

ACT ONE SCENE TWO

LIGHTS COME UP ONCE MORE ON THE NURSERY BUT TIME HAS MOVED ON; THE SUN IS STARTING TO SET. WITH THE LIGHT FADING THE SHADOWS IN THE ROOM HAVE BECOME LONGER. A YOUNG WOMAN IN A CHEAP COAT AND HAT ENTERS THE ROOM CARRYING A BATTERED SUITCASE. THIS IS AINE. SHE WALKS ACROSS THE ROOM, PUTS DOWN HER SUITCASE AND LOOKS AROUND THE ROOM, LISTENING. ONCE CONFIDENT SHE IS ALONE, SHE TAKES A PACKET OF CIGARETTES FROM HER COAT POCKET, AND TAKING ONE FROM THE PACKET, LIGHTS IT. SHE THEN WALKS TO THE WINDOW AND THROWS THE DEAD MATCH OUT. SHE DRAWS ON THE CIGARETTE AND THEN WALKS AROUND THE ROOM AS IF TRYING TO TAKE IN THE PLACE ONCE MORE. AS SHE MOVES SHE LOOSENS HER COAT BUTTONS TO REVEAL A LIMP COTTON DRESS. SHE MOVES TO THE WINDOW ONCE MORE AND BREATHES IN DEEPLY. SHE TAKES A FINAL DRAW ON THE CIGARETTE, ROLLS IT BETWEEN HER FINGERS TO EXTINGUISH IT AND THEN THROWS IT OUT THE WINDOW. FROM THE POCKET OF HER DRESS SHE TAKES A RED LIPSTICK AND, OPENING IT BEGINS TO APPLY IT TO HER LIPS. AS SHE DOES SO SHE SMILES AND THEN CROSSES TO THE BIRDCAGE. OPENING THE DOOR SHE REACHES IN AND CAREFULLY SLIPS HER HAND AROUND THE BIRD AND BRINGS IT OUT OF THE CAGE AND IN TWO HANDS HOLDS IT UP TO HER FACE. SHE IS ANIMATED.

AINE

Now you have to tell me everything, little bird. I want to know it all. Everything you've seen. Everything you've heard. And in return? In return I'll tell you all about my adventures. Oh, and what an adventure it's been little bird; a life beyond your wildest imaginings.

A SHADOW PASSES DOWN THE CORRIDOR BEHIND THE GLASS WALL, MOVING QUICKLY AND QUIETLY. BILLY ENTERS THE ROOM. AINE REPLACES THE BIRD IN THE CAGE.

BILLY

You're a dangerous body, d'you know that?

AINE SMILES AT HIM

AINE

Did you do what I asked?

BILLY

I did.

AINE

And no-one saw you?

BILLY

No-one; they're all far too busy downstairs with the preparations for this great wedding to notice the likes of me.

AINE

Then I owe you.

BILLY

You do. I'll have to put my mind as to how you might repay the debt.

AINE

Oh, will you indeed?

BILLY

And by the way I can smell that cigarette coming up the stairs. How long have you been out of this house? Have you forgotten already what they'll do if they catch you smoking up here?

AINE

I've forgotten nothing, Billy.

BILLY

You might have been leading 'the life of O'Reilly' while you were away, but you can't carry on like that if you're serious about coming back here.

AINE

Like you say; I'd be mad to think I could.

BILLY

I worry about you.

AINE

There's no need.

THEY HOLD THE MOMENT. AINE SMILES.

BILLY

And after every thing that's happened...

I had to come back. **AINE**

Why? **BILLY**

It's complicated. **AINE**

Do you trust me? **BILLY**

You know I do. **AINE**

Then come back with me now. **BILLY**

I can't. **AINE**

I care about you, Aine. **BILLY**

I know... And I'm grateful. **AINE**

BILLY
I don't want you to be grateful. We could be away from here in the van in a moment.

AINE GIGGLES

I love you, Billy. **AINE**

AINE KISSES HIM ON THE CHEEK. BILLY LAUGHS RUEFULLY.

I wish you did. **BILLY**

THE SOUND OF MALE LAUGHTER ACCOMPANIED BY THE CLICK OF DEIRDRE'S STICK ON THE STAIRS IS HEARD OFFSTAGE. DEIRDRE AND TWO OF THE GROOM'S PARTY THEN MOVE DOWN THE CORRIDOR BEHIND THE FROSTED GLASS SCREEN.

AINE AND BILLY FREEZE CONCERNED THEY ARE ABOUT TO BE CAUGHT.

DEIRDRE

(Offstage) This way, your rooms are down here. You have a fine view of the gardens and the lake from the windows in this wing of the house.

THE GUESTS MOVE THROUGH AND DISAPPEAR FROM VIEW. BILLY BREATHES A SIGH OF RELIEF.

BILLY

I have to go. I can't get caught up here; especially with you.

HE WAITS FOR HER TO SPEAK BUT SHE IS SILENT.

BILLY (CONT'D)

You're a mystery, d'you know that?

AINE

I need them to know I'm still here, Billy.

BILLY

You think they care? That they'll even notice?

AINE

I won't just lie down and be walked over.

BILLY

And I wouldn't expect it of you. I love the spit in you. And I know you think Niamh's different, but I have to tell you, I don't think she is. In the end she's 'family' and that's what counts.

AINE

She's always treated me well.

BILLY

Only because it's suited. When it comes down to it, she's one of them and always will be. You ask anyone here on the estate, they'll say no different. Nice as pie to your face when life's sweet, but when it's not... You'll not change who they are, Aine, whatever it is you have in mind.

AINE

I don't believe she played any part in what happened.

BILLY

Then I hope to God you're right. I'll be back later; they've given me a new list of things they want delivered for tomorrow.

HE STARTS TO MOVE AND THEN STOPS

BILLY (CONT'D)

Will you promise me something?

AINE NODS HER AGREEMENT.

BILLY (CONT'D)

That you'll just think about what I said. I couldn't bear for all this to go wrong.

AINE

Nothing's going wrong, Billy.

BILLY

I hope not. But I tell you now, you have more faith in these people than I do.

SHE WATCHES HIM GO, HER MOOD SOMBRE. THEN, FUELLED BY A NEW ENERGY SHE SPINS ROUND TO FACE THE BIRDCAGE.

AINE

Oh you drive a hard bargain, little bird. My story first? Then listen... And carefully.

AS SHE TELLS HER STORY SHE MOVES ABOUT THE SPACE, ENJOYING THE SPACE, RELISHING THE WORDS AS SHE SPEAKS.

AINE (CONT'D)

I met this painter, a good painter by all accounts, not that I know anything about it, but she said to me she'd like to paint me, to put me in one of her pictures. I have to admit, I was surprised. I'm tidy enough, but not what you might call a looker. People of my class don't have the polish on their skin to be truly sensual. 'So why do you want to paint me?' I says. 'Because you're so full of life,' she said. 'Sure you don't just want me to get my clothes off, so you can get an eyeful of me in me skin?' I says. 'If I wanted you to take your clothes off' she replied, 'I'd seduce you. And then it wouldn't just be your clothes that would go. I'd peel back your skin, open your flesh right out until I could touch your soul.' 'Would you?' I says. And then she said, 'So which of the two would you like?' And I says, 'It had better be the picture because if you was to seduce me you'd only be in for a disappointment.' 'And why would that be?' she replied. 'So I says, 'Because if you was to seduce me, to open me up like you say, what you'd find is that someone else had been there before you and torn out my soul.' 'You want to take more care over your choice of lovers' she said. 'Oh it wasn't a lover,' I said. 'Love had nothing to do with it!'

THE MOMENT IS BROKEN BY THE CLICKING OF DEIRDRE'S STICK IN THE CORRIDOR.

SUDDENLY DEIRDRE IS IN THROUGH THE DOOR AND IN THE ROOM. AINE IMMEDIATELY ADOPTS A MORE SERVANT-LIKE DEMEANOUR. DEIRDRE CATCHES THE WHIFF OF CIGARETTE SMOKE, LOOKS AT AINE BUT CHOOSES TO SAY NOTHING.

DEIRDRE

Good. You arrived safely.

AINE

I did. Thank you.

DEIRDRE

Have you been here long?

AINE

A matter of minutes.

DEIRDRE

I hope the journey was comfortable.

AINE

Quite. Thank you.

DEIRDRE

You should have telephoned from the station, someone could have driven down to fetch you.

AINE

I wanted to walk.

DEIRDRE

It's a long way from the station.

AINE

To feel the country air on my face once more.

DEIRDRE

With such a heavy case?

AINE

It's good to be able to breathe again; to smell the blossom.

DEIRDRE

The cherry trees are magnificent at the moment.

AINE

They are; I've missed them.

*AINE REMOVES HER COAT SLOWLY AND LAYS IT
OVER HER CASE.*

AINE (CONT'D)

So, she's to be married.

DEIRDRE

That's why you're here.