

Andy's hand was on her shoulder and maybe he squeezed a little, but the lower part of his body was against her and he was still hard. He had the boxers on and she wore pants but she still must have felt it, of course she would have and shifted from him. She seemed asleep but maybe not. But her breathing. She was awake. He raised the quilt and settled on his back, arms by his side. He was happy to lie there. Yes he was tired but he would hardly sleep now. That was that, and he had to go to work, sooner or later.

What did it matter? She shifted position, turning into him. Are you awake? she whispered.

Yeah.

Your eyes were closed. I thought you were sleeping

I was concentrating on your face.

Remembering what I looked like?

He turned to her, reached to brush her cheek with his index finger, tracing the cheekbone. The light glinted on her eyes. He leaned to kiss her cheek, his hand on her arm, but she was resistant. He withdrew and settled on his back. You're not good at relaxing, she said.

He didnt reply, then was stretching as far as he could, pushing down as far as he could, feeling a reaction to this at the ankles and over the tops of his feet and lower limbs, stretching out his toes, pushing up his hips. A couple of moments later he changed

position, changed it again, then moved onto his side away from her. He was wishing away the erection. His feet had come out from under the duvet so that would help. How could she even think he was sleeping! It was just ludicrous. Did she not bloody who cares. He was tired; tired and weary and needing to sleep, he really did need to sleep. He had an early start. Why could he not sleep? Surely he was past this stage in physicality for christ sake! Maybe it wasnt a stage. Eternal erections. All these years and still governed by that bloody drive to wherever, who cares. The gap between their bodies was less than ten inches – ten centimetres. That was a reasonable estimate. Definitely not ten inches, but the warmth, her very presence. Did she expect him to ignore that she was there lying beside him? It was stupid.

She really did not want sex.

That is how it was and he had to accept it. He had accepted it. She didnt ask him to keep on the boxers but she kept on her bra and her pants so that was that. By invitation only. He had to keep them on. Although it was his bed!

Mind and body. His mind was willing but his flesh was weak. In principle he did understand. He did. It was just this damn body of his, it seemed unwilling to accept reality. He grinned.

There was a twitch from her side as if she had felt his facial muscles move. Very interesting that she should ‘feel’ the face muscle but not a full-blown hardon. Life, who cares. But why had she come to bed with him? It was difficult to believe she would, unless – unless what? He had to get used to the idea. And sleep, if he could sleep, he just couldnt sleep. How could he with her there! My god. But would he scream? Do males scream? Of course they do. If not the precedent was his, to be his his his, all his.

The unmachoness. So what, bloody nonsense.

Wearing his shirt too! Ah well. An old one. Did he have new

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ones? She chose it. He offered his entire wardrobe! She chose the old shirt, a comfy old effort he should have dumped years ago – although he did like it, a good old shirt, and she chose it! He grinned again. That was typical. How like a woman! Just like so amazing at times how they seem to know certain things!

His bloody neck was sore. She had the big pillow. He only had two on this bed, the good one and the bad one; the bad one was like a handkerchief or something, he would have been as well with nothing at all, but it made it difficult lying on his side. The best way was on his back but he didnt sleep on his back. On his front was difficult because of his nose getting in the way and most of all the lower regions. But even the nose. How could ye forget the nose. The nose aye gets in the way. Lie on yer front and forget about it. Yes but how can one, one cannot fucking forget it, then it pops and blood everywhere. His was a bleeder. Forget noses.

He thought the erection had gone but it hadnt.

Do erections ‘go’? Where do they go to? What happens to the unused physicality, unused energy? Is something absorbed? What about the sperm that does not ejaculate, does it just get sort of submerged or kind of thinned out and then

Shut up ya fucking fool.

But it is true that we cannot survive without them but for 99.999% of the time they get in the way, they just get in the way. One might be glad to do without them. Except do what without them?

He was not bothered about not having sex but there was a physical reaction against it. Nor could he ignore her body. He stroked the curve of her shoulder. He wished for a pencil for a go at drawing her shoulders and neck, the hair straggling at the nape. She shifted onto her back and he withdrew his hand. Do you never sleep? she asked.

Her name was Fiona and she was powerful. This had not occurred to him. She came to his bed on the understanding there would be no sex but how could ye take such nonsense at face value? Can women do this? It was just crazy. He was to keep on the boxers. Utter madness. Maybe she regarded them as a kind of chastity belt. Of course these boxers were more like whatever. Where the hell had he bought them anyway? The January sales at Lidl.

How could he go to bed with a woman in the expectation of not having sex? In the name of god. This was not like going to bed with a long-term girlfriend for christ sake they had only met!

Exactly. So why would she have come to bed with him if not on a certain understanding? Jesus christ what time was it anyway!

He must have left his damn watch on the kitchen table or someplace. Usually it was next to the bedside lamp. Probably it was about three o'clock. But it could have been later. There was light but this was early June.

He heard the sound of her breathing; a murmur. Was she sleeping? Maybe she was. Maybe she truly was. He raised himself up onto his elbow to see her, and he could in this particular light and she looked good. Man, she did. She just looked good really, the shape of her shoulders and neck and just her body, her hair and so on, just everything. He kissed her on the nose, softly, his hand to the side of her face, cupping her cheek. Was she beautiful? Actually she was. She seemed to be. He tried to remember her completely. He couldnt: not completely. He entwined her hair with his fingers, twisting it and turning it.

Definitely she was awake. And cleared her throat as if to speak. He whispered, Shh, and started massaging her scalp. He wondered if she was smiling. It felt like she was, but maybe not. She might

have been strained. Her eyes were shut. Then they were open again, and maybe she smiled. He stopped the massaging.

I wonder if they all got their taxis, she said. Sometimes they're hard to get at this time of night. Although there's usually plenty around here. How long has yer phone not been working?

He had moved from her and was lying on his back again.

Eh? she said. Has it not been working for a while?

Yeah. He shrugged. No I mean.

Why dont ye get it sorted?

Get what sorted?

Your phone.

I need a new one.

Why dont ye get one then?

I'm waiting for my stocks and shares to come in.

She paused a moment then slapped him on the shoulder. It took him by surprise. Hey, he said, that was sore.

I dont like it when you're sarcastic. She slapped him again, and again it took him by surprise. He was taken aback and it must have shown. But he could see her smile, and whatever it was – maybe that combination, hitting him with a smile on her face – the reaction was immediate god almighty, the proverbial knee getting hit by the proverbial fucking hammer, doi oi oing. From nothing to full, raging bloody hardon. She didnt realise the effect she had, she didnt realise, effect she was having! Christ! He moved suddenly to grip her by the shoulders in a sort of pretend-manner moving onto her as though to pin her down. He leaned to kiss her on the lips his body against her not pressing in but touching the length and she would have noticed how hard he was. She must have. She couldnay not have. That was impossible. His eyes had closed. When he opened them he saw she was studying him. He was a specimen.

She knew the state he was in. He rested back from her, on

his elbows. His breathing was harsh and he needed to calm down; he was sick of this, it was like a stupid game. How stupid could it get? The duvet was mainly on her side so he could let his right leg lie outside; help the calming-down process. But this was ridiculous. He felt like saying it to her I mean for fuck sake what age are we at all it's not like we're bloody eighteen years of age! Christ almighty!

Yet maybe she didnt know. Maybe she lacked experience. She had been married to the one guy for years and from what he could gather he was not the most physical of chaps.

What did that mean? Did he not like sex? Did he not notice sex? Was he – what? What on earth did that mean? Not the most physical of chaps? But it wasnt her said that it was him, he thought the words, picking up from her. He had just picked up that her husband wasnt really bothered.

Even how she smiled, there was an uncertainty about her. So apart from him, her ex-husband, apart from him, what males did she know? Some women just married guys that asked them. Maybe she was one. So she didnt really know other guys. She didnt realise they wanted bloody sex all the fucking time jesus christ not all the time but just like these times when they were geared up for it and just like my god lying in bed with a woman ye had just met and was damn beautiful and sexy for christ sake.

Oh god. He really needed to calm down. I'm sorry, he said, I'm just tired.

When d'ye start work?

The back of eight.

I dont work Saturdays, she said.

Lucky you.

She said nothing. Then she yawned.

Want a coffee? he asked.

She looked at him as if he was daft.

Or tea?

Do you have any hot chocolate?

Hot chocolate. He laughed.

What's so funny?

Nothing. He grinned. Are ye serious but?

What do ye mean?

Hot chocolate? Ye think I would have hot chocolate?

Pardon?

I did used to have some.

It doesnt matter, she said.

I've got peppermint tea and like eh green tea.

Fiona smiled. Your friends go on nonstop, she said, everybody talking and talking and talking. I thought they would never be quiet. That what-dye-call-him? Him with the ponytail.

Tony.

He plays in a band?

He does, aye . . .

She was looking to hear more but he could not be bothered. Tony was Tony and not really a friend. Well he was a friend, he wasnt a pal. Pals are friends but friends might not be pals.

Andy, she said.

Yeah?

She didnt answer.

What? he said.

Nothing.

So if it was nothing why mention the guy? Tony in some ways was a shit but fair enough; who cares, who cares. She didnt know that. But he was a shit. Especially with women he was a shit, just like women didnt seem to know until it was too bloody late, the guy was just a fucking – whatever, not a friend, well he was a friend, just not a pal. Who cares anyway. Andy was tired. She surely appreciated that. He had stretched out on his

back again. What the hell time was it? Maybe there would be no sleep either. He closed his eyes. Maybe he could doze.

She was talking again. He was awful high though wasn't he? Ye would've thought he was on something. He acted like he was.

Andy closed his eyes.

You were high as well, she said.

Pardon?

Ye seemed to be.

I'm no sure what ye mean by 'high'?

Do you play in a band? You yourself, do you play in a band?

No.

You've got that guitar.

Aye well I've got a fishing rod too. Actually I've got two fishing rods. What I mean by that, I don't do any fishing.

She shifted onto her back now and seemed fully awake. He wondered whether to switch on the light. She was gazing at him. Why not? she asked.

He looked at her.

If ye've got two fishing rods?

I only mean I've got two fishing rods and don't go fishing and it's the same with guitars. I've actually got three of the buggers, if ye go in the other room. Plus a keyboard plus a fiddle. I sold my sax.

God . . .

Only kidding. What I mean is because I've got something doesn't mean I am something. I've got guitars but I don't – whatever, I'm not in a band. So to answer yer question: no, I don't play in a band.

Ye don't have to be nasty.

Nasty? I'm not being nasty.

I only asked a question.

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I know ye did, sorry.

I thought ye played in a band because of how the blonde woman asked if ye would play when she sang.

Andy stared at her.

I know she asked ye and ye wouldnt, however ye said it, I saw ye shaking yer head. And then she asked him with the ponytail, the old guy.

He wouldnt like ye calling him 'old'.

Well he is. When you wouldnt play she asked him. It would've been nice if ye had played.

Andy nodded.

I thought ye were going to. I've seen her in there before, the blonde woman. I would like to have heard ye. I thought ye would have and ye didnt. It would've been nice. Why didnt ye?

The thing is she was wanting to sing and it didnay matter who played. Well it did, but only in a wee way. She doesnay really care. It's her thing and that's that, whether it was me or somebody else. Anyway, I didnay have my guitar.

He offered ye his. Him with the ponytail. I saw him offering.

Andy sighed.

I saw him.

Yeah well.

Dont be so jaggy.

I'm not.

Yes ye are, ye're edgy. It's hard even to talk to you. Ye just seem to get stressed. I would like to have heard ye play, that's all. I would just like to have heard ye play.

Sorry.

It's not sorry. Ye dont have to say sorry. I dont need to know yer business. Obviously there's something. But I dont care.

There isnt anything.

The way ye're acting.

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I didnt know I was acting. It's Barbara ye're talking about.

Fiona lay still. After a moment she said, I dont care. Just obviously there was something the way ye were acting. What about him with the funny hat, the man with the whistle? Is that a real instrument or what? I mean like a real musical instrument?

Of course.

He doesnt play in a band though does he? in a real band, I mean like playing a whistle!

Andy chuckled.

Seriously? It's a real instrument?

Are you kidding?

No.

That's Joe Wylie. Joe Wylie. He plays everything, the pipes, the flute, sax, clarinet, pibroch, the bloody bassoon. Everything.

What he plays them all?

Andy grinned. He carries the whistle in his pocket.

So he can just come out and play?

Exactly.

He sounds like a busker.

Huh! Joe Wylie! Probably he has busked anyway. He's done just about everything else. Some buskers are good ye know.

Have you ever?

What?

Been a busker or been busking? however ye say it, have ye? Have you ever done it?

What?

Been a busker on the street?

Yeah, well.

Have ye!

Once or twice.

Did ye make any money?

Eh . . .

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Ye would if it was New York or Paris or someplace. London, there's buskers play down the tube. Imagine it happened here! Fiona chuckled.

It couldnt.

Of course it could.

No it couldnt, not down the subway, they'd get like arrested. The cops would move in. Music's barred in this town.

Dont be silly.

I'm not being silly. It's only in controlled areas. Like everything else. Subways are for going to work and other places of confinement. Everything's controlled. The cops and politicians have it sewn up. Just like the rest of society.

But that's everywhere!

I know it's everywhere that's what I'm saying, society, the whole of bloody society, that's Scotland, it's just like . . .

Dont get angry.

I'm no getting angry. We dont have to like it but because it's the same everywhere. I mean god sake.

Dont get so upset.

I'm not.

Yes ye are. I think ye worry too much.

. . .

Ye shouldnt, she said.

I dont. I just . . . He sighed again. Ye know the song, 'Go Lie Down'?

No.

Andy sang:

If you dont get angry lie down
go lie down
go lie down
If you dont get angry lie down

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yeah just lie down, lie down
you better lie down,
you dont get angry, you lie down

That's nice.

Yeah.

What it means is go away and die. Lying down is the same as dying. If ye dont get angry ye would be as well dead. Least that's how I see it.

You wrote it?

No, god. It's an old blues, a great kind of . . . He paused.

I wish ye had played tonight. Why didnt ye? Eh? They were waiting to see. I saw them. They thought ye were going to. When she asked ye, the blonde woman, they were looking to see, him with the ponytail.

Andy was silent. Eventually he said, Look it's not a big deal. I just didnt want to play, I wasnay like . . . He paused. I just didnt want to.

You write songs as well dont ye?

He shrugged.

So are they all musicians? Your friends? The ones that were there last night? Ye seemed to know them all.

Well not them all.

I just thought it was a bit strange. It looked like ye were going to play and then ye didnt.

He had his eyes open and could see by the shapes that she was looking towards him although she lay on her back. It was too dark to gauge the expression on her face.

I wasnt watching ye, she said, I was at the next table remember. I couldnt help seeing ye.

He shifted side on to her now, raised himself up to rest on his left elbow. I did notice ye, he said.

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Eventually.

His chin was resting on his left hand now, he was gazing down at her. Ye were squeezed in at the side – you and yer pal.

Well I wouldnt have gone in by myself. She turned to him. I wouldnt have gone in myself.

Why because ye're a woman?

Of course.

Ye dont get hassle in there but surely?

Dont be silly.

Seriously?

Women always get hassle.

Yeah but no the Scotia I mean I didnay think in there, it's got the reputation for being good like I mean a place where women can go.

Huh.

People say that anyway.

Do they?

So I'm being stupid . . .

Ye're not being stupid it's just there's no such thing as a hassle-free bar. There isnt. Ye're wrong if ye think there is. Ye're wrong. Ye are.

Well . . .

What?

Sorry, it's just the usual like I mean if ye're young and good looking yeah, people – guys – guys will talk to ye and whatever I mean surely?

If I was an old woman I wouldnt get bothered by men?

No what I mean

I think I know what ye mean Andy, so about tonight of course I was with a pal. I wouldnt go into a bar on my own unless I was meeting people. I mean any bar, unless it was same-sex; gay, lesbian.

Andy turned from her and lay on his back, he clasped his

hands behind his head. I know that's most pubs but I didnt know this one as well. Sorry.

Sorry?

Yeah.

Why are you sorry?

No, just . . . I was just I mean it's supposed to have a good reputation for that I mean like just a place where women dont get hassle.

Is that a fact . . . !

. . .

Fiona said, I see ye smiling.

No ye dont.

I do.

Andy kept his hands clasped behind his head but turned a fraction towards her. Fiona had raised herself up on her shoulder, enough to be looking down on him. The light's on yer face, she said.

I was only smiling because of yer cheek: the way ye said, Is that a fact. It's funny. Sarcastic but funny. I'm not being critical. I know I had a few beers tonight.

More than a few.

He smiled.

Honestly.

Well I wasnay that bad!

I didnt think they were going to serve ye. Then yer pal too eyeing me up. Like trying to get off with anybody in that state – God! Come on back to our place we're having a party!

Andy looked at her,

That was what he said, as soon as ye went to the toilet.

Tony?

Him with the ponytail.

Andy shook his head. Sorry.

There's no need you saying sorry. It was him. He wanted me to go outside for a smoke with him.

Huh!

It was like hash he was talking about wasn't it? Was it?

Maybe, I suppose.

Fiona was silent for a time. She had watched for his reaction, then she smiled. That made him smile. It was a certain kind of smile and reminded him of somebody – an old-time film star maybe, whoever that was. But interesting, an interesting smile. Smiles can be interesting. Some anyway. Hers was. People seeing ye in a certain way. That was her, like she knew him. Or thought she did. Really. Kind of comical. His bad points too, as though she knew them and wasn't caring about them either. She had no idea.

Christ. He touched her shoulder and she moved slightly, but away from him, as a reaction, she wasn't stopping him. He traced a line along her upper arm; the outline of her right breast, shadowed. He could have touched it but couldn't. He could have touched as within easy distance easy easy distance, but he couldn't.

Really, she had no idea. If she thought she knew him! What a laugh. Fiona. Christ – but really, she didn't know anything, not a single damn thing.

That bastard Tony. It made ye laugh. A pal? Some pal. As soon as yer back was turned. He was known for it. Guys laughed. Except when it happened to you. A fucking sleaze-bag more like.

What is it? Fiona asked.

Nothing. But he had taken his hand from her shoulder. When? he couldn't remember, the thought of Tony, just so bloody stupid, but dangerous. Tony was a dangerous guy, dangerous because of how he made ye feel, like fucking battering him! Doing time for a guy like that, ye could, it was just stupid. The arrogance!

Then how he saw you. That was the thing too, it was like you were a total fool and didnt see what was happening! Jesus christ!

Yer head's twitching away! said Fiona.

Sorry.

Ye're away thinking.

Yeah. He put his hand to her shoulder again, massaging, gently, then stroking, stroking lightly, was aware of his breathing, now lying on his side in to her: she had turned her back to him but was not resisting his touch and he was aware too of her body, just her bum, the curve of her, the heat! coming from him too, and if he had closed in to her, only centimetres, god. He swallowed saliva.

Fiona murmured, You're thinking about the blonde woman.

What? No I'm not . . . He had stopped stroking but kept his hand on her shoulder. I'm not, he whispered.

It was her you were looking at.

Andy kept his eyes shut. He needed not to be as hard, not to be as hard as this. He put his hand to her shoulder again. I'm not thinking of her at all.

Ye were looking at her. Ye were.

Well

I knew ye were.

I've known her a long time.

I know. Barbara Peters.

Barbara Morrison. Peters is her married name . . . Andy shifted onto his back now but returned his hand onto her shoulder.

Fiona said: I knew the way she asked ye and ye said no, when she asked ye to play, I knew ye knew her, the two of ye, ye knew each other . . . Fiona was still lying on her side facing away from him, but lying very still. Ye dont get many Barbaras nowadays; it's an older name. I had an aunt called it; she was actually my mum's aunt.

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Andy's hand rested on her shoulder. She made no attempt to shrug it off. He was not sure what to do but it was uncomfortable lying like this and he shifted back onto his side again and very gently massaged her shoulder.

He couldn't see her face but she could see his. He closed his eyes. After a moment he chuckled.

What? she said.

Sorry, I'm making myself laugh.

What? she said again, and she chuckled.

The way ye said 'the blonde woman', it was like how my granny would have said it. In a very disapproving voice, the blonde woman, as though being blonde was grounds for suspicion.

So I sound like yer granny?

Not at all, I dont mean that.

If ye think I sound like yer granny!

I dont. Of course I dont. It's just like how she used to say things, like how she injected meaning into ordinary words: The blonde woman – dan, di ran dan, my granny would have made it sound like the title of a haunted house horror story. Andy grinned, massaging gently.

Fiona was silent for a while, and she said, I just noticed ye were looking at her.

Well I might have been, I might have been, but I can assure ye of one thing anyway, one thing about Barbara

Dont, dont assure me of anything.

No but

No.

Yeah but

Dont; there's no need.

No I was just

Honestly, I would prefer ye didnt. Really. I dont care. It was only a thing I noticed. Fiona now shifted onto her back, and

turned her head to look up at him: Who was it she came with?
Him with the ponytail?

No.

Did she come with somebody?

Eh . . .

See!

See what? What do ye mean?

Ye dont even know who she came with!

Who Barbara came with – Ronnie probably. Ronnie was there. Ronnie Craig. Keyboard.

That's what I mean, she comes with a guy but nobody cares.

She's a singer but Fiona.

She wasnt singing when you were watching her.

I've known her a long time.

That was obvious.

But the same with most of the ones there. They're good acquaintances.

Acquaintances and not friends?

Andy sighed. He was now lying on his back, he clasped his hands behind his head. Some are friends, he said, some arent.

She grunted, amused. He glanced at her. She said: You are so predictable, if ye dont mind me saying.

Thanks.

It's because ye're predictable we find ye so funny, so stupid. She raised her hand and patted him on the chest. How many times have ye noticed me? How many times? I'm serious.

What?

How many times have you noticed me? Fiona was staring down at him but he still could not distinguish her face. Maybe she was smiling, he couldnt tell. Her hand was on his chest. He closed his eyes, hardly breathing. She sighed.

Sorry, he said.

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You are way out. You really are. Way way out. You think we've only met this one time but ye're wrong. You remember my name, but how long did that take ye?

Her hair was sticking up next to her ear. He wanted to smooth it down, he unclasped his hands and reached to do it, and she allowed it.

How long did it take ye? she said. To remember? Fiona chuckled. She patted him again, her fingers in the hair there on his chest. She continued to look down at him, then turned onto her side facing out, but did not move away. Was she going to sleep? She made some sort of noise in her throat but it was peaceful sounding. Maybe she was going to sleep. Fine if she did. He had his work to go to!

His work.

Strange strange life. He touched her shoulder again then he moved to her and kissed very very slightly the side of her neck almost just like his lips nudging her skin. And she stayed so still he wasn't sure if she had noticed. He edged himself back a little. There was no movement from her but he couldn't stop it now and moved forwards onto her, settling against her, her pants, tight smooth, his cock upright: no, and he parted from her again, his right arm round her, brushing her right nipple with his fingers, through the bra material, he felt it, that kind of beautiful just how . . . christ. He tightened his arm round her, kissed the nape of her neck.

Nothing came from her; not in response. He waited moments. Nothing. He returned onto his back; and one of these trapped situations, having to unfasten the boxers and free his bolls, and that summed it up. That summed his life up. In a way it did. He figured she was angry.

So was he!

Well he wasn't.

But nearly! He nearly was. How come? Yet he felt it. Was he clenching his fists! Maybe he was. He pushed down with his arms, straining, feeling it in his upper arm muscles. He turned onto his side again, facing into her back, just the damn erection. Mind and body, just so so stupid. What happens to the flesh? Flesh is not weak, it just operates at a different remove. Cocks dont relate to minds but to flesh, and it doesnt matter whose. It was like the comedian giving his routine about ordering his dick to lie down. It just doesnt happen. Fiona with her bra and her pants. Yet he was glad, he was glad. So much worse if he had been nude. How the hell would he have coped! Never! Bloody never. She would have been the boss. The total boss! Nude hardons reduced to nothing, fuck all. That was nay a nightmare, that was like an amazing control game. Thinking 'facial muscles', oh I can feel you smiling. Can ye not feel the hardon then? No. Oh well, strange. Not think so? Not think it is strange? Even just a wee bit! Jesus christ, all he wanted was a sleep, then to get up and go to work.

You are way out, she said, you really are. She waited for him to reply but he was not sure what she was meaning, being way out, but what about, way out about what?

Fiona said, You were surprised I came home with ye. When ye asked me and I said yes, ye were surprised.

Ye didnt say yes. Ye didnt say yes. Andy turned onto his side, and repeated it: Ye didnt say yes.

I said alright.

That's different from yes.

The thing is ye were surprised. You think we've only met this one time but ye're way out; you are way way out. Fiona turned onto her back now and her head inclined towards him. You remembered my name, but how long did it take ye?

What d'ye mean?

Ye didnt remember my name, at first. At first ye didnt.

Well

We met before but ye didnt remember. Ye dont remember now. She chuckled, then added, Ye're better not telling lies.

Telling lies? What about? Why was she saying that. What the hell was she talking about? He didnt know. He truly truly did not know what the hell she was talking about. He said nothing. Because there was nothing to say. He didnt have anything to say. He was not telling any lies. What about? What would he have lied about? There was nothing to lie about so why would he have lied? It was nonsense. This was bloody nonsense. Proverbial stuff, gender stuff, men and women, women and men, christ almighty, just bloody gender and he was sick of it, sometimes, really, he really really was, just go to bed and go to sleep and go to yer fucking work, that was all he wanted, nothing more, nothing nothing more.

Bloody blues, he could sing blues alright, fuck that! It could even make ye smile. Coming to bed in her bra and pants, why not a coat and a pair of shoes, it was just bloody stupid. But thank god he wasnt nude, just thinking about that, if he had been, christ!

Andy shook his head and settled on his back again. Just because ye get sick of it. Ye think of Barbara too, how Barbara used to just like how she played people. It was Fiona too.

Ye were just fucking laughable. Mind and body! Yer body isnt even yours. Stand at attention. She touches you and that is that. You tell yer body, Dont move at all costs! Just stupid. A-ten-shun! Flesh flesh flesh.

Lies! Why did she say that.

That is women. That for him was women. He had no idea. All the stuff behind him – he hadnt told her about that – his life, all the previous crap. He hadnt told her about a damn thing.

Nothing. For all she knew he had a score weans and five bloody ex-wives. And why should he have told her? They had only just met for christ sake.

He listened for her breathing. Obviously she was awake.

I'm not telling any lies, he said. He swallowed saliva. Not because he was lying; he wasn't. It is simply that is what he was doing, swallowing saliva. He didn't have to justify himself. He stared at the hair at the back of her neck, his head now balanced on the palm of his left hand and he raised his other hand, lifted the hair free from her shoulder. But she edged away: only a little but enough, enough.

He lay on his back again. That was him now, that was him now for sure. No more no more, no more McCrimmon. No he didn't play for Barbara, of course he didn't play for Barbara. They could all go and fuck themselves. It was the superficiality, he hated that above all. Ye wanted to be honest and straight with people and it didn't work. That bastard Tony who was his pal, supposed to be.

What did it matter, women or whoever? He was out of bed, had swung his legs out and over the edge without thinking, and he stood. It was quite cold and he shoved on his T-shirt. Fiona raised herself up on the bed. A cup of tea, he said, ye fancy?

Ye dont have hot chocolate? I'm joking.

He smiled. Sorry.

You say sorry a lot.

Actually I used to have some ye know, in the cupboard someplace.

Oh you've got a cupboard?

He scratched his head.

Tea's fine, she added.

Ye sure?

Yes.

I definitely did have a tin of hot chocolate. I had Horlicks too. Things vanish in this house. Sometimes they turn up again, sometimes they dont.

Are you cold? she asked.

Me?

Ye're hopping about.

Well it is cold.

Ye look like ye're freezing!

Okay, he said and walked ben the kitchen. He did have central heating but it had the habit of switching itself off. What a facility! It only worked when it wanted to work which was hardly at all nowadays. Past tense, like most everything else.

It was true about things vanishing. It happened with a particular mug he liked. It disappeared then turned up out the blue. He thought of it as an independent wee soul who liked to visit other pieces of crockery. He told his daughter that story. It turned out the only mug was the one telling the tale. He hadnt seen her for a couple of weeks. She was a polite wee girl. He wished she wasna. He wished she was a harum-scarum, a proper wee kid, one that didnt worry. She worried. At seven years of age. If she wasna polite he might disappear altogether.

Ach, enough; enough enough.

He made a slice of toast and ate it while making one for Fiona who was delighted when he returned; amazed and delighted. He switched on the light. She was sitting up in bed, had pulled a cardigan over herself. What a smile. A beamer! The way to a woman's heart, he said. He passed her the toast and placed the tea on the floor at the side of the bed.

Thank you!

It's only toast!

The smell alone! When ye were making it, I wondered if it

came from next door! I didnt even think I was hungry! Oh but where's yours?

Mine, I scoffed it, while I was making yours. It's just a wee toaster. It only makes one at a time.

It must be the last of its kind, she said, reaching for her tea. Yeah, well. He shrugged.

She sipped at the tea, munched on the toast. He grinned. What? she said.

Nothing.

She lifted the last of the toast and put it into her mouth but noticed he was still watching her. What's wrong? she said.

Nothing.

Ye're just standing there watching me. Why arent ye coming into bed?

I'm waiting to put the light out.

You should have a bedside cabinet. It would be useful for putting things on, including a lamp.

I used to have one.

Yer books too, ye could put yer books on it. I know ye're a reader.

Yeah. He smiled again, to which she noticed but made no reference. Another reason why he was standing there! He was waiting for an invitation! How come? It was his bed but he was the guest. Weird. It was an old pair of boxers too. Tried and trusted; the kind ye wear to yer work, if ye are unlucky enough to have work to go to.

She had finished her toast now.

Ready? he said.

I'm fine, she said. He turned and switched off the light. In bed he faced out the way, away from her. She dropped her cardigan to the floor.

But it was weird. He hadnt been expecting to be in this

situation. Which said much about him and where his head was. At one time he would have dressed for every occasion merely in the off-chance of bumping into a woman. Footloose and fancy-free. He was neither and this was neither.

But what exactly was it? There was nothing between them. She was in his bed but they hadnay slept the gether in the accepted sense: in other words sex, there wasnay any! They were in bed for sleeping purposes only. So that degree of familiarity did not exist between them. Nowhere near it. Not even a prolonged kiss like from her as well as him. She maybe pecked him at one point but not an actual kiss, not a proper one.

But she didnt appear to grasp any of this. She was acting as if they knew each other really well. Christ almighty he had only seen her twice in his life and the time before tonight was only hazy, very hazy, although she had a clearer vision. The truth is he couldnay remember a single damn thing about it. What could he remember? Nothing. He had been drunk. Another fucking night of nothing.

That was him, that was his life. Tonight too. The beautiful Barbara. Bla bla. Just shit, all shit. Humbug and crap nonsense. In three hours' time he would have to go to work. That was the reality. Wage-slavery. All of his hopes and dreams. What was he doing with his life? It was just fucking shit and he was just utterly daft, a mental kind of lunatic, and he would never sleep anyway, what was the damn point of it all? He turned onto his back; it was like nowhere to go; he didnt have any place, and Fiona there. She was looking at him. Why are ye sighing? she said.

I'm not sighing.

Yes ye are. What's wrong?

Nothing's wrong.

She kept looking at him.

You have an inquiring gaze, he said.

She kept looking at him.

But I dont criticise ye for that. Which reminds me. Am I right in saying this, or have I got a faulty memory: before we left the pub – am I dreaming, did you accuse me of having a shocking sense of humour? If so it is a most interesting phenomenon because at one time I fancied myself a comedian. Honest.

I dont like comedians, they think they're smart and they arent. They act like schoolboys most of them. That's what they remind me of, boys from the third year acting big.

Does that include the females? he said and added quickly, But how can ye not like comedians? Although there again . . .

She muttered, Oh God.

Okay?

She sighed.

Now it's you sighing, he said.

Your feet are cold.

Because I was making the tea.

Do ye not have a pair of slippers?

He chuckled.

What's so funny?

The very word itself! Slippers, how it represents an entire way of life, like a whole world. So a whole world of meaning. What it all signifies. Just the word itself; that's what I'm talking about. The way I see it, being a comedian in periods of social abjection is the pinnacle of public achievement. Either a comedian or a sports star. It's only temporary. Once ye pass through this what-dye-call-it doldrumistic phase ye need them, comedians and athletes, football players, then ye start to get musicians after that, artists and writers; then a few years later everybody's fighting for independence. So it's a form of liberation.

You're not a comedian you're a musician.

OH THE DAYS AHEAD

No I'm not.

Yes you are.

I play music but I'm not a musician. I know musicians, I'm not one.

Yes you are.

No I'm not. He raised his head to see her and their hips touched, their hip bones.

So him with the ponytail, is he one?

Eh . . .

Yer duvet's too wee. Look, she said, clutching the duvet up to her chin, wagging her feet at the bottom. He pushed his arm beneath her shoulders and neck. She allowed it. He let his other hand lie there on the bed. So is he? she said. Tony whatever ye call him. Is she with him now?

Who?

Her, the blonde woman.

I dont know. Maybe. Barbara, yeah, probably she is, I would say, probably.

Mm.

If he had allowed his arm to come right the way round her it would have been touching over her breasts, just below, but nudging them. Maybe she was thinking the same, she shivered. Did she? Slightly. She did. Her head came onto his chest and the twinges again immediate but a great feeling and he wished he was naked, he just felt like that, to do with just being free or something, his body being free, even if he fucking wasnay – stupid thing to say of course he was, of course. Just stupid. He was aye guilty of that, stupidity.

But if she was naked, her tits – boobs, softly, he felt them; she was turned into him slightly and he did. Her hair tickling his face. It tickled very much and affected his nose and his eyes. He didnt mention this in case it went against him. It would not

have been a criticism but people take things differently. He had to move. Are ye cold? he said.

No.

Shivering is a reflex action anyway and we canna be responsible for reflexes. It's not like intentional, like it's an intentional thing. There's all these different parts of the body and if some outside thing happens it just reacts, the body.

Fiona was silent.

Anyway, you will be glad to know I gave up the idea of being a comedian.

You're a musician.

I was too droll. Droll's good but no in Glasgow. Ye get compared to the greats.

The who?

The greats. Chic Murray, if ye've heard of him. Have ye heard of him?

No. Maybe. I dont think so.

Andy shrugged. Ye find it in countries going through a bad patch of inferiority, a kind of mass infantile behaviour. We all suffer from it, like in primary school we're all sitting there and the teacher has to leave the room, so everybody starts farting and burping. The boys do anyway. Maybe girls dont.

I'm not sure what ye're talking about.

Dont they?

What?

Doesnt matter. It's just like a theory I have. Or used to have! You've just shot it down in flames.

Fiona chuckled.

I felt that! Your facial muscles twitched.

I was only wanting to say about countries going through a bad patch, did ye mean the whole country?

Eh . . .

Ye said countries going through a bad patch.

Yeah.

Do ye mean countries?

Sorry, what?

Fiona said, Is it the whole country ye mean or is it like working-class people?

Eh, working-class people, I suppose. Yeah. He raised his head a little to see her face but could only see her hair, until she turned her head and settled her hand on his stomach and nestled into him side on. And she yawned. He was aware of her boobs almost like squashed on the side of his chest, they were squashed and just – fleshy. The shirt she wore was open and her boobs bare against him, she was not wearing a bra. She had taken off her bra and he was hard. He was going to say something, whatever, whatever it was. She had taken off her bra. Her breasts were squashed in against his chest and felt just – he drew his arm round her more tightly. She eased herself away. Who's the wee girl in the photograph? she said. The one on the wall, standing next to you.

My daughter.

After a moment Fiona said, I knew ye were married. I knew ye were.

Well, divorced. How about you? Do you have any kids?

I knew ye were going to ask that.

Well because . . .

Because ye're nosy.

Andy smiled.

Ye are, she said, ye pretend not to be. She removed from his chest but raised herself, closing her shirt; she sat up with her back to the bed-end, leaving an absence, he was so aware of the absence, of her absence. The warmth of her, from her. Why are ye smiling? she said.

I'm not smiling.

What are ye doing?

Not smiling. A gentleman doesnt smile at a lady.

Fiona reached her hand to the centre of his chest, twirling the hair in her fingers, then pulled out a hair. He reacted with a shriek: Jesus christ what was that! Jesus! That's sore! That's actually sore! It's a sore thing to do.

I know!

I mean really.

Yes.

God.

Coward!

Coward? What do you mean coward? Andy shook his head.

I warned ye about smiling before.

Christ almighty! Pulling a hair out my chest! It was probably the only one I had too! Andy chuckled.

I dont like ye swearing.

Huh.

I dont. Sorry.

Christ almighty isnt swearing.

It's worse than swearing.

What?

It's a lack of respect for people's religion. Fiona glanced at the window. Daylight now, unmistakably. She shivered.

Okay? he said.

Do ye have another duvet?

Duvet, eh, no, sorry, I dont, sorry.

Have ye a spare blanket?

No . . . what are ye cold?

Not so much cold but it's uncomfortable with this one ye have, when it gets dragged over yer legs, the way ye're moving about all the time.

Aw sorry I mean yeah . . . Andy got out of bed and in the lobby he found his big coat then a spare cushion from a chair. She watched his return. He passed her the coat but held onto the cushion and proceeded to plump it up for her. This is an activity known as pummelling, he said, the experts call it 'plumping'. People plump up pillows. Nurses do it. Let him plump up your pillow, they say; plump plump.

Fiona smiled.

If it was a male nurse he would say 'pummel'; let me pummel yer pillow. Know why? Because plump sounds gay and they wouldnt want to sound gay. I'm talking about some.

Fiona was silent.

Only some. Some dont mind at all. Male nurses I mean. Because they are nurses doesnt mean they are gay. Andy frowned. Sorry, he said. Where did all that come from! I'm not anti-gay at all, not even like the slightest slightest. Just some words are amusing. Plumping. It just sounds – I dont know – vulgar. It makes me think of fat people. Plump equals fat.

I'm plump.

Nonsense.

I am.

Nonsense.

I dont care and dont know why ye're going on and on; fat and gay and . . . Fiona shook her head. It's just stupid and prejudiced – fat. It's horrible, just a horrible word.

I didnay mean it like in any sort of . . . I'm not anti-anything. I'm not.

Yer jokes dont work anyway. They dont. I'm sorry, they just dont.

Well, I'm not a comedian, that's for sure.

Ye're a musician. Ye're a musician.

Whatever.

Ye are.

I'm not prejudiced anyway so just I mean like if any of my mates heard this conversation they'd be like who are we talking about here because it wouldnt be me.

Bla bla.

Andy waited by the side of the bed, aware of the cup of tea he had left there. No doubt he would kick it over before the night was over, before the morning was through, before dawn had broken, whatever time it was. But it had broken, the daylight through the window, oh god and work, work work.

The teacher returns to the room and everybody is silent and sitting with their arms folded. But it's all a lie and the teacher knows the teacher knows the teacher always knows.

She was on her side facing away. He needed to say something. He didnt want her thinking anything bad. How come she did because he wasnt like never ever anti-fat, anti-gay, he was not anything like that, racist, that horrible bigotry horrible horrible shit. None of that. Never. He told bad jokes. He told them bad; maybe they were good till he told them, it was him, he made them bad. What else? He talked too much. That was normal he was just normal. She just

something

He needed back to bed; maybe he didnt.