

# *Letters to Therese*

## *Part One*

1

Tony is sick. They moved him from St. Michael's today. I had to leave the office. The doctor told me it's not serious. It's just a lung infection. Tony's a healthy boy, he said. He's a brave, strong boy. He can fight it. Tony's in a room of his own. It's quite bare. The walls are a pale yellow colour like a faded daffodil. There's just one large window Tony can see out of, if he lies on his side with the pillows raised under his head. Outside, the trees are cold and unmoving in the winter mist. By this time they've lost nearly all their leaves.

He does not seem to mind being alone, though he must miss St. Michael's. The matron there was quite concerned when she phoned me at the office. Her voice was shaking. They love Tony there. They really do love our child, Therese. The matron's name is Concannon. She's a middle-aged woman, old style, old fashioned even, but quite motherly towards Tony. She was good enough to ring me at home this evening.

"We miss him so much. He must come back soon."

It's touching. Her face is wrinkled like the skin of an old apple and her eyes hover constantly on the edge of tears. I have to laugh when I think how infatuated she is with our little boy. She adores him. She worships the light in his eyes. I have often seen her with him in the Home. I have noticed how she looks at him, how she touches him. When she lifts him it is with great care and attention. She embraces him, cradles him. She holds him with infinite grace, with absolute tenderness. I have discovered her secret. Or rather, she told it to me.

"You know I had a little boy like Tony. But he died," she confided in me one day. Tears of a most delicate transparency ran down her face. She was distressed. I felt sorry for her and would have liked to console her in some way. But I didn't know how. What could I do? What could I say? I was thinking of Tony.

"I have great faith, Mr. Fenlon," she said with conviction, touching the silver cross she wears about her neck.

"It is faith that gives me strength."

Strength. How we all need strength. I pray for it daily, though you know, Therese, what my faith is like. I wish I had more. Perhaps things would be easier.

I'm sad for Tony, alone in that hospital room. It must be so strange for him. So quiet. Every half-hour the nurse comes to check on him. Her shadow blots out the light from the half-open door. Tony will be aware of her presence hovering darkly over him. I hope she will be kind to him. I hope she will touch his face softly and stroke his hair. I hope she will speak to him a little, whisper to him in the night, hum a little music to him. Maybe she knows *Sorrento*, Therese. If only she would sing quietly, even wordlessly, *Sorrento* to him. It would be so beautiful. Tony would love it. The night would be magic. There is too little kindness and love in the world.

"Sleep, sleep peacefully my lovely Tony. My extraordinary child."

Dearest, darling Therese, I can't help these words. It must be because of Tony. I need to talk to you Therese, in whatever way I can. I know that sounds strange. You used say I didn't know how to talk to you. That I

didn't know how to love you. But, please Therese, in spite of all that, let me talk to you now. I need to so much. Let me reach out to you with my voice. Let me tell you about Tony, our child. Let me, Therese.

Please, let me.

Your loving husband,

John.

I called into the hospital early on my way to work. Tony was turned to the window. The morning was still dark. I thought he was sleeping but when I reached over to kiss him his eyes were bright, wide awake. Their light seemed to leap out to grab me and hug me. One of the nurses came in. When she saw me there with Tony, kissing him, holding him, stroking his face and hair - well, she seemed quite embarrassed. She looked away. I wanted to say to her,

"You can hold Tony and kiss him. There's no need to feel embarrassed."

In spite of her presence, Tony absorbed me.

"I've brought you music," I told him.

He loves music. It's his element, like water to a fish. It excites him. He reverberates when he hears it. His body vibrates and hums like an instrument. Our Tony becomes, Therese, like a piece of resounding music, like a thundering orchestra. In St. Michael's they understand. They put the music on full volume for him and Tony shakes like a conductor on stage, throwing himself about with abandon. Mrs. Concannon herself, insists on the music being played. She demands it. Arriving at St. Michael's you might hear *Carmina Burana* in full storm, in all its heady, pagan glory, shaking the very foundations of the place, the venerable institution. It erupts in loud chorus about Tony's bed, voices crashing like waves of the sea on him. Tony responds like a child underwater, rising from under the waves, surging upwards, striving through the air, catching hold of the light. Afterwards, he lies exhausted on his bed, worn out by the sea of music that embroiled him. It's like that when he comes home to me at the weekend, we play music all day until we drop into bed from it at night, utterly, physically exhausted.

When the nurse left the room, taking her embarrassment with her, I took the black cassette player from its bag and plugged it in beside the bed. I placed it on the pillows alongside Tony's head and switched it on. It had to be *Carmina*, just one blast of the opening section. The wheel of Fate. Tony went rigid, he stayed like that for an instant. Then his body lost all its tension, his eyes closed as if to sleep and he began to drift, to float gently about on the bed. He was like someone swimming about in the stillness of a dream. Then he began to move to the rhythm of the music as though it had taken hold of him, was holding him in the hollow of a wave, carrying him, lifting him up, letting him fall. The force of it getting stronger all the time till Tony was riding on the height of the wave, and coming down in a shattering crescendo of strident music. I watched him plunge from his height, as, his dream breaking, whatever dream he was dreaming as the music played, he came falling downward into my arms where I was waiting for him.

It was light outside. The shadows of the naked trees emerged from the mist. Tony was calm. He was looking into the pale morning light beyond the window, surprised to find it suddenly there. The nurse came back with his breakfast. When she heard the music playing she seemed frightened by it. She'd probably heard nothing like it before in her life. It seemed to startle her. The breakfast tray shook in her hands.

"It's Tony's music," I tried to reassure her, "he loves it."

"You have to go now," she said nervously, dismissing me.

How I hated her attitude. It was so unnecessary. So stupid. Only that she was so young, and so nervous, I would have told her what I thought,

"Try to be more sensitive. And for God's sake have some understanding. Please."

She will, no doubt, learn someday. I hadn't time to remonstrate with her. I had to leave. I was already late for work. I kissed Tony goodbye. I had to rush away from him. From the corridor I heard the nurse turn the music off.

This is all so distant from your world, Therese. *London*. The teeming city. Haven of the Irish. Are you at home there Therese? With all the buildings, the bright lights, the bustling streets? I try to imagine you there, walking through the winter streets. Working. Shopping. Meeting your friends. The warmth of conversation. Having a drink. Laughter. I see your face radiant with smiles. Your head thrown back, your raven-black hair floating about your face, bright with reflected light. Tony has your hair you know. Jet-black, catching every ray of light that strays. My mousy, middle-aged tufts have escaped him. Luckily. He is your beautiful child, Therese, with all your dark and mysterious beauty. And your searching eyes. He resembles you. I can hardly believe two such beauties could possibly inhabit the same world.

Darling Therese, please don't worry about Tony. He's going to be alright. I'm taking care of him. I promise. I'll be personally responsible if anything happens to him. So don't worry one little bit. Take care of yourself. Be generous and loving with yourself. Live your life to the full. And know that we love you. With all of our hearts,

Our darling Therese,

John, and Tony.

I saw the doctor again today, Therese. Kelly, his name is. He's a bespectacled, grey-haired man, with an earnest look. He speaks with a ponderous accent, full of concern. He uses his hands as he speaks. They caress the air. They stroke it. A man who owns a dog, I think. His hands used to touching its fur. He touched me. Suddenly, his arm went up and his hand flew forward like a released bird, alighting on my shoulder. I'm not used to physical contact, apart from Tony. So the doctor's gesture only succeeded in confusing me. I wanted to listen to what he was saying, wanted to take it all in, but had to deal with the abrupt flight of his hands at the same time. With what they were saying. The doctor held me with his eyes. He tried to hold me in every way.

"It's not that the infection is more serious than I thought. But it may take a little while longer to clear up."

"How long?"

He considered his response, eased it from the air with his hands.

"It's not easy to say. I think some weeks, maybe longer."

He must have noticed my dismay, for he quickly added.

"It may be a lot less than that. It could just be a ten day infection."

His hand flew out and closed on my upper arm. I sought reassurance.

"But it is just a minor infection?"

"Minor, but it still needs attention. It has, after all, necessitated that Tony be hospitalised. We never underestimate these things. No matter how transient they may appear."

He paused to allow me absorb this, then continued speaking.

"We know how strong Tony is. He's a remarkable boy. But because of his condition, primarily his lack of mobility, but with other factors, important ones, he doesn't heal so readily. The road to recovery is a longer one for him, so to speak."

There was something I wanted to know.

"His birthday is soon. Will he be able to leave hospital for his birthday?"

"How soon?" he asked. I knew he wanted to give the answer I was looking for.

"Christmas. Tony was born on Christmas day."

"I can't promise it," he said. "Until he's much better I can't allow him out of the hospital."

He reached out again, grasping my arm. He added.

"We'll hope and pray for the best. If Tony must spend Christmas in hospital we'll try to make it a happy one for him."

He looked round at Tony. He stroked the down on his cheek with the back of his hand.

"What age will he be?"

"Twelve."

"Getting to be a big boy Tony," he said, "growing up."

He said it without the least shadow of doubt in his voice, Therese. Yes. Tony *is* going to be twelve. A birthday wreathed with carols and hymns. *Adeste, Silent Night. We wish you a Merry Christmas.* Wreathed with light. The city is lit up like a ship on a dark bay. A galaxy of light strung above our heads. Constellations. How it brings me back. Those days... How bright they were! You were big, swollen, your belly tight as a drum with happiness. And Tony making it resound like a big kettle-drum. *Oh*, I know he hurt. *I remember.* I know he hurt a lot. But you were happy then, weren't you? Your hair was so black, it got darker and darker during the pregnancy, but you were radiant. You shone. I was happy. I moved in your brightness. It was like a dream. Life was perfect. There were lights, music and song on every street. *Sorrento* was popular that year. We heard it everywhere, following us, weaving through the light and the darkness, so beautiful the melody.

*Then say not goodbye  
Come back again beloved....*

So poignant that music. I held you. I kissed you. Curved ridiculously about your bump. Your hands caressed my face. I wanted to leap about with insane joy. At *my* age. Well I wasn't so old then. Was I? Only forty. And you made me feel young, Therese. It was afterwards I began to feel old. Grew old. But, old or young, that Christmas will always be for me, Therese, the most wonderful time. In the garden of the hospital they've put up a Christmas tree. With brightly coloured lights. If I lift Tony ever so slightly he can see it. It's like a beacon, lit up in the mist, these sombre days. This is a time for celebration, it says. Joy to the world. Joy to us all. Tony's excited. We're really going to celebrate Christmas this time, I tell him.

After work, after I called in to see Tony again, I walked home through the night-time streets. Cold, winter streets. A sea of white mist covered everything. There was nobody out. The streets were deserted. There were no cars. No noise. Just the road ahead of me. The railed gardens. The streetlamps. Pools of yellow light.

I walked all the way home to Elmpark. It hasn't changed much, Therese. Though they've taken away most of the trees, to make way for more houses. It's the same dull avenue you knew. I don't suppose it matters to you that the trees are gone. I quite liked the trees. I felt they sheltered the avenue, sheltered me as I walked. Now, I feel exposed without them.

I've installed a time switch so the house isn't in darkness when I come home. I like to see a light in the window. As soon as I get inside I put some music on. I make tea. I listen to the music. I think about things. I think about Tony. I think about you Therese. Last thing at night I switch the lights off and stand in the bay window behind the closed curtains. To see if there are any stars. Isn't it wonderful that no matter where we are in the world we still see the same stars? Of course that's not really true - it's just that you said it to me once. And I've always remembered it, always sought those same stars from within my bay window. Always seeking you Therese. As now I seek you through these words. Through my silent letters to you, my voiceless voice. *Listen*, Therese. These days of mist, without sunlight, these nights without stars, I miss you. *I miss you.* I lie in my empty bed and I miss you terribly. I climb the stairs to an empty bedroom to lie in an empty bed, knowing the sky is empty overhead. I feel tired and empty. I sink into my own emptiness. Till I am nothing. Not longing, not sorrow, not regret. Nothing. Sleep. Darkness. My love. *Love.* Therese.

I still work for Greyson. Accountancy. Surprise, surprise. Over twenty years now. I've gained superiority. I manage the office now. I oversee the *young bloods*. While Greyson (you remember him surely - the solid rock on which the empire is founded?) - Greyson remains in his citadel. He has, in fact, gotten grey. He's lost some hair, not a lot, but a little. He's also lost some of that athletic fierceness he had, even in his forties. His skin sags more. He's developing a paunch. All in all, he's not as sharp as he was, but he still commands respect. He needs to. The young bloods sense blood. They think he's on his way out. Being young they underestimate his strength of willpower. They underestimate his tenacity. He has another ten years in him yet.

Greyson has always known about Tony of course. When I had to leave work the other day all I needed to say to him was,

"It's Tony."

He gave a nod of his head, ever so slight. Enough to signify that he understood. Today, he emerged from his sanctuary to summon me inside. He had the goodness to enquire about Tony. I thanked him for it.

"Don't hesitate to ask if there's anything I can do for you," he said, "and if you need to take time off just do it."

He added with a wry smile,

"Greyson will survive."

We don't really see that much of him in work. The young bloods joke that he's already retired, that he just hasn't told anyone. But I know he still has his finger firmly on the pulse. He misses nothing. I know he appreciates me. We have our experience in common. He can talk to me, and I to him. We relate to one another, so to speak. The youngsters describe us as *ancient*. We are collectively *the office ancients*. Greyson, at least, has his office for refuge. I have to face the biting pack. They understand each other so well. They exclude me. I am, as far as they are concerned, *for the birds*. After five minutes with Greyson I retreated to my desk. It's by the window overlooking the noisy street. After twenty years I don't hear the noise. Also, I'm less inclined than the younger ones to be distracted by movement outside. Still, I'm not working so well these days. I lack concentration. I lack effort. I lack discipline. They see it in the office and wonder what's wrong,

"Are you not feeling well, Mr. Fenlon?" one of them, Doyle, had the cheek to ask me.

No, I'm not feeling well. In spite of everything, the reassurance the doctor gave me, and Tony's innate strength, I'm worried. With a sickly, gnawing worry in my stomach, and in my heart. My work suffers because of it. I deal with it by giving the others more work to do. As every good manager should. But I feel vulnerable. I cover my face with my hand as if to protect my eyes from the light but it's really just to shield my face. So as not to be looked at, not to be seen to be *unwell*. Their fingers on the computer keyboards make a feverish tap - tap - tap but every pause in that fretful tapping undermines me. I wait impatiently for the relay, knowing that those pauses last only microseconds. But they seem forever. I get angry inside myself. Greyson has put me at a disadvantage. He won't send me on any computer courses. My role he insists is primarily managerial, meaning in effect, supervisory. But the young bloods despise my lack of knowledge. They see me already as obsolete, redundant. Really Greyson should know better. I must talk to him seriously about it, when Tony is better. I'll hold my peace in the meantime.

When I got to the hospital this evening Tony was sleeping. It's unusual for him to sleep so much but the nurse on duty explained that his antibiotics have been increased and they are making him sleep. I asked her if there was any improvement and she said,

"Not a whole lot," sounding apologetic.

"How is he during the daytime?" I asked.

"Oh, he's fine, just fine," she said, nodding her head with emphasis. I think she was relieved to be asked a question she could respond to in the affirmative. She was more relaxed around Tony than the other nurse some days ago. I noticed when she looked at him that there was some tenderness in her eyes. I appreciated it.

I had a pleasant surprise. As I leaned down to kiss Tony's face I noticed a gleaming chain around his neck inside his pyjama collar. It had a silver cross attached to it. Mrs. Concannon's silver cross. I was delighted by it. The woman had been to see him. She hadn't forgotten him. It was wonderful. It lifted me up. After a troubled day it restored me, made me feel good again.

I was disappointed however that the cassette player with its flex wound round it was put away in the bottom of the bedside cupboard. The music is obviously not encouraged. I put on *Schubert's 8th, the Unfinished* as Tony slept. It's one of the most beautiful pieces of music I know. My father gave it to me when I was fourteen. It's the only gift I remember him giving me. Almost forty years later I sit listening to it with my own son.

I sat by Tony's bed as the music played. I missed him, missed seeing him enjoy the music. I could only watch him as he slept. His only movement, the steady rise and fall of his breathing, his tiny chest filling and emptying at regular intervals. With just sometimes a flicker of eyelid. He was as perfectly still as a sleeper can be and did not wake before I left. I didn't try to wake him. I left him to his dreams.

My life revolves around Tony. It has for the last ten years. I live for him completely. His life, the life I gave him, is my life. Of course, it could have been different. I sometimes think about the other life Tony could have lived, the life we dreamed for him, Therese. A full life, a life full of joy and happiness and energy, a life full of movement. But then, when I hold him in my arms and feel his music in him, it's as if his life is full of those things. I think, *dear Tony*, how wonderful you are. How unique. How perfect in every way. Yes, I think Tony *is perfect*, as perfect as we dreamed him, Therese. As perfect as any human life could be. I see nothing wrong with him. He's incandescent. He's bright and beautiful. He's my life.

Usually Tony comes home at the weekend. The ambulance brings him on Friday evening and collects him on Sunday. This Friday I felt the same anticipation of Tony's visit, the same tense excitement taking hold of me, nor could I prevent a feeling of disappointment when the ambulance did not come, as I had, irrationally, hoped it would. The house is intolerably quiet without Tony. There is a void even blaring music cannot fill. I played all of Tony's favourite pieces but it only doubly emphasised his not being there. I did not realise how completely he filled my weekend for me. Dressing him, feeding him, washing him. Taking him for walks in the wheelchair, his head rebelling at the absence of trees in Elmpark. ( They were Tony's trees I used tell him - it never occurred to me they could be taken away. I always imagine trees are eternal. ). Tony's head shakes with reprobation, faced with the blank stare of a new housing estate.

On Sunday mornings I took him around to the church and we pushed in through the doors at the back after mass had started. You know I'm not a religious man but I love the sound of singing inside the church and so does Tony. We remained unobtrusively at the back of the church, in the grey light that surrounds the doorway, with the choir above us and the iron - voiced organ blasting its music out. You could feel its notes throbbing in the wood. I raised Tony's hand against the wood to feel the strength of the notes, the depth of their vibration. He was fascinated by it. *You can not only hear music, but you can also touch it, hold it*, I whispered to him. The singers sang their marching hymns and their *Alleluias* and the priest's voice, solemnly peaceful, descended on us from the distant altar. Tony's head twisted about like a little bird's to catch the ponderous cadence, the fateful rhythm of the priest's words. He picked at it with little nodding movements like a bird picking up seed. His hand rested on the wood near him where the organ was silenced. Habituated to this every Sunday we waited for its final blast when the mass ended. It came in a torrent of falling notes. Even the stone seemed to vibrate with it. The heads of the congregation looked up with fear, as if their whole world was about to collapse in on them. As the organ thunder faded, Tony and I were the first to make good our escape.

This morning, on my way to see Tony, I went into the church. I touched the vibrating wood with my fingers, for Tony's sake, and said what I can only call, a quiet prayer for him. Those people who normally congregate at the back of the church and who are used to seeing me with Tony looked round with unconcealed dismay at seeing me on my own. One old lady came up in a flutter. Her high heels were like light hammers tapping the floor tiles. She wore an old-fashioned hat kept in place with a steel pin, with a veil of black gauze covering her wrinkled face. She was small, like a child that's never grown, with a diminutive, wheedling voice to match, as unsteady as her balance. She seemed quite perturbed, asking for news of Tony,

"Where's the boy," she asked, "where is he?"

I had never noticed her before, yet here was someone involved in Tony's life, for whom he was, in some way, important. I allayed her fears with a word or two and then as she returned to her seat I left.

On my way to the hospital I went through the park where, weather permitting, I usually take Tony at the weekend. Where we went walking, Therese, with Tony when he was little. I feel the need, Therese, to touch on those things that were part of my routine with Tony at weekends. As if life was going on as usual. I want to bring them like gifts to Tony, gifts of hope, for him, for myself, Therese. If I can still do those things I normally do with Tony at weekends then what have I to fear? Life will soon take up where it left off. I am the architect of my own reassurance.

Yet, nothing is the same. The park is ugly without Tony. There are dead leaves underfoot and some still hanging on the trees. The pond is still and cold, the swans' nests abandoned. A white mist clings to everything. I begin to walk briskly, in a hurry to get to Tony. The leaves are thrown back from my feet as I plough through them.

I've been hours in the hospital with Tony this weekend. He sleeps mostly, waking in fitful starts for brief intervals. His eyes are clouded and vague. I don't like him sleeping so much, antibiotics or no antibiotics. When I ask for the doctor he's not available. I'm presented with a careworn looking young woman, Dr. Carroll, her hair straggling about her white face, her eyes half-closed, who tells me she hasn't slept herself for the past thirty-six hours, and that Tony's sleeping so much is nothing to worry about. I tell her that I'm used to having a son who's alert and alive and who responds to me, and to his music. *Why is it that his music is put away?* I ask her. But she only blinks helplessly back at me with obvious fatigue and admits that she knows nothing about it.

"I saw nothing about music on his sheet," she says, with just a hint of impatience.

"Well maybe you could put something about music on his sheet," I say, equally impatient; and then add, with unforgivable arrogance. "You know, you have to be concerned as much with someone's health as with their sickness."

"I am," she assured me tiredly, looking hurt, sounding hurt.

Did you know I could be *so savage*, Therese? Of course you did. The nice, quiet man image never fooled you. You used rail against my placid demeanour until the other, violent side of my nature broke through. We had our moments, didn't we? When we discovered the darker side of love. Were we richer or poorer for it? I don't know. There were certainly times when we could have been happier. But every couple, married or unmarried, every relationship has that. We were no exception. I regret my attitude to the young house-doctor. It's not making friends for Tony. I'm aware the nurses feel threatened by me. *Why?* Am I an obstacle to their caring for Tony? I want them to love him. How are they with him when I'm not around? I know they see me as an intruder when I'm there and their attitude to Tony is sometimes perfunctory. I watched one nurse feed him and she wasn't even looking at him. When she spoke to him it was like speaking to a baby. It's so different from St. Michael's where Tony is adored. I say it unequivocally: *Tony is adored*. And that's what I expect for him. *Is it too much?* Then it's too much to expect for any human being. It's only simple, *Christian* love, after all. It's what everybody needs. What everybody should have.

I'm sorry Therese. I don't mean to go on like this. Ranting and raving. I don't want you to worry about Tony either. He's fine. The young doctor told me he was responding to treatment. He's getting better. Maybe he'll be out for Christmas. Each time he woke I raised his head up to see the tree in the grounds with its colourful lights. It's Christmas, Tony, I told him, it's Christmas. His eyes were riveted on the chain of bright colours. The mist was thick and heavy but the lights shone vividly through it. I sang idiotically,

*Jingle bells, jingle bells....*

Tony was happy. That vague, sleepy look in his eyes was gone. His eyes shone. Then, slowly, he drifted back to sleep. The hours in the hospital were long with Tony sleeping. I played some music. I stared out into the enfolding mist. The grey December day becoming a dark December evening. I followed every gradation of its deepening darkness, till I felt I was almost part of it, that I, also, was night. When it was completely dark, I left for home. I felt strangely disconsolate.

I'm lost in my own home. I'm completely alone. I'm desolate when I think of Tony in his hospital bed. I wish he was here with me, or that I could be with him all the time, or that he was back in St. Michael's with Mrs. Concannon and his friends. I'd be happy then. I'm so restless this evening Therese. I don't know what to do with myself. I've watched some telly, listened to some radio but my mind won't settle. Elmpark is dead these dark, winter nights. Without trees the breeze can't be seen, can't be heard. It used to be a companion rustling

the leaves or shaking the branches. Do you remember we used listen for its movement outside the bedroom window?

I *remember* so much as I write to you, Therese, so much is coming back to me. *Memories*, fresh in my mind. At moments I'm all memories. I look out the window to see if I can find stars in the sky. There are none. The street is empty too. The air has become bitterly cold. No one leaves their houses. Everyone stays inside. I pity those who have no homes. Who have nowhere to shelter from the terrible winter coldness.

I saw a young woman on the telly who said that in London, Therese, the streets are full of homeless Irish. Living in cardboard boxes. Under bridges. In doorways. On the footpath. They're *living refuse, debris, refugees* in a sense. They leave Ireland full of hope with some money in their pockets. They're escaping from unemployment, from unhappiness. Sometimes it's just a big adventure. But sometimes it doesn't work out. They don't find work. Their money runs out. They've nowhere to live. No one to turn to. They can't or won't come home. Sometimes it's shame, sometimes it's fear, but they won't return to Ireland. And they can't be made. There's so little love for them in Ireland that they prefer the *dog's - life* of London's streets. Freezing, starving, drinking, fading away, dying, their lives disintegrating. There are lots of suicides apparently. Bodies floating on icy rivers. *Oh Therese, Therese*, why must there be so much unhappiness? Why can't there be more love for everybody? Why does anyone have to die from not being loved? If only the world was different, kinder... I wish it was! No one would have to leave home, no one would have to run away. The loveless would not have to lie like litter on the streets of faraway cities.

Therese, I want to tell you what I *remember*. I want to tell you of all the memories that are flooding back to me. Things we did. Things we said to each other. I can remember so much. All that we lived through together. From that first moment we met on the train. The two of us on a journey we did not wish for. *I*, to the funeral of a parent and *you*, to the home you did not love. So long ago now. Look how far that journey has taken us. That train we both took, more in despair than in hope, Therese. I feel ready to take it again, if it will bring me back closer to you.

Therese, I will take it,

John.

I could not sleep last night Therese. I tossed and turned fitfully, continually. I thought about Tony. Most of all, I thought about you, Therese. I had to get up. It must have been four or five o'clock. It was still dark. The house was unbearably cold. I thought of going for a walk but decided not to. I wanted to write to you but could not. I sat before the blank sheet of paper, wanting to pour my heart into it, but it remained empty. I wanted to tell you *everything*, all that I've lived through these past years. I wanted you to know every moment of it exactly as I have lived it. I wanted you to experience the same longing, emptiness, regret. I wanted you to live my life. I wanted you to be me. For just a few hundred words. Only a few hundred words.

Then, faced with the white silence of the blank page, I realised how futile, and also how presumptuous it was, to want that. To want to invade you like that, to disrupt your privacy, to beg your sympathy. *To force* my world on you. I'm sorry. The white page reflected back my own impotence. My own emptiness. It imposed itself on me, filled me up with itself till I could neither feel, think or imagine what I wanted to do. I think I just wanted to be as near to you as I could be, Therese, and was seeking a way.

I sat in front of the page till the darkness lightened behind the closed curtains. I pulled them back. Another day, I thought, but it was more than just another day. It was lovely. The sky was amber with sunrise and a sliver of moon could be seen. There was no mist, just light, light filling the sky. After my emptiness of the night it seemed to fill me, heart and soul. I was awfully tired but felt at that moment full of optimism, as if it was the beginning of a new world. I knew if I hurried I would have time to see Tony before going to work. I ran. I was full of anticipation. I was joyous almost. The sky was clear and bright and the sun was burning on the horizon.

When I reached the hospital I rushed like a madman through the corridors. Even before I got to Tony's room I could hear the music. I sensed it as if I had invisible antennae out. I burst through the door of the room with the music of *Carmina* playing at full volume. *Ringing, vibrant notes. Loud, vigorous music. Sweeping, bravado music.* Tony lifting and falling on his bed, lost in an ecstasy of sound and motion. *Swept away.* With arms outspread, I dived through the music after him. *Oh, how I held him ...*

When I got to the office, late of course, everyone looked at me as if I had come back from the dead. Greyson stood on the threshold of his office immobilised by my appearance. When I saw myself in the mirror of the restroom I understood why. I was white as a ghost, unshaven, tie - less, my suit crumpled as if I'd slept in it (or hadn't, as was actually the case).

"Been out on the town then?" Doyle quipped and everybody laughed.

Greyson was speechless, he didn't know what to say. I had to excuse myself and ask his permission, which he graciously gave, to return home and dress properly.

I ran through the streets. I forgot about the night I had lived through. I felt carefree. Unconcerned about anything. Indifferent to fate. It was only when I got to the hospital in the evening and the young doctor was in Tony's room, waiting for me, and she turned and said, before I had time to look at Tony, to see whether he was awake or sleeping,

"He's had a little setback. It's alright. Don't worry."

that my mood collapsed and *oh, Therese, what can I say? What can I say?*

John.

I felt so dejected, Therese. I had no courage left. Another name for *little setback* is *relapse*. I find it hard to contemplate Christmas without Tony here with me. I went back to the hospital today hoping things would be better. But the doctor was unambiguous. The older one, with the glasses and the flighty hands, Dr. Kelly.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said "but I couldn't in all conscience allow Tony to spend Christmas out of hospital now. It would be most ill-advised, even were he to strengthen considerably between now and then."

"Which is," he added, with emphasis, "the likely course of this infection. He will improve, but Mr. Fenlon, we don't need to be rash."

I *was rash*, Therese. He reached out his hand to touch me and I shook it away.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I need more than a bedside manner right now."

He looked dimly at me through his glasses. Unsure of me.

"I understand," he said.

"I know I'm being unfair," I told him, "but I'm just worried about Tony. You tell me he's going to be alright, but I don't know if you mean it. I don't know what to think."

"I know," he said. "I appreciate that you're worried. So are we to an extent, but we're confident, from our experience and knowledge, that Tony can beat this infection."

Then he said,

"I don't know if it's a good idea to play his music to him just now."

I was speechless.

"It seems to overexcite him, to agitate him."

"It's Tony's life," I protested, "it's like air or water to him. You can't do that to him. I can't allow that."

"I have to recommend it," he said.

"But I can't accept that you take his music away from him."

His expression was stern, unyielding.

"Look," I said. "Tony loves music. He hasn't got speech or movement like you or I have. He hasn't got our perceptions, our understanding. But music has always excited him. Moved him. Made him come alive. Agitated him if you want. But I've seen him like that since he was two years old... I'm sorry, but you don't know Tony here, you don't understand him. If you like, ask Mrs. Concannon from St. Michael's. She understands. They play Tony's music all the time there."

He remained firm.

"As Tony's doctor, concerned with Tony's health, and with his present ill-health, I feel I have to insist."

"As Tony's father," I pleaded, "don't I have a say?"

He seemed unmoved by my plea.

"Why do I have to go through this?" I persisted.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Of course you have a say. I won't insist."

I shook my head, unimpressed.

"I'm sorry," he repeated, and I could tell that he genuinely was.

Am I being unreasonable? I only want what's best for Tony. To make decisions in his life has always been my responsibility. Am I to accept that the doctor, who only knows Tony through his sickness, should decide that Tony is not to listen to his music? Surely that would be unreasonable? Anyhow, Tony sleeps all the time. How could his music agitate him? He's asleep when I play it. I play quiet music. The *Unfinished*, *Elvira*, *Moonlight*. It's not going to disturb him. It will help him. Music is like an embrace to Tony, it holds him. It will help me hold him, help me keep him close to me. To take music away from Tony would be like pulling a fish out of water. Tony has always had music. For him, it's the world, his world. How could they even think of doing that, Therese? How could they? Tony's music. When I came home to Elmpark I played the great Schubert symphony, the 9th. Do you remember, Therese? When Tony was very little I danced around the room with him in my arms, the scherzo from that symphony breaking in solid shards of sound about us, *chop, chop, chopping* like waves on a pier, then dancelike, *laa - la la la la la la la la*, and then, at the end of a flight of notes signalling a change in the movement, the start of the trio, the swirling, waltzlike section, like light revolving about us, starlight, spinning round the globe, catch your breath as it goes faster, Tony high in my arms, turning around my head, turning inside the music. You stood in the doorway as the music swayed, rising and falling, rising and falling. Isn't it wonderful that we can see stars, the sky white with them spinning inside the music, the dance, *laa - la la la*, sweeping, swirling, reaching greater heights, fierce, heady music, striving outwards till it has reached its apogee of sound, glorious sound, then restful, calmed, quiet, soft, the wind instruments, like blowing candles out, the silence of space, the intense blue colour of the night, a sliver of silver moon, Tony turning in silence, in the deep blue sky, then the sudden, terrific hurry of the strings, the unwieldy dance of the scherzo shaking us about the room. You were caught in the broken rhythm of sound, you were shaken by it, reaching up to take Tony from me, dancing with him in your arms, Therese. *Do you remember?* The two of you, abandoned to the music, were as one. *One music. One dancer.*

I danced alone to that music this evening. Swung myself about the room until I was dizzy. One music. One dancer. Empty - handed. But I still love that music, Therese. *I love it.* Imagine, Schubert never heard it played in his lifetime, just in his head, his brain racked with sickness, spinning through the stars. Such joy in it in the face of death. Celebrating life, and love. *Love.*

If heaven exists and I go there someday, I would like to meet Schubert. I would like to put my arms around him to hug him and tell him that I love him. And maybe we could dance together. Like I danced with Tony. Schubert would lift me up. The music would play. I'd touch the stars. *And we'd dance.*

Dear, darling Therese, do I make any sense to you? My world, and Tony's, must seem so distant and narrow to you, so insignificant. London is your world of stars now. All the city lights so bright. Just walking in the streets is music and dance to you. It has you entranced, the adventure and excitement of the great city. You love its air of excitement.

*Are you in love?* I'd like to know. Have you found someone to love, someone who loves you? I hope you have. I could not bear to think of you unloved. In a loveless world. With all the beauty you have to give. Then again, I suppose if you are happy, love is not as important. Being happy, it's possible to be alone or to just have friends. Life is easy. It's good. You're not trapped by needing someone. It doesn't gnaw continually at your insides, at your heart. Needing someone.

I want to believe that you are in love, Therese, and that you are happy. To believe anything else would cause me too much pain. So, *be happy*, Therese, *be in love*, and *shine brightly*. *For me. Shine brightly for me.*

My work is suffering. Each day I try to assume a one - dimensional facade of authority but in our cramped office space, with nowhere for me to retreat to, having, literally, to face the others all day long, that facade crumbles. I inevitably betray some anxiety. I lose my concentration. I forget what I'm saying mid - sentence or lose track of a conversation. It can be embarrassing. I feel undermined and the others seem to enjoy my discomfiture. Doyle in particular, who sets about me with glee like a dog set on a wounded animal. He's the one I dislike the most and fear the most. He has a pitiless, loveless air about him.

There are five of us in the main office. Greyson keeps to himself, jealously guarding his inner sanctum. There's Doyle, who's one of those brash, young kids other youngsters seem to admire so much. He inspires the others with his wit and his savagery, his livewire attitude. His hair is never combed and his face is brown with freckles. His eyes are round and grey and seem never to close. They never miss a trick, so to speak. Doyle is always seeking his own advantage, always seeking another's weakness. He uses people. He uses the inexperience and immaturity of his colleagues. I imagine they like being used, for they submit to it willingly.

There's also Flynn and Conlon. Two respectable non - entities. Does that sound harsh? Intelligent enough to do their work, or at least to get by, I have never heard them express an opinion of their own, or to admit to having thoughts about anything. They dress well, wanting to look good. They want to be attractive to women, a tendency which is aggravated by Linda. They're completely under Doyle's spell. He turns them on and turns them off. He's like electricity to them. He lends them colour, and personality. If he breaks wind they fall about in fits of laughter. Does that tell you the level we're at? But then if Doyle breaks wind it's with a purpose. If it provokes laughter and creates esteem for him, so much the good, but as with almost everything he does it's directed with particular venom at the world around him. His is a perpetual offence to everything and everyone. There is a peculiar hatefulness in his nature, an eternal resentment. You may think I'm exaggerating Therese, but do you know what I really think? I think the world is full of people like Doyle, whose natures are utterly repugnant. I know that's a terrible, terrible thing to say.

Then there's Linda. Sometimes I think it was a mistake to allow a woman into the office. If we had young men with more sense maybe it would be different, but we don't. She's, how shall I put it, *attractive*. The young bloods describe her as *bloody gorgeous*. She might be called a *beauty*, with her long blonde hair, like streaming sunlight on her back. She has a good figure, supple and shapely, good features, good angles to her face, round cheekbones and clear blue eyes. She wears short skirts, not too short because I won't allow it, but short enough for her to be able to show off her legs to advantage.

"I like feeling and looking feminine, Mr.Fenlon," she said to me when I spoke to her about wearing too short skirts, adding snidely. "I am, after all, a woman."

She says things like,

"If you've got it - flaunt it."

As if it were a general principle, a touchstone philosophy guiding her conduct. The young bloods work hard to weave a web of suggestion about her that sometimes she seems to be succumbing to, throwing their unsubtle remarks back at them. I've had to reprimand them occasionally. At the same time, I believe in letting young people express themselves, however unsatisfactory it may sometimes be. Linda says she can take it. Of course, Doyle is the one who harries her most. He's relentless, never missing a chance to make some coarse remark.

Generally, they fawn on her like puppies. It's pathetic. Her work rate is at the same time the lowest and the highest in the office. They do her work for her most of the time.

"Don't worry Linda love, I'll do that for you."

"Let Linda do her own work," I say, but they still do it for her.

If she goes to the photocopier they crowd around her, to straighten the sheet of paper, to check the machine isn't blocked, to make sure the print is dark enough. They've reduced her to a cipher; her only real function, and the one she's happiest with, is answering the phone. She files her nails, runs her fingers through her hair, re - applies her perfume. The atmosphere of the office is thick with her perfume. We bathe in it, sometimes my clothes smell of it when I come home in the evenings. I'd be embarrassed to meet somebody. Greyson, who comes into the office to wave his magic wand occasionally, when everything falls into place and is in order, says he likes her perfume, says he likes,

"The scent of a woman, a woman's touch in the office."

He winks at Linda, and she winks back. She's never winked at me.

If I had even one of them on my side I'd feel less besieged, less embattled, and what happened today might have been avoided.

Doyle of course was the herald of misfortune. He had been working away steadily when suddenly he threw himself back in his chair, kicked his feet up on to his desk, put his hands behind his head and cursed loudly. Everybody stopped working.

"First of all, get your feet down of the desk and sit up straight," I told him.

The way he looked at me with absolute bitterness and the slow, meditated way he removed his feet from the desk top should have warned me, indeed did warn me, that there was going to be serious trouble.

"Now, what's wrong?" I asked him.

"The blasted file's missing," he said, with an angry wave of his arm.

There was a wry cheer from his colleagues.

"Shut up!" I roared at them.

"Which file?" I directed at Doyle.

"The Cunningham file."

The Cunninghams being one of our biggest clients.

I went over to Doyle's desk, looking over his shoulder at an empty blue computer screen with *file not found* written across it.

"Is it listed then?"

"Yes it is."

"Have you tried everything?"

"Yes I have."

There was an air of complacency in his voice that I resented. I thought I could shake him up by saying,

"I hope you realise the seriousness of this if the file's not found?"

"I've done everything I've been trained to do," he told me calmly, pointedly.

I've explained, Therese, that computers are not my *forte*. Doyle knew I would be incapable, on my own, of finding the file. It's Greyson's fault for not sending me on courses. Nevertheless, I know how to deal with these problems. It was useless to ask Flynn or Conlon; Doyle is by far the brightest of the three. But I could call in someone from outside without any difficulty - one of the programme designers, it had been done before. I could not help worrying at the same time that the file might be irretrievably missing. There was something merciless in Doyle's expression that made me panic a little. I wanted to shake him physically as if that would have done any good.

As I said, I had already made up my mind to call in a *trouble-shooter* and everything might have proceeded without fuss if Greyson hadn't decided to put in an appearance. He was suddenly, ominously there, at my shoulder. It was more than fortuitous. Greyson has an uncanny sense, his finger always on the pulse of what's happening. Even from the depths of his office he can detect the slightest ruffle in his affairs.

I tried to explain to him that the problem was *under control*, office parlance that I detest, a despicable euphemism that only infuriated Greyson. Immediately he swelled up as if he was going to burst,

"You call this *under control*? How long have you been in this business?"

"I realise how serious it is," I told him.

"Good. You should. It's your job to."

He stormed back to his office. We heard the door bang shut behind him like a loud clap of thunder. I was unnerved. I felt humiliated. I'd seen Greyson angry before, but I'd never experienced his anger directed at me with such virulence. To strip me bare like that in front of all the others, how could he? The young bloods were jubilant. Even Linda was amused. There was an air almost of congratulation in the office. I was stripped of my authority, brought down a peg, or several pegs. At that moment, no one needed to feel respect for me. I was lower than any of them, standing bereft on the office floor like a hapless idiot. I tried to put some shape back on the situation, I told Doyle to phone the programme manufacturer and get someone competent to deal with the problem.

I went back to my desk by the window. I was angry, and I didn't care any longer. Twenty years in Greyson's and Tony sick in hospital, I put them side by side to weigh them in the balance. Those twenty years have no weight alongside Tony. As for Doyle and the others, Tony's worth much more, much more than any of them or all of them put together. He's better than they are. Alongside Tony they're diminished, reduced to their proper size, dwarfed, petty, with their petty, pathetic manners, their arrogance and complacency, their vain, stupid, self-satisfied lives. They're incapable of real life, of understanding joy or sorrow, of knowing beauty or pain - they're debased, degraded, futile. They make me sick. I wanted to have nothing to do with them. I wanted to burst into Greyson's office and let him have his job, those twenty wasted years, on his desk. Let him take that and let him bury it, some lost file in some obscure computer recess. But I didn't. I sat

looking out of the window. No one was working. How could anyone work in that atmosphere? Doyle, Flynn and Conlon had their heads down, guiltily absorbed in doing nothing. Linda was innocently filing her nails. We were all listening to the delicate rasp of the file across the nail edge. It was all we had to do. Listen to that.

I had to stay late in the office. The engineer took hours with the computer, looking for the missing file. The others had all gone. Greyson insisted I stay behind until the file was found. *It was*, he told me, *my responsibility*. Did he forget about Tony? I had to ring the hospital. They told me Tony was sleeping, had slept all day. I said I'd call later but they said *there was no need*, that he would probably sleep all night. I was furious,

"He can't sleep all the time," I protested.

And in any case, even if he is sleeping, I still need to be with him, and he still needs me with him. It's not as if he were dead or something.

The engineer's work was slow, painstaking. Eventually he began to search through all the papers in Doyle's desk.

"This is your most important file, right?" he said. "It's just possible someone may have created a password for it."

He went through a list he found in one of Doyle's folders.

"I have it," he cried out. "Eureka!"

"What is it?"

"A password," he laughed. "It's so simple, nothing to it. I should have tried this in the first place."

I didn't understand.

"He gave the file a password," he explained to me, "and the password is *Eureka*. Imagine forgetting that..."

"Who, Doyle?"

But of course. Doyle. I was so relieved that I couldn't feel any bitterness towards him just then. Still, I was sorry that Doyle's vindictiveness towards me was confirmed. The loss of the file had to be deliberate. Doyle wanted to hurt me, and had succeeded. I was hurt. Hurt and vulnerable. Thank goodness I had the weekend to refuge in.

I shut up the office and set off at a tremendous pace through the streets. It was late, very late, but I wanted to see Tony. The streets were quiet, the pubs still crowded. I ran below the swaying lines of coloured lights strung above my head. I'd almost forgotten about Christmas. The lights seemed a peculiar anomaly to me after the day's events. They were unexpectedly cheerful, yet, in the mood I was in, seemed quite pointless and dreary. The night - mist had dimmed them.

I ran breathlessly towards the hospital. I don't know how far I got, but suddenly I felt a terrible fatigue. I stopped dead in my tracks. I was unable to go on. I was incredibly tired, overwhelmed by tiredness. I stopped a taxi and said automatically,

"Elmpark."

It was all I could do. I almost collapsed in the back of the car. I felt like crying. I told myself,

"Tony will be alright, Tony will be alright..."

The taxi - driver looked back at me from the rear - view mirror.

"Who's Tony?" he asked, and I realised I'd been speaking out loud.

"Tony is the only person in the world who counts," I told him, having difficulty getting the words out straight.

He shrugged his shoulder, unsympathetically,

"Yeah, we all have someone like that," he said.

*Did you know, Therese? We all have someone like that. We all have our Tonys. I have mine. You have yours. And all the others have theirs. It's a perfect world.*

I thanked the taxi - driver for his insight. I was so glad to get home, with the light shining in the window, that I tipped him lavishly. I slept fitfully for an hour. I've been writing all night. My eyes are shutting. I don't know if I'm awake or dreaming. But I still miss Tony, and I miss you, even if I am asleep. I miss you even in my sleep,

Love Therese,

Your husband,

John.

I slept all day. It was dark when I woke. There was a noise. Someone knocking at the door. I got up and peered furtively out the window. It was difficult to make out who it was but then when she stood back from the door to look up at the front of the house I recognised Mrs. Concannon. Immediately I tapped on the window pane and called out to her. I was afraid it might have something to do with Tony. Had she come from the hospital? Was there bad news? I threw my clothes on and rushed down the stairs. I waited for her to say something about Tony but she only asked me,

"Are you O.K? I've been to the hospital, they said you hadn't been in for two days."

Two days since I'd seen Tony. I cursed Greyson under my breath. I invited Mrs. Concannon in. She took her heavy coat off. She was dressed entirely in black. It was the first time I'd seen her out of uniform. She was wearing a black woolen jumper and skirt, black tights and boots. I thought, she must be widowed.

We sat in the large sitting -room. We drank brandies. She had been unable to find the house. She had wandered about in the mist. It was cold outside. She shivered. The house was cold. I explained how, after a sleepless night, I had slept all day. I hadn't had time to light a fire.

"How is Tony?" I asked awkwardly, feeling I was the last person who should be asking that question.

"He's fine," she responded, "he was very tranquil."

I shook my head.

"It makes me despair," I told her. "How can it help to have him sleeping all the time?"

"It's the treatment. The doctor says he can't reduce the medication until the infection starts to respond to it," she said.

"Tony doesn't belong in that hospital. Is there no way he could be treated by you in Michael's?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"We'd love to have Tony back, but our rule says when a patient is that sick he must be sent to General."

"He'd be so much happier with you," I persisted. "I'd be so much happier if you were looking after him."

"I'm sure he's being well looked after. He's in a good hospital."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm too anxious."

"It's natural," she said, "and then, if you're not sleeping..."

We sat in silence. She turned the brandy in her glass. She broke the silence.

"Perhaps you need some distraction? Perhaps you've too much time to think about Tony?"

I nodded hesitantly, not knowing what to expect.

"How would you like to go for a drive in the country tomorrow?"

I was surprised and answered automatically, without thinking. I said yes. The creases on her face thickened in a smile of real pleasure. Her watery eyes swam with satisfaction. I was glad. It meant something to her that I'd agreed to go. It seemed to enliven her. She downed the rest of her brandy in one swallow. She got up quickly to leave. As she pulled her heavy black coat shut I noticed the knitted crease left on her bare neck by a chain.

"Thanks for the silver cross," I said, collecting myself. "It didn't go unnoticed. I meant to ring you to say... I appreciate it."

Her smile broadened to a beam.

"It's nothing," she said. "He can keep it until he comes back to me."

Though I've known her for ten years, today was the first time that I'd met her outside of Michael's. Until now our relationship had been purely *professional*, so to speak, and yet here I was accepting to go for a drive in the country with her. It doesn't bother me. It might do me some good, and she's a kind woman whose love for Tony is obvious. So why not?

"We can visit Tony early in the afternoon, I'll call for you, then call in to see him afterwards," she said enthusiastically as she left the house, the mist winding its white arms about her.

"I hope we have some luck with the weather," I heard myself, with some surprise, calling after her as she vanished down the avenue.

I felt guilty about Tony. I rang the hospital. I lied. I said, I'd not been well. That proved my guilt. I said I'd be in tomorrow, trying to absolve my guilt. The anonymous woman's voice at the end of the phone was perfectly indifferent. *Give my love to Tony* I whispered after she hung up. Then I cried. *I cried*. I've not cried in years, Therese. The house was dark and cold. I raked the grate clear and set a fire that would not light. The tears ran down my face and fell on the coaldust. The match flickered and went out. I gave up. I went upstairs to bed. I had left the blankets turned back. The sheets were cold. I lay there in my clothes looking at the ceiling. I didn't know what else to do, Therese. Without you, without Tony, I'm lost. Do you hear my words at all - wherever you are? Do you know that I can't live without you? Do you know, Therese?

*I can't live without you.*

The day was misty, with that same white mist that has shrouded all of December. I did my best to look well for Mrs. Concannon, and did my best to look right for the country. Heavy sweater, corduroy pants, thick shoes. It felt strange to be out of a suit. I had not realised how habituated I had become to wearing one. I shaved, finding myself haggard and unattractive looking in the mirror (for my own sake you understand, Therese, not for Mrs. Concannon). I managed to cut myself several times, my hand was so unsteady. I think it's time to take a grip of myself. I'm not much use to myself, or Tony, or anybody like this.

Mrs. Concannon arrived in her small, black car. She was dressed in black sweater and jeans and boots and looked as if she already belonged to the country. Her clothes emphasised the short, thick sway of her figure, like a piece of lumpy dough, if that's not too unkind an image. Even out of work she has a commanding air and shifts her body about as if it were an unwieldy bed - patient, but with a new, constraining self - consciousness, as if she was aware she's not dressed properly. Her face, though rather pathetic with its watery eyes and criss - cross of creases, redeems her. Her good - heart shines through it, not through any particular feature but through all of it. Looking superficially at her you might easily think her absurd, but when you know her a little, and know her kindness, you form a different impression of her.

Sorry for going on at length about her, Therese, but you must remember this is almost a new experience for me - it's so long since I've had an *ordinary relationship* with someone, anyone, that Mrs. Concannon has a certain fascination for me. I find myself looking at her as a scientist might look at a guinea pig in a laboratory, wondering just what she's going to do next. Well, what she did next was talk. It was a constant stream of words, thoughts, opinions, impressions, feelings. She poured herself out quite literally as I listened. I was her captive audience. There was of course a nervous edge to her talk, as if she was afraid to be silent, afraid not to fill the space between us with words. I felt a little nervous myself. We were practically strangers intending to spend most of the day together and I was unsure of exactly what to do, what to say. So, I tolerated the steady flow of words. I was, in fact, relieved by them.

Of course, we talked about Tony a lot. We called first to the hospital. It was quiet and antiseptic smelling first thing on Sunday morning. The highly polished floors gleamed under the spreading fluorescence. Mass was being broadcast through wall - speakers. It could be heard everywhere, even in the toilets. Mrs. Concannon looked at me nervously from under questioning eyebrows,

"Have you been to mass this morning, Mr. Fenlon?" she asked me.

The answer was of course negative. She shook her head in mock ruefulness, tut - tutting me gently.

Tony was awake. I gave him a hug that embraced all of the last two days, lifting him high in my arms. As I held him Mrs. Concannon stroked and kissed the side of his face, repeating his name. I looked into her eyes just inches from mine. She smiled benignly, her fingers caressing the nape of Tony's neck. We could hear the mass all the time, punctuated by hymns and a tinny organ. A solid chorus of voices battered the scattered, dislocated murmur of a paltry, passive congregation. The priest's voice droned distantly.

I could feel the music, like electricity, tingling under Tony's skin. I was sure it was the music that had woken him. It had pulled him out of his sleep. He was listening to it. Alive to it. I wanted it to be louder. I wanted the organ to burst with notes, to explode from the speakers, to shake the walls of the room, to vibrate right through Tony, to rock him, as I was rocking him.

Mrs. Concannon said,

"We can stay here, if you like."

To be honest, after two days without Tony, I did not want to leave him, but I did not want to disappoint her either. I said we'd go for our drive. We left the hospital then, the mass still hovering above our heads. In the car we were quiet a short while, I still holding Tony, Mrs. Concannon absorbed in her own reflections. Then, gradually, she began to talk again, commenting on different things, how well Tony seemed, the beauty of the mass, the power of music, the cleanliness of the hospital, the dedication of nurses, and doctors, and so on, taking us all the way through a dwindling, mist - cloaked cityscape, clusters of housing breaking down into isolated fragments, less and less frequent, less and less populous, till we were on a road twisting up across the hills, through pine trees gathered massively at the roadside. She stopped the car at the edge of a dark wood. The mist seemed to have descended through the branches right down to the roots. We were completely alone. The silence was eerie. We walked along a narrow dirt - road, under dripping branches, with pools of water underfoot that reflected, blindly, the mist - filled air above. It was impossible to say that there was a sky above us. A warm, clinging mist, as heavy as rain, enveloped us. It soon formed tiny streams that ran down our jackets onto our legs. We were damp with it, but still, when Mrs. Concannon wondered if I wanted to turn back, I said *no*, and so we persisted, deeper into the mist, further along the dirt - road, until we came to the crest of the hill we were walking on and paused a moment. To look out over... Nothing. We had no hope of seeing the city, only the shadowy bulk of hills and belts of trees not too distant looming up. We stood there gazing out, like looking over a sea that had marooned us. It felt as if we would never get back to where we had come from. Then, with heavy feet and a certain, inexplicable sadness in our hearts, we descended the road. Mrs. Concannon said nothing. She walked with her head bowed, her eyes fixed on the slow, unevenly swinging march of her feet. I wondered what she was thinking. Perhaps, like myself, she was not thinking of anything at all.

By the time we got back to the car, night had practically fallen. It felt like the very heart of winter, sitting in the darkness, listening to some music she put on. I don't even know why she played it. She hadn't asked if I wanted to listen, just assumed that I did. It was a tenor voice, singing great soaring songs full of beauty and tenderness. We sat in silence. I felt perfectly contented. I was entranced by the music, the sweet, sweet, melodies, the soft, glorious voice. I was losing myself, forgetting where I was, who I was. The music utterly captivated me. I was weak with it. Annihilated. I was dreaming, I was floating in the darkness. I had lost touch with everything. I was in a world of my own. Separate. Cut off. My mood of the walk, that inexplicable sadness, was intensified by the sad, sweet flow of the songs. I wanted to drift away completely. I wanted to disappear, to vanish, to not exist any longer. I think, Therese, that, carried by the power of the songs, I wanted *to die*. That I secretly wished, in that moment, for death.

Then, something wonderful happened, Therese. Out of the amalgam of songs that had merged in one amorphous mass, all the various songs merging in one, so to speak, *universal* song, it surged out and into my brain, *the song, our song*, Therese, our *Sorrento*. The tenor's divine voice erupting in my heart.

The song was you, Therese, was Tony, was all three of us, our lives spinning about one another. Like the sky spinning about the earth. I remembered, in a flash, *everything*. Like a dream that lasts only a second but in which everything that's ever happened is contained and happens again in an instant, shaking you like a great blow of a wave of the sea, Therese. I was shaken, stunned, exhausted, but held all of my life, held all of our lives, in my hands, in my heart. I rose up. I leapt up from under the terrific welter of memory. Wanting to *live*. Wanting to be so alive, with all that I have lived, all that we have lived, going on inside me. I wanted to return to my life, to return to Sorrento, with you by my side and Tony in our arms. Go back to where I put my hand on the back of the Sphinx and wished for return. To go back again and immerse myself in the Mediterranean. *Our sea*, Therese. The sea the singer's voice was praising. The singer's voice, potent as the siren's call. *Rescuing me*.

At a point where we dipped low beneath the mist we could see the city with all its yellow lamps, like a marvellous constellation revolving beneath us, as the car turned from side to side on the twisting, turning

road. We sped down narrow roads, down a tunnel carved out by the car's yellow beams, into the loose suburban edges of the city's sprawl. In contrast to her early - morning loquacity Mrs. Concannon was now quiet as a mouse. She was intent on her driving. She devoured the city streets, her foot down hard on the accelerator. I saw a blur of houses, city lights and shopfronts. It was, in a way, as if everything had disintegrated, had been broken up, and hung back together in a vague, ramshackle way. It was familiar, yet distorted and strange, but not in a frightening way... *no*, I just felt as though I had emerged into a shattered world that in the morning would be made anew, just like it always had been. There was no need to worry.

When we reached the hospital I asked her if we could take the cassette tape of the music in to Tony. I wanted him to hear *Sorrento*, sung by *God*. I joked with Mrs. Concannon,

"This man sings like he is God!"

She laughed.

Tony loved the music. I played it over and over. Mrs. Concannon could not understand why I loved it so much. She could see that Tony was responding to it, that it was lifting him up. We sang along to the melody, the two of us, just for him. The nurses laughed when they came in. I felt as if we were back in St. Michael's, it felt that good. I was happy and spoke cheerfully to everyone. The nurses were surprised to see me so carefree. Normally, they seem to want to avoid me, I treat them so morosely. Even the young, blond nurse, who had seemed afraid of Tony in the beginning and ever since covered in my presence, came out of her shell a little and began to smile and laugh. I invited her to dance to the music and we even managed some broken steps together. It was without doubt a sign of hope. For the first time I felt really strongly that Tony would recover. He would get better. Mrs. Concannon left me home.

"I really, really enjoyed that day," she told me.

I did too. It was, Therese, quite extraordinary. How on earth will I sleep? I can hardly sit still as I write to you. I want to sing, I want to dance. I want to jump and leap, and twist and turn, and rise and fall. I am filled with energetic, insatiable wanting...

You know, Therese, what I realise and understand now, I think for the first time? It is, that my life is good, has been good, and that,

I *love* you,

as if you didn't know,

I *love* you, Therese.

My mood relented somewhat today. I was calmer, relaxed in myself. The office atmosphere was tense however. As soon as Doyle sat down at his desk he saw the sheet of passwords with *Eureka* scribbled on it. I had left it beside his computer so he'd know immediately his game was up. He became morose and when the others arrived to work he did not acknowledge them. When Greyson came in I followed him into his office and explained what had happened. He nodded contentedly. He was happy the situation had been resolved. Fifteen minutes later he called Doyle into his office. We heard him, at first it was hard to hear, then he began to shout at Doyle, telling him,

"You'll have to look for a job elsewhere if this is your level. How can you justify such stupidity?"

He roared stupidity. I was sure he could be heard in the street. In the outside office no one was working. We listened as the tirade continued. It was very impressive. I had never, in all my twenty years, seen Greyson so angry. I could see the fear in their faces, Conlon, Flynn, Linda. It was a lesson to them. They could not imagine now that Greyson was someone retired into a world of his own. The office *ancients* were biting back, and *how*. When Doyle came out he was pale. His freckles stood out against the white of his skin in thick, brown blotches. His eyes looked colourless and his uncombed hair seemed to be, literally, standing on end. He was in a state of real shock. I was surprised to see him, the *hard man* of the office, so broken. He sat at his desk for a full five minutes, clung to it rather, as if he needed its support. Then he made a dash for the toilets. I knew he was going to be sick and sent Flynn running after him. They were away for a full half-hour. When they came back Flynn said,

"He's not fit for work."

Doyle looked up at me from his desk. He was almost bent double. He was beaten, defeated, and looked it. He said nothing but his look pleaded for mercy. I said quietly,

"You've a whole day's work to do and you're already behind. Don't you think you should get started?"

There was no way I was going to allow him the luxury of escape.

A short while later something unprecedented happened. Greyson came into the office. He stood in the middle of the floor and without any preamble made a little speech. He said,

"On Friday I insulted Mr. Fenlon. I was rude and unjust to him. I want to apologise. I hope you will have the goodness to accept my apology, John?"

He looked to me for a response. I said, rather weakly I thought,

"There's no need, Mr. Greyson."

He continued,

"I have always demanded respect in this office, not just for myself, but for everyone. I've let myself down. Once again I'm sorry."

He finished,

"In spite of what has happened, respect is still demanded in this workplace. Don't let anyone forget it."

With this flourish of authority he returned into his office. For the rest of the morning the office was so silent it might have been deserted. Only the hum and buzz of the computers, the constant clicking of the keyboards, and once or twice the strident ringing of the telephone, could be heard. The only voice we heard was Linda's answering the phone. In the shocked silence that surrounded it, it had very little charm.

At lunchtime I followed Doyle out into the street. The day was bitterly cold. He seemed to shrivel up when we got outside. He looked so defenceless, wearing only his flimsy office suit, that I actually felt some compassion for him. I ran to catch up with him. He was surprised to see me. He looked worried, wondering what I was going to say to him. I just said,

"You can take the afternoon off."

He grinned wryly, "No," he said. "I won't take it off."

That was all. I let him walk away from me. I had given him a way back. I had lifted him out of the pit. He could start being himself again.

Tony's fine. He's sleeping less. When I was at the hospital they told me Mrs. Concannon had been in to see him. Isn't she incredible? She played his music for him. I think her visits have made a positive impact on the nurses. Their attitude has changed. They're much friendlier to me now, and, more importantly, they're better with Tony. They've begun to talk to him, to treat him like a real human being. Tony this, Tony that... I think they've begun to sense how aware he is, how alive he is. The doctor says Tony has improved. It's good to hear. He's a kind man, Dr. Kelly. I know he tried to be before, but today I really felt it. His hands were quiet, not leaping and pulling at me. A sign perhaps that he has gotten to know me a little, his approach more cautious. He tells me there's still no possibility that Tony can come home for Christmas. I accept that now. What else can I do?

I've begun to think of Christmas, Therese. It's only a few days away. What will I get Tony as a present? For the first time in three weeks I feel free to think of such things. I've been doing much too much worrying. I've had too many sleepless nights. Now I can think of wandering out in the bright – lit city, with the light - hearted crowds, the carol - singers, the festive air, the warm, inviting shops, to do what I have so enjoyed doing for Tony each Christmas. Buy him a gift. If only you were here to help me choose. It would be just like old times, walking hand in hand...

I still come home to an empty house. Ever since Tony has been in hospital the house has felt empty. I know he won't be here at weekends. I don't know when he will be here again. I play some music. I listen to the radio or turn on the television for the news, but it depresses me, Therese. There is too much ugliness in the world, too much unnecessary pain and suffering.

I think of you, of course, Therese. I still stand in the big bay - window to look at the stars. I feel it brings me closer to you, even if the sky is covered and there are no stars to be seen. There's no sun in the daytime, no stars at night. There is a burgeoning moon that cannot be seen, but I'm on the lookout... If it appears, I will see it, I promise.

Waiting for the stars then,

Yours, Therese,

John.

I feel much better. I've been sleeping well. I get up in the morning with real enthusiasm for the day. I take the long way to work, striding through the empty park, its trees completely bare now, or I call in to see Tony at the hospital. He's doing well it seems. He's awake most of the time and seems happy. I talk to him and hold him, I play his music for him.

There is a cassette of Chopin *Nocturnes* we bought one Christmas before we had Tony. *Do you remember?* It was exceptionally cold so we stayed in bed for three whole days, listening to those *Nocturnes*. You loved them. You closed your eyes as the music played and dreamt that you were floating among the stars. You said you could see the earth below covered in ice. It glistened like a huge hailstone, its seas frozen. You said you could reach out and touch the gleaming stars that hung about you, that you could trail your hands through the night sky like water and feel the stars brush your palms. I've been playing those *Nocturnes* for Tony. He loves them. It's a case of like mother, like son, I dare say. He closes his eyes but does not move, yet I know he is floating in the stars. I can see it when I close my own eyes. At such times I feel almost as if I'm with you, Therese, as if both Tony and I are with you.

I've been busy. I've bought two Christmas trees. One for the house and one for Tony's room, a smaller one. I got such pleasure from putting them up. The one at home I've put near the sitting room window. I leave the curtains open so the tiny, coloured lamps shine out warmly into the darkness. I played my beloved Schubert as I wreathed the spiky, green - leaved branches with bright tinsel and hung tiny decorations, snowmen, sleighs, soldiers, angels all over it. Looking through the window I could see the pale, blind moon, through almost transparent grey cloud, with tiny points of starlight dispersed around the sky. The music was full of sweeping strings and hurtling crescendos, the tremendous, racing excitement of the last movement from the *Great C major*. I was *exalted* by it, I was *practically joyous*.

In the hospital I put up a smaller tree by the window near Tony's bed. The nurses were drawn into the room as if by magnetism. They shimmered and rippled with pleasure in front of the glowing tree. I switched the room lights out and played the *Anniversary Waltz*. (*Do you remember, Therese?*) The nurses, a good half - dozen of them had come into the room, oohed and aahed in the darkness, a darkness saturated with colour: red, green, orange, blue, gold. I held Tony in my arms, swaying slowly to the rhythm of the dance. A couple of the nurses began to step falteringly about in a makeshift waltz, turning in awkward and unsteady circles. I began to sing softly to the music,

*Oh, how we danced  
On the night we were wed...*

my voice as uncertain and uneven as their dance.

I walked home through the ice - cold night with a real warmth in my heart. I walked through the empty streets still singing, as if I was still with Tony in the hospital,

*The world was in bloom  
There were stars in the skies...*

It was magic, Therese. I didn't mind coming home to an empty house. I built a blazing fire. I poured myself a glass of brandy. I could even face the telly. The worst excesses the news had to throw at me, famines, wars, death and more death, I faced with perfect equanimity. I'm living in a sort of sheltered timezone for the moment. I'm happy, I suppose, and feel quite indifferent to the world. If Tony is getting better that's all that matters. I want him to be healthy.

I've found a Christmas/Birthday present for him. It's nothing special, just something I saw and liked. It's a mobile, a collection of brightly white doves turning on strong filaments of shining steel. There's a music box attached that plays *Brahms Lullaby*. I don't know if that's quite right for swirling doves but I found it irresistible and I know Tony will love it.

I feel quite prepared for Christmas now. I'm looking forwards to it. Before going to bed I take my nearly empty glass of brandy and stand alongside the tree in the slender arc of the bay - window. I am absorbed in the colours of the tree shining over me in the darkness. The nights are colder but the sky remains covered by a thin, white mist, made bright by the hidden moon. I wait almost an hour for the veil of mist to lift and reveal a corner of moon or a section of its purple corona. Can you see that above the city buildings in London, Therese? Do you love it like you always used to? The night - sky belonged to you. It was your first love, your first refuge. When you couldn't sleep you used always get up out of bed and stand for hours watching the stars. I remember you standing by the window, your silhouette dark and perfectly immobile against the pale moonlight. I watched you and waited, sleeplessly, so many nights, for you to come back.

Therese, for me, the night still belongs to you,

Yours always,

John.

Today was our last working day at the office before Christmas. Because Christmas falls on Tuesday this year, Greyson gave us Monday off. I have three free days before Christmas and the rest of the week afterwards. I'm looking forwards to being with Tony as much as I can, looking forwards to being away from the office. Oh, the atmosphere is better, a lot of the tension has gone and Doyle is particularly subdued. I'm happier, my concentration is stronger and I've been taking a more active role, really getting into my work. Everybody was a little excited today. We were all thinking of getting away, having a break from our monotonous office world. Doyle, Conlon and Flynn were making plans for an after - work drink, coaxing Linda to come along with them. Eventually, she yielded. I don't think she socialises much with them, for all their flirting. When she gave in to them it put them in good humour – they were going to the pub with *bloody gorgeous Linda*. I, of course, was not asked to go to the pub. It was not even suggested.

Greyson came to the rescue. He asked me to go to another pub with him, he wanted to buy me a Christmas drink he said. We had a drink together, then another, then another. I enjoyed them all. He was dapper today, you would have admired him. He was wearing his polka - dot dicky - bow over a navy - blue and white striped shirt. His suit was loose and free - flowing, which gave him a slightly academic, or bohemian air. Do you remember we used talk about Greyson's *swagger*, the Greyson of old? Well, it had come back, or he had recaptured it for a moment. He had a certain energy or extravagance, that you used call *charm*, in his movement, and a certain elegance in his speech and expressions. I remember you once described it facetiously as, *seductiveness*. When we walked into the pub even the younger and better - looking women there looked at him. I thought to myself, if only they had known him twenty years ago. They could not have resisted him.

I wonder what his secret is? In the past couple of weeks he seems to have flourished, to have come into bloom all of a sudden. I ask myself, jokingly, if he has fallen in love. Joking aside, he looks it. I complimented him on how well looked.

"It's exercise," he said. "I've starting going to the gym. I work out. I'm getting myself into shape. I'm tired of looking at tired old Greyson in the mirror each day."

"Is that all," I asked him flippantly.

He examined me ruefully.

"You could do with some gym work," he advised. "Some toning up, some firming of the muscles."

I'm sure I looked doubtful.

"The office has undermined you physically," he said.

The conversation went on like that, in a casual, light - hearted way. Then he asked about Tony. I responded positively, but he shook his head in a concerned way, as if what I said was worrying. Then he asked about you, Therese.

"Have you contacted Therese," he asked, "have you been in touch with her?"

He sounded as if it was really important. I was surprised because he has not asked about you, or even mentioned your name in years. He knows you're a sensitive subject.

"Of course," I replied.

I wanted to tell him that I write to you almost everyday. That would have surprised him.

"Will she come home to see Tony?" he asked.

"I don't know," I told him flatly.

He might have seen then that I was a little uneasy, but he went on,

"Where is she living now?"

"London," I said, with such finality that he didn't dare ask another question. He said only,

"Caroline often asks about her. She wants you to come around one evening."

"I'd love to," I told him, but thought to myself, *no bloody way*, not if she wants to talk about Therese all evening.

I'm sorry, Therese, but I just couldn't stand it. Caroline has never changed. She still thinks about no one except herself. Every so often her curiosity flickers to unpredictable life and her antennae extend beyond her own world.

"Where is Therese living *exactly*?" she would not hesitate to ask. "The next time I'm in London, I could call to see her."

We had another couple of drinks to finish up. Outside the pub we bumped into Doyle, Conlon, and Flynn, with Linda in tow. They were laughing uncontrollably. I wondered what on earth was so amusing. I can't remember having laughed like that in a long, long time. It seems to me only young people laugh with such helpless abandon.

"Come for a drink, come for a drink!" Flynn shouted. "Buy us a drink Mr. Greyson."

Spirits were high. I could have fallen over when Greyson said,

"Right - ho."

He was beaming benignly at Linda and she was gazing adoringly at him. He seems utterly infatuated with her. They went off singing with wild incoherence,

*Christ our Saviour is bo - orn,  
Chri - iist our Saviour...*

I shuddered. I could not understand such behaviour, and I did not like. But there was something else. It was Doyle again. In contrast with his submissive air of the last few days in the office, he had given me a look of absolute detestation on the street. There was something else besides. It was contempt, real contempt. His look etched itself in my brain. I can still see it. It was vicious. It made me feel unwell. I find it difficult to understand why he dislikes me so thoroughly? What other reason can there be, other than his own bad - nature? His hatefulness? Have I ever done anything at all to hurt him, or earn his dislike? I don't think so.

Greyson surprised me,

"Are you really going with them?" I asked him.

"Yes," he laughed. "I think I will. It might be interesting."

It made me feel insecure and vulnerable thinking of him with them. It made me feel more alone somehow, but then I shrugged it off. I'm determined to enjoy Christmas.

"I have something for you," he said, dipping his hand into his coat pocket.

"It's just a little Christmas present for Tony. I know he loves classical music. I hope he doesn't already have it."

It was obviously a cassette - tape wrapped in Christmas paper.

"It's the *Four Seasons*," he said uncertainly, looking for reassurance that Tony didn't already have it.

"No," I said, "he doesn't have it, but I know he'll love it."

I almost caressed the tape with my fingers. It's not often I'm given a present for Tony. We shook hands warmly and wished each other a happy Christmas. Then, he hurried off after the young bloods. What could they possibly have in common I wondered. Would they talk about me? I went to see Tony. I'm much happier with the hospital. They're taking better care of Tony. They've realised that he needs taking care of as much as anyone. It's not unusual for his music to be playing quietly when I walk in. One of the nurses has fallen in love with Chopin. She plays him incessantly. She stands over Tony as the music plays, and watches him, his eyes closed, lost in his nocturnal, starry dream. Sometimes she strokes the hair on his forehead as the music plays. They are listening to the same music and it's as if she identifies with Tony as they listen to and love Chopin, as if she too becomes part of the dream and drifts with Tony in his darkness.

Mrs. Concannon calls to the hospital quite often. Almost as often as I do, one nurse said. She called to the house this evening. She was waiting at the door when I arrived home. She had some gifts. Another tape for Tony.

"It's a surprise for you too," she laughed, "so you mustn't open it until Christmas."

I promised. But it has to be the recording of *Sorrento*. It must be. I can feel it. I wanted to tear the paper off and play it straight away.

She had a wreath of flowers with her, fragile, white ones on a background of green - leaves. All tied up with a pretty red bow. She felt it would look nice hung near the mantelpiece. So we hung it there. She was delighted with it.

"Doesn't it look lovely!" she said.

She didn't stay long, she said that she didn't want to. Before she left, she asked me if I'd like to go to mid - night mass with her on Christmas Eve. I said yes. I couldn't say no. I felt, again, that it would disappoint her. She said she was really looking forwards to it. It would be the most beautiful mass of the year. I was sad because I used to bring Tony each year, but not this one. I will miss having him with me.

Darling, Therese, it must seem sometimes as if I forget about you, as if I'm only interested in myself, only think about myself, or Tony. It's not so. Not a day goes by without my thinking of you. Indeed, I sometimes

feel as if my every waking and sleeping hour revolves around you. You're like a piece of music that's constantly playing in my heart and mind. I hear your name over and over again, Therese. You're like song at the heart of my life, the loveliest song I know. When I sit and write to you like this I want to make that song heard, I want it to echo in my words. *Therese, Therese, Therese*. I want it to be like the most generous of hymns flowing through the world. If the beauty of your song cannot be heard in my words, Therese, then it is because I have not the voice I wish I had and sing badly. But, even if I sing badly, struggling with my meagre, inadequate voice, I can still hear, Therese, when I sit and write to you, for you, like this, your perfect song inside me. I can hear it. It fills me up. I hum and vibrate with it. Always, Therese, always. *Not a day goes by...*

I will make more of an effort, Therese, to show you, to remind you, of how much you mean to me. You will see that I have not forgotten you, that you are still, completely, a part of me. How could I forget you, Therese? How could I?

I wonder, what will your Christmas be like? Do you have someone to share it with? As I did my Christmas shopping, as I put up the large Christmas tree in the bay window, I thought to myself, perhaps Therese is doing these things now, at the same time as I am. It's easy to picture you negotiating the crowded streets of the city, seeking out that *meaningful* present for someone you love. It's easy to picture you meeting friends, sharing drinks, laughing, singing even... It's Christmas time, you must have lots of parties - you always enjoyed a party, it got you out of yourself. It's easy for me to picture all that, but to imagine you decorating a Christmas tree of your own with some man you love helping you, settling the lights on the branches for you, reaching up to put the crown of holly on top for you, well, that's not easy. I wonder what is he like? Does he love you as utterly, as completely as he should? What presents will he give you? Does he know you well enough to know the things you love? Does he love you well enough to know those things?

I wonder if, while he's settling the lights on the branches, or reaching past you to put the holly on the tree - top, as I used to do, you are reminded of me? If you look, furtively, through the misted window - pane, through the cold night air, to catch a glimpse of the glimmering stars that hover eternally over both of us? Do you remember, Therese, how we used put the tree up together? With *Schubert* in the background, the romantic music you loved so much. Days before Tony was born we danced to the trio from the *9th Symphony*, the waltzing section from the scherzo movement. You were laughing in my arms. You had forgotten all the pain. You began to flow in and out of my arms, at once solitary and part of the dance with me. You began to hum the tune, to lilt it, ever so sweetly. Therese, Therese, I was happy, you were happy. Our child was about to be born. We danced with him in our hearts. We held him, as precious as our love. So precious... I put my arms around you and held you so tightly. And then you began to cry, sobbing uncontrollably, shaking in my arms, while the music played on, serenely. The tears ran in streams down your face, they soaked my shirt, my skin. I said,

"What is it? What's wrong, Therese?"

And you said, as you always did each time you cried and I asked you what was wrong, why were you crying, you said,

"I don't know, I don't know."

Till eventually the tears ceased and your body stopped shaking. You wanted me to hold you, *to always hold you*. You'd never really known love. You'd only ever known pain, fear, rejection. You were afraid of losing my love, that it would be taken away. But still you said,

"I don't know, I don't know."

As if your sadness was much more than that, much more than the past that haunted you, much more than the fear of losing my love, for as I always told you, the past was finished with, over and done with, it could no longer harm you, could no longer touch you, and that you would never lose my love, it would never be taken away from you, that I would always love you, I promised you, *I would always love you*, whatever happened, I would always love you. Nothing could change that.

And so, Therese, if you remember me this Christmas, if you think of me, know that I still do love you, that I've never stopped loving you, that I will always love you, as I promised, and promise still. There's no need to cry, there's no need to be afraid. I'm here.

*I'm here*, Therese,

John.

The postman woke me this morning. I'm not used to him calling, I only see him two or three times a year, and then he brings me correspondence, bills and notices, not letters. Today he brought me a card, from Mrs. Concannon of course. It said,

*Wishing you a Christmas full of Joy and Peace*

and reminded me in a short, scribbled note, that we are going to mid - night mass together tomorrow.

I put the card on the mantelpiece just above where we had pinned the flower bouquet. It has a religious theme. There is a picture of the Holy Family on the front. Mother, and Father, and new – born child. They seem quite at home on the mantelpiece.

I did not go to mass today. Around lunchtime I went to the hospital to see Tony. It still saddens me that he will not be at home for Christmas but I know it cannot be helped now. I met Dr. Kelly, who told me he would not be working at Christmas but that his junior, Dr. Carroll, whom I know, (she was the one who said, *I saw nothing about music on his sheet. Do you remember, Therese?*) would take his place.

"Tony is doing nicely," he told me. "We might be able to reduce his medicine some more."

I feel I've cramped his style a little. His hands hover restlessly in front of his body. I know he'd like to reach out to touch me. It's his manner, he needs it as much as he thinks his patients do, wanting to give them a contact words cannot give them, wanting to *go beyond* speech. After our little altercation he doesn't dare touch me. I'm almost penitent with him, I tell him,

"I'm much happier with the care Tony is getting now. I feel you're looking after him well."

He smiled complacently.

"And the music," he said, "I understand better about the music now. I've heard that it can be used for therapeutic purposes. In fact, I think Tony is very interesting."

"Where did he learn to respond to music like that?" he asked.

"It's part of him," I said. "He's been listening to music since he was in his mother's womb."

I wanted to talk about it, I wanted to tell him about Tony.

"I always had music in the house. Oh, I'm not passionate about music, it's not that, I don't know a whole lot about it, but I've always really appreciated certain pieces, the better known ones. So, I always had a small collection of records."

He was listening attentively. I could see that he was genuinely interested.

"I played the music for Tony's mother. She cared less for classical music than I did, but she grew to like it. I told her that it was a good idea for pregnant mothers to sit and listen to Beethoven or Mozart, that it helped the development of the child."

He was still listening, still interested. I resolved to continue to the end.

"You see, we dreamed that Tony would be the perfect child. So, Therese sat listening to *Elvira Madigan* or the *Ode to Joy*, with her arms wrapped round her tummy as if she was already holding Tony in them. She sang to him too. She had a sweet little voice. There was a song we had learned on our honeymoon in Italy, you might know it - *Sorrento*."

"I know it well," he said, encouraging me.

"She sang *Sorrento* to him, morning, noon and night. When she couldn't sleep, she'd get up out of bed and stand in the window looking out, singing all the while, softly to him,

*Hear the music of the waters  
Vows of tender passion sighing  
Like my heart on which go flying  
All my thoughts in waking dreams."*

I sang it for him. He liked my flourish. He laughed.

"Then, of course, we had Tony. I can't tell you how hard it was for us, especially Therese. She could never accept it. It was too cruel. But she was great really. She really tried. We decided to keep Tony at home for as long as we could and we filled his days with music. I think at first it was our way of living with Tony, it was our clinging to the dream we had had of him, the perfect child, the dream child, it was our link with the perfect time before he was born."

I paused.

"Go on," he said, encouragingly. "Go on."

"Well, as I was saying, at first we played the music for ourselves more than for Tony. Then, I noticed how responsive he was to certain pieces. I remember I was playing *Carl Orff*, the start of *Carmina Burana* when Tony, who had little or no movement - I was used to having him like a lifeless doll in my arms - Tony began to shake as I held him. I thought at first he was unwell, but as the music subsided, grew calmer, Tony grew calmer, then when the music began to race again, Tony began to move in my arms again. *It had to be the music*. So, I began to play music, for Tony. It became a link to him, a way of communicating with him, and a way for him to respond. For the first time, we were able to relate to him in a positive way. We had a common language. It helped Therese. I remember her dancing with Tony to a piece by *Schubert*. It was lovely."

"I see," he said. "Really, it's fascinating. I've never come across anything quite like it."

I had more to say.

"They told us Tony would never be a normal child, that he would never be able to move, never be able to talk, that he would probably not have any intelligence, that he wouldn't be able to perceive who we were. He wouldn't be able to recognise or respond to us with his mind or his emotions. We would never be able to have, what one doctor called, a *real, human* relationship with him. You can imagine our joy when we discovered that Tony could share in the pleasure of music, that he could be one with *Mozart*, or with *Ravel*, and that he had the most wonderful sensibility to music, greater than our own perhaps. As he grew older the music became more and more a part of him, it seemed almost to possess him, to play through him, to express itself through him. I realised I had a wonderful child, a blessed child, who had something pure and perfect

inside him. His love of music." As I spoke, Dr. Kelly gave me his complete attention. I wondered what sort of fool I was making of myself, but I could see that he would let me go on and on.

"Best of all," I continued, "I could enter into the music with him, I could be part of it with him. My own love of music grew, I became passionate about that language which drew me close to Tony. I followed him into that world of notes and chords, I became Tony in a sense, I wanted to be him, I wanted to be the music playing through him, so we could be perfectly together, father and son. I knew that in spite of what I had been told, Tony was aware of me. He was aware of me through the music. Now do you understand? "

I practically admonished him.

"I know that Tony knows me. He may not know me as other people do, but he knows me as a force in his life, like music is. Music has taught him about the world. Don't you see it in his eyes sometimes? When he hears music? Or looks at the Christmas tree with its lights? Or how he seems to follow the movement of the clouds and the changing light? Sometimes when I come to see him, I see it, his eyes light up. If he could, I know he'd hold me, he'd reach out to me. Tony may not have movement or perception or thought or whatever, but he is still, deep down in himself, aware. He exists. He has being. He is alive. I know it. I know it only too well."

I felt embarrassed. It's not like me to ramble on so much. Something had taken hold of me. All the thoughts I have about Tony just seemed to pour out of me. In a way, it felt as if I was writing to you, Therese, speaking to you in that old - fashioned, stilted style of mine. I was like someone who hasn't spoken to another human being in a long time, who's forgotten how almost, then someone presses a button and the words tumble out in a torrent. I excused myself to the doctor, who, to be honest, showed no impatience, so I don't think what I said sounded too awful. In fact, there was something more he wanted to know.

"What about Therese?" he said. "You left her behind in the middle of all that."

He said it naively, Therese, that *I had left you behind in the middle of all that*, but he was more perceptive than he was aware. I've often thought myself that I *did* leave you behind in the middle of all that. I became too involved in Tony and forgot too much about you. I'm sorry.

His question was still there, waiting for an answer. Apart from Greyson there's really no one left who knows me well enough to ask about you. The doctor was a stranger. He had no real interest in knowing about you, or about us. As I said, he asked the question innocently. So, I answered it innocently, by telling the truth.

"She left me," I said, "when Tony was two. I think it was my fault, but she couldn't stand it any longer."

His only response was to shrug his shoulders.

"My own wife left me," he explained, "but I don't blame myself for it. It wasn't my choice, after all."

I was stunned. Does it make any sense to say you would never think it to look at him? That his wife could have left him? This gentle man, who tries so hard to be caring? He was laughing,

"I think I bored her. She found life too dull with me. She went looking for excitement somewhere else."

I was struck by his carefree attitude.

"You're one of life's true innocents," I told him.

"Why do you say that?" he asked, still laughing.

"You seem to accept things, you're not looking for someone or something to blame."

"What's the point?" he said with finality. "We can't remake the world."

There was nothing more to be said about it. We shook hands and wished each other a happy Christmas. Before leaving he said,

"I'm glad you and Tony found each other. That was certainly a happy moment."

*Certainly a happy moment.* I've had many, many happy moments since with Tony. Today was happy. I sat with him for hours, played music to him, raised him up to see past the Christmas tree by the window out to the one in the grounds. It's lit all the time, now that the days are so short, and so dark. I pumped the foot - pedal that lifts the bed till Tony was high up above the window frame and almost at a level with the star on the top of the Christmas tree. I could see his excitement at being so high up and being able to see out through the wide window, through the curling, white mist that hung on the bare branches of the trees. After music Tony loves trees the most. Perhaps, it's because they are so still and yet so alive, so full of sound and motion when the wind is blowing. They make a music of their own for Tony to listen to. They sing a song of their own for Tony to hear. It's sad to see them cut down, or without leaves in wintertime. It must have been that I had talked so much about Tony.

Later, returning home, I crossed the park. It was dark of course, just some shadowy moonlight filtering through the mist. I circled the pond, whose water, like a mirror in a darkened room, had caught whatever light there was, and was reflecting it back at the sky. I felt the cold bitterly. The air had a sharp, penetrating edge. I walked with my arms wrapped round myself to keep myself warm but it was useless. I don't like the cold or the dark and was anxious to get home.

I don't know if it was because my mood had suddenly changed and I was feeling a little lost and isolated in the emptiness of the park but I thought back to my walk there some weeks ago. The last dead leaves were still clinging to the branches then. I remembered thinking, in a nonchalant way, that they were like dead birds, starlings perhaps, hanging from the branches. That thought came into my mind again this evening. I imagined that the ground under my feet and the icy, glassy water of the pond, were covered with the fallen corpses of the starlings. It gave me an eerie sensation. I stopped in my tracks to try to steady myself, but could not shake of the sudden fear that had taken hold of me. I began to walk on again, quickly. I was like a little boy frightened of the dark. I left the pond valley behind me and set off across the grass intending it to be a short - cut. It wasn't. In five minutes I arrived at a closed gate. The perimeter wall was too high for me to climb. I thought of going back, of retracing my steps to the entrance I had come in, but decided instead to follow the perimeter wall until I found a way out. I could hear my heart beating hard and my breathing was strained. Perhaps I was walking too fast, I don't know, but before long I had to stop walking. I felt suddenly tired, just like the evening I had to take a taxi home instead of going to visit Tony. I needed to rest. I found a shelter with a seat. I sat there until I felt better. The atmosphere around me was dark and foreboding. I was too susceptible to it. It began to frighten me, to work on my imagination. Afterwards, when I left the shelter I found an exit almost immediately. I was so relieved. I hurried home.

I'd almost forgotten the incident by the time I got home. I busied myself about the house, I set a blazing fire, I drank a full glass of brandy, and put on some *Schubert*, the *8th Symphony*, the *Unfinished*. I sat down in front of the fire. The music rippled like dense flame. It was burning. It was strained and tensed and strident at the climaxes, but still it flowed like unstoppable fire. How did this music die? How did it cease to exist? Did it consume itself in its own ardour? Swallow itself up in its own fierceness? I heard it this evening as if

for the first time, *raw, savage, brutal, impassioned, searing* as a cry of pain. I wanted to hold the music in my arms and cradle it to some sort of serenity; I wanted to embrace it till it had burned itself out in the mysterious tranquility of its ending. I wanted to ease its pain, to rock it, soothe it to sleep, a dreamless sleep where its own savagery could not hurt it. It made me remember Tony. I remembered his birth. I heard you screaming again and saw his foot plunging out of your body. He seemed to break you bone and tissue, to crack you open, to shatter you. I heard your body breaking asunder, your bones being crushed, your muscles tearing apart, your voice howling down through your hollow insides. I cried out to them to help you, I wanted to grab Tony's legs and pull him out of you, but the doctor was already sinking his hands inside you, had caught Tony's body and was easing it out. In an instant Tony appeared, his body flopping down between your thighs, his head still in the doctor's hands. Your body seemed to disintegrate all at once, to fold and collapse in on itself, as though it was Tony who had been holding it all together. As I held you, you were only a murmur of breath and heartbeat, without consciousness.

I held you as if you were sleeping but then I wanted to see our child so I leaned across you to look down at him lying between your legs. One of the nurses tried to push me back but I had time to see it, the still taut cord twisted round his neck and the open, breathless mouth. He was hanging by a noose from your womb. I thought he was dead. I saw the doctors fingers unwind the cord and swing Tony upwards and hit him sharply.

"We've got to get him breathing," he was saying.

And I waited, still holding you in my arms, for his breathing to start, for Tony to start crying like any child, but he never did. The doctor hit him again, then again. He laid him down on your belly and breathed a mouthful of air into his mouth, pushing it down into his lungs. Then I saw him breathing, Tony's chest kickstart and expand, then deflate, then fill up again. I thought everything was alright. I had no idea yet how cruel birth could be.

Why, tonight, I remembered all this I don't know. First there was the park, then the *Schubert* like a bridge across time, pulling Tony's birth out of me. By the time the music had stopped the memory had come and gone. I was aware only of wanting you, Therese. I wanted to hold you as I had that night after I saw the cord stretched around Tony's neck. *How could I sleep?* I stood in the window but that was not enough, I could see no stars. I think they too must have died and fallen from the night. I had to write, I had to try to tell you all this. You're the only one who could understand, the only one I could tell it too. The only one, Therese, for whom the pain needs no explaining.

I've nothing more to say. The house is cold, the fire's died out. My mind is empty. I'll just sit here. I won't think. I feel better already. I'm fine now.

Mrs. Concannon kept her rendezvous. She called about half - past ten for midnight mass. She noticed immediately I was not feeling well.

"What's the matter? We don't have to go," she said.

I wanted to go. I hadn't left the house all day. I'd stayed in bed till after dark. I hadn't even been to see Tony. Mrs. Concannon was aghast when she heard. I felt I had to excuse myself,

"Sometimes, I'm just not able to. Do you understand that? "

"Of course I do, of course I do," she answered me.

She suggested that we drive. There was a white mist outside, but I wanted to walk. I needed the air. It would take about an hour to get to the church. We hardly spoke. She was concerned about me. It was palpable. It made me uncomfortable.

"There's no need to worry," I said. "I just feel a little unwell."

"I know it's Tony's birthday tomorrow," she said, having already formed a clear notion of why I was feeling unwell. "I know it can't be easy for you - I've seen it so often, sometimes it's the hardest time of year for relatives."

She was anxious to be sympathetic and understanding. I didn't appreciate it as much as I should have. I shook my head to show her I accepted what she said, but also to indicate that I wasn't in a mood for talking. She respected that. Without a word, we walked on through the mist - covered night - time. She was like a shadow beside me, always the same distance from me, a reflection of my own darkness and silence.

When we reached the church we were among the first to arrive. I told her I wanted to be near the back, just below the choir. I sat and waited for the mass to begin. Mrs. Concannon knelt beside me. I could see her lips moving but heard nothing of her prayer. Almost instantly she was absorbed in it, seemingly oblivious to what was around her.

The church was filling up. It was brightly lit but everyone was dressed in dark clothes. Soon there was a closely packed mass of people covering the church floor like a dense and heavy cloud. There was a damp, smoky smell as if the crowd within was an extension of the cold mist outside that had infiltrated through the swinging doors of the church and was turning to steam in the warmth of the interior. There was a chorus of coughing as people gagged on the thick, muggy atmosphere. I coughed too to clear my throat. I knew I'd soon become accustomed to it. Each year it was like that. I always brought Tony to this mass. People left us a space near the door. We listened to the bells, ringing a silver web of sound over us. Tony loved it. He loved it all. The light in the air above the crowd was fabulously bright like a golden shield covering it. Tony's eyes were attracted up through the dazzling light to the high beams of the roof. It was like a dark and solid sky resting on marble pillars. Rays of light like shooting starbeams lost themselves in it.

The massive force of the organ impressed Tony. I held his hand against the wood. He could feel the reverberation of crowd and music in it, an immense resonance as if the wood was transformed into a unique and silent instrument.

When it was time to shake hands, to offer the sign of peace, everyone wanted to shake Tony's hand. Bodies closed in a dense ring around him. They squeezed his hand, his arm, his shoulders. They caressed his head,

running their fingers through his hair. Tony didn't mind. He liked it. He shook himself as if all those hands were music and he was part of a rising, falling cadence. I always said,

"It's his birthday today!"

They congratulated him.

"Happy Christmas, Happy Birthday. Aah, sure God love him."

Yes, *God love him*. God love Tony. I believe in love and if God is love then I believe in him, her, or it, too. I will continue to go to mass, if only once a year, or once in ten years, if the priest says, with his arms outspread to all the world,

"God is Love!"

As soon as the mass started my mind began to drift. I heard individual words coming through a fog of sound. *Peace, joy, triumph, celebration, redemption*. Mrs. Concannon looked back and smiled at me. I followed her movements. When she stood up, I stood up; when she knelt down, I knelt down; when she sat, I sat. There was music with the choir singing the traditional Christmas songs. Mrs. Concannon's voice was loud beside me. *Adeste* rang out. The organ pumped out the divine breath of its notes, displaying the angelic thunder of its voice.

The crowd was filing past to communion. Mrs. Concannon squeezed past me. I hoped she would be able to find her way back. The choir was quiet. The organ playing all alone. It was strange. I never heard anything like it. I saw faces around me turned up in fear and amazement to the gallery. The music was tremendous. At first, it was formless and chaotic, it was all crescendo. It pulverised the air. It dominated everything. It rose up under the solid, blackened wood of the roof then came crashing down like the heavens falling. It came roaring down through the light, crushing the air under it. As it reached the lowest point of its fall, just above our heads, it seemed to exhaust itself, to free itself of its own weight, of its own sombre and magnificent gravity and rise up again to the roof - beams. It floated about up there like the flight of birds, twisting and turning in even curves and swerves, its notes joining in an unknown but gentle harmony, song - like, softer and softer, until it became silence.

The silence was brief. I heard a voice, human this time. A child's voice lifting up from the silence, full of quiet, sweet tenderness. *Ave Maria*. I thought of you, Therese. The church was incredibly silent, as if it was empty. The only sound was that voice singing its lyrical praise. There was nothing but loveliness. Pure loveliness. I felt my spirit rise up, Therese. I felt, in a sense, redeemed. I was aware, Therese, that I loved you, that I loved you more than any beauty in the world. That I loved you more than the heavens and earth and God and Love itself. That's how much I love you, God forgive me, I can't help it.

*Ave, ave...*

The song soared and soared high above us, away from the dense, black, milling mass of crowded bodies, as if it had nothing whatsoever to do with us at all, as if it was free of us, as if it was indifferent to us, to our fate, and was singing to *Maria, Mary, Marie*, alone.

*Marie - Therese, Marie - Therese... You, Therese.*

Mr. Concannon came back in a dream or trance of her own, the white disc in her mouth. Her lips had the delicate poise of someone who's afraid to touch the wafer with her tongue, her mouth dry, keeping the thin, sharp, bright full - moon intact for as long as she could. Afterwards she was all smiles, radiant even. She

gripped my hand and shook it warmly, wishing me peace. Her eyes were bright as a child's, looking as they always do, close to tears. Her skin was more crinkly than ever, her cheeks round and shining. The midnight mass had certainly worked its magic on her.

We came out of the church into the still, cold, misty air. Automatically I searched the sky for stars. Mrs. Concannon looked up too.

"First one to see one has a wish," she said.

We saw none. There was no wish. Near us, in the midst of the shapeless crowd spilling down the steps from the church porch, a small and bearded drunk was singing with his arms held out, his head thrown back, looking up at the tall, grey spire high above him,

*Fall on your knees,  
Hear the angel voices,  
Hosanna...*

His voice was broken and twisted, cracked. Most people ignored him, streamed darkly past him. He was ragged and torn, like something used, useless and discarded. From his coat pocket the neck of an uncorked wine bottle stuck out. Some people laughed at him as he staggered, pushed aside by bodies passing him.

"Thank God we have homes to go to," Mrs. Concannon said, adding pitifully. "God help him." I could see that she genuinely felt sorry for him.

We followed the crowd through the streets. It thinned out and soon we were alone. Mrs. Concannon turned around excitedly.

"Look, look!" she said, pointing up through the mist.

The mist had broken behind us. I could see the entire moon and a few stars scattered close to it.

"Now I can wish," she said, and she became silent as if she was praying again. She stood there for a long time like that. She was putting all her heart into her wish. She really wanted it to work. When we started walking again she slipped her arm through mine and we walked the rest of the way home like that, our arms linked. Back home we drank a brandy together. She was talkative again, just like when we went for the drive in the country. She was smiling and laughing all the time.

"You can call me Irene," she invited me. "We should be on more familiar terms at this stage."

She added,

"You're John, aren't you?"

I nodded that I was.

"Well then, John," she said cheerily, lifting her glass up to me. "Happy Christmas!"

"Happy Christmas!" I echoed.

"Can I call to see you again?" she asked.

"Of course," I replied.

It was Christmas morning, what else could I have said?

It was almost four in the morning when she left. I couldn't sleep. There were birds singing. I thought that was strange in the middle of the night. You seldom hear them in Elmpark since they cut the trees down. Maybe it was the moonlight. It had been hidden away behind the mist for almost a month. The birds confused it with the dawn perhaps, or thought its appearance worth a song. Their song went on for a half - hour, then petered out with a few half - hearted, disappointed notes.

I slept then, fitfully, for a couple of hours. I even dreamed. I dreamt of Tony lying on his hospital bed. *The sheets were thrown back off him. He was naked, his skin white as snow. Everything was white. Even the yellow walls had been painted over white. Though I did not appear in the dream, Tony's eyes were looking at me. They had a blind look as if he could not see me but knew that I was there. His body was shaking on the bed. I felt he wanted to put out his arms to me but could not. He became agitated, as if some music I could not hear was playing. His legs and arms shook. He reminded me of a spider on its back, he was so helpless. I wanted to get closer to him or call out to him but in the dream I could only observe him, I could do nothing to help him.*

Then, as often happens in dreams, the absurd took over. I can't explain this but as I watched *birds came out from under Tony, white birds, like doves, like the mobile, flapping their wings at his sides. They jumped on him, on his legs, his belly, his arms, his face, till they covered him. I could no longer see him, just his black hair and an eye peering out through the birds on his face. Then, the birds, all of them together, began to flap their wings, as if they were about to fly off. The flapping of their wings became furious, a white flurry of wind and feathers.*

*The noise was thunderous, a great, hollow booming like the organ in the church, and then it was incredibly silent again. The birds were in the air. I could hear nothing, see nothing. The birds were no longer birds but had become a sea of white mist I was trying to find my way through. I was looking for Tony. I couldn't find him. I ran with my hands out in front of me. I wanted to shout out, Tony, Tony... but could make no sound with my voice. I began to panic. I was afraid I'd lost Tony, when I came to the edge of the bed. I could see nothing through the white mist but I knew it was Tony's bed. I did not reach out to touch Tony. I just sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for the mist to clear. Then, of course, I woke up.*

It was the most beautiful Christmas morning. The sunrise began with a purple band across the horizon that turned to a taut, darkened amber, then melted in the golden fire of the sun. Still high in the sky the moon was almost translucent, a pale ghost of itself descending through the crisp, blue air. I forgot all about my dream thinking of the day ahead. I would do some work around the house, then have breakfast, then visit Tony. I would spend the day with Tony. Tony's birthday. With the sun shining the inside of the house seemed full of light, I moved about in a golden glow. I could run my fingers through the light like water. It felt warm.

Outside it was cold. The sun's light was cold and vibrant. On my way to the hospital I walked through the park. I circled the pond. The abandoned swans' nests were broken and scattered on the footpath. Nothing stirred, the surface of the water was still, like a layer of ice. Everything seemed frozen in a perfect stillness. Even the sun's cold fire seemed unmoving in the sky. The sky itself was like a sheet of blue ice. In the space of a few hours the autumnal mists had dissipated and real winter coldness taken over. The weather had changed. It was a strangely different world.

The hospital was quiet. Tony was sleeping. I unwrapped the mobile and hung it from the ceiling just above his bed. I unwrapped the two cassettes. Mrs. Concannon's was, as expected, the cassette of songs she had

played for me the day of the drive in the country. I played the cassette of the *Four Seasons* that Greyson had given me. It was a day of music from beginning to end. I played all of Tony's favourite music, *Carmina*, *Elvira*, then the *Schubert*, the *8th* and *9th*, the *Unfinished* and the *Great*. I played Chopin's *Nocturnes* for you, Therese, then the *Four Seasons* again, Tony loved it, then *the songs*, then *Carmina* again, then the *Schubert* again. We always, always come back to my beloved Schubert, as if he is the only one who really understands us.

All day the sun was bright outside. There was no wind and no cloud. As it grew dark we sat in the light of the Christmas tree, its coloured globes reflecting on the pale yellow of the walls. I switched the mobile on. The music played as the wire filaments turned and the doves rotated above our heads. Tony was enraptured. He could not take his eyes off it. The familiar tune went round and round, tinkling in the air above us, its silver, birdlike notes. It was a true lullaby, it seemed to lull the air and the light and the darkness around us.

Later, I heard voices coming down the corridors. I noticed the lights going out outside the room. There was singing. Soon, a group of nurses came into the room with candles held before them. They were singing Christmas carols. *Adeste*, *Silent Night*. They stood around Tony's bed and sang softly to him. It reminded me of how in Michael's some of the nurses would chant passages from *Carmina* around Tony, laughing at the sound of their own voices. I was so carried away that I decided to sing. I stood up and with all the voice I could find I sang out *Sorrento*. My voice broke more than once, cracked under the stress of the melody, but the atmosphere succeeded for me and the nurses were entranced by it. When I came to,

*Now I hear that thou must leave me,  
Thou and I must soon be parted...*

there was an expectant hush in the room. Silence. I felt as if I was back in Italy all those years ago, in the small Sorrento bar, singing my heart out, my voice straining to hold the song, with the Italians listening, their heads bowed respectfully, and you there beside me, Therese, half - embarrassed, half - happy, for my sake.

Miss Carroll, the young house doctor replacing Dr. Kelly came in Tony's room. She was impressed by the light, the music, the dancing doves. She shook my hand,

"I'm embarrassed," she said. "I talked to Dr. Kelly about the music. We think it's actually helping Tony to get better."

She paused uncertainly,

"I know it sounds strange, but it's a form of love isn't it?"

I did not answer her question. I could see that she understood.

"We hope if Tony's improvement continues that he'll soon be able to go back to Michael's."

It was good news, the best Christmas present I could have.

Tony's twelfth Christmas, Therese. It was a happy one. Only one thing could have made it happier, could have made it infinitely more happy. You know what that was, Therese. It's been ten long years without you. I can hardly believe it's been so long, and yet... It's been like crossing a desert. It's been barren, Therese. How can I tell you? How can I show you? How can I make you see? The loneliness, the longing, the regret, the desire, without you, Therese. The emptiness of my life. Yes, in spite of everything, in spite of Tony, and thank God for Tony, my life has been so empty without you. If you could only see, if you could only be here

with me a moment, I could show you. You would see, you would understand, you would know, Therese, how hard it has been. Hardly a day goes by but that I think of you and long for you, my Therese. You are always in my life and in my heart and never far from my thoughts. Darling Therese, this Christmas, I say to you once again that I love you, as I have been saying each Christmas since you went away, and will go on saying, as long as I have breath.

Walking home from the hospital, I saw dozens of stars and constellations appear on the sky face. I walked slowly underneath them, as if seeing them for the first time, discovering them, mesmerised by their brightness. How could I fail to think of you, Therese? You are the stars for me. No matter how far apart we are we still see the same stars and perhaps you were looking up and thinking of me at the same time.

*The night was in bloom  
There were stars in the skies...*

At home, though it was almost midnight, I lit a blazing fire. I stood in the bay window, the room behind me dark, except for the leaping flames and the coloured tree lights. I wanted to devote the night to you, in memory of those other Christmas nights long ago when the night was in bloom and there were stars in your eyes. How was I to know, perhaps you too were remembering those times, standing at your window in London, looking up at the same stars, full of longing, sorrow, desire, regret. Perhaps in the night there, we were as close together as we have ever been, holding each other across a great distance, our love reaching up to the sky, touching the stars. *Therese, Therese, I am yours. I am lost to you.* In the sleepless night I am aware more profoundly than ever of the depth of my love for you and of the eternal hold you have on me. Though you went away, you never left me. You're still the center of my life and my life without you would have no meaning. Do you hear, Therese? Do you see? I'm still hopelessly, terribly, in love with you. If you came back to me tomorrow I would never ask where you had been. I'd only want to hold you and hold you, till these past ten years had melted into forgetfulness and nothingness. Till there was nothing left of them but the memory of a dreamless sleep, as brief and obscure as a split - second of darkness.

*If you came back to me tomorrow...*

Darling Therese, dearest, sweetest darling, I wish you in your distant, light - bound city of soaring stone and glass a Christmas time full of peace and happiness and love.

John.

The days have flown past. The New Year has simply swept the old one aside. I've been to see Tony everyday. I don't worry so much about him now. He seems much better, and he's well taken care of. Usually, when I call, his music is playing. The nurses put it on themselves. They seem to like certain pieces. I notice they play Chopin quite a lot. Tony swims about in his dream with his eyes closed. I sit and wait patiently for him to break the surface.

These past few days have given me more time with Tony. I've been there to feed him and wash him. I'd almost forgotten how important this was to me, how much it means. The only physical contact I have with another human being is with our son, Therese. It is as important for me as it is for Tony. When the music is playing I can feel it in him. I put on the Schubert *Great* today and from the first passage, the extended motif building to a sweeping climax of strings, I could feel the music like a deep stream flowing through Tony's body. I felt as if I was holding the music itself in my arms. That first movement was frenetic, hurried, urgent, racing through Tony. The thought occurred to me for the first time, Therese, that music *is his heartbeat*. It's the pulse of Tony's blood in his veins, his lifeblood.

Music is a deep stream through both our lives. It would be impossible to understand our lives without understanding music, the music at the heart of our lives. It's not hard, Therese, to understand this music. It's like hearing *Sorrento* sung and remembering our wedding and Italy, thinking, *yes*, that music is part of our life, has absorbed some of our life into it, some of our most precious memories. It is the language of memory. I can hear the past through it. But with Tony, that precious language is the language of the present, and for Tony, who lives always in the present, it is like speech. It's Tony's speech, *Tony's voice*, Therese. Music is his voice - and when I hold him, I listen, and when I listen, his voice is my voice, his speech my speech, his music my music. Do you see now why it impossible to understand us without understanding our music?

Dr. Kelly has not returned from his Christmas break yet. The young woman, Dr. Carroll is very optimistic about Tony but I'm waiting for the older man to come back to deliver his verdict. I live in hope, Therese. Tony will get well. Everything will be as it was before.

New Year's Eve was the most unusual I've spent since you left me, Therese. Mrs. Concannon called around. Well, she had said she would.

"I didn't want to think of you spending this evening all by yourself," she said.

I'm used to having her in the house now. She makes herself at home. She looks around with avid interest, reading my life in the objects around her. She's become interested in my life. She wants to know my secrets. I had a feeling she was going to ask about you, and she did,

"I notice you still wear your wedding ring," she said coyly.

When I answered,

"I'm still married," she looked quickly away from me.

I suddenly realised that she knew nothing about you, that she might well have made assumptions that were not, in fact, true. Perhaps I was a little too brutal when I said,

"My wife is living in London."

She was downcast. I wondered if I had ruined the evening for her. I had never considered she might be attracted to me. The idea seemed absurd. She was Mrs. Concannon, the Matron of the hospital, at least fifty years of age, and though no older than myself, I could not attach the idea of romance to what I already knew of her. Whether or not she was disappointed she still remained interested in you, Therese.

"Do you see her often?"

"I don't see her at all."

"Do you keep in touch? Do you write? Does she?"

"No," was all I answered.

"I'm sorry for asking so many questions," she said. "I realise I have no right."

"It's alright," I reassured her. "There's no harm done."

"I didn't know," she excused herself. "I thought..."

Whatever she thought she never made clear. She asked more questions.

"Have you told her about Tony? About how sick he is? Will she come back to see him?"

"I don't know," I told her. "I never could say what Therese would do."

She hesitated before she asked another question, perhaps the one that was on her mind most.

"How do you feel about her?"

"I love her," I said, and though it was true I regretted saying it so bluntly.

It was suddenly clear to me that she had formed some sort of emotional attachment to me, whatever it might be. Instinctively, I felt I had to save the situation, to rescue her. Maybe I was unfair to her, maybe I should have said nothing at all.

"I don't think Therese will ever come back," I said.

She looked up, more hopefully.

"But when she knows about Tony? She surely will... Any mother would."

Her voice sounded almost desperate as if it were impossible to believe that you might not come back, Therese, but then I explained,

"She doesn't know about Tony and I have no way of letting her know. I haven't heard from Therese since the day she left me. I don't know where she is. She said she was going to London. She may be there."

She began to cry. The tears were streaming down her face. She tried to control them with her hands.

"Oh, it's so sad," she said. "I'm sorry for crying."

I gave her a handkerchief. She began drying her tears. I poured her a glass of brandy. She took big gulps out of it.

"I'm the one who's sorry," I said. "This isn't a very nice evening for you."

"It's my own fault," she said. "I opened my big mouth. I didn't know what I was asking."

"It's of no importance," I said.

The evening seemed to have foundered completely. I thought she would go when she had finished her brandy. I was surprised when she pulled a large book out of a bag she had with her. I was even more surprised when I realised it was the Bible.

"I hope you don't mind," she said. "I just wanted to pray with you."

"I'm not very religious," I reminded her.

"I know," she said, "but I believe in the power of prayer so much. I believe it could help us, help Tony. Even if you just listen... you don't have to say anything."

I let her. Once again, I didn't want to hurt her.

"Some psalms," she suggested.

"Why not?" I concurred.

She opened the book and began to read. Her voice was not very strong, but she put a lot of feeling into the words as if she really believed them, as if they were meant for her, as if God would rescue her from her enemies and all that. My mind soon began to drift. I listened to the sound of her voice only, a thin, reedy sound like a clarinet or oboe. Now and again the words reached me but mostly the sound of her voice was punctuated only by the turning of the pages. After about twenty minutes she was suddenly quiet, she seemed to be praying soundlessly and that caught my attention as I wondered what the prayer could be, the one I couldn't hear. Then she was reading out loud again, and because of the silence that had gone before them the words registered inescapably in my mind. I was shaken by them.

Her voice read,

*Where could I go to escape from you?  
Where could I get away from your presence?  
If I went up to heaven, you would be there,  
If I lay down in the world of the dead, you would be there.*

There was more than this, much more, but these words were enough, Therese. I was possessed by them. I knew exactly what they meant, Therese. *You. You alone.* I looked to see where they were written on the page. I repeated them, over and over again, and even when Mrs. Concannon had gone on to other prayers, I was still lost in this one. It was my own prayer. It was my prayer to you, Therese, to your all - embracing presence in my life.

I wanted Mrs. Concannon to go. I wanted to be alone with you, Therese. She was blissfully unaware. She

stayed, kneeling by the fireplace, under the card of the Holy Family, her head almost touching the bouquet of white flowers she had brought me before Christmas. She had not noticed that the flowers had withered and that the green leaves had become crisp and brown. I thought it a curiously poignant counterpoint to her voice. The dead flowers and leaves were like a wreath hung over her words.

Finally, she left. She called out,

"Happy New Year."

I had no idea of what time it was, whether it was the New Year or still the Old. Then I heard bells ringing and looking up saw the stars sparkling in the sky. The air was bitterly cold, frosty. I went back into the house. I was in a fever of excitement.

*Therese, Therese, where could I go to escape from you? If I lay down in the world of the dead, you would be there. Everywhere I look I find you, and you will always be there, will always be with me. Inescapably. Even if I lay down in the world of the dead....*

I wish for nothing more, Therese. If I could die and find you, I would be happy. I realise now that my life is, has always been, a search and searching for you. Why then when I met you for the first time on the train did I suddenly feel that my life, my world had suddenly taken on shape and form? And why then since you left has the shape and form of my life been wrapped around your absence? You were light to me, Therese. Even in your darkness you illuminated me, gave me light. And without you my own life has been spent in darkness, seeking the stars, searching for you. I will go on searching, Therese, through the past and present and through the future. I will ransack time to find you. I will take our memories, Therese, and I will exhaust them. I will relive them until I have worn them out completely, until they have become shadows lost in the night sky. And then I will live them again, searching them out like faded constellations. If I cannot live them, I will dream them, and if I cannot live or dream them, that will not stop me loving you, Therese. Nor will it stop me seeking for you, Therese, throughout time. I will never give up the search. And if tomorrow or someday, I find myself taking a train, that's leaving from some far - off station in the past, I won't be afraid, even if that black - haired girl you were back then sits beside me and smiles mysteriously at me, with all the dark mystery that was yours, Therese, I won't be afraid, I won't have any regrets, I'll still go on that journey, I'll still smile back at you, happy that I've found you, ready for whatever life may bring, not asking for anymore than that, not afraid, not having any regrets, only saying to you, Therese,

"Remember when we did this for the first time?"

Do you, Therese? Do you remember?

*I do.*

I met you on the Galway train. I was stopping at Tullamore. My father had just died. I was going to bury him. I had no one else. Strange that you should happen along then at that very moment. Your name was Marie Conway, but you told me to call you Therese. Therese was your middle - name. You were finished with Marie. For your family you were Marie. You were finished with your family. You were going back home just one more time to tell them. It was over; the past as you knew it, as they knew it, as I knew it, was over. You said you had decided to end it, the past; to close it like a book, to shut it up, with Marie inside. You had lain awake all night thinking about it. You had discovered who you were. You were Therese. Therese had a life of her own, a future. You were looking forwards to it. I asked,

"What sort of life will Therese have?"

You said,

"She'll have a life full of all the things she's been missing up to now, all the things she's been denied, and all that in her wildest dreams she's ever wanted."

I had been sitting alone. The train was still in the station. I was thinking about my father. I was thinking about the funeral arrangements. There was dirt on the window. I remember trying to rub it off with my fingers. That's when I saw you, darkly reflected in the glass. I looked around at you. You were dressed in black: black woolen jumper, long black skirt, black boots. Your hair was raven - black.

"Is this seat free?" you asked me.

I nodded that it was. I watched as you reached over me to put your case on the overhead rack. Your jumper climbed up over your stomach and I saw the tiny shell of your navel for the first time. Your stomach was flat and smooth and firm with muscles. You were a long time reaching above me like that, settling your case and jacket on the rack, and when you sat down opposite me I felt, in some way, different about you. I was interested in you. You noticed and smiled. You gave me a white handkerchief.

"This might help take the dirt off."

I took it from you, awkwardly, and began rubbing the grime with it, then, I stopped; the handkerchief was getting smudged.

You said,

"Why are you travelling?"

And I said,

"I'm returning home to bury my dead."

You smiled again, saying,

"Well, in that case, so am I."

I thought you were full of confidence, full of life. Life had not loved you well but at twenty you were breaking free of all that, ready to begin again, to start a new life. You had a job in the city centre, you told me, with Prentice Solicitors. You had worked with a law firm in Galway after school, it was through them that you had the opportunity to go to Dublin, to work with Prentice. Your family were opposed to it, especially your father.

"Have you ever noticed how we love the things we hate? We don't want to let them go?"

That was how you put it, meaning that your family would miss having you around to mistreat.

"I know what you mean," I said.

"How can you?" you said, with that brusque, dismissive tone you sometimes used.

"I just can," I insisted, and you laughed. "Why? Do you think I'm patronising you?"

"No, I think you're lovely," you said.

I warned you,

"I'm twice your age. I'm old."

"That's alright. I like older men."

Looking back, you were quite flirtatious, but I realise it was more than that. You were, when I met you then, full of life, you were brimming over with it, you were ready to live, you were going to conquer the world. I was charmed. I was more than charmed, I was subdued.

I watched the train pull away from the station platform and you smiled at me through the glass. Then you did something I will never forget, it has always been precious to me. You raised your hand a little as if to sketch a tiny wave. You had even started the gesture, given your hand a tentative shake. Then, and it must have been impulsive, a surprise even to you, you raised your hand just a little further, your fingers curled to your lips and you blew from your mouth, the most evanescent of kisses. The train was gone and I had no way to respond. I just stood on the platform, mesmerised by the bright ghost of that kiss in the air before my eyes. I remember thinking had it really happened. You shook your head when I asked you later,

"No," you said, laughing. "I never did that."

But even as I walked down through the grey, dismal, winter streets of my home town, on my way to bury my father, with the rain pouring down through the dull streetlamps, all I could think of was that ethereal kiss that had fallen on me out of your dark heavens. My life was transformed by that kiss. It was, I sometimes think, the star under which I was born, under which you too were born. That kiss was our destiny.

I followed it down through the grey streets of my childhood. I followed into my father's house. I followed it to the bedside where my father lay and I followed it, following him out of the house, through the streets again, to the church whose grey walls had merged with the night. Then, it followed me back to the house I had grown up in, back into the heart of my loneliness, into the bed where my father had lain, dead, just a few hours before. It was there, that kiss, in my broken sleep and broken dreams. I dreamed of the broken earth and my broken love and I dreamed of you, Therese. I dreamed of a kiss wafted through the air and each time I woke in the darkness of that empty house I thought of you, and wanted you. I needed you, as if you were my only consolation.

I remembered that I had your handkerchief. I'd folded it in my hand and put it away in my pocket. I took it out again. It had your scent on it. I held it to my face and breathed it in. *White Mist*. It was called *White Mist*.

Strange as it may sound, in the depth of that night so long ago, I called out your name. I called it out quietly, softly, in that house of death that had not heard a woman's name in years. I called it out like a prayer to the night, *Therese, Therese, Therese*. My prayer.

The next day I buried my father. Some of his friends were there. They thought they knew me. I saw them looking. Where have you been all this time, they were thinking. I knew well. They were thinking that I did not have enough love in me; but I had enough to cry for my dead. It was raining still. I abandoned myself to my tears.

***End of Part One***

## *Part Two*

1

When I called to see Tony today, something strange happened. The young woman, Dr. Carroll stopped me. She was friendly, friendlier than usual. I wondered if something was wrong.

"No, no," she assured me, "nothing."

But there was something all the same.

"Dr. Kelly would like to see you someday, if you have a moment," she said.

Why did he want to see me? She repeated that it was nothing, nothing at all. Wasn't it about Tony then? *Yes*. But it was nothing to worry about. I musn't worry. She wanted to know when could I see Dr. Kelly.

"Anytime," I said. "I can see him anytime."

I'm to see him in two days. I tell myself not to worry, but I'm anxious all the same. Until I hear that Tony is better...

I've not noticed any change in Tony. He's perhaps not as strong as he was but that's to be expected. He's been so long in that hospital bed. Almost six weeks. Christmas has come and gone. The tree in the grounds has been taken down. I left the one in Tony's room up a couple of days longer. Then, stupidly, I began to wonder if it might mean bad luck to leave it up too long, so, I took it down. The days are brighter. The mist there was all December and into the New Year has gone. Usually when I get to Tony it's dark. The sky is full of stars. Sometimes we sit in the dark looking through the large window at the star - whitened night. I try to recognize the constellations but have forgotten most of them. I know *Orion*, waiting till he appears over the horizon before I leave Tony. I know *Orion* has a dog, *Sirius*, the brightest of stars, but we never see him, as he hides in the very depths of the night.

The stars await me in the night, Therese. I walk home slowly beneath them. They're like a path I follow, a brilliant, white path of fiery coldness. Despite their wintry lustre, they remain so coldly distant. I never go to bed without standing in the window to watch them. I look on them as a sea, the sea of light for which you left me, Therese. *London*. As if it were detached from the earth and floating about in space with all its lamps and lights shining through the vast darknesses of countless galaxies and universes. I believe so intently in my fancy, Therese, that I imagine I can make out the streets of that London floating in space. I wonder in which of them I could find you.

Dublin seems bare now that Christmas is over. The colourful lighting is gone, the decorations have been taken out of the shop windows. When I walk around, I wonder where has it all gone, all that unique and poignant atmosphere. I miss it. Most of all, I miss the singers on the streets with their carols and their voices fighting the cold. The world is empty without song.

In the office, we're settling back after our short holiday. There's a general air of tiredness, of energy sapped enjoying oneself.

"How am I supposed to work, after all the fun I've been having?" Doyle said.

"Someone has to work," I told him.

"But why does it have to be me," he protested.

Doyle, Conlon, Flynn and Linda seem closer after the Christmas. New alliances have been formed I think. I feel more excluded than ever from their little group, but what can I expect, we have so little in common. I have to harden myself to being the office *outsider*. Linda, strangely enough, is my closest link to them. It's as if she hasn't realised that I'm the enemy. Unwittingly she'll make a comment to me which allows me enter into their conversations, to Doyle's evident frustration. I've seen him grimace with displeasure. I wonder sometimes if it's Linda's *feminine softness* that simply makes her kinder to me. I wonder if she's taken pity on me for being on the *outside*.

About Linda, I've learned something. I overheard Doyle saying it one day.

"She has a child," he told Conlon and Flynn. "I saw her with it. It's a boy, about three years old I'd say."

"Are you sure it's hers," Flynn wanted to know.

"Ah, for God's sake," Doyle said in exasperation. He doesn't like anyone to doubt him.

When Linda came back into the office we all looked at her differently. Myself included. I see her differently now. I have to admit that I was unfair to her. It's so easy to look at someone on the surface and dismiss them. It's what Doyle and the others do to me and it's what I did to Linda. It was so easy to see her as the empty-headed receptionist, as someone only interested in how she looked, in whether or not she was attractive to men. But now, knowing that she has a child, a little boy, there is so much more I would like to know about her. Does she live alone? Does she see the father? And the little boy? What does he look like? Does he resemble her? I bet he does.

I can't explain, but I want to see her with the boy. I want to see them together. I want to help Linda. I feel protective towards her. How has she kept this secret for so long? When I think of how isolated she has been in the office, with her secret inside her, thinking only perhaps of the evening and being with her son. A little like myself, I think. That's it, that's it, we share something, Linda and myself. If nothing else, we both have children, we both know what it's like to have a boy.

As for Greyson, he dotes on Linda. I wonder does he know about her son. I wonder if he's always known. Did he know way back, when he was insisting on employing her. I must admit I thought it would be bad for the office to have a pretty young woman around, but Greyson was adamant, he wanted Linda in the office, and that was that. Since Christmas, Greyson is even more familiar with her. I've noticed once or twice that he put his hand on her shoulder or arm when talking to her. He comes into our office more often. It's all for Linda, I'm sure of it. I think now that Linda was the reason he went drinking with them at Christmas. He wanted to be near her. I hope at least that he will respect her. She's very young. It would be a very delicate situation to be in if Greyson began to put pressure on her. At least, I'll be there to keep an eye on that. If I notice anything, maybe I can do something.

Ah, Therese, Therese, why am I telling you all this? Does any of it matter? Or, have I just gotten so used to sitting writing like this, to telling you about my days, even though you can't hear, that it's now an end in itself. I think of these fragments I write as *letters*, Therese. My letters to you, my letters to Therese. When I look at them, I can see all that I've been thinking about you, Therese, as well as all the events that have filled my world since I started these pages. I seem to have so many of them now. Will you ever see them, Therese? Will you ever read them? And what will you think of me then? What will you think of all that I remember? Will you be happy? Will you be sad? Could you sometimes, like me, dream of starting again, of going back to the beginning and reliving those moments of happiness that are ours forever? Could you see yourself

sitting in the office of Prentice Solicitor again as the door opens and someone you've met before walks in. Your eyes opened wide and you let a gasp of astonishment, and I said,

"Hello, Therese, do you remember me?"

And I blew you a kiss, right across the office, to your astonished lips, and laughed, because I'd found you again, and I felt happy.

Brace yourself, Therese, as I launch that kiss again, across the stars, through the arms of *Orion*, into your bright, city world, blown by my breath. Darling, Therese, gather my kiss into your astonished heart, like you did long ago, and let's live again, if only for a moment, that moment we lived together back then. Let's live that moment again, Therese, if only to see where it will lead us, this time, Therese. My *kiss*, Therese...

Therese, I saw Dr. Kelly today. It was about Tony. Dr. Carroll, the young woman, was there as well. She wasn't looking at me, she had her head down all the time, looking at her hands, looking into her lap. If she looked up it was to look at Dr. Kelly, while he was speaking in that, slow, considered, voice of his, telling me about Tony. He sat behind his desk with his hands joined on top of it. I sat by the window where I could see the bare branches of the trees wavering in the vivid sunlight of this January day. As we spoke, those bare branches shaking in the breeze, were all that I could look to for escape, my eyes continually seeking them.

He began,

"I don't want to alarm you unnecessarily about Tony."

It was a good beginning.

"I understand he's much improved," I said.

His hands leapt forward as if he were trying to catch some fleeting thought.

"I don't think we can quite say that," he said.

I looked at the young woman, sitting near me, with her head down. I wanted to protest.

"But you told me..."

I said nothing. I was waiting.

"Despite intensive treatment," Dr. Kelly said, "the particular infection that Tony has does not seem to be retreating."

"What is it doing?" I dared to ask.

"Well," he said, his hands joined together again, "it seems to have taken root, in a manner of speaking."

He paused to let me absorb this.

"Indeed, it has to be said, that in the last couple of weeks, since Christmas, it has gained ground."

Dr. Carroll was still sitting with her head down, avoiding me. Beyond her I could see the gleaming bark of the branches in the sun.

"Forgive me, but it's not what I understood," I said.

"Until recently we thought Tony was improving," he said, cautiously.

"And he's not improving," I said. "Then, he's not getting better?"

He shook his head. I wish, at that point, he had said something. I needed him to say something.

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked.

He drew a deep breath.

"Well," he said, "the infection is starting to affect Tony's respiratory system. You can already hear a rasp in his breathing."

It was true, I had heard it. Why had I ignored it? It seemed so insignificant.

"Don't misunderstand," he said. "I'm telling you all this so that you'll know exactly what Tony's current state of health is. No other reason. We're still treating him as best we can..."

I interrupted him.

"But the treatment's not working," I reminded him.

"We're changing the treatment," he said. "We're adopting a new approach."

"As long as you're doing all you can," I said.

"We are. We are doing all we can," he assured me.

I got up to go. He held out his hand to me. I took it in mine.

"I'm available anytime you want to see me," he promised.

Behind him, the young woman doctor looked up and smiled, but her smile went to one side of me, deflecting into the unimpressionable air.

I left them. I don't know what I was feeling, what I was thinking, just then. I was dazed, I suppose. I went straight to Tony. He was sleeping. I didn't know what to do. For once, music didn't help. I put on the Schubert *8th Symphony*, the *Unfinished*, but it seemed to play to itself, in a world of its own, cut off. It was out of reach, at a distance from me. I heard it as if it was playing in the background somewhere.

I went to the window. It was getting dark outside. I could see, through the bare branches of the trees, the first glimmering points of light on the night's horizon. The evenings are longer, I thought to myself, the spring will soon be here. There'll be new leaves on the trees, and flowers, and warmer days. I could not imagine that Tony would not, in the end, be well. He seemed so peaceful as he slept, Therese, and his breathing was untroubled. I sat by him until late. Until I could see *Orion* striding into the darkness. Then I came home, Therese. I came home to you.

Greyson asked about Tony today. He called me into his office. He said he could see that I was worried. It had to be Tony, he surmised. What was wrong? I blurted it out, Therese. I could not help myself. I was suddenly emotional. I realise at last that Tony's life is fading away. I don't believe he's going to get better, Therese. I'm afraid.

"You must let Therese know," Greyson said.

What could I say to him? I had nothing to say. Should I have said that I don't know where to find you, Therese? That I don't know where you are living? That I haven't heard from you in the ten years since you left me? Not a single word, not even a sign of life? Should I have told all that, Therese? And even then, I'm sorry, Therese, would you care? Tony had already died for you, before you went away. I remember you shouting it in my face,

"He's dead, he's dead, why don't you admit it? You must see it. Why are you trying to fool yourself that he's alive? Why are you lying to yourself? He's only an empty shell! A zombie, a zombie, not even a zombie!"

*Please, Therese, please don't say those words. I beg you. Tony's so alive. He's alive, Therese, alive.*

I've been in the hospital almost constantly. Tony sleeps nearly all of the time. There's a noticeable rasp in his breathing now. Sometimes he seems to be in real difficulty, as if he can't draw enough air in. I made a fool of myself running to the nurse. There's not much that can be done it seems. They give him something to ease the problem, he improves, then a couple of hours later, he gets worse again.

I've stopped playing his music. I know that's unreasonable, I've always insisted that even if Tony was sleeping, the music could still reach him. I tried in the beginning. I played all the music he loves most. I played *Carmina* constantly. That music, with its wild and tumultuous choruses used to throw Tony about like a frenzied sea. Now it seems to play in a vacuum of its own; its great, booming sounds mean nothing. Tony's music has become like a void between us. I can't bear it. I prefer to sit in silence. When I get home, I lie on my bed for hours. I watched television one evening, only to discover there's another war someplace. There was a bomb blast in London, in the railway station. I worried about you, Therese. I hope you weren't anywhere near... I hope you're alright. How can people do those things? If anything happened to you, Therese... What would I do? I need you. It would amuse you to hear that, no doubt, but I do. I don't think I could go on living without you in the world. It doesn't matter how far away you are, once I know you're there, living your life, Therese. I need you to live. As Tony gets worse, I find myself recalling more and more of our life together, Therese. You'd say that I'm *living in the past*. Living in the past to escape the present, you'd say. You might be right. On the other hand, I see myself wanting to be close to you. How can I reach you, *except through the past*?

So, I lay on my bed for hours and as I lie there, *I remember*. I remember coming back from Tullamore. I had been a week there and from the moment I left you on the train to the moment I saw you again when I walked into the office of Prentice Solicitors I had thought only about you. I recalled in the most minuscule detail every moment of that hour and fifteen minutes we spent on the train together. You were amazed how I could tell you that at a certain moment you turned to look out of the window and the shadow of the rain running over the glass fell on your face; or how, at another moment, telling me how happy you would be to leave your family in Galway behind you, you ran your hands through your black hair, pulling it away from your face and shaking it out, as if you were shaking your family, literally, out of your hair.

And there was so much more. When I described your navel in perfect detail to you, its narrow, creamy shell, with the delicate curl of flesh at its centre, you fell about laughing.

"You know it better than I do," you said.

I was able to go on and on, adding detail to detail until I came to your kiss. I surprised myself with how much I remembered, but then, I'd had all of that week in Tullamore to seek you out in, all of you; the shell of your navel on the flat, white ground of your belly; the slight, almost imperceptible dent at the point of your chin; the slender, strong curves of your lips; the broad, dark sweep of your eyebrows; the delicate, drooping flesh of your earlobes. I remembered it all and our first days together I loved to rediscover it all, my eyes closed, my fingertips exploring your face.

"Go on," you said. "Touch my lips, touch them with your fingers, rub your fingers on them, get to know them, know them as well as you can, know me as well as you can."

I caressed your lips with my fingers, moving them from side to side of your mouth.

"Touch inside my mouth..." you said.

And you opened your mouth under my fingers and I could feel the inside of your lips and the warm, liquid, softness of your tongue.

Those days were so wonderful. Do you remember you used to say that it felt as if we were meant for one another, that our lives were made complete by each other? You said that you had never expected to find someone who loved you as I loved you. The only man you had ever really known was your father. He used to beat you. You would never forgive him. If it had been drink you would have understood, you would have tried to help him. But it wasn't drink - it was just sheer self – righteous thuggery. You grew up with his shadow over your life. How many nights had he woken you, the door to your bedroom opening, his body filling the doorframe and blocking the light from the hallway, to take you out of bed and beat you with his bare hands, shouting,

"I'll beat the badness out of you!"

He didn't like women. When you were younger you wanted to be a boy to please him. That might have made a difference, for you, for your two sisters, and your mother. He tyrannized all of your lives. Once, when you were fourteen, you ran away. You took the Dublin train. The police took you off in Athlone, your father was with them. He cried when he saw you. You couldn't understand why he wanted you back. He looked so small beside the policemen. For the first time you saw him as pathetic. His tyranny was never so complete afterwards. Still, when he got you home he beat you black and blue. You fell to the floor of the kitchen, crying at your mother's feet for her to help you. She did not move. She knew better. You showed me where the bruises had been, on the arms, on your back, and on the legs, so far down that you had to wear dark stockings to hide them. That was when you began to dress in black.

I hated your father hearing all that. You laughed when I proposed to go to see him, to give him a taste of his own medicine. We both knew I never would. You said it was better to just forget about him, to forget that he existed. He was as good as dead then.

"I learned a lot from him," I remember you saying to me. "He made me go to mass with him on Sundays. He paraded me through the streets, pretending to be proud of me. He showed me what a hypocrite was. Once a month he dragged me to confession with him. When the priest asked me what my sins were, I told him that I only had one. *What was that?* he asked. I told him I hated my father and wished he was dead."

You said, Therese, that that was the only pleasure religion had ever given you, to be able to tell the priest that you wished your father was dead.

We had so much to tell each other, so much to learn about each other in those first days, weeks, months. I had stories to tell you too, Therese. I'd had a father too, but very different from yours. A widower when I was too young to remember my mother, he didn't know how to be a father to me. In a sense, he abandoned me, he turned his back on me. I had no one else, no brother or sister, no one, just my father and great silent distances between us. I don't ever remember talking to him. He was the most perfect stranger. Only once had he made a gesture, that might have been, could have been, a gesture of love. He gave me a recording of Schubert's *8th Symphony*, the *Unfinished*. It really surprised me, it wasn't my birthday; indeed, he never gave me presents, for my birthday or any other time. I'd never listened to a piece of classical music before. I listened to the *Schubert* time and time again but it meant nothing to me. It was only years later, after I'd left home, when my father was just a vague memory to me, that I played the music and it opened its secret to me. It was as if my father had said,

"All the pity that can be expressed for our lives is in this music."

I understood then that his isolation, our isolation, was not a premeditated thing, was not a calculated stratagem on his part, but simply a product of his own tormented soul, and that he could not help himself.

I played that music to you, hoping it would help you see what my life had been, but you never liked it, you said there was something *creepy*, something *frightening* about it. I said, *yes*, my father was like that a bit, *a bit like Schubert*.

And yet, the first time we made love, it was to that music.

I don't know when I first felt that I wanted to marry you. I think it was one morning after you had left me to go to work. I was free that day. I remember feeling that after the night with you I had been through some sort of ritual cleansing. My body felt light and pure, and I could still smell your perfume on my skin.

"What perfume do you use?" I asked you while you dressed.

"*White Mist*," you said.

*White Mist*. I thought of it later that day when I went to the sea. There was a low fog, a light, white mist covering the bay. The sea was unmoving. I missed you. I felt so lost without you, staring out into a bay whose water I could hardly see. I missed you so much, I did something quite ridiculous that you said was one of the most romantic things you'd ever heard. I left the edge of the bay and went to the nearest chemist. I asked for *White Mist*. I took it back down to the water and sat on the steps inhaling the scent from the tiny bottle. I sprinkled some on my handkerchief and covered my face with it. It was like the tissue of your blouse rubbing against my skin, like your skin against my face.

It must have been then that I decided to marry you. If I needed you that much, that badly, I felt I had to. I took you out walking under the stars. There was a bright moon glistening on the sea. You showed me the different constellations, you named them and the stars.

"Isn't it wonderful," you said, "that no matter where we are in the world we always share the same stars!"

You were quite earnest. I was amused.

"If ever, in the future," you said, "we have to live apart from each other we'll have these stars over us. When we look at them we can think of each other."

"But we'll never be apart," I said.

"Never?" you said, doubtfully.

"Never!" I said again. "Because we're going to marry!"

I'd never seen you look so happy. You screamed with delight, like a young child.

"I don't believe it," you said, over and over again. "I didn't dare dream it could happen..."

But it could. When I said, *Sorrento*, you said you had never heard of it. I began to sing,

*Then say not goodbye...*

standing there at the water's edge with the moonlight rippling at our feet, and you laughed and laughed as my voice floated over the moonlight, echoed off the water, and hovered beneath the stars. If there was one moment when we were supremely happy, it was, perhaps, then, that moment when we gave ourselves to each other without a shadow of doubt or hesitation in our hearts.

"I am perfectly happy," you said to me. "I could die now."

"Why would you want to die?" I wondered.

"I don't know," you answered. "I don't know."

It was February; we decided to marry in April. *The month of inception*, you had read somewhere. *The month of fools*, I joked. We would be *God's fools*. We'd marry in Dublin and honeymoon in Sorrento. It would be a new beginning. We were going to leave our old lives behind forever. Nothing would be the same again, and very soon, nothing was.

*Linda*. I made a fool of myself, Therese. Today, when she went to the photocopier, I approached her.

"Can I help you, Linda?" I said.

She never heard. Doyle was quickly between us.

"I'll help you, Linda," he said, loudly, covering my voice.

He practically pushed me out of the way. I don't think Linda even noticed I was there. I turned round to go back to my desk and Conlon and Flynn were looking at me. The little drama had not been lost on them, they had seen what had happened. I felt they were looking right through me, that they could see what was in my mind and why I had offered to help Linda. Though I'm sure Linda had not noticed anything I could hear her laughing with Doyle behind me. I felt humiliated. I walked back to my desk, subdued. I could see Doyle's laughing face, his big mouth opened wide to show all of the hard, white gleam of his teeth. Linda obviously enjoys him. I cannot say how much I dislike him. That was not all, however. In the afternoon Linda had some extra filing to do. She had to stay back slightly later than the others. I found myself alone with her. It was an opportunity, I thought, to try to talk to her, to get to know her at last. She was immersed in her work. She wanted to get finished quickly, I could see that. Still, I had to say something.

"Have I told you, Linda, I'm very happy with your work?"

I hadn't expected to sound so *gauche*. She looked up briefly and sketched a weak smile.

"Thank you, Mr. Fenlon," was all she said and concentrated on her work again.

Undeterred, I tried again.

"I suppose you have a busy evening organised," I said.

She looked up quickly again, gave another wry smile and shook her head.

"No, not really," she said.

"Not really!" I exclaimed. "You surprise me, Linda."

She hadn't heard, she wasn't listening. I sat watching her. Her long, blonde hair fell over her shoulders, covering her face.

I wondered if she could see out through that cascade of hair, if she could see me looking at her. I felt furtive, guilty, as if I was doing something wrong in simply observing her. In the end, to atone for my sin, I said,

"If you like, Linda, I'll file those away for you."

She looked up nervously.

"I mean, you can go home now," I told her. "I'm sure, despite what you said, that you have a lot of things to do this evening."

She seemed hesitant.

"Perhaps, a boyfriend to meet?" I hazarded.

"No," she said, almost inaudibly. "No boyfriend."

She was happy to leave. She showed me how the different files were to be organised and where I was to put them. She hurried away then. She didn't even say goodbye. I did something impulsive then. I followed her. I can explain it, but I can't excuse it. It was wrong, I know, but my curiosity about her got the better of me. I wanted to know her better, to find out things about her, things I would probably never be able to ask her and that she would never tell me. I waited a minute, looking at the confused files on her desk. I realised that I had no interest in them. I was only interested in Linda. I could hear her footsteps on the stairs and then the door shutting behind her. Hearing the door close and the silence that followed it, made up my mind for me. I hurried after her. She was wearing a red jacket so that even in the dark evening I would be able to follow her from a reasonable distance.

I saw her the moment I stepped out on the street. She had only gone about fifty yards. I could see quite clearly the silver fall of her hair waving over the bright, red back of her jacket. I ran a little to get closer to her. I didn't want to risk losing her. If she turned in somewhere I might miss her. A split second could do it.

I was not happy with myself, Therese. I told myself to stop, to turn back, to forget about her. I felt that what I was doing was wrong and inexcusable. I wanted to turn back but I could not. I had to stay with her, I had to follow her. I couldn't help myself.

She lives not far from work. She turned into a row of terraced houses, with basements and small, railed gardens in front. She opened a gate in one of the railings and went down some steps to a basement. There was a small window and I saw light going on inside. I went right up to the railing. It was dark, there wasn't much light from the streetlamps there. I could hear faint voices inside. I could see shadows moving about and then the light went out again. I could see nothing, hear nothing. I waited a half - hour almost. I wondered if the light would go on again, if I would be able to see someone, Linda perhaps, or her child, but after a half - hour there was still no light and I was beginning to feel the cold so I left. At least, I knew something about her; I knew where she lived. You will wonder, Therese, why it was important to me? I can only say that it is, it was. I don't know why. Yet I was glad, I felt a quiet sort of elation; I was glad I had followed her.

Afterwards, I felt guilty again. I went to Tony. Even before I got there I wondered how could I spend an hour chasing after Linda in the street when he was so sick and alone? It was worse when I saw him. He's not well, Therese. He's still sleeping but he's gotten much thinner and paler. Each time he breathes it's like listening to gravel being dragged by a rake. He has a fever, his face is warm, with a thin coating of sweat on it. I asked to see Dr. Kelly but he was finished for the day. I was told he couldn't be contacted. Dr. Carroll was there. She told me not to worry. I wanted to tell her that she should be ashamed of herself.

I came home and lay on my bed. I can't think of anything to do except to write to you, Therese. I haven't the concentration for watching television. I stand in the bay - window looking out at a night filled with stars. The weather is fabulous these days. Glacial, but bright and clear. In the daytime, the sky is the most vivid, cerulean blue. At night, it's pure indigo, with an ocean of stars swirling and shining on it. The sunset today was wonderful. The deepest, darkening, dying rose colour, the saddest of colours; it covered the rooftops with a wine glow. There's a sliver of moon upturned in the sky. You used say it would pour the rain out, but there's no rain, Therese, just bright, icy coldness. The moon rises up in the sky, cutting a swathe through the stars. The night is brittle and might break. I can hear it like the branch of a tree cracking in the cold. To tell the truth, Therese, my mind is in tumult. I'm looking at the stars but I just want to scream at them. Sometimes, I wish the sky would shatter and fall down around my ears. Then, I could live in peace, maybe...

Linda arrived in work before I could even begin to sort her files. She looked at me with dismay when she saw that the work was not done.

"Mr. Fenlon, you said you'd do it for me. I would have stayed... "

Doyle leapt up from his desk.

"I'll do it for you, Linda."

"Do your own work," I insisted. "I'll help Linda."

"No, no," Linda was saying. "I'll do it myself now."

She gave me a look of exasperation.

"I'm sorry, Linda," I said. "I had to leave the office unexpectedly yesterday evening."

That little effort made no impression whatsoever.

What a day! I saw Dr.Kelly. When I asked him about Tony, he just shook his head.

"I wish I could say he's getting better," he said

"Is he getting worse?" I asked, looking for confirmation of my fears.

"You can see, can't you?" he said quietly.

I could. Tony is so thin and white. His breathing is so harsh, I'm afraid it must hurt him. I sit with him but he sleeps all the time. I wait for him to open his eyes but he never does. This evening, as the stars appeared, I played some Chopin *Nocturnes* for him. That music is so gentle. It was one of your favourites, Therese, you drifted off into the stars hearing it. Despite its gentleness, I only played two or three pieces then I abandoned it. I find it impossible, these days, to listen to music.

Mrs. Concannon called in the evening. I hadn't seen her since New Year's Eve. To tell the truth, Therese, I'd practically forgotten about her. I was surprised to see her. She came about Tony. She was emotional. She began to tell me about her own handicapped child who had died.

"He was the most beautiful child," she said. "I loved him so much."

She broke down and began to cry, remembering her son.

"My husband was alive then," she said." He got sick afterwards. He couldn't bear it. I know it killed him. It broke his heart."

I gave her a brandy. I had one myself.

"I know this isn't helping you," she apologised. "I really picked the wrong time, didn't I."

"It's alright," I said. "I know how you feel."

We talked then about other things. I knew that eventually she would come to you, Therese. She's fascinated by you.

"Do you have any photographs?" she asked. "I don't see any."

I decided to be brave. I went up to the empty, second bedroom where I keep everything. I took down the cardboard box of photographs from the top of the wardrobe. I showed you to Mrs. Concannon, Therese, and I saw those photographs again for the first time in years.

"Oh, she's lovely, she's really lovely," she said, "but she looks so young."

"They were taken twelve years ago," I explained. "Therese would be in her mid – thirties now."

"Tony has her looks," she decided. "There's something undefinable about her. She looks so happy, and yet. I wish I could tell what she was thinking."

"Oh, yes," I said. "I remember, we were at the seaside. She wanted me to buy her an ice cream. They had her favourites near there. Therese loved ice cream."

"She was still a child," Mrs. Concannon laughed.

Maybe. Maybe, Therese, I didn't realise how young you were.

Mrs. Concannon left in great good humour. She had forgotten Tony, had forgotten the death of her own child. She wanted to see me again. She said it directly to me.

"I want to see you again, John," she said. "Now, you mustn't say no!"

"If you like, Irene," I told her.

"That's the first time you've called me by my Christian name," she said.

It obviously meant a lot to her.

She left me alone then with my photographs of you, Therese. For the first time in a long time, I was able to look at you again, to see you before my eyes. There were the photographs of our first walks together; in the hills; by the mountain lakes; at the seaside.

Do you remember how you coaxed me to make love to you by the sea? You said you'd always wanted to. And then as I undid the buttons of your blouse your tears ran onto my fingers. I asked you what was wrong, and you said, as always, that you didn't know. Then you told me that you weren't a virgin and did that make a difference. I laughed. It made no difference at all. Even if you had told me that you'd murdered someone it could not have changed how I felt about you. I was in love. I was lost in you.

There are the wedding photographs, taken by Greyson. Do you remember that he was drunk and could not hold the camera steady? Caroline was so embarrassed but we thought it was so funny. You wouldn't marry in the church, you didn't want anything to do with the church. Do you remember the small, spare Registry Office near the Green? And afterwards, the hotel with the band playing for the afternoon tea? When Greyson

announced to the entire room that we were just married, the band played the *Anniversary Waltz* and we were made dance between the tables.

*Oh, how we danced,  
On the night we were wed...*

Greyson ordered champagne. He linked arms with you.

"This is how lovers must drink champagne," he said.

The glasses sparkled in the lights of the tearoom. Your face was radiant. You were wearing a dress of shining silk, bright silver, your wedding dress. It was the first time I'd seen you out of black. It was wonderful. Greyson was merry.

"Isn't she the most beautiful, desirable woman that anyone has ever seen anywhere?" he asked the entire room.

"Shush, please, Dear," Caroline admonished him.

"Yes, yes, she is!" I heard myself shouting so that everyone could hear.

You looked so happy. Your eyes were full of bright light. You gripped the fabric of your dress with your fingers, excitedly.

"Come on, dance with me," you said. "Dance with me."

It was April. The leaves were coming out on the trees. The park was bordered with the fragile green of new leaves.

"Look," you said, "life is just beginning."

You whispered to me then that you were pregnant.

"Yes," you said. "I'm sure of it. I can feel it."

Then, in Sorrento, you changed. You were surly. In the mornings when you got up you felt sick. You just wanted to stay in your bedroom. You could see the superb bay of Naples from the bed. From the terrace you could see Vesuvius. What more did you want? I wanted you to visit Vesuvius with me, to travel up to Pompeii, to go to Capri. You made me go on my own. I walked up the slopes of Vesuvius in a blanket mist. There was nothing to see, even the inside of the crater was hidden. But there was a wine - seller who sold me a glass of *Lacrima Christi* and took my photograph. I still have it. You thought it was ridiculous; that I looked ridiculous drinking wine on top of a volcano.

You seemed happier to be left alone. It was important not to exert yourself too much, for the child's sake. For the child's sake I wanted to stay with you at the hotel but you said that you needed to rest. Still, when I returned from Vesuvius I found you on the terrace. You were topless because you liked the sun on your breasts you told me. The waiters were flirting with you. Even when I was there they kept up that unending flow of melodious language and though you understood nothing of it you enjoyed it and encouraged it. I can still see you laughing with them. I was a little jealous. I felt threatened by those young, dark, romantic men. It occurred to me how attracted you might be to men of your own age.

I was away almost every afternoon and each time I came back I found you on the terrace with the waiters in a group around you. They didn't even notice my presence in the end. When I insisted on staying at the hotel you stayed in bed, you wouldn't talk to me, you complained of feeling sick, you insisted on being alone. But if I left you for even an hour you were on the terrace when I returned laughing with your admirers.

The day I went to Capri I felt troubled. It was a place that couples went to. The island was full of lovers holding hands, embracing, kissing. I wanted you to be there with me. I felt suddenly alone there, more alone than I had been since meeting you. I took the small bus up to the house of *Axel Munthe*. It was a shrine to art, to beauty. From the edge of the garden there was a sheer drop to the green and blue sea below. I felt it was somewhere, and I have never told you this, Therese, that I might say a prayer to whatever God exists, to protect our love. I stood under the pergola heavy with flower, with pinkish - white blooms falling down from the beams, and I asked the God of beauty and love to protect us.

I followed the path down to where the *Sphinx* was facing out over the sea. I strained out over the rampart to try to see its face but I could not. Someone said it was broken, the face. Someone else said that if you laid your hand on the back of the *Sphinx* and made a wish, you would someday return to Capri. I put my hand on its back, and, with difficulty, leaning back, I snapped a photograph of it, my left hand, with my gold wedding - ring shining in the sun. I thought at that moment that our love was secure forever, that one day the two of us would go back to Capri together, to hold hands, embrace, and kiss in the garden of Axel Munthe's house.

When I got back to the hotel I couldn't find you. You weren't on the terrace nor in the bedroom. Hours later after I had eaten you arrived back. You said you'd been walking, that you had wanted to see some orange and lemon groves. You'd walked out of the town along the coast. You'd seen Capri's angular shape in the distance. You'd missed me.

I was angry, I don't know why. I'd spent the whole evening wondering and worrying about you but that was no excuse, and, yes, Therese, I did believe you, though you said I didn't, that I suspected something, that I had ideas in my head. To make up you said we'd go to a small bar you had passed in one of Sorrento's narrow streets. There was music there in the evenings. It was there that we heard *Return to Sorrento*. I asked for it to be sung again and again. The band played it three times, and the singer, who was a wiry, toothless, old man revelled in my enthusiasm. Afterwards he came to our table and told us in broken English that there was an English version of the song. He vaguely remembered the words but together we worked out a version. Then, to much applause, and to your embarrassment, I had to sing it. My voice was not good, but it was the occasion, the atmosphere. I sung, not listening to, not heeding my own voice. I just let the song out with as much feeling as I could and they loved it. The room went silent. I saw their faces turned to me, and how attentive they were. Afterwards you told me what a fool I'd been but all I cared was that for a moment it had been glorious. I had felt glorious. The singer congratulated me, his toothless mouth open on a broad smile.

Then the dancing started, everyone was on the floor. I pulled you up and began to shake you about to the rhythm of the music. You protested. I know I should have listened. It was too late when you went suddenly pale and began to get sick. I thought I'd never get you back to the hotel. You spent three days in bed. The honeymoon was over.

There are not many more photographs. There are some of the summer months where you can see that you're bigger, heavier without it's being obvious that you're pregnant. Then later you can see that you are. Your expression is inscrutable, it's impossible to know what you're thinking. I remember those months as happy months but I remember the pain you suffered as well. I remember those restless nights when you stood at the window looking out at the stars. The stars were your only freedom you said. You had had them when you

were trapped in your family, you had them now, you would always have them. No one could take the stars away, you said. But the trees were in the way,

"I can't see with the branches," you said. "They make too much noise, I can't hear."

"What do you want to hear?"

"The silence, the silence."

I didn't recognise how unhappy you were. I plead guilty. I can see it now, behind the smiles and the laughter of those photographs. But I still don't know why you were unhappy, Therese, was it me, was it Tony, was it the pain, or was it something else inside you that no one could uncover, that was hidden from view and perhaps would always be so? We were too isolated in those months perhaps. I should have tried harder to get us out, to help you enjoy yourself. We went to a couple of parties with the Greysons, that was all, but in two or three photographs of you at those parties, the laughter is spilling out over the edges, as though you were the happiest person alive.

I would have liked to have you always like that, always laughing, always happy. Instead, I kept you in a cocoon. You resisted my music. Those *Classical guys* gave you the creeps. I broke down your resistance. Do you remember I told you that Chopin's music was like a picture of the stars on the night sky. You looked startled, as if you'd had a revelation. You began to listen, you closed your eyes,

"Yes, yes, I can see them," you shouted, with delight.

You wanted Tony to hear that music, you wanted him, trapped inside you, as you put it, to be able to visualise the night with its stars, like a promise of freedom. One day you came home all excited because the doctor had told you that Tony was floating in a special fluid like a tiny sea around him. The stars, the sea, these were your elements, Therese, and they were Tony's too. You were beginning to see how much a part of you he was. You began to look forward to his birth. When he kicked in the night you sang to soothe him. You sang *Sorrento* for him, though you didn't know the words, you remembered only *music of the waters*. You said you had happy memories of Sorrento, despite being sick. The walk to the orange and lemon groves was *especially remarkable*, you said, mischievously, with a happy flush on your cheeks.

The last photograph of you is two or three days before Tony's birth. We were in town. There were crowds everywhere. You were excited. You loved the Christmas lights strung across the streets above our heads. When we turned into one street we heard a busker singing *Sorrento*. We looked at each other and began to laugh. It was our song. We kissed. There was a street photographer and I asked him to take a photograph of us. You were quite big then, round almost, but still beautiful. I had to spread my arms out wide to reach around you, to hold you while I was kissing you. You laughed so much. You said I was a clown, *your clown*. The photograph captured your laughter. I have it now between my hands. There are no more photographs after this one. Two days later there was Tony's cruel birth that wiped your laughter away forever.

You put all our photographs together in a cardboard box and banished them to the top of the wardrobe in the second bedroom. I protested but you said you didn't want to see them anymore, that you couldn't bear to see them. I haven't moved them, Therese. When you come looking for me you will still find them there, and these letters will be with them. As I write I see you reading them, the loose pages falling at your feet, where the photographs lie scattered around. As you read your hands are shaking, the pages make a sound like crisp leaves, you try to hold them tightly, so tightly they are in danger of tearing, but you want them to be quiet, so that, while you read, you can hear the silence.

I remember the doctor saying.

"Mrs. Fenlon needs plenty of rest. It would not be wise to suddenly confront her with the reality of Tony's handicap."

I agreed.

"It's terribly unfortunate," he said. "It's quite tragic."

Again, I agreed.

I then said something I will never forget, or forgive myself for.

"You could have let him die..."

I remember the sudden, awful shock on his face.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice near to breaking. "I really am."

I had to tell Greyson that I don't know where you live, Therese. He couldn't believe it. He said, "Are you serious? Is that true?"

"I haven't heard from her since she left," I said. "She told me she was going to London, then disappeared."

"And you've made no attempt to find her?"

"I'm waiting for her to come back," I told him.

"Waiting, waiting..." he said. "What does that mean? It makes no sense."

We were in the hospital. He had come in unexpectedly. He wanted to see Tony. When he saw him, he went white in the face.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I would've warned you."

"I thought he was getting better," he said, his voice shaking.  
And then,

"You must tell Therese, you have to tell her to come home..."

I could only stare blankly at him, and then into empty space, and then through the darkened glass of the room window. The sky was the deepest blue I have ever seen. The stars looked so bright. Greyson sat with me. We sat without saying a word. Eventually, I put on some music, Chopin, the *Nocturnes*.

"She liked that," Greyson said automatically.

I looked questioningly at him,

"Therese," he explained. "I remember that she liked that music."

He put his hand on my arm.

"John, I don't expect you to come to the office, it's up to you. When all this is over, when Tony is better..."

"I'd like to keep working," I told him, "when I need to spend more time with Tony, I'll let you know."

Tony. He's so thin, he's wasting away. With my thumb and forefinger I can circle his arm now. I saw Dr. Kelly. I wanted to hear from him what I fear most. I'm ready for that now.

"Tony is going to die," I said to him.

"No, no, no," he said, "let's not think like that. I still believe that recovery is possible."

I shook my head disbelievingly. Maybe he's right, maybe Tony will recover, but since the first day he went into that hospital I have felt he's going to die. Why am I so calm? Why am I so accepting? I've lived with the idea of Tony's death for two months. I'm prepared. I see Tony sinking down. I see that inevitably, he will touch the bottom and not rise up. He hasn't got the strength any longer.

On the way home I found myself passing near where Linda lives. I found myself standing in front of the window of her basement flat. I say *found myself* because it just seemed to happen without my even thinking about it. It was a bitterly cold evening. These days have been so cold, it feels like snow. Still, I stayed in front of that window for a half - hour, waiting for a light to come on. No light came on but after half an hour the door opened, someone was coming out, so I ran, turned and ran, Therese. Can you imagine what I look like when I run? When I got to the street I began to walk at a normal pace, my breath misting the air in front of my face.

I'm just not myself. An incident a couple of days ago has upset me. I don't know if I can call it an incident, it was just something I overheard. I had been out of the office for about twenty minutes. I was going back in. The door was open. I could hear Doyle's voice. He was talking about me.

"I can't stand Fenlon. He thinks he's better than we are. He's put himself on a pedestal. I'd like to knock him off it."

That was all. I walked right in. Doyle was standing in the middle of the office holding forth to the other three. They froze when they saw me. I didn't pretend anything though they must have suspected that I'd overheard. I was too discouraged to try to talk to them. When I got to my desk Doyle was still standing in the centre of the floor.

"Have you no work to do?" I asked him.

That same day Greyson confessed he was attracted to Linda. When we were alone he asked me what I thought about her. I was non - committal. He said then that he *fancied her*. I thought to myself that he sounded like Doyle when he used that expression.

"Do you think she could be attracted to me?" he asked.

Before I could think what to respond, he said,

"Don't bother to answer, I can see by your face that you don't approve."

Then he brushed the whole matter aside. He forgot about it. It left no trace whatsoever on his behaviour. It's as if it never happened. But what, I wonder, has he in store for Linda... I find myself thinking more and more about Linda. In all honesty, it's even more than that, Therese, I've become preoccupied with her. In the office I watch her all the time I can. When the others are absorbed in their work I look at her, at her blonde hair, her skin, her mouth. I take every opportunity to get close to her, to speak to her, to hear her voice, to smell her perfume. I imagine things about her, that I'm following her home for instance, when she turns around and sees me. To my surprise, she's not angry. She smiles. She invites me home with her. She's alone with her child. He jumps immediately into my lap and begins to play there. Linda tells me about lonely she is, that it's getting too much for her, that only my kindness to her in the office keeps her going. Then, while thanking me for my kindness to her, she begins to cry. She presses her face against my chest and I put my arms around her shoulders. That's all, Therese, there's nothing sexual. I imagine that I stay with her and look after her and protect her, but that's all very vague. I love the boy as much as I love Linda, but I have no idea what his name is. In my fantasy I call him Tony. It seems so natural.

If only it were possible. I don't think, however, that it could ever really happen. I have to be content with being a hero in my imagination. I like to think, at the same time, that just having protective thoughts of Linda can help her, can in some way make life easier for her. At least, if nothing else, I may have helped dissuade Greyson from being over - attentive to her. I'm glad my face betrayed how I felt. Why am I telling

you all this, Therese? Because I want you to know it all. When you read these letters, and I am convinced that one day you will, I want you to know all that was going on inside me. I want to tell you everything, to hide nothing. If I need forgiveness for anything, Therese, you are the only one who could forgive. You will be my only judge, Therese. You will be my only, loving, judge...

Today was like a perfect haven in the middle of a storm. I woke to find snow on the ground. It has been threatening all during January, the weather has been so cold, but last night when I was going to bed, the sky was clear and full of stars, without a hint of cloud. The surprise this morning was perfect. The earth resembled a huge untouched wedding cake early in the morning before the first footsteps marred it. I walked across the park on my way to work. The pond was covered in a layer of ice laden with snow and the branches of the trees had thin lines of snow along them. The sky had cleared again and was brilliantly blue. The cold was sharp and unabated, it reached through clothing to touch, as cold as ice, on the skin.

Everyone was more relaxed today. Doyle was in form, making everybody laugh. Linda looked beautiful, her face lit up with laughter. One moment, when we were alone, she came over by my desk to look out at the snow.

"Do you mind, Mr. Fenlon?" she asked.

I didn't mind. I wished she would stay there all day. I wanted her to remain there, just inches away from me, so close I could hear her breathing, so close I could feel the warmth of her body by my side. She ran her fingers through her silky, silver hair, like running her hand through a stream of glistening water. I could not resist saying to her,

"You have lovely, lovely hair, Linda."

She looked, smiling, at me. I had never seen the ice - clear, cold, ice - blue brightness of her eyes so close before.

"Thank you, Mr. Fenlon," she said, and went back to looking out at the snow - covered street. I was torn. I wanted to sit watching her, while she was seemingly oblivious of my watching her. But I was alone with her beside me, and I wanted to use that to talk to her. To break the ice, so to speak, to see myself in the centre of those beautiful blue eyes watching me.

"Do you enjoy life, Linda?" I said.

"Sometimes," she said, still looking out the window. "I'm enjoying this."

"Then stay there," I told her. "Stay there for the whole afternoon if you like."

And I believe that when I said it I was perfectly serious. I would have let her stay there. She laughed and her laughter gave me such pleasure. It's the first time I remember her laughing at something I said. Soon afterwards Doyle, Flynn and Conlon came back into the room. Linda went back to her own desk almost immediately. Having been physically close to her, I felt desperately, inexplicably sad when she moved away. It was, however, a feeling I enjoyed. It reminded me a little, Therese, of having to be away from you when we first knew each other. Not that, in any way, my feelings for Linda approach my feelings for you, Therese.

When Linda left the office in the evening I followed her again. The evening was bright with a clear sky overhead. The first stars were appearing. The snow was crisp and brittle on the ground. Linda wore boots and walked confidently on the snow. I stayed always about thirty yards behind. If she had turned to look she'd have seen me. In a way, I hoped she would. Maybe then my dream would have been fulfilled. Maybe then she would have smiled encouragingly and asked me home with her. But she didn't look, which in the end, only made me more daring. I went closer still to her, so close, I felt I could almost touch her hair if I reached out with my hand. As it was I could hear the crunch of her boots on the snow. I got a glow of

pleasure from thinking she could hear my feet behind her and might be tempted to turn around. Why didn't I call her name, why didn't I make her turn? I was too happy perhaps, happy as I was, just watching her step across the breaking snow. And then, it's also that, perhaps, I don't altogether believe in my dream, in the possibility of her being pleased to see me. I prefer to dream.

I followed her along the line of terraced houses, waited again for the window to light up. I went right up to the edge of the railings to look inside. I could see only shadows. When the light went out I left. It was time to go see Tony. Tony has been very sick, but strangely, I felt calm and unworried entering the hospital this evening. It's as if I knew everything would be alright. When I got to Tony's room I heard music playing. One of the nurses was sitting on the edge of Tony's bed, listening to *Chopin*, her hand resting on Tony's cheek. Tony was sleeping, his body restful. The nurse said he had been quiet all day. She had put the music on when she came in to him. She was going to leave but I asked her to stay for a while, until the music had finished.

I felt so good walking home. The streets were empty, the snow was spread everywhere. The moon was almost full, its soft, silver glow on the hardened surface of the snow, but there were thick, grey clouds on the horizon waiting to cover the face of the sky. There will be more snow, I'm sure of it. It's so cold, I was shivering with it by the time I got home. I stamped my feet inadvertently on a note that had been pushed through the letterbox. It was from Mrs. Concannon, inviting me to go walking with her in the snow, before it melts. *The snow won't melt*, I whispered to her note, *the snow is here forever*. But I will go walking with her. I want to see the snow spread out over the entire countryside, as she promised in her note. I want to see the earth frozen to its distant corners, the snow billowing up to the horizon's edge. I want to see a hard, cold, brilliant whiteness reaching everywhere, and I want to walk across it, as if it were starlight at my feet.

I was right. It snowed again last night. I enjoyed walking to work in it, the soft covering of new snow yielding to my steps, the old layer crisp underneath. I felt light - hearted, carefree. I had no idea that the day ahead would change my life.

The day in the office went smoothly. Only Greyson appeared a little nervous. He said he wanted to talk to me after work. I said I had to go to see Tony. He came back later and said he'd drive me to the hospital. I wondered what he wanted. Was it about Linda? Was it about you, Therese? Linda was the pivot of my day. I manufactured pretexts to be close to her, to talk to her, to look at her. When I was alone with her I went to the filing cabinet behind her pretending to look for some file I already had on my desk. I stood right behind her looking down at the bright cascade of her hair. I imagined taking that silver stream in my hands, running my fingers through it like shining water. I felt sudden, sweeping tenderness for Linda. I wanted to put my arms around her, to touch her, to hold her. I don't know how long I remained like that, standing behind her. I felt that the reality of what I was imagining was only a gesture away. If I just reached out a hand, if I just touched with the tip of one finger, one strand of her lovely hair... I was tempted. I realised that I was about to test my fantasy, that I was about to take a risk I should not take. If Greyson had not come into that office at just that moment I think I would have reached out my hand and touched Linda then. She would have looked round at me, surprised, a little frightened maybe, but I would have said,

"I'm sorry, Linda. Your hair is so lovely, I couldn't resist touching it. Forgive me."

She would have understood, I'm sure of it. I went back to my desk. Greyson was looking peculiarly at me. He sensed something. His gaze switched between myself and Linda. Perhaps he suspected something. How little he knew. How little I knew, wanting to imagine the opposite, how unattainable Linda was to me, how unattainable she will always be.

After Greyson left, we were alone again. Linda began to brush her hair with long, even strokes. The rhythm of her brushing was hypnotic. I watched her, not even attempting to conceal the fact that I was watching. She saw me and smiled. It was the gentlest of smiles. Or did I imagine it, imagine that she saw me, imagine that she smiled, *imagine it all...*? I sat in a dream as she brushed her long, bright hair, the movement of her brush like a long, tender caress.

Greyson drove me to the hospital. He gave Linda a lift home as well. Because of my seniority I sat in the front of the car, next Greyson. Linda sat quietly in the back. Though I was, in a sense, sitting between them, there was an obvious warmth shared by them. I felt sure, for the first time, that an intimate relationship, of some description, existed between them. I felt a twinge of jealousy. I imagined Greyson in her arms. I imagined that they might be lovers.

After we had left Linda off, Greyson began to talk about her. In effect, he was giving his version of things.

"You know you were right," he told me. "I'm too old for Linda. I was infatuated with her for a little while, how could I not be? She's lovely."

I reminded him that I had not, in fact, offered any opinion about himself or Linda.

"No, but I saw how you felt. You were shocked. You said to yourself, here's Greyson, just like he used to years ago, chasing everything in a skirt, forgetting his age, forgetting Caroline."

"I don't expect you to be anything, other than yourself."

He waved his hand impatiently.

"Don't say that," he said, brusquely. "I was so tired of myself, tired of living. Linda inspired me. I wanted to be *young Greyson*, not *old Greyson* for her. That's why I started going to the gym. I really made Caroline nervous."

I could imagine. Once upon a time, Caroline used leave him at least once a year.

"Anyway," he continued. "I flirted gymnastically with Linda, so to speak. I flexed my muscles. I was showing off. If I could have come into the office in swimming togs I would have. I really thought she was impressed, then, I made the mistake of talking to you."

He laughed out loud.

"That's a pity," I said.

"No, no," he said, "it was no pity. The bubble burst. I felt sorry for myself, but I realised - how shall I put it? I realised an old truth, that people are rarely on the same wavelength as we are, no matter how much we'd like to think they are."

I didn't know what to say then. I thought of my own feelings for Linda.

"I felt defeated after talking to you," Greyson said. "I went straight into my office to phone the gym and cancel my subscription. Have you noticed I've put a little weight back on? And I don't dress as sharply? Caroline says she prefers me not too attractive. She prefers me to look my age."

The city was blanketed with snow. Greyson drove slowly. We were silent a long time, then he said,

"I feel happier. I accept defeat. There's dignity in accepting reality. There's nothing heroic about being a fool."

His story was too elaborate for me to imagine that he was using it as a decoy. Why would he bother to invent such a rigmorole? And why bother to tell it to me? Yet, the impression I had earlier, of a secret collusion between Greyson and Linda stayed with me. I treated him with caution. I said nothing that might indicate my inner thoughts to him.

When we reached the hospital, Greyson wanted to come in to see Tony. We parked the car in an almost empty carpark, the unbroken snow spread out around us. It was starting to snow again.

"God, it's wonderful," Greyson said. "I love this weather."

He rubbed his hands vigorously. We could see through scattered, grey cloud, the waning moon, its white edge finely pared, and a sprinkling of flickering stars. I saw Orion clear an edge of cloud with his diamantine stride. I felt the same feverish joy that Greyson did. I said,

"Yes, it is wonderful."

Greyson stayed about an hour. He was nervous, agitated by something. He moved restlessly about the room. He played with the mobile I bought Tony for Christmas, pushing the white birds around. He noticed the silver cross hanging round Tony's neck. I explained about Mrs. Concannon.

"Sounds like a nice woman," he said.

He was concerned about Tony.

"He's lost weight," he noted. "He looks pale."

Despite his pale, wasted body, Tony was sleeping calmly.

"Have you thought anymore about Therese?" Greyson asked.

"About what?" I asked him, wondering what he was getting at.

"Wouldn't you like to have her here?" he said.

"I don't know what I can do," I told him.

He had to leave then. He wanted to take me home, but I insisted on staying, despite the snow. I liked walking through it, I told him.

"See you tomorrow," he said, as he was going.

"Yes," I answered, neither of us seeing that there would be no tomorrow, that our involvement with each other was now part of a shared past rather than a present.

On leaving Tony I followed a strong impulse to go to Linda. The snow was still falling fitfully and the air was well below freezing but I wanted to, needed to, go to where she lived. I thought to myself, *it's late, she'll surely be at home, maybe this time I'll see her through the window.* It was about a half - hour walk from the hospital. The streets were deserted. I was alone, completely alone. There were no cars, no buses, not even a taxi. The silence of the night was so complete that I could hear the creaking of tree branches lined with snow. The waning moon was my only companion as I walked through the streets. Its slightly lop - sided face appeared every so often through slowly parting clouds. I was rewarded on arriving at Linda's by seeing a light on in the front window of her basement flat. The curtains were closed but not fully. There was a small gap at the centre through which I could see a corner of the room. There was someone inside but I couldn't see well. I could hear the sound of a child's voice. Then I heard Linda's voice, quite clearly.

"C'mon Tony, time for bye - byes."

She said Tony, I'm sure of it. I went through the gate of the railings, down the snow – covered steps to the window, and looked through the chink in the curtains. I saw Linda inside. She had the boy in her arms. He was struggling in her grasp, trying to escape from her. She was absorbed by him, trying to control him. He was a lovely child. He had Linda's blonde hair with a fresh, laughing, innocent face. As I looked at them together I was moved by them, by the everyday scene in front of my eyes. I wanted more than ever to be part of that life with them. I wanted to knock on the window, to announce my presence, to call out,

"Linda, Linda, please let me in..."

There was no possibility of that. Someone had come up beside me and was pushing me away from the window. A fist crashed into my shoulder and I fell down on the snow beneath the window. I was dazed, unable to look up, I couldn't see who had hit me but I recognised the voice shouting down at me.

"Spying on Linda, are you? Spying on Linda? You filthy, old man. She's my girlfriend, my girlfriend... What do you think your game is?"

Linda must have pulled the curtains open. Bright, yellow light streamed out from the room onto the snow. I was out of breath but I couldn't help laughing. *Yes, I had to laugh.* The whole absurdity of my behaviour had caught up with me at the same time as Doyle's fist had knocked me over.

"What are you laughing at?" he shouted, his feet shuffling on the snow. I was afraid he would kick me.

I heard Linda. She had come out, she was standing right behind him.

"Help him up, for God's sake get him off the ground!"

Doyle was not going to help me. He was standing over me, cursing at me.

"What were you doing?" he kept repeating. "What were you doing?"

I wondered the same thing.

I caught him and though he tried to shake me off, I managed to pull myself up. I remember, strangely, brushing the snow off my coat. I went to go past Doyle but he grabbed me and swung me round against the wall. He pushed his face into mine. In the yellow light from inside the room his face was twisted and venomous.

"I'm going to beat the shit out of you, Fenlon!" he roared.

Linda had her hands on his shoulders trying to pull him away. I felt detached as if it were all happening to someone else. I heard the child crying inside.

"Linda," I said. "Go in to Tony. He's crying..."

I felt Doyle's grip loosen. Linda had succeeded in wrestling him away from me. Slowly, nonchalantly, I picked my steps up to the gate. I heard the door closing behind me, and then quiet. I could hardly believe the scene had taken place. Behind me, the curtains closed abruptly on the yellow light, shutting me out.

I steadied myself on the railings until I caught my breath, then I walked home. I was not unhappy. I felt instead a quiet exhilaration. I realised I could not go into work tomorrow, that I would no longer be able to work for Greyson, that twenty years of my life had suddenly sunk into a void that had opened, and that I was glad of it. I felt as if a violent crack had appeared in the ice-bound earth, separating my past from my present. With each step I took the chasm between past and present grew, became more and more uncrossable, but I was unperturbed. I was strangely serene. Doyle's fists, his venom and hatred of me, had set me free... *I was free.*

When I arrived home Mrs. Concannon was standing in the doorway. She noticed nothing.

"I was just about to leave," she said. "Will you come for that drive on Saturday? Before the snow melts?"

"Yes," I said. "And don't worry, the snow won't melt."

Inside the house, I felt as if I had reached a haven. I felt safe. I turned the television on. On the news it said

the world was changing; there were countries, states, communities, whole continents falling apart. I was glad I was not the only one and hoped the world would embrace disintegration as readily as myself. Do you think I'm being unnecessarily facetious, Therese? Do you think I've forgotten how serious a business life is? Well, I haven't. I just don't care any longer. I may have let you down, Therese, and may have let myself down, and maybe even Tony, but I'm past caring, Therese. You see, it doesn't seem to matter anymore. I'm sitting here asking myself, what matters, what matters? But I can find no answers. I thought you mattered, Therese, but now I realise that like Linda, you're not really *on my wavelength*, as Greyson put it. Tony mattered but Tony will soon be dead, leaving me with nothing to live for. I don't murmur a single protest. I accept everything. I'm defeated, but I accept defeat. In that way, I retain *my dignity*. I give in. There's nothing heroic about being a fool, as Greyson said. Well, Therese, there you have it. I don't know if I have any more to say to you. Indeed, would you want to hear more? Perhaps, you too have had enough. And I've no wish to write a single word... I'm finished, so then... Then, let's be at peace. Remember, I *am* serene. I *am* perfectly happy. Hard as it may be to believe...

## ***End of Part Two***

## *Part Three*

1

I don't know where to begin, Therese. Weeks have gone by. I thought I had finished writing to you like this. You know, I secretly thought I was doing this for Tony, that I wanted to leave some tangible record of his life for you to discover, a record of that part of his life of which you know nothing. But Tony is dead and here I am, still writing, still wanting to describe our world to you, my world, Tony's world, wanting too, perhaps, to break the silence which has closed around me since Tony's death. In a word, Therese, I'm alone, I live alone, I see no one, I talk to no one, I don't go out, I don't want to... but let me tell you first what happened, going back to where I left off, to where Doyle's fists had knocked me off my *pedestal*, and into a new world of freedom. I slept without a care in the world that night. I had bruises that ached from Doyle hitting me and my falling in the snow, but still I slept, soundly as a baby, indifferent to the pain.

I dreamt of Tony that night. *He was naked, running as fast as lightning across a snow - bound world. His body was perfect, his stride seemed to reach out to the horizon, his hands were held up to the sky, as if he was going to leap up to it and fly through the atmosphere. He was fleet as a bird flying low over the ground. I waited for him to sprout feathers, to grow wings, to rise like a bird into the air. But he just kept running, the harmony and elegance of his run was so exhilarating, growing faster and faster all the time. I felt so happy, I began to run too, the world rolling under my feet at a frightening pace. For a long time I ran, just behind Tony. I noticed that his feet left no impression on the snow, he hardly seemed to touch it. I ran faster to catch up on him. Ahead of us the sun had risen on the horizon making the snow burning bright. I called out excitedly,*

*"Tony, Tony, the sun, the sun..."*

*As Tony ran further and further into the distance his body seemed to grow and grow. Eventually, he dominated the horizon, dominated the sky. I realised that he had become Orion. I was stunned. I stopped running. I stood absolutely still, watching him as he ran against the sky. Full of joy, I shouted his name,*

*"Orion, Orion."*

I woke up with that vision of Tony still intact, his arms and legs filling the sky above the horizon. I felt awful sadness to have left him, left the dream behind, but with it, the most tremendous excitement and exaltation. It was the sweetest, most delightful dream I ever had. Each night when I go to sleep I wish I could dream it again.

The following day was a Friday and I should have been at work, but I had *retired* myself, so to speak. I went to see Tony during the daytime. He was sleeping such a peaceful sleep it was impossible to believe that he was on the edge of death. I saw Dr. Kelly and he admitted to me that Tony was incredibly weak. He said, however, that overall, he remained optimistic. They were playing music for Tony when I called. Dr. Kelly said it was Mrs. Concannon who had encouraged the nurses to play music for Tony. Each time she came in she turned the volume up loud so it could be heard in the corridors.

"I never see her here," I said.

"Oh, but she comes nearly everyday," he told me. "At dinner time, tea time, mornings sometimes."

At least, I thought, there is one other person in the world who loves Tony as much as I do. Is that fair to you, Therese? Being there is surely part of love, don't you think? And Mrs. Concannon is certainly someone who knows what *being there* means. I'm glad she was there. When I could no longer *face the music*, when I felt

overwhelmed by it all, by the realisation that Tony would die, when I was defeated, as I've said, she was there to take over, to shore up what little life he had, with songs, and with symphonies. I had stopped playing music for Tony long before. It still made me profoundly sad to hear it, playing between us like a lost language.

At home, I enjoyed the unwonted isolation of a working day spent alone. If they were all like that, I decided, I would enjoy my *retirement* immensely. How did I fill my day? I listened to the radio, I watched television, I drank. I don't recall doing anything with great attention, I don't remember a single item of news. In the evening, however, Greyson called to shatter my peace.

At first he was amicable, gentle almost. I suppose he didn't know what to expect from me. He might have thought I'd gone crazy.

"You've been drinking," was his first observation.

"Not much," I said. "You needn't worry."

*Just enough to dull the pain*, I might have added.

We talked casually then, as if nothing in the world was wrong. He asked about Tony. We might have been two old friends meeting, for no particular reason, just to talk. Then he said,

"I know what happened."

"I expect you would," I told him.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said.

He seemed not to know what to respond, he sat in silence for a long time, then he said, with some vehemence,

"Nothing, nothing, but you can't do *nothing*..."

"Why not?" I wondered, which only made him impatient with me. No doubt I sounded like a recalcitrant child to him, refusing to be reasonable. With quiet firmness and emphasis he said,

"Your life is falling apart, John, that's *why not*. You must do something, for God's sake."

"What do you suggest?" I asked, then added. "I'm not going back to work."

"We can discuss that another time," he said.

"There's no need," I told him. "My mind is made up."

"John, John," he pleaded with me. "You're not in a right state of mind just now for making decisions."

"Do you think I'm crazy?" I challenged him.

"For God's sake, John, no I don't. It's just that with Tony so sick, you're obviously under pressure. Can't you see?"

I was really stubborn.

"I see better than you think," I told him.

Then he said,

"I want you to contact Therese."

It was my turn to be impatient with him. Gradually our exchanges had become more heated.

"I've already told you," I said. "I don't know where Therese is. How do you expect me to contact her?"

"I want you to ask her to come back."

"Aren't you listening?" I said. "I don't know where she lives I've told you."

"Tell her how about Tony, tell her how sick he is. Tell her he needs her, that you need her."

"Don't be stupid!" I shouted at him. "I have no idea where Therese is. How can I tell her anything at all?"

He gave a long sigh. Did he really believe that I knew where you were, Therese, and that I could contact you in an instant if I wanted to? Was he trying to force that admission from me by refusing to accept what I was saying? Or was he just gambling, hoping that I did know where you were, hoping to avoid what came next?

"I can help," he said.

"How?" I asked him, wondering what he would suggest.

He made no suggestion, he just reached into his pocket and pulled a piece of paper out. There was great hesitation, reluctance, in his movement, his gesture, his voice. It was obvious he was doing something he didn't really want to, that he was making himself pull that thin, ragged piece of paper out of his pocket and hand it to me.

I took it from him and read it. It had your name on it, Therese, with an address in London.

"Don't ask me any questions," Greyson said. "Don't ask me anything about it."

I couldn't, even if I had wanted to. I sat holding the piece of paper in my hand. I was so shocked I was unable even to formulate questions for myself. Eventually, Greyson stood up.

"Look," he said. "Don't say anything now, just write to Therese. Tell her about Tony, tell her you need her..."

I followed him dumbly to the door. At last, I said,

"How was Linda today?"

He stopped, turned, looked questioningly at me.

"She didn't come to work," he said. "Only Doyle. Doyle says they're going to leave me."

"No, no, they mustn't," I said. "I won't be going back. They need the money. There's a child, you see."

"I know," he said, "but I'm letting them leave. Flynn and Conlon can go too if they want to. Your job will always be there."

We stood looking at each other for a long time it seemed, so much unsaid, so much unacknowledged between us. Then, he said,

"Please write to Therese," and turned abruptly into the darkness and snow outside and was gone.

He left me with the piece of paper still in my hand. I read it again and again but could not take it in. I could not say now what the address was exactly, except that it was somewhere in London. I was angry, Therese. I'd rather that Greyson had not given me that piece of paper. It made me remember things that I wanted to forget, that caused me a lot of pain. Just for a moment I was unable to master that anger, that pain. I was hurt and wanted to hurt. I had a fire burning in the sitting - room. I went to it, fell on my knees before it, paused just an instant, then let the paper float from my hand onto the flames. I still see it so clearly, the paper curling and discolouring, blackening, the words vanishing, disappearing in thin wreaths of smoke. It was done in a couple of seconds, there was nothing left of the paper except a fragile, fluttering, remnant, completely charred. I was sorry but I had to do it. I would have been tempted to contact you, Therese. I've always wanted you back, but not to bring you back, not to force you back, using Tony. For all you knew, Therese, Tony might have been dead for years. Is that not true? Was I not right to do what I did?

And Greyson? I don't care what happened between you and him. I always told you that. I never wanted to know the details. It was none of my business. But I was hurt. I was hurt watching you at those parties, you couldn't take your eyes off him, as if he was some bright, mesmeric figure. I don't blame you. You were young and many women had found Greyson's charm irresistible. I don't blame him either, you were so beautiful, Therese, and you flirted easily. I only wish you had been more discreet. I remember that time you went missing with him at a party in his own house, with Caroline there, with his two children sleeping upstairs. Caroline was so nervous. She came up to me,

"Don't you think you should find your wife," she whispered, and sounded so imperative that I actually left the room.

I stood in the empty hallway at the foot of the stairs. I could hear your laughter floating down, I was tempted to follow it, like a labyrinthine thread leading me God knows where, but I was afraid. I think I was afraid of losing you, Therese, and to go up those steps after you, after Greyson, would have meant losing you.

After ten minutes you came down. The two of you were laughing together. When you saw me you began to smooth your dress. It was heavily creased. Greyson was laughing hilariously,

"I've been showing Therese my etchings," he roared.

There were times when he had no respect for anyone or anything. When you got to the bottom of the stairs I took you by the shoulders.

"You can't go back in there," I said.

"Why not?" you said, defiantly.

"Your dress," was all I could say.

"What's wrong with my dress," you said. "They've already seen it."

I knew that only a terrible argument could stop you going back into Greyson's living room. I was not able for it. I could not stop you. Greyson was standing looking at us with an amused glint in his eye. No doubt he found us absurd. Then Caroline came out and we had to act normally, as if nothing was wrong. I saw her looking at your dress and the sadness in her expression. Greyson was diabolic with her, I could accept that he had encouraged you to ruffle your dress to upset her, but I did not believe it.

I had made a secret pact with myself, Therese, to allow you complete freedom. I saw how difficult life was for you after Tony's birth and I was concerned about you. I decided that I would say nothing or do nothing to hurt you. I would let you live life to the full, demanding nothing, expecting nothing of you, other than your own happiness. I wanted only to be allowed to love you and wanted you to stay in my life, but perhaps that was too much. I wanted also to try again, to have another child, but you wouldn't let me near you, you wouldn't let me touch you, and that was hard, I must admit. I had so much desire for you then, as if only our physical intimacy could heal, could repair, the awful hurt in our lives.

How many sleepless nights did we spend, Therese, when you would get out of bed and stand in the window looking at the stars, dreaming perhaps of the even more complete freedom you were soon to make yours. I lay on the bed, wondering whether I dare call you, coax you back to me. If I did call, you began to fret and complain about the cold, and the trees outside, that seemed to be always whispering amongst themselves, and clouded the starlight with their branches and leaves.

"Why don't they cut them down?" I remember you saying.

"They serve no purpose. What use are they to anyone? They only make noise. I can't hear with them, I can't hear."

"What can't you hear, Therese?"

"The silence, the silence..." you said, bitterly.

There is silence here now, Therese. Strangely, the day after you left, they began cutting the trees down. At first the silence was unbearable to me, embracing at once your absence and your presence, your obscure, silent presence. In the end I grew used to it just as I grew used to your not being with me. I don't say that I stopped missing you, only that I grew used to missing you.

Greyson was courageous, in a way, to come here with your address. He knew that he risked making explicit certain things that had always been hidden between us. He needn't have insisted that I ask him nothing, I was never going to pry. After all, I think I know more than he does, but who knows... Perhaps he has been to see you often during these ten years, perhaps he knows all about your life? Perhaps he knows more about you now than I ever did? But I don't think so. He could, after all, have brought you back himself if he was in any way close to you, but he wanted me to. I'm the only one then with the power to bring you back, Therese, and it's a power that I won't exercise. It's part of that promise I made to allow you complete freedom. I will never try to influence you, Therese, you will make your own decisions, and you alone will be responsible for them.

I think and believe, however, that one day you will come back, Therese, that someday you will want me again. You will find these letters then and read them. You will wonder why, knowing that you would one day return, I could not wait for you. But, remember, Therese, that I have been waiting. I've been waiting for

so, so long for you, ten years, Therese, and only Tony has kept me going. Call me weak, call me whatever you wish,

Therese, my only loving judge, but though the love I have for you cannot die, and cannot be broken, *I can*, Therese, *I can be broken...* as I have been, Therese, I have been. If that is my own fault, then that is all that needs to be said about it.

Needless to say, I did not sleep well the night Greyson called and gave me your address, Therese. It was early morning before I fell into an uncomfortable but heavy sleep. I was woken by someone knocking at the door. It was Mrs. Concannon. It was a minute or two before I understood that it was Saturday, the proposed day of our walk. Mrs. Concannon was surprised to find me in such a vague, dishevelled state. I apologised, explaining about my sleepless night, and went to get ready. I dressed in the corduroy pants and woolen sweater I had worn on our last walk. Temperatures had been below freezing for over a week and it would be cold out on the exposed hillsides. Mrs. Concannon, as usual, was dressed in sombre black. I remarked, rather gauchely,

"Therese nearly always dressed in black."

She seemed a little unsettled by the remark, saying,

"I guess I've never stopped mourning for my husband, and my child. That's a mistake, isn't it?"

"Why?"

"Well, we have to get on with life, don't we? The dead have to take care of themselves..."

We called first of all to the hospital. We stayed with Tony for almost an hour. He was very weak, very low, I had misgivings about leaving him. For the past few days his condition had seemed to ease somewhat, he was comfortable, sleeping, still. His breathing was barely perceptible. I might have said it was untroubled. I had not noticed the previous harsh dragging of his breath for days. It seemed to have disappeared. But he had no strength, no strength to breathe. I didn't want to leave him, I wanted to stay. Mrs. Concannon would not have protested, but I did not want to let her down either. That seems to have become my excuse for everything, doesn't it, Therese?

As we were leaving, Mrs. Concannon put a cassette in the tape player. She may just have picked the first piece of music that came to hand, but hearing the eerie, introductory motif of Schubert's *Unfinished 8th Symphony*, only made me feel more uneasy about leaving Tony. As I retreated down the corridor with the strings unfolding to their first climax behind me, I thought of my father. It was his music I was hearing as if he was in the room with Tony. That music haunted me all day, pulling at my mind like a restless, untranquil memory. *How many ghosts am I to have in my life*, I asked myself, *how many lost loves?*

The main roads were clear of ice and snow but everywhere there were fragments that persisted like lingering, clinging tendrils of whiteness. The trees everywhere looked exceptionally stark against the ice-cold blueness of the sky. Everything was frozen still. Once out in the countryside I had the impression that we were the only moving object across all that white. The world was still and cold as death. When we went onto smaller roads, leading up to the hills, they were covered in ice. I didn't think Mrs. Concannon's small car would have enough power to take us up but it did. Soon, from the high, mountain roads, we could see out over the frozen city with its solid, white shell, and a faint, wispish mist floating above it.

Mrs. Concannon was not as talkative as she had been before. I felt she had something on her mind but I didn't want to ask. Perhaps she too was worried about Tony, had some vague, doubt in her mind, wanting her to turn back to the hospital. Perhaps it was for my sake that she said nothing, but just kept driving with some goal in her mind, somewhere she wanted to be, before the car began to struggle with the ice and cold, and the endless slopes, and she said,

"We'd better stop here, I don't think the car will take anymore."

And so we stopped at the bottom of a long track cutting its way through bare trees into solid, glacial light far ahead. I've never felt such coldness. Immediately we began to walk to get warm. The track seemed unending, the air seemed to get colder and colder as we climbed.

"There are clear spaces up ahead," Mrs. Concannon told me, as if it were some promise she was making.

Up ahead there were indeed clear spaces. We must have walked for half an hour to reach them. Eventually, we left the trees behind and strode out over the crest of the ice - covered hill. It was terribly exposed to the chill air. I forced myself to go faster and faster across it till I began to get warmer. I had not noticed that I had left Mrs. Concannon behind. First thing I knew, I felt completely alone. When I turned round I could not see her anywhere behind me. The landscape was flat and white and endless to my eyes, the snow seemed to have obliterated all contours, all the rolling, uneven shape of the hillside. I began to walk back in the direction I had come from. The white of the hillside stretched out to the very edge of my view, bound only by the sky, which, like the snow - covered hilltop, also seemed flat and featureless. I was walking across a blanketed, monotonous space where there were no bearings to be taken. Here I was indeed the only moving object over a still and frozen landscape. I could see no sign of Mrs. Concannon, when I stood still I could hear nothing other than a silent, ringing coldness in the air. At last, after some uneven wandering on the hilltop, I stepped out of the single dimension of snow and sky, into a more familiar reality. I seemed to step through an invisible barrier separating me from my own world and found myself within yards of Mrs. Concannon. She had obviously been afraid, there was intense relief on her face when she saw me.

"I ran out of breath," she said. "I had to stop here. I lost sight of you. I called but you didn't hear. I panicked..."

I sat down on the hard - packed snow beside her. It was perfectly dry, breaking in tiny fragments around the edges of my boots.

"I don't know if this was such a good idea," Mrs. Concannon said, hesitantly. "Maybe we should just head back to the car?"

The sky had become grey, the cold had intensified. There was a white mist forming just above the surface of the snow. It was possible that in a very short while the hill would be covered in mist and fog. My better sense told me to turn back to the car but, perversely, I heard myself saying,

"Let's just go up to the highest edge of the hill there, to see down on the city. It would be too disappointing to turn back just now."

I could sense her reluctance as she got up and began to trudge after me. She did not go far. I heard her calling,

"I'll wait for you here."

I turned and waved to her that it was alright. I shouted back to her,

"Yes, I won't be long."

Why I wanted to reach the highest point of that hillside I don't really know, but knowing that Mrs. Concannon was waiting for me encouraged me to hurry, to push myself upwards. I was soon in a half - run, the snow crunching with the hard, heavy pounding of my boots. Up ahead I could see a sort of fence

looming. It became part of my goal, it was the only feature on that blank landscape that I could aim at. As I got closer to it I could see that it was a barbed wire fence, well rusted, with tufts of sheep's hair hanging from the pointed barbs. The edge of hill to which I was running seemed to have receded far beyond this fence. I had to climb it, catching myself on the sharp, rusted points. I tore myself away from it, the wire ripping my jacket. I was out of breath but began straightaway to run again.

Ahead of me the sky was getting brighter, the grey cloud began to diminish and I could sense the strength of the sun seeking to pierce through. The light drew me on. Already out of breath and running too fast, I began to push myself harder, to run as fast as I could. All of a sudden, I was running effortlessly. I was surprised, astonished by my speed and the ease of my running. It felt wonderful and then I reached, in a split second, the edge of the hillside I was running to. The sun came through the clouds in a blaze. It was blinding. I could see nothing ahead of me or under my feet. I fell, tumbling over and over across the hard snow until I came to a stop. I was hurt and stunned. I lay on my back looking up at the grey cloud recover the sun and absorb it, then I cried out as loud as I could into the empty sky above me, as I had in my dream a few nights before,

"Tony, Tony..."

And I knew he was dead, Therese.

I picked myself up and began to redescend the hillside. I was moving slowly, the white mist had risen up from the ground and was closing round me. I did not see the barbed wire fence until I came to it. I was feeling the cold again, the air was like ice. When I got to Mrs. Concannon I was never so glad to see her. When she saw me she said,

"What happened? What's wrong?"

"It's Tony," I said. "I've a terrible feeling something is wrong. I want to go back now. Quickly."

"Oh God," she said. "I've been so afraid..."

And we rushed back to where the track debouched on the hillside and both of us ran down it to the car.

On either side of the road the mist was rising and curling through the trees. When we reached the first houses and streets they were already enfolded in the tender arms of the gathering fog. It was almost dark when we arrived at the hospital, running from the unbearable cold outside into the warm, harsh light inside. When we got to Tony he was lying on his bed as we had left him. The music of the *Unfinished* Schubert Symphony was still playing as if the scene we had left had remained intact and unchanged for all of the day. Time seemed to have stood still and Tony seemed no worse or better than before.

I don't know how to tell you how it happened, Therese. I bent over Tony and picked him up in my arms. I remembered holding him when he was a baby and seemed lifeless in my arms and thinking then that nothing would ever move him, that he could not live, Therese, for me, for you, Therese, for us. I held him tightly in my arms urging him to move, to give even the slightest of gestures, more than the automatic tremor of a reflex or the slender pulse of his blood. I almost cried out with anguish, there was nothing, nothing. Only music... The *Schubert* was still playing in Tony's room. Its languorous, dolorous rhythms, its heartbreak, surrounded us. It was too much, I could not bear it. I turned it off and plucked the cassette out. I put the *9th Symphony* on, and we were swept away immediately by the race of its strings.

Tony died while I was holding him like that. The scherzo from the symphony was playing, the uneven, staccato hammering of the chords had stopped and the wild exuberance of the waltz was in full flight. That music is like the spinning of stars around us. I held Tony up, as I had when he was a little child, and we spun together inside the music, inside the spinning starlight. The music was full of the joy of living, of dance. We danced, Tony and I. I held him high in the stars. I felt the excited pulse of his heart as he turned around in the broken, strident light of the music. As the waltz died, and the wind instruments blew a series of notes, like blowing a candle out, I felt Tony's heart die, give a sudden, hammering blow against my skin and then wither into nothingness. I let him lie back on the bed as if he was sleeping. I would never hold him again.

Two days later there was the funeral. The snow was still on the ground. It even snowed a little that day, brief flurries of snow as we made our way from the church to the cemetery. Someone said they had seen the first daffodils of the spring growing up through the snow. I could not believe that Tony had died while daffodils were breaking up through earth and ice to live.

After Greyson and Caroline had gone, and Dr. Kelly and Dr. Carroll, and Mrs. Concannon, I stayed alone guarding the fresh mound of clay. I don't know how long I stayed like that, watching the flakes of snow flicker onto the damp, brown earth, before I returned home to sleep the longest, deepest sleep that I have known. In which there were no dreams, no dreams, no memories, no regrets, no desires, no lost loves, and no ghosts. If only I could always sleep so well... I would be happy.

Greyson called a couple of days later. He was awkward, constrained. He found it hard to talk. We sat in sombre silence most of the time. When he said,

"Therese wouldn't come back then?"

I could see that the thought that you would not come back, when you had been told that Tony was dying, disturbed him.

I was careful not to indicate, in any way, what the reality was, that I had burned your address, unforgivably, and that you knew nothing of Tony's death.

"Therese will come back when she wants to," I told him, attempting to cover my deception.

"But what use is that?" he said impatiently. "She should have been here for Tony."

He shook his head, Therese, very disappointed. I was satisfied then that he did not know you as well as I did. He couldn't understand you.

I had another visitor at that time. Mrs. Concannon. She was very quiet, very reserved. She said she missed Tony, that she could not believe he was dead. She seemed to be grieving. She said it was like her own son dying, it had all come back, Tony was like a son to her she said. She asked if she could call to see me from time to time, she wanted to keep in touch, now that we knew each other a little. We had lived through something very special together she said with tears in her eyes. She put her hand in mine as she spoke. Automatically, without thinking, I pulled my hand back. It was as if I'd slapped her across the face. The tears began to flow down her cheeks. She began to sob.

"What is it?" I said, trying to repair the damage. "What's wrong?"

She had difficulty getting the words out, they were twisted and broken by her voice torn with grief.

"Will I ever find someone to love me?" she asked. "Will I ever?..."

I didn't know how to respond to her, I didn't know what to do.

"I'm so lonely," she said, almost inaudibly. "So lonely."

Abruptly she got up and prepared to go.

"I still want to call to see you," she said.

I nodded. That would be alright. She could call when she wanted. I was not going to stop her calling.

She left. The snow was melting at that time, there was a thaw on. I went everyday to the cemetery to see Tony. I marked the grave with a small wooden cross. I found some daffodils for it, I put them in a jar upon the dark earth.

I began to dream. I had many dreams, strange dreams. I dreamt that I held Tony in my arms. *We were dancing. I called your name, Therese. That's all, I called your name, but you didn't appear.*

In another dream I was walking with Tony in my arms. *There was nothing around us to indicate where we were, we seemed to be in some sort of a blank space, empty and featureless. Then a figure came up to us out of the distance. Though his face was familiar I didn't recognise him for a long time. Then I saw that it was Schubert. I was so happy and Tony began to dance in my arms. Suddenly there were bright, coloured lights over our heads, Schubert had put them there, with white birds swooping down and rising up between them. The birds were singing. Schubert opened wide his arms to embrace us both. The birds settled on his arms to sing. Tony was laughing, laughing like a child. I could hear an orchestra playing in the distance. It was a waltz and in the distance, where the sound of the music was coming from, where Schubert had come from, there was white light spinning. Schubert picked us up and held us high amongst the coloured lights. Tony held a bright yellow globe in his hands. His hands were small as a baby's. One of the white birds flew down and stood on Tony's forehead. Tony was laughing wildly.*

*"It's Christmas, Tony," I was saying, "it's Christmas."*

*And I looked down into Schubert's bright, smiling eyes, where I could see, in their depths, the coloured lights reflecting.*

I have had many nights with dreams, Therese, dreams of you, Therese, dreams of Tony, and I have also had nights of deepest sleep without dreams. I wake always with the most intense sadness in my heart.

Some days ago I heard *Sorrento* on the radio. I guess we'll never go back there with Tony now, Therese. But even to imagine that someday I could go there with you, Therese, that would be something to live for. The song, when I heard it, took me by surprise. It changed my mood. I began to think less and less of myself, of Tony, and more and more of you, Therese. At all hours I remembered things, a flood of things, coming back into my mind.

Then, I did something that surprised me. I was passing a chemist shop and impulsively I went in. I asked the girl behind the counter if she had some *White Mist* perfume. I told her that I just wanted to smell it, to see if it was the right perfume. She looked suspiciously at me, wondering what my motives were. If only she knew... I opened the small vial she gave me and instantly recognised its odour, and could place myself inside a hundred sensations provoked by it. Afterwards, going home, I was in a daze, a sweet daze of dreams, in which you figured brightly, Therese.

*White Mist.* There was a white mist on the sea the other day when I walked there. My last memory of you is connected with the sea, Therese. The police brought me there, but then, you don't know anything about that. You had already left by then.

Living with Tony was so hard for you. I wanted to keep him at home. I insisted. He must stay at home. We had terrible rows. Blind with rage, with frustration, with horror, you accused me of every sin, of every cruelty, of every selfishness. We were already apart, divided from each other, before you left. I couldn't stand your rages. I was afraid of them. I was afraid you would hurt Tony, that you would break and do something savage to him. I made the nurse call everyday that I was at the office to clean and feed him. I gave her her own key to the house. She called twice, in the morning and afternoon. Sometimes when she called she found Tony on his own, you had gone out. You always said you had gone shopping. It could not last. The nurse threatened to report us. They would put Tony in care somewhere.

In the evenings I held Tony. I went into the sitting room with him, to escape you, Therese, to escape your eyes, like those of a trapped animal, with a look of horror that never left them. I played music for Tony, loud

music that battered the walls, the louder the better, making my eardrums ring. I had felt Tony move in my arms as the music played. I put him on the carpet and he continued to move, to shake with the rhythm of the music. You refused to believe it.

"It's all lies!" you screamed. "Why are you lying, why are you lying?"

I wanted you to hold him but you wouldn't. Once, when *Schubert* was playing, the waltzing trio section from the scherzo movement of the *Great* symphony, you came in while I was holding Tony high above my head and dancing around the room with him.

"What are you doing?" you said. "What do you think you're doing?"

I drew you into the centre of the room.

"Take him," I urged you. "Dance with him."

You took Tony from me and began to dance with him. I danced around the two of you, smiling and laughing. Then you began to cry. There were more tears than I had ever seen. You stood still in the middle of the floor, holding Tony up over your head. You began to shake uncontrollably. I was suddenly afraid that you were going to do something, that you were going to throw Tony down on the floor or against the wall near you. I reached across you and pulled him out of your hands. I almost had to drag him, you were holding him so tightly. You were shouting, with no end of despair in your voice,

"I feel nothing, I can feel nothing..."

You kept repeating that, that you could feel nothing, that it was all a lie, that I had told you a lie, that Tony could move, that he could respond to music, was all *a lie*.

"He's just a shell," I remember you saying. "He's not a person. He's dead, dead."

Was I too cruel, Therese? What was I to do? Was I wrong about Tony? Did I, in fact, fabricate a world, a life for him? Did I, in the madness of my own suffering, invent a *lie* about Tony? That I tormented you with, Therese? And were the doctors right who told us that Tony would be like an *empty shell*? That he would not have a life, no movement, no thought, no feeling? Or, was theirs the lie? The fabrication? The invention? Who was it who held Tony in his arms all those years, Therese? *Who*? And who should know then? And who can say what Tony's life was, Therese, *if not me*? Sometimes I feel as if I gave birth to Tony myself, as if it was my body that pushed him out into the starry universe, Therese. All I mean to say is that, sometimes, I feel responsible for Tony, for his life, for his death, but I don't feel guilty. I'm glad that Tony was born, I'm glad.

I was about to give in, Therese. You'll never know how close I was to letting them put Tony away, for your sake, Therese. The unending violence of our rows had worn me down, but it was when you said that *I did not love you* that I broke, Therese. You made me sound like your father, like I was ruining your life. You began to leave me in the evening time, to stay out until late at night. I had promised you complete freedom and you used it. In some part of me I was aware that you were leaving me, gradually, little by little, day by day, you were going further and further away. I refused to ask you where you had been, or what you had been doing. Then you began to stay out all night, to come home late in the mornings. I missed work. Greyson was very understanding. He never complained. He, for his part, allowed me complete freedom too.

I had already asked the nurse about hospitalising Tony though it broke my heart to do so. I hadn't told you. To tell the truth, I was afraid to. I didn't know what it would mean, how you would take it, or if, in some way, it would signal the end. The end, that I must have sensed was coming, and that was inevitable.

I had grown accustomed to your absences. It occurred to me that you might have a lover. You needed someone. I knew you weren't spending your nights away from me on the streets. You would leave sometimes, furtively, slipping out in the night; the door closing behind you the first sign I had that you were going. In the mornings, when you returned, there was that look on your face, of mischievous excitement, that look that was there the first few times we had made love, as if you had been doing something illicit, but eminently pleasurable. The look of horror that you had normally was erased and you had recaptured something of the happy girl. Any anger that I felt when you were away dissipated when I saw that look on your face. I think I could have forgiven you anything, Therese, as long as you were the Therese I had fallen in love with.

You stayed away longer and longer. At first a day, then two, then three, then a weekend. You know, I could have gone on living like that forever I think, as long as I knew, that in the end you would always come back. I always expected or feared, however, that someday one of those absences would simply prolong itself for an indefinite period. I never expected you to come to me and explain that you were going. When you did come I was ready to announce to you that I had found a place for Tony in St. Michael's. I never got the opportunity to say it. You told me that you were leaving, that there was nothing I could do, our life together was over, you had not been happy for a long time.

I was trying to take it all in, you had caught me unawares, I was reeling from what you had told me. At the same time I realised that I had very little time, that you were intending to leave without delay, and that I had to fight, now, immediately, if I wanted to keep you, and I did want to keep you, Therese, I wanted to so much.

"Where are you going?" I asked, wanting to stall you, fighting for time, wondering what to say, how to say it.

"London," you said, adding, "Where all the unhappy Irish go."

"But who have you there, who do you know there? How will you take care of yourself?"

You did not want questions.

"Everything's been arranged," you kept saying.

I could not break you down. *Everything's been arranged*. What did it mean, what had been arranged, how, by whom?

"Stay until I can arrange some money for you," I said desperately.

You shook your head.

"No, John," you said. "I'll send you my address when I arrive."

I was terribly afraid.

"No, you won't, you won't," I protested. "I'll never hear from you. I know it."

I never did hear from you, but you said anyway,

"I will write, John, I promise."

I remember you repeating my name, like a mother soothing a hurt child. You had not used it in months. It made me even more afraid of losing you, as if I sensed that once I allowed myself to be lulled into a false sense of security, you would be gone. I told myself that I needed to be more forceful, that if I didn't want you to go I would have to stop you going. I remember, before I could even consider what I was doing, I grabbed you by the arms. I saw how frightened you were. You were calling out. "No, John, please don't hurt me, please don't..."

"I won't let you go," I said. "I can't let you go."

"You have to, you have to, John!" you were shouting it at me. "I can't stay, really I can't!"

I was shaking you with all my strength. Then I let you go, suddenly releasing you. You fell away from me backwards onto the floor. I still hear the solid thud of your body hitting the ground. I stood over you, shouting at you.

"Why do you have to go? Why? Why can't you stay?"

You half - picked yourself up, you were crying, you held your arms, protectively, around your stomach. I didn't hear or didn't understand what you were saying at first, then I heard it, then I understood it, and my world really did fall apart.

"John, please don't hit me, don't hurt me," you were saying. "Please don't hit my child, don't hurt my baby, please John, I'm pregnant, John, please don't hit me, don't hurt me, please don't hurt me."

I felt as if I was falling through the air trying to hold the emptiness with my hands. I said,

"Go then, go, go on..."

I must have been mad. I heard the door closing behind you and I remember circling the room in a daze, looking for something to hold on to. I was wrong to tell you to go. I ran out after you into the night. It was too late. I spent hours wandering in the streets hoping that I would meet you, that I would see you. It was dawn when I returned home, my hands and heart empty.

You don't know what happened afterwards, Therese. I contacted the police. I told them that you had never left home before. That you were very distressed, that I was afraid for your safety. They made some effort to find you but nothing came of it. I remember, about a week later, they called and brought me to the city morgue. There was a young woman who had drowned in the sea. She resembled you, Therese, she had your black hair, your pale skin, and that same look of horror, the horror of drowning, imprinted on her face. They also said that she was pregnant. No one else who fitted that description had been reported missing in the last week. They would not believe me that it was not you, Therese. When I shook my head, they persisted,

"Are you sure? Look more closely."

To please them, I went closer to the woman. The white sheet that covered her was pulled back to her breasts. I asked for it to be pulled away further. I looked down at the small, tight button of her navel, so unlike yours, Therese. I shook my head again. They were disappointed it was not you.

"Are you sure?" they asked again. "Are you really sure?"

"I'm really sure," I said, staring down at the white coldness of her flesh.

What a bizarre scene that was, Therese. I shudder, even now, remembering it.

Afterwards, I went walking by the sea. I knew that it had claimed you. I stayed a long time looking out over its cold, tremulous expanse, only hoping that you had not drowned in it. For hours, I watched the ships crossing the bay for England, where *all the unhappy Irish go*, and I dreamt sometimes of taking one and following you across the Irish Sea to London, in the hope of finding you there.

Just a few days later Tony went into St. Michael's. I felt as if, having lost you, I had now lost him. Except for the weekends, when they sent him home to me, I was completely alone, as alone as I had been two years before when I first met you. What an extraordinary two years they had been, Therese, what changes you had made in my life, to my life, and now you were gone. For a long time I felt as if I was dying and sinking into a bottomless pit. It was Tony in the end who rescued me, Tony and my beloved Schubert together. We learned to dance in the stars together, all three of us, and dance in the silence, Therese, of your absence.

I often wonder, Therese, what your life has been since you left me. I often imagine your world, I see you in the London streets, living your life, happy, loving your child. I would like to know, Therese, just what your life has been without me. I'd like to know your child, is it a boy or a girl? I'd like to see him or her, to see if there is a resemblance with you, Therese, to see if the child has caught and reflects any of your dark radiance, your sombre beauty. There is so much that I would like to know, Therese, about you, but I think I never will know those things. I can only, from time to time, wonder, imagine, dream your world, Therese, and your happiness. That is all I can do. It will have to be enough.

A couple of days ago I met Dr. Kelly out walking, Therese. We stopped and talked. He asked me how I was. He gripped my arm tightly with his hand, as he had not done since those first days when Tony was in hospital. I remembered how his hands had stroked and caressed the air. I remembered thinking that a man whose hands moved in that way must have a dog. There was a dog with him, a lovely white collie with mournful eyes. When I asked, he explained that it was not his, that it was a stray dog that had followed him. When he started on his walk again the dog did not follow him but stayed with me. It followed me. I was walking by the sea. The dog walked at my side. He had no collar nor anything to indicate who he belonged to. He followed me home. I brought him into the house, let him stay in the back garden. I told the police about him, but I haven't heard back from them yet. I'd be happy to keep him. When I look out the window, he looks back at me with those mournful eyes of his, as if he understands me, and I understand him. These past few days he has been the faithful companion of my walks, never leaving my side.

I've been living in quiet seclusion. Greyson has not called since that time just after Tony's death. Mrs. Concannon called several times but I did not answer the door to her. I've not seen her lately. I've not been bored, but don't ask me what I've been doing. I've put some things in order, everything that was Tony's I've put away, his clothes, his music, the mobile with the white birds, his Christmas present. I still have the chain with the silver cross that Mrs. Concannon gave him. I must return it to her, though she said she didn't want it. I think I'll post it to her.

So, I live an orderly, untroubled life. I go nearly everyday to Tony's grave. Yesterday there was a fresh fall of snow covering it. I stand there in silence, not remembering, not thinking of Tony, not dwelling on his life, or what has happened in the last few months. Christmas seems so long ago, it might have been in a different life, a different world altogether. I have the strange sensation that my life is over, that it has already ended. What more can happen, I ask myself. Today I looked again at some of the photographs of you, Therese, and you know it was like looking at someone else's photographs, someone I had never met, never seen, never known. There was still an eerie poignancy about them, like photographs of dead people sometimes have, but it was not a mood or atmosphere I attached to myself particularly. No, I felt very detached about them. I put them away thinking, *I will never look at them again.*

I've been to mass once or twice on Sundays. It fills in the time and then I try to pray. I empty my mind and I concentrate. When I empty my mind I can see the darkness that is at the heart of me, Therese, and my prayer is that the darkness will give way to light. I pray to the God of Love, Therese, to the God of Light, who is my God, the only God I can believe in, the only God that I can pray to. A lot of the time I sit watching television or listening to the radio. I like the news best, it absorbs, distracts me. Every time I hear the word *London*, I think of you, Therese. It has become like you, Therese, part of my life, and evokes, like your name, the same thoughts, sensations, and remembrances. I've finished, Therese. I'm not going to write anymore of these *letters*. What point is there in writing, if my life has ended? I have written all that you will need to know when you come at last. You will see that right up to the very end I loved you, to tell you that I love you will be the last thing I write. I hope you will understand that it was my love for you that prevented me going to find you in London. And what would you have done, I wonder, if I had suddenly turned up, standing unexpected at your doorstep, intruding unwelcomed into your life?

There are daffodils everywhere at the moment. During the thaw they shot up out of the ground. They're really very beautiful, it's worth living just to see them. The sunsets have been glorious these past few days,

blazing, colourful sunsets, such as I have never seen. There is a crescent moon again, and though the nights are cold I sometimes go out walking after dark. The sky is white with stars and *Orion* is the dominant constellation. I walk dizzily under them, so much brilliance covering the night. I hear *Sorrento* in my mind, *singing, singing, singing* its sorrow. It will not leave me, but haunts me with its beauty, as I walk under the stars.

I leave you then, in the springtime, Therese, with the world starting to unfold, to blossom, and to grow. If you could only see me standing inside the bay window, looking out at the starlit night, humming old songs to myself, you would see that sometimes I make a sweet gesture which is meant for you, Therese. I look past *Orion* into the heart of the stars, Therese, where I imagine your swirling city of stone and glass and light is. I look keenly to see if I can make out its streets and find the one where you are. When I am happy that I have found you, Therese, I steady myself inside my window, and lifting my fingers to my lips, I gather the softest of kisses off my mouth for you, Therese, and blow it across whole galaxies into your life and world. You might look through the window with surprise as I sketch a fragile wave *goodbye*, Therese, and catch me in the act of shaping my lips, still missing you, still wanting you, Therese, into a final, eternal, infinite, I love you... *Therese. I love you.*

***The End***