

A painting of a black and white dog and a brown hare running in a field. The dog is on the left, and the hare is on the right. Both animals are in motion, with their bodies low to the ground. The background is a dark, textured landscape with rolling hills.

THE END OF THE
WORLD IS
A CUL DE SAC

stories

author of trespasses

LOUISE KENNEDY

ALSO BY LOUISE KENNEDY

Trespases

**The End of
the World
Is a
Cul de Sac**



Louise Kennedy

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For my mother and father

CONTENTS



THE END OF THE WORLD IS A CUL DE SAC

IN SILHOUETTE

HUNTER-GATHERERS

WOLF POINT

BELLADONNA

IMBOLC

BEYOND CARTHAGE

WHAT THE BIRDS HEARD

GIBRALTAR

POWDER

HANDS

ONCE UPON A PAIR OF WHEELS

BRITTLE THINGS

SPARING THE HEATHER

GARLAND SUNDAY

Acknowledgments

145559228

The End of the World Is a Cul de Sac

The dereliction was almost beautiful, the houses dark against the mauve dawn, pools of buff-colored water glinting briefly as a passing car took the last bend before town. Number 7 was starting to look like the other units, the lawn stringy with brown weeds. The footpath petered out and Sarah landed hard in a puddle, picking her way over broken masonry and loops of cable until she reached the end of the cul de sac. The noise was coming from the show house. It looked even worse inside than out. Clots of dung littered the travertine floor. All the doors had been taken, including the front one, which only seemed to emphasize how small the rooms were. The donkey was in the living room, by the cavity in the chimney breast where the granite fireplace had been. It was plump and skittish, pastilles of dried sleep at the corners of its eyes. Sarah whispered to it, cajoled, pleaded. She tried shooing it, spreading her arms to drive it out to the hallway. It pawed and snattered, and a flume of shit hit the wall behind it. She would have to go and get her neighbor.

She left the estate and started up the steep lane toward Mattie Feeney's house. She had gone there once with Davy, when the old man's wife died. Away from the main road the light was different. It was hard to see. The brambles that coiled back over the dry-stone walls nicked her hands. She walked faster, almost trotting, her wellingtons kicking up small rocks and squeaking over the tranche of grass that ran the center of the lane. She was breathing hard when she reached the yard. A light was on in the stables. Someone was mucking out, metal tines scraping the ground. The raking stopped. She didn't hear footsteps until they were very close.

You're up early, said a voice behind her. A man's voice, his accent local, from the town.

I can't see you, she said, turning quickly.

The speaker was barely thirty, with a clipped beard and hair brushed to one side. The thin electric light made him look drawn.

Did I scare you? he said to her hands. She looked at them. They were trembling.

One of the donkeys got out. She wasn't used to hearing herself speak and her voice sounded slight, inconsequential.

Where is it?

In the show house.

I see, he said. His eyes were laughing at her.

Should I go and tell Mattie?

He's up in the hospital.

Is he all right?

He had a stroke three weeks ago.

I didn't know. How is he?

The speech wasn't affected. He'll be back when they finish the physio.

He hooked a horsebox onto an old jeep and opened the passenger door. You might show me where the donkey is, he said. She sat beside him. There was a tree-shaped air freshener swinging from the rearview mirror, but the jeep had the sweet, gamey odor of animals. At the bottom of the lane he glanced up and down the road, his eyes lingering on her when he looked left.

Ryan is my name, he said.

Sarah.

I know, he said. You're the gangster's moll from down the hill.

Is that what they call me?

I'm after thinking of it now.

She got out by the entrance and unchained the gate, swinging it open to let the jeep in. Ryan pulled in beside a dome of polished granite that had been sandblasted with the words HAWTHORN CLOSE in a Celtic font that Sarah had thought at the time might tempt fate. Not that she had told Davy so.

Morning had broken. Under the low cloud, the sunflower-yellow paint on the houses appeared noxious. I thought the place looked bad from the road, he said. She followed him to the show house. He sidestepped the shit and stood in the kitchen. There wasn't much left of it. Mold-speckled -

French-gray paint, dangling wires. Buckled skirting boards and sawn-off pipes. A few days before Davy left, a contractor had called to their house and accused him of stripping the place himself, selling the fittings on the sly. Sarah had run the man from the door; now she was inclined to believe him.

Ryan went into the living room. He ruffled the donkey's mane. All right, buddy, he said.

I didn't know what to do, said Sarah. I think I just frightened him.

He gave its arse a slap. The animal shimmied and clopped then began to move, colliding with walls and doorframes, reeling back before Ryan got it out the front. He jollied and pushed it across the hardcore, leaning his weight on it to get it into the horsebox. He secured the door and put his hands on his hips. Fuck's sake, he said, the words leaving his mouth like steam.

I can close the gate after you and walk up.

I said I'd drop you home, he said, getting into the jeep. Sarah understood. He was offering her a lift because he wanted to see the house. Everyone wanted to see the house. Strangers rang the bell on vague pretexts. Selling calendars. Asking for directions. Straining their necks to look into the hall when Sarah opened the door. Walking around the side for a view of the housing estate her husband had thrown up and abandoned to her.

Ryan waited while she locked the gate. She sat back in the passenger seat and he watched her pull the safety belt across herself. They only had two hundred yards to travel, but it made her feel bolstered, held in place. Her driveway bent up in an arc that mirrored the line of the floating wall at the front. The horsebox swung left and right, and Ryan had to lock hard to park.

She opened the front door. Bills and flyers were strewn across the entrance hall. The art was gone, lifted off the walls by the owner of the gallery on a tip-off from the architect. Davy had taken the buffalo hide he had bought when he went to the Super Bowl. It was the only thing he took with him.

Some spot, said Ryan.

His voice was still wobbling in the high, empty space as they entered the kitchen.

Coffee? she asked.

Aye, go on.

She filled the kettle and got out mugs and a jar of instant granules. He moved around the room, taking it in. The dining table was glass and chrome and surrounded by twelve curved white chairs. A globular light fitting was suspended above it, a spiky metal Telstar sort of thing. The kitchen units were at floor level only, high-gloss white with walnut counters. Sarah had had no hand in the decor. Davy had said it was the architect's job.

A vast patio door, bleared with dust, ran the length of the dining table. Ryan tried the handle. Pull it right up until it clicks, said Sarah. He opened the lock and slid it across until it vanished into the wall. The room filled with autumn. The must of leaf mold, the complaints of robins. You could see over Mattie's place and across the glen to the mountain. It was like being outside.

He leaned in the doorframe and lit a cigarette. His shoulders were taut, as though he was trying to look smaller. The beard both became him and made him unremarkable. Sarah handed him his coffee. He lifted the mug to his mouth and swallowed. He pulled a face and inclined his head at the Bakelite coffee machine that was plumbed in near the sink. How come I got the cheap shite?

You can only get the pods online.

So get them online.

My cards were canceled.

He stepped onto the patio, and Sarah followed him around to the west side of the house. She stood behind him as he looked down the garden. Terraces of shrubs were growing thickly all the way down to the wire fence, the spherical shape the gardener had once imposed on the box trees blurred with new shoots, the lavender silvery and woody and still flowering. Hawthorn Close was beyond it, lollipop shaped: twelve semi-detached houses either side of a track that led to five detached houses around the bulb of a cul de sac. From here you could see things you couldn't see from the road. That one of the units had been occupied, that

someone had tried to tame a garden and make a home. That the granite dome which read HAWTHORN CLOSE had been deposited onto a fairy fort. That beside the dome a tree had been torn down, its roots leaving deep velvety furrows which seemed to bulge when light fell across them.

Imagine living there, he said, turning to look at her. Sarah went back into the kitchen.

He followed her in and opened the fridge. It was empty except for Rouge Noir nail polish, skimmed milk, and a prune yogurt. He closed it again. Do you want to get out of here later? Get a drink or something? he said.

I don't know.

I'll come back at seven. He poured his coffee into the sink and left through the hall. She stood at the front door to see him off. He opened his window and adjusted his wing mirror. He was looking at her as he drove away.



After he left, she tied her hair up. She swept the floor. She wiped down all the surfaces in the kitchen and washed and dried the dishes. She closed the patio door and sprayed a section of the glass with green liquid she found in the utility room. She wiped it with newspaper and stood back. It looked worse than before. She sprayed the dining table and began buffing, rubbing round and round until the paper disintegrated. She cleaned the sink with bleach and mopped the tiles.

She went to the garden with the prune yogurt and a teaspoon. She sat on a metal deck chair and ate, sucking the spoon clean after each mouthful. A car pulled in by the gate of the estate. The driver got out. He had greased-back red hair and an off-the-rack suit. He stuck his phone through the railings to take photographs. Before he drove off he made a call, his voice indistinct. He was probably from the bank, or from a firm of solicitors acting for a contractor who was owed money. The reporters had stopped coming, although she feared they would return after the inquest.

She ran her wedding finger around the inside of the pot and licked it. Her rings were loose. Her skin tasted of sour milk and chlorine and green

apples. At least the place was clean. Maybe she should clean herself up too, in case Ryan came back. She went inside. She had started sleeping in the boot room Davy had built off the kitchen for their sons to use after football training. The arrogance seemed spectacular now; they didn't have sons, or daughters. The morning they found the body, Sarah had abandoned the master bedroom and dragged a mattress downstairs. Now she lay every night under the high shallow window with the white blind. There were gray stone slabs on the floor. The modular shelving that ran along one wall was empty. It resembled a clinic you saw on television, where rich women went to lose weight or go mad.

She shampooed her hair and smeared the contents of a sample sachet of conditioner onto the ends, twisting it in a coil on the crown of her head. She shaved her legs and underarms. She hesitated, then soaped between her legs, dragging the razor from back to front until her pubic hair lay in fuzzy clumps in the plughole. She wrapped herself in a towel and sat on the toilet seat with a magnifying mirror and tweezers, pulling black hairs from her mustache and eyebrows. The tubes and bottles of makeup in the bathroom cabinet were marked to be used within six months. They had gone off, like the prune yogurt. She took out makeup brushes she had bought in Saks on Fifth Avenue—after a boozy lunch, for \$314—and applied liquids and gels and powders. When she was done, her skin was bronzed and dewy, her eyes dark and wide. She blow-dried her hair and wound it around electric rollers. When she was dressed, she made a cup of tea and brought it outside. She sat in the metal deck chair again, a Missoni scarf on her head to hold the rollers in place, and waited.



At seven Ryan rapped a knuckle against the patch in the patio door she had tried to clean. Sarah saw her reflection. Her makeup had softened but there was no mistaking the care she had taken. She let him in. He smelled of deodorant and was wearing a fine wool jacket and expensive brogues. Maybe he had taken care too. He pointed at the smudged glass.

Was it all too much for you?

Ha, she said.

Are you hungry?

Not really. Her stomach made a hollow fizzle, betraying her.

Come on. I'll buy you a bit of dinner.

He had arrived in a silver convertible with leather seats. Very flash, she said. There was a fur of moss where the soft top met the window.

You're calling me flash? he said. Sarah turned to him, smiling. He wasn't smiling back.

She was stricken by her own foolishness. She didn't even know him. Besides, who was she kidding? She couldn't sit opposite a man at a table in this town. She hadn't so much as stood on High Street since Davy left. When the town was asleep, she bought milk and cut-price ham in the - twenty-four-hour petrol station with the dwindling bundle of notes she had found in Davy's wardrobe. I don't know if this is a good idea, she said.

Relax, he said. He had bypassed the town center and was following signs for Dublin.

Where are we going?

I'm taking you for a spin. I'll have you home before midnight.

The short stretch of dual carriageway narrowed into a road without verges. They passed wooden crosses, sometimes alone, sometimes in twos and threes, that marked the sites of fatal crashes. He drove fast, even on hairpin bends where most drivers would have braked, his left hand splayed on the gearstick, fingers flexing and tensing, the rush doing something almost kinetic to him. He turned left at a derelict filling station and drove a couple of miles down a gentle hill. He parked behind a line of cars at a lakeside pub. An extractor fan was belching frying smells into the night. Sarah crossed the road to a jetty that protruded over the lake like a diving board. A band of the water was white with moonlight, small boats rocking and bumping together.

Inside they were seated near a gas fire that had fake coals intended to look like embers. A young waitress came with menus and listed the specials. Ryan ordered a shandy, and a glass of Prosecco for Sarah. She would have preferred a gin and tonic but didn't say so.

How long have you been working for Mattie?

He's my grandfather.

I didn't know that, she said. There was a story about one of Mattie's grandchildren, something Davy had told her. She couldn't remember what it was. The waitress put the drinks in front of them, Ryan's first.

He ordered dinner for them both, the most expensive dishes on the menu. Buttered Dublin Bay prawns with garlic chives. Organic fillet steak, well done. Sarah asked the waitress if she could have hers medium rare.

Why not? said Ryan. Maybe he wasn't used to eating in restaurants. Mattie was a bit of a hillbilly, and his grandson probably wasn't much better, with his townie accent and pointy shoes. Still, who would bring you out for dinner and then choose your food, your drink? It wasn't that Sarah disliked what he had ordered. Two steaks were carried to the next table and they looked and smelled delicious. But it was odd not to be asked what she wanted.

The waitress brought their starter. They ate in silence, Sarah using her fingers and finishing so fast she was ashamed. Hunger was hard to conceal when there was food in front of you. The main course arrived: two unstable stacks of charred meat, portobello mushroom, grilled beef tomato, and onion rings, served on wooden boards that had to be held with two hands. The manager carried Ryan's.

She'll have a glass of red with the beef, he said. Sarah tried to put aside the feeling he had taken charge of her. The food was good, the wine not bad either. It was nice to sit at a table in a restaurant. She'd had worse nights. When their plates were cleared, Sarah leaned back and smiled. Her belly was quiet for the first time in weeks.

Back in a sec, she said, and picked up her handbag. Ryan reached across and took her free hand. She knew what he had put in her palm before he closed her fingers around it. She crossed the room to the ladies and shut herself into the largest cubicle. She crunched out a line with one of the canceled cards. He had given her a fifty-euro note too. She rolled it up and leaned over the cistern.

When she came out she looked in the mirror. The light in the bathroom was filtering through a red shade and should have been flattering. Her face was skull-like. There were purplish ruts under her eyes and a pair of deep grooves ran from either side of her nose to the corners of her mouth. She applied more concealer and eyeliner and fluffed out her hair. She put her

hand on the door to leave. Then she turned quickly and went back into the cubicle. Another bump and she might even enjoy herself.

She sat demurely and smiled at Ryan, nudging his knee gently under the table to pass him the wrap and the banknote.

He spread his hands. That's for you, he said. He beckoned the waitress and ordered her another glass of red.

Why thank you, Sarah said when the drink arrived.

What's the story with your house? he said.

The bank is trying to sell it.

How's that going?

How do you think?

Why did you build the estate so close to your own place?

Davy was in trouble. He thought he could turn the development around fast, generate some cash flow.

Ryan gave a short laugh. He was in trouble, all right. What did you think?

I thought it would look ugly. That it was a huge risk. But he didn't ask me.

But you didn't say anything?

I'm the kind of girl men order dinner for, she said. Connaught's answer to Lauren Bacall or what? Fuck it. She was in the mood for some craic. She took a drink of her wine and waited for him to reply.

You seemed to be enjoying it, he said, a flash of something in the way he answered that made her stay quiet. She took another drink and looked around the room. Farmers and solicitors. Overdressed young couples. The usual frumpy lot you'd see in any restaurant down the country on a Friday night. Nosy as well, half of them gawping over and whispering. When Ryan spoke again he had composed himself. What about the estate? he said.

The receiver will accept a hundred grand for it.

Where's your husband?

There have been sightings of him in Málaga. Apparently.

The waitress came with dessert menus. I'm full, said Sarah. Ryan ordered her a crème brûlée. When it arrived she tapped at the caramel with

the back of a teaspoon. It cracked into shards that were shiny like tortoiseshell. She pushed the dish away.

Ryan went to the bar to pay. The manager seemed to be apologizing to him, gesticulating with her hands as she spoke. She called the young waitress over. The girl was short and Ryan had to bend to speak to her. He whispered in her ear then put something in her hand, closing her fingers around it the way he had earlier with the coke. She leaped up and kissed his cheek, fleeing to the kitchen. Ryan came back to the table with a carrier bag of clinking bottles.

What was that about?

Ould cunt didn't want me to give the girl a tip. Said the staff did all right with the service charge.

Sarah stood to put her jacket on. Every single person in the room was looking at her. They recognized her. It was why she didn't leave the house anymore. People remembered her face from the papers. From the photograph of her and Davy the day she won the Best-Dressed prize at the Galway Races. Or worse, the one taken the day Eoin and Lizzie moved into Hawthorn Close. Herself and Lizzie in the center, laughing, the baby leaning out of Lizzie's arms. Davy and Eoin flanking them, the yellow paint cheery in the sunshine. But was that why they were staring? There was something about Ryan, nothing overt, but it was there all the same, in the deference the manager showed him, the blushes of the waitress, as if she was starstruck. Was it the sight of them together that was such a spectacle? She didn't know. All she knew was that she was sick of being stared at by bogtrotters. She pulled her collar up and began striding toward the door. She was at the jetty when Ryan came out. He put the bag of bottles in the car and twisted her around to face him.

What's eating you? he said.

They were all looking at us.

Why would they be doing that?

I don't bloody know.

I'd say you've a fair idea.

What's that supposed to mean?

He laughed. You're gas, he said.

She sat in the car and opened the glove compartment. She did a line off the manual. There were CDs in a pouch. She found a compilation of seventies funk and put it on. On the road back to town she moved her shoulders to the music. When they got to the house she asked him in. She took out Murano tumblers for the vodka and filled them with ice. He spelled out her name in coke on the dining table. Up close the glass had tiny scratches, as though it had been scoured. You forgot the *H*, she said, when it was all gone. Sarah ends in an *H*.



Did you ever hear of tidying your room?

It isn't my room anymore. I sleep in a room off the kitchen.

Do you want to go downstairs?

No. There was something vestal about the boot room. She didn't want to bring a man in there, especially this man, who was moving around the house as if he owned the place. Still, he was here, and the way he was slinking about with that townie snarl on his beardy mouth wasn't completely repulsive. She took her top off. She lay on the bed so he would have to take her jeans off, wriggle her out of her bra and knickers, tactics she had employed to amuse Davy, especially when he was fucking that bitch of an architect. She hadn't changed the sheets since Davy left. She wondered if they would smell of the woody aftershave she used to buy him, but there was just a cold dustiness, like the rest of the house.

Ryan made a circle around her navel with his finger. The skin where he touched her felt like it was peeling off.

You don't remember me, do you, he said.

I don't, to be honest.

I was at the door a few times.

Are you a contractor?

He laughed. I'm in sales, I suppose, he said, and suddenly everything was clear. She remembered the story about Mattie's grandson. Davy had read it aloud one Sunday from a tabloid they didn't normally buy. A kingpin, no less, he had said as he folded the paper up. The wee knacker is a kingpin.

Davy owes you the money, she said. I've never bought drugs in my life.

That's what I thought. But you're like a Hoover, love. He turned her over and pushed her face into the mattress. She could smell Davy now.

Afterward, Ryan gave her a Valium. Before it had time to take effect she told him everything. She had persuaded Lizzie, her sister, to buy Number 7. Davy said if they got one family in, the estate would fill up in no time, it had happened with the other developments. He knocked ten grand off the price and threw in geothermal heating that never worked; they had only dug deep enough to disturb a nest of rats.

By the end Sarah was hardly sleeping, Davy beside her with his laptop on, chopping out powder in Morse-like dashes on the bedside table. Sometimes he watched porn, turning to her for rough, jittery sex that never brought either of them to climax. The sitting-room light in Number 7 stayed on through every night, and every night Sarah wanted to knock on the door and say how sorry she was. One night the light went out just after three. When dawn gave up the silhouette in the fairy tree she knew it was Eoin, a steadiness about him even in death, in the pendular swing of him. Davy ripped the fairy tree from the ground the day of the funeral. He said the bad luck had already come. Sarah watched him operate the excavator and remembered who they were.

Ryan dressed at seven. He was tender toward her, pulling the sheet up to her chin and leaving a long kiss on her mouth.

I'll come back later, he said.

She went into the bathroom. She wiped her arse with the hand towel and put on a dressing gown that was hanging on the back of the door. It was white, made of brushed cotton. Downstairs, she pulled the patio door open. She lowered herself into the metal chair, letting the dew seep into her robe. Lines had begun to crackle across the yellow plaster of the houses; the roadway appeared sunken, even where there was pavement, the gardens too. Another day was breaking over Hawthorn Close.

In Silhouette

The hot pants look trampy with the platforms, so you change into your yellow parallels. You pack your clutch bag with fags, a pat of powder, a tin of Vaseline. It's floppy, so you wad it with tissues to fill it out. The bag came free with a bottle of Charlie perfume you bought in the chemist's shop you're not allowed to go into because Mr. Crawford, the owner, is a loyalist. A last look in the mirror. The broderie anglaise trim on your top doesn't quite reach the waistband of your trousers. Your stomach is hollow, which you like, and pale, which you don't. You go down the stairs and put your head into the sitting room. Showaddywaddy are singing "You Got What It Takes" on *Seaside Special*, wearing suits the same shade as your trousers. Cheerio, you say. Your mother pulls the edges of her cardigan together by way of an answer. You go down the driveway. The wee ones are at the stream, building a dam or demolishing one, their shrieks blowing across the fields to you. The heat has been building all day. The tarmac is spongy under your feet, sundering into oil and chips of stone, and by the time you get to the Halfway Inn the cork soles on your shoes are greasy looking and the hair at the back of your neck is wet.

The front door is wedged open with a brick. The girls are already there, at the corner table by the jukebox, nursing jewel-colored drinks laced with cordial. Gin and orange. Pernod and blackcurrant. Vodka and lime. You tuck your clutch high up under your arm and go to the bar.

Buy us a drink, Thady, you say. Your brother acts as if he doesn't know you're there, so you have to lean in between him and Ciaran McCann. Your top has ridden up your belly and Ciaran slants himself forward for a better look. In profile he's nearly gorgeous, but then he twists on his stool and you see the heavy lid of the eye that doesn't open. You think he's admiring you, until he sniggers. You're in no position to be

laughing at anyone, Winky, you say, and he bends back over his pint. Come on, Thady, I've no money. He does this sometimes, makes you whinge stuff out of him. You're not even sure he's listening, because he has turned to look at the doorway. Everyone is looking at the doorway. It's like watching a Western, the tall silhouette against the yellow light, the face dark, in shadow. The tidy bulk of him crossing the room to the counter.

Thady must be thinking the same thing because he says Howdy, stranger.

The man smiles along the length of the bar. He's wearing a tweed sports jacket, too heavy for a summer night, in silhouette, and there's a spritz of sweat on his mustache. It's an evening for a few cold ones, he says, his accent going to the four corners of Ireland.

Thady puts his hand on your arm. Shandy, is it?

You reposition the bag and go across the floor to the girls. You sit at the table and they lean in and you're all talking at once. You drink fast and they dare you to ask for more. You tuck the clutch under your arm and walk to the bar, slower this time.

Buy us another one, you ask Thady.

You cost me a fortune.

Allow me, the man says.

Work away, says Thady.

When the drink is pushed at you, you hold it up at the man in thanks. *Sláinte*, he says, and you wonder if he's Scottish. He lifts a pint to his mouth. His lips are so full they hardly close.

You take some coins from the stack of change in front of your brother. You go back to the girls and put your drink on the table. Three plays, you say, and turn to the jukebox. You choose one for a laugh, one for dancing, one for the boys. As the last song finishes, Thady comes over and speaks into your ear. Go home, he says. You start to complain, swinging round to face him, but when you see the look on his face you are quiet. Night night, he says to the girls, and they clatter out ahead of you. Thady goes back to the counter. From the doorway you look at the man one last time. Now you are in silhouette, and you hope the broderie anglaise is gauzy and pure