

eden burning

Deirdre Quiry

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Door to Silence – John Main

“The purification that leads to purity of heart ... is a consuming fire. We must not be afraid of the purifying fire.

*We must have confidence in the fire because it is the fire of love ... It is the fire **who** is love”. **

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For Martin – my Guardian Angel – always by my side dancing
along the slippery path of life.



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***Song for Ireland lyrics copyright Phil and June Colclough*

Wednesday 12th January 1972

A velvet purple curtain glimmered golden at the edges of the Confessional box like a total eclipse of the sun. Tom sat on the bench, feet perched on the kneeler with hands joined in prayer. He listened to the hum of voices inside. It was surely Mrs McLaughlin with Father Anthony. He couldn't hear the content of what she was saying, but her voice rose and fell with a fingerprint rhythm. He raised his eyes towards the main altar where a familiar red light flickered beside the tabernacle, indicating the presence of God. He closed his eyes and prayed.

“Don't let them murder Rose.”

Thunder rumbled, then crackled in the distance over Black Mountain and the lights of the Church momentarily flashed on and off. Tom felt the sweat on his hands as the brass knob turned sharply and the Confessional door squeaked open. He rubbed them on his brown corduroy trousers.

Tom listened to Mrs McLaughlin's brogues briskly clump across the marble floor towards the exit at the rear of the Church. When the wooden door thumped closed, he looked around to make sure that he was alone, then heaved himself to

his feet, opened the Confessional door, blessed himself, and in the darkness whispered to Father Anthony, “Father, get me a gun.”

Father Anthony pushed open the confessional grill, stuck his curly black head through the small window and looked Tom in the eyes.

“What on earth are you talking about Tom? What do you mean a gun?”

“They’re going to kill Rose.”

“Who in God’s name?”

“Cedric and William.”

“Who are they for Christ’s sake?”

“Paddy’s killers.”

Father Anthony pulled his head quickly back through the window. He leaned forward and clasped his hands together, bit his right knuckles before sitting up and resting his head against the back of his chair.

“Christ Almighty,” he whispered. “Christ on a bicycle. Not Paddy’s killers. Not Rose.”

Tom leaned forward, peering into the Confessional through the wooden lattice window. Father Anthony pulled at the white collar around his neck, sat forward and looked directly into Tom’s eyes.

“We can’t stop them with a gun, Tom.”

Tom slowly shook his head. “This is not murder.”

“Tom, you know it is.”

Tom squeezed his hand into a fist and hammered on the lattice. He pushed his face against the wood. His lips pressed slightly through the lattice like soft putty. His teeth touched the pinewood as he rasped.

“Have you not heard a thing I’ve said? They’re going to kill Rose. How many times do I need to say it before you hear it?”

“What has happened to you Tom?” Father Anthony asked in a soft voice.

Tom stayed on his knees and slowly took a white cotton handkerchief from his trouser pocket. He opened it carefully, removed his glasses and wiped them. Holding the glasses in his hands he raised his eyes to plead with Father Anthony.

“Have you forgotten what they did to Paddy and Michael?”

Father Anthony was the right person to find him a gun. He approached Father Anthony because he knew that one of the other priests – Father Martin – had a gun which he used when he went hunting rabbits up Cave Hill in the summer. Tom thought that Father Anthony could be persuaded to get hold of Father Martin’s gun. He didn’t expect Father Anthony to pull the trigger or to aim the gun at Cedric. Tom was prepared to do that. If Tom had to kill Cedric to save Rose’s life that was the way it would be.

Anyone who had known Tom before the evening of Wednesday 12th January would never have believed that he was capable of contemplating murder. It was no wonder that Father Anthony felt totally confused. Tom was the most saintly man he had ever met; in or out of Confession. Saintly in Father Anthony’s mind did not mean “perfect” but someone who imperfectly struggled to put God’s will first in their lives.

Tom understood that the natural world worked within preordained rules and within a primordial order, annihilating and creating simultaneously. The sun rose and set at its prescribed times with each passing allowing light to flood the earth or darkness to cloak it. Seasons came and went in a disciplined manner. There was beauty in this order. Tom heard conkers thump onto the sodden ground or patiently watched a sycamore leaf flutter in an autumn breeze and settle into the moist earth, before disintegrating to nourish the tree from which

it came. Tom felt familiar in the rhythm of this natural world where a fuzzy cloud appeared from nowhere and held form on a still day before morphing, dissolving, reforming, moving and disappearing. He knew the importance of touching cherry blossom on the tree as it burst into life. Nature, apart from man, was at home in its rhythm, in harmony with God – the “prime mover” setting the world in motion.

For Tom, man was different – thirsting for water like a fish in the sea, trapped in time and space, restless to escape his sentence of movement on the earth, looking for stillness within an incessant burning, twisting desire for life and a fear of death. It was Tom who knew how to find stillness in silence. It was Tom who could feel his thoughts settle like waves swishing onto sand after a storm or slowly rolling like a billiard ball to a halt on a velvet table. It was Tom who had shown Father Anthony what it meant to be a man of peace, patience and forgiveness. It was Tom who had helped Father Anthony to recover a sense of hope and faith in the living.

Yet this same Tom was asking the impossible. “Will you help me? Get me a gun.”

Father Anthony rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands and lowered his head, grasping the crucifix around his neck.

“What’s going on Tom? Tell me everything you know.”

Tom sighed with relief.

“On Tuesday Paddy’s killers spotted Rose walking home from school. They were in a black taxi driving along the Crumlin Road, looking for a target. She caught their attention. They had seen her before coming out from Mass.”

Tom removed his glasses and gulped at the air like a fish on a hook. He placed the glasses on the floor beside the kneeler. He laid his head on crossed arms and sniffed tears to the back of his throat.

“She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. They only had to see her to add her to their list.”

“What list?”

“The list of people they plan to murder. That’s what happened to Paddy and Michael. They were on the list.” He raised his head, took a deep in breath and sighed. “I’d rather die than have what happened to Paddy happen to Rose.”

“Tom, Rose isn’t going to be murdered.”

“How do you know? How can you be so sure?”

Tom raised his head and stared into Father Anthony’s eyes. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand. He wiped it again with the sleeve of his jacket.

“There were three of them in the taxi – Cedric, his brother Peter and his father William. When they saw Rose, Cedric and William joked about her being their next victim. Peter was in the back seat of the taxi. Peter then heard what they were saying – about their plans to kill her.”

“How do you know this?”

“Tonight Peter came to see Rose after Mass, to warn her.”

“I’m confused. Why did he do that? Is he not one of the murderers?”

“I don’t know why.” Tom shook his head. “It seems that he is terrified of his father and brother. Rose said that he didn’t want to be involved in the killings. He wants the murders to stop. He wants out.”

“Are you sure Peter is to be trusted?”

“Rose thinks so. I don’t know what to think.”

Father Anthony pushed open the half door of the Confessional which led onto the side aisle. He turned the knob on the heavy wooden door on the Confessor’s side, gently opening it. Tom slid onto the floor and curled up like a snail, holding his head in his hands.

Father Anthony knelt in the darkness and pulled Tom towards him, holding him in his arms. “Tom, let’s go to the Sacristy. It’s easier to talk there.”

He placed his arm around Tom’s shoulders. They leant against each other as they edged up the side aisle towards the Sacristy door. Once seated and with a cup of tea in his hands, Tom explained.

“This evening Peter gave Rose Molly’s engagement ring. I recognised it immediately. Paddy had it with him the night he was murdered. I saw it with my own eyes. It’s proof that they killed Paddy. They took Molly’s ring. He had it in his trouser pocket that night when he left me.” Tom slurped mouthfuls of hot sweet tea. “What do we do now? I’ve told Rose and Lily to stay indoors and not to open the door to anyone.”

“Shouldn’t we call the Police?” asked Father Anthony.

“How do we know that Cedric and William haven’t got connections with the Police? Can we risk that?”

Tom’s voice was a little stronger. He placed the china teacup firmly on the saucer and rubbed his hand on his sleeve.

“Once we know that Rose is safe we’ll make sure that the Police know who killed Paddy and Michael. Let’s make sure that Rose is safe first. Do you remember the prison guard in the Crumlin Road jail who poisoned Roger Cochrane? You have to be careful who you trust. Wouldn’t you have thought that Roger would be safe enough behind bars? Can you believe that it was a guard who put the arsenic in Roger’s custard?”

Father Anthony got to his feet. He brought his hands to his face and mumbled through his fingers. “I’ll speak with Father Martin.”

“Don’t be long. I have to get back to Lily and Rose.” Tom sat with his hands joined on his lap. His breathing had returned to normal, the clamminess on his hands had gone. He

felt momentarily calm now that he had taken some action, no matter how small. He took a deep breath and tried to allow the fledging peace within him to grow.

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Father Anthony couldn't believe the difference that twelve hours had made to his sense of well-being. Only that morning he had been meditating in his cell, experiencing the deepest peace and tranquillity of his life, naively believing that he would never again give in to temptation. He truly believed this morning that he had an epiphany during his meditation that returned him to a state of innocence, wiping clean his fifteen year old sin. This same state of grace would now enable him to be eternally faithful to his vocation. Yet here he was, standing in front of Father Martin making plans to be party to a murder.

Father Anthony watched Father Martin scratch his head and then rest his joined hands on top of his stomach, sticking the thumbs through the cord twisted around his waist.

“Shouldn't we inform the Rector?”

Father Anthony vigorously shook his head.

“He's not here. Remember he's giving a retreat at Mount Argus.”

“I still think that we need to talk to him. He needs to know.”

Father Anthony's right eye twitched slightly.

“We haven't time to waste tracking down the Rector. What do you think Christ would do? Slouch in a chair and think about the best protocol to follow?”

“I don't think he would look for a gun – do you?” Father Martin's face was slightly twisted as though he didn't know whether to laugh or cry. “What about your sermon on Christmas Day about the meaning of the “powerlessness” of Christ and how we were meant to imitate it? How come you've changed

your mind?” Father Martin crossed his legs at the ankles and moved his toes up and down in his sandals. He removed his hands from his waist and tapped the leather arms of the chair as though to hurry a response from Father Anthony.

Father Anthony jumped to his feet, rubbed both hands through his curly dark hair and responded in a strained but powerful whisper.

“Rose’s death isn’t going to bring peace to Northern Ireland. If it was as simple as the powerless dying creating a change of heart in the killers, we would have had peace years ago. We don’t need another murder on our doorstep. Christ had a mission to fulfil. What’s Rose’s mission in life? Do you know? I would like her to live and find that out.”

Father Martin shook his head. “I still see an inconsistency in what you are saying, but I can see that there’s no stopping you. Let me show you how the gun works.” Father Martin pulled himself heavily from the armchair. “It’s only ever been used for rabbits.”

Father Anthony took the rifle out of Father Martin’s hands.

“Here are the bullets.” Father Martin handed him six bullets about an inch and a half long.

“How do I use it?”

Father Martin shook his head and took the gun from Father Anthony, clicking a cartridge into place and then emptying it again.

“I’ll aim for the legs.”

“Let’s hope he’s not too skinny. A rabbit is an easier target than skinny legs.”

“Pray that we don’t need to use it at all.”

“Of course.”

“I’ll explain to Tom what we’ll do. Will you do the evening Mass tomorrow for me? I’ll take guard outside.”

“That goes without saying.”

Father Anthony kept his eyes on the sandaled feet of Father Martin and walked behind him towards the oak door. Before Father Martin could turn the doorknob, the door shuddered under the pressure of two strong blows. Father Martin glanced nervously at Father Anthony. He turned the doorknob and pulled the door towards him, revealing the smiling face of the Rector.

“You’re the very two I am looking for.”

The Rector strode purposefully into the room and standing with his back to the crackling fire warmed his hands.

“I’ve had an interesting chat with Tom...”

“What happened to the Retreat at Mount Argus?” Father Anthony interrupted, hiding the gun behind his back.

“Let’s just say I heard a voice whisper to me in the darkness that I needed to be here. Curious don’t you think? Now, what do we do about Cedric?”

Father Anthony and Father Martin exchanged nervous glances. The Rector smiled.

“Father Anthony, take that ridiculous gun from behind your back and put it on the chair where we can all see it. Father Martin, I want to talk to you alone, this minute. Father Anthony you can keep an eye on the gun until we return. Although I don’t think it’s going anywhere do you?”

Father Anthony flushed red and dropped the gun on the floor, then retrieved it carefully and placed it on the leather chair.



Friday 31st December 1971

Cedric looked at his reflection in the darkened window of the Black Beetle pub. He combed his fringe off his forehead, pulled a few strands forward, slipped the comb into his back pocket and looked at his watch.

“Five, four, three, two and we have ... one.”

A bomb exploded in the distance.

“Yes ... that’s what we want ... on time.”

Cedric smiled at William and reached over to clink his glass.

“Come on Peter, cheer up, it may never happen! Happy New Year!”

Everyone else in the Black Beetle was standing on their feet, arms around one another singing and swaying in the smoke. “Should auld acquaintance be forgot ...”

William smoothed a single long strand of dark hair over his bald head and leant forward to clink Cedric’s glass a second time. “I hope the fuckers roast in Hell. On second thoughts, Hell is too good for them. Cheers. Happy New Year son.”

A second bomb rumbled in the distance.

“Crumlin Road; Ardoyne if Sammy P is on time.”

Peter wiped beads of sweat from his forehead with the palm of his hand before reaching for the salt and vinegar crisps in the middle of the table. The crisps rasped against the roof of his mouth. He choked and coughed. His stomach was doing circles like a twin tub washing machine on a fast spin.

“Looks like Sammy P has done a good job. I like a man who knows the importance of being on time.” Cedric gave a thumbs up to William, and pulled out the comb from his back pocket and slowly combed the fringe once more off his forehead. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and listened. A woman screeched at the front door – like a turkey getting its neck wrung, or someone descending at speed on a fairground big dipper. He couldn’t work out whether she was enjoying herself or whether she was in pain. Without opening his eyes he decided that she was enjoying herself. He tapped his feet on the carpeted floor. It was soothing. For a moment the contact of his foot against the soft carpet was rhythmic and gentle like a heartbeat. He inhaled the cigarette and cigar smoke like incense in a church and began to count.

“Five, four, three, two, one ... We have blast off!”

There was a third thump. This one was sharper, longer, lasting more than a second. WHOOOOMP.

“Well done Sammy P!”

Peter stood up, rubbing his salty hands on his jeans. He looked towards the door.

“Shouldn’t we go home? Mum’s alone.”

William reached for his jacket hanging on the back of a chair. “Cedric?”

“It’s not often that we’re first out of here.” Cedric waved at Jenny behind the bar. She blew a kiss at him. She was wearing a red polo neck jumper and jeans, with her hair curling onto her shoulders. There was a crown of artificial white daisies on top.

“I’ll be with you in a minute.” Cedric pushed his way through the crowd towards Jenny.

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On the Crumlin Road, Rose surfaced from deep sleep, opening her eyes in the darkness of the bedroom. It took a few seconds for her to realise that the noise was coming from downstairs. She tried to work out what was happening. There was an insistent banging on the front door. Her heart started to race. She instinctively tried to slow it down by breathing deeply but her body felt paralysed under the blankets. It was as much as she could do to turn her head slowly to the right and squint at the alarm clock beside her. Light from the full moon fell onto a rectangle on the worn green carpet and the objects in the room emerged as recognisable shapes. The white faced clock showed five minutes to midnight. Her heart beat even more quickly although she wouldn’t have thought that possible, her breathing quickened and she moved, jumping out of bed and searching the bedroom for something warm to throw on top of her pyjamas. She spotted her favourite purple coat with its fluffy lamb’s wool sleeves hanging on the back of bedroom door and ran towards it, pulling it over the pink brushed cotton pyjamas.

She recognised the voice now which was attached to the pounding of the door. It had to be Matt.

“Get out of bed. It’s the British Army.”

Rose fumbled with the buttons on her coat, threw open the bedroom door and ran down the first flight of stairs in bare feet, jumping two steps at a time.

“Tom, Lily, waken up.” She thumped on the bedroom door to her left. She heard the light tread of Lily’s slippers behind the closed door. “I’ll find out what’s happening,” Rose shouted as she ran along the landing towards the last flight of stairs. She

gripped the top of the bannister, took a deep breath, then let the bannister go and forced herself to jump two and even three steps at a time, before reaching the bottom and sprinting towards the front door. A soldier hammered urgently on the glass window.

“Wake up! There’s not much time.”

Rose lifted the metal bar from its catches and placed it against the wall on her left, turning the lock and swinging the door open.

“Matt, what are you doing here?” Rose whispered, looking over her shoulder to see if Tom and Lily were about.

Matt sighed in relief, tightening the strap of his helmet and pulling on his gloves.

“Rose, it’s a car bomb. Get Tom and Lily. It’s about to go off. The bomb disposal guys say it is a big one.” Matt pointed at a white Ford Cortina parked two doors away, on the pavement at the corner of Brompton Park.

“Is there anyone next door? I can’t get a response.”

“The Maloney family. But they’re not there tonight. They’ve gone to visit Nuala’s sister.”

Matt sighed. “They’re not going to have much of a house to come back to if this goes off.”

Rose looked past Matt to see two soldiers peering through the back windows of the Ford Cortina. They shouted at Matt.

“It’s about to go! Run! Get out of here!”

Matt grabbed Rose’s hand and pulled her towards the gate.

“No Matt. I can’t leave Tom and Lily. You go. Go!”

Rose’s hand slipped from Matt’s gloved fingers. She took two steps towards the front door. Matt sprinted with the two soldiers through the wrought iron gates, into the Church grounds. Rose was rooted, bolted to the floor. Matt was inside the gates of Holy Cross Church when the bomb exploded. It started with a small rumble and built to a massive roar as Rose saw the car

disintegrate. She instinctively moved her hands to cover her ears as the full force of the bomb swept towards her. It thundered to a recognisable BOOOOOM. The glass from the parlour windows to her right, the upstairs bedroom, and even further up in the attic exploded, dropping in a glittering fountain of glass. Her body swayed and she felt herself losing balance as the plaster ceilings collapsed above her. The roar continued as the plaster crumbled and the wallpaper lay in strips on the floor. After the initial explosion Rose could still hear a high pitched continuous ringing in her ears. She felt the stinging of small splinters of glass pierce both the soles of her feet and toes as she ran up the flight of stairs. She didn't care. There was only one thought in her head.

“Tom, Lily where are you?”

She tripped on a mound of fallen plaster on the landing, struggling to her feet as the hall lights flickered on and off. As she pulled herself off the floor, she looked up and could see stars twinkling above. It was as though she had fallen through a crevice and could see the sky from the jagged edge of the hole through which she had slipped.

Tom emerged flustered in his striped crumpled pyjamas and bare feet.

“Rose – are you alright?”

“Yes.” Rose ran towards him, forgetting the pain from the glass sticking into her feet.

Lily appeared breathless behind Tom. She threw her arms around them both.

“Oh my God, have a look at the bed.”

Lily held her hands to her face. The bed was covered with glass and plaster. A triangular piece of glass pierced the pillow. From the bedroom door, it looked like a sail on a small yacht.

“Tom's head was right there.” Lily pointed at the pillow.

“Come on everyone. There could be a second bomb. We need to find out what’s happening.”

Lily tightened the belt on her dressing gown.

“Quick. Downstairs.”

Mr Langley the next door neighbour stood at his front door smoking his pipe.

“Mr Langley. Are you OK?” Lily patted him on the arm.

“Well, I’m not bad at all – considering.” He tapped his tobacco on the wall and refilled the pipe. “I could be worse.” He gave Lily one of his slow smiles, holding the pipe in his hand, and then with a wink, he placed it back in his mouth and took a deep puff.

“Here’s Father Anthony.” Lily shivered, crossing her arms.

Father Anthony stumbled onto the Crumlin Road. His long black woollen habit swirled around him in the freezing breeze. His dark curly hair glistened like oil in the light of the moon. As he neared them, Lily pointed at his sandaled feet,

“You’ll catch your death of cold Father.”

Father Anthony rubbed his hands. “Forget about me. What about you all here? Has anyone been hurt?”

Rose stood beside Lily. Father Anthony looked at her feet which were covered in blood.

“You OK?”

Rose smiled at him. “I’m fine. It looks worse than it is. It’s only a few scratches. Lily aren’t you going to offer Father Anthony a cup of tea?”

Father Anthony followed Rose’s gaze across the road.

“Are you looking for someone?”

Rose shook her head. “No.”

Father Anthony followed Lily down the hallway as Tom brushed a path ahead of them.

Rose stood in the doorway and looked across the road

again for Matt. Her heart sank as she watched him jump into the armoured jeep. What would happen to him? As soon as he disappeared from sight she felt her stomach starting to churn once again. The driver swung out across the Crumlin Road to block oncoming traffic. She couldn't tell if Matt could see her. She wanted to wave at him but she couldn't as Mr Langley would see. She turned towards Mr Langley and looked into his eyes.

“Did you have any damage to the house Mr Langley?”

“Only the windows – you and the Maloney's have taken the brunt of it. I've got folk inside who will be boarding up the windows for me within the next hour.”

“Well, that's not so bad.” Rose patted Mr Langley on the shoulder. “You know where we are if you need any help. Goodnight Mr Langley.”

Rose closed the front door gently and joined everyone in the sitting room.

The reality of how close they had all come to dying hadn't hit home. That would happen the next day when they realised the extent of the damage and there was time to reflect. For now, it was Lily as always who made an attempt to lighten the mood before going to bed,

“You're not going to believe this Rose.” Lily held a banana in her hand. “The bomb perfectly skinned a banana.”

“You're pulling my leg.”

“I swear. It jumped out of the fruit bowl, skinned itself and lay there on the kitchen floor asking for someone to eat it.”

“So now we have not only a walking but a talking banana.” Father Anthony winked at Rose over a rim of his cup of tea. “What's your Aunt Lily like?”

Saturday 1st January 1972

Mileen cut a slice of white lard and placed it on the hot frying pan. She fried six slices of bacon, the edges shrivelling and kissing each other. She prised them apart, pressing them flat against the spitting fat. They bubbled up and the edges gradually browned. She turned to the six thick Cookstown pork sausages, stabbing each of them twice with a fork. Fat squirted into the pan as the sides burst open. She turned them round, watching the stripes of crusty brown spread over pink flesh. Bacon and sausages were placed into a Pyrex dish in the oven while she fried soda and potato bread, eggs, tomatoes and black pudding.

She rustled among the ironed shirts to find a white cotton tablecloth with which she covered the table. She found a small red candle, lit it and placed it in the centre of the table with a few sprigs of holly. A cuckoo jerked out from the clock hanging on the wall beside the door, calling its punctuated song for nine o'clock.

Upstairs, Cedric washed and shaved, splashed himself with Old Spice before carefully putting on a striped blue and pink

cotton shirt with a white collar. He fingered the perfect crease Eileen had ironed into the sleeves and then fiddled with the gold dolphin cufflinks.

“Why do they always make the bloody button holes too small?” He muttered under his breath, before opening the drawer filled with neatly rolled ties and finding a smaller set of blue crystal cufflinks. He sat on the bed to pull on a pair of navy corduroy trousers and a matching soft navy blue cashmere jumper. His dark hair curled onto the white collar of his shirt. He chose a pink silk tie spotted with blue hearts. He reached into the drawer for Eileen’s present.

Cedric ambled into the kitchen, one hand behind his back.

“Morning Mum. Happy New Year. How did you sleep?” He kissed her on the cheek.

“Not bad. What about you? What time did you get in?”

Eileen plucked a stray black hair from his shoulder.

“Not much after midnight. I thought you would still be up.”

“I was in bed for 11. Did you have a good New Year’s Eve?”

“Not a lot changes in the Black Beetle for New Year’s Eve.”

“I take that for a no then? Made any New Year’s Resolutions?”

“I’ve nothing to improve. You know that.” He gave Eileen a second kiss.

“You smell nice. What’s that you’ve got?”

“A New Year’s present for you.”

Cedric handed Eileen the long narrow box covered in silver wrapping paper with a red satin bow.

“Thank you.” Eileen removed the wrapping paper meticulously, folding it in four and setting it on the table. Inside the box lay a string of pearls like a row of small moons on red velvet.

“You shouldn’t have. You’ve already given me a Christmas present. They’re beautiful, though.”

Cedric took the pearls from his mother's hands and placed them carefully around her neck. The clasp snapped closed.

"They look great."

Eileen laughed, rolling the pearls in her fingers. "Sit down you big softy. Breakfast is nearly ready. Tell me about Jenny. Have you got around to asking her out?"

"No."

"You should do. She's a lovely girl from what you've told me."

The kitchen door squeaked open as William limped into the room.

"Morning all."

"Happy New Year. Ready for breakfast?"

"Fed the cats?" William looked around the kitchen.

"Of course. Here's Bouncer looking for you."

A mop of a striped tiger cat jumped onto William's knee, turned around twice and settled comfortably on top of his brown corduroy trousers. William stroked his head, feeling the long soft silky fur beneath his fingers. Bouncer looked at him through half closed eyes, digging his claws into William's thighs, gently swishing his tail.

"Honourable creatures aren't they?" William smiled at Eileen.

"Why do you say that?" Eileen buttered the toasted wheaten bread.

"They don't lie. Not like human beings." Eileen blushed slightly red but William didn't notice.

Five minutes later Peter was last to appear for breakfast. Wrapped in a green cotton dressing gown and brown leather slippers he sat down facing Cedric and held his head for a few seconds in his hands.

"What's the matter?" Eileen placed a mug of tea beside him.

“I hate this time of year.”

“Oh dear, will a fried egg make any difference?”

Eileen tweaked his hair. Peter held out his plate.

“You’ve too much time on your hands, that’s what’s wrong with you,” Cedric mumbled through a half-eaten pork sausage. “Remember that you’ve work to do tomorrow. That will stop you feeling sorry for yourself.”

“Don’t be mean Cedric.” Eileen topped up Cedric’s tea.

“What’s happening tomorrow?”

“Nothing special.” Cedric tapped a dollop of tomato ketchup onto his plate.

“We have a visit to do.”

Eileen helped Cedric to a second piece of potato bread.

“What kind of visit?”

“Showing Peter the ropes in case he wants to stay in the family business rather than waste his time at University next year.”

“Cedric – if you can’t say something nice, say nothing.” Eileen spoke in a gentle voice, resting a hand on Cedric’s shoulder and smiling at Peter. “Peter’s not going to waste his time. He’s going to be a doctor and help people. You help people too in your own way don’t you?”

Cedric returned alone to the Black Beetle at two o’clock. He sat with a pint of Guinness watching Jenny. She was laughing with Sammy P who was propped up on a stool at the bar. From a distance he couldn’t hear what she was saying, he only saw the playful way she threw a bottle of Guinness in the air as though it was a cocktail shaker catching it behind her back. She opened it and the Guinness went everywhere. Sammy P wiped foam from his face. Jenny helped him dry off with a paper tissue. She was wearing a long pink wraparound skirt with cream crocheted top. Her brown hair waved down to her waist. Over her fringe

she wore a braid of artificial daisies. She had pink tights, yellow leg warmers and yellow platform shoes.

Cedric carried the empty glass to the counter.

“Hi Cedric. What will you be having?” Jenny smiled.

“Nothing thanks. I’ve had enough.”

“Is this a change for the New Year?” Jenny leant on the counter. Cedric noticed her gently glossed lips; the blue eye shadow, eye-liner and rose blusher across the top of her cheeks.

“Could be.” He coughed. His face reddened. “Jenny.” There was silence.

Jenny looked at Cedric. His eyes were deep blue with a circle of black around the iris. His face was lean – not a trace of fat or loose flesh, smooth wrinkle free skin.

“Would you like to go out for dinner?”

Silence.

“Is this an official date?”

“You could say so.” Cedric wiped at his forehead with a cotton handkerchief.

“When have you got in mind?”

“What about Tuesday ... around eight?”

“What about tonight? I’m free at six? I’ve got a few days off now after the holidays.” Jenny held her head in her hands, elbow on the counter. “See – I’m keen.”

“Tonight is not so good. I’ve got to talk to Dad ... You know William.”

“Of course I know William. He’s almost a resident here.” Jenny laughed. “Like yourself. I’ll see you Tuesday then. Where are we going?”

“Not here. The Queen’s Head. I’ll drive.”