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# Milkman

ANNA BURNS

SHORTLISTED FOR THE ORANGE PRIZE  
FOR NO BONES







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**fi**

MILKMAN



ANNA BURNS

**ff**



FABER & FABER

For Katy Nicholson, Clare Dimond and James Smith

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## ONE

The day Somebody McSomebody put a gun to my breast and called me a cat and threatened to shoot me was the same day the milkman died. He had been shot by one of the state hit squads and I did not care about the shooting of this man. Others did care though, and some were those who, in the parlance, 'knew me to see but not to speak to' and I was being talked about because there was a rumour started by them, or more likely by first brother-in-law, that I had been having an affair with this milkman and that I was eighteen and he was forty-one. I knew his age, not because he got shot and it was given by the media, but because there had been talk before this, for months before the shooting, by these people of the rumour, that forty-one and eighteen was disgusting, that twenty-three years' difference was disgusting, that he was married and not to be fooled by me for there were plenty of quiet, unnoticeable people who took a bit of watching. It had been my fault too, it seemed, this affair with the milkman. But I had not been having an affair with the milkman. I did not like the milkman and had been frightened and confused by his pursuing and attempting an affair with me. I did not like first brother-in-law either. In his compulsions he made things up about other people's sexlives. About my sexlife. When I was younger, when I was twelve, when he appeared on my eldest sister's rebound after her long-term boyfriend got dumped for cheating on her, this new man got her pregnant and they got married right away. He made lewd remarks about me to me from the first moment he met me – about my quaint, my tail, my contry, my box, my jar, my contrariness, my monosyllable – and he used words, words sexual, I did not understand. He knew I didn't understand them but that I knew enough to grasp they were sexual. That was what gave him pleasure. He was thirty-five. Twelve and thirty-five. That was a twenty-three years' difference too.

So he made his remarks and felt entitled to make his remarks and I did not speak because I did not know how to respond to this person. He never made his comments when my sister was in the room. Always, whenever she'd leave the room, it was a switch turned on inside him. On the plus side, I wasn't physically frightened of him. In those days, in that place, violence was everybody's main gauge for judging those around them and I could see at once he didn't have it, that he didn't come from that perspective. All the same,

his predatory nature pushed me into frozenness every time. So he was a piece of dirt and she was in a bad way with being pregnant, with still loving her long-term man and not believing what he'd done to her, disbelieving he wasn't missing her, for he wasn't. He was off now with somebody else. She didn't really see this man here, this older man she'd married but had been too young herself, and too unhappy, and too in love – just not with him – to have taken up with him. I stopped visiting even though she was sad because I could no longer take his words and facial expressions. Six years on, as he tried to work his way through me and my remaining elder sisters, with the three of us – directly, indirectly, politely, fuck off-ly – rejecting him, the milkman, also uninvited but much more frightening, much more dangerous, stepped from out of nowhere onto the scene.

I didn't know whose milkman he was. He wasn't our milkman. I don't think he was anybody's. He didn't take milk orders. There was no milk about him. He didn't ever deliver milk. Also, he didn't drive a milk lorry. Instead he drove cars, different cars, often flash cars, though he himself was not flashy. For all this though, I only noticed him and his cars when he started putting himself in them in front of me. Then there was that van – small, white, nondescript, shapeshifting. From time to time he was seen at the wheel of that van too.

He appeared one day, driving up in one of his cars as I was walking along reading *Ivanhoe*. Often I would walk along reading books. I didn't see anything wrong with this but it became something else to be added as further proof against me. 'Reading-while-walking' was definitely on the list.

'You're one of the who's-it girls, aren't you? So-and-so was your father, wasn't he? Your brothers, thingy, thingy, thingy and thingy, used to play in the hurley team, didn't they? Hop in. I'll give you a lift.'

This was said casually, the passenger door already opening. I was startled out of my reading. I had not heard this car drive up. Had not seen before either, this man at the wheel of it. He was leaning over, looking out at me, smiling and friendly by way of being obliging. But by now, by age eighteen, 'smiling, friendly and obliging' always had me straight on the alert. It was not the lift itself. People who had cars here often would stop and offer lifts to others going into and out of the area. Cars were not in abundance then and public transport, because of bombscares and hijackings, was intermittently withdrawn. Kerb-crawling too, may have been a term recognised, but it was not recognised as a practice. Certainly I had never come across it. Anyway, I did not want a lift. That was generally speaking. I liked walking – walking and reading, walking and thinking. Also specifically speaking, I did not want to



get in the car with this man. I did not know how to say so though, as he wasn't being rude and he knew my family for he'd named the credentials, the male people of my family, and I couldn't be rude because he wasn't being rude. So I hesitated, or froze, which was rude. 'I'm walking,' I said. 'I'm reading,' and I held up the book, as if *Ivanhoe* should explain the walking, the necessity for walking. 'You can read in the car,' he said, and I don't remember how I responded to that. Eventually he laughed and said, 'No bother. Don't you be worryin'. Enjoy your book there,' and he closed the car door and drove away.

First time that was all that happened – and already a rumour started up. Eldest sister came round to see me because her husband, my now forty-one-year-old brother-in-law, had sent her round to see me. She was to apprise me and to warn me. She said I had been seen talking with this man.

'Fuck off,' I said. 'What's that mean – *been seen*? Who's been seein' me? Your husband?'

'You'd better listen to me,' she said. But I wouldn't listen – because of him and his double standards, and because of her putting up with them. I didn't know I was blaming her, had been blaming her, for his long-term remarks to me. Didn't know I was blaming her for marrying him when she didn't love him and couldn't possibly respect him, for she must have known, how could she not, all the playing around he got up to himself.

She tried to persist in advising me to behave myself, in warning me that I was doing myself no favours, that of all the men to take up with— But that was enough. I became incensed and cursed some more because she didn't like cursing so that was the only way to get her out of a room. I then shouted out the window after her that if that coward had anything to say to me then he was to come round and say it to me himself. That was a mistake: to have been emotional, to have been seen and heard to be emotional, shouting out the window, over the street, allowing myself to be pulled into the momentum. Usually I managed not to fall into that. But I was angry. I had just so much anger – at her, for being the wee wife, for doing always exactly what he told her to, and at him, for trying to put his own contemptibleness over onto me. Already I could feel my stubbornness, my 'mind your own business' arising. Unfortunately whenever that happened, I'd pretty much turn perverse, refuse to learn from experience and cut off my nose to spite my face. As for the rumour of me and the milkman, I dismissed it without considering it. Intense nosiness about everybody had always existed in the area. Gossip washed in, washed out, came, went, moved on to the next target. So I didn't pay attention to this love affair with the milkman. Then he appeared again – this time on foot as I was running in the parks with the lower and upper waterworks.

I was alone and not reading this time, for I never read while running. And there he was, again out of nowhere, this time falling into step beside me where he'd never been before. Instantly we were running together and it looked as if always we were running together and again I was startled, as I would be startled by every encounter, except the last, I was to have with this man. At first he didn't speak, and I could not speak. Then he did and his talk was mid-conversation as if too, always we were mid-conversation. His words were brief and a little strained because of my pace of running, and it was of my place of work that he spoke. He knew my work – where it was, what I did there, the hours, the days and the twenty-past-eight bus I caught every morning when it wasn't being hijacked to get me into town to it. Also he made the pronouncement that I never caught this bus home. This was true. Every weekday, rain or shine, gunplay or bombs, stand-off or riots, I preferred to walk home reading my latest book. This would be a nineteenth-century book because I did not like twentieth-century books because I did not like the twentieth century. I suppose now, looking back, this milkman knew all of that as well.

So he spoke his words as we were going along one of the sides of the top-end reservoir. There was a smaller reservoir near the child's playground down at the bottom end. He looked ahead, this man, as he spoke to me, not once turning towards me. Throughout this second meeting he didn't ask one question of me. Nor did he seem to want any response. Not that I could have given one. I was still at the part of 'where did he come from?' Also, why was he acting as if he knew me, as if we knew each other, when we did not know each other? Why was he presuming I didn't mind him beside me when I did mind him beside me? Why could I just not stop this running and tell this man to leave me alone? Apart from 'where did he come from?' I didn't have those other thoughts until later, and I don't mean an hour later. I mean twenty years later. At the time, age eighteen, having been brought up in a hair-trigger society where the ground rules were – if no physically violent touch was being laid upon you, and no outright verbal insults were being levelled at you, and no taunting looks in the vicinity either, then nothing was happening, so how could you be under attack from something that wasn't there? At eighteen I had no proper understanding of the ways that constituted encroachment. I had a feeling for them, an intuition, a sense of repugnance for some situations and some people, but I did not know intuition and repugnance counted, did not know I had a right not to like, not to have to put up with, anybody and everybody coming near. Best I could manage in those days was to hope the person concerned would hurry up and say whatever it was he or she thought

they were being friendly and obliging by saying, then for them to go away; or else to go away myself, politely and quickly, the very moment I could.

I knew by this second meeting that the milkman was attracted to me, that he was making some move on me. I knew I didn't like him being attracted and that I did not feel the same way towards him myself. But he uttered no direct words by way of forwarding on this attraction. Still too, he asked nothing of me. Nor was he physically touching me. Not once so far in this second meeting had he even looked at me. Plus he was older than me, far older, so could it be, I wondered, that I was getting this wrong, that the situation was not as I imagined? As for the running, we were in a public place. This was two conjoined large parks during the day, a sinister environment at night, though during the day also it was sinister. People didn't like to admit to the day section being sinister because everyone wanted at least one place where they could go. I didn't own this territory so that meant he was allowed to run in it just as much as I was allowed to run in it, just as much as children in the Seventies felt entitled to drink their alcohol in it, just as slightly older children would later in the Eighties feel justified sniffing their glue in it, just as older people again in the Nineties would come to inject themselves with heroin in it, just as at present the state forces were hiding in it to photograph renouncers-of-the-state. They also photographed renouncers' known and unknown associates, which was what then happened just at this point. An audible 'click' sounded as the milkman and I ran by a bush and this was a bush I'd run by lots of times without clicks coming out of it. I knew it had happened this time because of the milkman and his involvement, and by 'involvement' I mean connected, and by 'connected' I mean active rebellion, and by 'active rebellion' I mean state-enemy renouncer owing to the political problems that existed in this place. So now I was to be on file somewhere, in a photograph somewhere, as a once unknown, but now certainly known associate. This milkman himself made no reference to the click even though it was impossible he had not heard it. I dealt with it by picking up my pace to get this run over with, also by pretending I had not heard the click myself.

He slowed the run down though, right down, until we were walking. This was not because he was unfit generally but because he was no runner. He had no interest in running. All that running along the reservoirs where I had not ever seen him run had never been about running. All that running, I knew, was about me. He implied it was because of pacing, that he was slowing the run because of pacing, but I knew pacing and for me, walking during running was not that. I could not say so, however, for I could not be fitter than this man, could not be more knowledgeable about my own regime than this man,

because the conditioning of males and females here would never have allowed that. This was the 'I'm male and you're female' territory. This was what you could say if you were a girl to a boy, or a woman to a man, or a girl to a man, and what you were not – least not officially, least not in public, least not often – permitted to say. This was certain girls not being tolerated if it was deemed they did not defer to males, did not acknowledge the superiority of males, might even go so far as almost to contradict males, basically, the female wayward, a species insolent and far too sure of herself. Not all boys and men though, were like that. Some laughed and found the affronted men funny. Those ones I liked – and maybe-boyfriend was one of that lot. He laughed and said, 'You're having me on. Can't be that bad, is it that bad?' when I mentioned boys I knew who loathed each other yet united in rage at the loudness of Barbra Streisand; boys incensed at Sigourney Weaver for killing the creature in that new film when none of the men in that film had been able to kill the creature; boys reacting against Kate Bush for being catlike, cats for being female-like, though I didn't tell about cats being found dead and mutilated up entries to the point where there weren't many of them left in my area anymore. Instead I ended on Freddie Mercury still to be admired just as long as it could be denied he was in any way fruity, which had maybe-boyfriend setting down his coffee pot – only he and his friend, chef, out of everybody I knew had coffee pots – then sitting down himself and laughing all over again.

This was my 'almost one year so far maybe-boyfriend' whom I met up with on Tuesday nights, now and again on a Thursday night, most Friday nights into Saturday, then all Saturday nights into Sunday. Sometimes this seemed steady dating. Other times not at all dating. A few over his way saw us as a proper couple. Most though, saw us as one of those non-couple couples, the type who might meet regularly but who couldn't be designated a proper pairing for all that. I would have liked to have been a proper pairing and to have been officially dating and said so at one point to maybe-boyfriend, but he said no, that that wasn't true, that I must have forgot and so he'd remind me. He said that once we tried – with him being my steady boy and me being his steady girl, with us meeting and arranging and seemingly moving, as did proper couples, towards some future end. He said I went peculiar. He said he also went peculiar, but that never had he seen me with so much fear in me before. Vaguely, as he spoke, I remembered something of what he was recounting. Another part of me though, was thinking, is he making this up? He said he'd suggested, for the sake of whatever it was we did have, that we split up as steady girl and steady boy which, in his opinion,

had just been me anyway attempting that ‘talking about feelings’ which, given my freak-out when we did, given too, I spoke of feelings even less than he spoke of feelings, I mustn’t have believed in any of that all along. Instead he put forward that we go back to the maybe territory of not knowing whether or not we were dating. So we did and he said I calmed down and that he calmed down as well.

As for that official ‘male and female’ territory, and what females could say and what they could never say, I said nothing when the milkman curbed, then slowed, then stopped my run. Once again, least not intentionally, he didn’t seem rude, so I couldn’t be rude and keep on running. Instead I let him slow me, this man I didn’t want near me, and it was at that point he said something about all the walking I did whenever I wasn’t running and these were words I wished he hadn’t spoken or else that I hadn’t heard at all. He said he was concerned, that he wasn’t sure, and all the while still he did not look at me. ‘Not sure,’ he said, ‘about this arunning, about all of that awalking. Too much arunning and awalking.’ With that, and without another word, he went round a corner at the edge of the parks and disappeared. As with last time with the flashy car, this time too – with the sudden appearance, the proximity, the presumption, the click of the camera, his judgement upon my running and walking then once again that abrupt departure – there was confusion, too much of being startled. It seemed a shock, yes, but shock over something that must be too small, unimportant, even too normal to be really truly shocked over. Because of it though, it was only hours later when back home that I was able to take in he knew about my work. I didn’t remember how I got home either because after he left, at first I attempted running again, trying to resume my schedule, to pretend his appearance had not happened or at least had not meant anything. Then, because I was lapsing in attention, because I was confused, because I wasn’t being truthful, I slipped on glossy pages that had worked loose from some discarded magazine. They were a double-page spread of a woman with long dark, unruly hair, wearing stockings, suspenders, something too, black and lacy. She was smiling out at me, leaning back and opening up for me, which was when I skidded and lost balance, catching full view of her monosyllable as I fell down on the path.



## TWO

The morning after that run session, and earlier than usual, and without telling myself why, I walked out of my way to the other side of the district to catch a different bus into town. Also I got that same bus home. For the first time ever I did not do my reading-while-walking. I did not do my walking. Again I did not tell myself why. Another thing was I missed my next run session. Had to, in case *he* reappeared in the parks & reservoirs. If you're a serious runner though, and a distance runner, and of a certain persuasion from a certain part of the city, you pretty much had to incorporate that whole stretch of territory into your schedule. If you didn't, you were left with a curtailed route owing to religious geography, which meant repeatedly going round a much smaller area in order to get a comparable effect. Although I loved running, the monotony of the wheelrun told me I didn't love it that much, so no running went on for seven whole days. Seemed too, no running ever again was to go on until my compulsion to do so got the better of me. On the evening of the seventh day of no running, I decided to return to the parks & reservoirs, this time in the company of third brother-in-law.

Third brother-in-law was not first brother-in-law. He was a year older than me and someone I'd known since childhood: a mad exerciser, a mad street fighter, a basic all-round mad person. I liked him. Other people liked him. Once they got used to him they liked him. Other things about him were that he never gossiped, never came out with lewd remarks or sexual sneers or sneers about anything. Nor did he ask manipulative, nosey questions. Rarely, in fact, did he ask questions. As for his fighting, this man fought men. Never did he fight women. Indeed, his mental aberration, as diagnosed by the community, was that he expected women to be doughty, inspirational, even mythical, supernatural figures. We were supposed also to altercate with him, more or less too, to overrule him, which was all very unusual but part of his unshakeable women rules. If a woman wasn't being mythical and so on, he'd try to nudge things in that direction by himself becoming slightly dictatorial towards her. By this he was discomfited but had faith that once she came to with the help of his improvised despotism, she would remember who she was and indignantly reclaim her something beyond the physical once again. 'Not particularly balanced then,' said some men of the area, probably all men of the

area. 'But if he has to have an imbalance,' said all women of the area, 'we think it best he proceed in it this way.' So with his atypical high regard for all things female, he proved himself popular with the females without any awareness he was popular with them – which made him more popular. Of beneficial significance also – I mean for me with my current problem with the milkman – was that all the women of the area viewed brother-in-law this way. So not just one woman, or two women, or three or even four women. Small-numbered women, unless married to, mother of, groupie of, or in some way connected with the men of power in our area – meaning the paramilitaries in our area – would have gotten nowhere in directing communal action, in influencing to their advantage public opinion here. Local women en masse, however, did so command, and on the rare occasions when they rose up against some civic, social or local circumstance, they presented a surprising formidable force of which other forces, usually considered more formidable, had no choice but to take note. Together then, these women were appreciative of their champion which meant they'd be protective of this champion. That was him and the women. As for him and the men of the area – and perhaps to their astonishment – most men liked and respected third brother-in-law too. Given his superb physicality and instinctive understanding of the combative male code of the district he had the proper credentials, even if his behaving to women, in the eyes of the men, had reached extreme bananas stage. In the area therefore, he was all-roundly accepted, as by me too, he was accepted, and in the past I did used to run with him but then one day I stopped. His tyrannous approach to physical exercise overtook my own tyrannous approach to physical exercise. His way proved too intense, too straitened, too offensive of reality. I decided though, to resume running with him, not because the milkman would be intimidated physically by him, harbouring fears of brother-in-law fighting with him. Certainly he wasn't as young or as fit as brother-in-law, but youth and fitness don't count for everything, often not even for anything. You don't need to be young and able to run to fire a gun for example, and I was pretty sure the milkman could do that all right. It was his fanbase – that cross-gender esteem third brother-in-law was held in – that I thought might prove a deterrent to the milkman. Should he take exception to brother-in-law accompanying me, he'd encounter not only the opprobrium of the entire local community, but his reputation in it as one of our highranking, prestigious dissidents would plummet to the point where he'd be put outside any and all safe houses, into the path of any and all passing military patrol vehicles, exactly as if he wasn't one of our major influential heroes but instead just some enemy state policeman, some enemy soldier from across the water

or even one of the enemy state-defending paramilitaries from over the way. As a renouncer heavily reliant upon the local community, my guess was he wouldn't alienate himself for me. That was the plan then, and it was a good plan, and I took confidence from it, regretting only that it hadn't occurred to me seven days and six nights earlier. But it had occurred now so next thing was to launch it into action. I put on my running gear and set off for third brother-in-law's house.

Third brother-in-law's house was en route to the parks & reservoirs and as I approached everything was as expected: brother-in-law on his garden path, in his gear, warming up. He was muttering curses and I didn't think he knew himself he was muttering them. 'Fuckin' fuckin'' issued softly from him as he stretched his right gastrocnemius muscle then his left gastrocnemius muscle, then more 'fuckin's' during the right and left soleus muscles, then he said from profile, because stretching was a focused business, also without indication that here I was, returning to run with him after a considerable breach since last running with him, 'We're doing eight miles today.' 'Okay,' I said. 'Eight miles it is.' This shocked him. I knew I'd been expected to frown, to assert that eight miles certainly was what we were not doing, then in one of those imperialistic, goddess fashions, to assert how many miles we were doing. My mind though, was on the milkman so I didn't care how many miles we did. He straightened up and looked at me. 'Did you hear me, sister-in-law? I said nine miles. Ten. Twelve miles is what we're doing.' Again this was my cue to take issue and pick bone. Normally I'd have obliged but at that moment I didn't care if we ran the length and breadth of the country till we reached the point where the littlest cough – even someone else's – should cause our legs to fall off. But I tried. 'Ach no, brother-in-law,' I said. 'Not twelve miles.' 'Yeah,' he said, 'fourteen miles.' Clearly then, I hadn't tried hard enough. Worse, my throwaway attitude, given the nature of my sex, now had him properly agitated. He looked intensely at me, maybe as he wondered was I sick or something. I didn't ever know what brother-in-law wondered but I did know it wasn't that he didn't want to do fourteen miles or wasn't capable of fourteen miles. To him – in his need to be gainsaid – as to me – in my preoccupation with the milkman – the mileage was the most irrelevant thing in the world. It was that I hadn't browbeaten him and, 'I'm no browbeater,' he began, which meant we were in for a prolonged bout of one-sided haggling, but then his wife, my third sister, stepped out onto their path.

'Runnin'!' she grunted, and this sister was standing in her drainpipes and flip-flops with every toenail painted a different colour. This was before the years when people except in Ancient Egypt painted toenails different colours.

She had a glass of Bushmills in one hand and a glass of Bacardi in the other because she was still at that stage of working out what to have for her first drink. ‘You two are fuckers,’ she said. ‘Uptight control freaks. Obsessive, anally retentive nutcases of— Anyway, what class of bastard goes runnin’?’ Then she left off because five of her friends turned up at their door. Two used their feet to shove open the tiny house’s little gate, for their arms couldn’t do the shoving because their arms were piled with alcohol. The others went through the hedge which meant yet again that hedge was made a mess of. This was a miniature hedge, a foot high, ‘a feature’ as my sister called it, but it hadn’t been able to feature because of people forgetting it was there and pushing through it or falling over it, which was what three of the friends now did. As a verdure therefore, it was distressed again, pulled out of shape again as these women made their way through it out onto the grass. Before they squashed into the tiny house, as usual they mocked the two of us as runners. This they did in passing, nudging us out of our stretches – the tradition whenever they came across us in any solemn, warming-up stance. Finally, before they closed the front door and we two had jumped the hedge to set off on our running, already I could smell the cigarettes and hear the laughter and bad language from the living room; could hear too, the glug of a long liquid being poured into a long glass.

\*

We ran along the top reservoir, which was seven days after I’d last run along it with the milkman, with third brother-in-law continuing quietly to curse to himself. I myself was keeping a look-out for the disturbance even though I did not want that person in my head. I wanted maybe-boyfriend in my head, for there he’d been, all cosy, until uneasiness about the milkman had pushed him out of it. This was Tuesday and I was meeting him later that evening after I’d finished this run and he’d finished tinkering on his latest beat-up car. I called the present one grey and he called it a silver zero-x-something and he’d set aside his fixed-up white one to get in this beat-up grey one to start resuscitation immediately, but when I walked into his living room last Tuesday he had a completely different bit of car on the floor. I said, ‘You got car on the carpet,’ and he said, ‘Yeah I know, isn’t it brilliant?’ Then he explained that all of them – meaning the guys at work – had been overcome with orgasms because some super-special motor vehicle, built by some high-dream carmaker, was dumped – ‘*For fuck all! For nothin’! They wanted nothin’ for it!*’ he cried – into the middle of their garage, into the middle of

their laps. ‘Can you imagine?’ he said. ‘No beans! No sausages!’ meaning money, meaning the owners not wanting any. He seemed in shock so I was unclear if this encounter with the dream car had been a good thing or a bad thing. I was about to ask but still he hadn’t finished. ‘The people who brought it in,’ he said, ‘also said, “You fellas can have our broken cooker, our bit of fridge, our mangle, some ratty carpet that’s okay really just a bit smelly so give it a wash then put it in your toilet, plus you can have all our broken glass and breezeblocks and bags of rubble for to make a conservatory hardcore foundation with as well.” So then we thought,’ said maybe-boyfriend, ‘that these poor auld people think we’re a boneyard and not a car mechanics and so maybe it wouldn’t be right to take the Blower off them because they’re mentally confused and don’t know what they’re doing, don’t know either maybe, what that car – even in the state it’s in – is worth. Some of us though, nudged others of us and hissed, “*Don’t be sayin’ anything. They want rid of it, so we’ll just take it,*” but some of us did say something – rephrasing the mental bit so as not to hurt feelings of course.’ He said the couple then rounded and said, ‘Are you saying we’re stupid or something? Are you saying we’re poor or something? What is it you’re saying? What something?’ Then they got insulting. ‘If you fuckers think we’re mad, then we’ll leave and take our white furnitures, our rubbles, our lumbers, our Blower Bentley, our carpet, all our excellent material that we brought for you with goodwill with us. So take it or leave it, see if we care.’ ‘Of course we took it,’ said maybe-boyfriend. At this point I opened my mouth to ask what was a— but he pre-empted by saying ‘racing car’, supposedly to make it easier for me. Normally he didn’t make it easier – not deliberately, but because he’d get carried away even though once again he was ill-judging his audience whenever he talked car and I was his audience. He’d talk on, giving technical exposition to the last hyphen and punctuation mark which was more than needful, indeed helpful, but I understood he had to make use of me because he was excited by the car and I was the only one in the room. Of course he wouldn’t intend me to remember, just as I wouldn’t intend him to remember *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Vanity Fair* or *Madame Bovary* just because once, in a state of high excitement, I told him of them. Even though ours was a maybe-relationship, not a proper committed, going-somewhere relationship, each was allowed in heightened moments to give full coverage, with the other making an effort to take in at least a part. Besides, I wasn’t completely ignorant. I could see now he was happy about what had happened at the garage. I knew too, that a Bentley was a car.

And now he was dotting on it, on the bit that was currently on the living-



room carpet. He stood beside it, gazing down, a big smile on his face, beaming away. And that was what he did – the way I'd get turned on, the way he'd turn me on, when he was engrossed, unstudied, unself-conscious, working on the old heaps, his face full of love and concentration, telling himself these were serious dilemmas from which the poor auld car mightn't recover if he didn't tinker conscientiously, also when some people might shrug and say in life, about life, *'Oh well, there's no point in trying, probably it won't work so we must just not try and instead prepare ourselves for bitterness and disappointment'* but maybe-boyfriend would say, *'Well, it might work, I think it will work, so how about we try?'* and even if it didn't work at least he didn't downgrade himself to misery before having a go. After he'd weathered his disappointment if it hadn't worked, once again, with renewed vigour, with that mindset of 'can' even when he couldn't, he'd be straight on to the next thing. Curious and engaged and eager – because of passion, because of plans, because of hope, because of me. And that was it. With me too, he was uncalculated, transparent, free from deception, always was what he was, with none of that coolness, that withholding, that design, those hurtful, sometimes clever, always mean, manipulations. No conniving. No games-playing. He didn't do it, didn't care for it, had no interest in it. 'Those are crazy things,' he'd say, brushing aside flank movements as protections for his heart. Strong therefore. Chaste too. Uncorrupted in the little things, which held fast for the bigger things. That was singular. That was why I was attracted to him. That was why standing there, looking at him looking at his car, doing his out-loud wondering and pondering, I was getting wet and—

'Are you listening?' he said. 'Yes,' I said. 'Heard everything. You were talking of inside-car.'

I meant the bit on the carpet but he said he'd tell again because it seemed I hadn't grasped the fundamentals. This was when I learned that this inside bit was an outside bit, that it went at the front of the vehicle. He said too, that the car it had come from had been a complete wreck when it turned up at the garage. 'Guess what! It was a write-off, a total terrible, due to some idjit blowing up the engine by not putting enough oil in. Vital bits missing, differential missing, pistons through the tappet cover, almost all of it, maybe-girlfriend, a tragedy.' From what I could gather – because the bit on the floor looked nothing special, just more of the usual – this car had been some coveted, early twentieth-century, cheery, brutish, speedy, noisy, not-good-at-stopping car. 'Beyond redemption,' said maybe-boyfriend, meaning beyond repair, yet still he was smiling down at it. He said he and the others, after much arguing, dissension and finally, a casting-of-votes, had decided to

disassemble what was left. So they split it up, then they drew lots with maybe-boyfriend ending up with this bit on the carpet, a bit too, that was presently causing him transportations of pure joy.

‘Supercharger,’ he said and I said, ‘Uh-huh,’ and he said, ‘No, you don’t understand, maybe-girlfriend. Few cars were supercharged then so this was advanced technology. It decimated the competition – all because of this’ – he indicated the bit on the floor. ‘Uh-huh,’ I said again, then I had a thought. ‘Who got the car seats?’ which made him laugh and say, ‘That’s not a proper question, darlin’. C’mere’ – and he brought his fingers – *oh God* – over to the nape of my neck. This was dangerous, always dangerous. Any time the fingers were there – between my neck and my skull – I’d forget everything – not just things that happened moments before the fingers, but everything – who I was, what I was doing, all my memories, everything about anything, except being there, in that moment, with him. Then, when he’d rub them in, into the groove, that crook, the soft bit above the bumpy bone, that was even more dangerous. At that point my mind would fall behind owing to deliciousness and to muddles with chronology. Belatedly I’d think, *oh, but what if he begins to rub his fingers there!* I’d go to jelly which meant he’d have to put his arms around me to stop me from falling which meant I’d have to let him. Even then though, within moments, we would be crashing to the ground.

‘Forget the seats,’ he murmured. ‘Seats important but not most important. This is what’s important.’ I was unclear if still he was on ‘car’ or had moved his attention now to me. I suspected it was car but at some moments you can’t stop to have an argument, so we kissed and he said he was getting turned on and was I not turned on and I said could he not look how I was looking, then he murmured what’s this and I murmured what’s what and he prodded something in my hand which I’d forgotten which turned out to be Gogol’s ‘The Overcoat’ so he said he’d just set it there, meaning the table, which he did which was okay and we were about maybe to go to the carpet or to the settee or somewhere when there were voices. They were coming up his path and were followed by raps on his door.

On the doorstep were men, his neighbours. They had come to the house because word had spread about the Blower Bentley, with everyone not believing and wanting to see for themselves. Given their number and insistence, this was not one of those ‘Kinda busy, can you not come back later?’ moments. It seemed their excitement was higher, more unbrookable, more intense than ours. As they were explaining their presence, they kept nudging forward on the doorstep, going on tip-toes, trying to juke over maybe-boyfriend’s shoulders to catch a glimpse of the precious motor vehicle.