

Chapter 1

He has a curious way of moving through his rubbish. He leans into it, skimming down the corridors like a fearless biker on a hairpin bend. He gallops and vaults through the valleys and hills, canters and bobs through the outcrops and gorges of his improbable hoardings. Now and then he stops to climb over an obstacle, folding his long legs like picnic chairs. And all the while his chin juts up and out and his body hangs beneath it, as if his grizzled jaw is wired to an invisible puppeteer. And all the while the backs of his big gnarly hands brush over the surfaces. For a tall man and an old man he can shift himself when he wants to.

I don't move like that. I wade, tripping over boxes and piles of mildewing curtains, getting caught in cables, hooked on hat stands and assaulted by rutting ironing boards. I flounder over records, books, stained blankets, greasy collections of plastic bags, garden forks, antique mangles, a woman's patent leather shoe and an unopened blender that also grates and peels. And cats, cats, cats.

Cats of all kinds: ginger, black, brindled, tabby and piebald. Cats sleeping, eyeing, scratching and licking their arses on

sour cushions, humping under upturned boxes and crapping on great drifts of newspaper.

I try not to look at the details but some little thing always catches my eye. A dead mouse curled in a teacup, a headless ceramic dray horse, a mannequin's pink severed limb: that sort of thing. I have a morbid bent.

This morning I am excavating the northwest corner of the kitchen. Taking as modern topsoil a pile of local papers dated September 2015, I have traced back through layers and layers of history. On reaching a sprinkling of betting slips stuck to the linoleum (dated March 1990) I was able to estimate that this filth hole has not been cleaned for at least twenty-five years. Having opened several speculative trenches and located an oven, I am now enthusiastically cleaning its hob.

I count (sing with me):

Seven withered woodlice

Six shrivelled spiders

Five black bags

Four kitchen rolls

Three dishcloths

Two scouring pads

And industrial grade thick bleach.

I am wearing a disposable apron, extra-safe rubber gloves and a facemask for the smell and for the spores.

He's staring at me from the kitchen door, Mr Cathal Flood, three feet taller than usual because he is standing on a mound of discarded carpet tiles. This makes him a giant because he is already a fair height: a long, thin, raw-boned, polluted old giant. The set of eyes he has trained on me are

deep-socketed and unnervingly pale: the pale, pale, boreal blue of an Arctic hound.

‘You had no business throwing out the cartons and so forth.’ He talks slowly and over-loudly, as if he’s testing his voice. ‘All my things gone and I had a need for them.’

I turn to him, breathing like Darth Vader through my mask, and shrug. I hope my shrug communicates a profound respect for his discarded possessions (twenty refuse sacks of empty sardine tins) combined with the regretful need for practical living.

He narrows his gimlet eyes. ‘You’re a little shit, aren’t you?’

I pull off my mask. ‘I wanted to find your cooker, Mr Flood. I thought we might branch out, give the microwave a bit of a break.’

He watches me, his mouth tight with venom. ‘I could curse you,’ he says, a hint of a sob in his frayed brogue. ‘I could curse you to hell.’

Be my fucking guest, I say to my Brillo pad.

I draw hearts on the rotten hob with bleach and then start scrubbing again. Mr Flood mutters in broken Irish on the other side of the kitchen.

‘That’s lovely,’ I murmur. ‘You have a poet’s voice, Mr Flood. Loaded with foreboding and misery.’

I flick the dishcloth blithely into the corners of the grill as Mr Flood switches to English. He wishes me a barren womb (no changes there, then), eating without ever shitting, sodomy by all of hell’s demons (simultaneously and one after another), fierce constrictions of the throat, a relentless smouldering of the groin and an eternity in hell with my eyes on fire.

Then he stops and I look up. He is pushing his hand through the spun floss of his hair (white halo, cobweb magnet, subject to static) patting it down, as if making himself presentable.

Then he raises the still-dark caterpillars of his eyebrows a fraction of an inch and dips his head to one side. The effect is oddly charming; it has something of an ancient misanthropic squirrel about it. His mouth starts to work, in a series of stifled contortions, like a ventriloquist with hiccups.

‘Are you OK, Mr Flood?’

He takes a deep breath and bares his tarnished dentures at me. I realise that he’s smiling.

I venture a tentative smile of my own.

‘Don’t you ever lose your temper?’ he asks.

I study his face for signs of attack. ‘No, Mr Flood, I have a sunny disposition.’

‘Isn’t that a grand thing for the both of us, Drennan?’ he says, and with a quick pat of the wall he climbs down from the carpet tiles and swims back through the hallway.

I stare at the damp patch on the seat of his trousers.

I have worked at Mr Flood’s house for just over a week and he’s finally said my name.

I consider this a relative success.

Sam Hebden, a geriatric whisperer brought in at great expense from a better agency than ours, lasted three days before Mr Flood ran him off the property with a hurling stick. I haven’t had the pleasure, but I gather Sam was in tatters.

Perhaps Biba Morel, Case Manager, was right after all in pairing us: Cathal Flood meet Maud Drennan. Biba’s cake-saturated voice was full of glee when she phoned me that day. I could picture her, squeezed behind the desk, sucking on a cream éclair. Her jowls wobbling with delight as she rifled through her agency files, performing that alchemic magic she was renowned for: matching geriatric hell-raisers with minimum-waged staff. Biba the social-care cupid, dressed in

a stretch-waisted suit and floral scarf. Her voice honeyed with the joy of facilitating yet another spectacular client-care worker relationship.

I hardly listened, but if I had, I would have heard the words: *attracts a higher pay rate, challenging, assault, hoarding and common ground*. I would certainly have agreed that Mr Flood and myself, both being Irish, share a love of fiddle music, warm firesides and a staunch belief in the malevolence of fairies. Not to mention the innate racial capacity to drink any man alive under the table whilst we dwell, in soft melancholy, on the lost wild beauty of our homeland.

But now, as I survey the scene before me, my optimism falters.

Even the cloakroom in Mr Flood's straight-up, falling-down, Gothic crap heap is on a grand scale. Part-ballroom, part-cave, with a great black marble horse trough of a sink and wall sconces three feet high topped with whipped glass flames. An antiquated tin cistern roosts high above a monumental throne – a masterpiece in crenulated ceramic. The colour palette of this room is unremittingly unwholesome: the paintwork is lurid sphagnum and the tiles are veined the blue-black-green of an overripe cheese. The linoleum, where I've swept the floor, is patterned with brown lozenges like ancient orderly blood stains.

In one corner a limbless Barbie doll floats on an ocean of takeaway menus. Her smile is a picture of buoyant fortitude. I wonder if she is part of some sort of art installation, like the abstract expressionist shit that splatters the wall and the mug tree lodged in the toilet bowl.

Perhaps this is a job for another day. Perhaps this is a job for never.

A low-grade grumbling tells me that Mr Flood is haunting the corridor outside. He has been watching me all afternoon,

lurking behind stacked boxes and disembowelled televisions as I crinkle through his house in my disposable plastic apron.

I'm certain he's working up to something.

Out of the corner of my eye I see him dragging a filing cabinet to the mouth of the door. He arranges himself on top of it, ruffling his many layers of clothing and folding his rangy limbs like an ancient disdainful crane.

Then: 'I've been thinking, Drennan.'

'Good for you, Mr Flood.'

Then: nothing.

I glance across at him, waiting. He is staring down at the hands resting on his knees, so I consider them too. Palms big enough to span a melon, fingers slim and dextrous-looking: a pianist's or a surgeon's fingers. A smear of paint on the knuckle of his wrist, and long, curved nails, as strong as horn. He wears several checked shirts, each with over-stuffed patch pockets, which give him the appearance of having multiple lopsided breasts. A woollen scarf is wound haphazardly about his head. On his feet he wears a pair of winkle-pickers laced with string. The toes alone are a metre long. They curl at the end with all the coiled threat of a scorpion's tail.

I put on my safety goggles and turn back to the toilet, hastily extracting the mug tree from the bowl. I triple bag it without breathing, tie the handles and get ready to start my bleach offensive.

'Maud Drennan.' He says my name slowly, as if tasting it, savouring it. 'There you are with your head down the toilet. Will you come out and let me talk to you?'

Now here's a departure: it wants to talk.

I pull the chain on the old-fashioned cistern. The thing flushes with a rush of rust-coloured water.

'What do you want to talk about, Mr Flood?'

‘The house: how are you finding it?’

I glance up at him. He has an expression of twisted playfulness, as if he’s pulled half the legs off a spider and is now going to watch it reel round in circles.

‘The house is grand.’

He narrows his eyes. ‘You’re rattled by it and by me. I can tell by your pinched little face.’

‘My face is in no way rattled or pinched, Mr Flood.’

‘I make you nervous.’ His voice softens. ‘Don’t lie to me now, Drennan. I can see it in your eyes.’

‘Don’t flatter yourself,’ I growl into the toilet bowl.

He sits in silence for a while, then, softer still: ‘You have a beautiful set of eyes. The brown of a newly split conker.’

I squeeze bleach under the rim.

‘Or a polished walnut table.’

I start to scrub.

‘An amber glow to them in the light, like fine Cognac.’

I scrub harder.

‘Had a little sister with eyes just like yours,’ he says. ‘Could bore through the chest of a fella at ten paces and grab him by the heart at five. Eyes a man could drown in. Like hot treacle.’

I straighten up and throw him a withering look. He looks back at me gravely, sucking solemnly on his dentures, without even a hint of a smirk.

‘Of course, it was miraculous that she had a pair of eyes at all,’ he says. ‘Considering . . .’

‘Considering what?’

He takes cigarette papers and a pouch of tobacco out of his breast pocket and puts them on his knees. He regards me slyly. ‘Do you want to know why my sister’s eyes were miraculous?’

I give a half-shrug, which means not especially, and turn

back to the cistern, giving the chain a pull for something to do. But it's too early: the mechanism clanks and there's nothing. I'll have to wait.

Mr Flood waits too. With calm, practised movements he starts to roll a cigarette against his long thigh. His big hands are gentle, adept. I try not to watch him. He deftly licks the gummed strip on the paper, pinches the loose tobacco from the ends and puts the cigarette between his lips.

'It all started with the wasps.' He lights his cigarette and takes a drag.

'The wasps?'

He exhales. 'It's quite a story; do you want to hear it?'

'Is it a long story?'

'Not at all.' He gives me a crafty smile, his blue eyes lit. 'In my boyhood I was a great one for a dare.'

'Were you now?'

'There was nothing I wouldn't do if you bet me to do it. I'd bite into the belly of a dead frog, shit on the priest's doorstep, or sleep the night on the grave of the terrifying Mrs Gillespie.'

'You did all those things?' I give up on the cistern, shut the lid of the toilet and sit down on it.

'I did. I was a holy terror.'

I laugh, despite myself.

He laughs too, delightedly. 'Now one day the town's children bet me I wouldn't climb up the tree in Mrs Clancy's yard and belt the hell out of her wasp's nest. It was the biggest nest anyone had ever seen. For years it had grown unchecked, a great whorled bunion of a thing.'

Mr Flood pauses for effect, taking another drag on his cigarette. 'Mr Clancy had been forever promising Mrs Clancy that he'd deal with it. But it was well known that he was terrified of wasps, having been stung on the end of his gooter

whilst pissing in a hedgerow.’ Mr Flood opens his legs and points emphatically at the drooping crotch of his trousers.

‘I know what a gooter is, Mr Flood.’

As if laughing, the cistern gives a sick gurgle.

He grins. ‘So you do. One day, word began to go around that Cathal Flood was going head to head with Clancy’s wasps. There was nothing for it but to take a length of rope and a sturdy belting stick and set out for Clancy’s.’

For a long moment he sits smiling at his knees. ‘Every child in the neighbourhood came to watch me climb that tree. Up I went, and soon enough I got a proper look at the nest.’ He frowns. ‘There they were, these great long feckers. Flying in and out, crawling over each other with their arses fat with venom.’

Above me, a nervous dribble of water runs down through the pipes.

‘But I held firm and gave the nest a bit of a poke with my stick. All the children below roared and hopped as the wasps woke up and began to spill out of the nest.’

He eyes me belligerently. ‘My next move was fearless. I stood up on the bough of the tree and gave the nest a good clout. It peeled from the trunk like a rotten blister and fell down to the ground amongst the children, who scattered to the four corners of the yard. We all stared at the nest in surprise.’ Mr Flood hesitates, looking at me expectantly, waiting for the question.

‘Why? What did you see?’ I ask.

Mr Flood leans forward, his eyes wide. ‘*Nothing.*’

‘Nothing?’

‘That’s just it,’ he says. ‘Nothing happened. The nest lay there motionless. Dented but intact. And quiet. Not a peep from it. So the children drew nearer. And nothing happened. So the children drew nearer. And still nothing happened.’

‘The wasps were dead?’

A smile plays on his lips. ‘I jumped down out of the tree and everyone gathered around me and we began to debate whether I ought to stamp on the nest or set it on fire. And that’s when Ruth heard it.’

‘Heard what?’

He looks like he’s enjoying this. He has the voice for it: blarney-coated. ‘As we debated, my baby sister had toddled up to the nest and crouched on the ground. She dipped her head to it and listened. Do you know what she heard?’

I nod slowly.

‘A low angry drone. The sound of a thousand wasps protesting,’ he says. ‘Ruth, in her innocence, picked up the nest. She cradled it in her arms and began to sing it a lullaby.’

He relights his roll-up, tapping ash into a nearby broken soup tureen. ‘Of course, I’d noticed none of this for by now a fight had broken out. I was refusing to have anything further to do with the nest but the children had come to see a daring spectacle. I was just about to agree to eat a dead wasp, minus the sting, for I was not a total fecking eejit, when one of the children pulled on my sleeve and pointed across the yard in horror.’

I’m on the edge of the toilet seat; the cistern too is riveted: it is holding its drips. ‘What was it?’

Mr Flood frowns. ‘Ruth. Sitting on the ground, no bigger than a milk pail. Her face a mask of furious insects.’

I shake my head.

He leans forward, his voice clotted with disgust. ‘They were swarming all over her. No sound came from her mouth, which was opened as if in a scream, only wasps crawling in and out of it.’

‘Bloody hell,’ I whisper.

‘The wasps began to spread, coating her a hundred deep,

writhing, teeming. Soon all that was left uncovered was one tiny outstretched finger.’ He mimics Ruth’s pose with his horn-nailed old digit.

And it strikes me how utterly convincing he is, his pale eyes filled with emotion and a distressed look about his jowls.

‘Then, God help me, I acted, Drennan. I took up my stick and began to beat the feckers off her. The others watched, horrified, behind walls and ditches. But I stood my ground, holding my arm over my face, belting the wasps until Ruth fell over and Mrs Clancy came screaming out into the yard.’

He passes his hand over his forehead, frowning deeply. ‘Mr Clancy tried to pull me away and Mrs Clancy tried to cover Ruth with a blanket, but I swung my stick again and again.’

I realise that I’m gripping the toilet brush. I put it down.

He regards me with a grave expression. ‘And then, and I swear this to God, all at once the creatures lifted up in one great maddened cloud and droned off across the field. I threw down my stick, slung Ruth over my shoulder and, without thinking, carried her up to the holy well.’

‘The holy well?’

‘A horse trough on the road out of town, but it was said to have powers.’ He glances at me. ‘God bless Ireland in the olden days; if water collected in a teacup it was said to have curative powers. Ours was a great well for curing scrofula.’

‘Scrofula?’

‘Five miles down the coast, there was a pond that relieved pharyngitis. I ran up the road, threw the baby into the water and held her under.’ He frowns. ‘If she still had eyes in her head I couldn’t see them. Her face was pulp, a mess of poison. Her little arm floated up and out of the water as if she was waving to me, although I was sure she had gone.’

He looks at the cigarette end forgotten in his fingers. He finds his lighter. ‘But the saints were listening that day and

the water in that trough was truly holy. For as I raised her up out of the water Ruth took a deep breath and began to wail. And I saw there wasn't a mark on the child. Not a sting. Not a bruise. I pulled her outfit off and turned her around and around. There she was, shivering and turning before my eyes, a perfect little unmarked girl.'

'St Gobnait,' I mutter.

St Gobnait with her pale hair and calm face, lovely in her golden robe and diadem. Smiling down at the friendly bee that has alighted on her finger. I glance around, half expecting to see her leaning against the sink, but she isn't of course. No reasonable saint would come into this house.

Mr Flood frowns. 'What?'

'The listening saint would have been St Gobnait. Although, she's bees really, but she'd have been a great one to help with the stings.'

He looks puzzled. I've dropped a pebble in his story; it has made ripples and clouded the picture.

'So Ruth survived?' I ask.

He nods. 'But things were never the same with her. She had changed. She began to talk to herself.' He gives me a twisted half-smile. 'She said she was speaking to the dead.'

'The dead?'

The cistern gives a resonant burble.

Mr Flood looks up at it distractedly. 'Mammy took her before the priest and Daddy offered to knock the corners off her but still Ruth twittered on. Until I sat her down and told her that if she wanted to survive her childhood she must keep her abilities to herself.'

'And did she?'

'She did. From that day, whenever the urge was upon her, Ruth crept outside and whispered to the fence post. So it all ended well in a way.'

‘In a way,’ I say flatly.

‘But the biggest change was in her eyes and Ruth couldn’t hide that.’ He smiles at me. ‘They were lit with a kind of sorrowful gleam, a kind of tragic lustre, like *pearls*, you know.’

Something moves deep in the heart of me, as lithe and unwholesome as an old snake turning over in the sand. My breath snags; my nerves catch.

I keep my voice light. ‘Not conkers?’

A faraway look settles on Mr Flood’s face. ‘Do you know how pearls are made? A tiny bit of grit works its way inside the shell, into the softest place.’ He twists his fingertips into his cupped hand. ‘The oyster coats this irritant to make it smooth, to make it bearable.’

I can’t answer.

‘A pearl is an everlasting tear,’ he whispers. ‘A swaddled hurt.’

I stare at him.

‘Likewise, the loveliest eyes are found in the heads of women who have suffered.’ He smiles. ‘Damage lies at their shining core. As I said, Drennan, you have beautiful eyes.’

The cistern gives a tense gurgle and I remind myself that this old man has no idea what damage lies at my shining core. Away with his reveries, prodding at his palm, murmuring nonsense; he hasn’t a clue what he’s saying.

‘Stick to the story, Mr Flood,’ I say.

He narrows his eyes. ‘But you’ve a better one . . . ?’

‘If I had I wouldn’t tell you.’

‘Fair play.’ He smiles. ‘So because of me, Ruth went to the brink of death, was saved, learnt to keep her cracked ways to herself and became better-looking.’

‘And because of you the nest came down and the wasps nearly killed her in the first place.’

‘Shit happens. Mind, Ruth did predict that I’d marry Mary.’

The cistern comes alive with the happy gushing of water. I glance up at it.

‘Your wife?’

He nods. ‘Although my sister didn’t need second sight to work that out.’

‘Why not?’

Mr Flood hesitates. ‘Mary had this fiery hair like the sun setting on autumn. Born to a farmer but built for the drawing room. You’d never imagine she wasn’t a lady, a queen, Helen of Troy, any day.’

‘You must have loved her very much.’

His body stiffens. ‘Must I?’

‘You must miss her.’

Brows lower over a blue glare. ‘Must I?’

‘You’ve been on your own for a while now, haven’t you?’

‘Have you even read the fucking care plan?’ He affects a sing-song snarl. ‘Mr Cathal Flood, retired artist, mechanical engineer and dealer in curiosities, lives *alone* in his substantial Victorian Grade II listed villa.’

‘But you have a son. He must be some comfort to you?’

‘What do you know about my son?’

‘What I read in the care plan.’

He pauses, his face a picture of disgust. ‘Spill.’

‘Dr Gabriel Flood is a Drama and Theatre Arts lecturer and an active member of West Ealing Choral Society.’

‘Dr Gabriel Flood is a gobshite.’

I frown. ‘Who wishes very strongly for his father to continue to reside at Bridlemere, with the best possible care, pending Mr Flood’s admission to a suitable residential home.’

Mr Flood smiles sourly. ‘Which will prove a challenging placement because the old bastard has threatened trouble on a *biblical* scale – dirty protest, arson and ruin – if he is moved to a residential home.’

‘It doesn’t say that in the care plan. So you’re not planning on moving to a residential home, Mr Flood?’

‘Not while there’s a hole in my arse,’ he says.

He throws me a look of loathing as he unfurls his limbs in a series of spasms. Hauling himself to his feet, restacking bone and joint. Setting his great head wobbling at the top, all hinged jaw and glowering brows.

He’s halfway down the corridor when I say it.

‘I’m sure your son only wants the best for you, Mr Flood.’

With remarkable speed, in one blurred bound he’s back in through the door and across the floor.

Bolt upright his height is stunning.

He is a gigantic longbow: body held taut, every sinew trembling with tension. He points down at me, the arrow of his index finger aimed between my eyes.

‘*Fucker,*’ he hisses.

He backs out of the room, still pointing, drops his arm and casts off down the hallway. Piles of rubbish slump and tumble in his wake.

I wonder if I should make a run for it. I sit down on the toilet while I think about this, my legs not being quite trustworthy yet. Above me water races through the pipes, a sudden deluge into the cistern, as if it has been waiting with its breath held.

Then this happens, in this order: the cloakroom door slams shut, a low moan sounds deep in the cistern, a toilet roll unspools itself across the floor.

I glance over at limbless Barbie. She looks alarmed, despite the winning smile.

I cross the room at a half-run, try the door handle and find it locked.

The wall lights flare with a sudden tungsten glow. Burning bright, then dipping low.

I wait, still holding the handle with my heart flapping, counting down and then up again in little panicky scales of numbers.

On high, the top of the old tin cistern begins to hop like the lid of a pan on the boil, dribbles of water bubbling over. This is followed by a concentrated hiss like the pressurised song of a coal-fired train. Streams of water spurt from the joints of the pipework in a series of gushes. I press myself against the door. Airborne arcs of water whip and fall from the cistern. Dashing and collapsing, twisting and falling, like dropped skipping ropes.

The water in the toilet bowl starts to rock.

The handbasin taps join in, opening with a metallic grind, vomiting water. In moments the sink is full, overspill pouring onto the floor.

I watch as a milk bottle, of all things, bobs up from the depths of the handbasin. The milk bottle treads water in a slow revolve, as if, fully aware of its inexplicable entry into the scene, it is waiting for the audience to catch up. Then it launches, decisively, over the side of the basin in a cascade of water to skim across the wet linoleum and knock gently against the side of my trainer.

The torrent halts as suddenly as it started. The last jet from the cistern arrested in mid-air falls, scattering droplets on the linoleum. The handbasin drains.

The room is silent but for the odd coy drip and contrite burble and sheepish splash. As if the plumbing is embarrassed about its outburst.

Behind me the cloakroom door opens.

The milk bottle is old-fashioned, shoddily stoppered with a taped-on foil top. It is empty but for a photograph. I dry my hands and the bottle and poke the picture out.

Two children stand, hand in hand, beside an ornate fountain. The stone nymph at the centre of the fountain watches them with languorous curiosity whilst pretending to listen to her conch shell. The water in her pond looks solid, dark. Icicles hang from the tiered rims. The branches on the bushes in the background are frostbitten and bare.

The boy scowls up at the camera. No more than four, his face translucently pale and his hair vivid auburn.

The girl is taller, no less than seven, and has no face. Instead there is a burn that goes right through the photograph. Edges melted, a raised welt, as if from a cigarette.

An army of spiders march across my scalp. I feel cursed even to be holding this. Drop it, I say to myself.

But I don't. I look at the frizz of hair that surrounds the space where her face should be: russet hair, unnaturally bright, backlit by the setting winter sun. I look at the girl's patent shoes and her legs in red patterned tights and her navy coat. The toes of her feet meet. Pigeon-toed.

I turn the photograph over. The first word is scored out, a series of deeply etched kisses. The caption reads:

Xxxxxxxxxxx and Gabriel, Bridlemere, 1977.

An artefact has washed up, knocking, on my shore.

Why my shore?

My shore is strange, inhospitable terrain. It is rock-ringed and uninviting and ruled by odd, unfathomable tides.

Another person, in another time, put their faith in the unknown – in the unseen me. They rolled and stoppered and hoped their message would get through. Someone transmitted: I received.

Would it be churlish to throw it back amongst the flotsam and jetsam and let someone else find it?

Would I dare? In all the mad swill of objects, the house gave me this.

The photograph lies on my palm, turning up at the ends like a fortune-telling fish. It's telling a bad kind of fortune, of that I've no doubt.

I glance around me. At the sodden rubbish, the soaked walls; at limbless Barbie watching me from the corner with one eyebrow raised. Her fuchsia-pink lips mouth one word. *Run.*

Chapter 2

I don't run at all. I go into the kitchen, close the door, prop a chair against it and select a cast-iron skillet. Testing the heft of it in my hand and placing it within easy reach on the Formica-topped table.

I am professionally obliged to leave Mr Flood a nutritious dinner. Then I can run.

Today it is steak and kidney pie and potatoes; for afters there is jelly and mandarin oranges. My landlady, Renata Sparks, says I ought to pocket Mr Flood's money and serve him dog food and crackers. I tell her I derive a sense of occupational pride from finding a clean plate every morning. Besides, the old man is looking a lot less peaky, still cadaverous, but filling out a little around the eye sockets. Renata laughs through her nose at me.

I also have to feed his clutter of cats before I run.

I've named them for all the top writers. Hemingway has half an ear and a rousing meow, Dame Cartland is a sociable Persian with a matted rear-end, and Burroughs, dour and sneaky, hisses suspiciously in corners. They are starting to come when I call; they twist themselves around

my legs, giving me bubonic constellations of fleabites.

Once or twice I stop, hearing something at the door: a faint cry, a scratching, perhaps not of cats. Once or twice my hand reaches for the skillet. But after all it is nothing. Away from the confinement of the downstairs cloakroom I remind myself of the following:

1. There are more things in heaven and earth, but rarely are they this direct or comprehensible in their methods.
2. I hardly read Biba Morel's legal disclaimer, but if I had paid more attention I would have noted the words: *council raid, booby traps, ingenious mechanisms, police caution.*
3. Quick reflexes and heavy cookware will turn the tide in all but the most desperate situations.

Keeping a calm, steady pace, I wash up, put my jacket on and lock the back door behind me. Fighting the urge to break into a run, I make my way sedately down the garden path. Congratulating myself for reaching the gate in a serene and orderly fashion, I step out onto the street.

And take a deep breath.

Here the pavement is certain beneath my feet and nothing heaves or scurries. Here smells are simple, uncomplicated: the scent of bus fumes, the dwindling waft of a cigarette. Rather than the thick, fierce, mind-shattering, stomach-lifting stench of decades of hoarded refuse, one unwashed old man, one hundred cats, the shit from one hundred cats and the fecund wreckage of a decaying garden.

It's funny how humans and care workers adapt. On my first day I thought the reek of Mr Flood's house would take the top of my head off. By the end of my shift I could eat a fig roll if I breathed through my mouth.

But I haven't got used to the uneasiness that haunts me

as I catch the bus to work, or the foreboding that grows as I walk from the bus stop, or the dread that drowns me as I step over Mr Flood's threshold.

I look back at Bridlemere from the gate. From the street it's a wall of dark green, a forest of *leylandii* grown up around Sleeping Beauty's castle.

The only way in now is through the back gate, past satellites of sheds and decaying outhouses. Along a path lined with dismembered bicycles, eviscerated mattresses and abandoned car batteries. Step off the path and you will allegedly find a walled garden, an ice house, a well and a gate lodge with mullioned windows. Keep to the path and you'll reach the rear of the house with the conservatory to your right. A miniature glass cathedral, all pointed spires and arches, its panes fogged with whorls of whitewash and greened with moss. The lower windows of the house have been blinded: shuttered or newspapered to a height. A flight of iron steps leads to the back door, the kitchen, the scullery and the pantry.

The house has four storeys and at the top there is a belvedere, a long glazed gallery, which, if I ever got to it, would give me a view of the whole of London. From there I would see the wing tips of the planes landing at Heathrow or the masts of the boats in Greenwich. From there I would see the changing of the guards at Buckingham Palace or a pigeon shit on Nelson's Column.

To the left of the house is a narrow path that continues to the front of the house, where you can still discern, amongst the riotous undergrowth and suppurating bin bags, the ghost of a driveway. It circles a pond with a fountain where a nymph wilts with moss in her crevices.

The place where two children stood in 1977, one with a face and one without. (I check my bag. The photograph is there, rolled and furled and back in its bottle for now.)

The nymph still holds a conch to her ear, pretending to listen. At her feet, stone fish with gibbous eyes cavort and unspeakable pond creatures turn in water clotted with algae, a soup of ooze. She gazes languidly towards the porch, as if waiting for the occupants of the house to come outside, which they don't, for the front door is painted closed. Walk up the wide, flat steps and look through the letterbox – you can't: it's nailed shut.

There's an underwater quality to the light at Bridlemere, a greenish cast from the forest of foliage that surrounds the house. Sound changes too, noise fades, so that you hardly hear the traffic outside. At Bridlemere there is only the slow settling of rubbish and the patter of cats, and, when he is not roaring a lungful, the subtle sounds of Mr Flood moving, or the silence of him standing still. Sometimes there is a kind of hushed rustling, a sort of whispering. Like a sheaf of leaves blown, or a prayer breathed, rushed and desperate, just out of earshot.

Time wavers and retreats at Bridlemere, coughing and shambling. Here is history mutely putrefying and elegance politely withering.

But for all this, the quiet house is not at peace, for there is a watched and watchful feeling, a shifting shiftless feeling. As if more than cats track your moves, as if nameless eyes follow you about your business.

At Bridlemere objects disappear and reappear somewhere else at will. Put your wristwatch on the windowsill, you'll find it hanging from a hook on the dresser. Turn your back and the teapot you left on the table is now on a shelf in the pantry.

At Bridlemere cats startle and hiss at nothing, bouncing down the hallway with their hackles lifted and their ears flat. Or else they rub themselves, purring, against patches of air.

At Bridlemere spiders spin webs like Baroque masterpieces.
They hang all through the house like coded warnings.

But it doesn't do to dwell on it.

Sam Hebden, Senior Care Worker, no doubt dwelt on it and that is how Bridlemere broke his nerve. Mr Flood's attempted assault with a hurley would have been the final straw; the house would have got to Sam first.

Sam Hebden was armed with an NVQ in Social Care and a diploma in Geriatric Conflict Resolution. He didn't need an induction; he merely glanced at the risk assessment. He worked alone. Some said that Sam was a tall man with a topknot like a Samurai. Some said he rode a Ducati and had a tattoo of a cobra on his neck. The truth is, only Biba had seen him and she spoke his name low and with a barely contained excitement. Sam was the human embodiment of a care plan successfully coming together; he was untouchable.

Then he came to Bridlemere.

Then he was gone.

Maybe he climbed on a homeward-bound motorbike. Or maybe he was detained at a local mental-health establishment, frothing at the mouth and ranting about sentient rubbish.

Who knows?

It wouldn't do to take the fate of Sam Hebden lightly. Here are working conditions the likes of which have not been seen since Charles Booth's day. Whole days trapped in a maze of clutter with a bockety old maniac liable to rear up at any moment, all clacking dentures and spittle-flecked gizzards. Despite his age, with his speed and long legs he would run me to ground in an instant, if today was anything to go by. My only defence is a constant vigilance and a willingness to kick an octogenarian right up his hole.

As I close the gate, I catch sight of a sudden movement

in the garden. Mr Flood is emerging chin-first from behind the bushes. He throws a furtive glance towards the back door and limps across the path holding a length of rope and a sink plunger. I thank the saints in heaven I've made it out alive.

I don't thank St Dymphna (family harmony, madness and runaways) specifically, although she is waiting outside the gate for me, as she does most days, shimmering dimly. She is chewing the plait that hangs down inside her veil. She does this when she's bored; it gives her a ruminative look and leaves the ends of her invisible hair spiky. St Dymphna catches sight of me, widens her eyes in mock surprise and blesses herself in an ironic kind of way. Framed against the verdant backdrop of Bridlemere's hedge, she glows and is beautiful. They always paint her with fair hair, but it's brown. She resembles a very young Kate O'Mara, only transparent and world-weary (which is remarkable considering Dymphna was consecrated to Christ at fourteen and dead by fifteen).

I ignore her, hoping she might just dissipate, but she hitches up her robe and trails behind me. I can hear the faint slap and saunter of her sandals. From this sound I can tell she's affecting her jaded gait.

St Dymphna won't set foot in Bridlemere. She refuses to come any further than the gate. The only other time she balked this badly was during a trip to the National Wax Museum in Dublin. She said the place was too bloody heathen for her; there was no way she'd go inside, even though she was mad to view the likenesses of Wolfe Tone and de Valera. She flew up onto the roof and waited it out with the pigeons, sending invisible spits down onto the heads of visitors. Faced with Bridlemere St Dymphna narrows her

eyes and sucks air in through her teeth like a plumber condemning a boiler.

I glance over my shoulder at her as I walk to the bus stop. She wanders through pushchairs and litterbins. She makes a beeline for every pedestrian to drift through them. I see them shudder and look around, like someone has walked over their grave. It is not a pleasant feeling. I've felt it.

At the bus stop St Dymphna draws level and flicks back her veil. 'What's that about?' she points at my bag. 'In there?'

'A message in a bottle washed up in the downstairs cloak-room. Under strange circumstances.'

St Dymphna frowns. 'Don't.'

'Almost like a kind of haunting.'

'Just. Bloody. Don't.'

St Dymphna is all talk: all dark flashing eyes and righteous swords and sulking and bluster and challenge. But underneath this she is terrified by anything out of the ordinary, or overly mundane, or pitiful, or unpleasant. Death scares her, as do people who are terminally sick, crying loudly, or depressed. She is frightened of the dark and of enclosed spaces and will barely even hazard an alcove. St Dymphna likes very little other than bagpipe music, stories about herself and dirty limericks.

'I feel like this job could kill me,' I say, more to myself than to her.

'Jobs are very dangerous.' She closes her eyes. 'Disappointment, lung disorders, boredom, stress, futility, suicide, heart disease, disillusionment, diabetes, strokes.'

'And you know this, how?'

She shrugs, keeping her eyes closed.

'So I am in danger at Bridlemere?'

She opens her eyes. 'How the hell would I know?'

We wait in silence for the bus.

Her voice, when it comes, is weary. ‘Occupationally or spiritually?’

‘Both. Either.’

‘In that house?’ St Dymphna pouts. ‘What do you bloody think?’

‘Then I should leave?’

‘Do what you want. I wouldn’t bloody stay there.’

‘Why?’

She hesitates.

‘What’s in there? Ghosts? Demons?’

She rolls her eyes. ‘There’s no such thing.’

‘Just hoary old Mr Flood and his cats up at the house?’

She says nothing.

‘Go on, give me a hint,’ I say. I tap my bag. ‘This photo—’

‘Don’t even bloody ask.’

We stand in silence for a while.

‘They have the look of siblings.’ She gestures towards my bag with a flap of her arm.

‘And you’d know that how? One of them doesn’t have a face.’

St Dymphna steps out into the path of a man in a cheap suit with a carrier bag in his hand. He falters as he moves through her, as if he’s tripped on a crack in the pavement. He looks around himself, glancing at me briefly with hunted eyes. Then he’s off down the road clutching his bag a little tighter.

St Dymphna wears a pleased expression. ‘It’s in the way they are standing, you know, for their picture to be taken.’

‘How do siblings stand?’

‘Oh, I don’t bloody know.’ She inspects the end of her tattered plait. ‘Like they are part of the same suite of furniture. Sort of unaware of each other, like a table and a lamp.’

‘There’s only one child in the care plan, the boy, Gabriel. The Floods only had the one son.’

‘And they put every bloody thing in the care plan? What about all the stuff a family leaves out?’

Cars go past but no buses.

‘All the skeletons, you mean?’

‘I warned you.’ She straightens her crown pettishly. It sparks and glows a little brighter in the places touched by her fingertips. She has no visible halo, although in dim light, when her veil slips back, you can sometimes see a glow radiate from her centre parting.

‘So I shouldn’t go back then?’

St Dymphna rolls her eyes. ‘Jesus, I told you: do what you like.’

I tap the bottle in my handbag. ‘What if this is a cry for help?’

‘So what if it is?’ she mumbles.

‘It’s strange though, a little girl with her face burnt out of a photograph.’

She pulls her veil around her ears. ‘I don’t want to *hear* it, all right?’

‘What if I found this photograph for a reason?’

‘What bloody reason? Drop it,’ she says. ‘Walk away.’

‘But someone might need my help?’

‘You’ll only cause bloody trouble. Like you did before.’

I stare at her.

With a sour glance over her shoulder, St Dymphna steps out through the bus stop and into the path of the oncoming bus.