

*An extract from
Conan Kennedy's*

**THE SNAKE
DANCER OF
SATI CHOURA**

Introduction

***M**y name is Arthur Doyle. I am a medical doctor in the county of Monaghan, a remote, impoverished and somewhat backward region of Ireland. Here I run a large hospital in one of the major towns. Before I moved into the administrative area I was a consultant specialist in geriatrics, and this remains an area of medicine in which I have a particular interest. I feel that I can state, (hopefully without too much affront to modesty), that I do have a certain affinity with and expertise in dealing with older people.*

In recent years, while not clinically involved in their care any more, I have maintained that interest. I feel this interest has not been to the detriment of my other responsibilities. In my administrative inspections and tours of wards and units within the hospital I do make a conscious effort to apply equal attention to paediatrics, surgical, medical and all the areas that fall within my remit. It must be admitted that I am perhaps forced to make that particular 'conscious' effort because I have noted that, in my 'managerial wanderings' around our complex, I have inevitably ended up in our geriatric wards chatting to the patients.

However, I fail to find it necessary to recriminate with myself for this apparent 'bias'. Indeed, on the contrary, and again hopefully without too much affront to modesty, I feel that I am amply fulfilling the demands imposed upon myself by both the Hippocratic Oath and by my own firmly held Christian convictions. It is a sad commentary on our society that our older citizens are so ignored by the 'generality', if I may apply that word to our younger people who in fact form, essentially, a minority. Our older citizens are, in fact, the 'generality'. A demographic, statistical and perhaps technical point admittedly, but one perhaps worthy of restating.

It would be untrue to state that I am 'amazed', in that little amazes

me at this stage of a long career, but nonetheless I do 'note', and am perhaps 'surprised' at how few visitors our geriatric patients receive. Very frequently I discover that I am the only person to whom an individual might have spoken throughout the day. Or indeed, throughout a week. In this context I mean the word 'speak' to be understood in the non-medical sense. Our nurses and doctors are excellent. It goes without saying that I wouldn't countenance otherwise. The ship I run is, as our American friends are wont to say, tight. My staff are competent, and friendly and open, and would of course give a few minutes of non-medical attention to the elderly's care. I define 'non-medical' in the sense of normal friendly human banter and intercourse. I here use the terms 'medical' and 'non-medical' in the sense that the lay person might understand, but essentially (in a medical sense!) there is no difference. (My senior colleagues will forgive me for pointing that out and younger members of our profession could, I feel, do worse than refer to my paper on the topic in The Lancet).

That then is the preamble. My exposition above hopefully explains how I met and became friendly with one of our geriatric patients. I find it unnecessary to include her name here, privacy is a dignity too often denied our elderly.

This lady had come into our care from what is euphemistically referred to as a 'nursing home', where she had lived previously for five or six years. Prior to which she had lived many years in Dublin with her husband. And there was some talk of India. I recall her mentioning that topic once, but she didn't elaborate afterwards at our further meetings. I didn't press her on the matter, feeling that she had decided not to discuss India. When widowed, she had returned to Monaghan, her native place. And indeed a place where she had earlier inherited the family farm. It had fallen into

dereliction in her decades of absence but she restored it, and created a successful business in the breeding and raising of rare breed poultry for export to the Asian market. She did not seem to have been short of money. Then, when age and infirmity had caught up, as indeed it does to us all (a fact too often forgotten), she sold up and moved into the nursing home. And thence, as noted, after five or six years, she came to us. She was well into her eighties at this stage, but completely compis, and well aware of her surroundings. It must be stated, however, that she did not actually pay much attention to her surroundings. Instead she lay there, or sat there, quietly, elsewhere in her mind. One knew her gaze was on distant things. But she always greeted me warmly. With phrases like “ah, the good doctor arrives,” accompanied by a warm smile and a twinkle of her eyes. I rather think she took a fancy to me, if I might be so presumtuous. But the very elderly sometimes do, a younger doctor or a nurse reminding them of a husband or a wife from distant times.

The lady’s husband had been a writer. Of the middle rank, I gathered, and not particularly successful or well known. All professions are, of course, akin to armies, in that there are more ‘foot soldiers’ than generals. The medical profession is no exception to this phenomenon. Many doctors are in that ‘foot soldier’ category, competent, professional, jacks of all trades, and able to make a satisfactory living in an anonymous sort of way. Few enough of us can rise to be directors of large medical facilities. Hopefully without being flippant I can suggest that doctors such as myself are the ‘best sellers’ of our profession.

My patient knew she was dying. We discussed death and the hereafter and, wearing my other hat as Lay Preacher with the First (Reformed) Church of Christ (Redeemer), I feel I did manage to at least raise an

awareness of The Lord's promises and the certainty of Salvation and Eternal Life in the Divine Presence of the Christ Jesus. For my own part I did find prayerful consolation in observing the serene way she smiled at my words.

It was at one of our last meetings that she gave me this, the manuscript of the book that follows. She told me that her husband had published many books but, as is the way with professional writers, there were many that remained unpublished. And of most of these she said they are merely notes and passing thoughts, and will make the good startings of a fire for somebody. But this particular one, she said, it would be nice if it saw the light of others' days. 'Nice' was precisely the word she used. And equally, 'the light of others' days' was precisely the phrase she applied. I recall that without hesitation. Since my student days, and hence perhaps my success in my field, I have been renowned for the precision of my memory. A gift of God, of course, and to be appreciated for that. An appreciation which, it goes without saying, should always be accompanied by an understanding that a gift from God is a tool from God, a tool to carry out His work.

When giving me this manuscript she did not say, or ask, or request that I organise its publication. She merely said, and I quote again, it would be nice if it saw the light of others' days. After some thought and consideration and, indeed, after a seeking of God's guidance, I have found that to be a sentiment with which I can concur.

* * *

One

The guy was a fucking nerd. Or a geek. Never too sure of the difference. One thing certain though. If he was a nerd he was a nerd's nerd. And if a geek? Yes, he was a geek's geek.

Thing about nerds. And geeks. Keep them on topic. They're specialists. That's what they're there for, created for. They know things, useful things. But these are not the sort of things a man wants to clutter up his mind with. The things geeks know are things that come in handy on a particular occasion. Useful for a particular purpose. And afterwards best forgotten. Remember that, all goes well.

Summary. With nerds avoid the generality. And avoid the specifics outside the nerd's speciality. Politics and sex, avoid. No point. Your nerd is a Nazi. Or a Green. He wants to kill jews and blacks. Or he wants to save the planet. His political ideas and ambitions are deranged, psychotic, and dangerous. He's an extremist. And as for sex. Jeez. Avoid that definitely. Like plague, avoid it. Your nerd stroke geek is weird in this department of the human condition. I mean all us blokes like to dress up in frilly lingerie now and then... but your nerd? No, you do not want to go there. Auto eroticism? Partial strangulation? Dressing up as that little girl star of silent Charlie Chaplin movies? No harm in any of that. We've all done it. But all at the same time? Normal, for a nerd.

"Tell me about the photograph" I said to him.

"Well," he pointed. At the photo. "Like what do you want to know?"

“How did it come about? Starters. How did you meet him, how’d he get in touch with you?”

“Guy at work. Knew a guy. Who knew a guy.”

“Uh huh,” I said, my code for please-continue.

“Did you know that if you walk up to a stranger in New York he will know someone who will know someone who...”

“Yes,” I interrupted, “I do know that.” I also know that if you walk up to a stranger in New York and start talking he could take out a legally held firearm and shoot you.

“Interesting isn’t it?”

“Not overwhelmingly,” I had to tell him, putting a firm fullstop to that line of chatter. “Let’s move it on a bit. So, guy at work. This guy knew someone who knew someone who knew someone who knew that this was your area of...area of what?”

“Expertise?”

“He put you in touch?”

“Uh huh.”

“Where’d you meet?”

“At the creperie in Stephens Green Shopping Centre”

“At the creperie in Stephens Green Shopping Centre?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Funny place to meet.”

“Where would you meet?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“Who I was meeting. And for what purpose. Like if I was meeting a woman...”

“Do you have a woman?”

“Good question,” I replied.

Good question.

I thought of her. Brown hair, pale shoulders, brown eyes, short sighted.

“Thinking of getting my eyes lasered,” the brown eyed girl said

to me.

“For what?”

“To see better.”

“What do you want to see better?”

“The world.”

“Not a good idea,” I told her.

She laughed. I played with her brown hair. Drawing patterns with it on her pale shoulders. Good memory. Good question. Did I have a woman?

“What’s it to you?” I said to the nerd.

He shrugged. “Just making conversation.”

I shrugged.

So what do we have? Two men shrugging at each other in the bar of the Shelbourne Hotel. Good place to meet though. Quiet in the morning. Free nuts. I ate some. Problem with free nuts is there’s a lot of free crap in the bowl as well, to bulk it out. Crap equals bulk. They teach them that in the catering business. So a guy’s got to poke around in this crap to find a pistachio. Recession I suppose.

What is that crap anyway?

Some of it’s pink.

What does it matter?

Do I have a woman?

Silent questions. A man looking for the lone pistachio in a bowl of nuts but mostly crap comes across a lot of questions in his mind. Silent questions. Best to break that silence.

“Why did you meet him, in the crepèrie, in Stephens Green Centre?”

The nerd didn’t answer. OK, time to reveal. He had a name. James. So, James didn’t answer. He just pointed at the photo on the table.

Grafton Street. From the top, looking down. Mid morning sort of photograph. Busy enough, but not frenzy busy. And not like one of those photos the media uses to illustrate the state of the

economy. Out of focus faces with shopping bags swinging around knees, those sort of images. Not like that at all.

“This is a good photo,” I told James.

Keep your nerd onside.

They have certain sensitivities.

Can go bad on you, unexpectedly, your nerd.

“How do you mean?”

“Well, like he’s in focus, and everyone else sort of fades into the distance.”

“I’m a photographer.”

“Yeah but when I take a photo everyone remains in focus. Foreground, background. If I took that photo it’d be in focus right down to the end of the street. Why is that?”

“Just the way you set the camera. And also of course the fact that you don’t know what you’re doing.”

“I suppose so.”

I looked at the photo.

He was tall, not too tall. Goodlooking, not too goodlooking. Well dressed, not too...all that.

“Funny thing,” I said to James.

“What, what’s funny thing?”

“Hey look I found a pistachio.”

“That’s funny?”

“No not really, That’s an aside. But funny too, I suppose. In a way...here am I looking at the photo and my fingers in the bowl find their own pistachio. Without me looking, like. Know what I mean?”

“Uh huh.”

“The real funny thing though, about photography.”

James looked at me, waiting. He had close cropped hair. I wondered if he was gay. But what did it matter to me?

Good to know though.

Facts like that can come in useful, later.

“The funny thing about photography is...” I paused, to let him

know that there was an insight coming up. And it might very well be to his advantage to listen, carefully.

He listened, carefully.

If, I told him, if I look down Grafton Street the whole street will be in focus. Yeah admittedly stuff in the distance does get smaller. And hard to make out. Hard to read shop signs. Recognise faces. But it still will be in focus. Ever think of that?

“Of what?”

“That. Why do photographers focus their photo.”

“It’s an art form. Photography.”

“And looking down the street with eyes isn’t?”

“Eyes actually do focus anyway,” he said, “but in a sort of intellectual way.”

“You wha?”

“They choose what to see, pick out what’s relevant. Ignore all the peripheral.”

“But the peripheral is still in focus.”

“You can actually focus your ears,” James said.

“Can I?”

“Ever been in a crowded pub?”

“No never, against my religion.”

“Well in a crowded pub and everyone chattering and you look across at someone you’re interested in...”

“Like someone you fancy?” I interrupted. Kind of thinking James needed all the interruptions he could get.

“Not necessarily. But that too. And you focus your ears and hear what they’re saying.”

“But your ears don’t move.”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“Nothing, nothing.”

I picked up the photograph. I didn’t want to look at it anymore, just wanted to talk about it. And picking something up...the very holding an object sort of helps the mind to concentrate.

Wonder why that is?

I suppose other senses kick in. Senses of which we have no comprehension and why should we? Does a computer know it's a computer? Or a washing machine, does a washing machine know it's a washing machine? No, it just washes.

Computers compute, washing machines wash.

Deal with it.

"He came to you," I told him, told James the photographic nerd, "he came to your office..."

"Studio," he interrupted.

"He came to your studio and told you he wanted a photograph. A particular photo. This photo. A photo of him walking up Grafton Street."

"Uh huh."

"But not just anywhere, not anywhere in Grafton Street."

"No, a particular point."

"Let's go there." I stood up. One last poke around in the nuts. All crap now. Nothing edible. "Let's go there. I'll be you and you be him."

"Come again?"

"Show me what he did."

"But we weren't coming from the Shelbourne Hotel."

"What's that mean?"

"Well we came up the street, up Grafton Street."

"Your gaff is in Aungier Street."

"My studio, yes."

"Why would you come up Grafton Street from Aungier Street? Would you not come along by the Gaiety, South King Street, along there."

"We weren't coming from the studio."

"I know." I sighed. Oh god. This was getting exhausting. Already. "I know. You were coming from the creperie in the shopping centre."

"Why'd you raise the point then?"

“It’s what I do. Check things. Give people opportunity. To change their stories.”

“To catch them out. Because you’re a cop?”

“I am an investigator.”

“But you were a cop.”

“I have been many things”

“What’s that mean?” he asked. But I didn’t answer immediately. Because just at that precise moment I entered the swing door of the hotel and had a sudden flashback of those circular packets of cheese we had as kids. Circular, divided into triangular segments of cheese. And those segments were just like the compartments inside swing doors. Segments which in some cases were all the same type of cheese, but in other cases the packet offered a variety. Some spreadable, some called Galtee, and others Mitchelstown. Named for different cheese manufacturing localities. Yeah they all tasted the same, but what do kids know about cheese? Point is, they all had different labels.

“What do you mean,” James asked again as he came out of the door behind me, “what do you mean you’ve been many things?”

“I’ve been a son and a lover,” I told him, “and a man standing beside a grave. Many things. I’ve been the story and the storyteller, many things.”

“That why they threw you out of the police?” James asked.

“Why what.”

“Because you’re crazy?”

“Sanity is a greatly overrated condition,” I told him. “And anyway they didn’t throw me out. I took early retirement.”

“How old are you now?”

“Thirty four.”

“How long have you been out?”

“About six years.”

“I see what you mean” said James. “Early retirement.”

“Let’s move” I told him.

We walked along the Green to the top of Dawson Street, and then down, so that we could cut across and walk up Grafton Street to the location of the photo.

“What time was it?” I asked, “the time of the photo.”

“Around now.”

I looked at my watch. Phillipe Patek. Twenty dollars on a street corner in New York. Can't get a good watch much cheaper.

Eleven fifteen.

“Was that time specific, chosen, or was it just circumstance?”

“Oh no, he choose the time of the photo. Well, not exactly. Not to the minute. But he said between eleven and half past. Mid morning.”

“Mid morning?”

“Well he didn't actually say that, he said half way between breakfast and tiffin.”

“Tiffin?”

“I asked him that too. It means lunch. In India.”

I looked at the photo. “He doesn't look Indian to me.”

“He wasn't. White bloke.”

“So why's he talking Indian?”

“Hindi. Or Urdu,” said James. “There's no such language as Indian. Though I suppose English is a general language all over. And maybe that could be called Indian.”

“Thank you for that input. What I mean is, why's he using a foreign word anyway?”

“Ask him,” said James.

“I will,” I promised. “When I find him.” Then thought about the thing for a moment. “Strange way of putting it though” I suggested. “I mean saying between breakfast and tiffin or saying between breakfast and lunch...still strange.”

“He was a strange bloke.”

“What do you mean *was*? Is he dead?”

“Why would he be dead?”

“Why not? In the midst of life we are in death. We have not here a lasting city.”

“I meant *was*, like when he *was, was* with me, he was strange then.”

“You *perceived* him as strange.”

“Exactly.”

“And you don’t know whether he’s alive or dead now?”

“How would I know, he was just a client. Might have been run over by a bus since. In London.”

“Why London?”

“Just London. People go to London.”

“Did he go to London?”

“I don’t know where the fuck he went. And I don’t really care.”

“I care.”

“It’s your job to care.”

“Caring is not a job,” I told him, “it’s an emotion.”

I felt good about this remark. So I elaborated. Thinking I’d maybe feel even better if I spun it out a bit. “That’s the problem with this world. Everything is jobs, and bought and sold. So we end up with things like professional carers. Like being a professional hooker isn’t it?”

“Isn’t what?”

“Like why does a man go to a prostitute?”

“I have no idea,” said James.

Yeah, I thought, looking at his close cropped hair, yeah he’s probably telling the truth there.

“Well I’ll tell you then. People go to prostitutes because they can’t get that service at home. And they have to go out and pay for it. Same with carers. Our society is not providing care. So we have to have professional carers. Same difference.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” said James.

He was probably right.

We walked along Anne Street. I wondered why he was leading

me there and I asked him. Because Anne Street is not at the bottom of Grafton Street, and if we walked up from there we'd be missing a whole area. But James explained that no, it didn't matter. Because the day he took the photo the client had just hurried along until quite near the top of Grafton Street. Like he knew the general location. And only got specific in the last fifty yards or thereabouts. Well that's what James said. Though maybe he was sick of me and my philosophy, and wanted to hurry things along.

It happens.

From the intersection of Anne and Grafton we walked up the street, James gradually walking slower and...slower...and slower. All the while looking around, in a distracted sort of concentration.

If he was painted silver folks would have been giving him money, that sort of walk.

"What are you doing, precisely?" I asked, politely.

It seemed a reasonable question.

"Well you said, you be him and I be you. I'm being him."

"OK. OK. But you could just say he slowed down round here, and looked around. Like he was searching."

"Remembering. He looked around like he was trying to remember."

"You know the difference?"

"The word just came to me."

"He was looking for a specific place. And you're acting out the part. You ever think of going into acting?"

"No, do you think..."

"No," I interrupted. "The words day job. Give up. Don't. Make your own sentence."

James stopped.

I stopped.

Pedestrians walked round us like we were a rock and they were the tide. But they took no heed of us nor we of them. It was automatic, that walking round us.

“Here,” he said, right here.

“How do you know?”

“Because this is where he stopped.”

“How do you know, how do you remember? Like one part of the street looks much like another.”

“It’s the patterns on the street. Those lines of brick. Different colours.”

“Paviors they call those bricks,” I told him.

“How do you know that?”

“I know a lot of things.”

“OK. Those lines of brick.” James pointed. “Those ones up there, too far. Those ones down there, not far enough. These ones...” He pointed at our feet. “Just right.”

“I don’t get it James.”

“What don’t you get?”

I told him. The guy had been taking him to a spot, a specific spot. And a specific place is by definition a place that someone knows, knows beforehand. So why all this looking around, this searching, this remembering? Why that?

James didn’t know.

He just shrugged. *Way it is*, that shrug told me. I can read a shrug. Not too difficult. *Way it is*, that’s what most shrugs say. Though some say *I don’t care*. Language of shrugs. A science in itself.

Like eyes, the language of eyes. Though much more complex that, that particular language. The way she looks at you. In the morning. How different is that to the way she looks at you in the evening? Is it different at all? You want it to be different. But in a good sort of way. Good different. Not bad different.

Did I have a woman?

I wondered, standing there like a rock in the street and a tide of pedestrians washing round me. It seemed to take a while, that wondering, about the woman. But maybe it wasn’t that long at all. Maybe only a minute, or two. It just seemed a while of wondering.

There's a lot of thoughts about a woman, a particular woman, a lot that a man can get into his mind in a short time, wondering.

It passed, the daze. And I became aware of James the nerd photographer beside me, watching, waiting.

"So this is where he stood" I said.

"Right there."

"There? Not here?"

"I meant there where you are standing, not me."

"We're kind of close together, what's the difference?"

"I don't know. He just stood there. And I stood here."

"No you didn't."

"What do you mean?"

"You went up there and took the photo."

"Yeah of course. But you know what I mean."

"I don't know what anything means. So ok. Now I'll be you and you be me. Or, more precisely, you be him, and I'll be you, I'll take the photo. How far up the street did you go?"

"Next line of coloured bricks."

"Ok I'll go up there and look back."

I went up there and looked back.

James was standing, facing me. No, not standing. He was posing. Just like one of those silver painted guys who make a living as human statues, whatever they call themselves. Standing like he was walking, no, not walking, strolling. Right hand in his pocket, and left hand loose by his side.

I recognised the stance.

Guy in the photo stood like that.

James was acting out a part. And enjoying himself, this little outing. Perhaps he didn't get out that much, meet enough interesting guys like me. A lonely life. Being a nerd. A gay nerd. Lonelier.

I looked at him.

People ignored us, what did they care? We were two rocks now and they were the tide. Same tide, different rocks. What does the

tide know of the rocks except to flow around? And wash away in time? That's all, that's all the tide needs to know. But the rocks, the rocks need to know a lot more. Like where to stand and who to love, what other rock to love. Needs to know all that, your rock.

But your average rock?

Knows diddley squat, your average rock, just stands there in the tide.

Wondering, do I still have a woman?

Thinking, something wrong.

Looking at James back there in the street and that way he was standing in a vaguely mad looking fashion. But what did it really matter? Most folks in Grafton Street are standing or walking in a vaguely mad looking fashion, it's the human condition.

No, it wasn't that, it wasn't that which was wrong.

I walked back down to him.

"You're imitating the guy in the photo, right?"

"Yeah, how am I doing?"

"Not bad," I congratulated, "but not quite."

I stood beside him, to his left.

"Hold my hand," I told him.

I suppose he blushed. Being of that persuasion. Or, indeed, not being of that persuasion. Like if he was gay as pink ink he'd blush, and if he wasn't, likewise. Though I suppose it'd be a different sort of blush.

Language of blushes?

Reckon so.

I held his hand. And then I said "hey, I'm going to let go of your hand."

"Yeah maybe you should, people are looking."

"Fuck them. I'm going to let go of your hand but I want to you to keep your hand in precisely this position."

"Got you."

I let go of his hand and walked back up the street and looked

back.

Yes, that was it. James was standing as if he were holding someone's hand. No, not standing. Not exactly. Standing in a walking position, as if frozen. Frozen in the midst of strolling up Grafton Street holding someone's hand. Just like the guy in the photograph had stood.

Why hadn't I noticed that in the photo?

No reason, can't notice everything.

And that wasn't the question anyway. The question was who's hand was the guy in the photo holding. When I knew that I would find him. His name was Richard Roe.

"Where'd you get the photo anyway?," James asked me as we finished up. Or as we started, whatever it was we were doing.

"From my client, Amanda Blake."

I watched him carefully as I spoke, to see if the name might mean anything to him. Hard to tell, hard to tell. He just shrugged and said "And who is she, and what's her interest?"

Good question.

Two

Fifty, sixty, I met her at a wedding. Someone's aunt, I thought, there's always someone's aunt at a wedding. I don't know where they go when there's not weddings on. Particular apartment blocks I suppose, full of someone's aunts, fifty, sixty, that vintage. Yep, it follows. They all live in particular designated apartment blocks. Or down the country. Reckon a lot of people's aunts live down the country. They never married. Or they married a farmer. And have spent their lives trying to work out which was worse. And have gotten worried from the calculations. Worried but healthy looking. That's the fresh air. The farming life. Mass on Sunday. Sex on Saturday. And the mirror every day as seasons pass.

We live in times of mirrors, difficult times. Mirrors on the wall, on the TV screen, in magazines. And we see ourselves, and don't see ourselves. And worry worry worry. Yep, these are the times we live in, difficult times, fragmented times. And we protect ourselves by circles, creating circles to move in. Closely knit. Our companions much the same as us. In age, in class, in colour. Maybe it's good, maybe it's not. Maybe the alternative is spending a lot of time with the elderly black. The elderly black working class. The ones with dementia. Maybe, what do I know? If I had answers to these unanswerable questions I'd be a sociologist. Or a statistician. I just dunno. Sociologically speaking, statistically speaking, about the only thing I do know is there's one hell of a lot of someone's aunts at your average wedding.

And I'd noticed this particular one watching me.

In my job I'm very aware of people watching.

This one certainly watched me, noticed me, picked me out, had me in her sights. But she bided her time. She bided her time through the service. She bided her time through the meal. The speeches. And then in the flux and the flow afterwards she came over and sat beside me. I wasn't that pleased. I was working on another guest, a woman with cleavage. I like a woman with cleavage. I like the very word cleavage. It's complex. I like a complex word. To cleave, verb, seems to mean to hold together. But cleavage, noun, seems to mean to hold apart.

If I read things right.

Maybe I don't.

I'm not perfect.

The someone's aunt came over and sat beside me.

It kind of knocked me out of my stride. With the woman with cleavage. And I wasn't that pleased. But there again in a deeper way I was pleased. Because I reckoned that now I'd find out why she'd been watching me, picking me out, holding me in her sights.

"You're the investigator," she told me.

I smiled, non committedly.

Her name was Amanda Blake.

And her eyes said no, you cannot call me Mandy. And she was not just any old someone's aunt. She was Richard Roe's aunt. And she told me her nephew Richard Roe was missing, and she wanted him found. And she opened her someone's aunt's handbag and took out a photo and handed it to me. And I looked at it, a young man walking up Grafton Street. Informative? No. So no comment there then. Then I asked her why, what's it to you? Like has he no parents, no girlfriend, no siblings to be searching? Obvious questions. Like why is it down to an old aunt to be looking for him? Though I didn't say the word 'old' of

course. I am a gentleman. But that was my drift.

Richard Roe had no relatives in Ireland. No girlfriend. No siblings, no-one. All he had was Amanda Blake. He was estranged from his parents. And they were in New Zealand. Well one was in New Zealand and the other in India. Can't precisely remember which, should've taken notes. But it probably didn't matter, both parents were separated and married with new families. And didn't give a bugger. Though Amanda Blake didn't say the word 'bugger' of course. She being a lady. But that was her drift.

Richard Roe wasn't like a son to her, she said, but she had no children of her own in Ireland. And she found herself going through the motions of parenthood. But they hadn't been close. Yes he had contacted her when he came back to Ireland. And she had ended up spotting him the deposit on an apartment, and she suspected that might very well have been the reason for his contacting her. Part of the reason anyway. Though he had in fairness refunded her when he got sorted with a job.

"Back," I asked, "what do you mean back, you said he came back to Ireland?"

Amanda Blake hesitated. Just that fraction. She probably didn't even know that she hesitated. I did. My job to notice. Little things. "He was away," she said.

"Away? Where away?"

"What does it matter?"

"Could be away the same place again."

"In India. He was away in India. Working."

"What did he work at? In India?"

"I don't know."

"Where'd he work in Ireland?"

"Google."

"What'd he do?"

"I.T. Not that I know what that means."

"Of course you do."

“Yes of course I do. But I like to play the granny with younger people.”

“Why?”

“Saves a lot of hassle.”

Hassle, I thought, hassle? Not a very someone’s aunt sort of word really. But maybe fifty sixty is the new thirty. Like black is the new beige or something. What do I know?

Richard Roe worked in Google. In I.T. He had an apartment in Smithfield. He was missing. I was to find him. It was a job. There was a recession on. I needed jobs. That’s what I know.

“Ok, Miz Blake,” I said, “I’ll have a go. Can’t guarantee anything. Miz Blake” I concluded, repeating the Miz Blake bit. As a sort of hint for her to say “you may call me Amanda.”

She didn’t.

She handed me her card.

Amanda Blake it said. Yep, I’d expected that. But there was also an unexpected line of foreign type along the bottom. It looked like Arabic, or Hebrew? No, neither. More Eastern? Perhaps. Indian? Could be. I’ll check that out, I decided. Maybe ask the guy in the *Kanpur Curry Kitchen* next time I was eating in his place? Yep, I’d do that. Just as soon as my recovery from his last meal was complete.

Amanda Blake lived in Rathgar. Temple Road. But there was no phone number on the card. Why no number? What the fuck use is a business card without a number? I thought about this, reached no conclusion. Except that maybe there was no space, not enough room on the card. That’s a reason? Not a good reason. In fact a very bad reason, how much space does a phone number take up? Certainly not as much as the big fancy monogram AB she had on the thing. Granted, nicely done. None of your *Cut Price Copyshop* graphic design here. *Why pay other’s prices when you can get this crap here?* No, this was calligraphy. AB. Stylish. Amanda Blake had style. And she also had very nice legs.

I noticed that as she walked away.

Very nice legs. Almost as nice as her line of patter. Why had she hesitated, about India? What was that all about? Interesting. Just like herself. Attractive woman. But fifty sixty I mused ?

I dunno, I dunno.

Then the one with the cleavage came back to the table.

She was from Longford.

It wasn't really that great a wedding.

*

Very next morning I got the LUAS up to Smithfield.

Amanda Blake didn't.

She arrived outside the apartment on one of those rent-a-bikes.

"You a member of the Green Party?" I asked.

"Fucking cobbles," she replied. "If it's not the fucking cobbles it's the fucking tram tracks."

Her fucking surprised me. Hey maybe I'll rephrase that. Her use of the swear word surprised me. But then I noticed that she was wearing black fishnet stockings. And she really had very very nice legs. And her persona sort of re-established itself in my consciousness. I'd gotten misled at the wedding. By the one with the cleavage from Longford. It happens. But fifty sixty? I dunno, I dunno.

"You look different" I said.

"Than what?"

"Than the wedding."

"I don't go to weddings on bikes."

"Oh so you're not a member of the Green Party."

She laughed. She had a very nice laugh. But fifty sixty?

She parked the bike.

She locked the bike.

"They'd take the eye out of your head round here" she said.

“Who?” I glanced around. Most of the local citizens looked like they were heading off to have a double latte or coming back from one. And some of the male citizens were wearing low slung laptop bags over their shoulders. Rule of thumb. The longer the straps on those bags, like the nearer the knees hangs the manbag, the bigger the jerk.

Take that from me.

I know these things.

“Who?” I asked her again, “who’d take the eye out of your head?”

“Kids,” said Amanda Blake. “Feral kids.”

“I don’t see any kids.”

“That’s because they’re all in the Children’s Court over there.”

She pointed. “When they get bail they’ll come out and steal this bike. And Dublin Corporation will slap the cost onto my Visa.”

“You’ve got a certain view of humanity” I told her.

“Once bitten,” she announced, “twice shy.”

She winked.

“Ah hah,” I said. I was getting the impression that Amanda Blake had been bitten more than once. And thinking that shyness might not generally arise.

We went to the apartment.

I’m a southsider. Smithfield is outside my comfort zone. And my mental filing system has it categorized as a derelict square full of horse shit surrounded by derelict buildings and car scrapping guys. But that’s an out of date image. A hangover from maybe when I got lost round there twenty years before. Or whatever reason. Anyhow the place is changed. It’s now a tidy square full of homosexual looking street furniture surrounded by crisply modern apartment blocks.

Richard Roe lived in one of these. Block C. A whacking great building on the left coming up from the LUAS stop. Block C, I thought, historic name or what. Who said developers had no imagination? Whatever, Richard Roe lived there anyway. Or, to be

more precise, and the reason I was there at all, he did not currently reside there. Not that his absence made much difference. There was an empty feeling in the building anyway, as if Roe's apartment was not the only vacant one.

"Kind of eerie isn't it?" I said to Amanda Blake in the lift.

"What, elevators, eerie?"

"No, the building. It feels empty."

"A lot of the apartments are vacant. Since the recession. A lot of the Polacks gone home."

Ah," I said. Thinking. Elevator. Polacks. Those words, Americanisms. But Amanda Blake didn't have an American accent. So why was that? What accent did she in fact have? But what did that matter?

Good to know.

Good to know these things.

Sixth floor. The corridor was empty too, eerie.

I watched her open the door.

"How come you have a key to your nephew's apartment?"

"Why not?"

"My aunts don't have keys to my place."

"I'm his nearest and dearest. And anyway there's a reason. To feed the cat."

"He has a cat? Why doesn't he feed his own cat?"

"When he goes away."

"Where does he go? India?"

"I don't know," she shrugged. "Just away." She shrugged again. That made two shrugs. One shrug for each breast, so to speak. She was a good looking woman. "He gave me the key. To feed the cat."

"You been feeding it since he vanished?"

"No, the cat's dead, for months."

"What happened the cat."

"Got run over by the LUAS," she said, and gazed up at me, her expression daring me to laugh. And as she dared me to laugh her

eyes were sparkley and she was biting her bottom lip with her top teeth and it was a very attractive and appealing combination. But fifty sixty? Those there were probably false teeth I decided. And that sort of took the magic out of the occasion.

We went in, she switched a light. It was one of those dimmer switches and came on gloomy. Rheostats, they are, in technical terms. I know these things. She turned it up. Then down a bit. Then up again. Please stop doing that, I thought, but held my peace. She was the boss. I needed the money. Her money.

First impression of the place. He was a tidy bastard, Richard Roe. Or else he didn't come home that much, not enough to muck up his apartment anyway.

"He goes away a lot," said Amanda Blake, a comment on the tidyness. So, I thought, she can read my mind. Already. And is that good or bad?

"Yes, we've established that" I said and she looked at me as if I'd been cheeky and she didn't like it.

I mooched about. Went out on the balcony...what's that church over there? St Michan's? Yeah, probably, most likely. What am I now, a tourist guide?

I went back in.

"Will I make a cup of tea?" asked Amanda Blake. As if to restore cordial relations.

"No, I'm good," I said.

"Just as well, there's no milk."

"OK let's establish this. Where does he go, when he goes away?"

"Work, I suppose."

"But he works for Google. That's down in Docklands."

"Well they're all round the world too, aren't they?"

"I suppose they are," I agreed, "I'll check it out."

"How?"

"Google?"

She laughed, but still and all was watching me. Just like at the

wedding, I realised, watching, and biding her time. But for what, I wondered. At the wedding she'd been waiting for the right moment to approach me. That was just the normal working out of a social situation. But now, what was she waiting for now?

I like to know these things.

It helps.

"Talking technology," I said, "I suppose you checked his Facebook?"

"I don't understand Facebook."

I didn't say anything, didn't believe her. And remembered what she'd said at the wedding. That it was less of a hassle to play the old Granny. Uh huh. And maybe it is, maybe it isn't. Maybe in fact it's quite hard work playing the old Granny if you're Amanda Blake. If you've legs like that. And eyes like that. And that attractive laugh. But there again, maybe it's easy. If all the roles you play are roles you play. If you're an actress it's your job, that sort of thing. Comes with the territory. Change your roles like you change your knickers. Yep, something like that, I thought. Then something in my mind remembered. Some girl thing, about a girl I remembered. Almost a joke, but not a joke, useful too. An actress. She had knickers labelled Monday Tuesday Wednesday...days of the week...seven different pairs...

Yep, comes with the territory.

Changing. Knickers and personalities.

If you're an actress.

"You don't understand Facebook?" I said

"No," she shook her head, biting her lip in that fashion of hers. Radiating innocence. That'd be a childlike innocence if her hair wasn't grey, I reckoned. But it'd also be one of those childlike characteristics that'd buy and sell you, couldn't be trusted, not an inch.

What colour, I wondered, what colour was her hair before it was grey? Was it blonde, or brown, or black? Or red? Should be able to

tell that from the colour of her skin.

I looked.

She looked back, defiantly, innocently.

“What colour is your skin?” I asked, but not aloud. And now that I asked myself I realised she was not totally a white person. Yes she was white, but she lacked a certain amount of pink. Her features were white, but they lacked...well...a certain amount of white characteristics.

“Lack,” I said, but not aloud. Why is it a *lack* to be not totally white? Perspective? Must be that. White bloke’s perspective. But it’s the only one I’ve got.

“You’ll know me the next time,” said Amanda Blake.

“What do you mean?”

“Isn’t that what Dubliners say when they find a stranger staring at them?”

“Yeah, they do, and it usually precedes a fight.”

“Are we going to fight?”

“Am I a stranger?”

“We ask ourselves a lot of questions.”

“Maybe we’re looking for a lot of answers.”

She nodded at that, and turned away and walked to the window, looked down into the square.

“My bike is not stolen,” she reported, “yet.”

“Good,” I said, watching her. She was wearing sneakers. For the bicycle I suppose. And sneakers don’t do anything for a woman’s legs. But then, Amanda Blake’s legs didn’t need anything done for them. Nor did her backside, nor her figure generally.

“You are one good looking woman” I said, but not aloud. But the grey hair kind of...kind of...kind of does whatever grey hair does.

One good looking woman. One good looking woman who doesn’t understand Facebook. Yeah, right. One good looking woman who doesn’t tell the truth. Hey OK, benefit of doubt. Maybe she really really doesn’t, doesn’t understand Facebook. It’s not important, I

do. And I had checked Richard Roe out on line. And learned not much, diddley squat really. He had one of those Facebook pages that say nothing, with no content. Like he'd set it up and then said to hell. This looks like too much crap, hard work, waste of time, all that. I know the feeling. My page is just like that.

But then, I am not Richard Roe.

I'm not an IT guy.

And I'm not working in Google.

So it's OK for me to have nothing to do with Facebook. But it's not OK for him. It's worse than not OK. It's strange, it's weird, it's peculiar, it's ridiculous.

It just doesn't compute.

And why?

Another damn question. And who knows the answer. But relax, I told myself. One door doesn't close but another opens. And a question with no answer can be the answer to another. And so, continuing, moving on. On Richard Roe's page there wasn't even a picture of himself. But there was a picture of one person, one friend.

Amanda Blake.

I thought of it there in his apartment as I was mooching about, going through his stuff, getting the feel of the place, the feel of the man. I thought of that picture of Amanda Blake on Richard Roe's web page. Thought of it, remembered it, pictured the picture in my mind.

Her hair was brown.

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