



the incubator

issue 13 | fiction | memoir





the incubator journal
home of the Irish short story

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call for submissions

Our reading period is now open

(August 2017)

for new Irish writing.

For Issue 14

(due to be published in December 2017)

*we are seeking **flash fiction, short stories and one scene plays.***

*Guidelines are at **theincubatorjournal.com***

contents

	page
editorial	7
 in interview	
Gerard Brennan , author of <i>Undercover</i>	9
 short stories	
Sundowners, by Mandy Taggart	16
Faith Lost, by Lesley Walsh	29
Shared Needles, by Máiréad Casey	38
Dr Fintan, by Marc de Faoite	50
Saturday Morning, by Andrew Maguire	59
 review	
Claire Savage on <i>The Watch House</i> , by Bernie McGill	65

memoir

The End of the Line, by Brian Kirk	70
Lessons in Loneliness, by Kathryn O' Regan	79
From Ballinliss to Boston: a journey through place, time and memory, by Martin Cromie	85

flash fiction

My Fault, by Sharon Thompson	100
Watching, by Réaltán Ní Leannáin	103
Comfort Food, by Simon Henderson	105
Everything Hurts, by A. Joseph Black	107
Into the West, by Barbara Lovric	109
Uncle Fonsie, by Robert Barrett	112

contributors	116
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editorial

I ALWAYS GET EXCITED about the memoir issue, and issue 13 holds three that are just superb: memoirs from Brian Kirk, Kathryn O' Regan and Martin Cromie, pieces that are all individually honest and distinctively descriptive and yet somehow manage to speak to each other.

This time round our features editor Claire Savage chatted with crime writer Gerard Brennan about his previous work and upcoming ventures. Brennan is a strong authentic voice in the Northern Noir scene and it's terrific to read more about how he writes in this interview.

Claire has also reviewed Bernie's McGill's wonderfully poetic and dark *The Watch House*, which was published just a couple of days ago. If there are two local writers who can write dialogue, they are Gerard Brennan and Bernie McGill! Which leads me to remind everyone that we are now seeking one scene plays for issue 14. (As well as the usual: short stories and flash. Please read our submission guidelines.)

On a personal note, I'm beyond delighted to announce that my debut short story collection *Bank Holiday Hurricane* will be published in September by the magnificent Doire Press. I will be having a book launch at Aspects Literature Festival in Bangor, and reading out and about, where I hope to finally put faces to many names in the writing community that I've come to know online and through this journal.

As for the short stories and flash fiction in this issue however, they are as rich and inventive as ever. And I'll stop there because it's best that you just read them for yourself.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Best wishes,

Kelly Creighton

Editor

in interview: Gerard Brennan

author of Undercover

NORTHERN IRELAND HAS A WEALTH of writing talent, with work spanning a wide range of genres. One of these, which has been bubbling away merrily for a number of years, is crime writing, which has, in various ways, put Northern Ireland on the bookish map. Belfast author Gerard Brennan, who has just sold the rights of his latest book, *Disorder*, to German publisher Polar Verlag, is most certainly a part of this crime writing troupe.

Polar Verlag will publish the author's new 'riot novel' in 2018 and have also acquired the rights to another of Brennan's books, *Undercover*, which will be published in German this year. Meanwhile, Endeavour Press has also just acquired the rights for *Undercover* and another previous title, *Fireproof*, which will be published in August, while Brennan himself is currently self-publishing past titles online as well.

Disorder is a novel Brennan wrote as part of his creative writing PhD thesis, which incorporates both novel-writing and a critical piece linked to the novel. The story focuses on the culture of recreational rioting in Belfast and is, says Brennan, perhaps his "most considered" work to date.

"It starts and ends with a massive riot going on in a heatwave in Belfast," he says. "The characters are brought together by this riot and the novel has a really frenetic and crazy pace, with a good action backdrop. It's probably my most considered work to date as I had three years to think about it as part of my PhD, so there's a lot in the book, even though it

has one of the shortest word limits of all my novels. There was a word count limit of 70,000 on this.”

The writing style for *Disorder* also differs from Brennan’s other works, in that it adopts a behaviourist point of view. As a result, the reader gets no internal dialogue from the characters, just straight-up action and dialogue.

“Part of my critical PhD at Queen’s University, Belfast, was about point of view in books,” he says. “I had examined books like *The Maltese Falcon* [a detective novel and film noir] which used a behaviourist point of view. There’s no insight into a character’s thought process so you don’t get that internal narrative.

“You have to use symbology more and have characters read each other. You also have to be careful not to just tell the story in dialogue. Essentially, you’re quite limited in what you write, so it cuts down the word count. I did enjoy writing it but it has to be the right story for this style to work. In my mind, when I was writing a novel about riots, I considered it a mindless behaviour – a mindless mob mentality – so for me that was a good reason to take thought out of the book.”

With previous work, including *Fireproof* and street crime novel *Wee Rockets*, published by Blasted Heath in Scotland, Brennan is now self-publishing his earlier works, after the company folded. He’s also acquired a new agent in the past year, who’s looking after his latest work, including *Disorder*.

“I’ve just re-released my novella, *Wee Danny*, along with *Wee Rockets*,” says Brennan.

“There’ll be other books coming along too with my backlist throughout the year.

“My new agent has two finished manuscripts from me and has sold the rights to one in Germany, which has the biggest marketplace for crime fiction in Europe. My translator over there actually used to live in Dublin so he knows the slang but still has to send me the odd email to ask what things mean.”

With some sort of writing project always on the go, Brennan is currently working on another novel which, at the time of this interview, he's 40,000 words into. Taking a break after the publication of his Belfast cop thriller, *Undercover*, in 2014, Brennan is now tackling book two of a police procedural series.

"I've taken a break from Cormac Kelly [of the *Undercover* series] because my agent took on my police procedural book about Detective Sergeant Shannon McNulty," he says. "It's based in Warrenpoint and Belfast so there's a juxtaposition of the two styles of living in those two places. She's only just returned to Northern Ireland after living in London – she's an interesting character and I'm writing the second instalment of her story."

This second instalment is entitled *Drag*, while book number one in the series is called *Shot*. As police procedural books they do require a certain degree of accuracy, says Brennan, but he says he no longer feels under pressure to have every detail exactly as it would be in real life. Indeed, it was this self-imposed expectation of research and accuracy in such novels that initially put him off writing them.

"It kept me away from police procedurals before," he says. "Then I realised that I read a lot of police procedurals and you have to remember that you're writing a made-up story. Who's to say in this fictional world I've created that it isn't right that something happens a certain way? I got a bit more confident when I saw the books as the stories they are, rather than 'how-to' manuals.

"It's obviously great to have a well-researched novel and to make it as realistic as possible, but in my mind, as long as the story is believable and you're not depending on coincidences too much, then you're ok."

It's not just novels that Brennan writes, however. He's also prone to a short story or two, with pieces published in anthologies including *The Mammoth Book of Best British Crime* and

Belfast Noir. To add to this, he also has a penchant for screenwriting and for novellas, one of which, *The Point*, won the 2012 Spinetangler Award for Best Novella.

He's certainly a writer who likes to keep busy, and admits that he currently has two pieces of work in "half-finished stages" while he works on that second Shannon book.

"Because I write very slowly and carefully, I generally do only two to three drafts," he says. "I need to go back over my work that I've written the day before, so my manuscripts tend to be pretty tidy. But I do like editing. I like the fixing part of the book."

Indeed, Brennan previously co-edited a collection of crime fiction based on Irish myths called *Requiems for the Departed*, which went on to win the 2011 Spinetangler Award for Best Anthology. And, while he didn't contribute a story to the anthology himself, being a co-editor, he's very interested in writing something with a supernatural slant.

"*Requiems for the Departed* turned out really well, with a broad range of stories. That's why I'm keen to have a go at it as well," he says. "I do have an idea based on Irish mythology. I wrote a story during my PhD featuring The Morrigan — the Celtic Goddess of War — set in Northern Ireland. I've read a lot of speculative fiction and horror and would like to work on something with a more otherworldly element. Something which still relates to crime, but with a private investigator vibe."

"When I started out as a writer I actually wanted to write horror because when I was a teenager I read mostly Dean Koontz and Stephen King. I wrote a horror comedy spoof novel, but then the next idea I had was about a gang of kids terrorising the neighbourhood in Belfast."

"At first I thought of making it a zombie novel but then realised that making it more real made it scarier. It kind of happened by mistake. I realised it wasn't horror but more crime/noir. From then, I got more interested in Irish crime writers. I'd read Eoin McNamee

and Colin Bateman before I started writing but then picked up people like Claire McGowan, Brian McGilloway and Stuart Neville. There's such a big scope in the genre — it's very versatile. That's perhaps why I like it so much — there's so much flexibility. Every Northern Irish author in the genre has a very distinct voice."

Having now successfully completed his PhD at Queen's, Irish crime stories based on mythology may well be on the horizon for the Belfast writer. He's also keen to get back to writing more short stories, which he says are much quicker to write and allow more scope for experimentation.

In the meantime, having worked full-time on the PhD for the past three years, immersing himself in the writing, Brennan is now back at his day job three days a week. The rest of his time is spent writing and he says he tries to keep to a schedule for this.

"I do try to write on the days I work as well, just to keep the story ticking over in my head," he adds. "You write faster. I don't aim for huge results on those days though — even just editing. Thursdays would be my most writing-intense day."

As for reading? Well, he does like his crime and noir books, but for Brennan, nothing is off-limits.

"I do try and mix it up quite a bit with my reading," he says. "I pick up fantasy and literary books once in a while. I will basically try anything!"

Interview by: Claire Savage

short story

Mandy Taggart

Sundowners

BEFORE THE LONG SETTLING into motherhood, the woman used to roam city streets at daybreak, revelling in untainted air and cool, empty pavements. Back then she was unremarkable, dressed in jeans, boots, a leather jacket. This morning, she's pacing the garden in a nightgown and dirty bare feet.

She knows there comes a point when exercising your own free will – a friendly chat with yourself, a walk at five in the morning – stops being a choice, and turns into the sort of thing that people make notes about. But she's not sure what makes the difference. Your age, maybe, or how you're dressed. Or even just who sees you.

She could always pretend to be a ghost. She hunches and waggles her fingers, trying on the disguise. *Woooo*. Catches herself and glances over her shoulder, but the house keeps on ticking over. A peaceful bungalow, hanging baskets and pebbledash, two teenagers and a husband asleep inside. A steady woman, so she is. Rising with the sun to take the air outside her own house, as she's perfectly entitled to do.

The cement of the patio feels too level this morning, and even the lawn is uncertain. Too many spaces between the grass blades to ground her. She crosses the garden, making her inventory as she goes. *Geranium, peony, granny's bonnet*. She goes out the gate and stands in the sleeping road. Here, she feels the press of tarmac beneath her soles and finally knows for certain where she is, and who, and when.

The woman bends and lifts a piece of gravel, squeezes it tight and opens her hand again, examining the inverted mosaic it leaves behind on her palm. She looks down and sees both of her feet. Ten unpainted, bare toes, like empty cups.

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It was her feet that marked her out on her first day in Grove House, years ago. She was a girl in those days: a cacophony of a girl, clattering giant shoes along the corridor, poking heels up and down steps. Tiptoeing more and more as the day went on, in mortification. She could laugh at herself, now: those heels, that eyeliner, the pink-streaked hair. They gave her a cotton overall like the rest of the care workers, but some of the residents must have thought she was an alien.

Looks were exchanged amongst the proper staff in their white, silent shoes: perfect if you needed to avoid startling people, or creep up on them. Whispers about the Real World that the girl, it seemed, did not inhabit.

“Wouldn’t you have a pair of gutties at home, pet?” asked Bertha, the nice one.

The girl hadn’t even wanted to come here. She’d put Social Worker on the form but the school had placed her here, saying there was nothing else. Mam wanted to complain but the girl put her off, her throat hot at the prospect of Mam thundering into the office, pink with injustice, the smell of smoke so strong off her that you could nearly see it. Instead, she’d pretended to prefer it this way. ‘Grass roots experience’, she would call it in university interviews, if she ever got that far. The future felt like a kind of puzzle, a folk-tale labyrinth where you closed doors behind yourself and couldn’t get back through them again.

She was to spend her fortnight in this utilitarian place, purpose built in the Seventies. Solid orange doors with windows patterned in squares, like the paper they put in maths books to help you get the measure of things. The bent back of a cleaner with his bucket, a floor smelling of things that had been freshened. But nothing could hide the smells that came

from the corridor to the left, where the bedrooms were. As she arrived on her first day, a man's voice from the depths was wailing for a nurse.

The people here were grannies and grandas. Like her own Granny, roaming the garden at dusk, smiling by the fire telling stories that had gradually turned into weeping: "Oh, Susan, oh, Susan". Nobody knew who Susan had been. "Doting," said Mam, and the girl had been confused. In books, it was always a good thing to have a doting grandmother. But the Grove House grannies and grandas were old people, and her own Granny hadn't been that old at all.

"You're assigned to me," said Bertha, "but there's not much practical you can do. We wouldn't ask you to take them to the toilet or anything. But you can give them company, maybe a hand with lifting up their tea. All right?"

The girl understood she was a liability.

"And we always use their first names. Their child names. It doesn't seem respectful, but they respond better. Especially the women."

The girl supposed that made sense. Imagine if you woke up tomorrow with ancient hands and legs, and strangers calling you Missus. An alien surname, no trace of the girl you thought you were. Far better to be Agnes or Marjorie, like in old-fashioned children's books.

She stayed as far out of the way as possible on her first day. Awkwardly patted the shoulder of a weeping, bone-handed woman who could not be comforted. She caught sight of her reflection in the long window of the staff canteen; always locked, apart from mealtimes. There was her own, pallid face, the black-rimmed eyes that made her look like she'd been beaten. She could see right through herself to the tables and chairs behind. A wisp of breath, like pale steam, drifted out of the mouth of the reflection.

--

The next day, the girl wore trainers and much less makeup, flattened her hair, took the edges off herself. Passing the canteen window, she loosened the focus of her eyes and watched herself as a pale-shrouded ghost skimming the furniture, transparent feet brushing the tabletops, tiptoeing through pepperpots and vinegar bottles as if they were tulips. She snapped her focus back and the shroud became a white overall, the phantom just a hurrying girl. But she was still there, the ghost girl: just a flick of the eyes away. A flash of white hung still in the corner of her vision as she padded on.

In the afternoon, she stayed in the day room, moving between the women – most were women. Never sure what to say to each one, she spent most of the time sitting quietly in an adjacent chair, its vinyl cushion huffing out air behind her knees. Smiling back if smiled at, speaking when spoken to.

There was Mrs McShane, rail-thin and imperious, calling for the housekeeper. The only Mrs amongst all the residents.

“It’s how she knows herself,” said Bertha.

Mary, the crying one from yesterday, was best left alone. Wee Jeannie never spoke, but gripped the girl’s hands as if she would anchor them both. The girl told her the stories that her grandmother had told, before all her words had drained away. Even old, trodden tales were new and enchanting to Jeannie: the yellow rings around her irises turning golden with delight. The girl learned to dole the stories out in spoonfuls, loving to watch her reach for them. She couldn’t remember when she’d first heard them herself, but she must have done. Once upon a time.

Edith was better at remembering who she was, or pretending to. On the girl’s first day she was a retired hospital matron, bossing the staff about, fully believable until the next day, when she was Audrey Hepburn. The girl almost envied her, thought she must have been an actress when she was young.

“Or a liar,” said Bertha, on their tea break.

One or two men she was warned to stay away from. Even the most formerly benign of gentlemen, it seemed, could lose the run of themselves.

"C'mere, pet. C'mere." Beckoning from the corner. She was everybody's pet in here. "Would you sit on my knee? I want to see if there's still lead in my pencil!"

Cackles, a reawakening, like an old animal when it smells something wild in its nostrils. The girl didn't know whether the illness had put a mask onto them, or torn one away.

"That's a great question, pet," said Bertha. "You're smart, you are."

--

William was in the day room on her third day. He hadn't been well before.

"That one loves a chat, and he'll do you no harm, pet. He was an educated man," said Bertha.

The girl noted the way he managed to make his sagging cardigan and trousers look like a suit. The remnants of an erect carriage. Distinguished, even with splashes of porridge down the front of himself. She wondered what Bertha meant by putting his education into the past tense, as if it had all floated back out of his ears and he wasn't educated any more. She went over and introduced herself.

"Zara! Hee, hee. That's a good one." He performed a zigzag slash across the air. Maybe it was the accent that had made Bertha call him educated.

"Come here, love. Let me show you something."

She qualmed for a second, remembering the other men and their pencils. But he reached stiffly over to the side table, like a tree might move when nobody was looking, and brought up a peach-coloured cardboard folder. He fumbled it in his fingers, but when the girl reached out, too quick to help, he snatched it jealously away.

"My *life*," he said. "My life."

She sat back again, trying to arrange her features into a look of respect and patience, and William eventually managed to pull out a photograph.

"Here I am," he said. "With Henry, my brother."

Two small boys were standing beside a flat-roofed car, with wheels that looked like they might have done better on a pram. It must have been an occasion: the children formally dressed, their faces serious, upright at the command of some invisible adult.

"Was that your car?"

"Hee, hee! That's a good one. My *father's* car, of course. Not mine. I can't have been more than seven! I wasn't even away to school."

They had quite the afternoon together. The girl admired young cousins hoisting pet rabbits, views of the Lakes, a dour-looking nanny. Here was one of the lucky ones, she thought.

"I knew you'd enjoy him," said Bertha. "He's not been here long. And he's lucky enough, I suppose. So far. Some of them wander half the night, poor souls – that's why we've all these alarms. And a couple would even get rough with you. Oh, you'd be surprised. The smallest, gentlest wee ladies ever you saw."

The girl thought of Jeannie, eyes shining over Cinderella, and decided not to ask.

"No offence, pet, but you'll never see the worst of it. They always get bad in the evenings," Bertha said. "It's a symptom, you know. They call it 'sundowning'. Some people think it's the change in the shadows."

The girl was later in leaving, that day. As she passed the canteen window, the lowering light must have hit the glass at a different angle, because she couldn't see her own reflection at all. Instead, there was a worried-looking middle-aged woman, casting about the place as if she'd lost something. Her hip bumped a table, her hands flapped anxiously at her sides. The girl would have thought it was a canteen worker, if she'd been dressed like one. But this woman was wearing a pale nightdress and slippers.

The girl was about to knock the glass and ask if she could help, when she felt a wrench in her stomach. She grimaced, and with the narrowing of her vision there was no more distracted woman. Only a girl in a white overall, exactly where the woman had been, staring back into her own eyes.

--

She was getting used to Grove House. By the second week of her placement, she'd developed a routine, and at the end of every lunchtime she went to William. He was always happy to see her, especially when prompted with her name.

"Zara! Hee, hee." Always the double slash in the air. She supposed it was the Z that amused him. There weren't many Zs in the names of women his age.

After the chaos of her morning's encounters, it was a relief to sit with William and look at photographs. Remnants of sticky tape hung off the corners of some of the pictures, but William treated them all with reverence. His brother; their legion of cousins; Nanny Kipling; a spaniel pup called Sniffer.

"Lovely," said the girl.

Here was a beaming woman, holding a child bundled in white.

"That's my sister, Rose," said William.

"Have you a sister?" she said. "Really? You've never told me that."

"Oh, yes. And the baby is my niece, Betty. Rose is a nurse, now."

He'd mixed up the names. It was baby Betty who must be the nurse, of course. Even she would be thinking about retirement.

"I might want to be a nurse," the girl began. "If I don't get into university. What do you think?"

"Not a bit of it," said William. "*I'm* a nurse in here, and it's dreadful."

She'd stayed too late again. It was nearly time for her bus. She said goodbye and walked away, William waving cheerfully behind her. She tried hard not to feel that he'd let her down.

--

That Wednesday the staff arranged dancing, or a version of it, for the afternoon. It took the girl a long time to work out what the problem was.

"All these songs," she said to Bertha. "They're from the wrong war."

She'd heard them on a programme they'd watched for History. Surely it was bad enough, living in your own past, without having music played to you that wasn't from that time at all.

"Are they, now?" said Bertha. "Ah, but they love it. Where's the harm?"

The girl thought that everybody was spinning loose in time.

She took her turn with the rest of the staff in shuffling around the floor with the residents: only the women, of course. William might have been an exception, but he was in his room. Bertha said he hadn't been himself that morning.

Mrs McShane gripped her arm as they waltzed.

"They just do their business in the street, you know. Have you never noticed?"

"No, I never have. Aren't you tired, yet?"

Wee Jeannie leaned her head against her shoulder, and the girl told her the story of the twelve dancing princesses. Afterwards, as she was helping her sit down, Jeannie spoke to her for the first and only time.

"You're next," she said, and folded herself back into the chair like flour into cake batter.

Later, by the canteen window, the girl stood watching the nodding back of a grey head, the frail bend of a neck. A tiny woman was seated at the table, hugging herself, her shoulders heaving. The girl turned and walked back to the day room.

"I think I saw a sundowner," she said.

She wasn't surprised when Bertha frowned at the description, nor when they arrived back at the locked canteen to find nobody there.

"Don't worry, pet. You go on for your bus. They'll be opening in a minute, anyway. I'll tell them to search it high and low."

But she knew they wouldn't find anybody.

--

It was her last day. William had kept to his room on the Thursday as well, and she'd been starting to worry that she wouldn't see him again. But on Friday he was back, full of tales of his time in the Army. To hear him you'd have thought it was all a great party, jolly pals and lovely girls.

"Beautiful," he sighed. "Of course, if it was a little Catholic girl and her people found out, she'd get tarred and feathered on account of you." He tapped the side of his nose and chuckled in reminiscence.

She smiled and nodded, feeling like she was betraying him. Shouldn't she argue? Tell him he was mistaken: tell him that had been somebody else's war, a different place and time?

"It's my last day here," she told him, instead. "I'm back at school on Monday. A-levels, you know."

"I'll miss you, love."

He looked her straight in the eye, reached out his hand towards her face.

"They should hang the whole bloody lot of them!" roared Mrs McShane, flinging herself up like a corpse. The girl nearly wet herself. William pulled his arm back and stared. Bertha and another one – Moira, she thought – bustled in.

"Right-oh, lovely. Let's you and me go for a walk."

"All of them! The whole bloody lot!"

Mrs McShane receded with Moira, still shouting: as inappropriate as nightclothes in the road.

"Well, never mind that, now." Bertha looked weary. "William, you'll be all right with Zara. Haven't you any pictures for her, today?"

"Oh, yes. Oh, yes, indeed."

He hauled up a folder, fumbled around in it a good while.

"A special one," he said. He held out a rectangle of card.

The picture showed a small boy in swimming shorts, sprawled in a deck chair, grinning up at the camera with an ice-cream cone in his hands. *Greetings from Brighton*, it said, across the middle. In the top corner the girl saw a ragged white stripe where sticky tape had been tugged loose, ripping the cloudless blue sky away with it. She turned it over and looked at a postmark from the summer of the previous year. Wobbly printing: *To Great-Granny Jeannie, love from Ben and Molly*. A careful line of Xs and Os.

"That's my mother. She's coming to collect me, later."

He took the postcard back out of her hand and kissed it.

The girl was just about to speak when Bertha, in her silent shoes, appeared again by her side.

"Hasn't she a good day for it?" said Bertha. "Looks like she's enjoying that ice cream. Do you think she'll bring *you* one, when she comes?"

He beamed with pleasure. "I'll tell her, one for you, too!" He wagged a finger at Bertha, spittle glistening on his chin.

"Lovely. Tell her extra chocolate sauce," said Bertha. "And one for Zara as well."

She looked at the girl.

"Sprinkles and a Flake," said Zara.

She turned and ran out of the day room. Bertha found her crying in the corridor.

"That was cruel," the girl said. "You were making a joke out of him."

"Listen, pet," said Bertha. "Imagine if you told him the truth. 'Don't be silly. Your mother's not coming. She died, years ago! Your wife's dead, too, by the way. Your son's got cancer, and your daughter never comes near you.' He would suffer, if you did that. He would grieve for every loss in his life, and what for? Tomorrow you'd have to tell him all over again."

"It isn't right."

"Never mind right. It's how people fill in the gaps. 'Confabulation', if you want the great big word for it. Being right isn't everything."

The girl scrubbed at her eyes.

"He was telling me all about the Army."

"A solicitor all his life, pet. Conscientious objector for the War. It's in his notes. Does it matter?"

She didn't dare ask about Henry or the cousins, Nanny Kipling or Sniffer the pup.

"Go you back in, now," said Bertha, "and say goodbye to him properly."

Before going over, she looked at William, sitting warm like a candle over his pictures. He'd had a better time in the Army than the people who'd really been in it. Could she really have crossed the carpet, right now, and told him his mother was dead? She imagined the smiles fading from his face.

"Cheerio, love," said William, when she kissed him on the cheek.

"You're a good girl, pet," said Bertha.

Edith gave her an elegant wave, serene in some regal identity. Wee Jeannie held her grip until she had to prise her fingers away. Out in the corridor, Moira was still struggling with Mrs McShane.

"Take your hands off me! Who do you think you are?"

In the canteen window, the sundowner raked her fingers down her own cheeks in desolation. The girl passed her at a run, keyed in the code for the door and stepped out into

the evening. The light had dropped in the two weeks she'd been here. Soon it would be full dark at this time.

She hurried for the bus stop, keeping her eyes low as she passed the boys that kicked their heels around the wall outside Grove House.

"C'mere. Hey! C'mere."

Something metal clattered along the pavement. The girl pulled up her hood and walked faster. Over the play park, a gull pitched itself in circles, flinging its wings wide and screaming that it was lost, lost, lost.

--

Mam always said she'd go the same way as Granny, but it was the heart that got her in the end. Hardly a surprise, people whispered, when you looked at her. The woman has always looked after her own heart. She thought she wasn't afraid of the other, until it was there one day. Standing behind her, wearing white shoes.

She always tries to keep sure of herself. It's the best she can do. First, she got the habit of rubbing her fingers against the skin of her face, feeling along the jawline, tugging the soft hairs at the base of her neck. When that stopped working she took to pressing things against her hands: solid things like shells, gravel, the handles of coffee mugs.

She searches for the sundowner in mirrors and shop windows, tries to conjure her into the water glass beside her bed. But only her own reflection stares back, cold and curved. Nobody but Zara in the buckles of shoes and the water in the corner of her husband's eyes. She knows that won't last. One day, it'll be herself that she's looking for.

Back in the house, she lays her hand against the bathroom mirror and watches condensation spread from her fingertips like five exhalations. She tries to smile at the middle-aged woman looking back, but now she's crying again. She cries so easily, these days.

"Zara?"

Hugh walks in.

"Nothing," the woman says, before he can speak again. "I'm being silly."

"You're all right," says Hugh, but he doesn't sound convinced. She remembers that this isn't the first time.

He pulls her close and walks her out of the bathroom. She leans her head against his shoulder, breathes in his scent. She'd be happy to let her mind pull holes in itself and fill them with new stories. She wouldn't care what was real anymore; if only she knew that she would always remember him, and their children.

Hugh, Amy, Oliver. She names them in her mind like treasures.

"I was thinking about when I worked in Grove House," she tells Hugh.

"Did you work there?" he says. "Really? You've never told me that."

Outside, the sky is fully clear. The first car of the morning skims past the woman's window as the driver clicks his headlights low, then off. Lighting-down time.

Lesley Walsh

Faith Lost

8.43am

Ben,

I'm forwarding you an email from mum because she said she can't remember your email address — whether it's an underscore, dash or hyphen. Shows you how much you email her if she can't find one to reply to.

She said she tried to ring you yesterday to find out but she couldn't get you and she only has access to the computers for two hours a day so sort that out for fuck sake will you! I swear Ben, sometimes you're so selfish.

Anyway, she's sent us a few video messages and has only said that some people are doing a study or something and want to get her views on what it's like to be in her situation, like as a woman and a mother, so I don't really know what it's all about but I'm going to have a look now. Bit scared to watch them to tell you the truth. Want me to have a look and let you know whether you could handle it or not? Actually just wait, don't ring her yet and let me come back to you first.

For now though email her hello and never let on yet you know about the video messages.

Faith x

“Hi there. Well, here I am. On camera. Captain's log, stardate May 31, 2017. Found an old collection, originals so Captain Kirk has been keeping me occupied here a bit.

Forgot I'd been quite the trekkie when I was young.

Anyway, I always feared if someone pointed a camera at me I'd be rendered speechless.

I know you both think I'm so articulate but sometimes unexpected attention makes me

come over a bit shy. Anyway, it's not long now till your graduations. Imagine, I'll be the mother of a couple of graduates; of economics and medicine of all things. Spawned from me who's all about the words. You're both so clever. I'm so proud.

I really wish I could be there. But since we last spoke I've been told it would be a good idea to record my feelings so I'm allowed to use this camera to tell you how sorry I am I won't be at either graduation.

Looking into the camera, all I can think of is being one of those people reporters stop in the street to ask their views on something, like Brexit; or something really important, like all these homeless people dying in every doorway every night in town. Then I'd go dumb and utter something inconsequential, some inane drivel. Of course I wouldn't falter if they asked me about the Syrians. But we all know I'm far too sensitive on that subject, though I still maintain that wanting to give an innocent child a home is hardly an insane thing.

Anyway, my reason for this is to explain what happened. You deserve the truth and I know I have told you in the past that some people just can't live together, that it was better for you for us to part; better than being stuck in the middle of us arguing all the time. And that was true: it might sound trite but there's more to it than that, obviously. And because I only have this little film to tell you it might seem cruel of me to speak of your dad like this, who you love, but it's something really fundamental that you both must consider, fully, when making life choices as serious as marriage. *'No one should enter into it lightly or selfishly, but reverently and responsibly in the sight of almighty God'*. Must be the medication but that just popped into my head — must have listened in Sunday school after all.

It's as simple as this: I went against my gut. Our backgrounds, our world-view, were so at odds that I felt like a hybrid, caught between my world and his, but without a real foothold in either.

'I don't do books' was his reaction when I tried to drag him into a beautiful, old secondhand bookshops we stumbled upon in Edinburgh. I was gutted at that. And when my great aunt Dodi offered us my granny's beautiful old piano, the one I'd spent hours playing as a teenager, he jeered, 'What the hell do you want with that? I'm putting the TV on that wall.'

He's not a bad person but I don't know what he saw in me actually. Apart from the chemistry. I suppose it was so powerful I didn't realise the threads of our undoing were just hanging there, parallel, never to meet or be tied. They just crossed fleetingly at the start, blown by a cynical wind.

'Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediment'. Oh God not that again, I hear you say! But can you understand? I'm rambling now, I know. I took something there that may have tongue-loosening effect. You know me — a sip of anything, be it codeine or wine — either makes me a tad loquacious. Temporary and not addictive I've been assured.

I did love your daddy, and he loved me in his way, but it turned out a misfire, from some twisted cupid. With a grudge, obviously. I ask myself, why I didn't confront this 25 years ago? Superficial attraction? I can barely admit to such hollowness, even at that age. He eagerly came to the opera with me, once, at the start, but when he refused a repeat visit he took me up the mountains instead and named every peak and valley and I was willingly duped.

I didn't mean to do what I did, I really didn't – I was just so frustrated. Your dad was so intolerant; so unyielding. I know I shouldn't have lashed out. That last day, it was just so harsh, in front of the Unicef girl, when things were nearly all settled. I know I should have discussed it with him first."

9.59am

Ben,

Just watched the first one and she's trying to explain what happened. She's saying sorry so go ahead and watch it. She looks weary but still her usual wordy self and spouting that Shakespearean sonnet she loves. Now I know why.

You don't really know what it was like for her and what she went through with dad. You two were so tight you didn't see it. I love him too but, well watch them and give her a ring.

Faith xx

"Here I am again. Captain's log and all that. I'll just carry on where I left off. I was telling you that what I first felt for your dad seemed real but really it was ephemeral and all that really existed between us in the end was a great poverty, of understanding;

of insight. I went behind his back because I had this crazy idea that once he realised it was only one little child, in our big house, with me doing all the work to look after it, he'd relent. That if it was a case of accept the child or lose me, he'd make the right decision.

Okay lovies, there's the news on. I'll come back to you in a minute.

The headlines, at six o'clock from the BBC

Russian President Vladimir Putin has denied reports his forces were behind a strike which left scores dead in Syria.

Dozens of children are among those killed when a drone struck a school in Homs, south of Aleppo, last night...

"Sorry kids, meant to turn the camera off there.

Nurse, how do you know how to turn this thing off?"

Facebook

Faith Streatfield. "What's on your mind?" 2hrs.

"Looking up at the sky and seeing coiled-looking clouds that remind me of ammonites. My mum loves them and our hall is lined with old-fashioned sketches of them. Coiled springs. 23 likes. 2 comments.

"Hi kids. Me again. I meant to come back to you last night but the news upset me so much I went to bed. And lay awake. So today there was lots of talking. And walking too. I like taking walks here. It calms me. The grounds are quite big, but sometimes you can hear the refugee camp, not far away. Ironical huh. That robs me of my calm of course so I try not to stray to the west side nearest the camp, but sometimes I just can't help myself. I strain to hear: I don't really know what I'm trying to listen out for. Anyway, the air carries a particular trace of something piquant. Chilli maybe? My senses are a bit dull; can't tell.

I'm back from watching the six o'clock news even though they keep telling me I shouldn't (they have no legal right to stop me but I can't help myself) and they reported someone trying to smuggle drugs into a prison on a drone! Your daddy can barely fly

his in a straight line and yet someone can breach all that security. It was relief when daddy got that drone you know. It got him away from that ridiculously big widescreen.

Anyway pets, I was explaining what brought us — me, to where I am today.

My reason for making the tapes, now I've had the time to sit down and mull over my life I feel I have to explain what happened to me and your dad. And why it came to the... the conclusion it did.

I'm so sorry it ended this way. There's nothing in the human vocabulary to convey how sorry I am. Some languages perhaps possess the shades and nuances I need for this for but ours fails.

Sorry, I know I'm probably a bit incoherent. Forgive me. I just need you to know that I just couldn't comprehend why he wouldn't want to help. I mean he showed an awful lot of love to you so why not to a child who really needed it? You two are grown and getting on with your own lives, meanwhile all these poor innocent kids are being washed up on beaches, half dead and dying and being shipped off to camps to God knows what horrors.

How could I sit back, in a house with three empty bedrooms and not offer one? Not even the box room? I wasn't going to let some axe man into the house to murder us in our bed at night like your daddy ranted about. Just one tiny bedroom for a child left with nothing. Nothing but need.

Sorry, I'll have to end it here; they're calling us to dinner. They like to see me eat. I really didn't want to paint an awful picture of your dad for you and I'm not forgetting what he has been to you. If it was fallow between us it was genuine love he had for you both."

12.31pm

Ben,

What the actual fuck? Hello? I've been out and back again!

Your very angry sister.

PS Sort it out!!!

"I saw dead babies on the news earlier. Lying on the floor. Aleppo maybe? Most likely. A hospital.

One, its face to the floor, dark hair and all swarthy-looking. Red... on its nappy. Looked like it'd been dropped by a child going on to the next toy. Fine layer of dust all over it. Made me think of a Victorian porcelain doll.

Was it a boy? Girl? Couldn't tell. Just discarded. Lots of downy dark hair like you two had. Same little shoulders that seem so oddly square for an infant. Tiny back small enough to be dwarfed by an outstretched hand.

Probably was Aleppo but does it matter where it's happening? On earth. To other humans. That's where. That's enough.

The others watched it too. They gasped. My lungs wouldn't allow me the relief of a gasp. I have pictures of you sleeping like that. But no dust.

Hope its mother is dead. How could she live now, breathe, exist?

They're calling it hypersensitivity disorder but to me I'm just a human. Yes, a mawkish maternal one, with all the psychological fissures motherhood bestows, but surely you don't have to have given birth to another human being to cry out from your core at such genocide?

I always turned off the breakfast news, didn't I, at the bad parts. Ended up breaking my 'no cartoons' rule before school to save you from whatever horror was making the headlines. When I was a little girl I only had nuclear war to fear, existential yes but not so random as today. The enemy was visible. Russia. Just Cold War stuff.

Sorry, I know you're shocked at me saying such things but you understand it's been tough for me lately."

2.19pm

Ben,

Why have you not answered me? Have you watched them yet? She's quite upset at times, just to warn you. She's been watching the news about Aleppo and no doubt getting uptight about Putin and ranting that if they could take Rasputin out why can't they assassinate him, with all their modern spyware and shit.

Anyway, dad told me he was going see her. So that was just the day before yesterday, if I'm right.

Answer me!!! At least text me!

Faith xxx

“Back again. Your dad has been to see me and I asked him to do what I’ve been doing, to tell you, from his point of view, but you know what he’s like; wouldn’t sit like a pillock in front of a camera — his words not mine. But somehow I persuaded him to put it down in writing. I told him you deserved — he deserved, to hear, and be heard. So this is the letter: he said I could read it out loud for you ‘cause I wouldn’t trust him to post it. I told him to be candid and, well, he really was.

“Your mum has said to be honest in this letter and I told her I would be.

She said she never understood me and vica versa and that’s why there was so much friction. I worked my fingers to the bone with the house but it never seemed good enough for her. I did it for you two so we’d have a roof over our heads but it was never enough.

I’d come in from a day’s work then get straight to fixing up the house but all she went on about was date night, or sitting talking to her when she was in the bath. I was always so tired after work I just wanted to watch the football and have a beer. It’s not like I went out drinking with my mates and I didn’t leave your mother every Saturday to go play golf like her snooty friends’ husbands.

Don’t get me wrong, she was a good mum to you two and she’d remind me often that before you were born I’d have a bath ready for her coming home on a Friday night after work, with a glass of wine and how much it meant to her. I remember the look on her face and she seemed so pleased. I don’t know when it was that I stopped wanting to do that for her.

Then this thing with the Syrian orphans. I know it was awful seeing it on TV every night but it’s nothing to do with us. I’m no xenophobic. Everyone wants to come here and there’s just no more room. My mate Gary had been on the dole for six months and he went for a job and you know who got it? A bloody Latvian, that’s who. It’s not fair. Am I wrong to want you to get what you deserve, for you to get the benefit of all them years of my taxes? Anyway, your mum started going on and on about it and it really started to cause rows. Of course it was awful to see all the children caught up in this war and I felt awful sorry for them but it wasn’t our problem.

But then driving over my foot after coming home to find some woman asking if the house was ready for this Syrian child, and me not knowing nothing about it? I’m still limping a bit and that was six months ago.

Then blaming me in court for causing her mental breakdown. Couldn't take anymore. Sorry kids.

Love, your dad.

“So there you are petals. He holds little back. But even before the refugee thing it had soured. So why did I stay? Because of you two, and sometimes he was kind, or made an effort. Like the teacher who praises you after years of criticism: you're so grateful you forget the affronts.

Got to go. Group therapy. Hope you can come see me soon.”

3.43pm

Hey B,

Where the hell are you? Why won't you answer me for God's sake?

I've watched all her videos. It's really quite sad how she says she felt like a hybrid. Who knew eh? She hid it well. Then when the Syrian orphan thing came up they weren't tight enough to survive it.

Penny just dropped — about the 'tempest' thing in that friggin Shakespearean sonnet, you know, “that looks on tempests and is never shaken”. It was her and dad.

Faith xxx

6.01pm

Ben,

You've got to come home. I've been trying to reach you again on the phone — it's been ages now and I'm really worried now but it's worse than I told you. I checked and there's a flight leaving Schiphol at 9.30 tonight.

Ring me straightaway.

Faith xxx

Sky news at six o'clock with Anna Botting

A woman has been killed after a drone being used by anti-refugee protestors breached a psychiatric hospital near Broadstairs, striking a patient.

Julia Streatfield, 49, from the Ealing area of London, was killed instantly in what is understood to be the first incident of its kind in the world.

The drone was being used to film a protest stunt by far right party, Freedom UK, near the refugee camp dubbed 'The Ghetto'. It struck the woman as she walked through the grounds yesterday.

A number of arrests have been made following the incident.

The woman, from Greatdown Road, Ealing, was the mother of 21-year-old paternal twins and had been in the centre for just over three weeks.

She had been sectioned under mental health legislation for six months following a court hearing in relation to a domestic incident in which she admitted driving her car over her husband's foot.

In a further development, it is feared her son Ben, a medical student at the University of Amsterdam, has gone missing while travelling to Syria. It is understood he was headed there to assist with the refugee relief effort.

Friends have revealed they and his twin sister Faith had been unable to contact the young man for a number of days. Aid agency sources in Aleppo confirmed the British man had enlisted to help but had failed to appear.

During Mrs Streatfield's court appearance, her lawyer appealed against a custodial sentence on the grounds of diminished responsibility, contending his client had been suffering from acute anxiety and depression as a result of witnessing the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis in the media.

Counsel outlined to the court that Streatfield maintained she had been on the brink of a mental breakdown over her husband's alleged refusal to give a young orphan a home at their former marital residence.

Controversy has been brewing in recent months over the use of drones by the public, particularly in light of near misses with passenger jets at Heathrow Airport.

This incident will likely heighten calls for legislation to ban their use in public places.

Faith Lost came second in the 2017 Strands International Short Story Competition — Water — part of the Four Elements series.

Máiréad Casey

Shared Needles

THEIR BOTTOMS WERE WET from the grass. In a ditch, down the bog road, they chugged back cans of Dutch Gold. Mikey robbed them from his brother's fridge. He liked it because it was nice and watery, and ran down the throat easy like a girl's bottle of Bud Light. But it was still a man's drink. There was no pretending.

"C'mon, it'll be getting dark soon," he said to Pidge.

As Pidge rose, his hood snagged on the briars. He pulled it frontways to check the damage. He hadn't many good ones left.

"Don't be sour. Look, I pricked my fucking finger!" Mikey said.

They crushed their cans and tossed them in the ditch. One day, I'll be dumping condoms here too, both of them thought but neither of them said.

Pidge was tall and lanky with a face full of spots that was sore to look at. He wore his hair shaved on all sides and faded up to a gelled brush of black. If he was a few years older it might have looked good with a beard. As it was now his shaved cheeks looked raw and

clammy, like unprepared chicken fillets. He was still figuring out what to do with his look. He planned on getting another earring, and as soon as someone close to him died, he was getting one of those grey-scale ink memorial tattoos of a Celtic cross with the name on the slab, or a pair of hands joined in prayer with the little scroll beneath for the names and dates. It would either go on his left pec or his belly but first he had to wait for someone to die.

Mikey on the other hand was a stout boy, fourteen and already with the shoulders and jowls of a French bulldog. Louder than Pidge, and with a real head on him for ideas. He wasn't a swat or teacher's pet or anything but when it came to the scheming of a thing, it was his delinquent brilliance that got them stuck into something but never quite pinned.

The two had stood shoulder to shoulder since the first week of primary school. With a rugby jersey and tracksuit bottoms and a noxious fog of Lynx around him, Mikey'd already settled on a tack that was going to score him friends and girls alike. Who knows, if he made the team next year he might have something better to be doing than drinking in ditches with old Pidge. Head in a girl's lap maybe and a changing room full of fellas to brag to about it to the following day.

Stories were important. Mikey noticed that people tend to tell when there's something or nothing to them. In small places like this you need the breath of a tale to go through town first. Only then will you have room to exaggerate.

This was how he came up with the notion that they should break into Miss McNally's decaying old farmhouse and steal her stash of booze.

Miss McNally lived further up the boithrín from where they'd pitched camp for the day. Grass grew up the middle of the road there and it was only travelled by visitors few and far between. The Legion of Mary used to call upon a time to keep the old girl company and coax her off the drink and on to the rosaries. Gently remind her that they hadn't seen her at Mass in a while (or ever for that matter, what religion was she again?) and get her to eat a bit.

While they were at it, bait out a good story or two from the fallen daughter of what was once the locality's only vet and biggest farmer. Mikey's auntie Agnes used to call over with a bit of cheddar cheese, scones and some milk for the tea.

She would call to his mother's house after with a saga about the rock of congealed sugar left on the table with a fly stuck in the weeping grains. She noted the marks of fingernails as McNally was ostensibly still cracking and scraping the stuff off to sweeten a drop of tea or hot whiskey. Waste not, want not, seemed to be her philosophy. While Auntie Agnes was charitably cleaning the old miser's bedroom during one of McNally's extended bathroom breaks, she noticed that beside the bed with ruffled sheets and a head-stained pillow, there was a chest with a drawer left strategically open should the bottle fall from her grasp. If she slipped into a doze, the drawer would lie waiting to catch the bottle with minimal loss to the contents within.

All through the house were cement floors. Mikey was told she sold her carpets to buy groceries and drink. Ivy snuck around the windows, ate at the plaster and began weighing down on the shingles of the roof. Luckily, now she was only a light little thing and didn't lean too hard on the withering, winding stairs. Luckily, she had little cause to go up there at all now. She would leave those rooms up there be, unless absolutely necessary. Her sisters' rooms still had their beds. Sometimes when the sheets started to feel clammy and smell of sleep, she was tempted to go into one of them, unused for years and years but still fairly fresh all the same, she'd bet. Then perhaps she would wake in the night, forget where she was and not be able to find her way in the dark. The thought would come to her of the pitch-black country nights, clutching with her knotted fingers for something familiar but finding nothing. The map of the room in her head gone all wrong. It made her lie back down on the crumpled linen, wrap herself into an imperfect ball just like when she was a little girl, furrow her eyes into a pained wince and mumble her prayers until the chant mesmerized her into an uneasy sleep. So she spent the night before and most other nights when there wasn't a drop to be found in the house.

"Howja know it's there?" Pidge asked.

"Sure, my aunt said so." For Mikey, that was enough. If it was stolen, of course McNally would tell someone but it was hardly going to be given the full shilling.

"Are you sure you didn't drink it and forget you had, Miss McNally?" An admirable appeal to be sympathetically reimbursed. Still there would be the whispers and outlines of the truth and then to the select group of potential friends, they would expand on their adventure and make it into something epic. Describe the task of getting in and out of the witchlady's old house with the weird air to it. Talk about the mad dog, Rebel, that was starved for day's and foaming at the mouth; the creaking stair, that summoned her drunken rage and dodging her grasping claws.

In all actuality, McNally would not even have to know they were there. Hopefully she'd be passed out on the couch while they filled up empty Lucozade bottles with whiskey and white wine and topped the containers up again with water. Really, they were only saving her from herself.

There was surprising stretch to the evening. Pidge and Mikey, underwhelming burglars that they were, decided to go to Miss McNally's front lawn. This meant navigating a territory overgrown and over-run with gnomes. The tops of their pointed hats cracked and snapped off, revealing their hollow insides. Pidge thought of Cornettoes when you chomped off the chocolate bit at the end, and sucked the ice-cream down through the cone. All their little faces pointed towards them as they waded through. Grins bared like a reluctant welcoming party.

They tried the doorbell to see if she was up and about.

No ding-dong sounded through the house. Mikey lifted the handle of bronze bit held in a horse's mouth and let it fall heavily back on the door again and again. There was no movement inside. In the trees, old boots tied by their laces kicked impatiently in the wind.

Pidge crept near the front living-room's dusted window and looked in. Teeth-clenched and inky-eyed, McNally looked back. Gazing through the dusted glass, he saw a woman sitting tense and still in her living-room suite of furniture. Eyes fixated on that hand-wiped circle of clear window pane, she looked like a China doll, set in place one day in her sawed-in-half of dollhouse, waiting anxiously for her playmate to return.

Pidge's feet were moving before he realised. He only turned his head to check when he passed the last crushed gnome, and found that Mikey lingered by the window. Mikey signalled for him to come back the way he came.

He didn't so much as whisper, "I think we could. No. I think we well could go through with this."

"She saw us Mikey."

"No, no, if you peek in again. She's looking out alright but I don't think she saw anything at all."

"We're not robbing a blind woman, Mikey! Let's just go home."

"Not blind, Pidge. Dreaming, she is. Away with the fucking fairies and birds."

"But we're not going to just go through—"

"No, I'd say it's locked. See if there's a window into the kitchen or downstairs bathroom."

Pidge found he could only nod in answer, his mouth had gone dry and sticky. He held his gut as walked around to the side of the house, a sharp knot pulled tight his belly. He walked slow, hoping it was only the drink or a stitch and not some babyish worry aching him into submission.

"There's no going around the back anyway," Mikey nodded towards the high wall decked with the bottoms of broken glass bottles. Deadlier than barbed wire, the splinters of

blue, brown, white and emerald sparkled in the setting sun like the turrets of a crystal castle.

"I'm going, Mikey."

"Suit yourself."

Mikey squeezed himself through the top panel of the bathroom's high window, balancing himself on the lid of the cistern when he was halfway through and wondering again why he was doing this alone. "I'm going to tell the fucker I nearly fell face-first into the toilet," he promised as he pulled one leg over and onto the window sill, then the other. "Oh well, you'll be doing everything without him soon enough," he thought. There was still no sound of the old woman.

He crept around. Agnes was right; cement floors everywhere you went. How does an old woman like that not freeze in here? He passed the living-room and threw a glance in, hoping he'd see Pidge standing at the window keeping watch, not really leaving him at all. All he saw in the corner of his eye was the black-and-grey figure thrown in the same armchair, in the same position as before. He wondered what if the old woman was dead, with her eyes still open? He knew that it would be in fact safer to rob her drink, but his heart thumped hard at the thoughts of being in the same space with her there dead. Mikey edged closer and could hear the soft sliding of metal and wool. She was alive, though she paid him no heed. The hands were going, fumbling with a dark forest of green thread with her hands. To see it gave him a slight catch in the breath as he recognised what she was doing. He'd seen his granny doing it when he was younger, popping her fingers fast and creating woollen knots on the steel spikes, like out of thin air. Mikey stayed only a second and continued his search at a more hurried pace.

He looked up the stairs. The first step groaned under his weight and so he lightly bounded up the rest of the way, two steps at a time. He ran down to the end of the hall. Nothing at all in any of the rooms. Only papers under the beds and fresh linens. He looked out the back-bedroom window and saw that in her backyard, the mad woman had covered a birdbath with the same chaotic film of broken glass as the garden walls. It looked like a spiny sea urchin pulled from the deep sea. Alien and beautiful; but what the fuck was she trying to keep out?

The creaks upstairs did not go unnoticed. In her armchair, Miss McNally closed her eyes and listened more intently, hoping that the weighted steps would stop at the back-bedroom window and be heard no more. Leave. Leave through the window, whatever you are. The awful sound of it turning, moving to come back down was followed by a terrible scream. It took a few seconds for her to realise that the shriek emanated from her own throat and echoed through a room she just left. She arrived at the bottom of the stairs in time to see the thing crashing frantically down and the pained face of the little goblin with no name as he fell through her landing floor.

Mikey wiped the tears from his face. The cracked wooden floor looked an awful long way up. He landed on his ankles and his left foot was beginning to swell around a pain that felt so wrong, so unbearable. He was fourteen and had never broken a bone before.

He couldn't understand how he was still alone. The old woman saw him, didn't she? He listened hard, there was a murmuring up above.

"Miss? Are you still there?"

A cautious creak bowed backwards.

"Miss? Please I'm sorry I broke in. Are you up there? I'm really hurt and I need help?"

"Is this a trick?"

"A trick? No please. If you could just...I don't know, help me up!"

"I'm not going one step near there. You'll just drag me in."

Mikey wondered what good that would do.

"I won't! I promise. Look, can you even just call my brother?"

"So the two of you can come kill me together?"

Was she serious? Mikey's stomach churned in answer.

He quickly imagined the rest of his days spent down here like prisoner, thrown bricks of sugar full of broken glass for food, while his leg healed into some kind of twisted flipper. He heard a rustle of furred bodies in the corner of the under-stair room. In Ag. Science class they talked about something called Weil's disease carried in the rats' piss. "Please just be a mouse," he asked the rustling quietly.

"My friend Pidge! You just saw him at the window. He didn't want to come in with you looking out like that."

"I'm not letting another soul into this house."

"Just...call my mam then. Her number is 086—"

"There's no phone here, child."

"See? You know I'm only young and my foot's broke. I can't hurt anybody like this. Help me out of here."

"It'll be dark soon."

Mikey was unsure if this was directed at him.

"I can't go down there. I can't go into the dark. When the night comes, I'm going to my room and you'll be by yourself."

"Listen, you, you don't have to come down here. I don't think it would help either way. If you could just throw me some rope or something? Just until I reach where I fell through."

The slippers shuffled away and returned with gasping breaths. Miss McNally purposefully tied a knot around the banister and fired the weighted end up the stairs and down the hole. A cry wretched from Mikey's mouth as he gripped the thing. Then gave out a little laugh. It was the fucking knitting needle tied with thread.

Pidge scribbled in his gridded Maths copybook while Mr. O'Sullivan chanted learnt-off theorems on the board. He coloured the selected squares on the grid to make an admirable Mario in his pixelated eight-bit Nintendo form. If Mikey was talking to him, he'd show him at lunch. He must have sent six texts asking how he got on, if he made it in and out again. Mikey left his phone at home on weekends where they'd be ditch-drinking. He'd only get them when he got back. The thought only struck him now that maybe he got caught. Or was still drunk after making all his new friends with his free whiskey and cool Indiana Jones story. To distract himself from visions of a future walking the hallways alone forever, he filled in the boxes on the other page to make Yoshi.

When he saw that Mikey wasn't in woodwork, and actually hadn't been in all day, he wondered if maybe Mikey had got into trouble at McNally's. What if the guards were called? What if he wasn't allowed go to his school anymore? By the school day's end, his copy had a Pikachu, Link, Megaman, and Sonic, and when he was really feeling lost and sorry for himself, he drew Kirby. He decided to bring the copybook over to Mikey's later to show,

thinking it would work as an “I'm sorry you got in shit,” gift under the guise of homework assignments.

Mikey's mother was the sort that liked to dress for a fox-hunt that was never on. Tweeds and fur caps, tartan capes and tight boots. Walking into her house made Pidge feel like he was invading one of his mam's English soaps set in the wild and windy English North and he was one of the chavs seen in a background bus-stop. So it was quite a surprise to him to see her outside his parents' house at all, much less in sweats and a man's fleece jacket. He wondered was her face red from the cold or crying or being seen pacing around his little cul de sac? When he reached her she nearly clawed him with her coral-pink nails. Pidge could tell she was trying to sound tough, “Where the fuck's Mikey?” She mostly seemed scared.

They had to break down McNally's front door. It wasn't very hard. Some of the wood splintered off at the threshold and jamb, releasing the dank smell of rot and mushrooms. The chub lock remained though, rusted onto the metal and rock like a barnacle and snagging on the loop of Pidge's school pants as he went inside. Another piece of clothing ruined. His mother will eat him alive tonight.

The garda, John Frawley, said Pidge and Mikey could split the damages evenly. That hardly seemed fair. There was no sign of Miss McNally inside.

There was a ribbon of forest-green wool tied around the bottom-stair banister. One end held the knotted ball of thread, the other led to a snapped cord. It was Pidge noticed the other broken half waving from the splintered board, sailing on the draft from down below.

“Mikey?”

“Pidge? You fuck!”

“Mikey, ah your ma is here with me and a garda! And we've to pay for the bloody door!”

“I don't give a flying fuck! Get in or get me out.”

Garda John Frawley got an axe to break the boy out of the belly of Miss McNally's home. She broke her fingers trying to pull him up by the thread, Mikey said. Maybe she went to the A and E? That was yesterday though, and Mikey didn't hear her leave.

“Check upstairs.”

“What now?”

“She was anxious to get upstairs to Maggie's or Peggy's room. Someone's room she was talking about. In the night I swear I saw her leap over me. Over the gap and on up like the fuckin' cow jumping over the moon.”

“You must have been dreaming,” Garda Frawley said.

Mikey thought that seemed unlikely. “There's quarr noises here at night,” he said. If she was gone, he didn't blame her for not sticking around, in the cold and in the dark.

“You were like Harry-fucking-Potter in there.” Pidge said and Mikey nodded. When they were alone, Pidge lifted up his shirt to reveal a pen-drawn tattoo of a crushed can of Dutch Gold, with the brand name changed to say “Michael”. “I drew it in the Garda station while we were waiting. Just in case you turned up dead.”

“It's pretty good,” Mikey admitted.

“I suppose I'll change it now.”

On the arm of the old woman's chair were four little garments. Tiny ones only big enough for a doll. Tiny little cardigan, two tiny little jumpers and a dainty little dress, resting with arms spread and imaginary fingers nearly touching like a sheet of paper-cut-out kids. Pidge popped each one on the fingers of his left hand.

"I wonder who she was knitting for?" Mikey said.

"What?" said Pidge, wiggling the headless finger-puppet family into an encore bow.
"Is it always knitting for someone?"

Marc de Faoite

Dr Fintan

NET-BAGGED BOTTLES OF Mekong-cooled Chang trailed in the murky water, ballast to the rudderless rubber tubes cushioning us wet-arsed downstream. The riverbanks slid lazily past, tangled undergrowth bannered with tattered strips of flood-swept plastic, posses of barefooted children diligently playing or fishing by the water's edge, bamboo canes for rods. Others squatted in the shade of tin-roofed shacks, picking nits from each other's hair. They jumped up when they caught sight of us, calling and laughing and waving, flashing white teeth. I tried to imagine kids on the banks of the Liffey or Dodder. They'd probably throw rocks. I took a last slug of lukewarm beer and tossed the empty bottle in close to the bank. A flurry of limbs splashed to retrieve it. Bottles better than cans, Mr Phang had said. The children would bring them to be recycled and earn a few coins, which might have explained why they seemed happy to see us. I watched the fastest boy, wet black hair matted, skin shining, grinning as he held the dripping green bottle aloft. I waved goodbye, feeling an uncomfortable mix of munificence and shame, and let the current sweep the children out of sight, but not out of mind.

"Here," croaked Dr Fintan, our tubes bumping together in a buoyant kiss, yielding for a moment before rebounding in slow motion. I reached for the joint, and with arms extended we momentarily became Michelangelo's Creation of Adam. I took a few long hits, head tilted back, and watched the slow ominous expansion of giant cumulus cauliflowers. Gnarled banyans streamed aerial roots down from their dark leafy crowns, then the riverbanks became green barcodes and barcodes and barcodes of bamboo.

Maria. I tried to conjure up her voice, the faint Spanish lisp, the elision of her vowels over the years, from Dough-bleen to Duh-blun. I lib in a billage, she once said when we first met. Mah-Ree-a, she insisted, not Mar-eeya. Gin and tonic accents, her voice just out of reach. Maria saying I don't want another thirty forty fifty years of this. Maria saying I don't want to pretend any more. I felt her words, more than heard them. I tried to reconstruct her face, superimpose it against the clouds, against the inside of my eyelids, but all I got were fragments: the tapered nape of her neck, the rounded curve of a cheekbone, the dotted stubble between and around her eyebrows, the plucked hair growing back, or was it new hair? The word *follicles* flickered past. I tried to grasp it, tried to see her face, but it was like the water trailed between my fingers. The only half-clear image I could conjure up was her Facebook profile photo, unchanged for years. She never used her account. No recent activity either, I had checked. And checked. Maria, frozen in the moment, surreptitiously right-clicked and saved to my phone, an arm draped around her childhood friend Carmen's shoulder, both raising beer glasses, eyes double-glazed, faces toilet-flushed, skin shining in the unforgiving light of camera flash. There are blurred figures in the dark background, splashes of purple and yellow light. I tried to remember where the photo was taken. Had I been there? Did I take the photo? I thought maybe I did, but couldn't be sure that it wasn't a false memory. Perhaps the seven-year-long episode of our lives together was a false memory too – seven years phantom itching to be scratched. I had nothing to show for it, everything left behind, all stolen by time that most skilled of thieves who loots our lives and fences the damaged goods piecemeal to memory, phantom fragments meted out in ghostly glimpses.

I opened my eyes. The early evening light had turned sulphuric yellow. I levered myself as upright as possible, the black rubber complaining. My back ached. I splashed warm dubious Mekong water on my face.

Mr Phang was just ahead, pointing to a rickety wooden jetty nestled in a shadowed river bend. A man on the jetty held a looped blue nylon rope that uncoiled as it sailed through the air. Mr Phang caught it, using the current to hold it taut. He gestured with his free hand, urging us to grab hold of the rope. Our tubes bumped against each other, and one by one we were helped ashore by wiry shirtless teenagers, waist deep in the brown muddy water.

Solid ground. More or less. I stumbled, my inner ear still floating on the river, my coordination impaired by the beers.

One of the Swedes, Sven, or Jens – I couldn't get their names straight – failed to understand and drifted past, spinning in an eddy, looking comically lost as the current pulled him away. He and his friend were in competition to see who could sustain the most chemical impairment and still stay conscious. A wiry youth launched himself in pursuit. Despite his bent-limbed splashes he was an efficient swimmer. The Swede flung himself on the boy, embracing a human being whose whole existence he had been unaware of mere moments before, in an instinctive act of trust. Or maybe he merely saw the boy as a human lifebelt. The boy shouted something the Swede failed to understand. They struggled with the intimacy of lovers until the boy eventually managed to stand and the Swede finally understood that the muddy water in which he so feared drowning wasn't that deep. We all cheered as they both staggered muddily ashore.

My travelling companions' faces glowed in varying shades of sunburn and drunkenness. Someone cracked open the last few bottles of Chang. Another in a day-long line of joints was passed around. We fell silent, contemplative, engaging in a reverential ritual as old, and older than history, slapping whining mosquitoes, watching a huge satsuma orange sun quickly slide behind the black silhouettes of the coconut palms on the opposite bank.

Mr Phang was our designated driver, the one who stayed sober and made sure we reached our destination safely. All the way down river he had kept a waterproof bag slung across his chest, conscientiously guarding our passports and wallets. He wanted to keep our phones dry too, but no one wanted to pass up on the photos we planned to upload the moment we found a decent wifi signal. In the half-light we watched him finish the joint and flick the fizzing roach into the river. He distributed wallets, flipped open our passports and passed them to us one by one. I slipped mine into my shirt pocket. Dr Fintan, more precautionary, lifted his shirt and zipped his inside a money belt.

It was a short walk uphill to the hostel and as we walked Dr Fintan gave an impromptu lecture on river-borne diseases: cholera, typhoid, dysentery, hep A. I hadn't taken any shots, but unlike the Swedes I had no fresh tattoos to infect, and for once no knife-nicks or

festering oil-spatter blisters. We listened to Dr Fintan with the devotion of disciples. He was a charismatic charmer who maintained his reassuring bedside manner no matter how much he drank. There are people you meet in life who bring you up, who seem eager to believe the best about you, and others who bring you down. Fintan was resolutely the former and when he listened it was as if you were imparting hard-won wisdom or a nugget of information he found utterly fascinating. But he could turn this on with anyone. Then you felt less special, manipulated somehow, betrayed and disappointed, but ironically more disappointed in yourself than in him.

Our backpacks had made it to the hostel as promised. We paid Mr Phang his cash-on-delivery and slapped him on the back, promising to fill the internet with rave reviews, then watched him climb into the cab of the pick-up truck that would take him and the tied and tamed stack of tubes back up river, ready for the same trip again the following day with another group of green inebriated travellers.

We bagged bunks in a dank dormitory that already reeked of sunblock, pot, and musky male sweat.

I had met Fintan a few days earlier in a dormitory just like this.

"You Irish?" he asked in a lilting Cork accent, pointing towards the tricolour clumsily stitched to my backpack. "Just heading out for beers and grub with a few of the lads like. Join us?"

We had been travelling together since, part of a raggle-taggle group of unshaven young men struggling to grow proper hipster beards, with varying degrees of failure or success.

If I hadn't lain down after my shower events might have transpired differently, but we can rarely identify the precise points where our lives veer course until after the fact. I heard Fintan's voice filtered through the grimy mosquito net.

"Pizza?" he asked, voice rising sharply on the second syllable. Eyes still closed, head reeling from my excessive absorption of beer and grass and reflected river light, I mumbled a vague reply about catching up later.

I woke under the harsh neon to the trance rhythm of the ceiling fan. I was groggy and dry-mouthed, still half-drunk and half-stoned, eyes gritty sun-dried raisins, a vicious pain pile-driving through my head. I popped a few pain killers, thirstily emptied my water bottle and took another shower to wash away a newly accumulated layer of sticky sweat. The dormitory was empty. Outside, frogs and insects sang. Motorcycles and tuk-tuks buzzed past, dopplering into the distance. I reached into my backpack, already sweating again despite my shower, and extracted my notebook and pen. I sat on the bed flicking through the first few scrawled pages. The record of my trip stalled abruptly somewhere mid-air after Abu Dhabi with a rhetorical inquiry as to why airline food always contained red and green bell-peppers. I uncapped my pen. I recalled the silent square-faced immigration clerk, but couldn't remember the name of the airport. I flicked through my passport looking for the entry stamp. A moment of confusion, then realisation: this was Dr Fintan's passport, Mr Phang must have switched them by mistake. It was easy to see how it had happened, we had already been mistaken for brothers several times, one matronly hostel owner shrugging, saying "all you Irish look same same."

I could have gone out to look for him, or just waited for him to come back. Instead I slipped the passport back into my pocket, looped my backpack straps over my shoulders, and walked out the side door of the dormitory into the frog-chirping night.

I hadn't walked far when I heard a tuk-tuk approach. I stopped in a puddle of flickering yellow light beneath a streetlamp and flagged it down. Twenty minutes later I was gazing into the darkness beyond my reflection in the window of a night train bound for the coast.

The clack-clacking of rails and the sway of the train must have rocked me to sleep.

When I awoke it was still dark, the landscape outside still invisible. It wasn't too late to turn back, get off at the next station, make the return trip. But I knew I wouldn't. The voice that urged me to backpedal belonged to someone else, someone I used to be.

The sky brightened on the horizon, followed by a sun that rose as quickly as it had set, ballooning into the cloudless sky. I half-opened a window, inviting a breeze to sweep through the carriage and sooth my sun-burned face. Despite a precautionary slathering of

factor-fifty before the river trip I was starting to peel. My fingers explored the tender flaking skin, relishing the delicate peeling off of sun-cooked epidermal layers. Like a snake or a reptile I was shedding skin, sloughing off a former self, becoming Dr Fintan.

*

Despite my scepticism, a Google search revealed that I really was a doctor, a proper medical doctor, on sabbatical from a Waterford hospital, volunteering with MSF. Certainly a step up the slippery ring-rang-rungs of the social ladder from a lowly cook fanning flames and delicate culinary egos in a fashionably over-priced Dublin restaurant. I tried to recall anything I knew about medicine. Treating burns and dressing wounds, been there, done that. I once packaged and preserved a colleague's severed finger in a Tupperware filled with ice, hardly an exploit, but the finger was successfully reattached, albeit with a certain loss of sensation. My only time in hospital that I could remember, and that only vaguely, was to have my stomach pumped after a particularly wild night out. Apart from that I had little experience of the medical world, though I must have absorbed something through osmosis and exposure to Maria's binge-watching of ER and Doctor House. Perhaps a sub-conscious desire to pander to her viewing habits.

I checked Fintan's Facebook page. The most recent post was a selfie taken on the river, captioned: *turn off your mind, relax, and float downstream ...#gowiththeflow #imlivinit*. No mention of a stolen passport. I clicked on the message option. *Dear Fintan*, I wrote. I deleted the clumsy debut, closed the tab, and started looking for my next destination. I needed somewhere to lay low. If I played my cards right my newly acquired volunteer visa was good for a full year of tropical heat, time enough to weigh my options.

There were two ferries to the island. The crossing took almost two hours. I gave a taxi driver the name of a cheap guesthouse I had found online. Within minutes we were outside the sleepy little town clustered around the ferry port, passing rice paddies bordered with

coconut palms and interspersed with ramshackle wooden houses where chickens and small children poked the ground in dusty yards shaded by huge tamarind and mango trees.

Traffic was light. Most of the vehicles we passed on the narrow roads were motorcycles, some driven by tourists, but most apparently on their way to or from the local school, three people or more astride the saddles, children dressed in neat school uniforms perched on the back, or squeezed between adults. Almost no one wore helmets. Other children walked along the dusty roadside, white school shirts glowing in the tropical light like an advertisement for detergent.

The clinic was short-staffed. It wasn't hard to bluff my way into an unpaid job in exchange for board and lodgings. I took temperatures, held wrists and counted pulse rates, pumped blood pressure cuffs and watched the falling mercury, asked children to cough while placing a stethoscope on their backs – none of it was particularly complicated or hard to learn.

The clinic grounds consisted of a few single-story buildings clustered around a dusty courtyard, the soil a vibrant orange that matched the rusted corrugated rooves, the exact colour of Maria's hair in sunlight the time she dyed it with henna.

Apart from the other doctors, the real doctors, few of the clinic staff and almost none of the patients spoke English. I improvised my own sign language, communicating in a combination of mime and exaggerated facial expressions. A frown and a hand rubbed on my stomach expressed abdominal pain, a flourish of my hand dropped from my open mouth conveyed vomiting, a similar gesture below my lower back expressed something similar for the other end of the digestive tract, swivelling hands mimed bandage wrapping, forefingers made snipping scissors signs.

My white skin was an unearned badge of authority, my lab-coat a suit of armour I wore at all times despite the heat. I played my role with the seriousness of a method actor. It was almost disappointingly easy to deceive everyone.

I spent my free time online, studying anatomy and the symptoms of common tropical ailments. There was so much to learn, the endless mysteries of the human body – in some ways so resilient, in other's such a delicately balanced machine.

I settled into a routine, thinking I had finally found my calling. Most of the patients came to the day clinic. There was an unending supply of colicky babies whose cries called out like car-alarms. Overweight and breathless women, wheezed bad breath and filled the out-patients waiting room with musky odours of stale sweat. I regularly saw diabetics with swollen feet and rotten toes who would have to make the trip to the mainland for amputation. It was humbling and made me grateful for many things I had always taken for granted, robust health not the least of them. I reassured myself that despite my deceit my presence had a beneficial effect on these people's lives, but I knew that sincerity was no replacement for expertise and I lived in constant fear of being unmasked.

Every day I looked at the office calendar and saw the date of my return flight draw nearer. I would miss the flight, unable to travel on Dr Fintan's passport. I had no way of knowing if he had reported his passport stolen, or named me as the thief. The stakes were too high. If I contacted the embassy and told them my passport was lost it might lead to a visit from the police. What had seemed like an escape route had led me to a dead end. My island refuge had become a prison. I was trapped.

I was finishing my rounds when one of the nurses came running. Yet another tourist had fallen off his motorbike. This was common enough. Between jellyfish stings and motorcycle accidents there was usually at least one foreign patient a day. Generally they weren't too badly bashed up, nothing worse than scraped knees or elbows, calf muscles burned from hot tail-pipes were all too common as well. A few days earlier I had seen a girl – a young woman – who had broken her front teeth. I told her she needed a dentist, not a doctor. She said she needed morphine instead. I slipped the needle into her arm, amazed that my hands didn't shake, all too aware that if I gave her too much she could slip into a coma or even die.

The new arrival was unconscious. A passing taxi had found him lying on the roadside by his motorcycle. Orderlies put the patient on a stretcher and carried him indoors. There was a nasty wound on his head but it had stopped bleeding. I checked his pulse while the nurse wiped away his mask of blood and dirt. He had shaved since I had seen him last. My hands shook as my fingers probed the lump swelling on the side of his head. Who knew what kind

of damage was done to his brain? He might have amnesia, but I couldn't count on that. If he regained consciousness he would almost certainly recognize me and expose me for the fraud I was. There was still enough morphine in the dispensary to make sure that never happened.

I waited until dark. I told the night nurse to take a break. There were only two other patients in the ward and both were asleep. Wooden slats near the high ceiling carved moonlight into diagonal sections. I stealthily approached Fintan's bedside and stood watching him breathe regularly. I slowly pulled down the bed sheet and lifted his shirt. The money belt protruded just above the waistline of his jeans. I gently unzipped it and breathed a sigh of relief when my fingers found the passport. Replacing it with the original, I zipped up the money belt and pulled the sheet back over him. I took his hand in mine and whispered his name. His eyelids fluttered open.

"How are you feeling?"

"Massive headache." His fingers explored the bandages wrapped around his head.

"How many fingers am I holding up?"

"One."

I knew that this and the fact he could move were good signs. He blinked, turning his head to take in his surroundings.

"I called the embassy." I said "They've contacted your family. They'll look after you here, they're good people. Just take it easy. I have to go."

"Where?"

Off to a cold damp purgatory to pay penance for my sins, and try to build a new life from the ruins of the last.

"To catch a flight."

Andrew Maguire

Saturday Morning

HERE AT MY DESK I have early letters of support. At least that's what I assume they are – I fiddle with the knife, flirt with the lip, but never slit the envelopes open. The likely less friendly e-mails are also ignored, and the phone is face down, though I let it vibrate, a shuddering window to the shaking outside world, as I balance the tightrope between ignoring and denying. It's not that I'm ignoring them, ignoring *this* – I know what most of them are saying, and it's theirs to say. They have granted me my new title, that one which they love to bestow: corrupt businessman. But for now I feel no guilt, remorse or wrongdoing, and I prefer to look back, rather than out, to decide if I should. Because if there's something wrong with what I've done, or who I am, it started long before I had any control over it. Why chastise me now for being something I started to become when I was less than fifteen years old? I wonder, do these same people believe the caterpillar always knew it would become a butterfly, and should have been practicing the ethics of flight and beauty when it was still sat wingless on the leaf?

I'm outside the gates of Frank O'Connell's yard, rubbing my hands together and jumping up and down. O'Connell's is in the centre of Glenfergus, and the air here is the coldest in the village. I've been in it all morning, at my Saturday job, following O'Connell around the mart, before he finally said, as he does most weeks: 'this is the one, son,' and sent me back, with his newly bought cow, while he stayed behind and handled the payment. I've just put the cow in the small shed in the yard, where they're kept for hours, days or weeks at a time, and I almost envy the animal for its warmth.

Sometimes this is a good job and sometimes it isn't, and that depends on whether or not O'Connell puts a shilling in your hand. I'm waiting for him to come round the corner with my wage for the day, and as always it's an anxious wait. There's only so much time that can be spent lingering; the shilling is a luxury, but being home with a newspaper under my arm by the time Ma puts the breakfast out is a necessity, and there is never much time to waste between the two. If O'Connell is late, it's the shilling that will have to be sacrificed.

I wipe down the top bar of the gate and sit atop of it. If O'Connell had a son, his son would walk the cattle home from the mart on a Saturday morning. But he doesn't, so I do. That has never been in my control.

'Because it's good for him, it helps him,' I heard my father say to my mother, months earlier, when I returned home one particularly cold morning.

'I don't see how having Liam stand out in that cold could be good for him,' she replied, and he said: 'I didn't say it was Liam it was good for.'

I'm waiting for O'Connell to come down the three-quarter mile stretch to the Mart. My house is a mile and a half long jog in the other direction, meaning my Saturday morning job involves at least four and a half miles of combined walking, running, strolling and leading a cow, between leaving my front door and returning back to it.

'And what odds are four or five miles to a fit young cub like yourself?' Ma said that morning.

'None,' I said, as I took the cup of tea and plate of toast from her. 'I'm getting faster and faster. I can get home in ten minutes, now, maybe in less than that this week.'

I ate the toast even though I wasn't hungry. 'It will warm you at least,' Ma said, like she did every week. 'And you're to be home in time to have a proper meal with your father later.'

Being home on time has nothing to do with eating with my father. It's that if O'Connell's late, it means he's in the pub, and though my parents would never say it, I'm not to see him after he's been there. Part of me knows that.

O'Connell's dog appears and I jump down from the gate and sit beside him. The dog is older than me. I've always known that, and he seems to know the same: it's like he's the adult. He doesn't want petted, would never run after a stick, but lets me sit beside him, and as I lean

in and put my arm around him, we share each other's heat, and it's like he's looking after me, even though he'd never let on.

Perhaps he's here to tell me to go home? It's the time when I normally would, but today I haven't. Do I think I can run home that fast? I'm notably faster than anyone in my class, as anyone who notices such things could tell you. But it doesn't matter, because here he comes, O'Connell, stumbling slightly, as he makes his way towards me. I jump up and watch as he comes forward, and when he gets close and takes off his cap I do the same.

'Young man,' he says, as he pats my shoulder, 'you're still here. Another good morning's work done.'

It's usually now that he presents a single coin,' and so I hold out my hand, but he only shakes it, like he would my father's. His palm is warm and sweaty.

'Any trouble with her?' he asks, nodding towards the shed in the yard, and I shake my head, putting my hands in my pocket, afraid they might still look presumptuous.

'C'mon then,' he says, as he opens the gate. 'Since you're still here, we'll have a look at her.'

I could hesitate, and say no, I have to go home, but I don't, so he waves me on in through the gate.

O'Connell's yard always feels bigger than you'd imagine any yard in a town centre could be. It's a good thing too, because as we get closer, the stink of the shed presents itself again. His house is beyond it. It's a waste I think, because it's big, but he has no wife or children. The curtains are always pulled, and his dog sits gloomily in the yard like he wants a permanent child to watch over.

'What're you thinking about, boy?'

'I like your dog.'

'She's a tired old thing, God bless her.'

'Ma says she's older than me.'

'And what age are you, cub?'

'Fourteen.'

'Only Fourteen. And what about your father these days?'

'He's thirty-eight.'

O'Connell laughs a drunk man's laugh (I don't know it then, but do now). 'I mean how's he keeping? Has he much work on?'

'He says there is no work.'

'Ah,' O'Connell whispers. 'Well anyway, here we are,' and he pulls at the shed door, which I had pulled shut an hour earlier.

The only light the cows get inside is from the cracks and holes in the metal sheeting and the door opens up like a revelation. But do cows feel sensitive to the light like we do? This one doesn't seem to react, and O'Connell notices the same thing.

'You can always tell in the first few seconds, son. If they're calm and have settled into this shed, and don't react when you come in, then it's a good cow.'

Who is this man I see every Saturday morning, and only ever hear talk about cows?

He takes my silence as an invitation to explain, and says: 'anyone that can react to what happens around them, and adapt, is useful. Why should a cow be any different?'

He looks at me, and after a second, when I've said nothing, laughs.

'I'm sorry, son. I haven't paid you for your work.'

He digs into his pocket and pulls out a crunched up note and sets it in my hand. I'd rarely held one before, and it was only ever inside my house, carrying it from my mother to father or vice versa.

'I can't,' I say, instinctively. I wish he would just give me a shilling like usual, which I feel deserving of, entitled too. Above all, allowed.

'And why not?' he says, turning and leaning on the fence of the pen, looking in at the cow.

'You mean to give to my parents?'

'No, son,' he says. 'For you.'

'I can't. They wouldn't let me have it.'

'She's a big cow, isn't she?' he asks. 'Did you have any trouble getting her down from the mart?'

'She was very calm.'

‘You do yourself a disservice, son. It’s the man’s character that is shown, not the animals, when a cow stays calm. Tell me, do your friends be jealous that you get the odd shilling off me? Do they even say you’re lucky for it?’

In the dark shed, with the stream of light coming from the door, the difference inside and outside seems total. ‘Sometimes,’ I say, and I watch his half lit face smile.

‘I’d know rightly. And yet a calm horse follows the man, and so does success. Don’t ever let anyone tell you you’re lucky to have either.’

He looks down at the crunched up note in my open hand. It seems almost alive as it gently opens; expanding in my hand like a magical creature that is only just waking up.

‘Fair enough he says,’ taking it from me. I instantly want it back.

‘You know this is how much she cost,’ he says. ‘Another one of these notes.’ He turns to me. ‘Would you take her instead?’

My eyes are on his pocket, wondering how many more of the notes he has in there. It doesn’t occur to me to ask for a shilling.

‘What do you mean?’ I ask eventually.

‘Well, we can take her up and put her with the rest of the cattle, but she’ll be yours. All the milk she makes, whatever percentage of the money we get from her, will be yours, and when we eventually send her off, you’ll have that money too. I’ll set it all aside, and wait for a time when you can have it. Until then it’ll be our secret. And there’s nothing lucky or wrong about it.’

The phone’s vibrating again, unknowingly ringing on, as the outside world turns, and my desk shakes with it. I won’t answer, but just as I refuse to look out, I refuse to ignore. I’ve opened the curtains a crack, and can see the light of day tracing a line across the carpet, as the sun rises on the broiling outside world. They want to ask those same questions, make that same accusation, and prepare it all for tomorrow’s Sunday papers. It’s a trap as much as a name, and true folly is falling into it, where you receive the scorn you have earned, but also the hatred and inherent disdain built up over generations, for people they have decided were just like you. Let it ring; I can’t stop any of it. My mind remains in that other Saturday morning, long ago. I regress again: I’m running home, in five minutes or less, but I’m already late,

without a shilling in my pocket, watching the butterflies around the leaves at the front of the house, wondering how I can explain myself to those on the other side of the door.

in review: Claire Savage

on The Watch House, by Bernie McGill

SET ON RATHLIN ISLAND towards the end of the 19th century, Bernie McGill's latest novel, *The Watch House*, is a riveting read with prose that draws the reader into the story with stealth. Published by Tinder Press on August 10, I was delighted to receive an ARC (Advanced Reader Copy) ahead of the big day as I've enjoyed McGill's previous work. I also have an added interest, given that it's inspired by the coastal landscape near where I live.

With both of her novels historical fiction inspired by real-life events, McGill is a writer who weaves fact with fiction (faction, I believe, is the term for this). It's something I enjoy as a reader – you can learn about the history of a time/place, while also enjoying the creativity that comes with making up stories around the truth of what happened.

The Watch House unfurls on Rathlin Island, hopping over to Ballycastle on occasion, and is set during the time of the Marconi wireless experiments which took place between the island and seaside town. It was an exciting period for those who lived there, as such a thing had never been done before; the work pioneering and ultimately opening up the way for the enhanced communications we enjoy today.

McGill captures perfectly what it must have been like to experience all of this, juxtaposing the thrill and excitement of it all with the suspicion and cynicism which no doubt co-existed. Her protagonist is Fionnuala McQuaid, a young woman recently married out of necessity following the death of her grandparents, who looked after her when her family emigrated to Newfoundland. She's known to the islanders by her maiden name, Nuala Byrne, however, a

small but significant detail which evokes a sense of her free spirit and marks her out as different.

Indeed, from the outset, we realise there is something about Nuala Byrne as McGill opens the book with a scene which quite clearly forewarns us of pending drama. Despite this, however, the reader is almost lulled into a false sense of security as the novel progresses, building up to the drama like a creeping tide. You just don't see it coming until the water's upon you...

For those who like to gain an insight into traditions past, McGill's depth of research into everything from wedding preparations to the Marconi experiments themselves, is evident throughout the novel. It's clear she also spent a great deal of time really getting to know the island – visiting it personally to walk in the footsteps of her characters, on top of all the bookish research. For those who are both familiar and unfamiliar with Rathlin Island, *The Watch House* subsequently paints a vivid picture of both island life and landscape.

When we first meet Nuala after that opening chapter, she is on the cusp of a life that entails nothing outside the norm. Her husband, known simply as the Tailor, is much older than her and fairly disinterested in his young wife, and his elderly sister, Ginny McQuaid, also lives in their cottage.

There is a simmering tension between Nuala and her sister-in-law and later, we find, also with Tam Casey, who's helping out at the watch house. The reader senses the frustration of a young girl trapped in a marriage which gives her a roof over her head and little else. Then there's her belief that she can see and hear the dead, which lingers at the periphery of all of this. Just who is the young girl Nuala keeps catching glimpses of when no-one else can?

'In the cottage, the aired is changed; I can feel it as I come in. The girl is there, sitting on a stool by the window, her back to me, staring out at the shore.'

So, when the Marconi team arrives on the island, we share Nuala's excitement and curiosity, and hope sparks.

'I am curious about the goings on in the watch house,' she says.

When she meets Gabriel, who is running the experiments on the island and later asks her to help out, it is clear he is going to leave a significant imprint on her life. What I don't think I

was quite prepared for, is exactly how, and this is where McGill's writing prowess comes into play again. Such is her skill at really drawing the reader into the story, that we are as surprised as Nuala when, about halfway through the book, a rather unexpected turning point comes.

McGill cuts in with some pivotal scenes which effectively turn the novel on its head. A story which has been progressing at a somewhat steady pace now delivers a few deft punches that alter the course of the novel. Without giving any spoilers, *The Watch House* suddenly deals out tragedy in myriad forms and in rapid succession. Tension is heightened and remains taut until the novel's end, as we work out, bit by bit, just what happened and why.

The story is mainly told from Nuala's point of view throughout, though we do get some insight also from Ginny and from Nuala's cousin, Dorothy. Interestingly, in the author's note, there is an explanation about the ghostly girl which clears up her part in the story where the novel retains the mystery of it.

In summary, *The Watch House* is an evocative novel that's brimming with suspense and tells the tale of a young woman whose life is irrevocably changed throughout its course. It also gives an interesting insight into the Marconi experiments, weaving fact with fiction to create a tale that most definitely reels you in and keeps a grip on you until the very end.

***The Watch House* by Bernie McGill is published by Tinder Press on August 10, 2017.**

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memoir

Brian Kírk

The End of the Line

I HAVEN'T LIVED THERE in over thirty years but, when I dream, Station House is always home for me. I can walk between the rooms, feel the dented brass door handles in my hand, run my fingers over the uneven walls, pick at the peeling wallpaper. Sometimes it is almost Christmas and I can see a naked stippled turkey hanging on the back of the scullery door. Later my mother will chop off the head and feet while the cats in the back yard mewl and climb over each other to get to the scraps she throws for them.

In 2006 they demolished the house and cleared the site to extend the commuter car park for the railway station, and I wondered then would it affect my dreams. On the few occasions every year when I drive past on the way to visit my sister the absence of the house is much more apparent to me than the actual structure had ever been. But still I dream of it; the old shambling house with rotting windows that rattled when trains passed; the back yard with its sheds and accumulated junk, the well-trimmed hedge around the lawn at the side, and the L-shaped field where we played football on long summer evenings.

The station lies between two rural towns in North County Dublin. A new Station Master, Terry, arrived in 1964, a man already in his forty-seventh year, married with nine children; the tenth, the seventh son, would arrive before the year was out.

He was educated only up to National School level but he was quick-witted and good with numbers; his mind kept active through his work and the daily bets he placed on horses. He was not in any way a heavy gambler, but he was habitual, making judicious use of low stake accumulator and permutation bets. He was not wasteful. He gave up alcohol when he married and handed up his wages every week to his wife, except for a little he kept back for horses and cigarettes, his only other vice. In photographs of him from that time there is a

John Player No. 6 pinched between the tips of his index and middle fingers.

He was born in the rural town land of Ross Lough in Co. Louth. His father died young, outlived by a grandfather who was illiterate but also a native Irish speaker, the last of the family to be able to make that claim. One of four brothers, Terry also had a twin sister who ultimately took over the small family farm. As a boy he worked the fields with his brothers when the state was new-born and farming methods were still primitive. His love for horses must have grown from his days walking behind the plough and the harrow at home. Soon he and another brother broke free of the farm to work for Great Northern Railways (GNR) which would ultimately be taken over by CIÉ in 1958. There was a future and security in the permanent way. The eldest brother emigrated to Scotland where he spent most of his life as a navvy, moving around the building sites and pubs of Glasgow. The youngest, who was never spoken about, was committed to St. Brigid's Mental Hospital in Ardee after an accident at a young age, never to emerge.

As a young man the Station Master had a strong sense of duty and purpose but also a degree of self-confidence far beyond his social standing. Perhaps it was the hopefulness of the emergence of the new state, the coming to power of De Valera and his Fianna Fáil party and all that it promised for ordinary working Irish men. Perhaps also it was the influence of American films and music – anathema as they were to De Valera's ideal of Irishness and the self-sustaining state. Those exotic images and sounds must have tilted a young man's view of a world that was heretofore bent to the tasks of the earth. Here was an alternative to the quotidian offered in the slick black and white images of the big cities. The wide and swaggering sounds of Jazz and Swing couldn't have been further from the hunched gatherings of neighbour's card games on winter evenings. And Bing Crosby's voice – simply talking or singing – carried the promise of an Irish version of the American Dream with honeyed confidence to the listener bent to the wireless on a dark evening at home.

He spent his wages on clothes, got his hair cut once a fortnight and trimmed his moustache á la Clark Gable. His suits were double breasted – the kind Jimmy Cagney wore – and he took to sporting a hat. Although he was not tall, like a boxer he was strong across the shoulders and slim at the hips, and the effect his suited presence had was striking. Heads turned to watch him as he passed. He was an independent man stepping out in a new and

independent country. The world lay at his feet.

The working world for him meant travelling in the guard's van on trains between Belfast and Belturbet, Co. Cavan, where he had digs. He was drawn to the weekly dances there and the local shop where young Anne Sheridan worked. Up north there was a war on but south of the border it was merely the Emergency and he hardly noticed. He was a proficient dancer and this coupled with his dress sense made him a popular figure. Anne called him 'Shiny Shoes' because of his meticulous appearance when he came to buy his cigarettes and linger in the hope of winning words and smiles from her, which he often did. Before long they were walking out, perhaps along the viaduct over the river Erne, watching the sun set hand in hand. She'd had her own admirer all through that summer, but poor Barney must have seemed like a child compared to the sophisticated Terry. Although educated beyond his level, Anne was amazed that such an older, urbane man could take an interest in her. He was seven years her senior. But, in turn, one wonders what her family must have thought of him. Her father was an RIC man in Westmeath, who undoubtedly would have hoped for a better match for his daughter than a border farmer's son who dressed like a spiv. Hers was a peculiar family in many respects. Anne's mother's choice of husband may have in turn prompted suspicion among her sisters, two of whom were rabid republicans with strong connections to the IRB, the 1916 Rising and important people in the burgeoning state.

In any event the Station Master married the RIC man's daughter on 4th June 1949. They honeymooned in Dublin, staying at the North Star Hotel on Amiens Street. In later life Terry never had much time for the city, but at that time it was his New York or Chicago. In the wedding photograph they are standing close together, although his hands are hidden behind his back. Perhaps he is holding a wide-brimmed hat. Their smiles are muted, as if they are suppressing the desire to laugh out loud. She holds her gloves and bag in her right hand, her left hand resting lightly on an ornamental table. Her suit and hat are pale and tasteful, matching carefully the pearls around her neck. Her left heel is raised slightly off the floor, the left knee bent, as if she wants to make herself a little shorter than she actually is for his sake. He is obviously older looking but handsome with it, his forehead high, the hair well groomed. His suit is pinstriped, white shirt and neatly knotted tie and of course those

shiny shoes. Boldly on his broad lapel he wears – for her – his pioneer pin.

In the best Catholic traditions it wasn't long before the children came. They set up home in O'Neill Park, a tough estate at the time, while Terry was Foreman at Clones Station on the Dundalk to Enniskillen line. Clones was a thriving station then for passengers, a junction connecting to Armagh and Belfast in the north and Cavan in the south. There was an extensive goods yard also and a concrete roundhouse for locomotives. Four boys were born there, before they were moved on. The world was changing; diesel engines were replacing the old steam locomotives and the beginning of line and station closures was already underway.

At Inniskeen, further down the same line, the Station Master's house was beside the platform's edge. The boys were woken by the sounds of engines and the chatter of morning voices outside their windows. Anne lived in constant fear of one of them falling on the tracks, but was far too busy to indulge her fears beyond the occasional whispered prayer. One day one of the boys went off alone in search of his father. He knew he would be high up in the signal box and started to climb the sixty feet of steep wooden steps on his hands and knees. When Anne saw him she came running but, fearing she might upset him and cause him to fall, she watched in silent anguish as the little boy made his way up to the top step and the safety of his daddy's arms.

The family were traditional, voted Fianna Fáil, knelt in the kitchen for the Rosary every evening and went to Mass on Sunday. Any vestiges of militant republicanism Terry ever felt was shed some years before when he attended an Easter march across the border in Newtownbutler with Anne and some of the smaller ones. He had been a standard bearer and the day had passed off well enough until he was picked up before they made it back across the border. He was thrown into a paddy wagon and taken to Crumlin Road Prison in Belfast. Anne heard nothing from him for a week. She prayed hard and worried and eventually they let him go. She counted her blessings. They both did. Soon after another boy came, then two girls at last. That made seven.

August in Inniskeen they went blackberry picking, filling punnets or pea cans which they would bring to Parr's to sell. The summers were hot then, or so it seemed, and the sweet juice from the fruit ran down their chins when they sampled their crop. With a

growing family Anne crossed the border every week to buy cheap butter, living in fear of being stopped on her bicycle by a Garda patrol man. Patrick Kavanagh travelled regularly from Inniskeen in those days and in later life Terry liked to recall their encounters. Anne was less impressed by the poet, seeing only an ill-mannered country man who drank too much. Years later she was amazed when I read his poems for her across the kitchen table.

The end of the 1950s saw CIE replace the GNR and stations continued to close on the smaller branch lines. The way was not so permanent after all. The family moved again, this time to Gormanstown in Meath on the main Dublin to Belfast line. It was the early 1960s and Terry was working all the time to feed the family and keep them clothed, but there was never enough money. Another boy and girl were born there. That made nine.

In 1964 he requested and was granted a move to Rush and Lusk Station. It was nearer Dublin and would be busier, and by working double shifts from 6am to 9pm he could increase his take home pay. Although only three stops south of Gormanstown they were in Dublin now. It was rural still, an agricultural area known for its market gardening and glass houses. The station and the Station Master's house lay in no man's land between the two towns. There the tenth child was born; another boy. That was me, the last of the family.

Terry loved his work, relished standing on the platform in his great coat with the silver buttons, the peaked cap pushed back on his oiled but thinning hair. Despite Anne's workload at home and the ever increasing brood of kids, his shirts were always carefully pressed, his trousers creased into a razor's edge, his shoes gleaming.

The new house was bigger than the last, but still not big enough. But it had a small field and a sizeable back yard which somehow managed to face towards the front. What should have been the front of the bungalow was attractive, but could only be seen by our near neighbours, the O'Briens and O'Connors who lived at the end of the lane. Every other visitor came from the opposite direction, from the main road or the station, and inevitably approached the first door they encountered, the back door, through the detritus of old bikes and junk collected by a large family made up mostly of boys.

This is where all my memories begin, in that old house beside the station. Coming from Lusk, heading towards Rush, you come over the bridge and stop to look down at the tracks. The ticket hall and waiting rooms on the down side and further along on the opposite

side the signal box perched at the top of a flight of steep wooden steps. There were two yards – we didn't call them car parks then: the near one and the far one. In the near one we played football sometimes, when the field was too wet, using the bus garage door as a goalmouth. Sometimes we played handball against it, or we raced our bikes down the hill from the main road through the yard and on down the lane towards the house where the big ash tree marked the finishing line. The surface was littered with pot holes and loose stones, and a competition was made of creating the longest skid marks with your tyres along the gravel yard. If you applied the back brake and sat it out and held the bike frame steady you could drift for yards. Luckily there weren't too many cars coming and going so we mostly managed to avoid accidents.

There was one other house near our home, a tiny cottage that overlooked the near yard. Two old brothers lived there by the name of Fay, but we hardly ever saw them. My older brothers told me how they ate cat food because they were so poor. They told me lots of other stories too that took hold in my imagination. How Kenure House in Rush was haunted; how the workmen there were amazed to find a room they'd just painted revert to its original blue. And they told me that poor old Mrs. Coroway was a witch, and how the devil had broken up a card game in a cottage on John Martin's Lane. The world was magical and scary then because I believed everything they told me.

On the other side of the tracks there was another yard and a siding where goods trains could drop off wagons. Every autumn a car full of turf and coal would be left to heat the Station Master's office and the waiting rooms for the winter months. For days we wheeled barrow loads up to the storage shed for which we received a few bob from our father. He did everything at the station. He lit the fires in the morning, he swept the waiting rooms, office and ticket hall. He sold the tickets and talked to the travellers. He still cut a striking figure in his hat and coat and he took pride in keeping his station in the best of order. Every spring the flower beds burst into life; his dahlias were exceptional. Between trains he could be seen aloft a ladder cutting the hedges that ran along the lane beside the up platform, his jacket and hat removed, his sleeves rolled up, his tie thrown over his shoulder.

My mother always woke up first and lit the range in the big kitchen, the beating heart of the house. Then my father would get up, wash and shave at a basin balanced on a kitchen

chair. After breakfast he would go out to work. The children followed one by one, surly or chatty; all were fed and packed off to school. There was no time for delay. At half past ten each morning, between the up and down trains, he would come home, a short walk down the lane, to have a cup of tea which would be waiting. There would be ten minutes or so to peruse the racing pages of the Irish Press and he would scribble some bets on the back of an old envelope. Dinner was at half past twelve, after which he'd be straight back across to the station. Tea time was between the 4.15pm to Dundalk and the 4.50pm to Connolly station. Every day revolved around the movement of trains along the permanent way.

I often think of the two of them, how their lives were forever entwined, working day-in and day-out so near to each other. I think of how lucky they were. But I also think of the differences in their lives. My father out in the world every day, meeting people and interacting with them while my mother was at home on her own while us kids were at school, working all the time to keep the house in good order, to feed and clothe us, to make our young lives as easy as possible. Over time, how they lived created the kind of person they became. My father was charming and outgoing while my mother was quiet, introverted at times. Both of them are in me.

But Terry could be tough also. Every summer gangs of boys came down on trains from Balbriggan to work on the farms, picking tomatoes or potatoes. The station was thrown into chaos, particularly in the evenings when the boys would be boisterous on their way home. There was no footbridge in those days and some of the boys would chase each other, jumping down on the tracks to escape their pursuer. Terry would jump down in their wake and, twisting an ear, lead them to safety one by one. Sometimes real fights would break out among them and Terry would be in the middle breaking it up, cuffing one boy, telling another off. Some of the boys were taller than him but he was never deterred. Later, when I was in secondary school, some of the Balbriggan lads figured out who my dad was, and I feared their reaction, but they only ever spoke of him with respect. I remember I couldn't understand it.

My older brothers worked during the summers too, giving up most of their money, which was a big help for the family at the time. When I was older I worked also, along with other local boys and the Balbrigganers. The work was hard. If you were in the glass house

you would be picking buckets of tomatoes, bent over most of the day, and carrying the full buckets down the rows to be boxed up for the market. The heat was intense and the acidic smell of the tomato plants was in your nose for days afterward. Your hands and hair were dyed green by the residue off the plants too, so that everyone looked sickly when they emerged from the glass house at the end of the day. I can still feel the relief of walking out into the fresh air after a long day's work; it was like stepping out of an oven.

But working out in the fields was physically more demanding. Mostly in the summer you would be picking spuds. One farmer had a potato harvester, which dug out the crop and sent it along a conveyor belt beside which four or five of us would stand. Each person filled the bags with potatoes as they passed by. We travelled up and down the field in this way, hands busy but minds free enough to engage in conversation. Some of the farmers were very fussy about the standard of potato being bagged, telling us to leave the small ones go for seed and to be careful not to throw in rocks or sods of clay.

I preferred to work alone away from the harvester. Luckily most of the farmers only had diggers. The tractor pulled the digger along the drills and it churned up the plants and spuds in its wake. The picker followed behind, bent over, with the bag between his legs filling the bags and leaving the full bags to one side as he went. Often this work was done 'on task', that is, you were paid a rate for every bag you picked. In high summer when the weather was dry it was good, but on wet days the clay stuck to the spuds and the bags were filled quicker but with less potatoes. At the end of the day you got paid an extra allowance to help with the loading, but only the bigger, stronger boys could toss a four stone bag high onto a trailer.

When I finished school I took the train each morning into work in the city. I dawdled in the house, watching for the signal change from the kitchen window, delaying until the very last moment before I would leave. I would break through a gap in the hedge and onto the platform and duck across the tracks in front of the signal box rather than use the new footbridge. If Terry saw me he'd give out to me the same as anyone else. Often he would give travellers lifts in his car if they missed their connecting bus to Rush or Lusk. Sometimes we moaned that he'd do anything for anyone apart from us, his family.

He had recently retired when I decided to move to London. My mother was upset

and sent me out to the garage, where my father was working on something, to tell him about my plans. We never talked that much really, not one to one. There were too many people in our house for that kind of intimacy and anyway it wasn't the way we were reared. When I told him he just continued to plane the piece of wood he was working on. After a moment he spoke: 'If that's what you want to do that's okay,' he said. I stood there awkwardly wondering if there was more, but itching to get away also. 'Just be careful,' he went on. 'Your mother will be worried about you. Stay out of trouble, don't get involved with the police. They don't like us over there.' And that was that.

So I handed in my notice at work and bought a ticket for the boat to Holyhead. I had some friends of friends over there and had arranged a place to stay for the first few nights. Inside I was panic-stricken about the whole thing, but I couldn't let it be known. I was twenty-one after all and the surface impression I made was the most important thing. I was lucky. I got a job within days and rented a bedsit in Kilburn.

Soon after that he got sick. We knew it was serious. One morning a police man called to my door with a message from my mother to come home quickly. I packed a bag and headed for the airport. The days of the boat and train were over already. I stopped off on the way for a few drinks with some friends. By the time I got home he was already dead, laid out in his own bed as if he was just resting. But I knew he wasn't.

Kathryn O' Regan

Lessons in Loneliness

1.

WHEN I ARRIVED IN LONDON first, I moved in with a Spanish couple who argued loudly in a language I did not understand. Later, it conspired that during the time I shared the flat with them they had actually broken up, yet maintained an unconventional living arrangement: the party who had moved out regularly occupied the flat with his friends in tow; he showered and cooked there to uphold some semblance of order. Additionally, a friend of theirs had moved over from Spain, after a breakup of his own, and proceeded to inhabit the small and dimly lit living area. To compound matters, there was, on occasion, the thankless task of cleaning up wet excrement deposited by the lodger's anxious dog, who much like me, was caught in the middle of all this.

Things could only get worse or things could only get better. Or so I told myself. I cleaned my room and did my washing as though my life depended on it. I squeezed giant oranges, still cold from the fridge, and drank the juice with the urgency of someone who had traipsed through a desert. I washed my hair and patted my face clean with mild camomile soap. I scrubbed the sink in the bathroom and made my bed. I went to work and applied for internships. I tried to be better at being a person but really I wasn't sure if I was actually alive at all.

2.

Spending a lot of time on your own presents the maddening, saddening sensation of being a ghost in your own life. That sensation is augmented by a city as vast as it is anonymous. There's no one to really know what you did all day, and if someone calls you later after supper say, there's equally no reason why you can't just make something up. Of course, I am a terrible liar so I will probably tell you the truth; that I spent all day in my fleecy pyjamas, streaming boxsets and reading nothing in particular on the internet.

The sense of gliding through life without leaving as much as a trace can be liberating. I could turn up to a dark basement bar somewhere in Soho, drink a single beer, stay for a poetry reading, and go home without as much as a hello to anyone. I could order a cheeseburger in a busy fast-food restaurant and give the impression of kindness by allowing strangers to sit beside me when there was nowhere else to sit. I could buy a luminous yolk-yellow sweater without asking anyone's opinion whether that's a good idea or not. I could read my book in peace on public transport. I could savour forkfuls of luxurious iced cake in a hipster coffee shop and sit undisturbed for hours on my laptop. I could spend an evening making a perfectly piquant curry, eat a bowl and keep the rest in Tupperware for two days' worth of meals. This must be what they call the romance of being alone.

I have often told myself that I don't require other people's company. In my mind spending time alone is invigorating and purposeful, granting opportunity to be truly oneself without the constraints of convention, or like how Adrienne Rich describes it in her poem 'Song': 'If I'm lonely/ it's with the rowboat ice-fast on the shore/ in the last red light of the year/that knows what it is, that knows it's neither/ ice nor mud nor winter light/but wood, with a gift for burning'. In reality, to tell myself this is a mildly shameful tendency that I picked up somewhere, but can't remember where or when. It most likely grew out of shyness that morphed into anxiety about having superficial conversations with people. Recently, I have opened myself up to the possibility that perhaps I should not tell myself this; it feels radical to even admit that maybe I don't need to be as independent as I somehow think I ought to be.

Of course, this realisation did not emerge from anywhere. My aloneness was thrown into sharp relief when, by some stupid misfortune, I fell one day while out running in a city I was still struggling to comprehend. It will, no doubt, take the very visceral sensation of smacking your head on the ground to force you to reflect on how you are living your life.

3.

I fell on an uncharacteristically hot and sunny Monday in early April. I awoke to blissful sunshine streaming in my window and knew that I should get up and make something of the day. I pulled on a pair of leggings and a t-shirt, and laced up my running shoes. Beach House hummed on my iPod and momentarily, I felt light and glad, the palpable goodness of spring sinking into my skin. However, those positive feelings were fleeting: within ten minutes of leaving home, I missed an uneven patch of pavement, and hurtled headfirst onto the ground, thumping my forehead on the cool concrete, the thud still ringing in my ears.

I lay there for several seconds. Was I, for the briefest moment or two, knocked out? I gathered myself into a ball, too scared to touch my searing head. Eventually, I picked myself up; a woman, maybe some other people, were there. She offered me a drink of water. I asked her was it bad? She said I had a bump, some blood. I told her I lived nearby. I made my way back to the high street, shielding the gruesome bulge from sight with my hand, occasionally examining the bulbous form in the dark glass of car windows.

People were staring. I started to cry, my tears glimmering on my lashes in the hazy afternoon light. I cried not so much out pain, which was significant, as much as did because there was no one here to help me clean this massive swelling bump. I cried because strangers were trying to call the ambulance for me, and because even in an anonymous city people still wanted to help. I walked into Boots; two teenage girls followed me, trying to tell 999 what happened down the phone. People I didn't know were asking whether I had been attacked. I declined the ambulance, I would sort this out myself, I thought.

So, I went home. I dabbed the bleeding mess with damp cotton wool, the anxious dog wailed at my side, truly concerned for my wellbeing. I put on a jumper and a pair of sunglasses. I considered calling my mother, but knew I couldn't now. There was no point in worrying her. I cursed this place and my choice of fuzzy jumper in the heat.

4.

I had never been to A&E before. It was surprisingly less hectic than I had imagined: mostly people with complaints not visible whilst they were sitting down, although there was one girl with an injured finger, who sat pointing it to the ceiling, the flesh crudely bandaged in a white towel. A few others had limps; another girl vomited into a plastic bag; a couple wolfed down chips wrapped in oily paper in the corner. A group of children turned to stare at me, wrinkling up their noses and covering their eyes with their hands.

The doctor could do little to help me. He prodded my skull, checking to see if any bones have been broken and stroked the side of my face to determine any numbness. He toyed with putting on a large bandage but decided against it as it would draw even more attention to the unsightly protrusion. He cleaned the area around my eye and gave me some literature on head and neck injuries. He asked me whether I lived alone, which for some reason I said I did. He inquired again whether I had any housemates. I nodded. I took two buses home and rested in bed with a bag of £1 frozen peas, swaddled in a pillowcase, pressed against my face.

5.

The next day I did the same: slept and recovered in bed. By now, the skin and tissue around my eye was a startling shade of magenta and my cheek was plump and puffy, swollen and round as a fallen fruit. My shoulders ached and I didn't really know whether I was lucky or unlucky: it could have been worse, or so everyone told me.

A few days later, I retraced my footsteps and tried to find the exact spot where I fell. I couldn't remember and if it hadn't been for my battered appearance, I would have

questioned whether it had happened at all. Later that evening I sat in my room and idly thumbed through books. I was restless. I had no plans for the evening or for the next day. There was not much I could do when I looked like this, no point going into the city centre or ringing up a friend to go for a drink.

Ironically, I was no longer invisible. Strangers stared at my bruised complexion, their eyes lingering on the garish wound above my eyebrow, which was beginning to turn a mangled shade of red-brown and crust over. I wore sunglasses in the supermarket to avoid further gawping. It looks worse than it is, I told anyone who asked.

‘Rebel rebel your face is a mess’, sang David Bowie over the speakers in work. I stared at my bruises in the mirror and willed my body to heal quicker but at the same time, was surprised by how much improvement could take place in a few days. On my day off, I went to the park, not far from where the accident occurred. I stretched out on a winter scarf beneath rays of stunning April sun. I called on the sun, or anything really, to put me back together.

6.

‘If you’re lonely this one’s for you’, writes Olivia Laing as a dedication to her book on loneliness and art, *The Lonely City*. I post this on Instagram while on a long bus journey home. I think about many people I know, and how loneliness might just be the last taboo. Admitting to being lonely is like admitting to some form of defeat, the failure of making connection, other people didn’t ‘get’ or understand you or warm to you. It’s an admission that is still a source of embarrassment, one which we frequently gloss over rather than going into the nitty-gritties of our isolation.

But perhaps, admitting to being lonely is the first step in forging connection? A long-distance friend of mine always says, ‘Misery loves company’ and she’s right. Do we ever really bond over the lovely things that happened to us? Friendships, relationships are made and deepened by opening up our less than desirable sides. To tell someone that you messed up might just be the most significant thing of all.

Although it may be silly or melodramatic of me to say, but I never felt more alone than on those days directly succeeding this accident, which in the grand scheme of accidents hardly warrants a write-up to this extent. But lying there, on the grass, in my bed, hibernating from reality, unlocked a series of thoughts previously unknown to me: maybe it's OK to reach out to people? Maybe I don't have to cut myself off or push people away in order to achieve some warped sense of self-growth even if that seems like the most natural thing to do? Perhaps loneliness is not as glamorous as I always deemed it to be. Maybe this was my rock-bottom and as it turns out, I'd rather not be there alone.

Martín Cromie

*From Ballinliss to Boston:
a journey through place, time and memory*

I KEEP A STONE on my desk. It is a pyramid of winter-grey granite, about six inches high. The edges are sharp, the sides sandpaper-rough. The base is weathered smooth and oiled dark with sweat from the hands that have touched it. Light through my office window illuminates the myriad mica crystals that form the core of the stone. It has been on my desk for years. From time to time I rotate the stone so that a different facet glints its unique arrangement of crystals and I can stare at it, study its shape, become hypnotised by the arrangement of granules.

The stone comes from the remains of my father's one-storey, two-roomed house which has lain abandoned since 1954. It was lodged in a niche in the wall above the open fireplace. When I look at this stone I feel I am in the presence of the lives spent in the house. I imagine the stone plucked from the boggy earth by an ancestor dressed in eighteenth-century peasant rags, his back aching, his arms deadened, his hands calloused from humping rock and arranging walls and shaping the solid fabric of a house on a flat bit of land sliced in the mountainside. I see his thick fingers slot the stone into a wall above a flat-edged heft of granite lintel that tops the hearth. I visualize the stone lying for centuries, exposed to Irish weather, the wind, rain, frost and sun breaking and shaping it into the pyramid I know. I think about the millennia this stone was hidden beneath a thick blanket of coarse grass and damp peaty earth. And I struggle to comprehend the enormity of the timeline reaching into the history of this piece of earth, to when the stone was gouged by a glacier from the solid mass of the dormant Slieve Gullion volcano and dropped in the townland of Ballinliss on the slopes of Camlough Mountain. The stone is a witness to lives lived on the five-acre site of my father's house from its earliest settlement, two centuries

ago, to the day he abandoned it and moved to Newry town, having long given up hope of making a living on a poor smallholding in South Armagh.

I imagine the stone in the cold darkness of winter and the long warm light of summer, in the presence of intimate conversations or late night gatherings, when stories were told, family myths created and enlarged. I consider the births, weddings, and wakes this stone has attended. And I wonder how many generations of hands have touched the stone, how many of my ancestors have warmed themselves at the fire in the hearth. I like to think that my father might have reached up to the stone as a child or that he gave it a fond touch on that day in 1954, when he left his home for good to settle in an alien place.

So, this stone on my desk is at once an inanimate piece of matter and a vibrant portal to my ancestry. In the scheme of things, the sum of the lifetimes this stone has seen is only a brief moment in the 400 million years since its creation. This stone holds the story of the place in the landscape I call 'home' and it tells me something of the countless lives that have forged the genetic makeup of my father, of me and of my children.

Seconds after the explosion, I feel a slight tremor underfoot, no stronger than the vibration of my car when the engine ignites. This part of South Armagh grows out of a solid granite base that connects fields, townlands, villages, towns, cities and continents. A French engineering consortium is constructing the Dublin to Belfast motorway and is blasting a half-mile wedge in the rock, uncovering the blinking crystals of granite, fracturing the skeleton of my family homeland. I drape my elbow over the locked gate at the lane to my father's old house. I scan the valley unrolling from here to the Cooley Mountains that block the Irish Sea from gushing inland. Granite dust hangs in sunlit plumes. Gradually it settles on the remnants of long-abandoned farm dwellings and sprinkles the bright shingle roofs of the modern, out-of-place houses that are transforming this haven of rural peace into the beginnings of a suburban sprawl.

My father's old home rests a hundred yards up the mountainside, hidden behind trees and dry-stone walls where the lane flattens out and disappears from view. Beside the lane I see piles of concrete blocks, roofing timber, and drainage pipes, the raw materials of a new-build house. Over the past twenty years I have regularly walked up the lane to the relic of the single

storey house. I have always felt as if I was visiting home and that walking up the lane was something of an inherited right although this land has long been owned by someone else. Mindful of the recent property boom, when the children of locals could no longer afford to buy homes near their birthplace, and when farmers couldn't resist the fortunes being paid for building sites, the prospect of locked gates and building materials causes uneasiness. I have heard rumours that the owners hope to demolish my father's vernacular cottage and replace it with a nondescript modern house. I feel like a trespasser. I evict images of destruction from my mind.

I recall the last time I was here with my father. He is unwell. Long years of labouring on roads, working a quarry and looking after a no-hope smallholding on the side of a rock-strewn mountainside have wrecked his back.

'I'd love to live here,' I say with the naivety of a teenager still living with parents.

'A couple of winters up here would soon change your mind!' he answers.

His hands jingle coins in his trouser pockets. A smile breaks out on his face. He has a smile for all occasions: a full cackle and grin for his plentiful supply of humorous tales; a gentle half smile that tells of his love and which he uses instead of the words that are an embarrassment to men of his generation; a distant glint in his eyes for private memories lying underneath his conversations about his family and his youthful years on the mountainside. He walks in front of me, unsteady on his weak legs but sure of his footing, finding his way through the overgrown space in front of the house.

'Why did you move?' I ask.

'No choice,' he says. 'It wasn't like now. There was no electricity, no running water or inside toilets in those days.'

He stands still and arches his back to ease the stiffness brought to life by the climb up the lane. His hands are braced on his hips. I watch him taking in a panoramic sweep of his past. In front of him, the remains of his house grow like an ancient cairn out of a bed of moss, grass and ferns. The walls are more or less intact but have lost the whitewashed life they had when my father's family eked an existence from the scant fertility of a five-acre strip of heath-land reaching beyond the house to the tree line above us. In their nakedness the stones are haphazard, precarious and ill at ease with each other, their clay mortar binding long gone.

‘Not too bad for somewhere that’s been empty for thirty years,’ I say.

He moves towards the house. ‘Well, it’s not changed too much,’ he says.

He begins to point out features with his tanned, weathered hand. I am given a guided tour. It doesn’t take long. It is a two roomed cottage. A small porch arched with rampant red fuchsia gives entry to the main room where every household chore took place. A low doorway leads from here to the bedroom on the right. It is about ten foot square with a low makeshift loft which serves as space for a few more beds. And to the left a cattle byre is attached to the gable wall, as important as the bedroom since the protection of the lives of a milking cow, a goat, some hens and maybe a suckling pig or two, meant the difference between subsistence and hunger.

My father nods to a ledge running at right angles to the front of the house. It is about five feet long, two deep and of similar height, topped with granite slabs. A small slate-framed recess is burrowed underneath the ledge like an ancient burial chamber.

‘If stones could talk,’ he whispers. ‘If stones could talk.’

I recall a photograph of my grandmother Kitty sitting in a wooden chair. The chair is pitch pine, blackened with years of smoke from the open fire, and smoothed to a sheen by calloused hands. In the photograph her own thin hands hang still and at rest over the ends of the chair arms. Her legs stretch out before her, feet crossed. She reminds me of my father in his chair at home, same pose, same expression. She is making the most of the midday summer sun, resting after a long morning’s chores around the small farm. In the late afternoon she’ll be baking bread on the griddle and putting a meagre stew together in a blackened pot hung on a crook over the fire.

Her pinafore is bleached white like the whitewashed wall of the house behind her. She stares into the lens of the Kodak Brownie my Aunt Lizzie holds at waist height. The photograph, like all the photographs I have inherited, is taken in bright light, their subjects still, posed for the soft flick of the shutter, the background idyllic and welcoming. There are no hints of the cold and damp, the poverty and sheer drudgery that is life here in the 1930s.

An old Raleigh bike is propped against a drystone wall. It has no crossbar, a lady’s bike made to accommodate long skirts and modesty. It belongs to my aunt who is about twenty years old. She is ‘in service’ to some well-off family and uses the bike to get in and out of

Newry, four miles of freewheeling speed down the Bernish road, a hard slog home again, back bent, legs aching, shopping swinging in tied brown-paper parcels on the handlebars. Unlike the photographs, life is not all sweetness and light.

Jack, my father's black and white collie dog is sprawled in the recess, his head sticking out and rested on a paw, sleeping off a morning's running up and down Camlough Mountain after a few scraggy sheep. Hidden behind him lie precious lumps of coal hauled up the lane from the roadside, clods of flaky turf scraped from the top of the mountain, and seasoned wood gathered up from wherever it might lie in ditches along the roads. This is heat and cooking for a family for a year. No wonder they dug into the hard earth and built a shelter of stone and sod to keep the precious fuel dry.

My father turns full circle, not looking at anything in particular, his head cocked slightly as if listening to voices or sorting his memories into a logical sequence.

'We would sit out here in the yard after work,' he says. 'We'd spend hours just talking'. His tone is in gentle harmony with the silence around us.

We stumble over boulders to the dry-stone wall edging the flat yard that begins at the top of the lane. Down in the valley Old Killeavey churchyard is shaded with tall oaks, and lopsided Celtic crosses mark the resting place of medieval monks and famine-starved peasants. And to the left near Meigh village stands the present-day chapel with a new cemetery studded with an orderly array of neat headstones.

'Some view,' I say.

'You'd go a long way to find better.'

We stand amidst the smell of damp dead leaves and ferns and fuchsia. It is the smell of the living present and dead past, the smell that even now, forty years on, brings that moment to life and my father to my side.

At my desk I stare at the stone and try to write about my father. It seems that I can record all the facts of his life in a few short pages. He was born in October 1913 on the eve of the First World War and died just shy of his sixty-fifth birthday. I only knew him, I realise, for the final third of his life, and the first third of mine. He was forty-three when I was born, seventeen years older than my mother, more like a grandfather beside the other fathers on

the street where I grew up. But his blue eyes were young and his smile was endearing, his laughter infectious and his few words wise. It is those glances and smiles, laughs and soft spoken words that form the substance of the father in my memory. These are timeless, ageless and sensual things that have survived beyond his brief lifetime, his sudden death and the years of his physical absence from my life.

He was born in that two-roomed stone house in the townland of Ballinliss on the southern slopes of Camlough Mountain, in South Armagh. He lived in the house until he sold it for a pittance, married my mother, and moved to Newry, following work wherever he could get it, quarrying stone or tarmacking roads. He lived in the same flat in Newry until his death in 1978. We buried him where he wanted buried, in the cemetery in Meigh, a mile, as the crow flies, from his derelict house in Ballinliss, with a full view of the landscape that made him the man he was.

My father lived a simple, quiet and unassuming life. He laboured hard for meagre returns when he was younger and fitter but the cruelty of cold damp weather and the back-breaking nature of the work robbed him of his youth and his health. In his time he set dynamite charges, blasting awkward granite obelisks from the quarry face, breathing in the after-dust as he inhaled from a Players Navy Cut cigarette. He could swing a sledgehammer with the best of them, eying up the fault lines in a hunk of blasted granite, smacking the 14-pound sledge at the weakest spot and shattering the rock into smaller chunks that were easier to shift onto steam-driven trucks. After the quarries closed, he navvied on the miles of roads that weave their way like patchwork seams across County Armagh.

So, that's my father's life: born in a house built with granite rocks pulled like teeth from the fields, and buried under a carved headstone slab sliced from a quarry gouged into the side of the same mountain. And in between birth and death there's nothing much to say as far as events or incidents go. He's been dead for close on forty years and I still think of him every day. I'm getting older, not far off the age he was when he died. As I slow the pace of living down a little I am more and more drawn to the landscape of my father, the granite bulge of Camlough Mountain that I too can see from where I live on the edge of Newry. The side of the mountain is littered with stones: ancient cairns precariously angled for millennia; centuries of drystone walls like rows of rough stitches criss-crossing small irregular fields; a

generation of abandoned stone houses, their whitewashed brightness eaten away with rain and frost, lichen and moss.

Show me a lump of granite and I think of Ballinliss and in my mind my father comes to life. My memory holds a limited supply of innocent childhood events, little gestures of my father's hands, a few phrases, some smells, some sounds. But that's it as far as vivid memories are concerned. The older I get, the more I forget. His voice is an echo in a distant place. Photographs help but they are few and far between. They are frozen moments: I want to know what has happened before the camera has clicked and after the shutter has closed. These are the things I don't know and, therefore, the memories I don't have. Besides, photographs are ephemeral. They fade, bend, tear, are misplaced or lost and, in the end, you try to remember the photograph. Memory twice removed, as it were. Give me a chunk of rock any day, a solid three-dimensional heft of earth's crust, something tangible, built to last. In a piece of stone I see a wall, a house, an enclosed field, a cemetery, a schoolhouse, a church, a quarry, a well, a lane, a mountain. In a stone I can see the lives of generations of farmers, labourers and quarrymen. In a stone I can find a connection to a place and time I have never lived in. In a stone I can see my father as a living presence, an influence stronger and more vivid than memories in my head or photographs in my hand. Call it spiritual for want of a better word, for that's what it is, spiritual.

It is January, a time for resolutions, for cleaning up and tidying, setting your house in order for the year to come. It is a time for organising the mind, getting rid of all the distractions, leaving space for new ideas to grow and old memories to breathe and thus last a little longer. I feel the need to visit my father's house. It is a need for renewal. So I take a drive. In front of me in the winter sun, Camlough Mountain rolls gently from north to south. The curves in the road are almost unnoticeable, requiring gentle little adjustments of the steering wheel. The line of the road I travel is, as it has always been, dictated by the stone fingers of the mountain base. I pass the quarry where my father and grandfather worked. It has long been out of use but traces of activity remain: bits of metal machinery, scraps of a tin hut, and the pristine facets of rock left after blasting and hammering. And in this tiny

crescent cut in the mountain there are remnants of geological time embedded in the multi-shaded strata that tell a 400-million-year-old story.

I drive up the steep incline of the Tamnaghbane Road to my father's house. I pull in to a grass verge, leave the car, scramble over the gate and walk up the lane. Once again I experience that unexplainable feeling of being home in a place where I have never lived. Although the worse for wear, my father's house is still standing almost sixty years after he left it. The roof has caved in and in some places it is replaced with rusted corrugated panels giving shelter to heifers in winter. The doors and window frames have rotted. But the stones remain. Much of the wall structures are intact and it is easy to recognise the layout of the house as it was in photographs taken in the thirties. Rooms, doorways, and hearths are more or less as they were.

The weather has been vicious. Coats of lime whitewash, applied layer by layer over generations, have been stripped away leaving sombre grey granite. Orange flashes of algae and fresh green moss break the monotony. All the man-made materials are decaying. Wood has soaked up moisture, expanded in the rain, dried in the sunshine, cracked in the frost and crumbled into the fallen leaves of autumn. Metal hinges, locks, wall ties, brackets and hearth crooks have been dislodged, are crusted in rust and flake away sliver by sliver. Tree roots, shrubs, wiry grass, ferns and bracken flourish in the absence of human traffic. But the house stones remain, lumps of granite, all shapes and sizes, gathered by hand from the surrounding fields in the late 1700s and early 1800s. A drystone wall, three-feet high and a good two-foot thick denotes the western side of the site. It slithers from the top of the mountain to the roadside. Another wall runs parallel, about a hundred feet to the east. In winter the walls cocooned the house from the westerly gusts and biting cold easterlies which have battered this mountain for centuries.

Yet, in spite of this protection, clay mortar and limestone rendering have submitted to the ravages of climate. And as the mortar cracks, the house is gradually returning to the earth, the dislodged stones seemingly swallowed by soil and embedded once again in the core of the mountain. I fancifully think that the stones have been on temporary loan to my family for a few hundred years, a miniscule period in the 400-million year lifespan of Camlough Mountain.

An 1836 Ordnance Survey map shows the house on this site. How long it stood before that I'm not too sure. At least fifty years anyway judging by a crude calculation of the ages of generations I know to have lived there. Like most people who settled in this area, my ancestors knew a thing or two about protection. They deliberately chose this site to maximise shelter from the elements for themselves, a few animals and a potato crop big enough to keep the wolf from the door. So far, there are no signs of a new house being constructed. Besides, the road is narrow, barely wide enough for two cars, and to cut enough space for a mandatory vehicle entrance would be difficult. To build a driveway up to the site would take an engineering miracle and connecting to electricity and water supplies would cost a fortune. I can almost hear my father chuckling quietly, my grandmother Kitty giggling in her chair, a broad smile on both their faces. I smile too. They were a wily lot, I think. The protection given by this site to a little house all those years ago keep it safe from the hands of men.

I pull out and drive in the opposite direction up the hill, until it flattens out at the top of the steep Bernish Road. I slow down as I pass Ballymacdermot Cairn, its mysterious arrangement of stones guarding burial chambers as they have done for 6,000 years, standing like sentinels watching over the ancient lands of Oriel that lie below. Driving home I feel some relief that for the time being my father's house continues to survive. I am happy for it to slowly reunite with the mountain, stone by stone, by virtue of natural forces rather than by the treachery of a bulldozer. Natural forces will take many decades to do their work; enough time, I hope, for the relics of my father's house to be enjoyed by me, my children and hopefully my grandchildren. It is a good start to the New Year. There is hope in the air.

I now have two stones on my desk. The grey granite pyramid continues to stand firm, its mica crystals sparkling in the alternating shafts of summer sun and beams of winter lamps. In front of it lies a slice of schist, about five inches long, three inches wide and two inches deep. Its matt charcoal hue is generously dappled with light grey flecks of biotite, chlorite and muscovite. Larger quartz particles reflect light in a highly lustred dazzle like miniature stars in a shrunken night-sky. Along its side the rock is stratified with multiple wafer-thin layers of light and dark. At first sight it looks brittle as if it were an oddly coloured *mille-*

feuille pastry about to disintegrate in flakes at the slightest touch. But it is hard and lead-heavy, forged out of sea-shale by the intense heat and immense force of crashing tectonic plates 400 million years ago.

The schist comes from Mount Washington, New Hampshire. At 6,288 feet above sea level, it is the highest peak in the north-eastern United States. During a recent trip to the summit I am struck by the scale of things. For someone used to heights, depths and distances dictated by the dimensions of Irish topography, the view from Mount Washington challenges my ability to appreciate a landscape of such proportions. My attention shifts from the enormous panorama to the tiny sparkles glinting from loose rocks littered at my feet. Here in the appropriately named 'Granite State' stone can't be avoided. Rock litters the slopes and summit of the mountain and it seems to protrude from every part of the New Hampshire landscape. Before it was named Mount Washington by European colonists the indigenous Abenaki people called the mountain *Agiochochoot*, meaning 'home of the great spirit'. Instinctively I reach down, lift a stone, and put it in my pocket. It will sit comfortably alongside the little granite pyramid from my father's house, that symbol of my ancestors' presence in the mountain landscape of home, and the muse that prompts me to seek their spirits out and tell their stories to another generation. This stratified schist with sparkling shards of quartz will remind me of where the spirits lurk: in the facts of history and the fancies of myth, in ancient graveyards and the ruins of long-abandoned homes, and in the legends of family passed down from fathers and mothers to sons and daughters. Each layer of time, each generation, embeds itself on top of the one before, and only a sharp eye will catch the spirits signalling like crystals flickering from the layers in a slab of schist. Only a willing ear will hear their tales.

Around Mount Washington the autumn morning air is crystal-clear with no hint of haze. Under my feet the hard granite heart of the mountain forms part of a hidden stone seam running from the southern tip of the Appalachians to the moon-like terrain of northern Scandinavia. I train my eye along an imaginary pathway that follows the run of the rock as it cuts through Boston, sinks into the harbour and crosses 2,800 miles of Atlantic seabed before emerging in the west of Ireland. From here the path snakes across country through

Slieve Gullion and Camlough Mountain before it ventures into the Mourne, and dips under the Irish Sea on its way to Scandinavia via Scotland and the North Sea.

I imagine my notional pathway cutting across the yard in front of my father's old home in the townland of Ballinliss. That a subterranean connection of this magnitude exists, and pre-dates human existence by millions of years, is a concept of truly cosmic proportions. The time-scales and the imperceptibly slow rates of geological change are beyond our intellectual capability to fully appreciate. Our obsession with countries and boundaries, nations and nationalism, seem insignificant and petty by comparison. Yet this is the currency we trade in: without a defined place to call home we would live our lives as physical and emotional nomads. So, it is gratifying to feel a physical link between this high mountain on a vast continent and a tiny house on a small hill in a little country 3,000 miles away. To some degree it salves the pangs of homesickness I experience when I am away from my own terrain. 'Attachment to the homeland can be intense,' says the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan. He tells us that 'human groups nearly everywhere tend to regard their homeland as the center of the world.' Here, amidst the grandeur and magnificence of Mount Washington, I feel as though I am on the outskirts of my world, the centre of which lies at the other end of this imaginary pathway, at the threshold of my father's home.

Looking down towards Boston I wonder about leave-taking and exile, the heart-breaking fates of those who, for one reason or another, felt that they had no choice but to leave their home place for cities like Boston where they found work, settled down and raised their children as citizens of the United States. Where do they call home? What sense of attachment to place do their children have? How many generations does it take to be able to say, this is where my ancestors are from, this is the centre of my world? Before I leave the summit I take one last look across the landscape of New Hampshire towards Massachusetts and set my gaze a few miles west of Boston where the suburban city of Newton lies along the banks of the Charles River. Exactly a century ago, my grandmother Kitty's sister, Mary, and her new husband John, left Ballinliss, arrived in Newton, and never returned. As I make my way down the mountain with nagging pangs of homesickness I try to imagine Mary's pain at being wrenched from her place in the world, her bewilderment as

she arrived on the alien streets of Newton, and the knowledge in her heart that she would never see her family again.

Later, when I check in at Logan Airport for a seven-hour flight to Dublin, I think of Mary's long one-way journey: an overnight passenger boat from Newry to Liverpool; eight days on the *SS Philadelphia* to New York; the endless queue at Ellis Island; her and John walking through the heat and crowds of Manhattan, overwhelmed by strange accents and languages; six hours on a packed train to Boston; and finally, on a Sunday afternoon at the beginning of May 1915, they arrive in Newton. I send a text message to my children, 'Boarding now. Home 7.00am. See you tomorrow', typical of the brevity and immediacy we have become accustomed to in our communications.

In the years to come, letters from Kitty bring news from home and in return Mary tells of life in Newton. She sends photographs of her and John and their sons, Francis, John Junior and Charlie. Gifts of a few dollars arrive now and then. After Kitty's death in 1952, my Aunt Lizzie continues to write. Gradually the letters from America become less frequent and eventually in the 60s they stop altogether. Lizzie's inquiring letters receive no reply. Mary and John, she presumes, have also died.

As the plane rises out of Logan and banks to one side, turning eastwards, it strikes me that the flight-path to Ireland more or less follows the line of granite which lies under the Atlantic and joins two continents together. I look down at the suburbs of Boston and squint at the rows of streets as if I might be able to pick out 98 West Street, Newton, MA 02458, the last known address I have for my great-aunt. An hour later, as dusk begins to fall I see a string of tiny lights 35,000 feet below. It is a container ship on the same north Atlantic sea route taken by the *SS Philadelphia* a century ago. This layering of pathways, one on top of the other has been a recurring theme as I journey through my family's past. Likewise the layers of history and time I have sifted through and the layers of stone underpinning the ground I have travelled over. The rock I took from Mount Washington is in my suitcase in the hold. With its tightly packed strata, it will not be out of place on my desk at home.

It is September and the last of the summer fuchsias drip from the hedges on the Tamnaghbane Road. I walk past the lane to my father's house. A sheet of blue galvanized

metal blocks the entrance. A part of me wants to jump the barricade, go up the lane and see what's been happening but a spark of rationality warns me I have no right to anything concerning this land nor, for that matter, have the owners any responsibility towards me. They have no interest in my opinion or feelings. If I'm honest about it my emotions range from shock to anger to resignation. I am still determined to find out about the fate of the old house but there's no need to scramble over gates and sneak around like a poacher. I don't know if the old house has been demolished or if a new build will ever materialise. I'm sure I'll find out soon enough.

In the meantime I've found myself scavenging around townlands, digging into my family's past, delving deeper and deeper in search of what it is that draws me here and keeps me living close by. Since coming back from Boston I've thought much about those who have left here for good, relatives who came down this lane and have never returned, their presence but a memory fading back into the landscape like the lane itself. People like Mary who walks the lane for the last time in 1915 and takes one final look over her shoulder at her mother Elizabeth and her sister Kitty standing half-way up the hill. Mary's nephews look bemused. Francis is five years old and more interested in chasing the dog. His brother, Michael is just eighteen months. He crawls around the feet of his mother, Kitty, and giggles at the antics of Francis. He won't remember Mary but, sixty years later, as my father, he will tell me the story of her leaving. The story of this little lane, it seems to me now, is one of leave-taking. All of these people, including my father, who left this house, never to return, but who have left stories to be unearthed and told before they have completely evaporated from memory.

My father's whispered words come to mind. 'If stones could talk,' he says.

'If only,' I answer silently

I stand a little longer in the silence of my own company and take a last look around me before leaving for home. I think of Mary and her husband John, both long dead. Their three sons, John, Francis and Charlie would have children of their own, probably about my age. And, like me, they may have children and grandchildren. That's four generations born and bred near Boston, their centre of the world. If they have any awareness of Ballinliss it is probably as some far-off, long-forgotten place to which they feel no connection whatsoever.

But to find them, listen to their stories and let them hear mine would help complete a circle, and bring something of Mary back to Ballinliss once more. My father and Lizzie would have liked that. I look up at three phone masts on the hill. America's no more than a text message or e-mail away. Finding lost relatives shouldn't be all that difficult.

So, I sit at my desk and rummage through a box of keepsakes and mementos. My father's words rhyme in my head. 'If stones could talk,' he says. I shuffle through a bundle of photographs and stop at one of me and my father. He is standing tall behind me dressed in a dark suit, a white shirt, a tie and a hand-knitted red sweater. I am four years old, and similarly dressed. My father's hands are gently draped over my shoulders as if he is steadying me, pointing me forwards, urging me to make my way in the world. I prop the photograph beside the stones. The crystals in the granite pyramid and fragment of schist sparkle in the lamplight. I sense a gentle pressure on my shoulders. I smile and lift my pen and write a line on a clean sheet of paper, 'I keep a stone on my desk...'

flash fiction

Sharon Thompson

My Fault

LOOKING BACK, I BLAME MYSELF.

*

‘Was it your mother again?’ Saul asks taking his mobile from me. ‘Was it?’

I know ignoring him doesn’t work. ‘Yes.’

‘How long was it this time?’

‘Does it matter?’

I aim to say, ‘I pay the bill?’ but don’t. I hate arguments. I never win them. They scare me.

‘But she doesn’t ring you — does she?’ His hair’s receding and he’s checking it in the mirror. She doesn’t ring because she’d get Saul. The fact hair leaves him, grates that ego. A distinguished nose turns this way and that and I think he’s handsome with those piercing blue eyes. ‘No-one loves you like I do.’ It’s in his soft caring voice. ‘Did you tell her about my buying you that expensive exercise bike? Was she impressed?’

He reaches over and touches the tiny roll of fat over my jeans and chugs at it. It's in fun. Isn't it? To tease? But my heart sinks to the bottom of my converse runners.

'She's always impressed,' I lie.

Inwardly, I lash myself for not telling Mum all the good things about Saul and for having the chips he insisted I eat, as he paid good money for them.

'Did you tell her about my work? How well my house looks?' He's rubbing in the solution I know not to notice. 'Did you tell her my father was promoted too? They'd not understand careers though. Being country-folk. I still think it's funny the way they talk.'

I pull my blonde hair into a ponytail. Saul's right of course. I'm lucky to have him. Such ambition and working in a good career already.

'This party. I think you should wear the blouse I got you to buy and those dark jeans.'

I nod. He has good taste. Everyone says so. Sure he picked me. I smile.

'I'm bringing my guitar. You suggest a sing-a-long won't you? They love to hear me sing but I can't push myself on people.'

'Yeah sure.'

Saul's gifted. Not like me. I'm at college. Unhappy and struggling with what I want from life. He's so together. A man and he loves me.

'Would you get it?' Off up the stairs I trot and find the large black case and struggle not to touch it off his house's paint-work. 'And we know you're tone deaf and shouldn't sing?' That wink and the chug at my fatty bit. 'Mime though, if you like. I know you're not good with parties. But I love you.' I watch him pull out the mobile phone I got him for his birthday. 'Don't take too long getting ready,' he holds my arm and swings me into him. 'Or maybe I could help you? I'm so mad about you.'

'You hate being late.'

He lets go and taps me on the arse.

‘Always giving out... Remember no-one who will ever love you like I do.’

*

I let him be like that. I said nothing. It was all my fault.

Réaltán Ní Leannáin

Watching

HE WAS THERE. Tucked in under the gable wall at the bottom of the street opposite. He was there at around the same time – this time – every afternoon now, waiting for the girl. One of the McGoran girls, two streets down. She would make up some excuse after dinner to get out from under her parents' watching eyes — to borrow a schoolbook from someone for homework, or go round to the shop for milk.

He kept watch for her every evening, never noticing the middle-aged woman behind the net curtains on the far side of the quiet road.

Every evening, while the girl was making up a different reason to get out, the boy would shake a cigarette out of its shiny gold box and swing it up to his moist lips in a smooth right-handed arc. The other hand never left his jeans pocket, ever. The cigarette box would be shoved back into his denim jacket pocket. Matches would emerge. The woman would watch as his young, slender fingers opened the box, extracted a match and scraped it across the gable wall with the same one-handed grace. He would light the cigarette between his lips, unaware of the soft rosy blush on his intent face in the gathering dusk.

He would wait, patiently, cigarette clasped between his forefinger and thumb. The woman waited with him, from her side of the curtain. The girl would arrive, her careful glance sliding from the street to the youth. His right hand would slide over her shoulders, still cupping the cigarette, smoke tendrils wrapping around both of them, folding them together.

His flushed lips would meet hers, the left hand still firmly in the jeans pocket. The girl would close her eyes. The watcher would close hers.

Simon Henderson

Comfort Food

PETER WHIPS TWO POTATOES up in a saucepan with a thimbleful of milk as two smoked mackerel fillets pop and spit in the microwave, clouding the window with a stink of steam. He ate the same thing last night; he eats the same thing most nights. His ma will stop in on her way home from Novena mass and harp on at him again, claiming the bricks are being ruined by the smell of them. But if a thing is to your taste and has no harm in it, what reason is there for abstaining?

He takes his plate into the living room and turns on the local evening news, punctuating the day. An attractive young reporter stands outside a Belfast pub ignoring the ruffling wind in her hair as she appeals for information on the 33- year-old solicitor last seen leaving the place after a work night out on a Tuesday, 13 days ago. Cut to the husband, still shot through with shame no doubt for suspecting his wife of straying, performing his anguish now as ritual. The wet-eyed women flanking him cannot speak, a mother and a sister with clasped hands covering their mouths praying for intercession, beseeching Him for salvation.

Peter feels a curious pang of envy for their heartache. He imagines the husband kneeling alongside them at the altar in devotion, asking Him for the same thing, his oblation an offer to accept that scant consolation. There is more than one way to lose someone, Peter knows. His own sisters have come to be aggrieved by Peter's failure to marry, as though affronted by a refusal to pay back some debt he'd forgotten he owed them. They are

ashamed of him, too, for letting himself go—a twofold affront implying something unspeakable about him.

He feels Judith's stare fixing on him with vague commiseration from the photograph on the mantelpiece, her hairstyle now a pop-culture artefact. It is morbid, his Ma had insisted, to keep it sitting there, when she's alive and well and married to Peter's childhood friend. But it's just a photograph, he answered, thinking: another time and another place, remembering a quote from a forgotten book professing that man lives not one life but many lives, placed end to end, and that is the cause of his misery. Back then, he worried love wasn't all that it should have been and so he let her leave, thinking he would find it. But where do you look for a thing like that, only in hindsight?

He switches off the television before the news ends. For a moment, the perfusion of silence confounds him, until he notices the absent tick tock of the mahogany mantle clock and realizes its hands have stopped. He speaks his own name out loud three times to dispel it—*Peter, Peter, Peter*—and is unsettled by the sound of his voice. A mug of tea will sort him out so he goes to make it and takes a handful of biscuits back with him to the couch.

He will get a dog, he thinks, resolving to let no one change his mind this time. No—in fact, he'll get a cat, instead. Pleased with himself, he decides he'll go for a walk, before his ma arrives, and maybe take the long way around, out past Judith's house, to buy batteries for the clock down in Tesco. He scans the floor for his shoes but pauses as he reaches for one, hearing a scatter of rain at the window; then the zipper-scrape sound of a key in front door lock, and the groans of his mother in the hallway.

A. Joseph Black

Everything Hurts

I SPIT. A THICK ROPE of phlegm and blood stumbles from my busted lips, but doesn't break. I push my back against the alley wall behind me and struggle to my feet. It swings in the air, so I pull it with one hand, then the other, like a macabre version of the clown pulling a multi-coloured streamer from his mouth. It stretches and droops, but still doesn't break.

I wipe it away with my arm instead, flinging it to the ground. The cuts and bruises on my hands are already an angry livid purple. I look down at my clothes, torn and bloodied, studded with gravel and pieces of glass which sparkle like feeble rhinestones in the half light of the alley. I tilt my head back, ignoring the pain, and look up to the night sky. Thin needles of rain, honeyed by the nearby amber streetlights, break cool onto the roaring heat of my battered face.

I feel like shit. A specific, insistent pain at the back of my skull pulls my hand to it, and through matted hair I feel a patch of raw skin and bloody moistness. In my mouth, my tongue finds the razor's edge of a broken tooth, then another. A third tooth creaks and rocks softly in its socket when I nudge it with my tongue.

I look across the alley. He still hasn't moved. He may be dead. I pull his wallet from my pocket and check it. Photos of his stupid-looking wife and fat kids, and ninety quid. He

fought like that for ninety poxy quid. I kick his prone body hard as I pass it, returning to kick it again, before staggering out of the alley and back onto the busy city street.

Barbara Lovric

Into the West

HE GOT ON THE BUS in Nenagh. He had a crooked smile and a bulging back pack. Their eyes met and that was enough. There were only a handful of people on the bus—a couple of pensioners; a young mum with two kids, one screaming; a few suits—but he dumped his pack in the overhead rack and sat next to her.

The bus idled in the station for ten minutes during which they both pretended their thighs weren't touching. He pulled out his phone and she a book; didn't matter what book it was, she wasn't reading it anyway. He was just the type she liked: longish, mad hair; battered leather jacket; faded jeans; meaty hands with long fingers, her heart was all pitter-patter but then he opened his mouth.

"Hi, I'm James," he said and held out his hand.

American. Perfect. She didn't come all the way to Ireland to meet a fellow American. A nice Irish lad was what she wanted and yet, her heart skipped all over the place every time he looked at her.

"Emma," she said, ignoring his hand. She turned back to her book, hoping to dissuade him.

"What you reading?" James said, shoving phone into breast pocket and zipping it up.

Emma used her hand as a book mark and flipped the cover over. "A History of Forestry in Ireland," she said. Surely, that would put him off.

"I find that whole topic fascinating," James said, blue eyes meeting hers then quickly finding a flap of skin near his thumbnail to inspect. "Hard to imagine now that Ireland was once blanketed in forest."

"I know," Emma said despite herself. "That's why I'm heading to Killarney. There's a national park there. Muckross, it's called. It's got tons of old-growth trees."

James smiled and Emma clamped her mouth shut. She didn't care how blue his eyes were, there were to be no American men on this adventure. He tucked his hair behind his ear. Was he blushing? No way. Cute and nice didn't matter; rogues and ravishers were what she was after.

"I'm off to Galway City," he said, sounding like his puppy had died, eyes a puddle she could splash in.

"I hear that's great...what do they say?"

James laughed. "Craic. Not like the drug though."

Emma smiled. Gabriel Byrne, that's who he looked like. God, she was half in love with Gabriel Byrne. He'd done a reading at university and then had dinner with the class after. Then drinks. The drunken flirtation. The heat of that man. She'd been in love with him ever since that movie Into...

"Into the West," James said.

Emma startled. "Excuse me?"

"I'm going into the West. Galway is considered the west of Ireland."

Emma unzipped her parka a bit. Hadn't it gotten hot on the bus? "I love that movie. It's my favourite movie about Ireland."

"No kidding. Mine too."

"I've never seen cuter kids in my life than those two urchins," Emma said.

"And Gabriel Byrne is a fantastic actor," James said. "I want to see that beach at the end. I've dreamt about it for months now."

"Oh, I'd love to go see that too."

The bus pulled into Limerick City and they both got off. James found his transfer first. "Well, see ya," he said to Emma who stood in line at the information desk.

Don't turn, Emma told herself. You'll meet some nice, young, Kerry man. Swoon under the stars of a dark forest.

She turned and smiled. "See ya."

James waved and got on his bus. Slowly.

Well, that was that. Emma got a bag of potato chips at the shop—why were the bags so tiny here—and a bottle of water, then waited for her bus. She was a bit sad as if she'd slept through her great adventure altogether. Boarding the bus to Kerry, she almost felt like going home again.

The night came in as the bus left the station; she flipped on the light and opened her book. Someone sat next to her. Not again. There were plenty of empty seats on the bus.

"The West can wait," James said and held out his hand.

Emma took it.

Robert Barrett

Uncle Fonsie

ALL DAY, THE WOMEN WORKED in the kitchen. Aunt Margaret cleaned the windows with vinegar and newspaper, scrubbing the glass until it screeched. The other ladies stripped the sideboard and washed and stacked the crockery, as if displaying it for sale. They brought the kitchen table into centre of the room and stood around it. Aunt Margaret made apple tarts, curling the thick slices of apple skin into a bucket on the floor with a sharp knife. The other women made white soda bread and scones. Aunt Margaret ordered the oven, and after they'd returned the table to its place beneath the window, she chased them to the sitting-room at the end of her scullery brush. Then she scrubbed the stone flags of the kitchen floor, filling the room with the scent of soap suds. All this time, the child sat on the lower steps of the stairs and watched them through the spindles, her grip tightly closed around a paper bag of appledrops, gone sticky from handling.

Uncle Fonsie and her father returned from town with a sack of cream flour. Her father stood in the middle of the kitchen with the cotton sack gripped by the ears, and the bottom of it resting on his boots. His cheeks were flushed red and his cap had come to a sideways anchor from a combination of carrying the sack and the drink he had consumed. Puffs of flour stained the shoulder of his jacket and the side of his jaw. Fonsie leaned into the

doorjamb, and let out a long hissing laugh. Aunt Margaret directed the flour towards the pantry and when her father came back, he stood in the middle of the floor again, as if awaiting more instructions. Aunt Margaret pulled a tea towel from over her shoulder and swiped it across his jacket in short sharp strokes, while he took off his cap and swatted uselessly at the same stains, much to the amusement of Fonsie.

The other women came from the sitting-room to see the source of the comedy. Fonsie straightened up and entered the room, taking off his own cap. '*We'll drink tay,*' he said, moving to sit down heavily at the table. He brought his hand across his brylcreemed hair and laughed again for no apparent reason. The child wished he didn't laugh. She wanted him to stop. As if sensing her admonition, Fonsie stooped to see her through the spindles of the stairs and sent her a glowering smile, his good eye darting from her to Aunt Margaret and back again. His other eye, lost to a splash of caustic soda, was hidden behind a cream bakelite lens in his glasses. To frighten children, he would lift the glasses off his head and let them see the dead grey sludge of his iris. He did this without warning, laughing at their horrified faces. Now, twisting to see the women in the door way, he brought his knuckles against the table to hurry up the tea.

They came for her in the small hours with hushed words — the darkness of the bedroom lit only by the open door into the hall. Aunt Margaret peeled away the covers and lifted her from the heat of the bed. Fonsie stood in the doorway, watching. The smoke from his cigarette arrowed downwards from his nostrils, towards the toes of his shoes. 'Good girl,' Aunt Margaret whispered as she fed the child's arms into the sleeves of her dress. From a bowl of steaming water on the bedside locker, she fished out a dripping flannel and rinsed it, before

cleaning the child's face and ears and hands. All this, she did with gentle coaxing. With a hairpin held between her lips, she brushed the girl's hair in long sure strokes to the tips before lifting it from her eyes and clipping it in place. 'Now,' she whispered, 'aren't you the princess tonight.'

They brought her towards the bed, speaking all together. 'Here she is,' they said, 'look who's come to see you.' A weak hand came from beneath the sheets. 'Closer,' they said, their hands on the child's back, pushing her forward, until the bigger hand could take her small hand. She knew her mother's eyes, but not as they were now, glaring and weak against the bare electric light. There was no smile from her mother now. Her breath came short and shallow, her mouth held open and her head turned limply to the side. 'Look who's come to see you,' they said again, as if the shape in the bed was the child.

When the doctor came, it was Uncle Fonsie who went to greet him at the door and brought him to the bedroom with hushed urgent whispers. Her father stepped back towards the wardrobe, sometimes leaning in to hear, and more times keeping back, his big hands clasped before him like a penitent. The child moved towards her father and stood there a long time by his side, squeezing in her palm the smooth hot circle of a two-schilling piece.

Fonsie brought her back to bed, breathing heavily as he carried her and realising the sourness of his smoke and whiskey breath into her face. He closed the bedroom door behind them and undressed her, pulling her dress roughly over her head and lifting her shoes off the back of her heels to let them fall to the floor. 'Won't be long now,' he said, and the child prayed that alone with him like this, he would not lift the patch on his eye, and when he was gone, she was relieved and drew her breath more easily in the cold bed, the palm of her hand empty now, and with nothing to hold onto.

contributors

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memoir: Brian Kirk. Kathryn O' Regan. Martin Cromie.