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## No Other Place

“White roses for this year’s bouquet, with ivy for remembrance. What do you say, Willie?”

Alice bends to sniff a rosebud, while a tabby cat weaves figures-of-eight between her ankles. She is slight – a breath of sudden wind could whirl her high above this overgrown garden.

“I know, Willie, I know. You want your milk. Just let me get these flowers gathered up.”

As she straightens, pain catches at her and she gasps, pressing the heels of both hands into her lower back. With an effort of will, she heaves her mind back to the flowers.

White roses for hope, she thinks. His hope and hers too. She must hold tight to hope. This roof over her head might be lost. The flow of words reduced to a trickle from her pen might vanish.

Even Willie might disappear – tempted by a household with more titbits. But hope she can carry on her back, like a tortoise with its shell. So long as she stays true to hope, it stays true to her.

She looks away from the garden, with its jungle of foliage, towards the house – a Church of Ireland rectory without a rector. It’s a substantial building, impressive enough in its time. But the shabbiness of neglect undermines its claims.

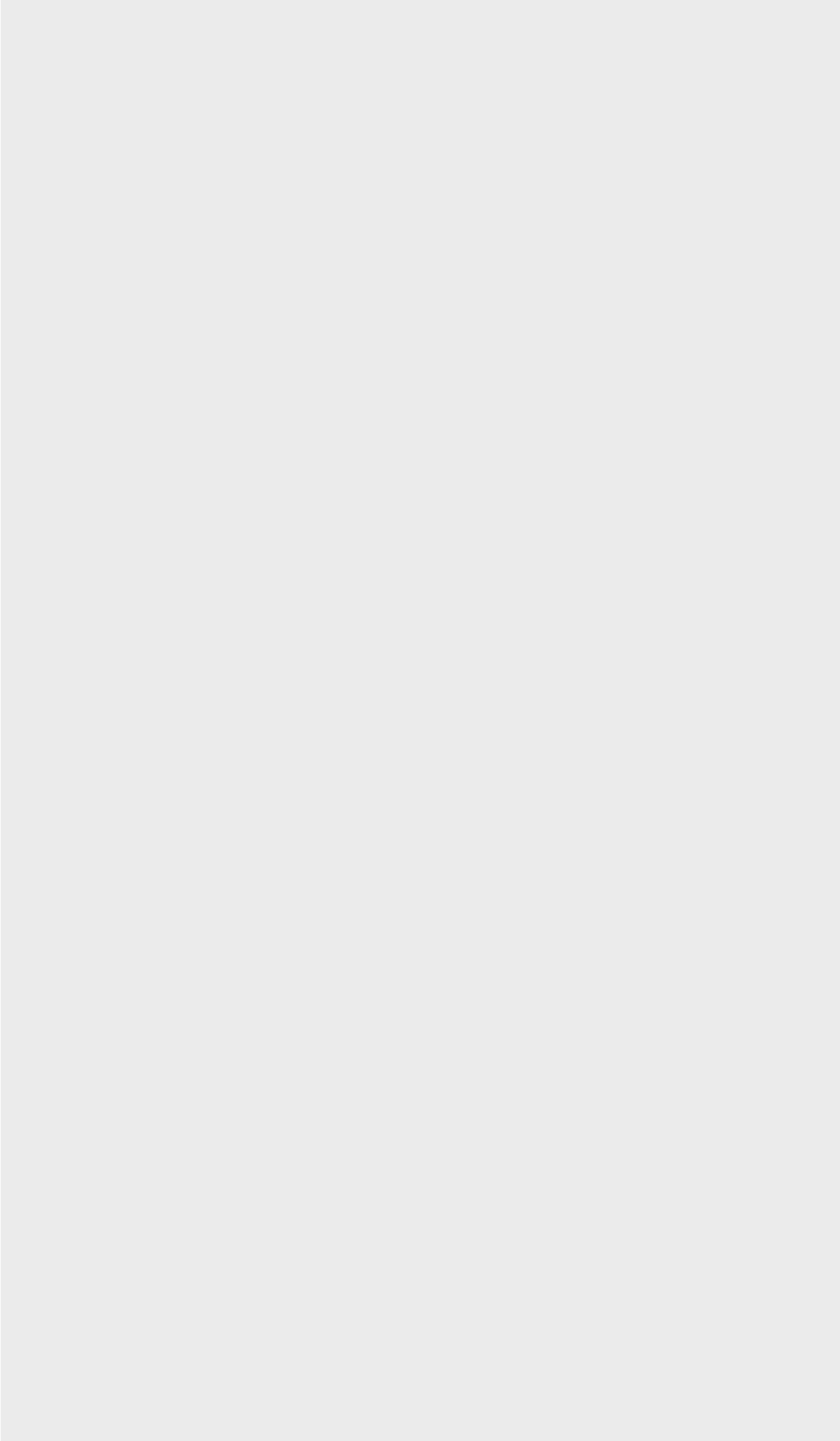
So many addresses over the years. Always on the move. Yet here she is, back where she started, near enough. She was born a handful of miles away and grew up in a house that sat fair and square beside a crossroads. How she wishes she was rooted by a crossroads again. A world of possibilities beckoned at them. Out here, the world keeps its distance: holding her at arm’s length.

Alice turns back to the rosebush, one hand cupping a bloom. The penetrating blue eyes examine it for imperfections before she takes a pair of kitchen scissors from her cardigan pocket and guillotines the stem. With the whisper of promise, the rose lands on a spill of ivy in the basket at her feet, followed by eight of its sisters.

“Morning, Miss Milligan.” A police constable advances, his moustache as stately as the bicycle he is wheeling.

She hasn’t heard him approach and is peeved by this proof of her deafness. However, she doesn’t let it show. “Good morning, Norman. Isn’t it a glorious summer’s day?”

[Alice Milligan then invites Norman in for a cup of tea.]



Tea leaves added, she returns the teapot now brimming with boiling water to the range. "I'll just put these roses in water while the tea draws." She opens a press and stretches on tiptoe for a Belleek china vase. Are the shelves getting higher or is she shrinking?

Too late, Norman realises he ought to have offered to hand it down to her. Not that she'd accept help from him or anyone else in a hurry – a headstrong one and no mistake. He watches her arrange the flowers, puzzled by the close attention she devotes to the job – placing them stem by stem, moving some an inch one way or another.

"You've green fingers, Miss Milligan. Them's fine roses." On a surge of emotion, he adds, "Like queens, they are, the way they hould up their wee heads." Mortified, he halts. It's only a jug of flowers when all's said and done.

She nods. "*And these I gathered at the dawn – Remembering you –*

*Wet in the gleam of morning' ... the garden is gone horribly to seed. I haven't the time to see about it, with the house to keep straight too. But I've always loved flowers. When I was just starting out, and felt a pen name was more appropriate, I chose a flower. Iris. Iris Olkynr."*

If you don't mind me askin', why did you choose Iris, ma'am? For tae be a poetess an' that?"

"She was the Greek goddess of the rainbow. I can never see one without stopping to admire it."

"I can never see one wi'out wishin' for a pot o' gold!"

Her smile is polite. Wealth has never interested her, although freedom from this perpetual anxiety about paying bills would be a relief. "Iris was a messenger of the gods – she rode on a rainbow between heaven and earth. Like Iris, I used to travel about a fair bit myself, back in the day. I thought nothing of flitting from Belfast to Dublin or Cork. The railways were my chariot – I had the timetable memorised. My father was the same, he knew the times upside down and inside out. Happy days! Now, I hardly ever leave Mountfield. I count myself lucky if I get the length of Omagh."

"I'm a bike man meself. I love mine. God bless the Royal Ulster Constabulary and His Majesty the King for supplyin' it."

"Hush, Norman, today's no day for blessing kings! If you only knew –" Repenting her sharp words, she stops abruptly.

Shock has immobilised his face.

Alice covers her mouth with the back of her hand, almost laughing aloud. The young are so quick to take offence.

He clatters to his feet, intending to leave. She's a Fenian to the core – just as the Sergeant said. The silver hair could fool a man if he didn't keep his wits about him. But she's betrayed her true colours.

"Don't go. Forgive me, I know you have your line of business to consider. You're Constable Gibson, as well as Norman, all grown-up now. Do, please, sit. Let's have that tea. Truly, I meant no offence. I spoke out of turn. Today's a sad day for me, you see. An anniversary."

Half against his will, he resumes his seat, although tempted to replace his cap in a show of authority. However, Norman's granny, who lives with the family, has impressed on him that only yahoos keep their heads covered indoors. She was in service in her youth and remains an authority on etiquette.

From the same press which housed the vase, china decorated with peacocks is produced.

The young policeman finds its near-transparent fragility as alarming as his hostess's anti-monarchy sentiments. "A beaker's good enough for me, ma'am. I wud'n want tae break one o' them delicate wee boys."

"They're sturdier than they look, Norman. I'm afraid there's only bread and butter to go with your tea. No jam."

"Ach, a cup in the hand is all I want, Miss Milligan."

She pours the strong tea and sets it in front of him, along with a jug of milk and a bowl of sugar. He serves himself only one spoon of sugar, although his preference is for three. Everybody in Mountfield and beyond knows how she's fixed. Poor as a church

mouse, for all her highfalutin ways. Meanwhile, she takes a breadknife to the loaf, butters the slices and lays them overlapping on a plate, devoting as much attention to their arrangement as to her floral display.

"I've noticed ladies is powerful fond o' flowers," he offers, between mouthfuls. "Me ma grows away at them. Though me da says there's no eatin' in a dahlia. A head o' cabbage wud be more tae the good."

Alice sits opposite, her tea untouched. "Flowers serve many purposes, Norman. I like to cut them as an act of remembrance, to keep faith with those who've gone ahead. I make what you might call a ceremony of it."

"Oh aye, you mentioned an anniversary earlier. I'm sorry for your loss. A relative, I take it?"

"The bond was comradeship, not family ties. But a loss, undeniably. This bouquet" – she indicates the roses and ivy – "marks the death of a fine man. An honorable man. I was privileged to know him."

Norman relaxes, at ease now. A spinster mourning a lost love – sure they're ten-a-penny since the war twenty-odd years back.

She realises how he is interpreting the flowers but doesn't correct him. People prefer to elevate romantic love above loyalty, fellowship and a common cause. Let the boy make his assumptions.

"Is he long dead?"

She frowns at the freckled hands on her lap. Involuntarily, their fingers reach out and interlace, one hand seeking comfort from the other. But her voice is steady. "They killed him twenty-three years ago today. It happened in London. I was there. On the pavement outside. Waiting. With other women from our circle who believed in him. When the bell tolled that morning to say it was done, the crowd bellowed its approval. Not words – just a thunderous roar. Of victory, I suppose. The power of might. I can hear it chiming still." She shudders. "I felt as if the human heart was beyond all understanding, that day. To cheer at another

person's death – it left me hardly able to put one foot in front of the other to leave that place. I tried telling myself his ordeal was over: he was at peace, finally. But it took me a long, long time to find any peace, myself. Those were wild times. Frightening. They ran out of control.” A clock ticks and she gives her head a quick shake. “Yet I never felt more alive than I did back then. They were exciting times too, you see. Dense with dreams. Overflowing with possibilities.” Unexpectedly, she smiles. “I always gather flowers on the third of August. In honour of him. And the dreams and possibilities we shared.”

Norman scrapes a tea leaf off his lower lip. He supposes the old lady must be talking about one of her rebels. Hanged or shot for disloyalty – and good riddance to bad rubbish. Which one of those traitors she's commemorating, he doesn't know and doesn't want to know. They were a nest of vipers, trying to murder away the link with Britain. Wasn't the British Empire the last word in magnificence? Envied by other countries with piddling wee empires? It was a privilege to be born British. Those renegades were rotten to the core – they were better off dead.

He's not prepared to listen to any more of this rebel nonsense. His granny always says he should make allowances for her and his ma backs her up. But he's had enough of Alice Milligan. There's no excuse for it, with her from good Protestant stock. Not even a papist who knows no better.

Seizing his cap, he pushes back his chair from the table. “Thankin' you for the hot drop, ma'am. I'd best be on me way.”

She pays no attention, engrossed in her own train of thought. “Sure he's dead now, Alice, for better or for worse.” That's what her brother used to say about her shrines, as he called them. “Is he?” she'd answer him back. “I wouldn't be so certain. There's an alchemy that sparks between memory, belief and imagination – in that space, he's alive. He always will be.”

She doesn't live in the real world, thinks Norman, sliding away.

As though the ghost of that judgement filters through, she lets fly a peal of laughter, clapping her hands together. Cheerful again, she carries the flowers into a drawing room impregnated with accumulated years' worth of turf smoke. A framed pencil sketch of a bearded man stands on a handsome marble mantelpiece, once white but somewhat yellowed by age, and she places the vase next to him.

"God bless you, 'verray, parfit, gentil knight'. You waved me into a seat beside you in the Ulster Hall the day the news broke about your knighthood. I was late for the meeting, delayed by a thunderstorm. You wouldn't go up onto the platform for fear they'd announce it. I thought you altered-looking – strained, weakened. And no wonder. You were just back from the Putumayo. Even so, you insisted on putting yourself out for people. Always first on your feet to offer your chair when a lady needed one. And you'd take no end of trouble checking train times for delegates to our conferences. I could never get permission to visit you in prison. Another Alice had that privilege. But you waved at me in the courtroom and sent your counsel over with a message. 'Write a poem about this, Alice,' you said. I suppose you meant it as a joke. But I took you at your word."

Head bowed, she leans against the mantelpiece. Through the years she wrote and wrote and wrote. Verse, stories, drama, journalism. Did any of it make a jot of difference? His words lit a flame. But hers? Did anyone hear her? Or was she just talking to herself? Perhaps it's irrelevant if they listen or not, she thinks –

maybe what matters is the act of writing.

Returning to the kitchen, she pours her cold tea down the sink and refills the cup from the pot. The cat has had the last of the milk. She'll have to take it black. A sip to brace herself. From her waistband she retrieves the dreaded envelope delivered by Norman Gibson. Two stamps on the top right-hand corner, one for a penny and the other a ha'penny. She looks at George VI's profile. The bicycle-provider, she thinks. Among other roles. A figurehead, of course. Kings reign, they don't rule. Bicycles are supplied only in their name.

He's her fifth monarch, imagine! None of whose rule she accepts. But whether she assents to them or not, each one has been a reality. Victoria, then Edward VII, followed by George V, succeeded by the short reign of Edward VIII, who abdicated for the love of Mrs Simpson. Such a burden for Mrs Simpson. And now this George, his brother, reigns in his place. Which tells her that kings and queens endure.

As she must.

Fancy! She has something in common with those British kings and queens. They persevere and so does she.

To give up is not in her nature. Here she was born and here she'll stay in this territory they say is theirs. And, after all, they have the crowns on postboxes and policemen's uniforms to support their case. But by living here she's planting a counter-claim. *Planting*. She half-smiles at that. A word with more than one meaning in this northern pocket of Ireland.

## Definitions<sup>1</sup>

### **Page 129**

*slight (adj.):* thin and not very strong or muscular

*to whirl (v.):* to move or go in a circle or curve

*to gather (v.):* to choose and collect things

*trickle (n.):* a slow, thin flow

*to vanish (v.):* to disappear entirely without a clear explanation, to stop existing

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*to tempt (v.):* to cause someone to do or want to do something even though it may be wrong, bad, or unwise

*titbits (n.):* a small piece of food

*tortoise (n.):* a kind of turtle that lives on land

*foliage (n.):* the leaves of plants

*rectory (n.):* the house where the rector of a Christian church lives

*rector (n.):* a priest or minister who is in charge of a church or parish

*substantial (adj.):* strongly made

*shabbiness (n.):* the quality of being in poor condition especially because of age or use

*neglect (n.):* the condition of not being taken care of

*to undermine (v.):* to make someone or something weaker or less effective usually in a secret or gradual way

*claim (n.):* a right to have something

*crossroads (n.):* a place where two or more roads cross

*to beckon (v.):* to appear attractive or inviting

*to penetrate (v.):* to see or show the way through something

*to examine (v.):* to test or look carefully at (something or someone) for signs of illness or injury

*to guillotine (v.):* to cut off the head of someone or something by dropping a heavy blade on its neck

*spill (n.):* something spilled

*peevish (adj.):* angry or annoyed

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*to brim (v.):* to be completely filled with something

*Belleek (trademark):* a very thin translucent porcelain with a lustrous pearly glaze produced in Ireland

*china (n.):* plates, bowls, cups, etc., that are made of china (a hard white material that is made of baked clay)

*to devote (v.):* to decide that something will be used for a special purpose

*surge (n.):* a sudden, large increase

*to mortify (v.):* to cause (someone) to feel very embarrassed and foolish

*jug (n.):* a large, deep container with a narrow opening and a handle

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*go to seed (v.):* to produce seed; to become less attractive, effective, etc., because of age or lack of care

*pen name (n.):* a name used by a writer instead of the writer's real name

*tae:* to (dialect)

*poetess (n.):* a girl or woman who writes poems

*perpetual (adj.):* continuing forever or for a very long time without stopping

*to flit (v.):* to move or fly quickly from one place or thing to another

*chariot (n.):* a carriage with two wheels that was pulled by horses and was raced and used in battle in ancient times

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*to supply (v.):* to make something available to be used, to provide someone or something with something that is needed or wanted

*to repent (v.):* to feel or show that you are sorry for something bad or wrong that you did and that you want to do what is right

*to immobilise (v.):* to keep something or someone from moving or working

*Fenian (n.):* a member of a secret 19th century Irish and Irish-American organization dedicated to the overthrow of British rule in Ireland

*out of turn (adv.):* at a wrong time or place and usually imprudently

*to resume (v.):* to take a seat, place or position again

*to impress (v.):* to put something in someone's mind

*yahoo (n.):* a person who is very rude, loud, or stupid

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<sup>1</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all definitions have been taken and/or adapted from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (*Merriam-Webster*, 2021, [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com)) or the Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary (*Merriam-Webster*, 2021, [www.learnersdictionary.com](http://www.learnersdictionary.com)).

*press (n.):* a closet or cupboard  
*beaker (n.):* a large drinking cup with a wide opening that is typically made of plastic or metal  
*wee (adj.):* very small or very young  
*sturdy (adj.):* strongly made

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*highfalutin (adj.):* seeming or trying to seem great or important  
*me ma:* my mother  
*me da:* my father  
*spinster (n.):* an unmarried woman who is past the usual age for marrying and is considered unlikely to marry — now often considered an insulting word  
*to elevate (v.):* to raise someone or something to a higher rank or level  
*common cause (n.):* a shared goal  
*assumption (n.):* something that is believed to be true or probably true but that is not known to be true  
*to interlace (v.):* to join things together by crossing them over and under each other  
*pavement (n.):* the sidewalk  
*to toll (v.):* to ring slowly  
*to bellow (v.):* to make a deep, loud sound  
*to chime (v.):* to make the sound of a ringing bell

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*ordeal (n.):* an experience that is very unpleasant or difficult  
*to scrape (v.):* to remove something from a surface by rubbing an object or tool against it  
*good riddance (n.):* an expression that is used to say that you are glad that someone is leaving or that something has gone  
*piddling (adj.):* small or unimportant  
*renegades (n.):* a person who leaves one group, religion, etc., and joins another that opposes it, someone or something that causes trouble and cannot be controlled  
*allowance (n.):* an amount that is regarded as acceptable or desirable  
*stock (n.):* the country or group of people that a person comes from

*papist (n.):* a Roman Catholic, usually used disparagingly (to belittle the person)  
*to engross (v.):* to hold the complete interest or attention of someone  
*alchemy (n.):* a power or process that changes or transforms something in a mysterious or impressive way

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*peal (n.):* a loud sound or series of sounds  
*turf (n.):* a dark material made of decaying plants that is burned for heat or added to garden soil (Irish English for “peat”)  
*mantelpiece (n.):* the shelf above a fireplace and the decorative pieces on the sides of the fireplace  
*a veray, parfit, gentil knight:* a quote from the “The Canterbury Tales” by the famous 14<sup>th</sup>-Century English poet Geoffrey Chaucer. It roughly translates to “a true, perfect, noble knight.”<sup>2</sup>  
*to strain (v.):* to put a lot of physical or mental effort into doing something  
*delegate (n.):* a person who is chosen or elected to vote or act for others, a representative

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*To brace oneself (v.):* to prepare oneself for something  
*Ha’penny:* a half penny  
*To endure (v.):* to continue to exist in the same state or condition  
*To persevere (v.):* to continue doing something or trying to do something even though it is difficult

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<sup>2</sup> “Meaning of ‘he was a veray parfit gentil knight?’” *Chaucer’s Tales and Works*, posted by Jk, 31 March 2011, [chaucertales.blogspot.com/2011/03/meaning-of-he-was-veray-parfit-gentil.html](http://chaucertales.blogspot.com/2011/03/meaning-of-he-was-veray-parfit-gentil.html). Accessed 20 November 2021.