

The Kingfisher Faith

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The plane landed in Dublin at 8.00 a.m. The grey morning air touched Kelley's skin like cold water. Queensland had been too hot. But there was a joyousness in the burning sun and the clear skies, the children swimming on riverside beaches in the middle of the city. It lightened the heart. Kelley had felt deliciously weightless in the warm bright air, she had imagined herself a bird, a migratory bird, a swallow, sailing swiftly above her own life. Back to earth now. When all is said and done, Ireland is a melancholy land. It's not surprising that so many people emigrate. They cite economic reasons but that's not the whole story. The young Irish in Australia say they miss home, but add that they like the weather in Queensland or Victoria or wherever they happen to find themselves on that distant continent. If they like the weather chances are they're never coming back.

When she gave her address to the taxi man, he asked her an unusual question:

"Have you lived there for long?"

She had an unusual answer.

"As a matter of fact I am moving in there today."

It turned out that the taxi man had lived around the corner when he was younger. The fact is, she often meets people who lived around the corner when they were younger. Around the corner were lots of houses "in bedsits," back then. Some of them survive, but the area is getting more upmarket, meaning no young person can afford to buy a house there, or even rent a flat.

When they turned onto her new road they saw that the white van was parked outside her house. The hall door was open.

"Don't think you'll be moving in today, love!" laughed the taxi man.

During her dreamy dozes on the plane Kelley had imagined this moment. She would open her new front door, make a cup of coffee, then have a lovely little nap on the camp bed in the bedroom. Oh the bliss of lying down in a bed after twenty four hours of sitting up in a cramped plane! Back from Australia for the first day in her new house. The builder had been working on it for months, and it would be pristine, freshly painted, exquisite. Tomorrow her furniture would arrive from the yard where it had been stored for al-

most a year in a steel container, and everything in the house would become chaotic, for a while – perhaps quite a while. But today was the day when the house was to reveal itself to her in all its bare beauty, like Botticelli's Venus rising from the waves, the tide of the builder's energy and creativity. The fresh paint, the bright windows. It would be whole and lovely as a shell.

"Damn!" she raised her eyebrows and shrugged. "They said they'd be finished yesterday."

"If I had a Euro for every time a builder promised to be finished and wasn't, I'd be a millionaire," said the taxi man. This is not an unusual thing for a taxi-man to say. They are masters of the proverb, and any other formula that keeps the wheels of conversation turning.

2. THE LETTER

There were a few silent men in overalls in the house, a huge electric saw on the kitchen floor, and a cement mixer in the back yard. So she parked her suitcase upstairs and took the bus to her sister's house, out in a suburb in County Meath, which had been her home for almost a year, since she moved from the big bungalow by the sea where she had lived with her husband for thirty five years.

There was nobody at home apart from the cat, a suave chartreuse. Usually reserved and aloof, the cat was delighted to see Kelley, and rubbed her smooth silky fur against her leg until food was offered. Kelley made the cup of coffee for which she had been longing for hours, and began to open her letters. Bills. Good news comes by email, bills in the post. There were two marked "Confidential. Only to be opened by the addressee." When she opened the envelope she saw the BREAST CHECK logo on the letterhead. She had completely forgotten that she had had the routine mammogram just before she left for Brisbane, a month ago. They always wrote a week or two later to say everything was all right.

But not this time.

There was a recall for a second investigation. There were three envelopes and three letters, in fact. They'd written three times.

So.

A leaflet accompanied the letter, including information. A call back does not mean anything is wrong, it murmured reassuringly. Then it described what would happen on the second visit. Another mammogram, an ultrasound scan, and possibly a biopsy using a needle. (There were a few different kinds of needle, some more unpleasant than others, Kelly guessed.) You may be more comfortable in a skirt and blouse or trousers and blouse, it said, and asked people who used perfume or deodorant (deodorant? Are there women who don't use deodorant?) not to put on too much of either. Prepare to stay in the clinic for three hours. You may bring someone with you.

3. *LADIES in SKY BLUE*

You are supposed to arrive at the clinic at 8.15 a.m.. Another early start. The Dublin Horse Show is on. It is Ladies' Day, the day when women in remarkable hats compete to win the "Best Dressed Lady" competition, so there is plenty of traffic on the M 50. But Kelley manages to arrive at 8.30.

The Breast Check Clinic is familiar – she's been here, over the years, at least half a dozen times. It's a nice place, considering it is part of a hospital, a hospital where you don't have to pay a few hundred Euro for a five minute chat with a doctor. The colour scheme is white with touches of sky blue, always guaranteed to produce a sense of freshness. The magazines on the tables – *Country Life*, *Image*, *Vogue* – are up to date, unlike the magazines in any other waiting room Kelley has ever been in. The staff are well-mannered, kind and thoughtful. Today, however, this kindness is a mixed blessing. The receptionist greets her with a gentle smile, doesn't ask her to produce any documents.

Doesn't even ask her to spell her name.

Nobody knows how to spell Kelley's surname.

This person obviously knows something.

Whenever Kelley has been here before there have been only a few other women waiting. But today the front foyer is full – full of women, and not a few men. The husbands, the boyfriends. No doubt sisters and daughters and mothers and female friends too, but you can't distinguish them from the patients, at this point in proceedings. Everybody looks solemn, but nobody is freaking out. In fact nobody is even talking. The place is as silent as the tomb. Are all the silent women people who have got the second letter, calling them back? Or are there women on their third or fourth test, women who actually have got cancer? Probably not, she thinks. Probably they are all in the same boat. The second letter folk.

One in twenty gets called back, according to the leaflet.

That's not a comforting statistic. Nineteen times out of twenty – nine and a half times out of ten – everything looks fine, on the mammograms. In this room are the five per cent who failed the test.

Still. The statistic for survival is pretty good. Even of women who are diagnosed with breast cancer, 85% survive (for five years.)

Five years which would include a lot of hassle in the form of chemotherapy, radiotherapy, hair loss. And so on.

And what if it has already jumped around to other place in your body? Then you could have a month.

Her left breast certainly feels a bit peculiar. There's an itchy spot underneath, and the nipple feels rather stiff. (These symptoms occurred for the first time this morning, on the M 50, when she was driving to the hospital.)

She would have to get a wig. Well, OK. Friends who had gone through the treatment looked good in their wigs, frequently better than they'd looked

with their real hair. Wigs were thick and shiny, like the hair of teenagers. Hot, but that wouldn't be much of a problem in Ireland, and she wouldn't be going to Australia, or anywhere else, if she were having chemo. And as for going to bed... nobody ever sees her in bed any more.

Actually, the more she thinks about it, the less she cares about the treatment, or even about dying.

When her husband, Erik, died, three and a half years ago, she had often wished she had died too. That feeling wore off. Time heals: the tired truism, like so many banal proverbs, is true. For the past year she has thought of Erik less and less often; the period of intense pining is over. Now she enjoys many things in life – learning Spanish, drinking wine, talking to her grandchildren on Skype. Up to a point she enjoys many things. And it would be most unfortunate to die just as she moves into her new house. She could do with about a year, a year untrammelled by illness, just to arrange the furniture and pick the right paint for the walls, to get to know the house and the neighbourhood, to find out if her expectations of living closer to the city centre would really make much of a difference to her life.

But on the other hand, she still feels no great pressure to stay alive now that Erik is dead. She wouldn't mind joining him, in death – not that she has the slightest expectation of any afterlife. She would just meet him as a knife meets a fork in a drawer, lifeless object to lifeless object. Ashes to ashes in the vast graveyard of the lifeless, out in Shanganagh by the sea.

She's glad really that he's not one of those husbands in the waiting room. The partner who is not sick is often more tortured by worry than the one who is. She herself was terrified, when Erik was ill, whereas he seemed to take it in his stride. Seemed is the word. Because now just one day after getting that letter she understands how he must have felt when he got his diagnosis of prostate cancer. He must have had the thoughts she has been having, since yesterday. Which are, Soon I may be leaving all this. The sea and the garden and what's for dinner. My books. My music. My friends. Soon I may no longer exist. But how can anyone get their head around that huge but evanescent idea, the idea of their own non-being? That's a thought which is as hard to catch as a cloud, as water in a sieve. It's the very essence of the unconscionable.

People are always saying – people in newspapers, people on radio shows, people of that sort – that we should spend more time thinking about death. But as far as Kelley can figure out, it's impossible to think about it at all. You can think around it, but you can't imagine death itself. Much easier to imagine what it will be like to live on Mars, or what it was like to be a stone age man, woman or child. Or animal. But your own non-being? You could as easily imagine what a stone feels, or a bone, or a box of ashes. She has concluded that the only sensible way to deal with death is the one most people employ. Namely, ignore the damn thing.

Maybe the prospect of death feels different if your partner is still with you, alive. Yes. It must do. Having a partner still with you would be both a blessing and a curse. A, you don't want to leave them, and B, you have to worry about how they'll feel, when you do. (Not that that seemed to worry Erik very much. But it crossed his mind, from time to time, and then he would say something like "You'll marry again, won't you, darling?" And she would laugh, frightened, and say, "Have you anyone in mind?")

Kelley didn't marry again. And just as well. Now when she's dying of cancer she won't have to say goodbye to someone who shares her life and they won't have to say goodbye to her. These partings, of the living and the dead, are not sweet sorrow. They are deep and searing sorrow, ghastly sorrow, which you would only wish upon your very worst enemy. There is nobody who will be devastated when Kelley sheds off the mortal coil. Good! A few people will be sad for a while, probably – well, she hopes so. Her children, her grandchildren. Her sister and brother? Maybe a friend or two. But nobody will be catastrophically affected the way she was when Erik popped his clogs. Nobody will be sorry overmuch. So she has one less thing to worry about. In fact, when you think about it, just as she's free to come and go on holidays, or to move house, or hop on a plane to Brisbane, she's free to die. Free as a bird. Freer, because dying is free – it's the one big trip everyone can afford, although some go economy and some in business class.

The women are called in batches of three or four for the first examination. Everyone looks up expectantly when the nurse comes in with the names and everyone looks at the women who turn the corner, and disappear. What awaits them, around that corner?

Another waiting room. That's what.

First you go to a little cubicle, take off your blouse and bra and replace them with an enormous blue smock. You put your clothes and bag into a basket, and, clutching this and the flap of the smock, go to the second waiting room. This is also quite crowded. Kelley gets one of the last seats, facing the other women. So she can have a good look at them. Most are between fifty and sixty. Well, they'd have to be, since they don't start doing the breast check until you're fifty. Their shoes or sandals, sticking out from under the gowns: tasteful sandals, flat or almost flat, leather, the two band sandals that have been fashionable for the past two years and – in Kelley's opinion – suit most women very well. She has a pair herself although she's wearing shoes at the moment. The women have neat casual hair styles, lightly made up faces. A few are reading actual books, while others look at the magazines – again – or at the TV in the corner. Nobody talks. Twenty odd women, wearing identical sky blue gowns, waiting for the second breast check, and not a word from any of them. It would not be so silent in the Mater, on the other side of the city, Kelley guesses. This is south county Dublin, where Kelley fits in,

although she's moved to the north side, where people are kind but suspicious of her, where she still feels like a bit of an alien, a duck who has flown from Stephen's Green and accidentally ended up on the other side of the river.

She passes the time by learning a poem off by heart. Swallow Swallow Swallow, the poem starts. Teach me how to fly high in the sky so that summer will begin. Teach me your songs so that I can spend my days in the meadows and the hills, so that I can fly up to the stars. The poem is for children, by a Spanish poet, and it is in Spanish. It's a very simple poem but it's challenging to memorize it. She has to repeat the lines dozens and dozens of times, and still she tends to stumble on one of them. That I may spend my days like you is the line that trips her up, again and again. It's expressed rather awkwardly, to force a rhyme.

"Girls!" this nurse addresses them as "Girls!". And it has begun to feel like school here. Uniformed, single sex, waiting for a test – a Viva.

Kelley is so concentrated on the poem about the swallows that she almost forgets why she is here. Which is the point, which is why she decided to do this. Partly because she's concentrating and partly because she's tired she doesn't seem to be especially worried, as far as she can tell.

The fact is, she doesn't believe there is anything wrong with her. But she barely express that thought even in the privacy of her mind. Tempting fate. And then... maybe she is just doing what people do. Denying. The first stage, for cancer patients, according to Elizabeth Kubler Ross, is denial. Kelley is very familiar with the Kubler Ross stages because they are also applied to bereavement, and when Erik died she read dozens of books on this subject, finding them comforting. Misery likes bedfellows. All the grief books and websites said it was a mistake to apply the Kubler Ross stages to bereavement but they summarized them anyway. The Kubler Ross stages, these books pointed out, originally applied to terminally ill people, not to the ones they left behind. And when you think about it, denial of a loved one's death doesn't make a huge amount of sense, even though – in a way – most religions are based on that belief. It's true that when Erik died, during the first weeks, Kelly sometimes thought he was just away on a holiday, or in another room, and would be back if she just held on for a bit. But these were momentary lapses, lapses of her body, her muscle memory, as it were, rather than of her mind. She was in a state of forgetfulness, not *in denial*. Not really. Really she knew he was dead and that there was no getting around that fact, which is the terrible thing about death. It is so heart-breakingly irreversible.

Bargaining is stage two. Kubler Ross. Kübler, there's an umlaut. Again, she wondered what you would bargain about, once your lover was dead? Bargain? If he comes back to life I'll give my money to charity? I mean, come on. But yes, these stages make much more sense when applied to serious illness. I'll be good if I don't have it. If I don't have it, I'll go to Greece and help the Syrian refugees. If I don't have it, I'll go to Brisbane straight away,

on the next plane, to visit my son and my beloved grand-daughter, and then straight on to Spain where my other grandchild lives. If I don't have it I'll live life to the full for once. If I don't have it I'll never complain or worry again.

But – here comes stage two, or is it stage one, denial – I don't have it, I feel perfectly fine. Every single woman in this room is probably indulging in Stage One denial, while doing a bit of Stage Two Bargaining. You can very easily do both simultaneously. There is nothing wrong with me, and if there isn't something wrong I'll de-clutter the house from top to bottom and travel the world.

But for one in ten there will be something wrong. That does not mean that nine out of ten in this room – which contains about twenty women – are going to escape. There could be something wrong with every single woman in this room, in their sky blue smocks, with their silent nicely made up south county Dublin faces. These could be the unlucky percentile; ten out of a thousand. While various other waiting rooms, scattered around the world, could be full to the brim of women whose tests will be clear. Statistics are tricky, and they only comfort the ones who are lucky, in the good percentile.

A dark haired woman, attractive – they are all fairly attractive but this one has that extra sparkle – comes in, carrying her basket. She giggles and says, “Gosh, it's scary!” And there is a response. Of course. Everyone laughs and nods in agreement. The woman she sits beside exchanges a few words with her. Then all the women in the waiting room start chatting to one another. The garden of sky blue erupts into a symphony of gossip.

Monica Ryan.

Sibyl Freeman.

Geraldine Murphy.

Kelley is listening to the story of how Maura Mc Govern had got The Letter the day before she was going on holiday to Tuscany and agonized over whether or not to tell her husband, when they called out her name.

4. *THE TEST*

“My name is Meg,” says the woman. “I'm the radiographer.”

There's another mammogram.

“Just the right breast,” Meg says. She's rather bossy.

The itch in the left breast disappears, while its companion, the good right, is squashed like a pancake between the glass plates of the mammogram machine.

Then another wait in the same waiting room. Maura has vanished so Kelley goes over the poem again, and manages to recite it in full. But her concentration is slipping. Why is she doing this?

Spanish. Why learn it? Her son's wife speaks perfect English, the little boy is bi-lingual. They don't even want her to speak Spanish, it's pure

self-indulgence; she has no real reason to bother about it. She pulls herself away from the thought. If she allows that sort of thinking to get a grip, soon there'll be no reason for doing anything. There'll be no reason to get out of bed, or go on living. Everything is just rubble, someone in an Alice Munro story says. Once Erik died, it all became rubble. Activities, like the Spanish classes, were just a way of getting through. That's why she took it up, to focus the mind, to keep it in denial about the rubble of the universe. Now it has become a goal, a thing she works hard at. Don't ask why.

Kelley Monaghan.

An ultra sound scan.

This will feel a bit cold, the doctor says, but it won't hurt, like the mammogram.

The mammogram didn't hurt either, Kelley says. Then bites her tongue. She shouldn't have said that. The doctor looks offended. It used to hurt, Kelley hurries on apologetically, when I first came, it hurt, but not any more. I suppose you get used to it, the doctor says. You're no longer afraid.

And your breasts get flabbier. They don't try to fight back when squashed between two glass plates.

The ultra sound doesn't even feel very cold.

The doctor looks at the image on the screen.

Kelley looks. A tangle of criss-crossed lines. She searches for a shadow, a disruption to the pattern. But it's double dutch, this picture of the interior of her breast.

"Well..."

You can tell by their faces. She knew about Erik's diagnosis before it was iterated by the anxious consultant.

"Oh!"

"There's something not quite clear."

"Oh."

"We'll do the biopsy, just to be on the safe side."

"OK."

"There's probably nothing to worry about but something is not clear."

"Right."

"Emma will show you the way."

And so, clutching the flap of hersky blue smock and her plastic basket, she follows Emma to the next room, which is another waiting room.

5. *THE KINGFISHER*

When she went out to her sister's the day before yesterday, she got off the bus at the stop called The Bridge. She herself and most people call it the Aldi stop, but the Aldi is new and the bridge has been there for centuries, on the road to Tara, spanning the Broadmeadow River. This is more of a stream

than a river, and not very well looked after. It flows past blocks of apartments, housing estates, its banks are unkempt and littered. But in some places – The Bridge is one – it is thickly overhung with shrubs and trees, and the water races along merrily through a lovely green tunnel of dappled leaves.

Just as Kelley alighted from the bus the sun came out. That's probably why she stopped and looked for a while down at the river, as it danced along in the bright light. Or maybe she stopped because she was remembering the Brisbane river, broad as a lake, festive with water buses and white yachts. Maybe that's why she looked into the little stream with the big name. Broad-meadow River.

Then, the flash of blue.

Down the river under the overhanging foliage dashed the bird, quick as a swift, faster than a plane.

Kingfisher.

She had never seen one before. Before in her life, and she is sixty three years of age.

For five decades she had wanted to see one, but never until this moment, on The Bridge beside Aldi.

Douglas Hyde, first president of Ireland, adduced the kingfisher as a reason for believing in the fairies. How many people have seen a kingfisher? He asks, in an introduction to a book of fairy legends. And yet we believe they exist. So why not believe in the fairies?

It's logical. Up to a point.

Kelley has not believed in the fairies since she was ten years old, but she has always believed in the kingfisher. A kingfisher is not a fairy. But it is a rare wild bird, and to see one, even for a the smallest particle of a second, is a great treat. And a particle of a second is all you'll get - the merest glimpse, a hint of a blue bird as lovely as a drop.

That's how it is, with wild things. You see them by chance. Whale watching tours, dolphin tours, mainly don't work. You see the whale when you're not looking for it, and the dolphin. That's what wild means. Wild cards, out of your control. They find you, generally when you least expect it.

Her heart rose, when she saw the Kingfisher, the flash of blue in the golden green tunnel over the water.

She could be still surprised by joy.

It was, she thought, a good omen.