

HOW HE WAS AFTER

“There are some side effects but nothing too alarming. You’re not planning to drive or operate heavy machinery are you?”

The doctor looked up from behind his desk, his eyes peering out over the top of his narrow spectacles. He paused for a long moment as if his remote had been pressed, waiting for a response. None came.

“Have a read through the small print if you feel up to it. That may well send you off to sleep anyway, save you taking the pills. Mr Mann, are you alright?”

Mr Mann was staring at a point above the doctor’s head. It was a mark on the wall. A light square framed by a dark boundary. It could have been where a picture had once hung. He wondered what the picture could have been and what had happened to it. Had it been taken down and shoved in a dark cupboard or an attic? What happens to pictures when no one wants to look at them anymore, do they wither and die like sunflowers in the dark? Or do they take on another form, something more suited to shadows? There was nothing there now but an empty space. The only trace was the ghost of an outline.

“Mr Mann, I realise it’s a difficult time for you. A close call, this incident on the bridge. Troubling but not out of the ordinary for someone in your circumstances. It took a lot of courage for you to come and see me. I know it can be difficult, especially if you’re not used to asking for help. These should help. Come back and see me if they don’t.”

He handed the prescription to Mr Mann who took it from him and nodded his head in appreciation.

Nice enough chap, thought Mr Mann.

Seems to know his stuff. Of course you never can tell these days, can you?

The automatic doors of the surgery jerked open and Mr Mann stepped out into the road without a glance to the right or left. He had one thing on his mind: the chemist shop. That's where he'd get his pills. They'd make him feel better or at least not as bad. He didn't hear the number 57 bus as it missed him by six inches. He walked into the chemist, handed over the piece of paper and waited patiently until the box of pills was dropped into his hand. He struggled to raise a smile for the girl behind the counter and wasted no more time as he stepped out of the shop and pointed his nose towards home.

The street was bustling with shoppers. Up ahead was a frazzled looking mum pushing an enormous buggy laden down with babies and draped with plastic bags full of shopping. A group of scruffy school boys hung around the bus shelter, one of them nudged the other as Mr Mann drew near. They stared at him brazenly but didn't say a word, turning their backs as he passed them.

He'd walked this street countless times. He'd been to school nearby, worked on building sites and in warehouses and visited every public house and bookie within a two mile radius. His parents had been born and died here, living as peacefully as they could into relative old age. His brother had died near the front of the old cinema, blown apart by the full blast of the Easter parade bomb. Wrong place, wrong time, wrong warning phoned in.

He passed the front of the church and paused. He looked down at the pavement, the paving stones were lined with cracks. They looked like roads on a map and he wondered where they led. He looked up at the church. "It's no St Peters," she'd said, but it was in their home town and they'd spend many a Sunday within its walls. They'd been married there and he thought of that day every time he passed. That memory was faint now, blocked out by everything else that had happened.

He entered the house to the sound of the phone ringing.

"Hello"

“Dad are you okay?”

“Yes, yes, I’m fine”

“Where have you been? I’ve been trying to ring you.”

“I’ve been out at the chemist, picking up my pills.”

“Oh, that’s good and have you taken them yet?”

“No, I’m just in the door.”

“Right and how are you feeling?”

“I’m feeling just fine. Don’t be worrying about me, I’m grand.”

“You’re not grand Dad. You’ve been through a hell of a lot. Do you want me to come round there, just now?”

“Well, no. I think I’ll just make myself some tea and watch some TV.”

“That’s a good idea. I’ll pop over tomorrow. Will you remember to take your pills?”

“I’ve got them right here.”

“Good, have a good night then. Ring me if you need anything.”

“Okay, bye.”

He stood at the kitchen sink and filled the kettle. He switched it on and looked out into the back garden.

The grass needs cutting. Those weeds are back too, poking their little heads between the slabs. Where do they come from? I dig them out and fill in the gaps and no sooner have I sat down they’ve grown back again. If I left the place alone for more than a couple of weeks it would be like Day of the Triffids out there.

The sky was beginning to fade. This was one part of the day that he felt most keenly. He watched the sky, staring into it, feeling the colour drain away. The kettle whistled and clicked off, steaming up the window for a few moments. As the steam cleared he could see that the sky had grown darker, no longer blue, now it was closer to black.

Another day she'll never know

A sharp sound echoed through the garden. He snapped from his thoughts as the outside lights flickered on.

“Those damn cats are back,” he said.

He looked out across the garden but he couldn't see much now, just his own reflection in the kitchen window.

Look at that. I'm just like a ghost, floating there above the garden. Am I even here?

He made his tea and took it into the living room. He drew the curtains, switched on the table lamp and sat in his chair. The faint ticking of the wall clock immediately scraped its way across his nerves. He took out the battery and hung the clock back on the wall. It read two minutes past seven. He looked at it and tried to remember what time it had been when she'd last spoken to him. It had been the evening before it had happened but he couldn't remember the exact time.

Is everything fading already? How long before I can't remember what she looked like?

He held the pills in his hand and fell asleep without opening the box.

The hammering of heavy fists on the front door woke him with an almighty jolt. He gulped in a huge mouthful of air and jerked out of his chair but there was no one there. He knew then he'd imagined it and he also knew why.

I'm not ready to think about that yet.

He opened the box containing the pills and took out the information sheet. The list of side effects ran to over a page. *Increased sex drive and hallucinations* caught his eye and for the first time that day a smile crossed his lips.

He woke up sore. His head had tipped to an odd angle in the chair and his neck felt like it had been bent out of shape. It took all his effort to bend over and pick up the box and

the pills and shuffle into the kitchen where he stashed them in a high cupboard at the side of the sink. He wasn't hungry but he knew he should have something. The loaf in the bread tin had been young once but the mould hadn't gone any further than the edges so he cut that off and put two slices in the toaster. He wandered back through to the living room and opened the curtains.

There it is. Same as it ever was, except it's not now is it?

He could just see the edge of the bus shelter. He waited. He knew the 75 bus would be along soon. His heart raced. It was as if it didn't really know what was going on. He could hear the bus coming, there it was at the stop. Someone was getting off. It was her. She was home early. He craned his stiff neck as far as it would go so that he could see her walking up the street before she could see him. She'd spot him and raise her hand, smiling sweetly like they'd not seen each other in weeks. Then he'd wait for the sound of her at the front step, rummaging about in her handbag for the keys that always seemed to elude her. She'd open the door and step inside, saying "Hello, are you decent?"

The 75 went past the window. There was next to no one on it. No one that mattered to him anyway.

He found himself in the garden. He couldn't remember exactly why he'd come out but there but there he was standing in front of the shed, key in hand. He shoved the sticky door open.

There's something in there, I'm sure of it. That noise from the garden, it came from the shed. Something's got in and set up home. Either that or those damned kids have found their way in and are planning on lifting my mower. Good luck to them if they are. They'd be doing me a favour moving that monster. It hasn't cut a blade of grass in a decade but still manages to take up half my shed.

He peered around the shed, checking the walls for gaps or new openings but he could not see anything big enough for anyone to squeeze through. Just as he was closing the door he heard it. A sharp shuffle at first and then a glimpse. Two huge green eyes fixed on him before a smudge of fur disappeared as if by magic. He stumbled back into the shed to see where it had gone but even then he couldn't see anywhere the visitor could have escaped.

At least I know what it is now. I hate cats.

He was back in his chair, the table lamp was on and the curtains were drawn. He stared at her chair. It just sat there silently in the corner of the room. It was still lined with cushions. She'd move most of them if she sat on it but she'd put them back when she got up. He never did see the point of all of that but she said it made it look nice and if it was good enough for her then it was good enough for him.

He didn't know what to do with her things. The cushions were just the start of it. She had a wardrobe full of clothes and an attic full of boxes. There were photo albums and paperbacks. There were piles of magazines and ornaments all over the place. There was a bathroom cabinet creaking under the weight of all her potions. Not to mention her jewellery and row upon row of shoes.

"How many shoes does one woman need?" he'd kept asking her.

"You can never have enough," she'd said with a smidgen of laughter.

He'd had a go at clearing her clothes the day after he'd come back from the hospital. He thought he'd just put the lot into bags and take them to the Cancer shop on the High Street. They'd know what to do with them and at least the money would go to a good cause. He'd got no further than opening the wardrobe's doors. He'd froze, unable to move while his mind wandered off down the High Street where he imagined charity shop mannequins dressed head to toe in her Sunday best. *It just didn't seem right.* He'd closed the doors with a

new weight on his heart. He wanted to do the right thing but he just didn't know what that was any more.

A few days later the funeral man had asked him for one of her outfits. He thought he'd misheard him at first. The words were on his tongue – she's dead – he'd almost said them out loud. He'd picked out her favourite dress, jacket and shoes. It took three attempts at getting out the front door without tears before he managed it. He scolded himself.

Look at you. With all the things you've seen and done. Not a second thought to any of them and here you are sobbing like a little girl when all you're doing is handing in a bag of clothes.

He couldn't find a decent bag so he'd used the Tesco bag, the one that said Bag for Life on it. He was pretty sure it wasn't appropriate but that was the only one big enough that he could find.

As he walked home he'd thought about her in that outfit. She'd bought it for Dougie's third wedding. Half price in the Debenhams sale. The jacket had been just a little too big so she'd had it adjusted. He could remember that he'd thought to himself that she looked beautiful that day and he felt a deep aching sadness that he hadn't bothered to tell her.

He was sitting in the garden. The sun had come out and he was fed up in house so he'd made himself a cup of tea and taken it outside, setting up the chair in front of the shed which was one of the sunniest places. It was a good spot. He could look out across the garden and let his mind amble around wherever it wanted to go like one of the bumble bees who were checking out the flowers. The sun made his skin tingle. It felt good like it was drinking it in. He sipped at his tea and put it back on the saucer next to his feet.

He reached down for the tea and there it was sitting looking at him: the cat. Mr Mann stared back. The deep green of the cat's eyes had a hypnotic wash to them and Mr Mann found himself looking away as his head became slightly giddy. The cat stood up, lazily

stretched out its front legs, arched its back and then casually walked over while keeping its eyes fixed on Mr Mann at all times. It rubbed its side across Mr Mann's leg and bent down to sniff at the tea and the shortbread finger that was balanced on the side of the saucer.

"You can have that if you want it," said Mr Mann.

The cat looked up at him. Mr Mann broke a small piece off the shortbread and held it out for the cat. It licked it cautiously then bit down, taking it back into the sun, setting about it happily.

Can't say I've ever cared much for cats.

He watched the cat finish off the shortbread and then start to clean itself. First the front paws, carefully and deliberately. Then it was the front legs as far up as its head would bend. Finally it had a go at its back legs, nodding and licking until its fur glistened. Quite suddenly the cat sprang to its feet. It looked straight over at Mr Mann, lowered its head slowly as if bowing and then darted off over the fence into the neighbour's garden. Mr Mann felt a twinge of sadness in his stomach when he realised he was on his own again. He found himself dwelling on it.

I almost didn't make it to the hospital.

Of all things, this took its grip like an iron fist squeezing his heart.

He'd been asleep, fast asleep and in his dream he'd heard the knocking but he'd just kept on sleeping. They'd nearly knocked the door in. He'd leapt from his bed and grabbed the gun from under the mattress. Something wasn't right. *They wouldn't be making so much damned noise. They'd just slip in and get on with it.* It wasn't them, it was the Garda.

"The hospital have been trying to phone you. They rang us. You know. To come and get you," he'd said.

"Has she gone?" Mr Mann asked.

"We don't know."

They'd sped through the deserted town. It was three o' clock in the morning. There weren't many about, just a few stragglers and some taxis. He'd slipped the gun into his coat pocket. It was fully loaded. When they got to the hospital it was all closed up. They'd taken him to a side entrance that he'd never seen before.

"You'll get in there, just ring the bell and someone will let you in."

They'd driven off before Mr Mann had a chance to say anything. He rang the bell but there was no reply. He tried the door and it wasn't locked. He stepped inside and realised he was on completely the wrong side of the hospital. Something inside him told him to run.

She's waiting for me. I can't let her go there alone.

He'd ran down the deserted corridors. She was up on the first floor so he bounded up the first stairs he came to. He didn't recognise any of it. He ran over a walkway which seemed to link the front and back of the hospital. He'd never seen it before. As he ran across he thought to himself,

This is ridiculous. I've seen this in those awful films. The ones that she used to love to watch where someone is running through a hospital to be by their lover's side. Except this isn't a film and I know that she's holding on for me. At least, I think she is.

He'd come to the end of the corridor where her room was. He could see the nurses at their station. He pushed through the double doors and they'd looked up, one of them getting up from behind the desk and walking straight towards his. He was sure then that he was too late.

"Am I too late?" he asked.

The nurse ushered him into a side room.

"She's not got long Mr Mann, I'm sorry," she'd said.

He'd nodded at her and walked to the door of her room. He paused for a moment, took a long breath and pushed open the door. The room buzzed and beeped with the sound of

the machines that had been keeping her alive. She lay there, her breath coming in stuttering gasps. He sat beside the bed and held her hand.

She didn't move. She didn't open her eyes or make any sound but he knew she'd waited for him and that now the waiting was over. He looked at her. She was almost unrecognisable. There were tubes everywhere, held on by bits of sticky tape. The machines pulsed and beeped, pumps whirred and spluttered. The drugs that hadn't worked hung on hooks above her. They'd been bags full of hope but they hadn't saved her. A wash of quiet slipped across the room.

He was back in the garden, waiting for the cat. It was a regular now. Each day when Mr Mann had finished his lunch he'd take his tea and biscuit out into the garden. He didn't usually have to wait for long. It had been a week or so now and unheard of as it was there hadn't been any rain.

"Thought you weren't coming today," said Mr Mann as the cat strolled over towards the tea.

He'd tried it with some cat food but it had turned its nose up. It had sat next to it and stared at him as if mortified by the offering. He'd gone back to trying it with tea and shortbread. It liked that. He tried it with some milk in a saucer. It had a dab at that with its tongue but it seemed to prefer the tea and shortbread.

"You'll need to watch your teeth if you're chowing down on that you know. It's pretty sugary. Can cats clean their teeth?" The question hung in the air.

"I take good care of myself," said the cat.

He'd been under a lot of pressure. That's what the doctor had said to him. He looked at the cat. He was sure he'd heard it talk. The cat looked at him. There was something about it, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. It was like a recognition but he couldn't see how. There was something about its eyes like he knew it.

My mind is broken. It must be. Cats can't talk no matter how many pills you take.

"I didn't think you could talk," he said finally.

The cat was tucking into its shortbread and tea. It looked up at him. Its eye winked. It went back to eating. Nothing else was said. Mr Mann watched the cat and felt a smile tugging at the edges of his lips.

Just what had happened on the bridge?

The walking had helped. The worst thing was staying in the house. He'd sink into his chair and the weight of it all would press him down. It was trying to drive him into the ground and he was sure that if he'd let it then he'd disappear through the floor boards and into the foundations of the house. He knew that she would have wanted him to carry on and to try to hold himself together and he took strength from that. He felt better outside, underneath the sky rather than penned in by the walls of his own house. There were too many memories there. Too many ghosts.

He never planned where he was going. He'd just follow his nose, get into a rhythm with the walking and see where he ended up. That day he'd started off doing just that but he'd began thinking about it all and although his body was awake and walking in the cold morning air he was deep inside his own thoughts, replaying what had happened. He wondered if there was anything else he could have done. Then those feelings of guilt had washed in.

She paid the price for the things I've done. That was what the little voice in his head was saying to him. *That's impossible. Things just don't work that way.* But it was enough to start him down that track. Payback, karma, reaping and sewing. That was what had happened - she'd paid the price for his actions.

There had been a time when he'd played at being God and now God had reminded him how things actually worked by taking away what was precious to him. There was a

clarity to this thought. A certainty that he knew was pure. In that moment he'd convinced himself.

He found himself on the bridge. He wasn't really aware of what he was doing as he climbed up and over the parapet. Way down below the traffic whizzed past as they joined the motorway.

They're all going somewhere. Somewhere better than here. They're flying along there. It would be good to do that. To have somewhere to go that had to be reached as soon as possible no matter how fast you had to go. Where is it that I'd go? If I was to fly from here to there then where do I want to go?

The answer to that came easily. He really was going to step out into mid-air. That's when the man had grabbed him and pulled him back. He'd had no idea what he was doing. He was so far inside his own mind that even the fall might not have pulled him back. He could have hit the road and jolted across without ever knowing what he'd done. It had been close. Now he just sat there on the concrete path, staring out across bridge. The man had been trying to talk to him but his voice was distant and echoing and whatever it was he was trying to say seemed unimportant.

He was waiting for the cat to appear. He'd watch for it coming each day but he'd never see if approaching. It didn't saunter around path. It didn't pop up on top of the garden fence. It didn't emerge from the shed either. He'd turn around, blink or look up from his newspaper and there it was. It just seemed to materialise, as if by magic.

"Cats can't talk," said Mr Mann.

"I am talking now. Can you hear me?"

For a long moment Mr Mann's tongue didn't seem to be able to work.

"Not all cats can talk, that is true," said the cat.

Commented [es1]:

“No cats can talk, that’s what I thought anyway,” said Mr Mann with some degree of effort.

“Sometimes what we think and what is true are not the same.”

“Am I the only one that can hear you?”

“I don’t talk to just anyone. I don’t want to frighten those of a delicate nature.”

“You don’t think you’ll frighten me?”

“No. You’re not the type.”

“What type am I?”

“Do you really want me to answer that?”

“Why don’t you give it a go?”

The cat paused. Its eyes locked with Mr Mann’s and he felt an odd tingle on the back of his neck. A strange tickling sensation as if someone was stroking him with a feather.

“You’re carrying a great sadness. It may well be too much for you to bear.”

“How can a cat tell that?”

“I can tell lots of things.”

“Why have you come?”

“Why does anything happen? How many things had to happen for you to come into the world? How many can you think of? How many can you count? What if your grandparents had lived in a different street or a different town? Would they have ever met? All the lives you’ve seen and all that you’ve touched would have been lost. You never would have met your wife. You never would have lost your wife. You wouldn’t be here now listening to a talking cat.”

“Are you some kind of trick of my imagination? Is it the drugs talking?”

“What do you believe?”

“I don’t know what to believe any more.”

“Perhaps you just need time to adjust to your new reality.”

“Are you a witch’s cat?”

“Come now. Let’s not slip into such prejudices.”

“If you were a witch’s cat, that’s what you would say.”

“Do you believe in witches?”

“No and I don’t believe in talking cats either.”

“I do so enjoy the food you give me.”

“Shortbread.”

“Is that its name? Exquisite.”

“Not so good for your teeth.”

“I have my methods of looking after them. I find that they come in most useful.”

Mr Mann looked over at the cat. The cat lifted its paw and began licking at it.

Strange beast. It doesn’t seem in the slightest bit bothered by me. It appears every day and pretty much the same time and tucks into its shortbread. What kind of a cat does that? Probably most of them by all accounts but how many sit there and have a conversation with you? Not too many, surely?

The cat finished its wash, stood up and stretched its front legs out as far as they could go. Mr Mann knew what this meant.

“You’ll be off then? I’ll see you tomorrow will I?”

The cat looked over at Mr Mann and bowed its head before darting off in the direction of the fence, disappearing from sight.

He tried taking the pills. They did something to his head that he didn’t like. *It’s like having a hangover without the drink. It takes the edge off that’s for sure but everything is still there except it is shrouded in a heavy mist.* He’d sit in his chair for hours. He didn’t bother

putting on the television or the radio. He preferred to just let his mind talk to him but it always led him back.

I know that some of them are still scared of me. Who wouldn't be? Don't believe everything you hear, that's what I say. Then again some of what you hear may well be true. They don't know any better. They've just heard the stories. Anyone that's truly interested will probably be thinking that I'm weak now, vulnerable. Someone, somewhere will be coming up with a plan with me in mind. Let them try. I still have protection. McGovern had taken me aside at the wake, told me he'd make sure that I'd be alright. I knew what that meant. I wasn't blind. I'd seen the car up at the end of the street and I knew it was his lads that drove around the back each night. No one would dare do anything while they knew he had my back. Of course, he'll be around here at some point asking for something in return. I don't want to get pulled back in. I'll take my own chances if it comes to it.

“You seem a bit distracted Dad?”

“Oh, I'm fine. I thought I heard a noise, you know, in the garden.”

“Have those youngsters been in your garden. They're a right nuisance.”

“I've not seen them but there has been a few strange noises.”

“Do you want me to go and have a look around?”

Mr Mann looked at her and raised his eyebrows. She shrunk from this gaze.

“It's alright. Probably just cats.”

“Would you like to come around for you tea.”

“I will. Not today though, I've got something in already.”

“There's not much in your fridge. Maybe at the weekend then?”

“At the weekend. I'll let you know then.”

“Are you managing to get some sleep?”

“I've no problems there.”

“Good. Things will get easier, with time.”

“I’m sure you’re right.”

The cat hadn’t made an appearance for days. He’d waited for it in the garden, tea and shortbread set out for it but it hadn’t come. On the second day he’d sat there all afternoon convinced it would turn up as soon as he went back into the house but still there was no sign. He’d even left the shortbread out for it overnight. Something had taken it but he’d seen two magpies in the garden and he was pretty sure they’d made off with it.

I don’t even like cats. Where’s it gone?

He’d take his pills when he remembered and drift in and out of his own thoughts. He’d check the front window for the bus coming and the kitchen window for the cat. At night he’d slip into a shallow sleep broken by thoughts of what had happened that night in the hospital.

I’m not so sure about death. It feels like she’s still there. It’s like she’s not really gone. I know that’s not true but something between my head and my heart hasn’t tied up. I was there when she died. I held her hand as she lay there. She couldn’t speak any more. She didn’t have the strength to open her own eyes. I felt her grip my fingers just before the end. It was her way of saying goodbye. She fought it for a moment. She wasn’t strong enough. No one is. Her last breath fluttered around the hospital room like a butterfly, fleeting and strangely beautiful but only there for a moment, replaced by silence and memory. I hadn’t known what to do. I just sat there, looking at her. I leaned across, closed her eyes and gently kissed her lips. They were still warm. Outside the room I could hear someone talking on the phone as if nothing had happened.

The next day he took his tea out into the garden. It had been over a week since he’d seen the cat. He’d put out the saucer with the tea and shortbread and taken his own seat at the little garden table. He stared down at his own cup of tea. The gun looked out of place next to

it. He tried not to think about it. He'd gone to the drawer, pulled it out, checked it was still loaded and slipped it into his pocket. *I always knew I'd need it again. That's why I've kept it all this time. I suppose that I just thought that if I did need to use it that I'd be pointing it at someone else, not at me.* He was running on automatic pilot. He didn't really know why he'd taken it out into the garden. It just seemed like the thing to do

He checked the shed for the cat but there was nothing there. He looked around the fence line of the garden, just in case it had managed to get itself trapped. He remembered he'd left the gun on the table and wondered what he should do with it.

I could take it for a walk. Somewhere nice and quiet or maybe somewhere with a bit of a view. The bridge perhaps.

The weight of it felt good. He walked back towards the house to get his coat.

"Leaving so soon," said the voice.

He turned around, reaching for his pocket. It was sitting there in its usual spot.

"I thought you'd gone," said Mr Mann.

"Oh, I have things to do. A cat can't live on shortbread alone."

Mr Mann felt his mood lighten. He could feel the blood pumping around his body, his heart was warmer like it had soaked up some sunlight.

"I was just going in," said Mr Mann. "Do you want to come?"

"I thought you'd never ask," said the cat.

Mr Mann left the door open for the cat. He took the gun from his pocket and put it in the cutlery drawer. The cat slipped through his legs and headed for the living room. Mr Mann followed it in there. He opened the curtains and turned on the radiator. When he turned around he saw that the cat had curled up amongst the cushions on her chair. It looked like it was settling down for a nap. He smiled at it and took his own seat. He watched the cat dozing, tuning in to the soft buzz of its purr. The sound was hypnotic and strangely

comforting. His eyelids were too heavy to keep open. He sank into a deep and untroubled sleep.