

One

It was a warm bright morning at the end of July when Grace Tynan consulted her map of County Meath. Its shape reminded her of France, and she involuntarily thought of vineyards now, and little street cafés full of locals. And baguettes, brown and warm from the oven. And crepes, perhaps with clotted cream and a little sugar . . . oh, she wished she'd made time for breakfast this morning.

'Anyhow!' she said. She talked to herself quite a bit in the car. Some days they were the only decent conversations she had.

There was a packet of cheesy crisps in the glove compartment and she opened them now. It was a free sample that Ewan had brought home. Free samples were one of the perks of his job. If you could call it a perk – they still had a whole case of Mega Curry Beans to finish up.

Thank God – here came an elderly man on a bike. She rolled down her window and beeped her horn enthusiastically. 'Hello there!'

He hadn't expected this, and his bike wobbled dangerously.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘It’s just that I’m lost – would you be able to point me in the direction of Hackettstown?’

He looked at her rather peculiarly, she thought. Perhaps it was a mistake to have flagged down a strange man on a deserted country road. Especially in a flash car with her leather handbag lying on the front seat. She might as well beg to be car-jacked! Really, this was the very last time she would swap with Lisa – if she really was getting a wisdom tooth out, the fifth now by Grace’s calculations.

But the man just said, ‘If you’re *sure* you want to go there, drive on about two miles, take a left at the crossroads and then the next right.’ He added heavily, ‘Good luck,’ before wobbling on.

‘Thank you!’ She quickly scribbled down what he’d said on the back of an envelope. She had learned over the years never to trust her own memory when it came to directions. It was already burdened enough with the school-run rota, essential items she must buy in the supermarket and nine different pin numbers. Oh, and the damned passports! She must ring Ewan as soon as she could, because he wouldn’t remember them either. Head like a sieve, Ewan. It hadn’t always been that way. His memory seemed to have got worse over the years as hers had improved, a development that hadn’t escaped her in its convenience.

Hackettstown. Twinned with Wart-Hausen. Grace slowly drove past the road sign and up a narrow mean main street, which boasted outlets such as Go West Fashions and Brenda’s Unisex Salon (20% off dry-cuts on a Monday). But there was a brightly lit

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Spar farther up, and quite a pretty little square with some roses in it – mind you, a group of the town's teenagers seemed to be tearing the heads off them, and threatening each other with what looked to be penknives. They turned dull envious eyes on her silver BMW as it went past.

'Hello there!' She waved a bit nervously at them and drove on.

Bridge Road was out in the suburbs. The driveway of Number 17 was empty and the house looked deserted. Grace parked acceptably and turned off the ignition. The radio, set on some station the boys favoured, was cut off mid *boom-boom*. She had only been listening to it at all because one of the other mothers had told her at the school gates that the whole class was tuning in to explicit songs about sex and drugs. But after weeks of monitoring, Grace had yet to make out a single word in any of the songs. Except perhaps 'yours was yum', once, but she was too embarrassed to report this to the others. Also she wasn't quite sure what it meant. Well, she had her *suspicions*. Then she found that she couldn't get it out of her head: yours was yum, yours was yum! And she a married woman, a mother, and therefore not expected to think about sex. (Why then did she find herself wanting to rush out and buy the entire album?)

Ten to nine. Good. She was early. She closed her eyes and lay back in her seat.

The car was a good place to think – or not to think. Grace could spend the whole day in the car, dreaming, and indeed once had.

Mind you, that had been open to a slight misinterpretation.

'Oh my God, Harry, she's after killing herself!'

'Quick – can you see the hosepipe? There must be a hosepipe from the exhaust!'

'Still, would you blame her? Would you blame *anyone*?'

'Shut up! We need to pull out the hosepipe!'

She'd opened her eyes to find Hilda and Harry Brennan from next door pressed against the windscreen, handkerchiefs clamped over their mouths. At least they'd cared enough to investigate. The boys would have come eventually, she was sure. Hunger would have brought them if nothing else. Would Ewan? Probably. It would depend on how engrossed he was. Well, he did work from home. He couldn't always come running every time a member of the family decided to disappear for ten minutes, as he had said mildly at the time. He had a point, of course – but at the same time, how long *would* she have to be gone before he'd come running? Three days? A week, perhaps? She was being most unfair now, he felt – he would certainly notice if she disappeared for a week. At that juncture the Brennans had made their excuses and left.

Grace had continued to enjoy stolen moments in her car. It wasn't that she was anti-social or unfriendly, but honestly, didn't you get heartily sick of people sometimes?

'Hello there, Grace! Found the place okay?'

A red-faced man of around forty propelled himself out the front door of number seventeen and towards

her car. He had a tape measure in his hand, extending out to about ten inches, and he waved it at her excitedly. 'I've got something to show you.'

Grace got out of the car, doing a swift trawl through her short-term memory banks – Fergus? No, Fergus was yesterday. This one must be Frank. After ten years, clients were beginning to look the same she was ashamed to admit.

'Frank – nice to meet you again.' He'd been in the office last week.

But he ignored her outstretched hand now and brandished the measuring tape with a loud snap. 'That fellow from your office measured up the place wrong,' he announced. 'The bathroom is nearly a whole foot wider than what you've put down on the brochure.'

'Is it?'

'Eleven and a quarter inches, to be exact. Look!'

'I'm sorry about that. I don't think it'll make much difference, though.'

She was taking this altogether too calmly for his liking, she could see.

'Some people,' he said, 'bathrooms are their *thing*. Sandy spends about four hours on average in the bathroom every day. That's why she never picks up the phone if you ring – she can't hear it, you see, what with taps running and water gurgling and the ballcock hissing.' He must have seen Grace's startled expression, because he added, 'She's a Pisces, she loves all that.'

'And Sandy is . . .?'

'My fiancée.'

'Oh! I didn't know you were engaged.'

'There's no need to look so surprised,' he said.

'I wasn't—'

'You think nobody would want to marry me? You think I'm not relationship material or something?'

'Not at all,' Grace said, trying desperately not to look at the small pimple on the end of his nose. The more she tried not to look, the more she *looked*, until all she could see was one enormous pimple. Dear God, had it started to throb?

'Anyhow!' she said, whirling around to look at the house. 'You have a very nice place here, Frank.'

More lies. It was a horrible low brown bungalow with nasty net curtains and fake oil lamps over the front door. A small notice had been propped in the glass panel: *No Jehovah's Witnesses Please*.

She retrieved her clipboard from the car and consulted it efficiently. 'I have three couples booked in to view your house this morning. Now, the first pair is due in about ten minutes, so you should really . . .'

He just stood there.

'You might have a little shopping to do . . .?'

He still stood there.

She said gently, 'Or you could just drive around if you don't have anywhere to go.'

His chin jutted up. 'Of course I have somewhere to go! I have any number of places I can go. In fact, I've been invited over by a very good friend of mine – Mrs Carr. That's her house across the road.'

Grace looked over. The house was like something from a fairytale – all turrets, and bits added over the years, higgledy-piggledy. An ancient sign hung over

the pink door saying *Lodging House*.

Grace thought it was a shame she wasn't trying to sell it, rather than Frank's brown bungalow. They didn't sell houses outside Dublin as a rule. They had only agreed to take on Frank's house at all because he was related to one of the partners' wives – an accident of marriage, she had been at pains to point out.

Frank was looking across the road in discontent. 'Look at that grass verge out the front!'

Grace did. 'What's wrong with it?'

'Nothing! That's the whole point! Because I had to take out my own lawnmower this morning and mow it. She couldn't be bothered. She never can. But I didn't want people arriving here to view my house thinking that this was some kind of lower class neighbourhood, some shabby do-what-you-like kind of place to live.'

'Well, people do tend to notice their surroundings,' Grace offered, patting his arm. Over the years, she had come to realise that her job wasn't just about selling houses. Depending on the situation, she was often required to provide moral support, relationship counselling, intervention in community disputes, and sometimes just to jolly people along. Lay people didn't realise how multi-layered a career in property was! They thought, rather harshly, that it was all about location and greed and pitting cash-strapped purchasers against each other like it was some kind of blood sport.

'Still, we mustn't lose sight of the bottom line, Grace,' as a young male manager from Head Office

had explained to her at a 'training meeting' last month. 'Sales, sales, sales!'

Apparently, she was taking too much time with clients. Gathering unnecessary detail about a property, such as the fact that Paul McCartney's second cousin had once owned it. Or encouraging clients to stay in touch once their properties had been sold, that kind of thing.

'All that might have been fine when you started as a trainee a decade ago, Grace.' He made it sound like a century. 'But with competition what it is, we just can't expect to deliver the same kind of personal service we used to.'

She had looked across at him and, with all the weight of her experience and the maturity of her thirty-four years, had slowly explained to him that these were people's homes they were talking about: places where they had laughed and cried and fought and lived and, in a couple of cases, died (although, she assured him, that this was not something she generally pointed out). Moving house was for some people like ripping a heart from its chest! Surely he could see that it was part of their job to support their clients as well as take their money?

'Absolutely,' he had said, smiling and nodding, before informing her that they would be setting time limits on call-out visits to assess or show clients' homes.

In pure defiance now, Grace gave Frank an encouraging smile. 'Go on.'

'Well, in the end she said I could mow the verge but I wasn't to touch the garden gnomes.'

Grace saw the gnomes now. There were three of them, all grinning widely, their hands wrapped firmly around fishing-rods. Someone had broken off the rods halfway down. The result was unseemly.

'Vandals,' Frank said, his complexion turning a darker hue.

'There's no point in falling out over a garden gnome, is there?' she said soothingly, trying to usher him towards the gate.

'It wasn't the gnomes we fell out over. It was the rosebushes.'

'Pardon?' she said.

'I just gave them a little trim. Well, more than a trim. But honestly, people like her, they let down the whole tone of the place. And I ended up telling her that too. Been wanting to for eleven years!' he finished up stoutly.

Grace had heard of plenty of people who had feuded with the neighbours soon after moving in, but never upon moving out. And after eleven years too! It was a tragedy. Mrs Carr seemed such an interesting person as well; apart from the gnomes, she had two wooden deckchairs parked on the uneven front lawn, and a rickety plastic table, as though she might decide at any moment to flop down with a bottle of wine and say to hell with the world.

'Frank,' she said, with the calmness and authority born of years of family mediation, 'why don't you go over to her and just apologise?'

'She says that she'll never open her door to me again.'

'She would if you bring her a replacement rosebush.'

'She says she's got her husband's shotgun.'

'I'd imagine she was pulling your leg.'

'She showed it to me.'

Grace looked over at the house. 'Are you sure?'

'What, you think I dreamed it all up or something? You think I'm hallucinating?'

'No, I just meant that it might have been a toy or something. My sons have water guns and they look very real—'

'She says she's so mad at me over the rosebushes that she's going to come out and stand on her front lawn and wave the shotgun around when people come to view the house. She says she might even fire a round or two into the sky if the mood takes her. She says that nobody will buy my house when they see they'll have a raving lunatic right opposite.' He paused for breath. 'I wasn't going to tell you, but I suppose you should know.'

'Thank you,' Grace said, faintly.

'So,' he said, 'what do you think we should do?'

The first thing that came into her head was that she did not have time for this. She was booked on a three o'clock flight from Dublin airport to Heathrow, and from there she was flying to Orlando. She was going to Disneyland today – hurrah! Well, tomorrow at any rate. The first night they were staying in a motel somewhere on the outskirts of Florida. She had never stayed in a motel before. The very word conjured up seediness and sex and debauchery, and she found herself strangely excited by it. Perhaps that's what happened when you went to the Isle of Man three summers in a row. Or listened to too

many obscene lyrics on the radio.

'Let's call the police,' she declared. This was their area, surely.

Frank's eyes popped behind his thick glasses. 'We're going to have people arriving to view the house at any minute! We can't have police cars parked outside!'

'Maybe we could ask for an unmarked one or something?' Grace wondered aloud, reaching for her mobile phone. Should she dial 999 or just ring the local Garda station directly? But she didn't know the number of the local Garda station and so she'd have all the rigmarole of ringing directory enquiries. If she rang 999 it seemed to be making such a big deal of it. Then again, a gun was a big deal in this country. She would dial 999.

'Look, I know her,' Frank pleaded. 'She likes to huff and puff. It's not as though she'd actually go through with it.'

'We can't just ignore it.'

'Why not?'

'Because she might shoot one of the potential purchasers!' Not to mention her. But Grace was professional above all else.

'Not if we get them to park as near to the house as possible,' Frank said. 'Then kind of encourage them to run to the front door keeping their heads low. Once they're inside, they're safe, and you can show them the house. Then we get them back out to their cars the same way, and tell them to drive off fast.'

'Maybe we could get a booking deposit off them as well before they're shot dead?' Grace enquired coolly.

'Oh, come on! The woman's a nutter! How many nutters have you come across in your profession?' He stared at her rather psychotically. 'If you were to pander to them all, you'd never sell a property! Nobody would ever move house!'

Grace's hand wavered on her phone. It was tempting . . . and, really, he was probably right about Mrs Carr saying that just to frighten him.

'Why don't you just ring your office? They'll know what to do,' Frank suggested.

Grace felt rather patronised. 'We don't actually have a set of guidelines lying around on what to do in the event of threatened shootings, Frank.'

Anyhow, it was after eight thirty; right now all senior staff would be in the meeting that was held on the last Friday of every month to assess performance and set targets. The rest of the crew would be on the road, like herself. Some of them had been showing houses since seven this morning (to facilitate people on their way to work) and would still be showing them at seven tonight (to accommodate people on their way home from work). Grace sometimes thought it was only a matter of time before they went twenty-four hours. And opened a branch in Hacketts-town.

And even if she did phone the office, she would most likely be referred to herself. She had a reputation as being 'a safe pair of hands' (which always managed to sound vaguely insulting). If anyone could deal with shootouts, Grace could, they would declare. She didn't know why. It wasn't as though she encountered violence on a daily basis in the

drawing-rooms of the middle classes. This was hardly what you'd call a high-risk job. Not physically, anyway – certainly there were huge risks financially, as she had often explained to Ewan. Look at the asking price for Frank's house, for example! People having to mortgage themselves into old age to pay for it! It was only worth half the money, in her opinion. Three quarters at most. But you couldn't say that to people, of course; increasingly, selling houses made her feel very dishonest.

'Try selling people a chocolate bar that claims to aid weight loss,' Ewan had said gloomily.

'You got the account then?' It would be nice if just once they finished off a conversation about her job before they moved on to his. But apparently selling second-hand houses was not as exciting as dreaming up television advertisement campaigns, and there was no use pretending that it was. At least, nobody in Grace's house pretended, and hadn't for years.

'By a whisker,' Ewan had said. 'Right now I'm playing with, "Slimchoc – the Chocolate Bar with Lots of Taste that Sheds your Weight!"'

'And does it?'

'Does it what?'

'Shed weight?'

'Oh, I don't know, I doubt it. We have to talk to the legal people yet. We might have to add, "as part of a calorie controlled diet".'

His gloominess had all but disappeared. It was an act he put on periodically to pretend that he belonged to that greater part of the human race who generally hated and loathed their jobs. But it was no use. The

man would literally hop and skip up the stairs to his study on a Monday morning with indecent haste, humming little jingles under his breath, or trying to find a three-syllable word to rhyme with 'bubblegum'. There wasn't one, he'd informed her cheerily, at least nothing that wasn't obscene.

'So, what do you think?' He'd waited keenly for her opinion on his slogan. She had once been very flattered by this, until he had told her that she was a living example of most advertisers' demographic ideal: a white middle-class female in her mid-thirties with a couple of product-hungry children and a successful career to fund luxury goods and impulse-buys. She had taken umbrage; he had said, you're at the top of the food chain, what the hell are you complaining about? She didn't know really. It made her sound so smug, or something.

He added, 'I brought a box of samples home, by the way. Jamie's already had one. He says they taste like washing-up liquid.'

So they would join all the other samples that were piling up in the garage. Despite her nagging, Ewan wouldn't throw them out. In some ways he reminded her of a small boy, hoarding things up. When she emptied out his trousers pockets to take them to the dry-cleaners she didn't find mysterious phone numbers or credit-card receipts for lingerie shops, but elastic bands and half-eaten chocolate products and pencil sharpeners. And a foam cup from the inside of a ladies' padded bra once. That had aroused her interest, until he'd explained that when it was matched with a second bra cup, which his colleague

Mick had in *his* trouser pocket, it formed exactly the right spherical profile for the new Easter Egg campaign they were working on. They couldn't use the Easter Egg itself, of course, which was entirely the wrong shape to sell itself.

She had believed him. Nobody could make that up. Besides, Ewan would have neither the interest nor the organisational capability to have an affair. It wouldn't be because he was so dedicated to Grace, so desperately in love with her. He did love her, she knew that. But sometimes she suspected that he would love any woman who had ended up agreeing to marry him – so long as he was left largely to his own devices, of course, and wasn't interfered with too much. He mightn't like her so much then.

'Oh my God,' Frank squeaked beside her. 'Take cover!'

'What?'

'She's pointing the gun at us!'

Grace swung around towards Mrs Carr's house. One of the side panels of the front bay window was open. Something long and shiny was poking out under the net curtain and directly out across the front lawn at them.

'Are you sure it's a gun?' she asked, trying to buy time.

'What else do you think it is?'

'I don't know . . .'

'Her Hoover maybe?'

'I'm just saying—'

'Don't just stand there chattering, for heaven's sake! Take cover!'

Heedless of chivalry, he elbowed past her and dived down behind her car, commandeering the safest spot by the driver's wheel.

Grace stood alone and exposed in the middle of his cobbled drive, staring across at the double barrel poking out of Mrs Carr's front window. Net curtains had never struck her as menacing before now.

'Hello there!' she tried, giving a friendly wave across. She had read somewhere that sometimes it worked if you established a personal relationship with the aggressor. 'Lovely morning!'

The gun malevolently reared out another inch.

Really, when you thought about it, the whole thing was rather cowardly on Mrs Carr's part, Grace decided. If she wasn't going to declare herself openly, then why should Grace demean herself by galloping hysterically to her car? On the other hand, she did have two children at home who needed her (sometimes), and a husband who loved her (he had said so two Christmases ago), and she should give some thought to her own safety. She would, she decided, take cover, but she would do it her way.

So, very casually, very unconcerned, she turned and started to walk away. Not wanting to appear to be making for the car too obviously, she did a little circuit of Frank's front yard, her hands clasped at the small of her back as though she were out enjoying a Sunday afternoon stroll. When a robin chirped nearby, she raised her head towards it and allowed a faint smile to play about her lips.

'What are you doing?' Frank barked. 'Do you want to get your head blown off?'

She quickened her step after that, and approached the car at what she hoped was an oblique angle. Then she looked down and pretended that her shoelace had come undone (she was wearing sandals). She *tsk-ed* loudly before bending down as if to tie it. Then she made a crafty and dramatic lunge sideways for the protection of the car, landing on top of Frank.

'Watch it!'

'Sorry.'

She wasn't really. Her heart was pumping fast with unaccustomed adrenaline and her face was strangely hot. She felt like she was in a western, or at least *Hawaii Five-O* – although, on the telly the aggressor tended to be a sinister attractive man rather than a dotty pensioner. She couldn't wait to tell the boys about this. Her, dodging shotguns! Surely they couldn't fail to be impressed?

Although you wouldn't know. Since they'd been about eight she'd had the feeling that they considered her to be mostly background noise. Well, that was probably unfair to them – it was just that she had been hurt about it and still was. In the space of about six months they had changed from her soft-faced twin babies into these semi-grown ups who wanted replica Uzi machine guns for their birthdays, and who spent most of their time beating each other to a pulp. What they did not want any more was her undivided attention and love – she would always remember that heartbreaking moment when Jamie had wriggled out of a kiss, a look of near contempt on his face. It was Ewan they followed around now, Ewan they implored to 'Watch this!' and 'Will you come outside

with us? Pleeease?'. Grace would be left waving them off at the doorstep like some kind of benign and detached housekeeper whose sole function was to provide clean socks and hot meals.

Disney had been her idea of getting them all together as a family again, properly. So she'd booked the whole month off work and bought the tickets, cleverly hiding them in homemade fortune cookies which she'd presented one night after dinner.

'A whole month? We'll go mad,' Ewan had declared, looking worried.

'Would this be during school term?' Neil had asked, the younger twin by twenty-two minutes but by far the craftier.

'My ticket is burnt,' Jamie, the other one, had said.

Grace had looked around at them all. They could have changed the car with what this trip would cost. They could have gone to the Maldives, and lay on the peaceful sand for a month, which was what she would have liked, instead of traipsing around the Enchanted bloody Tiki Room in the scorching sun in Florida.

So instead of cajoling and pleading and talking them around, she had dumped the Disney brochures on the coffee table, and let them do what they wanted! They had opened them, of course, and seen the fantastic water rides and the jungle cruises, and they were dying to go then.

A loud, high-pitched call cut through the morning air. 'Frank Gorman! You stay away from my house now, do you hear me?'

Frank visibly shook. 'Jesus Christ. She's going to shoot me.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Grace said. Lifting her mobile, she rang 999, and inched up a little to peer through the car window and across the road. Someone had stuck a piece of chewing-gum to the inside of the window. Neil probably. She would murder him.

'Don't provoke her,' Frank warned.

Across the way, the net curtain was pulled back a bit from Mrs Carr's front window. Grace caught a glimpse of lots of white-grey hair piled atop some kind of ruffled dress, or bathrobe. She was reminded of one of the witches from *Macbeth*. The gun was now halfway out the window. It jerked unsteadily before being cocked haphazardly towards the sky.

'Does she drink at all?' Grace asked.

'Like a fish,' Frank confirmed.

Then the net curtain fell back into place, as though Mrs Carr were tired of holding it. Or possibly she had gone to get another drink. The shotgun stayed.

Grace's feet started to ache. Her sandals had three-inch heels which always hurt after about an hour, but what could she do? A certain image had to be presented when selling houses, especially houses in the better parts of town. This accounted for the racks of sophisticated, neutral-coloured suits hanging in her wardrobe at home. The general idea was to complement a property's décor scheme; to blend in, as such. Once she had blended in so well that a client had lost track of her in the same room. There she'd been, standing right by the wall the whole time, while he had turned around in circles muttering, 'Where's that blasted woman gone?'

'Emergency services.' The 999 operator's voice

burst out of her mobile phone.

'Police, please,' Grace said.

A pause, then a man from the police switchboard was on the line, asking her what he could do for her.

'I'm at Number 17, Bridge Road,' she said efficiently. 'And there's a woman across the way who's threatening us with a gun.'

A gun? He sounded alert.

'Yes. A shotgun.'

Was she sure?

'A double-barrel shotgun,' she said for good measure.

She heard the man saying something to another person in the background, and she looked at Frank importantly. This was probably the most exciting thing that had happened to them all month. It certainly was to her.

The man was back on the phone. Was this woman threatening them right now?

'Yes. There was a dispute over a rosebush, you see.'

A rosebush?

'That's correct. Frank mowed down her rosebushes and she got mad.'

Who was Frank?

'Mrs Carr's neighbour.'

Okay, who was Mrs Carr?

'The woman with the gun . . .' Grace could sense she was diluting his interest with unnecessary detail. 'Look, it's all a bit complicated. The fact is that she has a gun and she says she's going to fire a few shots into the air if the mood takes her. She might even do it right now.'

That got his attention again. Was the woman pointing the gun at them at this moment, he wanted to know?

'Yes,' Grace said decisively.

She could actually see the gun?

'Yes, I can actually see the—'

Across the road, the gun abruptly withdrew and the window slammed closed.

After a little pause, she said, 'Would you believe it – it's gone now!'

The policeman paused too. And the woman, he wanted to know?

'She's actually gone too . . . but she was there a second ago. With the gun. I saw it with my own eyes!'

She could feel herself being ticked off at the other end of the phone as a crackpot to be checked out whenever a patrol car had a quiet ten minutes.

'Aren't you going to come down to the scene?' she asked.

He told her he would send a car.

'When?'

Soon. In the meantime, she was to stay exactly where she was. Under no circumstances was she to approach the woman or in any way attempt to communicate with her. That went for that guy Frank too.

'Okay. Thanks for your time!' Grace said. She always ended her phone calls like that. It was a work habit. Even when people took up *her* time, she ended up thanking them.

Frank was fretting. 'I hope this doesn't affect the sale.'

'I'm sure it won't.' To take his mind off it, she said,

'So, where are you moving to?' She expected him to say Navan, or Dunboyne maybe.

'New York,' he said.

'Oh!'

'Sandy is American, did I not mention that? Yankee Doodle, I call her! She loves that – cracks up every time. She says I've got a great sense of humour. Anyway, she lives in Brooklyn. She works as a nursery nurse, but just until she has her own kids, she says, then she's going to give up work and be a stay-at-home mom. But at the moment she's just happy doing her job, and taking out her disabled kids' group at the weekends and doing the soup kitchen for the homeless on Tuesday and Thursday nights.'

It was a wonder Sandy got to spend a minute in the bathroom at all, never mind the four hours daily that Frank gave her credit for. But Grace just said, 'Wow! A busy woman.'

'Too busy,' Frank with a frown. 'I tell her, you know. I say, Sandy, you have to think about yourself sometimes. But she doesn't listen. It's no wonder she's been feeling tired lately.'

'When are you moving over?'

'Two weeks' time,' he said. 'I'd have gone sooner only I'm finding it kind of hard to fix up a job over there.'

'What do you do?'

'Birds,' he said.

'Pardon?'

'I'm an ornithologist. I do work with wildlife foundations, zoos, that kind of thing. And I'm compiling a book, *An Introduction to Birds For Beginners*.

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Sandy thinks it's a great idea, she says she had no idea until I came along that it was a complete myth that cuckoos went around dropping eggs in other birds' nests the minute their backs were turned. Well, they *do*, of course, but it's much more complicated than that. Sandy says she could listen to me going on about birds all day,' he added.

Grace said, 'I suppose New York . . . well, there would be pigeons, wouldn't there?'

Frank didn't seem too worried about his slim job prospects. 'Sandy says she'll support me for a while.' How she would do this on a nursery nurse's salary, he didn't say. His big red face was all dreamy. 'She's just amazing, do you know that?'

Well, she seemed to like Frank, Grace thought, and that was surely a feat in itself.