

# COMING HOME

Mary Irwin was coming home. She had been late getting away from work, and had only just managed to catch the last express. It was a cold, dismal<sup>1</sup> night. Mary was tired. She gazed in silence at her pale reflection as it rocked to and fro in the frosted window of the railway carriage. The wrinkles of approaching age were visible round her dark eyes. Mary was a solitary<sup>2</sup> person. At eighteen, she had acquired the habit of solitude<sup>3</sup> as a defense against the callousness<sup>4</sup> of the world. Now she was thirty-eight and it had become an impenetrable barrier. None of her acquaintances could get through it - nor would relatives have fared any better, if she had had any. That chance had been lost, years ago. Mary was efficient, cold, inviolate<sup>5</sup>. But she was also worried.

1

- What do you think the story is about?
- Who was coming home?
- How was MI coming home?
- What was the night like?
- What was MI's character like?
- How old was MI?
- Why was MI worried?
  1. miserable
  2. lonely
  3. loneliness
  4. uncaring
  5. could not be changed

She glanced sidelong into the glass. He was watching her. Again. Every night now for weeks he had sat opposite her on the way home. He had never said a word. *Just stared.* Of course when she looked at him he was busy reading his paper. But when her eyes left his face, she knew he watched her again. He was a pleasant-looking young man of twenty or so, fair mustache and fine brown eyes not unlike her own, a plaintive<sup>6</sup> air such as lonely people often have. But that unnerving<sup>7</sup> gaze of his - *like a cat watching a bird* - haunted her. And he was always there. It didn't matter which carriage she got into, or at what hour - he was always there. Only one thing prevented her from panicking: her journey was always a short one - her station was the next on the line. A couple of minutes and she would be home. He did not leave the train: just sat there, his eyes straining to keep her in sight as the train separated them. *Night after night.*

2

- What was the source of MI's worry?
- In what ways did the young man resemble MI?
- What prevented MI from panicking every time she saw the young man looking at her?
- How does the writer suggest to us that she was very tense every time she encountered the man on the train?
- What do you think would happen after this?
  6. sad
  7. frightening
  8. made a continuous high sound

Here she was at last. The station was deserted. Without a backward glance, she headed for the exit, her heart already lifting with the thought that the bizarre nightly ordeal was over. The train whined<sup>8</sup> off into the darkness. She turned to watch it go out of sight.

All at once, in the darkness between the street-lights, a shadowy form moved. He was there! Her throat contracted<sup>9</sup>. Panic flooded her body. Tonight he had followed her! But the flat was close by. Walk, don't run, she said to herself. *You've got a head start and as long as he doesn't break into a run you'll get home first.* She set off again, not daring to look back.

3

- What made MI panic?
- In what ways does the writer portray to us that great sense of tension?
- How did MI feel when she arrived home?
- What would happen next?
  9. tightened / narrowed
  10. made a loud unpleasant noise

The key clattered<sup>10</sup> in her shaking hands as she searched for the lock. Then she was inside, the door shut. She leaned against it, exhausted with fear, her temples throbbing.

<p>She lay down on the sofa, and wondered. Who was this stranger who seemed intent on invading her private world: a rapist, a robber, some insane person who preyed on lonely women in ways she could not begin to think of? The sedative<sup>11</sup> began to take effect. Maybe he was in love with her. She smiled involuntarily at the thought. Her? A man young enough to be her ... Ludicrous<sup>12</sup>. She had had nothing to do with men for twenty years. One trauma<sup>13</sup> like the one she had lived through was more than enough. She sighed. That was the trouble with living alone. You tended to imagine things - all kinds of things ...</p>	<p>4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who did MI think was stalking / watching and following her over a prolonged period of time?</li> <li>• Complete the fragmentary idea that was in MI's mind: <i>young enough to be her ...</i></li> <li>• What would follow next?       <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. drug to induce calm and sleep</li> <li>12. ridiculous</li> <li>13. unpleasant and upsetting experience</li> </ol> </li> </ul>
<p>Her thoughts were broken by the sound of a cat crying. She knew its call: the stray cat she had taken to feeding at nights, a wild one only she could touch. It wanted to come in. But what if ...? She switched off the lights, cracked<sup>14</sup> the curtains and looked out. Nothing, no one in sight. Carefully, she slid back the bolt<sup>15</sup> and opened the door an inch. Nothing stirred<sup>16</sup>. Gathering her dressing gown around her against the cold, she stepped cautiously<sup>17</sup> out onto the step.</p> <p>'Cat!' she called. 'Cat. Here boy. Come in. Come home, cat.' She stepped down, searching the shadows for the animal.</p> <p><i>The man!</i> She froze<sup>18</sup>. He was standing in the shadow of a large bush, the cat held firmly in his hands. In the faint moonlight she could see that he was smiling.</p> <p>Mary stumbled<sup>19</sup> back towards the flat, hands raised against the approaching figure. Her heel caught on the step and she fell, sprawling painfully.</p>	<p>5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What interrupted her thoughts?</li> <li>• What do we know about the cat?</li> <li>• What did she decide to do with regard to the cat?</li> <li>• What did MI do that would qualify her to be described as cautious?</li> <li>• What was the man doing when MI saw him?</li> <li>• Does anything strike you as odd with regard to the behavior of the cat?</li> <li>• How did MI feel when she realized that the man was outside?</li> <li>• This section of the story is filled with dramatic tension. How does the writer convey this?</li> <li>• Predict what would be the outcome of this harrowing situation.       <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>14. made a small opening</li> <li>15. metal bar at door to fasten it</li> <li>16. moved slightly</li> <li>17. carefully</li> <li>18. stopped moving</li> <li>19. tripped</li> </ol> </li> </ul>
<p><i>'Get back! Leave me alone!' She stared up, numb with terror. The young man towered over her, his head blocking out the moon.</i></p> <p><i>'Mary? Mary Irwin? I want . . .'</i></p> <p><i>He bent towards her. The moon shone madly.</i></p> <p><i>Mary screamed and fell inside the door. Panting like an animal, she cast around for something to defend herself with. Nothing. He was in the door, coming after her. She was as good as dead. It was him or her. The porcelain cats! She seized the largest, swung it back and brought it down with all her strength. There was a ghastly<sup>20</sup> thud, a spurt of blood and the body of the young man crashed to the floor. The cat in his hands screamed and fled.</i></p>	<p>6</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did MI feel when the man towered over her as she lay on the floor?</li> <li>• Describe the quality of the moonlight.</li> <li>• How did MI bring the man down?</li> <li>• This section of the story is similarly filled with dramatic tension. How does the writer convey this?</li> <li>• What would be MI's next course of action?       <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>20. frightening, upsetting, or shocking</li> </ol> </li> </ul>

<p><i>Sobbing, Mary retreated into a corner. She must get out, raise the alarm, call the police. Yet something stopped her. Something in the young man's pale face haunted her. She bent closer, scarcely breathing. There was something in his hand - a crumpled piece of paper. What was it about him?</i></p> <p><i>Gingerly<sup>21</sup> she plucked<sup>22</sup> the paper from his hand. It was a soiled<sup>23</sup> photocopy ... a birth certificate, dated twenty years earlier, so grubby<sup>24</sup> with constant handling that it was almost illegible<sup>25</sup>. The Christian name was indecipherable<sup>26</sup>. As for the surname: I-R-V - no W-I ...</i></p>	<p>7</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What struck MI about the man's face?</li> <li>• What was in his hand?</li> <li>• When was it dated?</li> <li>• Why was the print on the document almost illegible?</li> <li>• How would the story conclude?       <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>21. in a careful manner</li> <li>22. pulled quickly in order to remove it</li> <li>23. dirty</li> <li>24. fairly dirty</li> <li>25. difficult or impossible to read</li> <li>26. impossible to read or understand</li> </ol> </li> </ul>
<p><i>The floodgates that had stood closed for years now burst. Her pain had caused her to shudder<sup>27</sup> uncontrollably, gushing out of her in a long choking sob, an ancient wound opened anew. She knelt and cradled his head in her arms, wiping away the warm blood. Mary Irwin was sick with fear. Her son might die. Twenty years before he had been taken from her at the urging<sup>28</sup> of others. Now he might be taken again but this time it would be her fault. Then his eyelids flickered<sup>29</sup>. Those brown eyes, so like her own, opened and gazed<sup>30</sup> up at her. His lips formed a single word, so faint that she had to bend to hear it. Life had returned to her. He had come home.</i></p>	<p>8</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why did MI break down in tears?</li> <li>• What was the history behind MI's relationship with the man?</li> <li>• What single word did the man utter upon regaining consciousness?</li> <li>• When did life return to MI?</li> <li>• Why do you think the story is called <i>Coming Home</i>?       <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>27. shake for short time because of fear</li> <li>28. suggestion</li> <li>29. quickly made a sudden small movement</li> <li>30. looked for a long time</li> </ol> </li> </ul>