

DUBLIN DREAMING

Excerpt from a novel-in-progress, by Kay Dunne

The novel is set in Sydney, Australia, and Dublin. The central character is Patience Doyle, an academic psychiatrist. This excerpt is early in the story. Patience and her husband Don, have had lunch together, a few hours earlier.

Going Home

At that moment when my world spun out of its orbit, what stands out most clearly is a wide red mouth opening and closing like a fish. I think I remember a sense of wonder that I could have caused such consternation, seeing I was the injured party, and I felt nothing.

After our lunch I had walked back with him to his car. He had hinted at an early night, drawing me to him, catching my hair in his fingers, trapping me with his hold as he pressed his lips to mine, adding a small tongue flicker. It was the middle of the day, in full view of the passing students, in front of the medical building. When he let me go I was disorientated. I felt twenty years old. I felt some hope.

Foolish old woman that I was, I made an excuse to get out of the faculty meeting and rushed home early – caught a taxi, not my usual bus. Had it really been years without sex? No, not years. Maybe a year. I wanted to be there when he came home. I would be in one of those outfits he had bought me when the ardour was stronger, waiting, draped across the bed. Strategically draped of course, one leg over the other to hide the varicose vein in my left calf. More three quarters view than side. Didn't want the soft flesh around my belly to bunch up, or my boobs to spill over into my armpits. But all was well. I was still slim, in fairly good nick – my cardiovascular fitness was better than average for my age, according to my stress test four weeks ago – nothing to be sniffed at, even though inner fitness was not exactly relevant to the anticipated action.

His car had been in the driveway when I arrived: a sign of his eagerness. How sweet the early spring fresas had been, how poignant and fecund was the air with nesting magpie songs. No

matter that the breeze winding up from the Bay was the harbinger of a storm, at that precise moment it had the charm of the airs of an Aegean shore. All that was missing was the swelling music.

No, I spoke too soon. There was music, coming from overhead, from upstairs. My toes curled with anticipation as I heard my husband's favourite love making music, Van Morrison's Brown Eyed Girl. I was his brown-eyed girl. My plan changed. He was already up there, so I showered downstairs. I didn't bother with the sexy lingerie – it was in the bedroom where he already was waiting for me – instead I simply wrapped a towel around me.

The carpet was deliciously soft under my feet as I made my way upstairs. I dropped the towel half way up – why did I need a towel? The soft, spring air was coming through a window and bringing with it those perfumes. My breasts moved rhythmically with my feet, their swing adding to my anticipation; my steps were hindered by my mounting arousal and I hadn't even yet seen the object of my affection. I was so easy. He had said that so many times, so many teases ago. You're so easy. So easy he had murmured in my ear while his finger slipped into my vagina.

The music had moved on to the Rolling Stones. There were some other sounds coming from the bedroom. Maybe he had started without me. I hoped not. I hoped he hadn't been so overcome with impatience for his Patience that he was already done. I opened the door.

I had never seen my husband's bottom from this angle before and I wondered at its paleness, so white and so vulnerable looking where gravity had dragged down the flesh at the corners at the top of his thighs.

The absence of emotion in moments of stress is called dissociation. Dissociation: a disruption of and/or discontinuity ... In essence, aspects of psychobiological functioning that should be associated, coordinated, and/or linked, are not.

There was a scream and a crash as an arm flailing about on the end of a round naked body knocked

something onto the hardwood floor – the table lamp it must have been. There was a flurry of white sheet. Even as the wide, red mouth registered silent dismay, I noticed her dark, wine-coloured areolas and the silvery hints in her skin at the base of her abdomen, that told me she was a mother. The sheet was off the bed and my husband was hastily winding it around his hips so that I, his wife might not look at the offending organ. How ungallant of you to hog the sheet I thought as the lady scrabbled about for something to cover herself with. I took my pink robe from the hook behind the door and offered it to her. I thought the colour wouldn't go with her vermillion hair. She didn't say thank you. I walked out the door.

And after the dissociation, there was the horror.

Horror was to be expected when one's husband was caught in flagrante delicto. With a young woman. An old man's folly. To be expected. And with the possibility of forgiveness.

But she hadn't been young.

As I threw what I could into a bag, only things from the bathroom, blindly snatched – the bedroom was occupied – I decided that the problem was not only his betrayal but also his misleading me. This was the greater sin: his stupid, immature, overcompensation; the guilt which made him touch me up, make suggestions he had no intention or capacity to meet.

As I drove away I wondered what they were doing, up there in my bedroom, what recriminations and apologies were going on. Did she too feel betrayed? Or was it full bore, having a go at the stupid, duped wife?

It was five in the afternoon as I headed west in my BMW Roadster, with the hood down, my bag on the seat next to me, the sun in my eyes, black clouds on the horizon and my heart and mind on ice.

I hadn't thought about where I was going. I hadn't thought, period.

To speed with the wind in my face would have been the choice, something to make me feel alive, but it was peak hour and I was forced to do the slow drizel along New South Head Road,

along with the thousands of commuters, and probably just as well in retrospect, given my mood and restricted vision with the glare of the sun low in the sky. I missed the turn off onto the cross-city tunnel at Rushcutter's Bay and ended on Bayswater Road. Instinctively, I turned right into Darlinghurst Road. I'm not sure why. It's romantic to think an ancient calling from the past lead me that way, but more likely, I knew the area, Kings Cross was the tourist area, full of hotels. And there was one hotel I knew intimately.

As I turned left into Macleay Street I noticed the El Alamein fountain in Kings Cross Park was not on: as it was forty odd years ago, it must still be turned off periodically for cleaning. The bursts of water in peacock feather shapes must have only been accomplished by water flowing at pressure through narrow pipes and then being released suddenly, so I imagine the pipes and the outlets would clog up with residue if not periodically cleaned. I glimpsed the red brick library still there in the corner of the park shaded by a Port Jackson fig tree and the street itself was still as beautiful as I remembered, with its art deco buildings and sycamores spilling their spring leaves in a continuous arch across the street. And the Parisian was still there.

I pulled up opposite the building in a no stopping zone and took my time looking it over. It was no longer called the Hotel Parisian of course. It hadn't had that name since 1970 when it became the California Club, part of the transformation of the Cross into the playground of American soldiers on leave from Vietnam. It remained a hotel however. It had been saved from redevelopment as it was an art deco building, a down market version, but still, it had some of the recognised features of being 'period'. However, it was surprising that its insides hadn't been gutted and turned into apartments, as seemed to have happened to many of the old buildings. It was still painted a nondescript beige colour, and, but for the sign, declaring it the Hotel Russell, it could still have been 1968 when I worked there with Maureen and Tanya and the others.

It was as good as anywhere else to stay, I supposed. I hadn't been clear where I was heading: west, back to the house I grew up in, where my oldest sister now lived, or even further to the Blue Mountains where the other older sister was? Heading towards 'home', I suppose, and, in 1968, the

Parisian had been better than home.