



# THE LOGISTICS OF ADULTERY:

dreams and poetic  
possibilities

A Novella by Louis Hemmings

# THE LOGISTICS OF ADULTERY:

dreams and poetic possibilities

A Novella by Louis Hemmings

In the 15th year of their marriage, Ben and Martha come to a psychological and emotional cross roads. Their only child was stillborn. Now, Ben is made redundant from his printing job.

Ben, dreamer & poet, wants to start a second-hand bookshop down the country. Martha is reluctant to leave their Dublin home. They agree on a compromise strategy - but will their marriage still survive?

Ben leaves Martha to start his bookshop, in a small town. There, he meets Indigo, a dynamic young African artist. Her art and empathy impact Ben. What will come of their asymmetric friendship?

*Louis Hemmings* started writing poetry in 1972, when his boarding school girlfriend found his first ever poem in the classroom bin. Since then he has written numerous poems, won a Poetry Ireland award, been published in diverse magazines, and samizdat-published a dozen small collections.

While attending a community college in 2018, Louis accidentally discovered that he could write credible fiction. *The Logistics of Adultery: dreams and poetic possibilities* - is the first novella of an auto-fiction trilogy.



# **The Logistics of Adultery:**

Dreams & Poetic Possibilities

## **Samovar Books**

Avonbeg, Newtownpark Ave, Blackrock, Co. Dublin Published  
June 2020 Copyright © Louis Hemmings 2020

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher.

The right of Louis Hemmings to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him. All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

<https://linktr.ee/louishemmings>

*Eros is the quick spirit that moves between people - quick as in the distinction between 'the quick and the dead'. It's the moving force that won't be subdued by habit or law. Its function is to keep cracking open what is becoming rigid and closed off. Eros explodes the forbidden. Eros mocks our fantasy that we can nail down life and control it...*

- Lara Feigel

*The act of writing bears something in common with the act of love. The writer, at his most productive moments, just flows. He gives of*

*that which is himself. He makes himself naked, recording his nakedness in the written word.*

- Jourard

*Your visions will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes.*

— C.G. Jung

**E**ach weekday morning Ben crimped his trouser ends into his bike clips. He pulled on his tweed cap over his full head of thick but greying hair. He put on his leather bomber jacket and sheepskin gloves. Last, he shrugged on his satchel, containing sandwiches and a thermos flask of strong tea. Then he pushed his old fashioned black bike through the squeaky narrow gate.

As an afterthought, he chucked in a copy of Hot Press, an alternative Irish music magazine. Rory Gallagher featured on the cover. Ben had fond memories of hearing Gallagher's 'On the Boards' blaring out of boarding school dorm windows.

Ben was a printer in a dockside factory. Martha, his wife of five years, tended their Victorian era terraced house. Part of Martha's daily routine was walking Sam, their foxy-looking terrier rescue. During those walks, Martha gave time to aspects of her marriage dynamics. Both spouses defied typical gender tropes: Martha did the supposed-male jobs, fixing things, house painting. Ben's jobs comprising lawn cutting with push mower and hedge clipping with hand shears. While working, he often reflected on the trajectory his life took.

He bumped his bike off the kerb and onto the road. The loose chain clanged against the metal guard. He placed a foot on the left pedal, then with foot scooted up speed. Next, he swung his right leg over the seat.

He settled his bottom into the leather saddle. Its front ridge pushed hard into his pubic area, so he moved further back into the sprung, sculpted dip. Ben propelled the bike's rubber blocked pedals with determination. His thumb scrolled through the gears at the crossbar mounted selector. The sound of gear cogs clicking delighted him.

Birds serenaded Ben's early morning commutes in the cool autumn air. Over rooftops, coal and turf smoke wafted in the

clear sky. Lichen covered trees threw shadows onto root-lifted pavements. Small street facing gardens showed a sheen of gritty dust. School uniformed teens dawdled on their school route, adolescent shoulders weighted down by many books.

En route to work, Ben passed crowds of commuters. They stood stoically at bus stops with briefcases, or walked along crowded streets in factory overalls. Lorries and buses belched out blue-black exhaust from their exhaust pipes. The sharp autumnal air slapped Ben's cheeks. Wind caused his eyes to water, blurring vision.

Newspaper hawkers walked among junction-stopped traffic, shouting out titles. Many male cyclists overtook him on racing bikes, standing on pedals, pushing hard against the wind. Those red faced, self-declared champions, dreaming of the Tour de France.

His bike once belonged to his grandfather. He was third generation to continue family cycling traditions. He valued independent and cheap transport, the ability to stop wherever he wanted at a moment's notice, to write down any rhyming phrases that came to mind.

*Pushing pedals in the lowest gears,*

*No delay till weather clears;*

*Breeze blown biking quite unwise,*

*badly blurred his bespectacled eyes...*

He took an indirect route to work along old side streets. Tall trees overhung fences and walls. A harvest of hazelnuts and conkers fell on the pathways and roads. Over time, feet and tyres ground those nuts into dust, clogging roadside gutters and drains. The wind brushed leaves on concrete, making swishing sounds.

**Ben** thought most men needed a mission. For him, it was printing. Both in democracy or dictatorship, books spoke truth to power. Authors' imaginations set complacent minds on fire. Writers influenced society. Words changed the course of history, and he played a minor part in that process.

He daily fist-punched the time meter's large button, registering his brown clock-in card. Afterwards, he put his lunch box and thermos in the locker. He donned his ink smeared overalls, averting his gaze from the gaudy gallery of topless models. The printers sat on two benches, filling the cramped space with male sweat, cigarette smoke, and banter. Their droll camaraderie made him smile, though he

didn't join in with their joshing jokes, peppered with expletives. They mocked Ben for writing poetry and called him a "poof" behind his back. His work mates were the only masculine group that he immersed himself in.

The only women at the print works were three secretaries who worked in the manager's office. Their fashionable miniskirts, tights and black wet-look platform boots brightened up Ben's day. He appreciated their pervasive flowery perfumes wafting whenever they passed.

They sat at desks behind prefab windows, insulated from the loud machinery. Their polished nails tapping on typewriter keyboards, speedy clattering stopped if the phone on their desk rang. Then they chatted with subdued tones into heavy handsets, their slim hands playing with the receiver's coiled wires in an absent minded manner.

Ben executed the same processes each day. He made multiple micro adjustments on his machine. The calibration of ink and water delivery was a delicate balance: too much water caused colours to look washed out. Excess ink delivered, and the print plate "scummed". He aimed for an accurate replication of the original artwork.

He fanned many reams of A3 size paper, loaded them on the paper platform. Chains clicked behind metal panels, pulleys raised the tray to chromed entry rollers. Next, Ben ensured the correct balance of suck and blow from air ducts, to prevent sheet "doubles".

*Ink sheen on roller pyramid churned,  
row of ink duct nodes altered, turned;*

*rotary drums beat a steady rhythm out,*

*offset engine celebrates with shouts...*

A test-sheet got folded foursquare, to check that cut-mark registrations were true. If all was “justified” Ben set the page counter to zero, pressed the start switch and pulled the engagement lever, activating the printer. Then he sat beside the noisy machine, monitoring the job while he read his copy of Hot Press. The lead story that week was on Rory Gallagher’s recent rock concert:

‘On June 26th 1977, Rory Gallagher played one of his best gigs ever, entertaining 20,000 fans. Macroom Mountain Dew will make history as Ireland’s first open air rock festival.’ He always came up with excuses why he couldn’t attend those big

outdoor concerts: ‘The venue was far away. Who might go with me? Ticket costs were expensive. I’d prefer to save my money for another LP.’

The print machines often broke down. Mechanics would lean into the inert apparatus with spanners and wrenches. Management bought no new machines and when older employees retired, they sought no replacements. Rumours circulated the factory floor. Management called a meeting. Ben and his fellow- printers were to become redundant.

“Well, fuck that! It’s the dole now, lads!” “Let’s go to the Printers Pint.”

Striding, hands balled into tight fists, the gang pulled on un-tipped cigarettes. They swaggered along, swearing at factory management: “Fuckin’ fat cats!” Ben joined this angry army at the rear.

Like an outlaw posse, the grumbling workmen entered the pub through the narrow doors. Sitting on a row of stools, they nursed cream topped pints. Ben gazed at himself in the mirror behind the spirits bottles. ‘So this is what our lives have come to...’

He admired the old photos of print machines and local printers on the walls. After downing an obligatory pint, he left the pub. He preferred not to delay breaking the unpleasant news to Martha. When Ben arrived home, he took off his bike clips, red tweed scarf, and brown leather jacket. He slumped into a dining chair.

“The printers are closing...” Ben said. He closed his eyes and sighed.

“Oh dear. Something else will develop, surely?”

“Really!? I suppose I could always stack shelves in supermarkets?”

“Please. Stop being so dramatic! Such a pessimistic mentality doesn’t help matters.”

Sam barked outside. Neither moved to let him in. Martha reached out her hand towards him but then halted her gesture.

“Fifteen years of loyal service. Then I get kicked in the teeth.”

She felt sorry for him, but didn't cry. He was the one more likely to weep in any sad circumstances.

That night Ben dreamt about a dynamic black woman. Both of them were cycling along on a sunny day, speeding side by side downhill. Tyres skidded on the sand-covered tarmac as they stopped. They straddled their bikes, taking in a sea view.

“Look at those rolling waves smashing on the shingled shore,” Ben said. “That sentence sounds poetic to me,” the woman replied.

Gulls glided over the seascape, their lonely cries echoing as they wheeled around cliff faces. “

Actually, I am a poet,” Ben replied.

“I just love that hissing sound of water raked shells and pebbles,” she replied.

The summer-warm wind caressed their bodies. A long, empty beach shimmered in the heat. They dismounted, then leaned their bikes on the verge. A breeze lifted the woman's untucked t-shirt. Ben noticed that her sunken belly button become exposed. A steep sandy path wound down towards the strand.

They descended, laughing as they ran. Ben paused and looked at rabbits darting among the grassy sand dunes in a nearby field.

"I'll race you to the bottom," the youthful woman said, and pushed Ben over. He regained his balance, shouting at her disappearing figure:

"Cheat!" His overweight frame lagged her sporty body.

"Winner, winner, winner!" she said, grinning up at him from below. She danced, swaying her hips exaggeratedly, her arms raised in victory. That gesture caused her nipples to stud the tautened t-shirt fabric. His neurons fizzed and crackled like fireworks. She caught an unimpeded view of his erection from below.

"Let's go for a swim!" she said.

She stripped, standing nude and uninhibited. Her action flustered Ben. He didn't know where to look. Dusky-coloured erect nipples and a dark pubic triangle of frizz unblinkingly stared back at him. She turned and ran towards the waves, shrieking with delight.

Her silhouetted figure and distant voice beckoned him. 'Why are you waiting? How will Martha ever know...?' he dialogued with his alter ego. When he caught up with her, she smiled at Ben, now also nude. Was he becoming love struck by this nubile woman? Beside her lithe, achromatic body he felt a pathetic

figure. What was so sexy about his white untanned skin and middle aged midriff? He saw his profuse grey body hair as repulsive. She kicked water at him, hitting his face and body. Their free spirited fun elevated him.

*Naked, she runs on an empty beach -what lessons will this laughing lover teach to dumbstruck dreamer, poet minus speech?*

Ben woke from his erotic dream because of the insistent pulsing of an erection. A viscous damp patch marked the pubic area of his pyjamas.

Martha's long grey curls pooled around her creased, freckled face. Her pyjama clothed body radiated warmth. Her pillowy breasts tempted him, but physical contact at such an early hour would not have been welcome.

Instead, he reached for a pencil and paper on the bedside locker. He had those poetic lines to write and a fading dream to record. This compelling urge to document any event obsessed Ben.

Self-disclosure was a central part of his personality. Surely such constant observational writing wasn't normal? Who was he really addressing? Who would even bother to read one more emerging poet?

His slight stretching movement caused Martha to stir. She muttered a few unintelligible words, then she snuggled her warm body against his. Does she ever have erotic dreams, Ben

wondered? She never mentioned such events. Was sex even significant to her anymore?

In the kitchen, Martha consulted her tattered school recipe notebook. She wanted to achieve correct proportions for cheese sauce. Ben washed his hands in the toilet. The scalding water stung a throbbing finger, recovering from a recent work accident. One of his left hand index digits had got trapped in rotating machine cogs, requiring stitches.

When the sauce made, Martha plonked the simple fare of potatoes and broccoli on plates, then rang the small brass bell to announce that dinner was ready. Ben rarely complained about her culinary plainness. How many dinners had she cooked over the years? Martha-the-mathematician could have told him, had he bothered asking. He infrequently offered to take his turn cooking.

As he thought about this, he wiped his wet, half-clean hands on the white bathroom towel, leaving behind a few smudges. He tried scrubbing them away, but Martha's eagle eyes spotted the faintest of soiling traces. Reprimands usually followed.

On the dining room table, two hair-cracked porcelain plates stood. Broccoli and mashed potato covered with sauce and moated by a pool of vegetable water. The clank of cutlery backdropped their silent meal, as the grandmother clock

chimed in the hallway. Sam sat under the table, half-hidden by an embroidered linen tablecloth.

As they ate, Ben admired their Victorian piano. Its only redeeming features were the inlaid wood of floral patterns. Its high tuning pitch sounded harsh, spoiling his amateur renditions of classical tunes. As soon as he could afford it, he would rid that room of such a musical monstrosity, replacing it with a more modern model.

Above the piano hung a small imprint of baby feet. This was the only visual memory of their stillborn child who had been born a year before. It would soon be their daughter's first anniversary.

Six months into her pregnancy, a concerted movement started in Martha's womb. Then moments later a strange stillness, followed by a pronounced jab under her ribs. Might that suggest a premature delivery, she wondered? They phoned the hospital and were told to come for scans immediately. In the prenatal room, an overpowering smell of disinfectant hung in the air.

A nurse instructed Martha to change into a gown. She lay on the bed waiting for the scan. The nurse squirted a blob of cold

jelly onto her rotund tummy, causing her to flinch. The camera wand slipped over the globe of her stomach.

“How does mum feel?”

A blurred white image displayed on the monitor. It was motionless. Martha’s look registered no emotion even when she was told the defining statement:

“I’m so sorry. There’s no sign of a fetal heartbeat...”

Ben’s clear despair prompted the nurse to touch his forearm. Her gesture triggered his tears. Martha was dry eyed and processing the implications, wanting clarification:

“What exactly does that phrase mean?” “I’m afraid that your baby... is dead....”

Martha’s stomach convulsed. She started retching. Ben held up a metal waste bucket with one hand. With the other, he held a shocked Martha, to prevent her falling off the bed. She wiped her mouth of vomit remains and wailed.

It was such a pathetic, primitive moan. A onetime expectant and contended mother morphed into a wounded animal. She now lay paralysed, grip-locked in a terrible trap. That clinical room was now warp-blurred by shocked tears. Ben’s consolation was impotent. Martha felt that she failed her baby. She blamed herself for the stillbirth. Perhaps she ate something strange? Maybe she did something unwise? What might happen next, she wondered?

Their bewilderment made them inarticulate. Why hadn't Ben and Martha responded quicker? Might they have saved their baby's life? Had that kicking been its final death wrestle?

Significant issues now needed considering. Decay had already begun. It would speed up once their baby was born. Because of the baby's delivery position, its skull structure would collapse.

"Martha, even though this is a hard time, you need to decide whether to allow the doctors to induce," the nurse stated.

Martha hated any chemicals invading her, even medication that eased headaches or colds.

Bodily autonomy was primary to her now. Nature must take its course and this would give her time to adjust to her new birth circumstances. She continued carrying her baby to full term, even though dead in her womb.

Martha as mother fondly addressed her dead baby in a letter that she would later place in her tiny coffin:

*O my baby, your milk is here, but you don't need it. I shall never nurse you, feed you. I'll never hug you, kiss you.*

*Your marvellous, tiny fingers will never grasp my milky breasts. Such petite feet refuse to kick now. Little lips decline to cry. Blank eyes don't shine. Pudgy cheeks have no reason to smile.*

*Did you suffer? I should have protected and nourished you. I failed you. How I wish I could have hugged you as you died...*

*I am weeping, weeping, weeping for you...*

A few days later Martha's waters burst. Fecal evidence showed. That repugnant stench almost made Ben gag. When his dead baby presented they were alone, all medical staff absent. His shaking hands had to support their baby's inert, floppy head. He had to hold this lifeless baby, with raw macerated skin and water-bottle floppy head, until the absent nurses returned.

At her funeral, Ben stood with the congregation, trying his best to join in with the hymn. Hyperventilation and unrestrained tears left many of the words unsung. Whenever he heard that Slavic-sounding sanctus minor chord melody, he became like malleable clay in a creative potter's hands:

*Oh, the deep, deep love of Jesus*

*Vast, unmeasured, boundless, free -*

*Rolling as a mighty ocean*

*In its fullness over me*

**After** washing the dinner dishes each night, Ben climbed the stairs to his study. Sam followed and settled by his master's slippers feet. An aroma of old paper and leather permeated the air and sound-dampened that book crowded room.

Volumes of varying sizes and vintages awaited reading: poetry, history, biography. Ben hammered away on the button shaped keys of his black vintage typewriter. His incessant stop/ start

typing sounded above Martha's head, distracting her from reading. While typing, he played loud Seventies rock on his record player, energising him as he composed scraps of poetic ideas, or letters to friends.

A cream coloured moon hung low in the autumn night sky, peeking out from behind billowing clouds. The far-off stars reminded him of childhood Christmases: order reigned in the universe. On the street, a giddy girl gang sang a top ten pop tune in close harmony. Their amiable laughter echoed in the evening stillness. He coveted such warm feminine fellowship, such simple joy.

*Watch women gather, knitted in delight,  
hear them harmonise, tender and tight,  
succulent and sensual in moonlight bright.*

He paused to re-read those lines, to assess their literary worth. That stanza showed the makings of a poem, Ben thought. But how to best develop it? Might it fit well with an earlier couplet, he wondered? He remembered that he had crumpled it up a few days ago, having rejected it.

**Much** to the chagrin of Martha, Ben was a day dreamer. Lately, he dreamed of opening a bookshop in a country town.

Absorbing and transmitting authors' visions for a better society made him feel purposeful, almost priestly.

'Imagine selling second-hand books! That idea will really interest Martha,' he thought, and rushed downstairs, pursued by Sam. His ideas always deserved urgent attention, but Martha disliked being disturbed by his frequent invasions of her reading time. Martha was process orientated: everything in order, in its proper place and time.

"I've just had an amazing idea!!" he blurted out, entering the sitting room.

"How many times have I asked you to not interrupt my reading?"

Ben paced the room, trying to suppress his energy. He let Martha finish the page, their long-established agreement. In earlier marriage, she welcomed his intense flow of ideas. After many years of marriage, his male ego seemed demanding even. She felt that her life was trailing behind his turbulent torque.

"Let's start up a bookshop in a country town," Ben said. "We could match lonely authors with cerebral people. It could be our life mission."

Ben sought affirmation, eyes bright and hopeful, expecting a receptive audience. "A book shop? You needn't think I'll work in a shop!"

“It could be fun. Just imagine: the antiquarian scent, the many incredible conversations, and all those stimulating authors to read.”

“So romantic, Ben but how practical is this idea? It’s would be an enormous risk,” Martha replied.

“My redundancy money, on top of selling this house, could easily fund it. There would be excess money to put in the bank.”

“I don’t want to move away from my friends and life here.”

“You said that my unemployment could bring new beginnings. You don’t seem to support this unique idea though...”

Ben prepared scorching water bottles to warm their horsehair mattress. Then he washed. Martha sat on the bedside, inspecting her old grey jumper for wear and tear. While she did this, she reflected over the past day’s activities. When Ben finished washing, Martha took her turn.

Later, he placed his insatiable hands on her warm, soft suppleness. How could her imperfect body have such a calming effect on Ben, Martha wondered?

*Long loved, well-shaped breasts,*

*any image offered but my wife’s the best:*

*Her luscious outlines rob oxygen from chest.*

*Cushion my urges with sensual kindness,  
sweet silken purse, soft female fineness:  
I sink into her hair-hidden shyness.*

The red digital clock counted through many restlessness minutes. In his tossing and turning, he triggered cramp in his feet. He changed position to ease the discomfort, then sat up in the bed, massaging his paralysed toes. It didn't stop the searing pain, so he got out of bed to stretch and relieve them. Now sleepless, but returning to bed, Ben thought up the perfect name for his bookshop: The Biblio Emporium? That name had a better ring to it. That would stand out amongst the family named shopfronts.

He recalled reading a recent issue of Apollo International art magazine earlier that day. Its editors published a poem of his about Albert Schweitzer in it. The same issue carried a photo of an African artist who had won an international award.

Her stunning smile and bright coloured dress caught his attention. He tore her photo out, looked at it longingly, then hid it in his writing bureau. As he lay in bed beside Martha, he imagined being in that artist's companionable presence.

At the breakfast table, Ben was excited: "I had a marvellous idea in the middle of the night about the bookshop's name... The Biblio Emporium," Ben said. He hoped that his enthusiasm would bring Martha round to his unusual idea.

“Emporium suggests something on a large scale. Just how big will this shop of yours be?” Martha replied.

‘Wet blanket,’ Ben thought to himself.

Sam waited on the rough brown door mat, head resting on front paws. His mournful eyes directed accusatory glances towards his master. Such emotional blackmail usually achieved desired outings.

Martha got up out of her chair and walked towards Ben. He was expecting a friendly gesture, maybe even a hug - if not a kiss - but she walked straight past him. She hit the wall surface with the flat of her palm. Smack! One less moth in their house. Another threat to any woollen jumpers now eliminated.

“I’ll take Sam out for a walk,” Ben said.

When Sam heard those familiar words, his ears pricked up. His eyes also lit up, and his tail wagged in anticipation. Back and forth, his paws skidded on the shiny wooden floorboards, sanding the timbers like an accidental carpenter.

“Wait!” Ben said. In response to the shouted admonition, Sam’s tail drooped between his rear legs.

“Try speaking kindly to him,” Martha said. “He is an important member of this family...”

Ben didn’t reply and lifted the leash off the hook beside the back door. Sam restarted his irrepressible on-the-spot jumping.

His kinetic clowning brought a smile to Ben's face. Out on the walk, Sam pulled hard on the rope lead, almost choking himself. He stopped at every tree, bush, pole and pillar. Each object sniffed in some detail, pin-pointing where best to leave his mark. This stop/start nature of their walks was tedious for Ben.

A sunrise struggled to break through from behind clouds. Brown and yellow fallen leaves littered pathways and clogged up roadside drains, serrated edges looking like multiple jigsaw pieces. After the ten minute, round-the-block walk, they returned. Ben prepared his sandwiches and a thermos of tea for work.

"About your proposed bookshop, have you done the maths?" Martha asked. "You know I'm hopeless with numbers."

"Yes, I remember that quirk of yours. So, you might just need my numeral skills."

With many reservations, Martha agreed to sell their house. As that residential area was very desirable, a family made a quick bid. The sale was to close in three months.

"Deciding what to keep will be an emotional drain..." Ben said.

"Don't you think of dumping any of my family possessions!" Martha retorted.

She thought it unfair to have to dispose of these...'He just doesn't understand the complexities of inheritance,' Martha said to herself.

Ben had long seen this conflict coming. The thought of lugging her “junk” to their new location frustrated Ben. In case any argument required it, he created a rough inventory.

Many old screwdrivers with worn ends; hammers with loose fitting heads; chisels with smashed handles. A few rusty toothed blunt saws; hundreds of nails, many rusty or misshapen; screws aplenty. Old fashioned two-pronged plugs; Lyle syrup tins of various liquids; large cans of paint with crust covered surfaces. Enough plastic containers of graded oil to stock a mechanic’s garage; old bed sheets-cum- rags and paint daubed, tattered, green tradesmen coats...

“We’ve enough tools and materials to build an ark...” Ben said sardonically.

“What a brilliant distraction from mundane domesticity!” Martha replied.

The zany idea of an ark being constructed in their back garden amused Martha. She imagined building it by herself. Ben was hopeless. Sure he didn’t even know how to hammer a nail straight. Don’t get me going on straight saw lines! Sam could keep her company. She loved his playful trait of dropping his beloved tennis ball into toolboxes, stepping back to half hide, smiling and wagging his tail, demanding some response.

**Martha** had grown up in that small community. She attended the local Church of Ireland parish school. She and her friends

played Hop Scotch, Tip the Can and Red Rover on the pavements and quiet roads.

Decades later Martha remained connected with those same female friends. They empathised with her over her stillbirth. She attended their baby christenings and helped at birthday parties. Whenever neighbours departed on holidays, she minded their houses. How could she leave such a close-knit neighbourhood?

Ben's job had given his life much meaning and purpose. That, and his poetry. As redundancy loomed, he now needed new goals. To start again in mid-life required extra energy. Establishing a used bookshop might well give him a fresh direction. He loved older books with their archaic typefaces, varieties of shape, copperplate etchings, woodcuts, hand-tinted illustrations. Previous owner annotations gave a window to another world.

Their frequent tense exchanges diminished after Ben and Martha came to a compromise. When their house sale was complete, Martha would join Ben wherever he ended up, down the country. After a few days, he prepared for his journey. He thought he would establish his bookshop in the town where Martha and he had honeymooned. Some of his clothes, books along with his transistor radio were stuffed into his faded scouting rucksack.

He cycled through the city backstreets, then up the riverside, past old fashioned antique shops, an imposing court building and legal offices, to the central railway station. Travelling by train was such a democratic mode of transport, allowing all strata of society to co-mingle. Such travel offered time for reflection.

*Shuttling shouting-engines go!*

*engines chug, air-horns blow:*

*diesel grumble, pillar of cloud,*

*trackside verge obeisantly bows.*

When the train slowed at its destination, Ben leaned out the dropped window at the carriage door. He inhaled pungent rural smells of manure, turf smoke, and roasted oats. He disembarked at the film set worthy, Victorian-styled station, and walked down the platform to the goods carriage. Retrieving his bike, he exited the station. One hand pushed on his handlebars, the other carried his heavy type writer case, his rucksack on his back.

Ben searched for a bedsit to rent. He found none available, so rented a caravan in an empty field, just outside the town. The move from a comfortable urban house with full utilities, to living in a spartan caravan, was a shock. Ben enjoyed being alone, a skill he learned when at co-ed boarding school to avoid the gangs and bullies. There were fresh challenges, like

emptying his chemical toilet in a corner of the field. Every few days he filled his large water container from a nearby cast iron hand pump. Each weekend he washed his clothes in a basin, then placed them on bushes to dry.

Ben locked up his caravan and pushed his bike to the gate. As he cycled to the insignificant town, he detected the potent smell of manure. Stabled horses with wedge shaped heads peered out half- doors, munching. Their large noses let out vapours of steam in the autumnal air. Seeing horses being let loose was a novel experience for him. They ran around their paddock after a rainy day of confinement. It was breathtaking for Ben to see them standing on their rear legs, kicking heels high, whinnying with pure joy:

*Heel kicking horses, frolicking with fun,  
freed from dark stables and into the sun,  
clockwise and anti, riotous they run.*

When he got to the town, he chained his bike to a lamppost in the square. The once-grand buildings surrounding it had their sizeable reception rooms now subdivided into multiple flats. Below stood a supermarket, a bakery, a women's hairdressers and a butcher's shop. Cars, lorries, tractors with trailers parked every which way. On the principal street were a farmers Co-op, a small post office, a handful of pubs, a few cafes, a bookies', and a Carnegie library. A large Romanesque style Catholic church stood at the entrance to the town.

Ben continued to the town library. He pulled open its stiff entrance door. A musty smell of wax polish dominated the room. Tall windows with curved tops let in sunlight, giving it a theatrical look. The polished floors caused his shoe soles to squeak. He passed numbered shelves, each stating subjects: fiction, history, gardening, biography. Rows and rows of tired looking books, covers covered with pungent plastic sleeves. None of these attracted his interest, so he read the provincial newspapers.

Those publications carried notices of Mart reports; laudatory obituaries with Mass times, farmlands for sale and show band appearances in parochial halls. At the bottom of the pile was a magazine called Books Ireland, which showed a Celtic pop art Irish myth illustration by Jim Fitzpatrick. Ben flicked through it, stopping now and then to read an occasional essay or book review. At the rear a classified advert stood out: Private library offered; book subjects include topography, local history, agricultural interest, architecture and biography, etc. PO BOX 542, Dublin.

How fortuitous, he thought. Looking about circumspectly, he cleared his throat, to mask the sound of ripping out the advert. He folded it and quickly stuffed it into his pocket. The librarian non-chalantly looked at him when he passed her desk. She continued processing the pile of returns that created a barricade on her desk.

Back in Dublin, Martha, dressed in old work clothes, tidied up their house. This was a time of mourning, a slow goodbye to all she held dear. Contained within these walls were decades of domesticity. She relished that time alone, no interruptions, no unwanted commentary from a hectoring husband. She examined all the framed

photos sitting on many surfaces in various rooms. They represented a lifetime of memories: picnics with parents, pony rides, school hockey cups, her wedding day. Martha catalogued her domestic inventory like a curator. Their house had filled up with many objects over their many years of marriage: useful, useless, big or small, working or broken. In the utility room stood a modern washing machine beside an antique Belfast sink.

A Hoover so long unused that dust clung to its cloth lungs. A lighthouse styled paraffin heater close by. On a shelf were many tins of unused cleaning and polishing fluids, and plain white candles for power cuts. In a wooden box natural fibered brushes, clothes brushes, shoe brushes, hair brushes.

In the sitting room, she opened the stiff drawers of a large bureau. They contained a surreal gathering of bric-à-brac: a telescope, opera glasses, compasses, magnifying glasses. Binoculars with dust gummed focus dials; her mother's old spectacles. Wooden rulers, bottles of Quink. Hair locks belonging to ancestors, wrapped in plain paper, tied with string. Albums of stamps and cigarette cards.

Another drawer held important family photos, and genealogical books and papers. The photos mounted in large albums had names and dates written neatly under each image in fountain pen. The genealogical documents were books, official certificates and long scrolls depicting family trees. Martha's family had been cataloguing all their relatives for decades, but there was a major genealogical deficit on Ben's side.

Happy for a distraction, Martha had a look at Ben's family tree that she had started outlining. There were many gaps to fill, as no one had updated details in a long time. She noted a letter that one of Ben's cousins had written some time before. In it, the person asked if Martha or Ben might check some dates on a relative of his that died a few decades ago. It so happened that his distant relatives had buried the deceased person in a church graveyard in the same town where Ben was now living.

Ben made himself at home in his unfamiliar environment. One day, on the way to the supermarket, he cycled past an empty corner shop. It was a two-storey building and just the right "starter" size. Over the door, cast in concrete, was the name Bennett's Bakery. The building's lower half rendered in dull grey concrete, the upper section faced with stained redbrick. Attached to the weathered entrance door was a large fish-shaped iron door knocker.

He got off his bike and peered through the net curtain covering by a small squared metal grille. Two rooms stood unoccupied except for a broken chair, a dust covered counter with old

fashioned till. Strips of wallpaper hung defying gravity, their glued grip loosened by dampness. Hung on the wall, a curled John Hynde calendar and a gaudy coloured Sacred Heart of Jesus picture. Ben crossed the street to get a view through the upper sash windows. He saw a wardrobe, a sink with a mirror above.

The roof showed slipped slate tiles. Weeds overhung the clogged, rusting roof gutter. A plant had established roots, growing out of the chimney. Ben had the inner conviction that this would be his bookshop location. Pleased to have discovered suitable premises, he bought a postcard and wrote to the PO Box number, enquiring about the books.

He phoned Martha, informing her he had given their home phone number as a point of contact. Martha wasn't pleased about being involved in Ben's business, but she also had a favour to ask him.

"In exchange, I want you to look for a family gravestone in the Church of Ireland graveyard, where you are living."

Ben was more than happy to exchange such favours.

**Setting** out from his caravan, he cycled in wide arcs around the surrounding town lands. On one expedition, Ben discovered the old church graveyard which Martha had asked him to research. The padlocked gates deterred entry and he wasn't going to unceremoniously climb over them. He noted the service times

on a faded notice board and would access the cemetery after attending the church service. His Protestant childhood still held a fondness. He remembered gazing at his Sunday School stamp collection, a bald, bespectacled vicar droned a sermon.

Ben was enjoying another lazy Sunday breakfast when he heard the tinny church bell ring, announcing the start of service. He didn't rush to get ready, wanting to miss the preliminaries. After twenty minutes he entered by a side entrance door. The notes of a hymn were finishing. The latch clanked when he pulled the door shut and it scraped the tiled floor.

Ladies hatted heads turned in curiosity as he sat down on the back pew, lowering his head. A pudgy faced vicar then stood high in the pulpit, looking down at the congregation over the top of his slipped spectacles. Clearing his throat, he began his sermon. Much to Ben's surprise, it was about adultery. People squirmed in their pews. Just as well the children had left the sanctuary for Sunday School, Ben thought.

"The Greek word that Jesus used for adultery is '*epithumeo*'. This means to set your heart upon, to long for, to covet. That word suggests that you want to steal. You wish to take someone, which is not your right." Such frank language being spoken in a church startled Ben. At the sermon's conclusion, Ben wondered what the other congregation members made of it? It surprised him that a clergyman would raise such a controversial subject in this setting.

As they warbled a final hymn, he slipped out. The tumbling, baggy inky clouds were deciding whether to baptise the town in a downpour. Ben looked for the relatives grave before that rain started. He started walking among the graves, looking for the one that Martha wanted details on. She wanted to fill in gaps in his family tree that up till now, had held little interest for him. He looked and looked and failed to find the correct grave. As the rain began the drive to find his relatives burial plot lessened in intensity.

Martha later took a more organised approach and asked the clergyman to look at the burial registry first. The gravestone was small and tucked into a corner, almost obscured by uncut grass.

As there was no auctioneer's sign at the vacant shop, Ben approached a solicitor in the town. He explained why he was interested in renting the old shop. The solicitor responded:

"I know the who owns that property. The family can't decide whether to rent or sell it."

Ben hoped his enthusiasm might convince all to agree to rent this premises to him. He needed to prove that his bookshop dream could become a reality. His faith in this venture was, as yet, unproven. One day, Ben woke up in the caravan as sun shone through its condensation-blurred windows. He put the kettle on the gas ring and opened the metal half door.

On his transistor radio, a Bob Dylan gospel song played. He turned the volume up full. Its happy rhythm urged him to clap in time to the tune. Piano accompanied the

singer's gravelly voice. Falsetto backing singers screeched with Pentecostal energy. Rollicking loud guitars and tight-whipped drums pushed the song ever onward:

*Many try to stop me, shake me up in my mind,*

*Say prove to me He is Lord, show me a sign.*

He cycled to town hoping to see the solicitor without an appointment. The owners of the old bakery were happy to offer a short lease to Ben. Martha found out when he phoned her from a phone booth on the main street. It stank of sweat and nicotine from cigarette butts littering the floor. Local youths had scraped initials on the walls. He dropped two single shillings into the slot, then dialled his Dublin phone number. The line hummed and crackled with static. Outside the small mullioned windows a noisy tractor roared by, making it hard to hear when Martha answered. He pressed the stiff silver A button, causing the coins to clatter down inside the upright oblong metal box.

"Have you had any phone calls about those books for sale?"

"Yes. The person selling them lives just outside the town where you are staying.

"Really?! That's wonderful."

“The man sounded posh. He lives in the gatehouse of that estate we explored on our honeymoon... Avonmore.”

As she was about to tell Ben the owner’s name irritating pip sounds started. He needed extra money to continue the call. Holding the heavy handset, his free hand felt around pockets. He couldn’t locate any extra coins. Martha’s voice cut off, replaced by the dial tone sound.

That afternoon he pedalled his bike up the hill outside the town. This brief journey was about to change his life. Tall granite pillars and imposing black wrought-iron gates led to a long winding driveway. A row of beech and chestnut trees stood on each side, creating an arch. Chestnuts lay scattered on the ground, most split open.

As he admired this idyllic scene, a sudden whoosh! A young black woman on a rickety woman’s bike, turned off the drive, close enough for him to feel a draught as she sped past. Her patterned, loose yellow pantaloons flapped. On her feet, a pair of camel-toed sandals. Under a vivid green open jacket, a black and white spiral bikini top covered her near-flat chest.

This spectacular vision electrified Ben. Hands that should have been holding handlebars were adjusting a large pick comb in back brushed Afro hair. She smiled but didn’t stop, instead waved in graceful apology. Her bangled wrists chimed as she lifted her hand.

“Oops! Sorry!” she shouted back over her shoulder.

A middle aged man appeared from the gatehouse, in a baggy jumper and muddy jeans joined him. Both watched her speed away, cycling carefree downhill.

“Quite the spirited woman, a resident artist,” he said. “An inspiring character,” Ben replied.

“What brings you here?”

“I believe that you have a library for sale.”

“Oh, you must be Ben. Good to meet you. The books are in the basement. We’ll have a look, shall we?”

The spirited African artist cycled the area, searching out compelling scenes to paint. After a twenty minute cycle along a minor coast road, she discovered a huge outcrop of grey rock. She dismounted her bike, rested it against a dry stone wall, then climbed over a locked gate and walked for a while over that lava-like rocky surface.

Her gaze panned over this weird geological formation. The enormous rock plateau had all the geological drama that she was looking for in a painting. She caught sight of fast flapping, pointed wings and a fan shaped tail. It was a kestrel, hovering high over the rocky cracks hunting for prey. A small herd of feral goats stood on high ground, masticating on shrubs.

A while later, Indigo came across a hidden grassy hollow. It stood out, not only because of the spidery stems of scrawny grass but also because of some small white stones, laid out in

rough formation. Their symbolic presence intrigued her. Perhaps some hidden meaning was behind their placing?

The man brought Ben to the basement and opened the door. They entered to the smell of fresh pine sap scent perfuming the musty atmosphere. In the first room stood a pile of golden yellow tinted timber, beside a large old fashioned wood boiler.

A second room stored multiple boxes of books. Ben winced at the damp, mouldy smell of that unheated area but was very excited to see so many books. A tall row of box towers encompassed the room. He wondered what gems might be inside each one. It was as if all his bookish birthdays had come in one go!

“May I browse through them?” Ben asked.

“Yes - but try to keep the boxes tidy, please. When you’ve finished, just switch off the lights and pull the door firmly behind you.”

Then the man left. Ben savoured being left alone amongst this vast library. That afternoon hundreds of books were examined in the basement’s muffled silence. He lost track of all time as he looked and thought and segregated subject interests.

Night fell and the room cooled, causing his slight asthmatic cough to start. He was only a quarter way of sorting through them all but stopped. His arms ached from lifting and shifting the many heavy boxes. He would return the next day. As he

exited the basement, Ben saw a rat's tail disappear into the boiler room. Shivering, he flicked the light switch off and swiftly left.

Ben cycled along the rough, unlit drive. His bike light created silhouettes from the tunnel of trees. Duvet puffy clouds passed over the full moon. A fox ran across the long lawn and froze in mid-step. He looked over his territory, raised his head high and made a raspy bark, then climbed a steep bank into a coppice. Hedgerows rustled with mammals sheltering from nocturnal predators. A few distant voices carried on the breeze, dialogue muffled by distance.

His breath misted in the crisp night air. The far-off heavy entrance gates squeaked as they closed and bike tyres approached. A dynamo light beam wavered left and right. It was that zany African artist. Ben braked, straddled his crossbar and waited. The closer she came, the clearer her colourful clothes stood out. She stopped in front of him, dismounted, and held her handlebars. Tall and wiry bodied, she held a regal bearing. Her Nubian skin glowed a mesmerising blue in the moonlight.

"Hi! I believe we met earlier," the woman said.

"Yes, and we could both have ended up in hospital," Ben said.

"That's a very dramatic statement, isn't it...?"

“You were cycling fast... and without hands. How could you have braked?”

“Oh well, never mind. That kind of disaster scenario didn’t happen.”

“Why do you look familiar to me?”

“I’m from Ethiopia. I doubt that you’ve ever gone there.”

Many women reinvented their looks, making it hard to tell at a passing glance was it the same person, or not. Absurd and unlikely though it was, did she look similar to the woman in the magazine photo? That photo he regularly stole looks of then hid again in his desk drawer. If she was that same artist, that would be an uncanny event.

“Might you have won an art award last year?” Ben asked. “Yes. I did. How did you know?”

“I saw a photo of your being presented with an award in Apollo Arts Magazine.”

“So you recognised me? Then you’ll know that I’m called Indigo. I’ve just come from an amazing landscape that I intend to paint.

“I’m Ben. I’ve been in the basement, looking through the library of books...” he said.

“Are you buying all those books?” asked Indigo.

“Yes. I’m opening a bookshop soon. Maybe you will visit sometime.”

This was Ben’s first time standing close-up to a black African woman. Her dark complexion was silken smooth compared to his loose white, age mottled skin. Her back brushed kinky hair suggested a halo. She exhaled through her wide flat nose, warm breath turning to mist in the cooling night. Her smile caused pillowy lips to expose large-gapped incisors. Moonlight spotlighted her colourful, dashiki wrap dress.

“Well, it’s late. I have to wake early tomorrow. It’s been nice chatting.”

She stepped through her bike and parted. With a girly wave, off she cycled. He watched her silhouette disappear into the distance, then he mounted his bike and pedalled back to his new home. ‘She is so attractive!’ Ben said to himself.

*“Every time people develop new aspirations, they need a new portrait,”* Zeldin, a French philosopher that Ben read, came to mind.

**Martha** started tidying up the house, room by room. In Ben’s cluttered study, her sceptical gaze took in the untidy den space. It needed a thorough going over. Books were on the floor for no particular reason, records in their inner sleeves instead of being replaced into their psychedelic gatefold sleeves.

Letters from distant friends lay on the desktop. She placed them all into a sturdy box, opened the windows, then started dusting all the cleared surfaces. Sam brought along his ubiquitous ball and dropped it into the overflowing bin under Ben's bureau, smiling at Martha. Retreating behind a chair, he wagged his tail.

Retrieving his ball from amid many scrunched up pages, her eye caught words on one page. Curiosity got the better of her. She unfurled it, laying it on the carpet and ironed it with her palm. What she read caused troubling questions:

*Watching her womanly eyes widely brighten*

*hearing her voice-pitch sweetly heighten;*

*I'm magnetised by sweet feminine charms:*

*continental-kissing, proffered open arms.*

Who was that romantic lyricism about? Her imagination started swirling. What was Ben doing right now? Who was he spending his spare time with? Curiosity aroused, she trawled through his expanding folder and rifled through his desk drawers. She revelled being a domestic detective. Her detective skills paid off: buried under a packet of typing paper, she saw a photo of a hippy dressed woman. Underneath the photo it stated that

'Indigo' was an award-winning Ethiopian artist. Indigo! Did you ever hear of such a ridiculous name?

The African woman wore a floral-patterned poncho with baggy pantaloons. Her sensual smile showed a row of gapped teeth; sunken sexy belly button peeked out. It winked, challenging Martha. "Slinky slut!".

This exotic woman's hair was burnished black and thick dreadlocks challenged her straight, thinning and... grey hair. The face in the photo

showed smooth, dark skin. Martha looked in the mirror and saw her own loose, crinkled skin. She stuck out her tongue in defiance.

'It's the inner life that counts most, not the outer' Martha said to the empty room. 'Who is this siren!? Wait till reality slaps her flawless face! We'll see how much she'll smile then'. She replaced the photo and slammed the drawer shut. It could make useful incrimination, if required.

A few days later, Ben phoned Martha.

"Hi, Martha. How are things in Dublin? Have you started the sorting and packing yet? Have any charity shops come to collect leftovers?" Ben jibed.

"Impatient as usual. You just don't realise that it's not as easy, or as simple, as you might think. Why do you have to always challenge how I run my life?" Martha asked.

Her head bowed and her eyes closed to help her concentrate on communication.

"I guess the sheer volume of inherited objects is a challenge," Ben conceded.

He recently read an article about spouses' "junk". It had suggested a valid alternative to his impatient perspective: hoarders held onto many mementos as metaphors of family life: marriage, childbirth, family, relatives.

"It's good to see you trying to appreciate a world beyond your own interests...." said Martha.

"Right, as usual.... Sorry."

"Let's change the subject, shall we? I recently cleaned out your study."

"Thank you."

"You may not thank me for what I'm about to say... I found a poem in your bin..."

"I can explain that..."

"Writing about another women bothers me..."

"You don't seem to understand, I was...." Ben began.

"Dead right, I don't understand your excuses."

Then she slammed down the phone.

Ben never described his writing process to Martha. Anyway, Martha wasn't much interested in any of that. Her reaction to the photo was his marker about how much he could tell her about Indigo. Hours later, he again cycled through the Georgian gates, hoping that Indigo might be in. He wanted to see her again, also to gain access to the books. There was a lot of work left to do on assessing their worth.

He banged the heavy lion-head knocker against the tall door. As he waited for her response, he looked at the scenery. To the right, a long tunnel of leaf stripped trees created a dark passage, almost a tunnel. He didn't hear the window open overhead.

"Hey Ben! Great to see you! I'll let you in."

He craned his neck upwards. Two floors up, Indigo leaned out the sash window. Small blobs of paint covered her smiling cheeks. She wore a white, large shirt, also streaked with oil paints. 'So positive and energetic, always smiling,' thought Ben. He wished he could inject her cheerful spirit into his sombre life.

Indigo's bare feet skipped down the carpeted stairs, then they sped across the hall. She struggled to open the tall, heavy door. Succeeding, she bowed, making a theatrical low sweep of her arm and invited him in.

"I'm hoping to gain access to the books. I need to finish going through them."

"Which door leads to the basement?" Ben asked.

"That door is probably locked. Let me go and check," Indigo replied.

She left him and went to check, then returned to find him almost hypnotised by the sumptuous Georgian interior. Ornate floral shapes decorated the high ceilings. A wide sweeping staircase led up to the first floor. The stair wall displayed a collection of baroque-framed portraits of historical people. That old fashioned interior was as if he stepped into a museum.

"Someone's locked the door to the basement, sorry."

"No need to apologise. I'll come again tomorrow," Ben said.

"No, don't go just yet. I need a break from my painting. Stay. I'll take you on a house tour, if you like."

She led the way, laughing. She showed him the cramped, compact galley kitchen. Then the dining room with its very long, shiny walnut dining table. Next, other rooms with tables, chairs and a chaise longue. Over the shoulder high, marble fireplace an old fresco of the demesne, as it once used to be.

Then they climbed the wide carpeted staircase to the large bedrooms containing four-poster beds, hairline-cracked sinks, wardrobes and tallboys but little else. All the tall sash windows had closed curtains, giving each room a gloomy atmosphere.

Next they ascended to the top storey. The bedrooms were much smaller, once lived in by servants. The owner of the house left these rooms cluttered with domestic detritus: broken furniture, amateur oil paintings, an old bath, mattresses, a candelabrum and photos of school teams.

A few antique picture frames leaned against the paint cracked wall. Indigo leaned down to lift one. As she lifted it, her *decolletage* peeked out of her half-buttoned, baggy shirt. Ben averted his gaze and blushed. He hungered for the feel of warm womanly skin under his lonely palms.

“Mmm. Let’s see... which one suits you best? Let’s try this one!”

She approached him, holding up the picture frame and held it up to his head. Their bodies bumped as she did this. Ben breathed in Indigo’s slight sweat and her seductive smelling perfume. He became self conscious of his groin bulge and hoped that she didn’t notice it.

“That one’s too plain. We need a more dramatic framing for a poet.” “How do you know that I write poetry?”

“Actually, I didn’t know that you did but you have the dramatic temperament of a poet.”

‘She seems to be able to analyse so much from my facial expressions and tone of voice. What else does this woman surmise?’ Ben wondered.

“Now, let’s try this gilded baroque-styled one. Oh, yes... perfect. The poet laureate’s profile!” she exclaimed, in a light-hearted manner.

He smiled to please her. Indigo replaced the picture frame, then walked towards the room’s cobwebbed window and looked out at the long lawn.

“What a superb scene that is. All that swathe of grass, old trees and ornamental ponds.”

Ben stood beside her, looking and remembering back to his honeymoon. He noticed that some filaments had got entangled in her hair, reached out to extract them. Her back brushed hair felt as soft as a hank of silk. It would have been very tempting to touch her head’s sensual nest much more. Indigo apparently took no issue from his benevolent gesture, at least not mentioning any dislike of his brief touch.

### **Scene from Martha’s and Ben’s Honeymoon.**

Their honeymoon suite had a pile of books under both bedside lamps. One large book attracted Martha’s attention: ‘Guide to Irish Country Houses’. She discovered that it featured a big house nearby.

“Let’s go to see that local big old house. I’ll bring this guidebook.”

They walked up the hill that led out of town. Dogs barked as they passed farm gates. Housewives hung out washing. Farmers paused from hitching trailers, looking at this young couple. They got to the large house entrance gates, tied closed with a piece of baler twine.

When the coast was clear, Martha untied the tight knot. She swung open one of the stiff gates, and they entered. She then closed it and re-tied the twine. A strip of grass grew up the middle of the drive. Storm felled branches littered the ground, trees leaned at odd angles: the estate appeared neglected.

“What if we meet the owner?” Ben said.

“We won’t.”

“How do you know?”

“See that grass growing up the driveway and all those fallen branches? Owner absent is what that says to me.”

After several minutes walking up the lengthy drive, they saw at the big house. A dozen chimneys lined the high roof. Five enormous windows stretched along the wide frontage. Martha fished in her knapsack for the borrowed guidebook.

“The author describes it as having seven bays over three storeys, and a raised, rendered basement. Rothery designed it and they built it in 1740.”

Ben and Martha climbed up the stone steps leading to a walled terrace. Peering through cracked sash windows, they saw furniture shrouded with white sheets. The walls showed patches where plaster had fallen.

“I guess you’re right. No one seems to live here,” Ben said.

They then turned to view the majestic vista behind them. A few oak trees stood proud and venerable. One large branch limb lay in the grass. It looked charred, struck by lightning.

“Shall we go for a walk in that field?” Ben suggested.

“The author calls that ‘field’ a ‘Long Lawn’. Can you see the ornamental lakes in the distance?”

They walked towards the old oak tree in the middle of the lawn. Bees hummed and inspected clover blossoms at close range. Reaching the tree, Ben noticed that around its base, cow hooves had tramped the earth, denuding it of grass. Low hanging branches created a canopied appearance. Taking care to avoid the crusty cowpats, Martha placed their tartan blanket on the ground.

She unbuttoned her jeans and revealed her curved white thighs. Next, she took off her blouse and bra. Ben couldn’t believe that the once-shy woman was now uninhibitedly and

preparing for sexual intercourse in this pastoral setting. Such a daring initiative from his young bride made him feel blessed and elated. He smiled and quickly stripped off his clothes. The feel of warm summer breeze on unclothed skin was exhilarating.

*Newly wed and naked, tender pendant bells,  
between their legs, sacred energy swells,  
compliant, he unclasped her private purse,  
his seeds spilled deep into inner universe...*

### **The Artist's Studio.**

"Next, on my guided tour is the ballroom studio."

Just as they were leaving, she saw a menorah lying on its side. What on earth was that Jewish candelabrum doing there, she wondered? She took it, thinking it might make an interesting decorative object for her bare studio.

"Do you know what this is?" challenged Indigo.

"No..." Ben replied. He was used to being the challenger, not the person being challenged.

"The six stems of it allude to human knowledge. The seventh, central stem, represents Yaweh, or, God," Indigo replied. More cultural information for his hungry brain to accumulate.

“Interesting. How did you know that?”

“I’m a Falasha Jew, a descendent of the ancient copulation between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.”

She then opened the door to her studio in a room that ran the full length of the house. A large mirror captured their joint image as they entered. That companionable, intimate scene was one that Ben would never forget. The low mid afternoon sunbeam lit up Indigo, like an actress on stage.

Bare white walls and unvarnished floorboards that showed shiny nail heads. An antique dresser stood close to an enormous bed. Standing on the plain dresser were an enamel bowl and a jug. Through small windows he could see distant fields. Cloying oil paint and turpentine scented the air, reminding him of his garden shed.

On Indigo’s easel Ben noted the beginnings of an abstract painting. Without asking permission from Indigo he approached the colourful reinterpretation of the local limestone dominated landscape.

“This is dynamic.”

Though Indigo didn’t ask for a verbal response, it pleased her that Ben analysed her painting.

“It’s far from finished. There are other elements at the scene not yet placed.”

“I love its hybrid of bright colours from Africa, imposed on our subdued Irish landscapes.”

“Some art critics arrogantly dismiss African art as primitive. It’s not. We use very different conventions and perhaps more imaginative perspectives,” Indigo replied.

Was this a rebuke? It came across as one. Ben hoped that he had not yet again put his foot in his mouth, while trying to analyse her painting.

“At the scene there was a gathering of small white stones. Somehow they looked misplaced. Maybe they have folk religion association.”

“Such superstitions used to be present in rural parts of Ireland.”  
“And such still play an important place in African minds.”

Let’s go for a walk, shall we? I’ll show you the woods and the fields.”

Out into the yard they strolled. Treetop crows cackled, as if mocking them. Nearby, a stream gurgled, laughing behind bulrushes, scrambling through the undergrowth. Birds sang short, high pitched phrases. They walked along the rain- wet drive. Yellow and brown leaves lay on the ground and floated in water filled potholes. The bare tree shapes appealed to the artist in Indigo. Her eyes widened seeing such autumnal abundance.

“Isn’t this idyllic?” Indigo said.

“The variety of leaf colours are dazzling,” Ben replied.

Blackberries were half hidden among the tangled brambles. He lent over a gully and started picking them and offered a handful to Indigo.

“Have you tried any of these yet?”

Indigo looked at them in her cupped palm, then closing her eyes, she threw them into her mouth. She sucked on their knobbed texture. Her teeth split open sacs of sweetness. Sticky dark coloured juice dribbled from the corners of mouth.

A smile spread across her face. Ben smiled at her amazement. He wished for a camera to capture that special moment. But then, that would become another photo needing to be hid from Martha...

“So delicious.”

He looked for more berries and leaned to where a few were almost within his grasp. As he leant, he lost balance and toppled into the wet gully.

“Serves me right,” Ben said.

Ben lay on his back, struggling to get up. Indigo laughed, putting her sticky hand to her mouth. That typical girly gesture looked so sweet. Before Ben’s clothes absorbed much chilly drain water, she extended a helping hand and tugged him up.

“Sorry for laughing,” Indigo said.

He got back to his feet and peered at his palm, trying to locate the thorn that had burrowed in.

“Damn thorn stuck in my hand.”

Indigo took hold of his hand and lowered her head to inspect the problem. Her halo of soft, springy hair brushed against his face. When she located the embedded thorn, she sucked the skin in that area very hard. He grimaced.

“Be a brave boy, Ben!” Indigo said, and smirked.

After a few seconds of suction and teeth nibbling, she spat out the thorn.

“Thanks,” Ben said and looked at his minor wound.

This experience of practical intimacy showed how relaxed they were with each. Her vivacious personality bowled him over, though soon enough, she brought him back to earth with a bang.

“You should clean your nails more often! They’re dirty.”

Her colourful dress style and ready smiles were so attractive. Was he beginning to fall in love with her animated personality, he wondered? If so, what did he intend doing about those feelings? Could their interactions remain chaste?

“I’d better get back to my painting. I’ve only a few weeks left.”

Ben had thought little about how short their interactive time would be. It was ironic that just as he was getting to know and appreciate her, she would soon be departing.

*Watching Indigo's eyes widely brighten,*

*hearing her voice pitch heighten:*

*I'm magnetised by such feminine charms,*

*wishing this woman between these arms.*

Ben had just got the keys to the shop and needed to plan the layout out and pay for the books. He cycled over, bringing his few belongings, pushed the door key into the stiff lock, and felt a surge of adventure as he entered and dropped his rucksack on the dusty floor. The solicitor told him that once an old lady sold home-baking from the premises. Did Ben still detect the faint smell of baked bread in the musty, frigid air? Most likely it was his overactive imagination.

The following day he met the book owner again, and they agreed a purchase price for the collection. A van delivered the hundred boxes of books. Rows of tall box towers lined the dusty shop floor. He walked back and forth between their trench like ambiance. Shelves needed cleaning. Walls needed repainting and the rooms would require better lighting.

Box by box, Ben unpacked the many books. Each was quickly flicked through and examined. Between the pages he found interesting ephemera: forgotten letters, old stamps, bus and train tickets. Occasional pages showed underlined passages or annotations.

What he appreciated about extensive book collections was the ecumenical jumbling of contradictory texts. Shelves held many differing opinions, coexisting cover by cover, standing regimented and in physical proximity. In actual life, such would hardly ever happen.

Lost in work for many hours, Ben didn't notice dusk descending. Streetlights came on: the opaque light seeped through gaps between the sheets of brown paper covering the windows. He took a break, made a mug of tea, ate a sandwich and sat exhausted.

Blindly, he lucky-dipped into a box, he grabbed the first book that came to hand. It turned out to be 'Six Life Lessons from Leo Tolstoy' by Roman Krznaric. One quote seen intrigued him. It reflected his recent developments:

*"The best way to challenge our assumptions and prejudices, to develop fresh ways of looking at the world, is to spend time with those whose values and experiences contrast with our own..."*

[Next](#) morning, Sunday, Ben made a cup of coffee and toast. He settled into a long newspaper read at the kitchen table. Then

the doorbell rang. He sighed, wishing for this lazy breakfast time to be undisturbed. He grudgingly got to his feet and walked to the door. A familiar barking sounded outside the shop door. When he opened it, there was Martha and Sam.

“Well, well, well!” Ben said.

“I thought I’d make a surprise visit. Here, I brought your record player and a few of your LPs. And here’s some post.” “Thank you so much.”

He smiled at her rare spurt of imagination, coming all the way to see him, unheralded. They exchanged quick kisses. Sam ran in between them jumping up and down. Ben leaned down and scruffed his rough hair. Sam wandered off, going from room to room, sniffing, tail wagging, excited by so many fresh scents.

It was Martha’s first time seeing the premises. First, she opened doors, inspecting the rooms: toilet, bedroom, then kitchen. Ben followed her, interested to see her reactions.

“Come and see how I’ve organised things in the shop.”

She had wanted to explore at her own pace, and also with no commentary.

“Well, what do you think?”

Ben’s usual quick pace was not her preferred approach.

“Tell you what, why don’t you go back to your Sunday paper? I’d like to see the shop at my pace.”

Ben did as suggested, joined by Sam. Both sat in the kitchen while Martha ambled along the shelves. She stopped now and then, opened a book, and looked at the contents page. Leather covered books got sniffed and had their “blind tooled” covers traced by her forefinger.

Sam made entreating eyes at his master, wanting for a walk. Ben turned the newspaper pages until his eye settled on a curious article, about cillíní graves. He had never heard about those impromptu internments before. It made for a shocking read:

**A Place that Harbours Memory** by Adrian Tinniswood, Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. Heading the article was a photo of a burial site. It was a surreal jumble of skeletal remains lay scattered through beach sand. That image made him both furious and sad.

*'There are several hundred children's burial grounds, or cillíní, in the west of Ireland. Most of the surviving sites are on or near the coast, mounds in cemeteries, or nestling among dunes and marram grass beside beaches. At least one lies far out at sea, on an island where it stands beside ancient ruined buildings. Only seabirds, seals and peregrine falcons mourn for these unknown children, whose lives ended before they began.'*

After some time browsing around the shop, Martha returned to Ben. She found him in tears. He wasn't able to talk about what

he had just read. It was too upsetting. Martha suggested a walk on the beach. Ben acceded. When Sam heard the word “walk” he sprang upright, eyes glowing. His furry ears alert, his limbs starting a crazy dance.

That canine clowning cheered up Ben and made him laugh. He and Martha put on coats and scarves and walked down quiet side streets to the strand. Sam ran on and back repeatedly. Their shoes and paws imprinted the ridge patterned sand.

Gulls crooned in harsh accents, echoing off the rocky headland. Those seabirds swooped and rose on the same strong breezes that blew sand into their Ben and Martha’s faces, mussing their hair. Sam barked at the waves. Martha took off her shoes and walked in the chilly water left among rock pools.

She like the feel water between her toes, urging Ben to follow suit, but gave up when she realised his mind was elsewhere. He was in another world, not enjoying their walk. His brain was busy creating rhyming phrases in response to the article he had read. She long-accepted that Ben’s imagination often forced an emotional absence.

*Hear that hammer hitting, nailing down your sorrow...*

When they got back, they had lunch in the kitchen. Sam, as usual, lay under the table, watching for any falling crumbs.

“Have you been enjoying your time on your own?” Martha asked.

He had. Getting the shop ready. Meeting Indigo. Perhaps he should try telling Martha at his opportunity about Indigo, or she might think he was trying to hide information from her.

“Yes, preparing without distraction went wonderfully I’ve also met someone from Africa, an artist.”

“Oh... Let me guess, a female artist?”

“Yes. I’d have told you earlier but I didn’t want you to be concerned...”

“Well, I am. First, I find fragments of a poem, apparently about an imaginary muse. Then, I stumble on a photo of another woman. Now, you tell me you are meeting someone...” Martha said.

Her voice pitch heightened, and not at all sweetly, like one of his poems stated. Then he blushed. It flustered Ben that Martha had made a second find, discovering the hidden image of Indigo. Their conversation was about to get complicated. She stared at him unsparing, her gaze searchlight blinding.

“I intended telling you. I wasn’t hiding anything,” Ben stated.

He remembered he had accidentally looked down Indigo’s décolletage. Was that really so bad? So far, he hadn’t placed himself in any compromising circumstances.

“What’s her name?”

“Why is that important?”

"I just want to know!"

"Well ok, she's called Indigo."

"Indigo? Isn't that the same name printed under the hidden photo that I found?"

"I didn't intend hiding it. But yes, it's the same artist..."

"And you say, there's nothing to worry about??... who knows what might happen, given our physical separation?"

Martha may be right. In fact, he hoped that Indigo and he might interact as much as possible in their remaining days.

"You'll just have to trust me, Martha. I won't stop seeing her. In fact, I'm hoping that we will collaborate on a project..."

"If I get the slightest suspicion of adultery, you'll rue that day."

"Don't you remember, you once said that one person cannot fully meet the needs of another."

"That wasn't a wifely imprimatur for any *carte blanche* carry on."

Both women were central in Ben's life. One brought plain practicalities, the other brought flowering freedom. Both represented elements that Ben's character sorely lacked, but his imagination needed feeding with Indigo's creative nourishing the more.

After their feisty exchanges, Ben told Martha about his lack of finding the grave in the church graveyard. Focusing on that

would be a welcome distraction from any emotional interrogation.

"I've had no luck finding the grave you asked me to look for," Ben said.

"Well, you mustn't have tried very hard. It's there somewhere, according to your family's genealogical notes that I came across."

"Why don't you come down again, sometime and we can look together?"

"If I'd been aware of your failing to find the grave earlier, I could have achieved that important task on this trip and save time and money," Martha said.

Later that afternoon, Martha and Sam got the evening train back to Dublin. Ben waved both off. Martha waved back through the carriage window, using Sam's paw. Their dog's face looked more sad than either of theirs did.

**Ben** continued preparations for the inaugural opening of the bookshop. He had pencil priced many books and placed on shelves in their subject categories. Occasionally he would stop this process and have a browse. Books enabled him to catch up on his cut short education. Extenuating circumstances had concluded his schooling early. He devoured knowledge even if his autodidact approach lacked discipline.

There was nothing quite like a comprehensive text, as in Frost's History and Topography Of The County Of Clare. It told local history from ancient times to the

end of the 18th century, and described the people, localities, landscape, economy and history. Ben wondered would that book refer to any of the cillínís.

He put a record on the player and turned it up extra loud. The first track summed up his hopes, its lyrics became like a poetic prayer. He knew that folk song well, and sang along with it as he swept the floor.

*Lord of the star fields Ancient of Days Universe Maker Here's a song in your praise*

He reflected over the past day; on the positive side: showing Martha his fulfilled dream of the bookshop. Then there was the negative side: their marital tension about him meeting another woman. They both acknowledged that he was gregarious, while she was more reserved. Such wide differences inevitably threw up issues when they were separate. He was glad that there was a "Lord of the star fields" to rule over all of life's mixed blessings.

A knock sounded on the window. Who might that be, he wondered? He pulled back a section of the paper sheet that covered the glass. Shadows camouflaged Indigo's face. She leant against her bike, smiling back at him, an unexpected visitor.

When he opened the shop door, she was rubbing her mitten'd hands together. Her breath misted in the frosty night air. She looked very attractive in her hippy era ensemble: boots, loose blouse, and gypsy skirt. She tilted her head sideways. He loved her characteristic femininity.

"Thought I'd visit you before your big day. I brought a few presents for you."

"Bring in your bike. I'm getting the bookshop ready your company is welcome."

*You make my heart leap Like a banner in the wind*

*O love that fires the sun Keep me burning.*

"Who's that singing?"

"Bruce Cockburn, a Canadian singer songwriter."

"It's very nice but may I lower it a little, please?" "Fine. Go ahead."

Indigo walked over to the record player and turned down the volume knob. Then she started looking around the shop. Her look of interest cheered him, even though she made no exploratory moves, like Martha had done.

"I brought two celebratory items to mark your significant inaugural date," Indigo said. She bent low and rummaging in her large knapsack presented a large slice of cake wrapped in

tinfoil. Then she pulled out a bottle of red wine. She handed her gifts to Ben, her offering wrapped in an enormous smile.

“Hey! so kind.” said Ben. Touched by her thoughtful offerings, he hugged her.

“Let’s toast your bookshop venture,” Indigo said. She walked to the back kitchen in search of glasses and a corkscrew. She opened a few cupboards and called back.

“Where do you keep the corkscrew in this spartan dwelling?”

“There isn’t one.” Ben said.

Indigo, ever resourceful, grasped a spoon, then pushed hard with its handle on the bottle cork. It plunged quicker than expected. A gush of wine spurted up. Red wine splashed on her blouse and face. She laughed, wondering how ridiculous she must have looked.

“Do you have a spare shirt? This blouse needs to soak in water,” she said.

Ben went to get her one and also a jumper. When he gave them to her, she matter- of-factly pulled off her stained blouse, startling Ben. An array of raised dots circled her small breasts and raised patterns decorated her wiry torso. Ben couldn’t deflect his curious gaze, he didn’t want to. Her strange scarification transfixed him.

“So, dreamer poet. Have you never seen tribal markings?”

“No. I’ve haven’t ever seen such strange scars before. Why were they done?”

“So many questions! Those patterns are my ‘beauty scars’. They show significant life events, enhance sexual beauty and declare marriageability.”

“Are you married?”

“No, I am not. Why do you ask?”

“So, maybe you are a feminist?”

“Yes. Feminist ...and flat chested, as you can see.”

This was no dream, like he had some months ago, but it was as exhilarating seeing Indigo topless. Her confident nudity gave off an electric crackle, an erotic charge. Just because her nakedness turned him on didn’t mean that she had intended anything further to occur.

Ben couldn’t help wondering what it would feel like to trace those attractive patterns? Their hard / soft nubble would tingle the underside of his fingertips. Would such intimate interaction be a sin? Who was to know, except the two of them? His senses ignited, an arc swelling started between his legs. If he upturned his lifelong marriage chastity, what would that lead to? And what if Martha found out? They both would pay a lifelong price for a few minutes intimacy.

While his mind went through all these brief philosophical permutations, goosebumps started raising on her naked arms and chest.

"If you are thinking sexual thoughts, you can stop right there. Much as I feel a deep kinship with you, that's all it can be. Now, get me some warm clothes, please. This house is freezing!"

Ben then ran upstairs and brought down a shirt and jumper. Ben felt relieved that nothing further had developed between them. Where might such developments then lead, requiring complicated logistics, if they were to commit adultery?

"Now, time to open the wine and make a toast,"

"I don't have any glasses."

"What? No glasses? More of your pretend poverty?" Indigo said.

Ben grinned at her wit and got two pottery mugs. Indigo poured, filling both mugs right to the top. They clinked cheers. Alcohol coursed through their bloodstreams. When their mugs emptied, Indigo topped them back up again. Her spontaneous action symbolised her generous spirit well, Ben thought.

"So now that I know you are a poet, let me hear one of your poems."

The wine gave him courage to read. He wondered how she'd react to his stillbirth poem. He was testing her tolerance for levels of emotional openness:

*The fecal tinted dam suddenly broke:*

*No newborn wail, silence spoke.*

*Tabula Rasa - mouth mute, empty gaze:*

*body floppy... little for poet to praise.*

Seeing such raw wounds at close range was almost unbearable for Indigo. She masked her sorrow and stopped herself from crying, which helped Ben bite back his own easily shed tears. Then her paint-flecked hands reached out to Ben in a spontaneous gesture of empathy. He savoured her tight, warm grip of his hands.

"I'm so so sorry." Indigo said. "Maybe those invisible scars define you, the way my beauty scars define me?"

Exhausted from so much inner conflict, Ben soon took his leave. At the enormous door, he briefly kissed her proffered cheek. Later, as Indigo lay on her bed, she pondered their close friendship. Ben also lay awake, wondering was she lying awake.

Emotionally satiated and grateful for their chaste interactions, he thought that "deep speaking to deep" was far better than sex.

The first days at the bookshop were quiet. Faces peered in the windows, but no customers entered. Not even Indigo called to the shop. He'd have welcomed her bright, cheerful smile, but

she was busy working on her art. Ben sat at his desk browsing the newspaper article on the “Cillíni Graves”. He continued reading where he had left off:

‘The grave markers at Cillíni are always simple: nothing more than a clutch of the white quartz pebbles.’

‘That explains the small stones that Indigo told him about!’ Ben exclaimed. It was almost unbelievable, how Indigo had unwittingly stumbled on a Cillíni site.

The bell tinkled over the shop door. At last, a potential customer, perhaps. An eccentric, bookish looking lady in her seventies entered. She wore a brown and green tweed skirt with a matching jacket. Around her wrinkled neck a silk scarf. A large sensible hat sat on what seemed to be a grey wig and men’s black brogues on her feet.

“Ah, the smell of older books.... I just love it. Unfashionable authors getting second chances. Wonderful! It’s so good to see a bookshop in town...” she said, in a distinctive Anglo-Irish accent.

“Welcome to the Biblio Emporium,” replied Ben.

“I like the shop’s old-fashioned name,” the lady replied.

She looked around at the extensive variety of subjects: politics, history, art, music, transport, collecting, travel, literature, religion, reference, etc.

“What might you have on local hill walking?”

Ben brought her to that small section at the rear of the shop. He pulled out three books, and she took them, half turned her stance and looked at them. He left her browsing and returned to his desk, not wishing to disturb her concentration. The lady spent ten minutes there, then approached him with a few books. Ben totted up the prices with pencil and paper.

“That will come to twenty pounds, please.”

As he put her books in a bag, he noted that one was a history of the local town land.

“Do you mind me asking, are you a local?” “Yes, I am. Why do you ask?”

“Might you be familiar with the Cillíní sites?”

“I know about them.”

“I was wondering if you knew where they might be?”

“If you have an Ordnance Survey map, I can show you.”

Ben hunted through a box that had some old maps. He found an Ordnance Survey quarter inch map and handed it to the lady. She put on a pair of close vision spectacles, unfolded it, and looked.

“Let’s see.”

She traced her lumpy arthritic forefinger across the grids. Ben waited in anticipation.

“Here and.... Here.”

Ben leant down to focus on the detailed map. “There are many more sites, you know...”

“So it says, in an article I’m reading.” He pointed to the open newspaper on his desk.

“Could you please write the directions for me? I’m not good at reading maps,” Ben said.

She pulled a pencil stub and a scrap of paper out of her handbag, writing down the landmarks that Ben should look for. Then she handed him the exact amount for the books and clicked shut her old fashioned black leather handbag. She smiled and bid him farewell, her brown brogues click-clacking on the shop floor.

The phone rang. It was Martha.

“I forgot to ask, did you look for your relatives gravestone like you promised me?” “I had a look and then a thunderstorm broke. So, the answer is I didn’t find it.”

“That’s a pity. I wanted to get those dates sorted for your family tree. I’ll come down on Saturday evening, so I can gain entrance to the graveyard after the Sunday Service.”

“I’ll leave the key under the doormat, in case anything crops up.”

Ben re-read the Cillíní article’s closing lines. They packed a punch:

*‘... we have denied them admission to God, and an admission that they have lived on earth... as if they had never been.’*

Such a poignant and truthful phrase about denial was a challenge to society. He decided that he would continue working on his poem for these unacknowledged stillborns. The silent witness of their secret, shameful graves would cry out for justice. He would ask Indigo to accompany him to the Cillíní site on Saturday afternoon, before Martha’s train arrived. An hour there would be enough for him to absorb the atmosphere.

That Saturday afternoon Ben closed the shop. Today, selling books was not top of his agenda. Seeing Indigo and visiting the pitiful burial site was more important. A while later Indigo heard the crunch of his bike tyres on the drive. She peered out her studio window and saw Ben smiling and waving, full of boyish enthusiasm. What interesting ideas was he bringing this time, she wondered? Life around him would never be dull but that excitement brought other challenges. A verbal avalanche started the minute she opened the enormous door to him:

“Indigo, wait till you hear this! I’ve read an incredible account about the cillíní. There’s even one near here! Will you come with me to see it?”

“Whoa, Ben! Calm down. This is the first I’ve heard about cillíní. What exactly is it?”

Ben told her about the midnight burials and the cowardly clergy, who forbade all stillborns any dignified funerals. He painted poignant word pictures of fathers making doll sized coffins, and mothers not being told the whereabouts of babies graves. Then he recited a verse from his new poem to Indigo:

*Hear that hammer hitting, nailing down your sorrow.*

*Your stillborn baby silent, heavy heart unhallowed*

*Motherhood murdered, O cruel poisoned arrow.*

“Wow! Intense and... very passionate.”

“So, will you come then? It’s only a twenty minute cycle.”

“Well... Ok. I’ll come.”

“I’m so so pleased,” Ben effused. His face beamed. He could have hugged her in delight but restrained himself.

“Relax,” Indigo said. She pushed her bike out of the shed. Off they cycled, side by side, Ben leading the way. After their brief ride, Ben thought they were at the right location. They stopped, and he took out his map and notes.

“This is the area where I got the idea for the painting you saw,” Indigo stated.

“What a coincidence!” Ben said.

Indigo got off her bike and leaned it against a wall. She climbed over a locked gate a few yards away, then started walking towards the rocky outcrop. When Ben caught up with her, she was appraising the stark landscape. She was on the brow of the hill above the hollow area she had featured in her painting. In the distance the sound of sea waves crashing against limestone cliffs.

Side by side they ascended the slanted surface. Shale grit caused Ben’s shoes to lose traction, and he almost lost his balance. Indigo caught his arm just as he was about to tumble down. They paused, then descended into the naturally formed hollow. It was as she had painted, including a gathering of small white stones lying in a broken circle.

“So, this is the place of shamefully hidden history,” Ben replied.

“Knowing they bury babies here makes this place spooky,” Indigo said. She shivered.

“There’s nothing to be spooky about. Those babies are long gone to heaven. Only their pitiful bones remain under this grass...”

Then, Ben and Indigo, wordless, looked down at the arc of small white markers. Indigo’s lifted her gaze to scan the entire area,

analysing all its colours and shapes. Ben bent down and touched one of white stones, closing his eyes. What advocates did these babies ever have? Perhaps angels watched the weeping parents burying their babies.

*Guardian angels watch, and weep*

Ben liked that phrase a lot. He whispered word rhymes, starting with the letter A. He rhymed a few words until he got to D for 'Deep'. Another line came about these secret graves. He could see that spades would have been digging reluctantly but focused on the spades in a metaphorical way, as "stubborn".

*secret graves those stubborn spades dig deep*

He recited those newly minted words as he spontaneously composed them. His restless mind was sparking. Rhymes propelled the ideas. Almost in a trance, his eyes seemed to glaze over. He imagined the unfathomable grief of the new mothers and knew that their sleep wouldn't happen.

*keening midnight mothers refuse to sleep...*

A heavy rain fell. Ben seemed paralysed. His mind's eye was watching a burial take place back in history. Indigo became concerned for his well being. He was getting wet.

"We're getting soaked. Let's go back to my studio," Indigo said, breaking his visionary spell.

They cycled homeward in silence, pushing against the wind. What could anyone say after standing among those secret sorrow graves? It was as if they had been standing on holy ground.

When they got to Indigo's studio, she threw him a towel, and he dried his hair. "Could you get a fire going?" she asked.

Ben got on his knees in front of the stove. Twisting some newspaper, he placed it under some kindling. As the flames took, he added chopped wood to the fire, and locked closed the windowed door. The room soon warmed. He sat on her bed, watching flames flicker behind the glass.

"You better change out of those damp clothes? The only clean ones I have are spare pyjamas," she said and grinned.

He put them on, turning his back discreetly to Indigo. At the same time, she changed in front of him without any inhibition.

"You look exhausted. Why don't you lie down? I reckon you could do with a sleep."

She folded back the blankets and ushered him into her double bed. He was too tired to object and submitted, even though self-conscious. Then she tucked him in with the business-like manner of a nurse.

"And let's take these off," she said, lifting off Ben's spectacles and carefully placing them on a nearby table.

He took one last look at Indigo, out of focus, at the far end of the room. He closed his eyes and recalled a few phrases from a newspaper article he once read:

*'It's worth identifying who among the many people you encounter in your life are friends. Who makes time for you? Whose company enlivens, enriches, and maybe even humbles you? Whom would you miss? Who would miss you?'*

Then he surrendered to a deep sleep, feeling loved by this friend. It started raining outside. Meanwhile, Martha got off the train and walked to the shop. There was no answer to her repeated ringing on the doorbell and banging with the cast iron knocker. She was getting wetter by the minute. Her grey hair hung in strings around her face. Just as well I wore sensible shoes, she thought.

'Where on earth is Ben?' Then she remembered that Ben had said he'd leave the key under the heavy duty rough door mat. Martha lifted the sodden mat, and there was the key. She let herself in and put down her small worn suitcase on the floor. 'A cup of strong tea is what I need next,' she said to herself.

At her easel, Indigo started organising many tubes of oil paints on a tray. She gathered different sized brushes and readied herself for painting. Lighting the seven candles in the menorah, she turned off the ceiling light.

Not wanting to disturb Ben, Indigo whispered the Kaddish:

*'May His significant Name be blessed forever and to all eternity.*

*Blessed and praised, glorified, exalted*

*and extolled, honoured, adored and lauded*

*be the Name of the Holy One, blessed be He..'*

Then she scooped out a handful of ash from the bucket beside the stove and smeared her cheeks and forehead. She remembered the prophet Isaiah, who wrote powerful words about "loosening the chains of injustice and untying the cords of the yoke, and setting captives free..."

A fierce anger masked her beauty, making her look wild and purposeful. Closing her eyes, she repeated the prophet's words like a mantra and buried herself in deep harrowing of these parents hell. She repressed the urge to scream, as it would have scared Ben awake, maybe even give him a heart attack. Who knows?

Her painting would become more than a mere abstract landscape scene. It would fuse east and west and be hybrid in presentation. She now had a compelling, humane story to tell. That stoney setting Indigo and Ben had returned from became transformed into a stage set for a different drama now. She stood in front of her easel, analysing and examining that outline from fresh angles. Then she squeezed an array of colour out of many metal tubes, leaving blobs on her palette. Picking up a brush, she ploughed its white bristle head into them.

Taking the brush to the canvas, she layered the white surface with colours from the Savannah, not from overcast stage seen. If her subjects could not smile, she made sure that an element of the hope in Ben's poem was present.

She started off by changing the overcast clouds, infusing them shafts of light breaking through, contradicting them. They were symbols of the world beyond, creation hope breaking into this world of death, in the style of Linitsky\*, the Soviet- era dissident artist. And like him, no repressive society would censor her vision and voice.

Indigo never felt so alive when painting. She revelled in letting these secret stories be heard. "Let these dead bones live!" Her brush strokes would attempt to correct many injustices and misrepresentations against stillborn parents.

She wanted to challenge the stupid folk superstitions about dead babies cause malevolence, ill will and bringing bad luck on a house. She wanted to touch Ben's unique, invisible scarring and trace some stormy emotions he had experienced.

Provocatively, she chose an African looking woman and a European looking man as the parents of a stillborn. She presented these figures in an iconic style. The woman wore a *dashki* dress and swaddled the dead baby on her hip in an African print cloth, as if out on a walk.

Standing alongside her, the man held a simple small coffin that had revelatory words inscribed on the lid: "tears gone, pain

gone, crying gone". Behind them, a little way off, a third figure that glowed in a gold outline. He represented a guardian-like figure.

Lost in ecstatic concentration, Indigo painted throughout the night. Outside, wind wrestled the tree branches. Rain pitted against the windows, while Indigo's brushes dabbed and swirled colours. A spiritual growing and an emotional wrestling was taking place within her. It was an exhausting experience. She didn't know how to descend from such lofty heights, so intense an experience. It had emptied her out.

Some hours later, at dawn, the roar of a low flying jet bullied the birdsong. Ben awoke with a jolt. The other side of the bed was cold. Indigo hadn't slept beside him. Ben looked around the silent studio. Something was not right. There was no sign of Indigo's presence. All traces of her were missing: clothes, books, easel, paints. But she had left one thing, as if an offering, her painting.

The power of her glorious image sucked all the air out of Ben's lungs. He was dumbfounded, speechless, moved by Indigo's visionary art. The atmosphere of the couple, the way their bodies were rigid with shock, the imploring gaze in their eyes capture the spirit of stillbirth with such empathy. Her prophetic images made him feel euphoric.

As he continued to look at this iconic painting, his heartbeat became rapid. He felt faint, lay on the floor, curled in an

embryonic state, and cried. His wail echoed in the empty room. Was he experiencing something similar to Stendhal Syndrome? For what or whom was he weeping? For his long dead stillborn daughter? Or for the shameful, secret cillíní burials? Perhaps Ben was wailing for all the parents lied to by truth-distorted religion?

Of her own volition, Indigo had deeply connected with him, identified with him. She had identified with Ben's stillbirth story and had given all of herself to her prophetic art. Through her images, she had aptly captured the turmoil of grieving parents and recreating them with hope.

Indigo had brought exuberance colours and positive emotion into Ben's monochrome world and his poetic vision had given her art a fresh story to tell. Through her friendship, she had become the muse that Martha could never be. Until now, he never realised the impact he had on Indigo, she never told him. She once said: "Story is important. Art for art's sake does nothing for me. I strive to pose fresh questions and challenge presumptions. What else matters, other than the story? Who ever forgets a compelling story?"

Her brief presence had created a compelling story in his life. Their dynamic and dyadic friendship had helped form this masterpiece. It deserved a wide audience.

Ben felt exhausted and lay on the bed, almost falling back asleep. The images from Indigo's imagination prompted

concluding ideas for his cillíní poem. He had to write them down before he forgot them:

*Countless empty arms, countless grieving wombs,  
no human hope can fill so harsh a vacuum  
but stillborns live beyond limbo lies and gloom.*

Then he lay back down on the bed and began drifting back into sleep. Then a woman's voice sounded, faintly calling his name. He couldn't figure out was it in a dream, or was it a voice nearby calling to him? He went to the window and saw Martha standing on the path below. Going down the two flights of stairs, he went to the large door. He raised his arms high and lifted the big beam off the strong brackets that secured the door shut. Pulling it open, he came face to face with Martha.

"What on earth are you doing in women's pyjamas, Ben?" "It's a long story..."

Ben opened up his arms. Martha didn't recoil as usual but noticing that his eyes were damp and red looking, she hugged him. She looked over his shoulder in amazement, taking in all the ornate decor behind him. After some moments in silence, Ben took her hand and urged her to follow.

"You can look at the paintings and ceilings another time. I've something more important to show you."

She didn't like the provocative presentation of the cillíní painting that Ben showed her. He wasn't at all surprised. Art represented ideas foreign to her. She preferred the immediacy of photos and history books, rather than the nuance of paintings. In time, her appreciation of it might grow, he thought.

"You probably don't realise how important this painting is. It's the first of its type. It also has influenced my poem about how society views stillborn babies."

Ben and Martha weathered many minor storms in their five years together: a stillbirth, this recent temporary separation, and his exploration of female friendship outside marriage, which Martha had permitted. She had tolerated many of his wild ideas with a healthy dose of scepticism, hoping that they would at least be brief.

As for Indigo, she had been a very enjoyable fantasy of Ben's. Her younger mind stimulated Ben beyond what he thought possible. Her friendly tactility towards Ben was in pleasant contrast to Martha's stand off stiffness.

But there were other considerations to put a brake on any fleeting thoughts of any long-term companionship with Indigo. Her absence, their decade differing ages, and very disparate cultures. Fatherhood was part of his life story, whereas Indigo stated that she never wanted to be a mother. All those

mismatches made for a kind of stillbirth in their short lived story.

It relieved Martha to hear that Indigo was now absent. She had wondered was it wise allowing Ben to spend time with Indigo. But what could she have done anyway, being so far away? Now though, she could reassert herself as primary mistress of Ben's shambolic life. She would continue her role in their marriage, keeping a strong and systematic domestic scaffolding in place. As for Ben, for all Martha's faults and failings, how could he ever betray such covenant-like love and loyalty, by committing adultery?

*Even if kisses have less cause to linger,*

*gold bands remain firm on fingers...*

---

To be continued....

Acknowledgements: Poem excerpts: [louisheemmings.com](http://louisheemmings.com)

A few paragraphs have been taken with permission, from '**A Place That Harbours Memory**' - an historical article on Cillíní graves by Adrian Tinniswood - which I abstracted for the "newspaper article" - see full archaeological-based article here: <https://adriantinniswood.com/2016/10/16/a-place-that-harbours-memory/>

\*Vitality Linitsky - a Soviet-era Orthodox Christian artist:

<https://www.nytimes.com/1978/03/05/archives/soviet-avantgarde-artists-defy-curb-on-exhibit-artists-work-called.html>