

Iris Armstrong is missing.

That is to say, she is not where she is supposed to be. I am trying not to worry. After all, Iris is a grown woman and can take care of herself better than most.

It's true to say that I am a worrier. Ask my girls. Ask my husband. They'll tell you that I'd worry if I had nothing to worry about. Which is, of course, an exaggeration, although I suppose it's true to say that, if I had nothing to worry about, I might feel that I had overlooked something.

Iris is the type of woman who tells you what she intends to do and then goes ahead and does it. Today is her birthday. Her fifty-eighth.

"People see birthdays as an opportunity to tell women they look great for their age," Iris says when I suggested that we celebrate it.

It's true that Iris looks great for her age. I don't say that.

Instead, I say, "We should celebrate nonetheless."

"I'll celebrate by doing the swan. Or the downwardfacing dog. Something animalistic," said Iris after she told me about the yoga retreat she had booked herself into.

"But you hate yoga," I said.

"I thought you'd be delighted. You're always telling me how good yoga is for people with MS."

My plan today was to visit Dad, then ring the yoga retreat in Wicklow to let them know I'm driving down with a birthday cake for Iris. So they'll know it's her birthday. Iris won't want a fuss of course, but everyone should have cake on their birthday.

But when I arrive at Sunnyside Nursing Home, my father is sitting in the reception area with one of the managers. On the floor beside his chair is his old suitcase, perhaps a little shabby around the edges now but functional all the same. A week, the manager says. That's how long it will take for the exterminators to do what they need to do, apparently. Vermin, he calls them, by which I presume he means rats, because if it was just mice, he'd say mice, wouldn't he?

My father lives in a rat-infested old folks' home where he colors in between the lines and loses at bingo and sings songs and waits for my mother to come back from the shops soon.

"I can transfer your father to one of our other facilities, if you'd prefer," the manager offers.

"No, I'll take him," I say. It's the least I can do. I thought I could look after him myself, at home, like my mother did for years. I thought I could cope. Six months I lasted. Before I had to put him into Sunnyside.

I put Dad's suitcase into the boot beside the birthday cake. I've used blue icing for the sea, gray for the rocks where I've perched an icing stick figure which is supposed to be Iris, who swims at High Rock every day of the year. Even in November. Even in February. She swims like it's July. Every day. I think she'll get a kick out of the cake. It took me ages to finish it. Much longer than the recipe book suggested. Brendan says it's because I'm too careful. The cake does not look like it's been made by

someone who is too careful. There is a precarious slant to it, as if it's been subjected to adverse weather conditions.

I belt Dad into the passenger seat. "Where is your mother?" he asks.

"She'll be back from the shops soon," I say. I've stopped telling him that she's dead. He gets too upset, every time. The grief on his face is so fresh, so vivid, it feels like my grief, all over again, and I have to look away, close my eyes, dig my nails into the fleshy part of my hands.

I get into the car, turn over the engine.

"Signal your intent," Dad says, in that automatic way he does when he recites the rules of the road. He remembers all of them. There must be some cordoned-off areas in your brain where dementia cannot reach.

I indicate as instructed, then ring the yoga retreat before driving off.

But Iris is not there. She never arrived.

In fact, according to the receptionist who speaks in the calm tones of someone who practices yoga every day, there is no record of a booking for an Iris Armstrong.

Iris told me not to ring her mobile this week. It would be turned off.

I ring her mobile. It's turned off.

I drive to Iris's cottage in Feltrim. The curtains are drawn across every window. It looks just the way it should: like the house of a woman who has gone away. I pull into the driveway that used to accommodate her ancient Jaguar. Her sight came back almost immediately after the accident, and the only damage was to the lamppost that Iris crashed into, but her consultant couldn't guarantee that it wouldn't happen again. Iris says she doesn't miss the car, but she asked me if I would hand over the keys to the man who bought it off her. She said she had a meeting she couldn't get out of.

"It's just a car," she said, "and the local taxi driver looks like Daniel Craig. And he doesn't talk during sex, and knows every rat run in the city."

"I'll just be a minute, Dad," I tell him, opening my car door.

"Take your time, love," he says. He never used to call me love.

The grass in the front garden has benefited from a recent mow. I stand at the front door, ring the bell. Nobody answers. I cast about the garden. It's May. The cherry blossom tree, whose branches last week were swollen with buds, is now a riot of pale pink flowers. The delicacy of their beauty is disarming, but also sad, how soon the petals will be discarded, strewn across the grass in a week or so, like wet and muddy confetti in a church courtyard long after the bride and groom have left.

I rap on the door even though I'm almost positive Iris isn't inside.

Where is she?

I ring the Alzheimer's Society, ask to be put through to Iris's office, but the receptionist tells me what I already know. That Iris is away on a week's holiday.

“Is that you, Terry?” she asks and there is confusion in her voice; she is wondering why I don’t already know this.

“Eh, yes, Rita, sorry, don’t mind me, I forgot.”

Suddenly I am flooded with the notion that Iris is inside the house. She has fallen. That must be it. She has fallen and is unconscious at the foot of the stairs. She might have been there for ages. Days maybe. This worry is a galvanizing one. Not all worries fall into this category. Some render me speechless. Or stationary. The wooden door at the entrance to the side passage is locked, so I haul the wheelie bin over, grip the sides of it, and hoist myself onto the lid. People think height is an advantage, but I have never found mine—five feet ten inches, or 1.778 meters, I should say— to be so. Imperial or metric, the fact is I am too tall to be kneeling on the lid of a wheelie bin. I am a myriad of arms and elbows and knees. It’s difficult to know where to put everything.

I grip the top of the door, sort of haul myself over the top, graze my knee against the wall, and hesitate, but only for a moment, before lowering myself down as far as I can before letting go, landing in a heap in the side passage. I should be fitter than this. The girls are always on at me to take up this or that. Swimming or running or Pilates. *Get you out of the house. Get you doing something.*

The shed in Iris’s back garden has been treated to a clearout; inside, garden tools hang on hooks along one wall, the hose coiled neatly in a corner and the half-empty paint tins—sealed shut with rust years ago—are gone. It’s true that I advised her to dispose of them—carefully—given the fire hazard they presented. Still, I can’t believe that she actually went ahead and did it.

Even the small window on the gable wall of the shed is no longer a mesh of web. Through it, I see a square of pale blue sky.

The spare key is in an upside-down plant pot in the shed, in spite of my concerns about the danger of lax security about the homestead.

I return to the driveway and check on Dad. He is still there, still in the front passenger seat, singing along to the Frank Sinatra CD I put on for him. *Strangers in the Night.*

I unlock the front door. The house feels empty. There is a stillness.

“Iris?” My voice is loud in the quiet, my breath catching the dust motes, so that they lift and swirl in the dead air.

I walk through the hallway, towards the kitchen. The walls are cluttered with black-and-white photographs in wooden frames. A face in each, mostly elderly. All of them have passed through the Alzheimer’s Society and when they do, Iris asks if she can take their photograph.

My father’s photograph hangs at the end of the hallway. There is a light in his eyes that might be the sunlight glancing through the front door. A trace of his handsomeness still there across the fine bones of his face framed by the neat helmet of his white hair, thicker then.

He looks happy. No, it’s more than that. He looks present. “Iris?”

The kitchen door moans when I open it. A squirt of WD-40 on the hinges would remedy that.

A chemical, lemon smell. If I didn't know any better, I would suspect a cleaning product. The surfaces are clear. Bare. So too is the kitchen table, which is where Iris spreads her books, her piles of paperwork, sometimes the contents of her handbag when she is hunting for something. The table is solid oak. I have eaten here many times, and have rarely seen its surface. It would benefit from a sand and varnish.

In the sitting room, the curtains are drawn and the cushions on the couch look as though they've been plumped, a look which would be unremarkable in my house, but is immediately noticeable in Iris's. Iris loves that couch. She sometimes sleeps on it. I know that because I called in once, early in the morning. She wasn't expecting me. Iris is the only person in the world I would call into without ringing first. She put on the kettle when I arrived. Made a pot of strong coffee. It was the end of Dad's first week in the home.

She said she'd fallen asleep on the couch, when she saw me looking at the blankets and pillows strewn across it. She said she'd fallen asleep watching *The Exorcist*.

But I don't think that's why she slept on the couch. I think it's to do with the stairs. Sometimes I see her, at the Alzheimer's offices, negotiating the stairs with her crutches. The sticks, she calls them. She hates waiting for the lift. And she makes it look easy, climbing the stairs. But it can't be easy, can it?

Besides, who falls asleep watching *The Exorcist*?

"Iris?" I hear an edge of panic in my voice. It's not that anything is wrong exactly. Or out of place.

Except that's it. There's nothing out of place. Everything has been put away.

I walk up the stairs. More photographs on the landing, the bedroom doors all closed. I knock on the door of Iris's bedroom. "Iris?" There is no answer. I open the door. The room is dark. I make out the silhouette of Iris's bed and, as my eyes adapt to the compromised light, I see that the bed has been stripped, the pillows arranged in two neat stacks by the headboard. There are no books on the nightstand. Maybe she took them with her. To the yoga retreat.

But she is not at the yoga retreat.

Panic is like a taste at the back of my throat. The wardrobe door, which usually hangs open in protest at the melee of clothing inside, is shut. The floorboards creak beneath my weight. I stretch my hand out, reach for the handle, and then sort of yank it open as if I am not frightened of what might be inside.

There is nothing inside. In the draft, empty hangers sway against each other, making a melancholy sound. I close the door and open the drawers of the tallboy on the other side of the room.

Empty. All of them.

In the bathroom there is no toothbrush lying on its side on the edge of the sink, spooling a puddle of toothpaste. There are no damp towels draped across the rim of the bath. The potted plants—which flourish here in the steam—are gone.

I hear a car horn blaring, and rush into the spare room, which Iris uses as her home office. Jerk open the blinds, peer at the driveway below. My car is still there. And so is Dad. I see his mouth moving as he sings along. I rap at the window, but he doesn't look up. When I turn around, I notice a row of black bin bags, neatly tied at the top with twine, leaning against the far wall. They are tagged, with the name of Iris's local charity shop.

Now panic travels from my mouth down my throat into my chest, expands there until it's difficult to breathe. I try to visualize my breath, as Dr. Martin suggests. Try to see the shape it takes in a brown paper bag when I breathe into one.

I pull Iris's chair out from under her desk, lower myself onto it. Even the paper clips have been tidied into an old earring box. I pick up two paper clips and attach them together. Good to have something to do with my hands. I reach for a third when I hear a high *plink* that nearly lifts me out of the chair. I think it came from Iris's laptop, closed on the desk. An incoming mail or a Tweet or something. I should turn it off. It's a fire hazard. A plugged-in computer. I lift the lid of the laptop. On the screen, what looks like a booking form. An Irish Ferries booking form. On top of the keyboard are two white envelopes, warm to the touch. Iris's large, flamboyant handwriting is unmistakable on both.

One reads Vera Armstrong. Her mother's name. The second envelope is addressed to me.

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