

OIL

by John Boyne

The car won't start and you walk around to the front, lift the bonnet and peer inside. You might as well be looking at a schematic for a rocket-ship for all the sense it makes to you but still, you touch things and hope that inspiration will strike. Your neighbour comes out and sees you standing there but you pretend you don't see him. He kissed your wife once at a party. You saw him do it. You lost your way trying to find a bathroom and there they were, kissing in a bedroom, her hand pushing his away from her breast. You did nothing about it because you didn't know what to do. It wasn't a movie, after all; it was a party.

'Problem?' he asks and you look across at him. He's not as tall as you. And he's not as good-looking either. He wears a cheap suit. Still, she kissed him. You tell him that the car won't start and he offers to take a look for you.

'Aren't you a botanist?' you ask, refusing to move.

'I understand cars,' he says, pushing you away and looking down at the oily black engine and all those things, those things you don't know the name of, that surround it. He strokes his chin for a moment and mutters something to himself before tightening a few caps and squeezing a couple of wires. 'Try her now,' he tells you.

You sit in the car and put the key in the engine. You have an important meeting in an hour. A lot of things could come from that meeting. A lot of very good things. But still, you hope that the car won't start.

'No luck,' you say, stepping back to the front.

'I thought I had her,' he tells you before looking down again and shaking his head.

'I can handle it from here,' you tell him.

'It's no problem,' he says. 'I understand cars.'

You watched them for longer than you should have and when she stopped pushing his hand away and let him touch her, you got hard and wanted to see what would happen next. It wasn't like being at a party after all; it was like watching a movie.

'Battery's dead,' he says finally. 'You leave your lights on all night? That'll do it every time.'

'Thanks for your help,' you say, slapping him once on the back of his white shirt as he turns away, a gesture of friendship, two buddies talking engines. He walks over to his own car, which is smaller than yours, the dark imprint of your hand, black and greasy, perfectly centred on the back of his white shirt, the fingers stretched wide, the middle finger pointing north.