

This Happy, section 1-3, as per translation by Regina López Muñoz, 2020:

When I awoke to find him gone I was not immediately surprised. After all we had argued the previous night and I had broken a plate with a chaffinch on it, one part of a set decorated with thrushes and various tits. I had broken it emphatically but, surprised at myself, snapped back at the sandy *crack*: I felt remorse, as if I had let slip something I didn't mean.

As I lay in the bed it occurred to me that he could not have gone for a walk in the lane, or to visit the landlady, or to buy supplies, because the sun still hadn't come up. The kitbag that he travelled with was gone from the top of the inlaid chest. And then, Oh hell, I thought: he's gone back to his wife.

It was early. The window was a coffer in the wall and the room was filled with moonlight, and in the faded wallpaper were putti, Virgins, wolfhounds, hags, calligraphy. The moon lit the wardrobe and the horse-bits on the windowsill. It was an austere room. There was only the chest, the wardrobe, the bed with its cakey eiderdown, and a stack of mildewed books. Mice lisped in panels and the boards groaned underfoot. I lay in the hollow he'd left, beginning to feel afraid.

I listened for the ring of his weight on the ladder, for the creak of his tread in the lower room, for a boot or a cough or the rustle of clothes. I heard nothing but the wind rinsing the trees as shadows tossed along the wall.

After a time I rose from the bed and pulled on his expensive peacoat, which hung on a nail. The motorbike was gone from the yard below. Across the stubble field I saw the brick factory piped like a candle shrine, its tusks and stacks macabre against the sky.

What to do? It was cold in the room. It was five o'clock – this I knew because the cat was crying outside the window now: meowing in outrage, meow! The cat was like clockwork at five a.m. When I rushed to the pane we looked at one another before he leapt out of sight, and where his yellow eyes had been an oak tree rolled in the wind. I went downstairs and let the animal in; it

wrapped itself around my legs. It climbed up onto the pulverised loveseat to look at me. I knew the soles of both my feet were black.

What to do? I walked a thoughtful circuit through the house. The main room was cavernous with deep windows, and, in one of these, books had been crushed together on the sill. In this room there was also fireplace of wood-chocks and a crisp corona-shaped grate. A corridor of Perspex ran adjacent, lapped with leaves and seedpods. A lamp like a smoky bowl, upturned, ridged and twisted at the neck by the glass-blower, was always left on. I'd never seen it being switched on or off. It gave a waxy colour to the room.

Outside, I knew, the painful business of daybreak was beginning. The sky was gashed with grey and yellow to the east. Cold beaches without colour lay in low-tide, just a few miles away, and this was relevant to me, as was the bicycle beneath tarpaulin in the yard.

Every light out but the yellow of the lamp.

Every light out but the eyes of the cat.

Every light out but the truly indifferent moon.

Part One

One day in autumn when I had been married for less than four months I saw the landlady. I saw her in Cow Lane – such a strange place to be, cobbled self-consciously – and when I caught sight of her I turned and pretended to be distracted by the surplus of a shop door, a banal glass-panelled door, swinging and releasing people with shopping bags.

The landlady was standing on the pavement. It had been raining, all was shining, it was mild: she was pausing and reading something on her phone. In the years since I had seen her last, when she oversaw my disgrace, she hadn't changed. Even without preparation – nothing that had taken place during the day to indicate this encounter would occur – I felt generosity rise within me, a desire to tell her so – to tell her, you look great, you always do, you have such *style*. She must, I thought, be fifty now at least.

I weighed my options and eventually pivoted, prevaricated, walked away. I swept off before she could see me. My footsteps clacked on the cobblestones.

Dame Street was like coming ashore, and here I halted. I began to click the fingers of my hands. This is something I do when I want to summon a decision from within or without me. Behind, the chute leading back into Temple Bar was desultory. Buses broke from the Cathedral and brayed towards College Green.

Even now, I thought. Even now this minute I feel exhilarated to think about it, all of it, although I must confess it had been crushed into a kind of pinhead, a pinprick, a *punctum*, something severe, a tattoo: but when released, it was a rich green wave of memories, flaming seams and flaming seals. And at that point I hadn't seen her, nor Harry, for something like six years. I was thirty now – over six years – although nonetheless of course I remembered it all forensically.

I was going just then to meet my husband of four months – less than four months – but found my footsteps slowed, which was strange, since typically I hurried everywhere. And there was a general slowness then, after I had seen the landlady – a distension, it was almost like horror – like everything in the environment was a sign.

I wasn't married long. Things had happened suddenly.

I was going at that moment to meet my husband.

I continued, pressed, on my way, against the crowd, as the cathedral bells erupted and the birds scattered and gulls opened, as supple as crossbows, looking for scraps from tourists on the grass. I wondered how much I had told my husband about the episode with Harry when I was twenty-three. Little, I reckoned; hardly anything. But it had happened, certainly, to me.

It seems funny to say I have never listed the facts. This is because they make me sound foolish.

When I was twenty-three, and studying in London, I met a man who was older than me – a married man, a writer – and fell in love. Things happened suddenly then as well. We left London, this man and I, and travelled to Ireland, where I am from. We had met in April, in the first bit of mild weather; we went to Ireland in August. We came to stay in a cottage at the bottom of a tubular lane, the type in Ireland called a *boreen*. The cottage was his; he rented it, he knew it well.

I have taken apart every panel of this, like an ornamental fan. But we stayed in the cottage for three weeks only, just three weeks, because it was cut short you see – cut short after just three weeks, when I'd left my entire life behind.

Afterwards, for years, things brought it back to me, the cottage, suddenly: dusty aubergines; a copse against a cold bloodletting sunset in Phoenix Park; the smell of burning timber, or of damp. Once in the film institute I was folding my coat under my chair and when I sat up I could smell it – the cottage – smell smoke, wood smoke, on someone's clothes, and I was seized with strange autonomous ecstatic grief.

I think of it in certain atmospheres. A species of spacious evening, in the countryside especially; the sky stretched and pillared, wet scents of land-water, wet dog, wet dock, steeped leaves, and earth rippled up by hooves or bicycles or boots. I remember standing in the lane barefoot, bath-time, the lustful chill and coming discomfort of nightfall – the slow rich reclamation

of the fields and hills by darkness, threaded starlight, night coming on like someone filling a bucket with dark sand.

I could stay here forever! I thought. I could live on here, forever! I was young back then. I was always so wound up.

But when I saw her, the landlady, in Cow Lane, when I had been married for four months and six years had passed since it all, it was not that things came flowing back to me. In fact it had been with me, close to me, sewn into decisions like signatures, for years: redrafted, re-designed, streamlined, all confusion corrected, all forgotten details simulated, supplemented, quantified.

And so the sight of the landlady in a marvellous moss-green coat – the kind woven in Donegal and treasured for a lifetime – looking no older, looking more beautiful really, the sight of this was a source of grace or abrupt unasked-for glee. Like I had been waiting all this time to be rediscovered.

Really they are always with me, always near to hand, these memories. Image and gist maybe. Distilled.

A morning in the cottage, say. Outside the cottage: there, in the steeping lane. On this morning – I cannot capture it intact – the landlady came upon me peeing in a copse with a woollen rug on my shoulders. When I saw her I cried out to excuse myself and stood up straight. Harry was back in the bedroom, asleep.

She said, Oh dear, oh dear, the dog has run off, and I answered, I'm sure he'll come back, and she paused at a slant as if hanging from something, her face a half-rictus of pain, so that I imagined her to be judging me, although now on reflection I think she was only distraught.

Very early. And here she was running about after the dog. As I gathered myself up I felt the sensational field of my body, and especially my fingers, expand, spreading like filaments to the broken grin of the tree trunks and growing things, the liquor-smelling richness of decay, the path churned to peaks and troughs. I felt she had brought other people with her and they were watching me. But there was nobody around.

I went back to the bedroom of the cottage then. I don't understand how a man can sleep like that. Don't they worry what you will do, unsupervised?

I have watched my husband, asleep, similarly: so vulnerable, so trusting, or unthinking. You could be a Judith sawing the head from Holofernes; this could be Molly's Chamber, a girl filling a pistol up with water and inviting the magistrate in. All of these being idle thoughts of course. Free-flowing from below.

Later that same day, when Harry was once again elsewhere – working, of course – I sat on the steps as the evening fell and anxiously tried to absorb it, the lane of trees, the sounds of the breeze sifting dryly through the trees, the spokes of rowan with red berries, or to find meaning in it, to compose a deathless sentence that would explain it all to me.

I remember now that I'd felt helpless in the face of this task because I did not, for the most part, know the names of the trees.

I remember the giddiness that was a kind of declawed trauma when Harry told me, You are a complicated girl.

This is how I picture myself: as a girl, awaiting instructions, her knees drawn to her chest. A sense of aggravated static or of glittering anticipation, blackly glittering anticipation, and in such imaginings I was painfully alone. Much, much harder was the task of conjuring the man – Harry – from a distance, on *mature recollection*, and trying to wonder what he was thinking, if he thought about it at all, if he whipped my interest and discarded me accidentally, or without malice, without sufficient empathy – or if, really, I'd wounded him with what I'd said on that final day.

What I had said: I will not join your – *chaste borem!* You won't put me back in a box like a toy.

Snottily, it must be said. Insubordinately.