

MR. RICE # 1

MR. RICE. The day he brought her to my house — the first time I saw them together — my immediate thought was: what an unlikely couple!

I had met him once before about a week earlier; by himself. He had called to ask would I see her, just to give an opinion, if only to confirm that nothing could be done for her. I suggested he phone the hospital and make an appointment in the usual way. But of course he didn't. And within two hours he was back at my door again with an enormous



folder of material that had to do with her case and that he had compiled over the years and he'd be happy to go through it with me there and then because not only were the documents and reports and photographs interesting in themselves but they would be essential reading for someone like myself who was going to take her case on.

Yes, an ebullient fellow; full of energy and enquiry and the indiscriminate enthusiasms of the self-taught. And convinced, as they usually are, that his own life story was of compelling interest. He had worked for some charitable organisation in Nigeria. Kept goats on an island off the Mayo coast and made cheese. Sold storage batteries for those wind-mill things that produce electricity. Endured three winters in Norway to ensure the well-being of whales. That sort of thing. Worthy pursuits, no doubt. And he was an agreeable fellow; oh, yes; perfectly agreeable. Frank. That was his name. She was Molly. Reminded me instantly of my wife, Maria. Perhaps the way she held her head. A superficial resemblance. Anyhow. Molly and Frank Sweeney.

I liked her. I liked her calm and her independence; the confident way she shook my hand and found a seat for herself with her white cane. And when she spoke of her disability, there was no self-pity, no hint of resignation. Yes, I liked her.

Her life, she insisted, was uneventful compared with his. An only child. Father a judge. Mother in and out of institutions all her days with nervous trouble. Brought up by various housekeepers. For some reason she had never been sent to a blind school. Said she didn't know why; perhaps because her father thought he could handle the situation best at home.

She had been blind since she was ten months old. She wasn't totally sightless; she could distinguish between light and dark; she could see the direction from which light came; she could detect the shadow of Frank's hand moving in front of her face. But for all practical purposes she had no useful sight. Other ophthalmologists she had been to over the years had all agreed that surgery would not help. She had a full life and

never felt at all deprived. She was now forty-one, married just over two years and working as a massage therapist in a local health club. Frank and she had met there and had married within a month. They were fortunate they had her earnings to live on because he was out of work at the moment.

She offered this information matter-of-factly. And as she talked, he kept interrupting. "She knows when I pass my hand in front of her face. So there is some vision, isn't there? So there is hope, isn't there, isn't there?" Perhaps, I said. "And if there is a chance, any chance, that she might be able to see, we must take it, mustn't we? How can we not take it? She has nothing to lose, has she? What has she to lose? — nothing! — nothing!"

And she would wait without a trace of impatience until he had finished and then she would go on. Yes, I liked her at once.

His 'essential' folder. Across it he had written, typically, RESEARCHED AND COMPILED BY FRANK C. SWEENEY. The 'C' stood for Constantine, I discovered. And it did have some interest, the folder. Photographs of her cycling by herself across a deserted beach. Results of tests she had undergone years ago. A certificate for coming first in her physiotherapy exams. Pictures of them on their honeymoon in Stratford-on-Avon — his idea of self-improvement, no doubt. Letters from two specialists she had been to in her late teens. An article he had cut out of a magazine about miraculous ophthalmological techniques once practised in Tibet — or was it Mongolia? Diplomas she had won in provincial swimming championships. And remarkably — in his own furious handwriting — remarkably extracts from essays by various philosophers on the relationship between vision and knowledge, between seeing and understanding. A strange fellow, indeed.

And when I talked to them on that first occasion I saw them together in my house, I knew that she was there at Frank's insistence, to please him, and not with any expectation that I could help. And as I watched her sitting there, erect in her seat and staring straight ahead, two thoughts flitted across my mind. That her blindness was his latest cause



and that it would absorb him just as long as his passion lasted. And then, I wondered, what then? But perhaps that was too stern a judgment.

And the second and much less worthy thought I had was this. No, not a thought; a phantom desire, a fantasy in my head; absurd, bizarre, because I knew only the barest outlines of her case, hadn't even examined her yet; the thought, the bizarre thought that perhaps, perhaps — up here in Donegal — not in Paris or Dallas or Vienna or Milan — but perhaps up here in remote Ballybeg was I about to be given — what is the vulgar parlance? — the chance of a lifetime, the one-in-a-thousand opportunity that can rescue a career — no, no, transform a career — dare I say it, restore a reputation? And if that opportunity were being offered to me and if after all these years I could pull myself together and measure up to it, and if, Oh my God if by some miracle pull it off perhaps ... *(He laughs in self-mockery.)*

Yes, I'm afraid so. People who live alone frequently enjoy an opulent fantasy life.