

## DIAMONDS

I left the city with my connections scorched and my prospects blown, looking only for somewhere to batten down for the winter to come. I left on a bright morning in August, dozing fitfully as the train drifted through the purgatorial horizontals of the midlands, heading west. The midland skies were huge, drenched in pearlescent light and stacked with enormous chrome confections of cloud, their wrinkled undersides greyly streaked and mottled, brimming with whatever rain is before it becomes rain. Each time I came to and checked the carriage window the same cow seemed to be eyeing me from the same sodden, tobacco-brown field. Or each cow bore the same expression; the huge jaws mechanically working a wad of cud back and forth, the dark eyes registering me with the same steady, sullen incuriosity.

I was not well. I was drinking, too much and too often, and had resolved to stop. In the city I had drunk away my job, money, a raft of friendships, one woman, and then another. My cat, a princely tortoiseshell tom named Ruckles, succumbed to a heart attack after eating a phial of damp cocaine he'd unearthed at the bottom of my closet while I was out on another all-night jag. Ruckles' passing got me to thinking, in a vague and wistful way, of dying by my own hand. I began to consider my hands in the starlight of bar-rooms—the brittle wrists and yellowed skin, the nicks and weals and livid pink burn marks of unknown origin—and realised I was already

way along on that project. It was go home or die, and home was an oblivion that was at least reversible.

I was thirty-three and had no extant family in the town. My parents were in the cemetery, my only sibling, an elder sister, moved to the States years back, and those locals who were once my friends were now grown strangers. It was my old secondary school principal that saved me. The principal was of a type, the Sentimental Authoritarian, who have always proven susceptible to my charms. Recalling my teenage athletic prowess—I had been the star of the football team, driving Saint Carmichael's boys to three successive provincial finals and winning two—he found me a sinecure as groundskeeper and part-time gym teacher. He had seen a talent burgeon under his institution's aegis, and did not want to think it truly snuffed out. I admitted I had come into this low ebb entirely of my own accord, but he assured me in time I could make things right.

I was billeted in a small cottage on the school grounds, and granted a modest stipend in exchange for executing my duties and staying sober. As groundskeeper I was tasked with keeping hale the clutches of flora decorating the institutional hillocks, ensuring the dumpsters were emptied on time, unlocking the gates in the mornings and keeping watch as the train of kids moiled in. I cut my hair neat and dressed in long sleeves, to conceal the tattoos that wound like black foliage down my arms. I carried a large, old-fashioned ring of keys and jingled them as I patrolled my appointed territories, advertising my approach to any boys risking a smoke in the bushes. In the school's evening emptiness, seeking some kind of cosmic reparation for Ruckles, I fed the stray cats that foraged about the skips, and in turn they brought me blood tributes, depositing on my cottage doorstep the tiny mauled carcasses of baby birds.

I taught gym a dozen hours a week. Gym was easy; the boys liked the class because it was only technically a class. I refereed

games of indoor soccer and volleyball from a sideline deck chair and had only to blast the whistle if things became excessively robust. The boys not sportily inclined I designated 'stewards' and left to their own devices at the back of the hall, reading comics or catching up on homework, so long as one of them threw the ball back when it went out of play. I unrolled long, hortatory riffs at the fat kids as they heroically inched up the climbing ropes, and I came almost to cherish the swampy funk of perspiration the boys shed as they disported.

The Sentimental Authoritarian put me in touch with the local AA, a small and hardy group of sick-of-their-own-shit degenerates that met once a week in the town's Catholic church hall. Beneath fluorescent lights we recited the tales of our interminable fucking up. I listened and I talked and I listened and I talked, and I kept going back.

Winter came with a vengeance, as they say. The season felt like that, like a long, hard reprisal, exactly meted. Snow whipped down in record quantities. The temperatures bottomed out, and the fallen snow stayed on the ground even as more fell. At night, the town river iced over in sections that came creakingly apart at dawn and floated downstream in jagged, table-sized panes. Cars fretted along at fifteen miles an hour on the high street and helplessly butted grilles. Now and then a lone pensioner was found frozen to death in their refrigerated council flat. I salted the lanes and macadam paths of the school, but every day a kid fell and pranged a knee or sprained a wrist. The stray cats died off and when the roads became impassable, the rubbish sat uncollected in frozen piles in the dumpsters, but no matter what I kept going to AA.

She showed up the first Sunday evening in December.

Mellick, the elder of our group, was up top, talking. The rest of us faced him, pitched and slumped in informal rows on fold-away chairs. The hall was large and bare. Along one wall was arranged a

table bearing canisters of coffee, a bag of disposable plastic cups and a plate of inedibly stiff ham triangle sandwiches. Three ancient radiators clanked and burred along the wall. Overhead, the ceiling lights buzzed, low and insinuating as a defect of the inner ear.

Mellick was seventy. He had drunk for fifty years and been clean, now, five. He was short three fingers and looked like what he was, a survivor. Like many survivors he held himself up as his own worst example. He was telling us again about the fingers. As he talked, he held his maimed right hand in his undamaged left. Where index, ring and middle finger should be, there were only the abrupt drumlins of his knuckles, the scar tissue whited over. I was up in the first row, looking right into Mellick's elongated, pitted face. I could see the battered horseshoe of his bottom row teeth, pocked with black metal fillings and rufous with rot.

She was sitting to my left. She was pale, wrung-eyed, copying unconsciously or not Mellick's arrangement of hands; one held in the other, fingers curled round showing bitten nails coloured with chipped blue nail polish. She was hunched over in her chair—head low, shoulders tucked in and braced—as if awaiting a blow to the nape. She was breathing through her mouth, eyes fixed to Mellick as he unpacked his old story.

Mellick was forty-one when he lost the fingers, he said. He was in a shed on his farm, shearing planks of timber while drunk, drunk and angry, why he can't remember, of course. He said he was hurling the lengths of wood into the spinning bandsaw, splinters going everywhere, into his hair and mouth and eyes, the blowbacking sawdust rendering him practically blind, when hand met saw.

It was over in an instant, Mellick said. Before he knew what had happened he was staring at the pumping red mess of his hand. Mellick said he had no idea how many fingers were gone; the spewing blood and the luminosity of the pain made it impossible to get a tally straight in his head. The pain, he said, was like a

presence, a separate body or entity, standing there in the shed with him. He was scared, staggering around, looking for however many fingers he could find and getting rapidly woozy, knowing this wasn't a good sign, dazedly combing the straw and shaving-matted floor and all the time convinced he was going to bleed to death. And he did pass out, but he did not die, and by the time anyone knew what had happened the family cat (oh, Ruckles!) had already found the three severed fingers, eaten one until it was just a spur of bone with a nail attached by a thread of gristle, and stolen off with the other two.

'And did I learn anything from this experience?' Mellick asked.

Nobody said anything. I finicked with the cuffs of my shirt, crooked my head and brought the woman into my peripheral field. She was my age, maybe, early thirties, maybe younger, depending on the degree of damage she'd inflicted upon herself.

'I was back on it the second I was out of the hospital,' Mellick answered. 'It didn't so much as dent my appetite. Not for years, not for years, not for years.'

He cracked a mirthless smile. I did too. For this was what we were here for, the hard-scrabble tutelage of those come out the other side of their damage.

The meeting over, a few of the Anons hovered by the coffee table, husking themselves into their jackets. There was motiveless chatter about the weather. After an hour of intensive gutspilling, it was nice to impersonate normal people.

'Excuse me,' she said to me.

Her hair was a wan, unconvincing brown; one prompt spook away from turning completely grey. She had a round face, pale eyes and a faded scar on her nose, a blanched diagonal seam, neat, across the bridge, like a tiny rope burn. She was not good looking, but there was a watery indefiniteness to her features, a pliancy, that just then appealed.

'You're Carmichael's gym teacher, aren't you?'

I winced but admitted I was.

'Siobhán Maher. My boy is in your class. Anthony. He's a second year.'

I didn't say anything and she added, redundantly, 'I'm his mother.'

'Right.'

'I didn't know—I mean I don't know if you're allowed say you know each other here?' she said.

'It's supposed to be anonymous.'

'That's not really practical around this ways, is it though?'

'I guess not.'

'This is my first time,' she said.

We stepped outside, into the bright white furnace of cold. I cupped my hands and blew. The hall was at the northern end of the church grounds. The church steeple, lit from below, loomed above a row of skinny elms. The snow had frozen into sparkling crusts upon the roofs and bonnets of our parked cars.

'Anthony's not the sportiest, I imagine?' she said, trailing me as I crunched my way to my car.

I thumbed the serrations of my car key's teeth and tried to picture Anthony Maher, summoning up a quiet, pale, heavysset boy who did not stand out in any way. The others called him Anto, but even that generic diminutive—suggesting a lad possessed of a rudimentary streak of devilment or impishness or participatory vim—did not suit the ponderous, frumpy boy I had to verbally goad into an amble in the rare games of five-a-side he consented to partake in.

'He holds his own,' I lied.

I opened the driver door. A lock of snow crumbled down and shattered on the seat. The car was a rickety second-hand number the Sentimental Authoritarian had sourced for me. Its previous owner was a priest and former Carmichael's faculty member, and

the interior retained a smell I could only describe as *holy*, an aroma at once cloying and lightly sulphurous, redolent of thurified smoke or incense. It was a smell I could not eradicate no matter how much I scrubbed at the upholstery with solvents and sprays. Months later and it still made me gag.

When I looked up she was still there, standing by the tail lights.

'Are you okay?'

'It's a cold one, isn't it?' she said, like that was an answer.

'You could get in.'

She slid into the passenger seat, into the fretwork of shadows thrown by the limbs of the elms.

'I just live in Farrow Hill estate. If it's on your way.'

'It is alright.'

I turned on the engine and let the car tremble warmingly in place, then nosed us out onto the main road. I drove in second, mindful for black ice limning the macadam. There were long rumpled drifts of frozen snow choking the ditches, their ridges sooted with exhaust. Between us there was no talk for a little while, and there still wasn't when she dropped her right hand on my leg and began kneading my thigh, pressing slow and hard, wincing and unwincing her fingers.

'How long have you been going?' she said.

'Where? To the meetings? Five months, give or take.'

'And you've been good all that time?'

'Not all that time,' I admitted.

'Was it just drink?' she said.

'Mainly,' I said. 'There was everything at some point.'

'And you were away before?'

'In the city.'

'And what did you do there?'

'This and that.'

'What kind of this and that?'

'Bars. Clerking. The sites. Played in a band. Barwork was the

best. Steady pay, all the drink you could drink on the sly. You could go a long time lying to yourself in there.'

'And now?'

'Now, I do what you said. I teach gym.'

'It's better,' she said.

'That it is,' I said.

We moved down Main Street, past the lights of the Turkish takeaway, the flayed loaves of chicken and pork revolving on their spits in the window. We moved past one, two, three pubs in a row, smokers outside, some huddled, some affecting open-chested postures in defiance of the scouring sub-zero cold. I saw the drink in their faces, in the fuggy glower of their blood-bright expressions.

She directed me on to the quay road and we followed the river, a slash of brightness against the murk of the surrounding land. The water was freezing over again, growing scales.

'Carmichael's up ahead,' she announced.

'Uh huh,' I said, and wondered if she knew I lived there.

On the riverside footpath, coming towards us, were two short figures. The boy on the inside had a scarf wound over the bottom half of his face, his hands in his jacket pockets, moving purposefully against the cold. The boy on the outside was not in so good a shape, tromping along with a pronounced crabwise stagger, listing to his left for three or four steps then lurchingly correcting. I looked again at the second boy and realised that the stocky, dough-faced features were those of Anto Maher. He was hammered, his face and head bared to the elements, his jacket unzipped and his trousers soaking wet from the knees down.

'Oh Christ,' she said. Her hand jumped from my thigh.

'There's your guy,' I confirmed.

'Him and that other eejit, Farrell,' she said, 'partners in crime.'

There was a section of waste lot, not far from the school grounds,



some of the boys used for knacker drinking. I figured they were coming from there.

'You want me to stop?' I asked.

'No, no,' she said. 'This is what boys do, right? He tells me he's staying over at Farrell's house, watching DVDs and playing video games, and no doubt Farrell gives his mother the same shit.'

In the dark, and given Anto's condition, there was little chance that either boy would recognise me or my car or my passenger, but I stared straight ahead as we passed them.

'Take care of yourself, you dope,' she said in a low voice.

'Who's he more like?' I said. 'You, or his father?'

'Both,' she said. 'Luck will knock you only so far from the tree.'

'And where's the father now?' I asked.

'Oh,' she sighed. 'He's a thousand miles from here.' She laughed as she said this. 'No. Literally. He works in a mine in Africa, sorry, Siberia now, as big as any on earth.'

She looked across at me, still grinning.

'It's a huge hole in the ground that goes down almost a straight mile. You could pick up and drop this entire town into it in one piece. He comes back twice a year.'

'How's that suiting you?' I said.

'He's a good man for the couple of weeks he's around,' she said. 'He's a good man for the small doses. But remind me to show you a picture of the mine. It is something.'

'What are they after?'

'Diamonds,' she said.

'A mile down,' I said. 'It must get hot.'

'Left here... and a right.'

We slid into an estate, crested a hill. 'Here,' she said. I parked in the driveway. She said nothing as she got out. Beneath the porch light she held her handbag up close to her face and foraged for her keys. When she stepped inside she left the door ajar. I followed her in.

'What about you?' she said. 'You on your own?'

'I am.'

'Left a girl in the city?'

'Something like that,' I said.

We moved down the dark hall, into the kitchen.

She opened the fridge and a rhomboid of chilled light spilled across the floor, revealing a kitchen island, a table with two chairs pried back from it, as if the previous occupants had bolted from the seats in a hurry.

'Hi, moggy,' she said, and a cat, white coat splashed with black, emerged from a shadowed corner and dabbed across the tiled floor.

I took a chair. The cat slid in under my feet and commenced grinding its tiny weight against each chair leg.

'I think it likes me,' I said.

There was the heavy resonant thunk of a full bottle on the counter of the kitchen island. She unscrewed the cap, poured a long measure, and gulped it down. I could smell the whiskey. My heart began to race, as if I'd glimpsed the averted face of an old lover on a crowded street. She poured again. She shucked off her jacket, let it fall to the floor the way kids do. She came on over, the bottle in one hand, the glass in the other. I didn't wait for her to offer the drink—I spared her that—snatching the glass from her hand and downing it in one go.

'They must rate you in the school,' she said.

'It was a kindness, the job. I played football back when Carmichael's won stuff, and, you know, I was good. The old man didn't forget.'

'When I was in the convent, me and the girls would go down and watch some of the Carmichael's games, back when the Sisters still let us. Maybe I saw you play,' she said.

She was standing between the V of my legs. I returned the glass to her possession then rested my hand on the jut of her jeaned hip. She filled the glass again.

'I remember that,' I said.

The Sentimental Authoritarian had come up with the idea, and his equivalent number in the convent had consented to it. The idea was to expand local support, and so each game day a bunch of convent girls were bussed down to the grounds, bearing class-made banners in the Carmichael's and Convent colours. The girls were tightly chaperoned, of course, but every boy in Carmichael's staggered around in a humpbacked fever at the fact that live actual females were being permitted inside the school gates.

'Did you like it?' she said.

'I was good at it, so I guess I did.'

'I wonder if I noticed you,' she said. 'One of us probably did. We thought we were American high schoolers, in love with the quarterbacks.'

'I had best friends I saw every day for five straight years I wouldn't know now if I passed them in the street,' I said. 'So I won't be offended if you don't remember me.'

'But you were there and I was there,' she said. 'In our young skins, though we didn't know each other from Adam. Strange to think of it.'

'It was a long time ago.'

'Does it feel like that?' she said.

'How could it not,' I said. I curled the three middle fingers of my right hand into my palm, and waggled the thumb and baby. 'But what did you make of Mellick?' I asked.

'That terrified old cunt.'

'He's meant to be inspiring.'

'I don't want to end up like that,' she said.

I uncurled my fingers and reached for her hair.

In the upstairs bedroom, she flicked on a lamp.

'See.'

Tucked into the frame of her dresser mirror was a yellowing

picture. The mine. I was expecting a photograph by or featuring Anto's father, but it was only an image from a paper or magazine. The picture was full colour, with a column of text in a foreign language occupying the upper left corner of the page. The photo had been taken from altitude, not directly overhead but high enough to encompass the entire circumference of the mine, which was, quite literally, a big hole in the ground. There was a town, or at any rate a stretch of dinky building-like structures, spread out along its far rim. The surrounding landscape was suitably desolate, a lunar terrain of chinks and greys and indeterminate formations of rock and dirt, scrubbed clear of anything alive or green. The mine was widest at the surface and narrowed as it deepened, like a funnel. Carved along the exposed inner strata of the mine wall was a presumably machine-made channel or pathway that wound all the way down to its unseen centre.

'It's big,' I said.

'And far away,' she said.

She knocked the light off, took my elbow and brought me to the bed. We undressed, and made an obligatory stab at fucking, our strivings ruddled by the whiskey. After, we sprawled in the foamy folds of the duvet and finished off the bottle. The whole time, I kept a portion of my attention perched out on a little ledge in the very back of my mind, straining for the tell-tale slam of the front door, the thunderous clomping of feet on the stairs, but the rooms beneath us were as still as the bottom of a lake.

'So is this a thing you do?' I said. 'Go to meetings, pick up someone you scent the weakness in?'

'I want to be better,' she said. '*He* was worse, a real demon for it, and *this* was the only way to live with him,' she said, wagging the empty glass. 'And then he went away, as far away as he could get. He said it was the only way any of us would get better.'

'And is it? Better?'

'It's something you only do to yourself, they're right about that,'

she said. 'But I guess it's worse if there's someone else. And then there's Anthony.'

'He'll make it,' I said.

'Maybe he will.'

There was nothing else to say or do so I leaned in and kissed her, chastely, on the cheek. She traced her finger around the rim of the glass, dabbed the finger to her lips, kissed away the last amber fleck of whiskey, then turned away. After a while I got up and quietly dressed. I made my way downstairs, shoes in hand. Coming off the final stair step, I stumbled and brought my knee down on some sort of glass fixture—something that tinkled as it shattered. I hobbled down the hall, stuck my feet in my shoes, and let myself out. The dead-of-night cold was of a purity that scorched my lungs as I sucked it in.

The next morning, a Monday, I rose at seven. I bundled myself into my drab olive overcoat, loaded a double handful of council-issued road salt into my pockets and crunched down to the front gates, scattering the salt ahead of me as I went. I felt good, despite the familiar tightening in the midsection of my face that would bloom into a full-blown headache as the day wore on. I unlocked the gates, though the first of the kids would not show up for another hour. I went across the road, onto the riverside path. The sky was lavender, and there was a bank of high white clouds moving in off the Atlantic as stately as glaciers. I decided to walk up the town for a coffee and paper.

Passing the station I saw a bus about to depart. I asked the driver where to. It wasn't far, a little further on down the west coast, but I hadn't been to that particular city in years. I had enough cash on me for a ticket and clambered on. In the city I ransacked my ATM card and checked into a small hotel off the high street. They asked for a name and I gave them a name, reversing the natural slant of my cursive as I wrote it out. I drank at the hotel bar, and in the

afternoon did a circuit of the high street pubs. I did the same thing the following day. In the seclusion of the bars I felt like a ghost becoming slowly corporeal again.

I considered the lay of the land. It was easy to pick out the chronic soak-heads from the tourists, the amateur drinkers. It had something to do with the way they conformed themselves to the planes of the bar, the way they aggressively propped an elbow and periodically lifted a haunch from their stool to get the blood flowing back into that leg. It had something to do with the way they every so often softly exclaimed or sighed or rebukingly clicked their tongue at nothing and no one. The way they stared down into the weathered grain of the counter, mulling their special soak-head grievances and depletions. The way they were invariably alone.

The city was right up on the Atlantic. I walked the quays, the convoluted knot of cobbled alleys that wound narrowly back and forth through the tight parcel of buildings that constituted the city centre. There were strings of festive lights everywhere, council employees in high-viz jackets and wool caps scrubbing sleet into the drains with cartoonishly large black-bristled brooms. There were swarms of shitfaced stags and hysterical hens, and masked artists draped in tinfoil smocks impersonating statues in the street—even the cold could not disturb their poised inertia. My mobile filled up with voicemails, several from the Sentimental Authoritarian's secretary, and finally one from the man himself. His voice was mild and measured, shot through with a gorgeous note of presidential weariness. He was sure this was all some simple misunderstanding. He told me to ring just to let everyone know how long I'd be gone. He said to take care. At some point the battery of my phone died.

On the second or third or eleventh day I met a blonde woman with a black tooth—a cap that hadn't taken and become infected. In lieu of small talk she immediately embarked on a lengthy diatribe against a man she referred to only as The Spider. She said he was a

coward and selfish and probably a sociopath; a spiteful, petty bully congenitally incapable of empathy for others, though he was a *charmer* of course. He collected women this Spider and left his brand upon them—she pushed back her hair and angled her head. A perfectly lifelike blue arachnid was tattooed just under her ear.

'He made me get that,' she said, and she insisted there were over a hundred women in this wretched city bearing such a mark.

In my hotel room she scooped out her left tit and told me to say goodbye to it. She said it was riddled with tumours and was going to have to go. She said she almost certainly only had months to live. She saw me looking at her hair—it was bleached nearly white, and looked crispy in a dead way, like straw, but it was her real hair. She touched it self-consciously and said the doctors had assured her chemotherapy was pointless at this stage. I told her I was sorry, and she said that was okay; that she was putting everything that was the past, all the years of useless shit, behind her, and living only for now, for the moment, and that I was a part of the moment, and I should feel good about that.

And then she wanted to know my story.

It was dusk. There were crushed cans, empty miniatures and bottles littering the floor, stains soaked into the carpet, tangles of clothes. She was lying on the bed wearing nothing but my rumpled shirt. I was sitting in my underwear on the large wooden sill of the window. The radiators were on full blast and I had the window inched open.

I told her I was in town for just a few days, to check in on my ex-wife and kid, that I didn't get to see all that much of them anymore because I worked overseas as a diamond miner. She perked up at that.

'Diamonds,' she said.

She said I must make a mint and the next round of drinks was surely on me, so.

I nodded my head in a way that suggested that just might

happen. She wanted to know about the mine and I told her it was basically just a huge hole in the ground, so big you could pick up this entire city and throw it down there in one piece. I told her it was mostly done by machines now, the actual mining, with the men only required to operate the machines at a relatively safe remove, but that it was still sapping and inhospitable work. I told her that with all the drilling and pounding, enormous quantities of dust and grit and dirt were churned up into the atmosphere, so much that sometimes the sun was almost blotted out, and that no matter how many filters or masks we wore, we were still breathing in a certain amount of that poisonous shit. And there were of course the periodic on-site accidents, men getting injured, maimed, even killed. I told her how a good friend of mine, a tough old codger of a Ruski venerated as a legend by the other men, had lost three fingers on his right hand in an incident a few years back, and how now he had to make do with just a thumb and forefinger.

'Jesus,' she said.

'But then every line of living has its hazards,' I said kindly.

'Don't I know it,' she said, and yawned and stretched and settled herself again amid the pillows.

Then neither of us said anything and through the window I listened to the noise of another city, growing already familiar. I slid from the sill, put on my trousers and belt. I checked my wallet. I picked up my dead mobile, consulted its blank screen, and told her it was time to go.