

THIS IS HOW

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CANONGATE

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I

I put my bags down on the doorstep and knock three times. I don't bang hard like a copper, but it's not as though I'm ashamed to be knocking either.

The porch light comes on and the landlady opens the door. She's younger and prettier than I expected.

'Hello,' I say. 'I'm Patrick.'

'I thought you'd be here hours ago.'

It's after ten and I was due at six. My mouth's gone dry, but I smile, friendly as I can.

'I missed the connection,' I say.

I've not meant the lie, but she's forced me.

'You'd better come in.'

We face each other in the hallway. I've got my back to the door and she's got her back to the stairs. I should say something, but I can't think what. I put my bags down again and my hands hang heavy.

'You'll have to meet the other boarders tomorrow,' she says. 'They've gone out.'

She takes hold of her long brown hair and pulls it over her left breast like a scarf.

‘Let me take your coat,’ she says.
‘I’m not bothered,’ I say. ‘I’ll keep it on.’
I want the pockets for my hands.
‘There’s a rack just beside you.’
‘I’ve said I’ll leave it on.’
‘I thought you might feel more comfortable with it off. It’s a very warm evening.’

She looks at me and I look at her and she takes a step back as though she blames the place where she’s standing for the silence.

I want her to show me to my room and get it over with. I take my coat off and put it on the rack.

‘There,’ I say.

She coughs and I get to thinking maybe she’s nervous, same as me. Maybe she thinks I’m all right.

‘Is that all the luggage you have?’
I’ve got clothes in one duffel bag, my toolkit in the other.
‘Yeah.’

My coat falls off the hook and, because neither of us picks it up, it’s as though there’s something watching us.

Beside the hallway telephone, a pen hangs from a piece of string. I flick the string and the pen swings.

She laughs, but it’s not a mean laugh.

‘What did you do while you waited for your train?’ she says.
‘I read a book.’

I cover my throat with my hand. I didn’t read. I went to an off-licence and they had a four-for-two deal on bottles of beer. I drank three at the station to get in a better mood and I’ve still got one in my bag.

‘Is it a good book?’
‘So far.’

There are pictures of boats on the wall.

‘I’m building a boat,’ she says. ‘Bridget Bowman’s building a boat.’

I smile and she smiles right back. She's got a few stains between her teeth, like grout between tiles.

'That's good,' I say.

She points to the hallway wall, to a picture of a half-built boat in a dark shed. I should ask her what kind of boat it is, but I know nothing about boats and she'll think I'm an idiot.

I pick up the coat.

'I'll take you up now,' she says. 'You're on the first floor.'

My room's small, but it's at the front of the house and I'll bet it has a good clear view of the sea.

There's a single bed, a sink, a draining board, and a rack for cups and plates. Under the window, there's a table and a wooden chair.

I put my bags down under the sink, go to the bed, and sit. I wouldn't mind a ham sandwich and a cup of coffee. After that, we could lie down together and I could put my head in her lap, or the other way round. It'd be up to her.

She comes over, stands close to me. 'What've you got in the big bag?' she says.

'My toolkit.'

She looks at it.

'Do you want me to open it up?'

'Never mind,' she says. 'I was just curious.'

I stand.

'Is the room okay?' she says.

'It's more than okay.'

She smiles. 'How long do you plan to stay?'

'Indefinitely.'

'You've come here for good then?'

'Or bad.'

She laughs, takes a step back. 'We'd better go down to the office now.'

I follow her down the stairs and she takes her time, goes too slow, keeps turning back to look at me, tells me the ins and outs of the running of the boarding house.

Three weeks ago my fiancée Sarah was standing at the top of the stairs when she said, 'I can't marry you, it's over,' and when she was halfway down, I called out her name, but she didn't stop, didn't so much as look at me, just said, 'Please don't follow me.'

I wanted to push her down the stairs, make the kind of impression I didn't know how to make with words. But I didn't, and when she'd closed the front door I said, 'Okay, then,' and, 'Goodbye, then.'

Afterwards, I played the scene over and over, imagined how I planted my hands in the middle of her back and pushed hard enough to send her flying.

And I got this sentence in my head, over and over, 'You broke my heart and now I've broken your spine.' It was something I'd never say, not like anything I've ever said. I've never done any serious violence to anybody, never even thought about it all that much.

The next day I set about looking in the papers for work and lodgings down south near the sea and three weeks later my bags were packed and I was on the train.

I'm here now, a hundred miles away, and that's the past. Sarah's the past. It's done with. I don't have to think about it again if I don't want to.

At the bottom of the stairs, Bridget takes a left turn to her office. The writing in the frosted glass says: *Do Not Enter*. She unlocks the door, goes in and sits behind her desk. There are more pictures of boats and her black-and-white wedding photographs on the walls and a pile of books about boats on the desk and a vase full of white flowers on top of a filing cabinet. I wonder where her husband is.

'You'll need to pay for the first two months and a six-week bond in case there's any breakage or malicious damage.'

I've only ever heard my father use the phrase malicious damage and I expect it from him because he's a miserable factory foreman, always on the lookout for thievery and wrongdoing. She's too pretty to be saying it.

'Right,' I say.

I open my wallet and take out a wad of notes and without so much as blinking I give her the money. I bet she'll think there's a lot more where that came from.

She looks at the notes and frowns.

'Wait,' I say. 'Let me count it for you.'

I've given her all she's asked for and I've only got a hundred and fifty pounds left.

'Is everything all right?' she says.

I nod.

'You're just tired.'

'Yeah, it's been a long day.'

'Of course.'

She wants more.

'I'm sorry I haven't been more friendly,' I say. 'I'll be a new man in the morning.'

'We'll do the paperwork and get you a set of keys tomorrow then.'

'That'd be good.'

She moves round to the front of her desk. 'Well, goodnight then, Patrick.'

She's lovely.

'Goodnight.'

I reach the first-floor landing and she calls up.

'Breakfast's at seven-thirty on weekdays and eight-thirty on weekends.'

I call back, 'Okay, thanks. See you tomorrow.'

'Sleep well,' she says.

‘You too.’

There’s a good atmosphere made by our voices calling up and down the stairs, something like the mood of being on holiday, just me and Bridget, alone.

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I'm asleep when the front door slams.

It's half-midnight and the other boarders are home. Somebody's fallen against the wall outside, and there's laughter.

I get out of bed and open the window, try to hear what they say, but all I hear is a tomcat crying for sex.

'Fuck you,' I say.

I dress and put my shoes on, try talking myself into going down, but change my mind and take my shoes off.

The other boarders, two men, they go on laughing and talking.

I put my shoes back on.

'Forget it,' I say. 'You'll meet them in the morning.'

I've not meant to talk to myself and, if I've done it now, maybe I've done it before and not known it.

I take my shoes off again, undress, get back into bed.

But I don't sleep, don't even close my eyes.

When the men come up the stairs, one of them laughs and says, 'The new boy.'

I wake at 4 a.m. The man in the next room's farting, a sound like sausages bursting in a frying pan. I'm wide awake now and staying in bed's a waste of time. I won't sleep.

I get up and dress.

I'll go out and walk by the sea, watch the sunrise and be back in time for breakfast.

I go down quiet as I can and take one of the keys hanging on the hooks beside the coat-rack.

I cross the empty road to the promenade and walk down to the water's edge. The only light comes pale from the moon and a few of the unbroken orange lamps further down the esplanade. Waves roll to the sand and suck as though for food and the sound of the sea is like applause.

I walk towards the town. By the time I reach the main street, my tongue's sticky with thirst.

All the shops are closed. I go on further, down to the train station at the junction. It's about twenty minutes from the boarding house.

There's nobody at the station, no attendant, no cleaner, and the buffet's closed. I climb over a barrier and go out to platform 2. The air here's cold and there's a smell of stale ash and engine oil.

I turn back.

When I reach the boarding house, the sun's risen and the light's foggy and blue.

I go straight up to my room, open my big bag, take out the toolkit and put it safe under the bed, grab a towel and go to the bathroom at the end of the hall. I lock the door and undress for a bath, but the water runs cold. I try both taps, adjust the pressure, but still no heat. I take the plug out of the bath, wrap the towel round my waist, go out to the hall and check the closet for a meter or a boiler. There's neither.

I pick up my clothes, go back to my room and get into bed.

When I wake, it's quarter past eight. I've almost missed breakfast.

I wash my face in cold water, tuck in my shirt, wipe the muck off my shoes, then go down.

When they hear my fast feet coming down the stairs, they'll know I'm fit and keen to make their acquaintance. Going quick's a trick that helps kill some of my social nerves.

There are two men in the dining room. They sit together at a table under the bay window. There's another table, set for one, in the middle of the room.

I go in, put my hands in my pockets.

'Good morning,' I say.

One of the men stands. His hair is jet-black.

'Hello,' he says, 'I'm Shaun Flindall.'

Flindall's got a posh London accent and he'd have the looks of a movie star if not for his big ears.

'Hello,' I say.

The second man stays in his seat and he only bothers to nod in my direction. His arm's draped across the back of the chair and his long legs point out from under the table, crossed at the ankles.

He's not as good-looking as Flindall, but he's tall and he's got a thick head of blond hair and the kind of big blue eyes girls love so much. And he's got a tan.

'I'm Ian Welkin,' he says, his voice even posher than Flindall's. 'Why don't you sit here with me?'

Flindall doesn't protest, picks up his plate and goes to the table in the middle of the room, looks at me, then takes hold of the cigarette he's got behind his ear. I expect he'll smoke it, but he just moves it to the other ear.

I sit opposite Welkin.

'Welcome aboard,' he says.

'Thanks,' I say.

Both men have got their hot breakfasts.

'We were hoping to meet you last night,' says Welkin. 'We thought we could show you round the town.'

'I missed my train,' I say.

'And you've missed breakfast, too,' says Flindall.

'Bridget's gone into town,' says Welkin. 'But she'll be back soon.'

'She might make you a bacon sandwich,' says Flindall. 'If you ask nicely.'

'Good,' I say. 'I'm starving.'

Neither of them offers me any food. A piece of toast would do.

'Do you know she's a widow?' says Welkin. 'Her husband was killed by a train.'

'How?'

Welkin laughs without opening his mouth. 'He was in his car and got stuck on the tracks.'

'The train was running early,' says Flindall. 'Astonishing bad luck.'

Flindall moves the cigarette again, back to the other ear.

'When?' I say.

'Two years ago,' says Welkin. 'Imagine the carnage.'

'Now she's building a boat with the other woman,' says Flindall.

'The other woman?'

'Her husband had a passenger in the car,' says Welkin. 'A man he worked with.'

'The other woman is the other widow,' says Flindall.

'Jesus,' I say.

Welkin wipes his mouth clean with a napkin and Flindall cleans his teeth with a toothpick.

They both look at me.

Welkin's left two sausages on his plate and some black pudding. I wouldn't mind a bit.

'What did you read?' he says. 'At university?'

Bridget's been telling them the stuff I put in my letter.

'I didn't finish.'

'What did you take?'

'History and Psychology,' I say, 'but I left after a year.'

'That's a shame,' he says.

'That's too bad,' says Flindall, who's holding the cigarette, looking at it.

'I wasn't really bothered,' I say.

There's silence while they pour themselves tea.

'I was just telling Flindall earlier about my trip to Australia,' says Welkin.

I say nothing, can think of nothing.

'I was hoping to see a few sharks, but I didn't see a single one.'

'Me neither,' I say.

What I mean is that I've never seen a shark, but I'm not sure it makes any difference to him what I've meant. He goes on talking in his booming voice like he's on a stage.

'I think if sharks had arms,' he says, 'they wouldn't bother killing. They only bite legs off because they're curious. If they had arms they'd just—'

'Hug people?' I say.

Both men laugh and the laughter's in my favour and it's the first time they've looked at me like they think I'm not an idiot.

I'll relax a bit now.

Welkin leans across the table.

'Welcome to Vauxhall Street, Pat.'

'It's Patrick,' I say.

'Have some toast then, Par-trick.'

Bridget's come back and she's carrying a parcel wrapped in brown paper. Maybe she's got our dinner in there.

'Good morning,' she says.

I stand up to say hello.
'Did you have a nice sleep?'
'Yeah, thanks.'
'You've missed breakfast. Are you hungry?'
'I am a bit.'
'I'll get you a bacon sandwich,' she says. 'Will that do?'
'That's great, thanks.'
Flindall puts the cigarette back behind his ear and stands. 'I've got to get to work.'
We say our goodbyes.
Bridget puts the parcel down and sits where Flindall was sitting. I'll have to wait a while for that sandwich.
'Shaun's an architect,' she tells me. 'He's one of the head architects for the new pavilion.'
'Right,' I say.
'And Ian's a mathematician.'
'An actuary,' he says, 'actually.'
She smiles.
'But I'm on an informal sabbatical,' he says. 'I'm sick of the big smoke and I'm taking the sea air. A rest cure.'
'You been sick?' I say.
'Not exactly,' he says.
'Just a bit too rich and a bit too idle,' says Bridget.
Welkin nods. 'That's right.'
Bridget smiles, takes the parcel, leaves.
What's gone on between them looks like something that's gone on before.

Welkin stays with me while I wait for my food.

'Why doesn't Flindall light that cigarette?' I say.
'He gave up two weeks ago and he sticks one behind his ear so he's got something to play with.'

‘Isn’t that like torture?’
‘Yes, but I suppose that’s the very point. Don’t you see?’
I don’t see. I say nothing.
‘Have you got work here?’ he says.
‘Yeah, I’m a mechanic. I’m starting at the place on the main road on Monday morning.’
‘Is that the one that does vintage cars?’
‘Yeah, and sports cars.’
He turns his cup round, looks at the tea leaves.
‘Why did you give up university to fix cars?’
‘I prefer it,’ I say. ‘You’ve got to do the thing you prefer.’
‘Yes,’ he says. ‘I suppose that’s the right decision.’
I hadn’t asked him for his opinion on my decision.
‘Anyway,’ I say, ‘it’s a good line of work, and the money’s not too bad. And I get to drive some very nice cars.’
Bridget’s come back with my bacon sandwich.
‘Here you are,’ she says.
‘Thanks.’
I start to eat and she stacks dirty dishes onto a tray at the next table. Welkin stands to help her and when the job’s done she puts her hand on his arm and leaves it there, and they look at each other, longer than usual, and even though it’s not me she’s touching, the heat shoots through my legs. I hope she’s not one of those women who can touch a man she hardly knows without meaning anything much.
‘I’d better be going,’ says Welkin. ‘I’ve got to see a man about a dog.’
‘See you later, then,’ I say.
‘You’ve finished your breakfast,’ he says. ‘Why don’t you come up with me? You’ve got the room right next door.’
I’m not in the mood for more chat.
‘I’ll stay down here,’ I say. ‘I need to make a few phone calls.’
Bridget leaves and Welkin follows close behind. I’ll be damned annoyed if it turns out they’re having sex.

I wait for a few minutes, then go up to my room, get a towel, try the bath again.

The water's still running cold.

I go downstairs to Bridget's office and tell her, 'There's no hot water.'

'The best time is earlier in the morning.'

She's searching for something in the top drawer of the desk and looks at me as though she blames me for the fact she can't find it.

'I tried earlier,' I say.

'Oh.'

'Can I have my key?' I ask.

'Of course.'

She goes to the filing cabinet and gets two keys.

She looks at me.

'Don't forget to put your front-door key on the hook inside the door when you get in. This way we all know who's home and who isn't.'

'Okay.'

'Yours is the blue hook, which is the same colour as the number on your bedroom door.'

'Right. I won't forget.'

'We'll do the paperwork now.'

It's very formal, like she's a different person from last night. When I tell her I'm twenty-three, she tells me I look younger. She asks me if my parents are Irish, with my name being Patrick.

'No, but my grandad was.'

'But you're not confirmed? You're not a Catholic?'

'How can you know that?'

'You've put your full name down as Patrick James Oxtoby. You've got no confirmation name.'

I say nothing.

'I'll bet your mum will miss you,' she says.

I ask her why she's said that.

'You told me earlier you're the youngest, and you've left home for the first time.'

I shrug. 'She might miss me. She might not.'

I go to the door, then turn back.

'Have I done something that's bothered you?' I say.

'No,' she says. 'Not yet.' She smiles, just about the same sort of smile she gave Welkin in the dining room.

'That's good then.'

'Don't worry so much, Patrick.'

I don't see how she could know how much I worry or not.

I leave the boarding house and walk into town and on the way I get to thinking that my mum's probably worried sick and I should've left her a good long letter with some nice things said. She's been a good mum. I should've said thanks, or something that's the same as saying thanks.

My new workplace is on the corner of the deserted main street, two doors down from the post office. The metal sign outside is faded and rusted: *North Star Mechanics. Specialists in All Makes & Models. Vintage & New. Service & Parts & Repairs.*

I stand on the opposite corner and watch. I want to see what kind of business my new employer's got running, but nobody goes in or out. Friday should be a busy day for a mechanic. First thing I'll do on Monday morning is tell the boss to put up a new sign.

I walk on down the main street, towards the train station. I've got hungry again. I stop to buy fish and chips. I'm the only person in the chippy except for a ten-year-old kid and it takes a while to get the food ready because they've not had the oil on for long.

I go to the pier and sit on a bench and eat.

A fisherman comes in with his catch in a yellow bucket. He hasn't got much, a few small ones, the kind I thought they threw back.

When I'm finished eating, I walk a while and look at the old pavilion. I try going in, but all the doors are bolted. There's a sign down the back, one of those sandwich boards, someone's written on with chalk: *Closed Today*.

I go back to the main street, pass an old cinema called The Royale. There's only one film showing, a song-and-dance picture. I'd like to sit in the cool dark, but I've got no interest in song-and-dance. I want something with action and I'm in the mood for a pint.

I go to a pub behind the station called the Ducie Arms.

There's an old man sitting at the bar. He's got a lit cigarette in the ashtray, but he lights another and I get why he craves the start of things. All the hope that goes with the new thing. Coming to this town for a fresh start, I've got that feeling myself.

I order a pint and the barmaid sees me reading the chalk-board menu and asks me what I want.

'I'm not hungry.'

'You just go ahead and let me know if you change your mind.'

The door opens and I look round. I can't help it. I suppose I'm a bit jumpy.

I have another pint.

Two men come into the bar, both about thirty, and they sit together near the door, one of them with a suitcase and he's the one who gets the pints, then sits down again. But these blokes have nothing to say to each other. They just look out the window at nothing.

I'm not a heavy drinker, not by a long way, but I drink in bouts, and in these past three weeks since Sarah broke it off there's been one of those bouts. It's not that I want to get drunk, it's the pain-killer part of it that I want.

I've had a sore neck and sore shoulders since I was fourteen. I don't know why I've got the pains and the doctors don't know either. The only time I don't have the pains is when I've had a few

pints and the edges soften a bit.

‘Are you waiting for somebody?’ asks the barmaid.

She’s asked because I’m sitting with my back to the door and keep looking round at it.

‘Yeah.’

I don’t bother making up a lie about who I’m waiting for. She’s a barmaid and she’s obliged to talk to any old fool.

I order another pint and then another. Even though dinner’s included in my bed and board, I’ve got a craving for a pub meal.

I order steak and chips and have another pint, then head back to the house.

It’s nearly eight o’clock.

I check my toolkit soon as I’m back in my room, and I leave it sticking out a bit from under the bed, like I always leave it, with the handle facing out, ready for me to pick up in the morning when I go to work. I don’t notice right away that the bed’s been made and my things have been tidied, but soon as I realise I get a rush of good feeling. Bridget’s been up here straightening and cleaning my things and it’s like I’ve been promoted. I can’t afford this life much beyond three months, but I’m going to make it good while it lasts, make it count.

I lie on the bed and smell the clean sheets, close my eyes. I’m in the mood to go down and look for Bridget and that’s my plan, until the noise starts up.

Welkin’s got a girl with him and the bed’s drubbing the wall and they’re talking while they’re at it. I sit up and listen. Welkin groans loud at the end of the act, then laughs as though at a mistake somebody’s made. I’m only glad it’s not Bridget he’s got in there.

To insult me further, a fly lands on my face. I swipe it, and it takes off, buzzes its dirty black body against the wall over my table, then comes back for another taste of my sweat. Once it’s been at my face, it goes for a rest on the carpet, catches its breath, then comes after me

again. When it goes back to the wall over the table, I throw my shoe and shout, 'Get out of my room, you fucking shit.'

There's more laughter in the next room and my neck reddens and my arms sweat, even my shoulders sweat. I lie down and cover my head with the quilt.

My mood's ruined.

I'll need a radio.