

# The Temple House Vanishing

**A stunning, searing investigation of power, jealousy and desire from one of Ireland's most exciting new voices. An extraordinary debut.**

*Twenty-five years ago, a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl and her charismatic teacher disappeared without trace...*

In an elite Catholic girls' boarding-school the pupils live under the repressive, watchful gaze of the nuns. Seeking to break from the cloistered atmosphere two of the students – Louisa and Victoria – quickly become infatuated with their young, bohemian art teacher, and act out passionately as a result. That is, until he and Louisa suddenly disappear.

Years later, a journalist uncovers the troubled past of the school and determines to resolve the mystery of the missing pair. The search for the truth will uncover a tragic, mercurial tale of suppressed desire and long-buried secrets. It will shatter lives and lay a lost soul to rest.

*The Temple House Vanishing* is a stunning, intensely atmospheric novel of unrequited longing, dark obsession and uneasy consequences.

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# The Temple House Vanishing

RACHEL DONOHUE



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*We had fed the heart on fantasies,  
The heart's grown brutal from the fare;  
More substance in our enmities  
Than in our love;*

WB Yeats, 'The Stare's Nest by my Window'

*Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way,  
which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.*

Matthew 7:14



# Prologue

## The Journalist





I picture Victoria standing at the window of her office high above the city that morning. The face that must have once been lovely reflected in the dark glass, tired and wasted now. She holds the phone out from her, like it is a tasteless thing. My voice at the other end echoes into the bare room. The boxes stacked; shelves cleared.

I know there is a newspaper on her desk. They are delivered early to her floor. And that he, Mr Lavelle, is staring at her from the corner of page five, with my words underneath. He is like a spectre from the past, leaning against the bonnet of a car, his fair head looking slightly away from the camera, eyebrows raised. He looks dishevelled for a teacher, the collar of his tweed coat tilted up, the face unshaven. But beautiful, there is no doubting that. It's there in the symmetry of the bones and the evenness of the gaze. A sort of luminous quality to him. A face you would stop to look at, remember.

I think about how long she must have spent staring at the picture. And what it meant.

But Victoria didn't want to talk to me any more about him, or Louisa. She said nothing mattered much now. Her voice flat and listless. And this, in a strange way, was true. It was the end, not the beginning. The future, like the past, was already set. She hung up the phone then. She had no need for my intrusions any more.

I sat for a while on the edge of my bed. The early morning light leaking in under the curtains. A weary, sleepless, draining night

just gone. Victoria was leaving it all up to me. The responsibility of telling another's story. And it didn't surprise me.

It was reported afterwards that she cancelled her meetings for the rest of the week. She also deleted files and ordered flowers for her mother. No one, however, noticed anything particularly odd about her behaviour. She passed through the beige rituals of that day as she did every other.

A colleague was quoted as saying she ate lunch alone at her desk, and that this was not unusual.

Another said that she had looked like she was bored or distracted at their last meeting. The sky outside of the window that evening seemed to catch her attention more than the conversation within. Several times she apologized for having lost her way in the discussion and checked her mobile.

But this was not an ordinary day. It had not been an ordinary life.

When the office emptied that evening, Victoria climbed the narrow stairs to the roof garden ten stories high.

The garden where clients were entertained in the summer and junior associates were plied with free drink and promised opportunities for greatness.

A place where in the past I'm sure she had stood silently in the evening sun, waiting for the appropriate moment to leave.

The roof garden where you might walk to the edge of the building and pit the force of your life and all its glassy achievements against the strength of your desire to experience a fall.

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The place where Victoria chose to take off her shoes, climb over the low, neat, box hedge that served as a barrier and then jump, unseen into the dark night.

A silent, resolute descent.

I imagine she thought about Louisa. But then, I will never know.

She remained conscious of reputation to the end. She fell not to the front, where she might have crashed through the shiny white atrium and on to the expensive Italian marble tiles, but to the back of the building, where there are bike racks, and the ground is littered with cigarette butts. Where security wouldn't find her until the morning.

I know this because I went to see it for myself, the place where she fell. I stood behind the police line and looked up at the grey sky.

And I thought of Mr Lavelle and how once, when Louisa and Victoria were young, he had told them the fates might choose to come to the rescue of a hero.

But he had been wrong. I should have told her that.

There are no heroes in this story.



# Louisa



# Chapter One

I dream of it still, the school by the sea. It's always that first September day that returns. My legs warm and sticking to the plastic seats of the car. The radio drifting in and out of coverage. My parents awkward in their Sunday best. The half-opened map lying on the dashboard, slipping off every now and then. No one speaking.

Finally, the black sign for Temple House hanging off a crumbling granite pillar. My father turning slowly through the rusting, wrought-iron gates and up the winding, gravel driveway. The light more green than gold now, soft and low under the tall trees. The sense of hush as we finally emerge from shade to the edge of the cliffs, the sky stretching in front of us. The drive is narrow and sandy here, a sense of journey's end. I press my head to the cool glass, my curiosity like a fever. My suitcase and all that it signifies beside me on the seat. I open the window, strain my neck but can't see below to the waves, only sky and white birds. The air cool on my face.

Am I happy? I can't remember now.

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A thin film of dust or sand is thrown up and smears the windscreen. The drive swerves away from the coast, the path is more uneven. We pass between tall, thick yew trees, a last gateway, before a green lawn opens in front of us. The cliffs fenced off with a small warning sign. There is a large pond, leaves and dirt gathering in the corners of the pale water, and beyond this, net-less tennis courts locked up since summer term ended.

In my dream, Temple House, in all its Victorian, turreted austerity, emerges from a mist but this must surely be a trick of memory. Though in truth, that winter, it did have its own climate. Even the sunniest of days elsewhere could be grey and dull there due to its exposed position high above the sea. There are girls, certainly, standing on the wide granite steps waiting to greet the new students. The prefects. Their long hair and black cloaks flapping in the wind as they wait to welcome us. There is a nun behind them in the deep, arched porch. She is ticking off the list of new students. The fourth-year scholarship girls arriving the Sunday after term begins.

I step from the car to the smell of seaweed that blows in from the beach. The air salty and colder, suddenly it seems, than September should allow. The car door is whipped from my hand and slams. The house looms over us. It is red brick, three storeys tall, with large windows, their frames painted a deep green. Thick ivy reaches up to touch the lower sills. One side of the house is shaped like a tower and protrudes forcefully from the



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rest of the building. The windows look dark in the early evening light, shades pulled low, giving it a subdued, half-eyed gaze.

As we ascend the steps I look upwards. There are three girls watching us arrive from a large, arched window on the second floor. They are framed in an edging of stained glass and are standing in what I would come to understand was the Maiden's Chamber. The turn in the stairs.

The dream always ends here.

I know we, the scholarship girls, were greeted by the nun with the list, Sister Ignatius. She was a small, dainty woman, dressed in the navy and black habit of the order. Quietly spoken, she shook my parents' hands, directing us through the porch to a sitting room on the left of the hall where there were refreshments. There was an air of curt efficiency about her. Nothing wasted in her movements. As I walked past I glanced at her profile, she looked like a silent bird of prey. It might have been her nose, which was slightly beaked, and the way she had of turning her head very slowly. Her face was white, chalk white, and fine boned. I understood when you became a nun you took a different name. I wondered did any of them mind doing this, or were they just like the other women, like my mother who took my father's name when she married and pretended to be happy. All their old selves forgotten, packed away along with their records and books.

We entered a hallway, dark wood panelling on the walls and polished orange and black tiles on the floor, the pattern in

the shape of a spiral. There was a smell of pine and lemon and behind that, very faintly, meat. A room off the hall had a sign on the door 'Visitors'. We entered and one of the prefects, without speaking, poured tea into china cups. She had long, fair hair and around her neck there was a small silver cross on a chain. It dangled down as she leant over the teapot. After pouring it she left the cups on the table and sat by the window, her head turned from us.

The room itself was large, brighter than the hall, with a high ceiling and the walls were painted a pale green. They were bare except for a large portrait of a nun and a crucifix. The floor was covered with linoleum, also green, and in places there were slight rips.

The prefect said nothing and stared out to the sea.

Eventually, the two other scholarship girls and their families joined us, along with Sister Ignatius. We stared silently and morosely at each other across the table. One of the girls kept biting her nails. The other hunched her shoulders in the chair and looked like she might cry. After a summer of shorts and T-shirts, my uniform felt itchy and constrictive. Sister Ignatius spoke a few words of welcome but so quietly and with such economy it was nearly impossible to hear. She barely opened her mouth, her lips were thin, tight.

My father almost slipped off the couch in his attempts to lean in and listen. My mother looked dazed and slightly confused as to how we had ended up here. She had also worn too much

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make-up and looked out of place, desperate somehow. Not that the other mothers looked much better; one woman wore a white tracksuit top. We looked cheap and our insecurities made us act as if we were suspicious of each other. Furtive. After some moments of awkward silence, Sister Ignatius clapped her hands gently, like an emperor, whose quiet but insistent whims must be met. The prefect jumped to her feet. Awake again.

I don't remember if I hugged my parents as we said goodbye, but I imagine not. It wasn't our thing.

It has stayed with me for another reason too. That day. It was the first time I saw a dead body. After our parents left, the prefects led us to a small cloakroom off the hall where we left our bags. One of the girls addressed the group, telling us a nun, Sister Josephine, had died the night before and was laid out in the school's small church. The girl who spoke had long red hair caught in a bun, and pale skin. Her eyes were grey and large. Her name was Helen. We walked in line behind her, down a long corridor with a polished parquet floor. The walls were lined with framed photographs – the hockey team of 1962, the debating team of 1979, the graduation ball of 1985. All of the faces frozen in time, with awkward smiles and bad hairstyles.

The church was accessed through a heavy door, which I would later learn led to the nuns' quarters. It was dark after the fluorescent lights of the hallway and it took a second for my eyes to get used to the gloom. It was tiny, like a church designed for a dolls' house. It was lit by tall, white candles, laid out all around

the altar and the whole space smelt strongly of the same lemon polish of the other rooms. There were only eight pews in total. The altar, carved out of white marble with a vein of dark pink running through it, seemed too large.

The nun was laid out in an open coffin with thick cream satin lining the inside. The prefects led us to the front row and indicated that we should kneel. I was last into the pew and so my head was level with the dead nun. I could feel her pale, silent presence out of the corner of my eye. We all went on our knees, heads bowed. What prayer might I have said? 'Oh Lord don't forsake me' possibly. Is that even a prayer? I find all the words and incantations that we repeated are gone now. Dissolved.

We stayed there in silence for what seemed like an age but was probably only five minutes. I was to get used to the sense of time suspended when you entered the church. The girls around me shifted uncomfortably. One stuck her fingernail into the centre of her palm and was slowly twisting it deeper into the skin, another was breathing quickly, short, tight breaths. Like her heart was shuddering.

As we got up to leave, I looked at the deceased nun full-on. Her hands were clasped together on her chest. She was holding a large wooden rosary, the crucifix intertwined between her wrinkled fingers. Her face, unlike her hands, was mostly unlined, taut, and a few strands of grey hair were visible under the wimple. She didn't look asleep, as I thought dead people might, but empty, like a hollow doll. It was the gap the soul left

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when it transcended to God. You weren't really a person any more. Just a vessel, vacated. I had read about this.

One of the other new girls said she felt unwell and two of the prefects led her out. There was always one. The prefects put their arms around her shoulders, smiles of satisfaction on their faces, as if this had been the appropriate response and the plan had worked. Find the hysteric. The rest of us trailed out behind them, tracing our steps back along the corridor. The girls staring out at us in the photos on the walls seemed more sympathetic to me now, like we had shared in some initiation.

Afterwards, we were brought to our rooms. We dragged our bags up the stairs, passing under the large window above the stairwell where the three girls had watched our arrival, panels of blue and red light reflected on the floor. The wallpaper was salmon-coloured and textured but in places mottled and peeling, as if the sea air was seeping through. The stairs to the third floor were narrow, less grand. My room was large with a window that overlooked the forest that lay at the edge of the school grounds. I would learn later that the rooms with sea views went to the girls whose parents made donations to the school. There was a small bookcase and a desk beside my bed. The walls were white and empty, bar a crucifix that hung above the door and a large photograph of a nun holding a chalice. It was one of those pictures that was originally black and white but looked like it had been coloured in by crayon. The chalice was a gleaming yellow and her eyes an unnatural blue.

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I was to share with a girl from the year ahead of me, Alice. As I unpacked my case she entered the room and sat on her bed. She was tall and broad, fresh-faced, her hair fair and curly. She immediately asked me what subjects I was taking and had I ever boarded before. I asked her where the other students were; the house was unnaturally quiet. She seemed not to hear me and began brushing her hair. I thought we might be due back downstairs that evening for a talk with Sister Ignatius and a chance to meet others from my class. Alice indicated no, we were to stay in our room and she would help me get settled. After all, I must be tired.

She told me then that the 'drama' girl in the chapel had apparently thought she saw the eyelids of the nun quiver as she lay in her coffin. I hung up my few clothes and laughed along with her at the girl's stupidity. We didn't speak much after this. But later that night, when the lights went out and Alice was asleep, I lay there thinking about resurrection and how it might be the worst thing ever. You don't want to see the dead rise, no matter how much you might miss them. That first night in the hard, narrow bed was long. By midnight all I could think of was the nun climbing out of her coffin and walking the corridors in search of her missing soul. Her rosary beads dragging along the floor behind her.

It began with death, my time in Temple House.

## Chapter Two

Of course we were all bored. Bored and in search of meaning.

I have tried to remember who I was that autumn of 1990, what was my defining feature. Maybe there was nothing that distinguished me, and that in itself could possibly be the answer. I do know I wanted to be seen as different, special. But then, doesn't everyone?

I try not to analyse my past. I mostly choose to actively fake my existence. To reinvent it as something different, something I have only a casual interest in. It is how I cope. On my last day at the school, lying in the grass, with the sea below me, I stitched the undamaged bits back together and then covered over the rest with new material. I created a new philosophy for existing that has guided me these past twenty years. I never attempt to understand anyone; I just observe them. They are truly the other. You can never know anyone. There are no soulmates, man or woman, just other minds and other histories. Intimacy is a kind of dream.

This approach has served me well and I only changed, thought differently about it, after Victoria jumped from the roof of her offices.

At Victoria's funeral I had a sudden vision of her. Her divorce had just been finalized and she was in overbearing mode, ordering wine and insisting people try the shellfish. Control was her way of handling failure, which divorce is, I suppose. She was talking about taking a leave of absence from work and going travelling. As I remembered her, I thought about how she had become an idea to me long before she died. We had no way of listening to each other any more. A kind of nervous anxiety took hold of her when I was there. Her head would turn sharply as if I was judging her, or she would fold her arms in a hunted, defensive manner. Our attempts to connect with one another were invariably unsuccessful. We were never able to recapture what had once been. There were too many barriers now.

It was only as she was standing alone under the neon light of the sign outside the door of the restaurant that she talked about it. A journalist had been in touch. A woman who was writing a story about Temple House and wanted Victoria to contribute and if possible to suggest other people she might talk to. Suddenly, all sense of her as an ordinary woman with a neatly packaged life and tidily referenced history fell away. As it always did. She could only ever play at normal for a while.

She was twitchy and nervous, fumbling for a cigarette. She looked frail and thin. She wasn't eating, wasn't sleeping. I felt like holding her. But I couldn't; that was not who we were any more. So I walked away, turning back only once to see if she had left. She hadn't, she was standing on the edge of the pavement,



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staring into space as the taxis drove past. And I thought that maybe this time, this time, she would speak and tell of all that we had been and how it had ended. Because she can never forget, no matter how much she tries.

And I can never let her go.

Her funeral was large and elaborate, with an opera singer in an evening dress and a musician playing Handel on the organ. The people were the smart set, the ones she had known in tennis clubs. Their black coats were expensive, as were their bags. Victoria's father had been a judge and she grew up in a large house with granite steps that led up to the front door. I had visited once for a cocktail party. She was raised to be part of this world.

There was an awkwardness in the congregation. People avoided each other's gaze. The manner of her death was too open, too honest. It made them think of the stories they had heard, the reports that had appeared in the paper that week, the things that might have happened and what she might have known. There were journalists and a photographer at the gates to the church. If Victoria had taken a pile of pills it would have been easier for everyone to handle. Dark things should happen behind closed doors. Her fall through the air was too public.

I could make out Helen in the pews near the front. I had not seen her since that last day at school, in the summer house. Her red hair was still long but copper-coloured now, her back was straight and unflinching. I thought perhaps life had not broken her. She would not recognize me now.

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The priest spoke of Victoria's sense of duty and work ethic. She was an admired colleague, a much-loved daughter and sister: platitudes that accompany the eulogy for a lapsed Catholic by a priest that has never met the person who has died. One of the lost sheep the shepherd tries to retrieve, even though it's too late and everyone knows it. She's already dead on the dark hillside.

It was warm in the church. I could see people stirring and shifting in their seats, touching their collars or their hair. Everyone vaguely agitated, listening to words of forgiveness. I found myself drifting off until the end, when he said we must remember that nothing human can ever be alien to us. It was then and only then that I felt like crying.

I left the church before the coffin came down the aisle. I have lost all care for ritual. Like understanding the past and saying prayers, the capacity for ritual is also gone and with it, I believe, the last of my humanity.

I am the alien now.

## Chapter Three

I was to be a weekly boarder at Temple House, home on Friday nights and back to school Sunday evenings for supper and prayers. An embarrassment of high grades in the State Exams I took when I was sixteen secured my place. It hadn't been my first choice, indeed, boarding of any kind had not been on the agenda, but when the letter arrived in a heavy cream envelope with an actual wax seal, I was intrigued. There was an air of Malory Towers to the whole thing. The charm of running away, of being removed. Dedicating myself to higher things. I also liked tennis and the photos of the tennis courts perched on the edge of a cliff in the brochure was appealing.

I had another reason for taking the offer. My mother was leaving my father for a man she worked with. A man whose name and various deeds we had listened to her talking about innocuously enough for the last year as she prepared dinner. We had even met him once, at the cinema. He was standing in the queue ahead of us with his own three sons, when my mother called out his name. It was a faux jovial encounter with lots of

*'Isn't this nice'* and *'Imagine meeting here'* and so on. He dressed better than Dad did and when he shook my hand he said: *'So I hear you are the bright one; have to watch ourselves around you.'* He laughed then and his teeth were unusually small. One of his children made bunny ears over the head of a younger one. Thankfully, we didn't sit with them. My mother had some sense of decorum.

I wrote in my diary later, when I knew more, that the experience had been *'alienating'*. This was a favourite word at that time.

Since she broke the news of her leaving, there had been a kind of entente cordiale at home. My father looked like he had expected it and was being weirdly gracious around her. She looked exhausted and left the house most nights to meet friends to talk about all that was not being said at our house. It was the summer before I would leave for the new school, I had nothing to do, everyone was away. I spent most of the time alone, unseen, listening to Depeche Mode on my Walkman and lying under the apple tree at the end of the garden reading, or just looking at the sky.

Conversation was predictable most days.

*'You should go out more, Louisa,' says my mother.*

*'I don't have any money,' my response.*

*'You could look for a job. All you do is read,' says Mother.*

*'I like reading and it happens to be free,' I answer.*

*'Has your father fixed the light over your bed? Don't read at night if he hasn't done it,' she says, ploughing ahead.*

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*'He hasn't fixed it yet,' I say.*

*'What is wrong with him . . .' She is speaking to herself now.*

*'I don't know, what is wrong with him?' I reply.*

Silence.

It was a rare hot summer, the kind of summer you remember. The one that over time becomes the template for all the summers of the past.

The backdoor to the house open, the vague sound of tennis on the TV in the distance, flies trapped in the house at night and a strained silence over dinner. Sometimes the phone would ring in the late afternoon and I would traipse into the house, cursing, and answer it. Usually, no one would speak and I could hear heavy breathing and then laughter in the background. I used to hold my breath for a minute before hanging up, willing them to speak, to tell me who they were. But they never did. Something about the weird pointlessness of those calls became a strange metaphor for that summer.

In the evenings when my mother was out and my father had gone to bed, I would open the drinks cabinet and take some sherry from the heavy glass decanter that was covered in dust. It was thick and sweet and made me want to vomit, which was just what I wanted it to do, but I could never drink enough and so just fell into bed hot and vaguely nauseous. My dreams were the ones I had used to have as a child where there are two sets of my parents, the good ones and the evil ones. In the dream I am always standing behind a closed door, knowing they are inside

but afraid to enter because I don't know which version of them will be waiting for me. I woke in the mornings with my sheets all astray and the pillows halfway down the bed. The sun would be coming through the thin material of the curtains and I would lie there trying to guess the time. If I guessed right, I would reward myself with an extra bowl of cereal at breakfast.

My exam results, the ones that would decide whether I could escape to a better school to finish my education, had been the most important thing all that year but were now fading into oblivion. The day they were due to come out was circled in red on the calendar that hung on the back of the kitchen door. The paintings for each month were by someone who was deaf or blind or who had used their foot to paint instead of their hand. The picture for August had a child with no face in a blue raincoat standing on the edge of a dark forest. I thought the images were depressing and freaky, like badly drawn omens for the months ahead.

Of course no one talked about my exams that much anyway. It was all about whether to sell the house or not. She was going to move with the 'new man' into what was being referred to as a town house in the centre of the city. She always hated the suburbs, she said. There was going to be a small room for me. She kept saying we would decorate it together, as if this was some kind of a bonus feature. I felt like telling her I had a room, here in this house, which we had also decorated together.

I had never really thought of them as unhappy. They seemed just like everyone else's parents. Occasionally silently resentful;

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mostly tired from their jobs. I only ever remembered them fighting while in the car, for some reason. Possibly the enclosed space added to the tension. Also on holidays, those fights had usually involved small spaces and maps. And now, since the end had come, they were both being polite and respectful. What a fuck up, really. They had done everything the wrong way round.

It was a new way to be marked out. To have parents that were separating. It used to be my IQ that people had heard of. But now it was this. Pity was the abiding emotion as they watched us come and go from behind net curtains on our narrow road. There was only one other girl in my year whose parents had split up. She had a set of house keys and every afternoon when we were packing up to head home, she would take them out and lay them on her desk. I guessed she didn't want to be locked out.

My parents offered no explanations, other than it was best for all concerned if they went their separate ways. I would understand; I was, after all, a bright child. They also assured me their love for me was never in question. They talked about this a lot. And I knew they were telling the truth so let it wash over me. The tendency to not judge was in me from the start. They both looked like they had aged ten years and it made me question if it was possible to build future happiness on the back of causing pain to others. I thought possibly not and that people tricked themselves into thinking this.

The day of the results came late that August and my mother made pancakes. She had taken the day off work and was all set to

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walk me to my school to collect them. She had plans for a day of mother and daughter togetherness. We would go and have cake in a coffee shop near her office, where the 'new man' might pop his head in and say hello. As she talked on, I watched the TV news. There was a giant number in the top corner of the screen telling how many days of fighting there had been in a far off war. It was day 15. I thought it seemed kind of incongruous to have a number there, like it was a gameshow set in the desert.

As my mother did the dishes, I left the house quietly, picked up my bike which leaned against the front wall, and set off on my own. I felt she had forsaken any rights to gloat over me, to show me off to him.

The school was a crappy 1970s style glass and plywood mess about five minutes from where we lived. I walked into the hallway where the teachers were giving out the envelopes. I remember feeling like the crowds parted; I was the best and everyone knew it. They had been waiting for me. The gifted kid. The one who would prove that great talent can come from a modest home and parents who can't stand each other. Ms O'Malley was smiling at me, envelope in hand. She whispered, *'It's just as we planned it'* and squeezed my arm.

Somebody took my photo for the local paper.

And I felt sure then that something was ending, and something else was beginning.