

# Kevin Barry

City of Bohane

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Kevin Barry's first novel *City of Bohane* is to be published in April 2011. His debut collection of short stories *There Are Little Kingdoms* was published in 2007 and was awarded the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature. He has also been shortlisted for the Irish Book of the Decade Award, the Glen Dimplex New Writing Award, an Irish Book Award, and the Davy Byrnes Irish Writing Award. He has been the recipient of several bursary awards from the Arts Council of Ireland and has been shortlisted for an Arts Foundation fellowship in the UK for 2011.

His short stories have appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *Granta Book of the Irish Short Story*, *Best European Fiction 2011*, and many other journals and anthologies around the world. His stage adaptation of *There Are Little Kingdoms* has been produced by Meridian Theatre Company in Ireland and by the Keegan Theatre Company in the United States. He wrote the award-winning short film *The Ballad of Kid Kanturk* which is currently on the festival circuit, while his feature-film screenplay *Memorabilia* is in development with Parallel Productions and the Irish Film Board. His puppet show *Burn The Bad Lamp* toured Ireland in 2010. He also works on graphic stories with the artist Ale Mercado.

He has written about literature and travel for many newspapers and magazines including the *Irish Times*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *New Zealand Herald*. He previously worked as a columnist with the *Irish Examiner* and the *Glasgow Sunday Herald*.

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## City of Bohane

1

### The Nature of the Disturbance

Whatever's wrong with us is coming in off that river. No argument: the taint of badness on the city's air is a taint off that river. This is the Bohane river we're talking about. A blackwater surge, malevolent, it roars in off the Big Nothin' wastes and the city was spawned by it and was named for it: city of Bohane.

He walked the docks and breathed in the sweet badness of the river. It was past midnight on the Bohane front. There was an evenness to his footfall, a slow calm rhythm of leather on stone, and the dockside lamps burned in the night-time a green haze, the light of a sad dream. The water's roar for Hartnett was as the rushing of his own blood and as he passed the merchant yards the guard dogs strung out a sequence of howls all along the front. See the dogs: their hackles heaped, their yellow eyes livid. We could tell he was coming by the howling of the dogs.

Polis watched him but from a distance – a pair of hoss polis watering their piebalds at a trough 'cross in Smoketown. Polis were fresh from the site of a reefing.

'Ya lampin' him over?' said one. 'Albino motherfucker.'

'Set yer clock by him,' said the other.

Albino, some called him, others knew him as the Long Fella: he ran the Hartnett Fancy.

He cut off from the dockside and walked on into the Back Trace, the infamous Bohane Trace, a most evil labyrinth, an unknowable web of streets. He had that Back Trace look to him: a dapper buck in a natty-boy Crombie, the Crombie draped all casual-like over the shoulders of a pale grey Eyetie suit, mohair. Mouth of teeth on him like a vandalised graveyard but we all have our crosses. It was a pair of hand-stitched Portuguese boots that slapped his footfall, and the stress that fell, the emphasis, was money.

Hard-got the riches – oh the stories that we told out in Bohane about Logan Hartnett.

Dank little squares of the Trace opened out suddenly, like gasps, and Logan

passed through. All sorts of quarehawks lingered Trace-deep in the small hours. They looked down as he passed, they examined their toes and their sacks of tawny wine – you wouldn't make eye contact with the Long Fella if you could help it. Strange, but we had a fear of him and a pride in him, both. He had a fine hold of himself, as we say in Bohane. He was prideful and erect and he looked neither left nor right but straight out ahead always, with the shoulders thrown back, like a general. He walked the Arab tangle of alleyways and wynds that make up the Trace and there was the slap, the lift, the slap, the lift of Portuguese leather on the backstreet stones.

Yes and Logan was in his element as he made progress through the labyrinth. He feared not the shadows, he knew the fibres of the place, he knew every last twist and lilt of it.

Jenni Ching waited beneath the maytree in the 98er Square.

He approached the girl, and his step was enough: she needn't look up to make the reck. He smiled for her all the same, and it was a wry and long-suffering smile – as though to say: More of it, Jenni? – and he sat on the bench beside. He laid a hand on hers that was tiny, delicate, murderous.

The bench had dead seasons of lovers' names scratched into it.

'Well, girleen?' he said.

'Cunt what been reefed in Smoketown was a Cusack off the Rises,' she said.

'Did he have it coming, Jen?'

'Don't they always, Cusacks?'

Logan shaped his lips thinly in agreement.

'The Cusacks have always been crooked, girl.'

Jenni was seventeen that year but wise beyond it. Careful, she was, and a saucy little ticket in her lowriders and wedge heels, her streaked hair pineappled in a high bun. She took the butt of a stogie from the tit pocket of her white vinyl zip-up, and lit it.

'Get enough on me fuckin' plate now 'cross the footbridge, Mr H.'

'I know that.'

'Cusacks gonna sulk up a welt o' vengeance by 'n' by and if yer askin' me, like?'

A rake o' them tossers bullin' down off the Rises is the las' thing Smoketown need.'

'Cusacks are always great for the old talk, Jenni.'

'More'n talk's what I gots a fear on, H. Is said they gots three flatblocks marked Cusack 'bove on the Rises this las' while an' that's three flatblocks fulla headjobs with a grá on 'em for rowin', y'check me?'

'All too well, Jenni.'

It is fond tradition in Bohane that families from the Northside Rises will butt heads against families from the Back Trace. Logan ran the Trace, he was Back Trace blood-and bone, and his was the most ferocious power in the city that year. But here were the Cusacks building strength and gumption on the Rises.

'What's the swerve we gonna throw, Logan?'

There was a canniness to Jenni. It was bred into her – the Chings were old Smoketown stock. Smoketown was hoors, herb, fetish parlours, grog pits, needle alleys, dream salons and Chinese restaurants. Smoketown was the other side of the footbridge from the Back Trace, yonder across the Bohane river, and it was the Hartnett Fancy had the runnings of Smoketown also. But the Cusacks were shaping for it.

'I'd say we keep things moving quite swiftly against them, Jenni-sweet.'

'Coz they gonna come on down anyways, like?'

'Oh there's no doubt to it, girl. They're going to come down barkin'. May as well force them to a quick move.'

She considered the tactic.

'Afore they's full prepped for a gack off us, y'mean? Play on they pride, like. What the Fancy's yelpin'? Ya gonna take an eye for an eye, Cuse, or y'any bit o' spunk at all, like?'

Logan smiled.

'You're an exceptional child, Jenni Ching.'

She winced at the compliment.

'Pretty to say so, H. O' course the Cusacks shouldn't be causin' the likes a us no grief in the first place, y'check? Just a bunch o' Rises scuts is all they is an' they gettin' so brave an' lippy, like? Sendin' runners into S'town? Why's it they's gettin' so brave all of a sudden is what we should be askin'.'

'Meanin' precisely what, Jenni?'

'Meanin' is they smellin' a weakness, like? They reckonin' you got your mind off the Fancy's dealins?'

'And what else might I have my mind on?'

She turned her cool look to him, Jenni, and let it lock.

'That ain't for my say, Mr Hartnett, sir.'

He rose from the bench, smiling. Not a lick of warmth had entered the girl's hand as long as his had lain on it.

'Y'wan' more Cusacks hurted so?' she said.

He looked back at her but briefly – the look was his word.

'Y'sure 'bout that, H? 'nother winter a blood in Bohane, like?'

A smile, and it was as grey as he could will it.

'Ah sure it'll make the long old nights fly past.'

Logan Hartnett was minded to keep the Ching girl close. In a small city so homicidal you needed to watch out on all sides. He moved on through the gloom of the Back Trace. The streets of old tenements are tight, steep-sided, ill-lit, and the high bluffs of the city give the Trace a closed-in feel. Our city is built along a run of these bluffs that bank and canyon the Bohane river. The streets tumble down to the river, it is a black and swift-moving rush at the base of almost every street, as black as the bog waters that feed it, and a couple of miles downstream the river rounds the last of the bluffs and there enters the murmurous ocean. The ocean is not directly seen from the city, but at all times there is the ozone rumour of its proximity, a rasp on the air, like a hoarseness.

It is all of it as bleak as only the West of Ireland can be.

The Fancy boss Hartnett turned down a particular alleyway, flicked the cut of a glance over his shoulder – so careful – then slipped into a particular doorway. He pressed three times on a brass bell, paused, and pressed on it twice more. He noted a spider abseil from the top of the door's frame, enjoyed its measured, shelving fall, thought it was late enough in the year for that fella, being October, the city all brown-mooded. There was a scurry of movement within, the peephole's cover was slid and filled with the bead of a pupil, the brief startle of it, the lock clacked, unclicked, and the red metal door was slid creaking – *kaaarrink!* – along its runners. They'd want greasing, thought Logan, as Tommie the Keep was revealed: a wee hairy-chested turnip of a man. He bowed once and whispered his reverence.

'Thought it'd be yourself, Mr Hartnett. Goin' be the hour, like.'

'They say routine is a next-door neighbour of madness, Tommie.'

'They say lots o' things, Mr Hartnett.'

He lit his pale smile for the Keep. He stepped inside, pushed the door firmly back along its runners, it clacked shut behind – *kraaank!* – and the men trailed down a narrow passageway; its vivid red walls sweated like disco walls, and the building was indeed once just that but had long since been converted.

Long gone in Bohane the days of the discos.

'And how's your lady wife keepin', Mr H?'

'She's extremely well, Tommie, and why shouldn't she be?'

A tautness at once had gripped the 'bino's smile and terrified the Keep. Made him wonder, too.

'I was only askin', Mr H.'

'Well, thank you so much for asking, Tommie. I'll be sure to remember you to her.'

Odd, distorted, the glaze that descended for a moment over his eyes, and the passage hooked, turned, and opened to a dimly lit den woolly with low night-time voices.

This was Tommie's Supper Room.

This was the Bohane power haunt.

The edges of the room were lined with red velvet banquettes. The banquettes seated heavy, jowled lads who were thankful for the low lights of the place. These were the merchants of the city, men with a taste for hair lacquer, hard booze and saturated fats.

'Inebriates and hoor-lickers to a man,' said Logan, and it was loud enough for those who might want to hear.

Across the fine parquet waited an elegant brass-railed bar. Princely Logan marched towards it, and the obsessive polishing of the floor's French blocks was evident in the hump of Tommie the Keep's back as he raced ahead and ducked under his bar hatch. He took his cloth and hurried a fresh shine into the section of the counter where Logan each night sat.

'You've grooves worn into it, Tommie.'

Logan shucked loose from the sleeves of his Crombie and he hung it on a peg set beneath the bar's rail. The handle of his shkelper was visible to all – a mother-of-pearl with markings of Naples blue – and it was tucked into his belt just so, with his jacket hitched on the blade the better for its display. He smoothed down the mohair of the Eyetie suit. He picked at a loose thread. Ran dreamily the tip of a thumb along a superstar cheekbone.

'So is there e'er a bit strange, Tommie?'

There was a startle in the Keep for sure.

'Strange, Mr H?'

Logan with a feint of innocence smiled.

'I said is there e'er a bit of goss around the place, Tommie, no?'

'Ah, just the usual aul' talk, Mr Hartnett.'

'Oh?'

'Who's out for who. Who's fleadhin' who. Who's got what comin'.'

Logan leaned across the counter and dropped his voice a note.

'And is there any old talk from outside on Big Nothin', Tommie?'

The Keep knew well what Logan spoke of – the word already was abroad.

‘I s’pose you know ‘bout that aul’ talk?’

‘What talk, Tommie, precisely?’

‘Bout a certain . . . someone what been seen out there.’

‘Say the name, Tommie.’

‘Is just talk, Mr Hartnett.’

‘Say it.’

‘Is just a name, Mr Hartnett.’

‘Say it, Tom.’

Keep swivelled a look around the room; his nerves were ripped.

‘The Gant Broderick,’ he said.

Logan trembled, girlishly, to mock the name, and he drummed his fingertips a fast-snare beat on the countertop.

‘First the Cusacks, now the Gant,’ he said. ‘I must have done something seriously fucking foul in a past life, Tom?’

Tommie the Keep smiled as he sighed.

‘Maybe even in this one, Mr H?’

‘Oh brave, Tommie. Well done.’

The Keep lightened it as best as he could.

‘Is the aul’ fear up in yuh, sir?’

‘Oh the fear’s up in me alright, Tommie.’

The Keep hung his bar cloth on its nail. He whistled a poor attempt at nonchalance. Tommie could not hide from his face the feeling that was current in the room, the leanings and nuance of the talk that swirled there. Logan used him always as a gauge for the city’s mood. Bohane could be a

tricky read. It has the name of an insular and contrary place, and certainly, we are given to bouts of rage and hilarity, which makes us unpredictable. The Keep tip-tapped on the parquet a nervy set of toes, and he played it jaunty.

‘What’d take the cares off yuh, Mr Hartnett?’

Logan considered a moment. He let his eyes ascend to the stoically turning ceiling fan as it chopped the blue smoke of the room.

‘Send me out a dozen of your oysters,’ he said, ‘and an honest measure of the John Jameson.’

The Keep nodded his approval as he set to.

‘There ain’t no point livin’ it small, Mr Hartnett.’

‘No, Tommie. We might as well elevate ourselves from the beasts of the fields.’

2

## **The Gant’s Return**

That hot defiant screech was the Bohane El train as it took the last turn onto De Valera Street. The El ran the snakebend of the street, its boxcar windows a blurring yellow on the downtown charge. The main drag was deserted this windless a.m. and it was quiet also in the car the Gant was sat in. There was just a pair of weeping hoors across the aisle – Norrie girls, by the feline cut of their cheekbones – and a drunk in greasy Authority overalls down the way. The El train was customarily sad in this last stretch before dawn – that much had not changed. The screech of it was a soul’s screech. If you were lying there in the bed, lonesome, and succumbed to poetical thoughts, that screech would go through you. It happens that we are often just so in Bohane. No better men for the poetical thoughts. The Gant took a slick of sweat off his brow with the back of a big hand. He had a pair of hands on him the size of Belfast sinks. The sweat was after coming out of him sudden. It was hot on the El train – its elderly heaters juddered like halfwits beneath the slat benches – and the flush of heat brought to him a charge of feeling, also; the Gant was in a fever spell this season. The tang of stolen youth seeped up in his throat with the rasping burn of nausea and on the El train in yellow light the Gant trembled. But the familiar streets rushed past as the El train charged, and the pain of memory without warning gave way to joy – he was back! – and the Gant beamed then, ecstatically, as he sucked at the clammy air, and he listened to the hoors.

'Fuckin' loved dat blatherin' cun' big time!' wailed one.

'Fucker was filth, girl, s'the bone truth of it,' consoled the other. 'Fucker was castin' off all o'er the town, y'check me? Took ya for a gommie lackeen.'

He was back among the city's voices, and it was the rhythm of them that slowed the rush of his thoughts. He had walked in off Big Nothin' through the bogside dark. He had been glad to hop the EI train up on the Rises and take the weight off his bones. The Gant was living out on Nothin' again. The Gant was back at last in the Bohane creation.

Down along the boxcar, he saw the Authority man mouth a sadness through his sozzled half-sleep, most likely a woman's name – was she as green and lazy-eyed as the Gant's lost love? – and the city unpeeled, image by image, as the EI train screeched along De Valera: a shuttered store, a war hero's plinth, an advert for a gout cure, a gull so ghostly on a lamp post.

Morning was rising against the dim of the street lights and the lights cut just as the EI screeched into its dockside terminus. The train locked onto its berth – the rubber jolt of the stoppers meant you were downtown, meant you were in Bohane proper – and the EI's diesel tang settled, and died.

He let the hoors and the drunk off ahead of him. The Gant as he disembarked was fleshy and hot-faced but there was no little grace to his big-man stride. A nice roll to his movement – ye sketchin'? The Gant had old-time style.

The station is named Bohane St Francis Xavier, officially, but everyone knows it as the Yella Hall. The Gant sniffed at the evil, undying air of the place as he walked through. Even at a little after six in the morning, the concourse was rudely alive and the throb of its noise was by the moment thickening. Amputee walnut sellers croaked their prices from tragic blankets on the scarred tile floors, their stumps so artfully displayed. The Bohane accent sounded everywhere: flat and harsh along the consonants, sing-song and soupy on the vowels, betimes vaguely Caribbean. An old man bothered a melodeon as he stood on an upturned orange crate and sang a lament for youth's distant love. The crate was stamped Tangier – a route that was open yet – and the old dude had beltlers of lungs on him, was the Gant's opinion, though he was teetering clearly on Eternity's maw.

Choked back another tear did the Gant: he was big but soft, hard yet gentle.

The early edition of the *Bohane Vindicator* was in but the bundles had as yet to be unwrapped by the kiosk man, who listened, with his eyes closed, to an

eerie sonata played on a transistor wireless – at this hour, on Bohane Free Radio, the selector tended towards the classical end of things, and towards melancholy. Nodded his head softly, the kiosk man, as the violins caught.

Oh we'd get medals for soulfulness out the tip end of the peninsula.

The Gant settled into the blur of faces as he passed through. The faces, the voices, the movement – all the signals were coming in clear. They told that he was home again; it was at once painful and beautiful. He looked for her in every woman he passed, in every girl. He bought a package of tabs off a lady of great vintage wrapped in green oilskins: Annie, a perpetual of the scene.

'Three bob . . . tuppence?' she said.

There seemed to be that question in it, for sure, as if she recognised him back there beyond the dead years.

'Keep the change for me, darlin',' he said.

A hoarseness to his voice, emotional, and his accent was still quietly of the peninsula even after the long years away. Years of sadness, years of blood – this Gant had his intimate agonies. A snatch of a lost-time song came to him, and beneath his breath he shaped the words:

'I was thinkin' today of that beaut-i-ful land,  
That I'll see when the su-un goeth down . . .'

The hoors who had wept on the train were ahead of him now on the concourse. They had gathered themselves. They were painting on bravery from snap-clasp compacts as they walked. The hoors would be bound, he knew, for Smoketown, and its early-morning trade. The Gant watched as they went through the Yella Hall. Ah, look: the quick switching of their bony buttocks beneath the thin silk fabric of their rah-rah skirts, and the way their calves were so finely toned from half their young lives spent on six-inch spike heels. The sight of the girls made him sentimental. He had run stables of hoors himself as a young man. There was a day when it was the Gant had the runnings of Smoketown, a day when the Gant had the runnings of the city entire.

Was said in Bohane the Gant had run it clean.

He stopped for a shot of tarry joe by the main portal of the Yella Hall. It was served expertly by a midget from the back of a licensed joe wagon. He watched, rapt, as the midget tamped the grounds, twisted a fix on the old

Gaggia, arranged a tiny white cup to catch the pour. The midget also was familiar – a squashed little brow, a boxer's nose, oddly sensuous lips. Same midget's father, the Gant would have sworn, had the licence on that chrome wagon before him. The generations tag so in Bohane. He drank the joe in one, and shivered. He thanked the midget, and paid him, and he let the coffee's bitter kick arch his eyebrows as he looked out to the first of an October morning. The gulls were going loolah on the dockside stones.

Of course those gulls were never right. That is often said. The sheer derangement in their eyes, and the untranslatable evil of their cawing as they dive-bomb the streets. The gulls of Bohane are one ignorant pack of fuckers. He had missed them terribly. He laughed out loud as the gusts of morning wind flung the birds about the sky but he drew no looks – sure the Yella Hall would be crawling with wall-bangers at the best of times.

The Gant set out towards the Smoketown footbridge. He took a scrap of paper from his pocket and opened it. He read a hand that had not changed with the years – still those big, nervous, childish letters – and its scrawl spelt out these words:

Ho Pee Ching Oh-Kay Koffee Shoppe.

The Gant had a wee girl to meet at this place. It was a good time for such a meeting – he could be lost among the crowd. Smoketown, he knew, would be black at this hour of the morning. The late shifts from the slaughterhouses and the breweries were only now clocking off. Bohane builds sausages and Bohane builds beer. We exist in the high fifties of latitude, after all, the winters are fierce, and we need the inner fire that comes from a meat diet and voluminous drinking. The plants worked all angles of the clock, and after the night shift, it was the custom to make for S'town and a brief revel. In the dawn haze, the brewery lads were dreamy-eyed from hops fume, while the slaughterhouse boys had been all the silver and shade of night up to their oxters in the corpses of beasts, filling the wagons for the butchers' slabs at the arcade market in the Trace, and the wagons rolled out now across the greasy cobbles, and it was a gorey cargo they hauled:

See the peeled heads of sheep, and the veined fleshy haunches of pigs, and the glistening trays of livers and spleens, skirts and kidneys, lungs and tongues – carnivorous to a fault, we'd ate the whole lot for you out in Bohane.

The Gant hunched his big shoulders against the morning chill. The lowing of condemned beasts sounded in bass tones on the air – our stockyards are laid out along the wharfs. The Gant stepped over a gutter that ran torrentially with fresh blood.

How, he wondered, was a man expected to think civilised thoughts in a city the likes of it?

He kept his head down as he walked. He would try not to romance the place – he had work to do. His was a face where the age receded as often as it surfaced. Sometimes the boy was seen in him; sometimes he might have been a very old man. The Gant's humours were in a rum condition – he was about fit for a bleed of leeches. His moods were too swift on the turn. He was watchful of them. He had a sack of tawny wine on him. He untwisted its cap and took a pull on it for the spurt of life – medicinal. There was pikey blood in the Gant, of course – the name, even, was an old pikey handle – but then there's pikey blood in most of us around this city. Have a sponce at the old gaatch of us – the slope-shouldered carry, the belligerence of the stride, the smoky hazel of our eyes; officer material we are not.

Of course if you were going by the reckoning of pikey bones the Gant was old bones now for certain. He was fifty years to paradise.

And life tumbled on, regardless.

All the red-faced lads went in chortling twos and happy threes in the direction of the footbridge. These gentlemen of Bohane tend to be low-sized and butty: the kind who would be hard to knock over. Smoketown is their bleak heaven. And there is an expression here to describe a man in moral decline:

There is a fella, we say, who's set for the S'town footbridge.

It is a humpback bridge of Big Nothin' limestone. The Gant walked it and reached its high point, above the black river, about the nauseous rush of the Bohane river, and he descended into Smoketown. Each of our districts has a particular feeling, a signature melody, and he felt the dip in the stomach, the swooning of the soul, the off-note, that entrance to this neighbourhood brings.

Smoketown laid out its grogshops, its noodle joints, its tickle-foot parlours. Its dank shebeens and fetish studios. Its shooting galleries, hoor stables, bookmakers. All crowded in on each other in the lean-to streets. The tottering old chimneys were stacked in great deranged happiness against the morning sky. The streets in dawn light thronged with familiar faces. The Gant felt at once as if he had never been gone. He might get a twist yet on the combinations of the place. Maybe the Ching girl would give instruction.

The Gant threw a swift look over the shoulder – in his condition, he was

intuitive – and he spotted that the Authority man from the El was on his trail now, and apparently had sobered. His movement, then, was already noted – the Gant scolded himself for being so taken. High innocence! But to be followed was in some ways a relief. It told that his name meant something yet. He stopped on his way and rested against a grogshop wall. He saw the Authority man stop also and peer casually at a stack of mucky postcards.

To throw him off, the Gant entered a hoorshop, and he found there that most familiar of S'town fragrances – the age-old blend of rash-calming ointment, Big Nothin' bush-weed, and penny-ha'penny scent.

He paid the tax to a scowling hoor-ma'am, and he ascended to the upstairs slots, and there on the rush matting he spent time with a Norrie girl, and there was little enough but time spent.

'Are you lonely?' she said to him.

'I'm so lonely I could claw my fuckin' brains out,' he said, and she laughed, and she lit a coochie for him. 'Dinky little number, ain't ya?' he said, dragging deep.

'You wanna have another try off it?' she said.

Later, when he emerged to the street again, the Authority man was no longer to be seen, and the Gant moved on towards the Ho Pee. Now the city shimmered in the new morning's light, its skyline loomed in shadow, but it was what was out and beyond again, the Gant knew, that was the cause and curse of us.

Beyond was Big Nothin'.

## **A Marriage**

The Hartnett seat was a Beauvista Gothical, a gaunt and lumbering old pile, all elbows and chimneys. Its thin, tall windows were leaded and reproachful, its gable ivied, the brickwork sharply pointed and with a honeyish tone that emerged fully now against the blue of late morning in October. It sat plumb on a line of po-faced old manses that made a leafy avenue up top of the Beauvista bluff. The Bohane Dacency had built their Beauvista residences to face away from the city – though the money that built them had been bled

from it – but Logan Hartnett and his wife were Trace-born, the pair of them, and they kept a rooftop garden on a terrace shaded by the chimney stacks, and it was oriented to look back across the great bowl of the city, as though in nostalgia for it. They spent a whole heap of time up there.

Catch them in the morning light – so elegant and childless.

Logan sat at the wrought-iron table. He wore ox-blood boots laced high, a pair of smoke-grey, pre-creased strides, and thin leather braces worn over a light blue shirt. He was tentative in his private domain. He warmed his hands on a bowl of tea and he regarded his wife.

‘You knocking along the town, girl?’

‘Why’d you ask?’

‘It’s a simple question, Macu.’

‘You want every minute of my fuckin’ day, don’t you?’

Macu, from Immaculata, her sidelong glance hot with Iberian flare. Her father was a Portuguese off a fishing boat who got beached up in the creation. He married Trace, and Macu was dark-complected and thin, with a graceful carry of herself, and a sadness bred into her. One of her eyes was halfway turned in to meet the other, but attractively so.

‘All I’m asking is are you going to town?’

‘Hard to keep away,’ she said.

‘Who are you seeing in town?’

She wore a sleeveless fox-fur jerkin against the chill of the morning. She worked a pair of secateurs along the wall-creeping rose bushes. She ignored the question. Sometimes, she could knife the very thought of him. Right there between the shoulder blades – feel the sweet bite and settle of an eight-inch Bohane shkelp. But the slyness in him could soften her still.

He winced at the sour herbal bite of the tea. She went to the table and poured a fill for herself. She had let it stew till it was brown as old boots.

‘Nettles,’ she said.

‘Surprise me,’ he said. ‘Ne’er a chance of a mug of joe in this place, no?’

‘Good for the kidneys,’ she said.

‘Nice to know,’ he said.

By the look of him, he had hardly slept but that was not new. An hour or two, no more, and Logan Hartnett was awake to the city again. The black shadows beneath his eyes made for a gauntness but this, he maintained, merely added to his air of wasted elegance. She’d gainsay him but halfways believe it.

‘Got to head down soon myself,’ he said.

‘All fall apart without you,’ she said.

Bohane was seasonably calm down there. Always there are these pet days in October, when the impression of peace – at least – lies briefly on the place. Church bells sounded and did not pierce so much as emphasise the drowsiness of the morning.

‘Got the fiends to talk to, ain’t I?’ he said.

‘Ain’t you always,’ she said. ‘The Fancy, the Fancy . . .’

It was the last morning there would be heat enough in the sun to sit outside. He sipped at his tea. There was a fresh worry in him, a sliver, from somewhere, and she enjoyed that, and she knew not to try and coax it. It would come soon enough.

‘You seein’ Girly?’

He sighed.

‘Oh, I’ll look in, I suppose.’

Girly Hartnett, the mother, was eighty-nine years of age, and in riotous good health. Girly was the greatest rip that ever had walked the Trace but she resided now in a top-floor suite at the Bohane Arms Hotel. The curtains hadn’t been drawn back in decades.

‘Kisses from me,’ she said.

‘She’ll be waiting on those.’

It was satisfaction to lay a hand on the flatness of her belly. Holding well,

she felt, all things considered. Logan, he always said she could crack walnuts between those thighs. He squinted as he watched her. His skin was almost translucent in the morning light. She saw now he was ready to reveal the bother.

'Well,' she said.

He smiled at the read she had of him.

'It's probably just old talk.'

'S'what the place is made of, Logan. What's it particular?'

'They're saying the Gant's back.'

She was not prepared for this.

'Gant Broderick?'

'You know any other Gants?'

She tried to keep an evenness to her voice.

'Who's sayin' this?'

'Word all over. Word in the shebeens. Word on the wynds. Word is, he's back on Nothin'.'

'Shitetalk,' she said.

'In all probability,' he said.

When it was the Gant had the Bohane runnings, it was Macu had been by his side.

Her father had been taken by Bohane – the place has a way; visit just once and you will forever be homesick for it. He opened a bar on De Valera Street. He called it the Café Aliados after a square of his home town. He married, and the girl was born, and she gave a measure of youth back to him, a late radiance in his life. The Aliados became a haunt of the Back Trace Fancy as the years passed. Hard for a Fancy boy not to notice the looker working the joe machine, capping the beer, laying out the saucers of pumpkin seeds. A lick of the tarbrush, surely, but she was Bohane to her bones, Bohane in the sharpness of her glance and the quickness of her tongue.

The Bohane taint was stronger than blood.

‘Y’worried?’

He looked at her, open-faced. He shrugged and turned again to the morning sun.

‘If there was truth in it,’ he said, ‘the timing wouldn’t be so hot.’

‘Why so?’

‘Cusacks are playing up and all, girl. Could have random assaults coming at me from all fucking sides.’

‘S’the fun o’ the life you picked, Logan.’

‘That we picked. I hear you.’

He would not ask her directly how she felt about the Gant’s return. There are areas too tender for even the longest marriage. Twenty-five years the Gant had been gone out of Bohane.

It was the morning when she would bring in the pot plants from the rooftop terrace – the hardwind would soon be up for real. She set to the task as though she had no other cares but she kept her eyes down and hidden from him.

Her mind raced, her heart ached.

The dim greens and blues of her pitcher plants murmured to her in the morning sun.