

One

Something in the manner of her approach makes me think of a widow, a mourner. The funereal nature of her dress, perhaps, the erect posture and striding hips, her stark white face, inexpressive and unreadable. Down the long corridor she comes and I watch her advance, hear the clipping of her heels measuring out the distance in even steps. Outside, it is raining and wet footprints have made the floor treacherous, but she doesn't look down, her gaze pinned on something ahead.

I'm here before her, of course. It's her privilege to be late on this difficult day and my role is to be one of supporter, sentinel, father figure. I can't imagine her father will be here, and I am old enough to play the part. I smile at her as my hand reaches up to adjust my tie, then swipe at my hair. These small vanities, these nervous movements! One of the guards turns and gives me a look, as if sensing I am becoming restive.

She is wearing her long black cashmere coat and a sombre-looking silk scarf; there is a severe and unadorned elegance about her. My attire, however, is more suited to a wedding – the brightness of my tie, the crimson flourish from my breast pocket, cuff links winking beneath my sleeves. Well, with my background and reputation, I feel a touch of the theatrical will be excused – expected even. In fact, we are dressed for court.

The Director of Public Prosecutions vs. Keith Donovan. How ambiguous it sounds. The economy of words. It could be anything – a drugs charge, theft, a murder.

One of the guards nods at Helen as she reaches me and I lean in, take hold of her elbow and kiss her cheek. “All set?”

She seems to shiver. “Miserable out there,” she says, giving a nod to the world outside.

“It'll clear up,” I say, “don't you worry,” in my new avuncular tone. If only Frankie could hear me now... “We have time to go and grab a coffee still, to calm the nerves,” I say.

“Your nerves or mine, Reuben?” A playful smile lights up her face before it clouds over with the question she wants to ask. “Is he here yet?”

I know instinctively whom she means. “No, dear. Not yet.”

And I cannot tell if she is relieved or disappointed by the information. Her face gives nothing away.

“Well then. We may as well go in.”

My hand is cupped beneath her elbow as we approach the doors. A moment of shadow and then we are swallowed into the brightness of Court Twenty-nine.

Throughout the long summer days before the trial began, and even further back – when we first met – Helen and I have discussed the case endlessly. We have spent hours together over the last sixteen months analysing it from every angle. Indeed, I believe there is not a single aspect of it that we have not picked over. I fed her questions about the events that led up to that long night, what happened in its aftermath, and she answered dutifully, no – willingly. I believe she has embroidered the events on some occasions, perhaps for my benefit. But she has no one else to tell now, no one to share it with, since William turned his back on it. It was the grubbiness of the affair that shocked him, I think – the insouciant squalor of the details. The drip, drip, drip as each one emerged. He has maintained a dignified silence ever since she told him – she had to in the end. It was either that, or let him discover the facts with the rest of us once the defence counsel began cross-examination or, worse, it emerged from Donovan’s own mouth, his own skewed interpretation. William is not in court, not that I expected he would be. I imagine him in his office, head down, working on his research, or standing at a podium in front of a room full of his students, flicking through presentations, his cultured voice ringing like a bell. How will he get through this day?

And I have no doubt William feels that the stance he has chosen has a valiant and noble appeal – his tortured solitude – when in fact it is cowardice. “For better and for worse” I want to remind him, but I bite my tongue. And besides, if he had stuck around, I wouldn’t be privy to all the richness of information she has provided – this unexpected story.

We have been able to maintain some semblance of friendship, William and I, for the story's sake. I have put in my time with him too, for clarity, listening to him pour out his heart. All this talk, these people desperate to tell their tale, and me there poking and prodding, asking the leading questions. But now that we are here at last, in our places at the back of the courtroom, Helen and I find that neither one of us has anything to say.

We watch the room fill, the barristers sorting their books and notes, conferring with the solicitors, the registrar and stenographer sharing a joke, the guards milling about. On a desk behind the prosecution there is a Garda evidence bag, the name of the case written in Magic Marker; I wonder what exhibits are contained within it. The weapon, of course, the blade wiped clean; and perhaps the dress she wore, ivory silk with a splash of red wine and a crimson flower of blood blooming among its delicate fibres.

There is something familiar in the atmosphere, although this is my first time in court. There was the preliminary hearing in the district court, a year ago now – but that was different. For a start there wasn't this elegant space – these high windows and bright white orbs suspended from the lofty ceiling, dark wooden benches and grey carpeting. No, the district court was seedier in comparison, with the faint stench of urine, vomit and sweat. And I wasn't present at that hearing. It took place when William was still around, before it all fell apart between them. I watch the defence barrister fixing her wig and straightening her gown, and that's when it strikes me that the atmosphere is the same as on the opening night of a new play. That same blend of nervous excitement, the latent fear of being insufficiently rehearsed, yet impatient to draw back the curtain and start. And as on those opening nights, I feel, too, that I have a stake in these proceedings, that their success or failure will make a difference to my life. I watch the barrister as she holds back her gown, the starched white of her collar against tanned skin, the flourish as she sweeps around to address her colleague – she has the grand gestures and elegant bearing of an actor.

The barrister for the prosecution comes towards us – a sleekly good-looking young man with a sweeping self-confidence and a cocky bluntness about him. I have the impression he doesn't like me. On the one occasion we met before today, he addressed me as Mr Ford, although I urged him to call me Reuben, and he didn't bother to hide his

surprise or irritation that I – neither family nor anyone remotely connected to the case – should be allowed to sit in on these meetings between him and Helen.

“How are you feeling?” he asks her.

“A little nervous.”

“That’s natural,” he answers briskly. “Once things get up and running, which will be shortly now, then you’ll relax. You may even enjoy it.”

“I doubt that,” I say.

His eyes sweep over me and his face seems to register distaste. He seems unaffected by my celebrity – perhaps he has something against Americans. All he notices is the paunch that strains against my shirt buttons, and the face whose crags and dents betray a once-Dionysian lifestyle. He looks into my eyes and sees weariness and spiritual depletion. And maybe something else. Avarice, perhaps?

“A number of procedures have to be gone through first,” he says. “The jury will be picked and then sworn in, which takes time. The charges will be read out. The judge will say a few words. I will make my opening statement for the prosecution. The defence, of course, won’t make an opening statement – they don’t show their hand until cross-examination of witnesses, as I explained to you.”

She sits quietly, twisting her wedding band continuously around her finger, listening to this voluble young man in his natty pinstripe suit.

“So, do you think I will be called this morning?”

He shrugs. “Probably not.” Then, giving her the full wattage of his toothy grin, he touches a hand to her shoulder. “You’ve nothing to worry about, Helen. Just tell the truth and you’ll be fine.”

That said, he gathers his gown around him and returns to his place near the bench.

But of course, it’s not that easy. Is there really such a thing as a simple truth? What about perception? What about the many layers within truth? And what about all those dark secret things that are kept hidden – truths we are afraid to hold up to the light? Those are the things that Helen will be asked to surrender: the weapons that the defence team will use against her to impugn her character.

Outside, the rain is sheeting, bouncing off the pavement around the feet of people scurrying to work, struggling with their umbrellas against the wind. Morning traffic in

Dublin, exhausts belching, faces pressed with purpose. On days like these, I wonder why I came back to this country, of which I am not a native. My body yearns for the heat of the southern United States, the sultry fug of my childhood. I am too old for this city and I know that I will have to leave it soon. But not until all this is over. Not until I have done what I can. Or taken what I can. A rogue thought. Even now, my notebook is burning a hole of shame in my breast pocket. Why I bothered to bring it, I don't know. I can't imagine I'll have occasion to scribble anything. Yet I have it with me. An old habit.

“Reuben,” she says, and reaches for my arm.

I follow her gaze to the doorway and there he is – the accused, Keith Donovan, taking a moment to find his bearings. Despite myself, I feel a sudden shock at his proximity. There is nothing – no handcuffs, no police buffer – to bridge the space between him and Helen. I feel her tense. But what is more shocking is his appearance – he seems harmless. As he slopes past us, head down, eyes fixed on the ground, he appears wretched, like a schoolboy on his way to the headmaster's office. Surely this man cannot be capable of a crime of passion: he looks no more than a teenager, nothing like the yobs in tracksuits who stalk the corridors here. There is something clean and delicate about him, a gaucheness that is oddly touching. For the life of me, I cannot see anything sinister in him. His elderly parents accompany him, and I watch his mother – a thicket of blonde hair and too much make-up – leading his frail-looking father as the three approach the dock. Of course it's not called the dock anymore. Just as Helen is not the victim – she is the injured party. Prejudicial language; admissible and inadmissible; weights and balances.

Helen crosses her arms, and I notice that she has not removed the cashmere coat or the silk scarf. She is not yet ready to relinquish that defence. Donovan has sat down and is shifting about uncomfortably. His clothes are ill-fitting: he is dwarfed by his jacket's shoulders, but his narrow wrists emerging from too-short sleeves. There is something bewildered about him – his face seems to ask: *How has this happened to me?* And it occurs to me that his face is his best defence – young and frightened. I have read the letters he wrote; I have seen the scar; I have witnessed the rending apart of a marriage. And yet, somehow, that face seems removed from it all, unconnected.

Helen's hand goes up to the silk scarf underneath her collar. Silk. And I wonder if she wore such expensive clothes for a reason – to make a distinction, perhaps, between herself and the polyester-clad man in the dock. We are all in costume. In a way, we are all on trial.

“How much time?” she asks, voice wavering.

“Plenty.”

A difficult day for her. For me too. It's Frankie's anniversary, not that Helen is aware of this. That is my own memory, my private sadness. And this is not a story about me.

Helen looks so frail, gaunt, even with make-up. I reach across and lay my hand over hers. “We've all the time in the world.”

A door opens and a voice says “All rise” and the judge makes a sweeping entrance and every one of us is on our feet.