

SHE WATCHED the sky darken, threatening rain.

'There's no light at all these days,' she said. 'It's been the darkest winter. I hate the rain or the cold, but I don't mind it when there's no light.'

Father Greenwood sighed and glanced at the window.

'Most people hate the winter,' he said.

She could think of nothing more to say and hoped that he might go now. Instead, he reached down and pulled up one of his grey socks, then waited for a moment before he inspected the other and pulled that up too.

'Have you seen Frank lately?' he asked.

'Once or twice since Christmas,' she said. 'He has too much parish work to come and visit me very much, and maybe that's the way it should be. It would be terrible if it was the other way around, if he saw his mother more than his parishioners. He prays for me, I know that, and I would pray for him too if I believed in prayer, but I'm not sure I do. But we've talked about that, you know all that.'

'Your whole life's a prayer, Molly,' Father Greenwood said and smiled warmly.

She shook her head in disbelief.

'Years ago the old women spent their lives praying. Now, we get our hair done and play bridge and go to Dublin on the free travel, and we say what we like. But I've to be careful what I say in front of Frank, he's very holy. He got that from his father. It's nice having a son a priest who's very holy. He's one of the old school. But I can say what I like to you.'

'There are many ways of being holy,' Father Greenwood said.

'In my time there was only one,' she replied.

WHEN HE HAD gone she got the *RTE Guide* and opened it for the evening's television listings; she began to set the video to record *Glenroe*. She worked slowly, concentrating. In the morning, when the *Irish Times* had been read, she would put her feet up and watch this latest episode. Now in the hour she had to spare before she went out to play bridge, she sat at the dining-room table and flicked through the newspaper, examining headlines and photographs, but reading nothing, and not even thinking, letting the time pass easily.

It was only when she went to fetch her coat in the small room off the kitchen that she noticed Father Greenwood's car still in front of the house; as she peered out, she could see him sitting in the driver's seat.

Her first thought was that he was blocking her car and she would have to ask him to move. Later, that first thought would stay with her as a strange and innocent way of keeping all other thoughts at a distance; it was something which almost made her smile when she remembered it.

He opened the car door as soon as she appeared with her coat held distractedly over her arm.

'Is there something wrong? Is it one of the girls?' she asked.

'No,' he said, 'no, there's not.'

He moved towards her, preparing to make his way back into the house. She wished in the second they locked eyes that she could escape now to an evening of cards and company, get by him quickly and walk to the bridge club at the hotel, if she had to. Anything, she thought, to stop him saying whatever it was he had come to say.

'Oh, it's not the boys! Oh, don't say it's the boys have had an accident and you're afraid to tell me!' she said.

He shook his head with certainty.

'No, Molly, not at all, no accident.'

As he reached her he caught her hand as though she would need his support nonetheless.

'I know you have to go and play bridge,' he said.

She believed then that it could not be anything urgent or important. If she could still play bridge then clearly no one was dead or injured.

'I have a few minutes,' she said.

'Maybe I can come back another time. We can talk more,' he said.

'Are you in any trouble?' she asked.

He looked at her as though the question puzzled him.

'No,' he said.

She put her coat down on a chair in the hallway.

'No,' he said again, his voice quieter.

'Then we'll leave it for another time,' she said calmly and smiled as best she could. She watched him hesitate, and

she became even more determined that she would go immediately. She picked up her coat and made sure the keys were in the pocket.

'If it can wait, then it can wait,' she said.

He turned away from her, walking out of the hallway towards his car.

'Right you be,' he said. 'Enjoy your night. I hope I didn't alarm you.'

She was already moving away from him, her car keys in her hand, having closed the front door firmly behind her.

THE NEXT DAY, when she had finished her lunch, she took her umbrella and her raincoat and walked to the library on the Back Road. It would be quiet, she knew, and Miriam the new girl would have time for her, she hoped. There was already a molly@hotmail.com, Miriam had told her on her last visit to learn how to use the library computer, so for her first email address she would need to add something to the word 'Molly' to make it original, like a number maybe, hers alone.

'Can I be Molly80?' she had asked.

'Are you eighty, Mrs O'Neill?'

'Not yet, but it won't be long.'

'Well, you don't look it.'

Her fingers had stiffened with age, but her typing was as accurate and fast as when she was twenty.

'If I could just type, I'd be fine,' she said now as Miriam moved an office chair close to the computer and sat beside her, 'but that mouse will be the end of me. It doesn't do what I want it to do at all. My grandsons can make it do

whatever they want. I hate having to click. It was much simpler in my day. Just typing. No clicking.'

'Oh, when you're sending emails and getting them, you'll see the value of it,' Miriam said.

'Yes, I told them I was going to send them an email as soon as I could. I'll have to think of what to put into it.'

She turned her head when she heard voices and saw two women from the town returning books to the library. They were studying her with immense curiosity.

'Look at you, Molly. You've gone all modern,' one of them said.

'You have to keep up with what's going on,' she said.

'You never liked missing anything, Molly. You'll get all the news from that now.'

She faced the computer and began to practise opening her Hotmail account, as Miriam went to attend to the women, and she did not turn again when she heard them browsing among the stacks of books, speaking to one another in hushed voices.

Later, when she felt she had used enough of Miriam's patience, she walked towards the cathedral and down Main Street into Irish Street. She greeted people she met on the street by name, people she had known all of her life, the children of her contemporaries, many of them grown middle-aged themselves, and even their children, all familiar to her. There was no need to stop and talk to them. She knew all about them, she thought, and they about her. When news spread widely that she was learning how to use the computer in the library, one or two of them would ask her how it was going, but for the moment she would be allowed pass with a kind, brisk greeting.

Her sister-in-law sat in the front room of her house where the fire was lighting. Molly tapped on the window and then waited while Jane fumbled with the automatic system.

'Push now!' She could hear her voice through the intercom.

She pushed the door, which was stiff, and, having closed it behind her, let herself into Jane's sitting room.

'I look forward to Monday,' Jane said, 'when you come down. It's lovely to see you.'

'It's cold outside, Jane,' she said, 'but it's nice and warm in here, thank God.'

It would be easier, more relaxing somehow, she thought, if one of them made tea, but Jane was too frail to move very much and too proud to want her sister-in-law in her kitchen. They sat opposite each other as Jane tended the fire almost absent-mindedly. There was, she thought, nothing to say, and yet there would never be a moment's silence between them.

'How was the bridge?' Jane asked.

'I'm getting worse at it,' Molly replied, 'but I'm not as bad as some of them.'

'Oh, you were always a great card player,' Jane said.

'But for bridge you have to remember all the rules and the right bids and I'm too old, but I enjoy it, and then I enjoy when it's over.'

'It's a wonder the girls don't play,' Jane said.

'When you have young children, you've enough to think about. They never have a minute.'

Jane nodded distantly and looked into the fire.

'They're very good, the girls,' she said. 'I love it when they come down to see me.'

'You know, Jane,' Molly replied, 'I like seeing them and all that, but I wouldn't care if they didn't visit from one end of the week to the next. I'm one of those mothers who prefers her grandchildren to her children.'

'Oh, now,' Jane replied.

'It's true, Jane. I'd go mad if a week went by and my lovely grandsons didn't come down on a Wednesday for their tea, and I'm always raging when their mothers come to collect them. I always want to keep the boys.'

'They're nice when they're at that age,' Jane said. 'And it's so handy that they live so close together and they get on so well.'

'Has Frank been here?' Molly asked.

Jane glanced up at her, almost alarmed. For a moment a look of pain came on her face.

'Oh Lord no,' she said.

'I haven't seen him much since Christmas either,' Molly said, 'but you usually know more about him. You read the parish newsletter. He gave up sending it to me.'

Jane bowed her head, as though searching for something on the floor.

'I must tell him to call in to you,' Molly said. 'I don't mind him neglecting his mother, but neglecting his aunt, and she the holiest one in the family...'

'Oh, don't now!' Jane said.

'I will, Jane, I'll write him a note. There's no point in ringing him. You only get the machine. I hate talking into those machines.'

She studied Jane across the room, aware now that all the time her sister-in-law spent alone in this house was changing her face, making her responses slower, her jaw set. Her eyes had lost their kind glow.

'I keep telling you,' she said, as she stood up to go, 'that you should get a video machine. It would be great company. I could bring you down videos.'

She noticed Jane taking a rosary beads from a small purse and wondered if this were being done deliberately as a way of showing that she had more important things to consider.

'Think about it anyway,' she said.

'I will, Molly, I'll think about that,' Jane replied.

DARKNESS WAS falling as she approached her bungalow, but she could clearly make out Father Greenwood's car parked again in front of her car. She realized that he would have seen her in one of the mirrors just as soon as she saw him, so there would be no point in turning back. If I were not a widow, she thought, he would not do this to me. He would telephone first, minding his manners.

Father Greenwood got out of the car as she came close.

'Now, Father Greenwood, come in,' she said. 'I have the key here in my hand.' She brandished the key as though it were a foreign object.

She had put the heating system on a timer so the radiators were already warm. She touched the radiator in the hallway for a moment and thought of taking him into the sitting room, but felt then that the kitchen would be easier. She could stand up and make herself busy if she did not want to

sit listening to him. In the sitting room, she would be trapped with him.

'Molly, you must think it strange my coming back like this,' Father Greenwood said. He sat down at the kitchen table.

She did not answer. She sat down opposite him and unbuttoned her coat. It struck her for a moment that it might be the anniversary of Maurice's death and that he had come to be with her in case she needed his support and sympathy, but she then remembered just as quickly that Maurice had died in the summer and that he had been dead for years and no one paid any attention to his anniversary. She could think of nothing else as she stood up and took her coat off and draped it over the armchair in the corner. Father Greenwood, she noticed, had his hands joined in front of him at the table as though ready for prayer. Whatever this was, she thought, she would make sure that he never came to her house unannounced again.

'Molly, Frank asked me—'

'Is there something wrong with Frank?' she interrupted.

Father Greenwood smiled at her weakly.

'He's in trouble,' he said.

Immediately she knew what that meant, and then thought no, her first reaction to everything else had been wrong, so maybe this too, maybe, she thought, maybe it was not what had automatically come into her mind.

'Is it . . . ?'

'There's going to be a court case, Molly.'

'Abuse?' She said the word which was daily in the newspapers and on the television, as pictures appeared of

priests with their anoraks over their heads, so that no one would recognize them, being led from court-houses in handcuffs.

'Abuse?' she asked again.

Father Greenwood's hands were shaking. He nodded.

'It's bad, Molly.'

'In the parish?' she asked.

'No,' he said, 'in the school. It was a good while ago. It was when he was teaching.'

Their eyes were locked in a sudden fierce hostility.

'Does anyone else know this?' she asked.

'I came down to tell you yesterday but I didn't have the heart.'

She held her breath for a moment and then decided she should stand up, push her chair back without caring whether it fell over, not moving her eyes from her visitor's face for one second.

'Does anyone else know this? Can you answer a straight question?'

'It's known about all right, Molly,' Father Greenwood said gently.

'Do the girls know?'

'They do, Molly.'

'Does Jane know?'

'The girls told her last week.'

'Does the whole town know?'

'It's being talked about all right,' Father Greenwood said. His tone was resigned, almost forgiving. 'Would you like me to make you a cup of tea?' he added.

'I would not, thank you.'

He sighed.

'There will be a court hearing before the end of the month. They tried to have it postponed, but it looks as if it will be Thursday week.'

'And where is Frank?'

'He's still in his parish, but he's not going out much, as you can imagine.'

'He abused young boys?' she asked.

'Teenagers,' he replied.

'And they're now grown up? Is that correct?' she asked.

'He'll need all—'

'Don't tell me what he'll need,' she interrupted.

'It's going to be very hard for you,' he said, 'and that's killing him.'

She held the side of the table with her hands.

'The whole town knows? Is that right? The only person who hasn't known is the old woman? You've all made a fool out of me!'

'It was not easy to tell you, Molly. The girls tried a while ago and I tried yesterday.'

'And them all whispering about me!' she said. 'And Jane with her rosary beads!'

'I'd say people will be very kind,' he said.

'Well, you don't know them, then,' she replied.

HE LEFT HER only when she insisted that he go. She checked the newspaper for the evening television and made her tea as though it were an ordinary Monday and she could take her ease. She put less milk than usual into the scalding tea and made herself drink it, proving to herself that she could do anything now, face anything. When a car

pulled up outside, she knew that it would be the girls, her daughters. The priest would have alerted them and they would want to come now, when the news was raw, and they could arrive together so that neither of them would have to deal with her alone.

Normally, they walked around the side of the house and let themselves in the kitchen door, but she moved quickly along the short corridor towards the front door and turned on the light in the porch and opened the door. She stood watching them as they came towards her, her shoulders back.

'Come in,' she said, 'from the cold.'

In the hallway, they remained for a second uneasily, unsure which room they should go into.

'The kitchen,' she said drily and led the way, glad that she had left her glasses on top of the open newspaper on the table so that it would be clear to them that she had been occupied when they came.

'I was just going to do the crossword,' she said.

'Are you all right?' Eileen asked.

She stared at her daughter blankly.

'It's nice to see the two of you together,' she said. 'Are the boys well?'

'They're fine,' Eileen said.

'Tell them I'm nearly ready to take messages from them on an email,' she said. 'Miriam said one more lesson and I'll be away.'

'Was Father Greenwood not here?' Eileen asked.

Margaret had begun to cry and was fumbling in her handbag looking for tissues. Eileen handed her a tissue from her pocket.

'Oh yes, today and yesterday,' Molly said. 'So I have all the news.'

It struck her then that her grandsons would have to live with this too, their uncle on the television and in the newspapers, their uncle the paedophile priest. At least they had a different surname, and at least Frank's parish was miles away. Margaret went to the bathroom.

'Don't ask me if I want tea, I don't want tea,' Molly said.

'I don't know what to say,' Eileen replied. 'It's the worst thing.'

Eileen moved across the kitchen and sat in the armchair.

'Have you told the boys?' she asked.

'We had to tell them because we were afraid they'd hear in school.'

'And were you not afraid I'd hear?'

'No one would say it to you,' Eileen said.

'You didn't have the courage, either of you.'

'I still can't believe it. And he's going to be named and everything.'

'Of course he's going to be named,' Molly said.

'No, we hoped he wouldn't be. He's pleading guilty. So we thought he mightn't be named. But the victims are going to ask that he be named.'

'Is that right?' Molly asked.

Margaret came back into the room. Molly noticed her taking a colour brochure from her handbag. She put it on the kitchen table.

'We spoke to Nancy Brophy,' Eileen said, 'and she said that she would go with you if you wanted to go to the Canaries. The weather would be gorgeous. We looked at prices and everything. It would be cheap enough, and we'd

pay the flight and the hotel and everything. We thought you'd like to go.'

Nancy Brophy was her best friend.

'Did you now?' Molly asked. 'Well, that's lovely, I'll look at that.'

'I mean when the case is on. It'll be all over the papers,' Eileen continued.

'It was good of you to think of it anyway. And Nancy too,' Molly said and smiled. 'You're all very thoughtful.'

'Would you like me to make you a cup of tea?' Margaret asked.

'No, Margaret, she wouldn't,' Eileen said.

'It's the boys you both should be worrying about,' Molly said.

'No, no,' Eileen replied. 'We asked them if anything had ever happened. I mean if Frank . . .'

'What?' Molly asked.

'Had interfered with them,' Margaret said. She had dried her eyes now and she looked at her mother bravely. 'Well, he hasn't.'

'Did you ask Frank as well?' Molly enquired.

'Yes, we did. It all happened twenty years ago. There was nothing since, he says,' Eileen said.

'But it wasn't just a single episode,' Margaret added. 'And I read that you can never tell.'

'Well, you'll have to look after the boys,' Molly said.

'Would you like Father Greenwood to come back and see you again?' Eileen asked.

'I would not!' Molly said.

'We were wondering . . .'

Margaret began.
'Yes?'

'If you'd like to come and stay with one of us for a while,' Margaret continued.

'What would I do in your house, Margaret?' she asked. 'And sure Eileen has no room.'

'Or even if you wanted to go to Dublin,' Eileen said.

Molly went to the window and looked out at the night. They had left the parking lights on in the car.

'Girls, you've left the lights on and the battery'll be run down and one of your poor husbands will have to come and bail you out,' she said.

'I'll go out and turn them off,' Eileen said.

'I'm going out myself,' Molly said. 'So we can all go.'

'You're going out?' Eileen asked.

'I am, Eileen,' she said.

Her daughters looked at each other, puzzled.

'But you usually don't go out on a Monday night,' Eileen said.

'Well, I won't be able to go out until you move the car, because you're blocking the drive. So you'll have to go first. But it was nice to see you, and I'll enjoy looking at the brochure. I've never been in the Canaries.'

She saw them signalling to each other that they could go.

THE TOWN during the next week seemed almost new to her. Nothing was as familiar as she had once supposed. She was unsure what a glance or a greeting disguised, and she was careful, once she had left her own house, never to turn too sharply or look too closely in case she saw them whispering about her. A few times, when people stopped to talk to her, she was unsure if they knew about her son's

disgrace, or if they too had become so skilled at the plain language of small talk that they could conceal every thought from her, every sign, as she could from them.

She made clear to her daughters that she did not wish to go on any holidays or change her routine. She played bridge on Tuesday night and Sunday night as usual. On Thursday she went to the gramophone society, and on Wednesday, after school, she was visited, as always, by her four grandsons, who watched videos with her, and ate fish fingers and chips and ice cream, and did part of their homework until one of their mothers came to collect them. On Saturday she saw friends, other widows in the town, calling on them in her car. Her time was full, and often, in the week after she had received the news of what was coming, she found that she had forgotten briefly what it was, but never for long.

Nancy Brophy asked her one day when she had called to Nancy's house if she was sure she did not want to go to the Canary Islands.

'No, I'm going on as normal,' Molly said.

'You'll have to talk about it, the girls say you'll have to talk about it.'

'Are they ringing you?'

'They are,' Nancy said.

'It's the children they should be worrying about,' Molly said.

'Well, everyone is worried about you.'

'I know. They look at me wondering how to get by me quickly enough in case I might bite them, or I don't know what. The only person who came up to me at the bridge club was Betty Farrell, who took my arm and asked me, with them all watching, to phone her or send word or call

around to her if I needed anything. She looked as if she meant it.'

'Some people are very good,' Nancy said. 'The girls are very good, Eileen and Margaret. And you'll be glad now to have them so close.'

'Oh, they have their own lives now,' Molly said.

They sat for a while without speaking.

'Well, it's an awful shock the whole thing,' Nancy continued eventually. 'That's all I'll say. The whole town is shocked. Frank was the last person you would expect . . . You must be in a terrible state about it, Molly.'

'As long as it's the winter I can manage,' Molly said. 'I sleep late in the mornings and I'm kept busy. It's the summer I dread. I'm not like those people who suffer from that disorder when there's no light. I dread the long summer days when I wake with the dawn and think the blackest thoughts. Oh, the blackest thoughts! But I'll be all right until then.'

'Oh Lord, I must remember that,' Nancy said. 'I never knew that about you. Maybe we'll go away then.'

'Would you do something for me, Nancy?' Molly said, standing up, preparing to leave.

'I would, of course, Molly.'

'Would you ask people to talk to me about it, I mean people who know me? I mean, not to be afraid to mention it.'

'I will, Molly. I'll do that.'

As they parted, Molly noticed that Nancy was close to tears.

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TWO DAYS before the trial, as she was walking back to her house with the morning newspaper, Frank's car drew alongside her and stopped. She noticed a pile of parish newsletters on the back seat. She got into the front passenger seat without looking at him.

'You're out early,' he said.

'I'm just up,' Molly replied. 'I go out and get the paper before I do anything. It's a bit of exercise.'

When they reached the house, he parked the car and they both walked into the kitchen.

'You've had your breakfast, I'd say,' she said.

'I have,' he replied. He was not wearing his priest's collar.

'Well, you can look at the paper now while I make toast and a cup of tea.'

He sat in the armchair in the corner and she could hear him fold and unfold the pages of the newspaper as she moved around the kitchen. When the toast and tea were ready, she set them out on the table, with a cup and saucer for each of them.

'Father Greenwood said he was down,' Frank said.

'He was,' she replied.

'He says you're a lesson to everyone of your age, out every night.'

'Well, as you know, I keep myself busy.'

'That's good.'

She realized that she had forgotten to put butter on the table. She went to the fridge to fetch some.

'The girls are in and out to see you?' he asked.

'If I need them, I know where they are,' she said.

He watched her spreading the butter on the toast.

'We thought you might go away for a bit of a holiday,' he said.

She reached over for the marmalade, which was already on the table, and said nothing.

'Do you know, it would spare you,' he added.

'So the girls said.'

She did not want the silence that began then to linger for too long, yet everything she thought of saying seemed unnecessary. She wished he would go.

'I'm sorry I didn't come in and tell you myself what was happening,' he said.

'Well, you're here now, and it's nice to see you,' she replied.

'I think it's going to be . . .' He didn't finish, merely lowered his head. She did not drink the tea or eat the toast.

'There might be a lot of detail in the papers,' he said. 'I just wanted to warn you myself about that.'

'Don't worry about me at all, Frank,' she said.

She tried to smile in case he looked up.

'It's been bad,' he said and shook his head.

She wondered if they would let him say Mass when he was in prison, or have his vestments and his prayer books.

'We'll do the best we can for you, Frank,' she said.

'What do you mean?' he asked.

When he lifted his head and took her in with a glance, he had the face of a small boy.

'I mean, whatever we can do, we will do, and none of us will be going away. I'll be here.'

'Are you sure you don't want to go away?' he asked in a half-whisper.

'I am certain, Frank.'

He did not move. She put her hand on the cup; the tea was still hot. Frank smiled faintly and then stood up.

'I wanted to come in anyway and see you,' he said.

'I'm glad you did,' she said.

She did not stand up from her chair until she heard him starting the car in the drive. She went to the window and watched him reversing and turning the car, careful as always not to drive on her lawn. She stood at the window as he drove away; she stayed there until the sound of his car had died down in the distance.

A Journey