



VALE

Jill Crawford

THE DERELICT GATE LODGE out Loughingaskin Road has been a sanctuary of his for a few years, on and off, give or take, maybe more. Who the hell knows? Where does the time go anyway? He's been knocking around the North of the Island for, what, sixteen years, his whole adulthood.

On the occasion of a row, he'll scarper for a while from his sister's house on the council estate. The gate lodge sits between the Park n Ride and the old bog, just to the south of the wee town. It's a twenty-minute dander, lonesome, even next to a thoroughfare that's more hyper than you'd think on an ordinary day. It near drives him mental to sleep that close to the traffic, with only a brick wall between himself and a lawless car, not even a fence for peace of mind or nothing. It's fucken terrifying being woken in the middle of the night when a lorry rakes past and blows out the dark with its loud, loud motor and them powerful lights. You think you are about to get run right over. No matter how used you are to living in a wreck that's full of holes and the cold and the shit of all manner of creatures, that's a shock. A time or two, he pissed himself. He's back here cos Ginka threw him out, saying there were too many in the one house and not enough room. She's at her wit's end with Daniel, who's acting up, and Ani, who won't sleep in her own bed.

Bobi's sick of it, sick of everything. He's on the lookout for a new spot, an alternative to the gate lodge, somewhere less hectic and less aggressive, where people don't know where he is. Sometimes it doesn't seem like any of it is worth the effort. On your own, things are wild hard. It's tricky, keeping on. No one wants him, not at the moment anyway. Ginka feels

guilty all right. So what? Pity never did a man real good. It's like moving about inside an ice cube: you can't even feel where the walls are cos you're that numb. Nobody would give a toss if he didn't wake one day. Even his own sister would be relieved to have got rid. There's nowhere in this world for wonky people, he thinks, not for the first time. You're sorted if you're tough and useful like Ivan, who came and married a local girl.

But this morning he's on decent enough form, actually. The head's not too bad. He's been off the drink, not a drop taken the last day or so, not since the thing that happened; well, there's no point dwelling since there's nothing to be doing there and they let him off with a warning. He's a fierce pang in his belly because that stuff he was at isn't meant for drinking. He only ever touches it when he can't get a hold of anything else or can't help himself, when he's desperate.

Today he's landed on a wee change to the usual routine of wandering from one end of the town to another. He's going to go and have a nosey at the traveling circus, whose signs have been glued about. Your man JP told him that they were due to move in today, and he should know cos he's the one who rents out the land. They visit once or twice a year. Somehow, he always misses them. They never linger for more than a couple of days. By the time he remembers, they've already gone. Not on this occasion. Bobi hasn't been to a circus in years, not since he was a child of 9 or 10, back home, and took a shine to one of the acrobats. That foreign boy with the strawberry cheeks and caramel hair can't have been much older than Bobi but could hook his legs back and cross the ankles behind his head while beaming away. A circus is weird and holy wherever you are, bound to be. In that colorful tent you'll find a bunch of unnatural miracles. One of them old sad elephants is what he'd like to lay eyes on, one of them ones with the faraway sight. He wants to give that elephant a treat.

He rises from his bed of straw, not exactly early now. After a piss, he plucks a few sour apples off the misshapen tree in the otherwise bare field, its grass the beige of sand. He pockets two and gnaws the other as he walks into town, past the off road to the flyover and underneath the bridge, past the driveway into the business park, past the tile shop, past the tarpaulin company, past the place sign that always has its name scrubbed out, by the youngsters likely—though the cops can't prove who it is cos the culprits do it at night with their hoods up—and past the church that doesn't look like a church, more like a posh house owned by somebody important. The letters on it say ELIM PENTECOSTAL.

He nibbles around the stringy apple core and tosses it into the good-smelling mauve bush that covers the wall.

He has a bad old feeling he can't situate yet. He's had it since well before the latest incident. It has to do with what happened last winter to that couple who bought the house over there, opposite Elim Pentecostal church. Francis, the guy who keeps the keys of the chapel, told him all about it. But sure, the whole town was on about what happened. They weren't local people. They came from somewhere east. Before they moved in, they spent buckets doing up the inside and had the patio done. One of them worked north in a restaurant on the coast and the other worked west in a private hospital near the border. They settled on the wee town cos it was located between. All was grand for a while. They were away a lot. They left the curtains open, which nobody private does here. Sometimes, of an evening, they were seen through the window, glass of wine in hand. Then there was a note or two that wasn't kind. One night in the run up to Christmas, ones came to their door, and when the door was opened, ones pushed in and thrashed the two of them to a pulp in the nice hall of their new house. They were taken off in ambulances and never moved back. The house went up for sale. It still is. Nobody can be certain why ones did that to them. Cos they were outsiders? Cos they were two men? Most folk wouldn't mind either—live and let live. Somebody did mind.

At the foot of the hill, Bobi turns left and mounts the road that holds the fire station and McCartney's music shop. Mick McCartney is a friendly sort. He can play near every instrument in the shop, even the harp, though he's timid about that one cos for some odd reason it's thought to be a girly instrument, probably to do with the shape of it, all curves. Mick talks a lot. You can't shut him up. Still, he'll let Bobi use the toilet if need be. Bobi doesn't look in the window. Instead, he looks down at his feet. He's keen to push on today and not end up having long chats with Mick about the latest scandals in the town. Bobi's wearing the new pair of runners that your girl Kelly got him from New Look for five quid in the sale. They are a decent enough fit. She took two sizes to test to make certain they were OK.

"Sure, you'll be wearing them all the time," Kelly said.

Bobi promised to pay her back.

"Ach, don't worry about it," she said. "I can't endure seeing you walk by my shop window one more time with them dirty gutties with the flapping soles. Do ye want me to wash anything in my machine?"

Kelly co-owns one of the hairdressers, Curl Up and Dye, and takes towels home most evenings to wash, so now and again she doesn't mind flinging in the odd thing of his too. She's washed his sleeping bag a few times. She gave him a couple of pairs of socks that belonged to her boyfriend. Bobi likes to be fresh and soft like a wee un. Doesn't everybody? Kelly's mighty generous, really, considering he's nothing to her.

The pie factory's just across the road. It's too soon, though—they won't thank him for showing up yet. Later in the day is better. Bobi rocks up at the factory quite often. Some of the workers slip out the back for a puff, and Bobi is sometimes fit to cadge a fag or scrounge a nibble. If nobody's around, he waits, like a nob, sucking at the tasty air till somebody comes out. You could almost get tight on the smell of piecrust and sausage rolls.

Today he continues past the factory, and the houses, and the youth club where a young fella was murdered during the troubles here, not a million years ago, up to where the hill is chopped off by a road called the Vale in English and something else that he can't say in the Gaelic. Two names for things in these parts. They take great trouble over their pretty road signs.

On the corner there is the petrol station and behind that, bordered by a lanky handful of pines, is the scrubland Bobi's looking for, a weedy, shaggy odd-shaped patch that hurts your sight it looks that miserable. There isn't even a gate. A line of orangey barbed wire runs across the opening at the height of your crotch. It wouldn't keep anyone out, not that anyone would be looking in.

Right enough, the circus poster is there at the entry, stuck to a blond fence post. It's a tacky effort, nothing like the lively posters he remembers from his uncle and auntie's flat when he went to visit them in Sofia. But they're definitely not here. Fuck, they haven't come. He didn't want to believe it. Why does everything always go bad? Did he get the day wrong? Naw, they must've got held up. Maybe they aren't coming at all cos they haven't sold enough tickets. A waste of a plan. What'll he do now? You'd have thought they could've found a nicer spot, the country being full of cracking fields. Maybe they muck up the grass too much, with their huge trucks and the animal feet.

One reason Bobi stays on here, even though his sister and him aren't speaking again at the minute—aye, that's never easy—is that there's just so much wind and light moving back and forth across this part of the

world. You don't feel squashed in as you do in a place where the air is too still, as you do in a crowd. Plus, the folk here tend to be decent, mostly so. Mind you, you can get away with next to nothing in a small town where everybody knows everybody. They all have their eyes peeled for any bloody nonsense or annoyances that might be going on. It's after dark when your life glints and stuff can switch in a blink to raucous and insane. That's a different setup altogether. There are streaks of loose badness still about. No matter where you find yourself, you don't know the half of it.

Bobi's been to Belfast a couple times, thumbing a ride from a lorry that came from the west through the mountain, thinking that he might fare better there. There isn't much work in the countryside, and everyone here has somewhere to live; he's the only one without a home. But the city didn't please him. Cities are spiteful, crispy, alien places. Last time he was there, he got lamped by two pissed fucks that were old enough to know wiser. He had to beg for ages outside a Subway sandwich shop for the £9.50 or so that bought him his seat back home here to the town. He'd cleaned himself up as well as he could at a sink in the public bogs in the station, so the driver wouldn't say he couldn't travel in that state. Luckily, the driver clocked his oozing eye and nodded.

"On ye go, fella. Watch yourself there."

She'd probably seen it all and, sure, Bobi's money was as good as any. It was one of them buses where the heating doesn't go off, and they were scalding, but sure that is out of the driver's hands. She had the radio turned on, some station that played old pop music, the gobshite from Take That who sings about angels, cheesy. He'd pick Chemical Brothers over that crap any day, floating to "The Sunshine Underground." He'll never forget the first time he went to a city by himself. He must've been 16, a village boy in his native country. He couldn't get his head around being able to see them famous bands in real life for nothing.

As the roasting 212 bus had rolled through the outskirts of Belfast and swooped into the Islish green, his lungs had opened more easily, and he felt a bit looser again.

THE CROSSING PATROLDWOMAN, with her fluorescent jacket, cap, and lollipop that says STOP, is eyeballing him from across the road. Bobi's in the process of poking a tatter of apple skin out of his back teeth. Now he's all self-conscious. He takes his fingertip out of his mouth. It smells rotten. He probes with his tongue. No good. He'll sort it out later. It

must be near lunchtime. His stomach's groaning as per usual. It's not always for the want of food or drink, but a hunger for, fuck knows, something else, an answer to a puzzle, some peace and quiet. Aye, he could eat a horse.

"How's about ye?" the lollipop woman calls over.

"O, not too bad. Can't complain," he calls back across the road.

The worst thing about being alone is that you have to talk to strangers, and that's awkward. He was bullied as a boy for saying funny things at the wrong time. Even his sisters used to say he had an odd manner of speaking, but there's nothing he can do about that. What's he supposed to do, not speak? He has trouble looking people in the eye, too. That got worse when his mother killed herself. What he'd like is to not be a burden. He's never been fit to work out how the rest get on and live normal lives. It's second nature to them. Sometimes he forgets and it smacks him, like the very first time, that he's a man without a mother or father, an orphan. Then he could howl like a wee un.

He lowers himself onto the lumpy wall that edges the forecourt of the filling station, whiffing that petroleum. He thinks about how to start up a chat, watching as now and again a parent arrives and vanishes inside the primary school and emerges, leading out a titchy one and driving away home. The youngsters will be off on their holiday soon. Easter's coming. That means his birthday's approaching. He'll be 34. He watches as some kids are shown across the road to get crisps, sweets, drinks, and whatnot in the petrol station's shop. He'd kill for a Wispa. The lollipop woman has come over to his side.

"What do they call you?" he asks.

"I'm Pauline. I've seen you."

"Yeah, I've seen you too," he says. He isn't sure that she just doesn't look like one of the other old ones, who you see about the place. Her eyesight's crossed. Is she simple? Naw, wouldn't be doing this job if she was. "Where'd you see me?"

"About the chapel," she says.

"Aye, I'm sometimes in there, right enough."

He's in the chapel every day, sometimes more than once. It's a calm place, and you're not a nuisance in the Lord's house. Hasn't he as much a right to be there as anyone, one of Mother Nature's critters?

"You wouldn't have any gum?" Bobi asks her.

"No, do you want a Fruit Pastille?" the lollipop lady says.

"What color?"

"What color are you after?"

She looks into her hand.

"I've a purple or orange left," she offers.

"Which do you want?" he asks.

"I like the orange and yella ones," she says, taking the orange and sticking it in her gob.

She drops the purple one into his palm, the last sweet in the crumpled silver paper.

"Nice one," he says, popping it in and biting.

The tart feel of the juice causes his gums to seize for a second and he makes a face. Between her toing and froing across the road, they pass a while, chatting. Pauline says that if you follow the Vale out toward the foot of the pass and the mountain, it's a fair wee walk, past a ween of houses, and the big school, and some grassy fields, and a farm, and a doctor's abode, and the Riding for the Disabled center—after that, the road loops back on you like a lasooo.

"What's that?" he asks.

"What? A lasooo?"

"Aye."

"Och, you know, one of them things cowboys use for catching animals, a length of rope with a loop at the end that closes round the neck."

"Oh a lasso! Like a noose?"

He mimics putting a noose around his throat and hanging himself, tongue lolling out the side of his mouth. She laughs.

"Aye, like that but not as nasty. Mind you, that depends on why you're snaring the creature in the first place."

When Pauline laughs, she places her hand over her mouth to cover her bad teeth, as if he hasn't seen them already. They're craggy and stubby, blackish in places. She's a fat woman, with a few pale bristles growing out of her chin. It's a wonder she doesn't do something about that. He's itching to say cos maybe she hasn't noticed, maybe she can't see all that well, but she might get insulted. There's no accounting for other people. That's what his wanker of a father used to say. There's no accounting for fathers, either. Less said about him the better. Makes Bobi's blood boil, puts a thirst on him. Can't think about that or he'll be raging for the rest of the week.

"I like ponies," he says.

"They used to come right up to the fence," she says. "They might not be too friendly now."

"Why not?"

"There have been incidences at night. Young ones spooking them, climbing on their backs and necks, beating them with sticks, throwing glass bottles, hurting poor beings that wouldn't hurt a fly."

"That's terrible," he says.

"Aye, one of the ponies got a big gash on its head and lost an eye."

"Tsk. That's not right."

"Disgusting. Youngsters hooked on filth, getting up to all sorts, I'd be willing to bet. It's the drugs, ye know. They're pouring into rural parts now. Still," she adds, "they're gorgeous beasts to look at, even from a distance. You could be out and back inside an hour."

Why's she so keen on him going off into the middle of nowhere? Does she think he's nothing else to do?

"Are you looking rid of me?" he says.

"Not a bit of it," she replies. "It's just a pretty road to look at. Millionaire's row, folks call it."

Maybe she's only trying to be helpful. It's nice when a body takes an interest. Maybe a stroll would do him good, distract him from the crampy belly, and he appreciates the way Pauline speaks to him. She doesn't speak to him in a strange voice. She talks to him like he's ordinary and one of them, no separate singsong, assumes he'll follow what she's saying, which he mostly does. He's been around here long enough.

"You wouldn't have a quid on ye?" he asks.

Pauline glares.

"No, I do not have a quid," she says.

"Or a wee lock of change?"

"What are ye, a beggar?"

Bobi's skin heats.

"I meant. It'd be a loan."

"Well, sorry," she says, looking away, her lips bulging, face sucked tight.

She doesn't look sorry. She's all het up, as if he asked for something atrocious, something filthy. The familiar panic rises, a terror that she might tell tales on him and cause the devil in people to poke from under the skin and tear him to pieces, eat him whole.

"Maybe I will take a walk," he says.

He hadn't meant any harm. He's skint, and he thought to ask, and he asked, and now it's too late, and she's all offended. She'll get over it if he scrams. He never does know what exactly will set off folk here. You've a better feel for people where you grew up.

"Here, I'm sorry for asking," he says, not looking at her straight. "I shouldn't've asked that, so I shouldn't."

"No, ye shouldn't," she says, curt, looking right and left down the blank road. "I already do my part by donating, and I've my own mouth to feed without having to be giving free money to strangers."

"I know, I know. Don't I know it? Wish I hadn't said a thing. I take it back. Here, I'm taking it back here. D'ye hear me? I shouldn't've asked. Sorry I asked ye. Will we, can we make like it never happened?"

"Would ye quiet yourself," she says. "Stop with your fretting, for I won't be telling nobody. My goodness, I never thought I'd see the day that ones, from who knows where, would be begging from me in my own town."

"Och now, I'm not begging. I was just asking for a small favor, a loan. But, sure, that's no problem. It was cheeky, I'll give you that. I take it back. I've taken it back now."

"Fine, I heard you the first time," she says. "I just knowed you were wanting something. Then I said to myself, no, Pauline, don't be quick to judge. Anyway, let's leave it."

"Aye, let's leave it now," he says. "I'll be out of your sight."

"Well, Jesus, will ye just hold on a minute," she says. "What's your rush?"

Propping the pole of the lollipop stick between two prongs of the steel school fence, she starts groping in the pockets of her fluorescent yellow coat. A hand comes out with a heap of matter—keys, receipts, Polo mint foil, a whistle—and her other hand picks out a pound coin.

"Here," she says, pressing it into his palm.

He hesitates, looks at the round metal disc and into her face. Is this some trap or something?

"I can't," he says, not moving the open palm with the coin, raising his other hand to fend off temptation.

"Ach, you might as well take it after all this palaver."

A pound would buy him a thing or two to tide him over till he gets a hold of something else.

"Great stuff," he says. "That's wild nice of you. I'll pay you back."

“Aye, you will,” she says, “when I’m dead and buried. You’re a bold one. And here was me thinking you were laden with the weight of the world when what you are is a saucy piece of work.”

He reckons she’s angry till she winks before heading again across the road to open a safe passage for a slight dark fairy and two chubby ones. A bubble springs into the base of his throat and works its way up, past his tongue root. He swallows. It tastes of fake blackcurrant, not a flavor he appreciates but beggars can’t. Back down it goes to where it came from. His belly’s gurgling. He’s ruined his gut with the drink, always feels as if he’s about to puke rings around him, an unsteady feeling, like the time when he went on that ferry to England and was sick the entire way, had to lie on the deck in a deck chair all night. He lasted a couple of months through the summer, working on a building site during the day, sleeping out of doors in a park alongside a crew of Lithuanians. He’s not cut out for work like that, not clever with his hands. He gets flustered when he’s made to hurry. He prefers his own company to being in a group of unknown ones. He missed the presence of women, Ginka and wee Ani. He even missed playing Carmageddon: Max Damage and watching the footie on the TV, back when he and Daniel were getting on grand.

When Daniel’s on his own in the house, it’s mostly OK, not the worst. It’s when he’s been out with the gang that he changes. He’s embarrassed by his uncle. Once he thundered in, pissed to the gills, and woke the house shouting harsh things, accusing Bobi of stuff, calling him a poof and a paedo, saying he wished he’d fuck away off to a different place. Then his face turned and he was crying, banging his fist against the kitchen counter, trying to wound himself, draw blood. Ginka tried to settle him. Daniel wouldn’t quit sobbing for ages. He was sorry. He hadn’t meant it. He hadn’t meant it, but he had meant it.

When the shit hits the fan, Bobi gets out of their hair for a bit. It’s not easily done in this neck of the woods. There’s one main street, where all the shops and pubs are. Still, in other places, Leeds for example, they’re fouler to the likes of him than they are here. Here’s not perfect, no doubt. He’s yet to find a better place to be. He can’t go back to where he came from. What would he do there? Nah, home’s not the place anymore. It’s been ages since he was last there. Ginka’s here, and he has a shocking fondness for Ani, who’s coming seven. She’s as bendy as a caterpillar, and that massive smile when she’s springing from here to there. She’ll

march in and seize you by the hand and take you over to her electric piano and sit you down while she plays. She's fit to play a tune that Bobi and Ginka sang as children. Usually, she sings in English. There's one she loves about a fried egg and another one about being happy. With that she has you doing the motions, so you have to keep your wits about you. You clap your hands, stamp your feet, wiggle your arse, all that. There's one part where she stops playing and signs out the words for the people who can't hear, and there's a secret verse that her mummy doesn't know about, where she makes a fart at the end; Daniel probably showed her that. Her granny would have doted on her, pet.

Daniel's another story these days. He's crabbit. When his stepdad Pod took the computer off him for giving cheek and scrapping at school, Daniel went ballistic, wrecked his bedroom, disappeared. After they tracked him and forced him back, he flushed Pod's protein supplement, for his bodybuilding, down the toilet. That stuff doesn't come cheap.

Pod and Daniel used to get on OK cos Pod went easy on him, easier than Ginka, on account of the flack he was always getting for being short and for being foreign and because he doesn't know his real dad. That ended when Daniel joined the group of local lads and started dabbling with dodgy stuff. He thinks nobody can mess with him now. They call themselves the Sunnyvale mafia. No one's supposed to know that except them. There's Daniel, who's the only Bulgarian-Islish. There's Tall Lee, Daniel's best pal. His dad runs the takeaway beside the estate agent, which isn't as good as the other Chinese between the pizzeria and the flower shop, but they get free curry chips, so they always go to it. Tall Lee's the king. Second in line comes Neil, who's the joker; he's bad news. Then there's Tinman, who lives opposite Daniel on the estate. Q, Ricky, Wonder, Jermboy, Roars, Pixel, and some other ones Bobi doesn't know the names of. They're mad into their footie.

There's also a pack of girls who hang around with them. They all look the same. They seem way older than the boys till you clock them up close, behind the slap. The only one he's ever talked to is the blondie with the lilac ends who works in the hairdresser on Saturdays after her camogie match. Oona's her name. She's always running around in denim shorts, even when it's baltic. She has a tattoo of a dolphin diving over her bellybutton. It wasn't that long ago, he remembers, that she had hairy legs. Now it's the dark tan and the purple lines around her lips, like a really young porn star. If he had a daughter . . . Ach, that won't happen.

It's been an awful long spell since he was with anybody like that. And who'd want him as a dad? Yet, you never know, things being different, he might have done an OK job with a daughter of his own. He grew up with sisters and got on best with girls till he was Daniel's age and people reckoned he was up to no good, trying to take advantage. People have sinister minds, inventing all kinds of happenings. It's scary what people dream up.

The lollipop lady's back, but the chat seems to have fizzled out.

"Anyway," she says. "I'm wrapping up here. Today's a short day, it being Maundy Thursday tomorrow. Be seeing ye at mass?"

"Right, no worries," Bobi mutters. "Thanks again for the . . ."

He taps his jeans' pocket, where he dropped her goldy coin.

"Don't be going crazy now," she says, pulling a twisted tissue out of her sleeve and rubbing her nostrils. "No partying or nothing, you hear. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Haha, right you are," he says. "I'll keep wise."

"Later," she says, balling the tissue in her hand. "I'll be back when school restarts. Ye may visit for a chinwag. Sure, it passes the time."

"Aye," he says, nodding.

She looks like she's about to say something else but turns the back and waddles off, using her lollipop stick to help her along, cutting left at the entrance by the McDonald's billboard—the closest McDonald's is three-and-a-half towns away. Pauline must live on her own down in that cul-de-sac that runs alongside the primary school, near where the greenhouses and the Gaelic pitch are. He wonders does she have a spare room. It's mostly Catholics who live up this end and this here school is for their youngsters, whereas the other one is all the way down at the other end. That's why she'll have clocked him in the chapel. Aye, she'll be a decent woman, probably devout.

When Bobi goes into the service station, the bell jangles. After a few minutes, a bald man in denim dungarees emerges from a door into what looks like a sitting room, the TV squawking. The door swings closed. The man grunts as he moves through to the other side of the counter. Bobi was contemplating a drink, but all he can get for what he's got is a small box of Ocean Spray. Diet cranberry juice is not his scene.

"Do ye only have Wispa Golds?" Bobi asks.

"Looks like it," the man replies, not looking.

"One of them then," Bobi says.

The man fetches it from the shelf behind him. Why do they always have to go altering good things? You can't resist the future even if you want to. Bobi pockets the change and breaks into his snack as soon as he's out of the jangly door. He turns right, interrupts himself, then goes left. He might as well head down the Vale, after all. Why not? There's fuck all else to do. He'll feed some grass from the verge to the ponies if he can tempt them over. The scent of a pony is nice and comforting, them gentle mouths. A lock of wilder air would do no harm, either. Afterward, he might drop by Pod's work at the lumberyard to ask if Pod thinks it's worth him going to see if Ginka's cooled down, just to gauge the lay of the land. If so, he'll have to wait till she's finished for the afternoon cos she doesn't like him coming by her job. Ginka works in the toy and homeware departments on the second floor of the supermarket. Her boss is friendly with everybody, but she worries about what he'll say if Bobi comes in and puts off customers. Mind you, it's a free country and Bobi's 40p is as good as anyone's to spend. No, no, he won't ruffle her feathers when he's looking to make things better, not worse. It'll be all right. She'll come round. Daniel will, too.

TODAY'S NOT REALLY the day for a walk. A mizzle's starting, the kind that drenches you, getting in every nook. No matter. He has a hankering to lose himself among growing things. Plus, he likes going places he hasn't been. You can't tell what you'll find. It's only weather. He can handle a bit of weather.

He sets off toward the lonely mountain in the opposite direction to the way Pauline went. They reckon there's gold up there. There's a quarrel between ones who want to dig it out and ones who want it kept where it is.

Five minutes along the Vale, he spies an empty house, windows and doors boarded with wood. Now that might be interesting. Another option? He likes to change it up and not be too predictable. Time to find a new place. Not wanting to draw attention, he continues without looking too closely. He passes a blind girl in sports gear who's striding into town. She knows exactly where she's headed, must walk this route often. A BMW pivots fast out of secret gates. A second car makes a gradual approach along the undulating road from the opposite direction. When it passes, he notices that the bonnet's speckled with rust.

As the skinny rain washes the world, he embarks on the loop, or lasso, and the dull clouds shift, and the rain disperses then halts. The

sky turns sapphire. The horses are nowhere to be found. That's a shame. The birds are noisy. The stench of slurry hangs in veils. At the crest of a slope, there's a bungalow and on the opposite side of the road, there's a tin barn, gleaming, with a meadow beside. The black-white cows canter up to the steel gate and hover in a breathy line, hoping for something, squinting through hot light with gooey faces, making him smile. He passes a garden with stone ornaments. A wee stone boy who's meant to be peeing against a tree trunk. A stone girl with a stone parasol bending over a spray of stone daffodils. No cars. Not a body home. The porch of the bungalow is open, the door wedged by a bucket. But a fluffy thing—a rabbit, is it?—is sprawling at the threshold, out of the wet and dazzle. Yeah, a gray bunny.

For a length, the Vale becomes less populated. On his route back toward town, the flare of the sun is in his eyes. And now he's retracing his steps. This time he looks more closely at the vacant house, a pure wreck, set back from the road, behind a garden wall, on its own square plot. On one side of the property is a high fence that marks the boundary of the land of the neighboring home, a stunning mansion, painted cream. There's a security camera on the top of the fence, angled away from the empty house and across the front garden of the mansion toward a fair view of the mountain. Through the close wire mesh, he can see that the ground in front of the mansion is a shambles, gutted by building machinery, earth parched, not a living growing thing.

This old house might work a treat as long as he bothers no one and not a soul gets wind of his presence. No one need know.

Bobi heads into the town center to see Pod, who tells him to hold fire with Ginka to give her some breathing space and, sure, they'll see each other Sunday at Easter mass. Back at the gate lodge, he turns on the pay-as-you-go phone that Ginka gave him. He has no credit so can only receive calls and messages. There isn't word from Ginka, or anyone. He'll be out in the cold for a time longer. He turns off the phone and stuffs his sleeping bag with a few other bits and bobs into the rucksack. He leaves out an odd item to suggest he's still staying here, throw ones off the scent in case ones are looking for him.

After sundown, he enters the empty house on the Vale through a bathroom window, having pried away the plyboard with a fork that he borrowed from a neighboring garden then put back. The phone is his torch. His face is snared in a cobweb as he lowers himself to solid land.

Sure, what harm is a body doing taking shelter in a deserted building? By the looks of it, nobody's given thought to this place in years. It's in rough nick. The mold catches in his throat, sets him spluttering. The floorboards have rotted and caved in. A horde of wasps must have gushed down the chimney. They're scattered, dead, all over the ground. Except for dirt there's not another thing. Nowhere soft to lie. It's a wonder this plot hasn't been sold for new houses. The rest of the Vale is all fancy homes, big hedges, big lawns. He hardly sleeps that first night. It's OK. When he's safe somewhere, he likes the night.

Next day he sleeps in relative peace. In the afternoon, he wakes in a terror at the racket of young girls, who can't be traipsing home from school cos it's Maundy Thursday and school's shut. The sound of their screaming and ribbing flows down the chimney, and they seem to be inside the house with him, not a snug feeling. Eventually, the din fades. It's only the occasional car and the clacking, gobbling birds. He must have been grinding his jaw cos his teeth are ringing. They feel like chalk. There's a foul smell of some dead animal. He tests the tap in the kitchen. Holy fuck, he can't believe it: They haven't stopped the water! He drinks. The water tastes of tangy rust. He's hungry. His hoodie and jeans are damp. He needs to piss. He creeps out and goes in the shadow of an enormous, wavering leylandii hedge. He'll find somewhere farther next time—the odor might give him away. It's not been simple here. He wasn't expecting paradise, but he'd hoped, in time, things would turn out to be more possible, as it's been for some. Ivan was here a while before Bobi arrived. Ivan warned Bobi at the start that he'd have nothing to do with him.

"We might hail from the same place," Ivan said. "That's the height of it. We aren't the same."

Bobi isn't allowed to speak to any of Ivan's family. Ivan's strange with Ginka, too. He reckons he's that much better than them cos he's better skilled and drives a good car.

At twilight, zipping his anorak, Bobi picks through the rear garden across weeds and nettles, pierces the back hedge, crossing the deep fields, far from the popular roads. There are tons of bluebells. You can't eat them. He tried eating a bulb and near passed out from stomachache. Lord knows what he was thinking. What he needs is to get a job on one of them farms, helping with lambing season. He's meek about asking is the problem. Farmers are not that approachable, all business. Because of

the accent, people think he doesn't understand English. If he could get a touch of regular work, not charity, and a stable place to live, and if he could stay away from any badness, maybe it wouldn't take much more to set him right. There's many a one hasn't got it together by his age.

He enters the town from a new direction, so nobody will guess where he's been, and runs into your girl Oona, who's seated on a bench outside the shut butcher's, eating chips and red sauce, bored looking, waiting for something to happen. Oona puts him in mind of Lana del Rey when she came out with the song about the video games. There's something in her eyes, like she's seen things she wasn't meant to see, things that weren't right. Oona does her hair like Lana, too, with the quiff, and she sticks out the lip, all sultry. He's staring at her when she glances round.

"Why don't you take a picture?" she says. "It'll last longer."

"Uh, sorry," he says.

He didn't mean anything by it. It's hard not to stare at something that's pleasant to look at.

"Whatever," she says. She looks a bit off, not herself.

"Do you mind if I?"

He nods to the bench. She didn't expect that.

"It's a free country," she says.

He sits down and tries not to eye her chips. They smell nice even if they're floppy in vinegar.

"So, how's tricks?" he asks.

"Don't even talk to me," she says, in a hump.

Bobbi says nothing.

"Here."

She sets the carton on his lap. There are only about seven chips left.

"Cheers," he says, hesitating to dig in. He pokes a finger in the cold pool of red and sucks. It tastes of acid and sugar at the same time.

"He does my head in," she says. "He's gone off, racing or God knows what with that bunch of nutcases and left me sitting like a fucken idiot. We were meant to be . . . Ach, I'm done with him this time so I am. I'm not lying. Had it up to here and then some."

Bobbi sits there, silently chewing, trying to work out what to say. Which fella is she talking about? He feels sorry for the wee girl, acting like an angry wife when she can't be more than 14 or 15, tensing her jaw, screwing up her forehead. It doesn't hide that she's got a wobble in her face.

"You know," he says.

He stops.

"What?" she asks.

"Naw, nothing."

"What?"

"Doesn't matter."

"No, what?"

"Best not."

"Tell me!"

She nudges his leg with her leg, almost dislodging him from his seat.

"Go on, spit it out, ye big tease."

"Jesus, go gentle," he says, laughing a moment.

She's laughing, too, the giddy you get when you're not far from crying.

"Not till you spill," she says. "What were ye saying till you stopped? I can take it."

"I think that a cute girl like you can do better. Sure, you've time enough."

"Are you saying I'm a ride?"

She's coddling him now, all pleased, glitter back in her eyes, watching him get embarrassed.

"Now here," he says. "I'm an old man."

"You're not that old," she says. "What are ye?"

"Old enough to be your uncle."

"I don't like my uncle. It's OK. I bet you're not into the likes of me. Do ye not miss company though?"

"Wha'?"

"When you're living outside?"

"It's OK," he says. "Simpler on your own sometimes."

"Wish I could live on my own without people chewing off my face. Here, will I move in with you? I make a bit of money from the hair-washing."

"That's not a good idea."

"I'm only having ye on." She looks as if she's sizing him up, calculating. Then she says, "Do ye want a wee bump?"

"What?"

"Ye know. A wee bump."

She presses her fingertip to a nostril.

"Where?" he asks.

"In here."

She pats the red, plasticky, heart-shaped bag that's slung by a long strap across her body.

"Class, isn't it," she says. "It's real. Vivienne Westwood. What do ye think?"

"It's right and shiny."

She flicks the dangly part of the zip with a baby blue talon.

"Mirrored vegan leather, cost 225 quid."

"Jesus Christ," he says. "How d'ye?"

"My Neil got it for me to say sorry for being a snake."

Bobi drops his face and jerks the head.

"Neil best watch people don't start wondering where he gets his money," he can't help but remark.

"Well, I won't be telling tales," Oona says, a hardness in her of a sudden, protecting her man.

"Nor me," Bobi says, lifting his palms.

"So wise up. Nobody gives a fuck what we do anyway. It's no different from the drink."

They sit in silence a moment. A fella emerges out of Muscles gym, fixing himself, and ducks into the White Horse. In the dark window, the yellow glow of the HARP LAGER sign is quivery, abblur.

"Right," Oona says, looking about to check no one's spying. "You stick here for five minutes, and I'll meet ye in the doorway at the back of the chapel, where it's safe."

She goes. He waits a while listening to the wind through the trees and watching the lights ping to black in the estate agent where Francis works before following after, knowing he shouldn't, not feeling able to resist. Sometimes you just need to escape into a sort of glamor or at least go off elsewhere.

THEY'RE SEEN BY Oona's enemy's cousin, who tells a workmate from the bakery, who tells Tall Lee's mother, who tells Tall Lee.

Tall Lee waits till deep the next night when they're off their heads at Pixel's stepsister's house, half-playing video games, to blurt it to Neil, Daniel, and the rest of the lads. That's what shifts things onto a new path that Bobi doesn't even know he's on till it's too late.

Neil phones Oona and wakes her, which doesn't go down well because she's helping do hair for a wedding early in the morning. Oona asks, Can

they not talk tomorrow? Neil's having none of it. He wants to know what she did, cunt. Oona says nothing went on, says she got pissed off with Bobi yapping at her, says he smelt bad so she left him, says he must have followed her, says she told nobody—and definitely not Bobi—about the toot, asks if they think she's fucken stupid, says she's not fucken stupid, says she knows what trouble she'd get into if Neil and the rest knew.

Neil doesn't believe her.

Oona changes her tune, says she feels sorry for Bobi, says not to do anything, says he needed a pick up and, sure he's not right, sure something's up with him, says what the fuck does Neil take her for, says she wouldn't touch that, says she'd never fuck around on Neil, says Neil's the one who fucks around on her, says don't do nothing, leave him, says love you babe, says it was only a wee bump.

Neil flings a bottle across the kitchen, denting the fridge. It bounces on the lino and doesn't break. Pixel says he'll kill Neil for spoiling his sister's fridge. Neil says he'll kill Daniel. Daniel says it's not his fault, says Bobi's a waste of space, says he'd like to show him a thing or two, says they should, says they just should, says he's been itching to, says he hates his guts, says he can't stand him.

They go looking. He won't be far. He keeps close to the town. They know where he's likely to be. There are only a few options for a person without a place of their own. They walk to the gate lodge—no sign. They divide into twos and threes to check the old leisure center, the old medical center, the old parish hall, the old garage, the broken shed near the Orange Lodge, the alley between the supermarket and the mobile shop, the back of the chicken takeaway by the cinema, where the recycling bins line up at the hotel. The disco in the hotel is long over. The town's dead.

They head back to the session at Pixel's stepsister's house. She's in Ibiza. Pixel is meant to be looking after her cat. The cat's pregnant. Now they can't find the cat. Where's the cat? Pixel says it's an OK cat. The white hairs stick to everything. Where's the asshole cat? The window got left open. What knob left the window open? They leave the window open and close the curtains. Tall Lee racks up lines of coke. There's ket, too. The bass thumps. They stay on it through the morning. Emm, Julz, and Grace come round in the afternoon with frozen pizzas.

Oona joins later after Saturday mass. She finds them smoking dope in the living room. There's porn on the TV, muted. Oona and Neil fight on the stairs. They go up to a bedroom. While he's in the bog,

Oona sneaks a gander at Pixel's stepsister's clothes. At the bottom of the wardrobe on a fleece dressing gown, the cat's snug, nursing babies. Oona leaves the door ajar, as she found it, and doesn't tell Neil about cat and kittens. They fight some more, then they fuck on a towel on Pixel's stepsister's bed because Oona's worried her period isn't quite over. He doesn't have a johnny, so she makes him promise to pull out—time enough. He comes onto the black towel.

Downstairs stinks of burnt cheese and KP peanuts. She makes a cup of tea in the kitchen. The milk's off so she has to do without. Neil pours himself a JD and white and disappears into the living room, looking for more coke. They're getting loaded again before they decamp to the hotel to dance.

In the living room, Tall Lee asks Oona if she got some sweet cock. She gives him the finger, says nothing. Emm says, You're jealous. Tall Lee says, Shut your mouth, lesbo. Emm says, Just cos I wouldn't go near you. Grace tells him to go fuck himself. She and Tall Lee have an on-and-off thing.

Leaving her cup on the mantelpiece, Oona kneels at the glass table. At Oona's turn, Julz hands her a rolled fiver. She's last to go. As she bends, the magazine under her elbow slides, smudging the line. After inhaling, she sucks a fingertip to redd up the stray flour on the glass. She'll do one more line before they leave the house. That's her limit. The lads don't know when to stop.

Pixel goes upstairs. Jermboy raps the dumb horoscope. The girls piss themselves laughing. Neil's wild quiet, tossing a lighter from one hand to the other. Daniel's wild quiet, too, watching the room, somewhere else. Her drink forgotten, Oona sits on the floor against an armchair by a speaker and starts to feel good. Grace tells Tall Lee to give her the phone. She flips the music to Ariana Grande. The lads complain. She turns the volume higher. Oona pushes her fingers through her hair. She likes that Pete Davidson, wishes Neil was taller and less possessive. Julz wants Grace to play "7 rings." That's the end of it. Tall Lee takes back the phone and puts on dubstep, "My City."

They're meeting the others at the club in the hotel. Pixel and Wonder have to stay at the house till everyone gets back. Wonder got banned for life from the hotel for breaking a glass on somebody's skull. Pixel's stressed about the cat—What if it gets run over by a car? He's close to his stepsister. She's cool. He wants to be there in case it comes back.

The club will be rammed with lame wedding people. The maid of honor was so fussy about her hair. Oona wishes she could stay and watch *The Godfather: Part II* with Pixel and Wonder. That's not an option. No can do. All the girls are going dancing. Neil would be livid.

As they vacate the house, Oona tells Pixel to look in his sister's wardrobe. They walk to town in a blob that spills onto the road, annoying drivers. The whole way there, Neil's hand is tucked into the ass pocket of her skirt. She likes it, makes her feel appreciated. The sky's purple and pink. They take a selfie, but the color of the sky doesn't come out on her phone camera, even when she adds a filter. They have to stop and buy fags from the pub that sells fags. Tinman and Q swing on lampposts. Even though Daniel doesn't smoke, he goes in anyway, maybe searching for someone, not Bobi she hopes. It'll be OK. Aye, it's grand. She'll find out who it was. It's bound to have been that bitch Rhiannon starting trouble, or else one of her spies. She'll get what's coming.

When Daniel comes out of the bar, Oona asks him how it's hanging, asks if she can have a prawn cocktail crisp. He shoots her a dirty look and throws the packet at her. It ricochets off her shoulder, hits her bag, and lands on the pavement.

"Watch it!" she says.

She's not stooping to lift that. It's not hers, nothing to do with her. It can lie there. It's on him.

"Don't be touchy, big man," she says.

"Oona!" Julz says.

"What?"

Daniel looks at her, looks at Neil, looks struck or something, really still, shakes his head and walks away in the wrong direction.

"Really?" Julz says to her.

"I didn't mean anything," Oona says.

Daniel boots a wing mirror clean off a parked car. It arcs through the air and lands with a clatter in the middle of the road. Julz and a couple of the fellas go after him. The rest head on.

They get into Dolce Vita. It's heaving. Neil buys her a daiquiri. The music's OK. She can't move. She hasn't a good feeling. Neil's going at it on the dance floor, lost in a tune, so she thieves a pack of Marlboro Reds and a lighter from some guy's jacket pocket and goes out front to sit alone on a windowsill and chain the lot while listening to Lana, at least till Neil notices she's missing. It's elevenish. A lovely evening

though, mild, not a breath for once. She doesn't even have goose bumps on her legs.

Well into the thieved pack, she's wondering why Neil hasn't seen she's not about, when someone walks out of an alley by the Credit Union through the headlights of an idling car and crosses the road. It's Bobi. He enters the chicken takeaway, probably seeking freebies, and emerges eventually with a box of something.

"Heya!" she calls, not wanting to say his name.

He doesn't hear or doesn't think she's talking to him. He crosses back, vanishing into the same alleyway. She could say something to prepare him. She could run after him and just mention that they were seen and now ones are talking, stirring things up, assuming God knows what. That alley comes out near the beauty parlor where Oona did nails for a week. The problem with doing nails is it ruins your own nails. She could meet him at the other end.

No, she sits on, finishing her smoke. With the heels, she'll not make it. It doesn't matter anyway. Nothing'll happen and, if it does, she can't have anything to do with it, not with her family. She smears the dying fag under the sole of her sandal and lights a new one. If she runs after Bobi and Neil finds them, well that'll be tricky. That would be way worse. Better to leave things be, not get any more involved. Shit. She has a shitty feeling. How did this happen? She didn't do anything. They didn't do anything.

She holds the fag in her teeth, zips open her bag, unscrews a pot, dabs on fresh gloss, slips out her mirror, checks her cat's eyes and her bronzer, closes all in her bag, and takes the fag in hand again, picking a speck of tobacco off the shine of her mouth. Daniel didn't even look angry when he left. He just looked—something else. She's never ever seen anyone young look like that. Sure, she was only winding him up. People slag each other. Everyone does that. It's how they get on. He knows that rightly. And he's called her a WAG before. So what! She couldn't care less if he thinks that. Maybe she is a WAG. Wouldn't he like to have a WAG? She's unbothered. She has plans. She's going to make good money one day. He was really still, and his face was so dark or soft or blank or full of feelings. What was it? It's doing her head in. She's thirsty. She needs a drink. She takes out her earbuds, drops them in a pocket of her handbag, stands up to go back into the club, and catches sight of someone coming quick down the other side of the street.

He's short. His hood is over his head. The jacket's zipped right up. It's Daniel, is it? She can't see his face. He turns into the alley, where Bobi went. Fuck. Fuck. Nah, it'll be grand. Ah, fuck. That's rattling. Sure, it's OK. Sure, nothing's going to happen. What's going to happen? Maybe it isn't even him. This isn't good.

Flashing the bouncer her wrist stamp on the way in, she joins the gang on the packed floor dancing to Pop Smoke and acts like she was there the whole time.

"Where were you?" Neil asks, face harsh, suspicious.

BOBI DOESN'T SHOW at Easter mass the next morning, which isn't like him. Ani is disappointed because she really wanted him to see her Easter bonnet. Daniel doesn't appear, either. The smell of drink emanates from his bedroom. He's in his bed, having got home early in the morning. They let him sleep.

In the car park after mass, Francis saunters over to Ginka and Pod to ask where Bobi is today. They try his number. The phone's off. They send a text: Where r u?

Daniel hasn't seen him around. Ginka's a bit uneasy but also still annoyed, so Pod drives around to the spots Bobi tends to stay, the ones they know about, just to check Bobi's all right and nothing's happened. Ginka's sent a plate of food under tinfoil. Pod sets it on the mat in the footwell of the passenger seat and drives carefully. There's no joy in tracking him down. Where the hell is he? Pod drives home.

By next morning they're very worried. He'd say if he was leaving town. Ani keeps crying. Daniel barely says two words in the house and looks like he hasn't slept in a week. They ask around the shops. Ginka posts on social media. Nothing.

On Tuesday morning, they call the police.

He's found on Tuesday afternoon in the empty house on the Vale, the one the blacksmith used to live in.

In time, the empty house is razed to the ground. The security camera on the high fence that borders the neighboring property is moved. It no longer angles away toward the mountain. Now it stares down at the space where a house used to be.

AVE ATQUE VALE +