

**E**bbtide.  
 Beneath the rhythmic slopping, ale-coloured waves lift lazy harbour detritus. Shrouds slap out-of-synch masts, a cantankerous tinkering. Above the car, gulls squabble psychotically.

A low hum has been diffracting all day through the slit to the top of the driver's window. A man who has not the air of paying the radio the slightest heed. A man who appears distracted, dishevelled, vaguely disreputable.

The ricochet steps of that woman with push-chair quickened just now as she pushed past, face forwards, eyes profiled. He hasn't seen her. Or if he has, her passage has made no more impression than the cavorting gulls.

His mind is elsewhere.

His mind is worn out.

Its cogitations whirr, gears gone in the teeth. He hasn't slept more than a catnap in days. Intractable, implacable insomnia has pushed a deep thumbprint beneath each eye. Fingers are nail-bitten and nicotine-stained. The jowl, coarse as sandpaper. Every so often the fingers flick open an empty cigarette box, shake it, toss it back onto the dashboard. It's hours since he smoked the last cigarette.

As far as the eye can see the sky is an estuary from which light is draining. He glances at the face of his wristwatch without reading it. All the while, like untutored metronomes, the masts beat irregular time.

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'What were you thinking? I mean, what the fuck were you thinking?' Creegan's eyes, so pale beneath his glasses as to be almost transparent, had fixed on him furiously. No, not furiously. Willy Creegan could be many things, but not furious. He'd looked straight back at the thinning red hair, the outrage, the bristling moustache. 'What the hell were you thinking, Tom?'

Creegan looked around the bar, appealing for help, ensuring they were alone. 'Is she even seventeen?' After he'd hissed this question,

this accusation, Will Creegan took a long draft from his pint that left a yellow tide-mark on the brush of his moustache. When no answer was forthcoming he'd sucked it clear. 'Seventeen.' His eyes widened, narrowed. 'Christ's sake!'

But Duffy had no answer. Not then, not now.

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He fingers the cigarette box, tips out its vacancy, drops it onto the dashboard. With a will of its own it bounces, teeters, disappears somewhere to the far side of the gear stick. Seventeen! Duffy shuts his eyes, shakes his head, and groans.

He'd been suspended of course. As a matter of course. It wasn't that there'd been, ah, any suspicion of, ah, sexual misconduct ...

He pummels his forehead several times with the balls of his wrists. Oh by God there'd been suspicion all right, one should try to be, ah, precise about these things. Of course there'd been suspicion, Christ's sake!

The heels of his palms press slow circles into his sockets. Duffy can vividly see Janet Burke's moral brown eyes fixed rivet-like on his, her bosom inflated, her head elated with indignation. And the fierce muttering that died the instant he'd walked into the staffroom. I heard it wasn't ... 'twas too! A sixth-former? Go on! No, definitely. Who? No! One of them Poles is what so-and-so told me. It wasn't you-know-who, because ... And drunk, they say. There was a pair of them in it, so ...

Will Creegan, horrified, vulnerable, staring at him from behind the industrial coffee tin, the mug cradled, empty and impotent. All Duffy could do was shake his head to him as, one by one, his colleagues remembered a pressing duty to hurry them from the staffroom.

And then the egg-shaped head of McGrath, the, ah, principal, once he'd been summoned to the office. Tilted forwards, hand visor-like to forehead. So their eyes wouldn't meet. Who could tell what thoughts were hatching in that celibate crown? 'But, ah, Tom, I don't see, ah ... what exactly was the girl doing in your car, and, and ... and at that time of the evening?' A hiatus. 'Tom?'

Evening! It had been past midnight. A gloved hand that somehow belonged to that night's nightmare-logic had rapped, ruptured, interrupted abruptly at the window. Instantly Duffy was aware of the fug of whiskey sweetening the cigarette smoke. Instantly, of the schoolgirl who was curled on the passenger seat beside him. Magda Prokiewz, her eyes feral with alcohol, with anticipation. And the black, tactless glove tapped out a second time its peremptory Nevermore!

Duffy shakes his head. He sucks the stale air through incisors, breathes out, and pats the steering-wheel. From what Costello, the family lawyer, said on the phone, it doesn't look like he'll necessarily lose the licence. An irony there.

Will Creegan had said, oh years ago, that time he'd picked up the points for speeding, 'Did you know they refer to it as "endorsing" your licence? You'd imagine that'd be a good thing, having your licence endorsed. And by the Garda, no less.' Always the English teacher. For nigh on twenty years it was a part he'd played to the hilt, even when inside the staffroom. But for whose benefit? His own? No doubt his own. Creegan had never married. But he hardly believed in the role any more than the schoolkids did. It was some relic of his own schooldays maybe, the tweeds and the colourless sarcasm and the inordinate interest in words.

On balance, then, Duffy's licence mightn't be endorsed. True, after he'd blown a guilty lungful into the bag, after he'd stepped out of the car please sir, the urine sample he'd copiously provided down at the station had confirmed he was three times the legal limit. That much wasn't disputed. But when, officer? And where, officer? Had he been driving at all? Had they not consumed the whole damned naggin as they sat there in the car, he and his ... underage companion? It was, at least, a possible scenario. And in the eyes of the law, in the eyes of the lawyer, possibility was what mattered.

Duffy shudders. Eight months ago (was it?), the time a tipsy Helen had skidded into the traffic lights, that was the very defence her paramour had had her mount. Was that the word? Doubtless Creegan would know! A man takes a mistress, but a woman? Whatever you'd call him, the very instant they'd punched into that

traffic light, Silvio had hastened her into a bar that serendipity had placed directly facing the junction, where you could hardly miss it. They'd drunk off any number of shots as they waited for the guards to arrive. Dealing with the shock. Oh he was a cute whore, and no mistake.

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'Why did you never get married, Will?'

To move the subject on, to get away from the indignity of revisiting his moment's madness. To break, at the least, the awful silence that had descended like a wall between the two teachers, he'd restrained his colleague's arm from lifting the pint a third time.

'Why do you ask that?'

'Come on, Creegan. Talk to me.'

The transparent eyes had lost none of their wounded indignation. But he was as reluctant as Duffy was to put twenty years' friendship through the trial of silence. He shrugged. 'Guess I never met the right gal.'

'Too easy.'

'What do you want me to say?' The tone had shifted. Already, Duffy sensed that Creegan was coming about, like a boat with its nose to the wind.

'You were going great guns with Dolores McIlroy for a while there.'

'Dolly!' Had he almost smiled? There was a faint twitch at the corners of the moustache, the tremble of a float that tells the lure is being tested. 'That's old history!' Was he punning, maybe? For seven years she'd taught history at their school.

'Before she moved on to Pres,' said Duffy, ostentatiously relaxing, 'most of the staffroom had the two of you hitched, I can tell you that. You heard of course she married their blond biology teacher up there, and he five years her junior? Rugby. D4, the whole package.' He chanced a wink. 'Someone even told me he's a Protestant.'

'I've always been of the opinion,' Creegan began to expostulate, donning his pedantry, he too relaxing, 'that's there's something inherently incestuous in the teaching profession. We never seem to marry outside the tribe.'

'Helen's no teacher.' The unexpected retort hung in the air. It

surprised Duffy even more than Creegan.

‘No, Tom, I’ll grant you that.’

‘No.’

‘She was far too cute for chalk and talk, says you.’ And suddenly, looking at the mild raillery in Will Creegan’s face, Duffy had been gripped by a compulsion to confide in him. Memories welled up in him unchecked, like water throbbing in a fountain. And, caught in this unlooked for surge, his throat opened and closed, opened and closed. But words would not come.

How could he tell it?

How could he translate into language the gradual change of light that their marriage had been? That he imagined, finally, all marriages must be? This smug bachelor sitting across the table from him, Willy Creegan, who’d even been his best man, could he comprehend the sense of erosion? That underneath the giddiness of love, from the first, a tiny subsidence that each of them felt but never articulated? Resentment, was that it? If it was, it was aimed at the self as much as at the other.

No, it was impossible. Disappointment is intimate. And what word could ever represent the monstrous apathies and evasions, the silences that, with the years, swelled into tumours?

Or the shock of the first casual infidelity.

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Helen would find out, of course. In due course. It was only a matter of time. For the present she doesn’t even know that he’s been suspended.

Duffy looks into the tentative dusk to where the sea beyond the harbour mouth is marbled like meat. The middle-aged men we used to laugh at, love, sitting in cars by the harbour, not getting out, not taking breeze or sun, covering their loneliness with newspaper, with radio, or staring vacant as mannequins at the moving water. Do you remember, love?

He tries out a laugh which transmutes into a cough.

What had he been thinking? Magda Prokiewz! A chance encounter, out by the park. Can I offer you a lift? Magda Magda

Prokiewz, high boots and cheekbones and oh so husky, seventeen going on twenty-seven. The guards hadn't even suspected till the duty sergeant asked her for her details. I'm sorry, you're how old?

Duffy gives a sour guffaw at the ignominy of it. Ignominy! There was a word that Creegan might use. Ignominious. Ignoble. Ignoramus.

The engine has thrummed into life. It seems his hand has turned the ignition.

All along the promenade street-lights are flickering on. From up on the Head they'll resemble a necklace. Far above the clamour, the seething tide, the jostle of masts. From where a car no bigger than a toy might be seen edging out onto the pier, how strange, what can it be doing? From where we watched the harbour lights come on, love. From where, the night of her nineteenth birthday, Duffy had proposed to her.