

AISLINN HUNTER

Unto Herself

LOVE, SHE DECIDED, was a windy country, a two-storey stucco in the path of disaster, a glued together door-frame, a loose hinge. Love was a continual state of disrepair and, ironically, she married the carpenter.

“She” is a cosy bedsit, stacked washer-dryer, kitchen built into the wall without much room for manoeuvring. Marriage the end of her mobility, the loss of high ceilings, not to mention her culinary abilities. Well, after that first week at any rate, when Salmon in Raspberry Cream Sauce and Spinach Ricotta Soufflé went unappreciated, then made the rounds as a point of humour with the lads down at the pub. Nora the cook, they called her, the haute cuisine housewife. They made her small, but “She” used to be a flat unto herself. Modest three rooms with a coin-box shower, a window that opened onto the back deck over the garden in the hub of Rathmines. The room arrangements, she knew, were simple, the furniture worn, but it was what she had salvaged from her parents’ attic, and it was hers. The only investment being her bed which was, in fact, too small; the thick blue down duvet decadent enough to make up for all that was average. Nora could always make the best of everything, add her little touches, a vase of fresh daisies, throw-pillows, the odd cluster of framed photographs on the monotone walls. It was while living here that she found the carpenter half-lit in the entry hallway, straddling the front door and tooling with the lock mechanism. “Been broke fer a month,” she said as she stepped over him onto the walkway. “Mind yourself,” he muttered, almost into the bell of her skirt.

Whatever he was it must have been large and spacious like his hands. In ownership, probably his parents’ because, even after

the engagement, he never took her there. It must, she reasoned, have had a workshop out back where he spent his days caught up in the loud whirl of the power-saw, the air thick with light trails of dust. He was never, in her estimation, a people person. He liked enclosed spaces, doors with latches. At present however, he is absent, a garage without a garage door, just three walls encompassing a Vauxhall with shite for brakes which, at any moment, might snap its cables and start the slow roll down the driveway into the neighbours' begonias or over their saggy-bellied calico cat. And so, on this, an unspectacular day in August, Nora fiddles around the house polishing already shiny silver, thinking about the imminent automotive disaster and her husband, who is undoubtedly a square concrete room housing a beat-up auto and a dozen boxes marked 'for the rummage sale.' He is this at the absolute best. For months there's been nothing between them save her requests for conversation and his outbursts over breakfast, when the look of her snivelling over her sunny-side ups was more than he could, apparently, bear.

The fixed address is 1 Bainsbridge Road and certainly the decor is modern, the corners free of cobwebs, the company often bland or innocuous enough. "She" may have been whittled down to a bed-sit but in truth she has never lived so spaciously, never had carpets so lush, never had a banister and stairs to descend from. But not for the doors. First the garage, unfailingly open, and now, as if his quiet excursions out the back door weren't enough, it's the front entry come ajar. A solid looking wooden door painted yellow, a "1" fixed firmly in brass where a window might have been cut, seemingly stable enough, but now the frame's splitting slightly at the seams and the hinge with the cock-eyed screw is nearly undone again. When they met he was fixing the door in Rathmines; he has fixed a hundred doors since, including this one. Last week, however, he threw his hands up in the air, tugged at his shirt collar and left it askew. "Nothing to be done," he'd said, as if the whole house were irreparably damaged, as if a violent wind storm had levelled the whole of Dublin. "It's only a hinge," she replied, but he was already out the door, toolbox in hand, ready to fix entries in every other house in the city.

"And so?" she asks herself, wiping the counter again, the rust stain from last week's stew-can still fixed on the blue arborite re-

ardless of attempts to remove it with cleanser. Nora turns toward the entry hall, dishcloth in hand, and because it must be done, resolves to give the door a go herself. She digs through the odd sods in his tool cabinet and finds only sandpaper, saw blades, ratchets and bits. Behind the empty paint-cans his favourite tape-measure, a broken pencil, mothballs. The screwdriver, the carpenter's glue, must be with him. And where then, is the carpenter? The carpenter. Nora's mind runs round it and she comes back to architecture, blank spaces framed by immense rafters, two rows of people cheering them up the aisle. "God bless Nora, God bless," and only her mother scowling at her daughter's fourth month of pregnancy hidden under the empire waistline of her wedding dress. "God-bless," right up to the day they moved into Bainsbridge, the cardboard box of sewing and needlepoint falling to her feet with something else which did a slow waterdance down. The end of it confirmed by ultrasound and now only blank spaces.

Still at a loss for tools, for the carpenter, for everything, Nora runs her hands along the upper metal shelves of his tool cabinet. Nothing. As empty as the trip up the stairwell, the view from the front door down Leinster Street. No one to be seen at six in the evening when all good folk are in their homes eating their roast and potatoes. No one to be seen at all. Roast here on the table and overcooked at that, but no matter as there is something else still askew. The door. The door, and the carpenter. The roast should have been taken out of the oven before six. Her fault entirely. And the carpenter, Nora finally acknowledges, has run off with the lingerie salesgirl from Stephen's Green Centre. A wee blonde who had a laminated tag on her blouse pocket, some flower or another for a name. Daisy was it? No. Petunia? Rose? Ah, Lily. He's run off with the pixie girl called Lily, for the weekend anyway, and Nora's in the house with her altogether numb body, the door askew, wind rattling the window panes.

She sits on her queen-sized bed and surveys the light blue wallpaper which neither of them ever liked. Downstairs, the door is ajar, Nora having managed to completely unhinge it, but failing when she tried to hold it in place and put in the new screws. The wallpaper, on which she focuses, consists of small clusters of flowers in Victorian-style oval frames. Lilies, Nora fancies, although more likely some version of marigold. Nora's mind slips gears just

then, and she begins to concentrate on the untoward woman called Lily. She is an American living in Ireland, undoubtedly revelling in her foreignness, her staff discounts, purple satin bustiers, silk camisoles and the like. Nothing to her beyond the changing room she cleans with Shine More every night at closing. Lily, then, is, like the carpenter, a series of attached walls. He is the garage without a door and she is the changing room propped up in the back of a gimmicky and overpriced store with its 2-for-1 signs and made-up counter girls who mutter, "Oh, it's lovely on you Ms.," or, "Sure to be a hit with the husband now."

That day, two Saturdays ago, Nora first saw her. The slight girl with her hair bundled up on her head smiling as she cracked open the door to take the medium half-slip out of Nora's hand. "Do you need a large to try as well?" the pixie asked, puckering her Really Red lips while examining them in the changing room mirror. Nora disliked her before she'd even really caught on. An airiness about her, as if she was as insubstantial as a light breeze that raises the hair on the back of your neck before vanishing entirely. That girl, obviously still in her early twenties, was as vacant as the three-by-three cubicle in which Nora stood. What was there to her anyway, save for some lingerie strewn about inside and a few tightly screwed-in hooks opposite the door? "No, the medium's fine." And that was it, aside from a vague notion of excitement on the carpenter's behalf as he paid the giddy clerk who, giggling, handed him back his VISA and then carefully wrapped the half-slip which Nora, most often in her housecoat, had yet to wear.

"She" would like to be a garden. Something along the lines of Phoenix Park. A wide open space, a well-treed space, a space with buildings, a space with flowers, a space with families and children picnicking on Sunday afternoons. But, at twenty-nine and three-quarters she is 1 Bainsbridge Road and that day, moving in here, Nora became a two-bedroom house without any use for the second bedroom, the nursery already painted, the crib in place and the door quietly but firmly closed.

Abandoning their bedroom, the wallpaper, Nora heads for the nursery and opens the door. Something should happen, she thinks, but it doesn't, and so she goes right into the room, up to the crib, putting her hands on the railing. She is still not satisfied, she is

still restless. There is a light film of dust, thicker along the sloping headboard. He'd wanted to get started on it early, so it would be ready in time, she remembers him saying that, as if it might take months, but he built it in an afternoon. Even made the dowels by hand. "Here it is," he'd said, taking her out onto the lawn and pulling down the tarp from the back of his pick-up. A wide-eyed 'tada!' expression on his face, probably the happiest she'd ever seen him. Nora turns to leave the nursery but one hand is still fastened to the crib railing and it nudges forward on its wheels, as if to follow her. She tugs again. The crib moves a few inches over the carpet. Pretty soon she is wedging it out of the nursery itself, scraping the white door, leaving brownish oak streaks along the way. At the top of the stairs she goes around to the front of the crib, leans into the weight of it, keeps it from coming down more than a few steps at a time.

Grabbing the keys off the hook by the door to the garage she slides into the Vauxhall in her yellow house dress without her purse, or her licence. She yanks down hard on the bungee straps that run along the roof and, deciding the tension will do, gets ready to embark. Taking a minute to smooth her hair, and push it out of her eyes, Nora at the last second, before turning on the ignition, thinks to step out and peer under the car to be sure the neighbours' cat isn't napping underneath. She honks the horn twice, then backs out at full speed. The crib hits the garage ceiling where it dips down over the open doorway. There's a loud crack, the bungee cords make a twanging sound, reverberate for a second but hold.

Once out onto Leinster Street she becomes focused with the automated clarity of a driver whose thought processes are on stand-by as long as the vehicle is in motion. Stop. Signal. Advance. Turn. Accelerate. She finds herself heading down Crumlin and taking a left on Dolphin Road. On stand-by and, therefore, not in the frame of mind to question, she follows her hands, which turn the steering-wheel left and right appropriately. She might, she briefly considers, be looking for the carpenter and, in fact, she does drive by Stephen's Green Centre, thinking he might be there and that he might see her drive by with the Vauxhall, an oak crib strapped to the roof, that if all went well he might give chase. She circles the Green twice, then gives up, turns left, and once over Grand Canal

she sees that Phoenix Park is where she's headed. Besides, she thinks, what could he do for her if found? Aside from a few nights of dance at the Ormand Quay Hall, and the flowers on their first anniversary, he has been inept and preoccupied from the beginning. He'd be more interested in the broken headboard than in her state of mind. He's only a carpenter. Even with doors he just tightens screws until they let loose again, and what's the use in that?

At the entrance to the Park she slows down to go over the speed bumps and then, she makes her way through the lot past the neat rows of parked cars. Nora keeps driving then, even past the asphalt and slowly onto the Green itself, her wheels sinking the slightest bit into the grass so that she has to push harder on the gas to move forward. She picks up speed for the biggest garden bed she can find. A long stretch of snapdragons and freesia sitting central in the Green and behind them, more flowers, and the fish-pond. Nora notes the colours and, only dimly aware of a groundskeeper running behind the car, she heads straight into the flower-bed coming to a stop over the tulips, the nose of the Vauxhall inclined to the water. By the time the red-faced groundskeeper has caught up, onlookers are assembled and Nora is wading into the pond with blood from a gash on her forehead matting her hair.

"Come up here Ms.," the groundskeeper calls tentatively, stepping onto the pond bank and extending his hand. Nora stays put, waist-deep in the pond, with no intention of going any further, no intention of drowning or of saving herself. No intentions at all. She watches the crowd watching her, mostly women with their children, whom they have half hidden behind their skirts, a few officials running out from the President's House. One wee girl in particular, Nora notices, about two years of age, her hair reddish, like Nora's own, getting blown about in the wind. "It's picking up," Nora says to the groundskeeper, who is wading in water up to his knees, his hand reaching out to take her arm. He seems to her somewhat earnest, the type of man who might be an entry hallway, a cosy space destined to take you into the heart of a lovely suburban family home. And Nora considers his hand, tries to take a step forward, her shoes sticking in the mud.

Giving in to its angle, the Vauxhall starts to roll forward, coming down the dirt bank and, with a splash, it settles into the water, knocking Nora and the groundskeeper backwards. "Christ,"

he says, standing up, the grille of the car directly in front of him. Then, "Ms....," and again, "Ms....," his arms reaching frantically into the muddy silt. Nora just slightly behind him, up to her neck in water, treading ever so slowly says, "Over here, I'm over here."

"Come on," he pleads, but she shakes her head and continues to tread water, moving her arms in wide open circles. "You've gotta come out," he says, "please Ms." But she stays just out of reach, the Vauxhall barely visible now, only the crib above water, as if floating there, a slant of sunlight on the broken headboard. Nora thinks the water surprisingly warm for the time of year. So even as the sirens start getting closer, followed by the lights, she stays out in the fish-pond. Wading, she swings her arms out around her. The crib, its spiralled handrails, a sort of ladder, if she should choose to get out.