

houses were always going up. Every year the *Advertiser* had another dreary tragedy, with names and ages and places of origin, from Carlow, originally from Roscommon, originally.

Coll was back in the living room, flicking through his records. She whispered it to him. Fuck sake! he said. Fucking typical of these people! There's another deposit gone! He ran upstairs and saw that it was as she said—he didn't and never would trust women's accounts of things—and he went to fetch the water. When she had bent down to whisper to him, he turned just in time to see the swell of a breast beneath the dressing gown and the image now occupied his mind to a far greater degree than the non-event of a failed fire.

Martina turned to Mary Pearson, on a couch pushed back to the

living-room wall, and she said:

'Dave Costelloe? Yeah, but... kind of low-sized, isn't he?'  
 'I know. It's the kind of way that if he was three inches taller he'd be a different man.'

'Yeah but I do know what you mean, he's kind of dirty?'

'Oh, filthy! There is absolute filth in those eyes.'

'Yeah, there is but... Jesus. Can you believe the time?'

'Sunday's a write-off. Come here, do you want to go and get some breakfast? I'm pretty sure Anton's is open.'

It was eight o'clock, in Galway, on a Sunday morning. The wind had eased, to some extent. It would be a cold day with intermittent rain. Ollie drove the Corolla down the docks, his beany head swivelling left and right. He had people to see at the Harbour Bar, which kept market hours, and he had only the one wiper working.

In rain, it felt as though the Corolla was gone half-blind. His shin was reefed open from the drainpipe but the wound had dried up some and, all told, it was unlikely to kill him. He passed by the house and wondered if there was anything still going on there. If things worked out at the Harbour Bar, he could knock back up and do some more business. But just as he drove past, the last of the stragglers emerged to the grey old streets and another wet morning of the reconstruction.

### *Breakfast Wine*

They say it takes just three alcoholics to keep a small bar running in a country town and while myself and the cousin, Thomas,

were doing what we could, we were a man shy, and these were difficult days for Mr Kelliher, licensee of The North Star, Pearse Street.

'The next thing an ESB bill will come lording in the door to me,' he said. 'That could tip me over the edge altogether. Or wait until you see, the fucker for the insurance will arrive in. Roaring.'

He took the rag to the counter and worked the rag in small tight circles, worked it with the turn of the knot and the run of the grain, he was a man of precise small flourishes, Mr Kelliher, and these flourishes were a taunt to the world. Even in desperate times, they said, proper order shall be maintained. The Kelliher mouth, like generations of Kelliher mouths before it, was bitter, dry and clamped, and the small grey eyes were deranged with injustice.

'I've no cover,' he said. 'My arse is hanging out to an extraordinary degree. I'm open to the fates. It's myself and the four winds. You'll see me yet, boys, with a suitcase, at the side of the road, and the long face on. The workhouse! That's what they'll have to get going again for the likes of me.'

The clock considered twelve and passed it by with a soft shudder, as though it had been a close call. It seemed to be a fine enough day,

out there beyond the blinds. Birds in the trees and flowers in the park and the first bit of warmth of the year. The torpid movement of late morning in the town, and the sunlight harsh in its vitality, as if it was only here to show the place up.

'Nail me to a cross and crucify me,' said Mr Kelliher, 'and at least that way I'd go quick.'

The North Star was an intimate place, a place of dark wood and polished optics, with the radio tuned to the classical station for calm (it played lowly, very lowly) and the blinds let slants of light in and you'd see distant to the morbid hills, if you strained yourself. Myself and Thomas were sat there on the high stools. We were fine specimens of bile and fear and broken sleep. There was slow hungry slurping, and I finished what was before me.

'Would you put on a pint for me, Mr Kelliher?'

'I would of course, Brendan.'

'Cuz?'

'I will so,' said Thomas.

Mr Kelliher never drank himself—not anymore—but he drank milky tea by the gallon, and a whistling kettle was kept in perpetual operation in the small private space adjoining the bar. Its whistle

was a lonesome gull, or the wheeze of a lung, and it was part of the music of the house. Mr Kelliher attended to the stout. Each fresh glass he filled two sevenths shy of the brim, with the glass delicately inclined towards the pourer's breast, so as the stout would not injure itself with a sheer fall, and he set them then, and there was the rush and mingle of brown and cream notes, and the blackness rising, a magic show you would never tire of.

'Small industry in this country is being wiped out,' said Mr Kelliher.

'Who are you telling?' I said.

'It's the likes of us who toil and scrape, Brendan. We're the ones getting a clatter off the blunt end of a spade. Ignorance! That's all you come up against around this place.'

'Shocking,' I agreed.

He removed our used glasses—averting his eyes from them, so decorous—and placed them in the neat dishwasher, where they would expect company. He filled to the top the fresh ones and with a curt nod put them before us and a note was slid across and we moved our lips wordlessly in thanks.

'There are fellas in Leinster House would shame a brothel,' he said.

We had no women. It was an awful lack in our lives. Mothers, daughters, lovers, wives, we had none of these at all, not a one between us, because women were a premium in the county, and in truth we were hardly prizetakers. It was from this lack of women that we had turned into auld women ourselves. Daily we regaled each other with our ailments and complaints, we talked of changes in the weather, and strangers in the town. Nothing could occur in the town of an insignificance beyond our gossip. If a wall got a lick of paint, it would be remarked in The North Star. Mr Kelliher winced, and stretched a liver-spotted hand up behind himself to investigate a region of the upper back, and his eyes leapt to the ceiling, and he said:

'Would you ever get a class of a cold pain out a lung?'

'Would you not mean a kind of a white heat, Mr Kelliher?'

'Precisely so, Brendan!'

'Searing,' said Thomas.

'Like a poker!' said Mr Kelliher.

'Arra,' I said, and we all three of us nodded in sad resignation.

The North Star was discreetly situated in the town. You trailed down the steep decline of Russell Hill, passed Bord Gáis and Hair Affair, you kept your head down passing the guards, you moved away from the commerce and traffic of the town, you hung an abrupt left into a narrow, vague, nothing-much sort of a street, and this was Pearse Street, its dullness a measure of the low esteem that particular

martyr was held in hereabouts. The North Star was the only action on Pearse Street, and sunlight breached this narrow gorge for just one hour a day but now was the hour and Mr Kelliher came out from behind the bar and he shut the blinds fully against it. He was a small man neatly hewn, and sallow, with impressively planed features, like the carved dark aztec of a cliff-face, and he was of indeterminate age; it wouldn't surprise you if he was forty-three or seventy-four, and there was something of Charlie Chaplin in the swing-along, quick-stepping gait, but you wouldn't mention it.

'Turned out fairly nice, Mr Kelliher.'

'Pleasant enough looking, Brendan.'

'After the night we put down.'

'Sure the night was filthy altogether.'

He picked up the neatly placed beer mats from each of The North Star's five zinc-topped tables, though they hadn't been used, and he replaced them with fresh, which he dealt out with Vegas flourish. Stepped in behind the bar again, with a clearing of the throat, hmm-hmm, and it was the satisfaction of small rituals that emanated from him, though by now it was a weakish glow.

'What way are they above?'

'Well, Mr Kelliher.'

'That's good at least. Did you tell them Hourigan was gone to the wall?'

'I did.'

'They'd have sport from that?'

'They would, Mr Kelliher.'

'A very bleak situation.'

'I thought he had his head above water.'

'Indeed no.'

'Hard to have sympathy, all the same?'

'Same fella wouldn't piss on you, Brendan.'

'The beard does nothing for him,' said Thomas.

The classical music succumbed to a news bulletin and there was

talk of violent death, atrocities in Africa, oil shortages, a widow in Castleisland with lucky numbers for the Lottery, and we listened, keenly enough, for The North Star was at a remove from the world, certainly, but by no means cut off from it.

'A sad, peculiar life, gentlemen?'

'To put it very mildly, Mr Kelliher.'

The stout was about its work. It was the third drink of the day, and the drinking would slow now to session pace—the dread of the morning had lifted, we had passed the hour of remorse, and we marched to the mellow afternoon. Even Thomas was starting to look fairly chipper. A strange rumbling then, like dogs going at each

other in the distance, but it was internal, miserably, and I wasn't sure if it was my own stomach or the cousin's. Serious drinking, the drinking of a lifetime's devotion, is hard physical labour.

'You persevere despite it all, Mr Kelliher?'

'You never weaken, Brendan. Weaken and all is lost.'

It was due that the crossword of the *Irish Times* would put in an appearance, and the three of us would make light work of it, normally. Thomas would be an amazement to you. Sit there like a stone all the morning and then start throwing out words like 'inimical' and 'hauteur'. But the crossword was left aside, for there was to be a disturbance this day in The North Star. The door opened up, and glamour stepped in.

Glamour carried itself with great elegance and ease. It was jewelled at the fingers and jewelled at the throat. It wore fine woolens and high leather boots and a green velvet cape, the texture such an excitement against machine-tanned skin. Glamour took onto a high stool beside us, and delicately arranged itself.

'Howye, lads,' she said. 'What reeds have ye on?'

The North Star was by no means inoculated against the charms of glamour, especially when it spoke with this whispery hoarseness, and Mr Kelliher was a flushed boy as he pressed into action.

'Madam,' he said. 'I'm afraid I can only offer a meagre selection.'

But let's see now, let's see.'

He took down one each of the varieties of red wine he kept in the house, the little 33cl. glass-and-a-bit bottles, which myself and Thomas sometimes resorted to late in the evening, if the sheer volume of stout was threatening to overwhelm matters. The evenings we hit the firewater are as well left unremarked.

'Really,' said Mr Kelliher, 'I should put you in the hands of these gentlemen. They'd be the experts.'

I nodded, shyly, and reached down to see if my voice would function, and it had a quiver and a quake but it emerged anyway.

'The merlot isn't a bad old drop, as it goes,' I said. 'A Chilean.' 'Oh?' she said, and she took the bottle to examine it. She granted a familiar smile to me, and she crossed her long legs beneath the woolen folds. The electric rustling of nylons was heard, it went off like a crack of lightning in the premises, and a light sweat broke out on my forehead.

'The pinot noir is bog standard, to be honest with you. It'd be fairly... flat, really. Of the three, I'd nearly go for the cabernet. It's not going to stand up and talk to you, it's very much the usual, but there's nothing wrong with that. It's kinda...'

'Full and ripe?' she said, with the mouth twisted slightly.

'You could say.'

'A very nice breakfast wine,' said Thomas, you'd never know when he was going to come out with a quick one. She granted to him a slyer smile.

'I'll take your word for it,' she said, and she took the bottle and unscrewed the top, the movement of her long fingers was quick and dizzying.

Now jealousy was no stranger in the town. It was my own foul weather, a cold mist that surrounded me. But it's a familiar old song, that one, you'd hear it in every public bar of the town, you'd hear it in all the low bars of Nicholas Street, and in the suede-smelling hush of the hotel's lounge bar, you'd hear it in all the honky tonks of the

Castle Walk. The radio announced that a complex frontal trough was moving in off the Atlantic. Good luck to it.

'The sort of day,' she said, 'you wouldn't know would you want a coat on you or what. Seasons changing.'

'They haven't much choice,' said Mr Kelliher. 'Where are you from yourself?'

She named a western town, a place so far away that we hadn't a picture at all of the fallings of life in that town, though we'd suspect them to be harsh.

'And what brings you here?' said Mr Kelliher.

'A minor secondary road,' she said, and winked him one, and he lit up like Christmas.

She enquired about rental accommodation in the town, and I could sense stirrings the other side of me on a high stool. We related to her what possibilities there were.

'Are you talking a night or a week or what?'

'You wouldn't know,' she said. 'I'm the way I don't know how a notion might turn in me. Did you ever get that way? Did you ever wake up and think, what about a turn on the heel? What about a sudden swerve?'

She seemed carefully made up, at first glance, but a more considered examination, there in the convivial afternoon of The North Star, revealed the flaws and slips. The mascara had run a little at the eyes, and the lip gloss was a rush job, and this gave her a fraught quality. It hinted at drama that was by no means unwelcome, for the days were slow in The North Star, and the nights were only trotting after them.

'Would you put on a pint for me, Mr Kelliher?'

'I would, Brendan.'

'Cuzz?'

'Go on sure.'

'And yourself, miss?'

'Very kind,' she said.

Mr Kellihier smirked in the way that he has.

'Very poor qualities of observation I would have to say, Brendan.'

'Oh?'

'This isn't a miss we have,' and he wriggled fingers in the air, and I caught it, belatedly, on the third finger of her left hand, the sparkler. She looked at it herself and mock-proudly held it for display.

'Actually,' she said, 'I'm separated.'

A class of dizziness palpable from the high stool the other side of me.

'I'm sorry to hear that,' whispered Mr Kellihier, decorous again after his cheeky intrusion.

'Ah,' she said. 'It's the way things work out sometimes.'

We nodded, the three men, sombre as owls. We nodded as though the cruel variables of love were hardly news to us. We nodded as though we'd each known heartbreak and the ache of a lost love, as though we'd each walked the Castle Walk, at four in the morning, in cold rain, with the collars turned up against a lonely wind. Oh what we wouldn't have given for broken hearts.

'A marriage is an old record,' she said. 'It'll go around and around grand for years and then it gets so scratched it's unlistenable.'

Stranger talk, this, and there was unease now at the counter of The North Star. Even before our stout was settled and served, she was making good progress on the second small bottle of cabernet.

'Are ye farming, men?' she said.

'You'd hardly call it that,' I said, 'at this stage.'

'Site farmers!' said Mr Kellihier.

'Don't mind him,' I said.

'You take what's going,' she said.

'A fool not too,' I said.

Certainly, these had been good years for us. The land of the vicinity wasn't great, not by any stretch, but it had fine views of dreary hills, and the rivers were swollen with licey trout, and this

was enough to draw people in. We sold them what space they wanted, having plenty to spare.

A truck went past, rattling the neat stacks of glasses, and Mr Kellihier shut his eyes, briefly, in suffering, and he was seen to suppress a swear.

'More of it,' he said. 'They're using it as a rat run, d'you see? Since they got in the traffic calming up on the Castle Walk. Bastards of lorries cutting down all day, you'll pardon my French. What way are ye over for traffic calming?'

'Measures are in place,' she said. 'But if you're asking me if any good is being done?'

She shrugged. It was an expansive movement, performed, to let us know in the cheap seats that a wry puzzlement was signalled. She was a kind of woman not entirely unknown to us. In quietish towns, there are women with a great want for drama and heat, even if it's only trouble that can bring it. Such a woman might often be the only throb of life in a place. We were stirred by her. Mr Kellihier's mouth hung on its hinges and waves of emotion swept over him, as though she was a sacred daughter brought back from the wolves. Thomas, by the big red face on him, was clearly subject to notions himself.

And I couldn't wait to get home so as I could dream about her.

'Take all the cars off the roads,' she said. 'All the trucks and all the jeeps. Build bonfires of the things and torch them. Watch them burn, wait for the tanks to blow. Storm the county councils and rip up the road plans. No more roundabouts and no more lay-bys. Anybody stepping anywhere near a vehicle of any mechanical description is put up against a wall and shot before night. Imagine it, lads—the world slows again to a human pace. We could saunter and stroll. How would that be?'

'A woman,' said Thomas, 'after my own heart.'

'Mind you,' she said, and she held three fingers aloft, indicated with them our glasses, and winked for Mr Kellihier. 'I was thankful

for the car under me when I was putting distance between myself and Rhino Flynn.'

'Who?'

'My husband,' she said.

'And ye're... separated now?'

'We are,' she said. 'Since about half four this morning.'

She drained what was left of the second cabernet, made a start on the fresh. From a wallet of fine snakeskin she placed a note on the table.

'One yourself, sir?'

'Thanks, I won't,' said Mr Kelliher. 'I haven't drank in years.'

'Oh?'

'It wasn't agreeing with me. A doctor put me on the spot and said I wouldn't see forty.'

'And now you've seen it,' she said, 'has it been worth it?'

'Arguable,' he said.

We went uncertainly into the afternoon. The classical station went into its period of great torpor, to the slowest dirges and dreamiest movements. Up top of the hill, the town could be heard to go about its Thursday business. Car doors slamming was the punctuation of the place. Soon enough, they'd let out from the primary school, and quick giddy footsteps would go past outside, and sing-song taunts in unbroken voices. We knew them all. We'd watch them grow taller and leave. The years come in, the years go out. The longer you'd sit and look at it, the life of the town would contract to almost nothing, to the merest glimpse of life, the tiniest crack of light against the black. It passes quickest in the slow places.

'You'd hear him before you'd see him,' she said. 'Big old lunk. Big shit head on him. Powerful build of a man but a small child at the end of the day.'

'Would be often the way, missus.'

'You can call me Josie,' she said, and the name was all her, it had

carnival roll to it, and more drinks were arranged.

'I don't know would I have a Heineken?' she said. 'I have a throat on me but no, listen, I'll stick with these. Grape or grain, never the twain.'

'Hard-won wisdom,' I said.

'Married at all yersevelves, lads?' she said. 'I didn't think so. Ye're as well not. Less complications.'

'I could use complications,' said Thomas.

'Now!' said Mr Kelliher. 'That's a ripe one, Tom.'

Thomas slugged off the high stool, he was embarrassed once the words slipped out, and he headed for the gents. She watched him over her shoulder, the tip of her tongue emerging between her lips.

'What's with the quiet man?' she said.

'The strong silent type,' said Mr Kelliher.

'Learned my lesson about them longo,' she said. I felt a thrumming within myself, the heartbeat had quickened, and Mr Kelliher worked the rag with the turn of the knot and the run of the grain, and we were nervous until Thomas got back.

'So tell me,' she said. 'Is it always this hectic?' She crossed and uncrossed her legs, there was a crack of lightning, and the afternoon was in around me like redcoats with muskets primed, and I said:

'Would you put on a pint for me, Mr Kelliher?'  
'I would, Brendan.'

'Cuzz?'

'Would you ever leave me live my fucking life?' said Thomas.

'He will, Mr Kelliher. Josie?'

'One for the high road,' she said.

Things settled again, and cream notes mingled with brown, and though I searched for the small talk that might work as lead to weight the balloon, there wasn't need for it, because something had given away in Josie now: she showed herself more fully.

'Strain in my neck from the car,' she said. 'Driving half the night

on bad roads. But I had to get away from the other bastard. The poison got into the big fool and he couldn't let me out of his sight. The next thing I know I'm on the floor of the garage tied down with flex.'

The schoolchildren passed by outside, high and excited, the sense of release, the daily fiesta of half past three, and the town's noises would change and quicken with the afternoon, a particular agitation would surface, the rush and hubbub of it, people hurrying home to whatever was waiting, and normally at this time the pace of our drinking would quicken also. Often, it was the hour of the firewater.

'This is what flex does,' she said, and she shucked the cuffs of her sleeves to show the weals and the raised welts, blistered yellow and furious red, and soft consoling noises were made. Grip her gently in the darkness, pull her towards you: it would read like Braille.

'Who were you talking to, he says. I seen you talking to him. Why were you talking to him...' She shrugged it away. 'I should have seen it coming.'

She finished what was left of her drink, and she regarded us with great fondness and there was an intimation that there was shared history to come, that she too would become a familiar of the premises.

'It's been something else, fellas,' she said, and she carried herself to the door on careful heels, not a single step was sloppily placed.

'I open at eleven,' said Mr Kelliher, discreetly.

'Good to know,' she winked for him once more, and left.

So it was that The North Star was saved. With its five zinc-topped tables in the afternoon gloom, and the pendant flags of Tipperary, the gold and the blue, and its three high stools placed so by the bar. The turn of the dark wood's knot, the run of its grain. The shine of the optics, the calendar, the lulling music always played. The North Star is immune to all winds and complex troughs. The North Star is a safe haven.

### Burn The Bad Lamp

**A** man walks into a corner shop. He is a nervous man, easily knocked from his groove, and it is a great disturbance to him when he is addressed by a four foot tall chicken.

'Cluckety cluck,' it says. 'Try your luck?'

Ralph Coughlan and the chicken have this encounter six days a week and it's doing neither of them any favours. He knows there is a motion sensor embedded behind the chicken's eyes that clocks his movement. He is quite aware that it is an electronic chicken that lays plastic eggs containing trinkets and toys but even so, it leaves him a little shook. It's got to the stage where he is trying to tiptoe past the chicken to dodge the sensor's reach. It is a Tuesday in March, with all that that suggests. Ralph scans the magazine racks as he waits to be served. All the magazines are about extreme sports and cannabis cultivation techniques. The shop is operated by an unpleasantly owl-faced woman. Not once in four years has he had even a suggestion of warmth from this person. He knows that 'perceived slights' is one of the key danger signs but there is nothing perceived about it. He is always super-friendly himself, to provide an instructive contrast with her surliness, but you might as well instruct the wall. He buys a sausage roll, a Diet Coke, and a scratchcard. She slams his change onto the counter and eyes him as though to say more? Is there something more?