
Opening Extract from...

Ghostheart

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My surface is myself.
Under which
to witness, youth is
buried. Roots?
Everybody has roots.

William Carlos Williams – 'Paterson'

ONE

The sound from the street was bold, bellying up against the breeze like a bright colored streamer, and from the sidewalk vents the smoke and steam crawled like tired ghosts from the subway below. It was early, a little after eight a.m., and from the boulevards, from the junctions and corners and storefronts, people emerged to meet the world as it surfaced from sleep.

Manhattan came to life, here on the Upper East Side. Columbia University, Barnard College and Morningside Park, bordered to the west by Hudson River Park, to the east by Central, and then the West nineties and hundreds, roads that skipped out in parallel lines – a mathematician's archipelago. Here was academia – the students and bookshops, the Nicholas Roerich Museum, Grant's Tomb and The Cloisters – and wrapped around it the smell of the Hudson River, the sound of the 79th Street Boat Basin and the Passenger Ship Terminal to the south.

Amidst these things was the haunt of freshly baked bread and donuts, frosted sugar and frying bacon; the sound of bolts being drawn, of voices merging one into another like the murmur of thunder somewhere along the horizon; the rumble of traffic, of cars, of wagons, of delivery vans bearing fresh fruit and ham hocks, newspapers and cigarettes and new-drawn churns of cream for the coffee houses and delicatessens: all these things, and more.

And into this ripe medley of life's small pleasures, rough edges, and sharp corners a young woman walked past the steps that climbed from the tunnels below, her movements swift

and deliberate, her windswept hair clouding her face, her hand clutching her coat up around her throat against the bitter fists of wind that seemed to lunge at her from behind doorways, from around corners. Her skin pale, her features aquiline, her lips rouged with aubergine, she hurried forward until she reached the junction between Duke Ellington and West 107th. Here she paused, glancing left and right and left again like a child, and stepped from the curb, hurrying across the hot-top to the other side. Here, almost unnoticeably, she paused again and, turning left, she made her way along a sidestreet to a narrow-fronted bookstore. Pausing there in the doorway she searched her coat pockets, found keys and leaned into the lee of the frame to unlock the door. Once inside she turned on the lights, flipped the sign and hurried into the back room where she filled a coffee jug with water. She switched on the antique percolator, filled the glass reservoir, set the jug beneath, and with the deft motions that came from endless repetition, lined the bowl beneath the reservoir with paper and coffee grounds and slid it home. She removed her coat, tossed it nonchalantly onto a chair beside a small deal table, and made her way back to the front of the shop.

She looked around the room, a room not unlike some narrow closeted library, the ceiling-high bookshelves racked from left to right with not so much as breathing space in between, and in no order, and with no formality, and discounting any such thing as alphabet or barcode, these books, these battered hand-worn, dog-eared, musty-smelling books, challenged her with their totality of words, with their myriad silent voices, with the pictures that each paragraph and sentence, each phrase and clause inspired. These were her words. Her books. Her life. Here on Lincoln Street, in the backyard of nowhere special, she had created a brief oasis of sanity. Her name was Annie O'Neill. She would be thirty-one come November. Sagittarius. The Archer. With her hair a rich burnished auburn, her features clear and concise, her eyes almost aquamarine, she was beautiful, and single, and often a

little lonely. She wore open-necked blouses and cumbersome sweaters, constantly tugging the sleeves up above her elbows and revealing a man's wristwatch, given to her by her mother. The watch had belonged to her father, and it was too big, and the leather strap was drawn to its tightest hole, but still that watch ran up and down her forearm like a mischievous child. Her eyes were sometimes clouded and quiet, other times bright and fierce, and her temperament unpredictable – often mellow, sometimes challenging and thunderous and awkward. She read poetry by Carlos Williams and Walt Whitman, and prose too – Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, and Shapiro's *Travelogue For Exiles*. And other things, many things, and though not all the books that lined the shelves, perhaps a thousand of them, or two, or five.

This was Annie O'Neill's world and few people came here, the majority because they did not know of it, others because they did not care, because they were rushing to some other place that bore greater importance than the written word. And there were things that did not belong here: vanity; ostentation; falsity; cowardice; greed; superficiality.

And there were things that did: love; lust; magic; definitiveness; compassion; empathy; perfection.

Idealistic, passionate, decisive – fingers grasping for life in handfuls too broad to be held – Annie O'Neill wished for something. Something unspecific, but dangerous. She wanted to be loved, she wanted to be touched, she wanted to be held. She desired; she longed; she ached; she hurt.

These were her feelings, her emotions, her thoughts. These were the unfolding patterns of her unsettled and brooding life. These were her colors, her deliberations, her emptinesses.

And this was Thursday morning, a Thursday in August towards the closing chapters of summer, and even as she considered her life she knew she was an anachronism, a woman out of time, out of place. For this was the beginning of the twenty-first century, and she knew, she *knew*, that she didn't belong here. She belonged with Scott Fitzgerald, with

Hemingway and Steinbeck, with *To A God Unknown* and *The Outsiders*. That was where her heart could be found, and she struggled with this, struggled with each new dawning day as she went about the business of her narrow life, turning in ever-narrowing circles and centrifugally spiralling away into the hollowness of solitude.

Something had to change. Something had to be *made* to change, and she was pragmatic enough to realize that she herself would be the fulcrum of any change. Such changes did not come unprecipitated, nor did they come through divine intervention. They came through decision, through action, through example. People changed with you or they stayed behind. Like Grand Central. You took the train, the 5:36 for Two Harbors, nestling there beneath the Sawtooth Mountains where, on a clear day, you could almost reach out and touch the Apostle Islands and Thunder Bay, and those that walked with you came too, or they did not. And if not, they were content to stand and wave, to watch as you rolled away soundlessly into the indistinct distance of memory. And if travelling alone you packed only sufficient for your needs and did not burden yourself with things too weighty, like lost loves, forgotten dreams, jealousies, frustrations and hatred. You carried with you the finer things. Things to share. Things that weighed next to nothing but held the significance of everything. These were what you carried, and in some small way they also carried you.

Annie O'Neill would often think such things and smile, alone with her thoughts.

The coffee was ready. She could smell it from the front. She went out back, washed a cup in the sink in the corner, and took a small carton of cream from the refrigerator, upended the last half-inch into a cup, and filled the cup with coffee. She stayed a while in the back room, and only when she heard the bell above the door did she venture once more into her world within worlds.

The man was elderly, perhaps sixty-five or seventy, and

beneath his arm he carried a brown paper-wrapped bundle tied with string. His topcoat, although heavy and once expensive, was worn in places. His hair was silver-grey, white over the temples, and when he saw her he smiled with such warmth and depth Annie couldn't help but smile back.

'I intrude?' he asked politely.

Annie shook her head and stepped forward. 'Not at all . . . how can I help you?'

'I don't wish to disturb you if you are busy,' the old man said. 'I could perhaps come back another time.'

'Any time is as good as any other time,' Annie said. 'Are you after something specific?'

The old man shook his head. He smiled once more, and there was something about the way he smiled, something almost familiar, that put Annie at ease.

'I'm just visiting,' he said. He stood for a moment surveying the store, glanced once or twice at Annie, and then turned to look again across the racks and shelves that surrounded him.

'You have an impressive collection here,' he said.

'Enough to keep me occupied,' she replied.

'And to serve the needs of those whose taste runs beyond the *New York Times* bestseller list.'

Annie smiled. 'We do have some odd and unusual items here,' she said. 'Nothing too rare or intellectual, but some very good books indeed.'

'I am sure you do,' the man said.

'Was there something you were hoping to find?' she asked again, now somehow slightly uneasy.

The man shook his head. 'I suppose you could say that,' he replied.

Annie stepped forward. She had the unmistakable sense that she had missed something.

'And what might that be?' she asked.

'It is a little difficult . . . '

Annie frowned.

The man shook his head as if he himself were questioning

what he was doing there. 'In all honesty, I have come for no other reason than reminiscence.'

'Reminiscence?'

'Well . . . well, as I said it's a little difficult after all these years, but the reason I came down here was because I knew your father –'

The old man stopped mid-flight as if he'd anticipated a reaction.

Annie was speechless, confused.

The man cleared his throat as if in apology for his own presence. 'I knew him well enough to take books,' he went on. 'To read them, to pay him later.'

He paused again, and then he laughed gently. 'Your father was a brilliant man with a brilliant mind . . . I miss him.'

'Me too,' Annie said, almost involuntarily, and was gripped by a sudden, quiet rush of emotion at the mention of her father. She paused a moment, gathering herself perhaps, and then walked a little further into the shop.

The old man set down his package on a stack of hardbacks and sighed. He looked up, up and around the shelves from one wall to the next and back again.

He stretched his arms wide, a fisherman telling tales.

'This was his dream,' he said. 'He seemed to want nothing else but what he possessed here . . . except of course your mother.'

Annie shook her head. She was having difficulty absorbing everything that she was feeling. A sense of absence, of mystery, and a sudden reminder of a huge hole in her life which, even at this moment, she was trying desperately to fill with half-forgotten memories. Her father had been dead more than twenty years, her mother more than ten, and yet in some way her memories of her father were stronger, more vivid, more passionate. In that moment she could almost see him. Right now. Standing where the old man was standing with his worn-out expensive topcoat.

'How did you know my father?' Annie asked, the words

clawing their way up out of her throat. There was tension in her chest as if she were fighting back tears that had long since been spent.

The old man winked.

'That, my dear, is a very long story . . .'

Annie O'Neill's mother had listened to Sinatra. Always. The mere fact of hearing his voice so often as a child had enchanted Annie O'Neill long before she saw his films or read his biographies. And she couldn't have cared less *who* the world believed he was. She didn't care that Coppola called him Johnny Fontaine in *The Godfather*, or that he introduced a girl called Judith Exner to both Sam Giancana and John Kennedy, or that he underwent extensive investigations regarding his alleged involvement with the Mafia . . . man, he could *sing*. From the first bars of 'Young At Heart' or 'I've Got The World On A String', whether the orchestra was led by Harry James, Nelson Riddle or Tommy Dorsey, even if it was Take #9 or Take #12 with Frank's irritated demands left intact on the master, it didn't matter. A man could sing like that, didn't matter if he'd been the one behind the grassy knoll smoking a cigarette and waiting for The Man to come to town. Hoboken, New Jersey, 12 December 1915, the world was given a gift from God, and God deigned to leave him here long enough to enchant a million hearts.

And it was to Frank that Annie O'Neill would go when she felt she was losing herself inside the anonymity of her own life. And it was within the timbre and pace of his voice that she would find some small solace; find refuge in the mere fact that this had been a love she had shared with her mother. Inside her third-floor Morningside Heights apartment – four rooms, each decorated with care and consideration, each color labored over, each item of furniture selected with a complete ambience in mind – she would sequester herself from reality and find her own reality that was so much more *real*.

It was from this same safe haven that she had ventured that

August Thursday morning, a walk she made each and every working day, and it was within those ten or fifteen minutes that she would habitually re-design her life into something more closely approximating her desires. For all the hundreds, perhaps thousands of people who passed her in the street, it was nevertheless a lonely walk, a methodical passage from one foot to the next with little of consequence in between. And in arriving she would see much the same people. There was Harry Carpenter, a retired engineer who'd once worked down at the Rose Center for Earth & Space: a man who talked endlessly of his Spiderman comic book collection, how he'd found a mint copy of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, March 1963, *#14* of July '64 when The Green Goblin first appeared and, to cap it all, a *#39* from August '66 when Norman Osborn's real identity was revealed. Harry was perhaps a little lost, sixty-seven years old, his wife long since gone, and he trawled through the shelves and selected books that Annie knew he would never read. And then there was John Damianka, a lecturer from Barnard, a kindred spirit in some sense. John and Annie had been neighbors an eternity ago, and when she'd moved to Morningside John had kept right on visiting like it was something that would happen for the rest of their lives. Once upon a time, sitting on the stoop, they had talked of life's inconsequentialities, but now he came to the store, and however well he might have seemed there was always something about him that reminded Annie of the quiet sense of desperation that accompanied all those who were lonely. He talked endlessly of the trials and tribulations of finding *a decent girl* these days. *I don't need Kim Basinger* he would say, *I just want someone who understands me . . . where I'm at, where I'm coming from, where I'm going*. Annie held her tongue, resisted the temptation to tell him that it might be a little easier if he knew those things for himself, and she listened patiently. *Irony of it all*, he would say, *is that the only letters people like me receive are Dear John letters*. He would laugh at that, laugh each time he told her, and then he would add: *But you know, the only girl that ever dumped me by*

mail called me J.D. And that was how it began. Dear J.D. So the only real Dear John letter I ever got wasn't a Dear John letter at all.

People like this. Lost people perhaps. Lost enough to find the little bookstore down a narrow sidestreet a short walk from Ellington and West 107th.

She welcomed them, all of them, because she was still idealistic enough to think that a book could change a life.

And thus her first thought when the old man in the expensive but tired-looking topcoat had mentioned her father was that he had come to reminisce, to select a book perhaps, to consume a few minutes of their lives shooting the breeze and skating the differences. And then her second thought, her third and fourth and fifth also, was that this man – whoever he was – might be the key to understanding something about her own past that had been forever a mystery. The urgency she felt could not have been explained any other way; he represented a line to the shore, and she grasped it with both hands and pulled with all she possessed.

'You are busy?' the old man asked her.

Annie held her arms out as if inviting him to survey the crowds that were even now jamming their way into the store. She smiled and shook her head. 'No,' she said. 'I'm not busy.'

'Then perhaps I can take a few minutes to show you something.'

He collected his package from the stack of hardbacks as he came towards her, and when he reached the counter he set it down and untied the string that bound it.

'I have here,' he said quietly, 'something that may intrigue you.'

The brown paper unfolded like dry skin, like a fall leaf once again unwrapped from its own multi-hued chrysalis. Within the package was a sheaf of papers, and on top of the papers a blank manila envelope. The old man took the envelope, and from within it he drew a single sheet of paper. He handed it to Annie.

'A letter,' the man said.

Annie took it, felt the coarse and brittle texture of its surface. It felt like the page of an age-old volume, a first edition left somewhere to hold its words in breathless perpetuity. At the top of the page, faded now but still legible, was a scrawled heading. *From the Cicero Hotel* it read.

'No longer standing,' the old man said. 'They tore it down in the sixties and built something strange and modern.'

There was something clipped and too articulate in his voice, something that made him difficult to place.

Annie looked up at him and nodded.

'It's a letter your father wrote,' he went on. 'He wrote it to your mother. See . . . '

The man extended his hand, then his index finger, and the index finger skated over the letter and rested above the words *Dear Heart.*

Annie frowned.

'He always started his letters that way . . . it was a token of his affection, his love for her. Shame, but I believe the letters never actually reached her . . . '

The old man withdrew his finger.

Annie watched it go like a train leaving a station with someone special on board.

'If there was one thing your father knew how to do,' he whispered, almost as if for effect alone, 'it was *how* to love someone.'

And then the old man nodded towards the letter, and the hand with the index finger made this small flourish, like someone introducing a minor act in vaudeville.

'Proceed,' he said, and smiled.

'What's your name?' Annie asked.

The man frowned for a second, as if the question bore the least possible significance and relevance to the matter at hand.

'My name?'

'Your name?' she repeated.

The man hesitated. 'Forrester,' he said. 'My name is Robert Franklin Forrester, but people just call me Forrester. Robert is

too modern for a man my age, and Franklin is too presidential, don't you think?'

He smiled, and then he bowed his head as if a third person had made a formal introduction.

Once again she felt a twinge as he smiled. Was there something too familiar in the way he looked at her?

She was possessed then, compelled to consider something that at once excited and terrified her. She found herself scrutinizing his face, looking for something that would serve to identify who he might be. She shuddered visibly and turned her eyes back to the letter.

Dear Heart,

I am lost now. More lost than I ever imagined I could be. I am sorry for these years. I know you will understand, and I know that your promise will stand whatever happens now. I trust that you will care for the child, care for her as I would have had I possessed the chance. I feel certain that I'll not see you again, but you are – as ever – in my heart. I love you Madeline, as I know you love me. Love like ours perhaps was never meant to survive. A moth to a flame. A moment of bright and stunning beauty, and then darkness.

Always, Chance.

Annie frowned; she felt her heart tighten up like the fist of a child. 'Chance?'

Forrester smiled. 'He called her Heart, she called him Chance . . . you know how love is.'

Annie smiled as if she understood. She did not question the feeling, but nevertheless the feeling came. She believed – all too unwillingly – that she did not know how love was.

'He died soon after,' Forrester said. 'I believe, though I could never be sure, that even though she never received it, it was in fact his last letter to her.'

Annie held the page in her hands, hands that were even now beginning to tremble. Emotion welled in her chest, a small,

tight fist in her throat, and when she looked back at Forrester she saw him blurred at the edges. Blurred through her own tears.

'My dear,' he said, and withdrew a silk handkerchief from his pocket.

He handed it to her and she touched her lids gently.

'I did not mean to upset you,' he said. 'Quite the opposite.'

Annie looked at the page once more, and then back at the old man. They became one and the same thing – the old man standing beside her and the letter she held in her hand, and in that brief second they represented all she had ever wanted to know about her own history.

'I came, you see, with an invitation,' and then he smiled once again in that strangely familiar fashion.

Of her parents' relationship Annie O'Neill knew little. Her father had died when she was seven, and in the years that followed, when she'd lived alone with her mother, Madeline, there was little said of him. Of course he would crop up in their conversations, perhaps her mother mentioning something about the shop, about a book they'd read . . . but the intimate details, the whys and wherefores of life before his death – these things went unspoken. Madeline O'Neill had been a woman of character, self-possessed and intuitive. Her intelligence and culture defied description, and time and again she spoke of things that Annie believed no-one could have known. She knew books and art, she knew music and history; she spoke the truth directly and without hesitation. She had been Annie's life, a totality, a completeness, and for the years they had been together Annie could never have comprehended existence without her. But time marched, and it marched with foot-soldiers, and the footsoldiers carried weapons that weakened the heart and frayed the nerves. They arrived one evening a little after Christmas 1991, and they brought with them Madeline O'Neill's call-to-arms.

After her mother's death, after the funeral, after people she barely knew had come and gone with their words of sympathy

and regret, Annie was left with almost nothing. The house where they had lived all those years was sold, and with the proceeds she bought ownership of the shop and paid a deposit on her apartment. Aside from that there was a box of papers and oddments beneath her mother's bed which Annie knew were meant for her. Among those things was a book. A single book from all the many thousands that had passed through the family's collective hands over the years. It was a small book called *Breathing Space* by Nathaniel Levitt. Printed in 1836 by a company called Hollister & Sons of Jersey City and bound by Hoopers of Camden – companies both long since vanished into the tidal wave of conglomerates – and Annie had no real understanding of its significance. The book came to represent her father, and thus she had never investigated its significance, never searched out other works by its author. These things did not matter, and seemed in some way to challenge the memory of her father. Inscribed inside the cover were the words *Annie, for when the time comes. Dad.* and the date: *2 June 1979*. It was a simple story, a story of love lost and found once more, and though the places and names and voices were dated, there was something about the rhythm of the prose, the grace with which the slightest detail was outlined and illuminated, that made the book so special. Perhaps it meant nothing of any great significance, but to that book she had granted character and meaning far beyond its face value. It had been left for her. It had come from her father. And though she would perhaps never understand the time to which he referred it didn't matter. It was what it was, but most of all it was hers.

Nevertheless, it struck Annie O'Neill that for the first time in many years she was thinking of her father as a real person: a person with his own life, his own dreams and aspirations. What had Forrester said? That if there was one thing her father had known *how* to do it was to love his wife, Annie's mother. And love seemed now such a tortuous path, such an unknown territory. Navigating the arterial highways of the heart. And even how it sounded. *Falling in* love. Surely that

said everything that needed to be said. Like a headlong pitch forward into the hereafter. Why not *rising into love*? Hey, you never guess what happened? I *rose* into love . . . and man, was that a feeling. A feeling like no other.

Annie's mother had always looked a certain way when they spoke of him. Annie would beg her to talk of him, to tell her what he was like, but there was something there, something so driven and powerful that seemed to prevent Madeline from expressing her heart. Losing her husband had devastated her, something that was evident in her eyes, in the way her hands tightened when his name was mentioned. Madeline O'Neill had possessed a strength of character that Annie had rarely seen in anyone else. Her wit and intelligence, her compassion, her *passion* for life, were things that Annie had always aspired to but always seemed to fall short of. It was that character that had made her mother so special to her father, of this Annie was sure, and from this single, simple fact she knew that her father also must have been a remarkable man to capture her mother's heart.

Annie held the letter. *From the Cicero Hotel.* Why was he in a hotel? In a hotel and writing to his wife? She believed she had experienced more emotion in this single moment than she had in the last year. Emotion for her father, the man who had given her life, and almost as soon had disappeared from that life. Emotion also for her mother, for these few words seemed to say everything that could be said about the depth of their love for one another. There was a vacuum within her, as wide as the building within which she stood, and never had she discovered anything that could erase that emptiness.

She looked at Forrester. He looked back – unabashed, direct. He possessed a lived-in face, warm and generous. His features were neither clumsy nor chiselled, but somewhere in between. This was the face of a man who would reach the end of his life, sitting somewhere in a hotel lounge perhaps, or in a rocker on a porch stoop, and with unequivocal certainty declare that it had in fact been a life. A *real* life. A life of moment and

significance, a life of loves and losses and calculated risks. Here, she thought, was a man who would never ask himself *What if . . . ?* Sadly for her, but nevertheless realistically, the antithesis of her own quiet existence.

Annie smiled. She handed back the letter.

Forrester raised his hand. 'No, it's for you to keep.'

She frowned, but didn't question how or why this stranger possessed the letter in the first place.

Anticipating her unspoken thought Forrester smiled. 'Frank . . . your father and I, we shared a room together many, many years ago. I have been away, have recently returned to the city, and in preparing my things to move I came across this letter, some others also – '

'Others?' she asked.

Forrester nodded. 'Other letters yes, all of them from your father to your mother . . . also I found some snapshots, old snapshots . . . even one or two of you when you were younger.' Forrester smiled. 'That was how I knew you were Frank's daughter when I came in.'

'You could bring them?'

Forrester didn't answer her question at first. He merely nodded, and placed his hand on the stack of papers on the counter. 'This is my invitation,' he said. 'Your father and I, we started something. We started something special here in Manhattan many decades ago. It was soon after he leased this store – '

Forrester raised his hand and indicated the room within which they stood.

'I met him here, and here is where it all began.'

Annie placed the letter on the counter. 'Where all of what began?'

Forrester nodded and winked as if imparting a tremendous secret. 'The reading club.'

Annie frowned. 'A reading club . . . you and my father?'

'And five or six others . . . closet bohemians, poets, even some writers . . . and every week we would gather here or in

one of the apartments and we would share stories and read poems, even letters we had received. It was a different time, a different culture really, and people wrote so much more . . . had so much more to say if the truth be known.'

Annie smiled. Here was a facet, an angle of her father's life she had never seen before. He founded a reading club.

'And as I am here for some time, weeks, months perhaps, I felt we should revive the tradition.' Forrester smiled. He once again performed the small introductory fanfare with his hand, indicated the shelves that stood to all sides: literary sentinels. 'After all, we have no shortage of material.'

Annie nodded. 'You're right there.'

'And this,' Forrester said, taking the sheaf of papers from its wrapping on the counter, hesitating for a second as if a little awkward. 'Well Miss O'Neill, I thought that this might perhaps be the first subject of discussion.'

He handed the papers to Annie. She could smell their age, feel the years that had somehow seeped into the very grain of the pages. Perhaps it was her imagination, but it was almost as if her history was here, a history her father had been part of, and thus she might find something that would contribute to her own. An open door beckoned her and there was nothing she could do but walk right through it.

'It is a novel I believe . . . at least the start of a novel. It was written many years ago by a man I knew for a very short time, all things considered. He was a member of the club, and while he was there he possessed all of us in some small way.' Forrester smiled nostalgically. 'Never met a man quite like him.'

He paused quietly for a second or two. 'This is the first chapter . . . reads like a diary I suppose. I would like you to read it, and then next Monday I will come and we will discuss it.'

He smiled, and there was something so warm, so genuine about his face, that Annie O'Neill never questioned intent or motive or vested interest; she simply said, 'Yes, of course . . . next Monday.'

'So there it is . . . signed, sealed and delivered.' Forrester held out his hand.

Annie looked at his hand, then up at his face, and his eyes were looking at the silk handkerchief that she still clutched in her hand. 'Of course,' she said. 'Sorry . . . ' and returned the handkerchief to him.

'It has been a pleasure,' he said, and once again he bowed his head in that strange clipped European fashion.

'Mr Forrester?'

He paused.

'Could you . . . would you tell me about my father? I know that it seems a strange thing to ask but he died when I was very young . . . and . . . and well – '

'You miss him?'

Annie could feel that tight fist of emotion again, threatening her ability to breathe. She nodded. She knew if she tried to speak she would cry.

'I will come on Monday,' Forrester said, 'and you can ask me all the questions you like and I will tell you what I know.'

'Could you . . . could you stay a little now perhaps?' Annie ventured.

Forrester reached out and touched her arm. 'I am sorry my dear,' he said quietly. 'There is, unfortunately, something I must attend to . . . but I will be here on Monday.'

Annie nodded. 'You will come . . . you promise you will come.'

'I will come Miss O'Neill . . . of that you can be certain.' And then he turned, and Annie watched him go, and though there seemed to be a confusion of questions and noises inside her head she said nothing at all. The door opened, the breeze from the street stole in to gather what warmth it could, and then the door closed and he was gone.

Annie carried the sheaf of papers to the counter and set them down. She turned over the first blank page, and then started to read:

A friend of mine once told me something about writing. He said that at first we write for ourselves, then we write for our friends, last of all we write for money. That made sense to me, but only in hindsight, for I wrote these things for someone I believed I would never see, and then I wrote them for money. A great deal of money. And though the story I will tell you has more to do with someone other than myself, and though this thing began long before I met him, I will tell you about it anyway. There is a history here, a history that carries weight and substance and meaning, and I write of this history so you will understand how these things happened, and why. Perhaps you will understand the reasons and motives, perhaps not, but whichever way it comes out . . .

The bell above the door rang again. Annie paused mid-sentence and looked up. The wind had pushed the door open, and the chilled breeze hurried in once more to find her where she stood.

She closed the door, closed it tight into the jamb, and walked back to the counter. There were things to do, a new delivery to log and inventory, and the sheaf of papers would have to wait until she returned home.

She wrapped the papers carefully inside the package that Forrester had brought, tucked the letter he had brought in the package too, put it into a bag, and carried it through to the kitchen at the back of the store. She set the bag on a chair, and in the event that she might absent-mindedly hurry from the store for some reason, she covered it with her coat. She would not forget it; *could* not forget it.

Annie O'Neill thought of the papers throughout the day, like a promise waiting, a sense of anticipation and mystery surrounding them, but even more so she thought of the man who had visited. Robert Franklin Forrester. A man who had known her father, and in the few minutes she had spent with him had given her the impression that he'd known her father far better than she had. And the reading club. A club for only two it

seemed. First meeting evening of Monday, 26 August 2002, right here at The Reader's Rest, a small and narrow-fronted bookshop near the junction of Duke Ellington and West 107th.