

Eithne Shortall studied journalism at Dublin City University and has lived in London, France and America. Now based in Dublin, she is chief arts writer for the *Sunday Times Ireland*. Her debut novel, *Love in Row 27*, published in 2017, was a major Irish bestseller, and her second novel, *Grace After Henry*, was shortlisted for the Irish Book Awards and won Best Page Turner at the UK's Big Book Awards.

Also by Eithne Shortall

Grace After Henry
Love in Row 27

three little truths

eithne
shortall



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*For Fidelma Curran, who is my mother –
and for that, I'll forever be grateful.*

‘Blood is thicker than water, but neither’s as thick as mortar.’

Shay Morrissey, long-time Pine Road resident

*** Pine Road Poker ***

Bernie:

Hi, all. Number 6 found a hole in their back garden this morning. That makes *three* in one week. I hope we can all take this seriously now? I have spoken to Island Stores and they've ordered in extra rat poison. Remember to say 'Pine Road Discount' to get ten per cent off. Regards, Bernie Watters-Reilly

Ellen:

So well said, Bernie – as always. We've already put down two doses.

Eddie:

Will buy ours asap. Thanks for organising, Bernie! X

Ruby:

I wonder where the little buggers are coming from?

Ellen:

From Number 8, no doubt. I don't like to speak ill of the dead, but for the lack of attention Mrs Ryan paid to her garden she should have been taken out and shot before the pneumonia had a chance to get her. Yes, she was 97, but how much upper body strength do you need to pull a few weeds? I just hope the new people sort it out.

Any sign of the woman yet?

Ruby:

Saw the husband and daughters leaving again this morning. No sign of the wife, though.

Carmel:

I've got Robin on window watch.

Fiona:

She's definitely in there, Ellen hun! I can hear the radio. XXXX

Rita Ann:

Did anyone take the Irish Times from my doorstep this morning? I need yesterday's Sudoku results. The paper of 'record' would appear to have made a mistake.

Ruby:

Are you asking if we stole your newspaper?

Rita Ann:

I'm wondering if someone took it by accident.

Ruby:

Maybe the rats took it.

Fiona:

Do you think so??

Ruby:

No.

Fiona:

Do you think the rats might affect house prices?

Ellen:

I didn't know Robin was still staying with you, Carmel. Everything okay with her at home?

Fiona:

We already have poor aspect. I wouldn't like a rodent rumour to depreciate our value any further ...

Rita Ann:

Who cares about a few mice when there's a thief in our midst??

If my paper is returned by dinnertime, all supplements intact, I'm willing, on this one occasion, to turn a blind eye.

Ruby:

Rita Ann and the Case of the Missing Broadsheet. 

Bernie:

Poison, ladies! Do not forget the poison!

ONE



Martha Rigby had been sitting at the kitchen table since Robert left for work. The girls, who had taken to their new school with such ease it almost seemed pointed, had set off before either parent was awake.

There were boxes everywhere, furniture still stacked in corners, gas and electricity readings jotted down on a pad in front of her waiting to be registered, a to-do list lying unticked beside it.

She knew she should stand up, make a start on things.

The radio played on and the light through the grubby windows grew brighter.

She looked around the room and felt a profound sense of detachment. The idea of doing anything was so exhausting that the only reason she could think to stand was to go back to bed. Oscar snored by the back door. She'd have to get up eventually, if only to let him out to do his business.

Her distorted reflection glinted in the oven door. The old her, the *real* her, would never have let it get to this.

Maybe she should take the tablets Dr Morten had prescribed. There was no shame in it. Most people who'd been through what she'd been through would have been knocking them back well before now. Dr Morten had made that very clear. But Martha took pride in her will-power. She'd had her wisdom teeth out last June without so much as a painkiller. In fact, the last time she took paracetamol was four years ago, and she'd only allowed herself that indulgence

because it was the morning after her blow-out fortieth birthday party.

Martha didn't take drugs unless entirely necessary. If her body had something to tell her, she wanted to be able to hear it.

But then, this wasn't a toothache or a hangover she was dealing with. To put it mildly.

The radio jingle went for the eleven o'clock news. She could have sworn the ten o'clock bulletin had just ended. She'd hear the headlines, see if anything had happened beyond these walls in the past hour, and then she'd stand up.

Hospital bed shortage . . . No-deal Brexit a possibility . . . Calls for improved sex education . . . Irish accent voted sexiest in the world.

The male Irish accent, she noted. No mention of its female counterpart. Presumably this was what Sinéad meant when she said the patriarchy was always at work. 'And *we're* working for it, Mum,' she'd insisted the previous evening before Robert told her pubic hair was not a suitable topic for dinner-table conversation. That just set her off again. Her father's views were 'a domestic iteration of the institutionalised subjugation of women's bodies'. Robert gave up then and went back to his microwaved lasagne.

Martha hoped this new school would be as good as the last. Both her girls had loved their old place. Sinéad had been chair of the debating team and had just been made editor of the paper, despite only being in fifth year, when she was yanked out of her old life and shoved into this one. And with that, Martha's mind was off, rushing down the M7, fleeing their new life, heading back to their old one, but she caught herself just before the Limerick exit.

She redirected her attention to the radio.

Was that really news, though? About the Irish accent? An international poll conducted by some travel company you'd never heard of and verified by nobody?

Martha thought of all the terrible things that happened in the world and never made the news. She wouldn't have wanted their

ordeal broadcast on national airwaves – the local papers picking up on it was bad enough; though Robert hadn't minded at all – yet it was amazing how there'd never been a question of it. Nobody had considered such an event worthy of twenty seconds of radio coverage, not when matters as important as 'orgasmic accents' needed the nation's attention. What had been on the news the day it happened? She thought and thought but she couldn't remember.

Perhaps she was doing a better job of blocking it out than she realised.

She'd leave the tablets for another while so.

The bulletin ended, the weather was reported and Martha continued to stare out the kitchen window into a garden so overgrown the weeds were practically coming in to get her. The old woman who'd lived here before had gone into hospital with pneumonia and never come out. The place had smelled faintly, but persistently, of fermented cat urine when they arrived. Robert insisted he couldn't smell anything, of course. It had lessened now, or maybe she'd just gotten used to it.

Martha hated her new kitchen. She hated the whole house. She knew these red-brick homes were highly sought after, but she couldn't stand how old they were. No matter what she might do – and admittedly she hadn't done much yet – everything felt dirty. She hated how the floorboards creaked even when she wasn't standing on them and how there always seemed to be a draught coming from somewhere. She missed their home; the nice, modern country pile about 12 miles outside Limerick city, with its high energy rating and underfloor heating. She and Robert had it built right after they were married, with the plan of never moving.

Number eight Pine Road had cost almost twice as much as their forever home. It was an obscene amount of money for a place that wasn't half as cosy. But the worst bit, the bit that made her want to twist a tea towel into a ball and stuff it into her mouth to muffle her red-hot rage, was that they could only afford this money pit because

Robert had gotten a promotion – and he'd only gotten a promotion because of what had happened to them, because of what had caused them to move in the first place.

Martha knew her family blamed her for the move. She was the one who could no longer sleep in their house; it was her who'd uprooted everyone, moved the girls away from their friends, made them change schools. Robert, meanwhile, had swooped in and saved the day, yet again. He had made an alternative possible. Three months on and he was still the hero.

The thoughts boiled up and Martha wondered if she'd have to get up and grab the towel from the draining board. She couldn't even scream freely in her own, empty home. A terrace was supposed to be safer, that had been the idea, but all Martha felt was suffocated.

Anyway, no. She was fine. A few deep breaths and it passed. She stayed put.

Inane theme tunes and canned laughter reverberated faintly through the walls. It wasn't fair, she knew, but she instantly presumed her new neighbours were stupid, lazy. Martha had never been tempted to turn on her own television before dark. There'd be no coming back from that. Besides, before, she wouldn't have had the time.

There had been car-pool rosters to draw up for school runs; club meetings and soccer practices to supervise; Meals on Wheels to deliver; evening walks with Helen and Audrey; morning yoga; afternoon coffee. She'd been so busy she usually didn't have time to read the monthly book club selection and resorted to stealing opinions from GoodReads right before the meeting. The idea of sitting down to watch an afternoon rerun of some sitcom was inconceivable.

The weather report ended and the current affairs show returned, straight into a more detailed report on the hospital bed shortage. Still, Martha sat and stared out into the weeds. Still, she did not budge.



‘Muh-ummm!’

‘We’re home!’

The door slammed and several kilos of books hit the barely varnished floor. Martha, who’d been carrying bathroom wares upstairs, put down the toothbrush holder and bolstered herself.

‘I’m starving!’

‘No you’re not!’

‘Yes I am!’

‘Starvation is a serious state endured by millions of people worldwide every day, Orla. It’s when you haven’t eaten for, like, ten days. You had a Chomp on the way home.’

‘Muh-ummm! Tell Sinead to shut up!’

Martha hurried down the stairs. ‘Girls! Keep it down! The neighbours will think a pack of wolves has moved in.’ She picked up the backpacks dumped in the hallway. Had they been this heavy at their old school? ‘Don’t leave these lying around.’

‘There’s nowhere to put them.’

‘How about under the stairs?’

Orla looked at her mother like she’d been personally wounded. ‘We never used to put them under the stairs.’

‘She’s right, Mum,’ said Sinead, who only ever agreed with her sister when it enabled her to more robustly disagree with Martha. ‘We used to put them below the coat stand in the hall. But this house doesn’t even have a coat stand.’

Martha observed her daughters: Sinead giving her a look that said ‘tell me I’m wrong, go on, I dare you’, and Orla watching from behind a curtain of lank hair and massive glasses. They were so entirely fine. It was as if nothing had ever happened to them.

The sound of another key in the lock made Martha jump. She had a hundred mini heart attacks every day; this had occurred to her

upstairs earlier, in the bathroom, when the hot tap had unexpectedly creaked. There was a thud from the other side of the front door as it jammed in its frame. Her husband's voice floated through: 'Will you just – bloody – work!'

The girls shrugged and sauntered down towards the kitchen. When the front door finally opened and Robert appeared in the hallway, Martha let the schoolbags slump to the ground.

'Hello, darling,' said Robert, reaching around awkwardly to kiss her cheek. 'I managed to finish up early today. At least someone's here to greet me.' His daughters were disappearing down the couple of steps and through to the kitchen without so much as a backwards glance. 'I remember the days when they used to come running to greet me.' He shook his head and smiled ruefully. 'How are you?'

'Fine.' Martha moved away from him to shut the front door, which he'd left ajar. She could feel his eyes on her.

'I was going to close that.'

'We need to get it fixed,' she said, doing her best to make it lock.

'It's grand. It's just a little stiff.'

'It doesn't' – Martha pushed it again – 'close' – Robert came to help and she gave it a final, massive shove – 'properly!' The thing slammed into place just as he went to touch it and, for a moment, they both just looked at it.

Martha lifted the schoolbags again and carried them over to the storage area under the stairs. The estate agent had told them a lot of the neighbours had turned this into a downstairs bathroom. Martha found that hard to believe. It was so small. She pulled the door open and went to toss the bags in but was confronted by more boxes. So this was where the movers had put the contents of their old utility room. 'Is there no space anywhere?' she muttered, closing the door again and sliding the bags back to where the girls had originally thrown them just inside the front door. 'We need to get a coat stand.'

'We need to get a lot of things,' Robert agreed, offering his wife

a sympathetic smile. Her expression didn't change so he dropped it. 'Don't worry, darling, we'll get to it.'

Martha welded her mouth shut. *She'd get to it*, he meant. He'd keep saying everything was grand and eventually she'd fix it. As soon as their old house went on the market, Robert had acted like the nitty-gritty of the move had nothing to do with him. He was just here for the grand gestures.

She hated him.

The thought was so strong, and so unexpected, that it frightened her. She felt guilty, then angry again. She wanted to grab a sleeping bag from under the stairs and scream.

'Get up to anything today?'

Martha watched as Robert shrugged off his jacket and looked around helplessly for somewhere to hang it and his briefcase.

'Nothing very interesting, no.'

'Did you get a start on the unpacking?'

'Yes, Robert, of course I did. Do you think I've been lounging around drinking cocktails all day? I mean, maybe when I find the cocktail shaker, but I haven't gotten to that box yet.'

'Of course not. I was just asking. Did you . . .' He hesitated. He was trying to annoy her now, looking at her like she was going to bite his head off.

She let out a heavy sigh. 'What?'

'Did you see about joining some classes at the community centre? Not that I mind if you don't, of course. It's just that you said you might . . .'

'Not yet.'

'Okay, well, no rush. Knowing you, you won't be able to stay cooped up here much longer. You'll probably be running the classes by the end of the month.'

Martha doubted that very much. 'I might go tomorrow.'

'Absolutely. Great. And did you see about registering with the local doctor? Just for a quick chat?'

She shot him a look. ‘Don’t patronise me, Robert.’

‘I wasn’t. I just thought—’

‘Well, maybe don’t. Maybe next time you have a thought, just keep it to yourself.’ Martha turned from her husband and followed her daughters into the kitchen.

Orla was hunting through the boxes and Sinead was on her phone ignoring Oscar, who was trying desperately to offer her the paw.

Martha watched them going about their new lives like it was all they’d ever known. Orla pulled a bowl from a box and hugged it like a long-lost friend.

‘Old bluey! I forgot about you!’

Sinead was staring out the window into the weed jungle now, preoccupied by the transient concerns of teenage girls.

Martha wanted to grab them. She wanted to shake her daughters by the shoulders and demand to know how they dared to be so fine.

Why aren’t you waking, sweating, in the middle of the night? Why don’t you jump every time a book falls from the table, or look around for me whenever a floorboard creaks?

But it was just a passing anger. One of those flashes that came on her now and retreated just as quickly.

She cracked the bones of her face up into a smile and tapped her hand on the counter until the two girls looked up. ‘Who wants a snack?’

TWO



'Someone stole the wheels off Fiona Quinn's car.'

Robin Dwyer stopped staring out the sitting-room window and twisted her body around to see her mother, sitting on the opposite armchair, staring down at her phone. The lines on her face were more pronounced. Maybe it was having her twenty-six-year-old daughter back living with her. Or maybe it was just the glow from the screen.

'Can you believe that?' her mother continued, shaking her head at the phone. 'Poor Fiona. She only got the thing a few weeks ago. Bit flashy for a family vehicle but still, no call for swiping the wheels.'

'Who's that?'

Carmel, her mother, looked up from the screen and peered over the rim of her glasses. 'Fiona Quinn. Across the road at number ten. Works part time in an insurance company out by the airport, obsessed with property prices, calls everyone "hun". You know her, you do. Two kids; twin girls. The husband works in London half the week.'

'Vaguely . . .'

It was hard to distinguish the neighbours from one another. Half of them hadn't been here when Robin left home eight years ago. She said hello to some of them, when calling Jack in for dinner or bedtime, but generally went for a middling level of familiarity – unsure if she was supposed to recognise them or not.

Her mother's phone beeped again and she guffawed. 'Would you – the cheeky scuts! Four of them. Trish Walsh says they came

up at five this morning and had the whole thing done in less than ten minutes. Trish caught it on her CCTV camera. On a cul-de-sac, can you believe that? No way out. As brazen as you like.'

'The Walshes have their own CCTV camera?' Robin did remember the Walshes. She used to be friendly with their daughter, Laura. She couldn't remember exactly why they'd drifted apart but no doubt it was her fault. Last she'd heard Laura had married the son of a property developer and was living on some leafy square in London.

'They had it installed after all that trouble between Ted Walsh and the Morrissey daughters. Remember? I told you about that. You don't listen, Robin, that's your problem. I might as well be talking to the wall.' Carmel sighed, lifting her glasses on to her head. 'There was a big fight over parking – what's new? says you – and Shay Morrissey's two girls – of course, they're women now – came out of their dad's one night and threw paint stripper all over Ted Walsh's car. They said they didn't but they did; sure, we all know they did. You know what the Morrisseys are like, rough as a New Year's Day hangover. So anyway, after that the Walshes got the security camera installed.'

'Right . . .' Robin's own phone beeped. The Facebook Messenger icon flashed. Eleven unread messages. When would he quit? She switched it to silent and threw it across the room on to the beanbag. 'And sorry – they stole the wheels? Why not the car? How do you steal wheels from a car?'

'Trish says . . .' Carmel frowned as she scrolled rapidly back through the seemingly never-ending conversation between the women of Pine Road. The WhatsApp group had been set up to coordinate their monthly poker game, but its real function was the circulation of gossip. 'Bernie Watters-Reilly is still going on about this rat hole she found in her garden. How she can tell a rat hole from any other kind of hole, I don't know, but she has everyone convinced the whole road is infested now. She's organised a discount

for residents on rat poison at Island Stores and is monitoring who's availed of it. Where the feck is it . . .? Here! Now. They . . . They put the thing up on blocks! Had the four wheels whipped off in a matter of minutes. Can you imagine?' Her mother shook her head. 'And nobody heard a thing. Porsche wheels are very in demand – or at least that's what Edie is saying here now. Edie's up in the corner house, a young one. Her husband's a mechanic, so she would know.' Carmel tutted. 'Dreadful altogether.'

Robin twisted back around on the sofa. It was hard to imagine a gang of thieves sneaking past their house in the dead of night, while she slept in her childhood bedroom, Jack on the camp bed beside her, and her parents snoring softly down the hall. That kind of thing didn't happen on Pine Road. She gave an involuntary shudder and told herself it was an expression of horror and not a thrill of excitement.

Two girls wearing the school uniform Robin had once sported pounded up Pine Road, shoving each other as they went. They turned into the garden of the house directly across the street; the one her mother was keeping tabs on.

'We have movement.'

'Hmm? Oh!' Carmel heaved herself out of the armchair and scurried across the living room. She stood over Robin, peering out the window. 'That's the two daughters. They started in Saint Ornatin's at the beginning of term even though the family hadn't moved here yet. They were enrolled at the last minute, despite Saint Ornatin's already being full. Apparently – and Bernie Watters-Reilly told me this now, so it's between you, me and the four walls – there was an emergency order . . . *from the Department of Education.*' There was nobody else in the room, so her mother dropping her voice was for absolutely no reason but effect.

'What's an emergency order?' asked Robin, watching as the sisters squabbled over who got to put their brand-new key into their rather rickety-looking door.

‘Well, I’m not sure,’ admitted Carmel, returning to her seat as the girls disappeared inside their new home. ‘But Bernie says it’s serious. And she’d know. She’s chair of the Parents’ Association. Now you definitely know Bernie Watters-Reilly – she’s always in the papers or on the telly, going on about what a brilliant parent she is and how everyone else is raising future Hitlers.’

Robin had a hazy memory of her mother shouting at some woman on the radio the other morning that she’d be better off spending her time learning how to park.

‘Bernie has been known to exaggerate,’ continued Carmel. ‘Always going on about her bloody daughter, *Sylvie*. How a woman called Bernie gets away with calling her daughter Sylvie, I don’t know. The only thing French about Bernie is her Merlot habit. And the husband’s not much better. I feel sorry for her son – I can’t even remember his name, that’s how little attention he gets. But no, on this Bernie’s probably telling some version of the truth. As Parents’ Association chair, she’s on the school board, and she told us in the strictest confidence at the last poker game that the Department had made an emergency order on behalf of the new neighbours. Of course, Bernie only said all this because Trish wasn’t at the game.’

‘Who’s Trish again?’

Carmel opened her mouth, agog. ‘Trish bloody Walsh! With the CCTV camera. At the top of the road. The principal of Saint Ornatin’s. You used to be friendly with her daughter, Laura. Jesus Christ, Robin. Do you need me to get it tattooed on my forehead?’

Robin’s head was spinning. She had enough concerns of her own without trying to find the mental space to process Pine Road gossip. A man in a navy wax jacket was striding up the road now, briefcase in hand. Robin glanced back to the new neighbours’ place and changed the subject.

‘Isn’t number eight Mrs Ryan’s old place? The woman with the cats?’

‘Ah-ha,’ said Carmel. ‘Let’s just hope the smell died with her, that’s all I can say.’

‘Oh, hang on.’ The man in the navy jacket had stopped at number eight. ‘I think I have another one.’

‘Is it the mother?’ Carmel yelled, scurrying back over. ‘Ah no. That must be the husband. What age would you say he is? Hard to tell from the back. Fiona and Ruby have already seen him. It’s the wife we want, Robin. Nobody’s spotted her yet.’ Carmel moved her head from side to side, as if some better angle might allow her to see through the brickwork. ‘Is he just going to stand there or what? Maybe it’s not his house at all.’ She gasped slightly. ‘Maybe he’s casing the place. That’d be a great disguise if he was; a suit and a briefcase. It could be the same people who stole the wheels from – ah no. Never mind. In he goes.’

The man struggled with the key until he fell against the door and it finally opened.

‘Right,’ said Carmel. ‘Dinner. Come and give me a hand.’ She held out her hands to Robin. ‘I’m not charging you rent on your bedroom, but I didn’t say anything about that couch.’

It had been two and a half months since Robin and Jack turned up unannounced, and unexplained, on her parents’ doorstep. It wasn’t the first time it’d happened, but it was the first time they’d brought all their stuff. Robin had been grateful not to be asked any questions, but she feared that grace period was about to expire. Already this morning her mother had shown her a job she’d found online.

‘Telephone sales,’ Carmel had said, passing her the iPad. ‘Isn’t that what you were doing before?’

‘Sort of . . . I’m actually thinking about getting into something new . . .’

‘And won’t this do in the meantime? Send them in a CV and a reference and you should be grand. You’ll have to do something if you’re going to support yourself and Jack.’

And Robin had dutifully scrolled through the notice, not wanting to explain to her mother that the job she'd been doing before didn't exactly come with a reference, and not entirely ready to admit to herself that she was the breadwinner now.

She grabbed her mother's hands and pulled herself up from off the sofa.

'Hallelujah! She walks!'

A light shone from the folds of the beanbag and her phone shifted slightly as it vibrated against the coarse material, but the two women ignored it. With one last glance towards the window, they headed down to the kitchen.

'Where's that grandson of mine?' asked Carmel, her head already in the larder cupboard. 'He likes to whisk the eggs.'

'Upstairs.' Robin raised her head to the ceiling, listening for the sound of Jack playing on her bedroom floor. 'He's settling a dispute between his farmers. One of them stole the other's cows.'

'Oh. Farm business. Better not disturb him, so. Maybe you'll do it for me?' She slid the carton of eggs across the counter to her daughter.

Robin hadn't been particularly close to her mother growing up, and they'd drifted further when she moved in with Eddy all of two months after they started going out. When Robin told Carmel she was pregnant, her mother pleaded with her to come home and Robin said she wasn't about to let Eddy abdicate his responsibilities that easily. She was also in love with him – besotted, even – but she hadn't said that. She only ever said it to Eddy when she was being dramatic, over the top, and often drunk. She meant it, but she never said it like she did. 'I'm *besotted* with you,' she'd announce, mordantly, before swooning histrionically into his arms. And Carmel could never stand him. But after Jack was born, they stopped fighting about Eddy. They met on neutral ground and quickly grew closer.

'Is it broccoli or leek Jack doesn't eat? I can put either in this quiche, so whatever our little man wants.'

Her mother pulled vegetable after vegetable from the drawers at the bottom of the fridge. This was what a good mother looked like: selfless, kind, always putting her children, and grandchildren, first.

Carmel held a head of broccoli in one hand and a leek in the other.

‘Well?’

‘Broccoli,’ said Robin, clearing her throat and cracking the last egg into the bowl. ‘He hates broccoli.’

Carmel placed the vegetables on the counter, walked around the peninsula and wrapped Robin in a hug. She squeezed her tight.

‘I’m grand, Mam.’ She wasn’t going to cry. Carmel knew well her daughter never cried.

‘Shut up now, Robin, like a good girl.’

Her mother’s perfume filled Robin’s nostrils. This she remembered. She’d smelled the same since Robin was a child.

‘You know I love that son of yours,’ said Carmel, ‘and your brother and your father, but you’re my only girl. So you’re my favourite. It’s terribly sexist, I know, but there you have it. And if you tell the others I said that, I’ll bury you alive in the back garden and say I haven’t a notion where you’ve got to.’

Robin gave a half-laugh that came out like a snort.

The sound of a key in the front door and the wheels of a bike being ridden in.

‘Yo!’ Johnny, Robin’s brother, had finally moved out of home for the first time last summer, only to move right back in two weeks after Robin and Jack had turned up on the doorstep. His first long-term relationship couldn’t stand the pressure of cohabiting, much to his relief. Johnny felt no need to prove his independence; he loved living at home.

Carmel gave her daughter one last squeeze and separated, shaking the leek at her. ‘Not a word.’

Johnny came into the kitchen, his face red and slightly shiny from the cycle. 'Did you hear about the Quinns' car?' he said, not even trying to keep the excitement from his voice.

'How did you hear that?' asked Carmel indignantly.

'Met Ted Walsh at the end of the road just there.' Johnny shook his head. 'Mad stuff.'

'Ah,' declared Carmel, brandishing the leek once again. 'I knew it an hour ago.'

Johnny and Robin grinned at each other. Their mother prided herself on being the first port of call for all local gossip in the Dwyer household.

'The women's poker group, wha'?' Johnny came around the peninsula and nudged his helmet against his mother's arm. 'Better than any communication system the guards have come up with, anyway. I'm surprised one of you wasn't out to apprehend them.'

Carmel shoved her youngest child away. 'Don't be getting lippy with me, mister. You left this place in a state this morning. Rasher fat drippings across the floor, the chopping board covered in crumbs. What did I tell you? What did I say to you when you moved back in here? Clean up . . .'

' . . . or clear out,' Johnny and Robin sang in unison.

'Yes,' said Carmel, hand on her hip. 'Exactly.' She played up to this, the role of the put-upon mother; in reality she had little interest in domesticity. 'Now get ten potatoes out of the sack behind the door and chop them into chips like the good son that you are.'

Johnny threw his helmet on the table and went over and started pulling potatoes from the bag. 'Watch it!' The door opened again.

Jack sauntered in, carrying a small plastic cow in each pudgy fist. Carmel peered over her glasses. 'How are negotiations going?'

Jack placed the animals on the counter and rested his chin against the cool marble. 'I don't like them trees, Granny,' he said, and tried to headbutt the broccoli but it was just out of reach.

‘Those trees,’ corrected Robin, ruffling his tangled, clammy hair. He pushed her hand away. ‘I like the other trees. The big trees!’ He wandered over to his grandmother. ‘Them trees!’ He pointed up at the leek.

‘*Those* trees, Jack.’

Carmel hit herself on the forehead. ‘Silly Granny.’ She shook her head. ‘I forgot.’

‘That’s okay.’ Jack climbed up on to the stool beside her and patted her arm benevolently. ‘Old people forget things sometimes.’

‘That’s very true,’ said Carmel, bowing slightly at his absolution. ‘How did you get to be such a clever boy?’

‘Daddy told me,’ said Jack, leaning over to the fruit bowl and plucking a grape from the stalk before anyone could tell him not to. ‘Granddad forgot his keys and Daddy said it was okay because old people forget things sometimes.’

The room fell quiet as everyone’s movements slowed – everyone except Jack, who had realised nobody was telling him off and so was rapidly shoving grapes into his mouth.

Carmel cleared her throat. ‘When did Granddad forget his keys?’

‘Yes-ter-day!’ Jack threw his head back, half laughing, half gurgling, and brought his hand to his forehead just as Carmel had done. ‘You forget *everything*, Granny.’

A small piece of grape skin stuck to Jack’s lower lip. Johnny and Carmel looked at Robin. She shook her head. She hadn’t a clue what he was talking about.

‘Mick did forget his keys yesterday,’ said Carmel, quietly and without intonation as Jack continued to make light work of the grape punnet. ‘He had to ring the bell when they came back from the park.’ Then, loading her voice with serenity, she almost sang: ‘When were you talking to your daddy, Jack?’ But Carmel’s eyes were on Robin.

‘At the swing! Daddy can make it go much higher than Granddad. Granddad gets too scared.’

‘In the park?’ said Robin, finally finding her voice. ‘When you went to the park with Granddad?’

Jack nodded, his mouth now too full of grapes to speak.

Maybe Jack was getting his days mixed up. He wasn’t great with time yet. Surely her dad wouldn’t have let Eddy talk to Jack. Or at the very least he would have told her about it. And what was Eddy doing in the park? Had he followed them? Had he been waiting to get Jack alone?

‘What did he say?’ demanded Robin, her mind suddenly racing. Had Eddy been watching them? Was he still watching them? ‘What did your daddy say, Jack?’

Jack pointed to his mouth and bobbed his head from side to side. He reached for the fruit bowl again but Robin caught his hand mid-grab. ‘Stop messing now. Swallow that.’

She sounded crosser than she’d intended and Jack’s eyes grew wide and worried.

‘Spit it out,’ she said, opening her palm and spreading it below his mouth. ‘Come on. Just spit it out.’

‘Robin,’ her mother warned, and Robin saw that her son was on the verge of tears. She withdrew her hand and waited for him to swallow. When he did, he was panting, his fat little tongue stained purple.

She tried again. ‘What did Daddy say?’

‘He said he loved me and he loved Mammy.’ Jack’s lip quivered. He looked around at the adults. He knew something had changed. He didn’t like the way they were looking at him – but he did like that they were looking at him. He rallied under the attention. ‘Daddy said when we go home after our holiday with Granny and Granddad, he’s going to get me a tractor. Not like the one I got from Granddad, Mammy. A big one! Like on the television.’

‘Robin,’ said her mother, but Robin had already turned and walked out of the room. The kitchen door slammed behind her as she strode back into the sitting room, reached into the beanbag and grabbed her phone.

*** Pine Road Poker ***

Bernie:

Warning!!! Sylvie was bitten by a dog outside Island Stores today, circa 2 p.m. An adult male fled the scene with the attacker. Be on the lookout for an unfamiliar large black dog. If you see one please let me know but do not approach. Regards, Bernie Watters-Reilly

Ellen:

That's awful, Bernie. So sorry to hear it. Pets that aren't kept under control should be taken out and shot.

Love to Sylvie xxx

Bernie:

Thank you, Ellen. And I'm inclined to agree. I actually wrote about it recently and got some great feedback from readers.

Link: independent.ie/BestParenting/PetsArentPeople

We're debating going to the police. She's quite traumatised.

Ellen:

The poor chicken. Let me know if I can do anything. xxx

Carmel:

Sylvie seems to have all the bad luck. Is that her third dog bite since the summer?

Bernie:

Fourth, Carmel. She's just too trusting. She loves animals and always thinks the best of them.

Carmel:

That must be it.

Fiona:

OMG Poor Sylvie!! Will keep an eye out and tell my two to stay away from any dogs. Tnxs 4 the heads up hun!! XXXX

Ruby:

I think the new neighbours have a dog . . .

THREE



Edie Rice shifted slightly as her phone went silently berserk in her back pocket. She was about to excuse herself to go to the bathroom and check it – leaving people waiting made her anxious – when Daniel’s mother clattered one of her good plates down in front of her with an aggressive sigh. The chicken, wrapped in bacon, bounced.

‘Before you say it, I know you’re a *vegetarian* now.’ Mrs Carmody’s tone suggested she would have drawn quotation marks in the air if she hadn’t had a plate in her other hand. ‘Daniel gave me that bit of information after I’d already forked out for the meat. So,’ she sighed again, ‘I’ve given you the smallest piece.’

The bacon coat, still sizzling, slipped from the chicken breast and slid a greasy path across the plate. Edie’s throat closed over.

‘It’s perfect,’ she enthused when she could manage. ‘And those potatoes look delicious. Thank you, Mrs Carmody.’ She beamed up at her mother-in-law.

Her phone was still buzzing. Oh gosh. She hoped the Pine Road women hadn’t realised she was the last one to put down rat poison. It was so unlike her, but this particular task kept slipping her mind. *Baby brain*, she thought, wishfully.

‘Yeah, well,’ Mrs Carmody harrumphed, Edie’s positive response clearly a disappointment, ‘I spent all day making that so don’t go insulting me.’ Then she carefully placed the other plate in front of her son.

‘Thanks, Ma,’ said Daniel. Edie didn’t like to think badly of her mother-in-law, but his dead bird wrapped in dead pig did not look any larger than hers. He squeezed her hand below the table.

‘Everything all right, Edie?’ asked Mrs Carmody.

Edie gave her another enthusiastic smile. ‘Perfect,’ she repeated, glancing around at Daniel’s father, sister and older brother. ‘Thank you.’ When the others started to eat, she picked up her fork and scraped out a couple of uncontaminated beans from beneath the chicken breast.

Daniel carefully constructed a forkful of dinner so there was a bit of everything on it. You wouldn’t think it to look at her husband – a tank of a man regularly covered in car oil – but he was a gentle perfectionist. He was thorough and exact and believed if something was worth doing, it was worth doing right. It had taken him a month to propose because he wanted to do it with breakfast in bed and was waiting for the perfect morning light. But Edie had always been far too curious and she found the ring the day he bought it. She felt terrible for ruining the surprise and didn’t tell anyone, including Daniel. Although her nail technician guessed; nobody gets refills that often unless they’re expecting their hands to take centre stage in multiple social media posts.

‘Since when are you a vegetarian, Edie?’ asked Daniel’s sister.

‘Since last year,’ she said, doing her best not to hear the sneer in Rachel’s voice, and glancing at Daniel who quickly looked away.

But Peter, Daniel’s older brother, had caught the look. ‘No more steaks for your dinner, Two Straps?’ he said, needling Daniel, though his gaze was on Edie as he chewed, mouth opening slightly wider than necessary. ‘I wouldn’t be putting up with that.’

‘I’d say you’ve lots of time to cook, Edie,’ said Mrs Carmody, waving her fork. ‘No kids to look after, just your little job to go to.’

Edie, who had started nodding eagerly before her mother-in-law had finished, continued to smile, though her insides were contorting. Daniel rubbed his leg against hers.

She'd stopped eating meat the month they were supposed to start trying for a baby.

'Eddie actually got a promotion last week.'

She beamed. He was still proud of her. He loved her. The rest was just a phase.

'Is it more money?' asked Daniel's father, stabbing at his own meat combo.

'A little, I guess, but it's more of a title thing. I'll be going from day receptionist to—'

'How much?'

'Of . . . a pay increase? Oh, well,' Eddie looked to her husband, 'about eighty euro extra a week? I think.'

'For answering phones?' said Mrs Carmody incredulously. 'Sure, a monkey could do that. I've been doing it for free all my life.'

Eddie did her best to take it as a joke, but Rachel's sharp laugh scraped the smile from her face.

She knew Daniel's family hated her and that the more effort she put in, the worse it got. But she couldn't help it. It had always mattered to her what other people thought.

'You're practically a kept man now, bro,' said Peter. 'First she buys you a house, now she's bringing in the bacon. You'll be able to make up for the economic fuck-ups of Two Straps here, Eddie.' Peter nudged Daniel. 'Isn't that right?' Peter nudged him again. 'Two Straps?'

'I didn't buy Daniel a house,' she said, desperate to get out of this kitchen without a fight. 'I inherited it.' Though Peter knew this already.

'Yeah, but who owns it?' asked her brother-in-law. 'Whose name's on the deeds? Ha? Not Two Straps.'

Eddie ignored him. 'And Daniel doesn't need me to *keep* him. My husband is an excellent provider. He gives me everything I need.'

Suddenly everyone was ooing and sniggering.

'No, I didn't mean—'

But Mr Carmody brought his fists down on either side of his plate. 'No smut talk at the table!'

Edie reached down for Daniel's hand but he kept them both above the table. Peter continued to grin at her as he picked up his fork. A familiar knot returned to her stomach. They always got to him. No matter what she did, there always came a moment in this house when she felt Daniel loving her a little less.

'Actually, Two Straps,' said Peter, 'I need you to mind Rocky next weekend.'

Rocky was Peter's designer dog, although he spent as much time at her and Daniel's house as he did at Peter's.

Daniel took a sip of his coke. 'You just picked him up from ours yesterday. And we're busy next weekend.'

'Another dance class, is it? Haven't you mastered the cha-cha-cha yet?'

Rachel giggled.

'We did three dance classes for our wedding, because Edie wanted to. A year ago. Stop fucking bringing it up.'

'Daniel,' exclaimed Mrs Carmody. 'Don't swear at your brother.'

Peter slapped Daniel on the shoulder. 'I'm joking! Relax. It's only one night. I'll be back for him Sunday, yeah? Anyway, bro,' Peter winked at Edie, 'you owe me.'

Daniel owed him absolutely nothing. He was forever doing favours for Peter and his brother just acted like he was entitled to it all. Edie didn't like to think badly of people – she really didn't, it gave her a pain in her stomach – but her in-laws made it very difficult.

'Happy birthday, Ma,' said Peter, raising his can in Mrs Carmody's direction as everyone else lifted theirs.

'Ah, thanks, son.' Mrs Carmody beamed as she tucked her greying hair behind her ear. 'It's lovely to have all my family here.' She looked around the table, Edie's face lighting up as she caught her eye. 'And Edie, of course.'

‘We got you a cake,’ said Peter.

‘Ah, now! What did you go and do that for? Don’t be wasting your money on me.’

‘Nonsense, Ma. What better thing would there be to spend it on?’

Edie looked from Peter to Daniel, momentarily confused. ‘We got a cake too.’

‘Two cakes!’ Mrs Carmody clapped her hands to her chest.

‘No, Ma,’ said Peter evenly. ‘It’s the same cake. Edie’s just trying to make me look bad, because I didn’t physically *buy* the cake. If it’s about money, Edie, just let me know what I owe. I’m not working at the moment but I should be able to cobble something together. Or maybe I could pay you in instalments.’

‘I wasn’t—’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ interrupted Mrs Carmody. ‘Surely you’re not asking for his money, Edie? And Peter out of work? Surely you’re not that hard up that you can’t spare a few euro?’

‘Of course I’m not,’ Edie started to insist. Peter was the one trying to make her look bad; he must have seen her and Daniel carrying the bakery box into the house. And Peter might be technically unemployed but he’d just bought a new car – with a discount from Daniel.

But Mr Carmody brought his fists down on the table again before she could get any further, and Peter was back grinning now everyone else’s attention was fixed on her.

‘What the fuck are we talking about money for?’ barked Daniel’s dad. ‘It’s your mother’s birthday. Get out the cake, and keep the grubby talk for later.’

Mrs Carmody sniffled slightly. Peter got up from the table, went over to the fridge and produced the carrot cake Edie had carefully chosen and ordered three days earlier, then picked up – and paid for – this morning. It should have been Daniel, at the very least, lighting the candles.

‘Ah, son!’ Mrs Carmody clapped her hands, an actual tear in her

eye at the sight of her name spelled out in icing. 'You personalised it and everything.'

Rachel led them in a chorus of 'for she's a jolly good fellow' but Peter got the sole peck on the cheek. The cake was cut and slices doled out to everyone except Edie.

'Ma,' said Daniel.

'What? Oh, sorry. Can you eat cake, Edie?'

'Of course she can eat cake.'

'How was I supposed to know that? It's hard to keep up with all her regimes.'

'That's okay, Mrs Carmody. It's just meat I don't eat. Everything else is fine.' For the first few months she'd cut down on alcohol and caffeine too, until it became clear she was wasting her time. A glass of white wine was a paltry consolation prize, but it was better than nothing.

But Daniel's mother had already gone back to her other son. 'It's lovely, Peter, just gorgeous.'

Edie watched the clock above the sink and listened as Mr Carmody gave out about the family who'd moved in next door. He didn't know where they were from, but they weren't Irish. Edie reminded herself of generational differences and unintentional biases and the need to be understanding, but it was no use. There was only so long she could spend in this house before she felt herself becoming a worse person. Everyone was finished eating and they'd been there two hours. She pushed back her chair.

'I'll just help with these,' she said, gathering the empty plates to carry to the dishwasher. 'Thanks for dinner. I'm afraid we have to get going.'

'Oh no,' Rachel deadpanned. 'Don't go. You're such great craic.'

Peter snorted so coke came out his nostrils. The familiar knot expanded in Edie's stomach.

'You won't stay for a cup of tea?' said Mrs Carmody, a small quiver creeping into her voice. 'Daniel?'

Edie did not look at her husband but she knew he was looking at her.

‘We’d love to, Mrs Carmody, but I’m afraid I have a couple of things to get before the shop closes and Daniel—’

Daniel’s father hit the table again and everyone jumped. ‘It’s my wife’s birthday and if she wants you to stay for tea, you’re staying. Now sit down there and give us another fifteen minutes of your precious time. You’ – he pointed at Peter – ‘stick on the kettle.’ Peter instantly rose from his seat. ‘And don’t drown the bloody thing in milk.’

The kettle rumbled and Peter rooted in the press for mugs. Mr Carmody leaned forward and gave Daniel a smile that contained no humour. ‘How’s my garage going? I hope your wife’s not making all the decisions about that too?’

Daniel had worked in the family garage full time, and for peanuts, since the day he finished school. His dad retired three years ago and sold the place to him at full market value. It was entirely, and officially, Daniel’s. Yet Mr Carmody insisted on referring to it as his garage and Daniel, who wouldn’t let himself be undermined in any other circumstance, never corrected him.

‘Fine,’ he said. ‘Everything’s going fine.’

‘That’s interesting now.’ Mr Carmody scratched his beard. ‘Because Peter tells me things were a bit slow there before Christmas.’

Edie tensed. The queasiness in her stomach grew stronger. The slow year at the garage had been the cause of everything. It was why they still had cracked tiles in their bathroom and why a greater fracture had threatened to split the two of them.

‘No,’ her husband replied evenly. ‘Everything’s fine.’

‘Are you sure now, son?’

‘I’m sure.’

‘You know, I had that place for four decades?’

‘I know, Da.’

‘And I never once came close to shutting it down. I never once made a loss, even.’

‘What’s that?’ said Peter, carrying over two cups of tea and offering one to his father – ‘Get that away from me; it looks fucking anaemic’ – and another to his mother – ‘Oh no, don’t mind me; look after yourselves first’ – before giving one to Edie and putting the other in front of Daniel.

‘I’m just reminding your brother that my garage has been in the family for forty years without any problems, so he better not be the one to fuck it up.’

‘You were the best mechanic in all of north Dublin, Da,’ agreed Peter. ‘It’s a lot for any young buck to live up to. But Two Straps is doing his best, aren’t you, little bro?’ Then the thirty-year-old man reached for the arm of his twenty-eight-year-old sibling and quickly twisted the skin.

Edie threw the tea down her throat so fast she knew she’d be peeling the skin off the roof of her mouth for days. But she didn’t care. She could see the Carmody poison starting to worm its way into Daniel. He was too good for them. She had to get him out. When the cup was almost empty, she brought it over to the dishwasher, went into the hallway, got her coat and the faux-fur colour-block scarf that she thought looked very chic but which Mrs Carmody said made her look like ‘a streetwalker’. Then she came back and stood in the kitchen doorway.

‘We’re off now, thanks again.’

Daniel stood and the rest of them, who were laughing at some video Peter had gotten up on his phone, didn’t argue.

As she left the house, Edie imagined the bad feelings falling from her body. She shook herself silently before opening the car, discarding the last of the ill will on the driveway, and when the passenger door was closed behind her, she took a deep breath of unpolluted air.

‘Home we go.’

Daniel didn’t say anything. He just stuck the key in the engine and checked the rear-view mirror.

She glanced over. 'You all right?'

'Grand.'

She watched him, lost in the concentration of driving, frowning at some invisible grievance on the horizon. Had they gotten to him? They usually did. Was he back to worrying, to beating himself up and taking her down by association, to coming up with reasons not to give her what he'd promised?

'You know you're my favourite?' she said.

His mouth twitched and his head lifted. 'Of my family? I'm not sure that's much of a compliment.'

'Of everyone.'

He gave into the smile then.

Rows of identical houses whizzed past as Edie rolled back her shoulders and felt the knot in her stomach loosen. She loved him and he loved her. It all came back to that. They could let the scaffolding fall because the walls they'd built underneath were sound. That was the gist of the poem she'd read out at their wedding in place of making a speech. She took a deep breath and went for it.

'I know the last few months have been stressful for you, work wise and everything, and we agreed we'd leave it till the new year . . .'

His eyes flickered from one mirror to the other. They hadn't actually agreed, so much as he'd left her with no choice.

' . . . but January is already over and . . . it's coming up again.'

'Already?'

A brutal memory of standing in a new nightdress – she did a lot of window-shopping at Victoria's Secret, but this was the first thing she'd actually bought – and him saying he had a headache.

'Yes,' she said tentatively. 'Next weekend. So, since things are back to normal at work . . .'

A *headache*. That was an excuse women usually gave.

'They're not back to normal, Edie. I'm just not losing money.'

When she'd gotten into bed beside him that night, having changed into her pyjamas and resolved to return the nightdress

the next day, she'd felt his erection. It wasn't that he hadn't wanted to have sex with her, he just hadn't wanted to . . .

No. She couldn't go there.

She pulled a strand from her ponytail and wound it too tightly around her little finger. 'Well, I thought we could try again.'

Her voice cracked slightly on 'again' and Daniel turned. A look of sympathy and something else: Guilt? Regret? Resignation?

She sat, half holding her breath, waiting for him to rehash the old excuses of money and security and yada yada. But instead he took his hand off the steering wheel and placed it on her knee.

'I'm sorry,' he said, his own voice threatening to break.

He meant it. She knew he meant it. She just wished she could understand it.

'That's okay.' She placed her own hand over his and squeezed tightly, then she took a deep breath and put on her best, most Edie-like smile. 'At least we're guaranteed a fun weekend.'