropped the keys, catching her as she made to escape, throwing her back on the bed and climbing on her, trying to pin her down with his knees. As he prised the phone away, Leanne scratched with her free hand, drawing blood from his cheek with her black nails. Jay slapped Leanne then. Slapped her hard across the face.

In that moment the fight went out of Leanne and, after Jay got the phone, she slid to the floor, sobbing, as he left the room. I went to her but when I knelt down and put my arms around her, she just pushed me away, more violently each time. I begged her to look at me, to tell me she wasn't hurt, as after the door opened I was just so happy to see her. But then I wondered what damage we'd really done here, would she ever feel safe in her own home again?

I stood, picked up the picture with Rose in it, left it on a shelf. I picked up the keys, left them on the desk. The sandwich was gone from the plate, the mug empty. I was picking crumbs off the bed cover, because I didn't know what else to do, when Jay came in with the phone. Blood rolling down his cheek, he was pressing a key like he was scrolling.

I've seen her unlock this so many times, I could do it in the dark, he said.

I couldn't help but look in over his arm. Most folders he went into were empty. Nothing in the inbox, the gallery, and all that was in the log was the message to me.

She's after resetting it, Jay said. Why would you do that, Leanne? Have you something to hide?

Stop it, Jay, I said.

He stepped over to Leanne. Why did you do it, Leanne? he shouted. Why did you call her those things?

And he was still shouting when I started to hit him, crying Stop it, Leave her alone. His back, his shoulders, his head, and when he turned I slapped his face, his neck, his chest. I swung as hard as I could, his blood on my hands, and for a while it was like he just let me, but then he grabbed my wrists and pushed and I fell onto the bed.

Stop it, Tracy, he shouted. Stop it.

Why did you have to hit her? I cried. It's all my fault.

It's not your fault, Jay said. No one forced her to do it.

It's all my fault, I said again.

Leanne had stopped sobbing, you could barely hear her breathe.

Looking down on her, it was like she was frozen stiff, her knees up to her chest, her feet bare.

What are we going to do? I said to her.

There's a history, Jay said, of everything you do on a phone nowadays, and everywhere it's been. How long has she had this number? Three, four years? As Jay walked to the window, it was like we were all listening to the wind and rain going crazy outside. I called Kelly on the way home, Jay said then. He said he'll meet us in the morning, but we should probably bring her to the Guards after that. Dave said he was probably going to do that anyway with Emily. He just wanted to see what we were doing first.

Jay looked down on Leanne. He said if she shows remorse now and comes forward of her own free will, it will stand to her later. Jay took all the keys, left the room. Downstairs I heard him call Dave. Afterward he came up, a plaster on his cheek, to say they were meeting at the shop, that he'd be back in an hour. Before asking if I'd be okay on my own, he said he had to lock-up the shop and count the takings. I looked down on Leanne, only noticing then how dark the room had got.

Standing, my body shaking, I wiped Jay's blood in my clothes. After turning on the lights, I pulled the curtains and coaxed Leanne off the ground into bed. I wrapped her in her covers before checking to see if there was anything she could use to harm herself with. I picked up the tray, her wet socks, but when halfway down the stairs I had to sit on a step. I've read since about how people feel after a shock. They talk about sickness, disbelief, and I guess I probably felt all of those too but it was the sense of weightlessness I'll never forget. Like I was floating, not able to walk properly or hold myself up. I could've been half-dead with the worst flu you could ever get, and I wouldn't have felt so miserable. And the only thing I could hope for in that moment, with the boys standing at the end of the stairs, staring back at me, was that tomorrow it might not be as bad.

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It was like twilight in the sky. I was smoking at the back door, listening to the lambs. I'd cooked sausages for the boys, the smell in the house turning my stomach. Upstairs Leanne was in bed but I still couldn't get the image of Jay slapping her out of my head. I was rubbing the last of his blood from my hand, when he arrived home and parked by the shed. I met him in the yard.

You're never to hit any of my children again, I said, stamping on the butt.

They're my children too.

You're never to hit any of my children again, I said, slower. Understand?

Well, now she knows how it feels, Jay said, stepping past.

Inside I went back to sorting towels and sports gear. He opened the fridge, took out eggs, rashers, sausages. After putting on the pan, he came out to the utility room.

She was hysterical, he said. It calmed her down.

Calmed her down? I said, flapping out a jersey.

Look, Jay said, we're all to meet at Kelly's at nine in the morning. That's what we need to focus on now.

Well, I hope she's not bruised then, I said, firing the jersey into the drum.

She won't be brusied, my hand was open. And it wasn't even that hard.

And that's alright then, is it?

No. But it shut her up and we got the phone.

Jay went back to the cooker, cracked an egg into the pan. I started the wash and, when I went into the kitchen, Jay said there was a mug of coffee for me over by the kettle. I thought about leaving him, about going up to sit with Leanne. When Jay spotted two left over sausages by the toaster, he asked if he could have them.

Who's Dave's solicitor? I said, picking up the coffee.

He said he doesn't really have one.

Did you show him the phone?

Yeah, Jay said, biting into a cold sausage.

Where is it?

Jay tapped his trouser pocket.

I put out my hand. He passed it over and I said, We can't leave her on her own. Can you take time off?

Maybe, he said, turning the rashers and sausages.

You can keep an eye on the boys for the funeral.

You won't be going to the funeral, will you? he said. The Carneys'll string her up if they see her.

For fuck's sake stop it Jay, will you? She'll hear you, I said, looking to the ceiling.

She won't hear me. And even if she did she wouldn't give a shit.

I don't believe you said that, I said.

What?

That they'll string her up.

You need to be careful with them, Tracy, that's all I'm saying, he said, buttering a slice of bread, tearing it, the butter too hard. How would you feel if it was Leanne?

Not wanting to think about that anymore I sat at the table and sipped the coffee. He told me the password to the phone. I could've kicked myself when he said it was the year she was born backwards. When Jay sat down opposite with a plate full of food, dried blood showing through the plaster on his cheek, I threw down the phone, stood and said, Sorry but I can't look at that.

He ate his fry while I smoked another at the back door. The rain had stopped but I could still hear water flowing down a drain somewhere. I thought if I should phone my brother or not to ask him about the Carneys. I shouted back into Jay, Do you know the Carneys then?

What? Jay said, his mouth half-full.

Do you know the Carneys?

Yeah, some, Jay said, and there were a few seconds as he swallowed. I wouldn't know them that well, he said, but they've been in the shop.

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A man at the post office said the father bought the rope last year to make a swing. Did he buy it in our shop?

There was no answer. I looked into the sky and, with the clouds still hanging around, it seemed darker than it had been at this time on previous evenings. Any bit of heat that had been was gone. I closed the door, thinking the whole school will be at the funeral except for Leanne and Emily. Inside, Jay was at the sink.

We should stay up tonight, I said.

He looked at me. Okay, he said, biting into a digestive.

Jay, I said, and he looked at me again. Do you think she'd hurt herself?

He shrugged his shoulders and raised his eyebrows before saying, I didn't think she was that kind of girl but ... He stopped.

But what? I said.

After today, I guess, I dunno.

After washing up, he went into the boys to try and make it up with them. As he was leaving, I heard him make them a promise. In the kitchen I asked him what it was.

There's a circus in town next week, Jay said.

Oh. They were asking about that.

I said I'd bring them. That okay?

Yes.

Jay sat at the table, took up Leanne's phone. He was pressing buttons when he said, How is she now?

She's still in bed, I said. She's not saying anything and she hasn't touched her tea.

You want me to talk to her?

I didn't even answer him.

It was the right thing to do, Tracy.

What?

Going into the room. At least now you can keep an eye on her.

Later Jay read the boys their bedtime stories as I checked in on Leanne. I could hear Jay taking on the voices of the characters, the

boys laughing. Stop tickling they said every now and then.

Still not hungry? I said to Leanne, the fresh tea and toast almost cold on her locker. When I sat on her bed, she turned her back to me. If you want something else let me know, I said, reaching for her but then pulling back. But I know tea and toast is good if you've an upset stomach. Mum always made me tea and toast when I was sick. I remember your uncle took to the bed too after that boy died. But he got over it, Leanne. He did.

Downstairs I was finishing my coffee when a message came in on Leanne's phone. It was Vodafone offering free minutes and texts if she topped up before midnight. I don't know why, but I started to cry again, as if I'd just found out about Leanne for the first time. When Jay came down I showed it to him. He hugged me, said I must be tired and walked me back upstairs to our room where he put me to bed.

Don't worry about it, he said. I'll take the first shift. You get some sleep.

I can't sleep, I said.

Just try, he said, pulling the curtains and turning off the light, but when he went to close the door, I told him to leave it open. I saw him walk slowly across the landing, looking in on the boys and Leanne on the way. Then he descended the stairs, a slice of his body cut away with each step until he was gone.

I stopped breathing to see what I could hear. There was the wind in the trees, the boys' heavy breathing, the washing machine on a spin cycle, the rain on the skylight in the landing. And, when another message came in downstairs, I cried again, as if we had just lost forever the most precious thing in the world.

It was dark when I woke. The landing light was still on. The clock read 6:34 a.m. and Robbie was by the side of the bed asking where his Daddy was.

He must be downstairs, I said.

Can we go down?

Yes, I said.

We can go down, Robbie said as he left, and in that moment it was still like the day before hadn't happened. I don't know how long it lasted, but I appeared to have no recollection of Rose, or Leanne's phone. It was only as I brought my hand up to rub sleep from my eye that I felt a throb from Leanne's bite. I sat up, threw out my legs and rushed across the landing, but when I checked on her it was like she hadn't moved, like she was still frozen, and there was no mark on her face. Her food untouched, I took the tray on leaving the room. Downstairs, the boys were eating Cheerios with their Dad.

You should've woken me, I said.

I wasn't tired, Jay said, looking jaded, a fresh plaster on his cheek.

Did you check on Leanne much?

About every half-hour or so.

I made some tea and toast, was surprised at myself when I put on more toast. After the boys went into the sitting room to play with their Lego, Jay said he'd thought some more about the implications of it all.

Like what? I said.

Do you think it will affect the shop? Will people stop coming in? Yesterday I heard some people talking about Rose, they were saying they'd heard she was being bullied.

By Leanne?

No. But you'd wonder if they knew already.

You should get some sleep, I said.

He looked at his watch, said, It's hardly worth the bother.

It's an hour and a bit.

We both went upstairs. Leanne hadn't stirred. As Jay slipped under the covers, I stepped into the shower. There was a dark bruise on my hand in the shape of her mouth and I stood under scalding water for surely ten minutes. I spent sometime drying myself, moisturising, and, when I heard the boys starting a fight, I pulled on my robe and

ran downstairs.

Quiet, I said in a hushed voice. Daddy's trying to get some sleep.

He boxed me, Robbie said.

Garry said nothing.

Garry. Did you hit your brother?

No.

Liar, Robbie shouted.

Quiet, I said. Garry.

What?

Say sorry.

Sorry.

Right, I said. Now, no more fighting. And if you wake Daddy there'll be no circus.

In the kitchen I put on the kettle again. On the way outside, the red light on the washing machine was flashing, but I passed it by. I opened the back door and looked to the sky. It was almost like yesterday evening's, that kind of sky where you can't tell if it's almost night or almost morning. It wasn't going to be a day for drying towels, but that would be the least of our worries. As I lit up I felt a shiver. You shouldn't be out here, I told myself, with a wet head and nothing on only a robe.

I looked at the bruise on my hand, at the daffodils and primroses close by, some flattened by the storm. The lambs were baaing, I wondered if any were newly-born, hoped none had been taken by foxes. I looked into the field for them but couldn't make them out. Instead I saw something, something hanging from the first branch of the big oak. I rubbed my eyes, was it the smoke or twilight playing tricks on me? But when I looked again, the something was still there. Something red.

I dropped the cigarette, rushed into the yard. I felt winded, like all the air had been sucked right out of me. The closer I got the more like her it appeared. That weightless feeling came back over me but somehow I got over the fence, ran through the wet grass, the lambs

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running for their lives. Jay said after I was screaming so loudly I woke him from a deep sleep, but I don't remember any of that.

All I remember is the red coat. The blonde hair. When I reached the big oak, I fell to my knees looking up at the face, the plastic face. One of the eyes was a different colour to the other, its cheeks were scratched, its nose chipped, and it was like the dummy's lips had been filed away. Orange rope tied around the neck, no shoes on the pointy toeless feet, the wig was askew. The word *SLUT* was etched across the forehead in thick, black marker. I struggled to breathe, tried to look away, but could not.