

THE END OF EVERYTHING

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THE ROAD WOUND steeply upwards, becoming narrower and more pot-holed; Billy began to wonder again if he could have possibly gone astray.

On the passenger seat was the yellow delivery docket with the customer's name on top and, in his own careful hand-writing, the directions given to him by his colleague, Ted Turner. He had passed, on his left, an unusual over-hanging rock known as the Cut and then on the right, the old disused quarry, where the land fell sharply away from the road and was protected by a rusted chain-link fence. An aluminium barrier with reflective arrows also warned drivers of the potential danger—the quarry entrance was on a particularly sharp bend.

Billy shifted down a gear, the engine straining on the sharp incline, owing to the additional weight of the trailer and the cement mixer. The van was new, one of four similar vehicles owned by his employer Nick Costigan, for whom he had worked for the last three months. On the white back panel of the van, the company name "Hire It!" along with the phone number and other details, was printed in a deep blue.

He glanced again at the directions, though in fact he had already memorized them. House on the left, he had written. Ted Turner had described it as a shabby old place, up a narrow lane, easily missed except for the tall granite pillars at the roadside. He had been there himself, last year sometime. An elderly couple, Ted had said, adding that it was a lonely spot for anyone, stuck in the back of the beyond. Billy could see now what he meant.

Six miles only from the town, yet he was already in the middle of nowhere—nothing to be seen except the distant green-black banks of the pine plantations, meagre fields

where rocks poked through the withered grass and a bleak grey expanse of wintry sky. It had been Ted's idea to send Billy out on this particular delivery; a slow Friday afternoon in the first week of December, and Billy had been only too happy to go. Up to now he had been mainly sorting stock, cleaning the equipment and tidying the yard—he was still on trial, but Ted had told him only the previous day that Nick Costigan was well pleased with the way Billy was shaping up.

Ted was thirty-five, and married with two children, yet he had a restless, boyish way about him. With a narrow foxy face in which the features were always busy, he was full of quips and jibes, old sayings and yarns. In contrast, the other employee, a middle-aged man named Miley Devine, was taciturn and pedantic; the only topics upon which he became animated, were the pigeons he kept in a coop behind his house, and various horse racing fixtures. Three mornings a week, Gloria, a rather formidable lady of indeterminate age arrived to do the invoices and accounts. There was an understanding among the men that a low profile be kept on these mornings if at all possible – Gloria was notorious for ferreting out omissions and errors that might have occurred on the orders and delivery dockets, and it didn't do to be on the receiving end of her annoyance if the fault had been yours.

It was Billy's first proper job—and a great source of pride to him. Aside from helping his Da and Kevin in the garage he had been more or less unemployed since leaving the Christian Brothers two years ago. Billy had liked school well enough but had rarely given it his full attention. He had been eleven when his mother had died, and with his Da working all hours of the day and night in the garage, assisted by fourteen-year old Kevin after

school, many of the domestic chores had, by default fallen to Billy. By the time he finally got around to dragging his homework out of his schoolbag, he had frequently found himself gazing at the text through a blurred haze of exhaustion.

Billy drove on for a further mile and then to his relief spotted the crumbling stone pillars to his left. He turned sharply into a winding laneway choked and overgrown with winter-blackened shrubs and weeds, and bordered with high, bristling evergreens. The surface was rutted with mud-filled potholes; the van and trailer lurched and swayed, clipping the ditch in places.

As he swung the van into a rough clearing the house came into view. It might once have been a fine country residence; a tall stone three-bay farmhouse but had become so dilapidated as to appear at first glance, derelict. Grabbing the delivery docket, Billy hopped out of the van, and gazed upwards at the crumbling façade where a sprawling spread of ivy obliterated two of the windows and half the front door. It was evident that years, maybe decades had passed since this door, peeling and rotting and still sporting an enormous rusting knocker, had had any purpose beyond keeping out the elements. Two of the upstairs windows were shuttered from the inside, the glass of another was broken. The loss of several slates had left exposed patches of felt on the roof—jagged pieces of these slates were scattered around the weed-strewn yard.

There had to be a back door somewhere then, Billy decided, as, chaffing his frozen hands together he made his way through what might once have been an arch but was now just a large hole in a stone wall abutting the house, and found himself in a courtyard surrounded by a huddle of ruined and

dilapidated buildings. Underfoot, pools of stagnant water had formed on the broken surface, Billy frowned as he picked his way towards the door of a flat-roofed extension which jutted into the yard from the main house. Here and there were mounds of rotting organic matter which he could not identify, foul-smelling and pungent. Jesus, he thought grimly, some people don't half live like pigs! He would have a right story to tell his Da and Kevin tonight.

The door was slightly ajar, giving Billy a glimpse of a dirty flag stone floor and a section of peeling wall. He raised his fist to knock.

"Who are you? What do you want here?"

Billy whirled around with a start, found himself confronted by a small, elderly, angry-looking woman. The top of her head came barely to his shoulder, and she stood so close to him that he could smell her rancid breath. Her face, lined and leathery, was the colour of old porridge, her gimlet eyes hooded and lash-less. The tattered jacket she wore was stained and filthy, as was her ragged woollen hat.

Billy took an involuntary step backwards, before stammering,

"I — I'm looking for Stanley Wilkins."

"Stanley's gone!"

"Do you mean he's.... "

"I mean, he's GONE." The thin-lipped, snapping mouth wasn't unlike that of an ancient turtle, Billy thought. Feeling uneasy at this unexpected confrontation, he inhaled deeply and began again, adopting what he hoped was a firm, official tone.

"I brought the cement mixer — from Hire It? Maybe someone else..?"

"There's no one else here!"

She stepped closer again, regarding him furiously, clutching her ragged coat across her scrawny chest. Billy shifted uncomfortably, felt a flush of clamminess underneath his clothes. Ridiculous, he told himself sternly, to be afraid of such a small, defenceless person, but at the same time he could not shake off the feeling of cold, malevolence that seemed to pulsate from her.

All he wanted at that point was to deposit the cement mixer and leave — and the sooner the better.

"Look — someone here ordered a mixer," he said sharply, "Can you just please sign..."

With a deliberate gesture, Billy presented the delivery docket and a pen.

"Get off my property now, before I take the gun to you! I've used it before, you know!" she threatened.

In that instant it dawned on Billy that he had been set up, that Ted Turner had set him up for a joke. It was suddenly so blatantly obvious; Billy silently cursed his own gullibility. Of course he had heard, in the past, innumerable tales of lads, new in jobs, being sent off on wild goose chases, to carry out impossible tasks. A surge of relief rushed through him — it was all a joke — Ted would be creasing himself laughing back in the snug, warm office, but Billy wasn't laughing yet. He still had to extricate himself from the situation at hand. Fleetingly he felt a surge of pity now for the pathetic old creature before him, in her squalid old yard on this blisteringly cold evening.

"I'm sorry...really sorry...there must have been...a mix up in the office..." he began, crumpling the yellow docket and plunging it into his pocket, at the same time backing away, "Sorry!" he said again, raising his hands in front of him in a gesture of helpless apology.

All of a sudden, out of the stillness of the encroaching dusk came an ear-splitting sound, immediately familiar and yet unexpected; a dull thud, followed by the roar of an engine bursting into life and being violently revved to the limit of its capacity.

For a tense second, his eyes met those of the old woman — but it was long enough to register the fear in them. In a frantic gesture that was automatic but futile, Billy patted down his pockets for his keys, realizing immediately that he had left them in the ignition of the company van. Then he was running, squelching heedlessly through the muck and dirt, where such a short time ago he had picked his way with careful distaste. He was

shouting the word 'stop', knowing it was already too late. Where the driveway began, he caught sight of the red tail lights of the trailer as it leaped and bucked, travelling at a reckless speed on the rutted surface towards the road, the cement mixer lurching about inside it like a caged animal. Billy kept running, unable to think of any other course of action.

There was a metallic shriek and a savage grinding of gears as, glancing off one of the granite pillars, the van and its load made a sharp right turn down the quarry road.

Billy felt his legs buckle as he sank to his knees on the sodden earth. He knew he was witnessing a chain of events that would end in certain tragedy. Travelling at such speed, with the momentum of the trailer and mixer behind it, the van would never be able to take the bend in the road at the quarry entrance; their combined weight would plough through the rusting fence and plunge onwards down the incline. Nick Costigan's van would stop only when it hit the bottom of the quarry.

If in the unlikely event that the van did manage to take the turn, it would sooner or later collide with some other vehicle making its careful way up the narrow Mountain Road; it was already dusk, with people returning from work in the town. A faceless mad-man was rocketing towards death and destruction, because he, Billy, the person with responsibility for the van and the equipment, had carelessly left the keys in the ignition.

One way or the other, it was the end of everything. The end of his job, of Ted Turner's job too, of his father's respect, of his prospects in the town. Billy pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes as a low moan escaped his lips.

Behind him he heard a slight sound and he knew without turning that the old woman had followed him, at her own pace.

Almost absently he wondered about the gun she had earlier mentioned, and it occurred to him that, were she to go ahead and shoot him now, she would be doing him a great favour.