**The Ministry of Amnesia**

A storybook fog descends, a burial its cue in the theatre of life. It unfurls over Golgotha, bestowing melancholy kisses upon the mossy cheeks of angels, then curls across the creased sheet of the valley making for its own watery grave on the surface of a river.

A shivering throng gathers beside a pit carved in the hillside cemetery, hearts dense as its clay. Such places are where our stories end. The casket is a dead weight, yet to be swallowed.

Sean pinches his jacket closed in the chill as he steps from his car, and sees other mourners do the same. They make for a black figure, a sombre priest positioned at the headstone, his purple stole tumbling down a billowing cassock. Their uneven statures match the jagged contours of the boneyard.

The fog is an insistent master of ceremonies. It encircles them with impatience, presses upon their backs, pushes them closer to this maw of the underworld. It conjures a dull continuum without past or future in the metallic sky.

The priest’s eyes flicker. He is checking that his audience is attentive. He recites. Rest in everlasting peace, Marie.

Sean knows his mother will not. She will churn in death as she did in life and he will continue to carry the lifetime’s weight of her unhappiness. It is repeated ad nauseam that Alzheimer’s is a curse, but he thinks otherwise. Why face death burdened with such baggage as she carried? Tortured memories, coloured by wrath at the misfortunes that haunted her.

He spies long lost brothers, hard to recognise after all these years, broken men who ran from her overbearing presence. A pale fellow with sagging cheeks, a white quiff, television screen glasses. An overweight scruff pasting thinning hair with a flattened palm. Their eyes meet and they nod at each other.

The priest prompts the mourners to punctuate his forgettable oration with a humming “Amen”. It is soon over. He blesses the coffin with holy water indistinguishable from the droplets beading its varnished surface.

The solitary drive to the wake through deserted suburban streets, empty before the school run, is a calvary in which the cross Sean carries is one of unfathomable guilt. This burden is so heavy, he is forced to stop and breathe before resuming.

Fog also envelops the hotel in an eerie miasma and it is lost to sight, revealed only by blurred yellow light from its windows. They glow without outlines, streaking at their edges in vaporous intoxication.

He waits, takes a breath, prepares himself for a duty he does not want to perform. He trudges towards the door to familiarise himself once more with his prodigal kin. It is the only way to end a story in which they were secondary characters, attendants of a leading lady. Perhaps it will turn a page, exorcise the incomprehensible worthlessness that has blighted his life? He asks himself why he is weighed down by a burden that was never his to sustain.

Three old men cling to a bar trying to figure out what it is all about. They boil with an inexplicable, shared anger like potatoes in the same, seething pot. A mosaic with so many missing pieces, it has no discernible image. Sean may be in possession of a clue, but holds back, unwilling to risk information that will stir the ether into unpredictable whorls.

“There was a hole at the heart of her story,” is all he says, “and she filled it with rage.”

The three linger at the end, reluctant to part. They have recognised something from childhood that they share yet cannot understand, a hidden scar from a wound at birth. His brothers also speak of inexplicable anger, powerlessness, a guilt at living that has always held them back. Sean realises that he is not alone.

The wake fades and the staff clear away all proof that they had ever been together. Muffled farewells outside the doorway are swathed in gloom, car doors drum, motors growl then evaporate in the distance.

That night, Sean hears tapping. A typewriter. This sound echoes in that hollow partition that separates waking from dreaming. The staccato of his mother’s fingers on the keys, each letter another motif in the unbreakable code of her mind.

He is quartered by fatigue, a strange exhaustion of the soul, but succumbs to this sound’s entreaty, and it subsides. He will think about her if that is what she demands.

He lists what he remembers.

A big woman, a blurred ferocity of red hair framing bottomless, savage eyes. She did not smell of soap. She was never kind and always alone. Men feared her, misunderstanding defined her, squabbles shaped the narrative of the neighbourhood: a stroppy fishwife with a throaty cough, nothing but trouble. She refused to bend to the business of life, quibbled with shopkeepers for sport, and woe betide the teacher who wronged her son. The parish priest called in once, then never again, a bookish weakling too soft for his mission. She pushed back her chair with squealing aggression, stomped invasively, stood the law of nature on its head.

She spoke, of course, God did she speak, but that knuckle sandwich of a voice came from behind a screen, the mesh in the anteroom of life’s prison. She was never the hugging type, bemused by humour. As the eldest, Sean bore the brunt of her abrupt physicality – the way she dressed him roughly as a boy, tugged and squeezed him, dragged him hither and thither. They lived within a tomb, a home without heat, bare and dark. Resentment smouldered in their hearth.

But this list is unsatisfying. As he lies there in thought, he feels a strange yearning. He imagines the warmth of a mother’s hug.

He descends to her room and stares at the typewriter, still there, ancient. The closest he ever came to understanding what haunted the woman was on a single leaf of paper. She locked herself in her bedroom and tapped on that battered machine, her confessor, night after night. School. Home. Dinner. Bed. Typing.

He read it only once, alone, and has kept the secret since. He crept into her room when his younger brothers were asleep, and grew cold at the shock of madness. It hit him like the fist of a Christian Brother.

Now he stands there, swaying, recounting the story he read, the hysterical record of a memory written as an exorcism. He can still see the battered lines, the holes in the sheet where the force of her fingers had punctured it.

It begins in a school. Marie is summoned by Mother Superior, but this time the nun does not raise a stick to this defiant girl whom no sister will ever tame, or force her to her knees. She merely steers this child to the door with vengeful purpose.

“Your father has gone under a train on the docks,” the woman says, “go to your mother, I will ask our Lord to ease his mortal pain.”

The child is struck dumb. She shivers, stares into nothing. An almighty hand has reached inside and grasped her heart. It tightens its grip, wringing from her whatever essence there may have been.

Marie finds herself outside a hospital ward.

She sits on a wooden bench listening to the echo of shoes on a cold stone floor. She watches her mother, who twists a shoe in her fingertips. Its sole is bent double, its collar and heel contorted under a weight that would have defeated Atlas. The steel wheel of a coal wagon. The shoe’s soft leather interior is soaked in blood, still wet to the touch.

Her mother reels. It is hard for this woman to imagine the horror of that instant, her husband stumbling on the rail, a dock train ploughing over and through him, his soft body yielding like dough, his dreadful realisation that death has come in an unexpected, violent moment on an ordinary day, the revelation that in the blink of an eye everything has ended, the breath-taking agony, the thoughts behind his dying eyes as the light grows dim.

The feet of a nurse clack in the corridor. She rushes to the stricken woman. There is nothing that can be done, he’s gone, be strong, go home now.

Marie finds herself in a church.

She watches her mother in supplication at the altar of St Alphonsus, studies the despoiled feet of Christ. The woman crosses herself and turns her eyes to a wooden Madonna. She concentrates, as if directing a beam of light. Mother of Mercy, help me.

They had nothing, and now even less. She will receive no pension. She will scrape and struggle to raise her children. They will run wild in those unforgiving streets without a father’s word. The daughter has a loose lip, the youngest a gammy eye. Help me.

But the Mother of Mercy replays the image of her husband’s twisted shoe still enclosed in the bag at her side, and the woman’s mind is filled with feverish visions. A rolling wheel slicing a manly form, severing limbs, crushing bones, the suffering on his face, his terminal cry.

They leave and Marie notes the change in odour as she steps into the dockland air. The red brick streets of huddled terraces crowd, gossiping about their destiny, gloating. They reach a jigger and traverse a barren yard where children’s clothes dry slowly under skies that never cease to weep.

Marie finds herself in a terraced hovel.

She sits facing the extinguished fire, staring at the lifeless ashes in the grate. Her mother drapes a leaden blanket around her shoulders. It will be her last act of kindness, for the girl will no longer be spoiled by her father while there is work to be done.

The little lad demands bread, too small to understand. The woman cuts a doorstep, then spreads a smear of lard. Marie whispers slowly to her mother by the range, her eyes flickering beyond the window to the cranes of the docks. I will work, do not fret so.

In this story, when they have gone to bed, the woman takes out her purse. It does not rattle. She waits for the priest.

Marie finds herself in a parlour.

She begs her mother. She does not want them to prop the box against the wall. She does not want to see her father’s corrupted body on display. Instead, they place the casket on two chairs end to end because the table is not strong enough. He was a big man.

She does not want the wailing widows to roll their eyes without gravity, invoking spirits throughout the night, but they do so anyway. It is the custom.

She does not want her uncles to play the squeezebox and the bones, but the clan descends as if from the hills and they do so anyway and bring whiskey to toast the big fellow, and whirl like dervishes to their dirge.

She does not want a clatter of other children to chase around her father’s body and to and fro the empty yard, oblivious to the juggernaut of time, but they do so anyway and she knows they do not understand.

She does not want to pray. She is angry at God and fears her superstitious mother was right about what providence had in store for that family. She watches his kin spinning into the depths of that black night, careless beyond their ruddy faces, mocking of death and damnation.

Marie does not want any of this, nor what comes next. In her grief, her mother forgets to open the window to release her husband’s soul because she is drunk on her misery and hears no knocking on the pane. Past the witching hour, an old crone rouses the woman with a jab, and she fumbles with the latch.

The girl fears it will be too late. Her father will be trapped in that house, haunting them forever with his smashed body and their memories of his burly presence.

Women in black moan in the endless night, scaring the rats with their wraith-like cries. Those wrinkled faces have no eyes, and revolve in stupor, for they have entered the hysterical realm of the unseen. The chants stab Marie’s temples like a docker’s hook. It lingers there, the banshee lament, because her trauma is immense.

When the girl falls asleep, she feels her father’s embrace and hears his whisper, a brogue that warms the draught in that cracked terrace. He speaks kindnesses and strokes the brow of his daughter, his pauper’s princess. She caresses his thick fingers, traces his ridged nails. She looks into his eyes and dreams.

Marie finds herself in a graveyard.

Breakfast is the sickly sweet smell of flesh turned to soil and sips of mist. Marie wets herself beside the grave and her legs sting with liquid warmth, but no one notices her distress in the drizzle. The priest sings in the Latin language and she stares at him, a towering Kerryman.

They lower the box into the clinging earth and her mother screeches at last like the sky is splitting, so febrile a shriek that Marie cannot bear it and runs through alleys of the dead into streets of red brick and fetid passageways until she reaches a battered gate.

Marie finds herself in the yard.

She sits on wet concrete, bedraggled, heaving, and tries to imagine what life will be like, the hardships to come. She is but a child, yet she knows her fate is sealed. She feels that wagon pressing down upon her stomach and hears its malevolent squeal, the Devil’s mirth.

Something moves in the window. Marie turns, and sees her father’s face.

Sean staggers, and is forced to sit on the floor in the darkness. He recalls the otherworldly nature of the tale he read all those years ago. It floated above the page as if the words were being unchained. He recalls being disturbed by a sound downstairs and running to hide under his bed. Later, nightmares rose, curling from the thoughts on that paper like ghostly fingers come to punish sins he did not know he had committed.

He grows cold as he relives this desolate memory and is filled with compassion, for he knows Marie lived in turmoil. The only time he ever saw her smile was lying in her coffin.

As a child he had tried to find an inert position in the volatile chemistry of the compound that was his mother, turbulent, insecure, explosive in its reactive power. Her role was to fight, not nurture, to survive the invisible enemy of indigence. Her quarrelsome nature trapped others in fearful silence. She wrestled the world, never at rest. She was the hardest woman he had ever met.

Dawn arrives, bringing nothing but relief and a dilemma. Sean has retired to his bed, but is as exhausted as ever, his nights while she was sick a replay of confusing dreams with no apparent meaning. He has forgotten when he last slept without visiting a world not of his making.

Today, however, he is confronted by a momentous choice, free now of the stricture that he must make it according to the loyalty he owes his mother.

Is he to visit Marie’s resting place on a sliding hillside as duty demands, check that all is in order as this chapter ends? Or can he turn a page entirely and begin to live his own life, what’s left of it?

He projects upon the bare ceiling the faces of his brothers as old men standing beside him at the bar, and then as boys. He contemplates the sentiments they described to him, the strange coincidences, the collective confusion that none of them could explain.

Sean asks himself why these two boys, clever in their own right and once full of promise, stumbled like he did even in exile. They also became trapped in cages they could not escape. They also sought isolation, were hampered by uncontrollable reflexes, fled friendships. They also had no offspring, no one to care for or to care for them. The family will soon become extinct.

He rises and stares through the kitchen window. From here, he can see the cemetery sloping down towards the river. The fog has lifted and the clouds are clearing. In the distance, a tanker navigates the central channel where only a skilful pilot can read the unforgiving currents.

He realises that he has been doing this every day for many years, seeking refuge in a numb routine. He even feels that tug of habit, his muscle memory, reaching for a second cup, the floral one that his mother liked. He puts it down and stares at the empty vessel. She will never drink his tea again, she is no longer there. He resolves to walk, to clear his head before he decides how to live without her. He dresses, leaves, finds comfort in the fields beneath an empty sky.

The house is dark and still when Sean returns, a haunted place, and he hesitates before entering. He rummages in the attic, uncovers photographs, papers, whatever he can find, then splays them out on the floor, sits, waits bathed in bars of light and shadow from passing cars until he has the courage to examine them.

There, among the scattered artefacts is a yellowing envelope. It contains the typewritten tale that filled him with such fear as a child. Her story, revealing injuries that only he was privy to. Memory is a fever for which there is no balm and Sean is torn, his instinct to erase the past tempered by a fear that doing so will leave the questions it poses unanswered and erase him. He picks the paper up, examines its curled edges, then takes it to the kitchen and sparks a flame on the hob. He holds the flimsy sheet above it, ready to burn it then and there, yet hesitating.

He is pulled from his trance by the telephone. It rings and he stops what he is doing. He answers and listens to his brother’s voice at the end of the line with gratitude, because it is what he needs to hear.

Sean is overcome, his heart pounds with a sudden desire to be with his siblings at this moment. They return to the conversation of the day before, the emotions they had all experienced, the pieces of their lives that are missing, the uncanny emptiness, the persistent pain. Where do these things originate? his brother asks. Why has a shadow been cast across our lives?

Sean realises that he is still holding the sheet of typed paper that he was about to destroy, and this realisation shapes his response. He senses that the answers to such questions reside in the story it tells, a key provided unwittingly by their mother years before that might unlock the cells in which her pain has trapped her sons. He feels an urge to share the contents, but in person, to read it to his brothers, to see their faces as they hear her nightmare for the first time, to seek their counsel. He realises that they will need to remember in order to forget.

I have something to show you, he says.

Sean locks the dark house and does not look back. He drives through the night, occasionally glancing at the envelope on the seat beside him across which lampposts flash blocks of yellow light.

A novel energy has banished his weariness. He does not stop, his eyes fixed on the road ahead, his mind dwelling only on a destination he has never visited and what he will find there.