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1
ANNA

Anna knew that he was doing his best to be interested. She could read his face so well. This was the same look she saw on his face when older actors would come up and join them in the club and tell old tales about people long gone. Joe tried to be interested then too, it was a welcoming, courteous, earnest look. Hoping that it passed as genuine interest, hoping that the conversation wouldn't last too long.

'I'm sorry, I'm going on a bit,' she apologized. She pulled a funny face at him as she sat at the other end of the bed dressed only in one of his shirts, the Sunday papers and a breakfast tray between them.

Joe smiled back, a real smile this time.

'No, it's nice that you're so het up about it, it's good to care about families.'

He meant it, she knew, in his heart he thought it was a Good Thing to care about families, like rescuing kittens from trees and beautiful sunsets and big collie dogs. In principle Joe was in favour of

caring about families. But he didn't care at all about his own. He wouldn't have known how many years his parents were married. He probably didn't know how long he had been married himself. Something like a silver anniversary would not trouble Joe Ashe.

Anna looked at him with the familiar feeling of tenderness and fear. Tender and protective – he looked so lovely lying there against the big pillows, his fair hair falling over his face, his thin brown shoulders so relaxed and easy. Fearful in case she would lose him, in case he would move on gently, effortlessly, out of her life, as he had moved into it.

Joe Ashe never fought with people, he told Anna with his big boyish smile, life was much too short for fights. And it was true.

When he was passed over for a part, when he got a bad review, there was the shrug – Well, so it could have been different but let's not make a production out of it.

Like his marriage to Janet – It was over, so why go on pretending? He just packed a small bag and left.

Anna feared that one day in this very room he would pack a small bag and leave again. She would rail and plead as Janet had done and it would be no use. Janet had even come around and offered Anna money to go away. She wept about how happy she had been with Joe. She showed pictures of the two small sons. It would all be fine again if only Anna would go away.

‘But he didn’t leave you to come to me, he had been in a flat by himself for a year before he even met me,’ Anna had explained.

‘Yes, and all that time I thought he would come back.’

Anna hated to remember Janet’s tear-stained face, and how she had made tea for her, and hated even more to think that her own face would be stained with tears like this one day, and as unexpectedly as it had all happened to Janet. She gave a little shiver as she looked at the handsome easy boy in her bed. Because even if he was twenty-eight years of age he was still a boy. A gentle cruel boy.

‘What are you thinking?’ he asked.

She didn’t tell him. She never told him how much she thought about him and dreaded the day he would leave.

‘I was thinking it’s about time they did another film version of *Romeo and Juliet*, you’re so handsome it would be unfair on the world not to get a chance to look at you,’ she said laughingly.

He reached out and put the breakfast tray on the floor. The Sunday papers slid after it.

‘Come here to me,’ said Joe. ‘My mind was running on the same lines entirely, entirely at all, at all as you Irish say.’

‘What a superb imitation,’ Anna said drily, but snuggling up to him all the same. ‘It’s no wonder that you’re the best actor in the whole wide world and

renowned all over the globe for your great command of accents.’

She lay in his arms and didn’t tell him about how worried she was about this silver wedding. She had seen from his face that she had already been going on about it far too long.

In a million years Joe would not understand what it meant in their family. Mother’s and Father’s twenty-fifth anniversary. They celebrated everything in the Doyle household. There were albums of memories, boxes chronicling past celebrations. On the wall of the sitting room at home there was a gallery of Major Celebrations. The wedding day itself, the three Christenings. There was Grannie O’Hagan’s sixtieth birthday, there was Grandpa Doyle’s visit to London with all of them standing beside a sentry outside Buckingham Palace, a solemn young sentry in a busby who seemed to realize the importance of Grandpa Doyle’s visit.

There were the three First Communion, and the three Confirmations; there was a small sporting section, Brendan’s school team the year he had been on the Seniors. There was an even smaller academic section, one graduation portrait of Anna herself, very studied and posed, holding her certificate as if it were a ton weight.

Mother and Father always joked about the wall and said it was the most valuable collection in the world. What did they want with Old Masters and

famous paintings, hadn't they got something much more valuable, a living wall telling the world what their life was all about?

Anna had winced whenever they said that to people who came in. She winced now lying in Joe's arms.

'Are you shuddering at me or is that passion?' he asked.

'Unbridled passion,' she said, wondering was it normal to lie beside the most attractive man in London and think not of him but of the sitting room wall back in the family home.

The family home would have to be decorated for the silver wedding. There would be a lot of cardboard bells and silver ribbon. There would be flowers sprayed with a silver paint. They would have a tape of the 'Anniversary Waltz' on the player. There would be window sills full of cards, there might indeed be so many that it would call for an arrangement of streamers with the cards attached as they had for Christmas. The cake would have traditional decorations, the invitations would have silver edges. Inviting people to what? That was what was buzzing around Anna's head. As a family this was something they should organize for their parents. Anna and her sister Helen and her brother Brendan.

But it really meant Anna.

She would have to do it all.

Anna turned towards Joe and kissed him. She

would not think about the anniversary any more now. She would think about it tomorrow when she was being paid to stand in a bookshop.

She wouldn't think of it at this moment when there were far better things to think about.

'That's more like it, I thought you'd gone to sleep on me,' Joe Ashe said, and held her very close to him.

Anna Doyle worked in Books for People, a small bookshop much patronized by authors and publishers and all kinds of media. They never tired of saying that this was a bookshop with character, not like the big chains which were utterly without soul. Secretly Anna did not altogether agree.

Too many times during her working day she had to refuse people who came in with perfectly normal requests for the latest bestseller, for a train timetable, for a book on freezer cookery. Always she had to direct them to a different shop. Anna felt that a bookshop worthy of the name should in fact stock such things instead of relying for its custom on a heavy psychology section, a detailed travel list, and poetry, sociology and contemporary satire.

It wasn't as if they were even proper specialists. She had intended to leave a year ago, but that was just when she met Joe. And when Joe had come to stay it happened to coincide with Joe not having any work.

Joe did a little here and there, and he was never broke. There was always enough to buy Anna a

lovely Indian scarf, or a beautiful paper flower or find the most glorious wild mushrooms in a Soho delicatessen.

There was never any money for paying the rent or for the television, or the phone or the electricity. It would have been foolish of Anna to have left a steady job without having a better one lined up for herself. She stayed in Books for People, even though she hated the name, believing that most of the buyers of books *were* people anyway. The others who worked there were all perfectly pleasant, she never saw any of them outside work but there were occasional book signings, poetry evenings and even a cheese and wine evening in aid of a small nearby theatre. That was when she had met Joe Ashe.

Anna was at work early on Monday morning. If she wanted time to think or to write letters then to be in before the others was the only hope. There were only four of them who worked there: they each had a key. She switched off the burglar alarm, picked up the carton of milk, and the mail from the mat. It was all circulars and handbills. The postman had not arrived yet. As Anna put on the electric kettle to make coffee, she caught sight of herself in the small mirror that was stuck to the wall. Her eyes looked large and anxious, she thought. Anna stroked her face thoughtfully. She looked pale and there were definitely shadows under the big brown eyes. Her hair was tied up with a bright pink ribbon matching

exactly her pink tee-shirt. She must put on a little make-up, she thought, or she would frighten the others.

She wished she had gone ahead and got her hair cut that time. It had been so strange, she had made an appointment in a posh place where some of the Royal Family went to have their hair done. One of the girls who worked there as a stylist came in to the bookshop and they had got talking. The girl said she would give Anna a discount. But the night she met Joe at the benefit evening for the theatre he had told her that her thick dark hair was beautiful the way it was.

He had asked her, as he so often did still, 'What are you thinking?' And in those very early times she told him the truth. That she was thinking about having her hair cut the following day.

'Don't even consider it,' Joe had said, and then suggested that they go to have a Greek meal and discuss this thing properly.

They had sat together in the warm spring night and he had told her about his acting and she had told him about her family. How she lived in a flat because she had thought she was becoming too dependent on her family, too drawn into everything they did. She went home of course on Sundays, and one other evening in the week. Joe had looked at her enthralled. He had never known a life where adults kept going back to the nest.

In days she was visiting his flat, days later he was visiting hers because it was more comfortable. He told Anna briefly and matter-of-factly about Janet and the two little boys. Anna told Joe about the college lecturer she had loved rather unwisely during her final years, resulting in a third-class degree and in a great sense of loss.

Joe was surprised that she had told him about the college lecturer. There was no hassle about shared property, shared children. He had only told her about Janet because he was still married to her. Anna had wanted to tell everything, Joe hadn't really wanted to hear.

It was only logical that he should come to live with her. He didn't suggest it, and for a while she wondered what she would say if she were invited to take up residence in his flat. It would be so hard to tell Mother and Father. But after one long lovely weekend, she decided to ask Joe would he not move in properly to her small ground-floor flat in Shepherd's Bush?

'Well I will, if that's what you'd like,' Joe had said, pleased but not surprised, willing but not over-grateful. He had gone back to his own place, done a deal about the rent and with two grip bags and a leather jacket over his arm he had come to live with Anna Doyle.

Anna Doyle, who had to keep his arrival very secret indeed from her mother and father who lived in

Pinner and in a world where daughters did not let married men come to spend an evening let alone a lifetime.

He had been with her since that April Monday a year ago. And now it was May 1985 and by a series of complicated manoeuvres Anna had managed to keep the worlds of Pinner and Shepherd's Bush satisfactorily apart while flitting from one to another with an ever-increasing sense of guilt.

Joe's mother was fifty-six but looked years younger. She worked at the food counter of a bar where lots of actors gathered, and they saw her maybe two or three times a week. She was vague and friendly, giving them a wave as if they were just good customers. She hadn't known for about six months that they lived together. Joe simply hadn't bothered to tell her. When she heard she said, 'That's nice, dear,' to Anna in exactly the same tone as she would have spoken to a total stranger who had asked for a slice of the veal and ham pie.

Anna had wanted her to come around to the flat.

'What for?' Joe had asked in honest surprise.

Next time she was in the pub Anna went to the counter and asked Joe's mother herself.

'Would you like to come round and see us in the flat?'

'What for?' she had asked with interest.

Anna was determined. 'I don't know, a drink maybe.'

‘Lord, dear, I never drink, seen enough of it in this place to turn you right against it, I tell you.’

‘Well, just to see your son,’ Anna went on.

‘I see him in here, don’t I? He’s a grown-up now, love, he doesn’t want to be looking at his old mum, day in day out.’

Anna had watched them since with a fascination that was half horror and half envy. They were just two people who lived in the same city, and who made easy casual conversation when they met.

They never talked of other members of the family. Nothing about Joe’s sister who had been in a rehabilitation centre on account of drugs, nor the eldest brother who was a mercenary soldier of some sort in Africa, nor the youngest brother who worked in television as a cameraman.

She never asked about her grandchildren. Joe had told Anna that Janet did take them to see her sometimes, and occasionally he had taken the boys to a park nearby where his mother lived and she had come along for a little while. He never took them to her home.

‘I think she has a bloke there, a young fellow, she doesn’t want a lot of grandchildren trailing in to her.’ To Joe it was simple and clear.

To Anna it was like something from another planet.

In Pinner if there were grandchildren they would have been the central pivot of the home, as the

children had been for nearly a quarter of a century. Anna sighed again as she thought of the celebrations that lay ahead and how she would have to face up to them, as she had to face up to so many things on her own.

It was no use sitting in an empty bookshop with a coffee and a grievance that Joe wasn't as other men, supportive and willing to share these kinds of things with her. She had known there would be nothing like that from the first evening together.

What she had to do now was work out how the silver wedding could be organized in October in a way that wouldn't drive everyone mad.

Helen would be no use, that was for certain. She would send an illuminated card signed by all the sisters, she would invite Mother and Father to a special folk Mass with the Community, she would get the day off and come out to Pinner in her drab grey jumper and skirt, her hair dull and lifeless and the big cross on a chain around her neck constantly in her hand. Helen didn't even look like a nun, she looked like someone a bit dopey and badly dressed retreating behind the big crucifix. And in many ways that's what she was. Helen would turn up all right if everything was organized, and in her canvas bag she would take back any uneaten food because one nun loved gingerbread and another had a weakness for anything with salmon in it.

With a sense of despair Anna could see into the

future months ahead with her younger sister Helen, a member of a religious community in South London, picking her way through the food like a scavenger and filling a biscuit tin with foil-wrapped titbits.

But at least Helen would be there. Would Brendan come at all? That was the real worry, and the one she had been trying to avoid thinking about. If Brendan Doyle did not get the train and boat and then the train again and make it to Pinner for his parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary they might as well call the whole thing off now. The disgrace would never be disguised, the emptiness would never be forgotten.

An incomplete family picture on the wall.

They would probably lie and say that he was in Ireland and couldn't be spared from the farm, the harvest or the shearing or whatever people did on farms in October.

But Anna knew with sickening clarity that it would be a paper-thin excuse. The Best Man and the Bridesmaid would know there had been a coldness, and the neighbours would know, and the priests would know.

And the shine would be taken off the silver.

How to get him back, that was the problem. Or was it? What to get him back for? Perhaps that was a bigger problem.

Brendan had always been so quiet when he was a

schoolboy. Who would have known that he felt this strange longing to go away from the family to such a remote place? Anna had been so shocked the day he told them. Utterly straightforward and with no care about what it would do to the rest of the family.

‘I’m not going back to school in September, it’s no use trying to persuade me. I’ll never get any exams, and I don’t need them. I’m going to Vincent. In Ireland. I’ll go as soon as I can leave.’

They had railed and beseeched. With no success. This is what he was going to do.

‘But why are you doing this to us?’ Mother had cried.

‘I’m not doing anything to you.’ Brendan had been mild. ‘I’m doing it for me, it’s not going to cost you any money. It’s the farm where Father grew up, I thought you’d be pleased.’

‘Don’t think he’ll make the farm over to you automatically,’ Father had spluttered. ‘That old recluse could just as well leave it to the missions. You could easily find you’ve put in all that graft for nothing.’

‘Father, I’m not thinking of inheritances and wills and people dying, I’m thinking of how I’d like to spend my days. I was happy there and Vincent could do with another pair of hands.’

‘Well if he does isn’t it a wonder that he never married and provided himself with a few pairs of hands of his own around the place without asking strangers in to him?’

‘Hardly a stranger, Father,’ Brendan had said, ‘I am his own flesh and blood, his brother’s child.’

It had been a nightmare.

And the communication since had been minimal, cards at Christmas and on birthdays. Perhaps anniversaries. Anna couldn’t remember. Anniversaries. How was she going to assemble the cast for this one?

The Bridesmaid, as they always called her, was Maureen Barry. She was Mother’s best friend. They had been at school together back in Ireland. Maureen had never married, she was the same age as Mother, forty-six, though she looked younger. She had two dress shops in Dublin – she refused to call them boutiques. Perhaps Anna could talk to Maureen and see what would be best. But a warning bell went off loudly in her head. Mother was a great one for not letting things go outside the family.

There had always been secrets from Maureen.

Like the time that Father had lost his job. It couldn’t be told.

Like the time that Helen ran away when she was fourteen. That was never breathed to Maureen. Mother had said that nothing mattered in the end, everything could be sorted out just so long as family matters weren’t aired abroad, and neighbours and friends weren’t told all of the Doyle business. It seemed to be a very effective and soothing cure when things went wrong, so the family had always stuck to it.

You would think that Anna should ring Maureen Barry now and ask her as Mother's oldest friend what was best to do about Brendan and about the anniversary in general.

But Mother would curl up and die if she thought there was the remotest possibility of any member of the family revealing a secret outside it. And the coldness with Brendan was a big secret.

There were no family members who could be asked to act as intermediaries.

So what kind of party? The day was a Saturday, it could be a lunch. There were a lot of hotels around Pinner, Harrow, Northwood, and restaurants and places used to doing functions like this. Perhaps a hotel would be best.

It would be formal for one thing, the banqueting manager would advise about toasts and cakes and photographs.

There wouldn't have to be weeks of intensive cleaning of the family home and manicuring the front garden.

But a lifetime as the eldest of the Doyles had taught Anna that a hotel would not be right. There were all those dismissive remarks about hotels in the past, destructive and critical remarks about this family who couldn't be bothered to have the thing in their own home, or the other family who would be quite glad to invite you to a common hotel, an impersonal place, but wouldn't let you over their own doorstep, thank you very much.

It would have to be home, the invitation would have to say in silver lettering that the guest was being invited to Salthill, 26 Rosemary Drive, Pinner. Salthill had been a seaside resort over in the West of Ireland where Mother and Maureen Barry used to go when they were young, it had been lovely, they said. Father had never been there, he said there was little time for long family holidays when he was a boy making his way in Ireland.

Wearily Anna made the list; it would be this size if there wasn't an Irish contingent, and that size if there were. It could be this size if there was to be a sit-down meal, that size if it were a buffet. This size if it were just drinks and snacks, that size if it were a proper meal.

And who would pay for it?

Very often the children did, she knew that.

But Helen had taken a vow of poverty and had nothing. Brendan, even if he did come which wasn't likely, was working for an agricultural worker's wages. Anna had very little money to spend on such a party.

She had very little money indeed. By dint of hard saving, no lunches and a few wise buys at Oxfam she had saved £132. It was in the building society hoping to become £200 and then when Joe had £200 they were going to Greece together. Joe had £11 at the moment so he had a longer way to go as regards saving. But he was sure to get a part soon. His agent

had said there were a lot of things coming up. He'd be working any day now.

Anna hoped that he would, she really and truly did.

If he got something good, something where they recognized him properly, something steady, then everything else could fall into place. Not just the Greek holiday but everything. He could arrange a settlement for his sons, give Janet something that would make her feel independent, he could begin the divorce proceedings. Then Anna could risk leaving Books for People and go to a bigger shop, she would easily get promotion in a large bookshop, a graduate, experienced in the trade already. They would love her.

The time had gone by in thought, and soon the keys were turning in the door and the others arriving. Soon the door was open to the public. Planning was over, yet again.

At lunch time Anna made up her mind, she would go out to Pinner that evening and ask her parents straight out how they would like to celebrate the day. It seemed less celebratory than telling them that it was all in hand. But to try and do that was nonsense really, and she could still get it wrong. She would ask them straight out.

She rang them to say she would be coming over. Her mother was pleased.

'That's good, Anna, we haven't seen you for ages and ages, I was just saying to Daddy I hope Anna's all right, and there's nothing wrong.'

Anna gritted her teeth.

‘Why would there be anything wrong?’

‘Well it’s just been so long, and we don’t know what you do.’

‘Mother, it’s been eight days. I was with you last weekend.’

‘Yes, but we don’t know how you are getting on . . .’

‘I ring you almost every day, you *know* how I’m getting on and what I do, get up in Shepherd’s Bush and get the tube in here, and then I go home again. That is what I do, Mother, like a great many million people in London do.’ Her voice rose in rage at her mother’s attitude.

The reply was surprisingly mild. ‘Why are you shouting at me, Anna my dear child? I only said I was delighted you were coming over this evening, your father will be overjoyed. Will we have a little steak and mushrooms? That’s what we’ll have as a celebration to welcome you back. Yes, I’ll run down to the butcher’s this afternoon, and get it . . . That’s simply great you’re going to come back. I can’t wait to tell your father, I’ll give him a ring at work now and tell him.’

‘Don’t . . . Mother, just . . . well I mean . . .’

‘Of course I’ll tell him, give him pleasure, something to look forward to.’

When she hung up, Anna stood motionless, hand on the receiver, and thought about the one time she had brought Joe to lunch at Salthill, 26 Rosemary

Drive. She had invited him as ‘a friend’ and had spent the entire journey making him promise not to reveal that he was (a) living with her, and (b) married to someone else.

‘Which is the more dangerous one to let slip?’ Joe had asked, grinning.

‘They’re both equally dangerous,’ she had said with such seriousness that he had leaned over and kissed her on the nose in the train in front of everyone.

It had been all right as a visit, Anna had thought, Mother and Father had inquired politely about Joe’s acting career and whether he knew famous actors and actresses.

In the kitchen Mother had asked was he by way of being a boyfriend?

Just a friend, Anna had insisted.

On the way home she asked Joe what he had made of them.

‘Very nice but very tense people,’ he had said.

Tense? Mother and Father. She had never thought of them as tense. But in a way it was true.

And Joe didn’t know what they were like when there was no outsider there, Mother wondering why Helen hadn’t been there on two occasions during the week when they had telephoned her convent. Father striding around the garden snapping the heads off flowers and saying that boy was so restless and idle that he could only end up with the job of village idiot sucking straws on a small farm, it was hard to know

why he had to go back to the one village in Ireland where they were known, and live with the one man in Ireland who could be guaranteed to give the worst impression of the Doyles and all their activities, his own brother, Brendan's Uncle Vincent. Just to inherit that miserable farm.

Joe had seen none of this side of things and yet he still thought her parents tense.

She had pursued it. Why? How did it show itself?

But Joe didn't want to be drawn.

'It's like this,' he had said to her, smiling to take any hurt out of his words. 'Some people just live that kind of life where this can be said and that can't be said, and people think what can be told and what can't. It's a way of going on where everything is a pretence, an act . . . Now that doesn't bother me if people want to live like that. It's not my way, but people make up a lot of rules and live by them . . .'

'We're not like that!' She was stung.

'I'm not criticizing you, my love. I'm just telling you what I see . . . I see Hare Krishnas shaving their heads and dancing and waving bells. I see you and your family acting things out just like they do. I don't let the Hare Krishnas get up my nose, I won't let your old man and old lady either. Right?' He had grinned at her winningly.

She had grinned back with a hollow empty feeling inside her and resolved not to go on about home any more.

The day came to an end. One of the nicer publishing reps was there as the shop closed. He asked her to come and have a drink.

‘I’m going to darkest Pinner,’ Anna said. ‘I’d better set out now.’

‘I’m driving that way, why don’t we have a drink en route?’ he said.

‘Nobody’s driving to Pinner,’ she laughed.

‘Oh, how do you know I don’t have a mistress out that way, or am hoping to acquire one?’ he teased.

‘We wouldn’t discuss such things in Rosemary Drive,’ Anna said, mock primly.

‘Come on, get in, the car’s on a double yellow line,’ he laughed.

He was Ken Green, she had talked to him a lot at the bookshop. They had both started work the same day, it had been a common bond.

He was going to leave his company and join a bigger one, so was she; neither of them had done it.

‘Do you think we’re just cowards?’ she asked him as he negotiated the rush-hour traffic.

‘No, there are always reasons. What’s holding you back, these moral folk in Rosemary Drive?’

‘How do you know they’re moral folk?’ she said, surprised.

‘You just told me there’d be no talk of mistresses in your house,’ Ken said.

‘Too true, they’d be very disappointed to know that I was one myself,’ Anna said.

‘So would I.’ Ken seemed serious.

‘Oh, come on out of that,’ she laughed at him. ‘It’s always easy to pay compliments to someone you know is tied up, much safer. If I told you I was free and on the rampage you’d run a hundred miles from me instead of offering me a drink.’

‘Absolutely wrong. I left your bookshop to the last specially, I was thinking all day how nice it would be to see you. Don’t you accuse me of being faint-hearted, hey?’

She patted his knee companionably. ‘No. I misjudged you.’ She sighed deeply. It was easy to talk to Ken, she didn’t have to watch what she said. Like she would when she got to Salthill in Rosemary Drive. Like she would when she got back to Joe later on.

‘Was that a sigh of pleasure?’ he asked.

With Joe or with Mother or Father she would have said yes.

‘Weariness: I get tired of all the lies,’ she said. ‘Very tired.’

‘But you’re a big girl now, surely you don’t have to tell lies about your life and the way you live it.’

Anna nodded her head glumly. ‘I do, truly I do.’

‘Maybe you only think you do.’

‘No, I do. Like the telephone. I’ve told them at home that my phone has been taken out, so that they won’t ring me. That’s because there’s a message on the answerphone saying “This is Joe Ashe’s number”.

He has to have it, you see, because he's an actor and they can't be out of touch.'

'Of course,' Ken said.

'So naturally I don't want my mother ringing and hearing a man's voice. And I don't want my father asking what's this young man doing in *my* flat.'

'True, he might well ask that, and why he hadn't a machine of his own and number of his own,' Ken said sternly.

'So I have to be careful about not mentioning things like paying the phone bill, I have to remember I'm not meant to *be* on the phone. That's just one of the nine million lies.'

'Well, is it all right at the other end, of the line, I mean you don't have to lie to this actor chap?' Ken seemed anxious to know.

'Lie? No, not at all, what would I have to lie about?'

'I don't know, you said all the lies you had to tell everywhere. I thought maybe he was a jealous macho fellow, you couldn't tell him you went for a drink with me. That's if we ever get anywhere near a drink.' Ken looked ruefully at the tailbacks.

'Oh no, you don't understand, Joe would be glad to think I went for a drink with a friend. It's just . . .'

Her voice trailed away. What was it just? It was just that there was an endless utterly endless need to pretend. Pretend she was having a good time in the odd club place where they went. Pretend she

understood this casual relationship with his mother, his wife, his children. Pretend she liked these fringe theatres where he played small parts. Pretend she enjoyed lovemaking every time. Pretend she didn't care about this heavy family business ahead of her.

'I don't lie to Joe,' she said as if she were speaking to herself. 'I just act a bit.'

There was a silence in the car.

'Well, he *is* an actor, I suppose,' Ken said, trying to revive the conversation a little.

That wasn't it. The actor didn't act at all, he never pretended to please anyone else. It was the actor's girlfriend who did all the acting. How odd that she had never thought of it that way before.

They sat and talked easily when they eventually found a pub.

'Do you want to ring your people to say you've been delayed?' Ken suggested.

She looked at him, surprised that he should be so thoughtful.

'Well, if they've bought steak and everything . . .' he said.

Mother was touched. 'That was nice of you dear, Father was beginning to look out for you. He said he'd walk down to the station.'

'No, I'm getting a lift.'

'Is it that Joe? Joe Ashe the actor?'

'No, no, Mother, Ken Green, a friend from work.'

'I don't think I got enough steak . . .'

‘He’s not coming to supper, he’s just driving me there.’

‘Well, ask him in, won’t you? We love to meet your friends. Your father and I often wish you brought friends back here more often. That all of you did over the years.’ Her voice sounded wistful, as if she were looking at her wall of pictures and not getting a proper charge from them.

‘I’ll ask him in for a moment then,’ Anna said.

‘Could you bear it?’ she asked Ken.

‘I’d like it. I can be a beard.’

‘What on earth is that?’

‘Don’t you read your gossip magazines? It’s someone who distracts attention from your real love. If they get to meet upright fellows like me they won’t get the wind of evil sensual actor lovers who have their answering machines tied to your phone.’

‘Oh shut up,’ she laughed. It was easy laughter, not forced.

They had another drink. She told Ken Green about the anniversary. She told him briefly that her sister was a nun, her brother had dropped out and gone to work on the farm of her father’s eldest brother Vincent, a small rundown place on Ireland’s west coast. Feeling a little lighter and easier already, she told him that this was why she was having supper with her parents. For the first time in a long while she was going to come right out in the open, ask them what they wanted, tell them the limitations. Explain the problems.

‘Don’t go too heavily on the limitations and problems, if they’re like you say, dwell more on the celebratory side,’ he advised.

‘Did your parents have a silver wedding?’

‘Two years ago,’ Ken said.

‘Was it great?’ she asked.

‘Not really.’

‘Oh.’

‘When I know you better I’ll tell you all about it,’ he said.

‘I thought we knew each other well now?’ Anna was disappointed.

‘No. I need more than one drink to tell the details of my whole life.’

Anna felt unreasonably annoyed that she had told him all about Joe Ashe and about how he had to be kept a secret at home.

‘I think I talk too much,’ she said contritely.

‘No, you’re just a nicer person. I’m rather buttoned up,’ Ken said. ‘Come on, drink that back and we’ll head for the Saltmines.’

‘The what?’

‘Isn’t that what you said your house was called?’

Anna laughed and hit him with her handbag. He made her feel normal again. The way she had felt a long time ago when it was great to be part of the Doyle family, instead of walking through a minefield which is what it was like these days.

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Mother was waiting on the step.

'I came out in case you had any difficulty parking,' she explained.

'Thanks, but it seemed to be quite clear . . . we were lucky.' Ken spoke easily.

'We haven't heard much about you, so this is a nice surprise.' Her mother's eyes were bright, too bright.

'Yes, it's a surprise for me too. I don't know Anna very well, we just talk when I go to the bookshop. I invited her for a drink this evening and as it was one of her evenings for coming to Pinner it seemed like a good chance of a drive and a chat.'

Ken Green was a salesman, Anna remembered. He earned his living selling books, getting bigger orders than booksellers wanted to give, forcing them to do window displays, encouraging them to take large cardboard presentation packs. Naturally he would be able to sell himself as well.

Her father liked him too.

Ken managed to ask the right questions, not the wrong ones. He asked easily what line of business Mr Doyle was in. Her father's usual mulish defensive look came on his face. His voice took on the familiar pitch he had when he spoke of work, and rationalization.

Most people shuffled and sort of sympathized, mixed with jollyng Desmond Doyle along when he began the tale of woe, the company that had been going along very nicely thank you until in the cause

of rationalization a lot of jobs, perfectly sound secure jobs, went. Desmond Doyle's job had got changed, he told Ken Green. Changed utterly. It wasn't the same breed of men in business these days.

Anna felt weary. It was always the same, Father's version of the story. The truth was that Father had been sacked over what Mother called a personality conflict. But it was a secret. A great secret nobody was to know. At school it was never to be mentioned. Anna's first great habits of secrecy must have begun then, she realized. Perhaps that was when the secrecy all began. Because a year later Father was employed again by the same firm. And that was never explained either.

Ken Green didn't mutter agreement about the world in general and the ways of businessmen in particular.

'How did you manage to survive the rationalization? Were you in some essential post?'

Anna's hand flew to her mouth. No one had been as direct as this before in this household. Anna's mother looked with alarmed glances from one face to another. There was a short pause.

'I didn't survive it; as it happens,' Desmond Doyle said. 'I was out for a year. But they brought me back, when there was a change of personnel along the line, when some personality differences had been ironed out.'

Anna's hand remained at her mouth. This was the

first time that Father had *ever* acknowledged that he had been a year unemployed. She was almost afraid to see how her mother had taken it.

Ken was nodding in agreement. ‘That often happens, it’s something like putting all the pieces into a paper bag and shaking a few of them back on to the board. Though the pieces aren’t always put back in the right holes?’ He smiled encouragingly.

Anna looked at Ken Green as if she had never seen him before. What was he doing, sitting in this room interrogating her father about forbidden subjects? Was there the remotest possibility that Mother and Father would think she had discussed private business with him?

Mercifully, Father hadn’t taken it at all badly; he was busy explaining to Ken that people had indeed been relocated into the wrong positions. He himself who should have Operations Manager was in fact Special Projects. Special Projects meant as little or as much as anyone wanted it to mean. It was a non-job.

‘Still, that leaves it up to you to make what you will of it, that’s the thing with non-jobs. I have one, Anna has one, and we try in our different ways to make something of them.’

‘I have *not* a non-job!’ Anna cried.

‘It could be called that, couldn’t it? There’s no real ceiling, no proper ranking or way of getting recognition, you make it a good job because you’re interested in publishing, you read the catalogues, you

understand why books appear and who buys them. You could stand filing your nails like that colleague of yours with the purple hair.'

Anna's mother giggled nervously.

'Of course you're right when you're young, Ken, people have chances to make something of their job, but not when they're old . . .'

'So you were all right, then.' Ken was bland.

'Come now, don't be flattering me . . .'

'I wasn't.' Ken's face showed that nothing was further from his intentions. 'But you can't be more than forty-six, can you, forty-six or forty-seven?'

Anna fumed at her own stupidity, inviting this lout home.

'That's right, forty-seven next birthday,' Father was saying.

'Well, that's never old, is it? Not *old* like fifty-eight or sixty-two.'

'Deirdre, can we make that steak stretch to four pieces? This young fellow's doing me good, he has to stay for supper.'

Anna's face burned. If he said yes she would never forgive him.

'No, thank you, Mr Doyle, no, I mean it Mrs Doyle. I'm sure it would be lovely but not tonight. Thanks again. I'll just finish my drink and let you get on with your evening.'

'But it would be no trouble and we'd like to . . .'

'Not tonight, Anna wants to talk to you, I know.'