

Louise Kennedy, The End of the
World is a Beautiful Day (1979)

IN SILHOUETTE

The hot pants look trampy with the platforms so you change into your yellow parallels. You pack your clutch bag with fags, a pat of powder, a tin of Vaseline. It's floppy, so you wad it with tissues to fill it out. The bag came free with a bottle of Charlie perfume you bought in the chemist's shop you're not allowed to go into because Mr Crawford, the owner, is in the DUP. A last look in the mirror. The broderie anglaise trim on your top doesn't quite reach the waistband of your trousers. Your stomach is hollow, which you like, and pale, which you don't. You go down the stairs and put your head into the sitting room. Showaddywaddy are on *Seaside Special*, wearing suits the same shade as your trousers. Cheerio, you say. Your mother pulls the edges of her cardigan together by way of an answer. You go down the driveway. The wee ones are at the stream, building a dam or demolishing one, their shrieks blowing across the fields to you. The heat has been building all day. The tarmac is spongy under your feet, sundering into oil and chips of stone, and by the time you get to the Halfway Inn the cork soles

on your shoes are greasy-looking and the hair at the back of your neck is wet.

The front door is wedged open with a brick. The girls are already there, at the corner table by the jukebox, nursing jewel-coloured drinks laced with cordial. Gin and orange. Pernod and blackcurrant. Vodka and lime. You tuck your clutch high up under your arm and go to the bar.

Buy us a drink, Thady, you say. Your brother acts as if he doesn't know you're there, so you have to lean in between him and Ciaran McCann. Your top has ridden up your belly and Ciaran slants himself forward for a better look. In profile he's nearly gorgeous, but then he twists on his stool and you see the heavy lid of the eye that doesn't open. You think he's admiring you, until he sniggers. You're in no position to be laughing at anyone, Winky, you say, and he bends back over his pint. Come on, Thady, I've no money. He does this sometimes, makes you whinge stuff out of him. You're not even sure he's listening, because he has turned to look at the doorway. Everyone is looking at the doorway. It's like watching a Western, the tall silhouette against the yellow light, the face dark, in shadow. The tidy bulk of him crossing the room to the counter.

Thady must be thinking the same thing because he says Howdy, stranger.

The man smiles along the length of the bar. He's wearing a tweed sports jacket, too heavy for a summer night,

and there's a spritz of sweat on his moustache. It's an evening for a few cold ones, he says, his accent going to the four corners of Ireland.

Thady puts his hand on your arm. Shandy, is it?

You reposition the bag and go across the floor to the girls. You sit at the table and they lean in and you're all talking at once. You drink fast and they dare you to ask for more. You tuck the clutch under your arm and walk to the bar, slower this time.

Buy us another one, you ask Thady.

You cost me a fortune.

Allow me, the man says.

Work away, says Thady.

When the drink is pushed at you, you hold it up at the man in thanks. *Slàinte*, he says, and you wonder if he's Scottish. He lifts a pint to his mouth. His lips are so full they hardly close.

You take some coins from the stack of change in front of your brother. You go back to the girls and put your drink on the table. Three plays, you say, and turn to the jukebox. You choose one for a laugh, one for dancing, one for the boys. As the last song finishes, Thady comes over and speaks into your ear. Go home, he says. You start to complain, swinging round to face him, but when you see the look on his face you are quiet. Night night, he says to the girls, and they clatter out ahead of you. Thady goes back to the counter. From the doorway you

look at the man one last time. Now you are in silhouette, and you hope the broderie anglaise is gauzy and pure against the sunlight, and that he can see you through it. He lifts his pint at you. He sees you.

To get the free gift she has to buy two products, you explain, one skincare. You recommend the hand cream, because it's the cheapest. A wary look moves across her face as you speak, but you tone down your accent these days and she isn't sure. She drifts towards the handbags and you pack ten more of the pink velvet purses with their miniature bounty: a stubby English Rose lipstick (shade 1981), a wand of cream blusher, a canister of spray mineral water. You mist wrists with perfume, give a mini-makeover to a girl from Lingerie, clean the glass shelves. At lunchtime you take the back staircase to the staffroom. You left your bag on the windowsill in full sunlight. The smoked cheese in your sandwich has wept amber oil on to the letter from home, pages you won't open here. Yesterday's newspaper is on the table and you read it instead. There's a warship docking in Port Stanley. A pearly king and queen on Leicester Square. A street laid out for a party, bunting threaded between the lamp posts. A recipe for coronation chicken. Puffed sleeves and side fringes are in. A photograph of the silhouette man in a red and gold uniform, thick hair tamped down. A quote from his sister. *It's unbearable*

for my parents. You pull the page from the paper and put it in your bag.

One of the security guards comes in. He's the man who patrols the store for unattended bags, for accents like yours. He fills a cup with water from the boiler. There are four free seats at the table but he sits in the one opposite you. He taps a sachet of dried soup into the hot water and stirs, takes a paper bag from his pocket. His sandwich is flat and damp and home-made too. He smiles at you and your face twitches with something you hope will pass for civility. You're Irish, he says. You prepare to answer, breaking up words in your mouth and reassembling them to remove the moany vowels of the place you come from, but he keeps talking. His name is Sean, *shown* the way he says it. His mum is from Carlow, which makes him eligible to play football for the Republic of Ireland. He laughs to confirm he's making a joke.

In the afternoon you shift six gift bags and sell a tube of cleavage cream to a woman in a burka with beautiful feet. He is by the swing door when you leave, walkie-talkie and polyester epaulettes swapped for a striped short-sleeved shirt with a buttoned-down collar. He acts surprised to see you, says he's going your way. He asks if you've time for a quick one — a drink, obviously. He does the laugh again. The pub is opposite the Tube station. You sit under a huge window that's misty with diesel fumes and fly spray. He asks if you'd like a Pimm's. Oh yes, you

say, as though you know what it is. It comes in a dimpled beer glass with chunks of cucumber and apple in it. I don't know whether to ate it or drink it, you say, and the woman at the next table stares at you and says something into her man's ear. She is wearing a Lady Di blouse like yours.

He asks you questions as though he's reading them from a list.

Do you come from a big family?

I've an older brother and three wee sisters.

What does your brother do?

He's waiting for a job to come up.

Thady would smirk at your answer. He's three deaths away from going on hunger strike.

Sean finishes his pint in one gulp and crosses the yeasty, floral carpet to the gents. The woman at the next table is leaning in to her man, pointing at the floor where you've put your white patent-leather handbag. You pick it up, root in it, fingers moving over the greasy letter. Thady's wing is in lockdown and your mother hasn't seen him for months. You try to imagine your brother in a blanket, his hair matted with shite, but you can't picture him. You take out a lipstick and drag it slowly across your mouth, pressing your lips together when you're done. Then you use it to write four big letters across the side of your bag.

Sean appears, hoking at the waistband of his trousers. There's a light on the wall above his head and his

face is grey and shiny. He takes quick, light steps to the payphone and lifts the receiver, presumably to ring the woman who made his sandwich. You turn your handbag so the couple at the next table can read it. You've written

BOMB

in shade 1981, English Rose.

It's not yet ten, and it's Saturday night, and you've been ordered home like a wee kid. Your feet are slithering in your shoes when you reach the house. You take them off in the hall and unfurl your rosy-wealed toes as you go up the stairs. The kids are in the bath, protesting the tug of a comb, the rub of a soapy cloth. You lie on your bed in your clothes. Your legs won't keep still. You close your eyes and picture the silhouette man, framed in the doorway. The table the girls were at is empty. There's no Winky, no Thady, no Mallon boy from Aughnacloy, just you on a stool with your legs crossed and a Silk Cut between your fingers, watching him. You leave him in the doorway for as long as you can bear it, let him make his way across the room to you.

Thady shakes you awake. His face is close to yours, reeking of drink. There is another smell on him, like meat or copper. You follow him to the landing. In the wan light everything is smudged, except his eyes, which are shining. He's in his stocking feet. He undresses,

rolling each garment as he removes it, putting it on your waiting arms. You go into the bathroom and kneel over the tub. You've washed blood from his clothes before, slicks of afterbirth during the lambing, the bright blood of poultry. If you use hot water, it will cook and leave a stain like gravy, so you run the cold tap. You slap the jeans, the shirt, the jumper about in the flow until they are sopping, squelching them in your fists. It is a long time before the water runs clear.

You wring them as best you can and carry them out in the plastic baby bath. Thady flashes past you, his white skin almost luminous. Wait, he says. He goes into the bathroom and closes the door, opening it briefly to throw his Y-fronts on to the landing. You pick them up with a finger and thumb and go downstairs. You pull out the twin tub, fill it, turn it on, push the sodden clothes inside. In the sitting room, Thady's good shoes are propped against the brass fender on the hearth. You make a fire. You're not very good at it and use all the firelighters and a nest of willow kindling to get it going. You toss the underpants on and an oily blue flame bursts from the nylon. You poke at them until they shrink down into the embers. You can still smell shit. There's a mark on your new top. It's blood, a fine russet stain above the hem, like a feather.

Winky's at the bottom of the stairs. He's had the eye fixed. He's handsome all right, if you like the mountainy

look. Maybe you do. You put your hand on the banister. I'll come up with you, he says. Thady's laid out on his old bed. Someone has threaded pink rosary beads through his fingers. Your mother is by his corpse with her handbag on her knee, the straps sitting up in two hoops as if she's on the bus. You kiss her cheek and she shifts in her seat. You can't remember what you're supposed to do, so you touch Thady's shoulder and peer into his face. They've plugged the bullet holes with putty-coloured filler. You stay for as long as it takes to say a Hail Mary and turn to leave the room. Winky puts his hand on the small of your back and asks if you're OK. Yes, you say, but that's not what comes out of your mouth. When you can stand by yourself he brings you downstairs. Who's that with Ciaran? someone says, and it's a second before you know who they're talking about.

He pours you a whiskey in the kitchen and leads you out to the back yard. You run the edge of your finger under your eyes.

No damage done, he says.

Waterproof eyeliner, you say, and light a cigarette.

Ten years since the breakout, and they get him three strides from the border, he says. You drop the cigarette in the grating and go inside.

The funeral car pulls up and you get in the back with your mother and sisters. You put your cheek against the window and close your eyes. The wheels roll slowly over

the road and you are walking to the Halfway Inn on a summer night in your platforms, hoping to mooch a drink from your brother. Winky introduces you to his wife outside the church. She says she's sorry for your loss, her scrubbed face tensing as she takes in your painted one. At the cemetery there is a pretence of pushing back the camera crews before shots are fired over the coffin. As they crack into the air, you lower your head and adjust your sunglasses.

When you get home, someone has emptied the ashtrays, laid out trays of sandwiches. You settle your mother in her armchair and dole out tea and whiskey, wine and beer. Winky has planted himself at the bottom of the stairs. He's meeting and greeting as if he's the man of the house. You pass him with a tray, take it round the sitting room, fill it with dirty cups and saucers. In the hall you pause as if he's in your way.

Are you directing operations? you say. An eyebrow goes up and you wonder have you got away with it. He takes the tray off you and carries it to the sink. You put on pink gloves, fill the basin with hot soapy water.

I'll dry, he says, and his elbow brushes yours as he reaches across you for the tea towel. He's efficient, drying the saucers two at a time.

She has you well trained, you say. He doesn't reply.

He drives you to Aldergrove.

Some of them were talking about a ceasefire, you say.

Yeah. A few of us are back and forth to London.

You go the last ten miles in silence. At the set-off point, he flattens his fingers on the steering wheel, draws them into fists, flattens them again. You check your ticket, gather your things, prepare to tease him, but when you turn to look at him you stop. Beyond the wet window, the acetylene lamps are a shimmery orange. His face is dark. You reach a hand across and with the side of your finger you trace the hollow of his temple, the broad bone of his cheek, the line of his jaw. You get out of the car and manage not to look back.

You are early for your flight and walk around the shopping area. The cosmetic counter is grim. Last year's eyeshadow palettes, discontinued celebrity perfume. You feel sorry for the woman at the till and buy a clear mascara. Great for the eyebrows, you say. It's the first one she's ever sold. When you pass her a few minutes later with a packet of potato farls in your hand she smiles.

On the plane a stewardess hands out the next day's paper for free. There's a CCTV photograph on the front, blurred, sepia-toned. A boy leading a toddler by the hand across the concourse of a shopping centre. Thady's funeral is on page two. The headline is triumphant, but you hardly take it in, search the photo instead. It is a moment before you find yourself. You were looking for a girl in a broderie anglaise top, with a puffed-out canvas clutch bag under her arm. Winky is a row behind

you, three people over. His head is turned slightly to the side. Looking at you. The next page brushes over the minor offence your brother was convicted of, lists in bullet points the ones attributed to him. The bomb that blew the wing off Mr Crawford's Rover, taking his right foot with it. The shooting dead of a UDR reservist. A post office robbery across the border, in a village by the sea. On page three there is a photograph of the silhouette man. He's young, hardly out of his teens, hair long. One of his hands is gloved and there's a kestrel perched on it. They are both looking at the camera. You fall asleep and wake with your mouth open, as the plane is landing. You pull the pages from the paper and fold them. You tuck them in the pocket in your handbag beside the bit of paper on which Winky wrote his number.

You wait for something to happen, but the days are like all the other days, slow and close. They pick you up on the roadside. You get in without a word, looking back towards the house, but you are past the bend and can't see it. You haven't been arrested, the ginger one says, as they drive you through the gates of the barracks. They bring you into a room with a blue Formica table and beige walls, although later you'll remember a greyness. They let you smoke a cigarette. The ginger one lays photographs on the table. The hump-backed bridge, the

line of the McAlindens' shed behind it. The road, taken from beyond the bridge, the ivy wall of the Elizabethan fort in the right-hand corner. A beer can printed with a big-busted woman in a bikini discarded on a patch of dark, glistening grass. A tooth on tarmac, bone-white, a chunk of gristle at the root.

We already know who was in the bar, the tall one says.

What do you want me for, if you already know? you reply, and reach for your cigarettes. The ginger one takes the packet and crumbles them one by one on to the floor, like Oxo cubes.

What time did you leave? he says.

Before ten.

Who was there when you left?

You lift your shoulders. I was full, you say.

They leave the room, leave you there for an hour, two hours, the photographs still on the table. You avoid looking at the tooth, but your eyes keep going back to the beer can on the ground. The grass under it is torn up, as if it's been scrubbed by boots. There's an ache spreading across your lower back. You stand up and stretch, walk around the room, avoiding the shreds of tobacco and white paper on the floor. Your knickers are sticky.

A woman comes in. She has a Purdey hairstyle and green eyeshadow that matches the uniform. She is holding a clipboard with paper stuck to it.

I need to go to the toilet, you say.

Sit down.

I've my period.

Sit, I said. The other two come back in.

You wait for him outside Bromley South station. He appears at the top of the staircase and starts to go the wrong way, then doubles back against the crowd. His face relaxes when he sees you. You hail a black cab and tell the driver the name of the restaurant. He's carrying a dark cabin bag that he tucks behind his feet. You've booked an Italian place off the high street; you doubt he's the curry type.

They offer you a table near the window, but he points to an alcove and asks if it's free. There are broken Roman columns and plane trees painted on the walls, an alabaster bust with one bare boob on a plinth by your chair. He leans over and knocks it with his knuckles. Polystyrene, he says.

Are you complaining?

Not at all, he says — he says it like you do, not a tall — nothing like authentic Italian. Red or white?

Red makes me look like a vampire.

He passes you the wine list. You pick a Frascati that comes in a frosted bottle.

Are you hungry? he says.

Starving, you say, and order a salad. He laughs. Where do you usually stay when you're here?

I don't usually stay. We come over and back on the one day.

Fáilte go Bromley. You're in Tory heartland now.

He's careful with you. Pouring your wine, paying the bill, swinging the door to let you leave ahead of him. You walk the three streets home in the falling light, jackets over your arms. Past the fire station, the White Horse, around the corner to your house at the end of the terrace. He takes in the tiny cottage garden you planted, the pink front door.

It's like a doll's house, he says.

It's a mistress's house, you don't say. The deeds a parting gift from Sean when his wife threatened to tell their kids about you.

In the kitchen he takes a bottle wrapped in a foam sleeve from his bag and hands it to you. You take two tumblers from the dresser and go upstairs. He's three steps behind you, feet landing deliberately. You put the glasses on the nightstand with the bottle and switch on the lamps. He stands with his two arms the one length, looking around him.

You're not much of a barman, you say, and he's all apologies, making a big show of opening the bottle.

You take your evening make-up off in the bathroom, so he can't see you put on your bedtime make-up. Concealer, grey eyeliner, highlighter. Britt Ekland recommended it in a magazine article called 'Dressing

up to Undress'. When you go into your room he's on the edge of your bed in his clothes. You've gone tarty with the underwear to make him feel like it's your fault. He won't look at you. You lower yourself on to his lap and start to open the buttons on his shirt. You put his hands on the cheeks of your arse but he just leaves them there. You're beginning to wonder what you can do when something occurs to you. You put your mouth to his ear, run your tongue across the lobe, say his name. You both hold your breath and then he's at you like a dog.

You called him Ciaran, obviously. He hated the nickname and anyway the eye is fixed, and you can't fuck a man you call Winky.

He passes you a brandy and you take a cigarette from the packet. There's a lighter in the nightstand beside you, you say. He pulls open the top drawer and footers around. He pulls open the second drawer. Then he swings his legs on to the floor and stares into it. He pulls the whole drawer out and sits it on his knee, flicking through the bundle of newspaper clippings.

What the fuck is this?

Put them back.

He starts to lay them out on the bed. Jesus Christ, he says. Are you right in the head?

You can't explain to him why you've been keeping them. All he can see is page after page of morbid pin-ups. He can't see what you can when you put them together.

When they let you go, your trousers are destroyed. You go into the chemist's. Crawford's daughter hands you the bag of sanitary towels, and you catch her sniggering into her hand for the benefit of the other assistant before you even turn from the counter. There's nowhere to clean yourself up. The public toilets are locked so no one can plant a bomb in them, and you can hardly go into the hotel in this state. You start walking home. A car slows, and you pull your head down into your shoulders, afraid for a moment it's them, but it's just the post van. They'll hardly lift you again, you tell yourself. You gave them what they wanted.

The wee ones have the dog pinned to the lawn, pulling a tick from him. You can hear your mother in the kitchen as you go into the hall, the soft slap of her slippers, the trickle of water over potatoes in the sink. You go into the sitting room. Thady's good shoes are still on the hearth. You take them out to the yard and scrape the dried mud and blood off them with a stone. There is something else on them, grass or hair. It's grass, you tell yourself. Just grass.

You go upstairs and run a bath. The water is tepid, and you lower yourself into it. You soap yourself and a fawn cloud billows out between your legs. There's ink on your fingers from the leaky pen they made you sign the statement with, and you take a nail brush to them, scrubbing until the pearlescent varnish starts to peel away from your nails, but the blue-black stain won't come off.

You dress yourself and go down to your mother. She slops a pie from its tin on to a Pyrex dish, spoons mounds of it on to plates. Thady appears at the back door. His face is ruddy from the sun and there's a sheaf of barley between his teeth. The wee ones come in and sit at the table and he lopes about for them like one of the Wurzels.

He takes in your wet hair. Having a bath on a Wednesday? You're good to yourself, he says.

Ha ha, you say. You sit and put a piece of meat in your mouth. It seems to get bigger as you chew.

Winky is behind him, hovering. Your mother hands them each a plate and they sit across from you.

You break up a potato with the back of your fork and lift your chin to look at him. Hiya Ciaran, you say.

Thady leans back in his chair. It's Ciaran now, is it? Must be love.

Frig off you, you say, and glance at Winky. Even his ears are red, and he lowers his head and starts eating. His sleeves are pulled down to his knuckles, cuffs skimming the thin gravy. There's a stain on his fingers. Inky black, like the stain on yours.

You thought there was little that you wanted, but you surprised yourself, have had to fold the back seat down to fit it all in. There's a box of mismatched china, a dressing table that smells of 4711 and camphor. Bone-handled cutlery, the big fish kettle your mother boiled the ham in

at Christmas. The hall mirror. You'd take the fender, but your chimney is bricked up and you can't burn a coal fire in Bromley. You turn the key in the lock. You won't be back here again.

You start to get into your car but step into your walking shoes instead, rub on lip plumper. You go right at the gate. A van passes you, coming from the south, and you step up on to a hump over a ditch to get out of its path. The McAlinden place is unrecognisable, the house converted into an office, behind it a vast grey shed and the urgent hum of frightened poultry. The Elizabethan fort looks the same, ivy cloaked thickly around it. The bridge is smaller and prettier than you remember, the stones set in a pattern you never noticed as a child. You crouch on the tarmac, although the tooth is long gone, sealed in a polythene bag somewhere. Teenagers still drink here, but their tastes have changed. Buckfast, a quarter-bottle of vodka. An empty Kettle Chips bag. You thought you'd find an imprint, a trace, but there is nothing. Just a pretty hump-backed bridge, lush fields, an ivy-clad ruin.

You walk back to the house, change into your heels. You open the windows as you turn left out of the driveway, wanting to fill the car with the damp scent of the land. A gust of wind and the rank chicken smell is there instead.

A new bar and restaurant stands on the site where the Halfway Inn was, the entrance at the side. The car park

is filling with the Sunday lunch crowd. You take a table by the front window, thinking it is where the jukebox once was, but the new building is further back from the road than the original and you aren't sure. You were supposed to arrive first so Ciaran could saunter in and act surprised to see you. He's at the bar with a whiskey cupped in his palm.

He crosses the room and sits heavily in front of you.

You were meant to be here half an hour ago.

I went for a walk.

Where to?

Down to the bridge.

Fuck's sake.

A waitress comes to take your order. Her eyebrows are thinner than her eyeliner, and a silver stud flashes on her tongue as she recites the specials. You ask her for a salad and fizzy water. He orders another whiskey.

You should eat something.

I'm not hungry.

Herself'll have the roast on, I suppose.

He watches you eat. He watches you all the time now, as though you're liable to do anything. When he gets up to pay the bill you find yourself pacing out the floor, trying to walk where the silhouette man walked, but you don't know where the front door was, or the bar. He turns from the till and hisses at you.

The hell are you at?

I shake leaves from a bag on to a plate, tip pieces of cooked chicken over them. I bring it to the couch and switch on the television, go into Recordings, press play. The camera spans the field, taking in the fort, the chicken farm, the hump-backed bridge. The sky is thick and white. The reporter is in front of the bar and grill where the Half-way Inn once stood. He points at the corner of the car park. Forty years ago, he says. The photographs, then. The silhouette man in his red and gold uniform against a backdrop of painted trees and columns. Him again, a beret pulled down to the tips of his ears, surrounded by women on a street strewn with masonry. Thady's body on a wet road, feet turned out, a piece of cloth over his head and shoulders.

There's a man in an empty room, his head turned a little to the left, lit dimly from behind. The line of his jaw is heavy, thickened by drink. He starts to speak, but it's not his voice and the actor is too young for the words. *There were four of us left in the bar. Thady, Mallon, the soldier and me. We followed him out to the car park and had a go at him. It took three of us to get him into the car. We went at him again by the bridge, for hours.* He pauses, takes a drink of water. *He told us nothing. He was the bravest man I ever met. A fucking headcase.* He lifts a hand to his forehead, and I can see it, just for a second. The slightest droop of the eye.

I light a scented candle in the hall and switch on the UV lamp on the table in my parlour. I lay out a bowl

of warm water, phials of shellac, polish, glitter. My two o'clock appointment arrives, three minutes early. She is my age, with a glossy forehead and a leathery chest. I rub off the old paint and lower her hands into the basin, holding them in mine as I work back the cuticles. She chooses a burnt-orange colour that she saw in a magazine. I apply it in thin layers, drying each coat under the lamp. The blue light gives up age spots and ropey veins. She watches, a look of fear in her eyes. She tells me a secret. They always do.