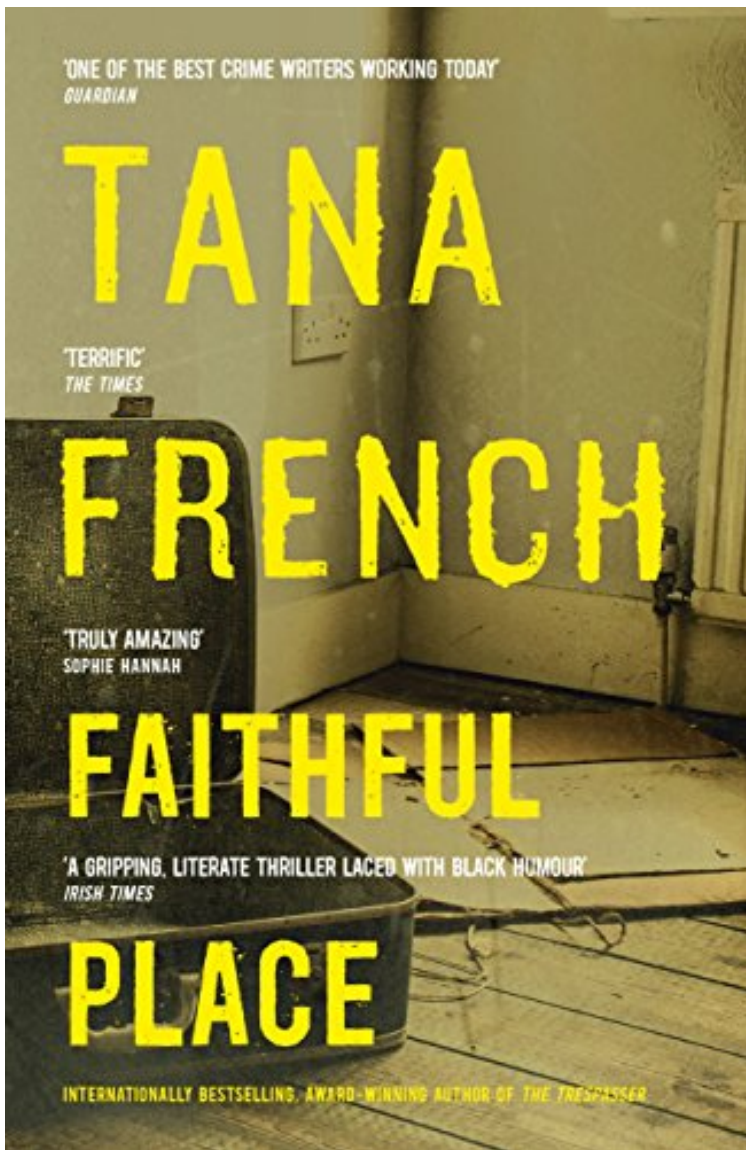


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Faithful Place: Dublin Murder Squad: 3



Par Tana French
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe course of Frank Mackey's life was set by one defining moment when he was nineteen. The moment his girlfriend, Rosie Daly, failed to turn up for their rendezvous in Faithful Place, failed to run away with him to London as they had planned. Frank never heard from her again. Twenty years on, Frank is still in Dublin, working as an undercover cop. He's cut all ties with his dysfunctional family. Until his sister calls to say that Rosie's suitcase has been found. Frank embarks on a journey into his past that demands he reevaluate everything he believes to be true.ExtraitPrologueIn all your life, only a few moments matter. Mostly you never get a good look at them except in hindsight, long after theyve zipped past you: the moment when you decided whether to talk to that girl, slow down on that blind bend, stop and find that

condom. I was lucky, I guess you could call it. I got to see one of mine face-to-face, and recognize it for what it was. I got to feel the riptide pull of my life spinning around me, one winter night, while I waited in the dark at the top of Faithful Place. I was nineteen, old enough to take on the world and young enough to be a dozen kinds of stupid, and that night as soon as both my brothers were snoring I slid out of our bedroom with my rucksack on my back and my Docs hanging from one hand. A floorboard creaked and in the girls room one of my sisters murmured in her sleep, but I was magic that night, riding high on that surge tide, unstoppable; my parents didnt even turn over on the pullout bed as I moved through the front room, close enough to touch. The fire had burned down to nothing but a muttering red glow. In the rucksack was everything important I owned: jeans, T-shirts, a secondhand wireless, a hundred quid and my birth cert. That was all you needed to go over to England, back then. Rosie had the ferry tickets. I waited for her at the end of the road, in the shadows outside the foggy yellow circle of lamplight. The air was cold as glass, with a savory burnt edge from the hops up at Guinness. I had three pairs of socks under the Docs, and I stuffed my hands deep into the pockets of my German army parka and listened one last time to my street alive and moving down the long currents of the night. A woman laughing, Ah now who said you could, a window slamming down. Scrabble of a rat along brickwork, a man coughing, the whoosh of a bike around the corner; the low fierce grumble of Mad Johnny Malone, in the basement of Number 14, talking himself to sleep. Couple-noises somewhere, muffled whimpers, rhythmic bumps, and I thought about the smell of Rosies neck and grinned up at the sky. I heard the bells of the city chime for midnight, Christchurch, St. Pats, St. Michans, huge round notes tumbling down from the sky like a celebration, ringing in our own secret New Year. When they rang one I was afraid. A trail of faint rustles and thumps all down the back gardens, and I straightened up ready, but she didnt come climbing over the end wall; probably someone sneaking home, late and guilty, in at a window. In Number 7 Sallie Hearnés newest kid cried, a thin defeated wail, till she dragged herself awake and sang to it. I know where Im going . . . Painted rooms are bonny . . . When they rang two, the mix-up hit me like a kick in the hole. It catapulted me right over the end wall into the garden of Number 16, condemned since before I was born, colonized by us kids ignoring the awful warnings, littered with beer cans and fag ends and lost virginities. I leaped up the rotten stairs four at a time without caring who heard. I was so sure, I could already see her, furious copper curls and fists on hips, Where the fuck have you been? Splintered floorboards, holes punched in plaster, debris and cold dark drafts and no one. In the top front room I found the note, just a page ripped out of a kids school copy. On the bare floor, fluttering in the pale rectangle of light from the window, it looked like it had been there for a hundred years. That was when I felt that riptide change, jackknife and turn deadly, much too strong to fight and not on my side any more. I didnt take the note with me. By the time I left Number 16 I knew it by heart, and I had the rest of my life to try to believe it. I left it where it was and went back to the end of the road. I waited there in the shadows, watching the plumes of smoke that my breath sent into the lamplight, while the bells tolled three and four and five. The night faded to a thin sad gray and round the corner a milk cart clattered over cobblestones towards the dairy, and I was still waiting for Rosie Daly at the top of Faithful Place. My father once told me that the most important thing every man should know is what he would die for. If you dont know that, he said, what are you worth? Nothing. Youre not a man at all. I was thirteen and he was three quarters of the way into a bottle of Gordons finest, but hey, good talk. As far as I recall, he was willing to die a) for Ireland, b) for his mother, who had been dead for ten years, and c) to get that bitch Maggie Thatcher. All the same, at any moment of my life since that day, I could have told you straight off the bat exactly what I would die for. At first it was easy: my family, my girl, my home. Later, for a while, things got more complicated. These days they hold steady, and I like that; it feels like something a man can be proud of. I would die for, in no particular order, my city, my job, and my kid. The kid is well behaved so far, the city is Dublin, and the job is on the Undercover Squad, so it may sound obvious which one Im most likely to wind up dying for, but its been a while since work handed me anything scarier than a paperwork megaturd. The size of this country means a field agents shelf life is short; two ops, maybe four, and your risk of being spotted gets too high. I used up my nine lives a long time back. I stay behind the scenes, for now, and run operations of my own. Heres the real risk in Undercover, in the field and out: you create illusions for long enough, you start thinking youre in control. Its easy to slide into believing youre the hypnotist here, the mirage master, the smart cookie who knows whats real and how all the tricks are done. The fact is youre still just another slack-jawed mark in the audience. No matter how good you are, this world is always going to be better at this game. Its more cunning than you are, its faster and its a whole lot more ruthless. All you can do is try to keep up, know your weak spots and never stop expecting the sucker punch. The second time my life geared up for

the sucker punch, it was a Friday afternoon at the beginning of December. I had spent the day doing maintenance work on some of my current miragesone of my boys, who would not be getting any cookies from Uncle Frank in his Christmas stocking, had got himself into a situation wherein, for complex reasons, he needed an elderly lady whom he could introduce to several low-level drug dealers as his grannyand I was

heading over to my ex-wifes place to pick up my kid for the weekend. Olivia and Holly live in a jaw-droppingly tasteful semi-d on a manicured cul-de-sac in Dalkey. Olivias daddy gave it to us for a wedding present. When we moved in, it had a name instead of a number. I got rid of that fast, but still, I should have

copped right then that this marriage was never going to work. If my parents had known I was getting married, my ma would have gone deep into hock at the credit union, bought us a lovely floral living-room suite and been outraged if we took the plastic off the cushions.Olivia kept herself bang in the middle of the doorway, in case I got ideas about coming in. Hollys almost ready, she said.Olivia, and I say this hand on heart with the proper balance of smugness and regret, is a stunner: tall, with a long elegant face, plenty of soft ash-blond hair and the kind of discreet curves you dont notice at first and then cant stop noticing. That evening she was smoothed into an expensive black dress and delicate tights and her grandmothers diamond necklace that only comes out on big occasions, and the Pope himself would have whipped off his skullcap to

mop his brow. Me being a less classy guy than the Pope, I wolf whistled. Big date?Were going for dinner.Does we involve Dermo again?Olivia is way too smart to let me yank her chain that easily. His names

Dermot, and yes, it does.I did impressed. Thats four weekends running, am I right? Tell me something: is tonight the big night?Olivia called up the stairs, Holly! Your fathers here! While she had her back turned, I headed on past her into the hall. She was wearing Chanel No. 5, same as she has ever since we met.Upstairs:

Daddy! Im coming Im coming Im coming, I just have to . . . and then a long intent stream of chatter, as Holly explained her complicated little head without caring whether anyone could hear her. I yelled, You take your time, sweetheart! on my way into the kitchen.Olivia followed me. Dermot will be here any minute, she told me. I wasnt clear on whether this was a threat or a plea.I flipped open the fridge and had a look inside. I dont like the cut of that fella. Hes got no chin. I never trust a man with no chin.Well, fortunately, your taste in men isnt relevant here.It is if youre getting serious enough that hell be spending time around Holly. Whats

his surname again?Once, back when we were heading for the split, Olivia slammed the fridge door on my head. I could tell she was thinking about doing it again. I stayed leaning over, to give her every opportunity,

but she kept her cool. Why do you want to know?Ill need to run him through the computer. I pulled out a carton of orange juice and gave it a shake. Whats this crap? When did you stop buying the good

stuff?Olivias mouthsubtle nude lipstickwas starting to tighten. You will not run Dermot through any computer, Frank.Got no choice, I told her cheerfully. I have to make sure hes not a kiddie-fiddler, havent

I?Sweet Lord, Frank! He is notMaybe not, I acknowledged. Probably not. But how can you be sure, Liv? Wouldnt you rather be safe than sorry? I uncapped the juice and took a swig.Holly! Olivia called, louder.

Hurry up!I cant find my horse! A bunch of thumps, overhead.I told Olivia, They target single mummies with lovely little kids. And its amazing how many of them dont have chins. Have you never noticed that?No,

Frank, I havent. And I wont have you using your job to intimidateTake a good look next time theres a pedo on the telly. White van and no chin, I guarantee you. What does Dermo drive?Holly! I had another big gulp

of juice, wiped off the spout with my sleeve and stuck the carton back in the fridge. That tastes like cats piss. If I up the child support, will you buy decent juice?If you tripled it, Olivia said sweetly and coldly, glancing

at her watch, not that you could, it might just about cover one carton a week. Kitty has claws, if you keep pulling her tail for long enough.At this point Holly saved both of us from ourselves by shooting out of her room calling, Daddydaddydaddy! at the top of her lungs. I made it to the bottom of the stairs in time for her

to take a flying leap at me like a little spinning firework, all gold cobweb hair and pink sparkly things, wrapping her legs round my waist and whacking me in the back with her schoolbag and a fuzzy pony called

Clara that had seen better days. Hello, spider monkey, I said, kissing the top of her head. She was light as a fairy. How was your week?Very busy and Im not a spider monkey, she told me severely, nose to nose.

Whats a spider monkey?Holly is nine and the fine-boned, easy-bruised spit of her mothers familyus Mackeys are sturdy and thick-skinned and thick-haired, built for hard work in Dublin weatherall except for

her eyes. The first time I ever saw her she looked up at me with my own eyes, great wide bright-blue eyes that hit me like a Taser zap, and they still make my heart flip over every time. Olivia can scrape off my

surname like an out-of-date address label, load up the fridge with juice I dont like and invite Dermo the Pedo to fill my side of the bed, but theres not a thing she can do about those eyes.I told Holly, Its a magic fairy

monkey that lives in an enchanted wood. She gave me a look that was perfectly balanced between Wow and

Nice try. What has you so busy? She slid off me and landed on the floor with a thump. Chloe and Sarah and me are going to have a band. I drew you a picture in school because we made up a dance and can I have white boots? And Sarah wrote a song and . . . For a second there Olivia and I almost smiled at each other, across her head, before Olivia caught herself and checked her watch again. In the drive we crossed paths with my friend Dermo, whoas I know for a fact, because I snagged his plate number the first time he and Olivia went out to dinneris an impeccably law-abiding guy who has never even parked his Audi on a double yellow, and who cant help looking like he lives life on the verge of a massive belch. Evening, he said, giving me an electrocuted nod. I think Dermo may be scared of me. Holly. What do you call him? I asked Holly, when I had fastened her into her booster seat and Olivia, perfect as Grace Kelly, was kissing Dermo's cheek in the doorway. Holly rearranged Clara's mane and shrugged. Mum says to call him Uncle Dermot. And do you? No. Out loud I dont call him anything. In my head I call him Squidface. She checked in the rearview mirror, to see if I was going to give out about that. Her chin was all ready to turn stubborn. I started to laugh. Beautiful, I told her. Thats my girl, and I did a handbrake turn to make Olivia and Squidface jump. Since Olivia got sense and kicked me out, I live on the quays, in a massive apartment block built in the nineties by, apparently, David Lynch. The carpets are so deep that Ive never heard a footstep, but even at four in the morning you can feel the hum of five hundred minds buzzing on every side of you: people dreaming, hoping, worrying, planning, thinking. I grew up in a tenement house, so you would think Id be good with the factory-farm lifestyle, but this is different. I dont know these people; I never even see these people. I have no idea how or when they get in and out of the place. For all I know they never leave, just stay barricaded in their apartments, thinking. Even in my sleep Ive got one ear tuned to that buzz, ready to leap out of bed and defend my territory if I need to. The decor in my personal corner of Twin Peaks is divorc chic, by which I mean that, four years on, it still looks like the moving van hasnt arrived yet. The exception is Holly's room, which is loaded with every fluffy pastel object known to man. The day we went looking for furniture together, I had finally managed to wrestle one weekend a month out of Olivia, and I wanted to buy Holly everything on three floors of the shopping center. A part of me had believed Id never see her again. What are we doing tomorrow? she wanted to know, as we headed up the padded corridor. She was trailing Clara on the carpet by one leg. Last Id looked, she would have screamed bloody murder at the thought of that horse touching the floor. Blink and you miss something. Remember that kite I got you? Finish all your homework tonight, and if its not raining Ill bring you to the Phoenix Park and teach you to fly it. Can Sarah come? Well ring her mum after dinner. Holly's mates parents love me. Nothing feels more responsible than having a detective take your kid to the park. Dinner! Can we get pizza? Sure, I said. Olivia lives an additive-free, organic, high-fiber life; if I dont do a little counterbalancing, the kid will grow up twice as healthy as all her mates and feel left out. Why not? and then I unlocked the door and got my first hint that Holly and I werent getting any pizza tonight. The voice-mail light on my phone was going apeshit. Five missed calls. Work rings me on my mobile, field agents and confidential informants ring me on my other mobile, the lads know theyll see me in the pub when they see me, and Olivia sends me text messages when she has to. That left family, which meant my kid sister Jackie, seeing as she was the only one Id talked to in a couple of decades. Five calls probably meant one of our parents was dying. I told Holly, Here, and held out my laptop. You take that to your room and annoy your mates on IM. Ill be in to you in a few minutes. Holly, who knows well that she isnt allowed to go online in private till shes twenty-one, gave me a skeptical look. If you want a cigarette, Daddy, she told me, very maturely, you can just go out on the balcony. I know you smoke. I steered her towards her room with a hand on her back. Oh, yeah? What makes you think that? At any other time I would have been seriously curious. Ive never smoked in front of Holly, and Olivia wouldnt have told her. We made her mind, the two of us; the idea of it containing things we didnt put there still blows me away. I just know, Holly said, dumping Clara and her bag on her bed and looking lofty. The kidll make a detective yet. And you shouldnt. Sister Mary Therese says it turns all your insides black. Sister Mary Therese is dead right. Smart woman. I switched on the laptop and hooked up the broadband line. There you go. Ive to make a phone call. Dont be buying any diamonds on eBay. Holly asked, Are you going to ring your girlfriend? She looked tiny and way too wise, standing there in her white padded coat that came halfway down her skinny legs, wide eyes trying not to look scared. No, I said. No, sweetheart. I dont have a girlfriend. Swear? I swear. Im not planning on getting one anytime soon, either. In a few years maybe you can pick one out for me. Hows that? I want Mum to be your girlfriend. Yeah, I said. I know. I put my hand on her head for a second; her hair felt like petals. Then I closed her door behind me and went back to the living room to find out who had died. It was Jackie on the voice mail, all right, and she was going like an express train. Bad sign: Jackie

brakes for good news (You'll never guess what happened. Go on, have a guess) and floors the pedal for bad. This was Formula 1 stuff. Ah, Jaysus, Francis, would you ever pick up your bleeding phone, I need to talk to you, I'm not just ringing you for the laugh, do I ever? Now before you go getting a fright, it's not Mammy, God forbid, she's grand, a bit shook up but sure aren't we all, she was having palpitations there at first but she had a sit-down and Carmel gave her a drink of brandy and she's grand now, aren't you, Mam? Thank God Carmel was there, she does call round most Fridays after the shopping, she rang me and Kevin to come down. Shay said not to be ringing you, what's the point, he said, but I told him to feck off for himself, it's only fair, so if you're at home would you ever pick up this phone and talk to me? Francis! I swear to God The message space ran out with a beep. Carmel and Kevin and Shay, oh my. It sounded very much like the entire family had descended on my parents place. My da; it had to be. Daddy! Holly yelled, from her room. How many cigarettes do you smoke every day? The voice-mail lady told me to press buttons; I followed orders. Who says I smoke? I need to know! Twenty? For a start. Maybe. Jackie again: Bleeding machines, I wasn't finished! Come here, I should've said right away, it's not Da either, he's the same as ever, no one's dead or hurt or nothing, or anyway were all grand. Kevin's a bit upset but I think that's because he's worried about how you'll take it, he's awful fond of you, you know, he still is. Now it might be nothing, Francis, I don't want you losing the head, right, it could all be a joke, someone messing, that's what we thought at first, although pretty shite joke if you ask me, excuse my language. Daddy! How much exercise do you get? What the hell? I'm a secret ballet dancer. Noooo, seriously! How much? Not enough. and sure, none of us have a clue what to be doing with it anyway, so would you ever ring me as soon as you get this? Please, Francis. I'll have my mobile in my hand, now. Click, beep, voice-mail babe. Looking back, I should have figured it out by that point, or at least I should have got the general idea. Daddy? How much fruit and vegetables do you eat? Truckloads. You do not! Some. The next three messages were more of the same, at half-hour intervals. By the last one, Jackie had reached the point where only small dogs could hear her. Daddy? Give me a sec, sweetie. I took my mobile out on the balcony, above the dark river and the greasy orange lights and the running snarl of the traffic jams, and phoned Jackie. She answered on the first ring. Francis? Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I've been going mental! Where were you? She had slowed down to about eighty miles an hour. Picking up Holly. What the hell, Jackie? Background noise. Even after all that time, I knew the quick bite of Shay's voice straight away. One note of my ma caught me right in the throat. Ah, God, Francis . . . Would you sit down for me, now? Or get yourself a glass of brandy, something like that? Jackie, if you don't tell me what's going on, I swear I'm going to come over there and strangle you. Hang on, hold your horses . . . A door closing. Now, Jackie said, into sudden quiet. Right. Do you remember I was telling you a while back, some fellas after buying up the three houses at the top of the Place? To turn into apartments? Yeah. He's not doing the apartments after all, now everyone's after getting all worried about property prices; he's leaving the houses a while and see what happens. So he got the builders in to take out the fireplaces and the moldings and that, to sell. There's people pay good money for those yokes, did you know that? mental. And they started today, on the one up on the corner. Do you remember, the derelict one? Number Sixteen. That's the one. They were taking out the fireplaces, and up behind one of them they found a suitcase. Dramatic pause. Drugs? Guns? Cash? Jimmy Hoffa? Fuck's sake, Jackie. What? It's Rosie Dalys, Francis. It's her case. All the layers of traffic noise vanished, snapped right off. That orange glow across the sky turned feral and hungry as forest fire, blinding, out of control. No, I said, it's not. I don't know where the hell you got that, but it's a load of my arse. Ah, now, Francis. Concern and sympathy were pouring off her voice. If she'd been there, I think I would have punched her lights out. Ah, now, Francis, nothing. You and Ma have yourselves worked up into some hysterical frenzy over sweet fuck-all, and now you want me to play along. Listen to me, I know you're. Unless this is all some stunt to get me over there. Is that it, Jackie? Are you aiming for some big family reconciliation? Because I'm warning you now, this isn't the fucking Hallmark Channel and that kind of game isn't going to end well. You big gobshite, you, Jackie snapped. Get a hold of yourself. What do you think I am? There's a shirt in that case, a purple paisley yoke, Carmel recognizes it. I'd seen it on Rosie a hundred times, knew what the buttons felt like under my fingers. Yeah, from every girl in this town in the eighties. Carmel'd recognize Elvis walking down Grafton Street for a bit of gossip. I thought you had better sense, but apparently and there's a birth cert wrapped inside it. Rose Bernadette Daly. Which more or less killed that line of conversation. I found my smokes, leaned my elbows on the railing and took the longest drag of my life. Sorry, Jackie said, softer. For biting your head off. Francis? Yeah. Are you all right? Yeah. Listen to me, Jackie. Do the Dalys know? They're not in. Nora moved out to Blanchardstown, I think it was, a few years back; Mr. Daly and Mrs. Daly go over to her on Friday nights, to see the baba. Mammy thinks she has the

number somewhere, but Have you called the Guards? Only you, sure. Who else knows about this? The builders, only. A couple of Polish young fellas, they are. When they finished up for the day they went across to Number Fifteen, to ask was there anyone they could give the case back to, but Number Fifteens students now, so they sent the Polish fellas down to Ma and Da. And Ma hasnt told the whole road? Are you sure? The Place isnt the same as you remember it. Half of its students and yuppies, these days; we wouldnt even know their names. The Cullens are still here, and the Nolans and some of the Hearnese, but Mammy didnt want to say anything to them till shed told the Dalys. It wouldnt be right. Good. Wheres the case now? Its in the front room. Should the builders not have moved it? They had to get on with their work. Its grand. Dont touch it any more unless you have to. Ill be over as fast as I can. A second of silence. Then: Francis. I dont want to be thinking anything terrible, God bless us, but does this not mean that Rosie . . . We dont know anything yet, I said. Just sit tight, dont talk to anyone, and wait for me. I hung up and took a quick look into the apartment behind me. Hollys door was still shut. I finished my smoke in one more marathon drag, tossed the butt over the railing, lit another and rang Olivia. She didnt even say hello. No, Frank. Not this time. Not a chance. I dont have a choice, Liv. You begged for every weekend. Begged. If you didnt want them I do want them. This is an emergency. It always is. The squad can survive without you for two days, Frank. No matter what youd like to think, youre not indispensable. To anyone more than a foot away, her voice would have sounded light and chatty, but she was furious. Tinkling cutlery, arch hoots of laughter; something that sounded like, God help us, a fountain. Its not work this time, I said. Its family. It is, of course. Would this have anything to do with the fact that Im on my fourth date with Dermot? Liv, I would happily do a lot to wreck your fourth date with Dermot, but Id never give up time with Holly. You know me better than that. A short, suspicious pause. What kind of family emergency? I dont know yet. Jackie rang me in hysterics, from my parents place; I cant work out the details. I need to get over there fast. Another pause. Then Olivia said, on a long tired breath, Right. Were in the Coterie. Drop her down. The Coterie has a TV-based chef and gets hand-jobbed in a lot of weekend supplements. It badly needs firebombing. Thanks, Olivia. Seriously. Ill pick her up later tonight, if I can, or tomorrow morning. Ill ring you. You do that, Olivia said. If you can, of course, and she hung up. I threw my smoke away and went inside to finish pissing off the women in my life. Holly was sitting cross-legged on her bed, with the computer on her lap and a worried look on her face. Sweetheart, I said, weve got a problem. She pointed at the laptop. Daddy, look. The screen said, in big purple letters surrounded by an awful lot of flashing graphics, YOU WILL DIE AT THE AGE OF 52. The kid looked really upset. I sat down on the bed behind her and pulled her and the computer onto my lap. Whats all this? Sarah found this quiz online and I did it for you and it said this. Youre forty-one. Oh, Jesus, not now. Chickadee, its the internet. Anyone can put anything on there. That doesnt make it real. It says! They figured it all out! Olivia was going to love me if I gave Holly back in tears. Let me show you something, I said. I reached around her, got rid of my death sentence, opened up a Word document and typed in, YOU ARE A SPACE ALIEN. YOU ARE READING THIS ON THE PLANET BONGO. Now. Is that true? Holly managed a watery giggle. Course not. I turned it purple and gave it a fancy font. How about now? Head-shake. How about if I got the computer to ask you a bunch of questions before it said that? Would it be true then? For a second I thought Id got through, but then those narrow shoulders went rigid. You said a problem. Yeah. Were going to have to change our plans just a little bit. I have to go back to Mums, Holly said, to the laptop. Dont I? Yep, sweetie. Im really, really sorry. Ill come get you the second I can. Does work need you again? That again felt worse than anything Olivia could dish out. No, I said, leaning sideways so I could see Hollys face. Its nothing to do with work. Work can take a long walk off a short pier, am I right? That got a faint smile. You know your auntie Jackie? Shes got a big problem, and she needs me to sort it out for her right now. Cant I come with you? Both Jackie and Olivia have tried hinting, occasionally, that Holly should get to know her dads family. Sinister suitcases aside, over my dead body does Holly dip a toe in the bubbling cauldron of crazy that is the Mackeys at their finest. Not this time. Once Ive fixed everything, well bring Auntie Jackie for an ice cream somewhere, will we? To cheer us all up? Yeah, Holly said, on a tired little breath exactly like Olivias. Thatd be fun, and she disentangled herself from my lap and started putting her stuff back into her schoolbag. In the car Holly kept up a running conversation with Clara, in a subdued little voice too quiet for me to hear. At every red light I looked at her in the rearview mirror and swore to myself that Id make it up to her: get hold of the Dalys phone number, dump the damn suitcase on their doorstep and have Holly back at El Rancho Lyncho by bedtime. I already knew it wasnt going to work out that way. That road and that suitcase had been waiting for me to come back for a long time. Now that theyd got their hooks in, what they had saved up for me was going to take a lot more than one evening. The note had the bare minimum of

teen-queen melodrama; she was always good that way, was Rosie. I know this is going to be a shock and I'm sorry but please don't be feeling like I messed you around on purpose, I never wanted to do that. Only I've thought about it really hard, this is the only way I'll ever have a decent chance at the kind of life I want. I just wish I could do it and not hurt you/upset you/disappoint you. It would be great if you could wish me luck in my new life in England!! but if you can't I understand. I swear I'll come back someday. Till then, loads and loads and loads of love, Rosie.

In between the moment when she left that note on the floor of Number 16, in the room where we had our first kiss, and the moment when she went to heave her suitcase over some wall and get the hell out of Dodge, something had happened.² You won't find Faithful Place unless you know where to look. The Liberties grew on their own over centuries, without any help from urban planners, and the Place is a cramped cul-de-sac tucked away in the middle like a wrong turn in a maze. It's a ten-minute walk from Trinity College and the snazzy shopping on Grafton Street, but back in my day, we didn't go to Trinity and the Trinity types didn't come up our way. The area wasn't dodgy, exactly factory workers, bricklayers, bakers, dole bunnies, and the odd lucky bastard who worked in Guinness and got health care and evening classes just separate. The Liberties got their name, hundreds of years ago, because they went their own way and made their own rules. The rules in my road went like this: no matter how skint you are, if you go to the pub then you stand your round; if your mate gets into a fight, you stick around to drag him off as soon as you see blood, so no one loses face; you leave the heroin to them down in the flats; even if you're an anarchist punk rocker this month, you go to Mass on Sunday; and no matter what, you never, ever squeal on anyone. I parked my car a few minutes away and walked; no reason to let my family know what I drove, or that I had a booster seat in the back. Night air in the Liberties still felt the same, warm and restless, crisp packets and bus tickets whirling in updrafts, a rowdy hum spilling out from the pubs. The junkies hanging on corners had started wearing bling with their tracksuits, for your truly suave fashion statement. Two of them eyed me up and started drifting my way, but I gave them a big shark smile and they changed their minds.

Faithful Place is two rows of eight houses, old redbricks with steps going up to the main hall door. Back in the eighties each one had three or four households, maybe more. A household was anything from Mad Johnny Malone, who had been in World War I and would show you his Ypres tattoo, through Sallie Hearne, who wasn't exactly a hooker but had to support all those kids somehow. If you were on the dole, you got a basement flat and a Vitamin D deficiency; if someone had a job, you got at least part of the first floor; if your family had been there a few generations, you got seniority and top-floor rooms where no one walked on your head. Places are supposed to look smaller when you go back to them, but my road just looked schizoid. A couple of the houses had had nifty little makeovers involving double glazing and amusing faux-antique pastel paint; most of them hadn't. Number 16 looked like it was on its last legs: the roof was in tatters, there was a pile of bricks and a dead wheelbarrow by the front steps, and at some point in the last twenty years someone had set the door on fire. In Number 8, a window on the first floor was lit up, gold and cozy and dangerous as hell. Carmel and Shay and I came along straight after my parents got married, one a year, just like you'd expect in the land of the contraband condom. Kevin was almost five years later, once my parents got their breath back, and Jackie was five years after that, presumably in one of the brief moments when they didn't hate each other's guts. We had the first floor of Number 8, four rooms: girls room, boys room, kitchen, front room the toilet was in a shed down the back of the garden, and you washed in a tin bath in the kitchen. These days Ma and Da have all that space to themselves. I see Jackie every few weeks and she keeps me up to speed, depending on your definition of the term. She feels I need to know every detail of everyone's life, while I feel I need to know if someone dies, so it took us a while to find that happy medium. When I walked back into Faithful Place, I knew that Carmel had four kids and an arse like the 77A bus, Shay was living upstairs from our parents and working in the same bike shop he left school for, Kevin was selling flat-screen TVs and had a new girlfriend every month, Da had done something unclear to his back, and Ma was still Ma. Jackie, to round out the picture, is a hairdresser and lives with this guy Gavin who she says she might marry someday. If she had been following orders, which I doubted, the others knew sweet fuck-all about me. The hall door was unlocked, so was the flat door. No one leaves doors open in Dublin any more. Jackie, tactfully, had arranged things so I could make my entrance my own way. There were voices coming from the front room; short sentences, long pauses. Howyis, I said, in the doorway. A ripple of cups going down, heads turning. My mas snappy black eyes and five bright-blue pairs exactly like mine, all staring at me. Hide the heroin, Shay said. He was leaning against the window with his hands in his pockets; he'd watched me coming down the road. It's the pigs. The landlord had finally put in a carpet, a flowery green and pink thing. The room still smelled of toast, damp and furniture polish, with a faint dirty undercurrent I

couldnt place. There was a tray full of doilies and digestive biscuits on the table. My da and Kevin were in the armchairs; my ma was on the sofa, with Carmel and Jackie on either side, like a war leader showing off two prize prisoners. My ma is your classic Dublin mammy: five foot nothing of curler-haired, barrel-shaped dont-mess-with-this, fueled by an endless supply of disapproval. The prodigal sons welcome went like this: Francis, Ma said. She eased back into the sofa, folded her arms where her waist would have been and eyed me up and down. Could you not be bothered putting on a decent shirt, even? I said, Howya, Ma. Mammy, not Ma. The state of you. The neighborsll think I raised a homeless. Somewhere along the way I swapped the army parka for a brown leather jacket, but apart from that I still have much the same fashion sense I left home with. If Id worn a suit, she would have given me hassle for having notions of myself. With my ma you dont expect to win. Jackie sounded like it was urgent, I said. Howya, Da. Da was looking better than Id expected. Back in the day, I was the one who took after him same thick brown hair, same rough-edged features but the resemblance had faded a lot along the way, which was nice. He was starting to turn into an old fellow white hair, trousers up above his ankles but he still had enough muscle that youd think twice before taking him on. He looked stone cold sober, although with him you never could tell till it was too late. Nice of you to honor us, he said. His voice was deeper and hoarser; too many Camels. Youve still got a neck like a jockeys bollix. So they keep telling me. Howya, Carmel. Kev. Shay. Shay didnt bother to answer. Francis, Kevin said. He was staring at me like I was a ghost. Hed turned into a big guy, fair and solid and good-looking; bigger than me. Jaysus. Language, Ma snapped. Youre looking very well, Carmel informed me, predictably. If the Risen Lord appeared to Carmel one morning, shed tell him he was looking very well. Her arse was in fact pretty high-impact, and she had developed a genteel meet-my-sinuses accent that didnt surprise me one bit. Things around here were more like they used to be than they ever had been. Thanks very much, I said. So are you. Come here, you, Jackie said to me. Jackie has complicated peroxide hair and she dresses like something out of a Tom Waits diner; that day she was wearing white pedal pushers and a red polka-dot top with ruffles in bewildering places. Sit down there and have a cup of tea. Ill get another cup. She got up and headed for the kitchen, giving me an encouraging little wink and a pinch on her way. Im grand, I said, stopping her. The thought of sitting next to Ma made the hair go up on the back of my neck. Lets have a look at this famous suitcase. Wheres your rush? Ma demanded. Sit down there. Business before pleasure. Wheres the case? Shay nodded to the floor at his feet. All yours, he said. Jackie sat down again with a thump. I picked my way around the coffee table and the sofa and the chairs, under all those eyes. The suitcase was by the window. It was a pale-blue thing with rounded corners, spotted over with big patches of black mold, and it was a crack open; someone had forced the pathetic tin locks. What got to me was how small it was. Olivia used to pack just about everything we owned, including the electric kettle, for a weekend away. Rosie had been heading for a whole new life with something she could carry one-handed. I asked, Whos touched this? Shay laughed, a hard sound at the back of his throat. Jaysus, lads, its Columbo. Are you going to take our fingerprints? Shay is dark and wiry and restless, and Id forgotten what it was like, getting too near him. Its like standing next to a power line; it makes you edgy all over. He had sharp fierce grooves going from nose to mouth, these days, and between his eyebrows. Only if you ask me nicely, I said. Did you all touch it? I wouldnt go near it, Carmel said promptly, doing a little shudder. The dirt of it. I caught Kevins eye. For a second it was like Id never been away. Me and your da tried opening it, Ma said, only it was locked, so I called Shay down and I got him to take a screwdriver to it. Wed no choice, sure; there was nothing on the outside to tell us who owned it. She gave me a belligerent look. Dead right, I said. When we saw what was in it . . . Im telling you, I got the shock of my life. The heart was leaping out of me; I thought I was having a heart attack. I said to Carmel, thank God youre here with the car, in case youve to bring me to the hospital. The look in Mas eye said this would have been my fault, even if she hadnt figured out how yet. Carmel told me, Trevor doesnt mind giving the children their tea, not when its an emergency. Hes great that way. Me and Kevin both had a look inside once we got here, Jackie said. We touched bits, I dont remember what ones. Got your fingerprint powder? Shay inquired. He was slouching against the window frame and watching me, eyes half closed. Some other day, if youre a good boy. I found my surgical gloves in my jacket pocket and put them on. Da started to laugh, a deep, nasty rasp; it collapsed into a helpless coughing fit that shook his whole chair. Shays screwdriver was on the floor beside the suitcase. I knelt down and used it to lift the lid. Two of the boys in the Tech Bureau owed me favors, and a couple of the lovely ladies fancied me; any of them would run a few tests for me on the QT, but they would appreciate me not fucking up the evidence any more than I had to. The case was stuffed with a heavy tangle of fabric, stained black and half-shredded with mold and age. A dark, strong smell, like wet earth, came up off it. That

undercurrent Id caught in the air, when I first came in. I lifted things out slowly, one by one, and stacked them in the lid where they wouldnt get contaminated. One pair of baggy blue jeans, with plaid patches sewn under the rips in the knees. One green woolen pullover. One pair of blue jeans so tight they had zips at the ankles, and Jesus Almighty I knew them, the swing of Rosies hips in them punched me right in the gut. I kept moving and didnt blink. One mans collarless flannel shirt, fine blue stripes on what used to be cream. Six pairs of white cotton knickers. One long-tailed purple and blue paisley shirt, falling to pieces, and when I picked it up the birth cert fell out. There, Jackie said. She was leaning over the arm of the sofa, peering anxiously at me. See? Up until then, we thought it mightve been nothing, I dont know, kids messing or someone whod robbed some gear and needed to hide it, or maybe some poor woman whose fella was hurting her and she was keeping her things ready for when she got the courage to leave him, you know how they tell you to do in the magazines? She was starting to rev up again. Rose Bernadette Daly, born 30 July 1966. The paper was on the verge of disintegrating. Yep, I said. If thats kids messing, theyre pretty thorough about it. One U2 T-shirt, probably worth hundreds, if it hadnt been pockmarked with rot. One blue-and-white-striped T-shirt. One mans black waistcoat; the Annie Hall look was in then. One purple woolen pullover. One pale-blue plastic rosary. Two white cotton bras. One off-brand Walkman that I spent months saving for; I got the last two quid a week before her eighteenth birthday, by helping Beaker Murray sell bootleg videos down at the Iveagh Market. One spray can of Sure deodorant. A dozen home-taped cassettes, and I could still read her round handwriting on some of the inserts: REM, Murmur; U2, Boy; Thin Lizzy, the Boomtown Rats, the Stranglers, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. Rosie could leave everything else behind, but her record collection was coming with her. At the bottom of the case was a brown envelope. The bits of paper inside had been mashed into a solid lump by twenty-two years worth of damp; when I pulled delicately at the edge, it came apart like a wet jacks roll. One more favor for the Bureau. A few blurred words of type still showed through the plastic window in the front of the envelope. . . . LAOGHAIRE-HOLYHEAD . . . DEPARTING . . . :30AM . . . Wherever Rosie had gone, she had got there without our ferry tickets. Everyone was staring at me. Kevin looked genuinely upset. Well, I said. That appears to be Rosie Dalys suitcase, all right. I started to transfer stuff from the lid back into the case, leaving the papers till last so they wouldnt get crushed. Will we call the Guards? Carmel asked. Da cleared his throat, spectacularly, like he was going to spit; Ma shot him a ferocious look. I asked, And say what? Clearly no one had thought about this. Someone stuck a suitcase behind a fireplace, twenty-odd years ago, I said. Its hardly the crime of the century. The Dalys can ring the Guards if they want, but Im warning you now, I wouldnt expect them to bring out the big guns for the Case of the Blocked Chimney. But Rosie, sure, Jackie said. She was tugging at a piece of hair and gazing at me, all bunny-teeth and big worried blue eyes. Shes missing. And that yoke there, thats a clue, or evidence, or whatever you call it. Should we not . . . ? Was she reported missing? Glances back and forth: nobody knew. I seriously doubted it. In the Liberties, cops are like the jellyfish in Pacman: theyre part of the game, you get good at avoiding them, and you definitely dont go looking for them. If she wasnt, I said, shutting the case with my fingertips, its a little late now. But, Jackie said. Hang on. Does this not look like . . . ? You know. Like she didnt go off to England after all. Does it not seem like maybe someone might have . . . ? What Jackies trying to say here, Shay told me, is it looks like someone knocked Rosie off, shoved her in a bin liner, hauled her round to the piggeries, dumped her in, and put that case up a fireplace to get it out of the way. Seamus Mackey! God bless us! from Ma. Carmel crossed herself. This possibility had already occurred to me. Could be, I said, sure. Or she could have been abducted by aliens and dropped off in Kentucky by mistake. Personally, Id go for the simplest explanation, which is that she stuck that case up the chimney herself, didnt get a chance to take it back out, and headed over to England without a change of undies. But if you need a little extra drama in your life, feel free. Right, said Shay. There are plenty of things wrong with Shay, but stupid isnt one of them. And thats why you need that shitethe gloves, which I was stuffing back into my jacket. Because you dont think theres any crime here. Reflex, I said, grinning at him. A pig is a pig twenty-four seven, know what I mean? Shay made a disgusted noise. Ma said, with a nice blend of awe, envy and blood lust, Theresa Dalyll go mental. Mental. For a wide variety of reasons, I needed to get to the Dalys before anyone else did. Ill have a chat with her and Mr. Daly, see what they want to do. What time do they get home, Saturdays? Shay shrugged. Depends. Sometimes not till after lunch, sometimes first thing in the morning. Whenever Nora can drop them back. This was a pisser. I could tell by the look of Ma that she was already planning to pounce on them before they got their key in the door. I considered sleeping in my car and cutting her off at the pass, but there was no parking within surveillance range. Shay was watching me and enjoying himself. Then Ma hitched up her bosom and said, You can stay the night here, Francis, if you

like. The sofa still pulls out. I didn't assume this was a reunion burst of the warm and fuzzies. My ma likes you to owe her. This is never a good idea, but I couldn't come up with a better one. She added, Unless you're too posh for that nowadays, in case I thought she was going soft. Not at all, I said, giving Shay a big toothy grin. That'd be great. Thanks, Ma. Mammy, not Ma. I suppose you'll be wanting breakfast and all. Can I stay as well? Kevin asked, out of the blue. Ma gave him a suspicious stare. He looked as startled as I was. I can't stop you, she said, in the end. Don't be wrecking my good sheets, and she hoisted herself up off the sofa and started collecting teacups. Shay laughed, not nicely. Peace on Waltons Mountain, he said, nudging the suitcase with the toe of his boot. Just in time for Christmas. Ma doesn't allow smoking in the house. Shay and Jackie and I took our habit outside; Kevin and Carmel drifted after us. We sat on the front steps, the way we used to when we were kids sucking ice pops after tea and waiting for something interesting to happen. It took me a little while to realize that I was still waiting for the action kids with a football, a couple yelling, a woman hurrying across the road to swap gossip for tea bags, anything and that it wasn't coming. In Number 11 a couple of hairy students were cooking something and playing Keane, not even that loudly, and in Number 7 Sallie Hearne was ironing and someone was watching TV. This was apparently as active as the Place got, these days. We'd gravitated straight to our old spots: Shay and Carmel at opposite ends of the top step, Kevin and me below them, Jackie at the bottom between us. We had personal arse-prints worn in those steps. Jaysus, it's warm, all the same, Carmel said. It's not like December at all, sure it's not? Feels all wrong. Global warming, Kevin said. Someone give us a smoke? Jackie handed up her packet. Don't be starting on them. Filthy habit. Only on special occasions. I flicked my lighter and he leaned across to me. The flame sent the shadows of his lashes down his cheeks so that for a second there he looked like a kid asleep, rosy and innocent. Kevin worshipped me, back in the day; followed me everywhere. I gave Zippy Hearne a bloody nose because he took Kevin's Jelly Tots off him. Now he smelled of aftershave. Sallie, I said, nodding up at her. How many kids did she have in the end? Jackie reached a hand over her shoulder to take her smokes back off Kevin. Fourteen. Me fannys sore just thinking about it. I snickered, caught Kevin's eye and got a grin off him. After a moment Carmel said, to me, I've four of my own now. Darren and Louise and Donna and Ashley. Jackie told me. Fair play to you. Who do they look like? Louise is like me, God help her. Darrens like his daddy. Donnas the spit of Jackie, Kevin said. Buckteeth and all. Jackie hit him. Shut up, you. They must be getting big now, I said. Ah, they are, yeah. Darrens doing his Leaving Cert this year. He wants to do engineering at UCD, if you don't mind. No one asked about Holly. Maybe I'd been underrating Jackie; maybe she did know how to keep her mouth shut. Here, Carmel said, rummaging in her bag. She found her mobile phone, fiddled with it and held it out to me. Do you want to see them? I flipped through the photos. Four plain, freckly kids; Trevor, the same as always, except for the hairline; a pebble-dashed seventies semi-d in I couldn't remember which depressing sub-suburb. Carmel was exactly what she'd always dreamed of being. Very few people ever get to say that. Fair play to her, even if her dream did make me want to slit my throat. They look like great kids, I said, handing the phone back. Congrats, Melly. A tiny catch of breath, above me. Melly. God . . . Haven't heard that in years. In that light they looked like themselves again. It erased the wrinkles and the gray streaks, fined the heaviness off Kevin's jaw and wiped the makeup off Jackie, till it was the five of us, fresh and cat-eyed and restless in the dark, spinning our different dreams. If Sallie Hearne looked out her window she'd see us: the Mackey kids, sitting on their steps. For one lunatic second I was glad to be there. Ow, Carmel said, shifting. Carmel was never good with silence. Me arse is killing me. Are you sure that's what happened, Francis, what you said inside? About Rosie meaning to come back for that case? A low hiss that might have been a laugh, as Shay sent out smoke through his teeth. It's a load of shite. He knows that as well as I do. Carmel smacked his knee. Language, you. Shay didn't move. What are you on about? Why would it be a load of shite? He shrugged. I'm not sure about anything, I said. But yeah, I think there's a good chance she's over in England living happily ever after. Shay said, With no ticket and no ID? She had money saved up. If she couldn't get hold of her ticket, she could've bought another one. And you didn't need ID to go to England, back then. All of which was true enough. We were bringing our birth certs along because we knew we might need to sign on the dole while we looked for work, and because we were going to get married. Jackie asked quietly, Was I right to ring you, all the same? Or should I have just . . . ? The air tightened up. Left well enough alone, Shay said. No, I said. You were dead right all the way, babe. Your instincts are diamond, you know that? Jackie stretched out her legs and examined her high heels. I could only see the back of her head. Maybe, she said. We sat and smoked for a while. The smell of malt and burnt hops was gone; Guinness's did something eco-correct back in the nineties, so now the Liberties smell of diesel fumes, which apparently is an improvement. Moths were looping the loop around

the street lamp at the end of the road. Someone had taken down the rope that used to be tied to the top of it, for kids to swing on. There was one thing I wanted to know. Da looks all right, I said. Silence. Kevin shrugged. His backs not great, Carmel said. Did Jackie . . . ? She told me hes got problems. Hes better than I expected to find him. She sighed. He gets good days and bad days, sure. Today's a good day; hes grand. On bad days . . . Shay drew on his smoke; he still held it between thumb and finger, like an old-movie gangster. He said flatly, On bad days Ive to carry him to the jacks. I asked, Do they know whats wrong? Nah. Maybe something he did on the job, maybe . . . They cant work it out. Either way, its getting worse. Is he off the drink? Shay said, Whats that got to do with you? I said, Is Da off the drink? Carmel moved. Ah, hes all right. Shay laughed, a sharp bark. Is he treating Ma OK? Shay said, Thats none of your fucking business. The other three held their breath and waited to see if we were going to go for each other. When I was twelve Shay split my head open on those same steps; I still have the scar. Not long afterwards, I got bigger than him. Hes got scars too. I turned round, taking my time, to face him. Im asking you a civil question, I said. That you havent bothered asking in twenty years. Hes asked me, Jackie said, quietly. Loads of times. So? You dont live here either, any more. Youve no more of a clue than he has. Thats why Im asking you now, I said. Does Da treat Ma all right these days? We stared each other out of it, in the half dark. I got ready to throw my smoke away fast. If I say no, Shay said, are you going to leave your fancy bachelor pad and move in here to look after her? Downstairs from you? Ah, Shay. Dyou miss me that much? A window shot up, above us, and Ma shouted down, Francis! Kevin! Are yous coming in or not? In a minute! we all yelled back. Jackie laughed, a high, frantic little sound: Listen to us . . . Ma slammed the window down. After a second Shay eased back and spat through the railings. The moment his eyes moved off me, everyone relaxed. Ive to go anyway, Carmel said. Ashley likes to have her mammy there when she goes to bed. She wont go for Trevor; gives him terrible hassle. She thinks its funny. Kevin asked, How are you getting home? Ive the Kia parked round the corner. The Kias mine, she explained, to me. Trevor has the Range Rover. Trevor always was a depressing little fucker. It was nice to know hed turned out according to spec. Thats lovely, I said. Give us a lift? Jackie asked. I came straight from work, and today was Gavs turn for the car. Carmel tucked in her chin and clicked her tongue disapprovingly. Will he not pick you up? Not at all. The cars at home by now, and hes in the pub with the lads. Carmel hauled herself up by the railing and tugged her skirt down primly. Ill drop you home, so. Tell that Gavin, if hes going to let you work, he could at least buy you a car of your own to get you there. What are yous lot laughing at? Womens lib is alive and well, I said. I never had any use for that carry-on. I like a good sturdy bra. You, missus, stop laughing and come on before I leave you here with this shower. Im coming, hang on Jackie stuffed her smokes back into her bag, threw the strap over her shoulder. Ill call round tomorrow. Will I see you then, Francis? You never know your luck. Otherwise well talk. She reached up a hand and caught mine, squeezed it tight. Im glad I rang you, anyway, she said, in a defiant, semiprivate undertone. And Im glad you came down. Youre a gem, so you are. Look after yourself. All right? Youre a good girl yourself. Seeya, Jackie. Carmel said, hovering, Francis, will we . . . ? Are you going to call round again, like? Now that . . . Lets get this thing over with, I said, smiling up at her. Then well see where we are, yeah? Carmel picked her way down the steps and the three of us watched them head up the Place, the taps of Jackies spike heels echoing off the houses, Carmel clumping along next to her, trying to keep up. Jackie is a lot taller than Carmel, even before you add hair and heels, but on the other hand Carmel has her beat several times over on circumference. The mismatch made them look like some goofy cartoon team, off to have painful comic accidents till they finally caught the villain and saved the day. Theyre sound women, I said quietly. Yeah, Kevin said. They are. Shay said, If you want to do those two a favor, you wont call round again. I figured he was probably right, but I ignored him anyway. Ma did her window number again: Francis! Kevin! Ive to lock this door. Yous can come in now, or yous can sleep where yous are. Go in, Shay said. Before she has the whole road awake. Kevin got up, stretching and cracking his neck. Are you coming? Nah, Shay said. Having another smoke. When I shut the hall door, he was still sitting on the steps with his back to us, snapping his lighter and watching the flame. Ma had dumped a duvet, two pillows and a bunch of sheets on the sofa and gone to bed, to make a point about us dawdling outside. She and Da had moved into our old room; the girls room had been turned into a bathroom, in the eighties, judging by the attractive avocado-green fixtures. While Kevin was splashing around in there, I went out onto the landing. Ma hears like a bat and rang Olivia. It was well after eleven. Shes asleep, Olivia said. And very disappointed. I know. I just wanted to say thanks again, and sorry again. Did I completely wreck your date? Yes. What did you think would happen? The Coterie would bring out an extra chair and Holly could discuss the Booker Prize list with us over salmon en croute? Ive got some stuff to do around here tomorrow, but Ill try and pick

her up before dinnertime. Maybe you and Dermot can reschedule. She sighed. Whats going on there? Is everyone OK? Im not sure yet, I said. Im still trying to figure it out. Tomorrow I should have a better idea. A silence. I thought Liv was pissed off with me for being cagey, but then she said, What about you, Frank? Are you all right? Her voice had softened. In all the world, the last thing I needed that night was Olivia being nice to me. It rippled my bones like water, soothing and treacherous. Never better, I said. Gotta go. Give Holly a kiss from me in the morning. Ill ring you tomorrow. Kevin and I made up the sofa bed and arranged ourselves head to foot, so we could feel like two party animals crashing out after a wild night instead of two little kids sharing a mattress. We lay there, in the faint patterns of light coming through the lace curtains, listening to each other breathe. In the corner, Mas Sacred Heart statue glowed lurid red. I pictured the look on Olivias face if she ever saw that statue. Its good to see you, Kevin said quietly, after a while. You know that? His face was in shadows; all I could see was his hands on the duvet, one thumb rubbing absently at a knuckle. You too, I said. Youre looking good. I cant believe youre bigger than me. A sniff of a laugh. Still wouldnt want to take you on. I laughed too. Dead right. Im an expert at unarmed combat, these days. Seriously? Nah. Im an expert at paperwork and getting myself out of trouble. Kevin rolled onto his side, so he could see me, and tucked an arm under his head. Can I ask you something? Why the Guards? Cops like me are the reason why you never get posted where youre from. If you want to get technical, everyone I grew up with was probably a petty criminal, one way or another, not out of badness but because that was how people got by. Half the Place was on the dole and all of them did nixers, specially when the beginning of the school year was coming up and the kids needed books and uniforms. When Kevin and Jackie had bronchitis one winter, Carmel brought home meat from the Dunnes where she worked, to build up their strength; no one ever asked how she paid for it. By the time I was seven, I knew how to fiddle the gas meter so my ma could cook dinner. Your average career counselor would not have pegged me for an officer in the making. It sounded exciting, I said. Simple as that. Getting paid for the chance of some action; whats not to like? Is it? Exciting? Sometimes. Kevin watched me, waiting. Da threw a freaker, he said eventually. When Jackie told us. My da started out as a plasterer, but by the time we came along he was a full-time drinker with a part-time sideline in things that had fallen off the backs of lorries. I think he would have preferred me to be a rent boy. Yeah, well, I said. Thats just icing. Now you tell me something. What happened the day after I left? Kevin rolled over onto his back and folded his arms behind his head. Did you never ask Jackie? Jackie was nine. Shes not sure what she remembers and what she imagined. She says a doctor in a white coat took Mrs. Daly away, stuff like that. No doctors, Kevin said. Not that I saw, anyway. He was staring up at the ceiling. The lamplight through the window made his eyes glitter like dark water. I remember Rosie, he said. I know I was only a kid, but . . . Like, really strongly, you know? That hair and that laugh, and the way she walked . . . She was lovely, Rosie was. I said, She was that. Dublin was brown and gray and beige all over, back then, and Rosie was a dozen bright colors: an explosion of copper curls right down to her waist, eyes like chips of green glass held up to the light, red mouth and white skin and gold freckles. Half the Liberties fancied Rosie Daly, and what made her even more fanciable was that she didnt give a damn; none of it made her think she was anything special. She had curves that could give you vertigo, and she wore them as casually as she wore her patched jeans. Let me show you Rosie, back when the nuns had convinced girls half as pretty that their bodies were a cross between cesspools and bank vaults and that boys were filthy little burglars. One summer evening when we were about twelve, before we ever copped that we were in love with each other, the two of us played Ill-show-you-mine. The closest Id ever got to seeing a naked woman before was black-and-white cleavage, and then Rosie tossed her clothes in a corner like they were just getting in her way and spun around in the dim light of Number 16, palms up, luminous, laughing, almost close enough to touch. The thought still knocks the wind out of me. I was too young even to know what I wanted to do about her; I just knew nothing in the world, not the Mona Lisa walking through the Grand Canyon with the Holy Grail in one hand and a winning Lotto ticket in the other, was ever going to be that beautiful. Kevin said quietly, to the ceiling, We didnt even think anything was up, at first. Shay and I noticed you werent there when we woke up obviously, like but we just thought youd gone out somewhere. Only then we were having breakfast and Mrs. Daly came roaring in, looking for you. When we said you werent there, she practically had a bleeding coronary. Rosies stuff was all gone, and Mrs. Daly was screaming that youd run off with her, or kidnapped her, I dont know what she was on about. Da started roaring back at her, and Ma was trying to make the both of them shut up before the neighbors heard. Good luck with that, I said. Mrs. Dalys form of crazy is different from my mas, but at least as loud. Yeah, I know, right? And we could hear someone else yelling across the way, so me and Jackie had a look out. Mr. Daly was chucking the rest of Rosies gear out the window, and

the whole street was coming out to see what was up . . . Ive got to be honest with you, I thought it was bleeding hilarious. He was grinning. I couldnt help grinning too. Id have paid good money to watch that. Oh, yeah. It almost turned into a catfight. Mrs. Daly called you a little gouger and Ma called Rosie a little slapper, like mother like daughter. Mrs. Daly went through the roof. See, now, my moneyd be on Ma. The weight advantage. Dont let her hear you say that. She could just sit on Mrs. Daly till she surrendered. We were laughing, under our breath in the dark, like two kids. Mrs. Daly was armed, though, Kevin said. Those fingernails Fuck me. Has she still got those? Longer. Shes a human what do you call those? Garden rake? No! The ninja yokes. Throwing stars. So who won? Ma, give or take. She shoved Mrs. Daly out onto the landing and slammed the door. Mrs. Daly yelled and kicked the door and all, but in the end she gave up. She went and had a row with Mr. Daly about Rosies stuff, instead. People were practically selling tickets. Better than Dallas. In our old bedroom, Da went into a coughing fit that made the bed rattle off the wall. We froze and listened. He got his breath back in long wheezes. Anyway, Kevin said, lower. That was sort of the end of it. It was major gossip for like two weeks, and then everyone forgot about it, more or less. Ma and Mrs. Daly didnt talk for a few years Da and Mr. Daly never did anyway, sure, so no big change there. Ma gave out shite every Christmas when you didnt send a card, but . . . But it was the eighties and emigration was one of your three main career paths, along with Daddys firm and the dole. Ma had to have been expecting at least one of us to end up with a one-way ferry ticket. She didnt think I was dead in a ditch? Kevin snorted. Nah. She said whoever got hurt, it wouldnt be our Francis. We didnt call the cops or report you missing or anything, but that wasnt . . . Not that we didnt care, like. We just figured . . . The mattress moved as he shrugged. That Rosie and I had run off together. Yeah. I mean, everyone knew the two of yous had been mad into each other, right? And everyone knew what Mr. Daly thought about that. So why not, you know what I mean? Yeah, I said. Why not. Plus, there was the note. I think that was what blew Mrs. Dalys fuse: someone was messing about in Number Sixteen and they found this note. From Rosie, like. I dont know if Jackie told you I read it, I said. Kevins head turned towards me. Yeah? You saw it? Yeah. He waited; I didnt elaborate. When did . . . ? You mean before she left it there? She showed it to you? After. Late that night. Sowhat? She left it for you? Not for her family? Thats what I thought. We were meant to meet up that night, she didnt show, I found the note. I reckoned it had to be for me. When I finally figured out that she meant it, that she wasnt coming because she was already gone, I put on my rucksack and started walking. Monday morning, coming up to dawn; town was frosty and deserted, just me and a street sweeper and a few tired night-shift workers heading home in the icy half-light. Trinity clock said the first ferry was leaving Dun Laoghaire. I ended up in a squat, off Baggot Street, where a bunch of smelly rockers lived with a wall-eyed mutt named Keith Moon and an impressive amount of hash. I sort of knew them from gigs; they all figured another one had invited me to stay for a while. One of them had a nonsmelly sister who lived in a flat in Ranelagh and would let you use her address for the dole if she liked you, and it turned out she liked me a lot. By the time I put her address on my application to cop college, it was practically true. It was a relief when I got accepted and had to go off to Templemore for training. She had started making noises about marriage. That bitch Rosie, see; I believed her, every word. Rosie never played games; she just opened her mouth and told you, straight out, even if it hurt. It was one of the reasons I loved her. After life with a family like mine, someone who didnt do intrigue was the most intriguing thing of all. So when she said I swear Ill come back someday, I believed her for twenty-two years. All the time I was sleeping with the smelly rockers sister, all the time I was going out with feisty, pretty, temporary girls who deserved better, all the time I was married to Olivia and pretending to belong in Dalkey, I was waiting for Rosie Daly to walk through every door. And now? Kevin asked. After today. What do you reckon now? Dont ask me, I said. At this point, I honestly dont have a clue what was going on in Rosies head. He said quietly, Shay thinks shes dead, you know. So does Jackie. Yeah, I said. Apparently they do. I heard Kevin take a breath, like he was gearing up to say something. After a moment he let it out again. I said, What? He shook his head. What, Kev? Nothing. I waited. Just . . . Ah, I dont know. He moved, restlessly, on the bed. Shay took it hard, you leaving. Because we were such great pals, you mean? I know yous fought all the time. But underneath . . . I mean, youre still brothers, you know? Not only was this obvious bullshit my first memory is of waking up with Shay trying to jam a pencil through my eardrum but it was obviously bullshit that Kevin was making up to distract me from whatever he had been going to say. I almost pushed it; I still wonder what would have happened if I had. Before I got there, the hall door clicked shut, a faint, deliberate sound: Shay coming in. Kevin and I lay still and listened. Soft steps, pausing for a second on the landing outside, then moving on up the next flight of stairs; click of another door; floorboards creaking above us. I said, Kev. Kevin pretended to be asleep. After a while his mouth fell open and he started making

little huffing sounds. It was a long time before Shay stopped moving softly around his flat. When the house went silent I gave it fifteen minutes, sat up carefully Jesus, glowing away in the corner, gave me a stare that said he knew my type and had a look out the window. It had started to rain. All the lights in Faithful Place were out except one, throwing wet yellow streaks on the cobblestones from above my head. I have a camel-type approach to sleep: I stock up when I get the chance, but I can go without for a long time if something else needs doing. I spent that night staring at the dark lump of the suitcase under the window, listening to Da snore and getting my head in order, ready for the next day. The possibilities were tangled up like spaghetti, but two stuck out. One was the line I'd fed my family, a minor variation on the same old theme. Rosie had decided to fly solo, so she stashed the suitcase early, for a quick getaway with less chance of being snared by her family or by me; when she went back to pick it up and drop off the note, she had to go through the back gardens, because I was watching the road. Hoisting the suitcase over walls would have made too much noise, so she left it where she'd hidden it and headed off the rustles and thumps I'd heard, moving down the garden to her shiny new life. It almost worked. It explained everything except one thing: the ferry tickets. Even if Rosie had been planning to skip the dawn ferry and lie low for a day or two, in case I showed up at the harbor in full Stanley Kowalski mode, she would have tried to do something with her ticket: swap it, sell it. Those things had cost us the best part of a week's wages each. There was no way in hell she would have left them to rot behind a fireplace, unless she had no choice. The other main possibility was the one that Shay and Jackie, on their different levels of charm, had gone for. Someone had intercepted Rosie, either on her way to Theory One or on her way to meet me. I had a truce with Theory One. Over more than half my life it had worn itself a nice little corner in my mind, like a bullet lodged too deep to dig out; I didn't feel the sharp edges, mostly, as long as I didn't touch. Theory Two blew my mind wide open. It was Saturday evening, just over a day before Zero Hour, the last time I saw Rosie Daly. I was heading out to work. I had this mate called Wiggy who was the night guard in a car park, and he had this mate called Stevo who was a bouncer in a nightclub; when Stevo wanted a night off, Wiggy did his job, I did Wiggys, everyone got paid in cash and everyone went away happy. Rosie was leaning on the railings of Number 4 with Imelda Tierney and Mandy Cullen, in a sweet giggly bubble of flowery smells and big hair and glittery lip gloss, waiting for Julie Nolan to come down. It was a cold evening, fog blurring the air; Rosie had her hands pulled up into her sleeves and was blowing on them, Imelda was jiggling up and down to keep warm. Three little kids were swinging off the lamppost at the top of the road, Tainted Love was blaring out of Julie's window and the air had that Saturday-night charge, a fizzle and musk like cider, tantalizing. There's Francis Mackey, Mandy said to the air, nudging the other two in the ribs. The hair on him. He thinks he's only gorgeous, doesn't he? Howyis, girls, I said, grinning at them. Mandy was little and dark, with a puff of fringe and a lot of stone-washed denim. She ignored me. If he was ice cream he'd lick himself to death, she told the others. I'd rather someone else did it for me, I said, wiggling my eyebrows. The three of them screamed. Come here, Frankie, Imelda called, flipping her perm. Mandy wants to know Mandy shrieked and dived to clap a hand over Imelda's mouth. Imelda ducked away. Mandy said to ask you Shut up, you! Rosie was laughing. Imelda caught Mandy's hands and held them away. She said to ask if your brother fancies going to the pictures and not watching the film. She and Rosie dissolved into giggles. Mandy clapped her hands over her face. Imelda, you wagon! I'm scarlet! So you should be, I told her. Cradle robbing. He's only started shaving, do you know that? Rosie was doubled over. Not him! Not Kevin! She means Shay! Imelda gasped. Would Shay fancy going to the She was laughing too hard to finish. Mandy squeaked and dived back behind her hands. I doubt it, I said, shaking my head ruefully. The Mackey men have never had any trouble with the ladies, but Shay was in a class of his own. By the time I was old enough for action I took it for granted, from watching him, that if you wanted a girl she came running. Rosie once said Shay only had to look at a girl and her bra snapped open. I think our Shay might be more into the fellas, you know what I mean? The three of them screamed again. God but I love gangs of girls on their way out, rainbow-colored and perfect as wrapped presents; all you want to do is squeeze them and see if one of them is for you. Knowing for sure that the best one was all mine made me feel like I was Steve McQueen, like if I had a motorbike I could sweep Rosie up behind me and leap it straight over the rooftops. Mandy called, I'm telling Shay you said that! Rosie caught my eye, a tiny secret glance: by the time Mandy told Shay anything, the two of us would be a sea's width out of reach. Feel free, I said. Just don't tell my ma. We'll need to break it to her gently. Mandy'll convert him, won't you? I swear, Melda The door of Number 3 opened and Mr. Daly came out. He hitched up his trousers, folded his arms and leaned against the door frame. I said, Evening, Mr. Daly. He ignored me. Mandy and Imelda straightened up and looked sideways at Rosie. Rosie said, We're waiting for Julie. That's grand, Mr.

Daly said. Ill wait with yous, so. He pulled a squashed cigarette out of his shirt pocket and started carefully smoothing it into shape. Mandy picked a bit of fluff off her jumper and examined it; Imelda pulled her skirt straight. That night even Mr. Daly made me happy, and not just the thought of his face when he woke up Monday morning. I said, Youre looking very well dressed tonight, Mr. Daly. Are you off out to the discos yourself? A muscle flickered in his jaw, but he kept watching the girls. Bleedin Hitler, Rosie said, under her breath, shoving her hands into the pockets of her jeans jacket. Imelda said, Well go see whats keeping Julie, will we? Rosie shrugged. Might as well. Bye-bye, Frankie, Mandy said, giving me a cheeky dimpled grin.

Say howya to Shay from me, now. As Rosie turned to go, one eyelid drooped and her lips pursed, just a fraction: a wink and a kiss. Then she ran up the steps of Number 4 and vanished, into the dark hallway and out of my life. I spent hundreds of nights lying awake in a sleeping bag, surrounded by smelly rockers and Keith Moon, picking those last five minutes to shreds looking for a hint. I thought I was losing my fucking mind: there had to have been something there, had to, but I would have sworn on every saint in the calendar that Id missed nothing. And all of a sudden it looked like I might not have been off my nut after all, might not have been the worlds most gullible all-day sucker; I might have been just plain right. Theres such a fine

line. There had been nothing in that note, not one thing, that said it was meant for me. I had taken it for granted; I was the one she was ditching, after all. But our original plan had involved ditching a lot of other people, that night. The note could have been for her family, for her girls, for the whole of Faithful Place. In our old room Da made a noise like a water buffalo being strangled; Kevin muttered in his sleep and rolled over, flinging out an arm and whacking me in the ankles. The rain had turned even and heavy, settled in. Like I said, I do my best to stay one step ahead of the sucker punch. For the rest of the weekend, at least, I had to work off the assumption that Rosie had never made it out of the Place alive. In the morning, as soon as I had convinced the Dalys that they wanted to leave the suitcase in my capable hands and that they didnt want to

call the Guards, I needed to talk to Imelda and Mandy and Julie. Ma got up around seven; I heard the bedsprings creaking, through the rain, as she stood up. On her way to the kitchen she stopped in the doorway of the front room for a long minute, looking down at me and Kevin, thinking God only knows what. I kept my eyes shut. Eventually she sniffed, a wry little noise, and kept moving. Breakfast was the full whammy: eggs, rashers, sausages, black pudding, fried bread, fried tomatoes. This was clearly some kind of statement, but I couldnt work out whether it was See, were doing just grand without you, or Im still slaving my fingers to the bone for you even though you dont deserve it, or possibly Well be even when this lot gives you a heart attack. No one mentioned the suitcase; apparently we were playing happy family breakfast, which was fine

with me. Kevin shoveled down everything in reach and sneaked glances at me across the table, like a kid checking out a stranger; Da ate in silence, except for the occasional grunt when he wanted a refill. I kept one eye on the window and went to work on Ma. Direct questions would just get me the guilt trip: All of a sudden you want to know about the Nolans, you didnt care what happened to any of us for twenty-two years, rinse and repeat. The way into my mas info bank is by the disapproval route. Id noticed, the night before, that Number 5 was painted a particularly darling shade of baby-pink that had to have caused a conniption or two. Number Fives been done up nicely, I said, to give her something to contradict. Kevin gave me a startled are-you-mental stare. Looks like a Teletubby puked on it, he said, through fried bread. Revue de presse Tailor-

made to terrify (Guardian) Even more gripping than her last two. A truly amazing novel - so brilliant on dysfunctional family dynamics, with characters so real that you can hardly believe someone's made them up.

(Sophie Hannah) Gripping. Tana French's third novel hooks the reader from the outset; the characters are masterfully drawn, and the author's ear for Dublin dialogue is pitch-perfect. (Irish Independent) A gripping, literate thriller laced with black humour (Irish Times) If you're only going to buy one thriller this year, let it be Tana French's Faithful Place. Searing, utterly Dub, and very funny . . . Just don't plan anything if you pick this up; you won't be able to put it down. (Evening Herald (Dublin)) French copperfastens her reputation as an author of exceptional insight and talent. (Sunday Independent Ireland)