



They found a table near the fire and she settled into the chair nearest the wall, so she was looking out into the room, so she could keep an eye on whatever, or whoever, and so she could catch anyone who might be staring at her. She knew it was crazy, but she sometimes felt as though everyone in the room was turning to look at her, as if there was some sign or mark upon her, some black cross on her forehead, or something, invisible to her, but everyone else could see it, and it drew their eyes to her. She glanced around the room, satisfying herself that she was safe for the while.

“Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

“So...how are you. I mean, really.”

She knew she couldn't give a pat answer this time.

“Coping, I suppose.”

“But coping well, or coping badly?”

She smiled, and her fingers fiddled with the bar mat in front of her.

“What is it, getting for eighteen months, isn't it?”

“Mmm.”

“And, well, does it get any easier?”

“No. Not really.”

She paused, but the silence between them was a gap that allowed for adjustment and understanding. She looked up at him, at his eyes full of concern.

“They say time heals...”

“So they say, yes, but...”

“But what?”

“I miss him.”

She felt her throat tighten.

He smiled reassurance across the table.

“Is this helping, then? I mean, this visit, now.”

She nodded, still not trusting her voice.

He took a long drink, giving her time to recover.

“It's hard to explain....”

“Go on..”

“Well...I think about him all the time, and it's like he's here, with me, all the time. Not just here, I mean everywhere. He's with me...”

She pressed her lips together and swallowed hard.

“...with me always. And yet...I know he's gone.”

He looked at her, and she looked off around the room, blinking away a tear.

“Does that make any sense?”

“Yes.”

“I don't know, I'm not so sure...”

"It makes sense to me."

"Thanks."

"You've lost someone you loved..."

She looked down.

"And there's all these...there's times I feel so alone, you know, really, totally alone..."

He nodded.

"And lonely, too."

He watched her.

"And they're not the same thing, not the same at all."

He took a sip.

"There's these stupid, I don't know, paradoxes, I suppose. You know, I'm alone, and I feel he's with me....or, he's there, but I'm lonely...."

She smiled, wanting help.

"Talk if it helps. Go on."

"Does it sound silly, though?"

"No. Don't worry about that."

"Thanks....you know, that day, the day it happened, I mean I knew I'd lost him then, but...I don't know, it's like ever since then, I keep losing him again, and again. Like he's here, with me, and then he's gone. And I keep losing him."

"It must be hard for you."

"That day, everything, just keeps coming back."

"Just give it time."

"I thought, you know, I'd come to terms with it, say, after a few months, That, I'd come to accept he was gone."

"But he isn't."

"No, he isn't. I feel him beside me, sometimes. Or he's right here inside me. But I can't reach him. Does that sound crazy, or what?"

"Sounds like you loved him a great deal."

"I still do."

He smiled, but there was sadness behind it.

"You know something...?"

"What?"

“Well, sometimes I think I catch a glimpse of him. In the street, or in a supermarket. Sort of in the corner of my eye...it only lasts a split second: he’s there, then he’s gone. I think, ‘It’s Mike!’ and my heart misses, andwell....”

He took another drink.

“It’s like everything sometimes reminds me of him.”

“That’s understandable...”

“I constantly relive losing him.”

“Perhaps that’s part of coming to terms with it.”

“Perhaps. You think?”

“Yeah.”

“And it’s like he’s everywhere, and in everything around me. Everything I do.”

She smiled at him, aware that she might be saying too much, but she couldn’t stop there.

“He loved Keats, you know, the poet, and there’s this line from one of his poems, about ‘eternally watching someone eternally vanishing’....That’s how I feel. That’s exactly how it is.”

Poetry belonged in her world, hers and Mike’s, and Steven fell silent for a moment or two.

“When you came over in the summer, was that a good idea, d’y’ think?”

She paused.

“Yes. I wanted to mark the day. The anniversary.”

“I didn’t see much of you then, did I?”

“No.”

He held her gaze.

“You stayed in Douglas.”

“Yes.”

This was safe, because known territory, known fact.

“But it didn’t feel right.”

“No. It was awful.”

He waited.

“Too much going on, everyone too happy. Too busy enjoying themselves, and expecting me to join in, you know.”

“Yeah.”

“Everyone oblivious to ...”

“To the way you were feeling.”

“Something like that.”

“We would’ve liked to see more of you, then.”

She smiled.

“Perhaps I should have ...”

He gave a slight shrug.

“Still, you’re very welcome now.”

“Thanks.”

She was making an effort, but it was easier than she thought it would be. Steven was good company because he was listening to her and she could talk to him, and the pub was quieter than they had expected, perhaps because of the fog, but it meant they were able to sit, quietly, closely together. She felt good, sort of relaxed and at peace, and she liked him.

She waited while he was at the bar, and turned and gazed into the flames, into the red heart of the heat. All sorts of shapes danced there, all sorts of memories. She looked around the room, trying to remember if she had been there with Mike, and though it seemed vaguely familiar, she couldn’t be sure. There were the usual Christmas trimmings, and a large tree in the corner, but the striking feature of the place were the nets, and underwater photographs and a display of knots, and an old brass diving helmet, like they used to draw in adventure comics. She had thought it was all for effect, a rather poor plastic job-lot bought in because the pub was near the harbour, to give it the fisherman-feel, but Steven had explained the landlord used to work as a diver on the North Sea oil rigs, and when he retired from that, and bought the pub, when it was stripped out and refurbished to his taste, he had shopped around for appropriate memorabilia, and taken the opportunity to put on display some of his own equipment and photos.

It had a cosy, welcoming atmosphere, and now she could look around the room and feel it was genuine. The heat from the fire was pricking her eyes and she moved back from it, as Steven returned with their second drink. She had insisted on paying for this round, but he was having none of it, saying it was his idea to come out for this drink, and she had better accept it. They were on the local ale, he on pints and she on halves, and even she could already feel the alcohol doing its work. They talked about the island, its problems, its politicians: Steve joked it was one and the same thing. They talked about the weather, in particular the blanket of fog outside, and Faye recalled the hot days of last June, and the tourism the T.T. still brought in. There was a natural ease and pace to the conversation, and no long, awkward silences they had to work to fill. To the casual observer, they could have been old friends, perhaps even husband and wife.

Steve finished his second pint and she offered to buy another, but he declined, much, she thought, against his inclination, but he was clearly on his best behaviour. For her, she knew. She glanced at her watch, and at the fog outside, turning the harbourside lights a dull rust, and began to wonder about the drive home.

“Faye...”

“Yes.”

“Sorry about last night.”

“What?”

“You know....when I came in.”

He cleared his throat.

“I’m not sure how much you heard...”

“Not much. Really.”

“Perhaps I was, you know, a little out of order...”

“It’s O.K.”

“Well....sorry anyway.”

He smiled at her, and she grinned back.

“So, tell me about the , er, ‘atmosphere’ at home.”

He turned his glass round slowly in his hands.

"You don't want to hear about that, do you?"

"Try me."

He pushed the glass before him, and ran his fingertips gently around its rim.

"Well....I don't know..."

She waited.

"Dad had to drop out of it a couple of years back: doctor's advice, and so on, after a bit of a scare. With his heart."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Don't tell him I told you."

"Of course not."

"It's a state secret."

"Right."

"And, you know, he recovered, and he's O.K. now....but he had to take it easy. And, I think he sort of resents me and Chris running the farm."

She could remember Chris, his dark eyes and smile, his quiet manner.

She had met him on a couple of occasions, just in passing, though he had left an impression. The last time was back in the summer when she had dropped in on the Cowins one afternoon and he was there. She remembered he was taller, with a fairer complexion than Steven. He looked more delicate, but that was deceptive.

"Chris is your brother, right?"

"Yeah. Older brother - well, half brother to be exact."

She looked puzzled.

"Dad was married before. That's where Chris comes in. But it didn't work out."

He took another drink.

"And Chris and me, we always did our bit on the farm, Chris more than me, perhaps, but dad was always the gov'ner. And then, when he had to take a back seat, well, the two of us sort of had to divide up the place between us."

There was a pause. He looked into the fire, and there was a sadness in his eyes.

"I think the old fella finds it hard to take."

She nodded.

"Plus, you know, we've had to change things. Couldn't go on running it the way he did. And he was upset by all that. Sort of took it that it reflected badly on him."

"What sort of changes?"

"Well, the biggest one was I thought we should, you know, diversify. Get away from just the sheep, and go into a mixed farm. Beef herd, too. On the lower fields, we get some good grazing, and, well, it caused an awful lot of rows, but in the end, Chris stuck with the sheep and I went into building up a strong beef herd."

"And Ted thought that was wrong."

"Thought I was wrong!"

She smiled, trying to picture the arguments.

"Perhaps he was right, too."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we knew it would be hard for the first couple of years, but, you know, we were just about keeping our heads above water, when the bloody B.S.E. fiasco breaks."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Oh."

He shook his head.

"Bloody stupid.... and we were really in the shit. And of course, it just proved Ted was right, and it showed I couldn't run a piss-up in a brewery, and the whole thing just got worse and worse."

"And he blamed you."

"Yep. He blamed me."

"That's unfair."

"Try telling him that. And of course, while I'm screwing up everything I touch, and losing money hand over fist, Chris can't do a thing wrong."

"Oh."

They looked at each other and she held his gaze. For a moment, she was reminded of Mike, of the way his eyes were deep enough to reflect everything between them. A log on the fire shifted and settled, and they

both looked.

“So, you can see, there’s a lot going on just beneath the surface.”

“Mmm.”

“But we get along O.K. for the most part.”

“Well....I mean, it can’t be easy for him. Your dad, I mean.”

“No. Suppose not.”

“And Chris, does he know all this is....you know?”

“Oh yeah. We’re O.K.”

She smiled at him.

“But he doesn’t get all the aggro I do. All this about how much I drink.”

She forced a smile of sympathy.

“I mean, if Chris came home, and he’d had a skin full, it’d be ‘Wow! What a man! Look how he can hold his drink!’ All that ‘That’s me boy...’ crap.”

She looked down at her drink, beginning to feel embarrassed.

He paused, aware the mood had changed.

“Sorry.”

“No. It’s O.K.”

“No it’s not. You haven’t come here to hear my sob story.”

“I did ask...”

“Well. It’s not that bad. I mean, we get along.”

“Seems....I don’t know....”

“If it gets too bad, I can always move out.”

She gave a half-hearted shrug, trying to lighten it all.

“Families! Don’t you just love ‘em?”

“Yeah. Something like that.”

They both laughed.

“Want another?”

She looked at her drink, which she had hardly touched.

“No. Not for me, thanks. I’m having trouble with this one.”

“Out of practice.”

“Yes.”

There was a moment’s pause.

“Want to finish it for me?”

“No. It’s alright.”

“Shall we go then?”

“If you want.”

“Right then. I’ve had me two pints, so I shouldn’t be over.”

“O.K.”

“You’ve done well.”

He had a gleam in his eye.

“What?”

“Keeping me in order.”

“Oh, that.”

She laughed, and they got up together.

“No, I mean it. I’ve enjoyed this evening.”

“Me too.”

He looked at her, as if checking.

“Good.”

“And Steve...”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

He smiled a big smile at her and shifted a chair for her to ease herself out. She brushed past him, and caught him looking at her. In that instant, she was struck by the fact he reminded her of Mike, that same relaxed smile, that same sincerity beneath. She turned away, slightly shocked that she could admit that to herself, suddenly thrown into all sorts of turmoil that this innocent drink together could have become something more.

She needed to check, and as he held the door for her and they went out into the fog, she took a sideways glance at Steve, but she could tell nothing from his face.

The drive home was very quiet, as though they both acknowledged that they had had their couple of hours together and now they were returning to being separate, and this quietness was part of the distance they had to re-establish. She wanted to ask him what he was thinking, but she knew it was now too late for that intimacy. There was something on his mind, though: that she could tell, and though she knew he was concentrating on

the driving, as the fog seemed to have closed right down upon them, and visibility was reduced to a matter of a few yards, there was still the feeling that somehow the atmosphere between them had changed. She was aware they had come closer during the evening, and she was worried that somehow they had come too close. She had opened herself more than she had expected, and perhaps spoiled things. They sat in silence, the whine of the engine, labouring at this speed in second gear, was all that there was.

As they rose higher, the fog now pressed itself onto the windscreen, and even the near-side hedgerow was hard to pick out. Steve cursed once or twice under his breath, and leaned forward over the steering wheel to get a better view. He was driving so slowly; again, she thought, probably slower than if he had been alone, and from time to time he flicked the wipers across the glass, though they made no difference whatever, merely creating a darker cutting in the frosted grey before them. Sunglass lenses to hide behind. And a faint reflection of herself and Steven.

When they got back, Steven was clearly relieved the journey was over, and warned her to be ready for the 'press conference', as he called it, but there was no sign of Ted, and Emily was watching a drama on television. She looked up as they came in, and smiled a smile slightly too enthusiastically.

"Have a nice time?"

"Yes thanks."

"Was it busy?"

They looked at each other, then Steven answered.

"Not really. Quiet."

"It was nice," she said.

There was a pause. Emily looked at Steven, a noncommittal look, but half enquiry, half accusation. Faye was sure he noticed it, but he was determined not to rise to the bait. Emily pursed her lips together and got out of the armchair.

"Would you like a coffee, cup of tea?"

Faye shook her head.

"No thanks. Not for me, thanks."

"Steven?"

"No."

Faye stood, a little awkward all at once, everything slightly forced.

"I'm off to bed, if you don't mind. I'm whacked again."

"Of course not, love. You go on through."

"Well, goodnight, then."

"Would you like a cup of cocoa?"

"No. Nothing, thanks."

"O.K. Well, sleep tight."

"Yeah. Have a good night's sleep."

"Thanks. See you tomorrow, then."

"Any plans?"

"Er, well, I thought I'd wait and see if the weather clears."

"Forecast is that it should brighten up mid morning."

"Good. We'll see then."

"Goodnight, love."

Emily turned and plumped up the cushion.

"Night."

"Goodnight."

She gave a last glance at Steven and he smiled just for her. What passed between them, unspoken, was a warning for him to keep calm if the questions continued, and he clearly understood, giving her a signal that she picked up easily: she had no need to worry.

She woke late, the sun bright and streaming through a gap in the curtains. Beside the bed, on a small cabinet of white plastic laminate, stood an old brass alarm clock. She had not tried to set it, in fact she had hardly given it a second glance, but now it demanded her attention: she was reminded of a similar clock she had as a child, an old-fashioned thing that had two keys, one to wind the spring and the other to prime the alarm. It had been

a gift from her grandparents, and she had wound it every night without fail. The keys she kept safe in a jewellery box, which she imagined was her treasure chest. The clock was solid gold, not tarnished brass plate. Jewelled movement.

And then, one day, she had wound it till the keys stuck, and she felt the whole thing go solid and seize, as if it had been a living thing and she had killed it. She cried, and then got frightened, and didn't know what to do, so she tucked it away in the back of her bottom drawer and hoped no-one would miss it.

Two or three days of worry followed, when she felt she was on the edge of a precipice and the slightest thing could tip her over. She felt sick, with a heavy coldness in her stomach, and she couldn't get any depth to her breathing. And she knew her mum was watching her, and she mustn't give it away, but she felt such guilt, and it must be so obvious. And then, there was that morning she was supposed to tidy her room, and her mother had noticed it missing, and asked her where it was. Tearfully she had dragged it out and explained, and though she was told off, there was also a genuine concern, and a hope that perhaps granddad could mend it. And, quite rapidly, all that anxiety drained away, and she felt she could breathe again, and she had a lightness instead of a dark, heavy weight on her, though she was acutely embarrassed about the whole thing. There was a day or so of peace-making, and knowing looks, and avoiding her mum's eyes, and waiting for the clock to be fixed, because that would mean everything would be fixed and back to normal.

And the next time he called, out came the clock and he nodded and straightaway fetched some tools out of the garage and began examining it, like some master surgeon. She hung around, and he smiled and winked at her, understanding some of the anxiety she had suffered, and let her watch as he carefully unscrewed the back and peered inside. He showed her, pointing out things with a tiny screwdriver, enjoying her wonder at the brass cogs and wheels and levers in miniature. It was beautiful. So

intricate and so wonderful. And there, coiled tight, he showed her the thin blue steel spring, which he somehow touched, and she saw it come to life, and the cogs moved again, and the wheels spun this way and then that, this way and that. He wound the clock and she saw the spring turn and tighten and grow smaller, and then he touched the release and she watched it take up the tension and unwind and grow big again. She was fascinated by it, and when he went off to get some machine oil, she tried it herself, winding it up and running it down, the spring a spiral that grew small or large. He let her place a tiny drop of oil onto the tip of her finger and rub it along the coiled steel, carefully, or she might cut herself. He told her that spring was the heart, and it kept the clock going as long as she didn't strain it by winding too tight. He tried to explain what was what, but she couldn't listen; she was lost in the sheer intricacy of it all, the layer upon layer of minuscule bits, and awed by the thought she was looking inside some living thing. That sense of wonder had never left her.

It had been wound too tight and he had fixed it: he the doctor, she the nurse, restoring it to life. She thought, if only it were that simple to get her life going again.

She let those memories, those thoughts, fade in this bright sunlight, and moved across the room to draw the curtains. Looking out, and checking the sky, she could see enough to tell her most of the mist was beginning to clear and it was going to be one of those sharp ice-blue winter days, and she should make the most of it.

It was Mike's birthday: today he would have been twenty-eight. That was a memory she held on to, closing her eyes and imagining his face, his eyes a-shine.

She knew she had to keep things strictly under control, today more so than usual, but marking this special day was one of her main reasons for coming to the island and she would steel herself through it.

She showered quickly and, choosing to be on her own this morning, made herself some toast and coffee for breakfast in her own kitchen, that Emily had kindly stocked with essentials. She checked outside and was encouraged to find the mist had cleared from all but the high ground, for today, weather permitting, she had plans to walk all day. She made some cheese sandwiches, and found some Kit-Kats, and when she had finished, she heard the Hoover going in the main house and it crossed her mind to slip out without being noticed, though she imagined that might not go down too well. So she made sure she was completely ready, with her waterproofs on and her packed lunch in her back-pack, before going through to meet them.

Emily was in fact hoovering in the dining room, but Faye was surprised to find they had company too. Chris sat reading the paper, lifting his feet for the cleaner, and he turned and greeted her, folding the paper carefully and placing it on the table before him.

“Hello.”

“Hello.”

Emily turned off the hoover and the sound died.

“Morning, love. Did you sleep O.K.?”

“Yes, thanks.”

“She was out with Steven last night.”

“Oh?”

He was on his feet, hand out to shake hers, smile all over his face. Clear dark brown eyes and fair hair, short, curly: nothing like Steven. There was a bronze, a coppery tint to his hair.

“Chris. Remember?”

“Yes. Hello, Chris. How are you?”

A tiny spark.

“I’m fine. How are you?”

He looked directly into her eyes.

“Great.”

He nodded, agreement, approval; she wasn’t sure which.

“You look set to conquer Everest.”

She looked down at herself and smiled.

“Well, thought I’d better be prepared.”

She looked down, suddenly unsure.

“You certainly look that.”

“Don’t tease her,” said Emily.

He smiled.

“Where are you off to then?”

“I’m not sure, really. Just a long walk.”

“How long is long?”

“Most of the day, I suppose.”

“Would you like me to pack you a lunch, then?”

“No, really.” She patted her back-pack. “It’s done.”

“Oh.”

“There’s a nice walk out Ballaglass way. On the way to Ramsey. You know?”

“Perhaps...”

“I’m sure Faye knows which way to go.”

“Well, just suggesting.”

“Thanks. It’s very kind of you.”

Emily looked outside.

“You’ve got a lovely day.”

“Yes.”

“Going on your own?”

Faye looked at her.

“Yes. Why?”

Emily busied herself with the Hoover lead.

“Oh, nothing. Just wondered.”

There was a moment of silence. Chris reacted to it.

“There’s a good walk, out of here, towards Laxey, and then around over Slieau Lhean, and you come out at the Corran corner, on the main road.”

He raised his eyebrows to ask if she knew where he was talking about, but she couldn’t decide whether he was serious or not.

“Where’s that?”

“Don’t pay any attention to him, love.”

“Over the hills at the back here.”

“How far?”

“It’s much too hard a walk: over the top and that, and in this mist.”

“Not far. It’d take you say, four hours. For an experienced walker like you.”

Emily glared at Chris. And he let his eyes show Faye he was teasing and sort of asking her to play along.

“Have you got a good map? Because we’ve got a spare one somewhere.”

She tapped her pocket.

“She’s come prepared, mum. Compass, emergency supplies, distress flares...”

Faye smiled.

“No, but seriously, that’s a nice circular walk, and a good mix of hill climb and track, and you come back on the main road. I don’t think it’s too hard.”

“Chris, that’s enough. Faye wants a good long walk, not...”

“I may take the other way, down into Laxey and work my way round and back.”

“That sounds a bit better,” said Emily.

There was a pause, and Faye felt they were waiting for her to decide, and tell them, and she wasn’t going to do that. Chris caught on first.

“Well, let’s leave her to it, eh?”

“Thanks...I’ll...”

“Wherever you go, Faye, have a lovely walk.” He gave her a warm smile.

“Thanks.”

“But no tricky hill walking, please. That mist can come down any time.”

She gave Chris another stern look before he could contradict her. He was ahead of her.

“Yeah. Mum’s right. Keep to a safe route.”

“Right. I will.”

“And see you back here for evening meal?”

“Roast lamb,” chipped in Emily.

“You’re on.”

“Good. Have a great day, and see you later.”

“O.K. Bye then.”

“See you.”

She felt awkward, and again it was Chris who came to the rescue. He cut the moment short, and glanced at his watch. And then he was suddenly on his way to the front door, as if he were hours late for a meeting of vital importance.

"I'm off. See you later, you two."

"Hang on..."

"Can't stop. See you."

And he was gone, striding out to his old Landrover, as if there was not a moment to lose.

Faye turned to Emily and smiled.

"And that was Chris!"

"Yes, that was Chris."

"Well, I might as well be off myself."

"O.K. What time do you expect to be back? Not that I'm..."

"No. It's alright. I don't really know....say about fourish. It's getting dark by then, isn't it?"

"Yes. It's pretty well closed in by then. You want to be back before that."

"Right. I'll aim to be back by three thirty at the latest. O.K.?"

"Fine."

They exchanged a warm smile at the conclusion of this deal.

"Steven enjoyed last night."

"Yeah. So did I."

There was a moment when Faye wondered whether there was something else going on here, but she looked at Emily and she was giving nothing away.

"A horrible drive back though."

"Yes. That fog can be dreadful."

She looked outside again.

"But you should be alright today. Should get better as the day goes on, according to the forecast."

"Right then, better make the most of it."

"Are you sure you've got everything?"

"Yes, thank you. I'll be fine."

Emily squeezed her hand.

“You have a lovely walk, then, love. And back here by three-thirty!”

“Yes mum,” thought Faye, and smiled sweetly.

Chris had been up since five thirty, out and about in the early morning frost and the remnants of the fog, that together gave a ghostly paleness to everything around him. He had waited for the light to be good enough, and then had spent several hours checking on the sheep in some of the upper fields, for though the winter had been relatively mild so far, he was still anxious to keep a close eye on the pregnant ewes, knowing roughly where they tended to huddle together for shelter, and doing a quick head count as far as he could in these conditions. It was always going to be imprecise, but he felt he was doing something, and that, at least, served to reassure him. Over the last couple of weeks he had had more than the usual number of ewes abort, finding one or two of the pathetic lamb carcasses most days. He had lost some ewes too, dieing in agony when the pregnancy went wrong: sometimes it seemed to be one big losing game, and nothing but bloody hard graft.

Today, though, he had a smile on his face, pleased at having played out that little charade to spare Faye any further embarrassment, and though he did have a meeting to get to, the other side of Douglas at the meat processing plant, it was not for another hour and a half, and so he decided to fill the time doing a stock-take of the feed supplement in the big barn, rather than take the run up to the higher fields, where he now expected the worse. He felt this kind of checking up on things was a major part of his job these days, along with running errands of one sort or another, and though he employed a couple of men to help manage the sheep side of the farm, he saw it as his responsibility to himself and the family, to be on top of everything personally.

They had spent a great deal over the last few years, investing in a good herd of Aberdeen Angus and Blue-Greys, but the beef crisis had certainly

hit them hard, and, just now, that side of things was touch and go, with Steven doing what he could to hold on to what he had recently built up, although, to compensate, the demand for quality lamb and mutton had increased, and he had been looking to negotiate new export deals with the suppliers to some of the larger meat outlets in the big conurbations of North West England. He had even had enquiries from Belgium and France, where the demand seemed particularly strong, and last autumn he had watched the first shipment of his lambs to the Parisian meat markets. He was proud to think that he was expanding in that direction, taking the Cowin name into Europe.

He was worried at times, though, about Steven, and although he tried to help in any way he could, he had to keep out of that side of operations, for he knew to his own cost that his brother could be headstrong, and very independent, and very determined to succeed - but on his own terms. They argued rarely, but he always felt they were just on the edge, sometimes, as if the potential was there, just beneath the surface. They were not close, never had been, and Steve tended to be a bit hot headed, and the slightest thing could set him off. So, he was always wary of his younger brother, tending, when he needed to, to go about any dealings via his father, using him as a kind of go-between, although he knew that was the coward's way out, and it sometimes made things far worse, for Ted had to chip in his penny's worth, and the two of them were like oil and water.

He thought of Faye. He had been unsure what to say to her: they had only met the once, last summer, and it was so difficult then. What do you say in such circumstances? She had been numb, completely knocked sideways, and looking at times, as if she had stopped and the world was carrying on without her. He saw her as a strong, gutsy woman. But. She had slowly pulled herself through that dreadful accident, through her own injuries, and through the loss of Mike, rebuilding her life bit by bit, for everything had been smashed when that bike ploughed into them. Bits and pieces all over the shop, little bits of plastic and glass and odd fragments of the bike:

but really, it was her world that had been shattered.

And then there had been the inquiries, the Coroner's inquest, the Police investigation, the insurance people, the press, all the bloody ghouls just inquisitive about what it felt like. And having to make the arrangements to get the body back to England, because Mike's parents had been devastated, totally wiped out, totally out of their depth with it all, and she had had to cope with all that. They clung to her, they kept within inches of her side all the time they were over here, as if they knew if they moved too far from her, they would fold up. She was their support, when she could hardly support herself. That was her strength, and he admired her for it. They almost stifled her with their intense need of her, like a swimmer in trouble will cling tightly, too tightly, to their rescuer, and drag them down, so the rescue turns to disaster.

But she had risen above all that. Pulled herself through and pulled them through too. She had come back in the summer, amongst all the bikers, all the race fans, to mark the date of the accident: that took some doing. It must have been hell for her, walking along the Douglas prom and seeing those hundreds and hundreds of bikes lined up, and some of them, no doubt, identical to Mike's, and all the memories that would have evoked. He knew she had not stayed as long as she planned, but that was understandable: the atmosphere didn't really take account of anyone trying to remember a loved one killed in a tragedy, it was all hype, and holiday time and enjoy yourself.

He didn't know why she was on the island now, but he presumed she had her reasons. When he had asked Emily, she had shrugged and said it was none of their business, so even she didn't know, and he'd left it at that, though it was odd that she should be here the new year, unless that was it: some kind of new start, making a break from the past.

He liked her, but he had no idea how to get close to her. She was attractive, dark hair, dark eyes, though he didn't for one instant imagine

she was his type - whatever that might be. He was still trying to work that one out, too. At the moment, there was Joanne, but that was more off than on, these days. She was a good looking divorcee a couple of years younger than him, and when they could get away from their jobs and be alone, and relax with each other, then they were really quite good together, but, he always felt she wanted more. More commitment from him, more time with him, more everything. He thought perhaps she felt she had failed once, and she had to go for broke this time: something like that. He couldn't work it out, really, and whenever he tried, things just got too heated, there was too much pressure, and so, they sort of mutually agreed it was a taboo subject, and that left them with a continuing relationship that they both felt was going nowhere. Sort of love by default. Easier to just let it go on than risk making decisions and possibly losing it all.

They tried to see each other at least once a week, but sometimes even that was hard. The farm demanded all his time, and Joanne worked in Douglas, in the Finance sector, her boss being the type who was in the office by seven and not home till six or seven, and he expected her to be the same. He didn't think Joanne understood the pressure of running the farm, especially over the last year or so: she was pretty dismissive sometimes about him being 'only a farmer', as if it was something he should fit around a proper job that made real money. They laughed about it sometimes, but there was always that serious undercurrent.

Christmas had been difficult. She was part of a social scene that had started at the beginning of December, with office parties and dinners and dances and the lot, continuing all through the month, to a crescendo at Christmas Eve. Then, for Christmas itself, she wanted the full family festivities, the happy grandparents and grandchildren gathered round the tree, opening wonderful presents and the smiles lasting forever. He had never known it like that. Neither had she, but she clung to the myth. And she wouldn't listen, wouldn't even try to understand, when he tried to explain that he couldn't do it like that: his Christmas was the same as all

the other days, the animals needed feeding and looking after, the farm had to be run.

Besides, Ted and Emily didn't think much of her. They didn't like Joanne being divorced, which he thought was ironic, for she was his second wife - but nothing was ever said of that. He thought back to that time.

Ted used to say they had married when they were too young, and from the very beginning there were huge problems they could never sort out. She had been a local girl, from Laxey, from the old part of the village, and some of her family lived there still: the Kershaws. His mother, Voirrey, had left, had just walked out when he was five, taking him with her, and going to her parents. That as when he lost his dad for the first time, though for a while, he settled down happy enough with his grandparents. But the problems had followed them, and she had started drinking too much, whether because of the separation he didn't know, but he had vague memories of violent rows and screaming, and his mum always being too ill to do things, and his granddad shouting at her, and lots of tears, lots of tears.

There were visits from Ted, some of them almost silent, he recalled, some of them simmering over into terrible arguments, and then came talk of the divorce, and things got steadily worse, until one day, when he was about eight, his grandma had told him mum was going away and he was going to live with his dad and a new mum. He remembered a black numbness coming over him; actually felt it spread through him. Their mouths going, but everything drowned by the no inside his head. They tried to explain to him, but he closed himself tight and they couldn't get through, not even with all the talking, all the screaming that followed. But it was no good; Ted paraded his new wife to be before them, all fake smiles and over optimism. And the wedding date was arranged, and his mum, well, away she went, all the way across the world to America, to start a new life, they said, and she left him behind, along with all the other bits and pieces she didn't want, didn't have room for. He was just so much unwanted

baggage. Like he was nothing. She could go, but he belonged nowhere.

But amidst all the hurt and hell going on in his head, he told himself it didn't matter at all. It was as if he were a million miles away anyway, and there was nothing they could do to reach him, and when they tried to talk to him he could see their mouths going but hear nothing, like one of those terrible video links when everything is out of synch, and the picture is breaking up, and the lips go all rubbery. Because he had cut away from them all, before they could do it to him. Put distance between himself and them, so he could feel nothing. So they could do nothing.

He had lost his mother and it meant nothing. She had left him and he made it mean nothing.

There he was, just eight years old, and this huge emptiness in his life. His mother the other side of the world, his father re-marrying this woman who was taking her place, and his grandparents there, but so far away, really, in time: always looking so old and grey and worn out. He felt he was the one in the wrong time, and the wrong place. He was an eight year old child with these grey people in their grey world, and this yawning empty chasm inside him, where they had ripped out his heart and soul, and left him nothing; an emptiness he could never fill, and a hardness he would never soften.

When the big day came, he went to the wedding in his best suit, his hair brushed, with a blank face, and with nothing in his heart. It was like a bad dream. It was like watching a film on the screen in front of him, and never once realising that he was in the film. It was all about them, and nothing about him. And when they came back from the honeymoon, he was reclaimed, like lost property, and he had to say goodbye to his grandparents, sniffing away the tears and all the false promises to keep in touch, and be a good boy. That was how he lost his grandparents the first time.

He had cultivated a coldness through those few years, an aloofness that gave him a safe circle around himself, a sort of exclusion zone, a space in which he could be himself and not be touched by anything happening. A hardness, a coldness, because he couldn't let anything else get to him, not any more: he had been caught unawares, caught off guard, and he was angry with himself for not seeing what was going on, not seeing it coming, like persistent heavy rain that will build up and build up, until one day, without any apparent sign, it will send the stones of a wall tumbling down, and it's only then, looking back, you can see how the water wasn't able to get away, and you know you should have seen it, should have done something about it: because all those things out there, going on around him, had found a way to get inside him, affect him, eat away at him and leave him with this aching hole inside his guts.

At ten, there was a baby brother: Steven John Cowin. Chris remembered when they brought the baby home, and he had looked at its little face, and felt nothing. It was nothing to do with him, nothing of him.

And then he lost everything, everyone. He was eleven, and his grandfather had been ill some time, but he wasn't prepared for him to die. Again, he felt as though he had been blind not to see it. Bitter roaring anger in the pit of his stomach. Rage at himself for not knowing, and rage at his granddad for going like that. And beneath the anger, there were other feelings he couldn't identify until much later, feelings of not understanding why they all left him, why he lost everyone who came close. What was it with him? What was it he did, or said, that drove them all away? Why was he left with nothing to hold on to? There were no answers, and no-one to ask, and so his world went quiet. And the cottage went dark, the heavy curtains drawn tightly, and the front room freshly polished and sweet scented flowers in vases, and it suddenly smelled like a sick-room, and people were visiting and all hushed, and his grandma sort of steely faced, rigid, and changed. Like she had been struck stock still, because it had all stopped for her, and so, though she went through the motions, she had stopped too.

And ten days later she just gave up completely: she had sat in her armchair by the window, gazing outside, and she faded before their very eyes. A week after the funeral she passed away in her sleep, just like that, as if she had given it a go, and she knew it wouldn't work without him, so there was no point going on.

It was the summer England won the World Cup; and he had lost his grandparents for good, the people who had been closest to him for years, who had never let him down, and now they were gone.

And he felt it had all collapsed around him, suddenly, and he stood there like the party child at the end of musical chairs, when they're all sitting and grinning at the one for whom there is no chair.

Much earlier than usual, Steven was wide awake in the cold and the darkness. Before he opened his eyes, he listened but could not hear the whine of the boiler, so he knew it had not yet kicked in. He rolled over and checked the time on his alarm, rubbing his eyes to focus on the pale green glow of the digital display. He lay on his back, his forearm across his eyes. He thought of Faye, and buried himself in the warmth of the quilt.

He had slept poorly, fitfully, last night, and in fact, had lain awake for a long long time, thinking of her, thinking of that couple of hours in The Shore, before he had drifted off. The evening had been so different, so unlike what he had expected, and he knew he and Faye had got a whole lot closer. He could relax with her, and be himself, and he had thought it would be so awkward, and yet, there they were, talking so easily, as if they had known each other for years.

Real understanding between them, and a closeness that had surprised

him, and he lay there wondering if there could really be something there, or whether he were imagining it all. But he knew he wasn't. He knew he had caught something in her eyes; something there, but how far to take it? It was crazy. She was on the island to forget, to put the past all behind her and move on, and perhaps he was part of that, helping her, helping bring her out of herself and back out of the shadows. And yet, he knew that was just so unlikely.

All sorts of possibilities raced through his mind, all kinds of nonsense. He knew, in reality, she would go back across the water in the next couple of days, and he wouldn't see her again for ages. Perhaps, once, maybe twice a year, she might come over, but that was no relationship. That was nothing, because they had little or nothing in common. Her quoting poetry last night had proven that.

She wasn't over Mike. She was still, clearly, in love with him. And that meant there was no chance for him: the very thought of it made him smile. And yet.

There had been something there.

Faye walked down the hill to the Dhoon Glen corner and stood and watched the cars sweep by. She looked around, at the watery blue of the sky and the pale remnants of mist high on the hills, and she imagined this place when the colours were stronger, and brighter, and the summer sun burned down on her. She had come to rest just about there, and Mike had twisted and somersaulted into oblivion. She knew, if she closed her eyes now, she would see him, all in black, tumbling and turning, head over heels into blackness. She had to keep her eyes open, keep it at bay. She fought it hard.

But at the same time, she felt a strange lack of emotion, wondering

whether she had prepared for this moment so long, and so often, that she had robbed it of the significance she wanted it to have. This was why she had come to the island, and yet, the moment had come, and she felt cold and numb. She slowly reached inside her coat and pulled out a small card in a clear plastic wallet, and placed it on the ground leaning against the short black, white and red reflector post. She stood back and looked at it.

It was a birthday card for Mike, and yet another farewell.

Inside she had written

“To Mike, my love. You’re with me always.

Faye.”

And these words from one of Keats’ letters: “I am leading a posthumous existence.”

She closed her eyes, and bit hard on her lower lip, desperately holding on. There was nothing she could do. So useless. And so much she wanted to do: she felt a cold wave of anger and frustration rise inside her. It came from the pit of her stomach and rose up to her heart. She was awash with it, and could only stand there and let it swamp her. She wanted to tell him so much, she wanted to be with him again. Sometimes thinking if she could only want it hard enough, she could bring him back, and if he wasn’t there, then she wasn’t wanting hard enough. It was in her power, it was all up to her. And she felt so useless. And then, as the emotions grew more intense, and she could feel it all gathering in her chest, in her throat, she wanted to vent herself, somehow, to sink down on her knees and empty herself in an endless, meaningless howl; empty herself of all this pain; she wanted to smash every tree down and rip all the branches to shreds; she wanted to shout and scream at the cars going by oblivious to her loss; she wanted to claw at her heart and tear herself open rib by rib; she wanted to crank the whole bloody stupid universe all the way backwards and make

him come back, make him come back, she wanted to un-bury him with her bare hands and hold him and feel his warmth and run her fingers over his face and open his eyes and bring him back. Bring him back.

But she stood there, eyes closed tight, hardly breathing. Thoughts of Mike wouldn't come, try as she might, to call him to her. She wanted to see his face, his smile, his eyes, and she knew he was there, but he wouldn't come. He was too far away. And she tried even harder, but it was no good. There was only a shadow there, and a shapeless form that could have been anyone. Or no-one at all. Herself maybe. And she wondered if she were seeing her own darkness.

She longed for him, and there was nothing there. An emptiness, a hollow, hungriness that was eating at her. She wanted him to come to her freely, and instead, there were feelings of guilt for being out last night, with Steven. For being out, and enjoying herself. For smiling, for laughing, for letting herself get close to someone else. Mike was cold and stiff and beyond all that. Mike could never be close to anyone. Mike would never smile again.

She hated herself, and she hated feeling like this. It wasn't fair, whichever way she looked at it. She was twenty eight and had a life too, and yet, she wasn't being allowed to live it. Posthumous existence, because she had lost her life when Mike lost his: posthumous existence, because he was still with her in everything she did.

And it wasn't fair that she had come out of the accident alive, had come out of the twisted metal and the shattered glass, and the smashed plastic and the screams and the scraping, with three broken ribs and a badly bruised leg, with a gashed elbow full of road grit, and that, she felt, was all wrong. Had it been her, somersaulting to her death, there would have been some justice: he had so much to give to the world, so much still to do.

She took one last look at the card and said a silent goodbye, and turned away, across the road and down the little slope to the railway lines. She would not look back now, and picked up the pace as she strode along the track towards Laxey. It was easier keeping just off the gravel, but she stepped from sleeper to sleeper as well, pressing on with real determination. She checked her watch, intending to walk for at least the next hour before she stopped, as if she had to put some distance between that corner and the rest of her life. Between her past and her present. She would walk to Laxey station, and perhaps stop there, at The Mines tavern, where she could sit outside and have a drink, and then press on again, back up the hill to Ballaragh, so completing a long circular route.

She felt good when walking like this, with the rhythm, the exertion, seeming to take her out of herself and, in a way, free her, at least for brief spells. It cleared her mind, and she was lifted by the wintry sunshine, and the saltiness of the air, and she wished she could walk like this always, and enjoy this kind of release always. She had walked with Mike, here, and on holiday in the Peaks, and on weekends, but since his death, she had walked more and more, as if it was vital to keep going, as if walking to get somewhere, to arrive.

Walking, walking, always walking.

Chris used to go for long walks with his grandfather Roy, his dad's dad, and his dog, Blackie. They would go off, with a pack of rough-cut sandwiches and a can of drink each, and spend most of the day walking the hills. Roy would make sure he had a pocket full of biscuits for Blackie, and there was always a stream to drink from, and they would roam as far afield as they could. Roy was fit and strong: often it was Chris, fifteen or so, and a good rugby player, who would decide it was time to turn back home.

Their other delight was fishing, though he remembered he hardly caught a thing, and Roy would spend ages setting up, and ages trying to cast where he wanted, and perhaps, after several hours' effort, he would, if he were lucky, have a couple of fish to show. The real pleasure was in being out together, and being able to talk.

His grandfather was a keen local historian, passing on stories and legends to Chris, as if he were some tribal elder and his life depended on it. Chris dared not share this with his mates: he just knew they would not understand, and would think him odd, but he secretly loved these hours and half-days with his grandfather. It was like for once in his life, he was in touch with something that would last.

But that was an illusion too. Just before his sixteenth birthday, Grandfather Roy died, and they had Blackie put down, because Elsie had a bad hip and couldn't cope, and Chris had begged and begged to take the dog in as his own, but to no avail, and he hated Ted for that, and hated Emily too, because he knew she was behind the decision. They wouldn't take another dog on the farm, what with the three they had, and the sheep and all. It was lose all round, not just Grandfather Roy and the dog, but it seemed like he had lost his parents too: a double loss, and it cut twice as deep.

Faye kept to the sea side of the tracks and pressed on at a good speed, feeling her muscles loosen and the cool air rasp through her nose and throat, and watching her breath come in long clouds. It was late morning, and going to be a beautiful day, with the sky clearing and the sunlight a pale honey gold on the surface of the sea. She stood on the crown of the rise and looked out across the ocean to England, thinking that was her home, or at least where she lived, and yet it was so far away and so unreal. She could make out the distant hills of Cumbria, white with snow, like they were part of a mirage. Closer by, in the lee of the hills below her,

the sea was a steel grey, darker in the depths, the waves sluggish and heavy in their slow rise and fall.

She thought of the evening with Steven in The Shore Hotel, and the diving paraphernalia, and how she had tried to imagine the landlord down there in the freezing waters of the North Sea, fumbling around the legs of some giant rig in zero visibility, his breath coming loud and controlled, bubble on bubble. She shuddered.

She and Mike had done some Scuba diving in their local pool, four or five weeks, on an evening course. She had wanted to, because they were planning to spend part of their summer holiday in Greece, perhaps Kos, and go diving there, so the plan had been to sign up for this course and get themselves through the basics and then they would be able to make the most of their time in the clear blue waters of the Mediterranean. Mike had put on a brave face, but she knew he was apprehensive of the whole thing, even though it was in a pool where the deepest water was about four metres.

That first part of lesson number one had been all giggles and feeling so ridiculous in the wet-suits, so exposed, and walking like some reptilian alien, and hearing and feeling your every breath, like you were breathing through your ears, not your mouth. She hated the rubbery taste in her mouth and the sweet smell in her nose. She gagged at first, and then felt faint and sick, and Mike had laughed at her, but that was just a cover for his own unease, but it hurt her.

She realised how scared she was when they lowered themselves into the water and bent down and put their heads under. She had felt cut off. Suddenly the outside world was gone and all that existed was herself in this hideous exoskeleton of a body that wasn't hers, her movements heavy and her breath pouring from her in liquid form. It was as if everything out there was now inside her and spilling out, and she had no control over anything anymore, and she had panicked, but Mike was by

her side and he caught hold of her and pulled that rubber thing from her mouth, and forced her to take great slow gulps of air with him, and gradually calm herself down, and she had clung to him and cried.

She was supposed to be the one who was going to reassure him, and yet it was her fear that burst through. They sat by the side of the pool, and the instructor had left them alone, and they had held each other a long time in silence. She knew she didn't have to explain it to him; it was more that she had to explain it to herself, and so she had talked about how that wave of panic had swept through her. Seeing herself, feeling herself, finding herself suddenly transformed into this strange creature in this strange body in this strange world. And totally alone. Isolated. Hearing the blood beating in her veins and the air rushing through her lungs; everything inside her suddenly thrown to the surface and exposed and outside of her. Everything outside, sounds and smells and sights and touch, all that gone.

Her world reduced to Mike holding her tightly, and the depth of understanding he showed her, so much so that she knew he would always be with her and understand everything about her; reduced to always and everything, because he was her whole world and more.

And that night, she remembered, they had talked it through and he had held her, stroking her hair, and their love making had been something special, quiet and intense and very tender, a togetherness that was perfect and complete. She had cried in his arms, and afterwards, they had agreed to go back to the pool next week.

But it was no good. She got herself through the next lesson, and the next, but only because she knew he wanted her to, and it sort of came between them: it brought them closer together, but it split them too. For Faye, it was like coming to terms with a personal nightmare, knowing that as she began to control it, and as she began to need his help less, so he too was having to face his own fears and misgivings, and she could do nothing for

the anxiety etched in his face, and she felt she had let him down.

They gave it one more go and then, after a lesson where they had had to dive down to the bottom of the deep end, they knew this was not for them. There was very little said that evening; they had a drink in a pub near the pool, and they both knew they would never dive again, and the holiday plans would have to be changed. It was one of those unspoken things that was the mark of their closeness, and when Tuesday came round again, there was no mention of the Scuba lesson: instead, they went to the cinema and sat holding hands and sharing some chocolate covered raisins.

That memory brought Mike to her, and she could see his smile and hear his voice. She closed her eyes and held that image of him, and treasured the moment.

She walked on, finding a good rhythm and placing her feet neatly on the railway sleepers, even though it meant stretching for each one, and that, she knew, would tire her legs very quickly.

As she walked, the time spent with Steven played on her mind, and she knew it was not just the guilt she felt for being out with him, for enjoying herself, but it was that and something deeper than that. Behind it all, beneath all the shallow smiles and the hollow words and the carefully made up face showing them all she was coping, doing fine, there was a darker, more terrible feeling that she should have died too. Or she should have died instead of him. She looked around. The sun was shining, sort of weak and watery, and the sky was a glacier blue, and there were gorse flowers of brilliant yellow, and it was all so unfair. All this for her, and there was nothing for him. He was beyond it all, out of it all. Smashed out of it, broken, bloodied. And here she was walking on this beautiful day. Her bruises had faded, her bones had healed, her pain had eased. No. That was untrue. She wished she had died with him, and she could be with him now, wherever. Without Mike the world was nothing, had nothing to offer,

even on a day like this, when everything seemed new made and gleaming and untouched, and it was all there waiting for her to reach out and take, when it was so bright it hurt her eyes and so blue it touched her heart. It was there, before her, brilliant for her, and inviting her to share in its beauty, and her beauty to be part of it too.

She didn't want it. She couldn't.