

## That Sinking Feeling

Frances rinsed the blade under the tap in the butler's sink, staring out of the window at the isolated fields; the corrugated rows of dormant vines stretched back to the woodland in the distance. At this time of year the only landscape feature that held her interest was the copse of thirty-seven oak trees that grew asymmetrically to one side of the farm's access road

The many times she'd looked out at this view from the kitchen had indelibly carved into her mind the trees' number, thirty-seven. A prime number. She rubbed disinfectant along the knife edge. Sometimes this irked her because she was unable, in her mind, to neatly section the group of trees into equally sized divisions – which was something of a compulsive habit that she had with numbers of anything. On other occasions she felt re-assured by the apparent randomness. She'd read that prime numbers had some mystical significance and were symbols of nature being untrammelled by man's conventions. Patterns of natural self-organisation fascinated her. The oaks' naked branches interlocked into a tight, jagged net that shattered the sky into stained-glass; thousands of tiny, irregular windows framed by the black boughs.

Frances took the blade and placed its tip on the inside of her upper left arm. She mused over the scarred, red lattice, before slicing across it with surgical skill into the white skin, knowing precisely the perfect depth to which to sink the blade in order to harvest the optimum yield from the capillaries buried within the flesh. The cut remained painless until she felt the re-assuring burn when the blood brimmed on the cusp of the wound and began to spill downwards. She quickly repeated the process in the same place on her other arm. It hurt a little more because she operated with her less accurate left hand.

Michael Clarke

There was movement in the undergrowth below the oaks. A man emerged: wiry, green-jacketed, Barbour cap. He held a couple of bloodied rabbits in one hand, in the other a shotgun: Declan. He turned towards the farmhouse, advancing up the drive.

Frances held her arms over the sink, rotating each to create a pattern of rivulets along her forearms, liquid crossing and interconnecting like a miniature, red river delta, before spattering on to the white porcelain.

Declan approached the kitchen window, his jaw set firm and his blue eyes boring towards Frances. She stared back. Her expression was impassive as the blood began to coagulate in the wounds and its flow ceased.

Her bloodied arms were in Declan's clear view. He dropped the rabbits to the ground and pulled out a couple of shotgun cartridges from his pocket. Staring at Frances, he loaded the gun and snapped it shut, pointing it towards her but not yet aiming. In that instant she wanted him to fire straight through the window, to be blown away for once and all in a storm of shot and glass.

He lowered the gun, transferred it to his left hand and gathered the rabbits in his right, disappearing from view towards the barn. Frances ran the tap to flush the sink and washed herself clean. Drying her arms she turned the key in the kitchen door. Declan would have to go. When Robert returned from his walk she would have to insist.

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