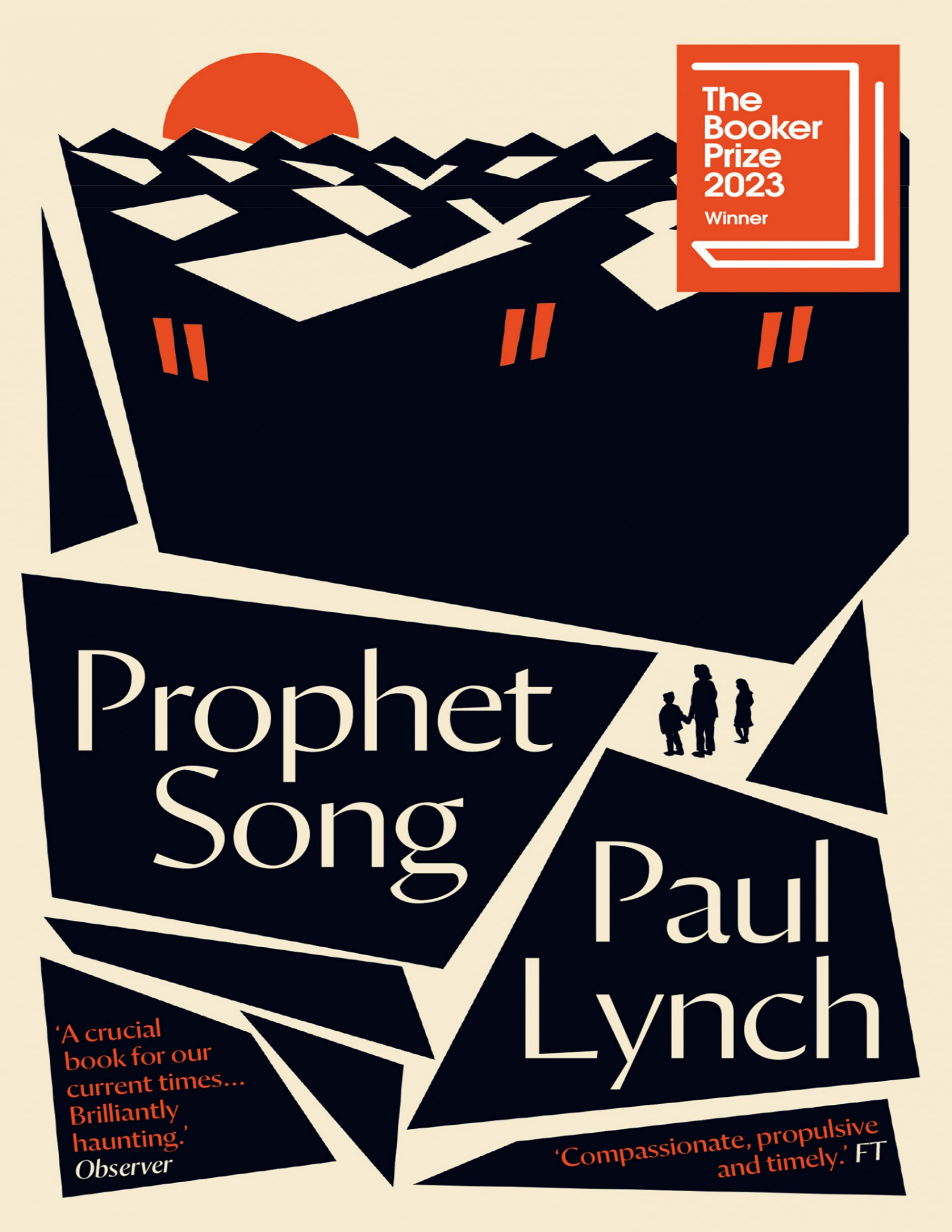




The
Booker
Prize
2023
Winner

Prophet Song

Paul
Lynch

'A crucial
book for our
current times...
Brilliantly
haunting.'
Observer

'Compassionate, propulsive
and timely.' *FT*

PRAISE FOR PROPHET SONG

WINNER OF THE BOOKER PRIZE 2023

A Book of the Year for 2023 according to the
Guardian, *FT*, *Irish Independent*, *Irish Examiner*,
Sunday Independent, *Economist*, *Big Issue*,
Daily Telegraph, *Irish Times* and *Waterstones*

‘Paul Lynch’s harrowing and dystopian *Prophet Song* vividly renders a mother’s determination to protect her family as Ireland’s liberal democracy slides inexorably and terrifyingly into totalitarianism. Readers will find it timely and unforgettable. It’s a remarkable accomplishment for a novelist to capture the social and political anxieties of our moment so compellingly.’

BOOKER PRIZE JUDGES

‘If there was ever a crucial book for our current times, it’s Paul Lynch’s *Prophet Song*... A literary manifesto for empathy for those in need and a brilliant, haunting novel that should be placed into the hands of policymakers everywhere.’

OBSERVER

‘A gripping, brilliantly realised story of political violence [inviting] comparisons with the work of Margaret Atwood and George Orwell... The local can be anywhere; other

people's nightmares can be yours. This is a masterly novel that reminds us that democracy is always fragile, and that it is fragile now.'

LITERARY REVIEW

'Thunderously powerful... Beautifully measured and solemn prose... Lynch asks us to face some of our darkest fears, and if he offers no comfort, and little hope, then we must surely recognize his true purpose: that the furious reader should return to the real world determined to find a better ending for this story.'

TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

'A compassionate, propulsive and timely novel that forces the reader to imagine – what if this was me?'

FINANCIAL TIMES

'The Irish offspring of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Paul Lynch's Booker-longlisted fifth novel is as nightmarish a story as you'll come across: powerful, claustrophobic and horribly real. From its opening pages it exerts a grim kind of grip; even when approached cautiously and read in short bursts it somehow lingers, its world leaking out from its pages like black ink into clear water... Where *Prophet Song* leads us in its closing pages is shocking, yet grimly inevitable. We would do well not to look away.'

GUARDIAN

‘Lynch’s writing bristles with tension... In a time when so many novels feel like carbon copies of books we’ve read before, *Prophet Song* is entirely original.’

SUNDAY INDEPENDENT

‘One of the most harrowing, minatory and provocative novels I have read in a while. It has the sharp cut of reality despite being set in an alternative version of our world, except for when it is all too recognisable. The final and penultimate chapters are truly shuddersome... The Irish context is important – I thought of it more as a kind of metaphysical novel. At what point do you flee? How do humans cope when faced with the unbearable, the inconceivable? Is the idea of common humanity an ethical fiction? So many books today do not take such questions seriously and reduce real politics to party politics.’

SCOTSMAN

‘Eilish is a wonderful creation... Lynch does an excellent job of showing just how swiftly – and plausibly – a society like ours could collapse. Certain sequences read like a thriller – readers will find themselves literally holding their breath – while others are rendered in beautiful, lyrical prose.’

IRISH INDEPENDENT

‘A book of encroaching terror... Lynch’s language is darkly lyrical, rich.’

SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

‘A chilling fable... Paul Lynch is who we need now to tell us about our contradictory world... Lynch renders this almost-Ireland in fluid, poetic prose, moulding sentences as if they were made of plasticine. It’s no surprise that since his debut he has been compared with the American writer Cormac McCarthy.’

THE SUNDAY TIMES (IRELAND)

‘The fifth novel from one of the most acclaimed Irish writers of his generation... It’s being touted as “Ireland’s *1984*”.’

TELEGRAPH

‘In his typically lyrical, lulling style, Lynch pulls off a masterstroke here, setting his futuristic story, of a nation made fearful and suspicious by their tyrannical government’s surveillance, in the most familiar of settings, his home country. The chill, so close to home, is blood curdling.’

BIG ISSUE

‘A masterclass in empathy, offering a bird’s eye view of the steady crushing of one’s ability to live somewhere safely, the dismantling of ordinary life by tyranny. I hope everyone reads this.’

IRISH EXAMINER

‘A chilling study of Ireland becoming a fascist state... An urgent, important read.’

GUARDIAN

‘While much of the book’s sinister power lies in how Lynch hints at the steps by which democracy gives way to totalitarianism, its real energy comes from how he portrays the continuing everyday pressure of Eilish’s obligations to her children and frail father amid the deepening turmoil.’

DAILY MAIL

‘As Eilish’s world begins to disintegrate around her, under the pressure of competing ideology and suspicion, the tension ratchets up almost unbearably. Lynch builds us a new world, and then pulls it apart with immense skill.’

ABC NEWS, AUSTRALIA

‘Lynch’s dystopian novel is at once so particularly Irish yet so universally familiar that it deserves the overused modifier “Kafkaesque”.’

LOS ANGELES TIMES

‘*Prophet Song* is a literary tour de force of mesmerising dexterity, a book that comes right at you with all the pace of a thriller... Tense. Terrifying. Heartbreaking.’

SUNDAY INDEPENDENT

‘Paul Lynch constructs a lyrical, devastating exploration of the political, social, and emotional fallout of an authoritarian takeover. Reminiscent of the poetry of Seamus Heaney and the prose of Cormac McCarthy, Lynch’s writing sustains a unique, enchanting narrative voice. Laced with confusion, corruption, and conflict, *Prophet Song* is a dystopian lament that exquisitely uses the iconic imagery of Ireland, along the lines

of James Joyce, to create an atmospherically overwhelming novel, warning of the potential woes of a modern-day fascist purge.'

READINGS, AUSTRALIA

'A beautifully written, ingenious, holy terror of a novel.'

MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE

'Surely one of the most important novels of this decade.'

RON RASH, AUTHOR OF *SERENA*

'I haven't read a book that has shaken me so intensely in many years... The comparisons are inevitable – Saramago, Orwell, McCarthy – but this novel will stand entirely on its own.'

COLUM MCCANN, AUTHOR OF *APEIROGON*

'A profoundly human story... Deft, subtle and written in strikingly beautiful prose, with this stunning novel Paul Lynch has joined the ranks of Atwood, Orwell and Burgess.'

CHRISTINE DWYER HICKEY, AUTHOR OF *THE NARROW LAND*

'A monumental novel, prose so flawless and flowing that reading it is akin to being taken up in a wave. You emerge dazed. You remember why fiction matters. It's hard to recall a more powerful novel in recent years.'

SAMANTHA HARVEY, AUTHOR OF *THE WESTERN WIND*

‘The work of a master novelist, *Prophet Song* is a stunning, midnight vision whose themes are at once ancient and all too timely: fear, complicity, resistance, and what becomes of us when hell rises to our homeland.’

ROB DOYLE, AUTHOR OF *THRESHOLD*

‘Part cautionary-tale; part dystopian-nightmare; part fever dream. Whichever way you skin it, there is no denying the gathering power of Paul Lynch’s writing... A masterclass in terror and dread.’

ALAN MCMONAGLE, AUTHOR OF *ITHACA*

‘A mesmerising, shattering novel, *Prophet Song* lives and breathes on the page and lingers long after finishing it. A paean to maternal love amidst gathering forces of darkness, Paul Lynch has done something extraordinary here... It is a work of wonder.’

LISA HARDING, AUTHOR OF *BRIGHT BURNING THINGS*

‘Gripping and chilling, and terribly prescient – a novel with a darkly important message about a particular moment in time.’

SARA BAUME, AUTHOR OF *SPILL SIMMER FALTER WITHER*

Prophet
Song

Paul
Lynch



For Anna, Amelie and Elliot

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The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun.

ECCLESIASTES 1:9

*In the dark times
will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing.
About the dark times.*

BERTOLT BRECHT

1

The night has come and she has not heard the knocking, standing at the window looking out onto the garden. How the dark gathers without sound the cherry trees. It gathers the last of the leaves and the leaves do not resist the dark but accept the dark in whisper. Tired now, the day almost behind her, all that still has to be done before bed and the children settled in the living room, this feeling of rest for a moment by the glass. Watching the darkening garden and the wish to be at one with this darkness, to step outside and lie down with it, to lie with the fallen leaves and let the night pass over, to wake then with the dawn and rise renewed with the morning come. But the knocking. She hears it pass into thought, the sharp, insistent rapping, each knock possessed so fully of the knocker she begins to frown. Then Bailey too is knocking on the glass door to the kitchen, he calls out to her, Mam, pointing to the hallway without lifting his eyes from the screen. Eilish finds her body moving towards the hall with the baby in her arms, she opens the front door and two men are standing before the porch glass almost faceless in the dark. She turns on the porch light and the men are known in an instant from how they are stood, the night-cold air suspiring it seems as she slides open the patio door, the suburban quiet, the rain falling almost unspoken onto St Laurence Street, upon the black car parked in front of the house. How the men seem to carry the feeling of the night. She watches them from within her own protective feeling, the young man on the left is asking if her husband is home and there is something in the way he looks at her, the remote yet scrutinising eyes that make it seem as though he is trying to seize hold of something within her. In a blink she has sought up and down the street, seeing a lone walker with a dog under an umbrella, the willows nodding to the rain, the stroblings of a large TV screen in the Zajacs' house across the

street. She checks herself then, almost laughing, this universal reflex of guilt when the police call to your door. Ben begins to squirm in her arms and the older plainclothesman to her right is watching the child, his face seems to soften and so she addresses herself to him. She knows he too is a father, such things are always known, that other fellow is much too young, too neat and hard-boned, she begins to speak aware of a sudden falter in her voice. He will be home soon, in an hour or so, would you like me to give him a ring? No, that will not be necessary, Mrs Stack, when he comes home could you tell him to call us at his earliest convenience, this is my card. Please call me Eilish, is it something I can help you with? No, I'm afraid not, Mrs Stack, this is a matter for your husband. The older plainclothesman is smiling fully at the child and she watches for a moment the wrinkles about the mouth, it is a face put out by solemnity, the wrong face for the job. It is nothing to worry about, Mrs Stack. Why should I be worried, Garda? Yes, indeed, Mrs Stack, we don't want to be taking up any more of your time and aren't we damp enough this evening making calls, it will be hard work getting ourselves dry by the heater in the car. She slides the patio door closed holding the card in her hand, watching the two men return to the car, watching the car move up the street, it brakes for the junction and its tail-lights intensify taking the look of two eyes agleam. She looks once more onto the street returned to an evening's quiet, the heat from the hall as she steps inside and shuts the front door and then she stands a moment examining the card and finds she has been holding her breath. This feeling now that something has come into the house, she wants to put the baby down, she wants to stand and think, seeing how it stood with the two men and came into the hallway of its own accord, something formless yet felt. She can sense it skulking alongside her as she steps through the living room past the children, Molly is holding the remote control over Bailey's head, his hands flapping in the air, he turns towards her with a pleading look. Mam, tell her to put my show back on. Eilish closes the kitchen door and places the child in the rocker, begins to clear from the table her laptop and diary but stops and closes her eyes. This feeling that came into the house has followed. She looks to her phone and picks it up, her hand hesitating, she sends Larry a message, finds herself again by the window watching outside. The darkening garden not to be wished upon now, for something of that darkness has come into the house.

Larry Stack moves about the living room with the card in his hand. He stares at it frowning then places the card on the coffee table and shakes his head, falls back into the armchair, his hand taking grip of his beard while she watches him silently, judging him in that familiar way, after a certain age a man grows a beard not to enter manhood but to put a barrier to his youth, she can hardly recall him clean-shaven. Watching his feet seek about for his slippers, his face falling smooth as he rests in the chair, he is thinking about something else it seems until his brow grows taut and a frown creeps down his face. He leans forward and picks the card up again. It's probably nothing, he says. She bounces the child on her lap watching him closely. Tell me, Larry, how is it nothing? He sighs and drags the back of his hand across his mouth, moving out of the chair, he begins to search about the table. Where did you put the newspaper? He steps about the room looking though not seeing, the newspaper might be already forgotten, he is seeking something within the shade of his own thinking and cannot alight upon it. He turns then and studies his wife as she feeds the child on her breast and the sight of this comforts him, a sense of life contracted to an image so at odds with malice his mind begins to cool. He moves towards her and reaches out a hand but draws it back when her eyes sharpen towards him. The Garda National Services Bureau, she says, the GNSB, they are not the usual crowd, a detective inspector at our door, what do they want with you? He points to the ceiling, would you ever keep your voice down? He steps into the kitchen chewing on his teeth, turns a glass upright from the draining board and lets the tap run, seeing out past his reflection to the dark, the cherry trees are old and will soon go to rot, they might have to come down in the spring. He takes a long drink then steps into the living room. Listen, he says, almost watching his voice as it falls to a whisper. It will turn out to be nothing, I'm pretty sure. As he speaks he finds his belief fall away as though he had poured the drink of water into his hands. She is watching how he gives himself again to the armchair, the body pliant, the automated hand flicking through the channels on the TV. He turns to find himself imprisoned with a look and then he leans forward and sighs, pulls on his beard as though seeking to lift it from his face. Look, Eilish, you know how they work, what it is they are after, they gather information, they do so discreetly and I suppose you have to give it to them one way or another, no doubt they are building a case against a teacher so it would make sense they would want to talk to me, give us a heads-up, perhaps before an arrest,

look, I will ring them tomorrow or the day after and see what they want. She is watching his face aware of some nullity in the centre of her being, mind and body seek the supremacy of sleep, in a moment she will go upstairs and slip into her nightwear, counting the hours until the baby wakes for his feed. Larry, she says, watching him recoil as though she has passed electricity into his hand. They said to call at your earliest convenience, call them now on the phone, the number is on the card, show them you have nothing to hide. He is frowning and then he inhales slowly as though taking measure of something looming before him, he turns and looks her full in the face, his eyes narrowed with anger. What do you mean, show them I have nothing to hide? You know what I mean. No, I don't know what you mean. Look, it's just a figure of speech, Larry, please go and ring them now. Why are you always so bloody difficult, he says, look, I'm not going to ring them at this hour. Larry, do it now, please, I do not want the GNSB to darken our door again, you hear the talk, the kind of things that are said to be going on these past few months. Larry leans forward in the armchair without it seems the ability to stand up, he frowns and then he is moving towards her, takes the baby from her arms. Eilish, please, just listen a moment, respect is something that runs both ways, they know I'm a busy man, I am the deputy general secretary of the Teachers' Union of Ireland, I do not hop, skip and jump to their every command. That is all well and good, Larry, but why did they call to the house at this hour and not to your office during the day, tell me that. Look, love, I'll ring them tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, now, can we let this rest for the night? His body remains standing before her though his eyes have turned to the TV. It's nine o'clock, he says, I want to hear what's on the news, why isn't Mark home by now? She is looking towards the door, the hand of sleep reaching around her waist, she steps towards Larry and slides the baby out of his arms. I don't know, she says, I've given up chasing after him, he had football practice this evening and probably had dinner at a friend's house, or maybe he's gone to Samantha's, they've become inseparable this last while, I just don't know what he sees in her.

Driving through the city he has grown vexed with himself, how the mind roams this way and that, pressing against something he seeks yet feels the need to draw back from. The voice on the phone was so matter of fact, polite almost, I apologise for the lateness of the hour, Mr Stack, we won't take up too much of your time. He parks on a lane around the corner from Kevin Street Garda Station, thinking how the main road used to be most nights, it was busier for sure, this city over the past while has grown much too quiet. He finds himself biting down on his teeth as he steps towards the reception and releases his mouth to smile, thinking of the children, Bailey no doubt will know he went out, that child is all ears. He watches the pale, freckled hand of a duty officer who speaks inaudibly into a phone. He is met by a young detective bony and brisk in shirt and tie, the face waxen and correct, matching the voice to the speaker from earlier on. Thank you for coming, Mr Stack, if you will follow me, we will do our best not to take up too much of your time. He follows up a metal stairwell and then along a corridor of shut doors before he is shown into an interview room with grey chairs and grey panelled walls and everything looks new, the door is closed and he is left alone. He sits down and stares at his hands. He reads his phone and then he stands and walks about the room, thinking how he has been placed on the back foot, shown a lack of respect, it is well past 10pm. When they enter the room he unfolds his arms and slowly pulls a chair and sits down, watching the same narrow officer and another his own age growing stout, a mug in the man's hand filmed with coffee spatter. The man eyes Larry Stack with the trace of a smile or perhaps it is just geniality resting in the wrinkles of his mouth. Good evening, Mr Stack, I am Detective Inspector Stamp and this is Detective Burke, can I offer you some tea or a coffee perhaps? Larry looks to the soiled cup and signals a no with his hand, finds himself studying the speaker's face, searching for an image he feels is known. I have met you before, he says, Dublin football wasn't it, you played midfield for UCD, you would have met me up against the Gaels, we were a powerhouse then, that was the year we put you into the ground. The detective inspector stares at his face, the wrinkles have collapsed around the mouth, the gaze grown opaque, an inscrutable silence fills the room. He speaks without shaking his head. I do not know what you are talking about. Larry is sensitive now to his own voice, he can hear it when he speaks as though he too were in the room watching the interview, can see himself from across the table, can see himself watching through the

peephole in the door, there is no other way of looking in, not even the one-way mirror you would see on TV. He hears his voice grown false, a little too chatty, perhaps. It was you for sure, you played midfield for UCD, I never forget an opponent. The officer takes a drink from his mug and swills the coffee against his teeth, he stares at Larry until Larry finds himself looking down at the table, he runs a finger across the nicked varnish then lifts his eyes again to the detective inspector. The bones in the face have thickened, for sure, the frame grown stout, but what is told by the eyes never changes. Look, he says, I want to get this over with, I should be home with my family getting ready for bed, tell me, how can I help you? Detective Burke motions with an open hand. Mr Stack, we know you are a busy man so we are pleased to have an opportunity to speak with you, an allegation has been received that is of the utmost importance, it is an allegation that concerns you directly. Larry Stack watches the gaze of the two men and feels his mouth go dry. Something is moving in the room, he can sense this now, for a moment he remains frozen and then he looks up and sees the domed ceiling light where a moth is trapped and beats berserkly against the glass, the amber cupola soiled and filled with the bodies of moths past. Detective Burke has opened a folder and Larry Stack sees before him the bloodless hands of a priest, sees placed onto the table between them a sheet of printed paper. Larry begins to read the sheet, he blinks slowly then bites down on his teeth. Footsteps pass down the long corridor and are absolved by a closing door. He hears the muffled beatings of the moth, grows aware for an instant of something inside him beginning to wither. He looks up and sees Detective Burke watching him from across the table, the eyes regarding him as though they have the power to roam freely inside his thoughts, seeking to free something within him that isn't there. Larry looks towards the detective inspector who reads him now with an open face and he clears his throat and tries to smile at the two men. Officers, surely you're having me on? He watches them feeling the smile slide from his mouth, finds himself lifting the sheet and waving it. But this is nothing but madness, he says, wait until the general secretary hears about this, she will be on to the minister directly, I can assure you of that. The young detective coughs smartly into his fist then looks to the detective inspector who smiles and begins to speak. As you will be aware, Mr Stack, this is a difficult time for the state, we are under instruction to take seriously all allegations that are put before us—— What the hell are you talking about? Larry says, this is not