

So he flipped a coin.

Heads he'd tell her. Tails, he wouldn't.

The fifty-pence piece was still in the pocket of his overalls from yesterday's teabreak. He took it out, and tipped it up with his thumb, like he'd seen his dad do on Saturday nights by the snooker table.

The coin rose and spun in the air.

It turned over and over.

It lingered in flight, and time.

The Queen tipped him a wink on the way back down.

As if to say: 'All will be well.'

Heads he'd tell her, tails he wouldn't.

It hit a plate on the draining board, bounced twice, then hit the floor tiles.

From another room. 'Niall? What are you doing now?'

'Nothing.'

Looking down, he saw the coin roll across the floor and disappear under the dresser. He bent down to look underneath. The tiles were cold against his cheek. He smelt dust and cooking oil. He heard the kitchen door open. He looked into the black but couldn't see anything.

Looking up, he saw his mum leaning on the doorframe, holding a plate with the remains of some potatoes, peas, some meat.

'What are you doing?'

'Dropped fifty pee.'

'Tight sod.'

Niall snorted, his arm probing beneath the dresser.

'You'll get filthy under there.'

'Yeah, yeah.'

'Do you want any tea or not?'

Flip another one?

'Gary? He's finally gone mad, love.'

His dad shouted something from the other room, he couldn't hear what. But his mum laughed and went over to the sink, sagging there to catch her

breath.

He looked again into the darkness. Dust blew into his eyes from the draft through the wall. He blinked them shut.

Flipping another one wouldn't count.

Say it's heads. So he tells her. And if the whole time, the other coin, the original coin, is lying under there tails up? That makes it null and void, doesn't it. How are you supposed to tell?

But he had to tell her at some point. This weekend they were about to start spending. Officially. Thank god she was happy enough with his nan's old wedding ring.

She'd understand.

Everyone said how clever she was.

They could wait.

They could wait until all this had panned out in what ever way it was going to. They could wait until they knew what was happening.

Heads or tails, Niall.

He swept his arm around in an arc under the dresser. Out first was a broken mug-handle, then a dustball. Next, the coin rolled out past his nose. He made a grab for it but missed and banged his knuckles on the edge of the dresser.

'Fuck.'

'Niall!'

His mum coughed. The coin rolled across the floor tiles, around the leg of the formica table, bounced over a dropped pea, then up over the lip of the doorway and out into the carpet in the front hall. Niall blinked again. The dust.

But the coin had gone.

'Can you get out of the way?'

'Sorry.'

He got to his feet and leant back against the dresser. He looked in the direction the coin had gone and then followed its trail back to underneath the dresser.

'Are you seeing Madeline tonight?'

'No.'

'All right, I only asked.'

He smiled. 'Sorry.'

'Honestly, the temper on you sometimes.'

Heads, tails.

'Do you want anything to eat or not?'

'I'll get something later.'

'Suit yourself.'

She shuffled away.

He walked into the hall, looking for the coin in the way he pretended not to notice the best-looking girl in the room. It was nowhere. He put his hand on the front door handle.

#

'What about the cinema then?' she'd said earlier on the phone, for something to break the quiet.

'There's nothing on.'

'There's always something on.'

'Nothing I fancy, then.'

'A drink?'

'We need to be watching our pennies, don't we. With the wedding and everything.'

'All right, Niall. Jesus.'

A pause. That was while he felt for the fifty pee coin in his overalls.

'Sorry,' he said.

'It's ok.'

'It's just. Everything's so.'

'I know. It might never happen, you know. There are talks with the Government. About a rescue package. To keep the Japanese happy.'

'We've heard that before.'

'Niall.'

'If The Plant shuts, we've had it.'

'I've got a plan. I've had. An offer,' she said. 'I need to talk it through with you.'

'What sort of plan? What sort of offer?'

It was her turn to be quiet and it was no better.

So now they both had something to say but they didn't know how to say it.

Did they see each other?

Did they see the story?

Did they see anything?

#

Now, from the hallway, he watched his dad sprawling on the sofa, looking like just one of the cushions. His brother was slicing up zombies on the Xbox. The only light came from the gutter of the TV and the lamp in the corner by the empty armchair.

Niall stood in the doorway.

'That's going off in a minute. Local news is on,' his dad was saying.

'What do you want to watch that for?' said his brother.

'Only way of finding out what's happening to this town, isn't it.'

'We all know what's happening.'

'Just turn it off.'

His brother blew a zombie's head off with a shotgun and switched off the console.

'Good lad. Where's the remote?'

He'd try again upstairs. In peace. With some light.

Halfway up the stairs, he stopped. He looked at the fading photo hanging on the wall, as if for the first time. A group of men in overalls outside the main entrance to The Plant, gurning, thumbs up to the camera, stacked crates of beer to one side, the front end of a bus on the other. His dad was there, in the front row, a full head of curly hair, looking more serious than the others. But in a good way. There was Uncle Pete too, arm draped loosely around the bloke next to him, whoever that was, clinking bottles. It looked like a sunny day, too. He'd seen the photo a million times. He always imagined himself standing there with them. It made him feel.

Something.

That felt like the past, but also a future.

He would have to tell her. The wedding was off. Too much. Uncertainty.

Coin or no coin. Heads or tails.
It was just a matter of when to tell her.
And how.
He came back down the stairs.
From the sitting room came a TV voice.

AND OF COURSE THESE HIGH LEVELS OF UNCERTAINTY CAUSED
BY THE RESULT OF THE EU REFERENDUM WILL HAVE KNOCK-ON
EFFECTS FOR THE PRIMRARY INDUSTRIES OF THE REGION, WHICH IN
TURN

Niall went quickly into the kitchen and shut the door behind him.
'Bloody hell, Niall, you're like a caged tiger.'
His mother was filling the dishwasher and drying up the good china. She
wiped some sweat from the corner her left eye.
And that's when Niall saw the coin again. From the corner of his left eye.
It was rolling up the stairs.
And, as it went, it was getting bigger.

#

A knock at the front door.
'Get that, will you, Niall?'
'It's probably Ali.'
'After your dad's beer again.'
He looked at his mum and smiled.
'Well, let him in then,' she said.
But Niall was already out of the kitchen and at the front door.
The volume on the TV rose a few notches.

*This is an amazing workforce, said his dad's voice, formal, his interview
voice. And we will do whatever it takes. Whatever it takes. To save our jobs.*

INCLUDING STRIKE ACTION?

Whatever it takes. I have the authority as union representative to

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE INTERESTS OF THE BOARD IN JAPAN? HOW CAN THEY BE EXPECTED TO INVEST IN A PLANT LOCATED OUTSIDE THE SINGLE MARKET?

This is an amazing workforce...

Niall opened the door.

It was Maddie. Her hair was beaded with rain.

The local MP was on now.

WE WILL DO WHATEVER IT TAKES TO SAVE THEIR JOBS.

'Then save our fucking jobs, you stupid old bag!'

From the kitchen. 'Gary!'

'Sorry about that,' said Niall.

'It's ok,' said Maddie.

'What are you doing here?'

'I was in the neighbourhood.'

'Yeah, right. It takes three busses for you to get here.'

'So let me in. I'm soaked.'

The coin must have seen its chance and rolled back down the stairs, because now it was bumping over the doorstep and heading down the pathway towards the gate.

#

Maddie brushed past him, smiled once, then went straight through to the kitchen. Niall looked both ways out of the door, saw nothing, and slammed it.

Maddie and his mum were embracing.

'Tea, love, or something stronger?'

Laughing. 'What have you got?'

'Gary! Where's that gin you got from Pete?'

'I've drunk it!'

His mum sighed and shook her head.

'Tea's fine, Jane.'

'Maddie's here!'

His dad appeared in the kitchen doorway.

'Sorry. How are you, love? I hope you don't mind. We're on the telly.'

'Of course, Gary.' She was frowning, though.

His dad disappeared again.

Maddie must have known what was going on up there. At The Plant. All Project Managers were said to be 'in the know', but unable to divulge matters reserved only for members of the executive group. It's not that simple, you see.

'How are you, Maddie?' said his mum. 'I didn't think you were seeing each other tonight.'

Looking at Niall. 'I thought I'd surprise him.'

'Well, I think you did. Look at the gormless expression on him.'

'That's just how he looks.'

'Like his dad.'

They laughed.

'I heard that!'

Niall leant against the fridge.

Mum placed three mugs of tea on the table. Maddie sat down. Mum looked from one to the other, then picked up her mug.

'Well, I'll leave you to it.'

'Thanks, Jane.'

'Cheers, mum.'

Niall sat down.

'What's the matter?' said Maddie.

'Nothing. What's the matter with you?'

Maddie took a sip of her tea.

'I'm just,' he said. 'I'm worried. Like everyone else is.'

'And that's all?'

'What do you mean "And that's all?"'

'It's nothing to do with us?'

'It's just. There's so many things happening at the moment. I can't,' Niall put his mug down and laced his fingers. 'Fit them together.'

'Some things are just...out of our control.'

'You keep saying that. What's this plan of yours? This offer?'

Maddie sat back in her chair and stared into Niall's eyes. For the first time, he noticed a fleck of grey in her irises.

'Tell me what's going on in your head,' she said, 'and I'll tell you what's going on in mine.'

He lowered his head.

'I just think. Maybe we should wait a bit. Put it off. Until after all. This.'

The sounds of some sort of quiz show came into the kitchen from the sitting room.

Take a look at what you could have won. A home. A job for life. And a beautiful wife. All the trimmings, lad. All the trimmings.

'I was watching that!' His mum's voice.

'Geoff has just texted. Something's happened. There's going to be a live broadcast from outside The Plant. After the news.'

But Maddie had stood up and was heading towards the front door.

'Oh, are you off, love?'

'Maddie. Wait.'

The weather woman was waving her hands over the clouds swirling above England.

#

Maddie had opened the front door.

'Have you got something to say or not?'

She was waiting. He couldn't fit the words together. There was no shape. Just a glow, inside a haze.

Maddie turned away.

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS, A SPECIAL, BESPOKE DEAL IS TONIGHT BEING PUT TOGETHER BY THE GOVERNMENT, REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE JAPANESE OWNERS OF THE PLANT AND THE EXECUTIVE BOARD. AS WE SPEAK, WE ARE EXPECTING THE RESULT OF THESE NEGOTIATIONS TO BE ANNOUNCED. THIS, IT HARDLY NEEDS SAYING, WILL HAVE HUGE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE PLANT,

AND OF COURSE FOR THE TOWN ITSELF.

'Maddie! They're announcing something.'

She stopped, her hand on the front gate. Without turning around: 'What?'

'Something about a deal.'

'Well, that sounds positive.' Her voice was flat. But she didn't move.

Niall stood straddling the door step, one leg in the house, one on the front path.

He shouted into the house. 'I'm just taking Maddie home.'

'What, already?'

They walked together down the street, Niall looking for wherever his dad had parked the car.

The coin was nowhere.

#

He turned off the radio.

He stopped at a red light. Three men stood smoking in a huddle outside the pub. He thought he recognised one of them from the hunch of his shoulders and the stabbing movements of the arm holding the cigarette. As he stared, the man turned round, caught his eye, winked. Niall turned away.

The light turned green.

'How can we afford to get married now?' he said at last, indicating left, realising she wasn't going to say any more. .

'It doesn't have to cost a fortune.'

'I want you to have a proper wedding. The one we wanted. But we don't have that kind of money. Not at the moment. Not. With all this.'

'We could put the date back. Niall, you're going the wrong way.'

'Shit.'

He pulled into a deserted garage forecourt.

'Until when?'

'Until we know for sure.'

'We'll never know for sure. There is no 'sure'. You can't control everything in life. You just can't. Sometimes, you just have to take a chance and let what's going to happen happen.'

Heads or tails.

'I can't get a mortgage. I can't afford a house. There's a bit on that form you fill in that specifically says: do you see your financial situation changing in the near future? Do I? I'll say I do.'

'We can manage on my salary.'

'Who's to say you'll have a job?'

'Geoff says...'

'Oh, right, Geoff. He'll be all right, you watch.'

Niall started the engine, lurched out into the road and drove past the darkened windows of the shops and houses, past the bus stop where a woman sat rocking a pram, past the exhaust centre, the school, the overgrown tumbledown house where no-one lived, the park with its whistling aspens and faded red roundabout; beyond, the fields, stubbled now, asleep, and beyond them even, the edges.

'Where are we going?'

On to the dark edges of town.

#

'Listen, Niall. There's chance they'll move operations to Spain.'

'Spain?'

'A lot of the tech team will be kept on, but they're not sure about...'

'Why Spain?'

'Well, Catalonia, actually. Martorell. It's a suburb of Barcelona.'

'Yeah?'

His hands gripped the wheel until the skin around his nails began to whiten.

'Geoff says he could get me a position there.'

'Nice.'

'Niall. I'm serious. You could come with me.'

'You'd go to Spain?'

'We could go to Spain.'

'When did he tell you about this?'

'Yesterday.'

'And you're just telling me now?'

'Niall, that's why I came round. To tell you face to face.' §

It was darker out here. Niall slowed the car, and leant his head against the headrest. The space closed in around them.

'So that was the deal?' he said.

Maddie was quiet for a while. Then. 'I don't know much about it.'

#

At last, he said: 'I flipped a coin this evening.'

'What?'

'Heads we marry. Tails we wait.'

'You're joking.'

'I've always used a coin. When I'm not sure what to do. I did the same thing just before I decided to make a move on you.'

'Jesus, Niall.'

'Aren't you going to ask me what the coin said?'

'I don't care what the coin said.'

'It rolled under the kitchen dresser. I couldn't find it. I thought about flipping another one. But that wouldn't have counted. What if it had said one thing, and the whole time there was the other coin, the original coin, lying under the kitchen cabinet, tails up. Or heads up. And then I imagined the coin kept rolling out from under the cabinet, getting bigger, rolling down the road, coming down one side up and then the other. "Head or tails, Niall? Heads or tails?"'

The car had almost slowed to a stop. Niall's foot pressed down on the accelerator. Black trees. An unlit cottage. Now fields.

Maddie sighed, and brushed her eyes with the back of her hand. 'Then maybe we should go back and see what the coin said.'

And that's exactly when it happened. At that exact moment. The moment when the coin shot out from behind a hedge and cut across in front of the car, silver in the headlamps. Niall braked sharp, and the car skidded, turned, span, and rolled rear-first into the hedge at the side of the road. He turned off

the engine, which ticked now in the silence.

'What was that?' she said.

'Are you all right?'

'Yes.' Both her hands were gripping the door handle. Her face was white in the dark. 'What happened?'

He reached across her, prised her fingers one by one from the handle, took them in his own, held them against his cheek. Reaching out, he brushed her hair behind her ear. But in the dark, it was hard to see into her eyes.

'What now?' he said.

After a little while, she said 'I don't know.'

But over here, on the other side of the hedge, hidden, buried amidst the dirt and dry roots, the coin lies on its edge, shrunken now, just a dirty, greasy 50 pence piece, spent.

Heads. Tails. It doesn't matter.

Here, in the darkness, at the edge of the town, what can you chance, if not love? If not, we live, as we dream, alone.

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