'I thought that was bad luck.'

'Only with beer,' he said, 'between you and me. But it's a better story.'

'Ege-shay-shay?' I struggled to remember the toast.

'Egészségédre,' Hideg said. 'Your health.'

'Rodney!'

'I know.'

'That's five minutes already.'

'I know.'

'As long as you know,' Margaret sarked.

Margaret had said it was up to me whether I covered the wall or not. I didn't have to think about it for too long.

'We don't want anything getting in the way of a sale.'

I had taken a few pictures with the Instamatic. They looked like nothing, if I was being honest, though the blue of the seas was nice.

At the last moment before starting to paper, I dug out an old bit of crimson crayon from the tin ('The Tin') with the Sellotape and parcel string in it, and knelt by the bottom left-hand corner of the wall, between Chile and the Maria Theresa Reef.

'The World by Rodney McGovern,' I wrote and added the dates: 'October 1968 – March 1975'.

Well, it was more than most people left.

Alma had moved on to the brasses in the front bedroom, Garrulous Graham's room. Garruless. Garruleast. The older of the Post Office engineers rinsed the empty cups with water hot from a flask. I opened the window to stub my cigarette on the sill. The men whirled round, saw me, saw I was harmless, nodded. The learner driver was reversing round the corner by number 24. Stalled, restarted the engine, stalled it again. The engine revved.

Margaret shouted.

'For the last time, Rodney!'

primary-school friend's house, when I discovered that the dinner table, chairs, settee and wireless in my own family's house weren't *the* at all, but *a, some*: versions rather than the definitive articles and, what was worse, that there was no way of telling whether they were the right versions. Standing in the kitchen of number 5 under Hideg's roving eye, I didn't know that I had had a day free from anxiety in all the years since.

The cut-glass tumblers were at the very back of the very last cupboard I looked in. They came out with difficulty and with another memory attached: Margaret and I arguing the night her brother – he of the whisky for Christmas – gave us them as a housewarming present.

'They're horrendous.'

'They're a gift.'

'They're not real crystal.'

I wiped them inside and out with a linen tea towel, held them up to the light, as if checking I'd got all the dust. Actually, they weren't that bad-looking.

With Jim's glass in one hand, Jim's bottle in the other, I asked Hideg at the top of the stairs to excuse me if I didn't give him a drum roll. I used my backside to open the boxroom door, my chin to flick on the overhead light.

For a minute or two Hideg was motionless save for the quick movement of glass to mouth, silent save for the sound of sipping and breath departing by his nose.

He hates it, I thought. He loves it. He's waiting for a suitable moment to make his excuse and leave.

Another quick movement of the arm, another sip, a long nasal exhalation, then he said the thing about it being a work of art and I said, 'Oh, I don't know about that.'

When he was through repeating himself, he complimented

me on my Hungary and pointed out with a thick fingernail Budapest and the city of his birth, near the broad Y of borders where Hungary, Yugoslavia and Romania all meet. He sniffed. I worried he was going to cry.

The first siren of the city's year wee-wawed distantly. I took a drink. The room tilted. I closed and opened my eyes. Hideg said something I didn't quite catch.

'Sorry?'

He was still looking at the wall. I was focusing on the back of his head. There was a spot of pink there, like the seat of a small explosion from which wisps of grey curled out and away.

'I said,' he said to somewhere about the Kalahari, 'why have we never been able to get on together?'

I realized I had in fact heard him the first time. Even the second time, though, I wasn't ready for it. I shrugged to his back.

'Jill says we are too alike.' *Jill* says? So they had talked about me. Me and him. Us. 'But I don't believe that like-and-like stuff, except maybe in the science lab.'

Those last few words were so Hideg. No situation was too inauspicious for him not to parade a little of his knowledge. Was he trying to score points even now, reminding me he had been (*claimed* to have been) a university student in another life?

We were alike all right.

'We should have been the best of friends,' I said then caught myself on. 'Better neighbours, anyway.'

'That's for sure.'

Hideg turned and, forgetting himself – or perhaps reminding himself he had now spent more of his adult life here than there – clicked his cut-glass tumbler on mine.

caught sight of me, pulled a face: 'Terrible sad.' I made a face back. 'Isn't it just?'

I lit a cigarette, the last of ten I bought a week ago. I never was that heavy a smoker. Alma kneaded her lower back. The engineers clasped their white Pyrex cups, eating chocolate snowballs, heads tilted right back looking up at the telegraph pole. A car with L-plates turned – too wide – into the bottom of the street. I performed a neat turn of my own to face the newly papered boxroom wall. Crown Vinyl P85832, a Rorschach test in shades of pink. I saw giant butterflies against the white background, a devil in a bow tie. I saw what would have been a perfect colour for the Common Market countries lying underneath.

It was my one big regret that I hadn't got round to colouring my continents. Oceans and ice caps, that was as far as I'd got.

'You can't cover this up,' Hideg had said and could not have sounded more outraged if he had created it himself. 'It's a work of art.'

'Oh, I don't know about that.'

Hideg shook his head, stepped back, heavily, for a better view.

'A work of art.'

This was after one o'clock in the morning, New Year's Day just gone. We were neither of us the soberest and we were still working our way through the quarter of a bottle of Teacher's we had brought across the road from Hideg's party.

Margaret hadn't come with us. I was in the bad books with her because I had let it slip (Hideg was already talking about next year's Hallowe'en party) that we were selling the house. *Thinking* of selling, said Margaret, who was superstitious that way, though of course the damage had already been done.

Hideg was affronted. He flung an arm as wide as the presence of neighbours would allow, which is to say wider than he might have in years gone by.

'Why would you want to leave all this?'

Because there were no cinemas or theatres left to go to; because my wife had never really felt she belonged here; because we were not city people when all was said and done and even this was too much city for us; because this was not a place we would have wished to grow old in; because, though you might not have been aware there was a contest, you won, Hideg, I lost my nerve.

'He needs a bigger wall,' Paul Blake said across the top of his glass. 'For the solar system.'

I wondered how often quips like that had been made behind my back, though of course now it was made to my face I had no option but to stand there and take the laughter.

Hideg didn't so much as smile.

'You'll have to show me this famous wall of yours.'

Jesus, Hideg, I thought, I'd have to draw you a map just to show you where our house is on the street.

'I'll try and book you in,' I said. 'This is our busy season.'

Hideg threaded his arm through mine.

'But you're open now, are you not?'

In our kitchen, ten minutes later, hunting for the cut-glass whisky tumblers I'd last seen the day we moved in, I was conscious of Hideg's appraisal of the cupboard doors (red Formica), the cushioned flooring, of every last pin in the pin saucer . . .

The *pin saucer*? When did Margaret and I acquire a pin saucer? When did those words come to seem as perfectly wed as our own two names?

I was reminded of the moment in my childhood, visiting a

'What?'

'Don't ask me if that's what this is all about.'

'I wouldn't dream of it,' I whispered into her hair and as I said it so I did indeed cease to dream of it.

'I get myself so worked up worrying about you, I don't know what I'm doing half the time,' she said. 'Imagine me trying to shave.'

'If you want,' I said, 'you can borrow my Old Spice.'

I got up off the bed and went to the wardrobe. I took out the skirt she was wearing earlier, but passed over the blouse in favour of her cream one with the high neck. As I turned back towards her I suddenly stopped.

'I like going to Jill and Hideg's,' I said, with the force of revelation.

And Margaret, who in more than a quarter of a century of marriage I had never known to swear, said through the last of her tears, 'Well, you've a bloody funny way of showing it.'

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'Rodney?'

'Two minutes.'

'You said two minutes ten minutes ago.'

'I was only having you on then.'

'How do I know you're not having me on now?'

'You don't, but I'm not.'

'That man,' Margaret said to herself, I presumed, though I yelled to her through the boxroom door, 'I can hear you, *that woman*.'

I leaned against the frame of the uncurtained window. A blustery day out, spring looking over its shoulder at winter. A Post Office van was pulled up next to the telegraph pole in front of number 9. Two Post Office engineers, old hand, new

hand, donkey jackets buttoned to the neck, stood in the shelter of the open rear doors, pouring themselves tea from an enamel pot. They had a Tupperware jug of milk, a little bowl of sugar. The inside of the van was half kitchen, half giant toolbox. A young lad glanced at them as he passed, coming from the newer houses, fingertips wedged in slit pockets, shoulder-length hair sailing behind him on the wind. I couldn't remember seeing him before. I didn't imagine I'd see him again. He glanced into our car sitting low on its suspension, hard by the kerb at the bottom of the path, lampshades crushed against the rear windscreen, bundles of bedding topped off with books on the back seat, and instinctively he veered in towards the garden walls.

It was a sensible precaution.

I tried to imagine driving a car laden with explosives, not being able to find a parking space, pulling it up to the kerbside in any old street, walking away. It was as good an explanation as any for the car that exploded outside the Chuck Wagon, the car abandoned with hazard lights flashing, boot ticking, in the driveway of O'Neill's timber yard.

I had recognized the man at once when I saw him interviewed on the TV. The windows were gone from the front of his house. The window frames were gone. One side of the roof had collapsed. Out the back the wood in the stores was still ablaze.

'At my age,' he had said, 'you have to ask yourself is it worth trying to start again.'

He was at a guess sixty. He looked, more than anything else, disappointed.

Alma Robertson was polishing her living-room window brasses, elbows going like fury – like she'd just had word there was to be an eleven o'clock inspection. She paused for breath,

door, looking past rather than at me. She was in her housecoat. The skirt and blouse she had been wearing when I left for the off-licence were on hangers, which she carried across to the wardrobe.

'You're not dressed.'

'I'm not going.'

'You're not what?'

'I'm not going.'

'How can you not go?'

'Watch me.'

She pulled back the bedclothes and, still in her housecoat, climbed into bed.

'I don't understand,' I said. Margaret gave me a look as though I had said something unintentionally funny. 'You were all right when I went out.'

For reply she let go an exasperated sigh. I sat on the edge of the bed. She drew the blankets up to the housecoat's lacy collar.

'It's you,' she said at length.

'Me?'

'And,' Margaret pursued her own train of thought, 'I wasn't all right when you left. I'm never all right on Old Year's Night. How can I be when I've been worrying about you from the moment I woke?'

There ought to have been something more to say than what I did say, but for the life of me I couldn't think what.

'Me?'

'Yes, Rodney, you. You spoil it for me every year, the way you get on over there.'

I tried to think how it was I did 'get on' over there.

'The year before last was OK, wasn't it?' I asked her. Or was I thinking of the year before that?

Margaret shook her lowered head. She shook tears from her lowered eyelids. I was so astonished that when one tear landed on the back of my hand I could do nothing for a moment but sit and watch it roll, swell, and break against my coarse black back-of-the-hand hair.

'Oh!' said Margaret and pressed her fingertips against her eyes. I knew that Oh. Part 'look at me', part 'look what you made me do'.

I reached for her, was impeded slightly by the seam of my car coat cutting into my underarms, but kept on reaching out until my arms were right around her and her head rested on my shoulder.

'Darling,' I said, shifting now that I had hold of her to ease the burn-like pain in my armpits, 'I'm sorry.'

Margaret made a light fist and struck it without force against my back. She was shaking her head again.

'I'm fifty,' she said. I told her I was too. She said, 'I have great big tufts of hair all over me.'

It was such an extraordinary thing for her to come out with that, despite myself, I laughed. When she struck my back the second time, I felt it. She pulled away from me, tugging at the housecoat's collar.

'Oh, my good God, Margaret.'

Her neck, low down on the right-hand side, was scraped and raw.

'How did you do that?' I asked, though I knew her answer before she gave it.

'Shaving.'

I leaned across and kissed the rawness. I swung my legs on to the bed and laid her back against the pillow.

'Sweetheart, sweetheart.'

'Don't say it,' Margaret told me, tensing.

and asked the assistant for a bottle of Pernod and twenty Bel Air.

I took the brown bag with my whisky in it and headed, without a backward look, towards the door. The buzzer sounded to let me out.

'Happy New Year, Mr McGovern,' George called as I reached for the handle.

I stared for a moment at the enormous male genitals, sprayed, the same colour as the F in Chuck, on the shutter of Watt's the butcher's across the way. The glans had been adapted into a trilby hat and a grin added halfway down the shaft. I turned.

The sales assistant who had served me peered at George and from George to me. Even through those glasses there was surely no way George could be taken for twenty-one.

'And to Mrs McGovern,' George added. His girlfriend smiled. The assistant peered harder.

Don't look at me, I wanted to say. But look he did, waiting for my response. I knew what would happen if I opened my mouth to say anything other than 'This boy is under-age.' I wish I could say a thousand thoughts raced through my mind. Only one did. I wanted to get through that crowd of yobs and into my car and home.

'Happy New Year, George,' I muttered, validating him.

Out on the street the child in the denim jacket stood with both hands in his pockets. For the first time, I thought, he was genuinely forlorn.

I walked into the hallway and climbed to the third stair.

'Margaret?'

'I said, I'm in the bathroom,' she called back.

'I'm sorry, I didn't hear you.'

I had carried on up to the top of the stairs. I listened outside the bathroom. There was no lock on the door.

'Can I come in?'

'No!'

In the early days of our marriage I would have known exactly what that meant. Peeing in one another's presence was fine, but not the other. Of late, however, our intimacies had contracted ever closer to our double bed. My wife's ablutions were an increasing mystery to me.

I trod quietly across the landing to the boxroom, but suddenly hadn't the heart for the bays and inlets of the Bellinghausen and Weddell seas and I went instead to check the radiator in our room. Hot, hot, hot. (My new hobby, Margaret called the central heating.) I had not taken off my car coat since returning from the off-licence, in spite of the heat. Oddly, given, one, that I knew Denis and Ivy Moore would be there and, two, what I had so recently seen, I was impatient to get to Hideg's party. Or maybe what I mean is that I was impatient to have a drink.

I crossed to the window, and found an angle from which to look up the street towards number 18. There were lights on in every window, the front door was open. I was distracted by several Stitt brothers passing on the far side of the road kicking a ball between them. I didn't know for certain how many of them there were in total. (I didn't know half the children I saw running up and down this street any more.) Three here, but there was at least a fourth, possibly a fifth. These three – eleven, twelve and thirteen maybe – were eating lollipops while they kicked their football. Lollipops in December. Football at – I checked my watch – after ten o'clock.

'Margaret!'

'Quit your yelling,' Margaret said, coming in the bedroom

behind, when I caught sight of them by the beer cans in the shop's system of convex mirrors. It was the girlfriend I recognized, straggly dyed-blonde hair, a half a foot taller than George.

(George, from the first I had ever seen him, last in a line of skipping children, was always a good half-foot shorter than most of the rest.)

I craned my neck, looking down the shop to make sure I wasn't mistaken, at the same moment that George, selection made, began walking towards the queue. He wore a yellow tartan scarf knotted at his throat. The tins in his left hand said Long Life, the tins in his right, Colt 45. I turned away, but he had already seen me.

Now what did I do?

The wee fella was barely sixteen. The sign on the door said strictly no service to persons under the age of twenty-one. I allowed my gaze to wander towards the convex mirror and of course George Moore and his girlfriend were watching me in it. George smiled at me. Maybe it was the mirror that turned the smile into a leer. The till drawer chinged open and shut, I took another baby-step closer to having to make a decision.

Already, though, I was beginning to suspect that there was no decision to make. George Moore was barely sixteen, George Moore, despite his big blonde girlfriend, despite his carefully shaped and tended bum-fluff moustache, *looked* barely sixteen. If the off-licence had a policy (for it was not the law which prevented them selling to persons under twenty-one) then the off-licence staff should be the ones to enforce it. Yes.

Ching went the till. Open and – ching – shut.

'Yes?'

The sales assistant who was to serve me wore glasses with lenses the colour of an iced-up river. An iced-up city river. Lenses so thick you could have skated on them. In fact going by the scratches someone already had.

'A bottle of Teacher's, please.'

'Ten, twenty or forty ounce?' the assistant said, on the turn, seeming to find his way to the whisky by touch rather than by sight.

'Forty.'

I couldn't help it, I glanced at the mirror again. George and his girlfriend were still watching, so intently that a gap had opened between them and the person in front of them in the queue. Another customer filled the gap and it occurred to me that they were going to hang back until they could get this particular sales assistant to serve them.

Which meant, in all likelihood, it was not me they'd been staring at all this time.

'Next,' shouted a second sales assistant and the man at my back stepped around me and set two dumpies of Guinness bottles on the counter.

'That's two ninety-five.' The short-sighted assistant adjusted his spectacles and took my five-pound note. 'Sorry,' he said, 'no pounds.' He counted the change into my hand, watching every coin. 'Five is three, three-fifty, four, four-fifty, -sixty, -seventy, -eighty, -ninety, and ten is five pounds.'

I began to think it possible that George Moore would get served after all. My heart sank at the thought of meeting the parents in less than an hour's time. Did I tell them? Did I not? Did they know already? Did they care?

Ching, ching.

'Who's next there?' shouted a third assistant. A woman with satin button earrings excused herself as she passed me

I resolved, I resolved, I resolved, I resolved.

ꕥ

'Margaret!'

I pushed the front door shut and pulled the curtain across it to keep the heat in, even though we would be leaving again any minute. I placed the car keys in their drawer in the telephone table and went through the living room to the kitchen.

No Margaret. I called her name again as I sloughed the tight brown bag from the neck of the Teacher's bottle and picked at the price tag with my thumbnail.

'Margaret?'

Margaret's brother, Jim, was away to his son in Guernsey for the holidays so he hadn't called, as he normally did, on Christmas Eve. Jim it was brought us the whisky I brought to Hideg's on Old Year's Night. It was near nine tonight before I remembered and had to jump in the car to drive to the off-licence.

'Margaret?'

The price tag came off the bottle in three sections, each more reluctant than the last. I looked at my hand as I finished rolling the pieces into a jagged excuse for a ball and I wondered did I detect a slight tremor.

It must have been years since I had last had to go out on to that main road at night. I had driven through after dark, but driving through didn't prepare you. It was not an experience I'd want to repeat in a hurry. The only premises that didn't have their shutters down were the off-licence and the hot-food bar, the Chuck Wagon, on the same side of the street. Crowd of young lads in denims and tartan scarves milling around on the footpath between the two, chip papers everywhere, broken

glass in the gutter where I first tried to park, so that I ended up having to drive on a hundred yards and walk back through the mêlée.

The language was nothing ordinary. Eff this, eff that, eff in the middle of other words. The letter F itself had been spray-painted in red over the first two letters of Chuck.

While I was standing outside the off-licence, waiting for someone of the staff to hurry up and answer the buzzer to let me in the security gate, a youngster in a denim jacket, trousers halfway up his shins, came and stood at my side. He had a pound note in his hand.

'Mister,' he said, 'will you go in for us?'

'What?'

He couldn't have been more than twelve.

'The offie. Go in for us, will you? Them ones there' – a nod to the older boys – 'are being sly. Go ahead. It's New Year's Eve.'

'I will not indeed,' I said and he wandered off a way, not, I thought, greatly surprised. As I closed the security gate behind me, I saw the boy stop another man and again be refused. Someone shouted he was an effing double-u. There was laughter. The boy shrugged, passed his pound from one hand to the other, looked up the street.

My leg brushed against the radiator in the dinette. It was roasting.

'Margaret?'

I went back into the living room, opened the fire's glass door with the tongs and nudged the air regulator to low. No tremor at all.

George Moore and his girlfriend were in the off-licence. I was in the queue, inching towards the till and the spirits bottles

'Bloody cigarette,' Paul Blake said and Hideg said he had heard me say they could kill you, but didn't know I'd meant that way.

Which for Hideg was pretty funny, though the laughter that everyone joined in went on a little too long, as if it was fuelled by something more needful than enjoyment of the joke. Indeed, unlike Paul who insisted he didn't need to go home, was soon in fact requesting another drink, the night never really recovered. At one point I found myself in a conversation about previous years' parties, which was always a bad sign. Tom McParland reckoned they started, on a much smaller scale, we were to understand, before the street was opened up beside his house, for he remembered an impromptu reprise the winter of the really bad snow, tipsy races across the waste ground on makeshift sleds. He bent almost double as he tried to describe for those of us who weren't there Ann McGuinness on a tin tray, yards from everyone else, beating her heels in the snow, shouting over the top of her head, Push me, push me!

There was a silence. Had anybody had word from Ann or Hugh? Michael and Patricia Kelly? The Quinns? The mood dipped again.

'They've been after Paul this months for protection money,' Margaret whispered, for no other reason than that the light was out.

Nineteen seventy-three was two hours and forty-five minutes old. There were still people abroad on the street, but Margaret and I were back to back in bed.

'Who's been after him?' I asked. 'And who told you?'

'Ivy Moore,' Margaret answered the second question first, but I was too impatient to listen to any more.

'Honestly, Margaret,' I said.

'No,' she said, 'listen. Ivy was talking to Annette. They threatened to bomb the shop unless he paid them and then as soon as he gave in they started asking for more.'

'Rumours,' I said. Margaret talked over me.

'He's told them he doesn't have any more, but they don't care. That's why he's on the tablets. That's why we've hardly seen him.'

Someone walked past the front of the house, whistling now through their lips, now through their teeth. I thought it was the tricky vocal part from 'Oh, Carol', but I could have been wrong. Margaret rolled over. I felt her breath on my neck where it emerged from the covers. She must have raised her head. She must have been watching for a reaction from me. I considered reminding her that Ivy Moore was the person who told her that the woman who lived here before us lost all her hair in a single night. Instead I listened to the whistler, out of the street by this time but still audible, and in a very few moments I had genuinely forgotten that Margaret was examining the back of my head until I felt her own head hit the pillow again, her entire body turn away.

Actually, even allowing for its source, the story about Paul and the protection money was all too easy to believe. These were days when anything, you felt, could happen to anybody in this city. Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, bearded shop-owning man . . . me.

Long after Margaret was asleep I lay and thought of Paul Blake, of the worry he must have been going through, the terror. I thought too about the words Margaret and I had at dinner and what I had come out with about Hideg turning Paul and Annette against me. The last thoughts I had that New Year's morning were of my own vanity and foolishness.

('It's been happening all my life,' he did say. 'I'm used to it by now.')

'Refill?'

Hideg.

'Not just yet.'

Hideg went to take the glass from my hand anyway. He wasn't really paying attention to me.

I placed my free hand on top of the glass and, saying I said I'm fine, yanked it towards me. Hideg gave a start and looked at me as though just realizing who I was.

'Rodney.'

'Hideg.'

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I missed-heard you.'

Seventeen years he had been living in this country. I went to correct him, but his gaze was wandering again. Fine, let him talk like a foreigner all his life. And then as I tried to remember was it really O'Neill you called the man with the gammy hand, tried too while I was about it to remember (the garbage you overheard at work) the surname of the woman to whom Neil Sedaka was singing, as loud at the back of the house as at the front now that there was an arch where the fireplace used to be, 'Oh, Carol', Paul Blake, standing where Hideg's gaze had come to rest at the far end of the room, reached out for a curtain as though for support and clutching only air collapsed.

'Bloody hell,' said Hideg, and Ivy Moore, helpfully, screamed.

'He's having a heart attack!'

Annette, coming from nowhere, just as she did in the Commonwealth Games, elbowed past me, reaching her husband before even Hideg did.

'Paul?' Nothing. 'Paul!'

Paul from the floor answered her with a groan.

'He just dropped,' said Ivy and let her arms flop by her side by way of illustration.

Paul groaned again, closer to speech.

'Open his shirt,' said Hideg, but Paul with Annette's assistance was already struggling to stand.

'Mo,' he gasped, breathed deep, gasped again, 'kay.'

He didn't look OK, leaning both hands on the table's edge, nudging a platter of mixed sandwiches with his whitened knuckles, while Annette rubbed his shoulders. He had cut a lip in the fall and the blood from it was weaving a glistening line through his beard.

'You had us terrified there,' said Ivy, herself resting a hand on the table.

Everyone was now either in the dining area or in the archway. Neil Sedaka stretched out the last note of his hymn to Carol . . . *King* was her name. I hadn't moved since Hideg attempted to refill my glass.

'He's been taking these turns,' Annette said. 'The doctor has him on tablets.'

Hideg, who was in the act of pouring a large measure of brandy, now set bottle and glass out of Paul's reach.

I sniffed the air and had just opened my mouth to ask was something burning when Paul Blake, barking with pain, jerked upright and beat his chest with one hand while tugging with the other at the front of his shirt.

'He's going again,' said Ivy, stepping back from the table into Margaret, who blanched.

But it was a false alarm. To the sound of a shirt button hitting a plate, Paul had got his shirt open and retrieved from it a squashed but still smouldering Senior Service.

The something burning was chest hair.

'There's no point,' she said at last.

'Then I'm right.'

'That's not what I said.'

'Well that's what I heard.'

I looked at Margaret watching the husband and wife in the window not talking to one another. He moved his mouth and I said, 'That's a lovely pork fillet.'

'Watt's.' Margaret let fall the name of the butcher then faced me. 'Why would Hideg want to do a thing like that?'

'You tell me,' I said.

The plain fact was that Paul and Annette had been giving us the cold shoulder for months. There had been a night, beginning of March, they had called over. All perfectly civilized. We played rummy, whist, chase the ace. We didn't touch the *Scrabble* in the end.

'Oh, God, *Scrabble*,' said Annette when she spied the box on the sideboard. 'I'm an absolute dummy at *Scrabble*.'

And Margaret said – I never did pull her up about it – 'I know what you mean, but Rodney likes it.'

Annette, all in all, was not quite what I had hoped. She had taken up athletics at school, she said, to get out of something she liked less. Middle-distance running was not a passion, just a thing she turned out to be good at. And then too her Commonwealth Games fourth *was* a long time ago.

'Of course,' said Margaret. Of course.

Still, a not unpleasant evening. Before they left I had taken Paul up to the boxroom.

'Hold on,' I said at the door and went ahead to adjust the Anglepoise. 'Ready.'

I showed him how I worked out the scale from the atlas, marking on the wall the four points of a territory – extreme north, south, east and west – and drawing between them

freehand. I had been on the South Sea Islands then for the best part of six months. Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, the Ratak Group and Rajik Group, some of them even on my scale little bigger than dots.

'How many nights a week did you say you spend doing this?'

He shook his head. He seemed impressed.

I had thought a fortnight, three weeks, maybe a little more – let them get Easter out of the way – they would return the invitation. Since when, nothing. Not even a Christmas card.

'Some people just don't send the way we do,' said Margaret. And some people had someone like Hideg bending their ears.

It was only when Hideg opened the door to us tonight that the penny finally dropped, or should I say the *pin*, a brand-new-looking forget-me-not in the middle of his paisley tie.

That was why he and Paul were suddenly so thick: it was the solid bond of masonry.

I had already spotted a couple more forget-me-nots on the jackets of this year's wild-card guests. I even thought one of them was giving me the handshake when Hideg introduced us. I had pulled my hand away before I realized the man had something the matter with his fingers.

'I'm terribly sorry,' I said and the man, O'Neill I think you called him – what with the shock, I'd hardly taken it in – the man told me I wasn't to let it worry me.

'It's been happening all my life. I'm used to it by now.'

He hadn't hung around too long after that. I hoped it was because he wasn't enjoying himself, I mean I hoped he *was*, but if he wasn't I hoped it wasn't just because of me.

unable to get a word into the main one having discontented themselves, each other, with a little local variation. Heads were shaken, fingers pointed, faces thrust into faces. It had occurred to me earlier that though the numbers might have been down on previous years, I could not remember ever having seen so much drink lined up on the draining board.

Someone was saying disintegration, someone else reunification. I heard independence, capitulation, direct rule. I heard Hideg say, in his Hideg way, 'Yes, but let us have some perspective, we are not talking about Bangladesh.'

I wondered sometimes whether Hideg had actually escaped from Hungary after the Rising, as he said, or whether the Russians had simply turned a blind eye to his going so as not to have to put up with having to listen to him all these years.

More than once lately, watching or reading about some new enormity, I had caught myself thinking what will Hideg say to that? I told myself that all I wanted was for him to take what was going on here seriously, admit that things were getting right out of control and never mind Hungary '56, or Vietnam, or Bangladesh or wherever else just happened to be in the news at that moment.

These were not circumstances in which I could take pleasure in being proved right.

Margaret was standing over by the fireplace with Annette and Paul Blake, watching me closely, them anxiously. With so much bait I knew she thought it was only a matter of time before I bit, showing her up in front of Annette and Paul. A fellow could have been hurt by such lack of faith. The Stitts, on either side of me, were leaning in to bicker with one another. I heard 'hands tied behind their backs', I heard 'gloves off', 'hell in a handcart', before I closed my ears to the clamour.

'Coats?' I called and Margaret looked as though she might kiss me.

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'Rodney?'

'What?'

'Enough.'

'Oh. Margaret,' I said, 'relax. Paul knows I'm only joking.'

Paul Blake, it was true, was not laughing, but really I was disinclined to care. We were in the Hidegs' dining . . . area, I suppose was all you could call the eating end of a knock-through. It was a quarter to eleven on the last day of another perfectly bloody year. Even I had not imagined twelve months ago that things could have got quite so hairy. This was more or less exactly what I had just said to Paul Blake. Paul now sported a thick black beard and sideburns to go with his black moustache. It was not a look, I wouldn't have thought, calculated to bring the customers in, and from what I gathered Paul could ill afford to be turning people away from his shop just now.

'Hmph,' he said and turned his back to light, with a none-too-steady hand, what must have been his twentieth Senior Service of the night. Margaret shook her head at me, but she could shake all she liked, it wasn't as if she couldn't have predicted how things were likely to go.

I had told her this evening at dinner Hideg had turned the Blakes against me.

She carried on eating, looking off towards the window, though there was nothing to see there except our reflections dining al fresco under a stark white light.

'You're not denying it.'

She swallowed, drank from her glass of milk, riming the down on her top lip.

'There you are, alone in your cab, no other traffic to distract you and a vast panorama opening before you.'

I had mostly worked the suburban line since moving to the city, vast panorama was maybe overstating it, but the point stood.

'I hadn't thought of it like that,' Paul Blake said and sounded genuinely chastened. 'Makes working in a shop seem very dull.'

He took a box of Senior Service from his jacket pocket.

'Smoke?'

He lit up as I shook my head.

'Annette's at me all the time to quit,' he said, 'but I say to her, I've been on them since I was a teenager, what am I going to do?'

'I know how you feel. I was on them myself from I was twelve.' I had not had so much as a puff in six and a half weeks. 'There's no answer only willpower.'

He looked at the end of his cigarette, then into his glass, glum.

'Of course,' I said quickly, 'you'd know all about willpower, running your own business.'

In the kitchen for a refill, I spotted – and gave a wide berth to – Ivy Moore. I had just seen Denis in the living room. Clearly they considered George to be old enough, at thirteen, to look after himself for the night.

Ivy was in full flow. I noticed her hands as she talked, touching forearms, shoulders, her fingers at moments hovering around her listeners' kidneys. She leaned in whispering, drew back, laughed with complete abandon. The woman was incapable of moderate emotion. I remembered her, the day we got the keys for the house, practically weeping when I met her in the street.

'Be happy there.' I was holding a drum of salt she had pressed upon me. 'Oh, be sure and be happy, won't you.'

Margaret found me close to the breakfast bar. She had been talking to Annette Blake.

'They seem a very friendly couple.'

'Yes,' I said. I was examining two plates at either end of the countertop. Each had squat hollow columns of puff pastry, filled on one plate with whipped cream and mandarin orange, and on the other with what appeared to be condensed chicken soup flecked with ham.

'It might be nice, some Saturday night . . .'

I nodded. Vols-au-vents? I'd read about them, *Sunday Times* supplement, or somewhere.

'. . . have them over, him and her.'

I looked at my wife. We had lived in this street for going on nine years and this was the first time she had suggested having people over. We had been married for almost twenty-five years and I could have counted on the fingers of one hand the number of times we had had guests on a Saturday night. I wondered whether Margaret's head wasn't a little turned by Annette Blake.

I touched her cheek with my fingertips, stroked behind her ear lobe with its tiny gold sleeper.

'She lost one last year,' she said in an undertone. I didn't need to ask her who. I didn't need to ask her what.

'Ah,' I said.

I wasn't the one started it. I wasn't even in the room. The bell had been rung, the toast drunk, 'Auld Lang Syne' sung and I had gone to the bathroom – the chicken and ham vols-au-vents, I feared – and by the time I came down the whole room had erupted in argument. *Arguments*, I should say, those who were

grander than here. Or maybe this was what happened when there were divorces with alimony and what have you to pay out. I saw a couple of boys playing in the garden the odd Saturday with Billy, Annette and Paul's Jack Russell pup. I had never enquired, but I had a feeling they were his. They certainly didn't look like they wanted for anything.

Hideg handed me an amber tumbler.

'Egészségére!'

I recognized the tumblers from the TV. Shell or someone was giving them away, ten tokens a glass, a token for every pound's worth of petrol.

'Tell me if that's enough water,' Hideg said and walked away before I'd had a chance to taste it.

'Thanks,' I said brightly to his back. Paul Blake's black moustache rose at the points, either side of his mouth, where it began the descent to his chin. I took this for a smile. I smiled back. He held up an amber tumbler as though for my inspection.

'I'm an ice man myself,' he said. 'Cleaner taste, I always think.'

I was guessing he did not really want to talk about whisky and that this exchange was intended only as a base camp. I opted for non-committal.

'I suppose it's what you're used with.'

'I suppose so,' he said.

We swallowed whisky, looked to see where our wives had got to and, finding there were no obvious roads out, turned back towards each other. Another drink, then:

(Him) 'No White Christmas again, then.'

(Me) 'Only on BBC2, ha-ha.'

'Same old bunch of repeats.'

'Christmas Day?'

He shook his head. 'Desperate. We switched it off altogether and played a game of rummy.'

'*Scrabble*,' I said. 'Me and Margaret.'

'*Scrabble*,' he said, with an air of wistfulness.

'Oh, we love a game. I've often said to Margaret, give me a game of *Scrabble* or a good book and I could do without the television altogether.'

His moustache (maybe I was being a little harsh earlier: it was the fashion, after all) rose at the corners, higher than before and for longer.

'You can't beat a good book.'

'You cannot.'

'Biography.'

'History.'

'Thrillers.'

'Mm.'

We drank, let people pass, held to our places.

'Do you mind me asking,' he said, and I knew what was coming, 'what it is that you do?'

I spied a small enamel forget-me-not in the lapel of his broad-checked jacket. Freemason.

'I drive trains,' I told him.

'A train driver?' He managed to pass his surprise off as the every-boy's-dream variety. 'I don't think I ever met a train driver before.'

'What people don't understand,' I said, 'is the time it gives you for thinking.'

'Oh, we're all big thinkers here,' Hideg interjected pointlessly, en route to the kitchen. Paul Blake availed of the opportunity to laugh. I could have let this go, but I had grown too fed up of people's incredulity at what they (not I) considered the gap between my interests and my living.

was something comfortingly scientific about their trapped-air warmth.

'What time are we expected at?' I said instead.

'Same time as every year.'

Margaret lifted her glasses case down from the mantelpiece.

'The Hallowe'en party was earlier than usual.'

'There was no truce at Hallowe'en.'

'Pity there's one now,' I said and Margaret narrowed her eyes at me. 'Joke. Honest.'

It was, of course, no laughing matter. To say things had taken a turn for the worse of late would have been the understatement of the year now ending. Every day of the last three hundred and sixty-five seemed to top the one before in awfulness. As ever at the year's close, pious hopes were being expressed that the horror would finally hit home and that next year would be an improvement.

I am afraid I had no such hopes. Somewhere deep down people in this city, this country, did not like one another.

The water on the television fizzed as though a tablet had been dropped in the top. A shark twisted through the pinking turmoil. Margaret bent over my polo neck fishing for the source of the pluck with the point of a needle. Little by little the nylon puff disappeared, like breath drawn in and held.

'There.'

'Teacher's! Excellent!' Hideg took the bottle from me in the hallway.

'Just for a change,' I said.

He placed a foot on the stairs. A tiny orange tab with an italic *f* was stitched into the waistband of his blue slacks. For Farah, not factory shop.

'Jill? Rodney and Margaret are here.'

A bird squawked.

'Come in,' Hideg said to us. 'Come in.'

The living room was the usual ferocious fug, though when my eyes had acclimatized I wondered whether, the unofficial truce notwithstanding, there weren't a few less guests than last New Year. Even with the earlier starting time, the Hallowe'en party had been a quiet affair, though there again Hallowe'en was not Hallowe'en since they brought in the fireworks ban.

The turnover in neighbours hadn't helped. The Quinns, of course, wouldn't have been here even if they hadn't moved out, but the McGuinnesses definitely would have, the Kellys too.

This was not a violent part of town. Until recently I would not even have said it was a flag-waving part of town. Besides, the Nixons who had upped and left for England at the start of November might not have been expected to take the same exception to the flags that were now being flown in the streets round about, but loss of nerve at times like these could be viral.

I could only see one set of the new neighbours in Hideg's front room. Blake, you called them, Paul and Annette. She used to run the mile, only just missed out on a bronze in the last Empire Games but two. Commonwealth Games. Blake wasn't the name she ran under then. Blake wasn't even the name she ran under when she got married the summer after those games. This was a second marriage for the two of them. They had a sports shop together on one of the main roads heading north out of the city. The papers were full of pictures when it opened.

Far be it from me to do my own street down, but you would have thought owning a shop and with the name she had (used to have) they could have afforded somewhere a bit

'Looking out the window again?' Margaret asked from out of the darkness of the bedroom, her voice muffled by the covers.

'I thought you were asleep,' I said, turning out the landing light. I had been in the house the best part of an hour. The sky outside the bathroom window was already brightening.

'I smelt the smoke,' she said. 'I don't know why you have to keep pretending.'

I took my trousers off and sat on the bed. My thumb throbbed.

'You know why,' I said. 'They'd never let me hear the end of it.'

Margaret turned in the bed towards me. 'Who's they?'

'Hideg . . . everyone. They'd try to make me look ridiculous.'

Margaret said nothing and after a second turned away again. I folded my trousers, matching the creases as best I could with only one good thumb, and laid them over the cushion of the dressing-table chair. The street was entirely silent. In the room next door the Sudan awaited the drawing of its eighth and final land border. (Wot, no break between here and Niger?)

'Margaret?' I said and when she didn't answer the first time I said it again. 'Margaret? Can we please do something else next Old Year's Night?'

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'Margaret?'

'I'm in the kitchen.'

'There's a pluck in this polo neck.'

'A what?'

'A pluck, in my white polo neck.'

'Your new one?'

'It must have caught on something.'

'I told you to be careful.'

'I was being careful.'

I fingered the little puff of nylon thread, traced the pucker that ran out in a straight line on either side.

'Well, take it off and give it down here,' Margaret called from the kitchen. 'And for God's sake don't fiddle with it.'

'I won't,' I said and stopped. My hair crackled as I tugged the polo neck clear of my head. It wouldn't have surprised me if the flaw had been in the thing when Margaret brought it home. She got it through a woman she worked with whose sister worked in a factory shop.

'Are you sure that stuff would be all right?' I'd asked her when she suggested it.

'Rodney, they don't look any different from other clothes. Half the town's probably running around in them only you don't know it.'

Margaret was sitting by the fireplace when I came into the living room, sewing box already on her lap. The television was on, the volume turned low. I stood by Margaret's chair following the pictures with her. Some underwater thing. Fish, vivid as glass ornaments, cut through a turquoise sea. It was like discovering television for the first time, getting colour.

'You shouldn't wear a string vest under this,' Margaret said, eventually turning her eyes from the screen, via me, to the polo neck. 'You'll look like a candlewick bedspread.'

'It's too cold to wear without a vest.'

'Wear one of your other ones.'

'I thought they were all thrown out,' I said and went to the Christmas tree, reaching in to the aluminium trunk and bending a white-fringed branch into a more natural shape.

'Who would throw them out?' Margaret asked, but I didn't reply. The simple truth was I preferred string vests. There

was on the unit holding the record player to my right, a jug of water beside it. People were looking disappointed. (We were, as they say, mixed company.) They were looking at me disappointed. I was wagging my finger. Slowly the realization dawned that the reason the conversation had turned towards politics was because I was steering it.

I stopped wagging my finger.

'Well that's my opinion, anyhow,' I said. I got the impression I had been talking at some length. Margaret, no doubt, wherever she had got to, would have said what's new in that, but the fact of the matter was that most people needed to have things explained to them. They were not in the habit of thinking for themselves.

The living-room walls had contracted once more to the dimensions of the other end-terraces on the street. You could even see a bit of carpet. Dark, dark blue to swallow up stains and show up potato crisps. Jill, at the front door, called goodnight to departing guests. For a few moments more, no one in the living room said anything, then Hideg, who I did not recall having noticed while I talked, sat forward in his chair.

'Interesting,' he said, which was Hideg for I don't agree with a word you say. 'But you know we should not get carried away.'

Caroline Stitt and her husband, whose name, supposing I ever knew it, escaped me, made their excuses and left.

'After all, we are not talking Hungary in '56. Some rioting, a bomb or two, now and then a gun battle. No, this is not at all like in Hungary. This time next year, you will see, everything will have settled down again.'

A few of the neighbours who remained in the living room nodded. From one came a muttered 'God willing'. I seemed

to remember Hideg saying last year that it was already over. My brain had just suggested I let it rest when my mouth said, 'You're missing the point.' There was a loud familiar sigh, which I chose to ignore. 'Missing the point entirely.'

'Rodney.' Margaret had come in from the hallway carrying the coats. 'Time we were off.'

'In a minute,' I said and Margaret dropped my coat on the settee and left.

Hideg laughed. 'You and I,' he said, 'we could talk the whole night.'

This time I resisted the temptation to tell him that we might talk all night, but only one of us would talk sense. Everyone else was making ready to go home. He gave me my coat.

'A lovely night,' he said, to me, to whomever else was within earshot, and then, as though this had been an experimental get-together, 'Yes, we must do it again.'

Margaret was already at our gate by the time I reached the end of the Hidegs' path. She let herself in, switched on the hall light, leaving the door ajar for me. The Quinns' car was parked in front of their house again. Nice people, the Quinns. A cat hunched between the rear wheels, all eyes and radar ears. Nice cat.

'Puss,' I said and bent my knees slightly the better to see under the car. 'Puss, puss.'

I pitched forward and, shooting my hand out to break my fall, stubbed my thumb on the road. The cat fled. I used the back of the car to help myself up.

A door shut at the far end of the street. I didn't think anyone could have seen me, but to be on the safe side I scowled down at the roadway, as though at a pothole or a patch of ice, dragging my foot backwards and forwards over the surface.

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To me she said it would be a sin to leave her mother on her own. Margaret's mother was a widow at the age of thirty-five. She lived till she was seventy-three. When her affairs were settled, I asked Margaret what there was to keep us in our market town now.

'Find us a house, then,' she told me. And by the next week I had.

'Just come in,' said the estate agent. ('Artie, for dear sake. Call me Artie.') He showed me the brochure. Inside terrace, royal-blue door, Bakelite number 5. With the nail of his ring finger, Artie dislodged a flake of dry skin from his hairline and transported it below the table. 'Lovely house, lovely area.'

'So why's it so cheap?' Margaret had asked me when I brought the brochure home. She didn't appear quite as delighted as I'd imagined.

'The people are emigrating. Probably got their tickets bought, need a quick sale.'

Margaret continued to examine the brochure, chewing her lip as though our good fortune was somehow ill-gotten.

'Handy to buses and the city centre,' I carried on, putting on the funny voice I used when I wanted to kid on I was somebody other than me, somebody like an estate agent. 'Very quiet neighbours.'

De-dang-de-dang-de-dang-de-dang-de-dang.

I was in the kitchen of our neighbours Hideg and Jill, hoping for a second helping of flan, when the hand bell was rung. Jill was a supply teacher. The bell was her signal that we were into the last two minutes of the old year. I gave up on the flan and refilled my glass ahead of the rush, so that by the time the one-minute warning was rung I had actually managed to find a seat – not an arm, not a perch – a seat directly in front of the

throbbing, retina-scalding spectacle that was *The Andy Stewart Hogmanay Special*, beamed on to the Hidegs' eighteen-inch colour television screen.

I made room for Margaret as she located me through the bodies moving back in from the kitchen and hallway, though there was no time for her to sit down, because Andy Stewart himself (who I discovered to be an orange-faced gentleman) had started the countdown, which was taken up by every voice in the Hidegs' living room.

'. . . nine, eight, seven . . .'

Jill was crouched with one ruched and ribboned arm around the television set as though she owned not just the box but its contents, as though Andy was doing this all for us.

'. . . five, four, three . . .' Hideg blocked Andy out, faced us . . . 'two, one,' and crossed his arms in front of his chest, offering his open hands. We all followed suit. We formed a raggedy ring, which straggled over settee and chairs, over occasional tables become mini Manhattans of tight-packed glasses, and sang 'Auld Lang Syne'.

'Happy New Year,' we told one another. Margaret kissed me.

'Happy New Year, love,' she whispered. She looked sad.

'How many of those have you had?' I asked, with a nod to her half-empty glass.

Too much drink always made Margaret blue. Her only answer was to shake her head. Which I took to indicate the opposite of what she thought it did.

At some point – I didn't wear a watch outside work, the TV was off, the Hidegs' wall clock had no numerals and in any case may have stopped – the conversation turned to politics.

I was in the chair before the television. The Teacher's bottle

'Cheers.'

There was a good spread laid out on the countertop and the gate-legged dining table. There was always a good spread at the Hidegs'. Pavlova, flan, apple tart, trifle, mounds of sausage rolls and sandwiches. Pickled silverskin onions, cucumber slices and bright yellow cauliflorets followed one another round the compartments of a stainless-steel carousel, the box for which stood on its end under the table. Lundofte. The draining board was straining under the weight of bottles and glasses. Of course, everyone had brought something, but still, you had to wonder how Hideg did it. And not only at New Year either. It was a plumbing supplier's he travelled for, not a distillery. Some people just liked giving parties, Margaret said. They saved up for them the way other people saved up for holidays.

Four male voices, Hideg's prominent among them, were roaring along now to the England record, achieving the nigh-on impossible in making footballers sound tuneful.

'Oh, God,' I said into my glass.

'I see someone else is full of the festive spirit.'

Caroline – Mrs Stitt – stood on the kitchen side of the doorway. A ruptured strip of Sellotape on the frame directly overhead might well have once held mistletoe.

'Is it the cigarettes? Hard staying off?'

Christ, I really had told the whole street. Caroline – Mrs Stitt – was one of those neighbours I seemed to be able to go six months or more without seeing. In fact, I had seen her so rarely in all the years I had been living here that even now I was unsure what I should call her, Caroline, Mrs Stitt. Tonight, as on the previous dozen or so occasions when we had spoken, I got around the problem by not calling her anything at all.

'Nice Christmas?' I asked.

'Only a man could ask a woman that,' she said.

'Ha-ha.' That's exactly the way my laugh came out.

'If you're not running round the shops, you're running round the kitchen. See kids? They're a flaming curse.'

'I'll take your word for it,' I said, but she had turned talking over her shoulder to Ivy Moore, whose dress, for all there was of it, might have been stitched together out of the few scraps left from the making of Jill's.

'Denis minding George?'

'Just till midnight, then we'll swap.'

Ivy raised herself on tiptoes to get a smile in at me.

'Everything all right with Rodney?' she asked as though I was Rodney's brother, or even her boy George's.

'Getting better by the minute,' I said. 'Getting better by the minute.'

The cats' chorus rejects had wandered, way down in their boots, from England to the Wild West, Lee Marvin country. Did I know where hell was? they asked, redundantly. It was eleven o'clock, thirty minutes (according to Hideg tradition) to supper, sixty minutes to 1971, the proper start to the new decade whose advent had been proclaimed so raucously inaccurately in this very spot twelve months ago.

I would not have thought at the beginning of the last decade that I would be seeing in this one in the city. We were market-townsfolk then, Margaret and I, born and bored. Oh, were we bored. There was not much theatre in a market town, not much chance to take in an orchestra, see more than the one new film a month.

Still, Margaret's mother would say, the city was no place to be bringing up youngsters. I would look at Margaret. Will you tell her or will I?

'You're right there, Mummy,' was all she ever said to her.

Jill busied into the hall (what on earth was she wearing?) and took our coats.

'Is it starting to freeze?' she asked. She had to hitch up her dress to climb the stairs without tripping.

The Hideg children – one boy, one girl – would have been packed off as usual to Jill's parents, his room become a cloak depository, hers a temporary home for the bird cages.

Hideg and his blinking birds. To hear him sometimes you would have thought he was a world authority, but I'd got him all right at Hallowe'en. Had him driven near to distraction asking him about the Wydoo.

'The Wydoo?' he was saying, hunting through his *Jumbo Book of Birds of the World*. 'The *Wydoo*? Where did you hear of this bird?'

'In the song, of course,' I said and sang it. 'Wydoo birds suddenly appear, every time you are near . . .'

'Rodney,' Hideg slammed the book shut. His nostrils twitched, his eyebrows twitched. 'You're very funny.'

'Come in,' he urged us now, pushing the living-room door. 'Come in.'

The room was blue with smoke. I waved at the party guests waving to me, from the cushions and arms of the chairs and settee, waving to me from out of the clusters they had formed by the television in one far corner and record player in the other.

So many people. When Hideg shoved the furniture back it was as though the walls themselves were pushed further apart, as though *space* was bent.

I took them all in without, as it were, differentiating them. Fellow residents, my brain said, neighbours, though there were invariably a few wild-card invitees in amongst us.

'We were just beginning to worry,' Hideg said. Since last I

was here he had wired up wall lights either side of the fireplace and done away with the overhead light entirely. I supposed the idea was to make the room more 'atmospheric', but if you asked me it would have destroyed your eyes.

'Smoke bothering you?' Hideg asked. I must have been peering. 'How long is it now?'

Margaret was by my side. I didn't look at her.

'Seven months,' I said and Hideg said, 'Good, good. Drink?'

'Well,' I said when he had gone.

It *was* seven months. Seven months since I had read the article in a *Lancet* someone had left on the train, saying that American researchers had proved the link between cigarettes and lung cancer. The Royal College of Physicians were preparing their own report. I had been telling anyone who would listen to me that one day very soon there would be a warning printed on their cigarette packets.

I told my own doctor.

'I'll take my chances,' he said, flicking ash. 'Thank you.'

Jill was downstairs again. Margaret joined Ann McGuinness in admiring her dress. Jill's dress, now that I got a proper look at it, was equal parts puffs and ribbons and ruches, from neck to wrist and waist. The hem was practically trailing on the floor. I didn't see what there was to admire. The cluster of guests by the record player broke up in laughter as Ray Coniff gave way to the moronic strains of 'Back Home', the England World Cup song. I wandered towards the kitchen doorway. Hideg put a glass in my hand as he passed coming the other way. He raised his own glass to within a whisker of mine. Hideg never clinked glasses. Bad luck. Some Hungarian superstition.

'Egészségére!' he said, as he had to, at least once, to every guest every year.

bottom right of the discoloration: Iceland. After a few moments' thought and a few moments more judging the angle of the diagonal I wanted to follow, I sketched an oval, a foot from the circle, to represent this lump of a place.

'I hope you're not going to forget you've to paper over that,' Margaret had said when she came up a couple of hours later to see how I was getting on with the stripping. I had a vague Isle of Man in by now, a big-bottomed approximation of Britain.

'Don't worry, don't worry,' I said.

Next day on the way from work I stopped at the central library and borrowed *The Times Atlas of the World*.

What did the two of us want with three bedrooms?

'What's keeping you now?' Margaret called from the living room. 'See if you're at that blinking map?'

'My black shoes need polishing.'

'Wear your new tan ones.'

'The tan ones won't go with the grey trousers.'

'Put on your green trousers.'

'The green trousers aren't ironed. Anyway I'm wearing my navy blazer.'

'Rodney,' Margaret came to the foot of the stairs and looked to where I stood at the top, holding my shoes, 'it is now twenty-two minutes past.'

'Maybe you're right,' I said and began unbuckling my belt. 'Maybe I should change into the green ones. Is the ironing board still up?'

'No,' Margaret said, though not, from her tone, in answer to my question about the ironing board. 'You'll wear what you have on you. Give me your shoes down till I brush them. And would you for God's sake hurry up?'

There was a further slight delay while I searched behind the chest of drawers for the back of a cufflink, another while I took the year-old bank statement I found there to the safe-keeping of a Clarks shoe box – Margaret was on the front doorstep, stamping her feet – and then at a shade after a quarter to eleven and with a bottle of Teacher's under my arm, I stepped out into the glittering street with my wife in the direction of number 18, where the Hidegs were hosting their traditional Old Year's Night party.

Every first of January I resolved not to spend another thirty-first of December in their house, but Hideg was indefatigable. The groundwork commenced the week after his Hallowe'en party, and even when I should have known enough to expect it, year after year I was caught unprepared.

'Rodney, made any plans for the New Year?'

'Well, it's still a bit early for . . . Plans? No, not exactly.'

'That's good.' Rubbing his hands. 'Allow me then to book you and Margaret both.'

'Is it a big thing where he comes from?' I asked Margaret as we carried on down the street, as I must have asked her a hundred times before. 'Or does he think it's a big thing with us?'

'Give over,' Margaret said then shouted, stepping off the kerb with me into the road, to Mr and Mrs Quinn from number 15, who were getting into their car, who were escaping the street. 'Happy New Year, Mrs Quinn. Happy New Year, Mr Quinn.'

'Happy New Year,' they both shouted back. Nice people, the Quinns. Lucky people. I saluted with the bottle of whisky.

'Teacher's!' Hideg said when I handed him the bottle a minute later. It could hardly have been a surprise, I brought a bottle of Teacher's every year. 'Excellent.'

'Rodney, are you in there?'

Let it go.

'No.'

'Why haven't you the light on?'

'Haven't I the light on?'

'Quit acting the lig.'

I opened the bathroom door. Margaret had just taken her heated rollers out. Her hair, here and there, still described the shape of them. Her hair was more grey now than brown. She had talked about dyeing. I – and this was not a stage, an age, I ever thought I would get to in my life – liked it just the way it was.

'What were you doing in there?'

She squeezed past me, reaching for the light cord. Her dress was not done up at the back.

'Looking out the window,' I told her.

The window was still on the latch, specks of ash clung to the frosted glass. There was two and there was two and then there was four.

'You were smoking,' she said and pulled the window shut.

'Smoking and looking out the window.'

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask her did she remember the skipping craze, back when we moved in, but I couldn't imagine myself what brought it to mind and I didn't want her thinking I was being maudlin. She leaned over the wash-hand basin to clean her teeth, holding her hair steady with her left hand. I zipped up her dress as she straightened and replaced her toothbrush.

'You don't have to hide it from me, you know. It was you wanted to stop.'

She was right. I had wanted to stop smoking. Did stop, overnight. Willpower. Told the whole street. Told Hideg.

Margaret squirted a haze of Tweed and stepped into it as I walked backwards out the bathroom door.

'No one will think any the less of you for going back on them.'

'I'm not back on them,' I said from the boxroom.

'Rodney!'

'What?'

The Tweed preceded her.

'There isn't time.'

I carried on with what I was doing, sharpening a 2B pencil.

'There's plenty of time, it's only ten.'

'Ten past ten and we've to be there at half past. Ten past ten and you're not dressed.'

I walked up to the party wall, turning the shade of the floor-standing Anglepoise with the palm of my right hand and pressing the button with my thumb. I stopped, I stooped, my nose an inch from the plaster.

Margaret switched the lamp off again, got left side of me and pushed with her shoulder.

'Come on,' she said and I submitted to her shoving. 'Rhodesia'll still be there in the morning.'

'The Sudan, actually.'

'Wherever.'

The year before last, our fifth year in the house, I had finally got around to stripping the two remaining bedrooms. (I had stripped the one with the baby paper before Margaret and I even moved in.) There was a slight discoloration in the plaster towards the top of the boxroom's party wall, a foot and a half left of centre. Something about the shape – I drew around it in pencil the better to see it and, yes, I was right – it looked a bit like Greenland. I tried to recall the maps we had at school that rolled down to cover entire walls. I drew a rough circle,

'Margaret!'

'What?'

'C'm'ere.'

'Where?'

'Here.'

'Coming.'

'Quick!'

'Coming.'

'Look.'

'Oh.'

Youngsters.

Skipping.

Girls and boys, ten or more of them, some tall, some small, happed up in gabardines and anoraks, in a line facing our house, not seeing us, not focusing on anything but the ropes that are as often above, below and behind them as they are in front. Some jump feet together, some two-step their rope, right foot, left foot. If they stumble they start again without missing a second beat, right foot, left foot, feet together. The daylight is fading, mist swarms high up about the orange globes of the street lamps. Down where the mouths are, puffs of breath issue forth, like steam from an engine in full flight, as ten or more ropes whip through the air, nick off the ribbed roadway.

'Do you think it's a display?' Margaret whispers. 'A greeting?'

I shake my head, at a loss. Whatever it is, it is extraordinary.

We stand side by side at the window, hardly daring to move.

∞

'Rodney?'

Deep breath. Hold it. Hold it. Hold it.

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