

Every Seven Years

Bibliomysteries

by Denise Mina, 1966–

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For Peter Straub

*He that with headlong path
This certain order leaves,
An hapless end receives.*
—Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*

I AM STANDING on a rostrum in my old school library. An audience of thirty or so people is applauding, I am smiling and mouthing “thank you” and I know that they all hate me.

The audience looks like people I used to know seven years ago, but less hopeful and fatter. Actually, they’re not fat, they’re normal sized, but I’m an actor. We have to stay thin because our bodies are a tool of our trade. A lot of us have eating disorders and that creates an atmosphere of anxiety around food. The applauding audience isn’t fat; I’m just London-actress thin, which is almost-too-thin.

I look down. The rostrum is composed of big ply board cubes that fit together. We are standing on five but the corner one is missing; maybe they ran out of cubes, or one is broken. It’s like standing on a slide puzzle, where one tile is missing and the picture is jumbled. This seems hugely significant to me while it is happening: we’re in a puzzle and a big bit is missing. The whole afternoon feels like a hyper-real dream sequence so far, interspersed with flashes of terror and disbelief. My mum died this morning.

There is no chair on the rostrum, no microphone, no lectern to hide behind. I stand, exposed, on a broken box and justify my career as a minor actress to an audience who doesn’t like me.

There are about thirty people in the audience. Not exactly the Albert Hall, but they are appreciative of my time because my mum is ill. She’s in the local hospital and that’s why I’m back. It has been mentioned several times, in the introductions and during the questioning. So sorry about your mum.

Maybe pity is fueling the applause. Maybe time is moving strangely because I’m in shock. I smile and mouth “thank you” at them for a third time. I want to cry but I’m professional and I swallow the wave of sadness that engulfs me. Never bitter. My mother’s words: never bitter, Else. That’s not for us. My mum said life is a race against bitterness. She said if you die before bitterness eats you, then you’ve won. She won.

A fat child is climbing up the side of the rostrum towards me. He can’t be more than four or five. He’s so round and wobbly he has to swing his legs sideways to walk properly. He comes up to me and— tada!—he shoves a bunch of supermarket flowers at my belly without looking at me. The price is still on them. He must be someone’s kid. He’s not the kid you would choose to give a visiting celebrity flowers, even a crap celebrity. He turns away and sort of rolls off the side of the platform and runs back to his mum.

He pumps his chunky little arms at his side, leg-swing-run, leg-swing-run, running all the way down the aisle to a big lady sitting at the back. Her face brims with pride. He looks lovely to her. She’s just feeding him what she’s eating; she doesn’t see him as fat. I’m seeing that. I’m probably the only person in the room who is seeing that. Everyone else is seeing a cute wee boy doing a cute wee thing.

It's me. Bitterness comes in many forms. Malevolent gossip, lack of gratitude, even self-damaging diet regimes. Today bitterness is a tsunami coming straight at me. It's a mile-high wall of regret and recrimination. Broken things are carried in the threatening wave: chair legs and dead people and boats. And it is coming for me.

My mum died. This morning. In a hospital nearby. My mum died.

This is going on, this stupid event in a dreary public library on the island where I grew up. At the same time an alternate universe is unfolding, the one where I am a daughter and my mum is no longer alive.

I love cats. On YouTube there's an eight-minute montage of cats crashing into windows and glass doors they thought were open. It went viral; you've probably seen it. Lots of different cats flying gleefully into what they think is empty space, bouncing off glass. It's funny, not because the cats are hurt; they're not hurt. It's funny because of that moment afterward when the cat sits up. They look at the glass, variously astonished or angry or embarrassed. It's funny because it is so recognizably human, that reaction. The WTF reaction.

Hitting the glass is where I am with the fact that my mum has died. I keep forgetting, thinking other things—I need a wee—that woman has got a spot on her neck—I want to sit down—and then *BOOM* I hit the glass.

But actors are special. We just keep going. If we forget our lines, or the scenery falls, or a colleague has died on stage, we just keep going. So I just keep going.

I'm standing on the rostrum with Karen Little. Karen and I grew up together. She made my life a misery at school and we haven't seen each other for seven years. I can see her eyes narrow when she looks at me. I can see her shoulders rise, her lips tighten. Maybe she hates me even more now. I don't have a system of quantification for hate. I've forgotten what it is to be the recipient of this, so maybe that's why it feels heightened. Life has been kind to me since I left.

My mum died and, frankly, I'm not really giving too much of a shit. I want to tell her that: hey, Karen, d'you know what? The human body renews itself every seven years. Each individual cell and atom is replaced on a seven-year cycle. It's been seven years since we met and I'm different now. You're different now. All that stuff from before? We could just let that go.

But that's not how we do things on the island. Aggression is unspoken here. We're too dependent on one another to have outright fights.

Karen Little, just to fill you in on the background, was in my class. There were thirteen in our year. Eight girls, five boys. Karen was good at everything. Head girl material from the age of twelve, she was bossy, sporty, and academic. She was like all of the Spice Girls in one person. Except Baby Spice. Karen was never soft. Growing up on a farm will do that to you.

She has gray eyes and blond hair, Viking coloring. She looks like a Viking, too. Big, busty, kind of fertile-looking hips. She stands on both feet at the same time, always looks as if she is standing on the prow of a boat.

I'm a sloucher. An academic nothing. A dark-haired incomer. My mother moved here to teach but gave it up before I was born. After the accident, they made it clear they didn't want her. Even the children shunned her.

Karen's a full head taller than me. So it was odd that she had this thing about me. I never understood why she hated me so much. Everyone hated Mum because of the accident, but Karen hated me. It wasn't reciprocated and it was scary.

No one there liked my mother or me but Karen took it to extremes. I saw her looking at me sometimes, as if she'd like to hit me. She didn't do anything. I should emphasize that. But I often saw her staring at me, at parties, across roads, in class. I was scared of her. I think she had a lot going on at home and I became a focus for her ire.

Now, Karen is the librarian in the school library.

My face hits the glass.

There is no one here I can confide in. My. Mum. Died. Three words. I haven't said them to anyone yet. If I don't say it maybe the universe will realize its mistake. It will get sorted out. The governor will call at the last minute and stop her dying of lung cancer. Maybe, if I don't say it.

Or maybe I'm worried that if I say it I will start crying, I'll cry and cry and maybe I will die of it.

No one in the school library knows yet. They will as soon as they leave. Mum is headline news around here. Everyone knows that she isn't well, in the local hospital with lung cancer. Since I got back several people have told me that she will get better because the treatment is better than it was. People tell me happy stories about other people who had cancer but got better and now they run marathons, climb mountains, have second lives. Mention of cancer prompts happy stories, as if people feel jinxed by the word and need to rebalance the narrative. I've learned that you can't make them stop with the positive anecdotes. They need them. No one here can believe that my mother is going to die anymore than I can. My mother is an unfinished song. It's out of character that she will simply die of an illness. My mother has never done a simple thing.

But they know that's why I'm back on the island, in the small town of my birth, standing on a rostrum with Karen Little, listening to interminable clapping.

I mouth "thank you" again and watch the fat kid's mother pull him onto her knee. He looks forward, flush from his run. Behind him the mother shuts her eyes and kisses his hair with a gesture so tender I have to look away.

Karen cornered me in the chemist's. Do come, Else, please. We would be so glad to hear from you, all your exciting experiences! Karen covers her loathing with smiles. They all do. Anywhere else we would have been excluded, picked on. Maybe they would have burnt crosses on our lawn. The hostility would have affected our day-to-day interactions, but the island is small, we are so dependent on each other for survival, that instead, aggression is a background thrum in a superficially pleasant existence.

Tourists fall in love with the white beaches and palm trees. The seeds are washed up here on the Gulf Stream and palm trees grow all over the island. The landscape looks tropical until you step off the coach or out of the hotel or from your rented car. It is bitterly cold here. The vegetation makes it perpetually unexpected. The distillery towns are always dotted with startled tourists from Spain or Japan, all looking for a sweater shop. That's what we're famous for: whisky and sweaters.

Karen is tired of watching me being applauded. It's dying out anyway, so she steps in front of me and blocks my sight lines.

Thank you! Her voice is shrill. Thank you to our local celeb, Miss Else Kennedy!

She has prompted another round of applause. Oh, god. My right knee buckles, as if it knows this will never end and it's decided to go solo and just get the hell out of here.

Karen turns to address me. Her face is too close to mine. She has lipstick on, it is bleeding into a dry patch of skin at the side of her mouth, and I can smell it; she's close. I feel as if she's going to bite my face and it makes me want to cry.

We have a present for you!

She is smiling with her teeth apart looking from me to the audience. Something special is coming, I can see the venom spark in her eye like the flick of a serpent's tail.

Karen's voice continues to trill through my fog of grief and annoyance. Special gift! It will be presented by ___ Marie! (I wasn't listening to that bit).

___ Marie is also a bit scary looking. She has an unusually big face, her hair is greasy. She climbs up onto the platform holding a yellow hardback with both hands. She looks as if she's delivering a sacred pizza.

I know this isn't a surreal dream. It's just work-a-day grim and I'm bristling with shock and sorrow. My mum died. I feel the glass bounce me backwards on the decking.

___ Marie takes tiny steps to get to me, the rostrum isn't big enough for three people and I'm making the best of it, a professional smile is nailed to my face.

But then I see what is in her hand.

It's the book. My smile drops.

Karen's voice is loud in my ear.

A lovely book about the famous painter: Roy Lik-Tin-Styne! This is, believe it or not! The very last book Else took out of our library! Isn't that fun? And Anne-Marie is going to present it to her as a memento of this lovely visit!

Karen turns and looks straight at me, giving a loud and hearty laugh. HAHAHA! she says, straight into my face HAHAHA! She is so close her gusty laugh moves my hair.

Anne-Marie drops the big book into one of my hands and shakes the other one. She is smiling vacantly over my shoulder. Then she's gone.

What do you think of that, Else?

I can't speak. I look at it. The flyleaf is ripped but it is the same book. Time-yellowed cover, whitened along the spine from sun exposure. I know then. I will kill Karen Little. And I'll kill her tonight.

Back in the house I sit in my mum's living room with a huge glass of straight vodka in my hand.

I haven't had a drink for seven years and surprise myself by pouring straight Smirnoff into a pint glass. This is what I want. Not a glass of full-bodied red or a relaxing beer. What I want is a sour, bitter drink that will wither my tongue and make me half mad. I want a drink that will make me sick and screw me up.

Before this morning, before the final breath went out of her as I held her hand in the hospital, I thought of Totty as "Mum." Now I find I call her "my mum." In the Scots Gaelic language there is no ownership. It isn't *my* cup of tea. The cup of tea

is *with* me. Now that Mum is no longer with me she has become *my* mum. I'm claiming ownership of her.

My mum is all around me in this room, I can smell her. I can see the book she was reading before she went into the hospital, open on the arm of the chair. This house is polluted with books. Her phrase. Polluted. They're everywhere. They're not furniture or mementoes. They're not arranged by spine color on bookcases or anything like that. They're functioning things, on the bathroom floor, in the kitchen by the cooker, on the floor in the hall, as if she had to stop reading that one to pull a coat on and go out. And her tastes were very catholic. Romance, classic, Russian literature, crime fiction. She'd read anything. I've known her to read a book halfway through before realizing that she'd read it before. She didn't read to show off at book groups or for discussion. She never made a show of her erudition. She just liked to be lost.

The book from the school is on the table in front of me. Yellow, accusing. Lichtenstein is on the cover, photographed in black and white. He is standing contraposto in the picture, looking a little fey. The height of the white room behind him implies a studio space.

I can't look at that anymore.

The couch is facing the window. A sloping lawn leads down to an angry sea. America is over there, obscured from view by the curvature of the earth and nothing more. Away is over there.

I sat here often while she was alive, on the couch, planning my exit from this small place. *I will get away*. The day after my sixteenth birthday, I left the island like a rat on fire. Down to London, sleeping on floors, in beds I didn't particularly want to be in, just to be away. I would have sold my soul. But my mum stayed.

She came to visit me in London once I got a place of my own, when I was doing the TV soap and the money was rolling in. Nothing makes you feel rich as much as having been poor. Totty came down to London "for a visit." Always "for a visit." Coming back was not negotiable. She was always going to come back here, to an island that hated her.

I asked her to stay with me in London. I did it several times. Sobbing, drunk, and begging her to stay. She took my hand and said *I love you* and *you know I can't* and *they'll win then*. Finally she said she wouldn't come and visit anymore if I asked her again. And you should stop drinking, Else. You don't have a problem but you drink for the wrong reasons. Get drunk for fun, she said, and only for fun. Never get drunk to give yourself guts. That's what I'm doing now. Sipping the foul vodka as if it were medicine, trying to swallow it before it touches the sides. I need guts tonight.

I look at the book on the table and I'm back at the event in the small, packed library. Why did they even have a podium, I wonder now. Everyone could see me perfectly well. In hindsight it feels like a freak show tent, with me as the freak everyone wants to peer at. Karen planned it all around the giving of the book. She must have known while she watched me speak about my pathetic career, my reality show appearances, the failed comedy series. She must have known when she cornered me in the chemist's.

I look down at the book.

I'm getting drunk and I try to think of an alternative explanation: is this a custom? Do people give people "the last book they took out of their school library"? No.

I should have asked: did someone else suggest this? But I know in my gut that the answer would be no. No one else suggested this. Karen Little suggested giving you this book. No one else would know which was the last book you took out of the school library. And why would they? Why the hell would they? It means nothing to anyone but Karen and me.

I open it. Tech solutions hadn't reached this little corner of Scotland yet. There were no chips or automatic reminders sent by text to the mobiles of borrowers. They still stamped books out of the library. The book has never been taken out since I had it, seven years ago. Of course it hasn't. Its been sitting in Karen's cupboard.

I start to cry and stroke the torn flyleaf. I realize that I'm glad my mum was already dead when Karen gave me this.

I flick through the book, as if casually, but I know, even before the pages fall open, that the handwritten note will still be there. The pages part like the Red Sea. A ripped corner of foolscap paper, narrow, faint lines. Even the small hairs at the ripped edge are flattened perfectly after seven years.

It is facing down, but the ink is showing through. I pick it up and turn it over. There in a careful hand to disguise the writing, it says,

*She got herself raped by
Paki Harris. That's why.*

The stock in the school library has always been old. Most of it was second hand, given to the school by well-meaning locals after post mortem clear-outs of family houses. The history books were hangovers from the Empire. Books that referred to "coolies" and other anachronisms. The Lichtenstein book was bang up to date by comparison. It was only fifteen years old and was about a modern painter. I was thrilled when I stumbled across it. I didn't know Lichtenstein's work. I was a pretentious teenager. I imagined myself walking through town with the book in my hand. I imagined myself in New York, in London, discussing Lichtenstein with Londoners. I didn't know until I got there that, one way or another, most Londoners are from small, hateful islands, too.

At the bus stop, on the way home from school, waiting with the book on my knee so anyone passing could see me reading it. *I'd Rather Drown Than Ask Brad For Help*. And then turning the page and finding the note. My whole life story shifting painfully to the side. Who I was. What I was. Looking up. Karen Little standing across the road, doing her death stare. The greatest acting lesson I ever had.

Replace the note in the pages.

Shut the book.

Bite your lip.

Smile past Karen and look for the bus. I thought I might be sick. I thought I might cry. I did neither. I sat, apparently calm, imagined what someone who

hadn't just been punched in the heart would look like, and I did that. I looked for the bus.

I scratched my face.

I saw a sheep on the sea front and my eyes followed it calmly for a few minutes. Karen kept her eyes on me the whole time, until the bus came and I got on and smiled at the driver and took my seat. Maybe she thought I didn't get the note. Maybe that's why she's giving it to me again. Karen Little made me an actor anyway. I have to give her that.

When I got to the end of our drive I was struck by terror. Totty might find the book. It might be true and she might tell me so. Why didn't I just throw the note away? It seemed inseparable from the book. I wrapped the book in a plastic bag and tucked it under a thick gorse bush. I left it there all night and picked it up in the morning and took it back to the library. I should have taken the note out but I didn't dare look at it again or touch it.

I wondered about the writing at the time. Did Karen disguise her writing because I knew her? Why stand there, watching me find it at the bus stop? Or did she disguise it in case the police became involved?

I never told Totty about the note. Ever. And I'm glad. And I know I'll be glad about that forever.

I remember that she's gone for the fifteenth time in an hour. My thoughts are flying, racing somewhere and then *BANG*. Shock. Disbelief.

Totty's gone. The world feels poorer. It feels pointless. The next breath feels pointless.

I sit on the couch and watch the waves break on each other as they struggle inland, then are dragged back out by their heels. Striving pointlessly. Then I make an effort. Studiously, I drink the crazy drink and get crazy drunk.

It's the middle of the night and I wake up on the couch. I'm sweaty and I smell unfamiliar to myself, strange and sour. The sea is howling outside, fierce gray. A self-harming sea. I'm going kill Karen Little. I'm so angry I can hardly breathe in.

The first problem is the car. I get into the car and start the engine and back it into a wall. It sounds as if it was probably a bad crash, from the crumple of metal, but I can't be bothered getting out to look at it. It's windy. The sea spray is as thick as a fog over the windscreen.

It's in *reverse*. That's the problem there. I've solved a problem and feel buoyed.

I change gear. I go for a front-ways one this time and move off. I pass the gorse bush where I hid the Lik-Tin-Stein all those years ago. The engine is groaning and growling, doesn't sound happy, so maybe it's third gear. First gear. That's the one. So I put it in first and it sounds happy now. Am I wearing a coat? Where does Karen even live now? I'll find her. Wherever she lives.

I get all the way up the hill, looking down on the lights of the town and the harbor. Its inky dark up here and the road is disappearing in front of me, swallowed in the blackness. Lights! Of course! My lights are off.

I stop on the top of the hill, over the town. She's down there somewhere. I crank on the hand break and look for the lights. I don't know this car. The switch should be on the wheel but it's not. Not on the dashboard. Why would they hide a thing like that? It's ridiculous, it's not safe. I'm going to write to the company.

A glass-tap and a shout through the sheeting rain—HELLO?

A face. Man-face at the window. Smiling.

I wind the window down. I'm already indignant about the safety flaws in the car and the rain comes in making my leg cold. Now I'm furious.

The hell're you *doing* out here?

Else? He smiles, sweet, as round faced as he ever was. Tam. God, he's handsome.

I heard she died, Else. I was coming to see you.

So there's a dissonant thing going on now: *inside* my head I'm saying "Tam" over and over in different ways, friendly way, surprised, delighted, howthellareye! ways. But outside my head, I'm making a noise, a squeal like a hurt piglet, very high noise. My face is tight so I can't will it to move and I'm holding the steering wheel tight with both hands. And my face is wet.

Auch, darlin', says Tam.

He opens the door and all the rain's getting on me and he's carrying me to his car and then I'm in the kitchen.

Tam.

Tam's pouring coffee. I hope it's for me because it looks really nice. He's telling me a lot of things that are surprising but also nice. Tam was my first boyfriend and, honestly, I have never stopped loving that man. We were inseparable before I left so abruptly. He knew why. I never wrote to him or called. I never asked him to visit. But Tam isn't bitter. He's winning his race.

Tam's telling me that he's gay and he has a man and he's happy. It makes me feel so pleased, as if a part of me is now gay and has a man and is happy, too.

Now he's telling me very carefully that it wasn't me that turned him gay, you know. Tam? The hell are you on about? He sees that I'm laughing at him. I'm laughing in a loving way because, Tam, you don't need to explain that to me! For godsake! Well, anyway he's laughing too, now, but his laughter is more from relief really.

He explains that he went out with another girl from the other side of the island. Well, she's kind of angry with Tam for being gay. She thinks either she turned him gay by being unattractive or that he tricked her into covering for him. She hasn't settled on one reading of events just yet, but even though it was five years ago, she's still very annoyed about it.

I think about asking how unattractive can she possibly be, but that's a quip and my lips aren't very agile. Nor is my brain. And then the moment for a joke is past. So I just smile and say, Auch, well. People are nuts.

Tam says, Yeah, people are nuts and gives a sad half shrug. Still, he says, not nice to be the cause of hurt, you know?

He means it. However nasty she was to him, he still doesn't want to be the cause of hurt to her. That's what Tam's like. Like my mum. Better people than me. Good people.

I put my hand on Tam's to say that he's a lovely person, that he always was a lovely person, just like my mum. But he looks at my hand on his and he's a bit alarmed, like he's worried I might be coming on to him and he'll have to explain something else about being gay and how gay isn't just a sometimes type of thing. He's afraid of causing me hurt maybe. So I get out of my seat, sticking my tongue right out and sort of jab it at his face while making a hungry sound. Tam gives a

girlish scream and pulls away from me and we're both laughing as if it's seven years ago and we're that whole bunch of different atoms again.

But then, as I'm laughing, I catch a fleeting glimpse of him looking at me. He is smiling wide, his uniform shirt unbuttoned at the neck, his tie loose. His hand is resting on the table and he's looking straight at me through laughing, appreciative eyes. I know that look and I feel for the jilted girl from the other side of the island. Tam would be easy to misread. When I'm not drunk I might tell him: you come over as straight, Tam. It's an acting job, being who you are. I am good at acting and Tam isn't. He's sending out all the wrong signals.

I'll tell him later. When my lips are working.

We're different people, I slur, every seven years, d'you know that?

He says no and I try to explain, but it's not going very well. Words elude me. When I look up he's very serious.

He says, Else, you're drunk. It's a change of topic from the seven years and he's not pleased I'm drunk.

I can get drunk if I want. You're not the goddam boss, Tam.

Yes, he says, seriously. I *am* the boss. I'm a police officer. You're drunk and you're driving a car. It's all banged up at the back. I am the boss. Where were you going?

I look at him and I think he knows where I was going but I just say nowhere.

I knew when she died you would do something, he says, as if I'm a loose cannon, a crazy person who can't be trusted not to mess everything up unless my mum is there to tick me off. I look up and see the Smirnoff bottle and know that I wouldn't be drinking if she were still alive. The world has been without her for less than twenty-four hours and I'm already drinking and driving and trying to kill people. Being so wrong makes me livid.

I say, So, Tam, you didn't come to see me, you came to *stop* me? I call him a swearsy name. What kind of person are you? You don't give a shit about me or my mum.

But Tam's face doesn't even twitch. Don't even try, he says.

Don't even try what, *Tam*?

Don't try to make me feel guilty, Else. You haven't been in touch, you never even wrote to me. You didn't call me and tell me she was dead. What happened to her is the reason I became a policeman so don't even try that crap with me.

But I'm still angry because I'm so wrong and I say things to him that are just crude and mean. A drunken rant and I'm cringing even as I'm shouting. I start crying with shame and frustration because I'm saying things so unkind and nasty. I'm not homophobic. I don't think policemen even do that. I'm just really drunk and my mum's dead and they were so mean to her and Karen had the book all along and it's not fair.

I'm furious and drunk and ashamed and wrong and it's making me cry so much that I'm blind. I can hear Tam breathing gasps. Confusing. By the time the tears clear I can see him doubled over, holding his stomach. I think he's being sick but then I realize that he is laughing, very much, at the things I said about policemen and what he might do with them.

If you saw them! he says, the other policemen! You couldn't, even for a dare!

My mood swings as wildly as a change in wind direction over the open sea. I hope that coffee is for me.

My eyes are trying to kill me. They're stabbing my brain. I wake up in bed this time, in the morning. I've got all my clothes on. I have to keep my eyes shut as I sit up. I get hold of the bedstead to steady myself and tiptoe carefully towards the bathroom. My mouth floods with seawater and I have to run, even with my assassin eyes.

The smell of coffee lingers in the hallway. I'm worried that I've broken something in my olfactory system with all that vodka, unaccustomed as I am, until I get into the kitchen and find Tam making more coffee.

I feel awful.

Good heavens, says Tam, there's a surprise.

It's a nice thing to say, the way he says it. Kind. I slither into a seat and shade my eyes.

He's making scrambled eggs. I won't be able to eat but I'm too comforted by his presence to interrupt him.

You can't drive today, Else, he says. You've still got high alcohol content in your blood and your car lights are all smashed.

I don't answer. I sit with my hand over my eyes and listen to him putting toast on the grill, scraping the eggs in the pan and I think, if this was the fifties we could have been happy in a sexless marriage of convenience, Tam and I.

Who were you going to see last night, Else?

The memory evokes a misery so powerful it almost trumps my hangover. I tell him: I want to kill Karen Little.

He's stopped cooking and is looking at me. I can't look back. Karen?

He puts two plates of scrambled egg down on the table. And takes the toast from the grill and drops a slice on top of each of the yellow mountains.

I pull my plate over to me.

Karen gave me the book back.

Tam is very still. Which book?

The Lichtenstein. She gave it to me at the library yesterday. She said it was the last book I ever took out of the library. No one had taken it out since. The note was still in it.

Tam sits down. His hands rest either side of his plate like a concert pianist gathering his thoughts before a recital.

Finally he speaks. I'll kill the bitch myself, he says.

The hospital tells me that nothing can be done about my mum today. They need a pathologist to come over from the mainland and do a post mortem, but the ferries are cancelled because a storm is coming. I can sit at home alone or I can go and confront Karen. Tam says let's go.

I'm in Tam's work car, a big police Range Rover. He isn't working today, he says, so it's no bother to drive me around. He's very angry about the book. He wants to know how she got the book to me. I tell him about the ceremony, in front of everyone, how she turned and HAHAA'd into my face. He gets so angry he has to stop the car and get out and walk around and smoke a cigarette. I watch him out there, walking in the rising wind, his shoulders slumped, orange sparks from the tip of his cigarette against the backdrop of the grey sea like tiny, hopeless flares.

When he gets back in he takes a hip flask out of the glove box. He has a sip and gives it to me, as if drinking in a car is okay now, because he's so angry. I drink to please him. I feel it slide down into me and pinch the sharp edges off my hangover. It is comforting to have my anger matched. He nods at me to drink more and I do. The alcohol warms me and eases my headache and just everything feels a little easier, suddenly. Being angry feels easy and the future feels unimportant. What matters is stopping Karen.

When he finally speaks Tam's face is quite red. He tells me that we will find Karen and take her somewhere. We will not even ask about the note or the book; that would be a chance for her to talk herself out of trouble. If we asked she'd say she knew nothing about it. She'd blame someone else. She'd plead ignorance. We will simply get her alone and then, immediately, we'll do it: we will stab Karen in the neck. We will get away with it because we'll be together. We will be one another's alibi. We'll decide which of us will do the stabbing when we get there. But I already know.

He drives and he asks me about the book and I tell him it had never been taken out since I recovered it from the gorse bush and took it back to school. He remembers how upset I was back then. He says it was devastating for him, too, because I just left and I was his only friend. She ruined his life, too, because she chased me away. I know this is true. Back then Tam became fixated on me to a degree that wasn't comfortable. It wasn't always benign. *In vino veritas*: if I hadn't had that drink from his hip flask I might not suddenly know that I didn't really leave despite Tam. It was partly because of him. He was too intense back then. His love was overwhelming, and I never realized that before.

Tam parks in a quiet back street in the town. He has finished his cigarettes. He needs more so he goes off to the shops while I go into the school and look for Karen. He says just pretend that you left something in there. I watch him walk away from the car and he is scratching his head and his hand is covering his handsome face.

Karen Little isn't in today. The librarian's position is part time, the school secretary explains. Karen only works Monday, Tuesday, and half day on Wednesday. Then she tries to segue into a rant about government cuts but she can see I'm not listening. Then she stops and seems to realize that I've been drinking. She waits for me to speak, cocking her head like a curious seagull. Then she guesses: did I leave something yesterday? I'm supposed to say I did but, at just that moment, I think of my mum laying in a dark drawer in a mortuary fridge and, to be honest, I just sort of turn and walk away.

Out in the car park Tam is waiting with the engine running. I get in. Karen's not there, I tell him. She's at home. He starts to drive and I realize that he knows where she lives. But he's a cop in a small community. He probably knows where everyone lives. And then I wonder why the engine was running, before he knew she wasn't in.

We drive out of town, onto the flat, wind-blown moor. I steal a glimpse at Tam. He's furious. He's chewing his cheek and for some reason I think of Totty. Not about her dying but what she said about being bitter. Tam looks bitter and I pity him that. I catch a glimpse of myself in the side mirror and I'm frowning and I look bitter. This is not what Totty wanted for me.

I know this road. We're heading for Paki Harris's house and I ask why. Karen lives there now, says Tam. She was his only blood left on the island. Karen was related to Paki Harris. I've always known that. Everyone is related to everyone here except us incomers, but I didn't realize she was so closely related to Paki. Second cousins, Tam tells me somberly, just as we're passing a small farmhouse by the roadside with a *For Sale* outside it. The sign flaps in the wind like a rigid surrender flag.

For Sale signs are a sorrow on the island. People are born, live, and die in the same house here. A *For Sale* sign means the house owner had no one to leave it to, or maybe only a mainlander. Mainlanders don't understand the houses here. They sell them for cash or use them as holiday homes for two weeks a year, a long weekend at Easter. You can't do that with these houses. They need fires burning in them all the time to keep the damp out. To keep the rot out. These island houses aren't built for sometimes. They need commitment. Karen Little has taken on the commitment of Paki Harris's house.

It was an accident when my mother killed Paki. She ran him over on the main street on a Sunday afternoon in May, just before I was born. The Fatal Accident inquiry found no fault with her. She didn't try to explain what happened. She just ran him straight over, once, completely. She never mentioned it to me, I heard it from just about everyone else, with various embellishments. But the note, that note in the book, was the first version I ever heard that made sense of it. Paki raped her. She got pregnant with me. She killed him. That's why.

Paki Harris was from here. My mother was not. So the island took his side because loyalty isn't rational and, in the end, loyalty is all there is in a place this small.

In the seven years since I left I have often imagined what it was to be my heavily pregnant mother and see a man who had raped her day after day, standing in church, shopping at the supermarket, strolling on the sea front. I would have driven a car at him. The note, though, the note made me realize how deep the bitterness is here. It had never occurred to me that she had a motive until I saw that note. And afterwards, I realized, if they knew, if they all knew that he had raped her and that's why, could they not have found one shred of compassion for her? They spat at her in the street. She couldn't eat in the café because no one would speak when she was in there. She used the library until they banned her for "bringing food in." She had a packet of crisps in her bag. I'm not leaving, she'd say, because wherever you live, life is a race against bitterness and staying makes me run faster.

I feel so sad remembering it all. I feel like a house without a fire in it. I glance at Tam driving down the small road. He looks as if he's had a good old fire burning for the past seven years in him. His cheeks are pink, his eyes are shining. He's upright, sitting proud of the seat back. He's wired with bitterness and ready. I'm a sloucher.

It seems so odd, us being in a car together, driving. Neither of us could drive back then. Tam takes a minor cut-off road and we follow the line of the hill, out towards the furious sea. At the headland, along the coast, the waves are forty feet high, smashing higher than the bare black cliffs. The sea is trying to claw its way

onto the land and failing. Each time it retreats to catch its breath it fails. But it keeps trying.

Suddenly we see Paki Harris's house, a stark silhouette against the coming storm. It's one of those Victorian oddities that seem inevitable because they've been there for a hundred and fifty years. It is big, squat, and solid. The roofline is castellated; the windows are big and plentiful. The wind coming straight off the water is perpetual and incessant on this headland. The house is an act of defiance, an elegant onefingered salute to the wind and the ocean.

Very much like Paki himself, from what I've heard.

Before I knew he might be my father, before the note, I listened to stories about Paki without prejudice. I knew they hated my mum and loved Paki but I didn't see him as anything to do with me. Paki was a wild boy. Paki had bar fights and rode ponies into the town on the Sabbath. Paki pushed a minister into a bush. Paki burned a barn down. I heard a lot of stories about him. He was ugly but wild, and wild is good here.

As we draw up to the house the big heavy car is buffeted by the wind. Tam finds a wind-shaded spot by the side. He drives straight into it and pulls on the hand break. He wants to talk to me before we go in. He gets the hip flask out again. I don't want anymore but he makes me take it. And he tells me quietly what will happen: he will knock on the front door. I will go around behind the house to see if the back door is open. If it is open, I will come in and find the kitchen, first door on the right. There is a knife block with carving knives on it. Karen will come to the front door and let Tam in. Tam will bring Karen into the kitchen where I am hiding behind the door with my knife. I will go for the neck.

He looks at me for confirmation and I nod. I shouldn't be scared, he tells me. He will be right there. He smiles and makes me drink more. He doesn't drink anymore because he is driving. He's a cop. He can't afford to lose his license.

We get out of opposite doors and I slip around to the back of the house. Suddenly, the wind pushes and shoves and pulls at me and I have to crouch low and run for the steps up to the door. It is open. I'm in. I find myself breathless from the pummeling wind and the short sharp run up the worn stone steps.

In the dark stone hallway the house is silent. I don't think Karen is in. This is an eventuality that didn't occur to either of us, so deep were we into our consensus. I flatten myself against the wall and listen to the creaking windows and the hiss of the wind outside. At the far end of the hall I can see the cold white light from the front door spilling into the hallway.

Three knocks. Bam. Bam. Bam. Tam's shadow is on the carpet. Karen isn't even in.

I draw a deep breath.

A creak above. Not wind. A creak of weight on floor above. Karen is standing up somewhere. She takes a step, I feel her wondering if she did hear someone knocking. Then Tam knocks again. Bam. Bam. Bam. She is sure now and comes out to the upstairs hall. At the top of the stairs she pauses, she must be able to see the door from up there. She gives a little "oh" and hurries down to Tam standing outside. She seems a little annoyed by him as she flings the door open.

Why are you knocking? she asks.

Tam keeps his eyes on the hall and slips in, shutting the door behind him, taking her by the elbow and pulling her into a room.

Thomas? She's calling him his formal name, his grown-up name. Why did you wait out in that wind? Did the lawyer call you? She's jabbering like a housewife talking over a garden fence but Tam's saying nothing back.

Their voices move from the hall to nowhere to suddenly coming from the first door on the right. They are in the kitchen. They have gone through a different door into the kitchen and I am supposed to be in there right now with a knife from the knife block.

For the first time in my life, I have missed my cue.

I throw myself at the door and fall into the room. Look up. There is Tam, standing behind Karen, holding her by the elbow, sort of, pushing her forward, toward me.

There, right in front of me, is a worktop with a large knife block on it. A lot of knives, maybe fifteen knives, all sizes, and the wooden handles are pointing straight towards the front of my hand. I can reach out and be holding one in a second.

Karen's mouth is hanging open. Tam's face is a glowering cloud of bitterness behind her shoulder.

I say, Hello, Karen.

No one knows what to do for a moment. We all stand still.

Hello, Else, says Karen.

If I was at home, in London, and a person I had been at school with seven years ago fell through my kitchen door I might have a lot questions for them. Karen just looks around the floor in front of her and says, Cuppa?

It takes a moment to compute. Cuppa? Cup of tea? Hot cup of tea for you?

Actually, I say, looking at Tam who is getting more and more red in the face, A cuppa would be lovely, Karen, thanks.

Expertly, as if she is used to doing it, Karen twists her elbow to snake it out of Tam's grasp and steps away. She picks the kettle up off the range. She turns to look at both of us, thinking about something or other, and then she says, Well, I might as well make a pot of tea.

No one answers. It's the action of the elbow that makes me realize my gut was right. Tam has held her by that elbow before. And Karen has freed herself from that grip many times. He knew she wasn't in school today. I remember his look at me last night, the laughing-eyed assessment of me as he sat at the table.

She has her back to us as she fills it from the tap. Tam nods me towards the knife block. There it is, his face says, over there.

And my face says, What? What are you saying? Oh! There? The knives! Oh, yes! I forgot about a knife! Okay then! But inside I'm saying something quite different. It's not his fault. It's understandable because I'm in a lot of crap on telly. Tam doesn't know I'm a good actor.

Karen gets some mugs down and a packet of biscuits. She's talking. To me.

Else, she says, I heard that your mum died. And I know that she died before you came to the school yesterday.

We look at each other and I see that she is welling up. I'm so sorry, she says and I wonder if she means about the book. But she doesn't. About the talk, she

says. You must have felt that you couldn't cancel. Or you were too shocked, I don't know, but I'm sorry.

And then she puts her hand on my forearm. I can see in her eyes that she is really sorry, for my loss, for my mum, and for the sorrows of all daughters and mothers and I start to cry.

Karen's arms are around me, warm and safe, and I hear her tut into my ear and say Oh no, oh no, oh dear. She whispers to me, I hope you like the book. I'm sobbing too hard to pull away and she adds, Tam remembered you liked it back then.

I don't think Tam can hear her. He thinks we are whispering lady things. We stand in this grief clinch for quite a long time, until the whistle of the kettle calls an end to the round.

She sits me down at the table and I gather myself, wipe my face, and look at Tam. Tam is staring hard at the table, frowning furiously. He has given up making eye contact with me or nodding at knives or anything. He hasn't heard it but he has realized that I'm not going to stab her and never was. He doesn't know what to do now. Karen puts a plate of sugary biscuits in front of me and gives me a cup of tea.

And I've put sugar in that for you. I know you don't take sugar probably, but there's sugar in that because you've probably had a bad shock.

Karen sits down, her knees towards me. She picks up her mug and flicks a finger out at him without looking.

Did he tell you?

I sniff, What?

She smiles, *Us*, she says, a wry curl twitching at the side of her mouth.

I shake my head, baffled.

She glances at him. He is staring hard at her but she says it anyway: *Married*.

I lift my sugary tea, for the shock, and drink it though it is too hot. When I put the mug down again, empty, I tell her that my mum never said anything about that.

She hums. It was a secret. They married on the mainland, didn't they, Tam. Tam? Didn't they? In secret. Tam gives her nothing back and that makes her sort of snicker. Because of their families, you know. Because she had a lot of money and houses coming to her and he had nothing. Her family didn't trust him. But, you know, it didn't work out and no kids so, no harm done. They're getting divorced now. Aren't we Tam? Tam? Tam, are you not going to speak at all?

Tam is so uncomfortable that he cannot speak. He is eating biscuit after biscuit to keep his face busy. He is doing a strange thing with this head, not nodding or shaking it but sort of jerking it sideways in a noncommittal gesture.

Karen frowns at him. She doesn't understand. She gives up trying and turns her attention to me. So, what is going to happen with your mum's funeral?

I tell her: I'm flying her out of there. I'm taking her to London and I'm going to have her cremated there. Karen says, Wouldn't it be easier to have her cremated nearby and then take her to London?

Tam came here to kill you, I say.

Karen says do I want another biscuit?

I actually wonder if I said that out loud because she hasn't reacted at all. But then I look at Tam's face and I know I did say it out loud. Karen lifts the plate and offers me another one, her face a perfect question: biscuit? That's how they do things on the island.

Tam stands up then, knocking his chair over behind him. The sharp clatter on the stone floor ricochets around the kitchen. He turns to the door and walks out, through the hall and out of the front door, slamming it behind him. A skirl of wind curls around our ankles.

Apropos of nothing, Karen says to me, This was Paki Harris's house.

I eat a biscuit and when I've finished I say, I know.

Karen nods. I don't know if you ever discussed him with your mum?

No.

She puts a hand on my hand and cringes, tearful again. Do you know who your father is, Else?

We never discussed my father.

Hm. Karen doesn't know what she can and can't say.

It just falls out of my London mouth: You think Paki raped my mum and that's why she ran him over?

Karen sighs. I don't know, she says, I don't know what happened. Not for me to know. But, Else, I think this house might be yours.

I don't want it.

It's worth a bit of money—

I don't want it.

Karen looks at me and I can see she's glad. She likes the house. She belongs here. These are not sometimes houses.

I was so mean to you when we were young. I'm sorry.

And I say, Oh! Forget it! because I'm flustered.

But she can't. She's been thinking about it, a lot, she says. But she is really sorry. She was jealous, because I was an incomer. It seems so free to me back then, she says, to not be part of all of this—

Aren't you worried, Karen? I blurt, Tam invited me here to stab you in the neck! Doesn't that concern you? You've just let him leave. Where's he going?

She looks fondly towards the front door. Gone to get drunk, I think. It's a rough week. Our divorce is final tomorrow.

And I understand finally. He wanted her killed today so he could inherit this house. And if I committed the murder I couldn't inherit from a woman I killed. It would be his outright.

I think he still has a thing about you.

Really?

Yeah.

I don't think so.

Well, you're wrong.

I look at her and realize that she's nice, Karen. She's not bitter. She is tied to this place and always will be. She accepts what it is to be from here and of here. There's no escape for Karen, not from my rapist father's house or from Tam who wanted to kill her. She accepts where she is and who she is and what had happened. She's like my mum. Karen is winning her race.

Let me drive you back to town, Else, as an apology. And as a thank you, for soldiering on yesterday. She pats my hand. Soldiering on is important.

She goes out to the hallway and pulls on a coat and I see past her to the vicious sea. The wind is screeching a ferocious caw. The waves are streaming over the cliffs. The grass on the headland is flattened and salted and Karen looks back at me. She smiles her soft island smile that could mean anything.

I am getting out of here. I am getting away, and this time I'm taking my mum with me.

