

## Four poems and two stories

*Mary O'Donnell*

“Those Prostitutes in Cuba”

For JS

They were like two kittens, he said,  
snuggling up to him,  
they were fun and they liked him.

I thought — against my own sex — how  
enviable his freedom to fall in  
with such company, then breakfast

with them afterwards, heartily, admiring  
their health, their strong teeth, that  
vitality. It could never happen

to a woman my age, two tiger men  
who would not wound, the three of us  
so human in a dusky room, sunlight

stealing through the slats in colours  
from Matisse, the riotous world  
within and without.

“Heron and the Women”

Quiet and still,  
those mornings when walkers  
suddenly pounce, with dogs  
ripping muscular through the wind  
on the far side of the canal.  
Female voices,

he hears their heat as  
if released.  
He is a study in grey  
a match for the silence  
absent in their words.

When they see him,  
it's too late. He has lifted,  
spread his wings  
against gravity, above  
the careless spirals of words.

Sometimes,  
they witness the grace  
of wing-tilt and wind,  
the dangling twig legs.

Ancient symbols appear,  
as on a page,  
to remain unread,  
wet inks of a script dropped  
from above as he flies,  
to settle only, when dogs  
are restrained,  
and the canal is vellum.

“Unlegendary Heroes”

‘Life passes through places.’  
– P.J. Duffy, *Landscapes of South Ulster*

*Patrick Farrell, of Lackagh, who was able to mow  
one acre and one rood Irish in a day.*

*Tom Gallagher, Cornamucklagh, could walk 50  
Irish miles in one day.*

*Patrick Mulligan, Cremartin, was a great oarsman.*

*Tommy Atkinson, Lismagunshin, was very good at  
highjumping – he could jump six feet high.*

*John Duffy, Corley, was able to dig half an Irish acre  
in one day.*

*Edward Monaghan, Annagh, who could stand on his  
head on a pint tumbler or on the rigging of a house.*

– 1938 folklore survey to record the local people  
who occupied the South Ulster parish landscape.

\* \* \*

Kathleen McKenna, Annagola,  
who was able to wash a week's sheets, shirts  
and swaddling, bake bread and clean the house  
all of a Monday.

Birdy McMahan, of Faulkland,  
walked to Monaghan for a sack of flour two days before  
her eighth child was born.

Cepta Duffy, Glennan,  
very good at sewing – embroidered a set of vestments  
in five days.

Mary McCabe, of Derrynashallog,  
who cared for her husband's mother in dotage,  
fed ten children,  
the youngest still at the breast during hay-making.

Mary Conlon, Tullyree,  
who wrote poems at night.

Assumpta Meehan, Tonygarvey,  
saw many visions and was committed to the asylum.

Martha McGinn, of Emy,  
who swam Cornamunden Lough in one hour and a quarter.

Marita McHugh, Foxhole,  
whose sponge cakes won the First Prize at Cloncaw Show.

Miss Harper, Corley,  
female problems rarely ceased, pleasant in ill-health.

Patricia Curley, Corlatt,  
whose joints ached and swelled though she was young,  
who bore three children.

Dora Heuston, Strananny,  
died in childbirth, aged 14 years,  
last words 'Mammy, O Mammy!'

Rosie McCrudden, Aghabog,  
noted for clean boots, winter or summer,  
often beaten by her father.

Maggie Trayner, Donagh,  
got no breakfast, fed by the nuns, batch loaf with jam,  
the best speller in the school.

Phyllis McCrudden, Knockaphubble,  
who buried two husbands, reared five children  
and farmed her own land.

Ann Moffett, of Enagh,  
who taught people to read and did not charge.

“The Kitchen Girl’s Pumpkin”

Next year, she promises  
to experiment with the plants:  
one for the glasshouse, the rest  
in open garden, taking their chances  
in vagrant soil.

She studies the crop,  
a single bright yellow gourd,  
flesh that yields to her fingernail  
but does not break; hollow sound  
when she taps it with her knuckle,  
its life-dense weight.

The mother plant lies shrivelled,  
puckered as an umbilical cord after birth,  
exhausted by this hefty youngster  
that glows brazenly through morning fog.

At night, on her narrow settle,  
she feels only solid heat,  
her dreaming mind already harvests seeds  
scoured loose by a santoku knife,  
composes extraordinary soups  
for the long table upstairs.

“La mer”

We’d always called ourselves ‘Les trois amies’. It was our little joke, and played on the self-consciously amused tone of the French writer Colette, whom we admired for a certain witty feminine intelligence. It was a question of accepting the incongruities of the world, of knowing paradox and inconsistency. Like most of our generation, we believed there was no single truth. It remains perhaps the only thing we share in common with the younger generation we sometimes sense snapping at our heels, believing that we have deprived them of some undefined text of rights.

A bond forged at university meant we never strayed very far from one another’s ideas, despite gaps of geography. When we would meet up again, there usually followed a debriefing in Conza’s pretty cottage on one of Dublin’s mysterious terraces. Although we were born in the same Catholic county and baptised with furiously defining names – my name-burden is Eucharía, while the other two trudged through childhood as Assumpta and Concep-ta – we took command of our destinies and the question of how the world would view us, and conflated our ghastly names to the secular monikers of Ria, Asta and Conza. We considered ourselves rather clever.

There was, in fact, a fourth party to the friendship, but for some reason we never became ‘Les quatre amies’. The other woman, Bernice, I had never known so well, nor she me, the result being that any attempts to turn ourselves into a four-wheeled vehicle of friendship floundered from the start. But if I wasn’t with Asta and Conza, and she was, they also referred to themselves as ‘Les trois amies’. So, this interchangeable, flexible arrangement persisted over the years, and I imagine will always do so. When I am with Asta and Conza, we are the three friends who appear in one another’s texted photos to this one or that one, and when she is with them and I am not, the triangle of friendship continues, even if in a slightly different shape and at a slightly different angle. Our triangularity is not equilateral, because we are each so different from one another.

On July 10, Asta and Bernice had travelled to Argentat to join Conza in the *maison secondaire* which she and her siblings had bought some years before. It was to be *une petite vacance*. A break with Conza never failed to lift spirits, and as usual there was need for some spirit-elevation, given that Bernice’s twin daughters had just left for Australia for God knows how long, and Asta had recently sold her cherished apartment in Cannes. These were big upheavals, and Conza – ever a mender of foul and depleted spirits – had invited them *chez elle* for a week. To say that I envied them would be an understatement. Being with Conza, one felt truly cared for. Her house nestled in one of the

most beautiful and unknown parts of *la belle France* in an ordinary town with its ordinary, but so pretty, streets. The Dordogne flowed massively beneath its several grand bridges, thick-watered, shimmering and gleaming in the shifting light. Her house was settled unobtrusively on a terrace and did not belong to a specially-built holiday scheme. *Au contraire*, dear Conza had managed to recreate the kind of provincial home she had had growing up in Ireland, a little smaller, but no less charming, with geraniums and nasturtiums tumbling in pots, and gentle walls of lemon and apricot colours.

On one side of her lived the family of an elderly Comptess. That house was painted in terracotta shades, with white shutters and small, lace-draped windows. The arrival of the ninety-year old Comptess, down from Paris, usually propelled her middle-aged bachelor twin sons to a flurry of gardening and lawn-trimming prior to the moment when her sleek limousine hummed quietly into position outside the front door. At first, she had held some reserve with Conza, but our friend's gift of innate *politesse* appeals to the more conservative French. Inevitably, the Comptess went so far as to offer her (and hence us, when we were there) the use of their *bijou* swimming-pool, which her sons had cleared of algae and water-beetles just before her arrival. Other friendly gestures came in the form of fresh eggs, ceps, and home-made jams, because the Comptess usually set to work immediately, happy to be free of Paris and its intense atmospheres, as she described them, and patê, jam and other delights would emerge at intervals from the next-door kitchen for us to sample.

That year, I had just had a holiday, but in Croatia. There should be no 'but'. There was nothing Oliver and I enjoyed more than a little swimming, some languid snorkeling, all in the clearest and cleanest of waters, as well as late-evenings dreaming over glasses of rich, red Degarra in the yacht we occasionally hired. But as I confided to Asta and Conza, no matter what, it was not France, the only country in the world that we loved without question. No matter where we travelled – and Oliver had already spent fifty days away from Ireland on business that year – there was always something lacking, that indefinable feeling of *bien-être* which went hand in hand with the land that is France.

Back in Ireland, Oliver and I were slightly depressed. The holiday sunshine had done us good, we'd been thousands of miles away from the niggling problems of our own lives – for example, our son, living with a woman who has never read a book, who told us brazenly that she *had* a book, but hadn't got around to reading it. She liked books, she even told me once, but preferred magazines. She made no bones about the fact that she wanted to make money, and worked sixty-hour weeks doing so. We should, I suppose, be pleased about that. When we married we moved into an unfurnished house, with no table or chairs, although we had a bed. At least we had a good bed. Between us, we

too eventually worked fifty and sixty hour weeks as Oliver's fine arts sales room thrived and buyers were sucking up the contents of every old ascendancy pile that came on the market around 2005, not to mention all the abstract art they could handle that would match a particular colour-scheme. *Puif!* as the French might say, with a hint of a shrug.

As for me? He supported me as I wrote Celtic noir thrillers and then made the money that covered the rental of yachts and out of the way, air-conditioned villas. Mostly though, I paid for our 'France habit', as I called it. I had to be in France in order to feel well. Even with imperfect French, I could go there with Asta and Conza and, as we evolved once again into *les trois amies*, I could feel the cells of my body regenerating. Or was it the cells of my mind? Renewed, I would then return home to Oliver, to my yellow-walled study with its tumble of books, to the Pierre Bonnard postcard pack which I never seemed to use as I enjoyed looking at the pictures so much, to my framed print of Matisse's *Nu Drapé*, and the problems of the next novel. *Je vais tourner la page*, I would tell myself, I want to move on. And I could move on, because of having gone to France.

At intervals during the day of July 14, I received photos from both Asta and Conza as they progressed through the hours in Argentat, with Bernice. *Les 3 amies!* Asta exclaimed around midday via a jubilant image of herself, Conza and Bernice at the market, all three bearing newly purchased, polka-dotted tote bags, and wearing happy, relaxed expressions. During the afternoon, another image popped up, this time from Conza herself: *Le troisième pont!!* I smiled at this, remembering the occasion I'd stopped on the third bridge of our cycling route with Conza and Asta, propping our bikes before taking a few pictures to forward to Bernice, who was in Ireland. I replied immediately with an equally joyous blast of French: *Ha, voila les trois amies encore! Comme la photo est adorable, tout le monde est heureux et souriant... bisous a vous et a les autres. Souhaitant que je pourrais être avec la bonne compagnie de vous! Ria xx*

Later that day, Asta texted me a gay *Going for our promenade soon. It's 14th July, fireworks tonight!* As if I didn't already know this? I thought of them then, remembering other occasions when I'd been in France – once near Toulouse, once driving though Sarlat and missing my turnoff away from the town on my journey back to a rented farmhouse outside Belves, and yet another time in the *quartier Latin* – and the great celebration which gripped the country when fireworks were lit and light and colour inscribed the evening sky, and the aroma of barbecuing meats – succulent beef, young goat, wild boar – became the fireworks of earthy appetite – the thing that defines France for me – and food was good, and it was good to eat, and to drink, because this was the gift and pleasure of living on our fragile earth. I couldn't resist texting Conza in my stricken French just then: *Bonjour Conza et tout*

*le monde a l'Argentat! J'espère que toutes va bien entre les trois gentilles filles! Have fun ce soir. Bisous, Ria x*

And within minutes, her reply: *Merci beaucoup Ria. Nous sommes tres bien . . . le soleil recommence a briller donc Asta est tres contente!! Bernice est parti hier pour Nice pour une rendezvous mysterieuse :) Asta et moi allons a la quai pour voir le feu d'artifice plus tard ce soir. C'est dommage tu n'es pas ici avec nous mais peut-être, la prochaine fois?? Bisous, C.* Being Conza, she attached a little French flag to mark the occasion, and left me to mull over Bernice's rendezvous in Nice, which I suspected to be of a romantic nature.

In Ireland that evening, we sweltered in an unexpected heatwave, not helped by the copious glasses of rosé I'd imbibed. Oliver was spreadeagled in shorts, his belly folding gently over the waistband as he sipped an icy beer. On impulse, he switched on Sky News.

There it was. Disaster in Nice. A 19-ton truck. The hundreds of revellers, their children, who had drifted carelessly along the Promenade des Anglais, which we three friends knew and loved – no, adored – a place of whole, affectionate histories, destroyed in seconds.

The world knows what happened. Oliver's eyes grew moist as he absorbed what he was hearing and seeing. My tears also leaked free as I beheld Hotel Negresci in the background, where *les trois amies* (both versions of us) had occasionally drunk cocktails and discussed our mutual concerns; I watched a man fleeing determinedly, his small son plastered tightly against his chest. It was the same rolling image, over and over, likewise on Al Jazeera, and on France 24. What voyeurs we became, I thought then. And yet, there seemed to be no choice.

Then I remembered. Bernice. *Elle est parti hier pour Nice.* Immediately, I texted the two in Argentat, but in English. No reply. Being an hour ahead, they'd obviously gone to bed after the local celebrations. Early the next morning, my text zoomed off again. It was no time to play at French. We were not part of *France profonde* and never would be. We were dilettantes. I knew that. *So shocked and saddened here by the terrible news, is Bernice okay? Oliver and I shed tears last night. He has great mems of being there with friends. They played Charles Trenet's La Mer on radio this morning as a salute. Asta x.* Indeed, Charles Trenet's joyful voice had turned my cheeks to a glaze of tears. I shook my head in despair at Oliver, who nodded, his lips sealed as if swallowing the burden of so much feeling. There was no point in falling to our knees in prayer, jack-knifing back to religion, because prayer did not help people like us. What had happened, was achieved. The wickedness of the



world had triumphed. Everything, laid bare. It was not time to pray, but to think: what next? How to go on?

Meanwhile in Argentat, my two friends and their neighbours were in a state of uproar, if despair can be termed uproar. I believe it can. The Comptess was prostrate in bed, Conza texted, while her sons sat despondently beside a row of heavily-fruited tomato plants. More commentary ensued, in English, this time from Asta. *O Ria, it's so awful. Only heard it this morn. It could be Cannes. Haven't caught up with Bernice yet, which worries us, but we are hopeful . . . sitting in le petit beau jardin now with a cup of Earl Grey tea in glorious evening sun . . . trying to catch up with it all and take a breath! But still need to hear from Bernice!!*

Asta was right. It could well have been Cannes, which she had only recently vacated by selling her airy holiday apartment in the city's ethnic area. *Les trois amies*, both versions of us, had occasionally decamped to there to spend time with Asta, whose French was as perfect as one's French can be. When we drove out in a rented car, the arrangement had, as usual, a tripartite aspect: Asta drove, I played map-reader, and Conza, who usually sat in the back with maps, books and Google, provided astute but relevant historical information. We would meander up into the Alpes Maritimes, stopping for lunch in out-of-the-way restaurants which seemed tacked precariously onto the side of sheer enough mountains, or occasionally pausing at that oddity of the modern world, a Marian shrine in the middle of nowhere. There were early mornings in St Paul de Vence before the great heat engulfed us, and galleries, and art, which I couldn't afford but bought anyway. And sometimes there were small tensions, as even among the best of friends, over such matters as how far to walk, or where to dine (Conza had specific culinary interests and occasionally liked to track down a good vegetarian restaurant, always difficult in France). But all in all, we pulled well together, and small, inconsequential, yet to us amusing things happened, which on the dark of a wintry January afternoon in Dublin we would recall and chuckle over.

Nevertheless, I still felt I had to text Conza, who after all is the centre of our web of friendship. *Ah, Conza, quels horreurs à Nice!*, I wrote. *As tu entendu parler de Bernice encore? Je suis totalement triste, Oliver aussi. Ooh la la, a case of 'au revoir les enfants', non? Ria x* To which immediately, and gratifyingly, came the response: *Merci Ria . . . oui, nous sommes tous en état de choc ici. Quelle horreur! Conza x*

To our relief, Bernice phoned Conza around midday on the 15th to say she was safe. She'd left Nice alone and on impulse that evening. Perhaps the fact of the journey was true, but I doubt if she was alone. She'd then caught

a train to Menton, where she'd stood on the shingled beach, (she said), with the yellowing town behind her as the local fireworks flushed through the sky. Everything was fine, she assured Conza, she was safe, and moreover she had heard from her daughters in Australia. They were apparently missing her. So she wasn't so sad as she might have been. Her daughters' love was apparently holding her safe in the middle of calamity.

The strange thing was that I, Conza, and Asta were all homesick in the indefinable, stomach-sickening, deeply-troubled way of those who have lost what I can only call a heart source. The French now needed compassion and more, if the ghastly wound, the rupture, was to heal.

We will always be sick, as if with love, for the France we once first encountered through Colette, Camus, and de Beauvoir, through Racine and Molière, and for me especially through the delicious theories of Henri Bergson, and the revelations of Flaubert, not to mention the miserable musings of Georges Bernanos's provincial curate. This is not showing off. These were the dead writers who fed me, as if through a funnel, towards France.

Now the passage of time itself seems strangely snagged, as if discontinued. As Bergson might suggest, everything has already happened anyway. Life is like a ball of wool, very dense, and we live through all of it, moving along the single thread of yarn that unravels with our lives. Somehow, you could say that the wickedness of Bastille Day in Nice had already happened. We just had to catch up with it, to experience the horrible knot that would drag us all to a standstill.

*Les trois amies* will continue to be such. We will visit France again and again, attempting, just by being there, to undo the repugnant marks of terror in a place misunderstood by its enemies, who are profligate and can never know what they desecrate. Once, it was the Germans who inscribed the worst on the text of history. Now, the others are writing our texts before we have even imagined them.

#### "The Path to Heaven"

It had been a beautiful autumn. She was glad not to live in Poland, where her housekeeper Kalina reported that snow had fallen. There were other reasons not to want to be in Poland, of course. She sometimes strolled and kicked her way around the garden and through the fallen leaves, encircled by a wall of tree-fire. Trees which she and her husband planted years ago were now mature. Their ground was hidden in a hollow far below the distant motor-

way from which morning commuter traffic droned. A gravel path led to the bottom end, and through a break in the ancient wall that enclosed a forest.

Kalina came on Tuesdays. Sometimes her face was bright and happy. She looked like a girl and not a mother of young daughters. She would chatter about the weather. *Very nice day!* or *In Poland now minus ten degrees . . .*

With her movement and smile, she carried a fragrant energy into the house. But sometimes, with hair pulled sharply into a thin, high, ponytail, she could look severe and sharp. There were grey circles beneath her eyes, and a worried pucker nicked the smooth skin between her eyebrows. Dressed in a worn, pillied fleece and tight jeans, she looked careworn. Lauren sometimes wanted to console her instead of having her clean the house. But it was part of the unspoken contract. The Irish woman employed, the Polish woman worked.

Sometimes she would listen from her study to the sound of the vacuum-cleaner on the stairway. They often talked together, usually while Kalina vacuumed.

She felt a certain guilt at having another woman do work she herself was not willing to do. She also felt guilt as a writer, because people, including Kalina, thought writers were wealthy, but sat at home and gazed at their navels during the day before heading out to quaff wine at some merry evening book-launch.

Each week, Lauren had already sorted the laundry herself, folded and smoothed it before Kalina's arrival. She removed all underwear except her husband's vests. The only items Kalina had to iron were his vests and shirts, then the sheets and pillow-cases. He changed his shirt every day, and was size 52, so these were large garments.

Kalina never took a break for tea, never accepted a biscuit. She would laugh and say she had to watch calories after having two babies. *Children such work! And I still breast-feeding.* At this, she would make a sucking gesture with her mouth, and smile shyly.

Even so, suspicion found its way into Lauren's thoughts. She could even isolate quite precisely its portal of entry. Three times during her first encounter with Kalina's partner, he informed her that in Poland he was once a Physics lecturer, but that now, he had no work. He loomed in their doorway with a parchment face and thick hair threaded with grey. He was serious and unsmiling, but, feeling at a loss, she offered sympathy and the hope that his chances would improve. From what Kalina told her in the ensuing months, he seemed selective about the work he would do. He would certainly not clean houses and offices, as Kalina did. Instead, he stayed home seeking work on the online job sites every day that offered opportunity after opportunity, yet none for him. He also minded their two infant girls. He disliked this. It was not a man's work.

Once, she asked Kalina if he prepared some lunch for her when she arrived home. But he was too busy reading and researching, then minding the

children as well. Kalina laughed incredulously at Lauren. Her partner often reminded her that she was a cleaner, but that he was a man of science.

Lauren was as old as Kalina's mother in Sobibór, Poland, but according to Kalina, she was glamorous and much younger looking than her mother. Sobibór lay close to where the borders of Belarus and Ukraine nudged against Poland. It was also the name of one of the more secret extermination camps during Nazi occupation. Lauren had never heard of it. The familiar list of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Belsen, Dachau, Mauthausen and Buchenwald sprang immediately to mind, but Sobibór?

Kalina's family remembered the time of the camp, but nobody talked about it any more. Her grandmother would like to, Kalina confessed, but her parents were modern Polish people. They avoided such talk.

From week to week the women discussed different topics. Men, education and children, cultural differences between Ireland and Poland, the fashion for tattoos and body art, and whether or not Kalina should have herself sterilised. Lauren already understood that this last subject was out of the question for Kalina's partner, and it intrigued her that some couples still played Russian Roulette in the bedroom.

He was a good man, Kalina would insist, as if to defend him. *Sometimes, I think he depressed.*

One night, Lauren had a monochrome dream, devoid of people. It unfolded like a grainy movie, with cloud shadows, muffled sound, unclear forms and tilting, unstable buildings.

Everything was indistinct, but she was in the scene, walking through fog along a narrow, rubble street, watching in fear as the tops of the buildings curved and tilted, waiting to be crushed beneath the falling bricks. She felt terrified, and woke with a jolt. Her dream was recomposing what she already knew about terrible histories, projecting it into the space left open by Kalina's comments about Sobibór a few weeks before. She tossed and turned, imagining the place which Kalina's parents didn't want to discuss. Her husband ground his teeth in his sleep beside her, then turned, pulling the bedclothes with him. She lay still, but her eyes remained wide open in the dark as she recalled the horrific elements of the dream.

The following morning, she opened up her laptop. Her grey eyes darted rapidly down the screen. *Sobibór*: built in 1942, dismantled after a prisoner revolt in late 1943. Almost a quarter of a million people died there. Jews themselves prepared other Jews for the gas chambers, collected shoes, advised them to tie the laces together so that the pairs would not get lost, Jews also removed the bodies afterwards. These helper Jews accompanied the people about to be gassed as they walked along a path in the forest, later referred to as 'The Path to Heaven'. Even though the path was surrounded by barbed wire, the tube-like, green and bucolic final walk gave hope to the unwitting people, who believed that they were going to have a shower after their arduous train journey.

Lauren paused to look out the window, allowing her gaze to fall on an almost leafless birch. Birds were still singing though it was late in the year. She imagined the birdsong of Sobibór, the verdant, fertile summer of that year, the faint glisten of hope in people's minds as they trekked along, thinking this camp was not going to be so bad, after all. They had been welcomed on the station platform. And now, they could shower. The soldiers had seemed quite civilised, considering the things one heard. Everything would be all right.

She tried not to dwell on the next part. It was the same in all the camps of death, and just over seven decades ago, Kalina's very young grandparents would have sensed all what was happening. They would have inhaled the infamous, sickening smell, it would have been part of their everyday breathing. They would have *known*. Everybody must have known that the second railway track, which forked away from the main station track and into the camp, was not a picnic site after a sight-seeing trip.

Autumn deepened into early winter. It was the end of November. The first Sunday in Advent had passed and Lauren resumed an annual ritual of lighting a candle on the breakfast table. She wasn't religious, but anticipation gripped her as days darkened, as twilights became cobalt with cloud, and bare branches and stems conversed with frail light. Kalina was due at ten.

Over breakfast, the couple discussed Christmas arrangements. Their son and daughter would fly home from London. There would be bedrooms to have made up, a tree to bring in, and gifts to buy. She felt the sheer privilege of all their lives. Her books were selling, and her husband was starting to think about retiring from his legal firm. There were still good years ahead.

That morning, her husband sat beside her in his slightly too-tight shirts (there would be a diet after Christmas, she knew), and the prospect of seeing their children for a week of news and mischievous modern cynicism filled them both with happiness. She poured herself another coffee as he cleared up the breakfast dishes and put them in the dishwasher.

By mid-morning, although Kalina was already in the house, she hadn't popped her head around the study door as she usually did. Lauren sighed critically at what she'd just written. It was going to be a day in which she'd have to force herself to stay put, to somehow drive sentence to follow sentence, when she'd rather catch a bus to the city to chat with friends in some bookshop cafe, an espresso and a glass of water to hand. She sloped down the long hallway – tracksuit bottoms and loose sweater – past yellow walls on which vivid blue plates hung above a book-case, and pushed the door open.

Kalina didn't look up. She was mopping the floor, and stared downwards, as if absorbed by the tiles. No, she didn't want a cup of tea, thank you very much. No, she was not hungry either.

She leaned on the mop and turned to Lauren. *Very tired today. Children awake all night.* She shook her head hopelessly, and continued to mop the floor.

Lauren moved towards her, reaching to put a hand on her shoulder. As she did so, Kalina released the mop handle, which fell to the ground with an ear-splitting sharp crack. Tears sprang to her eyes, and she hastily withdrew a tissue from her jeans pocket. *You must not tell anybody! I – embarrassed – you must not tell anyone!*

There had been an argument about money and about who did the most work.

*He get angry with me all the time . . . then he say that I friends with other mens – and last night –* Here she paused and shook her head. Her voice dropped again. *Something bad . . . he do something very bad to me. Children do not see, but he hit me. And then . . . hit me again in our bedroom . . .*

Lauren sounded calm as she asked where he had struck her.

*On my back. Only on back. Three times. I have mark today. Red mark. I tell him I never looks at other mens. Never! I would not do that. But he say he don't believe me. And after, he not say sorry either.*

Lauren, while wanting to jump into the car and rip his head off, could still hear his voice intoning the words *I am Physics Lecturer*. Brutus addressing the crowds from the steps of the Roman senate building. It was laughable that occasionally, she had pitied him because she knew how eggshell brittle egos could be, including her own.

She tried to form a plan. What could Kalina do, with two children, no money, limited English? Something must now happen because something had happened *then*, the night before.

Lauren's sense of consequence rose to a spike of insight. Feeling suddenly inspired, she gripped the girl by both shoulders and looked her in the eye.

'Would you like to go home to Poland for a few weeks? Stay with your mother? You could bring the children.'

She'd pay for the flights, and make something happen. It was hard to know what Kalina thought of the idea. She hesitated, then spoke.

*Thank you Lauren. I think about it. Nobody else help me – you are good friend when I have trouble,* she whispered.

She drove Kalina home. The girl waved goodbye before disappearing in the front door of the semi-detached rental. Lauren glimpsed Kalina's husband through the big front window, bent over a computer. He kept his head down, as if he hadn't heard Kalina coming into the house.

A week passed.

*I think – I want go home. I take children and return to Poland.*

The atmosphere in Kalina's house hovered on a scale of frost to permafrost, and the only voices that spoke were those of the children.

'If you're sure, give me dates and I'll book the flights.'

Later that day, she told her husband that Kalina needed their help.

'Are you fucking crazy?'

His glasses slid down his nose. He had just come in from work and was opening envelopes, glancing at the contents, and dropping them quickly on

the kitchen table. His expression was quizzical, and his unclipped auburn eyebrows danced as he reacted to Lauren's news.

'What's wrong with the idea?' she pressed. 'I want to help her.'

'Everything. You're going to make things far harder for her. Mark my words, they'll kiss and make up and then they'll both see you as a relationship destroyer. I have only one word,

Lauren. *Don't.*'

Now he was bending down over the kitchen bins, lifting and tying plastic sacks.

'I've told her I'll help her.'

'Well *un*-tell her. Tell her I won't allow it, she'll understand the cave-man approach. She probably hasn't grasped that Irish women aren't under the thumb of the lord and master any more, so tell her I've said no.'

He disappeared out the back door, rubbish sacks in hand. A vile wind blew in as he left.

'It's assault and battery,' she said as he came in the door again, wiping hands on jeans.

'There's the police and free legal aid if she wants to take it further.'

'Fuck it, but that's the kind of attitude that allowed six million Jews to be gassed during the last war.'

He stood stock still and regarded her. 'What in God's name has that got to do with anything? We're talking about a man who gave his wife a clip on the back –' He paused and turned to the wine-rack. 'And you're talking *Holocaust?* Are you joking?'

She fell silent. A 'clip on the back'? How annoying he could be, how thick. How could he not understand her reference to the Holocaust?

He eyeballed her. She stared back. Was that a shiver of amusement she detected in his eyes?

'I can help her.'

The words slithered out as her throat began to constrict with tears of frustration. She left the kitchen. A moment longer, and she might have walloped him, in itself a turn of events she was not entirely at ease with. She stood glaring at books on the hall shelf, without actually seeing any titles. From within the kitchen came the sound of a bottle of wine being uncorked, the thin clink of a glass. She slammed the door to her study.

Kalina had mentioned a date on which to travel. Thursday of the following week, when she knew that her partner would be in a day clinic. He was having his annual colonoscopy, she said. Immediately, Lauren began to scan online for flights to Warsaw, and hence to Sobibór. One way or return, she wondered. She could hardly take a decision like that without first consulting Kalina, so she decided to wait until the following Tuesday, two days before the flight.

She would book Kalina and her daughters onto a morning flight the following week. She could choose to do this, and there was no better motive than to remove a younger woman from danger, whose children were also at risk.

That night, she removed herself from the bedroom and slept in her daughter's room. Her husband could be glib and trivial about the situation, it was all in a day's work to him, an argument on paper, but he had to realise that there was something at stake, a principle of assistance to others which she was about to uphold.

When Kalina arrived on Tuesday, she pulled the kitchen door behind her, shrugged off her jacket. Lauren, smiling, wanted to talk about the flights. To her surprise, Kalina hesitated. Lauren peered closely at her. The girl looked, if anything, radiant.

*Everything much better, Lauren. I talk to him. He talk to me.*

Her eyes were bright, and Lauren could see that a new joy flowed through Kalina as if a healing river had overflowed its banks and saturated her soul. She said nothing for a moment. Her thoughts, which had been smooth and definite, were now choppy with judgement.

'So, you're going to stay?'

She knew the answer even as she asked the question.

Yes, she was going to stay. They had big talk, and she think that her partner depressed. *Very depressed. I tell him I not his enemy, that I his friend. True friend.*

'And did that help?' Lauren asked.

*He make promise he never hit me again. He say sorry.*

Despite this latest, promising turn of events, she felt disappointed by Kalina. It was just as well she hadn't booked the flights. So what had she expected? A decisive air-strike against the enemy? She hoped Kalina understood the significance of what she had been about to do for her. She felt slightly acidic about it all, about the 'big talk'. Did a man who beats his partner once ever really gain the self-control not to have the urge to do it again?

'I'm glad you've made it up. And I'd miss you if you went away,' she said, which was the truth. Then, an afterthought. 'He will see a doctor? It sounds as if he might need an antidepressant.'

At this, Kalina shook her head firmly. *No antidepressant. Bad for health. He a strong man. He feeling better already, now that we happy again.*

So they'd sorted it out. And her partner's body was such a temple that it could not be polluted by a chemical that might make him feel a little better. Oh, something had happened all right, but not in the way she'd imagined.

'So you're okay now?' she asked.

*Oh yes, yes, we definitely okay, thank you Lauren. I love him. He a good man, and I know that.*

Later, Lauren told her husband what had happened.

'Didn't I tell you?' he said mildly. 'These things have a way of sorting themselves out.'

'I still think we should get involved when something is wrong,' she said, 'but yes. You were so right.'



She considered how much better the alternative outcome she had openhandedly offered Kalina. But now, there would be no dramatic rescue and dash to Dublin airport and on to Poland for Kalina and her children. Her partner wouldn't be left to regret his unkindness and violence. There would be no grand style justice and retribution. This time, he got to kiss and make up.

That night, she removed herself once again from the bedroom, and slipped into her daughter's bed. In some way, her husband had offended her, but she could not quite explain how, even if he had asked. She kept thinking about all those who knew things but said nothing, the ones who silently accompanied others, believing they had no choice. The Jews had walked with fellow Jews along Sobibór's 'Path to Heaven', to the end of a forest road that was dewy and green, and bursting with bird-song. She thought of Kalina, and what might lie ahead. How she seemed to have brushed aside her partner's bruising blows, and how readily she embraced a future with him, staking her entire life on the path he was offering. And Lauren's grievance grew in the dark like an unpleasant forest fungus, not at herself, but towards Kalina, who failed to recognise that although help sometimes comes, it comes but once.

Then she slept deeply, like a traveller who had found rest without having reached the long-sought destination, but for whom everything was clearer. Her dreams still puffed and swelled as she slept, as the great starry skies orbited above the roof of the house, above the still, night garden with its secret nocturnal foxes and badgers. In her childlike, resting position, legs tucked up, fingers curled, her mouth made a small map of saliva on the pillow.

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