

Sleeping with Actresses.

I

Walking into the Abbey foyer you were left in no doubt that Pat Molloy was some sort of literary genius and that his play "Easter" was a modern masterpiece. Pat's craggy features, his face lined like the cracked bark of an oak tree, his forehead jutting forcefully above the eyes before receding into a disappearing hairline, his eyes, at once solemn, visionary, introspective, disdainful, his long, thin, pursed lips, and pointed, dimpled, chin, stared out intimidatingly from the grey slate gloom of the commercial poster advertising his play.

The poster was everywhere, on the glass panels of the entrance and exit doors, pinned to the central pillars which held the great institution up, jostling with aged portraits of aged or dead Abbey greats on the stairwells, even on the door of the gents. Pat Molloy's stern gaze followed you Christ-like around the foyer seeing your every move and perhaps your every secret thought as well; the inference was clear, this man would see into your soul if you were not afraid to let him. But something in his portrait, a sort of glaring, passionate wilfulness, meant that you were afraid, and that you sipped your coffee and nibbled your chocolate, while evading sheepishly his searching, questioning look, by lowering your eyes and turning your back to it. Whoever had drawn that portrait had turned Pat Molloy into a deity.

Alongside the portrait the scrawled testament of famous names paid tribute. Alan Saccerman, the well-known English playwright wrote: *"Pat Molloy is the inspiration for everyone else who writes. This man has the key to all the doors of the heart."* The imprimatur of the English going far in Ireland.

Another Englishman, Anthony Fashaw, a literary critic who had, it was said, pierced the gloom of Molloy's work, was quoted at length: *"...he, Molloy, has torn away the veils of darkness that have obscured our knowledge of the Irish heart and soul; he has woven Irish experience back into Irish history; he has given us a play full of meaning about the searing heart of a nation, a race, fighting for survival, stolidly defending itself against nature and imperialism..."*

Briefly, Jack Mangan, robust theatre critic with a leading Sunday Newspaper and garrulous television personality, edged his quote in: *"... the new Sean O'Casey..."*, and out.

Dick Brennan, the play's designer, made his maudlin contribution: *"I cried reading "Easter". It's heartbreaking. It takes your breath away. It crushes you. Ireland's terrible past rolls over you like a juggernaut. A juggernaut called Pat Molloy!"*

Finally, the neat, direct testimony of Cait Murphy, historian, philosopher at the National University, and producer of the televised Irish history series *"Ireland-a place apart"* delivered her coup-de-grace: *"Pat Molloy's "Easter" is Ireland! Make no mistake, the two are now inseparable!"*

The opening night midsummer audience of mainly American

tourists and first night celebrities nodded sagely to each other, reassured that here was no exercise in sentimentalised kitsch, but real theatre, a genuine expression of artistic endeavour and insight, performed in the very cradle of modern theatre, the world-renowned Abbey. The fact that this was no mere first night but the first night of a revival, the play being twenty five years old, and proof positive that "*Easter*" had stood the test of time, added to the clearly heightened anticipation of the Americans and the celebrities. They were present at an event; here was a great play by a great playwright; they would not be disappointed; even if they thought the play was awful they would bow to the judgement of others, the carefully laid out views of Alan Saccerman, Cait Murphy et cetera, and accept that its greatness was simply beyond them. In any case, being there, present at a precious moment of theatre, was what mattered most.

It had been impressed on Pat Molloy, with unmistakable clarity, by Jan Dolan, his agent and manager, that "*being there*" was what mattered most. *Enscorced* -he loved that word, it was so *English*, and he loved *English*- at the Abbey bar, in a corner where he would remain unnoticed, and freely served whisky by that most understanding of bald-headed barmen, who was also called Pat, bald-headed Pat, the mirror of his own destiny -he too would one day be bald Molloy told himself, stroking his bare forehead- he asked himself, feeling alone and unprotected: "Where the hell is Jan? Where is she?" The girl was late. The girl had forgotten him. How was he to face all these people

alone? With a drunken smile accepting their plaudits. With a short acceptance speech: "Thank you!" With a nod, and a wink, and a bow, if he could manage it. He already felt his feet had difficulty coming to terms with the barstool rung. If Jan didn't come soon he was going to play the part of the footless Irish bard dancing to whisky's tune; but good Jesus, just in time, there she was, good little Jan, his bundle of joy, but not with that heart-stopping bollix Pispenn in tow, he hoped; not with *that little...* Jesus, he wouldn't like to say it!

But she was with Pispenn. Pispenn was leaning towards him with a hand on her shoulder. "Pleased to meet you at last, Pat," he said, offering his hand. "You're the only playwright I'd offer my hand to!"

Pat leaned back precariously, preparing to catapult a withering crudity at Pispenn, but Jan preempted him; her voice, with its sharp slanting American points brought home from New York, filled the cruel, gaping void of his mouth: "Sean wants to write an article praising your work, Pat. He's an admirer. He thinks you're wonderful; the best there is! He came here expressly to pay his respects. He wants so much to shake your hand..."

She nodded significantly towards Pispenn's still outstretched hand. Pat took it reluctantly. "To the bawling brat of Irish journalism," he rasped. "The newspaper whelp... Your prose makes me shudder! Is it true you eat it, digest it and shit it, before you write it?"

The three laughed loudly, gleefully. Pat's abrasive wit was legendary. He was in form. They could all relax now.

Jan Dolan had been taking care of Pat Molloy for the last five years. More than an agent, the short, energetic, young woman with blonde hair cut short, round childlike face and big innocent eyes, had almost been a mother to him. She cooked him his meals, cleaned his flat, bought him his clothes, dressed him and undressed him, put him to bed and got him up again in the morning, she told him what to do and what not to do, she washed and shaved him if necessary, and from time to time had even been known to cut his hair, for which service he called her his Delilah. Sometimes he resented her "interference" as he called it and gave her a lick of his tongue for her pains but deep down he realised he'd never function properly without her. His life was a drama produced and presented by her. She did everything for him and the reason was, he well knew, that she had fallen hopelessly in love with him some years before his creative star had waned, when they had lived out a brief but fiercely passionate love affair. Jan had remained steadfastly devoted to the writer, whom she claimed *"was better than anyone who knew him could imagine"*. Jan's stunning success with Molloy was not just in making a presentable human being of him but also in maintaining his stature as a major playwright despite the diminution of his talent. In fact only she was aware, Molloy himself was not, of how little talent was left; the bottom of the barrel had been scraped a long time ago.

Jan's brilliant strategy was to recycle Molloy's early plays on the strength of the highly-praised middle ones; she had persuaded the Abbey to take on board Molloy's *"Easter"*, a hymn

to the resurgent nationalism of the mid-sixties, which had enjoyed a modicum of success in its time. She had managed the entire publicity effort for the play, presenting, with the willing collusion of her friends and contacts, Molloy's status as important/major/significant playwright as a fait accompli. She had succeeded so well that many a critic in an evening newspaper would write, automatically, without even thinking about it, that Molloy, was a "wonderful", "marvellous", or "brilliant" playwright, who wrote "stunning", "powerful", "passionate" plays. Now she had enlisted Sean Pispenn, the youthful, sparkling, new generation columnist, about whom everyone was talking, because he was in his own words "iconoclastic". Everything Pispenn wrote about was either damned or celebrated with unpredictable inconsistency; he didn't care whether he was right or wrong, he wanted only to be read, noticed, talked about.

His provocative, offhand style was built on obscure inventions of his own playful imagination, linguistic peculiarities, slang, neologisms, mostly to do with parties and inebriation, like *splocka*, that point of drunkenness where the subject has to be hauled out of the toilet bowl, or *spranger*, an acutely painful erection. His opinions were never considered but thrown on the page with abandon; determined to be subversive he wanted his views to have no value whatever apart from that of drawing attention to him; he was not afraid to write something that made no sense whatsoever, knowing that, to his audience, what made no sense was more interesting than what did.

Obscenities, along with abundant references to sex and intoxication, were his stock in trade; he littered his script with them. He hinted regularly of torrid sexual engagements with unknowns who passed in and out of his life and whose initials he hung like medals on the warped language of his text. *That JN, he might write, was a real bazoomazooma; left me all plip-plop! Me bed's bollixed since! Hot as the sun's backside, she was... Made me her dinnertime. Style stiletto sticky steal all! Pazoo, pazoo, pazoo! If you're still in touch with what makes me? Anytime, sweetheart. I'm awrack already. Let's go!* But he was read. Even more, he was a sensation, exactly what he wanted to be, and if he said: "go see Molloy's play *"Easter"*, one really must be seen there!" - there were those, young and beautiful, who would go just as if he had ordered them to a new nightclub or restaurant where "one really must be seen".

His was energy Jan Dolan wanted to harness for Pat Molloy; she saw the infinitely creative possibilities inherent in the fusion of two entirely opposite forces. She persuaded Sean Pispenn of the advantages.

"It's a form of symbiosis," she said persuasively, "we're trying to bring together two intrinsically conflicting aspects of our culture to create a unique social and artistic event."

Pispenn picked his nose pensively.

"Symbiosis," he asked, "is that where the animal shits on the vegetable he's later going to eat?"

Jan smiled her affection for his waywardness.

"You're just like Pat sometimes," she said. "Just like

him!"

Pispenn was more interested in Jan Dolan than in Pat Molloy. Jan's interest in him stimulated his ego, and for the same reason, the stimulation of his ego, he wanted to bed the pert, laughing blonde. If that happened, and he wasn't going to force her or pressure her in any way, then she could have her praise for Pat Molloy. Pispenn was indifferent to the idea of sincerity and flattery as relative forces; his belief was that everything emerged from human frailty, apparent sincerity and wicked lies included, and thus having a single origin, all was equal in the world of truth. To praise Molloy would probably cost him nothing; he had praised many before who had not deserved it, just for the heck of it, just for the amusement of himself, and of his world. The fact that Jan had been, in her previous incarnation, i.e. before she became Molloy's mother, an actress of some little repute, legitimised Pispenn's interest in her. As a precocious fourteen year old -he had always been precocious, he still was- he had been seduced, deflowered, debauched, by the buxom, middle-aged actress friend of his mother's, Moya Kirby, who said she needed the experience for a role she was playing. As a result, Pispenn had formed the notion, true because he believed it to be so, that actresses were a territory proper to him; and because his mother moved in that circle, she was a producer, he had ample opportunity to perfect his approach and appeal to that particular branch of female society.

Since launching himself on the scene as an aspiring

journalist, he was sixteen at the time, he had made his column the battering ram of his intentions. Column inches were the way to an actress' heart; he teased her with his "prick" as he called it, and if she liked it, and responded well to his efforts, well then she could have all of it. Thus, from time to time, his column was inhabited by a ruling muse to whom it was unashamedly devoted; famous initials that had figured there belonged to JC, Jackie Connolly, PW, Peebee Whorlhead, AK, Angela Keenan, IB, Imelda Brandt, HW, Helena White, FK, Fan Komly, TO, Tess Ories, CR, Christina Race... There were many, many more besides. All famed names in theatre circles; and all sacrificial victims to Pispenn's art as well as their own.

Jan Dolan was not exactly a glowing prospect to hang up alongside these other trophies but Pispenn wanted her all the same. She was known around town as a serious minded, determined, hard-working woman, not easily deflected from her cause; meaning, Pat Molloy. But Pispenn thought he might succeed in deflecting her. He was already working hard at it. He began where he always began, by telling her about his life.

"My father walked out on my mother when I was still a child. He thought she was too free and easy as far as her moral behaviour was concerned. I guess he thought I was some sort of bastard."

Pispenn's dark eyes, crawling with spectres from his past, locked in Jan's and would not let them go. He unfurled his voice like a white flag of peace to float before her. He spoke with extreme unction, in his most priestlike tone. He was just a regular guy at heart, he wanted it understood, a far cry from

the brazen tongued brash belling character who scribbled his column in thoughtless haste.

"I guess underneath everything we're all the same," he said to Jan. "We hide behind invented language, an invented persona, like actors and actresses do, pretending to be something else altogether, but the real person behind must come out sometime."

He squinted meanly at Pat Molloy who was not listening.

"Isn't that right, Pat?"

But Pat didn't, couldn't, wouldn't respond.

"You're going bald, Pat!" Pispenn spat contemptuously at him.

Still Molloy did not respond.

"The great bald playwright!" Pispenn laughed to Jan.

Jan glanced anxiously at her watch.

"I think it's nearly time..."

Pispenn protested.

"But I've hardly begun to tell you about myself! Aren't you interested?"

Jan looked around distractedly.

"I wonder who's come?" she said, half to herself.

"I've come! I've come!" Pispenn answered loudly. "I don't care who else comes or doesn't come!"

Jan noticed a tall woman in a long black velvet robe with a short red jacket hanging from bare, freckled shoulders, mounting the stairs.

"There's Helena White," she announced to Pispenn.

"Usen't she to be a friend of yours?"

Pispenn barely glanced around to see the apparition of the woman he used to call, "*La belle Helena*", or alternatively, depending on his mood, "*Poire Helena*". "*Every protuberance shaped like a pear,*" he had written in his column about the mysterious HW. But she had never been a friend, always an enemy, and much more than both. A fighter in bed, she had flayed him with her nails; for Helena every conquest was hate-filled and a call to mutilation; none moreso than Sean Pispenn.

"Hardly knew the woman!" Pispenn reassured Jan.

"Barely FNT with her."

"She's coming this way!" Jan warned him.

Pispenn performed a pirouette of startling gracelessness.

"Darling, how lovely to see you!" he cried. "You are a vision of beauty!"

Helena offered a rouged cheek to be kissed. Pispenn pecked like a chicken at it.

"This is Jan Dolan," Pispenn introduced them.

Helena smiled weakly past Jan at bleary-eyed Pat Molloy.

"I knew that man when he was something," she said sharply. "Before you came on the scene, Jan."

She lit and puffed at a cigarette, holding it in her best centre-stage manner.

"I hate being in the audience on first nights," Helena said. "I never feel that I belong there. I'm much more at home on the stage."

She drifted away towards a suited, enigmatic looking man wearing a long pony tail, who was obviously waiting for her.

"That's Ken Vincent," Pispenn whispered to Jan. "You

know, manager of the "*The Shallow Devils*" up and coming pop group... The guy's a millionaire, so they say! A real shit cat! A catch for Helena by any standards."

Jan looked after the retreating couple with no sign of real interest. The buzzer sounded and the usher called out.

"Please take your seats now, ladies and gents, doors closing!"

"Let's get Pat inside," Jan said, and together, their arms laced through Pat's, they hauled him into the auditorium and keeled him into the seat reserved for him just inside the door.

Jan cursed herself for having arrived too late; too many whiskies had practically annulled Pat's awareness; he was on the verge of sleep, ready to drop off, she hoped he'd come to before the end of the play. She sat beside him, ready to pinch his nose if he dared snore. Pispenn sat inside her, his hand resting lightly, reassuringly on her sleeve.

"Everything is going to be alright," he whispered.

Some rows in front he could see Helena White and Ken Vincent. He felt slightly jealous. In spite of everything, he had liked Helena in bed; the element of danger had appealed to him. The scent she was wearing stole across the few rows of seats between them and carried a cargo of memories with it. It was Chanel of course, Helena only wore Chanel; she used to dab it behind the ears of her pet cat, the ginger beast, Ozymandias, or Ozy for short... That pussy! It ate only chocolate biscuits. It slept in a bed of its own with satin sheets. But it would

tear you with its claws without warning, because pain was its favourite nutriment. Ah, such memories! Pispenn sighed wistfully, and felt a burgeoning nostalgic gratitude towards Moya Kirby whose attentions had pointed his life in this direction. Life was good, good, good, as far as Sean Pispenn was concerned, and maybe he'd look Helena White up later, when he'd done with Jan Dolan. No, he mustn't forget the matter in hand. Symbiosis. He tightened his grip on Jan's sleeve; the lights went slowly down and in utter darkness the actors took their place on stage. Almost instantly Pat Molloy began to snore.

In his youth Pispenn was a frequent, if irreverential, pilgrim to the hallowed Abbey stage. He brought all his loudest, most foul-mouthed girlfriends there: the lovely young things, aspiring actresses who had taught him his bedplay. He encouraged them to be the centre of attention; to claim it from the audience, mostly timid corpse-like creatures afraid to protest.

"Oh, fuck it, darling! This is boring the tits off me!"

Pispenn and his friends orchestrated their own symphony of noise, animal laughter, the squeals of pigs, prolonged grunting, as sensurround to the play in hand and their own purulent egos. The busy disapproving stares of those in hearing only excited them to more inane cackling and moribund commentary. Children intent on shocking adults.

"Oh Darling, do you think you could fuck me when this is done? I need a fuck most exceedingly badly! It's at least five hours since I last had one! A fuck, I mean!"

But all this was long ago. Having been thrown unceremoniously out of a side exit by a large American actor, The Iceman Cometh, descended from stage, had quenched Pispenn's ardour a little. His girlfriend trapped inside had been told by the incensed American, ex-army boxing champion, that if she "so much as said boo", he'd "eat her fucking head off!" Which humiliation she blamed on the luckless Pispenn. Pispenn had learned his lesson.

Still, sitting listening to Pat Molloy's dreary masterpiece "*Easter*" he hankered for the excitement of those days. True, those spoiled over-sexed rich young things were usually as stupid as they were loud and obnoxious, but that was a good equation in bed, and that's why, ultimately, he chose them as his companions. He was always assured of a good hot fuck if nothing else. And they always felt themselves amply repaid to be seen on the arm of Pispenn the "iconoclast", and possibly to earn some inches of his anarchic, pronounced *chic*, column.

If he had one of those Susan's or Sylvia's here with him now how he'd set her yelling her top off to distract him from this gloomy trash of Pat Molloy's. It was enraging. Easter Sunday, 1916. The Republicans in the G.P.O. The clatter of British horses outside. The smoke and fumes of battle. The squalling of the wounded. One by one the leaders addressed their men, women too, all soldiers in the fight for Irish freedom. What was there more than a pastiche of schoolroom texts, received history, and a ragbag collection of soliloquies patched together? Pispenn, genuinely angry, felt like spitting towards stage. This pretence at meaning, dressed up as costume drama,

sixties pabulum, cartoon characters in a cartoon world, insulted his intelligence! Pispenn groaned inwardly. This meant he'd be giving the play a good review. He loved to praise the worthless; but it was not without its cost. It always hurt him. He, Pispenn, genuinely suffered for his art.

"I love it," he said to Jan at the interval. "It has something... It definitely has something."

The second half was as brutally unrelenting as the first. Moreso. Speeches by the leaders. Some talk of death and destiny as the denouement approached. Their efforts would not be in vain. Though defeated they would be vindicated. They hoisted the flag, the Irish flag, which was the emblem and promise of resurrection; the rebirth of a nation's hopes and dreams. Pispenn waited impatiently for the final, ennobling moment of surrender. He wanted to cheer, as, marching out into the smoke streaked shadows of the Post Office arcade, the jeers and laughter of the Dublin populace fell in a torrent on the revolutionaries. The applause of the audience burst out.

"Bravo! Bravo!" Pispenn called loudly, nailing his colours to the mast, and demanding, "Author! Author!"

Jan pushed Pat Molloy out of his seat. In the sudden glare of a spotlight, his hand shielding his eyes, he staggered gently, cautiously towards the stage. Helped on board by a knot of smiling, green-coated rebels, he looked out sheepishly over an audience on its feet, flapping their hands, like the stunted wings of baby ducks, in his direction. He stood to attention and

saluted them. He grasped the flag and waved it backwards and forwards over the front rows. A cheer went up. Pat started to sing the National Anthem and behind him the assembled troupe felt constrained to mumble vaguely in uncertain Irish an accompaniment. As the Anthem, gathering strength all the time, drew to a close, Pat crashed his feet into the stage and shouted, "Up Galway! Up Galway!" -Galway was his native county- as if he was at a football match. Then, under a welter of thunderous applause he descended from the stage, ascended the bright, narrowing tunnel of the spotlight, made his way back to his seat, and exhausted, collapsed into it.

II

Pispenn sketched his review on a piece of toilet tissue. Downstairs Jan tucked Pat under a heavy patched quilt against whose weight he struggled uselessly. He slept almost immediately, his face relaxing into a posture of near angelic sweetness, which sometimes seemed to her an indicator of his true, though seldom evident, disposition. In reality his artistic temperament was barbed and virulent and could deliver its poison at any moment without warning. She knew this only too well and had forgiven him much in the past. But tonight, tonight... Tonight she felt as if she was getting old and was no longer as resilient as she used to be. She'd tried to hurry Pat out of the Abbey at the end of the play but ensconced once more at the bar Pat was determined to drown his success. Pat accepted graciously the flattery of everyone who approached him. He spoke at length and without interruption to a succession of

well-wishers who each carried away a fragment of his tale. Through a haze of whisky he recounted his life story and his rise from obscurity to fame: "twenty five years I've been at the top now, my star has never waned", he told them, and repeated, as if they were so many journalists come to interview him.

"Of course I had to leave my wife and children! An artist must know when to jettison all that stuff! Never grow otherwise... Don't blame me! Shakespeare left his wife, didn't he? What's more important: wife or art? Art, of course! I am the true inheritor of bold Shakespeare from Stratford in England; his lifestyle and his language are mine! True, I despise the English, but I love English! They say it's a cruel language and that Irish is a gentle one, but I don't think so: all language is cruel! Anything, any system of signs or codes that can be used to tell lies or tell truths is by its nature cruel! When my wife told me to get out of the house and leave her in peace, was that not cruel, and equally cruel in the original Gaelic I dare say... Even the deaf and dumb with their sign language could cut strips out of you with those hands of theirs if they wanted. Hands are crueller than tongues, don't you know. Irish hands have been crueller with me than English tongues!"

He went on for a solid hour and a half in this vein, his speech punctuated only by long draughts of whisky, and though a worried Jan signalled to bald Pat the barman to cease the flow, bald Pat was an ex-alcoholic who gloated over drunkenness in

others, and would not be deterred. Bald Pat brought missionary zeal to his profession of barman; with each tendered glass he manufactured a world in his former image and refreshed his remembered despair.

Eventually with the help of Pispenn Jan managed to prise Pat from his barstool and drag him out of the Abbey and into a waiting taxi. She asked Pispenn to stay and help her and he agreed readily with charm, grace and eagerness to do so.

Pispenn was more impressed by the long hour and a half in which Pat had held forth like a manic Shakespearean hero, an hour and a half which had ended in an improvised symphony of howling dog noises, which Molloy claimed he had learned from some dead Seanos singer who had visited him in a dream and entrusted the loveless dog melody, which he called "*The Dog at Dusk Laments his Dead Love*", to him, than by anything he had seen or heard on stage. Molloy was not a great dramatist but he was a great "character", a great "Irish" character: hard-drinking, feckless, anarchic, pronounced *kick*, verbally incontinent, laying waste to his store of talent that the Gods had cursed him with.

"An Irishman's pub is his stage!" Molloy had roared out. "And every Irishman in it but an actor!"

He looked vaguely round at his universe.

"We are such stuff as dreams...", he burped meekly.

Pispenn thought it was simply hilarious.

"If only we could get this Prospero on stage!" Pispenn said enthusiastically to Jan.

"If only we could get him to bed!" Jan sighed, feeling tired and empty.

Pispenn seated on the toilet seat wrote the word "anarchy" in a sleek, unfolding arabesque across the pink folded tissue flattened in the palm of his hand. It was beautiful. He had really enjoyed his evening. He must tell Jan. He was comfortable, even happy, sitting on the seat of the toilet. Shitting. He liked shitting. "Who says the anus is not the seat of virtue?" he asked himself out loud. He felt like singing. He began to hum quietly a soft acappella version of an old forgotten song from his distant youth: his teenage dream, his nihilistic dream of no future, his anthem. "I will lay bare the womb of time..." he promised the four yellow walls of the bathroom. He sang.

"I am an antichrist,
I am an anarchist!"

His own music made him heady. His penis hardened. He flushed the toilet and made himself ready. He girded his loins for battle. The world really was a beautiful place.

When Jan emerged from Molloy's bedroom, Pispenn was waiting. It was his moment. He had a smug, expectant look on his face which Jan was too tired to notice. She wanted to sleep. When he put his arms around her shoulders she pushed him away but he just wrapped himself, octopus-like, around her again.

"Jesus, Sean," she said, injecting a strong note of irritation into her voice. "Not now! Come off it! Some

other time! Not with Molloy in the next room! I'm tired! Sean, leave me!"

Pispenn's weight pulled her down. On the floor their limbs tangled untidily. Jan trying to get up. Pispenn holding her down. Breathlessly, angrily, she warned him off.

"Stop it, Pispenn! I'm not interested! Leave me alone! For Christ's sake, I'm tired! I don't want to fuck you! Listen!"

Pispenn pressed his weight down hard on her; his hand clamped tightly over her mouth. He was taking her choice away, she realised. Struggling, she bit into the edge of his hand. Suddenly he hit her. Hard. She felt a tooth crack and blood trickle into her mouth.

"Listen!" Pispenn said, twisting his face into her body, his mouth tearing at her throat. "I know you want it! I know you like to play games with me! Actresses all! But you don't fool me! I've been sleeping with actresses since time began! Pispenn knows all the games you play! I'm better at them! And I always win in the end!"

He sat on her and began tearing, one by one, the buttons off her blouse. He threw them in the air and tried to catch them in his mouth.

"This is fun!" he said, spitting a button across the room.

He rocked back and forth on her; he rode her brutally as if she was a toy wooden horse; he pulled her hair through his fingers and pulled it tight like reins.

Frightened, Jan began to caress his arms and legs.

"C'mon, Sean, lie down here beside me... Be nice to me. I like you, you know? I admire you... Will you write about me in your column?"

Pispenn dismounted her, raising his leg in a wide arc through the air. He gave her a broad, wide-eyed grin; the pathetic grin of a circus clown. He opened the waist of his trousers, shaking with savage laughter.

In the morning he brought her strong black, steaming coffee and left it, cup and saucer, on the floor beside her, before letting himself out. The morning air was crisp and clear as he walked to the bus stop. The birds were singing to the new-born day and nothing seemed amiss with the world. Pispenn strode jauntily along whistling to himself, his head held proudly high. The Johnny Cash song: "Walk tall, walk straight, look the world right in the eye!" The song he'd learned as a kid at his mother's knee. One of his favourite songs.

There was poetry in the air. As he walked he kicked small twigs and fallen leaves away from his feet. "Ah Autumn, prelude to the dying year..." Christmas was coming. Ah, yes, he thought, he'd straightened Jan Dolan out alright, just in time for Xmas. Pity she was the recalcitrant type, didn't know what she wanted, what was good for her. He knew the type. Too much hard work. Wouldn't get much of a write-up, JD, in his column. She wasn't dirty enough; just lay there. Some men liked that, but not Pispenn, no, no... Still, he'd done her a favour, hadn't he? Knew her game the minute he saw her, knew what she was after,

saw what she wanted. What was it about him? He'd always had women, they couldn't seem to get enough of him. He turned them on, he the singer, they the song. JD had practically begged for it. Would have been an injustice to say no to her. The moral equivalent of raping a woman, turning her down like that! And Pispenn would never do a thing like that... Didn't need to! Had them queuing up! See it in their eyes all the time: the silent prayer. Looking for it. Whether they knew it or not.

But all that was neither here nor there. Pispenn turned his attention to his next column. Pat Molloy would get a *slacker* of a review, meaning a good one; though he'd thought up a good jibe about the *Flintstones meets Irish Nationalism in Yabadabadoo Land* which he might use. He'd have to slip in something about JD sure enough; couldn't let it be unknown that he'd *flanged* her, a euphemism for "made love to violently". And maybe for the heck of it he'd throw in something about HW, still as *spalucha* as ever, meaning as sexually desirable as ever. Never know when she might climb off that Ken Vincent's lap and come crawling into his. Make sure the message got to her. Run up the flag. I'm waiting. Come and get me! Dab Chanel behind my ears, then tear them off with your teeth!

Under a dawn coloured faint lemon yellow, Pispenn smiled complacently at the workings of his own creative and colourful mind. He congratulated himself on how powerfully creative he felt this fine morning. It was sex that did it. Yeah, sure it was! Sex always set the creative juices flowing. He knew it. He could feel them *spaduuming* around inside him. Sex never let him down. Thank God for sex! For women! And for actresses! Pispenn's

very own camp followers; Pispenn's brothel of joys... Pispenn thanked his lucky stars, the stars still visible at dawn. At least he had not come away empty-handed from Jan Dolan. She had given him something for his pains. Something he was suitably grateful for. Creativity

Pat Molloy fumbled his way out of sleep. Paralytic with drink, he twitched his arms and legs painfully on either side of him and found he could barely move. He wondered vaguely if the inevitable devastating stroke had come. He tried to call for Jan but could not. He tried rocking himself on the bed to dislodge himself, to push himself off the side on to the ground and crawl to her, but it was useless. He couldn't budge. He was trapped, like a heavy stone, by his own inertia, by his past. God, he hated waking up, to remember himself.

It was always like this in the morning, memories, not dreams coming to lie their weight on him like so much heavy puppies; the past always waiting for him to wake from sleep. Flat and pinioned he had to allow them burrow into him and make him their warm bed. Ah shit, how long was it now since he'd had no dreams, only his past? He'd give anything to dream of a big, stout woman with arms open for him to lie in, or a nice, fat cheque slipping in the letter-box, reward for his great achievement, money for whisky, stroke money, instead of the pit that hung underfoot each time he stepped out of sleep: his past.

The past had seemed alright at the time; it hadn't worried him, it had left him to his own devices, like a disinterested friend. Now it came like a moneylender claiming an outstanding

debt; a cobwebbed, grey creature seeking its due. But how could you reclaim on a past already lived? Or on a past the future had made a lie of? Because the future did make a lie of the past: all the effort of plays, all the adulation of the stage, all the flattery and awards, the women and the money, the drinking and fucking, even those times when he thought he was happy and looked happy in photographs, all that time, was vain, stupid, pointless and illusory. It was all a lie and he had been fooled by it. Look at him now! Look at him! Sometimes he wished he was back home with his wife and children; the only good thing he'd ever had, if only he'd known it. Sunken without trace in the maw of the one word he hated: irredeemable. That word. That awful word. Meaning: *beyond redemption!*

And each morning the past came back to plague him without so much as a knock on the door. Go away! It seemed to sit in the corner of the room, in a corner of his heart, like some hungry, unfed animal, a scrawny, black-toothed thing, saying: "I can't go away! You own me! I belong here!" with its blackened eyes and bruised and broken mouth. Not at all how he wanted to remember it.

At the time everything had seemed fine; he took all that life offered him; he lived like a child, like a child running in a backlane, for the sheer hell of it, the sheer joy of it. There were no debts to pay, except when you broke the furniture, except when you broke something that had to be paid for. Sometimes he'd had to borrow money; borrowed time, borrowed money, he'd known what it was like to live on both. That was what wore him down in the end: scraping for a living, his wife

always demanding more, and the faces of his children each time he came home; and every jewman in Galway riding on his back like so many devils. "If only you had a proper job, Mr. Molloy, instead of this playacting!" The violence it had taken to smash all that up. He was incensed with life back then; he, who'd grown up with the tinkers' children on the wasteground near the canal; he, whose mother said he could roll the moon across the sky if he wanted, because he was her son; he, the wild west boyo who made the shopkeeper's daughter Mary Pringle pregnant in a pitched, patched tent in her own backyard, so they had to ship her off to England; he, whose head was full of savage dreams that he couldn't explain to anybody, dreams that flared up and flashed across his brain inextinguishably, dreams more powerful than any drink that had him reeling and holding his mind in his hands like some fragile crystal ball in which the future burned; he, who drank like a fish, like a lord, and delighted in spewing his guts up over his pregnant wife as he tried to make love to her, one to tell the boys that, they'd admire him for it; he, who had his head in the clouds and his feet in the grave of dreams, if only he'd known; he, the greatest poet who had ever been born, the great Pat Molloy from Galway, he knew it now alright, back then, he was incensed, he was enraged, he was passionate, and he was terrified of what was to come! He, he. He, he. Laughter at the back of his mind like a bad joke played on him. The past was a jackal; but at the time it had seemed alright.

They were back there now, Mary and the kids, and they hadn't forgotten him; because each month they had the cheque for

four pounds twenty maintenance, didn't they? Though what she needed it for now with the kids all grown up he couldn't imagine. Bleeding him dry. Women were always bleeding him dry. Thought they were different up here in Dublin when he arrived on the tails of his first success: Moya Kirby in the role of the *Sean Bhean*, a woman raped by the British, the tragic essence of her sex, the symbol of her nation's oppression and terror. Himself and Moya had had some great crack together, the two of them, at first. A couple of years they'd spent screwing each other and she'd always seemed so free and easy, the sort of woman he'd always dreamed of: loose of morals, free with the rest of her. Gave him some really good times before she cracked up and flushed herself down the toilet of his success. Never forget the morning he found her, with her butchered wrists, in the cold, used water of his bath, staring at him with those bulging, bewildered eyes, like a dead sheep hung on a meathook; any feeling he'd had for her died right there; nothing killed desire so much as suicide. He remembered sitting on the edge of the bath and telling her so: "Bad move, Moya! Bad, bad move!" What could she answer, being dead? Her last role, poor sheep.

Molloy had never looked back after that; success followed success; the number of women he'd had in his bed, phew! Did him a power of good to think of it! There was Deborah, and Charley, and Patsy, and Val, and Patricia, and Molly, and Kelley, the Australian, and Mickey, the star-struck American theatre student, and Brid, rising star of a local Dublin acting dynasty, and Kate, producer of his play trilogy, "*The Flag of Wrath*", "*The Land of Ire*", "*The Price of Peace*"; also Cait Murphy, who

had introduced his plays into her university syllabus, and Cait's sister, Mary, when Cait wasn't looking, and Maggie Keogh, the Broadway producer of his trilogy; and other's like Olwyn Bolton, the night she received her actress of the year award after taking over Moya Kirby's role in the "*Sean Bhean*", and Helena White, hadn't he seen her somewhere recently? who wanted him to write a play specially for her; commissioned it and all, offered him fucks anytime he wanted them, one of the best, Helena; and after Helena, some time, some way after Helena came... Jan.

Yes, remembering Jan, he tried to call her name again, wanting her to come and help him, but still his voice defied him and felt like scrambled compass points sticking in his palate. Ah fuck, nothing had been the same since Jan; sometimes he blamed her for disabling him and keeping other women away. And Jan was never that hot in bed: actress material, but never made it; brought failure in between the sheets with her, let him have it like some venereal virus, disgusted him in a way; anyway, he'd never been able to, not really, though he had tried, get it up properly with her. She just didn't turn him on. He'd only stayed with her, hadn't he, out of kindness to her. He knew how much he meant to her. And the girl earned her keep and kept the house clean! What more could he ask? He wasn't that hard, that he'd send her away, for no good reason!

Molloy could no long stand his memories; even the ones that gave him most pleasure hurt him and left him with the void of a life badly lived rotating like a blade inside him. He hated the

way they came like messengers arriving late, over-eager to announce the despair that had already overtaken him, but waiting for the moment when he was most vulnerable, when he lay like a moth clothed in formaldehyde and pinned defenceless to the barren, dreamless canvas of self that sleep disgorged. He hated them. They loved to taunt and mock him like boys in the street baiting a cripple, showing him their shit-besmeared backsides, their ultimate gesture to his gross impotence. They flung their crud at him, shouted obscenities, called him a beggar and a thief of time and dreams, and said he smelled and tasted like their own shit that they offered him to feed himself on: the stuff of memory, the dust and detritus of yesteryear. He couldn't stand it any longer. With one mighty convoluted spasm he jerked towards them to run them off but they remained with insolent stillness before him, statuesque and bold, grinning knowingly, and pitilessly at him, as if he were a fish wriggling and turning on a hook before their eyes, one they were waiting to beat with a stick until his wriggling has stopped.

Rolling himself violently he managed to throw himself off the side of the bed, sending his memories flying like so many frightened birds taking to the air; as he fell his arms beat the air, the darkness in the curtained room, like brittle, withered wings, that could not arrest his flight, but only exaggerated his spin to the ground and made him hit the floorboards harder. He cursed loudly, massaging his back with the flat of his palm; damned back, felt as if he'd been nailed down with a hammer. Still on his back he pushed himself over the floor, digging into the worn, threaded carpet with his heels and inching towards the

door. Little by little the rest of his body came into play as life and movement spread from his feet upwards; he squirmed energetically on his buttocks; used his elbows like angular wheels to cycle backwards on; stretched head and neck forwards like a tortoise does emerging from his shell.

Every inch of the way his back throbbed with pain, but he ignored it, because he needed Jan now desperately, as if his life depended on it, as if his escape from memory depended on it. His voice came back, like an axe chopping the silence of the house for kindling, the voice of a crippled, murderous madman calling for mercy.

"Jan! Jan!" he called, tears in his eyes. "Please!"

She wasn't that far away; he saw her as soon as he opened the bedroom door, curled like a foetus on the sitting-room floor, her back turned to him, not moving; he thought she was dead. He thought that somewhere in the black, leaden nothingness of his dreamless sleep he must have killed her; he always knew he would; many times he'd meditated murder, and Jan had always seemed a likely victim; she was so good, so innocent, so unsuspecting, she saw no badness in the world; she was made for murder. But had he really killed her? He felt a moment of terrible panic. He pushed himself frantically towards her, clawing the air above his face with his hands, as if it were a ladder, until he reached her. With slow, pained movements he managed to hoist himself over her, balanced uncertainly on his knees, ready to fall across her or away from her, and poked her awkwardly with his hands.

"Jan! Jan! Please, Jan! Wake up!"

She looked so small curled up in a foetus ball like that. Was she really so small? There was no response when he poked her, but he thought he saw her eyes moving from side to side, following invisible shapes through the air, like a child does lying in its cot, as if the fabric of dreams was unfolding without sleep and spreading itself across the canvas of the room. He noticed, with some alarm, the slender white line of her arm reaching out from her raised thighs and curving back on itself, carrying her bundled, swollen hand to her mouth, filling her lips with her fingers. She was like a child lying there, like a sick, hurt, abandoned child. What could he do to help her? He couldn't think! Nothing! He'd never been good with children; he could never tell where their pain was coming from. From him? He hoped not. But he always blamed himself. It always felt as if their pain was coming from him. That's why he was afraid he might have hurt Jan.

When he touched her she was stone cold, as if she'd been lying there all night, huddled and frozen in the dark depth of the big, cold house. She was like something spilled and turned to ice, trapped by hypothermia, waiting helplessly for the first gentle thaw. He shook her from side to side as if he might break her away from the ground like an icicle, but she was solid and rigid as she was cold and could not be broken. He wondered what the hell had happened? He hadn't killed her, strangled her, but had he attacked her? Had he left her like this? He didn't think so; he saw no marks or bruises and he would have left some, he was sure of that. But this was not like Jan, not like her at all! Had she flipped it? Turned to stone? Gone to live in

Siberia? The joke he'd made to dead Moya Kirby, her open arms reaching out from the cold water of her bath to him, came back to him with a sudden, pleasant sharpness. He smiled. This was not the time! But he had to laugh. He shook with suppressed laughter; he shook heartily; and Jan at the end of his arms, like a broken puppet on the puppet-maker's bench, shook with him.

At last, he realised, he was not responsible. Whatever had happened to Jan it was not him. He was beginning to feel cold now too; he shivered unhappily; for the first time he noticed the blunt blue and purple stripes of his pyjamas, he thought of his empty bed growing cold and missed the warm, oblivious peace of his sheets. Once he had clambered out of the pit of memory the day did not bother him; he was safe. On hands and knees he scuttled back to his bedroom like a fat, grey, foraging rat scraping through the shadows of morning. He climbed into the hollow centre of his bed, sinking into the deep palm of the mattress, and straightened the tangled sheets over him. He curled himself into a ball like Jan, thinking, "if you can't beat them, join them!" His back was still hurting, hurting badly, like someone had driven a six inch nail in through his spine. Jesus, that was all he needed; his back had never given him trouble. He saw himself edging his way through the streets of Dublin bent double. He laughed at the idea. You see, he could laugh at himself, even with his fucking back broke! No one could ever say Pat Molloy didn't have a sense of humour. Not Pat Molloy the Galway playwright; no, not him, the famous Pat Molloy! Pat Molloy knew which Pat Molloy he meant. He

remembered.

He hadn't shaken them off yet, his memories. As soon as he was back in bed they settled around him like scavengers. He tried to think of something else; he tried to think of a woman he knew, big tits, big ass, oh he loved thinking about her. He pulled the edge of the sheets tight as a noose around his neck. Oh, fuck it, why had they come back, reeling and rocking around him like a parade of circus clowns. Was there no escape from a life lived? Was there no drug, better than alcohol, to kill all this circus? He'd had enough of it hanging like a millstone out of him; he wanted an end to it: his wife and kids, Moya Kirby, the rest of those women, Jan, himself, the rotten plays, all of it...

Jesus, he felt terrible! What was he going to do? Was this death? Was it? Was this going to last forever? It had the ring of eternity about it! Waking from death with a pyramid of dead dreams and decomposing memory heaped on him; unable to move, Prometheus chained to a rock, forever and ever, unable to escape what and who you were, what and who you had been, Pat Molloy from Galway chained to a rock, his memories hammered through him like pivots into a rockface, like nails into a cross -Christ, the pain in his back!- Pat Molloy from Galway, eternal Pat, forever and ever, forever and ever, amen!

Ay, he could just see it: from now till the end of time nothing could, nothing would, ever change; everything would remain just as it was, the same. Damn blast it!

Jan was never the same again; she never applied herself in the way she had before. She got more and more slovenly and the house got dirtier and dirtier. He could hardly get a word out of her for weeks on end before she announced that she was leaving. Molloy's inarticulate, stunned protest, was futile. She had made her mind up.

"Thank you very much, Pat, but it's over."

And it was over. He helped her pack a couple of small suitcases and accompanied her to the airport.

"I don't know how I'll manage without you!" he said, with a great effort at humility.

"Oh, you'll find someone," she prophesied, with a wry smile, the first he had seen in weeks.

The wait for the plane seemed interminable; it had been delayed; Pat wished it would come and let them get the whole thing over with; so did Jan. Eventually it came. They shook hands and Jan let him kiss her awkwardly on the cheek. Before she boarded the plane she handed him a sealed envelope addressed to Pispenn.

"I meant to post this," she said. "I didn't get time."

"I'll look after it," Molloy promised.

From the window of the airport cafeteria Molloy saw her climbing the short flight of stairs to the plane. She looked so small in the distance, like a child standing on the steps, waiting patiently for the other bigger people who blocked her path to move ahead of her into the plane. She never looked back. Molloy knew she was not sorry to leave him, or Ireland. She had

a friend in New York, she was racing there. He thought she might never come back. He knew he'd never see her again. He was glad. For some, reason he couldn't quite describe what it was, she had begun to embarrass him.

Sure enough the house felt empty with her, and so did he, but then there was the visit of young theatre critic, Kit Boland, whose big admiring eyes made him feel full of himself again. In the midst of an intense rehearsed exposition of his work she let him pat her playfully on the thigh; after she left he made a point of filing her name away for future reference, never knowing when it might come in useful. Then there was a phonecall from his play director telling him how useful Sean Pispenn's review had been: audiences were up a third, mostly young people doing the right thing, but some dragging their parents along too. Molloy felt a swell of gratitude for Pispenn and remembered he had a note of Jan's to remit to him. Had Pispenn nobbled Jan? Molloy wondered. He felt sure he had, more power to him, he bet he'd given her a good one. That Pispenn had talent! Molloy asked his director for a cheque and was promptly promised one. How could life be bad when drinking money could be had for the asking? Molloy thanked God with all his Christian heart for the gift he had had from him. Who says God isn't good? he asked himself in the cracked bathroom mirror. And the cracked mirror answered: "Not me! Not me!"

Pispenn's domain was a big, bulky house straddling a hillside over Dalkey bay. Once the home of an artist it was painted a vivid, if peeling, yellow on the outside, and was

roofed with rippling rust coloured slates imported from Tuscany. Inside it resembled a white canvas daubed by a monkey; stray particles of written graffiti alongside crudely drawn figures of human or animal origin represented the only sure touch of human hand. Many of the figures, both human and animal, outlined in thick black paint, were engaged in obscene acts of intercourse or masturbation, often inter-species; under their sprawling, indistinct forms, coarse, screaming, epithets were scrawled with violent energy. Mammoth, dangerous looking vegetation exploded with instant growth into the blind white sky of whoever had dreamed this up: Pispenn, the bold. King Pispenn. Pispenn who did not value colour in his scheme of things. Pispenn who did not think the heart deserved beauty.

Approaching the house from the bay, nothing could have prepared Pat Molloy for the shock of actually entering it. His heart and mind were at peace as he mounted the slackly rising road from the railway station and entered through the great wooden gate and fence that extended like a palisade around Pispenn's house. The drive rose steeply between tall Eucalyptus trees: *Eucalyptus*, the name Pispenn had given his daughter. Molloy had heard the rumours about Pispenn, about the child he'd got, kidnapped some said, and the police inquiry stalled because Pispenn had an uncle who was a friend of the Attorney General. Molloy, contemplating the great yellow monolith of the house standing up high over the surrounding Eucalyptus trees, didn't give a damn about any of that. It was reassuring only that if Pispenn's purple prose had nothing to offer than perhaps his life did. Molloy was always curious to see what was going on in

the intestines of another existence; he was curious to see what Pispenn fed his soul on.

Pispenn himself answered the door, a great heavy housecoat in purple silk, tied with a loosely knotted cord at the waist, undulating gracelessly around his ankles. Pispenn was diminished by his clothes; seeing him in his housecoat Molloy was impressed by the scale of the man physically, his height, his sturdy frame, his hands large like spades inviting him into the interior Pispenn world. On each side of a massive hall, scattered promiscuously on small, round mahogany tables, various couples, human and animal, copulated in bronze, wood, porcelain, and iron. At the top of a broad, sweeping wooden stairs, a garish tableau of a gigantic, long-haired woman, her flesh splayed and oozing, being penetrated simultaneously by the kneeling, truncated bodies of men, whose penises resembled those of animals, stallion, bull, stag, ram, looked down with terrified panic on a ripped and red paint bespattered stair-carpet as if it were her own mutilated body discarded there.

From the distant height of the house Molloy could hear the sweet belling of women's voices calling out and laughing. He was immediately enchanted and looked with honest admiration on the gratified Pispenn.

"My household," Pispenn rewarded him. "Let's go see!"

The house seemed full of those voices emerging siren-like from the depth of some dark forest. Molloy felt drawn inescapably up the broad sweep of staircase, tripping blindly on the torn carpet, stumbling under the fervid, frightened gaze of the giantess on the landing, climbing steeply, dizzily to the

upper floor which seemed to swirl with the light of women's voices. The bare floorboards on the upper landing creaked noisily underfoot like squealing mice as Molloy, led by Pispenn, penetrated reverentially towards a high, bright open room with tall, high windows letting in the sun. Lying, kneeling, sitting on the floor, five or six entirely naked women supervised the play of seven or eight entirely naked children, all girls it appeared to Molloy. The two men stood on the threshold of the room while the scene within enacted itself indifferent to them; it was and felt, Molloy thought, like wandering through a dream; Pispenn had created a dream-world for himself, a real world for his dreams. Molloy wanted to applaud him but did not do so, afraid that his applause might be an untimely intrusion, like someone clapping between the movements of a symphony.

Pispenn led him further into the room and they walked slowly through the reclining figures of the women, the running, playing figures of the children. Pispenn caressed the women as he passed them, running his fingers through their hair, fondling their breasts and thighs, kissing them on the face, neck, and shoulders. The children took no notice. Molloy wondered which one was Eucalyptus and decided she must be the one with long black hair and green eyes who began to turn cartwheels as soon as Pispenn entered the room; of all the women and girls in the room she was the only one who seemed to seek his attention, who seemed to need it. She cartwheeled in wider and wider circles, and more and more energetically, her long hair flying around like a black flaming torch, till she was turning along the walls, swinging out to the furthest edges of the room. Molloy

noticed the walls for the first time, a whorl and dance of female genitalia in crude black and white from floor to ceiling, watching him like so many open eyes, from the flowering white jungle they hid in. It seemed as if the cartwheeling girl whose movement was more and more violent was bound to disappear into one of these crevices until Pispenn, his purple housecoat flying behind him, ran and caught her in his arms and carried her back to Molloy.

"Say hello to the gentleman!" Pispenn commanded her.

The girl's eyes had a savage glow that unnerved Molloy. She leaned towards him out of Pispenn's arms and struck vigorously at him with her fingernails.

"Fuck off!" she shouted, her voice shrill and desperate. "Fuck off! You bastard!"

None of the other women or children took any notice.

Pispenn surveyed the women smugly.

"Would you like to... You know?" he asked Molloy, hitching his eyebrows significantly.

He laughed at his own reticence.

"This is a free zone," he explained. "You can do what you like here..."

Molloy examined the women nervously.

"Go on!" Pispenn encouraged him. "Choose a toy!"

Like a man testing water Molloy advanced hesitantly towards one of the women who lay sleepily prostrate like a gross and lazy cat on a stained but sweetly perfumed sheepskin rug. He knelt behind the woman and rubbed her buttocks in gentle circles with outstretched fingertips. He let his fingers dip between her

legs and pushed the flabby flesh outwards. His eyes sparkled with delight at what he saw.

"My wife!" Pispenn told him, nodding his head towards the prostrate woman.

Molloy stood up and mumbled an awkward apology, without feeling that Pispenn needed or even demanded one.

"Come on, there's more to see!" Pispenn announced loudly. "The bedrooms!"

Molloy followed him silently through the rest of the house, followed everywhere by the voices of the women and children, through an array of bedrooms, all different, all equally disorderly, no sign anywhere of what Molloy thought of as the "woman's touch", Jan's "touch", his mother's "touch", or any other woman's "touch", the proverbial tidiness of a woman's hand.

Each of the vast, dishevelled beds was placed at a different point of the compass, so that in total they turned a circle of three hundred and sixty degrees through the house.

"This is my lucky circle," Pispenn said. "It leads to the orgy room!"

At the top of the stairs, below the attic, Pispenn pushed open a great oak door into a darkened room. On the wall ragged sexual images, old worn film, from a rattling, tormented projector, sieved and sifted uneven surfaces of light, lurid and dark, but sometimes flowering whitely. Molloy, not used to pornography, gasped at the explicit nature of the picture; the melting female figure ransacked by the active male, coupled with their frantic sounds of pleasure, and strange electronic noises,

primitive sensual music, made him feel suddenly, deeply sad, in a way he could not understand.

"Look inside! Look inside!" Pispenn encouraged him.

Molloy looked around the edge of the door, through the shifting, reflected light of the couple, towards the blind white eye of the aged projector that lanced its single beam through the heart of the room. In the middle of the room an alabaster woman, her skin shining brightly, sat in a broad-winged armchair, her legs spread across its outspread arms. Though her head was thrown back in the shadow of the chair and long strands of hair covered her face, Molloy thought he recognised her from somewhere. He turned to Pispenn for confirmation. Pispenn nodded affirmatively. "Helena White! My current pride and joy!"

Molloy looked again at Helena, feasting his eyes on her, her legs reaching out to the darkened outskirts of the room, her arms plunging with listless grace towards the heart of her, her voluminous veined breasts pointing the scalded red of their nipples at the couple on the wall, her head flung back in the shadows, her lips curling viciously away from glinting teeth, her eyes glancing from side to side behind long strands of curling sweat-streaked hair, like an animal hiding in the jungle, her whole body pulsing with a lascivious, rhythmic movement, spasmodic and serpentine, yearning and impatient. Molloy's sadness ballooned inside him, filling his heart; he had, he thought, never seen anything so beautiful. The whole experience was about to overwhelm him as the shocked numbness that had until now anaesthetized his responses gave way to a scintillating hue and cry of sensation, sadness and happiness

mingled, running after each other, trying to swallow each other's tail.

Molloy envied Pispenn so much; here was a world he'd have traded his talent to be part of; a world of Pispenn's making, where even the light in the rooms seemed to dance on the end of the puppet-master's fingers. Had he been born a generation later he, himself, could have had all this, could have put it together and shaped it like a play for the stage: pure sex, women always available, the rampant libido, the satisfaction of every instinct. Born too soon, shyly conscious of his age, he felt suddenly too old. Nowhere, on his tour, had he seen the smooth surfaces of the house indisposed by a single wrinkle, except when he looked into the occasional mirror appearing from its reclusive position in some alcove or recess to tell him that he did not belong. The whole stance of the house was that of a bouncer preparing to eject him from some hallowed spot; he was only allowed stay because Pispenn tolerated him. Molloy felt Pispenn had shown extraordinary kindness towards him; he turned to Pispenn unable to conceal his amazement and gratitude. Like an old man begging favours he dropped to his knees and taking Pispenn's hand in both of his kissed the knuckles and joints of the fingers.

"Get up!" Pispenn said, laughing. "Let's have a drink!"

Pispenn ran ahead of him downstairs, his purple robe floating loose behind him.

"Don't trip on the torn bits!" he warned.

Molloy, cautiously, followed him, down through the huge

stairwell, back towards the savage alarm of the sacked and plundered giantess in her eternal sadness. All the way down he noticed that the walls, with their scribbled obscenities and the toilet door brutality of their images, had been gouged as if with a chisel or smashed as if with a hammer; the plaster was broken and blistered, its wounds suppurating and oozing septic juices to the floor. He began to understand how Pispenn, crazed sculptor, had sculpted this world out of the sterile perfection it had previously inhabited, the one-dimensional, colour-drowned, tame perfection of its previous owner. Pispenn, putting his own stamp on things, had systematically shattered all that, had ripped it to shreds. If Pispenn had inherited, with the house, the beautiful mistress of the artist, Molloy was sure he would have cut and torn her too, just like the walls, until she represented an ugliness that was his own, and his alone. The slashed, gashed plaster was, in effect, Molloy realised, Pispenn's signature on his own creation.

In the immense drawing room downstairs, its high partitions flung wide to let cold light stream through from high windows, Pispenn mixed a variety of alcohols in a glass for Molloy.

"What are you going to poison me with?" Molloy asked.

"I'm just throwing a few things together," Pispenn told him. "Once I have the balance right, we'll see!"

Newspapers littered the floor and on the walls torn pages of Pispenn's column tacked up flapped loosely with a draught from somewhere, making a vaguely slurping noise like someone eating soup noisily. A couple of high wooden bookcases were filled with videocassettes; in each corner of the room a

television and video player sat on a small table or nestled in the arms of a chair. There was dust everywhere as if the room had not been cleaned in months.

"You have no books?" Molloy asked, accepting the glass from Pispenn.

Uncertainly, he sniffed the contents. It had a smell like petrol; a mixture of gin, vodka, schnapps, and God knows what else, waiting to combust.

"I hate books!" Pispenn acknowledged, sipping from his own glass. "They're so static, don't you know? Don't you agree? I feel trapped by the page with its fixed, idiot stare! I prefer the quicksand of images! You can see anything on the telly these days: wars, the collapse of nations, the dance of death, fabulous sex! Just turn it on! Turn it on!"

Pispenn, like a balloon going flat, spun around the room and flopped into a broken-sprunged armchair, settling on a tuft of orange horsehair that protruded through frayed leather. As he fell his purple dressing gown gusted away from his descending thighs to reveal an enormous bollocks jutting regally from a nest of hair. Molloy admired frankly, with an expert male eye, the bludgeoning presence of Pispenn's prick, the vigorous stump of his masculine pride, before Pispenn pulled the wings of his dressing gown, modestly, back into place. Molloy swallowed some of the burning liquid in the glass and waited for its fiery evisceration to reach his stomach. It felt like a stream of molten lava passing through his throat. It was good.

Molloy could hardly speak; his tongue felt like a barber's

leather strop rubbed too long with the barber's blade.

"But language? Language?" he stuttered harshly. "The language of books? Doesn't that mean anything to you? You're a writer."

Pispenn leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms and legs and, taking on a pensive air, considered.

"What is language?" he asked at last and paused significantly before going on. "Language is just a system of signs and ciphers, verbal or literary, used to communicate; but anything we wish to communicate can be communicated equally through visual or dramatic equivalents. Thus when I write a word, particularly when I invent one, I'm more attentive to its visual appeal than to any sense it might have..."

He sat up straight in his chair to point an accusing finger at Molloy.

"Language as unique representative of meaning is dead:, moribund; redundant! Nowadays we're more interested in how things look; we use our imagination to understand them, attributing whatever qualities we think are fitting; meaning is what we make it; words are clumsy and tiresome; words get in the way of imagination; they tell us what to think! No, no, no, I prefer the flux and chaos of telly, pop music, bodies, drugs! Ultimately we prefer fucking to talking or writing, don't we? Sleeping with actresses is our thing, n'est-ce-pas?"

"But here we are talking!" Molloy interjected. He

expanded, "we need language if we're to converse, don't we?"

He felt his point was unassailable, but Pispenn only laughed at him.

"You're so simple-minded," Pispenn said, pointing again, with an air of superiority. "You belong to another era altogether. Language is an archaic practice, an atavistic response, a hangover, a curiosity, like latin, nothing more. We're talking but are we saying anything? Isn't language mutual masturbation as far as we're concerned? I'd prefer outright, honest gobbledegook with no pretences. The only beauty left to syllables is the beauty of their own decay and disintegration."

Pispenn began spouting broken sounds twisting and distorting his voice outrageously.

"There!" he said, finishing eloquently. "That's all I have to say!"

It was Molloy's turn to laugh.

"Ah, you want us all to sound like babies!" he roared with good humour. "You'll have us in fucking nappies next!"

Pispenn indulged him, laughing with him, then lifting his finger to his lips commanded him to silence.

"Sshh," he admonished him. "Can you hear the heartbeat in this house?"

Molloy listened but heard nothing except faintly, distantly, the happy ringing of children's voices.

"Yes, I can hear it," he lied. "It's lovely! It's like a dream. It makes my back go all tingly!"

The two men listened intently to the sounds the house made.

"I know the house is alive," Pispenn said. "I know it is! I brought it to life... I hurt it and hurt it until I made it scream! Until I made its heart pump blood! I hear it now all the time as if it's buried alive somewhere near..."

This new, stranger Pispenn was unnerving Molloy.

"Ah, c'mon, cheer up!" he encouraged him.

Pispenn stood abruptly and clicked his fingers loudly. He clicked his fingers again and again impatiently.

"I want some music!" he shouted.

The door to the room opened slowly and a bowed, filthy, long-haired woman came in carrying a violin and bow. To Molloy, struck by the way her ribs and backbone jutted through her skin, she looked as if she was carrying the world on her shoulders, before he realised that there was something wrong with her, something wrong with the alignment of bone and moulding substance of tissue; he couldn't place her handicap or disease, but the woman emanated an air of ugliness that made him shudder to the depths of his soul. He closed his eyes to shut her out but when she sat on the floor cross-legged and began to play he had to look. The noise was diabolical; the instrument was completely tuneless and sounded like a cat drowning. Molloy called out to her to stop but she did not appear to hear him.

"This, by the way..." Pispenn said, with a satisfied grin, and pausing to search his memory to make sure he

got it right, "...is, I think, the slow movement from, er, Tchaikovsky's violin concerto. Isn't it beautiful? Don't you think she plays it beautiful, our Veronica? She often entertains us at nightfall before we begin our fun and games! I just love it! Love it!"

"It's fucking satanic!" Molloy protested.

"It takes a little getting used to," Pispenn conceded.

"I don't think I can stand it much longer," Molloy said.

"She has other uses! We can interrupt her at any moment!" Pispenn made an invitation of his remark.

Pispenn clapped his hands and she dropped the violin, spread her legs with the fingers of one hand and began to play across her exposed flesh with the bow still held delicately in the other.

"It's the same piece!" Pispenn assured him.

"What is she really?" Molloy asked, squinting uncomfortably at her.

"She's everything to everyone!" Pispenn said. "She'll teach you how to play Tchaikovsky, if you'd like that... She'll show you all the finger movements! Don't hesitate - she's as stupid as she is insensitive!"

Molloy stood up to go, declining the offer. The drink had his head spinning. He didn't feel well.

"I have something for you."

He pulled Jan's envelope out of his jacket pocket and handed it to Pispenn then started his retreat to the door.

"I'll let myself out," he said.

Pispenn cut the envelope open with his fingernails; he tore it with his teeth and spat fragments away. Molloy saw him open the folded page and read it. Pispenn laughed as if the letter contained some exquisite piece of humour. He noticed Molloy waiting at the door; he showed him the page. The single word written across the page was so large and clear that Molloy could read it from where he stood, but just in case, Pispenn spelled the letters out for him and repeated the word with finical distinctness for him.

"S-H-I-T-E," he read, pronouncing each letter with equal emphasis. "Shite!"

Thoroughly amused he looked inquiringly at Molloy.

"Do you think she means me?" he asked innocently.

He shook his head, allowing some disappointment.

"After all I've done for her," he said. "After all my effort!"

As Molloy closed the door timidly, Pispenn launched a final broadside.

"Those fucking actresses are all the same! I don't know why I have anything to do with them!"

Molloy's head was spinning, his heart pounding; what the hell was in that drink? He fumbled with the latch of the door and just about had it open when he heard a low whistle behind him. Helena White was standing, for all the world like a naked silver Goddess, in front of the horror-struck Giantess and her sexual assassins. Using a brief repertoire of charades she signalled to Molloy to shut the door and retreat back upstairs

with her. Molloy was as glad to see her as if she had been his mother; light-hearted as a boy again, he skipped upstairs to her. Helena reached out her hand to him and he held it.

Together, like surreptitious lovers, they climbed the stairs, keeping a watchful eye, wary of any sound. They passed the room with the women and children in it; they were silent now, not laughing; glancing inside Molloy saw the children were feeding on the women's breasts. Eucalyptus, calm now, was pulling her mother's teat with both her hands, swallowing it deep into her throat. The scene was infinitely tender, Molloy felt. It was beautiful; beautiful! Like Paradise lost. Like Paradise found again.

Helena led him into a large bedroom, cold and stark, but with a skylight in the roof throwing a beam down on the centre of the bed. There was no other furniture apart from the bed but there were several medium sized cardboard boxes against the wall.

"Come here, I want to show you," Helena said warmly.

She knelt beside the boxes and opened their lids slowly, delicately. Molloy could hear faint, nearly inaudible squeaking from inside; he knelt beside Helena and looked into the boxes. Nests of baby mice squirming through beds of crumpled newspaper.

"Pispenn keeps all the mice in this room," Helena said softly.

Helena smelled lovely; Molloy slipped his nose into the crook of her shoulder and sniffed her.

"You're the only chance I have to be unfaithful to Pispenn in his own house," she whispered, her lips touching the rim of his ear.

She led him to the bed and threw its covering back; a thick cloud of dust rose into the falling circle of light from the roof. It reminded Molloy of something biblical: a pillar of dust; a plague of locusts. Helena threw herself back on the bed and opened herself to Molloy.

"C'mon," she said. "Do you remember how it used to be?"

Molloy nodded, he remembered, with a vicious twinge and snap of memory in his heart.

"Before that Jan Dolan came along? When I used to call you my baby and invite you to suckle me fore and aft?"

Molloy nodded, he remembered.

"Yes," he said.

"Yes," Helena said, her arms and legs reaching out to him. "Come to me then, my baby, come to me..."

Molloy unhitching his pants stumbled towards her.

"Don't hurt me!" he pleaded.

Helena's arms reached around him.

"My baby, my baby, my baby!" she sighed. "Would I hurt my baby? Never!"

Molloy lay on top of her, instantly penetrating her; it was, he thought happily, like plugging into a mains somewhere; his body jerked and jolted with sudden surging electricity. He felt so good; sex was wonderful; he felt like bright, hard light travelling through the universe at one hundred and eighty six thousand miles an hour; that was how good he felt.

"I feel alive!" he told Helena.

"Good! Good!" she said.

And then he felt the sharp and painless brightness of her nails striping his back with pure, swift, and loving violence.

Afterwards she led him downstairs again and ushered him through the hall to the open door. He was loath to leave her but she pushed him gently away.

"I need you! I need you!" he told her. "Now that Jan Dolan is gone away! I need you to look after me! I need you to inspire me!"

Helena begged him, with quiet insistence, to leave her.

"Pispenn mustn't catch us!" she warned.

She closed the door on him.

"I promise you I'll come to you," she said.

From the front of the house Molloy could see through bright sunlight down over the roofs of villas and tall eucalyptus trees and scotch pines the circling bay with its shimmering, irregular light. Feeling exhausted, from what had been a thrilling but strenuous session of love-making, he descended the hill slowly, stretching his feet out uncertainly on the steep driveway. He felt like a man walking on the moon, trying to find a foothold where gravity would not allow him one; he was afraid of falling and rolling down to the sea, or alternatively, floating away over the tops of the trees and into the distant stratosphere.

"Fucking road!" he complained to himself.

At the bottom he had to stop and wipe the sweat off his

face with a creased, white, snot-spattered, handkerchief. He was pumping sweat, his shirt felt hot and sticky but what could he do, he couldn't take it off; in spite of the sunlight the day was cold, he'd freeze if he took his shirt off, winter would have his carcass, fucking glacial the light was, like bloody antarctica! Molloy began to walk briskly but soon his legs, aching from the walk down the hill, began to resist him and drag tiredly on the footpath; Molloy felt as if he was hauling two weary, unwilling children behind him. He stopped at the side of the road and leaned against a brick wall. He looked around speculatively. If a car came he might thumb a lift; but the place was deserted, there was no sign of anyone.

After some rest, Molloy crossed the road and went down slowly through a small park that led to a footpath along the bay. He followed the footpath through high pines towards a rocky outcrop that jutted into the bay; from here, sitting on a park bench, he could see the full extent of the bay, rippling silver, like a vast mirror tailored to the coastline. His shirt was thick and heavy with sweat; Molloy slipped his jacket off and unbuttoned his shirt, pulling it off awkwardly. His shirt was soaked in blood.

"Bloody evil bitch!" Molloy cursed Helena.

He felt his back; the bloody was still streaming out; she must have cut him really deeply. He bundled the shirt and threw it away from him angrily. He felt humiliated; the woman had been playing with him, using him.

"Never again!" he swore. "Never, never again!"

He stood up to go but felt suddenly dizzy, nauseous again.

He covered his face with his hands; his heart began a playful fox-trotting movement across and back his chest. He wanted to vomit; Pispenn's cocktail was coming back up his throat in a thick cold stream like iced treacle. Molloy leaned forwards with his head between his knees and shook the first gluey drops out. For respite he stretched out on the park bench spreading his jacket over him. It was freezing cold; he began to shiver violently; after five minutes he sat up again and began rubbing his skin vigorously. The cold nipped and slit him with tiny piercing blades. He hated it. He put his jacket back on, wrapped it tightly around him, and began to cry silently. He rocked himself backwards and forwards.

"What's going on? What's going on?" he asked himself, his teeth chattering with a snappy, brittle sound like castanets.

He tried to stand but he couldn't; he was literally freezing, turning to ice, but his heart was banging like a big kettle-drum, sending jagged splinters of sound, blunt crystal stalactites, like the electronic music he'd heard in the film-room, flying up behind his eyes. Someone or something was using the back of his eyes for needlepoint, he was sure of it: Pispenn had made a doll of him to torture with cruel pinpricks. Bad magic was being practised on him, no doubt about it.

He had to move on; at last he stood and stumbled forwards. There was a fence at the side of the footpath; he pulled himself along it. It was hopeless, it felt hopeless; he was going to fall down in a minute; he was going to fall down and just lie there, and die there, like a sick dog choking on its own vomit.

He gave up, he surrendered, why fight it any longer, he asked himself, since the end had come, and the end was the end and could be nothing else? He dropped to his knees and held his hands out emptily in front of him.

"Take me!" he asked the Universe. "Take me! I've had my fun!"

But the fun was not over. A tiny black dot appeared before his eyes and grew. He saw a small, dark figure in a coat and hat scurrying up the footpath towards him. It was a man, with bushy eyebrows and a thick black beard sticking out like a woollen scarf between his coat lapels; he was carrying a roll of cardboard under his arm. Molloy had to laugh at the man's unusual appearance and movements like a character in an old silent film where the speed of the film had fallen foul of a faulty mechanism. The man trotted like a clockwork toy towards Molloy kneeling on the ground.

"Jesus!" Molloy welcomed him.

The man stopped before him and looked down with big, black pitying eyes at Molloy. Molloy pointed at the scroll under his arm.

"What's that?" he asked.

The little, dark man stepped back and unfolded the roll of cardboard for Molloy to see. Molloy was amazed, his own chalk grey face, stern and immobile, looked past him into the ineffable, incomprehensible distance. He had to admit that the representation of him on the Abbey poster was a good, if somewhat spurious, likeness. He had to laugh. It made him look like a politician.

The little man, holding the poster high in one hand, stretched his free hand out towards Molloy, inviting him to take it.

"Welcome to eternity, Mr. Molloy," he said with a smile.

The End.