

The Fear

Jenny liked to get some air before her afternoon house calls. Most Tuesdays she'd drive down to The Promenade for lunch at Caruso's, where she'd sit outside, among the smokers and the dog walkers, at a rickety cafe table that had a good view of the beach. She liked to watch the kite surfers; admire the fuck you rhythm of their boards skidding and bouncing along the water's surface. No matter how hard she squinted, she could never make out the strings that bound them to their kites, and every time they caught a gust of wind, she felt her heart soar at the fluorescent orange and yellow slash marks they made across the sky. Today was such a dour and windless sort of day, Jenny knew there wouldn't be any kite surfers. The sky hung dull as pewter above the town, and the sea had a soupy look she wasn't able for. It wouldn't have taken much to pull her under.

They were breeding like rabbits in the new estates beyond the racecourse and she was flat out, haranguing first time mothers about the benefits of breastfeeding, making sure they were getting their babies to latch on, that they didn't have mastitis or postnatal depression. Or indeed its precursor: a neglected husband roaring about how he was no longer welcome in his own home. Jenny was one of two public health nurses assigned to Tramore. The other one—Maggie Dunphy—was on compassionate leave, for an undisclosed illness that everyone presumed to be her nerves. It wasn't easy to be sympathetic.

With the way things were, who wasn't suffering? The government had bailed out the banks, and now there was no money for anything, not even incontinence pads for her old and handicapped clients. When Jenny turned on the television news she was confronted by a government minister dolefully shaking his well-fed head and telling the country it had lost the run of itself, how stupidity and extravagance would cost us dearly for 'generations to come', but to remember—and be thankful—this was Ireland and not Greece. Greece was fucked. What good was all that civilisation when they were up shit creek without a paddle?

Jenny wasn't so sure. The Greek finance minister was too handsome for politics, he drove around European summits on a huge gleaming motorbike, forever giving the IMF the finger. His name was Yanis; it had a strong, sexy ring to it, and Jenny liked the cut of his jib. Besides, what had those beaky IMF shitehawks ever done for her? Only come over to Ireland, cut her pay, and slap a recruitment ban on the health service, which meant she now had to cover Mad Maggie Dunphy's home visits on top of her own. And the upshot? If your postpartum fanny was healing too slowly, or your mind was after wandering up to The Metal Man to consider the pros and cons of throwing your body off the cliffs, public health nurse Jenny Supple did not have the time or patience to deal with your hypochondria or your loneliness. The clock was ticking, and if whatever ailed you wasn't treatable, it wasn't worth the cost of putting diesel in her 05 Ford Fiesta.

Because it wasn't a kite surfing sort of day, Jenny decided to buy her lunch in the supermarket. She could recycle the wine bottles that were rolling around in her car boot while she was at it. She by-passed the town on new roads that looped past schools and houses towards the countryside, only to terminate abruptly at a roundabout offering three destinations: a potholed track leading to nowhere of consequence, an unfinished road that ended before it reached the ghost estate, and finally; a smooth, well-lit road that landed you in seven tarmacadamed acres of rezoned farmland. It had been freshly sliced and painted into two hundred parking spaces, around which were planted: a Lidl, a 24-hour Tesco, and a private health complex housing a team of general practitioners and a psychotherapist. Then there was the credit union, with an ATM on the wall outside that was forever 'out of service'.

Supermarket shopping always carried the risk of running into clients. Jenny rarely recognised them but they always spotted and cornered her, greedy for a bit of bonus care. They were surprised, offended even, when she appeared more interested in a tray of minced beef or a special offer on sausages, than she was in an update on their veins and their ulcers and their haemorrhoids. Once they left the context of their houses they became strangers; she remembered them by their furniture, not their faces. *Purple Velvet Curtains* was driven demented by a teething baby who'd neither sleep nor eat. *Man with Mallards on his Kitchen Wall* had diabetes and often farted with fright when she injected his belly. *Black Leather Recliner* would kill

himself by Christmas unless the cancer got there first. You could never avoid them completely, but you could cut the odds by steering clear of the aisles that stocked nappies, milk formula, and alcohol.

Black Leather Recliner was one of her clients, not Maggie's. She'd been checking in on him for years. His name was Maurice Grant. And even though it was against the rules Jenny brought him three large pouches of Amber Leaf tobacco every Tuesday, to spare him going up the town. Drink, to which he had a lifelong devotion, she refused to procure. His landlord did that. 'A right article,' was how Maurice described him to Jenny. For five Euro commission, he'd drive up and down to Lidl, filling his Toyota Estate with spirits and cider that he'd deliver to anyone who was too old, too sick or just too pissed to walk up the hill. Whiskey was Maurice Grant's poison, and there was always an open bottle of it beside his recliner when she called.

Tobacco bought, Jenny walked around the supermarket with her earphones in, listening to the radio. It was one of those blokes telling jokes kind of shows, full of pop ballads and adverts and listeners texting the DJs as casually as if they were good mates who'd last seen each other in Supermac's after the pub on Saturday night. The two presenters were yacking about some Hollywood actor who'd been diagnosed with throat cancer after he'd contracted the HPV virus through oral sex. Doctors in America were up to ninety—it hadn't occurred to them that the virus could afflict men. Rich men. Sexy men. Men, like them.

Serves ye right, Jenny thought. Picking up a plastic bowl of *Salade Nicoise*, she examined the contents: the egg yolk was going grey; it had a black rim around it, the tuna looked parched, and she counted just one... two... three black olives, like little knobs of sheep shit. She put the salad back on the shelf, and moved along the fridges past the *Tesco Finest* pork pies and sausage rolls. People go mad for pastry. *Samosas: Authentic Indian street food; spiced potato in a crispy shell*. Vegetarian junk food. She'd stayed away from meat for the five years she was with Gerard. He wouldn't have it in the house, and not counting the odd cracker with ham at work, she too had abstained. Jenny wondered if there was any chance she'd given Gerard the HPV virus. It

was no less than he deserved. She grabbed a chicken tikka sandwich, and made a bee-line for the cashier.

One of the benefits of eating lunch in your car is that nobody can interrupt you. There's no 'do you mind if I join you?' or 'is there anyone using this chair?'. You just put up the windows, lock the doors and eat without caring about the mayonnaise on your chin, or the green shit between your teeth.

My lunch.

My car.

Fuck off world.

A coffin dodger in an Auris pulled up beside her. Jesus Christ, there was nothing but empty spaces in the carpark, loads of them at the supermarket entrance, and loads more beside the trolley bay. After he'd hauled his bones out the door of his car and locked it, he bent down and peered in her passenger window. Was he a client? Jenny swung her head the opposite direction and observed, with great interest, a woman coming out of the credit union. She was dressed in a navy waistcoat and A-line skirt, with white ankle socks and runners on her feet. She stopped at the board on the footpath that said 'Talk To Us Today About A Loan', and she began to drag it into the credit union. Watching her flip the sign on the door to CLOSED, Jenny concluded this was it: the grimmest stretch of tarmacadam in Ireland.

No wonder Maurice Grant didn't want to leave the house. He'd be able for it alright. Most of the ones on the public health round were diabetic, middle-aged men and women whose privates were buried beneath their three-stone bellies, and because they could only cover short distances with a flat-footed shuffle that winded them, it was easier be housebound. But Maurice was nimble. He'd a gaunt look since the diagnosis, but his hands were strong; he'd wave them about as he spoke, wagging his tobacco-stained fingers to emphasise things he did not approve of. He was clean-shaven with short sideburns and he combed his hair into a stiff grey quiff. His clothes were always spruce enough to be seen in, but the only people Maurice ever saw were: his landlord, his daughter Helen, and on Tuesday afternoons, Jenny.

She remembered how a few months back, it had occurred to her that he must have been good-looking when he was younger. And how, on the same day, she'd noticed the house had been cleaned, particles of sunlight poured through the kitchen window and bounced off the stainless steel draining board. For once, her feet didn't stick to the linoleum floor; and there was a mirror she hadn't seen before on the wall above the mantelpiece. That was when she realised it was the house that looked and smelled better, not Maurice.

By her reckoning, it would be a year before he'd need the hospice, and when he did she'd have another added to her list in his place. Somebody she liked less. Maybe she should get him his whiskey. Who would know and what the fuck did Maurice have to lose anyhow? The only person losing out would be his racketeering landlord. Twenty-to-two, she still had time. Grabbing her handbag Jenny got out of the car and headed for Lidl, where she bought a gift bag and a bottle of the *Dundalgan* he liked to drink.

A grey scarf of clouds was choking the sky as she rounded the clifftop, and Jenny began to have second thoughts about the whiskey. Maybe Maurice would be annoyed that she'd crossed some unspoken boundary? Fags were fine—he'd asked for those. But booze? That was a different matter entirely. She decided to leave the bottle in the car and see what kind of form he was in. She could get it once she'd checked his prescriptions had been filled and his blood pressure was normal—as an afterthought, all casual. She'd tell him it had been given to her, but she'd no taste for spirits.

She rang the doorbell. Through the glass, the bulb in the hall gave off a pale yellow ball of light. The floor in Maurice Grant's porch was always littered with bills and flyers; a soggy pile of fast food menus, free-sheets, and cards telling him he'd missed the meter reader, again. He'd open the door and shunt them with his foot towards a pot containing the dead stalk of a geranium plant. Jenny rang the bell again. She thought about gathering up the junk mail and putting it in the wheelie bin that sat beneath the front room window, but that would be taking

liberties. She stepped into the porch and rapped on the frosted glass door. But still, there was no sign of Maurice.

It sometimes happened that clients did not open the door, either because they were out, or because they weren't in the mood. Maurice Grant had never done this; even if he didn't want to see her, he wanted his tobacco, and for that alone, he'd humour her. Jenny rummaged for her mobile and called him, she could hear his phone ringing through the warped front window that never fully closed. She got back into the car and pulled out her files. Maurice's next of kin was his daughter, Helen Grant; her number scratched in green Biro on the health board form. It went straight to voicemail.

Jenny left a message to call, then swiping at the screen, she stalled on the words *Gerard. Mobile. 11hr ago*. She resisted the memory of the night before, but it kept coming at her in sickening instalments: Facebook open on the laptop. The second bottle of wine. Melissa spitting fury down the phone. 'It's two in the morning... leave us the fuck alone.' Jenny remembered now, the baby had started crying. She imagined him swaddled in a blanket between them in the bed. Gerard, on environmental grounds, had probably refused to buy a new mattress. He took the phone from Melissa.

'Please stop,' he said. 'It's not fair.'

Fair? Since when was anything fair? That was the problem with Gerard, he was all about justice and equality. The smug bastard wouldn't know fairness if it slapped him in the face.

'You were married to me once.' She'd thought it, but did she actually say it? She blanched at the realisation that she did.

'Get help,' he said, and hung up.

Jenny pushed back the car seat and closed her eyes. She listened for the soothing roll and crash of the sea, but it would not come. She was submerged, deaf to the waves, to the warring gulls

and the car alarm blaring on The Prom. Her heart punched her ribcage. She did her breathing exercise. This too shall pass. This too shall pass.

High heels came clacking down the footpath. Jenny sat up and saw a taxi pull away from the kerb. A woman of about her own age, tall with dark hair, was struggling to turn a key in Maurice's front door. Jenny watched her go inside, then she got out of the car. By the time she reached the porch, Helen Grant was in the front doorway, blocking her way. She was a beauty, even with her face drained of blood, and her mouth stretched across it like a scar. Jenny understood, and took out her phone. 'Tell them he's dead,' Helen Grant said, then she closed the door and sat in a blurred slump at the foot of the stairs. Jenny stood by the wheelie bin, and waiting for the ambulance to arrive, she started to cry.