

Réaltín

THERE ARE FORTY-FOUR houses in this estate. I live in number twenty-three. There's an old lady living in number forty. There's no one living in any of the other houses, just the ghosts of people who never existed. I'm stranded, she's abandoned. She never has visitors. I should go down to her, really. When Daddy and me went in to the auctioneers to ask about these houses, they let on they were nearly all sold. I wanted a corner house with a bigger garden, but the guy started fake-laughing, as if I was after asking for a solid gold toilet or something. He had at least half a jar of gel in his hair. I'll see what I can do, he said to my chest, in a martyred voice. He shook his head and sighed and said we'd have to pay the deposit that day. He said he couldn't promise us any of the houses would still be available the next day. I believed him, even though I should have known better. Daddy got all worried and flustered then, and drove like a madman back to the Credit Union to get me the cash. I'd love to go in to that auctioneer now and kick him in the balls.

Poor Daddy. He comes up here nearly every day. He walks up and down the rutted avenues. River Walk. Arra View. Ashdown Mews. He tuts and shakes his head at the boy racers' tyre tracks. He tries to pick up every fag butt and beer bottle. He looks in the gaping, empty windows; he scowls at the houses' spooky stone faces. He hums and whistles, and curses now and again. He slashes at weeds with his feet. He kicks at the devouring jungle. He's like an old, grumpy, lovely Cúchulainn, trying to fight back the tide. The only men in my life are my father and Dylan. It's not fair on them or me.

It was a few months before we copped on to what was after happening. The builder was gone bust. My house and the old lady's were the only ones he could finish, because we were the only ones who'd paid. We heard he'd put all his money into some stupid thing to do with a fake island or something out in Dubai. Now he's made a run for it. He's lucky, Daddy says, because if I ever get my hands on him I'll kick the living shit out of him. Daddy never talks like that. He must be really, really mad. Imagine if anything happened to him; I'd never get over it. Gaga, Dylan calls him. He

stands at the sitting room window every morning, shouting Gaga, Gaga, Gaga. When he sees Daddy's car, he goes mad. He's a scream.

Daddy cuts the grass outside every house on this block. I watch him, sweating and steadfast, burning in the sun. He stops every now and again and stands behind his lawnmower with his head bowed. I wonder is he praying, or thinking about Mammy. Maybe he's crying. God, I hope he isn't. He says he does it to be doing something; he hates retirement. I know well he'd way prefer to be off playing golf. Or playing bridge with Bridget. He does it to make my life seem more normal, to see can he make the place look like a proper estate. He mows and strims and trims and puts all the cuttings into a trailer. Then he drives over to Cairnsfort Lodge, where the builder's parents live, and dumps the grass and stuff at the side of their garden. The builder's father says nothing. He wouldn't want to, Daddy says.

A camera crew came here a few weeks ago. They were making a documentary about ghost estates. They set up all their gear and knocked on my door and Daddy answered and he got really cross. There's no Dublin Four arsehole going using ye to make a name for himself, he said, when I went mad at him for not letting them interview me. I just wanted Dylan to be on telly, really, so everyone could see how gorgeous he is. Daddy wants us to go home and live with him and Bridget. I can't, though. Seanie would love that, for one thing; I can just imagine him in the pub with his stinky friends, saying she's gone back to her daddy, fwaah ha, with his big stupid donkey laugh. And I can't stand the way Bridget moves apologetically around the house, letting on she's not trying to replace Mammy. She's probably a nice person, but she can fuck off, to be perfectly honest. She wears that horrible, watery, flowery old-lady perfume. It smells like somebody took a bottle of okay perfume and poured out half the bottle and filled it up again with pee and then sprayed it all over her. She tries to talk to me about Daddy. I feel like screaming like a child at her to mind her own business, to leave me alone, to leave Daddy alone. When I don't engage she starts on about cards. Bridge. Forty-five. Whist. Jesus.

SEANIE CALLED UP last week. Hello Tom, he said to Daddy. Daddy only nodded at him, but he stopped mowing and followed him with his eyes up to the door. He came in with a bag of crappy plastic shit for Dylan. I let him stay for five minutes. Dylan smiled at him, the little turncoat. Daddy thinks Seanie is great, underneath it all. Would ye not try to make it up, love, he says. It kills Daddy not to be able to talk to him about hurling and

cars and machinery and whatever men do be fascinated by when they're not ruining women's lives. Make it up? Make it up? We didn't have a *row*; I scream at poor Daddy, he's just *useless, useless, useless*. All he's good for is drinking and shagging *floozies*. Daddy starts looking at the ceiling and humming and scratching his chin. He tries to block my shrill, crazy voice from his poor old ears. He tries to keep my horrible words out. They settle around his heart and weigh it down. His blood quickens. His cheeks turn a livid purple.

Little star, my name means. Some star I am. I'm not sure if Seanie is even Dylan's father. Imagine if Daddy knew that! I had sex with my boss, George, just once. The horny old bastard brought us all out to celebrate his firm's thirtieth year. He said he was having a special do, just for us. Really, he was having a special do for himself, hoping and praying that if one of us girls got pissed enough, we'd start to think he was more debonair than wrinkled, more witty than embarrassing. I shouldn't ever drink. The old biddies all went home early; the apprentices took it easy of course, the cute arses — and I drank sticky-sweet fake champagne and laughed at every inane thing the creepy old pervert said. Two days later when I finally got over the nausea Hillary said that it was so obvious we were going to shag when he offered to share a taxi home with me. He got all business like afterwards, and wouldn't meet my eye. His willy was tiny, his balls were wrinkled and uneven. When I told Hillary that, she nearly choked on her rice cake. Dylan looks like nobody except my father. Thank God, thank God; he's the absolute image of Daddy.

George charged a flat rate of four grand for conveyancing all through the maddest part of the property boom. If you added up the hours of work for the average house purchase, and multiplied by our hourly rate, he could have made a good profit if he charged seven hundred. He never looked at those files, we did everything. George wasn't even the most expensive. A guy rang one day in a panic; the builders of some crappy estate had put his house back on the market. For some reason, George had his file in his office. The contracts hadn't been sent back in time, the builders were backing out of the original deal and wanted another ten thousand to go ahead. He sounded young. His voice was cracking and shaking. George was in court. The guy had to get the promise of ten grand off the Credit Union in the end. Those builders were chancing their arm, but I couldn't say that. I know now what I should have told him: tell the builders to piss off, stay in

your flat with your girlfriend, wait two or three years and buy the same house for half the price. Hopefully he at least has other humans in *his* estate.

MY HEAD was all over the place. That's one phrase that I detest. It's a miserable excuse for doing miserable things. What does it even mean? I hear the scumbags saying it all the time in work, through George's door: Aw, my head was all over the place, I didn't *mean* to hit him with the iron bar, I would of never done it, only my brother was after been stabbed the night before and I knew in my *heart* and *soul* your man was fuckin goin round *skittin* over it ...

The awful thing is, whenever I think of the way I was the time I was meeting Seanie and accidentally had sex with George, that's the phrase that comes to my mind. My head really *was* all over the place. Mammy wasn't long dead, and I'd never really grieved properly. I was so worried about Daddy, I just decided to block it out and focus on him. Then I realized I wasn't the only one focusing on Daddy; Bridget the bloodsucker was mooning about the edges of our lives, with her big sorry-for-you eyes and her weirdly perky old boobs. If I'm to be objective, I can't blame Daddy, though. Mammy was gone for years before she went. Next thing now my *special paid career break* will be over and I'll be back in work, listening to scumbags again and looking at George trying to not look at me, wishing I'd just go away again. What will I do with Dylan then? My mortgage is *half* my wages.

FOUR FELLAS came here in a van this morning. I thought they were Travellers first, coming looking for stuff to steal. They looked around for a while, hands in pockets, kicking stones like four lads trying to look innocent. They made me nervous; Daddy wasn't due for another hour or so. One of them was really good-looking, tall and fair-haired and weather-beaten in a lovely way. He caught me staring out at him; I made it worse by jumping back from the window. He came over to my door. The sensible-bitch side of me whispered the words *rape* and *murder* in my head, but I had to open the door before he rang the bell — Dylan was only halfway through his nap. Howaya, he said, ammmm ... I shushed him; he looked embarrassed. I came out and closed the door behind me, as if to hide my lonely life. I was trying not to smile at him. Why am I such a fool for manly men? I pointed back with my thumb. Nap time, I told him. Oh, Jaysus sorry. No problem, I said, and let the smile have its way. He brightened a bit then.

He said he used to work for the builder who built the estate. They were up checking if the C2 boys had been back to finish off. What the fuck is a C2 boy? He looked a bit shocked at my language. God, he must be a right delicate petal. Self-employed workers, he explained, sub-contractors, foreign workers who were only taken on by builders if they registered as self-employed. That way the builder hadn't to pay the proper rates; stamps, tax, pensions or what have you.

His friends, a fat one, a foreign-looking one and a simple-looking one, were standing leaning against their van, trying to look like they weren't gawking over at us. I suddenly listed the things that were unfinished in my house, the loose skirting boards, the unpainted banister, the badly hung door, the wobbly kitchen tile, the lumpy garden, the missing fence panel. He wanted to know had I not gotten a snag-list done. A what? Another thing I should have known about. He sighed, then said he'd do all those jobs, *them* jobs, he said, but he'd have to charge, he didn't work for the builder any more. Forget it so, I said, I have zero money. Daddy had tried to do all of those jobs loads of times, but I'd never let him; I was foolishly insisting on waiting for the builder to come back. He looked over his shoulder at his friends and then back to me and said in a soft voice that he'd come back on Monday himself and do all the jobs. He'd charge fifty for labour and he'd probably be able to get any bits he needed from the other houses.

So now I have a whole weekend ahead of me of looking forward to Bobby the out-of-work builder coming to trudge around my house, dragging in muck around the place, putting Daddy's nose out of joint and probably frightening the life out of Dylan. I'll have to try and get into town tomorrow to buy a new top. How sad am I?