

CHAPTER SEVEN

Joyce was never certain when she first became aware of the disaster that was to overwhelm her family and, just when everything appeared to be within her grasp, un-pick a significant part of the web she had so carefully spun. Now that she thought about it and the things that might have been, she realised there had been little indicators, minute clues, scattered back a very long way, back to the evenings when she had taken her future in her hands and started attending night school, possibly back even further, even as far as her return home after Michael had reappeared in her life. There were the little innuendoes dropped by Mr Hiller, who asked questions to which he already knew the answer when she did not. There was his willingness to disregard her absconding when she found Michael lying in wait for her outside Woolworth's. There was his ready acquiescence to her going to night school to improve herself, and to working in the evenings. There was even the fact that he had willingly married her in the first place, a woman who had just appeared on his doorstep one day, and a fallen woman as well! There was the mysterious deed box, yet how could she have possibly even suspected let alone guessed its contents?

There was more. There were other signs which gradually became manifest over the years, signs that any reasonable, attentive, caring, mother would have seen and recognised for what they might have been, or what they were. But Joyce would not readily concede the presence of those and, except for the person who was or should have been closest to her, no-one who knew her thought of drawing her attention to them, not even Mr Pennington. Was it any small wonder that she now felt such a deep sense of betrayal?

But when did she first start to suspect? When did she cross the line from being in a state where she wondered if something was going on to where she wondered what was going on? The worst of it was she never progressed past these points. She might have wondered and nursed her suspicions, but she never knew, not until it all spilled out into the open. Perhaps the first indication that something was amiss came the summer after she had started to work full-time at the school. She felt on a pinnacle. She had nearly everything she had striven for; the position of School Secretary, a job that she found interesting and worthwhile. And she was continuing to work for Mr Wick, maintaining his books, re-organising some of the contents of the hallowed loft, and all the time recovering money that he otherwise might have foregone. That was the way he put it and although nothing was said, she was sure that he was heading in the direction of suggesting that she should join the Board of Directors.

It was one light, warm, evening as the red of the sun was just striking the top of the clematis on the side trellis in the back garden. She could see it as she washed up after dinner. Stephanie was up in her room doing what ever it was she did in her room; it certainly was not her homework. Mr Hiller was sat, replenished and satisfied, at the table reading the newspaper. There seemed nothing wrong and everything right with the world except they were running a little late or, to be more accurate, she was running a little late. "I could take you in the car," her husband said.

Joyce glanced at the kitchen clock. "No," she said. "I think it will be all right. It is a beautiful evening and the walk will be nice. If I am a little late home it won't matter for once will it?"

"Not at all," he replied from behind the paper.

Everything appeared to be absolutely normal when she closed the front door behind her and walked up to the High Street and along to the builder's office and yard. She had been there nearly an hour, working alone as was the custom, when she noticed the envelope on Mr Wick's desk. She knew immediately its contents and how important they were. They were papers that he was supposed to sign that afternoon, have them witnessed, then take them up to London with him first thing tomorrow. Something clearly had gone wrong! It was possible, she thought, that he was planning to come into the office first thing in the morning, but no-one would be there at that time. Perhaps the arrangements had changed, or perhaps he had simply forgotten them. There was only a continuous engaged tone when she tried to telephone

him at home. She tried reaching him through the operator who was no more helpful than telling her that the line was in use. There appeared no alternative but to take the papers around to his house on her way home. She knew he was in because he was on the telephone. Even if he was out when she arrived she could leave a note. And if she set out early, she could still be home at her normal time.

The walk through the park was most pleasant. She passed the usual crowd of youngsters loafing on the bandstand and wondered why it was never used now-a-days. She could imagine it before the War, on fine summer evenings with the audience relaxing in their deck chairs as the strains of Sullivan drifted out over the lake. This was just such an evening.

Mr Wick's house was a large house in a tree-lined street of large houses, set in a large plot well back from the road. As she walked up the drive Joyce found herself wondering if he had plans to develop the land. She had no doubt that he could have fitted quite a number of houses on it. Mr Hiller could do the layout plans. She thought she might mention it to her husband when she went back home. Whatever thoughts of this kind she might have had were completely dispelled when she reached the door. There, standing at the side of the house almost out of sight was the Rover. Yes, it was her husband's car. There was no doubt of it. And it was Mr Hiller who opened the door to her. "Joyce!" he exclaimed. "Good God! What on earth are you doing here?" It crossed her mind that he might have thought that she was up to something improper, but she was not and she felt vexed by the thought he might be thinking that.

"I could ask you the same question," she said sharply. "I have brought some important papers around for Mr Wick to sign."

"I didn't know anything about any papers," he blurted. "I mean, you didn't mention anything about papers to be signed."

"I didn't know," she replied. "I think Mr Wick may have forgotten them. He is supposed to be taking them with him to London tomorrow unless plans have changed."

"Oh," he said, still keeping her out on the doorstep and making no attempt to admit her.

"Is Mr Wick in?" she asked, trying to peer beyond him. "And why are you here?"

"Er, yes. He is in. And I had to come around on a planning matter - to do with tomorrow's meeting."

"What about Stephanie? Did you leave her at home alone?" Joyce did not know why she asked this question as her daughter had been left at home on her own before now. It may just have been the fact that on this occasion she did not know about it and it was therefore not planned. It may have been something deeper, something elusive but intuitive.

"No, I brought her with me. She's around somewhere," he said as the pitch of his voice rose slightly.

"She's here? And where is Mr Wick? Why did you answer the door?"

"He is, how shall I put it? He is answering a call of nature. You could not have called at a worst time in that respect, I suppose, but I don't think he should be long."

"May I come in, then?"

"I don't know," he said hesitantly. Before she could debate the point she heard a man's voice.

"Who is it?" Mr Wick called.

"It's Joyce," called Mr Hiller.

"It's me," she confirmed. "I've brought around the Banstead papers for you to sign. You will need them for the morning!"

"Well ask your wife in, then," called Mr Wick. "Don't leave her standing on the doorstep." He came down the stairs, straightening his tie and running his hand around the top of his trousers. "Come along in, Joyce," he beamed. "I don't know what this husband of yours is thinking of. Come into the study and let us sort out these papers of yours. I suppose I forgot all about them. I have always said you are worth your weight in gold to me! Would you like something to drink whilst you are here?"

"I wasn't planning to stop," Joyce said, holding out the envelope.

"You can still act and witness the signing of the papers, can't you?"

“Yes. Of course I can. Where's my daughter?”

“I am not at all sure,” said Mr Wick. “The last time I saw her she was upstairs exploring the spare bedrooms. There are quite a few, you know, far more than I could possibly require. She might even be in the garden, but she will be all right. She's such a nice girl.” Joyce did not know what to say or what she could say without sounding foolish. Yet she felt uncomfortable at the thought of her daughter being on the loose and roaming at will through her Employer's house.

“You shouldn't let her do that,” she did say.

“I am sure she can be trusted implicitly,” said Mr Wick with a small knowing smile which told Joyce he understood perfectly what was on her mind. “And I will take full responsibility should she break anything, not that it is very likely that she would. Perhaps you would go and find her, Hiller, whilst your wife and I are sorting out the Banstead papers?”

“Have you been there before?” she asked her daughter as soon as they were in the car. “To Mr Wick's house?” Stephanie appeared flushed and confused and Joyce attributed this to being discovered suddenly by her mother. Teenagers were like that; finding their parents something of an embarrassment. Perhaps the presence of their parents made them feel subservient and childish? “Have you?”

“Once or twice,” murmured Stephanie, looking into the car mirror.

“I have had to pop around to see Mr Wick once or twice,” said Mr Hiller, negotiating the junction at the end of the road and turning towards the park. “I normally take Stephanie with me to give her something to do. She can see how the other half live. I can't see there's anything wrong in that.”

“Oh, look!” cried Stephanie suddenly. “There's Owen Cross and he's with that Eileen Norris. I cannot see what he sees in her.” Joyce looked, turning her head so that she could get a good look at him. Could he really be the son of the woman she had met all those years ago?

“It doesn't worry you, does it?” continued Mr Hiller. “I mean, Mr Wick does not object in the least.” Joyce could not say that she thought that it was wrong even if she did instinctively feel that it was.

“No,” she said softly, “I am not saying that it does. I am not saying that at all.” She fell into silence and did not speak again until the car was turning into their road. “He looks like a nice young boy,” she said suddenly.

“Who does?” said Mr Hiller.

“That boy we saw. The one that Stephanie pointed out,” she said, looking around at her daughter.

“Who? Oh, Owen! He's all right but before you get any ideas about him, Mother, he is going out with that Eileen Norris.”

“I haven't any ideas about him,” said Joyce although she did wonder why her daughter never brought any boy friends home. Indeed, she never now appeared to talk about boys in the way she had a couple of years before. Surely someone as attractive as Stephanie, and Joyce had to concede that her daughter was attractive, should have boyfriends?

“So, he is going out with Eileen Norris,” she said once they were in the kitchen. “Haven't you got a boy friend, Stephanie?”

“A boy friend?” repeated her daughter with incredulity. “I am not interested in having a boy friend. I am not interested in boys.”

“But there was that crowd that you used to hang about with.”

“Dave Henry and his mob? I don't want anything to do with him! I don't want to have anything to do with this boy friend type stuff.” This was in a way pleasing news as far as Joyce was concerned.

“But this Owen Cross. There was something in the way you talked about him?”

“Oh, Owen. He's all right. He's sort of an ordinary friend. I think he may be a little sweet on me but he is going out with Eileen and she is as dull as ditch water.”

“And you are not sweet on him?” said Joyce, conceding to herself that she had never had a heart-to-heart talk to her daughter about emotional involvements or even some of the basic facts of life.

“No I am not. He is all right, I suppose,” said Stephanie lazily, yet there was

something in her tone and attitude that suggested there was more in the relationship with Owen Cross than her daughter was prepared to admit.

“But you do not appear to approve of him seeing this other girl, this Eileen Norris?”

“No, I do not. She is a real pain. Very prim and proper and stuck up just like her miserable parents. I don't know what he sees in her.”

“She looked all right to me,” said Joyce, tactlessly.

“You don't know her. I do!”

“Well, perhaps he will change his mind,” said Joyce kindly, thinking of Michael and her unrequited love. Goodness, how much there was that her daughter did not know and might never know!

“It wouldn't do him much good if he did. Not as far as I am concerned, it wouldn't. I don't want a boy friend. It would only get in the way.”

But Joyce was thinking of Michael, of her secrets, and of the worry that she might, on day, when talking in confidence and intimately to her daughter, let something slip. That was the kind of thing that could happen. That was the kind of thing she could not allow to happen. That was why she had to avoid a heart-to-heart talk with her daughter.

Her meetings with Michael went to plan almost like clockwork. It was perhaps because only one day was required and this was booked well in advance, in fact a year in advance. Joyce travelled down early by train and treated herself to a taxi to take her to the foot of the Downs. Every time she made the climb to the gardens, pausing now and then to look back on the Town or out to sea, she felt young again and immersed herself in pleasant memories. More often than not Michael was there, waiting for her, standing under the latest of the flowering cherries. “They are all for you,” he would say as the avenue gradually grew longer. “There's one planted for each year that we have been apart. They look superb at this time of year.”

“They would walk through the petals, hand in hand. “I always thought that flowering cherries were rather short lived,” she said on one occasion as they did so.

“Not these,” said her lover. “Up here they will last as long as our love.”

“Oh! That sounds so romantic,” she declared.

“It sounded a little mawkish to me,” Michael replied.

Joyce found that she took great care to prepare for the day, committing to memory all the things she wanted to tell him but found herself frequently lost for words when they actually met. Michael would always ask after the state of her marriage and about Stephanie. Joyce would report, saying that she was well, a handful, and that she was growing it a fine young woman. There was never anything in her report to Michael that would give him the least cause for alarm. She told him about Mr Pennington and the fatherly guidance he afforded her. She told him about her job with Mr Wick and the possible prospects. She told him about her position at the school and how pleased she was to have it. He said he was pleased too. But Michael rarely had anything to tell her. “There isn't much to say,” he would say. “You don't want to hear a load about my business deals. I am sure that you do not want a report on how my marriage is likely to go on for ever or how my wife occupies herself.”

“How does she occupy herself?” said Joyce. “She has given up writing, hasn't she?”

“For all intents and purposes,” he said. “I am the one that publishes books now.”

“Oh, yes. Your books on churches and architecture.”

“I am on to volume six now,” he said proudly. “Of course no-one buys them other than some reference libraries. And I am used to getting denounced by the architectural establishment, but I don't care. I have my views and if I think that the Victorian church of St Peters in Bow, which was unfortunately all but destroyed in the blitz, and which has since been pulled down, showed a distinct Romanesque influence imported from the Cathedral in Santiago di Compestelella, I am going to be prepared to say it.”

“Why would you think that, Michael?”

“The gentleman who designed it, one Horace Louis Biggins, went to Spain shortly before. I found some papers in a library in East Ham. There, that shows the kind of extraordinarily dull and boring things I get up to. No wonder Christina devotes her life to the

Church and charitable causes in about equal proportions. Very little of it is devoted to me, I can tell you."

"Are we wasting our lives, Michael? In living like this?" His arm closed around her and he paused.

"I wish I knew. You could tell me, couldn't you. If I thought that we did live only once and this was it I suppose I would have to wonder if we are. But we know we cannot be together. Even what we do could cast us into eternal damnation like Francesca and her lover."

"Oh, Michael. Do you believe? Do you really believe, after all this time?"

"I don't know what to believe. I suppose I believe enough to think that there is the risk that you are living in sin and that so am I and that there is nothing we can do about it. I suppose I believe enough to make me vow that when we can, when we are both free of our partners and legitimately so, we should marry before God."

"You realise that I am not married in the eyes of the Church," she whispered.

"Of course I do. I haven't forgotten my instruction. Father Thomas did a good job on me."

"Father Thomas," she breathed. "Such a weak man. I often wonder what became of him."

"He is still here."

"What? Here in Dover?"

"Yes, in Dover, but I do not want to spoil our day by talking about Father Thomas or, indeed, by getting morbid. Tell me Joyce, when we are both free, will you marry me?"

"Of course I will," she replied. They walked on under the trees, out into the open, and crossed the green stretch of grass to the jagged, ivy-covered, walls of the ruins. "Michael," she said impulsively. "If I were free, would you expect me to wait for you?"

"Wait for me? How do you mean?"

"Supposing someone wanted to marry me, someone who would not live for ever, someone who had been very good to me and who I wanted to repay in some small way."

"I don't know," he said, taking a deep breath. "To be honest, it isn't the sort of thing I have ever thought about. I suppose the answer is that I gave you your freedom to do as you please and that I cannot take that away from you. Only you can surrender it to me. I don't think it is the sort of thing I would do but, then, there's no woman other than yourself who has been in the least good to me."

"I am not sure that I have been all that good," she said darkly, "or that I shall be in the future."

"Well, I am not going to worry about the future right now, only the present, and I suggest you do the same thing. Shall we go down to the cottage?"

"Oh, yes!" she said and took his hand for the descent.

It was her day; that one day on the year that she reserved entirely to herself. Only Mr Hiller knew how she spent it and she never had any reason to believe that he had ever betrayed her confidence. At the school she would book it as a day off and it became known as "Joyce's Day". But she told no-one, not Mr Pennington, not Mr Wick, least of all her daughter who believed, for why should she believe otherwise, that her mother went off to see a long established friend who she had met in her youth, a friend who never wrote, never sent Christmas cards, never got in contact with them by any means.

It was the thought of being discovered that was Joyce's greatest fear and that fear was greatest when she was in the gardens at Newington with Michael. "Isn't this all a bit silly?" she said on one occasion. "What if someone came up and caught us together?"

"You are always asking me that and the answer is always the same! The chances of someone coming up here are rather remote. How often have you seen anyone up here?"

"I saw you," she said reflectively. "Sometimes it seems like it was only yesterday."

"And if someone did come up here, what would they think? There might be a little talk in the local of an evening, but I could put it about that you were a visitor who didn't realise the gardens were private and I was showing you around."

"I am worried you might be found doing more than showing me around."

“Even if that happened,” he said dismissively, “and I must stress that the chances are really very remote, I cannot see anything coming of it.”

“What about it getting back to Christina?”

“That's not very likely,” he said, laughing. “She never comes down here and she isn't exactly well thought of. I don't think even Lady Newington would tell her if she knew something.”

“Even if we were caught in a compromising position?”

“Are you asking to be compromised?” he asked cheerfully. “It can be arranged.”

“No, silly, I am not asking to be compromised!”

“We nearly were once, you remember.”

“Oh, then,” she said, thinking it was perhaps heartless of him to mention the occasion. “It is not an occasion that I am ever likely to forget.”

“Yes, it was a bit close, wasn't it? What with the men coming like that, then Christina turning up.”

“I often wonder,” she said slowly, “what would have happened if one of the workmen had seen my foot, or come in and discovered I was naked?”

“Probably nothing.”

“Or what would have come of us if Christina had come into the cottage or, for that matter, if I had gone out and confronted her? I was tempted to, you know.”

“You wouldn't have done that, would you? I can't believe that you would have done.”

“No, I suppose I wouldn't. But do you think the marriage would have gone ahead as planned?”

“Ah!” he said. “Being serious for one moment, I do. I don't think either my father or Christina would have allowed anything like that to stop it. My father knew, any way, and it would have only confirmed Chrissy's suspicions. Of course, she thought you were Moira so things would not have boded well for your friend when she realised for certain.”

“Oh!” Joyce said, sounding disappointed. “I had rather hoped that she might have said that was enough and thrown you over.”

“I do not think that she will ever do that.”

“But the life you lead, the two of you.”

“I am afraid it is as I have told you,” he said firmly. “We are married in name and that is enough for her. It doesn't extend any further than that and I do not think it will ever change. I cannot see her meeting anyone else who might tempt her to think about separating from me. I think she positively hates all men. She might well hate all women too. No, I am stuck with her until one of us dies.”

“Oh, don't say that Michael. I don't like the sound of that.”

“I am afraid,” said Michael, “that it is the truth. And as for you, even if she did come to hear of your existence she would be pretty hard pressed to find out who you are, leave alone where you live. So I don't think we run any risk in meeting here and I would not have us meet any where else, would you?”

“No,” she said submissively, “I would not.”

If Joyce's preoccupation was fear of discovery, Michael's was their daughter. “Have you told her about me?” he would ask each year. Her answer was consistent, but each year he would muster all his old arguments and sometimes parade a few new ones.

“No,” she would say, perhaps a little crossly, “I told you that I would not. I have no intention of doing so!”

“I was just wondering if anything had changed.”

“What would change, Michael?”

“I don't know,” he said, shrugging. “You might, or circumstances might. Surely you don't intend for her to grow up thinking that Mr Hiller is her real father? What happens if she finds out the truth?”

“The truth? For all intents and purposes he is her father. Think what the effect on her would be if I now told her he was not.”

“I often wonder what the effect on her is when she sees your relationship with him. What impression does that give her of married life?”

“That's unfair, Michael. There's nothing wrong with my marriage.”

“That's not the way you describe it to me.” Joyce felt tempted to tell her lover that it was fine for him to talk, but that he should look at his own relationship before he commented on others.

“What I tell you is the inner, secret, truth. As far as Stephanie is concerned we have a normal marriage. We do not argue. Mr Hiller has never raised a hand to me. I cannot see that our relationship can appear as anything other than relatively good and stable to Stephanie. And in some ways she appears to be closer to him than she is to me. How could I reasonable undermine that?” They were words that she was later to come to deeply regret, but that was much later, and how was she to know?

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