

'Could easily have been titled
"These Are Little Masterpieces"' *IRISH TIMES*

THERE ARE LITTLE KINGDOMS



From the winner of the **IMPAC AWARD**,
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C

• THE CANONS •

Atlantic City

A July evening, after a tar-melter of a day, and Broad Street was quiet and muffled with summer, the entire town was dozy with summer, and even as the summer peaked so it began to fade. Dogs didn't know what had hit them. They walked around the place with their tongues hanging out and their eyes rolling and they lapped forlornly at the drains. The old were anxious, too: they twitched the curtains to look to the hills, and flapped themselves with copies of the *RTE Guide* to make a parlour breeze. Later, after dark, the bars would be giddy with lager drinkers, but it was early yet, and Broad Street was bare and peaceful in the blue evening.

The youth of Broad Street and its surrounds had convened in a breeze-block arcade tacked onto Moloney's Garage. This had been one of Moloney's sharper moves. He'd taken an old shed that he'd used for a store room, it was maybe forty foot long and half as wide, and he'd installed there a pool table, three video games, a wall-mounted jukebox and a pinball machine. To add a note of local pride, he'd painted the walls in the county colours. It wasn't much of an arcade, with just the clack and nervous roll of the pool balls, and the insipid bleats of Donkey Kong and Defender. There was high anxious talk about girls and handjobs and who had cigarettes, and there was talk about cars and motorbikes. It wasn't much at all

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but it was the only show in town and this evening, a dozen habitués had gathered there, all boys, from pre-pubescents through to late teens, and there was desperation to make this a different kind of night, a night to sustain them through the long winter. But so far it was the same old routine, with Donkey Kong and Defender, and winner-stays-on at the pool table, and James was always the winner, and he always stayed on. The pinball machine lit up and crackled to salute a good score. Its theme was the criminal scene of Atlantic City, and the illustration showed a black detective, with a heavy moustache, patrolling in a red sports car, and whenever the day's hi-score was achieved, the detective's eyes lit up and he spoke out, in a deep-voiced, downtown drawl.

He said: 'Atlantic City. Feel The Force!'

This was James's cue to leave the pool table and approach the pinball machine. At nineteen, he was the oldest of the habitués, and certainly the biggest. Not fat so much as massive, the width of a small van across the shoulders, and he moved noiselessly, as though on castors, and the flesh swung and rolled with him, there was no little grace to it, and he considered the breathless, blushing youngster who'd achieved a new hi-score on Atlantic City, and he considered the score, and he said:

'Handy. Handy alright.'

With a long-suffering sigh he reached deep into the pocket of his jeans and took out the necessary coin and inserted it in the slot. The silver balls slapped free and he pulled the spring-release to send the first of them on its way, and it bounced and pinged and rebounded around the nooks and contours of the game, around the boardwalks and the neon boulevards, and wordlessly, the habitués of the arcade swivelled their attention from the pool to the pinball, for the magic had shifted to a new discipline, and cigarette smoke hung blue in the air, and it twisted as they turned. It was a matter of pride to James that he wouldn't let even one of the silver balls drop between the flippers to the dead-ball zone, and he worked the

flippers with quick rhythmic slaps from his fingers and palms—an expert—and his score rolled onwards and upwards. The habitués were hypnotised by the ratcheting numbers, and James knew precisely when he'd made the day's hi-score and he drawled it deep, in time with the black detective:

'Atlantic City. Feel The Force!'

Then, with the silver ball still pinging and rebounding, and the score climbing still higher, his routine was to become Stevie Wonder. He closed his eyes and clamped on a delirious smile and rocked his head wildly from side to side, and he sang:

'Happy Birthday... Happy Birthday to ya... Happy Biiiiirthday...'

And the arcade rumbled with the usual low laughter, and as James sang the blind star's signature tune and rocked his head on his huge shoulders, beaming blindly to the ceiling, he let the flippers miss the first of the silver balls, and he released the second and let that drop too, and then the third, and all the while he maintained the delirium of a blind ecstatic. Then he returned to the pool table, took up his cue, and said:

'Right so. Where am I here?'

'You're on the reds, Jamesie.'

Beyond the open doors of the arcade, Broad Street revelled in the unexpected languor of evening heat. Broad Street didn't know itself. The evening was moving to its close, quicker now as the summer aged, but there was heat in it still. There was scant traffic. The hills above the town darkened with the shadows of approaching night. Moloney sat in his kiosk, on the forecourt of the garage, by the pumps, and he cursed the championship reports in the weekly paper. The lying bastards hadn't seen the same match he'd seen. They were making excuses for the county side. He hadn't seen a county side as weak in years. There were fellas with weight on them. It was a disgrace. There were fellas on the county side who'd spent

the winter drinking. Where, Moloney asked the walls of his kiosk, oh where was the dedication? There were no answers, and certainly none outside on Broad Street.

James chalked his cue. He performed this action with priestly nuance, a sense of ritual. He allowed a particular amount of chalk onto the tip's head, blew off the excess dust, and then, with an air of dainty finesse, surprising in a young man the width of a van, he chalked the curved sides of the tip too. A small fat pink tongue emerged from between his lips as he performed the task. It was a sign of concentration, for it was a knacky business to get it right. He wanted no moisture whatsoever in the vicinity of the cue's tip. Not on a night so clammy as this, when the arcade was fuggy with the sweat and vapours of teenagers in summer.

'So listen, Carmody,' he said. 'Are you looking at me with a straight face on you and telling me she's not ridin'?'

'All I'm saying is I don't think our friend has been next nor near. Our friend hasn't been within a million miles.'

James closed his eyes, briefly, and nodded his head, slowly. This was sombre acknowledgement of information received. His manner, as he leaned in over the pool table, was proper and studious. The great mass of his belly he arranged carefully, and he peeked beneath his chin to ensure that it was not interfering with play and thus causing a foul—if it was, he'd be the first to call it—and he formed a careful bridge for the cue between thumb and forefinger of the left hand, and he sized up a long red for the bottom left corner.

'I'm not saying for a minute she'd be an auld slut,' he said. 'I'm not saying that at all. All I'm saying is she'd be gamey. All I'm sayin' is if you could get her going at all then she'd really go for you. Do you know what I mean, Carm? She'd be like...'

His gaze drifted out to Broad Street, as he sought the precise image.

'She'd be like a little motorbike.'

The low murmur of laughter rippled again around the table's

edges. Another kid was having a go at Atlantic City, there was an amount of interest in Defender, somewhat less in Donkey Kong, but there was no contesting the focus of attention. Outside, at a little past nine, the evening had gone into tawn, was in its dream-time, with the sky velvet, with the air still warm, with the shadows taking on the precise tone of the sky's glow. As he prepared to let the cue slide, James tapped the faded baize three times with the middle finger of his bridge hand, a sportsman's tic, and with his right arm working from the elbow as a smooth piston, he made the shot. He sent the white down the table onto the red and its kiss sent the red slowly for the bottom left, and the left-hand side he had applied to the cue ball, an indescribable delicacy, caused it to drag and spin back towards the centre of the table, where it would be ideally in place for the next red he had in mind. The object red still rolled, slowly, and then it dropped into the bottom left pocket, and the cue ball's positioning was perfect, and his opponent, Carmody, tapped the butt of his cue three times on the concrete floor in stony-faced regard. And the usual hymn, the usual evensong, was sung:

'Shot, James.'

'Shot, Jamesie.'

'Shot.'

'Shot, boy.'

The hymn was ignored, was disdained. He leaned for a tap-in red to the middle right, its ease a result of his positional play, and he made it without fuss. A lesser player would be inclined to ram in the easier pots with showy force and venom, but always James played the game quietly, he would roll his reds gently home rather than slam them, he would apply no more force than was needed, and for this reason it was exquisite to watch him play, and the arcade was hushed in the presence of his talent.

Just then, the air changed: a small troop of girls arrived in, a battalion of three. They had vinegar in them and they roved their dangerous eyes around the habitués and they were a carnival of

cheap perfume on young skin and whatever summer was they'd trapped its essence and fizzed with it. The habitués developed deeper slouches, and their heads went shyly down, and they moved back into the shadows if they could, but their eyes were uncontrollable and darted up insanely for an eyeful of suntanned girl and they couldn't but wince from the delirious pain of it. All the boys became awkward like this, and thick-tongued, all except James. He laid the cue across the table, rubbed his meaty hands together, straightened his shoulders, closed his eyes, shook his head in wonderment and he said:

'Ladies? I'll say one thing now for nothing. I've seen ye lookin' well in yere time but never as well as ye're lookin' tonight.'

It was the girls' turn to be shy. His hungry gaze asked severe questions of their confidence and inside they seethed at being reduced to these giggles, this nudging. They went and staked out the ground around the wall-mounted jukebox, it was their acknowledged terrain, and they hummed and hawed over the selections and James strode across the floor, searched for another coin in the pocket of his big jeans as he moved, and with a polite gesture of the hand moved the girls back a little from the jukebox and put the coin in the slot and selected the song that was currently at the top of the charts. He took the cue from the table to use as a microphone and he launched powerfully into song as 'Baby Jane' by Rod Stewart struck up on the tinny speakers, and he planted his feet wide on the floor, rock star fashion, and he had all the required shimmies of hip and flicks of hair, and laughter took hold of the arcade, again, and everybody was relaxed and easy again.

A farm truck pulled up on the forecourt outside, and dispensed a farmer, and Moloney shrugged out of his kiosk and nodded curtly, and received a curt nod in payment, and Moloney crossed his arms and leaned back against the pumps.

'That was some messin' below in Clancy Park on Sunday,' said Moloney.

'Shocking,' said the farmer.

'There're fellas should be shot,' said Moloney.

'Don't be talking to me,' agreed the farmer.

'You could put stones in jerseys and you'd get more out of them.'

'You nearly could.'

'But listen to me, did you have any joy with them creatures above?'

The farmer looked to the velvet sky, and he considered the vagaries of life, chance, and sheep management.

'There's no getting them down off that blasted hill,' he said. 'I'm going to have to come up with a new tactic.'

And Broad Street was on fire. The last of the evening gave out in a show of dying golds and reds. The street lamps came on. The blue flicker of television screens could be seen behind terrace windows. The summer night announced itself, with its own starlit energies. It brought temptation, yearning and ache, because these are the summer things.

James slotted a straight red into the top left pocket, and he applied top spin to the cue ball so that it rolled onto the top cushion and allowed him to line up the last of the reds. This would be tricky, because great precision was required when the cushions came into play, and he lit a cigarette to consider it. Carmody was his opponent, again, and he was all but beaten anyway, Carmody was beaten in the mind even before they began to play, but all the same James liked to win stylishly and well, he liked to make little gasps escape the habitués when he achieved the unlikely shots. He paused now to draw attention to the table before he attempted the difficult red.

'You're putting it up to me tonight, Carm,' he said. 'I don't know what's after getting into you but you've moved on to a new level of expertise altogether. Are you practicing on the sly?'

The habitués quietened, and moved in closer, because they could sense a put-down in the making. James had gone into the familiar pose, with the head held at a slight incline, and he regarded

Carmody down his nose, and there was a thin set to the mouth, and he expelled air from the nostrils with a powerful snort, and he said:

‘You’re practicing on the sly in the barn, aren’t you? You’re like...’

He put the cue down and danced a two-step.

‘You’re like an auld farmer hitting off to a matchmaking festival. He’s had the first bath of the year. He has the hair slicked back with strong tea. He’s dragged a comb through his teeth...’

The titters and giggles built nervously, as the habituées waited to see where James would take it.

‘...and he’s set the hens on automatic. He’s worried about the dancing, of course he is, the man has titanium hips, so he’s clearin’ back the floor of the barn, of an evening, when the working day is done, and he’s trying out a shtep.’

And he did a high-kick step in the air, and the laughter rumbled, and built.

‘And he’s saying what I need for myself now is... a nice good little nurse. Do you know the way? A nice little nurse from an ear, nose and throat ward. He’s always maintained a bit of a grá for nurses, because they’d be kind to you, wouldn’t they, of a cold winter’s night, with the big thighs wrapped around your throat?’

The girls gasped and tssked. The habituées shook their heads, embarrassed with mirth. They never knew where to look when James roamed abroad on a course.

‘It’s the way I see it, Carm. You’re practicing on the sly in the barn, like the auld farmer, by the light of a lonesome moooo-ooooon!’

And as he crooned the word, cowboy-style, he leaned in to attend to his shot: full attention had now been secured for the pool table. He made his bridge, tapped the baize three times with his middle finger, rolled the white along the cushion, it kissed the red, and gave it momentum to move at a slow even pace, and the red yawned for

a moment on the lip of the pocket, as though he hadn't given it enough, but of course he had, and it dropped.

'Shot, James!'

'Shot, Jamesie.'

'Shot boy.'

'You're a fucking lunatic, James,' said Carmody, and tapped the butt of his cue three times on the concrete floor.

'Sure I know that.'

Moloney put the petrol takings into a tin box, turned off the transistor and locked up the kiosk. He crossed the forecourt, carrying the tin box reverently, and he cursed at the weather. Ten o'clock at night and you were walking around the place in soup. He put his head around the door of the arcade.

'Ye've an hour till I close it up.'

'Not a bother,' said James.

'And keep it down a bit, for Jesus' sake.'

'Absolutely,' said James.

'An hour,' said Moloney. 'D'ye hear me?'

James laid the cue on the table, goose-stepped across the floor, threw his right arm into salute and cried out:

'Selbstverständlich, mein Kommandant!'

'And you watch yourself!'

Moloney tried and failed to keep the smile from his face, and he left them to it. This was the signal that the night was truly rolling, and for the more dangerous talk to begin. The younger of the habitués, earlier indulged, would now be pushed to the peripheries. The older ones would draw up schemes of devilment for the small hours. The girls became nervous.

'Atlantic City. Feel The Force!'

'Ah for the love and honour of God,' said James, who had been lining up the black to continue his evening-long winning streak. He crossed the floor to the pinball, considered the new hi-score, patted

his young usurper on the head and said:

‘Knacky. Knacky alright. As a matter of fact, you’ve put it beyond my reach. Let it be known that from this moment forward, the young fella here is the king of the pinball. Give the boy a banana.’

Walking back to the pool table, James suddenly stopped, gasped, and collapsed onto his knees. He clutched at his chest. His face was frozen in a terrible grin, and it became a grimace, and he gasped out the last words...

‘I... leave... every... thing... to... to... to Jamesie!’

The arcade throbbed with laughter. This was one of the most famed routines. It was James’s impression of the heart attack that had killed his father on the kitchen floor.

Though the girls had become shyer, shyness can fold in on itself and be transformed on a summer night: when there is possibility in the air, shyness can say what the hell and trade itself for a brazenness. They fed coins to the jukebox and summoned a couple of slow numbers.

James saw to the black, and allowed his next opponent to step forward and rack for a new game, and he moved his great rolling flesh to the jukebox, and he said:

‘Ladies? Ye’ll have me red in the face now for the want of it. Do ye hear what I’m saying? Is there no such as thing as a bit of mercy? Ye know full well what I’m like when I hear that one. I hear Bonnie Tyler and I go to pieces.’

The younger of the habituées began to drift off, in ones and twos, and those who left early would be furious the next morning, when they learned that they’d missed the great drama of the night. A little before eleven, the squad car rolled into the forecourt of Moloney’s, and Garda Ryan got out, with a face on him like turned milk. He stood on the forecourt and regarded the arcade, and everybody crowded to the door, and he addressed them.

‘There was a windscreen of a car put in below in the square last night,’ he said. ‘Is that news for ye?’

James moved to the front of the habitués, crossed his arms sombrely, and stroked his chin with his forefinger.

‘At what time precisely, Garda Ryan,’ he said, ‘was the mechanically propelled vehicle interfered with?’

‘Watch yourself.’

‘Have you no note made of it, guard?’

‘I won’t warn you again. Believe me! I don’t care who your family is. There was a windscreen put in. That’s a hundred pound damage. There’s been other incidents. There’s been nothing but trouble since this place was let open late. I’m marking yere cards for ye now, all of ye. I’ve eyes in my head and they are wide open. I’m not going to let this messing go on a night longer. Not a single night, d’ye hear it? I’m watching ye.’

Garda Ryan, in shirt sleeves, stepped back into the squad car, and with a flinty gaze he looked over the small group from his rolled-down window, and the more nervous of the habitués stepped back into the gloom, but it could not be left at this, and it wouldn’t be, and one of them stepped out onto the forecourt, and everybody held their breath, because it was James. He planted his feet wide, gunslinger style, and mimicked a pair of pistols with his fingers and thumbs, and he drew and aimed at the guard, and he said:

‘Atlantic City. Feel The Force!’

There were still tears and peals of laughter when Moloney came back to lock up, and Moloney had a few drinks on him, and he was convinced that he himself was the cause of the merriment, and he became narky.

‘Feck off home out of it!’ he cried. ‘I’m seriously thinking of closing this place altogether! I’m seriously thinking of calling a halt to the whole bastarin’ operation!’

And they set off about the town. The last of the younger ones straggled home with regret, because July nights like this don’t come around too often. The older ones caused what trouble they could, even though in a small town it was hard to work out constant

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variations on trouble, but they tried anyway. The summer night was warm and sweet about them, and repeated assaults were made upon the reputations of the girls. The summer would move on, and fade, there is always the terrible momentum of the year's turning. Exam results would come in. The older of the habituées would begin to make their moves. For one that would move to the city, another would stay in the town, some would take up the older trades, others would try out new paths, and one on a low September evening would swim out too far and drown, and it would be James. Laments and regrets were no use—these were just the quotas and insistences of Broad Street.

To The Hills

The way it is in this country, he said, someone sees you out walking a hill and you're a fucking eejit. Just because you're not in the pub or in front of the television watching crap. I will tell you one thing, Teresa, I would rather be walking the hills than listening to some of the fuckers around this place.

Teresa nodded, sighed, mewed.

It was a good old hike today, he said. You kept up well, the two of you. You found the North Faces did the job? Yes, well, what did I tell you? The North Face is an excellent boot. A good boot is something it's worth your while you spend a few quid on. There is no point coddling yourself with cheap boots, Teresa. The Goretex is an outstanding material, we know that, anybody can tell you that. Reliable, I wouldn't be caught dead with anything else. You found the dried fruit a help? Good. It beats a Mars Bar, you know? With the dried fruit and the nuts, you see, it's a slow release of energy that you get, just what you need at the tail end of a grade five.

He had furious eyebrows perched up top of a dismal nose. He wore a helmet of sandy, wiry hair. He was the guts of six foot.

Well, Teresa, he said, this is Wicklow, this is March, what were you expecting exactly? This isn't the Canaries we're talking about. Anyway, you don't feel it with the fleece on you. From the way you were going on, the two of you, I thought you were well used to the

hills. Hah? This is what I was led to believe, Teresa.

They had met at the hillwalking club in Dublin that winter. The club put leaflets in outdoorsy shops and sometimes a small ad in the paper. It met Tuesdays, year-round, at a well-lit suburban lounge bar: all welcome. It was mostly country people that showed up, and most of them were past the first flush. There would be two hours of shy talk over stretched drinks. Truth be told, Teresa and her friend, Marie, didn't have that much of an interest in hills but they had an interest in healthy men and Brian seemed steady, he had a good job in the labs on the campus, he didn't drink much, he was tall and slim. He wouldn't have figured himself for a catch but there you go.

I suppose you could say that I'm not great with people, Teresa, he said. I'll be straight with you now, women have always been difficult for me. It's a long time since I've been in a relationship of any kind. Which is a word I hate, by the way. The people at work we're having a drink or at lunchtime, what have you, it's my relationship this, my relationship that, blah blah blah. Another one is partner. Jesus! I hate that word. My partner this, my partner that, you can bring your partner, do you have a partner. Fuck off. Do you know what I'm saying to you? Fuck off! Partner, I don't know, it makes it sound like a badminton team.

They were naked together in bed, having not had sex.

I'll be perfectly straight with you, Teresa, why shouldn't I be? I haven't been with a woman for fourteen years. Drought isn't the word, Teresa. You'll be getting worried now, of course. You'll be thinking, what's with your man? But no, don't, listen, please. This is an absolutely amazing thing for me. It's like I don't know what's going on. Just to be lying here with you is unbelievable to me.

The plan had been: park in Wicklow town, walk the grade five to Tobar Pass, a bite to eat, a few drinks, stay the night at a B&B, walk back the next morning. They had booked three rooms. This had been complicated. Brian, obviously, was going to have a room to himself,

but what were the girls going to do? If they shared a room, it meant they were marking each other for the night and what if something happened? They booked a room each. We might as well get a room each, they said, it's cheap. This was an unspoken declaration of combat. Two channels had thus opened up for Brian, though he was not at all sure that this was the case.

The B&B was run by a tiny woman who conversed in the small hours of the night—every night—with an aunt dead twenty years. In the afternoon, when they got in, she put on her glasses and with a show of great ritual opened her bookings ledger. The bookings ledger gave her a tingling pleasure. It made her feel giddy and playful. When she opened that ledger she was like a cat with a ball of twine. She asked Marie and Teresa were they sure they didn't want to share a room, she had a fine double out back, it would be cheaper. The girls glared at her, they said no, thank you, no, we'll take the two. Brian flushed.

More money than sense! he said.

Crazy, said the tiny woman.

They went to their rooms, and each was glad of a short reprieve from company. These were single people, in their forties, each of them had lived alone for many years, and such a long morning of company was a trial. The rooms were pretty much identical. Each had a narrow bed with a lumpy mattress. Each had a wardrobe, a dresser, a tumbler, a cup and saucer, a kettle and teabags, sachets of Bewley's coffee that had lain there since the previous millennium. Each room had an en-suite bathroom that had been haphazardly plastered by the tiny woman's middle-aged nephew, a man who had savage dependency on drink, an addiction to cough bottles and a sullen, thyroidal glare. Marie's view was of a galvanised tin roof on a shed at the back of the house. She sat on the bed and stared at the green wallpaper. The wallpaper showed a jungle scene. It was green for calm. She could hear the shower running in Teresa's room next door.

Watch that bitch like a hawk, she said to herself.

If you were to ask me what it all goes back to, Teresa, said Brian, if you were to put me on the couch and say, well now, where does it all go back to? Tell me about your childhood, all that crap? Okay, fine, it's obviously all rooted down there.

Is that right? said Teresa

My father died suddenly, he said, when I was eight years of age. Yeah, I know, boo-hoo. But the way of it was the worst thing. It was shockingly sudden. A brain haemorrhage. We were on our holidays. We were at the beach! Yeah. One minute he's lying there in his togs, the next he's lying there dead. My brother and myself were playing in the dunes. Were you ever in Lahinch, Teresa? Unbelievable dunes and there we are, rolling around in the sand, pretending to be Buck Rogers on the moon, or what have you, and after a while we said we'll go back to Mam and Dad for the coke and crisps, you know, and when we go back, she's kneeling in the sand, bawling. She's going, John! Oh John! John! And my father is lying there on the towel with blood all over his neck. An amount of blood you would not believe.

Did you know that, he said, did you know, Teresa, that blood actually comes out the ears?

Go 'way? said Teresa.

Actually my most vivid memory isn't the beach but going back to Sligo the next day. My brother and myself, we were in shock I suppose but innocent—all we could talk about when they were putting him in the hearse in Lahinch is how long is a hearse going to take to get to Sligo? We worked it out. If a hearse goes five miles an hour and Sligo is a hundred miles away, that's twenty hours! It never dawned on us that the hearse would go at a normal speed until we got him home. We thought it was funeral pace all the way up through Clare and Galway. And this is the bit I remember vividly, isn't that strange? We're in the car, behind the hearse, with my mother up to the gills on tablets, she's cruising, and my uncle is

driving and your man is driving the hearse in front of us through Clare and he must be doing seventy. And all I can remember is the coffin bouncing around in the back of the hearse and thinking, ah Jesus, that can't be right, like.

A few days later, myself and the brother are kicking a ball again, Teresa, we're children, we're Buck Rogers, and you get on with being a child, you do. But are you going to come out of it right?

After the morning's long walk, after they reached Tobar Pass, they went to a pub for lunch. Soup, toasties, cups of coffee. The pub was rich on hillwalkers and had lately been refitted. A brand new coffee machine gurgled like an excited aunt. The lunchtime rush was just about done, and the slow hours of the afternoon yawned and presented themselves with a certain belligerence. Those who go mad go mad first in the afternoons. There was the usual fall-out of daytime drinkers, glassy-eyed, with their hearty talk and guilty-seeming cheer. A silence had fallen in on the three hillwalkers, it had a knuckly and mannish grip.

Well, said Brian at last, I don't know about yourselves but I'm going to go out there and get the last of that daylight into me.

Don't tell me you're walking again? said Marie, who was out of puff still from the morning's exertion. She was a pretty but dour woman, with eyes full of dread and rain.

Why wouldn't I? he said. Aren't we dead long enough?

Oh Jesus, said Marie, the legs are hanging off me. Are ye watching the calves? I have a pair of calves on me like an Olympic sprinter.

Ah now!

They're having a great day in the graveyard! said Teresa.

Exactly so, said Brian. You might as well take it while it's going. We can just circle back and around as far as Drumeenaghadra, then back down into the village. Come on, Marie, for God's sake! It'll do you good.

Oh look, I don't know, she said. I might go back and rest up for a bit first. I don't know. Ye're putting me to shame!

Marie, come on! said Brian.

We'll see you later on so, said Teresa.

Okay, so not only did the two of them go and walk for another three hours, but then they spent another hour in the pub, drinking Smithwicks, and Marie sat in her room looking at the jungle wallpaper. She went to pee in the en-suite and as she sat there a cloud of plaster dreamily descended and settled on her head. It was eight o'clock—eight!—when they arrived back to the B&B. She tried to make light of it, she honestly tried.

I thought the two of ye were dead in a bog someplace! I thought we were going to have to get the mountain rescue out.

Oh stop, said Brian, flushed.

It was hard to make light of it. There was something not far from hatred in her eyes. The three of them went for steaks in the restaurant at the back of the pub. Marie was thinking, am I after letting myself get beat very easily here? Teresa was thinking, she's much prettier than I am, she always has been, am I only fooling myself? Brian was thinking, all they go on about in the women's magazines these days is sexual performance.

I'd nearly take the whole cow onto the plate, said Brian.

I wouldn't put it past you, said Marie, who had looked after half a bottle of decent Rioja in seven minutes flat.

It's great to see an appetite, said Teresa.

Very quiet and smirky in herself, thought Marie. What went on on that walk?

What had gone on on the walk was that Brian had talked sense to himself. Marie, he decided, was just too good-looking for him: he wouldn't have a hope in hell. Teresa, on the other hand, was at the back of the line when chins were being handed out and she had the eyes of a crow. Surely this might play to his advantage? Brian was versed in the cruel wiles of natural selection, he knew that the better-looking animal was the obvious choice, but natural selection is quick ignored when you've passed forty and you're masturbating

into a sock the grey mornings in a one-bedroom apartment, lounge-diner-cum-kitchen.

And so it was that Brian and Teresa managed a semblance of flirtatiousness on the way back down to the village.

God, Brian, we're after getting some bit of fresh air into us today, said Teresa.

You'd nearly be driven wild with it, said Brian.

This, by his normal standard, by the normal old go of him, was richly provocative stuff. And suddenly she seemed to be walking very close. Her arm was touching off of his, and just the slight rubbery slap of Goretex on Goretex was enough to make him excited. Is that all it takes, he thought, the one ruby comment?

Some steak, said Brian.

It's great, said Teresa, it's done just right.

You can't top well-hung meat, said Marie, who was making shapes on her plate with fried onions. Waitress! Another bottle of that please.

Partying tonight, Mar! said Teresa.

Why the fuck not? said Marie. Has anyone change for the fag machine?

I didn't know you smoked, Marie, said Brian.

Many hidden talents, she said.

He sneaked a glance at Teresa then, who made a certain face which said: kid gloves here, pet, we'll leave her down easy. Brian was already becoming literate in Teresa's crow-like glances.

After the steaks, there was another painful hour in the pub. It was slow beer for Teresa and Brian, it was fast vodka for Marie. Teresa and Brian prepped each other carefully for the long opulent night that lay ahead.

Back at the St Ignatius of Loyola B&B, they said goodnight so, see you in the morning, bright and early! Brian went left for number nine, Marie and Teresa went right for six and seven.

Drink a glass of water when you go in, Mar, said Teresa.

THERE ARE LITTLE KINGDOMS

Fuck off and rot, said Marie.

Half an hour later, Marie heard Teresa leave her room. She did not hear her come back again. She sat there with the light on, she felt headachey. She stood up on the bed and took the battery out of the smoke detector and lay down again and smoked fags.

First bus! She said it aloud.

She looked at the jungle scene on the wallpaper. Probably someplace like Mozambique, she thought. A nonsense jingle from an advert went through her head. Um Bongo. Um Bongo. They drink it in the Congo.

You don't mind if we wait a little while, do you? he said. Thanks, love. It's just that all this is very sudden for me, you know? But you ah... you can tell I'm pleased to be here with you anyway, can't you? There's no denying that!

There isn't, said Teresa, coyly.

Teresa decided that she was having a terrific time. This intimacy, she felt, was powerful stuff. Yes, she was greatly enjoying the whole experience but she would enjoy it all the more when she was at home on her couch, alone except for the cat, with the lights dimmed and a glass full to the brim and the late programme on Lyric playing low on the radio. Then she would savour it all truly.

In the kitchen, there was the sound of a kettle coming to the boil, of tea being made, of a pair of slippers feet crossing the polished lino.

I'm thinking of painting the walls blue, Minnie, said the tiny woman. What would you think, Minnie? A blue?

Listen, Teresa, said Brian. I'm totally prepared to give this another go. I have no problem whatsoever getting back up on the horse. Look it, will you come here to me? Oh this is magic.