

Carlow

Lincoln's hands were what she had noticed the first time she'd laid eyes on him. She and Joe were only moved in when a knock on the open back door brought her down the stairs and in through the kitchen. She was wearing tight-fitting jeans and an orange t-shirt that clung to her breasts. She became aware of how she must have looked when she saw the stranger's eyes roam freely and without shame or embarrassment all over her. He'd kept that look well hidden ever since.

'Just thought I'd welcome ye to the parish,' he'd said in a coarse voice destroyed by twenty years on the fags. The clean jeans and the ironed shirt, the lighted roll-up that hung off his lower lip, the elegant hands; these were the things she remembered most about that first meeting. He'd said hello, is the man of the house around at all? and when she'd led him round to the front of the house, to where Joe was busy cutting back the overgrown hedge of hawthorn and alder, he'd introduced himself.

'I'm Lincoln Savage. I'm over the hill.'

He smiled as he caught them glancing at each other.

'Literally over the hill,' and he raised his arm and pointed towards the hill behind the house.

They'd gone inside and Mairead had made tea. Joe took down a couple of plain wooden chairs that were turned upside down on the kitchen table. Lincoln remained standing, placing his backside against the unlit range in a manner that betrayed long familiarity with the once always-warm stove; in its own subtle way, his casualness seemed to Mairead to insinuate some sort of tribal possession of the room. He appeared completely at ease as he rolled one cigarette after another with his immaculately groomed fingers, his clear blue eyes coming to rest on Joe's open, friendly face, and occasionally, though not often, on that of

Mairead. There was something edgy and unpredictable about his demeanour that both appealed to and repelled her. She caught herself staring at him in a way that she had never stared at anyone. He intrigued her. Perhaps the clean, pressed jeans and crisp blue shirt were a deliberate attempt to camouflage this edginess, this thinly disguised volatility. Joe, she knew well, would see none of this in him. Joe only saw surfaces in people; he wasn't literate in the language of interiors.

She liked Lincoln Savage's slimness, and his long legs, and above all she liked his hands. Several times she caught herself staring at his fingers as they nimbly rolled another cigarette. Four cigarettes he'd smoked in the space of an hour that summer afternoon. She had never in her life been so struck by a man's physicality as she was by his intense presence. It took her completely by surprise. Until that afternoon, she would not have thought of herself as a sexual person. She had had sex only with Joe, and she had taken pleasure in at least some of these intimate exchanges, though of late the whole messy business had become a chore, something that had to be engaged in, because that's what married couples do.

She hoped he hadn't noticed her staring at Lincoln. She hoped even more that Lincoln hadn't, though she suspected he had. He seemed the type who would notice such things. Was this what they called pure physical sexual attraction? Whatever it was, it frightened her, for she knew intuitively that it would be too strong for her to resist were the situation to present itself.

As the weeks passed, however, it became clear that Lincoln was only interested in Joe. Joe was the archetypal outdoor man. He'd grown up on a farm, studied horticulture at college, worked for a few years with a large landscaping contractor before setting up on his own eight years ago. He was naturally strong and could stay on his feet from morning till night without breaking sweat. He worked within a radius of fifty kilometres and was kept busy all year. Everything he had – the van, the trailer, the high quality machine tools, the

rotovator, the trimmers, the mowers – he owned outright. He led a simple life that was dominated by work, and by the slowly stagnating marriage to Mairead.

Lincoln took to Joe and Joe to Lincoln because they suited each other, temperamentally and practically. Lincoln, like Joe, spent his days out in the open; erecting and mending fences, digging and clearing drains, cutting and pruning hedges, tending his cattle and his sheep. He became a regular caller to Joe and Mairead's, though it didn't take her long to notice that he rarely landed if Joe was not around. The two men struck up an easy friendship, one that excluded Mairead. Joe lent Lincoln the rotary mower, the chainsaw, the trimmer with the hedge-cutting attachment. In return, Lincoln, who had a magician's touch with machinery, fixed whatever needed fixing. This aspect of Lincoln's life intrigued Mairead, for Lincoln's fingernails and his hands were always impeccably clean. Joe was not a dirty person, but he could let a couple of days go by between hot showers and think nothing of it. By contrast, she imagined Lincoln in his shower every morning without fail, probably every evening, too. He was that clean. He smelt that fresh.

In July of the following year, Joe and Lincoln went off to the National Ploughing Championships together. They left at six in the morning, promising to be home before dark. Mairead was glad to see Joe happy. Things had run aground at home, in the bedroom specifically, with Joe claiming exhaustion and Mairead drawing on her usual store of excuses whenever Joe was in the mood, which wasn't often. She waved the two of them off, having cooked them a dawn breakfast.

It was long past dark when Joe called her. He sounded pissed.

'We're staying with one of Lincoln's cousins,' he shouted into the phone. There were voices in the background. She heard women's laughter.

'Are you not working in Clancy's all day tomorrow?'

'I am, I am. I'll be home by eight. Gotta go, bye. '

She cooked up a fry, assuming Joe would invite Lincoln in, but the fry died a slow death in the oven. She tried phoning his mobile, but it was turned off.

Just after one, Joe's van pulled in to the driveway. He was alone.

'Jesus, where were you? I was sure you'd had an accident.'

She had never seen him look so pale, so exhausted. He reached out with his right arm and propped himself against the frame of the door. His head dropped and he stood without moving a muscle for half a minute.

'Tom Clancy rang,' she said.

'If he rings again, tell him the van broke down.'

He slept through the afternoon and into the evening. At nine, he surfaced, made a pot of tea, buttered four slices of bread and went back up to the bedroom to watch TV. When Mairead came to bed an hour later, he was asleep, and when she woke early the following morning, he was already up and gone. He came home late that evening, complaining of a sore throat and a temperature. She could see he was in no mood to talk, but there were things she wanted to know.

'So, how was Carlow?'

'The whole town was drunk as far as I could see.'

'You were well on when you rang me.'

'Was I? I can't remember.'

'What are Lincoln's cousins like?'

'I didn't meet any of his cousins.'

'But you said you were staying with one of his cousins. You told me that on the phone.'

He shifted position, looked out the window, avoiding her steady gaze.

'I don't know why I said that. It was his sister we were with.'

'I never heard him mention his sister.'

‘Yeh, well, you know what he’s like, he’s cagey, he only tells you what he wants to tell you.’

‘Why would he keep his sister a secret?’

‘Beats me.’

‘What’s she like? Does she look at all like Lincoln? Is she married?’

‘Jesus Mairead what’s with all the fucken questions?’

‘I’m just curious. We haven’t spoken since you got home.’

‘I haven’t been well.’

‘Even so. You’ve been doing your level best to avoid me.’

‘That’s a ridiculous thing to say. I had jobs to do.’

‘I’m not stupid, Joe.’

‘Who ever said you were stupid?’

‘So, where did you end up sleeping?’

He turned his head and glowered at her. ‘Honestly I can’t fucken remember.’

‘Why are you being like this?’

‘Like what for fuck’s sake?’

‘Was Lincoln as drunk as you?’

‘Lincoln could drink Shane McGowan under the table.’

‘Were there women there, apart from Lincoln’s sister?’

‘The pub was crawling with them. And they were all asking for it.’

She stared at him. During their twelve years together, he had never spoken to her like this. The nastiness was shocking. He was like a stranger standing in front of her.

‘You must remember waking up,’ she said.

He wouldn’t meet her gaze, choosing instead to stare out the window.

‘I’m not able for this crap,’ he said at last, and he walked out of the room and climbed the stairs.

She remained in the armchair for a long time, unaware of the slow retreat of the light of the day from the room. Later, in the silence and darkness of the house, she drifted off to sleep where she sat.

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Lincoln stood warming his arse against the range. It was where he always stood when he came to call. Outside, under the dark November sky, the rain was coming down in great sweeping gusts.

‘Joe told me the fox nearly got in to the barn the other night. Ye were lucky to have heard the hens.’

‘When were you talking to Joe?’

‘He dropped by on his way to the garden centre. He said the fox would have killed the lot if you hadn’t heard them.’

‘They were making an awful racket.’

‘Isn’t it a good job you’re a light sleeper,’ he said. ‘Joe would sleep through an earthquake.’

He had taken his tobacco out of his jacket pocket and was halfway through rolling a cigarette.

‘I don’t understand why Joe was over at your place,’ she said. ‘When he left here he said he was running late.’

Lincoln frowned and tilted his head slightly and gave her a curious look. He didn’t appear in the least perturbed by the turn in the conversation. It was her face, not his, that reddened. She had suspected for several months - since the Carlow incident, in fact - but the notion was so outlandish, so utterly laughable, that whenever she thought she might say something to Joe, she gasped at her own stupidity, at her newly discovered ability to consider

the impossible possible. But sometimes when she was making the bed, or when she was peeling potatoes or chopping an onion, or when she was out in the vegetable plot doing a bit of weeding, her suspicions came over her like a tidal wave and engulfed her. When this happened, she had no doubts. She saw the two of them in Lincoln's barn, or wedged behind his half-open back door, or on the landing, Lincoln's long hands bringing Joe to a sweet, silent climax. She even imagined them kissing, long sensual kisses as the hot water of Lincoln's shower cleansed their naked, exhausted bodies.

Following these visions, she would be dizzy and disorientated and she would have to go upstairs and lie down on the bed and close her eyes and force her mind away from the torrent of suspicions that were running wild inside her head. Now, in the kitchen, alone with Lincoln, she was bringing the horror out into the open. She hadn't planned to, but she was already launched and she didn't think she would be able to stop.

'You look like you've just been caught halfway up a ladder with no knickers on,' Lincoln said. He had his back to the warm range. His eyes penetrated her skull. 'You think me and Joe are up to some funny business, don't you? You think he comes over the hill for more than a chat and a fixing of the strimmer.'

She reddened even further.

'I think the time has come for me to dispel those suspicions,' he said.

He seemed to glide across the kitchen tiles towards her.

After their lovemaking, which was awkward and unpleasant, she made him a cup of tea and he drank it at his usual place.

'Do you think Joe will suspect?' he asked.

'You and me doing what we've just done is probably the last thing Joe would suspect. He trusts me, and he thinks the world of you.'

'It will be better the next time. You won't be as tense,' he said.

Mairead looked at his hands as he rolled a cigarette. They were no longer a thing of beauty to her. They had, in the space of a confusing hour, become an extension of Lincoln's detached personality. The hands, soft as they were, had been cold and unfeeling as they moved over her. The long, elegant fingers found their way effortlessly, but they lacked sensuality inside her. They switched her off instead of on.

She knew nothing about him. That which she thought she knew lay in ruins. There was no longer any physical attraction on her part; something closer to revulsion inhabited that space inside her now. She had no idea how he would take the rebuttal. Neither did she know how the three of them would manage from now on. A new notion, that he had seduced her in order to put her off the scent, was beginning to make her dizzy all over again. Only one thing was certain: it was the last time Lincoln Savage would lean his cute arse against her range. She steeled herself to tell him how it was going to be between the three of them from now on.