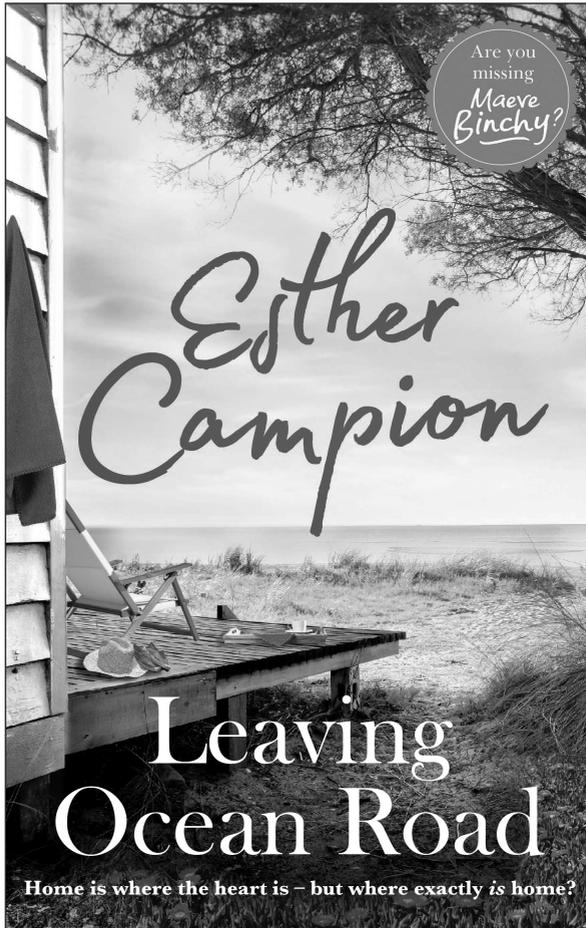


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**#TravelTuesday**

From coastal Australia to Santorini and Ireland, a slice  
of warm, character-driven fiction in the tradition of  
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Available from 25 July 2017

**Set in Ireland, Greece and small-town coastal Australia, *Leaving Ocean Road* is a warm-hearted, poignant story of treasuring our memories while celebrating new beginnings, from wonderful new Irish storyteller Esther Campion.**

Twenty years ago, Ellen O'Shea left her beloved Ireland to make a new life in Australia. Now a popular local in a small coastal town, but struggling to cope with the death of her much-loved Greek husband, Nick, Ellen finds her world turned upside down when an unexpected visitor lands on her doorstep.

The arrival of Gerry Clancy, her first love from Ireland, may just be the catalyst that pulls Ellen out of her pit of grief, but it will also trigger a whole new set of complications for her and those she holds dear.

Home is where the heart is – but where exactly *is* home? Can Ellen and Gerry's rekindled romance withstand the passage of time, family, young adult children with their own lives, and the shock disclosure of a long-held secret that will put all their closest relationships at risk?

## PROLOGUE

It was the kind of day that shouldn't be wasted. A glorious day full of sunshine and possibility. Far too good to be spent lying in bed.

Ellen ran through her mental checklist as she and Nick packed the boot of the Chrysler. Meat for the barbie, check. Enough potato salad to feed a small army, check. Drinks, check.

'Nick, would you go in there and get Louise moving?'

The laundry load would be finished. If she got that hung out, it would be dry by the time they got home. It was something she'd always loved about living in South Australia. Bone-dry straight-off-the-line washing.

Nick joined her at the Hill's Hoist, Paddy in tow as ever. He took a pair of her smart work pants from the basket.

'She'll be out in a minute.'

Ellen rolled her eyes. 'I spend the last two hours trying to get her out of bed and you ask her once . . .'

He gave her that cheeky smile that always annoyed her when she was stressed. It was only the annual Christmas lunch at the foreshore with her work colleagues, but she liked to be on time. She eyed him in despair as he pegged up the trousers by the legs.

'Holy God, how long do we have to live together for you to learn how to put up washing?'

He stood back with his hands on his hips and laughed as she unpegged the trousers and hung them up by the waistband.

‘Oh no! I’ve married a girl with . . . how you say . . . ODC?’

‘OCD,’ she corrected, already on to the next item. God, he drove her mad, but she loved him.

‘If it wasn’t for my OCD, which I don’t even have, this family would never get anywhere.’

He’d given up on the washing and stood watching her. ‘What are you looking at?’

He smiled that smile again, his gorgeous brown eyes fixed on her.

‘The beautiful Irish girl I fell in love with.’

She stopped and let out a deep sigh.

‘Am I still that girl to you, Nick?’

He moved closer and slipped his hands around her waist. ‘You will always be that girl to me.’

She let the pegs drop to the parched grass as he bent to kiss her. They might be twenty years older, but that kiss was as tender as their first.

‘Get a room, you two.’

Louise skipped down the steps of the veranda, radiant as a sunbeam in her floppy hat and sunnies, transformed from the grumpy teenager Ellen had been trying to rouse for most of the morning. She finished the laundry as Nick went to help Louise find a space in the boot for her beach bag among the eskies and camping chairs.

‘Can I drive?’ Louise asked, already sticking one of her P plates to the windscreen.

Ellen looked at Nick. Their daughter would drive her round the twist not to mind drive the car. As ever, he knew what she was thinking but held out his palms and shrugged his big shoulders.

‘We’re late already,’ Ellen started, ‘if you’d been up when—’ But Nick was holding out the keys to Louise who had climbed into the driver’s seat.

She bent down and took Paddy's face in her hands. 'Mind the house, Pads,' she told the dog. 'And enjoy the peace without this lot.'

A gentle breeze was blowing through the gum trees as they hurtled down the gravel driveway.

'Not too much speed, Lou,' Nick cautioned.

'Okay, Dad.'

If Ellen had said that, her daughter would have gone off. In her head, she replayed the familiar script. *I'm eighteen. I have my Ps. Will you stop telling me what to do?* She looked out over the coastline with its changing palette of blues, greens and yellows, so familiar to her now.

'I could just drop you both off,' Louise suggested as they neared the town.

'It's a family event.' Ellen was emphatic. 'And we're a family.'

Louise looked to Nick for sympathy, but in his own calm way he backed her up.

'Your mum's right, Lou. All her workmates bring kids.' There was silence for a moment before he added, 'Big kids like you and me.'

'Okay,' Louise acquiesced, 'but you have to swim.'

He shook his head. 'I think I left my bathers—'

'I packed them for you,' Ellen interjected.

'Oh no!'

Louise shook her head of beautiful fair hair and laughed as only her dad could make her laugh. It was the sound that never failed to lighten Ellen's mood and soothe her soul.

## CHAPTER ONE

Ellen stood at the edge of the paddock, still in pyjamas at four in the afternoon. Whoever was calling was not going to give up. She walked back to the house, Paddy shuffling at her heels.

‘I’ve been ringing for the past hour. Did you get my message?’

Tracey could be as annoying as she was loyal.

‘I was in the paddock, feeding Spots.’ Ellen held the phone in place between her ear and shoulder as she dried the dishes from a breakfast she’d eaten at noon.

‘Good on you,’ said Tracey. ‘That horse looked a bit skinny the last time I was round.’

‘He’s up to his knees in lush grass.’ Ellen tried to mask her irritation.

Tracey laughed. ‘How has your day been?’

‘Great,’ she lied. ‘You must be busy yourself.’

‘Flat out as usual.’

She waited for Tracey to elaborate, but there was none of the customary, dramatic retelling of everyday events in the world of the Popes.

‘I’d better let you go.’

‘I have news.’ Tracey paused. ‘You may be having a visitor.’

Ellen took the phone in her hand and held the plate and tea towel at her waist.

‘Don’t worry. I put him off,’ said Tracey. ‘Told him you’d be away for at least a week.’

‘Who?’ Her voice came out as a croak.

In the time it took Tracey to formulate her next sentence, Ellen had run through a myriad of possibilities: anyone from the taxman with one of those forms she’d ignored, to a census worker asking awkward questions.

‘Some Irish bloke, said he knows you from way back.’

‘Did you get a name? What did he look like?’

‘If you give me a chance, I’ll tell you.’

She pushed the phone back between her ear and shoulder and rubbed vigorously on the plate she’d already dried. It couldn’t be an Irish taxman; she hadn’t worked in Ireland in over twenty years.

‘Gerry Canty, or was it Clancy?’ With no sound from Ellen, Tracey continued. ‘Tall bloke, well built, not fat, you know the type.’

The plate fell with a crash.

‘What was that?’

‘Nothing.’ Ellen looked at the ceramic shards strewn across the worn lino. ‘Where is he now? Has he left?’

‘I’m not sure. Said he was visiting his son in Adelaide, that you’d be expecting him . . . something about a letter . . .’

She was thinking quickly now. She swallowed hard and straightened her shoulders. ‘Tracey, ask at the post office for my mail. I’ll phone and tell them I’m sick and can’t collect it.’

‘How long is it since you collected your post?’

‘Too bloody long by the sound of things. Just do it, will you?’

‘Keep your knickers on. I’ll bring it round tomorrow.’

Ellen hung up and sat at the kitchen table, stunned.

Gerry Clancy pulled his rented four-by-four into the driveway of the Sunshine Motel. He could hardly believe he was in Australia.

There'd been nothing but rain since he'd arrived in the country a fortnight earlier.

'Just the one night, Mr Clancy?' The woman behind the counter eyed him over her glasses.

'I'm not sure. I'm here to see a friend, but the lady at the petrol station seemed to think she might be away.'

The woman drew down the glasses and let them hang on a knitted sweater. 'Who is it you're here to see?'

'Ellen O'— I mean Ellen Con-stan-tinopoulos,' Gerry stuttered.

The woman smiled. 'Yes, I know Ellen. Irish, are you?'

'I'm from Cork, Ellen's home town I suppose you'd say.'

'I didn't know Ellen was away . . .' She opened her mouth, but then replaced her glasses and got on with the booking. 'Stay as long as you like, Mr Clancy. It's a quiet time of year in South Australia. Enjoy it before we're overrun with summer visitors.'

Five minutes in town and the two people he'd spoken to knew Ellen. He thought to tell the woman about his son in Adelaide, but something told him the bush telegraph would be relaying enough information about him already.

The motel room was basic but clean and had an uninterrupted view of the beautiful foreshore. With only a short walk to the main street, Gerry went to sample the local cuisine in one of the nearby restaurants before partaking in a couple of Aussie beers in a hotel bar that reminded him of *Crocodile Dundee*. He'd managed to escape to the safety of his room before the brawling broke out, but not before being quizzed by the barman and regulars about his origins and travels. He'd even gleaned a little insight into Ellen's Australian life and that of her Greek husband.

'Tough break for the family,' said one of the locals. 'Good bloke, Nick. Not shy of a day's work.'

'Not shy of a drink either,' his mate chipped in, raising a chorus of garrulous laughter.

‘Haven’t seen Ellen in a while,’ the barman said, looking thoughtful as he poured a schooner. ‘Used to come in every Friday and collect him. Even took a drink herself now and then.’

It was hard to imagine Ellen in her early forties. Gerry had only seen her once since she’d emigrated, and that had been some years back; a quick embrace and offer of condolences at her mother’s funeral. He sometimes ran into her brother and cousins in Cork and caught glimpses of her in them. It had seemed so final when she’d told him she was moving to Australia. He’d been tied to the family business by then, and she’d won a scholarship to do her final year at university in Sydney. Their summer romance had never had a chance once she’d made up her mind to leave the likes of him behind. Hindsight was a great thing, but if he’d had less pride and more balls, he could have followed her. By the time he’d thought about it, Jessica Sheehy had her sights set on him, and when he was asked to be best man and she bridesmaid at Pat Clohessy’s wedding, well, that as they say, was that.

He took the bundle of letters from his suitcase and propped himself up on the bed with the pillows. He looked at each letter in turn, carefully keeping them in order. It was after her mother’s funeral that she’d sent the first letter, said she wanted to keep in touch, to hear news from Ireland and how his life had turned out. Oh, he knew she had old friends in Cork who still phoned or emailed, or at least sent Christmas updates, but there was something in the tone of that first letter, the very fact that she’d wanted to be back in touch, which had made it impossible to ignore. They’d agreed early on that all communication be via snail mail. Her style was friendly. She loved to write, and he wasn’t a big fan of computers. And so their relationship was relaunched like a salvaged shipwreck, a shadow of its former self but still in existence. She wrote mostly about Louise, updating him on her only child’s achievements. She said her husband worked away a lot. He kept his letters light, preferring to bemoan the Irish

weather and update her on family and friends in the exaggerated style that used to make her laugh.

Had she received his last instalment? Was it possible she didn't know he was here? Surely he'd put his mobile number in the letter. Maybe she'd tried to call but he'd left out some digits for the country code. Come to think of it, he'd had some odd looks when he mentioned she was out of town. Surely to God, she'd be glad to see him. He flicked through the envelopes with their exotic stamps of koalas and kookaburras until he came across an early letter in which she'd drawn a rough map. It had a house, and a field with a horse in it, and an old-fashioned car in a driveway that led to a road. There was a signpost at the end of the road where she'd written *Port Lincoln*. He looked closer at the page. *Ocean Road*. Tomorrow, he would see if he could find it.

Ellen bent down and collected the pieces of crockery from the linoleum floor that was crying out for a mop. The cupboard doors looked like they could walk off their hinges. A smell from under the fridge reminded her of the resident mouse. Paddy whined about it now and then, but at thirteen he'd lost his taste for the chase, let alone the kill. She emptied the wreckage into the bin and went to the lounge room, picking up the remote before plonking herself down on the sofa. The ironing board stood beside the television she hardly switched off. It had been her intention at the end of summer to iron the lighter clothes and put them away. As the months went on, she'd watched plenty of mindless television but the clothes had only accumulated and formed an untidy pile on the worn leather armchair. In the early months Louise had come home regularly to help, but she was young. It wasn't fair to put so much on her daughter. Ellen had done her best to reassure her things were getting better, that she'd be able to cope.

The phone rang. Ellen checked the wall clock: six. It would be so easy to ignore it, but Louise would only worry if she didn't

answer. She stood up, turned down the sound on the TV and took the phone from its cradle.

‘Hello, darling. How was your day?’

‘Good, Mum. How was yours?’

‘Oh exhilarating, like all my other days.’

‘I hate it when you’re sarcastic.’

She heard the exasperation in her daughter’s voice. ‘Sorry. My day’s been fine. You’re not to worry.’

‘Did you speak to anybody?’

‘Just Tracey. And Spots and Paddy, if that counts.’

‘How is Paddy?’

‘Oh he manages.’ She didn’t want to over-egg the details of the ageing dog’s decline. ‘He’s a trouper. Keeps me going.’

Part of Ellen wanted to tell Louise about Gerry Clancy, but it was too hard. Instead, she listened to what was happening in her daughter’s life, grateful for the ten-minute insight into the trials and tribulations of a university student. There were assignments and student union events she always seemed to be organising. Nick would have been so proud. He would have done a much better job of this, asking the right questions, encouraging Louise to open up and say how she was really getting on, what those assignments and events actually involved.

‘Okay, Mum. I’d better go. Talk to you tomorrow night.’

‘Thanks, love.’

Ellen held the phone to her chest with both hands. This should have been the part where she handed Louise over to Nick and left them to talk as they always did, laughing at intervals, the sound making her smile. God, she wished Louise didn’t have to call home every night to make sure she was holding it together. Weren’t mothers supposed to worry about their daughters, not the other way around?

In Adelaide, Louise slipped her phone back into the pocket of her jeans and left the bathroom cubicle. The girl beside her at

the washbasins smiled at her. A friendly smile, or an I-feel-sorry-for-you smile, she wasn't sure. Didn't other students phone their mothers every night? No, of course they didn't. They were too busy being uni students. 'Work hard, party harder,' they'd told her in orientation week. She undid her hair from its elastic tie and shook out her long light brown locks. Toby said he loved it. Yes, Toby the happy handsome uni student who didn't have to phone his mother every night and who was waiting out in the restaurant for her, oblivious.

The girl was gone. Louise leaned on the sink and took a good look at herself. What was that expression her mother had about being old before your time? Well, hadn't her life been fast-tracked months ago? No, she wasn't going to go there. Toby would be waiting. This was supposed to be a romantic dinner. She'd made the call. Her mother sounded fine. She'd call again tomorrow. Her parents had worked hard to send her here. The last thing they'd have wanted would be to burden her.

She gathered up her hair and retied it in a tight bun. 'You've got this,' she told herself.

Someone was pounding on the front door. Ellen threw back the duvet and swung her legs over the side of the sofa. As she stretched her arms over her head and forced her eyes to stay open, she felt her stomach tense. The knocking came again.

*Oh, my God! It can't be Gerry.*

Sunlight had just begun to brighten the room. She looked at the clock: six-thirty.

'You okay, Mrs C?'

She shook her head at the sound of the familiar voice, stood up and nudged the sleeping dog at her feet. Paddy groaned and opened one eye.

'Come on, boy. Let's see what Tyson wants.'

Paddy stretched and staggered after her to the hallway, managing a hoarse bark in protest at the disturbance.

She opened the front door to see her next-door neighbour's burly figure almost filling the doorway.

'What do you think you're doing waking decent people at this hour of the morning?'

'I came to see if you was all right, Mrs C.' Tyson scratched his chest through a stained T-shirt. 'You don't look like you've been taking too good care of yourself this past while. I could come in and cook you up a nice breakfast.'

She could smell the alcohol on his breath. He meant well, but the last thing she needed was him coming in and feeling sorry for her. Anyway, he had enough problems of his own and she didn't have the energy for those either.

'Thanks, Tyson, but I was just getting up to go to town.' The white lie would get rid of him.

Paddy had thrown himself down beside her and lay with his eyes closed again.

'If you're sure, Mrs C.' Tyson moved his massive frame away from the door and slowly turned to go.

She grabbed an empty egg box from a shelf in the hallway, opened the screen door and handed it to him.

'Take a few eggs on your way home.'

'Well, thank you, Mrs C. I shall do that directly.'

As much as she could do without his appearance at odd hours, she couldn't ask for a better neighbour. He'd be the first to help in a crisis, just as he had when Nick . . . well, whenever there'd been any trouble.

She watched as Tyson swaggered down the steps and wandered off toward the chook pen. Curling back up on the sofa was tempting, but the sun gleamed through the windows and it had the makings of a nice day, one of the first in months after the miserable winter. Of course the day would have looked even brighter had the windows not been thick with dust, but before Ellen let herself be overwhelmed by the thought of all the work that needed to be done inside and out before any visitor could

see the place, she vowed to take one step at a time and start with breakfast and a shower, like a normal person.

*Goddamn it, Gerry Clancy, couldn't you have left well enough alone and stayed in Cork?*

She went to the bedroom and scrambled through cupboards to find something clean to put on. After the shower, everything about her smelled of coconut and frangipani, but her bedroom smelled old and stale. She ignored the cobwebs hanging between walls and furniture, grabbed what she needed and got out of there as fast as she could.

Her best jeans she kept for going out slipped down at her hips. She forced herself back into the bedroom to find a belt. Track pants were so much easier; she'd spent the winter months rotating a couple of pairs of them and a few longsleeved T-shirts, washing them by hand and throwing them over the makeshift line under the back veranda. The mirror she usually avoided caught her eye. She wanted to blame the coating of dust for the dullness in her pale Irish skin and the lacklustre green of her eyes. The shirt was crumpled, but a quick rub of the iron and it would be good as new. It would take more than a little ironing to turn the house back to its former glory, but at least she was trying. If she kept it together, surely she could make it look to Gerry as though she were on top of things.

By the time Tracey arrived, Ellen felt she'd done a day's work. A massive network of cobwebs had had to be removed from the Hill's Hoist before she'd managed to hang out a load of washing, but it felt good to see freshly washed clothes and linen blowing in the light September breeze.

Tracey thundered up the driveway in her Ford Falcon, dust clouds dispersing behind her.

'How're ya goin'?' she called out.

Ellen was sitting on the veranda taking a well-earned coffee break and imagining the contents of the letter her friend had

promised to bring. She watched as Tracey came up the steps, rifling in a vast handbag.

‘Rosie at the post office said you never phoned, but she was okay with me taking them.’ Tracey set the stack of mail on the wicker table and eyed the coffee mug. ‘Okay if I grab myself one while you look at these?’

Ellen just wanted to rip open the letter with the Irish stamps that poked out between bills and useless catalogues, but Tracey might go opening her grimy fridge or witness the bombsite that was her living room, ironing board or no ironing board. She shot up from her chair.

‘Have a seat. I’ll bring one out.’

‘Longlife?’ Tracey’s face was a grimace at the first sip of coffee.

‘Yes. I just ran out.’ Ellen fingered the pile of post.

‘Oh, don’t mind me.’ Tracey grabbed a supermarket flyer. ‘I’ll see what’s on special while you read your letter.’

Ellen could have lifted Tracey off her garden chair, placed her in her Ford, and set it on autopilot back to town, but Tracey was the one link with the town she had left.

*Ellen,*

*You won't believe it. I'm coming to Australia for a holiday. Kieran's in Adelaide since finishing the Leaving Cert. His friend is playing football for the Adelaide Crows (don't know if you know them) and he got Kieran some work through his contacts. Thought I'd take the short flight to your neck of the woods when I'm there. It will be great to see you after all these years. I'll sort myself out for accommodation. Should be arriving in Port Lincoln on . . .*

*My God!* Ellen scanned to the top of the page to find a date. The letter must have been lying in her post box for weeks.

‘You all right, love?’ Tracey asked.

With Gerry's letter in her lap, Ellen grabbed at the official-looking envelopes and tore them open. The red ink on overdue bills made her wince. When Nick was alive, she'd always paid her bills on time. She couldn't hold back the tears.

'Oh, darl, it can't be that bad,' Tracey soothed.

'Look at these.' She stifled the desire to scream. 'I'm a mess. My house is a mess, my husband is dead, my daughter's left home.' She gathered the papers in a bunch and slammed them on the table, a tremor rippling through her body. 'I can't even pay my bills, Tracey, and this blast from the past thinks he can just pop in . . .'

Tracey moved her chair closer and put an arm around her. Ellen let her head drop against her friend and sobbed into her flowery shirt.

'You've had a rough trot, darl, but it will get better.'

Ellen sat up and wiped her tear-soaked cheeks with a sleeve.

'How do you know it won't get worse?'

'Because I'm going to help you.'

Looking into Tracey's soft brown eyes, Ellen wondered where her small-town Australian friend got her self-assured notions. But it was true. Tracey was the one person who could help her.

'Might as well start now as I've got the day off.'

That was it. She'd let her guard down and it was payback. Tracey would be on a mission to whip house, garden, even her into shape.

'What are you doing?'

Tracey had taken her mobile phone out of a side pocket in her handbag and begun scrolling through the numbers.

'Can I book an appointment for a cut and colour tomorrow?'

Ellen made a grab for the phone, but Tracey made off around the veranda, confirming times.

'A little makeover is just what you need, darl,' she said, ending the call.

'Tracey, don't you get it?' She was shouting now. 'I can barely

get out of bed. My life is a shambles, and you want me to go to the hairdresser's?'

Tracey looked resolute.

'Look, I know you're grieving for Nick and that Gerry Clancy is just an old friend, but if you saw him, you'd know you'd want to look your best.'

'What are you saying?'

'He's a good-looking bloke. I'm sure he'd rather see you healthy and fresh than looking like a dag . . .'

'But I *am* a dag. I don't mind being a dag, living in my daggy house on this daggy block . . .'

 She was crying again.

'Oh, Ellen, I'm only trying to help.' Tracey leaned back against the veranda and took a deep breath before speaking again. 'We've been friends a long time, Ellen. Remember when our girls were born?'

Ellen smiled at the memory of the first time she'd met Tracey, when their girls were born a day apart and they got chatting over the incubators.

'I was freaking out with worry,' said Tracey, 'but you explained what was happening and set my mind at ease.' She lifted a hand from the rail of the veranda, sending her bangles jangling. Ellen looked away with embarrassment. 'You were always the one helping me. You always knew what to do when the kids were sick or naughty, what to say to teachers at school meetings, what books to buy . . . When they were teenagers we couldn't wait to get them off our hands so we could have some fun.' She sighed and, leaning her head to one side, made Ellen look her in the eye. 'Well, girlfriend, when will the fun start if I let you die of depression?'

Ellen bit her lip and gazed out over the lawn, past the vast yellow swathes of canola and out to the sea beyond. She turned around and went to say something, but Tracey had gone into the house.

'O . . . M . . . G!'

Ellen stood in the hallway and watched her friend take in the scene.

Tracey threw her hands up in the air. 'Looks like I came by in the nick of time.' Before Ellen could respond, she was apologising. 'Sorry, didn't mean to mention Nick. Well you know what I meant . . .'

Ellen was fixed to the spot. She couldn't believe Tracey had marched in here uninvited and uncovered the extent of her sorry existence.

There was a loud bark from outside.

'What's Paddy barking at?' asked Tracey.

'Nothing, I'd say. He's as deaf as a post. I suppose he feels he has to bark at some—'

They both heard the car pull into the driveway.



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