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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Restless Spirit: The Story of Rose Quinn

DENY ME NOT

MARGARET HAWKINS



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For Ruth

PROLOGUE

13 June 1988

Hannah Casey's twenty-three-year-old hands shook as she hung the framed cutting from *The Irish Times* over her bed.

She re-read the headline that had drawn her like a magnet.

THE END OF THE TERM ILLEGITIMACY

Tomorrow the term 'illegitimacy' - with all its stigmas and awful connotations - will be gone at last.

New law. New life . . .

Now she picked up the dusty frame that the newspaper cutting had replaced.

It was a group photograph of her and all the other children reared in Royle Protestant Children's Home.

She ran her finger over the glass, over the image of herself and her best friend Beryl sitting on Nanna, the housemother's knee, squinting at the sun.

What ages were they then? Five and three? Six and four?

Putting on her navy cardigan to go to work, she let the words escape into the silent room.

"Someday I will know who I am," she said as she closed the door of her room in the nurses' quarters behind her.

"And I will hold my head high."

14 June 1988

Abraham Stephenson felt excited as he climbed into the helicopter.

Not that he would ever admit that to Florrie, his wife.

"More money than sense," he'd told her when she revealed the gift she had planned for his sixtieth birthday.

Yet he knew she knew what would please him. To fly over Knocklannon - to survey all he owned.

The aerial photographs on his study wall had nothing on the bird's eye view he was getting right now.

As the helicopter gained height, he feasted his eyes on the land that lay below him - the back lane field, the big field, Walsh's grove, the twenty-two acres bought off Cribbens in '74, the marl field, the pound field, the stony field, reclaimed in '69, Ryan's rosses . . . two hundred and forty two acres in total.

He asked the pilot to take it slowly over the cattle fields where his pedigree Herefords were now like brick-coloured dots against the green grass. He saw some of them run, startled by the sound of the machine in the sky. Others stood their ground, white heads visible as they stared up at the unfamiliar noise.

Lifting his binoculars he picked out Knocklannon Lad, the bull, chain hanging from the ring in his nose, lumbering after the heifers, only mopping up work to be done now this season.

The silage fields, newly shorn of grass, stood out like yellow handkerchiefs below him.

He'd been the first in the locality to cut, as always, and now the fodder lay where it should be - fermenting in a pit ready to put weight on livestock in the winter.

The look of the crops pleased him too - the barley, wheat and sugar beet - five times more profitable than the other two - all satisfyingly clean of weeds.

"Will I sweep out wider?" the pilot asked.

"Aye."

Soon they were flying over the village of Rathbrandon - pub, the two churches, Carthy's shop, community hall, graveyard, then over his sister Vera's farm that backed onto his.

"Could do with money spent on it," he said to himself, irked by the wet corners in her fields and the pallor of the grass in places.

He would have to talk to the boys . . .

They were flying over the Blackstairs now, circling back to Wexford Harbour, over Ferrycarrig's round tower and now back to Knocklannon.

His eyes scanned his own land again as the pilot hovered over his chosen landing spot.

Pity Leo hadn't been with him - he would have enjoyed the trip. His younger nephew was hungry for Knocklannon - Abe knew that. Still, he wouldn't hold that against him. He'd been no different in his day.

He was out of the helicopter now, climbing again into the jeep that he would drive back to the yard.

The helicopter was rising, now almost out of sight on its journey back to base.

The radio turned on as soon as Abe switched on the jeep's ignition.

The one o'clock news . . .

He heard that barrister - what was her name - Mary Robinson, tail-ending a discussion about a change in family law.

The gist of it was lost on him, however, as he drove, puff-chested, back to the yard, his mind still lingering on his bird's eye view.

Not for the first time he felt a pang of regret that he had no son to pass Knocklannon on to.

"But that," he said to himself, "is what I get for marrying a dud."

Chapter
ONE

September 2004

"Odd."

Hannah Casey thought there was nothing in the envelope at first, it looked so flat. It was her mother's handwriting, she knew, but weak and spidery this time, as if control had gone out of the hand behind it.

Opening it she saw there wasn't even a letter inside, instead a few words scribbled on a piece of cut-up calendar that older women used as shopping lists.

"Hannah," it said. *"News not good. Come if you like. Mother."*

Below it was written the name and number of a hospice.

A hospice . . .

Hannah tried to take it in. She hadn't heard from her mother for over a year - now this.

It was several minutes before she got through to the nurse in charge. No, they couldn't give a lot of detail over the phone, but could Hannah please come up?

Hannah had to think. She would have to ask for time off . . . a lot of it.

"That'll be fun," she said to herself, "given that they think my mother is dead already."

"You'll have to tell them the truth," Beryl said, when she rang her at work.

"Looks like it . . ."

Phone to one ear as she cleared away her breakfast things Hannah tried not to feel resentful.

"Part of me doesn't want to run to her," she said to her friend. "That's not very charitable, is it? When did she ever run to me - that's what I keep thinking . . .?"

There was silence on the other end of the line for a few seconds.

"Yes - but does anyone deserve to die on their own?"

"No. You're right . . . I should go. I will."

The wider implications of her mother dying now hit her, though . . . What if she went to the grave with the secret of who her father was? It was a stonewall Hannah had always been afraid of coming up against. Right now, she couldn't even voice that fear to Beryl.

As she quickly packed a case, Hannah thought of her mother's age - sixty-nine - not that old. Cancer obviously - and her mother had never told her. What sort of a mother/daughter relationship was that?

"A non-existent one," she thought as she rang her ward manager at Waterford General's CCU unit. Emer Boyle was brusque but yes, she could see her at 9.30 a.m.

In the car now Hannah took the scrap of paper out of her pocket to read it again. *Come if you like*. It was more of an invitation than her mother had ever extended to her in the past. Did that mean she'd changed?

Driving into Waterford city to go to the hospital, Hannah knew she could do with a drink to steady her nerves but that would have to wait. On the quay in traffic she had the urge to ring Matt but stopped herself. No. Why would she? She'd ended it, hadn't she? What was the point of ringing him now? It would never have worked out. Not with him wanting a child. What was the point of her having a child, she'd thought, when she didn't know who she was herself.

As the traffic moved off again she wondered what she would find at the hospice. How long did her mother have left? Hannah felt the fear seeping in again.

Now she could see the disbelief on her superior's face.

"Pull the other one, Hannah. You've already had leave because your mother died! Two mothers. For God's sake!"

"There is an explanation."

Hannah watched her nursing colleague sit back in her chair.

"I'm all ears."

"The woman who died a year and a half ago *was* a mother to me. She was the house mother in the children's home I was reared in."

Hannah could see the flash of surprise on Emer Boyle's face. Was it followed by one of disgust? Pity? What was she thinking - orphan, bye-child, bastard even?

"You were reared in a children's home? God! You've never said."

"I didn't think it was anyone else's business."

"Of course it isn't. I just hadn't a clue - as long as I've known you. So - the woman who is dying now is your *real* mother?"

"Yes."

"And where was she when you were in the children's home?"

"Living in Dublin."

"And you had no contact with her?"

Hannah tried to control her voice.

"I did. She came to see me at the home - as often as she could."

"Wow! At least she kept in touch. How long has she been ill?"

Hannah had no option but to lie this time. What would her boss think if she told her she hadn't a clue?

"A few months."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Were you close?"

Hannah didn't answer.

"Right . . ."

"Please . . . if we could just get the leave sorted."

"Of course."

The ward manager lifted her pen.

"How much time off do you think you need?"

"A month maybe. It's hard to say exactly."

"No, a month's fine. To be honest I think it may be for the best - that you take a break, I mean . . ."

Here we go . . .

"I hate saying it - especially at a time like this - but I think we both know that's a good idea."

Hannah saw her boss turn pages of her file.

"Time-keeping issues, a medication error, being rude to a patient's family. I knew it wasn't like you - but at least I can see now that you've had a lot on your mind. Who'd blame you for going off the rails a bit."

Hannah didn't correct her.

"Like I told the medical manager, it won't happen again."

Her boss closed the file.

"Good. Sometimes we all need to take time out after we've been working for a long time, take stock . . ."

"I'll be nursing my dying mother!"

"Of course you will - and that's what you must concentrate on now. Where is she at the moment?"

"In a hospice."

Her boss waited for more detail but didn't get it.

"Right. Good. She'll get great care there. And you'll get support as well. You will let me know how things are going, won't you? "

"Yes. Thank you."

Hannah heard her boss speak again as she reached the door.

"There's no . . . shame in any of this, you know, Hannah. Being more open with people might be better in the long run. Secrets - they have a habit of eating away at us."

Hannah did some deep breathing to calm herself as she walked back into the coronary care unit to the brightness and the bleeping machines and the very sick patients. Who did her ward manager think she was? Oprah Winfrey? Concentrate - that's what she had to do - just until one o'clock when the agency nurse would arrive to relieve her in CCU . . .

In the car now she stared at her mother's letter again. The scrap of paper upset her. Could her mother not afford normal writing paper or had she not even bothered to buy some? Or was it the only thing she had in her bag that she could write on? Hannah stuffed it into her pocket again, unable to look at it anymore.

The hospice was like a hotel - the foyer with the big reception desk and the leather chairs, pseudo-marbled columns and original paintings hanging on the walls.

She could almost see the brochures for the place - *St Albert's - the hospice you'll be dying to get into* . . .

At the desk she explained who she was. The manager of the place was friendly, efficient, caring.

"Hannah - of course - Lil will be glad you're here. She mentioned you yesterday."

Lil?

The woman was showing her the way to her mother's room.

"You live some distance away, I believe?"

"Yes."

The words hung between them - like why hadn't she been here before now? Hannah answered the question before being asked.

"She didn't tell me how ill she was."

"I see, but you're here now. That's the main thing."

Right now Hannah wished Beryl was with her. Beryl had wanted to come, worried that Hannah wouldn't be fit to drive. She would ring her later . . .

A nurse was helping her mother to sip water from a beaker when she was shown into the single room.

"Look who's here to see you, Lil. Hannah. Your daughter. We'll leave the two of you to talk."

Her mother looked old, wary, trying to smile.

Hannah was shocked at how much weight her mother had lost from her face and arms, shocked too by the distended abdomen - a tell-tale sign of the cancer.

Hannah stood at the end of the bed.

"You got here."

"Yes."

Her mother was attempting to shift round in the bed but couldn't.

"Will I fix the pillows for you?"

"Please."

Hannah moved forward to fix them, careful not to disturb the morphine pump that lay beside the locker.

When she finally seemed settled, Hannah sat down in the armchair at one side of the bed. Her mother seemed even more tense now - awkward, her hands fidgeting with the sheet.

"You said the news wasn't good . . ."

"Yes."

"They wouldn't tell me anything over the phone. What did the doctors say exactly?"

Hannah watched her mother turn her head to stare out the window at the lavender beds and the pond.

"What no one wants to hear. You can talk to them yourself."

"I've an appointment for two o'clock."

"Right."

"How long have you known?"

Hannah saw her mother shrug.

"A few weeks but my stomach hasn't been right for many's the day."

"You should have said."

"I . . . didn't want to be annoying you."

The words stung. Annoying her? Any other mother would tell her daughter when something so serious was going on, wouldn't she, share her grief with her, draw comfort from her during the days of tests and results . . .? Her mother had denied her even that.

"Did you have trouble getting time off?"

"No," Hannah said. "I had holidays coming. I'll be able to stay with you as much as you want."

Was it tears Hannah saw in her mother's eyes?

The chat with the doctor took place in the family room.

"We'll make her as comfortable as possible, of course. Her pain will be controlled."

"Thank you. How long has she got?"

"Weeks, maybe a bit more, maybe less. It's difficult to say exactly. You know yourself, being a nurse."

Yes, she knew, after twenty years in the job, how slowly - or how quickly - death could come.

Hannah couldn't bear to go back to her mother immediately. Instead she went outside to breathe in fresh air and ring Beryl.

"It's in the liver. Probably a secondary."

"God love her."

Beryl had lots of questions: how Hannah was, was there anything she could do, would Hannah stay in her mother's flat?

"No."

She had never spent a night under her mother's roof in her life. It would be too weird to start now.

"I'll find a B&B."

"Ok. It's great you got time off to be with her anyway. You'll be glad afterwards."

"I hope so."

Beryl rang off eventually after promising to come up to Dun Laoghaire on Friday evening, after she finished her shift on reception in the hotel in Waterford.

"Book me into wherever you're staying. For two nights."

"Ok. Thanks."

The ward was quiet in the post visitor, post tea lull.

Her mother had very few visitors. It was one of the first questions Hannah had asked the nurse. The parish priest from Dun Laoghaire had come, she said, and a woman - a friend of Lil's, the nurse thought. She'd come every day - Kit - she was sure that was her name. If the nurse thought it strange that Hannah didn't know her mother's friend she didn't say so.

Her mother was asleep now, her mouth open, her breathing irregular. Her face had already distorted a bit, making it more difficult to understand what she was saying.

Hannah sat, an unread book on her knee, watching her. She wished she felt inclined to touch her again, but when she had touched her mother's hand it had moved away involuntarily.

"Hannah . . ."

Her mother's head lifted slightly.

"Yes. Do you want a drink?"

Hannah put her left arm behind her mother's shoulders to lift her up a bit then held the beaker to her lips with her right hand, tilting it just enough.

"Are you still with him - your young man?" her mother asked.

Matt? Young? He was twelve years older than her: fifty-one. She'd never gone out with a young man in her life.

"No. It didn't work out."

"Oh."

Her mother drifted in and out of sleep again.

Next time she spoke it was to ask what the doctors had said.

"How long?"

"They can't really say. Maybe not long . . ."

What was the point in telling her lies? Hannah was fed up of lies, of secrecy. Now she pushed herself to ask . . .

"Is there anything you want me to do? Anyone you want me to contact?"

Her mother shook her head.

"Is there family who don't know about me?"

"No . . ."

She watched her mother's crepey hands pull at the sheet again.

"None at all?"

"Your grandad died last year. There's no one else."

Her mother had turned her head away. Hannah felt hurt at the matter-of-factness of it. Her grandfather was dead and she had never even been given the choice of knowing him. Was he the man in the photograph she'd asked about when she visited her mother's flat for the first time when she was nineteen years old? The next time she'd gone there the photograph had been put away.

"There's so much I want to know."

Lil Casey had her eyes shut.

"Where you're from, about my grandparents, where they lived, where you went to school . . ."

Hannah kept going in spite of her mother's silence.

"You owe me that much surely . . ."

Her mother was trying to shift in the bed.

"Is the pain worse?"

Half an hour later, when the medication had been adjusted, Hannah watched her mother close her eyes again. That's it, she thought - her mother is trying to escape - close her eyes so no one can ask her any more questions. No big ones like the name of the man who fathered her child . . .

Hannah felt terrified at the thought of time running out. What if her mother never told her?

"So much for thinking I'd come to terms with not knowing who my father is . . ." she said to herself. It had been a way for surviving, she knew, pretending not to care, but right now, with her mother so close to death, the pain was raw - visceral.

After getting into the car later, exhausted, to go back to the B&B Hannah rested her arms on the steering wheel for a few minutes. What if her mother said nothing? Stonewall.

Hannah was amazed at how her attitude to the hospice had changed.

Two weeks ago when she'd come here first she'd thought it such a step up from hospitals, impressed by the size of it, the opulence of it. Now she only smelled the stench of death.

Three people had already died. She'd arrived in the morning from the B&B to see rooms being cleared and disinfected and family members pale and tearful getting into cars. Already new people had taken up the beds.

It was like an airport, she thought, people queuing up on the runway, ready for departure.

Her mother wouldn't last much longer; she knew that. Her kidneys were packing up. Food intake was non-existent.

She'd tried to broach the subject of her father three times. She had the right, hadn't she? She wasn't being cruel, was she? Wouldn't her mother have been the same if it were the other way round?

The first time she'd attempted it a nurse had come in and the moment was gone. The second time her mother had feigned sleep then eventually told her a bit about her grandparents and her grandfather working on farms and on the roads but very little else. The third time she had eventually said "No good'll come of chasing him" and refused to be drawn any further.

"You can't blame me for wanting to know . . . Mother - please . . . it's such an important thing."

Her mother was agitated after that, even in sleep.

Sensing strain in the room, the nurse had said to Hannah that her mother needed as calm an environment as possible. Had she overheard her trying to get answers?

Hannah couldn't help resenting the implication. How come it was always about what her mother needed? Even death was giving her a reason to keep Hannah at arm's length.

Beryl tried to console her friend but it didn't work.

"It's probably hard for her," she said. "She's kept the secret for a long time."

"And in the meantime I get told nothing, is that it?" Hannah said, her head in her hands at a canteen table. "I don't even know where she wants to be buried or what sort of a funeral she wants, for God's sake! I don't know all sorts of things like if she ever broke her arm falling off a swing, if she hated her teacher, when she reached puberty, if her mother made poultices like Nanna did when we got boils on the back of our necks."

"You're tormenting yourself - thinking so much." Beryl said.

"All the questions are doing my head in. Once she's gone how will I ever find anything out?"

The nurse interrupted them.

"Hannah - I think you should come back in. Your mum wants you."

Mum. She'd never called her that in her life.

"Hannah is here, Lil."

Hannah saw her mother's hand move as if she wanted something near the television.

"Is it your bag you want?"

"Yes."

The nurse put the navy handbag on the bed beside Lil and smoothed the covers.

"I'll leave you two alone. If you want anything, just buzz."

"Thanks."

Her mother's fingers were fumbling at the bag.

"You want me to open it?"

Her mother blinked again.

"What do you want? Your purse? Your rosary beads?"

"No."

The only other thing in the bag was a padded brown envelope.

"You want this?" she asked, removing it. She was surprised to see her name written on it.

"May I open it?"

Her mother seemed to nod.

The envelope was torn at the corners - as if it had sat in the bag for years.

She took out a folded document, a receipt of some sort, a few photographs, a post office book, a newspaper cutting and two sets of keys.

Her hand shook as she looked first at the receipt. It was for a burial plot in Dean's Grange Cemetery. At least she now knew where her mother wanted to be buried.

The folded document was a last will and testament.

Her mother was fingering the second set of keys that Hannah had placed on the bed - the older set, one huge, old-fashioned key and a smaller Yale one.

There was a label attached to them.

Hannah read the words.

'Casey, Drumcadden, Rathbrandon, County Wexford.'

"Are these for where you were born? Your home place?"

Her heart lurched at hearing the address for the first time. She tried to figure out what was happening here. Did this mean her mother was giving the house to her — a house she'd never even seen . . . God!

She looked at the photographs - ones obviously taken when her mother was a child outside what looked like one of those two-up, two-down cottages.

She looked at the backs of the photos - Drumcadden 1948, Drumcadden 1956 . . .

Angry tears now stung Hannah's eyes. Why hadn't she seen all these things years ago? Why hadn't she been let visit? Why hadn't her grandparents been told about her? Ask a stupid question . . .

The post office book looked ancient. Hannah opened it at the first page.

She was shocked to see that her name was down as the holder of the account. 1965 . . . The account was opened two months after she was born! Heart pounding, she turned to the next page and the one after. There were only twenty entries or so in the book, the biggest ones in the two years after she was born.

She couldn't even guess how much that would add up to now in euro.

How could her mother save money like this?

"Where did it come from?"

The expression on her mother's face told her.

"He gave this to you, didn't he - my father? To help rear me?"

The words choked off in Hannah's throat.

"But you never used it."

Hannah sat down in the chair beside the bed, unable to take it all in. All the deprivation at Royle came back to her - the hand-me-down clothes that never fitted right, the too-big shoes that slugged off her feet when she ran, the doing without when all the time the money was there?

Her mother had paid what she could afford towards Hannah's keep in the home out of her cleaner's wages - Nanna had told her that only in later years.

"It couldn't have been easy for her," Nanna had said.

Now she knew there was all this money . . .

"You have to tell me who he is - please . . ."

Her mother's hand was moving again, as if to locate some other object.

All that was left on the bed was some old newspaper cutting. What use would that be?

Her mother's fingers were fumbling over the cutting. Had it something to do with her father? Hannah almost grabbed it out of her mother's hand. One side only had ads yellowed with age, the other had a photograph taken at what - an agricultural show? It was of two men, she saw, one holding onto a cow that had a large rosette tied to its halter. The second man was presenting a trophy to the taller man who was holding the cow.

Hannah's eyes scanned the caption hungrily.

Wexford farmer Abraham (Abe) Stephenson (left) being presented with the Reserve Champion trophy for his pedigree Hereford cow Knocklannon Glory, by the chairman of the Royal Dublin Society, Ballsbridge yesterday.

"Is one of these men my father? The RDS guy? The other one? Abe . . . Abraham Stephenson? "

Her mother seemed to stare at her for ages before finally blinking "yes".

Christ! Thirty-nine years old and she finally knew . . .

When the tears eventually cleared she stared at the cutting again, scanning the man's face for similarity. Was there a resemblance? She wished the photograph was clearer. He looked tall. Was that where she got her height? She always knew it hadn't come from her mother's side.

She had to ask . . .

"Is he alive?"

Hannah saw her mother eventually nod then clutch her arm as if she was trying to say something but couldn't. Then the grip loosened and her mother's head sunk deeper into the pillow. Her face had distorted further. After several seconds Hannah pressed the bell for the nurse. She knew enough about dying people to know that it wouldn't be long now.

When death finally came two nights later, Hannah was glad Beryl was with her at the hospice.

Her mother had been agitated for hours, deep, guttural sounds breaking the silence of the room. She'd seen enough patients die to know that her mother wasn't at peace. Was her unconscious mind worrying about what Hannah would do with the information she now had, she wondered? Or was she simply sorry for holding back for so long? Hannah kept telling herself it was the latter.

She checked her mother's pulse again. It was barely there.

When her mother finally puffed out her last breath, no tears came. She knew she should be feeling grief for the woman who had died and compassion for her but all she felt was sadness and anger at her mother's escape. She still had so many questions. How had her mother met this Abe Stephenson? Where did he live? What was he like? Had her mother loved him or her?

She and Beryl stood by the bed, the palliative care nurse at the other side, Hannah's brain somehow registering the coldness of her mother's hand on one side and the warmth of her friend's on the other.

Her mother's eyes were still open.

"I'll do it," Hannah said to the nurse and slowly she drew her hand downwards over her mother's face to close them.

October 2004

Abe Stephenson cursed. His prize Hereford bull was lame. Damn! The last thing he needed was an injured animal.

Something must have gone up in the animal's foot and let infection in; a sharp stone or a piece of rusty wire maybe.

He cursed again. He had always been so careful about making sure the field the bull was in was swept for anything that could cause damage. The vet would have to be called - more bloody expense!

Memories of losing one of the best bulls he ever had flooded back. The fever associated with the footrot had made the animal infertile and Abe unfortunately hadn't had him sperm-counted before the breeding season started. It had been an expensive lesson that year, finding that none of his pedigrees were in calf when they should have been. Luckily the breeding season was a long way off now. He'd have the animal well checked-out by then. A bull firing blanks would be no use to anyone.

Getting Knocklannon Esquire into the crush would mean hassle though. He'd need Leo. The days of him being able to handle a bull by himself were over - he wasn't stupid enough to think otherwise.

Leo's phone was ringing out. He was probably in the shed working on the corn drill.

With the good autumn weather and clay falling off boots it was time for sowing winter crops. He briefly considered ringing Roy. No, no point. The bull would smell the fear off him at twenty paces. Abe walked back to the yard. He would drive the two miles to his sister's place instead to find Leo. It'd be quicker that way.

After telephoning the vet he walked to the farmhouse to tell his wife, Florrie, where he was going.

She was at the piano again. The music met him as he came in the back door. Jesus, did she ever leave that thing alone these days? He stood listening for a few seconds, though, suddenly shocked at the standard of her playing. When had she become that good? Time was she could only play the three hymns for church - and that was after weeks of practice.

She closed the lid when he went into the drawing room.

"What?" she asked, hands in her lap.

"The bull's lame. I'll have to get Leo."

"Do you want some tea before you go?"

"I'll get some at Vera's."

"Whatever you like."

The music started again as he went out the back door - some loud, classical shite this time, the sort he'd switch off if he came across it on the radio.

The fact that she hadn't tried to persuade him to have tea annoyed him. There was a time she'd have humoured him into it with niceties, almost pleading as she told him that she had baked something or other he liked.

Still, at least she didn't neglect the house. He'd never been ashamed to have anyone step across his threshold. He never had to search for clean clothes either. Being turned out well every day was important to him, even now.

His mother had drummed it into him. "Look like a businessman and you'll be treated like one". Early on, he had taken to dressing smartly when he went to the mart, even wearing beige trousers sometimes, stuffed into clean Wellington boots. He knew he had presence - and that people turned to watch him when he passed. Yes, they might smirk at his smartness but they all paid attention when he was bidding. And he was easy to find when they were looking for him after they'd turned down the price in the ring but didn't want to bring their animals home.

Checking his wallet for his cheque book and his pocket for his glasses, he put the key in the ignition. There was a time he could see a midge on Mount Leinster. Now he couldn't read the back of a Corn Flakes packet without the specs.

As he reversed the car he remembered the prescription in the dashboard. Angina, my eye! Doctor Dunne didn't know what he was talking about. A little bit of pain after exertion never killed anyone. He'd never been sick a day in his life.

Glancing round the yard as he took off, he was pleased with what he saw. Cemented yard, gates properly hung, outhouses in good repair, doors all painted red - it looked well. What matter if he'd had to cut down on farming in the last few years? Hadn't the arse fallen out of the price of almost everything anyway, so what was the point in killing himself at the age of seventy-six? As long as he could hang onto the few pedigrees he'd be all right. The empty slatted shed where he'd once housed cattle was now earning tidy money as a storage area for a local builder. What matter that it didn't pay to fatten large numbers of stock in it anymore? With farming in a slump you had to grab opportunity where you could find it.

And contacts with builders would come in handy if - when - he got the green light for his own building development plans. Get in early, clean up. Only fools were held back by sentiment. It might have been bred into him never to sell land, but the world had

changed. He'd make more money out of those five acres joining the village than he'd ever make by farming it - that was for certain. He left the yard, the engine of the '03 Mercedes purring as he moved out onto the road.

Vera's place was only two miles away, less as the crow flies.

Marrying Harry Kemp who owned the land adjoining Knocklannon had been a cute move on his sister's part, especially the way things worked out with her being widowed young, but what could you expect with an eejit who couldn't even handle a gun properly?

Neighbours had gossiped at the time his sister married, about Harry Kemp being old enough to be her father, he knew, but Vera knew what she was doing. If there was one thing his sister had it was balls. She might never own Knocklannon but she would own the land beside it.

On the straight stretch of road before he turned right for Vera's he passed Lil Casey's cottage.

It was the only piece of property he didn't own on that side of the road: a cottage on half an acre. He made a mental note to ring Flynn, the auctioneer, again, to see if his bid had been accepted yet. Flynn hadn't been able to contact Lil Casey in the last few weeks, he'd told him, so had had no answer for him. Maybe she'd moved house. The delay irritated him. Especially as he needed the cottage if he was to be sure of meeting the council's sight line requirements for the housing development entrance.

Lil's father, Jim Casey, was dead eight months now. Surely she'd had enough time to make up her mind about selling?

He'd gone to Jim's funeral and had scarcely recognized Lil, she'd aged so much.

He'd caught sight of her only once since then at the cottage, filling a skip with old furniture and rubbish a few weeks after the funeral.

He hadn't stopped to talk then, even though he would have liked to have known her intentions. Better to let Flynn handle it. He'd make his move when the time was right. He didn't need tongues wagging if his car was spotted parked outside the cottage. The word would be out in no time that he was trying to buy the place and he didn't want that. Or people putting her up to looking for a higher price.

Driving down his sister's lane now he saw that Roy had been out with the hedgecutter. At least he had done a half decent job. He might make a few bob out of it the way he was going. Sheep'd never make his nephew a rich man. Nor being stuck in that shed

chipping away at some old stone. Good job he wasn't the only son Vera had or she could have shut up shop years ago.

Abe saw his sister feeding the dogs when he arrived into the yard.

Three sheepdogs were around the saucepan, snarling at one another to get the lion's share. He saw his sister Vera aim a kick at the noisiest one to shut him up.

"Leo around? I couldn't get him on the phone."

"In the shed. What's up?"

Shouting over his shoulder about the bull, he headed across the yard.

"I was just going to ring you. Come in when you're finished, will you?" his sister shouted after him.

"Aye."

Abe found Leo a few seconds later, face smudged and grease gun in hand, standing on the steps of the corn drill.

The sight of his nephew's bald patch shocked him. Both his nephews were now over forty - where had the years gone? It only seemed like the other day they were chaps.

"Well?"

The conversation with his second nephew was to the point as always. He needed a hand. Right. Just give him time to finish this and then he'd be over, Leo said.

"Which field are you sowing first?"

"The twelve acre - it's fit enough."

"The back lane field at home is pretty near it too. The seed'll be out from the co-op tomorrow, ready for you."

"Right."

"Where's the lad?"

He saw Leo grin.

"Michelangelo? Can you not hear him?"

Sure enough, Abe could hear the sound of Roy tapping away in an outhouse further down the yard.

Abe threw his eyes up to heaven. "He's easy amused. There's a few calves to vaccinate when you're over as well. I'll be weaning them in a few weeks."

"Give me half an hour or so."

"Right."

In the kitchen, Abe had to move two dirty coats, a bottle of sheep injection fluid and three old copies of the *Irish Farmers Journal* from a chair before he could sit down.

Vera was wetting the tea. Finishing that, he saw her plonk that day's *Irish Times* on the table in front of him.

Her finger was pointing out a death notice.

"Who's snuffed it now?" he asked.

His sister didn't answer as he scanned the surnames in bold print.

Barrett, Browne, Carr, Casey . . . Jesus!

Elizabeth Mary Casey (Lil) formerly of Druncadden, Rathbrandon, County Wexford . . .

Abe forced himself to speak calmly.

"Must have been sudden . . ."

"Cancer. Riddled with it - according to Tom in the shop."

His heart began to pound as his sister tapped the paper again.

"Keep reading."

. . . *sadly missed by her daughter, Hannah* . . .

Jesus! Abe Stephenson forced his breath to flow freely. Stay calm, stay in control. If he kept pretending to read he wouldn't have to answer.

He could hear his sister getting mugs from the dresser.

"That'll surprise a few people. Not me, though. That one had a gamey eye on her, if you ask me."

His sister placed the teapot on the table now, covering it with a tea cosy that had seen better days.

"It's a pity the paper doesn't say what age the daughter is. Jim Casey can't have known. Not that he'd have told anyone if he did. She'd have been the talk of the parish."

Abe forced a reply out.

"Aye!"

"Might throw a bit of a spanner in the works for you, though."

Abe's heart pounded. Christ, what was coming now?

"What?"

"You wanting to buy the cottage as a rental property - what if this daughter of hers wants to keep it?"

Abe swallowed.

"A city one'd hardly want a place like that."

"Maybe you're right. Wouldn't be grand enough for her, probably, the way women are going now. When's the burial?"

When Abe didn't answer he saw his sister turn the paper round so that she could see it herself.

"Day after tomorrow. Private, if you don't mind. I don't know who from around here'd be going anyway. When she was home she hardly set foot outside the door."

Abe took another gulp of tea, then stood up.

"The vet'll be out."

"Right."

Vera was reading the death notice again.

"Doesn't say *loving* daughter, did you notice that?"

Abe saw his sister put the paper down before taking a sip from her mug.

"The *Irish Times*, no less!"

Abe had his hand on the doorknob when his sister spoke again.

"Posh name for her sort too. Something less than Hannah would have done her."

Abe wiped the perspiration from his forehead with his clean handkerchief.

What could he do? What should he do? He had to get into the car quickly. No stress, that's what the doctor said, and here he was sweating like a pig.

Think rationally, he told himself.

Of course Vera had been all talk about Lil Casey having a child - the whole parish would be. That was just a normal reaction, he told himself. It'd pass.

Still, he felt nauseous at the thought of all the speculating and guessing that would go on, but then why should anyone think that the father of Lil's child would be in this locality? Lil hadn't lived here. They'd all think it was a fella in Dublin. The gossip'd all blow over in a few days.

The Hannah name was a shock, though. What was she thinking of? If he had known she was going to call the child that he'd have put a stop to it. He should have made it a condition of her getting the money. Hannah was his grandmother's name. What right had she to use it? He didn't care if she'd always liked his grandmother, running messages for her and bringing her cups of tea in her room when the old woman had been forgotten about on threshing days. The child . . . He squeezed his eyes tight to stop himself imagining her.

What age would Lil have been then? Twelve or thirteen when she started helping out in the house for a few pence while her father, Jim Casey, manned a rick or did his day's donkey work in the yard?

Abe let the engine idle at the end of Vera's lane. He had to think . . . If the truth came out . . . No, that was impossible! He would recognize no bye-child no matter what law there was in the country . . . A sudden recollection of the helicopter ride twenty years before unnerved him, though. The Status of Children Act . . . no more illegitimacy. He'd heard the news that night on the television. Effin women's libbers with nothing better to do but make trouble for decent people . . . Now he thought of his parents - his mother - what would she have said if she'd found out? He stopped himself before he got to the end of that thought.

Feck! What had he brought up all that old stuff for? It was all in the past. Buried. And if Florrie had been able to have children none of this would have happened. It was her fault.

Why did he have to go so far to prove that the problem wasn't with him, though? Was that what he'd done? He remembered how the worry had eaten away at him and how tongues had started to wag when two years had gone by and there was no sign of a baby.

It wasn't that he didn't know what to do. Hadn't he lived on a farm long enough?

After a year of nothing happening he had dispensed with any displays of affection, preferring to get down to business, grunting the seed out of him in the hope of it germinating.

Seeing Lil at the RDS that year had been a surprise. She was skittish enough even though she would have been what - twenty-nine? Thirty? No spring chicken. And old enough to know how to protect herself. She'd always fancied him, ever since she was a girl. The knowledge had turned him on. That time he'd grabbed her in the dairy and shoved his hand between her legs she hadn't complained . . . He used to catch her watching him as he went about his work, too, waiting for him to wink at her.

The job in Dublin had happened suddenly when she was seventeen. After the hen house incident. What age was he then? Old enough to have had more sense . . .

He could still see her that day in '65 when she had told him she was pregnant.

She'd been afraid to come near the house, knowing his wife would be there. She was apprehensive, too, that her father would see them speak.

There could be no phone calls, no arrangements, so she had walked up and down the roads for hours when she was home on holidays until he had driven past in the car.

She'd told him through the car window, her face pinched and white.

She was sure, she said. The news had horrified him. And elated him. He had lead in his pencil after all. No, he told himself, Lil Casey wasn't the sort to be having it off with several men. He was the father of her child. And she'd say nothing.

"What do you want me to do?" he said, finally.

"I don't know," she said, her voice quavering.

"You'll need to go somewhere for a while."

Her hand was gripping the rolled down window.

"I'm not going to the nuns - I might never get out! Can you get me a place in one of the mother and baby homes your church runs? That way I'll be able to get out when it's all over."

"It won't be easy. Your father knows nothing about this, I hope."

Lil had blessed herself before uttering "No".

Abe found a pen and a piece of paper in the glove compartment and passed it out through the window.

"Write your address on that and I'll contact you when I sort something out."

When Lil had scribbled the words, he placed the piece of paper in a bulb box in the dash.

"You'll need money."

Abe revved the car as he spotted a vehicle in the rear view mirror.

"I'll be in touch."

And he left her there, her arms wrapped around herself to ward off the shivers on a warm June day.

It had been difficult enough to get the information without putting himself at risk of exposure.

In the end he had gone to Dublin for a day and walked into two Protestant churches before he found a clergyman he could approach.

What the clergyman thought he didn't know, but he didn't care. He felt far enough from home to be anonymous.

He didn't care if the clergyman believed his story or not. His sister, he told him, had got herself in trouble, and he wanted some advice about what to do. His parents were elderly, he said, and it would kill them if they knew. His sister worked in Dublin, he said, and she could disappear for a while. Did he know of a place that could take care of her?

"God bless your brotherly concern," said the rector. "I'll write an address down for you. She must write to the woman who runs this place. She can stay there until after the child is weaned. How many months on is she?"

"Two."

"Good. There'll be time to organize it."

"What will it cost?"

"She will be expected to help out with the work of running the home while she is there and while she is able. A contribution to the home would, of course, be appreciated. It is God's work and those who do it should be supported."

"Yes."

His mind was already working out how much he would give - anonymously, of course. Luckily Florrie had little to do with keeping the books at that time. He put money on the table every

Friday morning for the house and that was enough. Anything special she had to ask for.

On the steps of the church, he looked at the address, Bethany Home . . .

Yes, it was far enough away from where Lil worked to give her privacy. If she stayed out of sight she'd be all right. She'd still be able to write to her father without him suspecting anything.

He had heard nothing until the following spring. Easter, was it? He was sowing potatoes in the pound field.

Lil had come home on the bus for a few days' holiday. He had made sure to give Jim Casey a few days tidying up work, even though he was now laid off from Knocklannon and trimming the roads for the council. That way he got to know if there was any news of Lil.

Abe had sent the money to Bethany Home in the form of a draft. "Towards Lil Casey's confinement" - that's all he had written on the envelope.

Fifty pounds - the price of an average cow - it had taken a lot of collecting, but it was harvest time and he could afford it. He had thought several times of paying nothing but decided against it. He wouldn't have her saying that he didn't pay his debts.

The day after Lil had told him she was pregnant he had sent Florrie to the doctor and then to a consultant for tests. Two months later they'd been told that Florrie would never have children. Blocked tubes.

The news had got out and the laugh was on the other side of the neighbours' and the workmen's faces now. There was nothing wrong with Abe Stephenson. It was his wife who was barren. They could put that in their pipes and smoke it.

He knew his attitude to his wife had changed from then on. He was harsher with her and she took his criticism as if it was her due. For years after she had been more anxious, more compliant. Part of him had enjoyed it. Part of him wished she'd stood up to him. He'd have respected her more if she had.

Lately, though, that had changed. There was a stand up in her now. When she was dressed up she was still a fine looking woman. Her breasts still drew his eye. Pity they didn't do what they were supposed to do and he mightn't be in the mess he was in now.

He tried to remember what time Lil's funeral was at. Would he go? Could he go? Maybe he could keep his distance, sit in the car and watch what was happening and who was there?

He would see her, the child . . . A shiver ran down his spine . . . No, he couldn't think of her as a daughter. He had no connection with her and she'd get nothing out of him. He'd told Lil Casey that.

He had met his obligations on that score. That was the end of it. They'd agreed on that.

He checked his watch. 11.55. He picked his mobile phone up off the seat beside him and rang his solicitor's number.

He couldn't have an appointment so soon, the secretary said.

"Tell him to make time," he told her. "I'll be there last thing this evening."

He was pulling into the yard at home when the mobile rang.

"Mr O'Connell will see you at five o'clock, Mr Stephenson," the secretary told him.

"I'll be there."

It would work out all right. Florrie would be at the day care centre working on that book she was putting together for them. She wouldn't even know he was away. Not that it would worry her if he was. Sometimes he wondered if she would care if he never came back.

Hannah was jealous of Kit Bermingham. She knew she should have more sense but that was the feeling that surfaced now.

Kit was with her in Lil's basement flat, helping her to sort through her mother's belongings.

Kit, Lil's friend and co-cleaner at the hospital, had had so much of Lil's time. Hannah felt upset that Kit knew her mother so much better than she did. She'd even given her her cat when she went into hospital. Why hadn't she asked Hannah to take it? It would have been some kind of connection.

"Is it ok if I have these?"

Hannah turned to see Kit holding up two tins of cat food that she'd found in the tiny pantry.

"Of course. Whatever's any use."

Hannah saw Kit's eyes light up.

"I'm serious," Hannah said. "I wouldn't have room for all this stuff in Waterford."

"Are you sure? Anything at all?"

"All the furniture, if you want it. I might want a few small things but that's all."

"You're joking! God, that's great!"

Hannah was sorting through an old biscuit box of photos. There was none of her - not even as a baby. Maybe no photographs had ever been taken of her.

"Maybe it would have been too painful for her to have them," she thought as Kit rooted out more cat food in the pantry. "Or maybe she was afraid to have evidence lying around in case

someone saw them and asked awkward questions . . ." Either way, it hurt.

"I'll be really glad of this - and the sideboard, if you're sure," Kit was saying, as she ran her hands over the arms of the sofa.

"We've turned a shed in the garden into an extra room. Jimmy's put electricity in it. With so many in the house it's a refuge for us sometimes."

"Take whatever you need."

Kit told Hannah she had two sons and a daughter. Her daughter was a single mother with a two-year-old child, living at home.

"God knows if times had been different Lil might've been able to rear you herself, but there was no lone parents' allowance nor nothing then but at least she kept in touch with you. Shows the sort of person she was. Must have been desperate on her going to visit you then leaving you behind each time."

Hannah bit her tongue, stopping herself saying, "What about me being abandoned until the next time it suited her to come?" The pity shouldn't be all for the mother, should it?

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean . . ."

"She never, ever mentioned me?" Hannah asked. "Let my name slip or anything?"

Kit looked embarrassed.

"No, but I wish she had. I thought she'd have trusted me enough, seeing as we knew each other so well. God, we even slept in the one bed on one of those bus holidays to Connemara. We talked about everything under the sun - or so I thought."

God, they'd gone on holidays together!

"She loved Connemara," Kit was going on. "Couldn't get enough of it. The wildness, I think. You can't take the bog out of the girl, she always said. Then she'd tease me about being a Dublin jackeen. It was a sort of a cant between us."

Hannah turned away.

She'd never known about Connemara.

"You see that picture there?"

Kit was pointing at a framed print over the sideboard, one of a barefoot girl wearing a shawl. Two goats stood beside her on the side of a hill.

"You should keep that. Your mam loved it."

Hannah took down the print, wiping dust off the frame as she did so. Augustus Burke. *Connemara Girl*. What was it in the picture that had connected with her mother? Had she owned goats as a child? What? Now she'd never know . . .

Hannah took another look around the room. Most of the stuff had been placed in a pile in the centre of it, clothes and bed linen in black bags ready to go to Oxfam, ornaments and crockery in boxes.

Kit could take the picture of the Pope and the Sacred Heart lamp. Hannah felt strange handling them, never having been brought up with such icons.

"I'll think of your mother every time I look at them," Kit said glancing round the room. "It'll be hard to believe she's not living here anymore . . ."

"Yes."

Hannah tried to remember how many times she had visited her mother here - ten times? Twelve, maybe? It was scarcely more. Even then she was seldom on her own. Whenever her mother invited her she would tell her to bring Beryl too or some of the others from Royle. Eventually, though, she'd realized that this was a ploy for preventing the discussion getting too personal.

After that she'd gone on her own as often as she had the courage to, but she could sense her mother's discomfort. She'd been distant, wary, saying that she had to go out later as if to cut the visit short.

The memory of the day she qualified came back to her. They'd had their tea in the Montrose Hotel. The occasion had been spoiled, though, when someone her mother knew had come into the restaurant just as they were leaving. A few strained minutes of conversation followed during which Lil did not introduce Hannah. Hannah was more hurt by it than she let on. Would she have been happier if Lil had introduced her as a friend?

It was only then that it had really hit her what she was: her mother's dirty secret.

The man was a retired solicitor that her mother had cleaned house for years before.

Her mother had only said who he was reluctantly and looked over her shoulders a couple of times as she crossed the road to get the 46A bus back to Dun Laoghaire.

Hannah had been glad to leave her. She didn't remember much about the evening. She met up with some of her friends from the Adelaide and stayed out late, sidestepping any questions about how she'd celebrated with her family.

It surprised her how raw the memory was still. How many times had she told herself that she had let all the pain of her past go? Lots of people had crosses to bear, didn't they, and they got on with life. That's the way it had to be if you wanted to survive. She took a deep breath . . . Now her mother was dead, though, and she'd just found out the name of her father . . . Stuff that had been repressed

for years was bound to come to the surface in circumstances like that, wasn't it?

Her phone rang. It was the undertaker. Everything was organized for tomorrow. Had she seen the death notice in the paper? Yes, she had, she said. Yes, it was what they agreed.

She had chosen *The Irish Times* deliberately. Protestants read it. She knew that from boarding school. Goosebumps rose on her arms at the thought of her father seeing it.

She still couldn't understand why she'd been reared Church of Ireland. Religion went deep with people, didn't it? Surely her mother would have wanted her to follow her faith?

It was a mystery. And how had her mother ended up in Bethany Home? And how come she, Hannah, had been sent from there to Royle? More goose bumps rose on her arms . . . Did that mean her father had chosen the place she was reared? Or was it just because her mother, a Roman Catholic, had given birth to her in a Protestant baby home that she had been sent to whatever Protestant children's home there was a space in?

"You look wrecked tired," Kit was saying. "Have you slept at all?"

"Not very much."

"Maybe you should go back to the B&B for a while? This can't be easy for you."

"No, it's a distraction. I'm all right. Honest."

She had intended to leave the sorting until after the funeral, but what was the point? The flat had to be cleared for the landlord.

Was there more information about her father hidden somewhere, she wondered. So far she had found nothing.

"Your father - did Lil say who he was?"

"Not really."

"Oh! It's none of my business anyway but I wish you well - if you're trying to find him or anything . . ."

"Thanks."

Hannah stood up to place the last sorted box with the others in the middle of the floor. Not that much to show for a life, was it?

"I was thinking - would you like to travel with myself and Beryl in the car tomorrow? To the church and that?"

She could see tears in Kit's eyes.

"I'd love that - thanks very much."

"Good. That's sorted then. Do you think many that have been invited will come?"

"They will of course - Sister Ambrose and as many staff as can get off. It's the least they could do the length she worked there."

"Are there any neighbours around here that I should ask?"

"I don't think so. Your mum kept to herself and a lot of people she knew are either dead or they've moved away."

"We'll see who turns up then."

"Yeah."

Kit was putting on her coat.

"I don't know what I'd have done without her sometimes, to be honest. I used to come down here, have a fag and a cup of tea and get things off my chest. She was a good friend."

Hannah swallowed hard to quell the feeling of jealousy again.

"Right. Could you collect whatever you want to take on Thursday, do you think, or maybe I'm rushing you? I told the landlord I'd give the keys back to him on Friday morning. No point in delaying things really."

"You're right. That'll be no problem. A friend of ours is a carpenter and has a van, so Jimmy'll ask him for a hand out. It's very good of you. I won't know myself with all these extra bits and pieces."

"Don't forget these."

Hannah handed her the tins of cat food.

"I'd forget my head if it wasn't stuck to me."

With Kit gone the place seemed empty. Weird.

She rang Beryl.

"I'll be home at about four. I've just the solicitor to see first."

"At least your mother sorted out her affairs," Beryl said. "Must have been hard for her, building up to giving you all that stuff . . ."

There it was again: the sympathy for her mother.

"You don't think it was about time, do you?" she snapped, then regretted it.

"Sorry. I didn't mean . . . Look we'll talk when you get back."

She looked now at the phone number written in small, neat print in her diary: Abe Stephenson's landline number. She'd looked it up in the 05 directory. There was only one Abraham. And only one Knocklannon.

Getting out of the car in the multi-storey car park by the shopping centre, she toyed with the idea of making the call.

Who would answer?

She keyed in the digits, after setting her mobile phone not to display her number. That would give him more information than she wanted him to have right now.

How was he feeling now, she wondered? Indifferent? Scared? Part of her hoped he was.

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