

A light blue door with a brass mail slot and two windows, set in a red brick wall with a vine climbing over it. The word "Delivery" is written in a large, bold, brown, cursive font across the center of the door.

***Delivery***

In her house outside the town, Mrs Kennedy writes her diary, paints the views from her windows, and finds no comfort in the world.

Every week Charlie Blue delivers a box of groceries to her door, but she never appears. It is now one year since the accident...

On Thursdays, after the last delivery of the long day, which was to the mad Kennedy woman, Charlie Blue was allowed to keep the van for the night. He could drive home to his mother, proud behind the wheel of the yellow van, waving to any of the boys from his schooldays he might happen to see in their long gardens, playing with their children or cutting their midsummer grass. The arrangement suited his mother. She would have the dinner ready for him and then, after watching their favourite TV programme Coronation Street together, he would drive her into town to Horan's Hotel for her weekly game of cards. Tommy Horan also owned the grocery store and she thought he was a great man, a generous man to let her son have the van so that she could get to her game of cards. Charlie said nothing, but knew Tommy Horan to be a bit of a bollocks, selling his tired vegetables and soft tomatoes and eggs that were no longer fresh. He said nothing because his mother could become as nasty as her twelve-year-old dog, which she allowed to sit on her knees while she fed it with the better bits of meat from her dinner plate.

There was a light shower of rain as Charlie was driving to Mrs Kennedy's. The sun appeared strongly again from behind the clouds, the road shone blackly, and the smells of fresh-cut grass and warm earth rose from the fields and came in through the open window of the van. With one hand, Charlie took out a cigarette from a packet and lit it with his Horan's Hotel cigarette lighter. He felt lucky. Lucky to have his driver's licence, lucky to have his mother still alive, lucky to be working for Tommy Horan, even if he was an old bollocks.

August 20

A month already. A day just as lovely as that day, the clouds low over the hills. Light seed balls blowing across the land like a first snow. And I hate this beauty because Bobby cannot see it. I paint it but I hate it. With their sharp wings, the birds cut open the sky and I am delighted to see it bleed. From my window, I can see the gate and the red wallflowers, staining the stones with their blood. At night, the screams of hunted animals comfort me. I am not the only one in pain. In the morning, I cannot bear to dress, and prefer to wear only shadows. I go to each of my fifteen windows and decide which view to paint today. I might eat, if my body lets me, and then I move to my chosen window and start to paint.

Charlie drove carefully around the last bend before the Kennedy house. It was a year to the day, he realized, since poor old Foley lost control of his tractor on this very bend and killed Mrs Kennedy's young son. Bobby was his name, only four or five years of age. He and his mother were planting flowers at the foot of the big stone pillars either side of the gate, when around the corner

came Foley, shouting about the brakes. The front of the tractor was already too close to the pillar on the left, throwing up grass and earth into the sky. Mikey Tuohy, who saw the whole thing from his field above the road, told the police in detail what happened. His story earned him free beer in the pub for a long time afterwards. He said the screams of the mother nearly stopped his heart. She picked up the boy's body before Tuohy could get there, and she ran all the way up the long driveway to the big house, screaming the whole time as the boy's head dropped lifelessly against her arm and shoulder. Poor old Foley sat on the grass and put his head in his hands and didn't even recognize Tuohy when he reached him. Tuohy said Foley shouldn't have been allowed on the road, not even on a bike, because the old boy was half-blind.

September 3

Horan's got somebody new to deliver the groceries. I recognized him: Charles Cullen. He knocked and stood at the door and stared out for a long time, out beyond the fields. At what, I don't know. He stretched his arms out wide like Christ on the cross, to take the whole world to his heart, perhaps. Then he yawned and knocked again. He lifted his T-shirt and scratched his stomach. With his toe he pushed the box nearer the wall, and left slowly, looking back occasionally at the door. While I was emptying the box afterwards I discovered a box of chocolates I hadn't asked for. I must remember not to pay for that.

Now, at the end of summer, the land is bled dry and colours are slowly returning to brown. The cooler air moves against my skin like long grass. When the night enters the house, I look for Bobby. I want to run a bath and pour warm water over his small, smooth back. I want to turn back his soft sheet and lift him into bed and bring the edge of the sheet to his chin. I want to kiss his eyelids as he sleeps. Instead, the darkness tears at my own.

Once, last autumn, as darkness was falling, Charlie saw an owl standing on the right-pillar of Mrs Kennedy's gate. It didn't move as Charlie edged the van past the ruined left pillar and wall, and then past the gate still on its side since the accident. At first, he thought it was a shadow. He had stopped by the pillar and quietly rolled down the window, when the top of the fat, dark shape turned towards him. From the centre of two wide circles two eyes stared evenly at him, daring him to move, and then with two or three movements of its surprisingly wide wings it slowly, coldly, flew off low over the field towards the trees. Charlie remembered feeling uncomfortable, judged in some way.

October 9

Charles still brings the groceries. For the same reason, I both hate and love him being at my door each week. He reminds me of a better life. I so clearly remember Charles in my class, tall and clumsy at his desk. I had to let him stand in the end. He was freer that way. And the day I decided, he had a gift, it comes back so clearly. (I hate the way I can remember every detail of my life before Bobby and Bobby's death!) He brought his finished painting up to my desk and at first, I was disappointed. 'A Beach in Summer' it was called, but everything in Charles's painting was a different

shade of blue, not just the sea: blue sand, blue hills, blue boat, and what I thought was a blue sun. I asked Charles why he hadn't used other colours, and he said in that frightened way he had, 'Well, Miss, it's a beach at night-time, you see.' Charlie Blue they called him after that. Maybe he still paints. I hope so.

When the police arrived, Mrs Kennedy wouldn't let them into the house, Tuohy said. Nor the priest either. In the end, the police had to break a window and get in that way. They found her upstairs washing the child in the bath. The bloodstained water went everywhere, over the walls and the mirror, wetting the priest and the doctor as they forced the dead boy out of her arms. Dr Murphy phoned his wife, who came over and stayed in the house. Mrs Kennedy didn't come out of the bathroom until the next morning. She came downstairs still covered in blood and told Mrs Murphy to kindly leave her house. Hasn't been seen outside her house and garden since the child was buried. From the high field Tuohy says he sometimes sees her sitting all day at one of her windows. Or walking naked to the woodpile or throwing bits of food out for her cats. As Charlie drove the van up the driveway, he looked around for her, as he always did. He threw the end of his cigarette out of the window, thinking to himself that he had only two cigarettes left and that the old bollocks wouldn't be paying him until tomorrow evening. He'd better save them. He looked up at the high field behind Mrs Kennedy's and guessed that Tuohy was probably spending a lot more time up there than he needed to.

December 25

I found a Christmas cake I hadn't ordered in the box of groceries yesterday.

Sometimes a man comes to the gate and stands there, staring up at the house. Who is he? I wonder. He was there last week and again today.

I feel Bobby's presence strongly today. I fetched the Christmas tree from the cellar and put it in the front room, with coloured lights and pretty glass balls on it. I write in its red and blue and green light. I have wrapped his favourite toys and placed them under the tree. I close my eyes and he is there, lying on the carpet by the tree, opening his presents, turning his blond head around to smile up at me, not minding a bit that they're the same presents as last year. I drink my wine and eat a piece of Christmas cake. Too rich for you, Bobby, too rich.

Charlie couldn't imagine his former art teacher naked. Every other woman in town had spent time naked in his dreams, even Mrs Simpson in the post office. Mrs Kennedy was older than her but not by a million years, she could only be forty or so, and she had had a good shape back then during his time at school, even if it was hidden by long dresses and colourful baggy jackets. He had liked her. She hadn't laughed at him for being stupid. She had put up a painting he had done of a beach at nighttime, right up beside the board where everybody could see it. That was good. It was worth being called Charlie Blue for that.

February 18

This week Charlie hid a couple of oranges in the box. I love him for these small presents, the only kisses I receive.

Today the stranger walked up the driveway to the door. I saw him clearly through the glass, tall, blond-haired, blue-eyed. Serious. He just stood there for a long time, unmoving. One of the cats scratched at the kitchen window and I looked away for a moment. When I looked back, he was gone.

Snow fell again today but a hard sun drove it into the hungry grass.

Charlie felt sorry for the thin grey mother cat. She came up to him as he pulled back the side door of the van. He reached down to scratch her head and she replied by rubbing her whole body against the leg of his jeans. It's not much of a life for you, Charlie said, not like you used to have, anyway.

He was halfway to the front door when he saw last week's box exactly where he had left it. A busy line of black ants led from the box to a hole in the front wall of the house. Confused, he walked up and down for a while, looking at the front door and windows. He put the box he was carrying back into the van, lifted his T-shirt and scratched his stomach. Near the corner of the house, he saw a torn egg-box and a pile of clean chicken bones.

April 28

I feel so heavy. As the world outside grows lighter and fills with hope, I become heavier. My paintings are still in winter, almost colourless. I paint from one window now, from Bobby's room, which gives the best view of the gate.

My handsome stranger is making good progress. He began by laying out the stones in rows and writing numbers on them. Sometimes he stood up and looked back up at me, serious as always, his blond hair not quite visible from where I sit. The wall is finished. All that remains are the pillar and the gate.

Charlie smoked a cigarette, then knocked on the door for the first time since he began deliveries to Mrs Kennedy nearly a year before. Just leave the box by the door and she'll bring the groceries in herself, Horan had said. But Charlie couldn't just drop the new box down beside the old one and let the ants run all over it. When he knocked, the door opened. It hadn't been properly shut.

'Mrs Kennedy?' he called into the shadowy hall.

May 21

Charlie still leaves his small offerings. Yesterday it was a packet of sweets. I cannot eat them but I feel grateful and that feeds me.

I heard the owl call again last night. Closer this time. In my head I could see his long brown body diving from the sky, the terrified movements of the small animal he caught, the slow beat of his wings as he rose into the nighttime trees.

The pillar is almost finished. The gate lies on its side on the grass, ready to be put back in place.

Charlie felt cold. These thick-walled country houses were impossible to heat, from a single wood fire, anyway. His eyes got used to the darkness.

'Mrs Kennedy?' he called again. He went into the front room. There was a painting she had been working on, and others standing against a wall, which was papered in a flower pattern. An untidy pile of silver knives and forks on the carpet. He closed the door and moved towards the back of the house, where the kitchen was, he supposed. This door was open. He switched on the light. There was a fridge in the corner, still working. Three bananas blackened in a glass bowl. He could see that rats had been here; they had eaten into the bread and the butter and there were even tooth marks in a piece of pink soap in a dish. Charlie went back out into the hall and stood at the bottom of the stairs. He felt colder than ever.

'Mrs Kennedy?' he called and started up the stairs.

June 20

The days are like children, unwilling to come in from their play, and tonight the sky is a gentle purple, as smooth and as tight as the skin of an aubergine.

I have washed all my brushes for the last time. Each one left its own history of colour on my hands. I emptied the wooden knife-and-fork box and put them into it, along with all my paints. My present to you, Charlie Blue.

Tomorrow I will walk through the gate.

The smell of paint-cleaner hangs in the air.

While Charlie waited for O'Reilly the policeman and Dr Murphy to finish inside, he smoked his last cigarette, leaning against the side of the van, looking out over the trees to the distant, darkening hills. A yellow light came from the open doorway and upstairs window of the house. He had just finished his cigarette when O'Reilly came out and handed him a small wooden box, told him to go on home, that the ambulance could take over an hour to get there from Ballinasloe and that there was no point in waiting. O'Reilly would see him tomorrow. Ambulances never hurry for the already dead.

Charlie drove back into town and parked outside Horan's Hotel. The bollocks could keep his van. Through the hotel window, he could see his mother at her card game, the dog at her feet. She must have asked a neighbour to bring her into town. The dog sensed his presence, looked out but did

not move.

He reached into the van and took out Mrs Kennedy's box of brushes and paints from the passenger seat. Shutting the door with his shoulder, he put her present under his arm and walked on, out past the last lights of the town and into the blue shadows of the moonlit countryside, feeling nervous but welcomed, like a stranger at home in what was once a foreign land.

- THE END -

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